

Context & Perspective

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Thursday, October 16 2008 7:00 PM -

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If you thought Cleveland sports fans were a cynical, unforgiving lot, then you haven't been listening since the Browns unexpected beating Monday night of last season's Super Bowl champs, the New York Giants. With one dominant performance, Browns fans seem ready to forgive virtually every sin that occurred in the prior six weeks.

In many ways, it's refreshing that a fan base can suddenly develop a short-term memory problem. Talking about and focusing on the negative all the time tends to sap one's energy anyway. But the current giddiness also smacks a tad of desperation.

The Cleveland Browns were a great team on Monday night. Does that mean they are a great team overall?

If that's the case, does that render the 1-3 record (with the only win being against a team vying with Kansas City to become the dictionary entry under the word "hapless) irrelevant?

At this juncture it's just as likely that the answer to each question is "no" as it is that it's "yes."

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This isn't about trying to throw cold water on a premature celebration. Ok, maybe it is, but just a little.

But it's only because this team still suffers from fundamental problems, Monday night's game notwithstanding.

Even a team with fundamental problems can play well, just not that often.

That doesn't mean the Browns won't duplicate their performance Monday night again this season.

But until they can duplicate not just sporadically but against the Pittsburgh Steelers, questions are going to linger.

For example, the fact that this was Derek Anderson's first really solid performance in his last 13 games as a starter doesn't mean that Anderson has suddenly rediscovered some sort of swagger, no matter how much fans want that to be true. All it really does is demonstrate, as Anderson did many times last season, that he's a young quarterback with talent still learning the game. That's not a sin nor should it be unexpected.

It's just the reality of playing one of the most difficult positions in professional sports.

Likewise, the fact that head coach Romeo Crennel stuck with Anderson doesn't suddenly make Crennel a genius any more than it makes anyone else questioning that thought process, including, by the way, general manager Phil Savage, a rube.

What it really emphasizes is something everyone knew anyway, Crennel is stubborn, sometimes to a fault.

This time it served him well, next time it might not.

In this case, Crennel's personality helped foster the conditions that led to Monday's unexpected performance. By sticking with Anderson, he essentially

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created a rallying point for a team on the brink.

It worked, but for how long?

Anderson is solidified for a few more games, at least, and with this issue temporarily off the table all this team has to do now is live up to the expectations rekindled by a performance most fans expected would be a weekly occurrence anyway, at least on the offensive side of the ball.

The test for Crennel will be whether he can get his team to perform any better now than earlier in the season without a contrived rallying cry. Crennel can't use the "respect" card because any lingering disrespect the Browns may still be suffering is of their own making, caused by playing like amateurs in the season's first four games.

The last time I looked, they still have several "national" games on their schedule.

That means they'll have plenty of opportunities to create change in the court of public opinion.

Whether Crennel is up to that task will ultimately play out before everyone's eyes.

But if you're looking for clues, you have to look beyond one game.

Putting a best face on the broader context, let's just concede that Crennel's performance has been uneven and leave it at that.

For whatever strides the team has made under him, they've also taken nearly as many steps back.

If you do want to confine yourself to just the most recent history, then don't ignore the fact that this team still committed 10 penalties that were accepted (and a handful that were not) on Monday night, five on one crucial drive.

No team is ever going to be able to crawl out of those holes game after game.

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One of the more interesting developments in Monday's game, and the one development in that one game from which it may be fair to draw broader conclusions, was the play of the defense in general and the defensive backfield in particular. Brandon McDonald, Eric Wright and Brodney Pool all had excellent games. Giants' receiver Plaxico Burress had a six inch height advantage over McDonald and yet, by maintaining position, McDonald was able to contain Burress most of the night. It was by far McDonald's best game as a pro. In fact, it was Wright's best game as well.

To put that performance in perspective, it's worth noting that even after Monday night's game the Giants still lead the league in total offense. They're still averaging over 400 yards and 28 points a game.

Eli Manning is still one of the top quarterbacks in the league. Brandon Jacobs is still a bruising runner and a load to bring down and Burress is still one of the better receivers in the game.

Yet time and again the defense found a way to seize opportunities and essentially shut down the Giants in a way that was far more suggestive of Cleveland's good play than a product of a Giants team malfunctioning.

That may not mean it's any more likely that the defense will continue to perform at that level for the rest of the season anymore than it means the offense will continue to perform at that level each week. It does mean, though, that there finally is enough talent to believe that with time there will be a defensive unit in Cleveland worthy of the support this team's fans give it.

It was a performance for the ages on Monday night, so long as we confine the ages to the last 10 years. Fans are understandably enthused by what they saw, but that doesn't mean the previous four games were just some substance-induced hallucinogenic haze either. Context and perspective, two words as foreign to a typical fan's vocabulary as beer and "bombs are family, caution restraint. So too does a remaining schedule that's every bit as difficult of the sequence they just completed.

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