

Lingering Items - Bengals Edition

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Friday, December 26 2008 7:00 PM -

The Browns season comes to a merciful end tomorrow when they head over to Pittsburgh for a game many Browns fans will not have the stomach to watch. In this week's Lingering Items, Gary talks about the Browns/Steelers "rivalry" and what years of ineptitude from the Browns has done to it. Gary also talks about the scoreless streak, Ken Dorsey, and the effect injuries have played this season.



Listening to Kevin Harlan and Rich Gannon broadcast last week's Cleveland Browns-Cincinnati Bengals game, you would have thought that the story of the Browns dismal season is wrapped up in merely a series of unfortunate injuries. If only that were the case.

The Browns do have 11 players on injured reserve at the moment, which is plenty. But on closer look, it's hard for anyone to conclude that this is the reason the team regressed so dramatically from the year before.

There are 3 quarterbacks on injured reserve, but the season was long gone before the first one, Derek Anderson, found his way there. When Brady Quinn ended up there all it did was cut short the time he had to demonstrate that he should have been the starter all along. Ken Dorsey was placed on injured reserve just a few days ago.

Similar stories abound with the rest of the players. Indeed, of all the players on

the list, the one that stands out as having the most impact is Ryan Tucker. Tucker, for all practical purposes, missed the entire season. He was out early, came back for a few quarters and was gone again. His absence disrupted the chemistry of a line that played nearly as well as any team's line in 2007. This season, without Tucker, the offensive line is struggling to be average.

With Tucker out, the Browns were forced to play Rex Hadnot. All he did was underscore that the Browns have a new area of need-right guard. Hadnot is far more suited as a back up, nothing more. Tucker is a 12-year veteran and while he has vowed to return, counting on him doing so and then playing at a high level would be foolish. Age and injuries take their toll on everyone, no more so than linemen. If the Browns end up going into next season with Hadnot as the starter, don't look for any significant improvement on the offensive line.

Some may argue that losing defensive lineman Robaire Smith early in the season hurt the team as well, particularly the running game. That could be, but Shaun Rogers and Corey Williams, the two players counted on to stop the run, played most of the season. Each suffered his share of bumps and bruises that at time limited their playing time and effectiveness. Having Smith around would have helped the depth.

But Smith's injury wasn't the reason the run defense fell apart. Simply, it was the fact that the Browns don't have a credible complement of linebackers and that was before Antwan Peek landed on injured reserve. If the point of the 3-4 is to give the linebackers more freedom to make plays, then the counterpoint is that without linebackers plays won't get made until opposing runners make it to the defensive backfield. It's no coincidence that 5 of the top 8 players with the most tackles on this team are in the defensive backfield.

The overall point, though, is that injuries happen to every team. Teams built with some depth find a way to overcome them. Teams without depth underscore the injuries as a way of diverting attention from the far broader problems.

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Speaking of a lack of depth, it's hard to fault a team for not being three deep at quarterback, but it's still worth asking how Ken Dorsey has remained in the league since 2003.

Dorsey is the perfect example of why the position of general manager can be so trying at times.

On paper, Dorsey would seem to have everything it takes to be a star quarterback in the league. He had the pedigree of a major college program and nearly unparalleled success at that level. As every announcer has told us since Dorsey took over for an injured Brady Quinn, Dorsey compiled a 38-2 record as a starter with the Hurricanes. In short, he would seem to be a general manager's dream pick, or at least the dream pick of every fan playing general manager in his own mind.

The real general managers in the league had Dorsey pegged as a late round choice, which is what he was. The San Francisco 49ers may have thought they had lucked into a gem in Dorsey when they picked him in the 7th round in 2003 but as it turns out, whoever had Dorsey being drafted at all was being overly optimistic.

Despite possessing a good football mind and the physical skills to compete at the NFL level, Dorsey lacks the one attribute that is absolutely critical, arm strength. He can't throw very far down field and he can't throw very hard across it either. More than anything else over the last three weeks, Dorsey proved that he doesn't belong in the league, unless it's on the sidelines in dress pants and wearing a head set.

It's still rather stunning when you think about it that Dorsey was completely unable to lead this team to a touchdown while serving as its starter. In fact, he never really came all that close to getting the ball in the end zone. Had Dorsey been able to suit up this week, there's little doubt that another shut out was inevitable. There simply is nothing about his game that an opposing defense needs to respect.

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Speaking of respect, it's possible that the Pittsburgh Steelers and their head coach, Mike Tomlin, will take it easy on the Browns this week, but don't count on it. With nothing to play for, it would be hard to believe that the Steelers would still take the Browns lightly, for at least two reasons.

First, the chance to add on to a 10-game winning streak against the Browns is awful enticing, even for professional athletes. Second, even without that motivation the Steelers still well remember how they were the afterthought in the preseason while the Browns were the sexy choice to win the AFC North. The Steelers didn't take well to that talk then and while they have more than answered the critics since there's nothing wrong with rubbing it in, either.

The real problem with the Browns' losing streak against the Steelers is that it has basically eviscerated a once great rivalry. Browns fans may still hate the Steelers but it has nothing to do with anything that's happened recently. It's simply tradition at this point with its genesis fading into distant memories.

Indeed, outside of maybe Hines Ward and Ben Roethlisberger, most Browns fans don't even bother to get to know the names of their former rival anymore. My guess is that hard core Browns fans can name more Steelers from the 1970s than they can on this year's team. At this point the Steelers are just another team that regularly uses the Browns to pad their own stats twice a year.

In many ways, what's happened with the Cleveland-Pittsburgh rivalry is the same thing that's happened with the Ohio State-Michigan rivalry. At any point in which one team becomes dominant in the series, it ceases to be a rivalry until the other team is able to mount a credible comeback.

The Browns-Steelers rivalry is not going to be resurrected by a Browns win every couple of years. It's only going to be resurrected once the Browns become a credible franchise and the games between the two teams take on some legitimate meaning.

When the schedule makers put together this season's slate they probably thought that a season ending Browns-Steelers game could very well be for the AFC North crown. As it turns out, it's just another chance to remind Browns' fans how long it's been since the match up meant anything.

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Given that the Browns' offense is plumbing the depths of history at this

point with their scoreless streak, this week's question to ponder was going to be some variation of how badly do you think the Browns would lose to the winless Detroit Lions? But that question already is getting a healthy debate on the various message boards and, personally, I think the score would be at least 21-0 in favor of the Lions.

Thus, we'll turn our attention to all the holes that have been revealed on this team and simply ask: If you were the Browns' new general manager, what would be your first priority?