

## A Pecking Order Established

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It may have been the bizarro NFL's version of the anti Super Bowl but it also proved to be one of the NFL's most entertaining games of the year as the Cleveland Browns and Detroit Lions, exploiting each other's ineptitude, combined for 75 points and more than 900 yards of offense. But it was the Lions, rallying late that won, 38-37, on a 1-yard pass from Matt Stafford to Brandon Pettigrew on an untimed play at the end of the game. The play was set up by a Hank Poteat interference penalty in the end zone on a Stafford Hail Mary as the Browns saw their second victory snatched away in cruel and heartbreaking fashion. Gary tells us about the game in his latest.



Well, at least neither team played down to their competition. That would have been impossible.

With the NFL's bottom rung clearly at stake in the bizarro NFL's version of the anti-Super Bowl, the Cleveland Browns demonstrated that they can be entertaining when the competition is perfunctory. They also demonstrated that they can lose in the most disappointing and heartbreaking fashion after dropping two certain touchdown passes, blowing an early 21-point lead, then a 3-point lead and finally a 6-point lead with no time remaining.

Detroit Lions quarterback Matt Stafford tied the game when he hit back up tight end Brandon Pettigrew on a 1-yard touchdown on an untimed play set up by a Hank Poteat interference penalty in the end zone as the time expired.

Jason Stafford's extra point gave the Lions the 38-37 victory.

It was Stafford's 5<sup>th</sup> touchdown pass in one of the NFL's wildest games of the season. Unfortunately it probably had the NFL's smallest audience of the season as the game was blacked out in Detroit and a perfect weather day probably had most Clevelanders outside doing anything but watching football.

The Lions' final touchdown came on a furious rally that began with just under two minutes remaining in the game and the Lions out of time outs after burning them during the Browns' previous series. With the ball on their own 12-yard line following a Reggie Hodges punt, the Browns were protecting the sidelines at the expense of the middle and the Lions moved quickly into Browns territory. But with 8 seconds remaining and the ball on the Cleveland 32-yard line, the Lions and Stafford had only a Hail Mary pass remaining.

Scrambling furiously Stafford was able to unleash a pass to the end zone that initially was intercepted by Brodney Pool as the clock expired. But Poteat was flagged for the interference

penalty giving the Lions that final, untimed play.

Though Stafford was hurt on the throw and with back up Daunte Culpepper seemingly entering the game, the Browns called two time outs.

It gave Stafford enough time to recover for that final, fateful heart stab of a pass to Pettigrew.

Until then, it looked to be a game that the Browns were poised to win. Now, of course, the NFL's pecking order is firmly established. Ten games into a meaningless season it's the Browns in a walk, definitively settling a carry over argument from last season that posited whether the Lions reverse perfect season have happened had they played the Browns.

No.

Although the game was certainly a coming out party for Stafford, who hit 26 of his 43 passes for 422 yards and those 5 touchdown passes, it was a coming out party of sorts for Brady Quinn as well. He nearly matched Stafford with 4 touchdown passes of his own and 304 yards passing on a 21-34 day with no interceptions. But in the end it was the two dropped touchdown passes, one by running back Chris Jennings and another by Mohamed Massaquoi, and Quinn and the Browns' inability to get a key first down with two minutes

remaining in the game that allowed the Lions to rally for the victory.

For awhile though, it looked to the Browns' day, finally. The Browns' offense, with just 5 touchdowns all season, took on the look of the New England Patriots circa 2007 and Quinn looking every bit like Tom Brady, at least until the end.

Sure, it was the Lions defense and if it had been Tom Brady playing the Patriots probably would have had a dozen touchdowns and that final first down, but Quinn at least demonstrated that he can play well against inferior competition.

In what was a magical first quarter for the Browns, Quinn had 3 touchdown passes, a 59 yarder to Mohamed Massaquoi, a 40 yarder Chansi Stuckey and a 6 yarder to Josh Cribbs. Tack on a 44-yard Phil Dawson on the first possession and the Browns had an early 24-3 lead and nearly as many points in the first quarter as they've had in the first half of the previous 9 games.

But the Lions and Stafford were also playing against inferior competition and Stafford, like Quinn, showed he can play well in such circumstances. If there was any doubt in that regard it ended on the Lions' first play from

scrimmage when Stafford dumped the ball off to running back Kevin Smith, who turned it into a 63-yard gain that ultimately turned into a 31-yard Jason Hanson field goal. It also put to rest any notion that Browns' defensive coordinator had somehow performed witchcraft by turning a rag-tag, injured Browns defense into a force.

Giving up 38 points and 473 net yards to the Lions, a team with but one victory before Sunday, should put that talk to rest.

After the Browns built their huge first quarter lead, Stafford and the Lions decided it was time to punch in for the day. A dump pass to running back Aaron Brown turned into a 26-yard touchdown. Stafford then hit Smith for a 25-yard touchdown and for good measure hit receiver Calvin Johnson on a 75-yard touchdown that helped tie the score.

That pass was the culmination of a 6-play 94-yard drive that took just 2:34 to complete.

As entertaining as that all was, it didn't compare to the Browns' final drive of the first half, which was an

adventure to say the least. Taking over with just 5 minutes remaining in the half, Quinn moved the team from the Browns' 20 to Detroit 11.

It led to a 29-yard Dawson field goal that gave the Browns a 27-24 lead at half, but that is hardly the whole story.

The drive featured the Browns eschewing a long field goal and going for a first down on 4<sup>th</sup> and 4 from the Detroit 29.

But then the Browns strangely wasted nothing but time thereafter.

On third down, Quinn looked to have another touchdown pass as he threw perfectly to Jennings streaking down the right sideline.

Jennings let it go right through his hands.

Then on 4<sup>th</sup>

and 9 from the Detroit 21, the Browns lined up for a

field goal only to have Dawson take the snap directly and pass to Mike Furrey for an 11 yard gain.

But with only 6 seconds remaining, the Browns then kicked the field goal.

A successful fake field goal followed by an actual field goal.

I doubt you'll see that again.

After the teams traded possessions to open the third quarter, the Lions took a 31-27 lead on a 1-yard pass from Stafford to tight end Will Heller. It was the culmination of a 10 play, 84-yard methodical drive, the key play of which was a Stafford 30-yard pass to Johnson that got the ball to the Browns' 1-yard line.

The Browns couldn't respond on their next

series though in fairness to Quinn, Massaquoi dropped what looked to be a touchdown on a long pass down the middle. It was the second dropped touchdown pass of the game, the first coming by Jennings on that last drive before the half.

But at least the Browns found another way to score. With Hodge's punt landing inside the 5-yard line and a Detroit holding penalty on the return, the Lions were pushed back to their own 2-yard line. A false start pushed it back to the Detroit 1. After a first down on a pass interference, the Browns defense swarmed Stafford in the end zone.

He was called for intentional grounding giving the Browns a safety and making the score 31-29.

Importantly, it also gave the Browns the ball



back as the third quarter ended.

But Quinn and the Browns couldn't respond.

That would have to wait until their next possession. Starting at their own 34 yard line, the Browns got what looked to be the go-ahead touchdown with Quinn engineering a plodding but impressive 15 play, 75-yard drive capped off by a 2-yard pass to tight end Michael Gaines for the touchdown. The Browns then successfully converted for two points on a direct snap to running back Jamal Lewis that pushed the lead to 37-31 with under 6 minutes to play.

Dawson then made things interesting by kicking the ball out of bounds on the ensuing kickoff. It gave Detroit the ball at its own 40-yard line.

With the ball just shy of the 50-yard line and Detroit facing a 4<sup>th</sup>

and 1, head coach Jim Schwartz had Stafford sneak the ball up the middle.

Stafford made it just by the nose of the ball.

But two plays later Stafford threw deep into triple coverage to Johnson and Pool jumped high in the end zone to pick off the pass.

Unfortunately for the Browns there was still 3:40 left to play. A team that's had trouble moving the ball all season, it was almost like a worst case scenario.

The Browns were able to get one first down but needed another to avoid what turned

into the game winning rally by the Lions.

They came up short and with it lost the game.

But say this for both the Browns and the Lions. Given a chance to be boring and ineffective, the teams used each other's ineptitude to great advantage in giving fans of both teams the most entertaining game of the season.

One team was always going to come up short and it really matters very little in this instance that it was the Browns.

Both teams are at the bottom of the heap anyway and a victory by either isn't going to change that fact.

What will change, though, are the fortunes of the Lions, if not now then soon anyway. Stafford has grown considerably over the season and Johnson is the kind of receiver Braylon Edwards always wanted to be.

They need a credible defense.

Sound familiar?

The Browns are a little further behind. They don't have anyone on the roster the caliber of Johnson and though Quinn played well and showed great leadership and an ability to throw down field, there probably aren't too many head coaches that would choose him over Stafford at the moment.

The Lions, too, seem better situated at

running back with Smith while Lewis is playing out the string and Jennings has quite a ways to go.

The Browns next head to Cincinnati and then are home against San Diego and then Pittsburgh. It looks to be a long three weeks.