

A Tale Of Two Halves

Written by {ga=davekolonich}
Saturday, September 12 2009 7:00 PM -

For one half at least, the Browns appeared to be among the doorstep of NFL legitimacy, challenging a solid Vikings squad with physical, aggressive play. While not exactly a finely tuned engine, the offense generated some movement on the ground, while the special teams again revealed themselves to be the team's greatest weapon in this new era of Browns football. If only we could have called the game then. While a new era of Browns football appeared imminent, the gray shadows of a not soon to be forgotten era of futility reared its ugly head in the second half. Dave Kolonich talks about it. For one half at least, the Browns appeared to be among the doorstep of NFL legitimacy, challenging a solid Vikings squad with physical, aggressive play. While not exactly a finely tuned engine, the offense generated some movement on the ground, while the special teams again revealed themselves to be the team's greatest weapon in this new era of Browns football. And perhaps in the most welcome sight to the Lakefront in several seasons, these new Browns played an incredibly solid thirty minutes of aggressive defense.

If only we could have called the game then.

While a new era of Browns football appeared imminent, the gray shadows of a not soon to be forgotten era of futility reared its ugly head in the second half, as the Vikings dominated a largely sterile Cleveland effort, calling up the ghosts of Romeo Crennel past.

Perhaps this season opener was simply a reminder of the competitive balance that makes the NFL inherently watchable, as in the end, the talent that separates the likes of the Vikings and Browns unfortunately tapped the Lakefront on the shoulder and reminded us all that while we are not one of the league's epically bad teams, we still have some work to do.

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The Good

Today's season opener truly was two games within one. In the first half, the Browns dialed up some great pressure on the aging Brett Favre. Perhaps the

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defensive highlights of the first half were Rob Ryan sending Abe Elam on some edge blitzes and the defense containing Adrian Peterson until the third quarter of play. The overall presence of Elam was a most welcome addition, as Browns fans may be witnessing the most dynamic safety the team has had in over a decade.

Other positives included some decent interior pressure in the first half, largely coming in the form of Shaun Rogers and the surprisingly solid play shown by Corey Williams. In terms of run defense - again strictly from a first half perspective, Kamerion Wimbley was impressive during some outside rush attempts and Eric Barton appears to be a definite upgrade over the dearly departed Andra Davis.

Along the offensive front, Alex Mack surviving his initial NFL start is a positive, along with Joe Thomas essentially handling Jared Allen for most of the afternoon. The overall inclusion of more motion, shotgun sets and the occasional Wildcat formation was a welcome sight, as was the team's dedication to running the ball in the second quarter.

As for the special teams...indeed. Josh Cribbs both electrified and depressed Browns fans by again affirming that he is truly the Browns most valuable player in so many respects.

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The Bad

How about the entirety of the second half? Does that work for everyone?

During the Vikings' longest drive of the third quarter, it appeared the Browns defense reverted back to the Romeo Crennel days, by essentially appearing helpless as the Minnesota line wore the team down. Later in the game, through another strange wrinkle in time, the defense again morphed into a bad Butch Davis flashback, as Adrian Peterson took advantage of some overpursuit and torched the Browns for what would be a knockout blow.

The constant underneath routes that rookie Percy Harvin continually gashed the Browns defense with ultimately proved costly in the second half. While the defense did a solid job of occasionally dictating the pace of the game early on, the Vikings eventually gained the dangerous advantage of balance they are capable of with Brett Favre. Once this happened, the Browns defense became helpless in the worst Romeo Crennel-esque nightmare possible.

The exposure of the Browns lack of offensive weapons manifested itself throughout the game, as the passing attack was relegated to a series of largely ineffective underneath routes to the team's tight ends and fullbacks. With the exception of Braylon Edwards' nullified first half touchdown reception, the Browns could not provide any kind of downfield threat throughout the game.

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The Ugly

Although you can't blame one person for this opening day loss, one thing that became evident while watching this afternoon is that Braylon Edwards remains the largest reflection of the Browns' past, and is probably not destined for a large role in the Eric Mangini era going forward. A classic reminder of Braylon's

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inconsistency could be found during a first half wideout screen, where Edwards was not in position to make a block, then compensated with an illegal blocking penalty. In the second half, his miscommunication with Brady Quinn led to a Viking interception.

Channeling his inner Belichick, Mangini's offense featured a baffling number of inside draws designed for James Davis...none of which fooled the Vikings impressive interior defense. When the running game clicked, it seemed that the Browns' best play was to run Jamal Lewis off tackle, which did not happen nearly enough to sustain the team's drives.

As for the Vikings, they appear loaded throughout their roster and could challenge in the playoffs this year. Of course, this is assuming that Brett Favre doesn't implode, Adrian Peterson stays healthy and Brad Childress doesn't go Brian Billick and decide to outsmart himself.

But enough about them...

The Rationalization

So, what can we take from this opening exercise?

First, the Vikings are a significantly more talented team than the Browns. Next, the Browns defense should improve this season, but unfortunately remains a few key players from truly competing on a regular basis. However, the presence of some aggressive schemes and overall solid tackling, at least in the first half, are a clear signal that this team will progress throughout 2009.

Offensively, things are a bit more muddled. The positives from today's loss could be Mangini's insistence on sticking with the running game early and usage of different formations and personnel groups. While not exactly spectacular, Brady Quinn managed the game well, if you can ignore his two turnovers, and generally held his own in what was inexplicably only his fourth career NFL start.

Much like they were during the bulk of 2008, the Browns special teams will play a major role in the team's short term success in 2009. While Josh Cribbs and Phil Dawson played their usual solid games, something seemed to be lacking in the team's kick coverage and Dave Zastudil's punting was not by any means exceptional. For a team that doesn't have much margin for error this season, all

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facets of the special teams will need to be extraordinary from here on out.

The Rationalization - Part Two

The true mark of this team's progress will come during the practice week, as we will finally see the importance of what appears to be a legitimate, competent coaching presence in Cleveland. The adjustments that Mangini and his staff make this week could largely determine just what type of team we are looking at in 2009.

For one half at least, things were looking pretty good.