

Rock Bottom

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Saturday, December 27 2008 7:00 PM -

The game was meaningless but in the end, the Cleveland Browns took another weekly beating, this time at the hands of a former rival, the Pittsburgh Steelers, losing 31-0. In losing in embarrassing fashion the Browns ended one of the worst seasons in franchise history and will embark on their latest extreme makeover, possibly as early as Monday morning. But on the plus side, Jamal Lewis went over the 1,000 yard rushing season, a lone bright spot in a miserable game and a miserable season. Meanwhile, the Steelers may be without Ben Roethlisberger for the playoffs. Gary details all in his latest.



When two NFL teams with nothing to play for match up on one final meaningless Sunday in December, it can look an awful lot like one final meaningless preseason game in early September. But two things that weren't meaningless in the Cleveland Browns' 31-0 loss to the Pittsburgh Steelers on Sunday were the injury to Steelers' quarterback Ben Roethlisberger and the NFL record the Browns established.

They now own the longest streak for not scoring an offensive touchdown, which they tied by halftime and owned for good when the third quarter expired.

And to add a little icing on top of that, they are now the first team in Browns' history to be shut out in consecutive games. Well done.

With the loss, the Browns close out one of the worst seasons in franchise history in the most embarrassing fashion possible, a one-sided blowout against a now former rival. It was a season that started with expectations and degenerated almost from the outset as the result of bad coaching, bad playing and a lack of professionalism and pride by too many players who acted as if just showing up was enough.

It was fitting, though, that the two Browns' players with the most pride, Jamal Lewis and Josh Cribbs, at least had one last chance to distinguish themselves. Cribbs did so through nothing more than his usual returning kicks, making tackles on special teams, running the ball on offense and occasionally passing the ball.

He even completed one.

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Lewis, who said this has been the worst season he's ever experienced, at least ended the season with more than 1,000 yards rushing thanks to his 94 yards on 23 carries.

The Browns thus ended the season 4-12, won only one division game, and generally showed the rest of the NFL that last season's 10-6 team was an abject fraud. The only way the Browns see a primetime game next season is if the league passes a rule that every team must play at least one Thursday, Sunday or Monday night game. Otherwise, get ready for a steady diet of Sundays at 1:00 p.m. or 4:00 p.m. next season with an alternating announcing crew of Kevin Harland and Rich Gannon or Gus Johnson and Steve Tasker.

It's what the NFL and the networks conspire to do when a team makes them look foolish.

The small matter of Sunday's game for the Browns was mostly just a matter of taking one final beating and heading back to Cleveland to await the fates of head coach Romeo Crennel and general manager Phil Savage and an announcement of a new regime. For the Steelers, it was more a matter of winning in whatever fashion and getting through unscathed.

While the Browns, as usual, met expectations, the Steelers did not and as a result their playoff chances may be in serious jeopardy. With 1:48 left in the first half Roethlisberger went down hard and stayed down with an apparent concussion. With Steelers players and fans alike looking almost in disbelief, Roethlisberger had to be strapped to a board and carted off, giving a thumbs up in the process.

But as he made his way in the tunnel, he may have taken with him the rest of the Steelers' season.

After all, it's not as if they get to play the Browns in the playoffs.

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The Browns quarterback du jour, their fourth of the season, was Bruce Gradkowski, a high school legend in Cleveland and a legend of sorts with the Toledo Rockets. At least he was an upgrade from his predecessor, Ken Dorsey, which is like saying that Paul Hubbard is an upgrade from Syndric Steptoe.

But in the end, he could do no more than Dorsey, he just looked better doing it.

On the Browns' first possession Gradkowski's completed his first pass to Donte Stallworth, making Gradkowski the first Cleveland quarterback to actually find Stallworth open early in a game. His second pass, on the run, went to Braylon Edwards.

But like so many before him, Gradkowski wasn't able to sustain a drive that had started with some promise forcing the Browns to attempt a 53-yard field goal on 4th and 3 from the Pittsburgh 36-yard line.

Phil Dawson, the first Browns' kicker to have 30 field goals in a season, was wide left.

If this game had meant something, it might be worth asking head coach Romeo Crennel why he didn't try for the first down instead.

But it is far too late in this season to even care about another poor strategic decision.

The Steelers, on the other hand, for all their professed desire to beat the Browns, looked like a team early on that was simply going through the motions. Their first drive ended with a punt and their second drive ended when Roethlisberger threw an interception to safety Sean Jones from the Browns' 20-yard line.

On their third drive, the Steelers looked to have capitalized on a key third down pass interference call on cornerback Eric Wright when Roethlisberger found Nate Washington two plays later for a 41-yard touchdown, but their third holding call of the game nullified that score and pushed the Steelers into a 3rd-and 21 that they couldn't convert. Still the Steelers hardly seemed panicked.

Head coach Mike Tomlin looked like he may have been balancing his checkbook on the sidelines.

After the Browns put together their eleventy-hundreth straight non-descript drive that ended in a punt the Steelers finally did break through with a little over 4 minutes remaining in the half and in a way that was familiar to Browns' fans, a long run by an opposing running back. This time it was Willie Parker easing his way through a porous Cleveland defense on his way to a 34-yard touchdown run that helped give the Steelers a 7-0 lead.

With what time remained in the half, it would then be up to the Steelers defense, the unit rated number one in the league, to send the Browns into the record books. They were more than up to the task, although the Browns helped them out with a holding call that effectively assured them of their place in the Dubious Achievements Hall of Fame.

It is worth noting that on that "drive" the Browns actually caught a break. A clear catch and fumble by tight end Martin Rucker, which was returned by the Steelers for a touchdown, was ruled incomplete. Tomlin, still trying to figure out who in his family wrote a check for \$34.95 to Best Buy, didn't look up from balancing his checkbook long enough to challenge the call.

It's what passes for professional courtesy in the coaching fraternity.

But Tomlin's indifference ended a few minutes later with the Roethlisberger injury. Byron Leftwich took over and was able to finish the drive Roethlisberger had started and helped push the lead to 14-0 halftime lead with a 12-yard scramble.

It would have been nice to write that absolutely nothing of note transpired the rest of the game and for awhile that looked to be true. But then Gradkowski threw the obligatory Cleveland backup quarterback interception from deep in his own territory that for a moment looked like it would be returned for a touchdown. But his luck was only momentarily better than Dorsey's. The throw, intended for Jerome Harrison apparently, instead went to safety Tyrone Carter who was tackled at the Cleveland 18-yard line.

Leftwich couldn't convert from there and instead the Steelers

had to settle for a Jeff Reed 27-yard field goal that pushed the lead to 17-0.

By this point, offensive coordinator Rob Chudzinski had all but abandoned any hope of scoring and instead continued to focus on two things: finding a way to let Josh Cribbs throw the ball and helping running back Jamal Lewis get to 1,000 yards rushing for the season. He was successful on both counts. With 4:12 left in the third quarter, Cribbs hit Rucker on an 8-yard pass.

Lewis, who had entered the game with 908 yards, had close to 70 more by the end of the third quarter and would need another 22 or so with slightly more than a quarter to play.

It would be a nail biter.

Meanwhile the Steelers were busy putting the final touches on their dominating win. First they put together an 88-yard drive capped off by a 3-yard run by Gary Russell for the touchdown that led to a 24-0 Steelers lead. Moments later, the ghost of Dorsey rose up and bit Gradkowski on the arm as Carter had his second interception of the game, this time returning it 32 yards for a touchdown that ran the score to 31-0. It was a pass that Lewis should have caught but instead deflected

right into Carter's hands for the easy touchdown.

Back to Lewis. Sandwiched into between the two Steelers touchdowns was a 12-yard run by Lewis that gave him 81 yards for the game.

There was still nearly 9 minutes to play and plenty of time to get over 1,000 yards for the season.

When the Browns found themselves at 4

th

down and 4 from their own 27-yard line with just over two minutes remaining, Crennel showed some real decency by eschewing a meaningless punt and giving Lewis one more attempt at cracking the 1,000 yard mark.

Lewis came through, got the first down and ended the game with 94 yards and 1,002 on the season.

Lewis was then removed for precautionary reasons.

Best move of the day.

The question now being asked, of course, is where the Browns go from here. In one sense, the answer is easy. Nearly anything would be an improvement.

In a grander sense, the answer is far more difficult and one which owner Randy Lerner hasn't ever been able to

solve.

There's no reason to really believe that will change.

But one thing is for certain, even as the carnage of this past season is tallied up. No matter who is hired, Browns fans will return to Berea next summer, like the buzzards to Hinckley, armed with hope and outsized expectations.

It's a far better scenario than either Lerner or Savage, if he remains, deserves.