

## Your 2009 Cleveland Browns: Outside Linebackers

Written by {ga=mrburns}

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Real nice to get Nick Allburn back in the fold, one of our very good Browns writers these last couple of years. Nick's taking a look at our '09 Browns, position by position, as we steamroll towards the start of the season. Today he takes a look at the outside linebackers, considered by many fans to be one of the real weaknesses of this football team. Kam Wimbley and David Bowens project as the starters ... but can David Veikune and Alex Hall push them?



*Previous Previews:*

### [Running backs](#)

After taking our first look at the offense, let's switch gears and check out the linebackers. To make things a little easier to digest (and because they are two very different positions in the 3-4 defense), we'll look at the inside and outside linebackers separately, starting with the OLBs.

### **The Cast**

**Bonafide starter:** [Kamerion Wimbley](#)

**Possible starters:** [David Bowens](#) , [Alex Hall](#) , [David Veikune](#)

**On the bubble:** [Leon Williams](#) , [Titus Brown](#)

### **Glancing back...**

Last season was a massive disappointment for the entire defense, but if one part failed more than others, it had to be the outside linebackers. The OLBs are the play makers of the 3-4, and if they aren't getting to the quarterback consistently, then it's a safe bet that nobody else is, either.

Wimbley (right OLB) saw the field the most, while Willie McGinest received the bulk of the reps on the left side. Rookie Alex Hall took some playing time away

from McGinest, but mostly in passing situations. Many fans, including yours truly, wanted to see more from Hall, but Romeo Crennel was more likely to win a marathon than play a rookie.

Hall recorded a sack in three consecutive games (at Ravens, at Bengals, Giants) early in the season, but apparently that wasn't enough for him to earn more playing time opposite Wimbley. Antwan Peek, who was allegedly a great pass rusher, spent the season on the injured reserve. Peek still banked roughly \$2.4 million last year. (Another free agent bullseye, Phil.)

One of the most frustrating things about the Browns over the last two seasons has been the apparent regression of Kamerion Wimbley. After logging 11 sacks as a rookie in 2006 and appearing to be a keystone player, Wimbley's sack totals decreased to 5 in 2007, and 4 last season. After being one of the few guys who made the team watchable in 2006, opposing scouts probably noticed that Wimbley's repertoire consists solely of a speed rush around the outside.

Leon Williams is the last holdover from the Crennel/Savage regime. Williams was a fourth round pick out of Miami in 2006, and at 6-2, 250 pounds, he certainly looks the part of a physical linebacker. But 2008 was a very disappointing season for the kid from The U. Splitting time between inside and outside linebacker, Williams had only 38 total tackles and no sacks (down from 85 tackles and 4 sacks in 2007). In spite of his physical gifts, Williams has trouble getting to the quarterback, which makes it difficult to be an effective outside linebacker.

I used to scream for Williams to receive more playing time, as Romeo Crennel was known to favor the vets. However, if Williams doesn't turn any heads with a (hopefully) more objective coach running the show, maybe he's just never going to make the jump. After all, this is a guy who fell to the fourth round largely as a result of inconsistent collegiate performance.

### **Looking forward...**

Thankfully, we won't have to watch McGinest run around the field in slow motion &quot; [Baywatch](#) &quot; style anymore, as he was not retained. The guy should have been cut after 2006. Antwan Peek won't be back either, and it's probably safe to label that experiment a failure.

There is some new blood at OLB, but probably not enough. David Bowens (former

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Jet), and David Veikune (second round pick from Hawaii) have been added to the existing corps of Hall, Williams, and Wimbley. The 23-year old Titus Brown is also competing for a roster spot. Brown had a cup of coffee with the Browns last year after spending most of the season on the practice squad.

The success of the position as a whole is largely dependent on Wimbley, and 2009 will be a watershed season for the former Seminole. If he doesn't make significant strides, then it's time for the Browns to cut bait and look elsewhere for a pass rusher. (I said it at the time, and I'll keep saying it: Haloti Ngata should have been the pick.) The Browns need Wimbley to deliver at least 8-10 sacks, thus becoming a player that opposing offenses have to account for and consider while game planning. Wimbley isn't a bust yet, but if all he delivers is one more year of sub-mediocrity, then the label should be applied.

David Bowens is ideally a backup, but unfortunately the Browns are pretty thin at outside linebacker. Bowens was signed to a four-year, \$7.2 million contract, which will probably just make him a more affordable version of Willie McGinest. I doubt that the Browns will keep Bowens for the duration of that contract. Mangini isn't looking for Pro Bowl production out of the 32-year old; consistency, depth, and veteran leadership are why Bowens is on the team.

Wimbley will definitely start on the right, so any depth chart mysteries will be associated with the left side ( [STRONG SIDE!](#) ). According to the preliminary depth chart, Bowens currently has the edge to start opposite Wimbley. That makes sense; he knows Mangini's system best, Hall is more of a situational pass rusher at this point of his career, and Veikune is still a project. In fact, Veikune might split time between OLB and ILB.

It will be interesting to see whether or not Leon Williams makes the final cut. Williams has to prove that he can play at least one of the linebacker positions well, as opposed to playing them both decently. In other words, he has to prove he isn't a &quot;tweener&quot;. Titus Brown has allegedly been making a real push to earn a roster spot, as well.

Bowens will likely start on the left side against the Vikings on September 13, but it remains to be seen whether Mangini will give the two starters the lion's share of the playing time, or rotate OLBs frequently (e.g. Alex Hall in pass rushing situations). Regardless of what happens on week one, look for Hall and Veikune to see more action as the season progresses, especially if Bowens starts to show

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his age or the Browns fall out of contention.