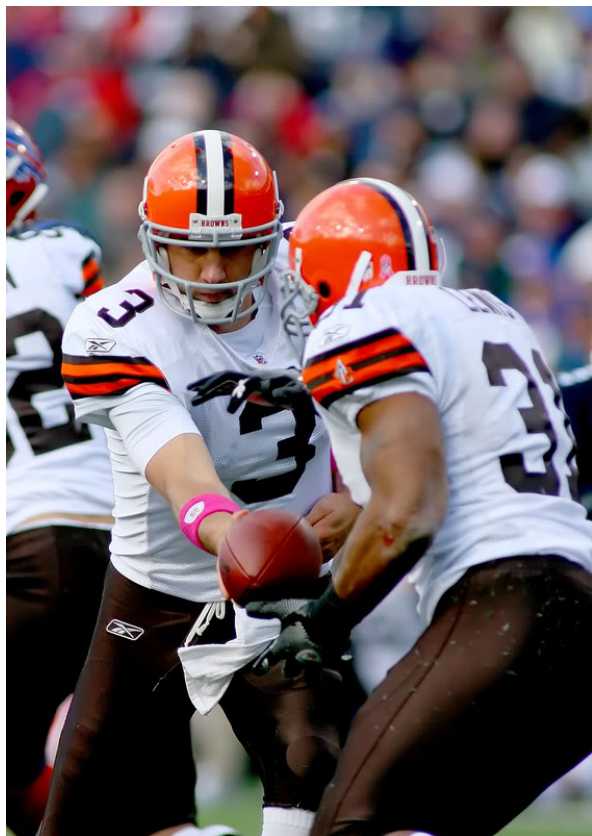


Lingering Items - Bills Edition

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Lost in last week's "win" over the Bills was the fact that the Browns rushed for 171 yards and were consistently effective on the ground, led by 117 yards from Jamal Lewis. In this week's Lingering Items, Gary says that for one of the first times in recent memory, the Browns under head coach Eric Mangini aren't just a team that talks about committing to the run, they are actually doing it. Gary also hits on the offense under DA and Daboll, Brady Quinn, and the Josh Cribbs contract issue in this week's piece.



The Cleveland Browns only attempted 17 passes last week in Buffalo in what is now being called "fierce" winds. First they were strong, but as the pumping up of quarterback Derek Anderson's fragile ego continues, the winds are now being upgraded in order to explain what can only be termed a pitiful performance, but more on that in a minute.

The Browns weren't passing not only because Anderson couldn't hit the side of a barn from 5 feet away, but because they were insistent, stubbornly so, on running the ball. That's not a bad thing.

Running the ball in the NFL is one of the least glamorous activities that take place within a game unless a team has a breakaway back like Adrian Peterson. Then,

every carry holds the promise of something big. But as a regular diet, a team's running game still is mostly made up of 3 yards and a cloud of dust. It's been that way since the days of Woody Hayes and even with all the fancy gadgets and gadgets that come and go, it's still true today.

Consider, for example, that almost half of the NFL teams at the moment average less than 4 yards per carry, including, for example, the Browns' opponent this weekend, the Pittsburgh Steelers.

There are plenty of ways to slice and dice the statistics, of course, but the larger message in it is that committing to the running game isn't usually pretty.

The Browns, on a per carry average, are in the middle of the pack at 3.8 yards. On a yards per game basis, they again are in the middle of the pack at 106 yards. But in terms of the number of rushing attempts per game, the Browns are a top 10 team with 138. In terms of rushing attempts per game, the Browns are basically a top 10 team there as well.

What's becoming clear as this season continues is that for one of the first times in recent memory, the Browns under head coach Eric Mangini aren't just a team that talks about committing to the run, they are actually doing it. Right now, the Browns are averaging two more rushing attempts per game than last season, which doesn't sound like much until you extrapolate that over a whole season. Doing that equates to an extra 32 attempts for a season which is another game's worth of attempts or, on the current pace, another 106 rushing yards for the season.

The Pittsburgh Steelers' Ben Roethlisberger gets a lot of good press because of a handful of comebacks he's led but the secret to the Steelers' sustained success on offense is their ability to run, year after year. New England's Tom Brady may be the greatest quarterback to ever play the game but Belichick has always made sure that there was a credible running game to balance him out. It's no

coincidence that these two teams annually appear near the top in rushing attempts.

Every offensive coordinator the Browns have ever had has pretty much said the same thing, "we're going to establish the run." But then one thing leads to another, the directions get all fouled up, and the next thing you know the final stats showed that out of the 48 plays run that day only 15 were runs.

The Browns this time seem to be incredibly serious about establishing the run. The fact that both Jerome Harrison and Jamal Lewis had 100-yard runs on consecutive weeks is a tribute to the fact that the Browns deliberately pounded at the run. Harrison had 29 carries against Cincinnati and Lewis had 31. It's not always pretty when teams try to establish a running game but it looks exactly like what the Browns looked like the last two weeks.

This also tends to explain offensive coordinator Brian Daboll's rather odd response on Friday to the question about whether there is a rift between he and Quinn over, among other things, Quinn's checking off to passes. "We have check with me's every week. It's just a matter of whether we get them called or whether we think that's the best thing to do. In a couple of those, we got into a throwing-fest there a little bit when we were down." Translated, because you need it, Daboll didn't really care that the team was down and needed to score to get back in the game. When he wants to run he wants to run and that's it.

Daboll has a point is you consider that this team really isn't playing to win as much as they are playing to re-establish themselves as a NFL franchise. A credible running attack is a good start.

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The Browns' commitment to the run and Daboll's view of it and Quinn's use of

check downs should also be viewed in the context of Mangini's almost purposeful but subtle trashing of Quinn. On Thursday at his press conference Mangini's discussed in some detail how the offense has gotten better on third downs in the last few games. This, of course, is just a continuation of Mangini's whisper campaign to justify what the statistics cannot, choosing Anderson over Quinn.

Fans have their favorite players but from my perspective the starting quarterback should be whoever gets the job done. If Anderson is the best player for the job, then the fact that Quinn was a number one draft choice is irrelevant. Once a player makes a team his draft status is pretty irrelevant. Josh Cribbs was an undrafted free agent and Braylon Edwards was a first round pick. Which player was better for the Browns?

Thus Quinn doesn't get extra points simply because he was a first round pick and Anderson was barely drafted. But from a pure performance standpoint over the last two seasons, Anderson hasn't outperformed his counterpart, at least in any meaningful way and surely not enough to justify what appears to be Quinn's banishment to the back of the bus.

Mangini's discussion of third down success since Anderson greatly illustrates the point. In truth, the Browns are awful on third downs, irrespective of who's at quarterback. In fact, they are 30th in the league, converting just 30% of their third downs. They were awful last season as well, converting just 33%. If you break last season down between Quinn and Anderson, there isn't any meaningful difference. The same holds true this season.

In Quinn's first two games, the Browns converted 25% and 21%, respectively, of their third downs. Against Baltimore, it was 25%. Against Cincinnati, with Anderson at quarterback, the number ticked up to 31% but then dropped back to just 25% against Buffalo. If you want to slice this even a little thinner, the teams the Browns faced in their first two games, Minnesota and Denver, have defenses that are 7th and 4th,

respectively, in stopping teams on 3

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down. The teams Anderson faced, Cincinnati and Buffalo, are 11

th

and 21

st

, respectively.

All of this is another way of saying that Quinn faced two tougher teams than Anderson and yet the success rate on 3rd down with Anderson hasn't ticked up meaningfully. It just adds to the mystery surrounding Mangini's decision not to give Quinn more than 10 quarters against two difficult teams before essentially yanking him for good.

If Mangini is going to trot out the supposedly minor progress on 3rd down success rate with Anderson in, then he should be willing to talk about the bigger picture as well.

If you're in to discerning trends, then the Bills game was clearly a step backward, particularly for Anderson. The Browns did continue to pound the ball on the ground, but Anderson was awful. Those

looking to make excuses for him have trotted out the windy conditions without acknowledging that Anderson has thrown well in the wind before (e.g. last season's Sunday night game against the Steelers. On that freakish weather night, the winds reportedly were 50 MPH and Anderson was 18-32 for 166 yards) and the supposedly large number of dropped passes.

In Daboll's press conference Friday, he wouldn't specify how many dropped passes there were by his count but didn't dispute a media apologist who claimed there were 8. I've gone back through the tape and can't find 8 dropped passes. There were 2, maybe 3 if you want to be really generous, passes that were thrown well that weren't caught. The other 5 or 6 were mid-range passes that the receivers were able to get a hand on but were balls either thrown behind them or at their knees. These don't qualify as dropped passes. If they did, Braylon Edwards would have had about 90 last season.

What's even more disturbing is that Anderson did this against one of the weakest teams in the whole league.

It's nice of Mangini to try and bolster the confidence of his quarterback, but doing so at the expense of your other quarterback on the most flimsy of evidence isn't going to serve Mangini well in the long run. Like Mangini, the players can only go by what they see as well.

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Continuing on that theme for another moment, the mystery surrounding why Mangini has tossed aside Quinn may never be known, at least publicly, but before anyone gets too comfortable with Anderson, all signs seem to point to Mangini not being sold on Anderson as the long-term solution, either. Given all that is known about Anderson, how could he be?

The picture that is starting to emerge though is one that explains exactly how Mangini is going about rebuilding this franchise. Essentially he's fixing the most basic of things that can and should be fixed before moving on to more sophisticated projects, such as who the real answer is at quarterback.

For example, the Browns, one of the most penalized teams last season, are now one of the least, proving that some things can be corrected just by paying attention. There has been a re-emphasis on the defense. It's nowhere near where it should be but Mangini isn't wrong when he notes that it's making progress.

As another example, the defense is getting better at getting off the field. They aren't in danger of becoming the Baltimore Ravens any time soon, but progress is progress. As Mangini said during his Thursday press conference, defensively the team has improved its ability to shut down opposing

teams on 3rd down by 16% in the last two games. That's far more meaningful than the difference between Anderson's and Quinn's success on 3rd down.

Fans might find it hard to believe but the Browns are in the middle of the pack on that statistic, which seems hard to believe given its overall ranking on defense, which is near the bottom of the league. The defense is still allowing opposing teams to convert 39% of their third downs, which is far too high, but getting off the field more quickly is ultimately the goal and this is one of the more positive steps the team has taken this season.

When you total up all these little things, including the re-emphasis on running, it's clear that Mangini is teaching a team that's been

lying on its belly arms flailing the past few seasons to crawl. This also tends to explain why Mangini didn't go for Mark Sanchez in this year's draft. He obviously didn't project Sanchez as a long-term answer either, which is hard to argue against given the rather spotty entrance that Matt Leinhardt, another USC quarterback has made into the league. (Before you email, I recognize Carson Palmer also is a USC quarterback and was establishing himself before his injury. I also know that Matt Cassel is a USC quarterback and given his play at the moment he may become this season's Scott Mitchell.)

What Mangini probably did envision, though, is that the Browns would have another high draft pick in 2010 at exactly the same time another good quarterback class is emerging. In no particular order, Sam Bradford, Colt McCoy and Tim Tebow all will be in next year's draft. It's

likely, too, that Jimmy Clausen will be there. Mangini will have some options any one of which must have looked better to him last spring than Sanchez, particularly when you throw in the extra draft picks he acquired by trading so furiously.

Whether any of this will work will take a few years to discern. And there will be probably 158 other things that happen in the interim that will throw this plan into disarray. But at least there's a plan. Whether Mangini will be around to see it through is a different discussion for another day.

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Mangini told the assembled press on Friday

that he has no interest in trading Josh Cribbs. No kidding. Cribbs is the kind of player any head coach covets. He plays hard every play. It may have something to do with the way he got into the league, as an undrafted free agent. It may have something to do with sheer ability that couldn't be properly showcased in the context of Kent State Football.

Whatever it is, Cribbs is a valuable player and one of the two or three players on this team for whom a real premium could be gotten in a trade.

While Cribbs isn't really a threat to holdout midseason because of his contract situation, this is a matter that Mangini has to address. Cribbs signed a very club-friendly contract two years ago. Sure, he got \$1 million up front,

which is pretty sweet, actually, it also was a 6-year contract at relatively minimal salaries. The length of the contract allowed the Browns to prorate the bonus over 6 years meaning that Cribbs' contract is exceptionally cap-friendly. Let's see, good player, cap-friendly contract, how long before Bill Belichick is on the other end of the phone?

It's understandable why Cribbs' agent is rattling the cages for his client, bemoaning the supposedly unfair contract that another agent negotiated. This is just an agent being an agent. But no matter how loud that rattling gets, the Browns probably won't do anything with Cribbs' contract until after this season. The lingering showdown with the players' union over the impending uncapped year looms large in terms of a team's long-term planning. There will be a new labor contract at some point but it may take a strike to get there.

The Browns' probably won't wait until then to address Cribbs' contract, but they will wait until there's more clarity to the situation. This may be a game but there is a business to run.

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Given the dichotomy of the Browns' last two games, this week's question to ponder: Why is there such a thing as a good loss but not a bad win?