

Seven Straight Losses, But Some Positives

Written by {ga=davekolonich}
Monday, December 07 2009 7:00 PM -

While not exactly the momentum-generating spark that our franchise so desperately needed heading into the last weeks of the season, at least yesterday's loss to San Diego represented a tentative step in the right direction. And in a season where moral victories are every bit as important as stat-padding, garbage-time advances, the Browns at least gave the playoff-bound Chargers a few scares. And didn't terrify the rest of us as usual. Dave Kolonich checks in with his thoughts on the Browns 30-23 loss to the Chargers. While not exactly the momentum-generating spark that our franchise so desperately needed heading into the last weeks of the season, at least yesterday's loss to San Diego represented a tentative step in the right direction. And in a season where moral victories are every bit as important as stat-padding, garbage-time advances, the Browns at least gave the playoff-bound Chargers a few scares.

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Granted, yesterday's game was not as close as the final score suggested, and perhaps you can concede that the majority of the Browns' momentum occurred after the Chargers ran out to a twenty point lead; however, there are some positives to be found in the Browns' seventh straight loss.

So, although the temptation is to again lament the current demise of our franchise, I will try to stay above the fray. Meaning I won't mention Randy Lerner's name. At least not today.

Having said that, let's go to [the scorecard](#).

Actually, let's add a question that before yesterday, no one would have ever thought to ask:

Who is Evan Moore?

In one game, the former Stanford grad and Browns practice squad member instantly became both the team's top tight end and receiving threat. Moore finished with six catches, and virtually dominated the Chargers during the game's opening drive. In addition to his pass catching, Moore was solid in blocking, particularly during Jerome Harrison's first touchdown of the afternoon.

Moore seems to have some ideal size for the tight end spot, as he is no doubt a "tall" target, if not a big one. Also, Moore's hands were a bit of a revelation for an offense that features several inconsistent pass catchers.

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And while I've been critical at times towards Eric Mangini - let's give him credit when it is due. Finding Moore amongst the NFL scrapheap was no doubt a great move - if only for one game. There was no doubt that the Chargers, much like the majority of Browns Nation, had no idea who this guy was. Let's hope we find out more over the next month.



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And now on to the questions...

1. *Can Brady Quinn accomplish one of the following:*

- a) *Take advantage of his pass protection, make quick reads and throws and somewhat move the Browns offense down the field?*
- b) *Trust that he actually has some pass protection?*
- c) *Not imitate the accuracy of Derek Anderson?*
- d) *Again prove that he is the team's best pass catcher?*

Throwing out the last answer, Quinn seemed to hit on all of the above during stretches of yesterday's game. However, in an alarming trend, Quinn could not maintain his hot start and probably jeopardized the team's true chances of competing late in the first half.

And before anyone completely writes Quinn off, let's again remind ourselves that yesterday was only the third-year QB's 10th NFL start. There's still something to be said for a young QB's progress. However, and despite the lack of talent around him, Quinn's inconsistency is slightly maddening.

Call it the Alternate Game Theory, or even a Non-Divisional Affective Disorder, but so far during Quinn's re-emergence as starter, he seems to follow a bad game - against a divisional opponent - with a much better one against a team outside the AFC North.

Obviously, this theory is a little half-baked, as the only evidence of Quinn's play is a shaky game against Baltimore, followed by the 1st Quarter explosion against Detroit, and then of course another up and down volley against Cincinnati and San Diego. However, all of this may simply suggest three rather obvious points regarding Quinn:

- 1. He's still a young quarterback and is surrounded by some very raw talent.
- 2. As such, he hasn't reached any point of true consistency.
- 3. If you follow this logic, he will fumble twice and throw three picks against Pittsburgh this Thursday.

2. *Can Jerome Harrison finally take advantage of yet another "golden opportunity" at running back, or does the Chris Jennings era officially begin yet again?*

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Isn't it funny how much better the Browns offense looks when Harrison is involved? While the running game was by no means dominant yesterday, at least Harrison made the Charger defense somewhat wary. And perhaps after nearly four years, the Browns have finally figured out that Harrison - if used as both a runner and receiver - can make some plays for the offense.

But then again, once Harrison misses a blitz pickup in practice this week, get ready for some huge doses of Chris Jennings and perhaps the elevation of another practice squad gem.

3. Does Chanci Stuckey continue to show scant signs of progress at the wideout spot?

Watching Stuckey yesterday, I've finally figured out his importance to this current collection of offensive talent. Basically, Stuckey is the veteran of the group, and if he is not directly helping out the other, younger receivers through teaching, etc.; then he is at least occupying an opposing defensive back. Or, to put it this way - finally, the Browns have a competent player to take some pressure off its rookie wideouts...

...Wait, did I mean to say wideout(s)?

I guess I did.

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4. Speaking of #3, does Jake Allen again contribute more to the offense than Brian Robiskie?

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5. Back to #4, Brian Robiskie is still on the roster, right? No, seriously.

As if the return of Jerome Harrison to the lineup, combined the most productive game of his career, along with the emergence of Evan Moore wasn't enough to inspire some hope in the slow-beating hearts of Browns Nation - the impossible went and happened.

Brian Robiskie not only played, but contributed four receptions. And before commenting on how two of the catches came during the nether regions of the fourth quarter, when the Chargers had already clocked out for the game, at least give our "other" rookie wideout some credit for actually dressing yesterday.

This indeed is progress.

But now, the question is this: can Harrison, Robiskie and even Moore take advantage of this momentum during the next couple days of practice in order to get another shot on Thursday night?

6. How does the Browns' offensive line - still relatively healthy at this point in the season - fare against a solid Charger front seven? Or, are we again reminded that John St. Clair is a starter at right tackle?

The line did a decent job for most of yesterday, at least in pass protection. However, there still remains a weird disconnect occurring between Quinn and his pass protectors. On some plays, it seems like Quinn feels that he has less than a second to get rid of the ball, while on other downs, he acts like he has an eternity.

Unfortunately, these responses seem kind of random at times.

A great example of this came during the end of the first half, when Quinn waited too long for an endzone receiver to come open, then was stripped of the ball, which killed some nice momentum the team was creating. At times, it seems like Quinn is playing a vacuum far removed from the realities of the game around him.

7. Speaking of #6, how much longer until the next draft?

It can't get here soon enough. And while I would love to see a premier tackle go early to the Browns, I also wouldn't be upset if the pick went to a safety or athletic

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linebacker. See below.

8. How long can this banged-up Browns defense hang in against a very good Charger offense?

It remains to be seen whether the Browns were simply outcoached in the third quarter, or simply overpowered. Either way, the Browns lost the game coming out of halftime. The combination of downfield strikes to Antonio Gates and some tough redzone running essentially killed any first half progress.

And speaking again of the draft, how different would this defense look with an actual playmaker at the safety spot? Or, even with a quality defensive lineman to plug in next to Shaun Rogers, or in yesterday's case, to replace him?

9. Will Mangini and Ryan try to creatively compensate for the loss of Shaun Rogers, or just simply plug in Ahtyba Rubin and pretend that nothing has happened?

Rubin is a nice player and could remain a part of the team's future, at least if he is only designated as one of the lower members of a defensive lineman rotation. Obviously, the absence of Shaun Rogers was felt, especially around the goalline. Without Rogers, the Browns couldn't generate much of a push and were generally worn down in the third quarter.

Of course, missing not only Rogers, but Kenyon Coleman and now C.J. Mosley also doesn't help matters.

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10. Will the Chargers simply employ the Bengal approach of last week - i.e., pound the ball some 40 times and keep everyone healthy?

Replace "pound the ball" with "repeatedly throw downfield to Antonio Gates" and you have your answer.

Perhaps a clear verdict on the Browns' defensive shortcomings can be found both yesterday and during the Steeler game last month. In each contest, the Browns' defenders could not cover a big, athletic tight end downfield. Regardless of the player assigned to Gates, the Browns could not stop him. In different situations, David Bowens, Hank Poteat and Abe Elam were all victimized.

And while Gates is no doubt a unique matchup problem, the Browns inability to even slow him down signals that this defense is badly in need of some real athleticism. Once again, to go back - or ahead - to the draft, let's imagine a scenario where instead of Abe Elam chasing after Gates, the Browns feature a top safety prospect. Or, underneath we can switch out David Bowens for a young, aggressive linebacker.

11. Speaking of #10, does Jason Trusnik set a team record for most tackles some five yards past the line of scrimmage?

Call me a hater, but how many times have we now seen Trusnik desperately running some ten yards behind a developing play? Yesterday, fullback - yes, "fullback" - Mike Tolbert outran Trusnik en route to an embarrassing early touchdown.

Granted, Trusnik is simply an injury fill-in at this point of the season. However, his mere presence again has to remind us of how much personnel work this team needs in order to compete.

12. At the least, will this team continue to show some fire, before being swallowed up thanks to a clear lack of talent and depth?

The pessimists among Browns Nation will point to the fact that the Chargers basically quit playing early in the fourth quarter. And while this may be true, at least the Browns did not. Obviously, the team showed fire throughout the game, but again, were overmatched in terms of talent, specifically in the third quarter.

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But, at least Mangini's club again gave some nice effort and practically fought until the very end. In many ways, our current 1-11 record - while horrific to think about - does not represent the true effort of this team. Which is why in my view, it's hard to be overly critical of Mangini - as a coach - at this point in time.

And although it seem a little far-fetched, as well as pointless given our current realities, things could be worse. This team could have given up long ago.

The Pick - Part Three

As Browns fans, I feel we are way past the point of accepting moral victories. Until raw effort and good intentions are rewarded in the standings, such things are quite meaningless. However, at least we know that Mangini is capable of rallying his team to compete against a much more experienced and talented club.

Granted, the Chargers were not playing full throttle for the entirety of the game, and of course, they were missing a handful of starters. However, considering our recent history of utterly depressing December football, at least we were given a mildly entertaining game - in parts.

As for progress - which is so the new "moral victory" - the emergence of Moore, Robiskie and Harrison - along with the baby steps being taken by Quinn - give us something to look forward to over the next four weeks.

But of course, an actual win would be much better.