

A Corner Turned?

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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In a game played in field conditions more suited for skating than running, the Cleveland Browns again played like it was their season on the line and walked away with an easier than it sounds 23-17 victory over the Jacksonville Jaguars. With the win, the Browns extended their winning streak to 4 and ended the season on the highest of notes and making the best case yet for their embattled and beleaguered head coach, Eric Mangini. Now new president Mike Holmgren gets the honor of figuring out what it all means. Gary tells us about it in his latest and final game story of the season.



It was a game played in conditions that offered more reasons to stay in the locker room than on the field. The Jacksonville Jaguars, with only a remote of chance at the playoffs, supposedly had the most incentive to win. B

ut it was the Cleveland Browns once again playing like it was their season was on the line and with that walked away with an easier than it sounds 23-17 win, their fourth straight and the first time in 23 years they finished a season with four straight wins.

The Jaguars scored on the game's last play with the game well out of reach to keep the score close.

With the win the Browns ended the season on the highest of notes and made the strongest case yet for why its embattled and beleaguered head coach, Eric Mangini, should find himself still with the organization once new president Mike Holmgren assumes his role in earnest next week.

It was a game in which the Browns, on both sides of the ball and on special teams, played with a spirit and intensity that hardly matched the near death march funk they had been in for most of the rest of the season.

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Whether all of that is evidence that Mangini's vaunted "process" is finally taking root or that the players know there's a whole new set of eyes to impress is something that Holmgren gets the honor of figuring out. But for Browns fans, so used to perfunctory performances for far too long, the last month has been the most pleasant of surprises.

Expect chants of "Super Bowl" "Super Bowl" when training camp opens next summer.

Browns fans are nothing if not optimistic.

What the Browns really proved with this and its previous 3 wins in this streak was something they actually had established early in the season-it doesn't really matter who is playing quarterback for this team. As the season closes, it's clear that running is what the Browns do best.

After attempting initially to put together a more balanced attack than in weeks past, the Browns abandoned it for good following a Derek Anderson interception early in the second quarter and simply ran over and through a Jacksonville team that looked like it was trying to get back to the locker room and into warm clothes as quickly as possible.

Once again the burden fell mostly on Jerome Harrison, a back who's been on the roster all season but was only recently discovered by this coaching staff. Harrison had 33 carries for 127 yards, his third straight week with more than 100 yards and his fourth 100+ yard game of the season.

Harrison also had 1 touchdown, a nifty 6-yard run off left tackle in the 3rd

quarter on 4th

down that effectively sealed the win.

Josh Cribbs, meanwhile, was his usual brilliant self and had his own touchdown, a 14-yarder out of the wildcat formation in the second quarter. He added 47 yards rushing to go along with 58 yards on kick and punt returns. Anderson, asked to do little more than hand off effectively and throw sparingly was 7-11 for 86 yards and 1 interception.

With the stadium half-full, the temperature in the teens and the wind whipping at upwards of 25 MPH, the field looked more suitable for skating than running. But it didn't seem to bother the Browns as they started off quickly again, taking a quick 3-0 lead on a 27-yard Phil Dawson field goal that was set up by, who else, Cribbs and his 31-yard return of the opening kick.

It gave the Browns good field position at their 46-yard line. After Anderson converted a first down on 4th

and 1 from the Jacksonville 45-yard line, he helped get the Browns into position with a 29-yard completion to tight end Robert Royal.

But the Browns could not get much further, settling instead for the Dawson field goal.

After a Reggie Hodges punt on the Browns' next possession gave the Jaguars the ball at the Cleveland 41-yard line, the Jaguars were able to tie it up on a Josh Scobee 47-yard field goal, a kick that had the trajectory of a block of ice and barely cleared the cross bar.

An exchange of punts followed and then the Browns looked to be on their way to regaining the lead but saw a good drive end prematurely when Anderson badly under threw Mohamed Massaquoi and saw it intercepted by Derek Cox at the Jaguars' 17-yard line.

But the Jags couldn't get a first down off the turnover. Jacksonville's Adam Podlesh's short punt gave the Browns the ball back at their own 43-yard line. At that point offensive coordinator Brian Daboll dispensed with any notion of a balanced attack and instead let Anderson do what he does best at this point in his career-hand the ball off to a running back.

The Browns ran it 7 straight times and a little more than 3 minutes later found themselves in the end zone with a 10-3 lead and never looked back.

Cribbs, following the lead block of fullback Lawrence Vickers, went the final 14 yards on a direct snap for the touchdown.

The Jaguars, showing they learned nothing from the Browns' drive, put the ball in quarterback David Garrard's hands and paid the price in the form of an interception by defensive back Eric Wright, who returned it 13 yards back to the Jacksonville 47-yard line.

After a Jerome Harrison run went nowhere, Cribbs took a handoff from Anderson on an end around and ran it 25 yards down to the Jacksonville 6 yard line just before the two-minute warning. An Anderson pass to tight end Evan Moore got the ball to the 1 but Anderson was then flagged for a false start taking it back to the 6-yard line. A statute of liberty play of sorts, with Anderson faking the throw and handing it off behind his back to Harrison got the ball to the 2-yard line but that made it 4th down and the Browns decided to take the points and a 13-3 lead thanks to a Dawson 21-yard field goal.

The Jaguars tried to get back into it early in the second half but their opening drive ended when a 43-yard field goal attempt by Scobee started down the middle but then was pushed right by the wind.

The Browns came right back at the Jaguars with a steady diet of Harrison, who ripped off runs of 14 and 16 yards as he closed in, once again, on another 100-yard game. But the best run of the game and one of the more entertaining runs of the season belonged to Chris Jennings.

It was only 11 yards in total, but it covered about 50 more as Jennings went right, ran into a host of would-be

tacklers, reversed field, almost got caught 2 or 3 times for huge losses before finally tiptoeing down the left sideline to the Jacksonville 15 yard line.

Harrison got another 5 yards and then Cribbs took it to the 6 on a direct handoff out of the backfield from Anderson. On 4th and short, after taking a time out to talk it over, the Browns opted to try and win the game right there by eschewing a short field goal.

It worked as Harrison took the handoff and ran around left end for the touchdown.

The Dawson extra point gave the Browns a 20-3 lead that, given the Jaguars' indifference, looked to be insurmountable.

After the Browns were forced to punt on their next possession, the Jaguars briefly caught fire, putting together their best drive of the day that closed the gap to 20-10 when Garrard found Zach Miller in the back of the end zone for a 6-yard touchdown. It

was a drive that featured two fumbles by the Jaguars and a 31-yard run by Jones-Drew, who, despite 82 yards rushing, ran tentatively all day and looked as if he was wearing a parka under his jersey.

Whatever spark the drive gave the Jaguars was quickly snuffed out when the Browns put together a clock killing, impose-your-will drive on the legs of Harrison and some timely, crisp passing by Anderson that kept the chains moving for 13 plays and just over 8 minutes. It ended with a 33-yard Dawson field goal, giving the Browns a 23-10 lead and leaving the Jaguars with a little more than 2 minutes remaining and no time outs left.

A 15-yard touchdown pass from Garrard to Miller as time expired rounded out the scoring.

The way the Browns finished the season puts an

interesting spin on the decisions facing Holmgren. A four game win streak in the NFL is something substantial.

Two of the four victories were against league doormats.

Another came against the Steelers in what surely is the signature win for this team.

The final came against one of the league's more intriguing teams but a team that is not yet playoff-caliber.

Still, in each of the games the Browns had as much or as little to play for as their opponents, depending on your perspective, and still gave the far better effort.

That doesn't erase, not by a long shot, all the mismanagement and missteps of earlier in the season. But if the win streak represents both an acknowledgement of and a break with those kinds

of problems, then things really are looking up.

And with Holmgren now aboard, this may be the first time in a long time when a Browns fans can actually say that they saw this team turn a corner and for once not head down another dark alley.