

## Lingering Items - Giants Preseason Edition

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Wednesday, August 20 2008 7:00 PM -

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As he will do every week, Gary gave his instant reaction piece about an hour after Monday night's loss to the Giants, and now he comes back midweek with some Lingering Items for us on the game. In today's column, Gary hits on Romeo falling on the sword for the team not being ready to play. He talks about the Corey Williams and Shaun Rogers acquisitions. And he hits on the trade with the Dolphins that netted us CB Travis Daniels, a 4th year pro out of LSU.



It was nice to see the Cleveland Browns head coach Romeo Crennel took responsibility for not having his team prepared for Monday night's preseason game against the New York Giants. By my count, that's about the eleventy hundredth time Crennel has fallen on that sword. Maybe one of these days he'll really mean it.

I'm not one to get all apoplectic about a preseason game. Just the same, there is no question that the Giants' starters were sending a message to the Browns' starters in that first quarter. The message was simple: chirp all you want about playoff aspirations. Just win something first. The question worth asking is whether that message was actually received.

In fairness to Crennel, his first priority is to get his team ready for the regular season. Preseason really is about evaluation. I've watched young head coaches place way too much emphasis on the preseason only to get their comeuppance once the regular season starts. My bigger concern here is that the Browns walked

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onto that field Monday night with a strut that wasn't earned. While they weren't being deliberately disrespectful (save for cornerback Eric Wright's high step into the end zone after an interception of Anthony Wright!), the vibe was clear. Just as clear was the slap down they suffered as a result.

In essence, the Browns acted as if they have bought into the hype being perpetuated by a mostly no-nothing national media instead of actually working hard to fulfill the expectations placed upon them. They aren't a good team until they actually prove they are a good team.

Crennel had the best perspective after last season when he downplayed the 10-win season by pointing out that all the team has proven is that it can win 10 games and not make the playoffs. Unfortunately, Crennel's ability to articulate the appropriate approach and then make it resonate with his charges is two totally different matters. If he's going to be successful as a head coach, that simply can't be the case.

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In just two preseason games, the Browns rather mediocre defensive backfield has been burned four times for long touchdown passes. And for the second straight week, general manager Phil Savage has brought in a reinforcement, this time in the person of Travis Daniels, formerly of the Miami Dolphins. Unlike last week's Travis, former Minnesota Vikings defensive back Travis Key, this week's Travis comes via a trade, the value of which is not yet known.

Daniels has played mostly as a nickel back to this point, so any immediate upgrade in the defensive backfield isn't likely to be realized. In fact, much more likely is that Savage will keep parading in mostly interchangeable names in an attempt to shore up what is looking to be the kind of weakness that could keep this team out of the hunt.

Still, it's hard to lay any blame on Savage, though many are doing just that. Leading is always about priorities and Savage rightly surmised that if a defense has to have a weakness, far better for it to be in the backfield than at the line.

Unquestionably, the Browns had one of the worst defensive lines in football last year. It was imperative that it be addressed in a bold way. It cost the Browns a second round pick in the trade for Corey Williams and it cost them depth in the backfield in the trade for Shaun Rogers. In the NFL, like any other league, you can't get something for nothing. Rogers may have overstayed his welcome in Detroit, but that doesn't mean he's not without ability. Indeed, his absence was noticeable on Monday night.

Leigh Bodden did nothing to hasten his exit from Cleveland, save perhaps that "do you know who I am" moment at Hopkins Airport, but sacrificing him was the price to be paid. As many will recall, the Cincinnati Bengals were trying to cut their own deal to obtain Rogers. But because they are, well, the Bengals, they couldn't make it happen. Nonetheless, under any circumstances Rogers, like Williams, was going to cost the Browns more than the "undisclosed future considerations" that they paid Miami for Daniels.

Even if the trade for either Williams or Rogers doesn't work out, never fault the effort. Indians' fans have been constantly subjected to a general manager more comfortable with talking himself out of deals than in making the final move or two to put the team over the top. Mark Shapiro seems so enamored with the talent he's assembled he acts as if making the something-for-something trade is akin to trading his first born. Thus, he relegates himself to picking at the discarded scraps of others. It's a method, just not a particularly successful one.

Savage has done his fair share of that, certainly, including his attempt to fill the gaping holes in the defensive backfield. But he's also been incredibly proactive on both the free agent and trade fronts. Disagree all you want with the judgments he's made, but at least recognize that he's not leaving many stones unturned in actually trying to improve this franchise.

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Something that seems to have changed drastically in pro football is punt coverage. A perfect example was the Giants' punt with about two minutes left in the first quarter on Monday. Brandon McDonald, subbing for Josh Cribbs, called for a fair catch and then fielded Jeff Feagles' 47-yard punt at the Browns' own eight yard line.

There was a time not all that long ago where a returner would have been criticized for fielding a ball inside the 10-yard line. In fact, a returner's only job in that situation was to try and distract the kicking team by faking a catch. It worked about as often as a team trying to draw a defense offside on a fourth and short play.

But because punters have gotten so good at putting air under every punt and because players can get downfield so much faster, returners are now forced to actually field a ball inside the 10. If they don't, the likely outcome will be a kick downed inside the two yard line. The NFL game is mostly a chess match that is won or lost based on field position. The ability to consistently pin a team well inside its own 10-yard line often spells success n the box score.

Thus where McDonald's fielding of the Feagles punt may have drawn much criticism in the past, now it's considered a good play. That extra six yards, as the Browns proved later in the game, is very meaningful. If nothing else, it means the difference between punting the ball away from the goal line vs. punting it from the back of the end zone.

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Here's a question to ponder as the Browns head into Detroit on Saturday night: If Leigh Bodden intercepts Brady Quinn, what's the over and under on the number

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of minutes it will take for someone to post a message board entry criticizing Savage for the Rogers trade? Personally, I think it's 45 seconds. That's probably conservative.