

Heroes & Zeroes: Week 6

Written by {ga=mrburns}

Friday, October 17 2008 7:00 PM -

From Braylon to DA, to the offensive line, to Shaun Rogers and the corners there's a lot of love to go around when it comes to giving credit to those who helped the Browns get their season back on track with the big Monday night win over the Giants. And that's what Nick Allburn does in this week's version of "Heroes & Zeroes". Who get's gold stars and demerits from Nick this week based on their play? Find out in this week's piece ...



"The night is darkest just before the dawn." It's a phrase that's frequently tossed around, and as it applies to Monday night's win over the Giants, it couldn't be more accurate. Nobody, including their most loyal fans, was giving the Browns much of a chance against the defending champs, and rightfully so. After being embarrassed by the Giants in the pre-season and barely squeaking out a victory against the Bungles two weeks prior, there was little reason to expect a turnaround. It was pretty inspiring to see a Browns team that seemed on the brink of collapse show up an excellent Giants squad, and it's one of the most impressive wins we've seen in Cleveland in years.

This Week's Heroes

Five Gold Stars: Ryan Tucker

Ryan Tucker's play has never blown me away. Maybe it was the suspension for juicing or maybe it was his 2006 leave of absence because his daddy never hugged him enough (well, a mental illness -- those details are totally fabricated), but Ryan Tucker was always a bit of a walking punch line to me. At any rate, I certainly never considered him to be an indispensable part of the line. Maybe I was wrong.

The offensive line, which was the strongest part of the team last season, looked reenergized

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against a very tough Giants defense that included lineman Justin Tuck, an absolute beast of a pass rusher who is one of the league's most fun defensive players to watch. Not a single Giant registered a sack, and we saw Tucker handle Tuck one-on-one time and again. Not bad for a guy's first game back from a major surgery.

When you think about it, Tucker's a guy who probably never gets his due. This is his seventh year in Cleveland, making him one of the longest-tenured Browns, and he's been a solid lineman. Plus with Kevin Shaffer struggling, Tucker's return was just what the doctor ordered. Tucker has spent his fair share of time on the injury report, but with this franchise, what lineman hasn't? It sure is good to see number 72 back out there.

Four Gold Stars: Braylon Edwards

We had this wide receiver last year that made lots of big plays, some impossible catches, and broke the team's single season receiving records for yards and touchdowns. Until Monday night, we hadn't caught a glimpse of that guy. With a big grin on my face, I'm ready to declare that Braylon Edwards is back, and he took his frustration out on the Giants' secondary with a 154-yard effort that included a 70-yard catch and a trip into the end zone. Man oh man, is it good to have Braylon back.

Edwards didn't look like himself during the first four games, but part of that could also be attributed to some questionable play calling by the Chud (where was the vertical passing game?) and some questionable decision making by Derek Anderson (throw the ball deep!). But it appears that reason was restored during the bye week, because the Browns made a concerted effort to get Edwards involved early, and not just on those stupid wide receiver screen passes that usually net two yards or so.

It is possible that Dontè Stallworth's presence may have taken some of the pressure off of Braylon, but seeing as Stallworth was virtually a non-factor, that's probably just conjecture at this point. If the Browns can nurse Kellen Winslow back to health and keep Edwards and Stallworth away from the injury bug, this offense could get pretty serious again.

Three Gold Stars: Derek Anderson

Like the majority of the fan base, I too had a feeling that Monday night was going to be the guillotine game for DA. After looking much more like Two-Face than Harvey Dent for the first four games, including a revolting performance against the hapless Bengals, we had no reason to expect greatness against a very formidable New York defense that roughed Anderson up in the pre-season. Anderson was pretty erratic on the Browns' first two drives, including yet another fumbled snap and a ridiculous six-yard pass on 3rd-and-12 that drew some boos. But on the team's third drive Anderson broke out with a 70-yard bomb to Braylon Edwards that set up a Jamal Lewis touchdown run.

After that long pass, Anderson's confidence seemed to be restored. He started to take chances and throw downfield again. That doesn't mean that my opinion of Anderson has changed, because I think he is what he is at this point. He still doesn't adequately go through his reads,

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usually looking at just one or two guys. For better or worse, DA is a gunslinger whose performance is going to be marked by peaks and valleys, when the Browns really need him to even things out. It seems unlikely that Anderson is the long-term solution at quarterback.

But on the positive side, at least Anderson may now have regained some confidence, and hopefully the stones to throw the deep ball have returned as well. If Derek Anderson is just going to check down and throw to the release valve, then he's going to be a lousy quarterback because he simply isn't very accurate. If Anderson is willing to go deep and take advantage of guys like Braylon Edwards, maybe the Browns can score some points.

Two Gold Stars: B-MAC and EZ-E

Phil Savage has been taking a beating in the media lately, and not undeservedly so. But Savage definitely deserves credit for finding the Browns a pair of solid corners in the '07 Draft. Brandon McDonald did a terrific job covering Plaxico Burress. Burress had four catches for 58 yards and a touchdown, but did most of his damage when McDonald wasn't covering him. When you consider that Burress has more than six inches on McDonald, it makes McDonald's performance all the more impressive.

Wright's interception and subsequent touchdown return essentially iced the game. Eli Manning and the Giants were inside the Browns' 10-yard line when Wright jumped a short pattern and picked off a pass intended for Amani Toomer. EZ-E's interception was impressive enough, but he showed remarkable balance and athleticism by staying in bounds on his 96-yard jaunt to the end zone.

The Browns may not have quality depth behind McDonald and Wright, but these two guys are going to be excellent starters for years to come, and it will be interesting to see how they continue to grow and develop. It's also worth noting that McDonald and Wright are both above average open-field tacklers for defensive backs, which will save a cheap touchdown every now and then.

One Gold Star: Shaun Rogers

Let's just say it straight up: Shaun Rogers is the best defensive lineman we've seen in Cleveland since Michael Dean Perry. The Big Baby didn't record any sacks, but he lived in the New York backfield and kept Eli Manning from getting comfortable. It's a special thing to watch an offensive line double-team Rogers, and then see him blow up both blockers anyway. The jury's still out on whether or not the Rogers trade will be a positive for the Browns in the long-term, but at the moment it appears that Phil Savage has found the Browns a premier nose tackle for the next few seasons.

This Week's Zeroes

Five Demerits: ESPN

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ESPN has in many ways become an abomination. SportCenter has gone from a must-see program to a laughable combination of human interest pieces and talking head screaming matches. Um, guys, remember when you used to show sports highlights?

ESPN now gives more face time to NASCAR than to the NHL because they don't carry NHL games anymore. We're talking about freaking NASCAR here! My elders tell me that there used to be this television network that would play good music laid over interesting videos -- I think it was called "MTV" or something like that. I fear that I'll be telling my kids about how there used to be a cable sports network that played loads of highlights, not half hour segments of Skip Bayliss screaming until he's blue in the face.

And I have to laugh, because ESPN had to think that Monday night was going to be more of a coronation for the Giants than a football game. You know that Tirico, Kornheiser, and Jaworski had tons of canned material on how the Giants are set to repeat as Super Bowl champs, and the Browns are bound for another top five draft pick. ESPN's pre-game programming focused on Justin Tuck's ability to leap over buildings in a single bound and how a lock of Eli Manning's hair can cure baldness.

Speaking of baldness, Tony Kornheiser is out of place on Monday Night Football. And I don't dislike Kornheiser, because I think he's hysterical on Pardon The Interruption and I'd frequently listen to his radio show several years ago. Unfortunately, Kornheiser just seems out of place on MNF, and his normal humor appears forced and unnatural. Replacing Joe Theisman with Ron Jaworski made that broadcast team much easier to listen to, but Kornheiser probably should be shown the door as well.

Four Demerits: Andra Davis

Andra Davis talked in the pre-season about having a comeback year and how the linebackers have to put up or shut up this season. With the exception of flashes shown by Alex Hall, the linebackers have shut up. Davis is still a sound tackler, but he's just too slow to make plays on the outside or rush the passer with any consistency. On Monday night, Davis had just three tackles, and only one solo tackle. That won't get it done for a starting inside linebacker in this scheme.

We are finally seeing some talent begin to materialize on defense, as the Browns have quality starters (but a lack of depth) in the secondary, and Shaun Rogers and Corey Williams are starting to click up front. The linebackers are running out of excuses, and I suspect that linebacker will be a top priority for Phil Savage in the off-season.

Three Demerits: Terry Cousin

Earlier I referenced the depth in the secondary and the fact that it's not good. Terry "Crazy for These Cupcakes"

"Cousin is where the problem begins. In today's NFL the nickel back is basically a starter, which is bad news for the Browns. Cupcakes had to cover Plaxico Burress a few times, and it wasn't pretty. Not surprisingly, Cousin was covering Burress when he scored his

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touchdown.

Hopefully if we give Phil Savage a few more drafts we won't have to deal with the Terry Cousins of the world anymore. Pundits always focus on the diamonds in the rough from day two of the draft (e.g. Tom Brady), but it's just as critical to simply draft players who can contribute in a reserve role.

Considering the dozen or so huge salaries that every NFL roster seems to pack at the top, it's important that you fill out your roster with quality reserves that come with a reasonable price tag.

Since second day draft picks are paid slave's wages compared to their first round counterparts and free agents, that's where general managers have to find those reserves that they simply can't afford to pay big money. Whether or not Phil Savage can do that may dictate whether or not the Browns take that next step and become a perennial contender.

Two Demerits: Nick Sorenson

Nick Sorenson blitzed several times on Monday night. I know this because I saw him run up to the line before the snap, and then try to get to the quarterback. If you didn't notice Sorenson blitzing, that's quite understandable. After all, he didn't come within shouting distance of Eli Manning.

Maybe I should be blasting defensive coordinator Mel Tucker for this, but the Browns seem have no concept of how to pull off a safety blitz. The point of such a maneuver is that you surprise the offense by overloading them with blitzers, including at least one that comes from an unexpected location (one of the safeties). When the safety runs up to the line five seconds before the ball is snapped, that element of surprise is nullified. A lineman, tight end, or back can easily block a guy like Sorenson, so if the Browns continue to telegraph these safety blitzes then there's really no point in even attempting them.

One Demerit: Dontè Stallworth

Hey, Dontè Stallworth played his first game as a Brown! The results were eerily similar to Stallworth's time riding the pine with an injury, and Stallworth is laughing all the way to the bank.

Two catches for 19 yards was not the kind of production Phil Savage imagined when he gave Stallworth a fat contract over the winter. It's tough to imagine Stallworth on this team next season, as he'd have to come on like gangbusters to accumulate numbers worthy of his salary. Stallworth also has to prove he can stay healthy, something he's struggled with throughout his career.

Up Next: 10/19, At Washington Redskins, FedEx Field, 4:15

Beating the Giants kept the Browns' season alive, but if they really want a shot to get back into the playoff hunt, this game is a game that they need to win. The Redskins are a tough team to get a feel for, but they definitely are beatable. Whether or not the Browns can win may depend on whether or not the defense can slow down Washington's offense. Clinton Portis already has

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643 yards on the ground this season and Jason Campbell has yet to throw an interception. Campbell's still a young quarterback in a new system, and the Browns need to get to him early and try to rattle him a bit.

Expect a close game, as Washington hasn't played in a game that's been decided by more than nine points all year. On the road and at the raucous FedEx Field, the Browns just need to keep things close and hope for a big break that can put them over the top. (Insert obscure Stallone reference [here](#) .) If they were at home I'd pick the Browns, but I'm not convinced this team can go into a hostile environment and beat a decent opponent yet.

Prediction: Redskins 24, Browns 20