

Previewing The 2008 Browns: Running Backs

Written by {ga=mrburns}

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When the Browns acquired Jamal Lewis last off-season, I had mixed emotions. Jamal was one of my least favorite players in all of football for the previous half decade, and killed the Browns every time he lined up against us as a member of the Ravens. By the end of last season, there were few players on the team I admired more. Jamal was a leader in the locker room, and as a runner, had a breakout season, and defined Cleveland Browns football with the way he ran. Nick Allburn previews the Browns running backs.



Starter: Jamal Lewis (9th season)

Reserves: Jason Wright (2nd string -- 5th season), Jerome Harrison (3rd string -- 3rd season)

Prospective Practice Squaders: Austin Scott (UDFA, Penn State), Travis Thomas (UDFA, Notre Dame)

The Browns will enter the 2008 season as one of the NFL's media darlings, and rightfully so. When a team like the Browns has been down for so long, and they play in a city like Cleveland where no pro team has hoisted a championship trophy in over 40 years, they become an easy team for the national media and many fans outside of Cleveland to embrace.

The media have already begun to fawn over the Browns -- for better or worse -- and the biggest reason for the Browns' return to prominence is the club's resurgent offense. Drawing much of the attention is the passing attack. Offensive Coordinator Rob Chudzinski's offense is headlined by two premier receivers in Braylon Edwards and Kellen Winslow, both of whom are not only extremely

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talented, but have the colorful personalities to make great interviews. At quarterback the Browns will start out-of-nowhere Pro Bowl alternate (yes, there is a difference) Derek Anderson, whose powerful arm distributed 29 touchdown passes last season. If that wasn't enough, second year passer and fan favorite Brady Quinn nips at the heels of Anderson's clown shoes, chomping at the bit for a shot at the starting job. If Anderson falters, a full-fledged quarterback controversy may ensue.

Amidst all of that star power, you'd think the Browns never ran the football, or certainly that they never did so with an success.

2007 Running Back Stats

Jamal Lewis

Rushing: 298 carries, 1304 yards, 4.4 YPC, 11 TD

Receiving: 30 catches, 248 yards, 8.3 AVG, 2 TD

Jason Wright

Rushing: 60 carries, 277 yards, 4.6 YPC, 1 TD

Receiving: 24 catches, 233 yards, 9.7 AVG, 0 TD

Jerome Harrison

Rushing: 23 carries, 142 yards, 6.2 YPC, 0 TD

Receiving: 2 catches, 19 yards, 9.5 AVG, 0 TD

Glancing back...

Just as the emergence of Anderson, along with the maturation of Edwards and Winslow played a role in the offense's improvement last season, so did the revival of Lewis, a grizzled veteran cast asunder by the Ravens and counted out by the vast majority of the media. Lewis answered with one of the finest seasons in his career, recording over 1,500 total yards and 11 total touchdowns, as if slamming his critics with a vicious hay maker.

In spite of those gaudy numbers, Lewis couldn't find his groove consistently until the last seven games of the season. After the rough opening day loss to the Steelers, Lewis made The Nati's defense look more like Natty Light, busting off

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big runs on his way to a 216 yard afternoon. But after teasing fans with his performance against the Bengals, Lewis struggled against Oakland and Baltimore, rushing for just 120 yards with a 3.2 yards per carry in those two games. In week five against the New England Lewis left the game with a foot injury after just one carry, and would ultimately miss the Browns' week six win against Miami.

Even after getting two full weeks of rest (week 7 was the bye), Lewis still couldn't quite hit his stride, failing to average 4-plus YPC against St. Louis, Seattle, and Pittsburgh, respectively. It's worth noting that even when Lewis did struggle, he provided the Browns with the short yardage/goal line back they sorely lacked for so many years.

The Browns' second date with the Baltimore Ravens was when J-Lew really started to roll. After bashing his old mates for 92 yards and a score, Lewis gouged Houston for 134 yards on his way to a huge second half of the season. Over the season's final seven games Lewis averaged 113 yards per game with a 4.69 YPC average, including an unforgettable performance against the Bills in the Snow Game and a memorable [31-yard touchdown run](#) against the Jets that probably drove [Joe Namath](#) back to the bottle. (Honestly though, Joe couldn't care less about the team strugg-ull-ing.)

Jason Wright was a steady backup, mostly playing on third down, when Lewis needed a respite, or when the big guy was injured. Wright ran for 277 yards on 60 carries, good for a healthy 4.6 YPC average, and also showed some receiving prowess by hauling in 24 catches.

Jerome Harrison will likely be the number three back again this season, and has there ever been a more popular scrub? Harrison only had 23 carries but he definitely made the most of them, racking up 142 yards (6.2 YPC) in his limited playing time. I poked fun at fans clamoring for more of Jerome Harrison earlier in the paragraph, but he is a fascinating prospect. You have to wonder how he looks in practice, and why Chudzinski didn't find more touches for him last season.

Between those three backs, the Browns pounded out a solid 1,800 yards on the ground. Those stats look even more impressive when you consider that 2006's leading rusher, Reuben Droughns, chugged his way to just 758 yards with a dismal 3.4 YPC. In fairness, much of the Browns' improved running game can be chalked up to the refurbished offensive line and the club's burgeoning aerial

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attack, but a healthy Jamal Lewis was a huge step up from Droughns. Lewis displayed a burst, power, and breakaway potential that Droughns never dreamed of, and the Eight Ball's arrival helped the Browns post their highest team rushing totals (1,895 yards) since 1985.

Looking forward...

The Browns made a point of re-signing Lewis to a three-year deal over the winter, letting him know that he'll be an important part of their new offensive juggernaut for the foreseeable future. A healthy and motivated Jamal Lewis should be a tremendous boon to the Browns' playoff hopes. You know what you're going to get from J-Lew: as long as he's healthy, he's going to give you 1200-plus yards and close to 10 touchdowns.

While some may be surprised to learn that Lewis is still just 28 years old, Indiana Jones may have said it best, "It's not the years, honey, it's the mileage." Lewis' odometer has certainly had its work cut out for it; in seven seasons (Lewis didn't play in 2001 due to an ACL injury), Jamal has posted 300-plus touches six times, including the last three seasons. If you're a fantasy football buff, you know that backs with that kind of wear and tear tend to reach their breaking point sooner rather than later -- just ask Rudi Johnson.

That's not to suggest that Lewis is finished, or even that the tread on his tires is wearing thin. Lewis is in terrific shape, by all accounts completely healthy, and his outstanding conditioning is well-renowned. Unfortunately, that doesn't change the fact that the trends aren't in his favor. It would be most imprudent to simply assume that Lewis will cruise through the grueling NFL schedule unscathed. With the beating that featured running backs endure, it would be foolish to assume that **any** back is bulletproof.

That's where the subject of depth comes into play. Some think the depth behind the Browns' formidable starter is suspect, and it certainly is free of household names. Jason Wright and Jerome Harrison? It doesn't get much more anonymous than that, but just because some fans are made uncomfortable by that unfamiliarity doesn't justify that discomfort. Just because [Skip Bayliss claims](#) that Heath Ledger played a lousy Joker doesn't make it true. After all, how many teams are packing star power with their second and third running backs? Also:

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someone punch Skip Bayliss for me.

If Jamal Lewis does have to miss some action, I'm not going to lose any sleep over the Browns starting Jason Wright. Frankly, Wright often looked better than Lewis before J-Lew came on like gangbusters during the season's second half. Wright is a solid backup because he's fundamentally sound and he plays within himself. Wright doesn't have breakaway speed or bruising power, but he's a north-and-south runner who generates positive yardage because he hits seams instead of waiting for huge holes. In other words, Wright isn't William Green. Arguably Wright's biggest strength is his skill as a receiver, which makes him an excellent third down back.

Jerome Harrison is more of an unknown. I poked fun at fans clamoring for more of him earlier, but he is an intriguing prospect. The Browns are very high on the strikingly speedy Harrison (he'll make .5 past lightspeed), and will supposedly look to expand his role his season. We heard similar rhetoric last summer, so keep your expectations in check until we see how the Browns really intend to use him.

Still, Harrison is intriguing. He showed some flashes last season in limited playing time, and the guy can flat out gallop. Who cares if he only had 23 carries? Averaging 6.2 YPC is nothing to scoff at. What we've seen from Harrison certainly merits a closer look. Hopefully the Browns are correct, and this is the year he breaks through.

Still not convinced? Well, in addition to their talent in the backfield, let's not forget that the Browns are now the proud owners of one of the league's best offensive lines. In terms of the running game, the presence of that line is at least as important as who's toting the rock, and probably more so. There's a reason that the Broncos were able to part with Clinton Portis and still churn out 1,000-yard backs faster than rabbits can make little rabbits. It's called blocking. As long as you can open holes you can run the football, regardless of who's racking up the stats.

So should we be worried about the Browns' depth at running back? Not really. And fans calling for the Browns to sign a broken-down (and probably overpriced) has-been like Shaun Alexander are out of their gourds. Wright and Harrison may not be as glamorous a backup as, say, Pittsburgh's Rashard Mendenhall, but they could get the job done if Jamal Lewis were on the shelf for a few games. If Lewis is hit with an early season-ending injury, then I'll concede there's reason for

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concern (although not too much, as long as that line is intact), but a Wright-Harrison tandem should be more than capable of shouldering the load for awhile.

The Browns need to take a good, hard look at both Wright and Harrison this season to determine whether or not the heir apparent to Jamal Lewis is currently on the roster, or will have to be added via free agency or the draft. Giving four or five carries each to Wright and Harrison could also serve the dual purpose of keeping Lewis fresh. Not only could this make Lewis more effective, but it would drastically reduce the chances of his suffering a catastrophic injury if the Browns could limit his carries to 15-20 per game, as opposed to 25-30.

For the first time in a long time, the Browns are capable of putting some big numbers on the scoreboard. Not only can they score, but they can control the clock and close out games. If the defense is able to make strides this season you can bet that the Browns will lean even more heavily on their running game, leading to fewer turnovers, shorter games, and (hopefully) plenty of victories.