

## To Destinations Unknown

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Saturday, December 26 2009 7:00 PM -

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In a game that served mostly as a series of reminders and what ifs, the Cleveland Browns beat a mistake-prone Oakland Raiders team 23-9. It was a reminder of one quarterback, Charlie Frye, sent packing two years ago, and another quarterback, Derek Anderson, sent to the bench several games ago. In the end, neither was much of the story, although Frye's 3 interceptions kept the Raiders from getting back into the game late. The victory was the Browns' 3rd straight in a season filled with mostly high drama and low execution, but where this all leads with Mike Holmgren coming aboard is anyone's guess. Gary talks about the game in his latest.



In a game that served mostly as a series of reminders and what ifs, the Cleveland Browns beat a mistake-prone Oakland Raiders on Sunday, 23-9, to notch their third straight victory in a season ending sprint to destinations unknown.

The reminders came in the form of the two starting quarterbacks, Charlie Frye for the Oakland Raiders and Derek Anderson for the Cleveland Browns. The "what ifs" came in the form of what if the Browns had made better use of Jerome Harrison and Josh Cribbs all season and had benched right guard John St. Clair and defensive back Brandon McDonald earlier in the year.

The last time the Browns and their fans saw Frye, he was packing his bags after a little more than a quarter of play into the Browns' opening season loss in 2007 to the Pittsburgh Steelers. As for the man that replaced Frye that season, Derek Anderson, the last time he was spotted it was on his back and reeling from one ineffective performance after another before being permanently benched several games ago in favor of Brady Quinn.

As it turned out, neither player ended up being the story of the game. Frye showed his game hasn't changed much, some fire too much ice, while Anderson was mostly doing his level best to get out of the way of both Cribbs and Harrison

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while limiting his own mistakes.

It mostly worked.

But the real story of the game was the undisciplined mess that the Oakland Raiders still are after all these years, though without nearly enough good players to overcome that tendency.

The Raiders probably relished the trip to Cleveland over the holidays about as much as kids relish the end of Christmas vacation. But that still doesn't excuse 13 penalties for 126 yards, many of which came at critical points of drives that forced field goals when touchdowns were needed, and 3 Frye interceptions, the first of which led to Cleveland's first touchdown before the game was even 2 minutes old and the last of which snuffed out the Raiders' last scoring attempt.

On Frye's first pass of the game, he made an ill-conceived decision that landed in the hands of linebacker David Bowens, who returned it 15 yards to the Oakland 17-yard line. Two plays later, Harrison ran the remaining 17-yards untouched for the touchdown that helped give the Browns a 7-0 lead that they ended up never relinquishing.

But it was a Raiders meltdown of classic proportions just before the end of the first half that ultimately propelled the Raiders back to Oakland with the loss.

It started innocently enough for the Raiders. After the Browns were able to pin the Raiders back to their own 1-yard line thanks to handy teamwork by Josh Cribbs and Brandon McDonald on a Reggie Hodges punt, the Raiders were able to regain field position thanks to a booming Shane Lechler punt and two Browns penalties that put the ball on the Browns own 7-yard line.

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Pinned back and heading further backward, the Raiders then emptied their frustration bucket all over themselves when a little discipline would likely have kept the score close.

First it was Richard Seymour igniting a scuffle with an unsportsmanlike penalty that was offset by a penalty on Rex Hadnot somewhere inside the pile. But Seymour, not content with having to share the spotlight with Hadnot, let referee Jeff Triplett know about it and was flagged for another unsportsmanlike penalty before the Browns were able to snap the ball.

It took the ball to the Cleveland 40-yard line.

That was followed a few plays later by another unsportsmanlike penalty, this time on cornerback Stanford Routt for a head butt that was deemed so flagrant that Routt was ejected.

That put the ball on the Oakland 27-yard line. Harrison, still showing great spring in his legs after last week's record-breaking effort, ran 8 yards. That set up a 19-yard touchdown throw from Anderson to Mohammad Massaquoi.

Phil Dawson added the extra point and it gave the Browns a 17-6 lead with just seconds remaining in the half.

The Browns defense couldn't quite hold the Raiders in those waning seconds. After a few quick passes by Frye moved the ball to the Cleveland 43-yard line, Janikowski hit an amazing 61-yard field goal that closed the gap to 17-9.

It didn't end up giving the Raiders much of a lift and, ultimately, was just an interesting highlight in a highly imperfect game.

The Browns meanwhile were able to push their late first half score to a 20-9 lead with a 33-yard Dawson field goal to open the second half. The Raiders, unwilling

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to kick deep to Cribbs, instead put the ball in Harrison's hands and all he did was return it 39 yards to the Oakland 43-yard line.

The Browns then broke out their wildcat formation with Cribbs hitting on a 21-yard run that nearly went for a touchdown.

But the Raiders defense then stiffened forcing the Browns to settle for the Dawson field goal.

The Raiders offense, however, was still a mess. It couldn't answer the Browns' field goal after another drive was snuffed out not so much by the Browns' defense but another series of penalties including a holding call and an intentional grounding penalty on Frye.

The Browns, not exactly an artistic success themselves, had a chance to push the lead out even further but had a Harrison touchdown nullified on an illegal block by tight end Michael Gaines and then two plays later Harrison fumbled at the Oakland 5-yard line. Oakland linebacker Kirk Morrison recovered, but the Raiders couldn't find a way to turn it into points of their own.

The Raiders seemed on the verge of getting back in the game as the fourth quarter began, with Frye moving the ball effectively through the air. But on 3<sup>rd</sup> and 9 from the Cleveland 24-yard line, Frye's sideline pass was intercepted by McDonald at the 14-yard line.

McDonald ran it back 39 yards to the Oakland 47 yard line. That led to a 34-yard Dawson field goal and a 23-9 lead.

It was Dawson's third field goal of the day, the other two covering 42 and 33 yards, respectively.

Then Raiders' tried to make a game out of it late and may have but for, predictably, a series of mistakes.

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Taking over with over 8 minutes remaining and the ball at his own 6-yard line, Frye hit a series of passes that quickly put the ball in Cleveland territory. On 2<sup>nd</sup> and 10 from the Cleveland 26 yard line, Browns' defensive back Hank Poteat was then flagged for interference in the end zone on a pass that was intercepted by safety Abe Elam.

It put the ball at the 2 yard line.

Frye then threw four straight incompletions.

Within those four passes though was an interception by Eric Wright that was overturned and an offensive pass interference penalty on Chaz Schilens on 4

<sup>th</sup>  
down that gave the Browns the ball with a little over 4 minutes to play.

The Browns were not able to get a first down and were forced to punt as the Raiders burned all of their time outs. Hodges punt put the ball at the Oakland 46-yard line. Frye then moved the Raiders quickly into scoring position again but his third interception, this one to Wright, effectively ended the game.

Those final two Raiders drives were a theme as they brilliantly illustrated the Raiders squandering of good opportunities to not just close the gap but perhaps take the lead, only to see drives stymied by mistakes, usually penalties.

For example, the Raiders' first points came courtesy of a Sebastian Janikowski 45-yard field goal in the first quarter but it could have, maybe should have been more. With Frye finding his rhythm after the early interception, he was able to put together a nice drive that got the ball down to the Cleveland 16-yard line. But a holding penalty on right tackle Cornell Green killed the drive.

On the Raiders' next drive, which started from the 50-yard line, a false start penalty on 3<sup>rd</sup> and 3 on tackle Chris Morris made it 3<sup>rd</sup> and long and led to a Shane Lechler punt.

Then, after the Browns second straight series in the second quarter that finished further from the end zone than when it started forced a punt from Hodges out of his end zone, his punt traveled only to the Cleveland 45-yard line and then a penalty on McDonald for running into the returner put the ball at the Cleveland 30-yard line. But the Raiders couldn't turn it into anything more than a 34-yard Janikowski field goal and a 10-6 deficit after Frye was sacked by Mike Adams on 3<sup>rd</sup> and 3 from the Cleveland 10-yard line.

As it was last week, the Browns used the game to further solidify a running game that has been taking shape since Jamal Lewis went down for the season.

The Browns were again wildly out of balance offensively, running it 45 times against just 17 pass attempts.

Harrison once again led the way with 148 yards rushing on 39 carries.

Anderson was just 8-17 with one touchdown and no interceptions.

It wasn't exactly the audition Anderson probably envisioned for new president Mike Holmgren and probably did little to ensure he'll be back next season. Though Anderson wasn't asked to do much, he still showed amazingly bad touch on short passes. To his credit, though, he didn't turn the ball over, though that was more a case of luck in the form of the Raiders defenders, naturally, twice dropping potential interceptions.

For the Browns, they now stand at 4-11 heading into next week's game against Jacksonville. A victory gives them 5 wins, which would be the first visible sign of progress over last season.

But there are still many questions facing Holmgren, not the least of which starts with the quarterback slot and pushes outward from there.

Where this thing is headed now is anyone's guess.

Still, in a season that has been mostly high drama and low execution, a 3-game winning streak has proven to be a nice respite. Sunday's game, with mistakes flying everywhere, ran nearly 3 ½ hours and yet seemed half as long as most other Browns' games this season.