

Browns Camp: Mild Relief & Guarded Optimism Edition

Written by {ga=davekolonich}

Monday, August 03 2009 7:00 PM -

In case there are still some Browns fans clinging to the disbelief that Eric Mangini is now running the show in Berea, the opening weekend of training camp should firmly establish that there is not only a new boss in town, but a brand new philosophy of football coming to the Lakefront. Dave Kolonich was out at camp this weekend observing the new edition of the Browns in person, and pens about what he saw in his latest column for us.



In case there are still some Browns fans clinging to the disbelief that Eric Mangini is now running the show in Berea, the opening weekend of training camp should firmly establish that there is not only a new boss in town, but a brand new philosophy of football coming to the Lakefront. Pardon my brief respite of homerism, as the calendar has barely dipped into August, but already there are some striking differences being shown in Camp Mangini, as compared to recent years.

The most telling sign of the new Browns climate can be simply represented by the amount of players active on opening weekend. With the obvious exception of Braylon Edwards and the curious case of Coye Francies, the only other Browns to not practice full speed were veterans Steve Heiden and Robaire Smith, both of whom are still recovering from off-season surgery. The presence of so many bodies, including all of the team's 2009 draft picks suggests that the initial tone of Camp Mangini has already been established; the tenants of which are accountability and effort.

With few exceptions, the Browns blazed through a morning practice, showing some outstanding intensity, particularly in the blocking drills, which featured some mid-season contact. While the Saturday evening edition was a bit sloppier at times, it was apparent that most of the roster realizes that they are truly competing for a job in 2009.

In terms of accountability, watching several Browns players run laps during the evening session was probably the most welcome sight coming from Berea in years. Although Mangini certainly has his detractors, the polar shift in terms of instilling discipline throughout the team affirms the idea that the Browns will, at the least, become a smarter and more physical team under our new czar.

Plus, it was great to see the return of Lee Suggs.

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Another striking detail regarding the infant stages of camp is the realization that Mangini's assistant coaches are on board in transforming a mentally soft team into a more hardened competitor. While Mangini himself was mostly invisible during camp drills, his assistants, notably George Warhop and Rick Lyle, were intense throughout.

I realize I may need to slow down a bit, considering what has transpired over the past 48 hours is a mere prelude to the cold reality about to surface, which is a bitter realization that the 2009 Browns are a major work in progress. However, after the first days of camp, there are a few reasons to allow yourself a bit more optimism regarding our great franchise.

Brett Ratliff

Although again, I have to state that I am trying to avoid using idealist, homerish cliches regarding our team, the presence of Brett Ratliff is nothing, if not intriguing. Ratliff is certainly not physically imposing and obviously his track record as an NFL quarterback is almost non-existent. However, watching Ratliff in drills, I get the impression that Mangini may have plans for him in the future.

Ratliff has a smooth throwing motion and looks very fluid, at least during some roll-out passing drills. What is striking about Ratliff in comparison to Derek Anderson and Brady Quinn is that the likely #3 is an altogether different passer. Ratliff certainly shows more finesse, compared to DA, yet still delivers a very sharply thrown ball. In terms of movement, Ratliff seems like a more natural athlete, as compared to Quinn, who often looked kind of rigid in his movement.

Of course, these claims are being made after the first weekend of camp, when the quarterbacks were throwing balls behind an offensive line that consisted of trash cans. Obviously, the true test for what Ratliff can bring to the team in 2009, if anything, will be determined in live action. However, I feel fans have a reason to be tenuously optimistic regarding the afterthought in the Browns QB derby.

2008 Draft Picks

Speaking of afterthoughts, the largely forgotten draft class of 2008, which featured Martin Rucker and Beau Bell as the "top picks" both were very active during practice. Bell had one of the biggest pops during pass rushing drills, as his collision with Noah Herron registered clear across the Berea facility. It's easy to

forget Bell, thanks to his injury-riddled rookie season, but the second year backer is among the more physical players at his position.

Call it K2 Fatigue (once a soldier, always a soldier), but offseason visions of the Browns tight end position in 2009 seemed to only consist of more in-line players, such as Heiden and Robert Royal. However, Rucker's talents were on display during some drills, as he showed an impressive set of hands.

Rucker seems healed from his own plagued rookie campaign, as he easily outclassed defenders in getting to the ball. Despite these apparent skills, it remains to be seen what Rucker's role will be in 2009. Even with the Browns probably utilizing more two tight end sets, it seems that Heiden's blocking and Royal's experience will likely prevent early contributions from Rucker.

Wide Receiver Depth

Considering my season long advocacy mission regarding the depleted depth at wide receiver, I have to admit that there is a tiny glimmer of promise at the position in 2009. While Braylon Edwards peddled away, seemingly miles removed from the rest of the team, Brian Robiskie displayed some good hands and surprisingly quick feet during drills. While certainly not going so far to suggest that Robiskie is a future Hall of Famer, his body control while running routes faintly resembles the likes of Marvin Harrison. We can only hope.

As for the rest of the wideouts, there is some promise. While Jordan Norwood appeared lost and was chastised a few times during drills, Paul Hubbard was fairly impressive. Perhaps because Hubbard has essentially been a ghost so far in his short career, it is easy to forget that he has some impressive size and length. In the most ideal scenario possible, Hubbard could evolve into a red zone threat, based solely on his physical attributes.

Noah Herron

Although I was convinced that Noah Herron and Jason Wright essentially shared the same identity, both as players and holders of the same Social Security ID, Herron reminds me more of a lighter fullback. Herron definitely has good lower leg drive, as shown in the blocking drills, but is also very physical. While not an ideal blocker, as evidenced by his being beaten in a couple drills, Herron could easily win himself a role on special teams, particularly on kick coverage. Jason Wright

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he is not.

Also, Phil Dawson was good enough to show...however, he spent a large portion of practice staring down Parker Douglass.



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As I stated before, seeing players running laps and our starcrossed wideout training for next year's Tour de France were welcome signs during the first days of camp. Compared to the team's previous camp incarnations, which resembled more of a country club, it appears that Mangini is committed to building a smart, physical and focused team. The mere presence of Braylon on a stationary bike suggests that the days of Browns players/stars being catered to are over.

Further evidence of the new approach permeating throughout Berea were the quiet presences of both Josh Cribbs and Phil Dawson, along with the mildly intense Shaun Rogers. Looking back over the past months, it appeared that the Mangini tenure was off to a rocky start, based on Rogers' initial offseason unhappiness, coupled with the recent contract squabbles of Cribbs and Dawson. However, all players were present and accounted for, and there was little debate over who was in charge this weekend.