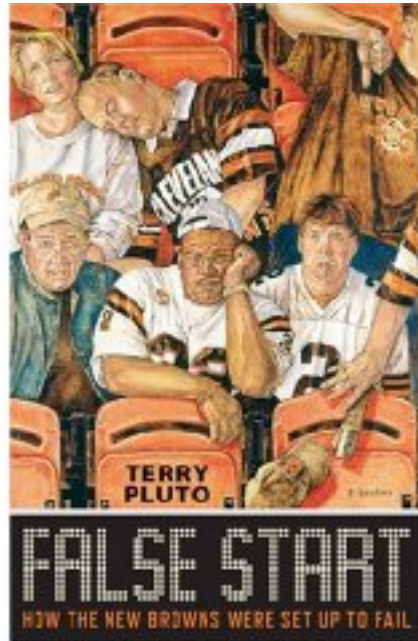


The Browns' preseason finale against the Bears is starting to loom large, at least from a peace of mind standpoint. After watching the Browns turn in back-to-back preseason performances that ranked somewhere south of west tissue paper on the mental fortitude scale, Thursday is one last chance to prove that this season isn't shaping up to be as bad as we think it might be. Erik Cassano gives us his thoughts on this years Browns as the regular season quickly approaches.



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After watching the Browns turn in back-to-back preseason performances that ranked somewhere south of west tissue paper on the mental fortitude scale, Thursday is one last chance to prove that this season isn't shaping up to be as bad as we think it might be, that the middle two games of the exhibition season were the products of injuries, sandbagging, avoiding injuries, playing on the road -- anything besides a blatant lack of readiness for the start of the regular season.

Unfortunately, Romeo Crennel probably isn't thinking the same thing. And the bitter truth is, we are going to head into the season opener versus the mighty Cowboys with a heaping helping of trepidation in tow.

The final game of the preseason is all about staying healthy and giving the guys on the roster bubble one last chance to impress the coaches. No matter how much you'd like to see Crennel keep the starters out there for the entire first half, giving them every opportunity to regain their dignity along with their confidence, chances are Crennel will follow final tune-up protocol and play his starters for a couple of series before turning things over to the Ken Dorsey All-Stars on the bench.

Even if Crennel elects to hang in there with his starters for longer than the prescribed amount of game action, so many first-teamers will be in street clothes in an attempt to stay healthy for the season opener, it probably won't make much of a difference.

Any way you slice it, this preseason is a lost preseason. It started foundering the week after the Jets game, when players started arriving on the trainer's table with assorted pulls, tweaks and the occasional spike wound. It sank into the abyss in the first half of the Giants game when the Browns had the kind of Chernobyl mental meltdown we all hoped the team had left in the now-ancient history of the Charlie Frye era.

Whether the Browns find their winning stride between now and the Sept. 7 opener, we're going to have to wait until Sept. 7 to find out. If you're looking for more assurance, you're probably not going to find it until Tony Romo launches his first deep ball to Terrell Owens, with Eric Wright attempting to stick with him stride-for-stride.

In other words, there is probably no way out of this that doesn't involve your heart in your throat. But then again, you didn't become a Cleveland fan for the sense of certainty, did you?

If there is any good news to be mined from what is now a 2008 Browns season facing an uncertain future, it's that this is all happening in the preseason. Because it was going to happen sooner or later.

The Browns are a relatively young team that tasted its first real success last year. Then came the go-for-broke additions of Corey Williams and Shaun Rogers to the defensive line. The Browns went from one of the rising young teams in the NFL to one of the leagues hottest properties. The Browns were lavished with the type of media coverage usually reserved for teams from New York or New England, or future Hall of Fame quarterbacks who can't make up their minds about retirement.

Even with the coaching staff constantly harping on players to not buy into the hype (and we're all confident that's exactly the message Crennel and his staff have been hammering into the players' skulls since the first round of organized team activities in the spring, right?), it's difficult for a young team to not feel at least a slight pang of cockiness, like it has arrived as a force to be reckoned with.

Teams like that are generally humbled at some point, if not humiliated outright. The Browns got a taste of what it's like to be held up as a overrated creation of the hype machine when they were embarrassed on national television by the Giants, complete with snarky comments by ESPN's Tony Kornheiser.

The preseason national telecast was merely a warmup for what awaits the Browns later in the year.

You already know the slate. The Browns will play the Giants on national TV again in October. They will also play the Steelers, Broncos, Bills and Eagles in prime-time national TV games -- and there is also a good chance that a fairly large chunk of the country will watch the Browns-Cowboys game, as they possess two of the largest fan bases in the NFL.

If you thought the sky was falling halfway through the second preseason game, you might want to build a bomb shelter before the regular season starts. What happened against the Giants a little more than a week ago was a minor inconvenience compared to what might await if the Browns turn up lame later this year.

But maybe, just maybe, enduring this time of trial in August will spare the Browns the slings and arrows of being labeled one of the NFL's biggest disappointments once the leaves start turning. If young teams with well-stroked egos are due to receive a blast of cold water sooner or later, it's better to go through it in August with nothing on the line.

The Browns could have breezed through the preseason 4 and 0, thought nothing of it, and some fans would already be setting aside money for Super Bowl tickets. But then the wake-up call would come from back-to-back sucker punches from the Cowboys and Steelers.

One way or another, some team was going to put the Browns on notice that the NFL doesn't hand out elite status like candy to trick-or-treaters. From this vantage point, it's better to get jostled awake by initial turbulence than to go through a demoralizing 1-5 start, or the like. And despite what some of you might think, the Browns still possess the ability to save the first part of their regular season from a preseason hangover.

Now is the time to learn from mistakes. Now is the time to make course

adjustments, iron out playbook wrinkles and get that whole gameday-mental-preparation thing straightened out. There is still time. For all of the problems the Browns have exhibited through three exhibition games, the fact remains that the NFL preseason is a monthlong series of mulligans.

Whether the 2008 Browns go into the history books as hype monster or as the real deal will be determined by their win-loss record. But the groundwork for the wins and losses is laid right now.

The good teams don't necessarily flip a switch just before the opening kickoff of the season. The good teams make their corrections in camp and during the exhibition season so they're ready to play when the games begin for real.

It's the bad teams that think they can just flip a switch and everything will be all right come Week 1.

What kind of team do the Browns have? We'll find out on Sept. 7. But not beforehand.