

## Choking On Sawdust

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Sunday, December 06 2009 7:00 PM -

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Does a fourth quarter rally against a team that was already half packed for its trip back to the West Coast constitute being competitive? If it does, then Cleveland Browns head coach Eric Mangini can use it as some evidence, scant as it is, that his mystical process is now working. If it doesn't, then, well, nothing's changed after Sunday's loss to the San Diego Chargers except the number on the loss column. You know Gary Benz has an opinion on the matter, and he gives it to us in his latest column.



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If it doesn't, then, well, nothing's changed after Sunday's loss to the San Diego Chargers except the number on the loss column.

In actuality the loss represents neither much of a step back or forward. In but a few days it will just be another forgotten loss in a season where everything's been forgettable in a season painfully memorable.

Quarterback Brady Quinn actually represents this polemic well. Quinn ran a text book, opening drive on Sunday that resulted in the team's first opening drive touchdown in over two years.

He also had two late touchdown passes and seemed composed and in charge throughout.

But then he also had a critical fumble in the second quarter inside the Chargers' 5-yard line when the outcome of the game was sort of in doubt.

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Call it growing pains or a growing pain but all that took place it as much as anything else represents the yin and yang of his season and that of the entire team, particularly the offense.

Apart, though, from the numbing insignificance of Sunday's game fans at least got an object lesson in exactly why this offense is failing. While it has everything to do with the offensive line, the running backs, the receivers and the quarterbacks, at the same time it has nothing to do with them at all.

They are but mere witnesses really to what is surely the most random and bizarre offense in the NFL this season.

Fans on Sunday got to witness Brian Robiskie actually catch a pass. He probably showed enough, actually, to get himself de-activated for next week, which is really the point.

The fact that Robiskie was even on the field is interesting in a Mangini-sort of way.

Maybe he was there Sunday because he really did practice well on the scout team this past week, as offensive coordinator Brian Daboll suggested.

Or maybe he was there because something clicked in his mind after 11 games, as Mangini suggested.

But after a season of living under the Mangini process and all it entails, what's more likely than either is that Daboll and Mangini realized they looked positively ridiculous for burying their second round pick on the bench on a team going nowhere and facing a glaring need at the very position that Robiskie plays.

But put aside Robiskie for a moment and consider the case of Josh Cribbs. Pulled in every direction except the one toward a new contract, Cribbs has been forced

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to learn new skills that he doesn't get to apply nearly enough.

On Sunday he ran out of the "wildcat" formation 3 times and ran one other time on an end around. Against Cincinnati, he didn't get any direct snaps. The "wildcat" isn't a panacea for anything but at the same time it's shown enough this season to be far more than just a mere gimmick, to be trotted out roughly as much as a flea-flicker.

Just as Quinn's Sunday was a marker for his season, so too was Cribbs' Sunday a nice overview of the nonsense that is this offense's guiding principles. Every time either Daboll or Mangini is asked about the herky-jerky nature of the offensive game plan, the response is prototypically non-responsive.

It's the result of circumstances and what was happening in the game.

Actually, circumstances and what's happening in the game are perfectly acceptable answers for adjustments that must get made, assuming those answers are followed by an explanation as to the exact circumstances being referenced. But that kind of information apparently is what passes for competitive business intelligence in Berea and thus a cloying media and a nosy fan base are just going to have to be satisfied that there is something more to it than a "let's try this" approach.

But put aside Cribbs for a moment as well and consider if you will one Evan Moore, the tight end du jour. Signed off the practice squad on Friday, he became Quinn's favorite target in the span of two days. Moore looked like he can catch, certainly, raising the question of what he'd been doing on the practice squad for so long.

But then again Michael Gaines looks like he can catch as well and he didn't see a ball thrown in his direction all day.

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Meanwhile all but forgotten free agent acquisition Robert Royal has morphed into the offensive version of Hank Poteat, a player of such limited ability that it makes one wonder how he even remains on this roster.

The glass half full contingent can say that this is exactly what a team in transition looks like but that's just a convenient excuse. A team in transition is one that has uneven results with a plan carefully laid out.

This is a team with uneven results on a plan that changes by the minute, just because.

It's these kinds of things, large and small, that make whatever Mangini does come under the heavy weight of suspicion.

I get a lot of email every week and at least 90% is negative toward Mangini for all the reasons you'd imagine. Other than the occasional outlier who contends that Mangini is actually some sort of mad genius working on a level that mere mortals can't understand, most of the rest of the emailers just want this God forsaken season to end and wake up on the Monday after the Super Bowl to the headline that Mangini has been relieved of his duties and the club is going in a different direction.

Actually, the club going in any direction would be the real news peg to that headline. Even with Mangini in charge and with all he promised, this club still isn't heading anywhere in particular as it glides through the season as if it was a Sunday drive to nowhere special in Barney's new car, with Andy riding shotgun and Gomer with his head out the window to keep from getting car sick.

The analogy of this season to the creampuff car Barney thought he bought from Mrs. Lesh really is quite apropos to this offense. During his interview with owner Randy Lerner, Mangini essentially spread enough verbal sawdust in the gearbox

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to make it appear to Lerner as though Mangini could get this thing up and running smoothly in no time.

Instead, after Lerner gave him the keys fans learned that with Mangini as chief mechanic and driver this car of a season turned out to need a lot more than a mere tune up. It needed something on the order of plugs, points, bearings, valves, rings, fuel pump, starter switch, ignition wires, water pump, oil pump, clutch, clutch bearings, clutchplate, brake lining, brake shoes, and a radiator hose. And it could stand a good wash, too.