

"The Process" Moves On

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Monday, November 16 2009 7:00 PM -

It was another loss to another division foe and another embarrassment, this time in prime time, as the Cleveland Browns were shut out by a very average Baltimore Ravens team, 16-0. A relatively competitive first half by way of a spirited Browns defense and a lousy Ravens offense gave way to 16 quick third quarter points and put the game out of reach quickly. The return of Brady Quinn wasn't the Cinderella story some expected as he put together a Derek Anderson-like performance, compelled with interceptions. For good measure, there wasn't much of a running game either. "The Process" moves on. Gary talks about it in his latest.



Contemplating the wreckage of another Cleveland Browns' loss to another team that's owned them, the truth, sadly, is that the outcome of Monday night's game against the Baltimore Ravens was as inevitable as Ron Jaworski describing a swing pass as if it were a military operation.

Even the return of Brady Quinn, dead and buried until lucrative bonuses were unreachable, couldn't do much to throw life into the lifeless. If only Quinn, abused as he's been by head coach Eric Mangini, had had the chutzpah to take the first pass,

Longest Yard

style, and turn to the sideline and drill Mangini in the groin with it, then maybe there would have been some intrigue.

But Quinn is still trying to build a career, Mangini trying to save one and thus the game was played straight, or at least what amounts to straight in these parts these days, and intrigue was mostly missing as the Browns lost 16-0 and saw their record drop to 1-8.

On the plus side, the planned protest went off about as well as a Cleveland offensive series-ill planned and poorly executed. On the downside, perhaps the biggest downside, Josh Cribbs was needlessly drilled on the game's last play and left on a stretcher.

For those not willing to ruin a perfectly good Monday night, the final score indicates a close score, or relatively close anyway. The Ravens did, after all, cover the spot.

While it wasn't a blow out, mainly because the Ravens at this point are a very average team, it really wasn't like the Browns ever really had a chance.

They failed to score, for goodness sakes and never really came close.

What the game really demonstrated, as if the point hadn't already been made 8 other times, is that this team isn't yet good enough for garbage time, let alone prime time.

But for the half full types, the first half of the game was mostly competitive due to a spirited Browns defense running head first into a tentative and average Ravens offense. When the teams entered the locker room it was with the dubious achievement of having accomplished something that hadn't been done in the NFL all season, a scoreless first half.

But while the first half belonged to mediocrity, the second half belonged to the Ravens long enough to ensure that they would improve their record to 5-4 and keep their dwindling playoff hopes alive.

And what a quick and decisive smack in the face it was. The Ravens found life quickly in the second half, scoring all of its 16 points in the half's first 7 minutes before the game settled back into what amounted to the Browns-Buffalo Bills matchup from earlier this season, but with better announcers.

Quarterback Joe Flacco, looking more like a rookie than at any time in his two year career, seemed harassed and confused by the Browns defense in the first half. But after a quick 3-and-out by the Browns to open up the second half and a bad punt by substitute punter Reggie Hodges, the Ravens took over from their own 41-yard line. Flacco hit Derrick Mason on a 41-yard pass down the right sideline to get the ball to the 13-yard line.

Then, with the Browns defense in disarray and with only 10 players on the field, Rice ran off tackle and into the end zone for the game's first score.

The Steve Hauschka extra point gave the Ravens the 7-0 lead.

On the Browns' first play after the Josh Cribbs kick return Quinn had his pass for tight end Robert Royal tipped and then intercepted by safety Dawann Landry who returned it, naturally, for a touchdown. The extra point was blocked by Shaun Rogers but the score was suddenly 13-0 and the game effectively over.

But in case that wasn't quite enough to convince even the most stout of optimists then Quinn's next interception in the next series sent them and the team back to the bench with heads down knowing what was to come. For the record, it was a 3rd and 12 pass to Mike Furrey that should have been caught, in fact rather easily.

But Furrey could neither hold on to a ball nor did he possess enough sense to knock it to the ground.

Cornerback Chris Carr caught the deflection.

The Ravens then moved it to the Browns 26-yard line before settling for a 44-hard Hauschka field goal and the 16-0 lead.

From that point, both teams seemed to lose sight of the fact that a game was still taking place and an audience was watching. The Ravens seemed to use the remaining quarter and a half in the game to work on whatever it is they need to work on (and from the looks of things, it's a lot) while the Browns worked on "the process."

And for what it's worth, it's now 9 games in and "the process" is as mysterious and ambiguous as the plot of a David Lynch movie, just not as successful.

Nine games in, 5 offensive touchdowns.

It wasn't as if the Browns were necessarily awful or at least any

more awful than they've been all season. It was more a case of the same things plaguing them that have plagued them all season. Whatever imagination and innovation they might otherwise have shown in the first half, and there was some, was abandoned in favor of a predictable approach of short passes and screens in the second.

Much of that, I suppose, was attributable to the fact that the Browns were being forced to throw and the Ravens defense, looking old, tired and uninspired in the first half, finally seeing some blood. But one bubble screen begot the next and it was suddenly crystal clear why it really didn't matter much whether Quinn, Derek Anderson, Anthony Quinn or Anderson Cooper was behind center.

The Browns lack playmakers and at this point in the season nothing is going to change that simple, painful fact.

At least the game started well enough for the Browns. A Ravens offense, limping and trying to find its way, quickly went 3-and-out.

Then Jamal Lewis ripped off a 12 yard gain on the

Browns' first play and survived a replay challenge over a fumble that occurred after Lewis was down.

The Browns looked to change the rhythm of a game that was all fits and starts initially by using the no huddle offense on second and third down.

It didn't yield another first down but it was something different, anyway.

The Ravens, meanwhile, were out of sync. With less than half the first quarter gone they already had used all three of their timeouts-the first on the ill-conceived replay challenge and then two more when the Browns defense seemed to have Ravens quarterback Joe Flacco confused.

Throw in a missed 36-yard field goal by Hauschka that seemed to have head coach John Harbaugh checking his cell phone to see if he still had Matt Stover on speed dial, plus two sacks and the Ravens, an average team anyway, seemed to be playing down to their competition.

The first real sign of life came on the Browns first

drive in the second quarter. Backed up as a result of a holding call on a Josh Cribbs punt return, Quinn hit Mohamed Massaquoi on a quick out pass on third down that Massaquoi turned into a 30-yard gain.

After one more first down, tackle John St. Clair helped kill the rest of the drive when he false started and pushed the Browns into a 3rd and 9.

Quinn then read blitz from the right side but Cribbs did not and it turned into a pass to nowhere and another punt.

Some lives weren't meant to live I guess.

And that's the way the game seemed destined to go. A few decent plays here, a few steps back there, kick and do it all over again.

The Browns, more crisp and imaginative on offense than at any point this season, had

trouble sustaining whatever success they were experiencing.

The Ravens, both on offense and defense, looked old, uninterested and tired.

Flacco seemed mostly confused and tentative and linebacker Ray Lewis was nearly invisible, finally.

As much as the Ravens were clearly struggling, it wasn't as if the Browns defense didn't have something to do with it.

Playing spirited throughout, they kept the pressure on Flacco and didn't seem to panic when running back Ray Rice broke loose a few times.

But all it really did was keep the game deceptively competitive until halfway into the second half.

Quinn's return wasn't the Cinderella story that would have made a nice narrative. Indeed he was very Anderson like, going 13-31 for 99 yards, 2 interceptions and a quarterback rating of 23.4.

The running game wasn't much better.

Overall the Browns had what's become a typical day at the office with 160 yards of total offense.

The Ravens actually weren't a whole lot

better, but more than good enough. Flacco was 13-18 for 155 yards, Rice had 89 yards rushing with Willis McGahee adding another 35.

None of this was a surprise, but then again it wasn't supposed to be.

If you want a gauge on if/when the Browns might be competitive against another NFL team, then forget games like Monday night's. The Browns don't have enough firepower on either side of the ball for that kind of matchup and it showed. Instead, let's ponder that next week the team visits Detroit for the first of several real tests against like-talented opponents and be

thankful that it's not on Thanksgiving.