

Playing The Victim

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Wednesday, December 17 2008 7:00 PM -

Never underestimate the ego of the modern professional athlete. Exhibit A, meet Cleveland Browns receiver Braylon Edwards. When we last saw Edwards he was about the only player on the Browns' team Monday night who could actually say he had a good game. He had five catches for 102 yards and no drops. So of course Edwards used the occasion of one decent performance scattered among the many lousy ones to sound off again on how misunderstood and underappreciated he really is in Cleveland. You know Gary has thoughts on this ...



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In essentially swiping at the supposedly ignorant Browns fans that can't see talent when it stands right in front of them and drops the ball on their feet, Edwards cited his status as a former Michigan Wolverine as the scarlet "M" he's carried with him since he arrived. In Edwards' world, all Browns fans are also all Ohio State fans so, naturally, they would never take to a guy from Michigan.

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The only reason Edwards' prior affiliation with the Wolverines is ever an issue is because he continues to make it one, not the fans. What Edwards fails to realize, either because it doesn't fit his theory or, more likely, because as the center of his own universe he can't see beyond those four corners, is that there have been plenty of Michigan players who have played for the Browns, 15 according to the Browns' all time roster.

Among those players have been Thom Darden, Mark Campbell, Aaron Shea, Steve Everitt and Leroy Hoard. I don't recall their status as former Wolverines ever being much of a concern for the fans. Indeed, each and every one of those players was, in fact, well liked by the fans.

Everitt, in particular, was embraced.

But as with everything else Edwards, the facts are always the first victim with the truth running a close second.

The Edwards situation really is one of the more compelling dramas that have played out in Berea over the years. Coming out of college, Edwards had a reputation for dropping passes. It was a reputation that was earned. That was why some general managers had a somewhat negative view of him at draft time.

On the other hand, Edwards also had a reputation for making big plays.

It was a reputation that was earned as well.

In the end, it was that reputation that won out and made him a high first round draft pick.

Thus, simply as an opening premise, the fact that the Browns made him their number one pick is evidence that his talents are appreciated.

But as Edwards has said, his gripe isn't with the team but the fans. Apparently,

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the fact that Savage recognized his talents should be good enough for everyone else. Perform
ance in that scenario is almost irrelevant.

In actuality, all his draft status does is buy him both a healthy dose of expectations and a near-term benefit of the doubt until fans can actually see some results.

Teams may pay their players based on potential, but fans judge them by results.

For Edwards, the results have been a mixed bag and really are at the heart of the fans' frustrations. To this point, everyone has seen enough to know that residing somewhere deep in the recesses of Edwards is a pretty gifted player just waiting to emerge. Edward
When that player emerges, which he has on
occasion, the team is almost transformed. s
as a legitimate weapon opens up so many other possibilities with this offense.

Last season in many ways was a cause for celebration and Edwards was often at the center of it. He put together a legitimately great season that was recognized by everyone, including the fans and peers that voted him to the Pro Bowl.

But the yang to that yin is this season. Except for some infrequent visits, the good Edwards has been mostly absent. Maybe
it was the preseason injury, minor though it was.

Maybe it was simple immaturity on his behalf.

But in the end it doesn't really matter.

Edwards' performance in 2007 set a bar that he hasn't come close to achieving this season frustrating the front office, his teammates and fans in equal measures.

Edwards has never much helped his cause either by his often illogical and ill-timed rants, the latest serving as just the most recent example. When Edwards

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was literally costing his team games this season by his inability to simply catch a ball thrown right to him, he stewed in the locker room and made himself unavailable to the media.

The minute he has any sort of accomplishment, he seemingly can't wait to open up.

All any of this does, though, is paint a somewhat incomplete portrait of a man who may be too complex for his own good.

Edwards may be egocentric and illogical in his thinking, but he is well spoken. He can be charitable to a fault, which is never a bad thing.

But too often he also comes across as not merely brash but entitled.

He's not necessarily wrong when he essentially suggests that fans should take into account the entire measure of him and not his performance in any given day.

But it's incredibly naïve to believe that all things are created equal.

For the fans, particularly Cleveland fans, it comes down to two things. They want their players to want to be here and they want their players to perform well.

Bernie Kosar, who came from Miami via Boardman, embodies exactly what it takes to win over this town.

He made his intentions to play for the Browns clear in college and manipulated the system to make it happen.

But all of that would have been for naught if he hadn't performed on the field.

He did.

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Edwards, while not being the polar opposite of Kosar, is enough of a contrast to help set the parameters. He's never come across as someone who particularly wants to be here. Conversely he's never publicly criticized the city, either. Mostly he comes off as indifferent to his locale, that Cleveland just happens to be where he drops his passes because that's the team that's currently paying him.

It could easily have been Denver or Tampa Bay for that matter.

Secondly, he hasn't shown enough on the field in a consistent fashion, game to game and season to season, for the fans to ignore his locational indifference. It's hard to really know if that would ever really be enough anyway, but in the end it would make a big difference.

If anything is certain, though, it's that the path Edwards is on right now is never going to work. He simply can't berate these fans into either embracing him or appreciating him. For that to occur it's going to happen on the fans' terms, not his. And the first step of many starts with understanding the distance between his perception and the reality.

The second comes with spending less time defending his alma mater and more time catching the damn ball.