

Lingering Items - Steelers Edition

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Thursday, September 18 2008 7:00 PM -

It's Lingering Items time once again, and in this week's installment, Gary hits on a number of topics related to last week's Steelers game. Gary talks about the performance from the defense, the struggles of the offense, and how injuries have exposed the lack of quality depth on this roster due to having a lot of money tied up at the quarterback position.



Probably the most frustrating aspect of the Cleveland Browns' 10th straight loss to the Pittsburgh Steelers centers on the fact that the loss is less surprising than the manner in which it happened.

Even those hoping against hope that the Browns would prevail felt like for that to happen it would have to be something like the Browns' 51-45 victory over the Cincinnati Bengals last year. No one expected the defense to hold anyone, let alone the Steelers, to 10 points. To have that happen only to then see an offensive meltdown seems like just such an insult.

The main offensive culprits are known at this point, quarterback Derek Anderson and Braylon Edwards. They are hardly alone, however. Gathering some, but not enough, attention is the offensive line. Last year's strength is turning to this year's vulnerability. Perhaps the return of Ryan Tucker will stabilize the situation.

But as a measure of how poorly the line is playing, just check the team's offensive rankings. Two games may be a limited sampling, but then again, it's all the games the Browns have played.

Some of the key stats: the team ranks 29th in the league in the number of offensive plays. As a result, they rank a not so surprising 28th

in total offensive yards. The Browns also are 26th

in the league in rushing, which is a decent measure of offensive line ineffectiveness.

Anyone watching probably isn't surprised at these stats, nor would they be surprised that the offense, particularly the line, is undisciplined. Holding penalties are one thing. They happen mostly because they are such a judgment call in the first place that a referee having a bad hair day could find a reason to throw a flag for it on nearly every play. But false starts and lining up in the neutral zone are entirely different matter. They result from a lack of concentration and focus. And they always seem to happen at the worst possible time, such as in the red zone or on third and short.

The Browns have committed 19 offensive penalties, third in the league. Couple that with the overall lack of production when they aren't otherwise committing penalties and you start to get the sense of why this team is in the hole it is. Anderson isn't

playing well anyway, but an offensive line that struggles will make any quarterback look bad, just like it will make any quarterback look good when it's playing well.

That's really what is making it so difficult to evaluate Anderson and, similarly, may be the reason general manager Phil Savage is reluctant to push Brady Quinn on head coach Romeo Crennel. A line that is playing poorly isn't going to miraculously play better simply because Quinn is behind the center. Quinn may have a bit more mobility than Anderson, which always helps, but Quinn will still be saddled with the same problems Anderson faces. When a team can't establish a credible running game because its line isn't blocking, passing is that much more difficult, no matter how mobile the quarterback.

It's hard to believe that the absence of Ryan Tucker is responsible for the offensive line's troubles thus far, but maybe it is that simple. Consider, for example, how much better the defensive backfield looked on Sunday with Brodney Pool back at safety. That's either a testament to Pool's talents or an indictment of his replacement, Mike Adams. In actuality, it's both.

Pool was a second round pick in 2005. Quietly, he's turned into one of Savage's better draft picks. But the talent level below him also highlights one of Savage's weaknesses: the inability to draft and develop defensive players or, stated differently, the inability to find quality backups.

The depth on defense is made mostly of undrafted free agents cast off by other teams. Both Adams and Nick Sorenson, who is filling in for strong safety Sean Jones, are good examples. Sorenson has played in 84 games in his career and has started none. He was signed by Miami and cast aside quickly. St. Louis toyed with him for a few years and he eventually landed in Jacksonville until he was waived before last season and then signed by the Browns.

Adams is building a similar career. He was signed by San Francisco in 2004, cut and then resigned to their practice squad. Eventually he made the regular roster where he started 18 games over two seasons before he found his way to the Browns. He didn't start any games last season.

Look at the rest of the defense: Louis Leonard, who likely will see much more action with Robaire Smith on the injured reserve, is likewise an undrafted free agent. In just two seasons, he's already on his third team. Shaun Smith, a starter at defensive end, also is an undrafted free agent. In four

seasons, the Browns are his fifth team. Santonio Thomas, his back up, also is an undrafted free agent who was signed and waived by New England about a dozen times in his short career. Linebacker Shantee Orr, who is in his rookie year, is an undrafted free agent. Kris Griffin, also a backup linebacker, is also undrafted free agent. Backup defensive back Gerald Lawson, too, is, you guessed it, an undrafted free agent.

The situation is better, but only marginally, on offense, which has five undrafted free agents among its mix: Darnell Dinkins, Steve Sanders, Charles Ali, Jason Wright, and Josh Cribbs.

The presence of a salary cap may very well create a situation where it is necessary to fill out a roster with cheap free agents. In Cleveland, where a healthy amount of salary cap money is invested in one position-quarterback, the situation is perhaps more aggravated. But if you have to fill out your roster that way, then you better make good decisions. Right now, Savage's only real success has been Josh Cribbs.

Until Savage gets much better at filling out the roster, the presence of injuries to the starters are always going to be that much more important to a team like the Browns.

With time running and short, along with your attention span, here's this week's question to ponder: What's more likely to happen first this season: Crennel makes a right decision on when to kick a field goal or Crennel gets a replay challenge right?