

Another Unraveling

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Saturday, September 20 2008 7:00 PM -

It's been ten years since a team that started 0-3 has gone on to make the playoffs. And that's the challenge the Browns now have in front of them after getting depantsed 28-10 by the Ravens in Baltimore this afternoon. And with a visit to Cincinnati next week against a Bengals team that looked pretty good today, it's possible the team could go into the bye week winless, which seemed unthinkable this summer. Gary gives us his instant analysis of today's loss.



It's hard to say which team needed a victory more on Sunday, the Cleveland Browns or the U.S. Ryder Cup team. It's not hard to say, though, which team has been resurrected and which team has not. The United States took care of Europe but the Browns couldn't take care of the Baltimore Ravens, losing 28-10 and dropping to 0-3 on the season.

The loss doesn't necessarily kill the Browns playoff hopes. There still are 13 more games to play. But let's just say whatever hope is left is on life support and the prognosis isn't good. The last time a team started 0-3 and went to the playoffs was 10 years ago. In the last 18 years, it's happened only three times. And with the Cincinnati Bengals suddenly looking better, having taken the New York Giants to overtime before losing Sunday, the Browns face the real possibility of entering the bye week winless.

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In a game that now raises more question than answers, one thing is certain. The drama the Ryder Cup held will be nothing compared to the drama inside of the Browns' headquarters in Berea Monday morning. Head coach Romeo Crennel likely will admit to only that the team just has to work harder and get better. As if. General manager Phil Savage on the other hand has to go about the more difficult task of not only figuring out what's gone wrong with this team but how he's going to fix it.

The first part of that equation is easy. The offensive line suddenly can't block. Braylon Edwards suddenly can't catch and Derek Anderson suddenly looks like the guy who couldn't make the Ravens' roster. The second is a far more complex problem, but it looks like the first step toward trying to fix it may come with a new quarterback behind center Hank Fraley. Put it this way, if quarterback Derek Anderson is behind center next week and not Brady Quinn, then the only explanation, no matter what the front office says, is that he's being showcased for a trade.

The game didn't really unravel for the Browns until the second half, though it unraveled quite well from then on. Indeed, after some flurry early, the first half was mostly a grind it out game playing true to expected form. The Ravens' first drive dissolved when the normally reliable Matt Stover missed badly on a 48-yard field goal try. Their second drive did likewise as the result of the first of two Joe Flacco interceptions. Neither situation, though, proved to be omens.

The Browns were able to turn Flacco's first interception, to linebacker D'Qwell Jackson, into a 7-0 lead when Anderson completed a simple out to running back Jerome Harrison which he turned into a 19-yard touchdown. It was the only highlight. Perhaps even more encouraging than the drive itself was the fact that on the touchdown play, the Browns for the first time this season had the right play called against the right defense. Anderson caught the Ravens in a blitz that was picked up nicely allowing Anderson plenty of time to complete the pass to Harrison, who had slipped out of the backfield unnoticed.

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A second Flacco interception on the next drive, this time by safety Mike Adams in the end zone off a flea flicker that fooled no one, didn't have the same impact. In a theme that's been repeated too many times this season, the Browns went immediately backwards thanks to two penalties and were forced to punt. Punter Dave Zastudil, so good last week in the wind and rain, shanked his punt, giving the Ravens the ball back in Cleveland territory on the 43- yard line.

The two Flacco interceptions, the second of which went to cornerback Brandon McDonald, seemed to convince Baltimore head coach John Harbaugh to button up the offense a bit and to good effect. Willis McGahee, like so many before him, ran through the defense, eventually scoring on a 5-yard run. Thirty-three of the 43 yards covered on the drive were on the ground. For the day, the Ravens rushed for 151 yards.

As surprising as it seems now, the Browns actually grabbed back the lead late in the second quarter thanks to a Phil Dawson 38-yard field goal that gave the Browns their only lead, 10-7. It was a drive that looked to promise more, like so many others before it, but sputtered under the weight of the pressure of the Ravens' defense which sacked Anderson on a crucial 3rd and 6 from the Baltimore 19-yard line. But the Ravens were unable to move the ball with just over a minute left in the half and were forced to punt.

The end of the half got a bit scary when a routine Jamal Lewis run resulted in what looked to be a serious injury to Ravens safety Dawann Landry. It wasn't clear from replays exactly what happened to Landry, though according to reports he suffered some numbness as a result of a blow to the head. The game was delayed eight minutes so that they could carry him off in a cart.

Whatever momentum the Browns may have had heading into the locker room was long forgotten just 15 minutes later. A decent return by Josh

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Cribbs on the opening kickoff of the second half was negated by a penalty, putting the ball at the Cleveland 10-yard line. On 3rd and 3 from the 17, Anderson hit tight end Kellen Winslow, but the ball popped out and into the arms of safety Chris McAlister, who returned it to the Cleveland 12. McGahee took the ball to the one. Flacco fumbled but recovered it and on the next play Le'Ron McClain, in for an injured McGahee, took it in from there for the first of his two touchdowns. Stover added the extra point to give the Ravens the 14-10 lead.

The road to the end followed quickly thereafter. Rattled, Anderson came back on the next series and hit Ed Reed with a perfect pass. The problem is that Reed plays for the Ravens and has been one of the Browns' key tormentors for the better part of his 7-year career. Reed took the interception back 32 yards for the score and with less than five minutes gone in the half the Ravens were up 21-10.

It would be nice to say that things got better from there, but it would be a lie. Crennel, relying again more on questionable instinct than logic, stuck with Anderson despite his doing almost nothing right for the better part of three games. It was a situation that begged for a change of pace, which is why Crennel so obviously missed it. Predictably, after one good running play, the Browns went backward on the strength of two more penalties and an Anderson sack and were forced to punt. The Browns added nine penalties on the day to their already bursting-at-the-seams season total.

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The Ravens, needing virtually no momentum anyway, got even more when Jim Leonhard took the punt back to the 50. For good measure, Adams committed a personal foul, putting the ball at the 35. From there, the defense offered almost no resistance, essentially giving up as the Ravens scored on a one-yard run by McLain. Stover's extra point put the score at 28-10. It was the final nail in a coffin that had long been shut anyway.

Anderson, playing for reasons which probably only make sense to Crennel, continued his futile quest toward mediocrity for the rest of the game, alternately overthrowing or underthrowing open receivers when he otherwise wasn't being sacked. On the day, he was 14-37 for a mere 125 yards and three interceptions. He also was sacked five times. In every way imaginable, the game was a disaster for Anderson. He entered the game with a quarterback rating of 57.1. Let's just say it didn't improve.

After a final, lengthy drive by the Ravens didn't result in any points but ate up most of the fourth quarter, Anderson quickly did his best to fix that by throwing it to Ravens cornerback Samari Rolle. Rolle didn't have quite the same luck as Reed and was tackled quickly. With the ball at the Cleveland 5-yard line Harbaugh, taking mercy on the Browns but in actuality only making the situation that much more embarrassing, had Flacco take a knee to run out the clock. As the Ravens celebrated

their own resurrection, the Browns had been reduced to a team seemingly going through the motions knowing that whatever promise the season once held, it held it no more.

Next Sunday, one winless division team faces another. It will be the furthest thing from a feature game that one could imagine. Indeed, if the NFL could, it would probably relegate the broadcast of it to the Home Shopping Network. But it can't so CBS has to take the bullet, Cleveland fans will probably get another week of Steve Beurlein announcing and some of us actually will be forced to watch.

It's hard to know at this point where the Browns go. It's a team without an identity playing like a team making excuses. Where the fact that 13 games remain on the schedule would seem to be good news, right now it seems more like a death march toward an active off season. This won't be the game that costs Crennel his job. That will come perhaps if the Browns do indeed enter the bye week winless. Perhaps not, for on a team that lives on excuses, there's always a bunch of injuries to blame.