

A Long Road Ahead

Written by {ga=davekolonich}
Monday, October 19 2009 7:00 PM -

Depending on your perspective, you can either view Sunday's loss to the Steelers as yet another frustrating and inept performance delivered by a mostly poor quality team - or as simply another stepping stone to improvement framed within the context of the team's seemingly eternal rebuilding project. And if you share in the sentiment that the Browns' performance against the Steelers serves as a barometer of success, then the logical conclusion is simple: This team has some work to do. Depending on your perspective, you can either view Sunday's loss to the Steelers as yet another frustrating and inept performance delivered by a mostly poor quality team - or as simply another stepping stone to improvement framed within the context of the team's seemingly eternal rebuilding project.

And if you share in the sentiment that the Browns' performance against the Steelers serves as a barometer of success, then the logical conclusion is simple:

This team has some work to do.

And speaking of work - let's get some done.

1. As stated last week, the first question from here on out is this: which DA will show up?

And the answer from here on out should be as follows: No matter the opponent, both the Good DA and Bad DA will continue to make their respective presence felt for the rest of the season.

Against the Steelers, the Good DA appeared early in the second half, as the Browns passing game momentarily came to life - which brought the team within a field goal of the lead. But, since we are dealing with the enigma that is DA, his evil doppelganger reappeared later in the game in the form of a wildly erratic turnover machine.

And even though DA accounted for several turnovers, I can without any hesitation state that I would rather take one of his tarnished performances over the kind shown by Brady Quinn during the first weeks of the season.

Certainly, DA's inconsistency is maddening, but at least he gives the Browns offense a remote chance of succeeding. And although DA was swallowed up several times in the second half by a blitzing Steeler defense, I can only imagine how Brady Quinn would have fared under similar circumstances.

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So, does this make me a DA-bot?

I say it makes me a realist.

And for those among Browns Nation who are severely disappointed in the play of the Browns' quarterbacks in general, take comfort in the fact that neither DA or Quinn will likely be leading the team back to respectability in a few years. [As I've stated before](#)

, the winner of this year's QB derby is the loser in the long run, considering the raw talent and lack of depth that permeates throughout this offense.



2. And speaking of schizophrenia, will the Browns attack through the air, reminiscent of the Bengal game, or revert to vintage Jamal Ball, which was exclusively shown against the Bills?

The Browns finally returned to some Wildcat formation looks, which were somewhat successful in the first half. Considering that the greatest talent Josh Cribbs possesses is his straight ahead running, it made complete sense to utilize him in the running game. Only next time, don't let him pass.

Overall, the Browns resembled the power rushing attack shown against the Bills in the first half, but did mix in some passing. However, again, the team was limited by an unholy trinity of dropped passes, inaccurate throws and a failure to pick up the Steelers' blitzes. The Browns failure to compete against the Steelers second half pass rush completely derailed any momentum the team gathered earlier on.

3. Speaking of which, what role does Jerome Harrison play against the Steelers?

Harrison seemed to have a bigger role against the Steelers than he did a week ago. In theory, the combination of Lewis and Harrison offers a great contrast in styles, but unfortunately, it appears that neither player is a clear number one option at this point in their careers. The health of both of these players should be interesting to watch as the season unfolds.

Speaking of which, the Browns' lack of depth at this position is quite unfortunate, considering that there are - or will be - opportunities for playing time in the future. Considering that Lewis' high mileage body cannot survive twenty plus carries a game and that Mangini cannot be happy with Harrison's tepid pass protection performance, the time is now for a running back to emerge.

How about James Davis? Nevermind.

4. Can the Browns take advantage of Aaron Smith's absence?

Unfortunately, the meager gains the Browns made on the ground more than likely were a result of Smith's absence. However, to the Steelers' credit, the fill-in rotation of linemen gave the Browns line some problems, especially in the second half. In terms of the Browns' offensive line, their performance was representative of a lack of cohesion on the right side - especially considering that Floyd Womack and Rex Hadnot took some of their first snaps of the season.

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5. Assuming that Alex Mack was drafted to take on the likes of Casey Hampton, how will our promising center fare?

One of the most promising sights of the game, or even call it a vision of the future

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- came when Mack, Thomas and Steinbach swept left and rolled up the side of the field to block for Josh Cribbs. While Mack still plays like an NFL rookie at times, it is becoming obvious that he brings a nice blend of size and mobility that could one day help the Browns in becoming a viable running team.

One day.

6. And if the Browns decide to pass - just how good is Joe Thomas?

Much has been written and said regarding the quality of Thomas' early season play. After holding some of the NFL's best pass rushers in check, Thomas faced his biggest challenge in Pittsburgh's All-Animal James Harrison. And for most of the game, Thomas performed well. However, in the second half, Thomas was baited into a holding call, then broke down later when the Steelers went into Kamikaze Blitz Mode.

But despite all this - and to answer the question, Thomas is very good.

7. Will we again be reminded that Mohammed Massaquoi is merely a rookie wide receiver?

In the first half, Massaquoi definitely reminded Browns fans that he is merely a rookie wide receiver. Massaquoi dropped two mostly catchable passes and looked a little confused at times in running routes. However, during the early parts of the third quarter, he again flashed the talent that could one day make him one of the better receivers in the game.

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8. If Robert Royal has a broken finger, does that mean we won't throw the ball to him?

And to add to the question, what if Royal also has a bum hamstring? Does that

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make him the featured receiving option? I understand that the Browns are depleted at tight end, but an injured Royal is not helping the offense. I'm not even sure how a healthy Royal helps.

[As I stated yesterday](#) , the Browns badly need to add a tight end. Having Hank Fraley available to help out the running game is a nice luxury, but is far from a solution to the problem. And considering that Steve Heiden is struggling to return from offseason surgery, perhaps a visit to the free agent wire is in order. How about Michael Gaines to start?

9. Can the Browns put some pressure on a weak Steeler offensive line?

There is a disturbing trend starting to surface with the Browns pass rush. It appears that the defense can get some early pressure, but cannot sustain it throughout the game. For example, witness David Bowens' early success, but then flash forward to the approximate sixty occasions that Ben Roethlisberger had to find a downfield target and the question is indeed answered.

And speaking of questions, here's one I never thought I would ask: Just how much did the team miss Kamerion Wimbley yesterday?

I suddenly feel so dirty.

10. Are the Browns fast enough to contain the Steeler spread formation attack?

Certainly not. Not by any stretch of the imagination. Not at all.

Outside of D'Quell Jackson and maybe Brodney Pool, the Browns defense is incredibly slow. Currently, this defense does not have any real playmakers, or at least anyone who can consistently challenge the opposing offense. I realize how harsh this sounds, but the reality is that the Browns will not improve as a team until better talent is added to the defense.

And considering that the Steelers - who are by most respects, the Browns' current measuring stick of success - have become a finesse offensive attack, this team will not be able to compete until they start to close the talent gap.

Or, in other words, the Browns need the following - and soon:

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1. An athletic, physical Inside Linebacker
2. An multi-dimensional Outside Linebacker
3. A top flight Cornerback
4. A physically intimidating Strongside Safety
5. A rangy, athletic Weakside Safety
6. Disruptive Defensive Tackles
7. An October to January beach vacation package for Brandon McDonald

11. If last week's ugly win over Buffalo was a sign of things to come under Mangini, how will the new Boss of Berea fare against the traditional barometer of success known as the Steelers?

Take away the turnover frenzy of the second half, allow a third party to take first down measurements, get Kamerion Wimbley some TamiFlu and order some Lester Hayes Stick-Um for the wideouts and we all could be experiencing some very different emotions today.



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However, in reality, what we again realized - for the twelfth straight time - is that the talent gap between the Browns and Steelers is as huge as your average Steeler fan's exploding arteries after a halftime Pastrami refill.

Yet, a day later, I still have a strange feeling of something that is certainly not a sense of accomplishment, but rather a weird mixture of pride and relief, combined with vague trails of optimism.

While the Browns certainly lost, and in most respects, lost convincingly - and in an ugly fashion - there were some times when it almost seemed plausible that this team was turning the corner. But whenever hope arose, sloppy tackling or an offensive turnover derailed any sort of momentum - the precious kind that a raw, struggling team needs.

Offensively, the Browns are currently a strange mixture of talent levels and experience. Basically, there are several key members of this year's offense who will probably not remain with the team long enough to hopefully reap the benefits of Mangini's rebuilding plan.

And I am incredibly relieved by this.

For example, can anyone realistically claim that either Derek Anderson, Jamal Lewis, Hank Fraley, John St. Clair, or even Robert Royal will be still be wearing a Browns jersey in 2-3 years? The same could be said for the likes of Brandon McDonald, Brodney Pool or any one of Mangini's ex-Jet castoffs.

The Pick - Part Three

So while this latest Steeler loss certainly stings, and the stain of ugliness that marked this team for the first three weeks of the season has reemerged, we all need to remember that 2009 is just the beginning of [The Process](#) .

And we still have a long way to go.