

The End Of The Beginning

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Wednesday, August 27 2008 7:00 PM -

The Cleveland Browns, in need of a good showing at a minimum, looked to take advantage Thursday night of the fact that the Chicago Bears are not the New York Giants or even the Detroit Lions but couldn't and ended a bizarre and disappointing preseason with a 16-10 loss. It's now back to the think tank to ponder what happened and prepare for the opener against Dallas in what is now 10 increasingly shorter days away.



The Cleveland Browns, in need of a good showing at a minimum, looked to take advantage Thursday night of the fact that the Chicago Bears are not the New York Giants or even the Detroit Lions but couldn't and ended a bizarre and disappointing preseason with a 16-10 loss. It's now back to the think tank to ponder what happened and prepare for the opener against Dallas in what is now 10 increasingly shorter days away.

The loss resulted in only the third winless preseason in Browns history, the last coming sometime around the Truman administration. Actually, the last time the Browns finished winless in the preseason was 1972. Proving the ultimate point that the preseason is meaningless, the 1972 team finished 10-4 and nearly spoiled the Miami Dolphins perfect season in the playoffs. Still, when you consider that the ensuing 36 years between those winless preseasons covered an awful lot of bad football, including every team since the Browns returned in 1999, it does give pause to consider the ramifications for this season in which so much is otherwise expected.

But just because the Browns on Thursday ended up losing one of the most boring games in the history of organized sports doesn't mean it's immediately time to

The End Of The Beginning

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Wednesday, August 27 2008 7:00 PM -

turn your attention to the Cavs. Quarterback Brady Quinn, subbing for starter Derek Anderson, led a mostly crisp attack on the opening drive but couldn't finish it off, missing a wide open Kellen Winslow in the end zone on third down from the Bears' eight-yard line. It was a theme. All totaled, it was one of three certain but missed touchdowns that turned what should have been a win into a loss.

Defensively, a Brandon McDonald interception on the Bears' opening drive saved what was otherwise turning into a typical Browns defensive stand, meaning bend, bend, bend and hopefully hold to at least a field goal. After one quick first down, the Bears stalled on the strength of their own incompetence, committing two straight false start penalties and leaving themselves in a 3rd-17 hole. Indeed, they seemed to concede the punt by running a simple screen that the defense immediately turned into another first down.

The McDonald interception thereafter was thus timely and put the ball at the Browns 28-yard line. Based mostly on a strong running attack anchored by Jason Wright, Quinn marched the team 72 yards in 10 plays for the 10-0 lead just before the first quarter ended. The drive was capped on a nifty fake to fullback Lawrence Vickers at the 1-yard line and a lateral to Wright who went into the end zone mostly untouched. Quinn and the starters' work was through. The Browns wouldn't score again.

After quickly falling behind 10-0, the Bears' starters seemed to lose whatever slight interest they brought to town and were looking for the safety of the bench. Bears quarterback Kyle Orton lived up to the burden of being Kyle Orton, missing receivers with the kind of frequency that suggested he'd have trouble beating out Ken Dorsey for the third string job in Cleveland. He was unable to move the Bears to a

The End Of The Beginning

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Wednesday, August 27 2008 7:00 PM -

score against a defense that's been accommodating to virtually everyone else. That had to thrill Bears fans, but that's their problem. Cleveland has its own set of issues.

After seeing enough of Quinn in two series head coach Romeo Crennel sent in Dorsey to manage the rest of the game with nearly three quarters left to play. Surely the instruction was to manage the game to a quick and efficient end and Dorsey mostly complied, eschewing the spectacular for the average. But to be fair, Dorsey had two near certain touchdown passes dropped, one by Travis Wilson, the other by rookie Paul Hubbard.

Orton, who really could use the playing time, nonetheless gave way to Rex Grossman, last year's starter, at the same time as Quinn. It was hard to tell the difference, save for that throwback '70s porn-star moustache Orton sported. Grossman handed off a lot and found enough open receivers to put together a 13-play 95-yard drive to close the gap to 10-7 with about three minutes left in the first half.

The drive itself wasn't as noteworthy or interesting as the fact that Grossman was quickly yanked right after in favor of Caleb Hanie, a rookie from Colorado State. Either head coach Lovie Smith was deliberately sabotaging Grossman's chance to be the starter or he had already concluded that Grossman and Orton were interchangeable and thus didn't want to risk an injury to either.

The End Of The Beginning

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Wednesday, August 27 2008 7:00 PM -

For his part Hanie showed the kind of poise that seems to have eluded both Grossman and Orton throughout their careers. Indeed, he looked like Brady Quinn during last year's preseason. He did enough to lead the Bears to three field goals, the last coming soon after a Dorsey interception late in the fourth quarter, that was the margin of difference.

Hanie, too, was victimized. In the midst of putting together what looked to be an 80-yard touchdown drive with less than two minutes left in the half, Hanie was done in by two Bears penalties, the most crucial of which was an iffy but fortuitous holding call on former Buckeye Kirk Barton on a Hanie-to-Mark Bradley touchdown pass.

It's actually hard to figure out why the second half was played other than out of contractual obligations. With injuries piling up, it likely wouldn't have taken much to convince either Crennel or Smith to head into the locker room early and catch the rest of the Democratic National Convention. But play on they did and Hanie took the most advantage of the opportunity and in the process gave Bears fans enough reason to think that their quarterback situation isn't nearly as desperate as, say, the Baltimore Ravens. Meanwhile Dorsey solidified his status as an active roster mentor to Anderson and Quinn.

Still, to the extent that it's either necessary or desirable to glean any information from teams clearly trying to hurry through to the post-game meal, it's this: the Browns' second string defensive line looks and plays a lot like last season's starting defensive line. Huge running

The End Of The Beginning

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Wednesday, August 27 2008 7:00 PM -

lanes seemed to open at will. Receivers ran unmolested throughout the secondary. Tackles were missed Third downs were converted. The drives were long. It was a stark and painful reminder of the lack of depth this team possesses. It's a problem that will linger.

Speaking of problems that will linger, much angst and worry has rightly been directed at the defensive backfield. But another problem area quickly emerging is at wide receiver. Braylon Edwards was out again but that seemed to be purely precautionary. Donte Stallworth, too, was a similar no-show. Winslow played, but sparingly. It gave Crennel and offensive coordinator Rod Chudzinski the chance to evaluate the rest of the contenders for that third and fourth receiver spots. Charitably, it was a mixed bag.

Syndric Steptoe, who has had some good moments this preseason, went out early with a shoulder injury suffered while making a tackle on special teams. Travis Wilson demonstrated why he's the Andy Marte of the Browns. He seems to have skills, he just doesn't make a habit of displaying them often enough. Unless he does something spectacular and soon, the most lasting image of Wilson will be of his dropping a perfect pass in stride from Dorsey that at a minimum would have been a long gain to keep a drive alive and likely would have been a touchdown. It was the kind of drop that all but assured that if he's thrown to again, it will only be because there isn't another option.

Hubbard, like Wilson fighting for a roster spot, might not be so lucky. He dropped a critical third and two pass from the Chicago two-yard line

The End Of The Beginning

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Wednesday, August 27 2008 7:00 PM -

that could have won the game. The best he can probably hope for at this point is a spot on the practice squad.

As for the defensive secondary, its bright spot was the two interceptions, the one by McDonald and another by the newly acquired Travis Key, who also had a sack on a blitz. The only problem is that each of those plays came against the Bears' reserves. It was hardly enough to give anyone any real comfort that Crennel and defensive coordinator Mel Tucker were any closer to finding a way to adequately paper over a definite lack of talent.

With a whimper, the 2008 preseason has ended. The Browns now have 10 days before the regular season opener against Dallas to find the consistency that has been missing all preseason. It's not an impossible task, certainly. It's just that there are enough injuries and question marks lingering to make one think that it's going to take far longer than 10 days before this team will click.