

Lingering Items - Make Or Break Edition

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This is shaping up to be a make or break year for Braylon Edwards. Is he really the elite receiver he thinks he is or the average receiver he's been in three of his four years? Meanwhile, the Browns are having trouble selling tickets for their preseason match-up with the Detroit Lions and it's time for owner Randy Lerner to figure out how to throw a party. And let's not forget, the Browns' offense makes a pitch to get its first touchdown in 7 games. All this and more in Gary's weekly edition of Lingering Items.



If it's possible to be both introspective and clueless, then that's at least one skill Cleveland Browns wide receiver Braylon Edwards has mastered. Unfortunately, it's not exactly the skill for which he's currently be overpaid by the Browns.

It wasn't that the touchdown pass that Edwards dropped last Saturday night against the Green Bay Packers was particularly important. Edwards has dropped far more meaningful passes. It's that he's now taken to essentially explaining away his incompetency on the petard of perfection. We all want to be perfect, but hey, who is?

At this point, no one expects anything close to perfection out of Edwards. He came prepackaged with several imperfections. Fans don't even seem to much care anymore if he can just be good. On the scale of downward expectations,

fans now are willing to settle for competent. Next year, they won't have to settle. He'll likely be some other team's problem.

When Edwards was unsuccessfully shopped by new head coach Eric Mangini prior to this year's draft, Edwards didn't seem particularly miffed. As clueless as ever, he took it as a sign that the Browns thought so highly of him to demand so much. He should have realized that it wasn't a case of the Browns demanding too much but other teams willing to part with so little. It was a referendum from the league's general managers on what they actually think of Edwards.

Edwards, along with an ever dwindling group of others, still thinks of himself as an elite receiver based on two things, the fact that he was the third pick in the draft and the fact that he had a good 2007 season. At this point in his career, Edwards' draft status is irrelevant. Teams are still willing to consider potential, but it's not longer based on what you did in college. You've had enough time to perform in the NFL, so get on with it already. On that score, Edwards' potential and his performance have driven themselves to the fault line. One good season, not duplicated, no longer constitutes potential but an anomaly. As much as anything else, this is Edwards' make or break season.

In golf terms, Edwards is like the player who has won one major title. It's a good accomplishment. It gets you noticed. But if you keep missing cuts, it begins to look more and more like a blip. When is the last time anyone used the words "elite golfer" to describe Ian Baker Finch?

To put Edwards' one good season into perspective, the 1289 yards he gained that year helped boost his career yards per catch average to 61.3, which places him a very respectable 38th on the all-time receivers list. Not quite elite, but borderline. It also boosted his yards per reception average to a slightly less respectable but still decent 15.6. Again, not elite but relatively close. But if 2007 never happens or he had performed at roughly the same level as his other three years in the league, his status becomes far more pedestrian with his yards per catch average dropping to 15.3 (Antonio Bryant territory) and his yards per game average

dropping to 54.02 (Derrick Mason territory). In other words, he's a useful piece on a NFL team, not the focus.

Edwards is a guy to whom excuses come far easier than catches. He can no longer talk about jumping too early in the end zone for a pass or bemoaning how the rotation of the ball coming out of the hands of Derek Anderson vs. Brady Quinn. He just has to start catching the ball. If he isn't able to put up a 1,000 yards receiving this season, he'll be a middling free agent next season. And in Browns' terms, he'll just be another swing and miss from a front office that connects about as often as the Indians' front office.

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Speaking of one-season wonders, the reason a quarterback controversy competition even exists on the Browns right now is solely the result of Derek Anderson's 2007 season. Under virtually any other scenario, Quinn, a first round draft pick like Edwards, would be the presumed starter.

On the other hand, maybe the real reason a quarterback controversy exists is because of Anderson's 2008 season. If you follow the logic the Browns' organization uses to keep Edwards' the presumptive starter, it seems like Anderson's wondrous, record-breaking 2007 season would be enough to keep him entrenched until his contract runs out.

Thus the question, why is Edwards still riding the coattails of 2007 but

Anderson is not? Every assumption that has been made about the starters on this team, whether by fans or management, is that Edwards is the team's number 1 receiver. Everyone else it seems is competing for numbers 2, 3 and 4.

Yet Anderson, whose 2008 wasn't much further down the misery index than Edwards', is in a fight for his career. It wouldn't surprise anyone that if Anderson lost out to Quinn that he'd find himself traded, if not sooner than soon anyway. If Anderson gets the nod, then the Browns are forced into essentially admitting that they wasted a draft pick on Quinn.

Maybe this is the real reason behind why Mangini is taking so much time, and hindering the team's development in the process, to make this decision. It's the first big one of his tenure and he can't afford to get it wrong.

What Mangini doesn't much appreciate, though, is that the chances of him getting the decision right are virtually nil. This has nothing to do with Mangini's decision-making skills, although the jury is out on those as well. It has really more to do with inevitability. Ask yourself this: when was the last time anyone associated with the Browns got a major decision correct?

In all seriousness, the outcome of Mangini's quarterback decision will set the tone for his regime and will determine, really, if he'll be here for the long-haul or if there is another makeover coming a few years down the road.

If you're not of the mind to think that Mangini is taking his time in order to ensure he gets it right, then the far simpler explanation is that he's hoping it's a decision he won't have to make. If only one would clearly outplay the other, the decision makes itself and everyone will come to the same conclusion.

It's frustrating to fans, certainly, and probably to Mangini that neither quarterback has fully taken the reins. Don't blame the quarterbacks. The politics of training camp and the incessant juggling Mangini is doing actually is more responsible for the situation than anything either quarterback has done or not done. Browns fans saw more of the Richard Bartel and Brett Ratliff than they saw of either Anderson or Quinn last week. Fearful of injury, Mangini doesn't seem of the mind to give either of them enough time in a preseason game to really establish their footing.

Mangini may think he's constructed a fair fight but all it's done is retard the development of the team and place himself at point blank range of a decision that will set the tone of the franchise for the next several years. Hopefully Mangini lives for that kind of pressure because if he can't he only has himself to blame.

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There is a theory going around that the reason the Browns' offense looked so horrible against the Packers last Saturday is that they didn't want to reveal much to a future regular season opponent. Mangini, typically, isn't commenting.

I doubt that's the case. This team simply isn't good enough at the moment to play hide the salami with future opponents in the preseason. For once, four games don't seem nearly enough. The Browns are in such fundamental transition that they need every second of the time they have to try and straighten out the mess left by the last caretakers.

It's almost amusing, actually, to think that a team that now hasn't scored an offensive touchdown in its last 7 games may be purposely hiding their scary-good offensive schemes from the league during the preseason. If that's really the case, the joke will be on them.

It's fair to note that the offensive ineptitude at the end of last season probably had more to do with injuries than abject incompetence. But fundamentally the reason this team's offense looks so vanilla is a near-complete lack of a running game. Take away that ability from any team and it will struggle to score.

Far beyond just the inability to establish a quarterback is the fact that its running game poses no threat. Jamal Lewis may be a warrior in football terms, but he's finished as a running back. He works hard, which any coach appreciates, but to expect him to carry the load is a stretch.

The impact that the lack of a viable running game has on the rest of the offense is obvious. Opposing teams need only worry about covering a middling group of receivers running 7-10 yard routes. Opposing teams also know that if Anderson's in the backfield, the chance that he'll hit these receivers, even if left completely uncovered, is only around 50%.

On short passes, he has no touch, like a 7-footer who can't put the ball in the hoop from 3-feet out. Opposing teams know that if it's Quinn, they only need to play tight coverage on these short routes. Quinn's far more accurate on short routes but also far less likely to throw long.

Even if Brian Robiski and/or Muhammad Massaquoi establish themselves as receiving threats this year, the offense is still going to look turgid unless there is enough of a running threat to keep defenses honest. Right now that's hard to imagine when Lewis is your starter, Jerome Harrison your back up and with only Noah Herron and James Davis waiting in the wings.

All of this adds up to exactly where the Browns now stand, a team that will need the defense to shorten the game to give the team any chance at winning. And doesn't that sound familiar? Mangini is looking more like Bill Belichick than he probably ever imagined.

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I'm sure Channel 3 in Cleveland saw it as a matter of economics, but there is a far larger message in the Browns' inability to sell out this Saturday's preseason game against the Detroit Lions on their own. The Browns were selling tickets at 50% off and still couldn't get enough takers. That's where Channel 3 stepped in, bought the rest, and assured themselves and their advertisers that the game would be on local television.

For the Browns and owner Randy Lerner, this should be a wake up call; a moment of sheer embarrassment that is letting them know that at even half the price there aren't enough people in this town that see value in this team. While Art Modell may be the devil, he at least understood how to throw a preseason party. Add a concert, throw in some world-class fireworks. Make the show bigger than the game itself.

Instead, what fans have to look forward to is a miserable game in hot weather between one team that went winless last year and another that didn't score an offensive touchdown in their last six games. And the beer will be \$8 for a large. Party on, Wayne. Party on, Garth.

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Thinking about the Browns' lack of talent leads to this week's question to ponder: What happened to George Kokinis?