

Long Since Forgotten

Written by {ga=davekolonich}

Wednesday, November 18 2009 7:00 PM -

Lost in the midst of what has become an increasingly publicized fall from grace has been the absence of two of the Browns most consistent and longest-tenured players in the team's recent history. While both the on and off-field versions of the Browns continue to scrape the depths of the league's wet basement, the likes of Steve Heiden and Ryan Tucker have quietly gone into that good night. In Dave's latest, he talks about these two players and also ranks the Browns best players since they came back to the league in 1999. Lost in the midst of what has become an increasingly publicized fall from grace has been the absence of two of the Browns most consistent and longest-tenured players in the team's recent history. While both the on and off-field versions of the Browns continue to scrape the depths of the league's wet basement, the likes of Steve Heiden and Ryan Tucker have quietly gone into that good night.

Much like the Browns' season in general, 2009 will be mostly forgotten far before it ever ends. Which is only natural, considering that the levels of genuine fan support among Browns Nation are among the lowest in team history. Already, many Browns fans are dreading the prospects of watching such a badly overmatched team prattle through seven more games.

Or, in other words - the offseason can't get here fast enough.

Which is a shame - especially for the likes of Heiden and Tucker.

Considering each veteran's injury situation, as Heiden cannot recover from offseason surgery and Tucker's body, specifically his shoulder, hip and knees have been decimated, the Browns have missed these two veteran voices in the locker room lately. And regardless of the team's 2009 finish, or even based on whoever is the latest person hired to "right" the ship, we've likely seen the end of both players in Cleveland.

Which is a shame - considering that each contributed a lot to the franchise, but will easily be forgotten - if anyone has even noticed that they're gone.

For the better part of a decade, both Heiden and Tucker have demonstrated the kind of raw toughness and fierce competitiveness that defines elusive NFL consistency. In Tucker's case, he played with a vicious mean streak, which combined with his brute strength and decent agility made him one of the best blockers in the league, albeit an underrated one.

In Cleveland, Tucker was easily the most talented and productive O-linemen to be found among a roster that was usually built from the outside-in. Perhaps because

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of the Browns' refusal to invest in their offensive line - which none of the previous regimes can claim otherwise - Tucker's skill was easy to notice. However, if you point to the team's random offensive accomplishments of the past several years, one thing becomes clear.



Ryan Tucker made this team much better.

Consider the few lone memories of a consistent offense that the Browns have

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enjoyed over the past 7-8 years. Beginning with William Green's career-defining run against the Falcons in 2002, and continuing on to Reuben Droughns' renaissance of 2005 and then concluding with what would become Jamal Lewis' NFL swan song in 2007, the one thing this trilogy of scattered success has in common is Tucker's often unheralded offensive line play.

And in comparison, the times over the years when Tucker has not played - which is a considerable number - has coincided with the Browns' complete lack of a rushing attack. Of course, Tucker's absence is not the only factor that has determined the offense's recent success, but perhaps the greatest example of his immense contribution to the team could be found in last year's still-shocking upset of the Giants.

In what turned out to be Tucker's only start of 2008, the entire Browns offense caught fire - much like they did throughout 2007 - and both the running and passing game reached levels not seen since.

Or, for another comparison - take a look at what has happened to the right side of the Browns' line in 2009. Rotating the likes of Hank Fraley, Floyd Womack and Rex Hadnot at Tucker's old position, while relying on John St. Clair to play Tucker's original spot, the Browns line has returned to being a weak link in the overall progression of the team.

Speaking of which, if this season has taught us anything regarding our Browns, is it that having a quality tight end contains an immeasurable value.

After watching the likes of one-handed Robert Royal muff his way through the schedule, while roster filler such as Michael Gaines and Greg Estandia are employed as glorified extra tackles, and then realizing that in the end, Hank Fraley is probably better than all of the above combined, I sort of long for the days of knowing that Steve Heiden was always there to plug in.

Although not of the same caliber as Tucker, Heiden brought an incredible sense of professionalism and work ethic to Cleveland. Known as the team's best-conditioned player for a number of years, Heiden's approach to the game gave the Browns' various offenses a number of options to play with. Consider that at different times in his career, Heiden was featured as a blocker, pass catcher, goal line decoy and incredibly effective check-down option.

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And while those traits may not signal a player worthy of remembering , at least consider that the 2009 Browns offense - the one that is historically inept - could vastly benefit from putting a player like Heiden on the field. While certainly never dominating, Heiden was proficient on underneath routes and could make plays by occasionally stretching a linebacker or safety deep.

And he definitely was not Robert Royal.

Or Kellen Winslow.



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Perhaps the tumultuous career of Winslow in Cleveland will forever cast a shadow over Heiden's accomplishments. For practically all of Heiden's tenure in Cleveland, he was never firmly established as the team's number one tight end. However, considering Winslow's starcrossed flight through Cleveland, Heiden was regularly thrust into a starting role.

Consider Heiden's 2005 season as his best, at least in terms of numbers. Replacing the sidelined stunt man Winslow, Heiden became one of Trent Dilfer's top options on an offense that challenged the limits of competence - which is no small feat compared to our current group. Heiden's solid play continued over the next few seasons, despite Winslow's eventual return to the lineup.

And while Winslow would eclipse Heiden in virtually every offensive category, the veteran tight end offered something that the young star could not - stability. Simply put, Heiden was always there for the Browns. Whenever Winslow's brittle body wouldn't allow him to play, or whenever the eternal circus of his personal life interfered with Sundays, it was Heiden who stepped up.

And since last year's Giants game has become something of an era-defining moment, one could make the claim that Heiden's performance on that Monday night rivaled some of Winslow's best work as a Brown. Consider that along with contributing in the passing game, Heiden did something that all effective NFL tight ends can do - something that Winslow never could - block.

It may not seem like much, but after you glimpse at our current talent at tight end, then compare ours to the best of the AFC North, such as Heath Miller and Todd Heap, an argument can be made that the Browns offense - while missing many pieces - could benefit from adding a real tight end.

Maybe like a young Steve Heiden.

But, if you're a realist, you have to admit that we have likely seen the end of both Tucker and Heiden in Cleveland. Which, again - is a shame. It's a shame because neither player - again, assuming both retire after the season - could leave the game on their terms. Also, it's a shame that both players had to wind down their careers playing out a string of meaningless snaps for one of the league's bottom-feeding franchises.

But, perhaps the biggest shame is that both Tucker and Heiden will be easily

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forgotten. Because they had the misfortune of playing for the Browns during an era of futility, neither will be remembered by anyone other than hardcore fans. And beyond remembrance, neither player will be appreciated as they rightfully should. In many respects, the departures of Tucker and Heiden are much like the losses of Orpheus Roye and Daylon McCutcheon. Sure, both were solid players, but does anyone shed a tear after hearing their names?

Speaking of which, perhaps the following is more important. In an attempt to put both Tucker and Heiden's careers in a more proper perspective, I offer this...



Best Browns Players Since 1999 or What Can You Do?

Category 1 - Offensive Player

Without much to pick from, here's how I would rank the Browns who created the most impact - since 1999. Also, I can't allow myself to place a quarterback in the top 5. And even if I did, who would I pick?

1. Kellen Winslow - Compared to the current offense and based on a long view of the past decade, K2 was nothing short of prolific.
2. Braylon Edwards - I can only rank Braylon second simply because of his sensational 2007 season. What does that say about the recent past?
3. Kevin Johnson - Considering the talent around him, I still feel KJ did a tremendous job in an incredibly tough situation.
4. Jamal Lewis - While the past year and a half have been less than impressive, 2007 was astounding - especially considering our team's historical weaknesses in the run game.
5. Steve Heiden - Not to criticize Heiden, but can you seriously think of anyone else who deserves this spot?

Category 2 - Offensive Linemen

1. Ryan Tucker - I realize that Joe Thomas has been our best draft pick since 1999 and he is currently our best lineman, but in terms of overall impact, no one touches Tucker. His loss has coincided with the loss of any toughness and consistency we had up front.
2. Joe Thomas - I've been critical of Thomas in the past, but we are incredibly fortunate to have such a skilled player at one of the most critical positions in the game.
3. Eric Steinbach - Despite his massive contract, Steinbach is easy to forget along the line. However, his impact can be measured by the initial successes of Thomas and Alex Mack.
4. Shaun O' Hara - I'm not sure if this ranking is colored by his Giants career, or by his time in Cleveland - but then again, the franchise has spent a ton of money and three high draft picks trying to find his replacement.
5. Kevin Shaffer - And because this franchise refuses to consistently draft offensive linemen, Shaffer - who was by all accounts a free agent bust - is light years ahead of John St. Clair.

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And since I went there with the rankings, I have to throw this one out.

As many devoted fans already know, the Browns signed former Steeler linebacker Arnold Harrison to the roster yesterday. And before you ask yourself just who Arnold Harrison is, consider this first.

The Steelers defense is really good - and their linebackers are excellent.

So, again - without knowing anything about Harrison - can we just go ahead and make this projection?

Category 3 - Current (Active) Linebackers

1. Kamerion Wimbley
2. David Bowens
3. Kaluka Maivia
4. Arnold Harrison
5. Marcus Benard

Now that I think about it - forget Heiden and Tucker. Draft Day can't get here soon enough. And Arnold Harrison is my new favorite linebacker - whoever he is.