

The Tipping Point: Browns/Lions Aftermath

Written by {ga=davekolonich}
Monday, November 23 2009 7:00 PM -

Let's just go ahead and call a moratorium on any references to "character-building", "processes", or "coming of age." While the Browns participated in an incredibly entertaining game yesterday; a loss to the Lions - one in which a previously overmatched rookie quarterback threw for 400 yards and five touchdowns - is anything but morale boosting. So, casting bittersweet sentiments aside, let's bring in Dave Kolonich to take a look at what could be known hereafter as the lowest point in team history. Let's just go ahead and call a moratorium on any references to "character-building", "processes", or "coming of age." While the Browns participated in an incredibly entertaining game yesterday; a loss to the Lions - one in which a previously overmatched rookie quarterback threw for 400 yards and five touchdowns - is anything but morale boosting.

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Playing on a 120 Yard Field

What yesterday's loss revealed was the limits of the Browns current collection of defensive talent, which includes a secondary that doesn't feature any hope for competence, outside of Eric Wright eventually serving as a #2 corner. And while Calvin Johnson is indeed an ultra-talented player, he will likely never match Sunday's output again in his career.

Beyond the secondary, the Browns' injury-plagued linebacking corps are easily the worst group of players in the league, regardless of team or position. Granted, Kamerion Wimbley is more of a pass rusher and D'Qwell Jackson is lost for the year, but a working trio of Jason Trusnik, Kaluka Maivia and David Bowens?

As I've been ranting about all season, for the Browns to truly improve defensively, a mainline of talent has to arrive. Speaking of the team's linebackers, there were moments yesterday when it appeared the Lions were playing on a CFL field. In my life, I have never witnessed a slower defense. These same Browns would struggle to adjust to the speed of 1920's football.

And yet, I shudder to think how these same Browns would fare against the likes of the Saints or Colts. Take away the rookie quarterback and developing stud wideout and replace them with seasoned veterans - and one of the league's unbeaten teams could reach 100 points against this defense.

Regardless of whether Eric Mangini sealed his Browns fate yesterday - which is

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still a highly unlikely scenario - perhaps the scariest aspect of the rebuilding job the Browns face is in the building of team identity.

From what I've gathered over the past eleven months, Mangini is insistent on bringing in tough, smart football players - which are always great attributes to build with. And who knows? If given a few years to shape this roster, Mangini could ultimately showcase a rugged, physical group.

However, lost in that equation is the polar shift in the NFL that favors the kind of flag football that the Saints, Colts, Patriots, Falcons, Steelers and Vikings tend to play on a weekly basis. Or, in other words - Mangini's rebuilding process may result in the creation of the slowest team in a league that rewards speed.

And considering we already have the most offensively inept (still) and directionally challenged roster in the league, this is a most distressing thought.



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Behind the Headset

Perhaps lost in the sea of misery that has been 2009 is a proper analysis of Mangini's game management skills. Considering the Browns have only played in two close contests entering yesterday, it's difficult to gauge what type of actual game-day coach Mangini is. Of course, it's easy to make decisions when your team is down by 2-3 touchdowns, or meaningless, but much more difficult when the balance of the game is on the line.

Or, in other words - of all the criticism Mangini has faced this year - and most of it has been unfair - his coaching prowess has largely gone unnoticed.

Until yesterday.

Naturally, all fingers will point to Mangini's untimed timeout before the game's final play. And perhaps rightfully so - as the sole reason Mangini took the timeout was to demand an explanation from the referee regarding the prior play. Of course, the most vicious of critics will contend that Matthew Stafford took the extra time to shake off the effects of C.J. Mosley's brutal hit - recovered and then beat the Browns.

However, to that - I would say that any potential "cold armed" quarterback could have easily made the same game-winning throw. Or, perhaps even the Lions' punter could have fit the ball into the canyon-sized hole the Browns linebackers created on the final play.

Anyway, the far more damning evidence came a few minutes earlier, when the Browns decided to pass on a 3rd and 5. Considering that short route-running and catching are not two of the Browns' receivers better attributes this season, the failure to complete a pass gave the Lions the ball back, as well as froze the clock.

And if we're talking about playcalling, surely the decision to punt early in the second half helped to kill any momentum the Browns offense was slowly gathering. But then again, the Browns coaching staff failed to capitalize on its early successes, as the Lions patched up their deep secondary and effectively neutralized what was for a short while, a prolific passing attack.

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What It Is...

I hate to sound like such a cynic, but I cannot allow myself to think that both Brady Quinn and Brian Daboll are suddenly validated by yesterday's performance.

While the presence of 24 first quarter points was a most welcome sight for an offense-starved Browns Nation, you have to realize that our historically inept offense was going against an even more disasterous Lions' pass defense. And although I applaud the efforts of Daboll for dialing up two deep balls, and for Quinn making the throws and Massaquoi and Stuckey finishing the plays, I have to be critical regarding the rest of the game.

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In terms of coaching matchups, it was beyond obvious that the Lions staff, which includes one of the worst, yet longest tenured coordinators in the league in Gunther Cunningham, adjusted to the Browns playcalling and nearly pitched a second half shutout. And while I have resisted most calls to bash Daboll this season, I can't give him the benefit of the doubt here.

On the other side of the ball, the Browns defense - which up until this game was steadily improving under Rob Ryan - was absolutely clueless against Calvin Johnson. Blame it on the Browns' horrific deep coverage safety tandem, but it seemed like Johnson had a free release on nearly every pass route. And while zone defense certainly has its place in the NFL, the talent level of the Browns is currently incapable of effectively playing such a scheme.

And don't get me started on Jason Trusnik covering Kevin Smith out of the backfield. There's a reason some players are destined to only play special teams.

The 80 Million Dollar Question

So, where does this leave us? Early commenters seem to be delighted that the Browns can now claim the first pick in the draft as a result of their ineptitude. Already mock draft boards have sprung up online and Browns Nation is debating who the next franchise QB will be. Or, should we invest in the defense?

To all this, I suggest any real Browns fans simply look at the present, then point back at the past.

Considering the chronically swelling mass of infection that is our front office and ownership, do you really want our franchise holding the first overall pick come next April? Have we already forgotten the ghosts of Tim Couch and Courtney Brown? Or, perhaps we should instead reflect on the enormity of a potential first pick's signing bonus.

But then again, it could be fun to see if Mangini can break his record for number of times trading one draft pick.

Speaking of which, if Mangini is truly the man to lead this franchise into the great unknown, I have to wonder if even he truly has confidence in his roster-building prowess.

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For example, while again - the Browns gave an inspired effort yesterday, one that Mangini should be commended for, I have to wonder where the likes of Brian Robiskie, Coye Francies and David Veikune fit into the big picture of this franchise. If these three players can't suit up for a game that matches 1-8 teams, what exactly are they doing on our roster?

Or, in other words - is Hank Poteat's experience the reason for Francies' lack of development? Or, are Jason Trusnik's coverage skills so far superior to those of Veikune? And does Brian Robiskie even still play for this team?



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What Next?

While it was great to see Mangini offer some reflective answers to James Brown's questions during the pre-game show - presumably because of Randy Lerner's prodding - now is the time for Mangini to come clean about his process.

After a loss like this - to a team like that - where is this franchise headed?

In many ways, yesterday's game reminded me of the reborn Browns first win in 1999, when a Hail Mary pass stunned the Saints. At the time, the Saints were headed nowhere, which is a place those future Browns have visited several times in recent years. And while our current roster resembles that expansion collective, I had to wonder what Saints fans experienced after that game.

Perhaps the popular sentiment was this: how did we lose to "them"?

And unfortunately, I now realize the full extent of their emotions.

And while a blowout loss to the Lions, one that would have included another 99 yard passing effort and zero touchdowns would have been much more humiliating, in many ways, I think that our franchise has finally hit bottom.

But then again, we still have six more games to play.