

The Tide Rises, The Tide Falls ... Sometimes

Written by {ga=davekolonich}
Thursday, October 15 2009 7:00 PM -

In preparing for the first Browns-Steelers matchup of the season, the usual themes of pride and tradition that in the past have been associated with this regional battle have been replaced with something far more sinister - a seasonal affective disorder known by Cleveland area psychologists as Extreme Disparity Realization - or 0 for the last 11 Disorder. So why is Dave Kolonich optimistic about the future of this rivalry? He tells us in his latest column. In preparing for the first Browns-Steelers matchup of the season, the usual themes of pride and tradition that in the past have been associated with this regional battle have been replaced with something far more sinister - a seasonal affective disorder known by Cleveland area psychologists as Extreme Disparity Realization - or 0 for the last 11 Disorder.

While it would be wonderful to acknowledge the importance of this rich historical rivalry, the past several seasons have revealed this once great matchup to be little more than a twice a year bloodletting.

And to add to the growing depression triggered by flashes of Black and Gold, consider that the last time the Browns defeated the Steelers coincided with the pinnacle of Tim Couch's Cleveland career. Or, for another comparison - since this last victory, the Browns have hired two more head coaches and have employed nearly ten different starting quarterbacks, while the Steelers have won two world championships, while destroying several different Cleveland teams in the process and producing some of the most depressing moments in the history of Browns fandom/careers of current Raider backup QB's.

But there is hope.

No, really.

Just follow me on this one.

While it's incredibly difficult to criticize a team that just won a Super Bowl title, you have to realize several things about the current day Steelers.

1. They are still among the AFC elite.
2. They are far removed from the power rushing teams of the Bill Cowher era.
3. Their defense, while still impressive, is no longer elite.
4. Or more specifically, the Steelers have lost some veteran toughness on defense.
5. The roster is getting older.
6. However, they do adapt well.

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7. Evidence of #6 can be found in their spread formation/flag football approach to offense.
8. Always remember, Bruce Arians is calling the plays.
9. Focusing on #8, Ben Roethlisberger will not age well as a starting QB.
10. The Steeler window is beginning to close.

Obviously, I'm not suggesting that the Steelers are rapidly declining. The defending champs still feature an occasionally exceptional defense - one that can cause havoc for opposing quarterbacks. And of course, the Steelers feature a very effective quarterback who tends to play his best late in games. Add in the usual great mid-round draft finds, solid ownership and consistent coaching and it's no wonder why Pittsburgh has become a modern NFL dynasty.

However, this same Steeler team is experiencing a bit of an identity crisis - albeit one that they survived long enough to win a championship. Anyway - the point is that this current Steeler team barely resembles the ones that were led by Bill Cowher for some 15 years. Evidence can be found by simply viewing last year's Super Bowl, as the Steelers - led by possibly the worst offensive line ever gathered together for a championship game, relied on the passing of Roethlisberger to rally the team against a far inferior opponent.

A championship was indeed won - but any current impressions held of the Steelers instantly changed thanks to last year's playoff run. Gone are the days of the powerful Steeler offense - and welcome in a subpar offensive line, diminutive receivers, finesse backs and an often reckless quarterback who is living on borrowed time.

And to further tarnish the rugged image of the Steelers' offense, just realize that Bruce Arians is calling the plays. Yes, that Bruce Arians - the one who glamorized the four-receiver set in Cleveland in the early 'aughts and made household names out of...well, I forget...

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Or, in other words - Bruce Arians will one day be held criminally responsible for the death of Ben Roethlisberger - along with about five incredibly average offensive linemen.

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So with all this alleged drama occurring in the Steel City - which has also lost its identity, I hear the Chinese have bought the rights to the nickname - why are the Steelers still so successful?

They still play Steeler defense.

While the Steelers have lost their way offensively, they have at least retained their sense of identity on defense - mainly by terrorizing opposing quarterbacks and creating chaos all over the field. The Steelers still feature several unblockable players, such as James Harrison, LaMarr Woodley and Troy Polamalu. And most importantly, unlike the pass happy fancy instilled by Bruce Arians on offense, the Steelers defense is guided by the hand of future Hall of Famer Dick LeBeau.

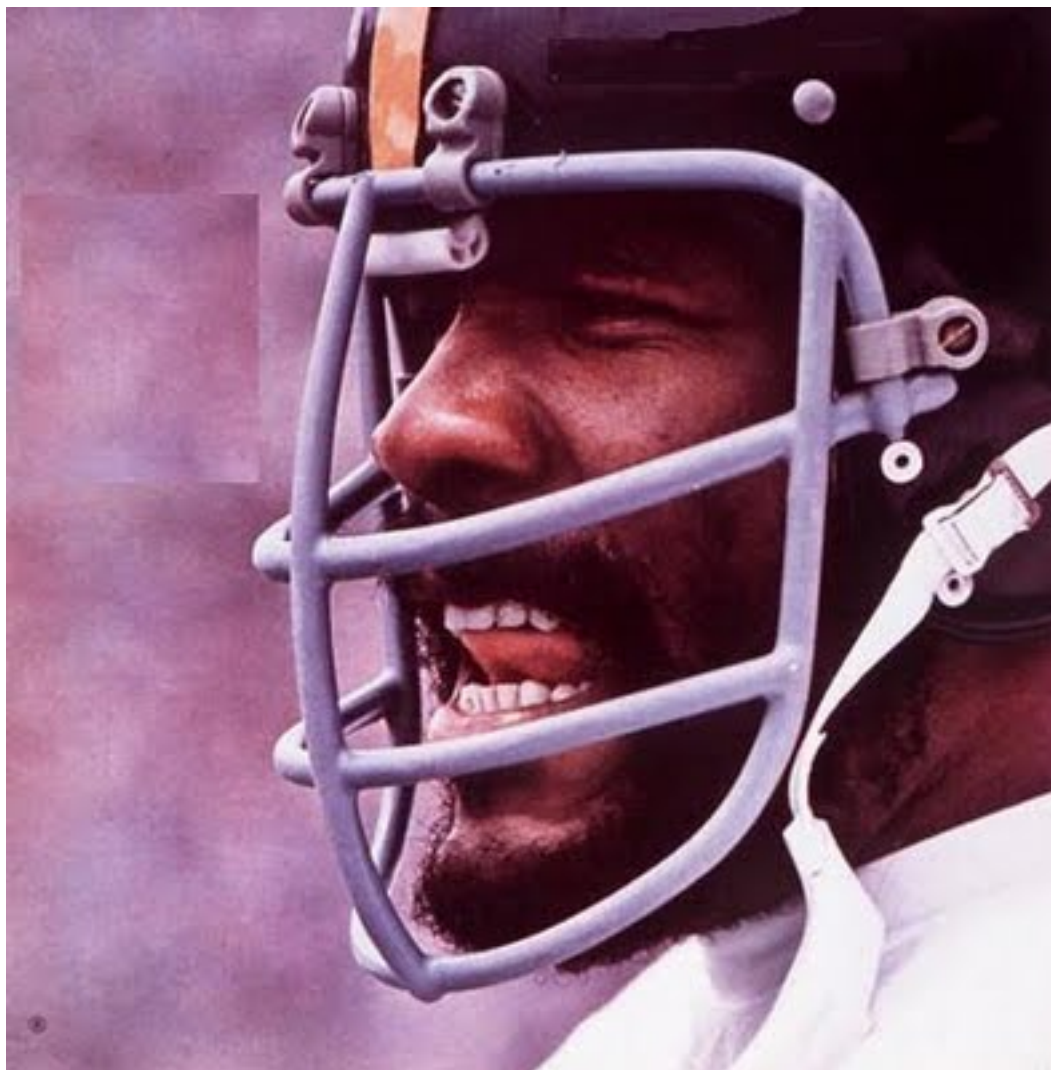
But again, hope arises due to the subtle losses of two underrated veterans, and the potential future absences of several more. First, the free agent loss of Larry Foote stripped this team of some much needed toughness. Along with the weight and age issues currently being experienced by nose guard Casey Hampton, this Steeler defense has slightly weakened up the middle - which helps to negate the usually stellar play on the outside.

Add in the potential season-ending injury suffered by end Aaron Smith, and this Steeler defense - while still effective - does not look to emulate the greatness of years past.

Often overlooked during his long time in the league, Smith is the kind of defensive end that every successful 3-4 team needs. Smith is a phenomenal run-stuffer, but is also explosive enough to disrupt offenses on passing downs. Losing Smith is a major blow for a Steeler defense, both in terms of production and leadership, as well as in trying to maintain the gritty demeanor that has carried this team in the past.

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So what does all this mean?

And what about that sense of "hope" I mentioned earlier?

Before stating the following - I offer the following disclaimer. Although I am a lifelong Browns fan, I pride myself on not being a clueless homer. Having said that, I believe that within the next three years, the Browns and Steelers will finally meet on a level ground.

Consider that while the Browns are indeed a major work in progress, this latest rebuilding effort features the most competent management and team-building strategy seen to date in the Randy Lerner era. While it's debatable whether the Browns can become an elite team; I strongly feel that under Eric Mangini - if he is given time - Cleveland can become a solid franchise that features a competitive team.

As for the Steelers, it may not be apparent to most, and also may not reveal itself for another year or two - but they are playing on borrowed time.

Consider that the keys to the Steelers' fortunes are Ben Roethlisberger and an outstanding defense. As long as this formula continues, Pittsburgh will annually challenge for a title. However, one has to wonder how long Roethlisberger can continue to take the kind of beating he receives on a weekly basis. While this abuse is largely self-inflicted, thanks to Big Ben's reckless, yet highly effective scrambling style of play - along with an inferior offensive line - eventually, the damage will take its toll.

As I mentioned before, Roethlisberger is not going to become one of those quarterbacks who ages gracefully. I can't imagine watching this same quarterback suddenly become a pocket passer, one who safely checks down or throws the ball away to avoid a turnover. In many ways, Roethlisberger will become Brett Favre without the luxury of a mostly healthy body. Or, in other words - he will burn out.

And the question is not "if", but of course, "when"?

And can you imagine the state of this team without him?

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How many more years can Roethlisberger survive such vicious abuse? Or, on a related note - how much longer will Bruce Arians remain the team's offensive coordinator?

Again, everything goes back to identity.

Speaking of which, the vaunted Steeler defense is close to reaching its own crossroads. Consider that the Steelers will need to find replacements for Aaron Smith and Casey Hampton along the line, James Farrior at linebacker and will eventually have to upgrade their secondary.

Along the way, the team will have to pay for some of their rising young talent - something the Steelers are not always willing to do - while jettisoning some key veterans, such as Hines Ward and Willie Parker.

Unfortunately in the meantime, none of this talk really helps the Browns. On Sunday, the Browns should be badly overmatched against the Steelers and will likely lose their 12th straight contest to their bitter rivals.

However, if last week's victory against the Bills can offer any bit of optimism - perhaps it's this:

Against Buffalo, the Browns showed the type of discipline, mental and physical toughness and desire that has not been seen in Cleveland for a long time. Although a 6-3 win over a hapless Bills team doesn't provide much in the way of celebration, at least we can acknowledge that the foundation of the Eric Mangini plan could be starting to form in Cleveland.

If you take the fundamental approach that delivered last week's win, then enhance the design with some quality talent - hopefully found in the next 2-3 drafts - then the finished product could prove to be impressive. And if this Browns rise can only coincide with a Steeler demise, we could see some better days ahead.

Just not this Sunday.