

## Browns Season in Review: Special Teams

Written by {ga=davekolonich}  
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Lost in the pre-December abyss of the 2009 season is the job that Mangini and special teams coach Brad Seely performed with largely a group of roster castoffs and undrafted free agents. And while any mention of the Browns' special teams begins and ends with the all-world Josh Cribbs, the likes of unknowns such as Blake Costanzo, Jason Trusnik, Nick Sorensen and Ray Ventrone are also worth noting as key contributors to the Browns few successes of 2009. In Part II of his look back at the 2009 Browns, Dave Kolonich takes a look at the special teams units. *The following is the second installment in what will likely be an 8,000-part series, highlighting the best and worst of Browns football in 2009.*

Lost in the pre-December abyss of the 2009 season is the job that Mangini and special teams coach Brad Seely performed with largely a group of roster castoffs and undrafted free agents. And while any mention of the Browns' special teams begins and ends with the all-world Josh Cribbs, the likes of unknowns such as Blake Costanzo, Jason Trusnik, Nick Sorensen and Ray Ventrone are also worth noting as key contributors to the Browns few successes of 2009.

In a further nod to Mangini's unheralded contributions to the franchise, these special teamers represented the type of player that formed the backbone of the 2009 team. Also, it is quite remarkable that the majority of these special teams contributors were nothing more than training camp afterthoughts. Even the cruelest of Mangini-haters can at least acknowledge that our beleaguered 2009 coach has an eye for finding talent among the NFL scrap heaps.

However, having said that - in watching the 2009 defense operate, there was a big reason why Jason Trusnik's abilities don't extend beyond special teams.

Anyway, let's take a look at the 2009 special teams scorecard.

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### The Best

In determining the best Browns' special teams performance of the season, just imagine the 2009 team without Josh Cribbs. And then think about the team's latest, alleged contract "offer."

#### 1. Cribbs against Kansas City

In many respects, it seems like the KC game didn't really happen. Even though both Cribbs and Jerome Harrison delivered some historical performances, I still can't fully believe what transpired at Arrowhead Stadium. In the same stadium that Dante Hall rose to stardom, Cribbs paved his path to Canton with two kickoff returns for touchdowns.

Let that settle for a moment.

Because Cribbs is so good, so often - a performance such as this almost seems natural. It is more than understandable that because Cribbs has delivered feats like this so often throughout his career, that we nearly take his play for granted. However, just consider that there are teams in the league who go seasons between seeing multiple kick returns taken back for touchdowns.

And in Cleveland, we merely have to wait hours.

#### 2. Dave Zastudil against Buffalo

Does anyone remember Zastudil? You know, one of the league's best bad weather punters? Sound familiar?

Zastudil quickly became another casualty of the Holmgren drama and ultra-successful December run, as our veteran punter landed on injured reserve with a plant leg injury. Of course, our mostly dead early season offense probably didn't do Zastudil's lower limbs any favors.

However, the team's lone early season win - and the one thing that kept Browns Nation from collectively bum-rushing Eric Mangini - has to be credited to Zastudil's amazing performance battling the winds of Ralph Wilson Stadium.

In a game that channeled the ghosts of 1930's college football, the Browns and

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Bills played the ugliest game in the history of the league. Trading fumbles and futility all day long, the excellent field position that Zastudil's punts provided essentially gave the Browns their first win of the season.

If not for Zastudil's brilliant performance figuring out some bizarre October winds, the Browns would have likely entered December staring at an 0-12 record. Because Zastudil was able to continually pin the Bills deep in their own territory, the Browns overcame a two-completion offensive effort and stole a win.

### 3. Trusnik, Ventrone and Costanzo against the Bills

And again speaking of the most painful Browns victory in the history of the franchise, along with the stellar play of Zastudil, the likes of Trusnik, Ventrone and Costanzo (which totally sounds like a law firm dealing in nursing home malpractice) swarmed the Bills return units into a series of game-changing mistakes.

Although I seriously considered Buffalo's Roscoe Parrish for this final spot in the rankings, credit has to be given to Costanzo's play. He was simply the best player on the field in Buffalo, as he continually beat defenders, made tackles and ultimately forced the game-winning fumble.



### The Pick

Although their names don't have the luster of Cribbs or...Cribbs, the play of Costanzo, Trusnik, Ventrone, Sorensen, Mike Adams, Zastudil and Phil Dawson virtually kept the Browns hanging around most weeks and prevented a full-on collapse during the more painful stretches of the season.

And much like their NFL benefactor, Eric Mangini, these players will never get the respect they deserve. In the everyday superstar sound-bite world of the NFL, Costanzo will likely have to fight for his next roster spot, Ventrone will likely be on some other team's practice squad in the future and no one seems to care that Dawson and Zastudil are perhaps the best bad-weather kickers in the league.

So before Mike Holmgren affirms his rule in Cleveland, here are some numbers to think about. The Browns kick return coverage units were statistically the best in the league in 2009, allowing less than 20 yards per return. On punt returns, the number hovered below 12 and the Browns opponents never came close to returning a kick for a touchdown.

Lifelong Brown Dawson missed only two kicks all season - which is no small feat considering that the team played in some seriously poor conditions late in the year. The aforementioned Costanzo managed to force three fumbles and all-world long snapper Ryan Pontbriand again went all Ryan Pontbriand in 2009.

But of course, the marquee name of the special teams - and basically of the entire franchise - remains Josh Cribbs. Although we've seen it all before, 2009 marked the ascension of Cribbs from local hero to future NFL Hall of Famer. Setting a most improbable career record for kick return touchdowns, Cribbs has made history before our eyes - and there is more to come.

### [Maybe.](#)

Although Mangini's greatest 2009 contribution - along with its individual components - may be quickly forgotten in the coming weeks, let's hope that Cribbs' value to this franchise and city is not.