

## Wake Us When It's Over

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The Cleveland Browns and the Cincinnati Bengals entered Sunday's game with a combined win total of six. About the only thing certain is that the win total would be seven when it was over and combined the teams would still have less win than the Miami Dolphins. As Charlie Brown would say "good grief." For the record, the Browns lost their fifth straight and sixth of their last seven, 14-0. It was also the Browns' seventh loss in their last nine games against the pitiful Bengals, as much a reason Romeo Crennel will be fired as any else. Gary delivers the painful news in his latest.



Ohio is one of the most talent rich spots in the nation for football talent and this is all they have to show for it on the professional level? The Cleveland Browns and the Cincinnati Bengals entered Sunday's game with a combined win total of six and an assurance that about the only two things that would be certain once it ended was that the combined win total would be seven and it would still be lower than that of the Miami Dolphins.

Both are now officially true.

For the record, the Bengals beat the Browns 14-0 in front of a small, windy, cold Cleveland crowd that can now take to their graves the fact that they if they were able to stay awake throughout they saw Romeo Crennel's last appearance in Cleveland as a head coach. It was the Browns 5<sup>th</sup> straight loss and 7<sup>th</sup> loss in their last 9 games against the Bengals, as much a reason as any that Crennel won't get to continue his head coaching career in Cleveland next year.

If the game was about pride, it was hard to tell. From this vantage point it looked more like one of those early season baseball games when both teams are swinging at the first pitch just hoping to get it over in two hours or less.

Though not even the final score would matter, there was the little issue to resolve as to whether the Browns' offense could find the end zone for the first time since Saturday Night Live used to be funny.

They didn't.

It's now been nearly 21 quarters and counting.

Ken Dorsey started for the third straight game for the Browns, subbing for an injured Brady Quinn. Dorsey was hoping to improve on that 0 touchdowns, 4 interceptions, 44% completion, 34.rating body of work he's put together to date. He didn't. He was 10-17 for 68 yards and three interceptions.

Meanwhile, for the Bengals Ryan Fitzpatrick was starting his 11<sup>th</sup> straight game for the injured Carson Palmer.

In that time Fitzpatrick's compiled a comparatively impressive 69 rating on the strength of a mere 3 touchdown passes against only 4 interceptions.

It's the kind of stats that scream "we're afraid to put him in a position to make a play."

If only the Browns were that cautious with Dorsey.

For all practical purposes this game was over early, very early. On the Browns' first possession, and after moving the ball effectively on the ground, offensive coordinator Rob Chudzinski once again thought being a contrarian would catch a team off guard.

It didn't.

He sent Dorsey back for an ill-advised pass, ill-advised not only because it was windy, but ill-advised because it was Dorsey.

And of course in a season where everything is bound to go wrong, cornerback Leon Hall stepped right in front of the pass and took it back 50 yards to help give the Bengals a quick 7-0 lead.

It would be hard to call a one touchdown lead by the Bengals with less than half the first quarter gone insurmountable but it sure seemed like it. When Braylon Edwards put the Browns in an all but impossible third and long with another interference penalty on the very next drive, the point seemed even more obvious.

As a measure of how truly awful the Browns' rushing defense really is, the Bengals had no intention of throwing the ball unless absolutely necessary, and that was before Chad

Johnson was put on the inactive list for the game because of a hamstring injury and even before that 7-0 lead. Yet the Browns' defense was essentially helpless to stop a Bengals' ground game that was 29

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in the league coming into the game.

In the first half alone, Benson had well over 100 yards rushing.

Benson was running mostly unmolested from the Bengals' first series on. But that steady diet ended up yielding only 7 points for a Bengals' offense that is nearly as pitiful as the Browns at this point.

The Bengals' second series was a measure of futility in its own right. Benson was 46 yards into a run and seemingly on his way to the end zone when cornerback Eric Wright knocked the ball loose. Wright returned it 15 yards before eventually fumbling himself. However, on a challenge Wright was ruled down by contact, giving the Browns the ball at their own 26-yard line.

It was the Browns 30

th

takeaway on the season, a league high.

But taking advantage of turnovers is not a core competency of this team and so it wasn't on this day either, so it shouldn't have much worried even the Bengals. After a couple of first downs, Dave Zastudil, bum knee and all, was able to pin the Bengals deep in their own territory. It didn't last.

As opportunistic as the Browns' defense has been all season, their downfall too often has been the combined inability to stop the run and to hold a team on third down.

The Bengals' ensuing drive, their only decent drive of the day, featured both and ended up putting the game well out of reach.

Even as Benson was chewing up yardage, the Browns' defense still was able to put the Bengals in

third-and-long five different times. Each time though the Bengals were able to convert, including a run by Fitzpatrick after he dropped the snap while in the shotgun.

The final blow came on a 3  
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and 7 from the Browns' 20 yard line.

Fitzpatrick found Chris Henry sprinting down the right side and past Wright for an easy touchdown that helped push the Bengals lead to 14-0.

It was at this point that it was worth asking why Crennel kept marching Dorsey back out on the field. When it's impossible for things to get worse, why not take a chance, however slight, that things might get better? Put in Bruce Gradkowski.

Line Josh Cribbs up behind center every play.

Anything.

Give the fans a reason, any reason, to keep watching.

But Crennel is stubborn if nothing else and the fans don't get a vote so Dorsey was still in the game, handing the ball off to Jamal Lewis and displaying all the body language of someone who himself knew he had no more business being in the game than owner Randy Lerner. Which is pretty much how Dorsey then played, throwing one ball deliberately, apparently, at the feet of Jerome Harrison on a screen pass and causing a delay of game on another.

Three plays later Zastudil was back in punting.

A perfunctory challenge by Crennel as to whether returner T.J. Houshmandzadeh touched the ball before Cleveland recovered was unsuccessful.

If you're looking for metaphors, that's as good as any other.

The Bengals were not necessarily doing anything special and weren't playing substantially better, which is why the game had all the excitement of your kid's Christmas concert. It's just that the Browns couldn't stop Benson as he ran through tackle after tackle. But on the Bengals' last drive before the half, the Browns' defense were eventually able to hold Benson long enough to force a field goal attempt, which missed spectacularly.

Taking over with just over a minute left, the Browns were at least able to do something they hadn't done all game, run a play in Cincinnati territory.

But it too was for naught when Dorsey was

sacked and time ran out.

Starting the second half, the Browns decided that maybe they ought to try using Lewis like the Bengals were using Benson. As a strategy it was more successful than anything else the Browns had tried to that point.

But unlike the Bengals, when the Browns were forced into 3  
rd

and long, they couldn't convert.

Fortunately and for reasons only defensive tackle Jonathan Fanene's agent can answer for other teams in the offseason, his client roughed Dorsey giving the Browns a first down at the Bengals' 28-yard line.

But it was a mistake forgotten one play later when Dorsey threw his second interception to

Hall killing their best drive of the game.

It's not that the interception ultimately cost the Browns anything other than a decent chance to get a touchdown on offense for the first time in almost 20 quarters. But it was notable for two reasons-the poor decision Dorsey made that was set up by the poor route Edwards ran.

Edwards couldn't be more wrong.

He is completely appreciated.

Ask Dorsey.

The Browns did cross the 50-yard line on

their next series as well but to much the same effect. A few plays forward, a penalty and a sack back and next thing you know it was 3<sup>rd</sup> and 25 from the Bengals (!) 48-yard line.

You would have thought with nothing to lose and even less to play for the Browns might try something on 4<sup>th</sup>

and 16.

They did, a Zastudil punt that he kicked into the end zone.

As if it really matters at this point, halfway through the fourth quarter Chudzinski played the contrarian card again and to the same effect as earlier.

Dorsey, summoning all of his arm strength, heaved the ball well downfield and sort of in the direction of Edwards.

We now know that Edwards can run faster than Dorsey can throw it.

Hall, who else, stepped in front of the dying duck of a pass for his third interception of the game. Either Chudzinski was calling the play out of some sort of cruel joke on the Browns' front office on his way out of town or he's just nuts. Hall returned it 27 yards to the Cleveland 40-yard line.

But finally the Browns caught on that the

Bengals would be giving the ball to Benson and stacked the box accordingly.

The Bengals were forced to punt.

It mattered little.

The fourth quarter was half over, the Browns had the ball on their 18-yard line and were down two touchdowns and hadn't scored in a month.

And of course it didn't matter, except that Chudzinski kept having Dorsey pass and eventually it cost the team its third quarterback when Dorsey went down with an injury. Gradkowski came in with

3:38 left in the game and overshot Edwards on his first pass.

He hit Donte Stallworth on his second and then Bengals linebacker Keith Rivers with his next.

As auditions go, it was as auspicious as anything else this season.

The Bengals then tried to do everyone a favor and ran out the clock, but Crennel, fighting to the end, kept calling time outs.

Apparently he wanted to see more of Gradkowski, which he could have if he had simply put him in earlier, say after Dorsey's first interception.

Eventually, though, and without much fanfare a game that didn't matter much when it started mattered even less when it finally finished.

With the loss the Browns closed out the home piece of their schedule at 1-7, a complete reversal from last season. It was well deserved, accomplished through an admixture of bad coaching, bad playing, enough penalties to last two seasons and four different quarterbacks.

The Browns now close out the away part of their schedule next week against the Pittsburgh Steelers, who already have secured a playoff game at home, despite their loss to the Tennessee Titans.

Even with a Steelers' team playing for nothing more than to avoid injury it doesn't look to be a good day for the Browns. If this offense couldn't score against the Bengals' defense, it's hard to imagine that even Vegas would give odds on the Browns' offense scoring against the Steelers.