

Written by {ga=davekolonich}
Sunday, November 08 2009 7:00 PM -

Now past the precious bye week, the Browns are currently scraping the bottom of the league at 1-7 and considering the caliber of play exhibited so far this season, it actually could be far worse. So, in the spirit of reflective venting, let's take a trip down memory lane - or a wrong turn into the ghetto of NFL franchises, if you will - and bring in Dave Kolonich to take a look at the best and worst of the Browns 2009 campaign through eight games. Watted by a shroud of secrecy, much like the monogrammed handkerchief that Randy Lerner has allegedly been crying into of late, the Browns front office has yet again experienced the kind of dysfunctional power grab that leaves the organization stumbling backwards into what has become another meaningless season.

But hope arose this weekend, as the Browns thankfully were granted a reprieve by the league's schedule makers. Or, in other words - this weekend marked the only time this season Browns Nation could utter the following:

There is no way we lose today.

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So, in the spirit of reflective venting, let's take a trip down memory lane - or a wrong turn into the ghetto of NFL franchises, if you will - and take a look at the best and worst of the Browns 2009 campaign.

A Three Act Play

In many ways, the fortunes of the Browns 2009 season can be sliced into thirds. Consider that the first act of the season could be generously characterized as the short-lived Brady Quinn era, as the team played a strong first half against Minnesota, before eventually losing by a couple scores. This effort was followed by a frustratingly bad loss to the Broncos and then complete devastation at the hands of the Ravens.

And before you could even blink, most of the goodwill and spirit created in training camp was long extinguished, along with the career of Quinn. The first three games of the season saw a competitive Browns team get overmatched in terms of talent. As the offense stagnated under the ultra-conservative play of Quinn, the defense wore down and the team was the victim of two fairly brutal losses.

Hope arose in the team's next two games, which remains the pinnacle of the

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team's 2009 success. Consider that the Browns gave their most inspired performance of the year in a marathon, overtime loss to the Bengals. For nearly five quarters, the entire Browns roster gave a more than worthy effort and almost upset a resurgent Bengals squad. The following week, the Browns captured what remains their only win of the season, beating an error prone Bills team.

And then echoing the old theater adage that if a gun is present in Act One, it must be fired later on, the Browns have continually shot themselves over the past three weeks. Facing two dynamic offenses, the Browns defense exhibited the type of raw talent that can only affirm their place as one of the league's worst teams. Adding to the Browns misfortunes has been the continued historically inept play of the passing offense, which has been highlighted by a misery of inaccuracy and dropped balls.



Ghosts of Romeo Crennel

While the enthusiasm and strategies put into place by new defensive coordinator Rob Ryan have been a most welcome addition to the lakefront, the Browns defense has again been addled by two weaknesses that have plagued the team for years.

First, the Browns continue to feature cornerbacks who cannot play man to man coverage. While Eric Wright could someday make a nice #2 corner, after two and a half years of watching him play, it is obvious that the Browns need to upgrade the secondary in a hurry. The lack of capable corners has forced the defense away from the aggressive approach that Ryan ideally wants to play and has forced the team to yet again employ the kind of self-defeating, preventative style of zone drops that were a staple of the Crennel regime.

In fact, things have gotten so bad in the secondary that Mike Adams, one of the Browns special teams aces/roster glue guys has been forced into duty at corner, while the likes of Mike Furrey and Hank Poteat have become regular contributors some twenty yards down the field.

Adding to the team's defensive woes - besides sharing the locker room with a completely inept offense - is the team's continued lack of a consistent pass rush. Although Ryan must be given credit for implementing more blitz packages, the team's inability to pressure quarterbacks has isolated the weaknesses of the secondary.

However, in a bit of optimism - and despite the obvious lack of talent among the defense's front seven - Ryan's schemes have generated some moments of success. Consider that the Browns were able to pressure Brett Favre in the season opener and may have given their best performance last week against Chicago, registering four sacks.

A Historical Season

Much has been written, debated and shouted over regarding the team's historically inept passing game. In fact, a large portion of Browns Nation have become single-mindedly obsessed with the woes of an offense that features several raw rookie receivers, a woefully inaccurate quarterback, a right side of an offensive line that consistently caves under pressure and of course, the inclusion

of a virgin offensive coordinator who has been clearly overmatched for two months.

And rightfully so, legions of Browns fans - who have witnessed some terrible offense in recent years - have been taken aback by the sheer ineptitude of a passing game that lately has been fortunate to break the 100 yard mark of production.

Things have been so ugly on the offensive side of the ball that my self-coined Mendoza Line of Browns Failure - last year's stretch of games started by Ken Dorsey and Bruce Gradkowski - seems almost rose-colored in comparison. Or, in other words - the Browns passing game in 2009 is close to representing one of the lowest points in team history.

And before my system collapses from again analyzing what has become a synapse snapping exercise in futility, let's at least look at some positives that have occurred in 2009. This won't take but a minute.

Special Teams

You know it's bad when you try to reflect on the positives of the season and the only names that pop up are those belonging to Ray Ventrone, Blake Costanza, Dave Zastudil and Josh Cribbs. But in Cleveland - at this moment in time - that's all you get.

Consider that the Browns only win of the season was delivered by the team's special teams unit. Basically, in a nod to the 2000 season, the team's punter has to be considered the team's MVP. Think of it this way - if Dave Zastudil couldn't figure out the swirling winds pouring through Ralph Wilson Stadium last month, this team would be 0-8. And I would also be remiss in not crediting Roscoe Parrish for our only fortune of the season.

As for the rest of the special teams, you have to give credit to the likes of Ventrone, Costanza, Mike Adams and Jason Trusnik for their great efforts this season. These four players, along with some others, have helped the Browns kick coverage units emerge as one of the league's best. And give some credit to Eric Mangini here - if we can say anything about his skills as a talent evaluator, it is that he knows a good special teams player when he sees one.

Speaking of which, despite resting in the basement of the league, can you imagine where this team and fanbase would be without Josh Cribbs?

Core Guys

Perhaps because there are so many bad teams this year, the ideas of NFL Nation Building have been prominently strewn in every corner of the league. One of the most popular sentiments is the Fourth Year Theory, which assumes that teams - rebuilding or established - have to rely on a core group of players entering their fourth and fifth years. Or, in other words - NFL franchises have to draft well in order to succeed.

Which brings us to back to the Browns.

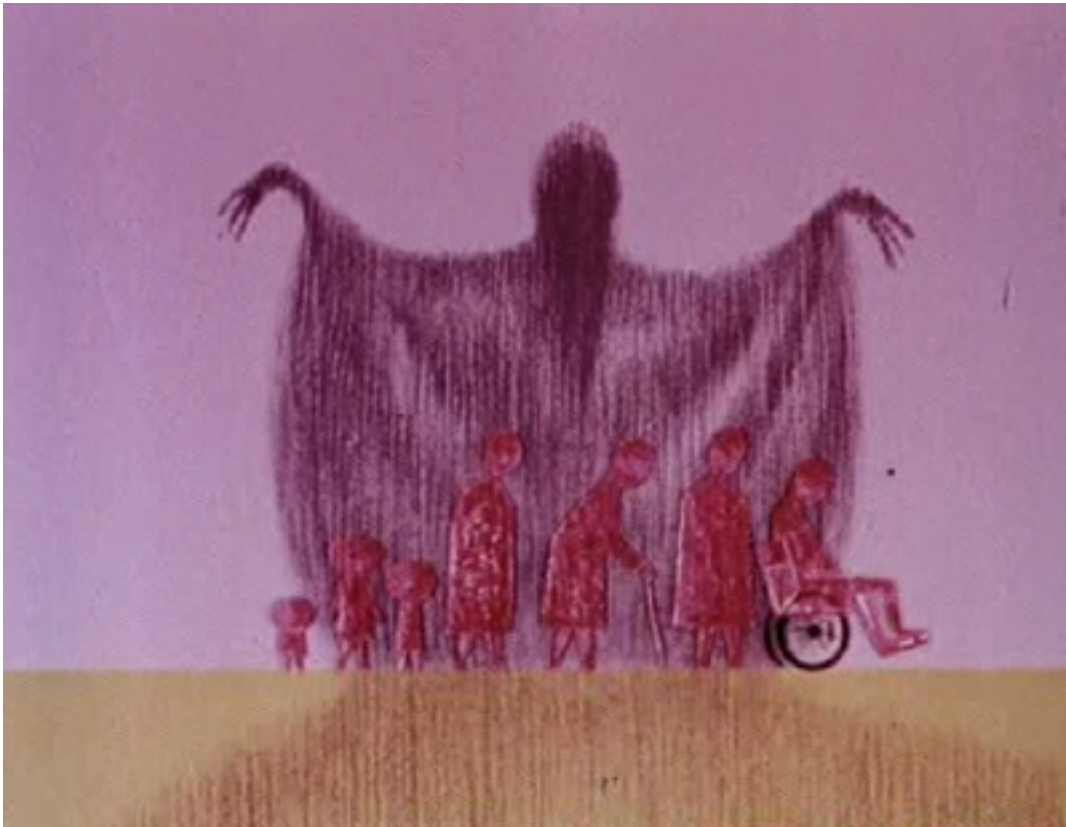
Currently, the Browns can only boast the presence of D'Qwell Jackson and Kamerion Wimbley as somewhat established fourth year pros. And even if you extend the rules a bit, it's very difficult to come up with any other players outside of Eric Wright, Brodney Pool, Lawrence Vickers and maybe Jerome Harrison.

For a team that is eternally rebuilding - the lack of a core group of players presents some damning evidence. When it comes to drafting, the Browns have no clue.

However, on a more positive note, the play of Jackson (pre-injury) and Wimbley has been encouraging. Particularly in the case of Wimbley - who was essentially left for dead by many of us entering the season - the college defensive end has shown some flashes of talent and remains the team's only true pass rushing threat. In Jackson's case, he has elevated his play, while the talent around him continues to erode.

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Embryonic State

If 2009 will be remembered as anything, it has to be marked as The Year of the Rookie. And before you scoff at that statement, consider that if Eric Mangini is here for the long-term, all the team's 2009 rookies could eventually become the types of fourth-year core players that the Browns will rely on for future success. And while certainly these players have not enjoyed prolific accomplishments in 2009, there could be some hope floating about here.

The team's top pick, Alex Mack, looks to be a keeper. Although he was thrown into a demanding position from the start, Mack has held his own against some quality veteran tackles. Of course, being a rookie, there have been times where Mack has been overmatched. However, in a hopeful vision of the future, Mack's nice mix of athleticism and strength could eventually bolster the team's running game.

The Browns next two picks, Brian Robiskie and Mohammed Massaquoi, have proven the age-old NFL theory that rookie wide receivers rarely have success this early in their careers. With the exception of Massaquoi's performance against the Bengals, these two wideouts have struggled mightily, both against more talented opponents and within their own offensive schemes.

However, in many ways - Massaquoi could represent the high-end of the team's 2009 draft. Although he is currently being swallowed up in coverage and dropping every third pass thrown to him, he does bring a nice combination of size and speed to the team's offense. As for Robiskie, again he's a rookie wideout playing on a struggling offense - who knows?

As for the rest of team's rookies, the remainder of the 2009 schedule should reveal more regarding the team's young defenders. With the injuries suffered by Jackson and Eric Barton, Kaluka Maivia and David Veikune should receive a crash course in NFL experience. So far in his limited playing time, Maivia looks like he could become a quality coverage linebacker - which is something that this defense desperately needs going forward.

As for Veikune - much like Robiskie, and even Kamerion Wimbley - who knows? Consider that Veikune may have the steepest learning curve of any Browns rookie this season. Coming off a college career that saw him play mostly defensive end, Veikune is having to adjust to a brand new position - one that is still not clearly defined. The same could be said for Coye Francies, who has continually bounced around the lineup, despite the lack of talent at his position.

Adding to the dilemma of all of the team's rookies is the often unstable state of the team's franchise. If Randy Lerner's recent comments prove true, it is possible that a new executive will arrive in Cleveland in 2010. If such a case occurs - and assuming that Mangini is not a driving factor behind the decision - it is possible that none of the 2009 rookies will last long enough in Cleveland to become core guys.

Another possibility - albeit a depressing one - is that none of the aforementioned players, with the exception of Mack, becomes anything more than a complimentary player. Consider that Massaquoi's ceiling as an NFL pro could only be that of a third wideout. As for Maivia, he may only play on third downs, while Robiskie, Veikune and Francies could likely end up on another team's roster.

But enough depressing talk - it's time to hand out some awards.

Best Game

Although the Browns only win of the season would be a more likely candidate, I still say because of the fan enjoyment, overall inspired team effort and sheer hope, the best game of 2009 has to be the Browns near upset of the Bengals.

For one game only, the Browns featured a competent NFL offense, both in terms of the team's passing game and running attack. Derek Anderson reminded us all of his elusive potential as a starting quarterback, while Jerome Harrison showed the type of slashing running ability that has placed him in the vaunted halls of the team's Ghosts of Running Backs Past Potential. Also, the Bengal game signalled the arrival - and departure - of Mohammed Massaquoi as a potential quality wideout. Of course, the presence of Braylon Edwards as a decoy helped tremendously in this development.

Worst Game

Picking the Ravens game is too easy. It was evident going in that the Browns were no match for an early season Baltimore team that was hitting on all cylinders. In my view, the loss to the Steelers was much worse. Consider that the Steelers continue to serve as the Browns' barometer for success - and consider the Browns were badly overmatched in terms of talent.

While pretty much every game in 2009 has served as an example of this lack of

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talent, the Steeler game demonstrated the team's utter lack of defensive athleticism. The Steelers pass-happy offense stretched the Browns defense all over the field and took advantage of some Isaac Sowells-sized gaps in coverage, culminating in Ben Roethlisberger throwing for some 800 yards and 14 touchdowns.



Worst Game - Special Consideration

Want to know how I know you're a Browns fan?

If you watched the entirety of the Bills game, almost had a heart attack when Roscoe Parrish muffed another punt return in the fourth quarter, then were generally excited as the team celebrated their first win of the season, then felt somewhat validated regarding the Mangini Nation Building Experiment - then you, my friend, are a Browns fan.

Best Performance

Although the sinister reason why Mohammed Massaquoi effectively shredded the Bengal pass defense was due to Braylon Edwards receiving double-coverage throughout the game, the one-game emergence of a Browns wideout who could actually make plays downfield was among the most exciting of lakefront developments in recent years. And although Braylon's departure, along with DA's cannon-like subtleness, has since retarded any offensive growth shown last month, this one-game result actually produced watchable Browns football.

Worst Performance

Let's toss out the easy examples - meaning let's move beyond Brady and DA. In terms of worst performance, how about John St. Clair making Elvis Dumervil into a Hall of Famer during the Broncos game? St. Clair's pedestrian performance made many Browns fans long for the days of Kevin Shaffer, or even the potential of Kelly Butler - as Dumervil dominated the second half of play, registering four sacks.

Worst Performance - Part Two

In a nod to Mangini's arrogance, or perhaps the team's overall offensive incompetence, let's go ahead and give an award to the coaching staff for refusing to give any help to St. Clair after Dumervil's first, second or third sack.

Best Play(s)

Let's go ahead and give any future award to the team's most explosive offensive player, special teams ace Josh Cribbs. Consider that Cribbs' 2009 special teams touchdown total is nearly half that of the overall offensive production. Actually, now that I think about it - let's not consider that.

Best Play - Machiavelli Consideration

Without question, the best play of the season has to be Mangini's complete domination of the team's front office. Consider that Mangini effectively took control of this organization in the Winter months, ignored "GM" George Kokinis in the Spring, made him irrelevant in the Summer, then pinned all of the team's failures on him in the Fall, then got him fired as Winter approaches yet again.

Simply brilliant.

Best Stutter Step(s)

For the second consecutive season, this award is presented to the ageless Jamal Lewis. In fact, according to Stats, Inc., Lewis is close to breaking his 2008 record for number of times his toes tap the ground before falling forward for a two-yard gain. And although Lewis is a well-respected veteran on this team, and despite claiming some great successes in his career, it is beyond obvious that Lewis has lost a step. Or, some 4,355 steps if you're counting at home.

Best Stutter Step(s) - Part Two

Without question, Mangini's training camp-long exercise in secrecy regarding the team's starting quarterback has to win this prestigious award. For well over a month, Mangini refused to name a starting QB, perhaps in an attempt to either establish his stranglehold on the franchise, or maybe to try to gain a "competitive advantage" over the Vikings. Either way, the entire charade was an exercise in wasting time, as both quarterbacks have proven to be equally ineffective within the realm of a horrendous offense.

Best Hit

Where has this Kamerion Wimbley been my entire life? Watching Wimbley drill Chicago's Jay Cutler was perhaps the nastiest hit a Browns defender has delivered to an opponent since the starcrossed days of Gerard Warren. And while I don't want to rain on the parade that has been Wimbley's decent progress in 2009, I have to admit that the hit was symbolic of the fourth year linebacker's career so far:

Once he starts running, he just can't stop.

Most Inspired Performance

Without question, the Browns loss to the Bengals reaffirmed what it means to watch a competent, even competitive NFL team play football. Although the Browns eventually lost to the Bengals, the atmosphere around Berea and among Browns Nation was an almost joyous display of hope and enthusiasm. Consider that after the game, Mangini was nearly in tears as he expressed his passion for how his team just performed.

And speaking of tears...

Most Inspired Performance - Part Two

Although the Browns lone win of the season also represents perhaps the ugliest game in team history, the Buffalo game showed the kind of raw desire and effort that has occasionally marked the Mangini era. The Browns managed to overcome a swirling wind and their own ineptitude to sneak away with a 6-3 win. Ugly as it was, the Browns lack of talent was supplemented with the kind of tough mindset that any successful NFL team requires to win.

Most Inspired Performance - Part Three

Because I'm running out of team highlights to discuss, how about we close with this:

The Browns didn't lose yesterday.