

## Going Through the Motions

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In a game with all the appeal of the preseason, the Cleveland Browns suffered their fifth loss in their last six games, losing to the Tennessee Titans 28-9. Throwing early out of design and late out of necessity, the Browns went without a touchdown for their third straight game and their fourth this season. About the only interest the game ended up generating came courtesy of Josh Cribbs, who seemed to play nearly every position on the field. Gary tells us about it in his latest.



It was a game that had all the look, appeal and luster as the last game of the preseason. The Cleveland Browns started their third string quarterback and the Tennessee Titans took the opportunity to hone their running game and situational downfield passing. But whereas the preseason is meaningless, this game was not and the Titans ended up clinching their division and home field advantage in the playoffs thanks to their 28-9 victory over the Browns.

In losing for the fifth time in six games, the Browns continued a number of trends, none of them positive. They didn't score a touchdown on their opening drive for the 13<sup>th</sup> straight game. In fact, they didn't score a touchdown on offense for the third straight game and fourth time this season.

But at least no one was seriously hurt, at least from the looks of things, which is the goal, isn't it, of most preseason games?

As games go, there wasn't much to distinguish this loss from any number of other defeats the Browns have suffered all season. It wasn't a case of things going horribly wrong at any one point.

Instead it was just the case of a superior team imposing their will on an

inferior team.

That the Browns didn't cover the 14-point spread the oddsmakers established doesn't even qualify as a surprise.

The Browns, behind Ken Dorsey weren't expected to have much of a shot anyway. Dorsey hadn't started a game in over three years and had thrown only four passes since, three of which were incomplete and the fourth an interception. Thus it figured that if the Browns were going to have any chance to keep the game close, they'd have to try and control the ball for as long as possible and shorten the game and hope that their relatively opportunistic defense could muster a few turnovers from the mistake-adverse Titans.

At least that should have been the game plan. Instead, offensive coordinator Rob Chudzinski, seemingly so intent on demonstrating the genius of his schemes, had Dorsey instead slinging the ball down field early while mixing in Josh Cribbs generously as if Cribbs were Florida's Tim Tebow. .Maybe it was to try and catch the Titans off-guard.

But as was clear from the Browns' second drive, whatever novelty factor it had was lost quickly. Meanwhile, the game went interminably long.

In that context, the Browns opening drive went nothing like expected, assuming you expected the Browns to run the ball. Instead, Dorsey threw on four of the Browns first five plays, completing two including a nice pass under pressure to Braylon Edwards that went for 26 yards. But things returned to normal a short time later thanks to Donte Stallworth letting a pass go through his hands on third down. That left it

again to Phil Dawson to finish the drive, which he did with a 47-yard field goal.

The Browns then got another field goal from Dawson a few minutes later after D'Qwell Jackson intercepted a Kerry Collins pass intended for no one in particular. Jackson brought the ball back to the Titans' 25-yard line. But Dorsey proved no more adept at getting this team in the end zone than either of his predecessors and the Browns were forced to settle for the Dawson 41-yarder.

What ultimately was keeping the game close, at least early, was a Titans team that seemed flat. After drilling the Detroit Lions the previous week, the Titans could almost be forgiven if they were taking another doormat opponent lightly. Maybe that's why Titans' head coach Jeff Fisher decided to go for it on 4<sup>th</sup> and 1 at the Browns' 28-yard line just as the second quarter started, just to wake his team up.

It worked.

Faking a dive to running back LenDale White, Collins found fullback Ahmard Hall on a swing pass that Hall took all the way for a touchdown that helped give the Titans 7-6 lead.

From there the natural order of things was more or less restored, in that the Browns resumed their inevitable death march toward defeat while the Titans resumed their march

toward the playoffs.

The only thing that made the Browns' next possessions, indeed the rest of the game, even mildly interesting was the use of Cribbs, sometimes as a quarterback, sometimes as a running back and sometimes even as a wide receiver. Cribbs responded by showing some adeptness at running back, probably making many wonder if that's his most natural position.

But a gimmick ceases to be one when it's used all the time and except for a few times in the second half, that strategy was mostly abandoned thereafter.

Thus having exhausted the various Cribbs/Flash formation plays, the rest of the drives, such as they were, had to rely on a more traditional running attack and Dorsey, neither of which had much of a chance of succeeding against the Titans' defense.

It didn't help that Dorsey, both rusty and overwhelmed, seemed to have the arm strength of your average junior varsity quarterback and the composure of a teenager on his first car date.

As a result, the drives ultimately went nowhere.

The Titans, even after their first touchdown, still seemed to lack much fire, showing about as much wattage as the scoreboard that had gone blank just as the game got underway. As it

turned out, though, they were just trying to establish a run as if to make a point, in the way that Sam McDowell used to use his curve ball to strike out batters.

After firmly establishing that the run was indeed there on their next drive, Collins was able to go back to a downfield passing game at key points.

In all, it spelled a 10-play, 93-yard drive, capped off by a 3-yard touchdown run by White that helped give the Titans a 14-6 lead with just over a minute left in the half.

The Browns' final drive of the half on the other hand would have been only slightly less productive if Dorsey had simply taken a knee three times.

The rout was officially on early in the third quarter. After the Titans were forced to punt on their opening drive, the Browns took over at their own 40 yard line.

But with virtually no running attack, Dorsey was forced to throw downfield and soon had his second interception in less than one full game at quarterback.

This one, to Michael Griffin, was returned all the way back to the Browns' 22-yard line.

Stallworth was then flagged for a personal foul that put the ball

at the Browns' 11-yard line.

Two plays later, Collins found Justin Gage in the back of the end zone and the Titans had a 21-6 lead and didn't look back, though in fairness they really weren't doing much looking back even before the Gage touchdown.

The Browns second best chance to get their first touchdown in three games (the first was following the Jackson interception) came halfway through the fourth quarter when White fumbled at the Browns' 26- yard line. But Dorsey and company fared no better than they did after the Jackson fumble, failing to even get a first down.

This time, though, Dawson missed a 44-yard field goal.

The Titans then took over and had a drive that lasted about as long as the Bush administration and made about as much progress. It was a drive that lasted for 11 plays and nearly 6 minutes and covered exactly 10 yards. It ended, mercifully, with Jackson's second interception that he brought back to the Titans' 46-yard line.

This led to the Browns third and final best chance to score a touchdown.

They did manage to get the ball down to the Titans' 22-yard line but could get no closer and settled for a 40-yard field goal by

Dawson, bringing the score to 21-9.

It's at this point you might ask why the Browns opted for the field goal, given the context of both the game and the season. Good question, actually, and one in which would likely get answered (assuming anyone even cares enough to ask) with "we were trying to win the ball game" kind of answer.

And if that's the answer, it will be the correct one for the only way the Browns were ever going to win was if they somehow managed 6 more field goals with one quarter to play while keeping the Titans stuck on 21 points.

Outside of a fluke or a defensive back falling down, there was no chance the Browns would actually have scored a touchdown, even if they had managed to get a first down on that 4<sup>th</sup> down.

There will be no questioning of Crennel's strategy on that play.

But of course the Browns didn't kick 6 more field goals nor did they hold the Titans to 21 points. After Chris Carr took a short Dave Zastudil punt back 44 yards to the Browns' 25 yard line, Chris Johnson took a Collins hand

off around left end and all the way to the end zone, taunting Browns' defensive back Brandon McDonald on the way. No flag. It helped give the Titans the final margin of victory.

With the game now long out of reach, Chudzinski decided to see if Cribbs could still throw the ball. He had done virtually everything else all day so it seemed like a logical move.

On Cribbs' only attempt he threw long to Edwards who made an acrobatic catch nearly 50 yards down field but was ruled out of bounds.

Replays showed that it was a far closer call than it originally appeared but Crennel didn't challenge.

If he had, he may very well have been successful.

Still, there will be no questioning of that strategy, either.

The Browns had a plane to catch and there was still over 8 minutes left.

To the Titans' credit, they tried to do all they could to accommodate the Browns. But by this point the Browns had pretty much given up and were allowing the Titans' White and Johnson to run through them nearly unmolested to pad their stats.

The Titans most assuredly would have scored again if they had had the notion. It seemed like they just lost interest. What made this all very strange, though, was that the Browns seemed intent on prolonging the agony, as if this week's version of a root canal wasn't enough.

Crennel called time out on 4<sup>th</sup>

down and the ball at the Browns' 4-yard line with 1:53 remaining in the game.

It was the kind of time out a coach calls because he needs to see another possession to make some evaluations before final cut down.

Now that strategy will be questioned as it almost caused the Browns to lose their third quarterback in three weeks when Dorsey was sacked hard with 6 seconds remaining in the game.

Given a chance to think about their 4<sup>th</sup>

down play, the Titans put as much thought into it as Crennel had put into the overall game play.

White was tackled for a 1 yard loss that cost him a 100-yard game.

That left the Browns 95 yards of field to move in slightly more than a minute.

They got less than a quarter of the way.

Statistically, the game was as one-sided as the final score. The Titans had 398 total yards, the Browns 178. Dorsey threw an astounding 32 times, completing 22 for 150 yards and one interception. Cribbs had 24 yards rushing on 6 carries. Look for another Jamal Lewis outburst this week.

He had only 7 carries for 7 yards.

By the way, Jerome Harrison got his obligatory 2

carries.

Collins was 14-23 for 155 yards, two touchdowns and the two Jackson interceptions. Johnson had 135 yards on 19 carries and White added 99 more on 24 carries.

Look for White's yardage to creep up to the century mark later in the week when the Titans' staff gets through pouring over the stat sheet.

The Browns now take on the Philadelphia Eagles next Monday night, which should give Tony Kornheiser ample time to re-load his arsenal of Cleveland jokes that he already had exhausted earlier in the season. Meanwhile, in a season with no remaining goals, except maybe to score one final touchdown for old time's sake, the Browns will have to go back to Berea and go through the motions for another week on their way to hopefully becoming, to paraphrase Cribbs earlier this week, the best 4-9 team in the league.