

Browns Season in Review: Offensive Line

Written by {ga=davekolonich}
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In a sign of overall franchise progress, at least compared to the previous three regimes of Cleveland football management, the 2009 Browns under Eric Mangini finally featured an effective offensive line. However, much like everything else related to the past season, the process of achieving such a historically elusive goal was a painful one to endure. Using his Jets history as a pedigree to build the Browns line, Mangini added a multitude of veteran bodies to fill in around his first draft choice, Alex Mack. And while the line was indeed patchwork in the opening month of the season, progress soon followed. Dave Kolonich looks back at the Browns offensive line this season.



The following is the third installment in what will likely be an 8,000-part series, highlighting the best and worst of Browns football in 2009.

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Using his Jets history as a pedigree to build the Browns line, Mangini added a multitude of veteran bodies to fill in around his first draft choice, Alex Mack. The likes of Floyd Womack and John St. Clair served as veteran stopgaps, much in the same way that Eric Barton and Hank Potratz basically became defensive duct tape for 2009.

And while the line was indeed patchwork in the opening month of the season, progress soon followed. However, much like the linear fashion of the 2009 season, the offensive line seemed to improve as the team slowly took the ball out of the quarterback's hands.

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And considering that Mangini's veteran acquisitions are basically run-blockers in design anyway, the ascension of the team's running game in December seemed to reflect the reality on the ground - pun intended. Obviously, the line play was enhanced by Jerome Harrison's more decisive and slashing running style, as compared to the version of earlier in the year, which featured a tentative and mostly broken Jamal Lewis.

However, the revelation of the year - at least in my view - came in the form of Joe Thomas elevating his game to an All-Pro level. While nothing short of a rock during his rookie campaign, Thomas slid a little during his sophomore campaign of 2008 - as he occasionally struggled within divisional play, as well as in facing the athletic freak pass rushers of the AFC South.

Yet, in 2009, Thomas realized his Pro Bowl laurels by essentially shutting down the likes of Jared Allen, Terrell Suggs, Antwan Odom, Tamba Hali and neutralizing one of his bigger nemesis, that of the Steelers' James Harrison. Thomas' pass protection was nothing short of sensational for most of the season. The handful of occasions where Thomas could be blamed for allowing a sack reflected the team's indecisive play at quarterback, rather than his own stellar efforts.

Much like the "spiritual" play of Josh Cribbs in 2009, Thomas' performance has become almost ordinary, if not expected. However, considering the recent decade of offensive line instability in Cleveland, Thomas has become a rarity - even reaching the heights of a sometimes mythical "shutdown" left tackle.



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No small thing, considering that during the early part of the season, John St. Clair served as Thomas' evil doppelganger across the line. During the dark days of September and October, St. Clair resembled a broken turnstile more than an effective right tackle, as he was continually victimized by pass rushers. Although St. Clair eventually improved as the season went on, his play was yet another liability among a historically inept passing offense.

As for the rest of the line, Hank Fraley yet again proved to be a quality veteran sparkplug, as he filled in nicely at right guard - and was quite effective - at least until the team's dire lack of tight end depth forced him elsewhere. And in terms of unintentional hilarity, the sight of Fraley as a tight end was no doubt award winning.

Along with Thomas, the play of Alex Mack was another revelation in 2009. Somewhat lost in the abyss of the first three months of the season was the idea that a rookie center was emerging as a future cornerstone of the line. Mack obviously struggled early in the season, but showed the kind of physical toughness required of AFC North divisional play, before excelling in the last month of the season.

The vision of Mack and Thomas sweeping to the left side was a thing of unhinged beauty. Featuring both solid strength and suprisingly quick feet, Mack helped to elevate the team's late-season ground game by getting to the second level and making the run game more of a vertical threat. Along with the always versatile Eric Steinbach, the Browns seem to have an incredibly bright future along three-fifths of the offensive line.



The Best

Obviously, the last month of the season featured the team's best offensive line play. And in saying that, the entire group delivered the kind of cohesive line play not seen in some years in Cleveland. And although it's still not a popular sentiment among Browns Nation, the late-season line play serves as yet another example of some quality coaching efforts given in 2009.

1. Thomas, Steinbach and Mack against Kansas City

Hopefully, a vision for the near future was shown against Kansas City. Utilizing a confident and slashing type of runner in Jerome Harrison, the offensive line destroyed the Chiefs front seven in a variety of ways, which led to a historic rushing performance. Harrison gashed the Chiefs both inside and out en route to nearly 300 yards of rushing.

The combination of Mack's dominant inside pushes and Steinbach and Thomas' effective outside sweeps offered endless running lanes for Harrison. Along with the stellar play of Lawrence Vickers, the Browns' line resembled the great running attacks of generations ago and was even further removed from the dismal production seen a few months ago prior.

2. Thomas against Minnesota

While it's hard to separate the individual from the whole when it comes to the offensive line, it's quite easy to focus on the All-Pro level play of Joe Thomas. In the season opener, Thomas basically shut down one of - if not the best - pass rushers in the game. Thomas' blend of footwork, reach and power neutralized Jared Allen, who features an almost identical skill set.

Thomas' opening season performance helped to affirm the idea that he had improved on his 2008 play, where he struggled against some of the league's more dynamic pass rushers. And in a nod to Thomas' sometimes overlooked value, just imagine the state of our team with the likes of Enoch DeMar or Kevin Shaffer being assigned the same task.

3. Womack against December

Talk about unsung. Womack quietly helped to solidify the right side of the line

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after John St. Clair battled a late-season injury. Along with Rex Hadnot, Womack displayed some monster power as the offense transformed itself into a rush-happy attack. While still not an effective pass protector, the offensive scheme shown late in the year helped to alleviate some of the earlier season's breakdown. Of course, Womack's initial push off the right side of the line also helped to contribute to this late season identity switch.



The Pick

Credit Mangini's re-focus on the offensive line, or at least his push towards establishing a run-first attack, or even give Phil Savage his due for adding Thomas and Steinbach a few years ago - but after nearly a decade of complete abandon, the Browns are very close to featuring one of the better offensive line units in the conference.

Of course, the next few months of 2010 will go a long way to ensuring this hopeful vision.

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Although the overall team needs are manifold heading into next season, the Browns new management needs to focus on the right side of the offensive line. While the likes of Fraley, Womack and Hadnot admirably served as veteran stopgaps in 2009, the future of right guard and tackle needs to be addressed.

Regardless of any possible shift in offensive identity in 2010, the Browns desperately need an infusion of youth and athleticism along the right side of the line. Adding an athletic right tackle on the first day of April's draft would be a most welcome addition. And considering the limited nature of 2010 free agency, Holmgren's regime would be better served to improve the line through the draft.

And what a novel idea this would be.

Using Mangini's Jet background as an example, along with the first round gold found in the form of Thomas and Mack, the Browns would do well to follow their too-limited history of taking linemen early in the draft. A quality right tackle would be ideal, especially considering that some combination of 2009 veterans could hold down the right guard spot for the next year.

And if Eric Steinbach does not become a cap-less cap casualty in 2010, the Browns could enter next season with one of the better lines in the league.

Which, entering this newest of bold new eras, could serve as the foundation for the team's eventual return to respectability.