

The Reprieve

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Saturday, December 12 2009 7:00 PM -

As this Browns season has worn on and head coach Eric Mangini has become more embattled, he's been increasingly vocal about pleading his case for more time. Does one victory against the Steelers doesn't in and of itself, make that case? Or is it simply a much needed but ultimately meaningless reprieve of the pressure that's been mounting against the Browns first year head coach? Gary gives us his thoughts on the matter in his latest column for us.



Of all the good news that Thursday night's victory over the Pittsburgh Steelers brought to the Cleveland Browns and their fans, perhaps the best of all was the realization that their most hated rival has turned soft.

And not just soft as in fat, happy and successful as it sits perched upon the NFL's highest mountain but soft as in easily intimidated and unable to cope.

The Steelers of earlier this season, when they beat the Browns 27-14 with quarterback Ben Roethlisberger throwing for more than 400 yards and receiver Hines Ward smirking his way to 159 receiving yards looked to the Browns like the Steelers of any other season, which is to say unbeatable. But somewhere between then and now, the Steelers have become not just beatable but beaten and not just by others but by the Browns. The Steelers, all primp and polish just a month ago have turned into a bunch of weak nancies that can't even cope with a

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little cold weather.

Well, they can get their jammies ready now. The offseason starts for them, just like the Browns, in a mere three weeks.

The victory, in retrospect, was set up by a number of factors coalescing at once. Although the game against the Chargers wasn't particularly competitive as the game's outcome was never in doubt, the Browns did stage a mini-rally in the fourth quarter to give the offense some needed momentum. With a short week and no time to unlearn what they had just memorized, the game on Thursday came at the right moment.

On the Steelers' side of the field, it was almost the exact opposite. Playing at home last Sunday against the woeful Oakland Raiders, the Steelers lost a late lead, were forced into overtime and then dropped the game. A short week, with no time to decompress over the magnitude of that failure, was the last thing that team needed.

Then there was the weather. In the storied history of a rivalry seemingly played in virtually every kind of weather, Thursday night's game represented the coldest temperature ever in the series. For the Browns, it just became another element to rally around. This is a team, after all, that's had far bigger obstacles thrown in its way this season, usually by its own coaching staff. For the Steelers, it was another reason to bitch. As the game started, it was the Steelers players, not the Browns, who were huddled together under parkas and cozied up to the heaters on the sidelines.

The Steelers weren't just out of their game plan from that first series forward, they were out of the game. They couldn't fight through their own demons, their own injuries, the weather and a small but vocal crowd long enough to prove that they are worthy defending Super Bowl champions. Instead they demonstrated themselves to be a shadow of their former selves, unable to handle the collective

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weight of the kinds of things that better and stronger teams typically fight through on their way to championships.

The Browns have an emotional leader in defensive coordinator Rob Ryan. It was his victory as much as anyone's. He speaks his mind, plainly and doesn't hesitate to call himself out as well as his players. He's emerging as the glue that's actually holding this team together. But emotion can only go so far when playing a team with far more talent as the Browns have seen over and over again this season.

For all the good Ryan can do with a defensive unit, he's not a miracle worker. Brandon McDonald is still Brandon McDonald. Hank Poteat is still Hank Poteat. Yet Ryan could tell from that first sack of Roethlisberger that these Steelers were indeed soft and as a result kept the pressure on, challenging their offensive line to make a play. It never did. Instead it was Ryan's usually overmatched unit that pushed the Steelers' offensive line around like a blocking sled on the practice field.

When the Steelers are sitting at home this off-season they will look back at Thursday's game and be left to ponder how they let it all slip away like this and whether they have what it takes to get it all back. It's about time that someone else in the division enters an offseason with a head full of doubts.

Exactly when and where the Steelers turned soft, it's hard to say. At one point in the season they were 6-2. Maybe it was the loss to Kansas City. Certainly last week's loss to Oakland contributed to the skid. But somewhere between last Sunday and this past Thursday night, the Steelers turned into something they probably thought would never happen to them. They've become the bullied.

In actuality, the Steelers are just following suit with the rest of the AFC North. The Baltimore Ravens, entering the weekend at 6-6, are just a bunch of posers and loudmouths at this point without enough bite to scare anyone. The Bengals, despite the record, are going to need a few seasons of success before anyone

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takes them seriously. For now they are a run-first, plodding offense and a defense that is quietly effective but hardly brutish.

The Browns, of course, are still firmly entrenched at the bottom of what's become a weak division pecking order but they are no longer singular in their despair. There's plenty of company, meaning that even small improvements in the off season have a chance to be noticed more quickly in the coming year.

Though any Browns victory is big news in these parts, the only reason to get particularly excited about this one is the fact that it came against the Steelers. Had this victory come against a team with a record similar to that of the Steelers, the Miami Dolphins for example, it would be more quickly dismissed.

Having been pushed around for the better part of the last 10 years by the Steelers, it was a necessary mountain that this Browns team had to climb. Having scaled the mountain once, though, doesn't signal the end of any sort of journey. This team won't have arrived until it can prove it's not soft by staying competitive with the Steelers year in and year out.

The Browns are still 2-11 and the problems brought on by Mangini don't just get swept under the rug because of one victory, even if it's a victory against the Steelers. In reality, that's why this franchise has been such a mess. Under the Lerner ownership it has an amazing capacity for naïveté. It tends to operate in best-case scenario mode all the time, assuming that great things naturally flow from small victories such as these. It's what's led to all of the incredibly poor decision making over the years.

This is not the time to lose perspective. Indeed it's when keeping perspective is most crucial. The Browns' victory on Thursday was as complete a victory as this team has had in 10 years. All three phases were working. And though players like Josh Cribbs like to say that a victory against the Steelers erases the memory of everything else about the season, the truth is that in the light of the next day it

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doesn't.

As this season has worn on and Mangini has become more embattled, he's been increasingly vocal about pleading his case for more time. One victory against the Steelers doesn't in and of itself, make that case. What does is the ability to channel that sense of accomplishment of Thursday into an on-going operational imperative.

To this point in his career, Mangini has demonstrated he's not up to that task. Given a reprieve on Thursday night, in all likelihood he's down to his last chance. If he wants to continue to be a head coach in the NFL, it's a chance he can't squander.

The Browns don't need to win any of their remaining games for Mangini to save his job so long as he and his team can demonstrate that Thursday's victory turned into something to build upon. But if the Browns lay the kinds of eggs they've laid for most of the season in the upcoming games against Kansas City, Oakland and Jacksonville, then the Steelers victory and Mangini's subsequent firing will be seen as nothing more than a pleasant little memory in a season filled with despair.