

Baby Steps

Written by {ga=davekolonich}
Sunday, October 04 2009 7:00 PM -

Depending on your perspective, you can either view the Browns overtime loss to the Bengals as yet another chapter in the team's rich history of prolonging eventual heartbreak until the bitter end or rationalize that the team took a giant step forward from virtual nothingness in displaying signs that they can indeed become a somewhat competitive NFL franchise. Despite the bottom line that the team is now staring at an 0-4 start, there are some positives to be found from this afternoon's performance. Dave Kolonich takes a look at them. Depending on your perspective, you can either view the Browns overtime loss to the Bengals as yet another chapter in the team's rich history of prolonging eventual heartbreak until the bitter end or rationalize that the team took a giant step forward from virtual nothingness in displaying signs that they can indeed become a somewhat competitive NFL franchise.

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And to start, let's take a look at the end.

The End of the Stone Face Era

You may have missed it, but Eric Mangini did something after the closing seconds of the game that hasn't been seen from a Browns head coach in several years - he actually looked upset that his team lost. Call it frustration, or just a collapsing, emotional cleansing, but it was obvious that Mangini realized that his team lost a game that they should have won - which is light years away from the feelings inherent in the first three contests of the season.

While I'm not ready to hail Mangini as a franchise savior before he even gets his first regular season win, the emotions the Boss of Berea showed throughout the game were a bit of a revelation. From the soul-emptying end, to congratulating Mohammed Massaquoi's breakout performance to getting in the face of Braylon Edwards after a personal foul penalty, Mangini's genuine passion was a very welcome sign, especially considering the negative swirl of publicity that has surrounded this team in 2009.

And again, while the Browns still sit at 0-4, at least there was some positive momentum to be found from the on-field product.

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The Anti-Braylon Edwards

During the offseason, Mohammed Massaquoi was almost an afterthought after the team drafted Brian Robiskie early in the second round of the draft. Call it Blind

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OSU Bias, but while Robiskie has finally cracked the Browns kickoff coverages, Massaquoi flashed signs of some serious potential this afternoon. Massaquoi ran some excellent routes against the Bengal secondary, used his size to his advantage and adjusted rather well to the hard throws of Derek Anderson...something that Braylon Edwards obviously was not prepared for.

While the next several games will serve as a better test for Massaquoi, considering that teams now will have to prepare for him, his stock on a struggling offense is soaring through the roof. The presence of Massaquoi in the first half allowed the team to run some routes underneath for Mike Furrey later in the game, which helped the team finally move the ball with some consistency.

The Anti-Jerome Harrison

Readers of this site know that I've never been a big Jerome Harrison fan, mainly because Jerome Harrison has never really played. However, today's game may have signalled the ascension of Harrison from a traditionally over-hyped Browns running back to a legitimate offensive contributor. While never flashy today, Harrison instead took advantage of some solid outside blocking and made some plays in the passing game.

However, considering Harrison's injury history and the current lack of depth at the position, it remains to be seen how long-term his contributions will be. However, in a dramatic contrast from the straight-ahead running of Jamal Lewis, Harrison's presence allows the team to become more creative on shorter yardage situations, which hopefully will be addressed in the coming weeks.

The Benefits of Rest

It's amazing the differences found when the Browns defense doesn't have to play 40 minutes a game. Although the start of the game appeared to be more of the same, as the Bengals dominated the clock in the first quarter, the emergence of the Browns offense allowed the defense to better reach its potential for most of the afternoon, before ultimately breaking down on the final overtime possession.

However, there weren't a lot of negative aspects of the defense as a whole, with the exception of the first Bengals drive of the game and some subsequent, soft zone coverage play. The third down defense was vastly improved, compared to the first three games, and the insertion of Mike Adams as a starting corner helped

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to slow down the Bengals shorter routes. Perhaps the most intriguing - and bluntly surprising - performance of the game came from Brodney Pool. Is it possible for the proverbial "light to come on" for a fifth year player? Will it stay on?



Special MVP

What more can be said about Josh Cribbs? Or, how can you mention the offense's success without including Cribbs' contribution on kickoff and punt returns? Had the Browns pulled out a win this afternoon, the latest fan petition should have been a demand for Randy Lerner to award Cribbs a new contract. Much of the team's success on offense could be attributed to Cribbs, which naturally correlates into the defense not being solely responsible for keeping the team in the game.

Perhaps the best evidence of Cribbs' worth came in the overtime session, as the Bengals rookie punter continually pinned punts along the sideline, making our team MVP irrelevant in the battle for field position. The natural momentum that Cribbs creates with his returns was negated, and the offense slumped through the extra period.

And speaking of special teams, although Brad St. Louis is obviously pulling the NFL long snapper version of "going Chuck Knoblauch", the play of Shaun Rogers also nearly proved indispensable, again assuming that the outcome would have turned out differently.

Call Off the Hounds

While I'm certainly not advocating the reinstatement of the "Mangenius" moniker for Eric Mangini, at least the team as a whole showed some vital signs this afternoon. Of course, starting Derek Anderson gave the team some professional options that had been lacking through the first three games, but overall, the play calling, fundamentals and overall desire shown by the team was a great reflection of a solid week of practice.

Of course, it wasn't enough for a win, which is severely disappointing - but, at least this team finally has some positive momentum to build on. Take away the two offensive turnovers and the Carson Palmer scramble and this game could have had ended much differently.

And considering how the season has progressed so far, at least it's something.