

As It Stands Again - Defensive Backs

Written by {ga=davekolonich}
Monday, July 06 2009 7:00 PM -

In the seventh part of his "As It Stands Again" series, where he breaks down the 2009 Browns, position by position ... Dave Kolonich moves on to the team's defensive backs today. Eric Wright and Brandon McDonald return as the starting corners. Abe Elam replaces Sean Jones, and will presumably start next to Brodney Pool. Rod Hood and Hank Poteat were signed for depth, Mike Adams and Nick Sorenson return, and Don Carey and Coye Francies were drafted in the sixth round. Dave takes a look at the unit. The following is Part Seven of a series profiling the most essential positions that will determine success for the Browns in 2009. So far, the rankings have broken down like this:

- [1. Linebackers](#)
- [2. Defensive Line](#)
- [3. Wide Receivers](#)
- [4. Offensive Line](#)
- [5. Running Backs](#)
- [6. Quarterbacks](#)

The basis behind these rankings is as follows....First, the Browns' most significant weakness since returning to the league in 1999 (besides inept front office management) has been the play of the defensive front seven. Until the Browns can solve their annually porous run defense and create some version of a pass rush, the team will continue to flounder.

The rest of the rankings reflect the absence of depth at key positions, as the current receiver and running back corps are amongst the worst in the franchise's recent history. Receiver and running back are separated only by the offensive line, which although vitally important to the Browns' success, seems to be stable heading into 2009.

The surprise among many readers is the ranking of the Browns' quarterbacks as low on the list of positions that will determine success in 2009. I have taken this stance purely to show that success at the quarterback position will largely be a result of the overall production generated by the rest of the offense.

Which leads us to the defensive backs...

Much like the success of Brady Quinn or Derek Anderson will result from an improved offensive line, revamped running game and from the hopefully sticky hands of inconsistent receivers, the Browns' secondary will benefit from increased production by the defensive front seven.

I am not stating that defensive backs are not essential to the overall play of the

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defense, but what goes on some ten to twenty yards in front of the secondary (or 30, in Romeo Crennel's case) will either help to elevate the performance of Eric Wright, Abe Elam and company...or force them to play another frustrating year of soft zone defense.



Fortunately for the Browns, the arrival of Eric Mangini, who served as Bill Belichick's defensive backs coach and Rob Ryan, who has experience coaching

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several different defensive schemes, should help the Browns secondary grow into a more effective unit in 2009. Of course, it is the first week of July as these words are being typed, which naturally reflects the optimist sentiment ingrained in all Browns fans during the weeks leading up to the season.

So, in saying that....the Browns are Super Bowl bound. Right?

I'm guessing the combination of fanciful summer dreams and the arrival of yet another new regime has gotten my hopes up for the future. However, I'm not sure that 2009 will be the culmination of these Super Bowl aspirations. In viewing the current roster, while realizing that Eric Mangini is merely in the infant stages of rebuilding the team in his own vision, I have to wonder what the future of the secondary holds for Cleveland.

Or, in other words...let's skip ahead two seasons and envision that Eric Mangini is entering his third year as Browns head coach. Regardless of his on-field success during the first two years of his tenure, you have to imagine that the roster has experienced a wealth of turnover. Using the secondary as a prime example, which of the following potential 2009 players will still be on the roster in 2011?

Eric Wright
Brandon McDonald
Rod Hood
Corey Ivy
Hank Poteat
Coye Francies
Don Carey
Gerard Lawson
Abe Elam
Brodney Pool
Mike Adams
Nick Sorensen

The idealist in me can picture Wright, McDonald, Pool, Elam, Adams, Francies and Carey all surviving to become a vital part of the Browns' defensive future. All these players, with the exception of Adams, bring youth, athleticism and untapped potential to the roster. However, in reality, is likely that only Wright, Elam and possibly Carey will be long-term, productive members of the Browns.

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So in giving that precocious speculation, what is the likelihood of success for the group in 2009? The simple prediction is that the secondary spots will essentially be filled by a collection of stop gaps. The likes of McDonald, Pool, Hood and others are temporary fixes, until Mangini finds some younger, more dynamic talent via the draft.

Looking at Mangini's tenure with the Jets, it is very likely that a top flight cornerback will be selected within the next two years. Much like the selection of Alex Mack reflected Mangini's previous drafts, which netted the Jets D'Brickashaw Ferguson and Nick Mangold, look for our new general to seek out a Cleveland version of Darrelle Revis in the coming years.

If the Browns could add a true top-flight cornerback, then the play of Eric Wright, Brandon McDonald and others in the secondary could be elevated to levels not seen since the days of Dixon and Minnifield...or possibly, the days of Langham and Griffin. Until more help arrives, the 2009 version of the Browns' defensive backs remains unsettled. Although there is some talent here, it is largely misplaced.



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Heading into 2009, the likes of Eric Wright and Brandon McDonald now have two years of NFL experience under their belts. However, both of the Browns' projected starting corners still have some growing to do. In the case of McDonald, his impressive 2007 play, when he filled in due to injuries, led many to believe that he was a future star at corner. However, thanks to the limited depth at the position in 2008 (thanks again, Phil), McDonald was badly exposed in man coverage.

However, McDonald showed some great toughness by rebounding from a string of bad games and a mid-season benching (albeit a brief one), and improved during the last several games of the season. McDonald brings great athleticism to the position and has grown into a sure tackler, in an almost Daylon McCutcheon-esque manner. McCutcheon...I mean McDonald...certainly needs to improve against more physical receivers in order to become a true #2 corner. Again, the arrival of a top-flight corner would help the position in the future, as McDonald could flourish in a less demanding #3 role.

The same could be said of Eric Wright. Although Wright is currently the best option at the position, he is by no means a top corner. Of course, in terms of 2009, Wright has to again be counted on to cover the opposing team's best receiver. Wright brings good size, playmaking ability and range to the position. However, Wright's innate gambling instincts, which should be an attribute the turnover-minded Mangini will covet, can often get the third-year corner into trouble.

Wright seems to play at a level that is bigger than his current skill set can support. While his determination and confidence are exceptional, Wright has not reached the level of consistency that is required of such a corner. Hopefully, Mangini and Ryan can work to further develop Wright's play. Until then, the best chance of Wright becoming a quality corner lies in the drafting of the mythical top flight corner. Basically, Wright could become an exceptional #2 corner and could contribute several game-changing plays throughout the course of a season.

The wild card of the secondary in 2009 is Rod Hood. Hood brings some good experience to the position, having started 30 games in Arizona over the past two seasons. Entering Cleveland, Hood instantly becomes the biggest corner on the roster, which could help in terms of run support. Hood has shown some big play ability in the past, specifically in 2007, and offers an upgrade over McDonald. However, in looking to the future of the position, Hood could very well be a one and done type of player in Cleveland. If Hood starts and plays consistently, he will

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likely sign elsewhere in 2010.



Speaking of one and done, Mangini has employed a depth-building strategy similar to the offseason work done on the offensive line and among the linebacking corps. To shore up depth, Mangini brought in the ageless Hank Poteat and well-traveled Corey Ivy. Of the two veterans, Ivy could contribute in 2009, both in dime packages and on special teams.

The fate of Poteat should be determined by how quickly Hood and the rookies assimilate into the new system during training camp. If no one steps up in camp, then Poteat's history with Mangini suggests that he could get a look at a starting

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position. And yes, I am very afraid. After all, the last time most Browns fans thought about Hank Poteat was when Kelly Holcomb was torching him in the playoffs years ago.

The first draft of the Mangini era brings the likes of Don Carey and Coye Francies to Berea. Both Carey and Francies played at smaller colleges and both offer some good size and presumably, intelligence. Reports from OTA's and minicamp suggest that Carey has impressed the coaching staff by quickly learning and applying the team's playbook. Carey's size (5-11, 192 lbs.), smarts and fluid motion make him an ideal candidate for the team's future. However, considering the volume of players at the position, Carey and Francies could spend 2009 on the practice squad.

The arrival of Abe Elam at safety could be viewed solely as a reflection of Mangini's desire to stock the roster with players familiar to his coaching style and system. However, Elam could finally bring the physical presence the team has lacked at the safety spot in recent years. While Elam is not an ideal deep coverage safety (Buffalo's Lee Evans was sorry to see him go), he may help the Browns' run defense and also offer a much-needed blitz option. Based on his familiarity with Mangini's system, Elam could start the season strong and continue to improve as he gets his first real starting experience in the NFL.

The fulcrum of the secondary could very well be the play of Brodney Pool. Pool has been a mystery of sorts throughout his short career. He certainly brings athleticism to the position, but seems to lack awareness at times. The mental aspect of Pool's play has to improve in order for the Browns' secondary to become a cohesive unit. Watching Pool progress throughout training camp should be interesting to watch, especially after Ryan recently admitted some doubts regarding the personnel at the position, which includes little depth after the fiery Mike Adams.

IDEALLY....

Mangini's coaching experience, combined with a more aggressive Rob Ryan defense reduces the pressure that usually confronts the Browns's secondary. Eric Wright's development continues and Rod Hood helps to solidify the starting lineup. Brandon McDonald's reduced role helps him channel his 2007 production, while Don Carey becomes the rookie surprise of the team. The safety position is bolstered by good health, as Abe Elam flourishes as a starter and Brodney Pool

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becomes a serviceable option. Finally, Corey Ivy and Hank Poteat offer one final year of production before drawing social security checks.

BUT REALLY....

The Browns' cornerbacks continue to struggle, as Wright continues to show that he is not a true #1 corner, McDonald continues to get picked on and we all realize why no other team signed Hood during the offseason. The rookie corners spend the year on the practice squad, at best, offering no help in 2009. While Abe Elam helps the run defense, the deep secondary is exposed throughout the year, as Brodney Pool never catches onto Mangini's system. Corey Ivy suffers from a gait disorder, while Hank Poteat is found wandering around East Third, shirtless and confused.

While there is some potential found among the Browns' defensive backs in 2009, their success will likely be determined by the play of the team's defensive front seven. If Mangini and Ryan can truly implement more aggressive schemes, then the pressure on the secondary should be reduced, leaving them in a position to make some plays throughout the season. Yet, despite the talent in front of the secondary, the current collection of defensive backs is still a work in progress. The arrival of talent via the draft over the next few years will likely signal a better sense of improvement than the version we could see in 2009.