

The Blueprint

Written by {ga=davekolonich}
Tuesday, January 26 2010 7:00 PM -

Football fans were treated to two excellent games this past Sunday when the Colts/Jets and Saints/Vikings squared off in the AFC and NFC Championship games. Dave Kolonich was watching keenly, and says that the games were more evidence that the NFL has become a passing league, and that the style of play that led the Browns to an undefeated December is not the stuff of champions. Although this style of offense took the Jets farther than they should have been allowed to go, in the end - the lack of an effective passing threat cost Mangini's former team a shot at the Super Bowl. Which is why the Holmgren hire in Cleveland now makes more sense than ever. If Sunday's conference championship games revealed any truths to a suddenly resurgent Browns Nation, these could be it:

1. The NFL is a league that rewards solid quarterback play.
2. Speaking of #1, the NFL of 2010 and beyond has essentially become a glorified version of flag football.
3. Speed - or at least the threat of speed - is essential to employing a truly balanced offensive attack.
4. One-dimensional offensive attacks can only take you so far.
5. Because of all the above, the key to successful defensive play is an ability to disrupt an opposing passer.
6. Our current Browns do not easily fit into most of these categories.
7. I have another reason to support the Holmgren hire.

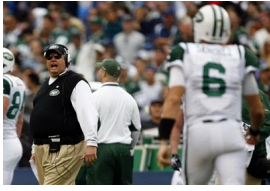
While I was one of the biggest supporters of Mangini in 2009 - at least during the final month of the season ... I'll admit the Detroit loss was the pinnacle of my depression - Sunday, it became obvious that the style of play that led the Browns to an undefeated December is not the stuff of champions.

In a league where defensive backs and pass rushers are forced to play in a handicapped manner, the idea of featuring a one-dimensional, run-heavy offensive attack is self-defeating. Although this style of offense took the Jets farther than they should have been allowed to go, in the end - the lack of an effective passing threat cost Mangini's former team a shot at the Super Bowl.

Perhaps a lesson is to be learned here. Beyond the Jets, consider the previous cases of the Bengals and Ravens - two similarly built teams. Neither AFC North contender could play the kind of vital contemporary game that allows teams to essentially "catch up."

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The Jets learned this lesson the hard way Sunday, as they found themselves engaged in a struggle to match points with the Colts - who are basically designed to take advantage of this new NFL landscape. Unlike the Vikings or even the Packers of a couple weeks ago, the Jets are simply not built to score a lot of points.

And while it's obvious that the Jets have enjoyed some great success featuring a strong running game and solid defense - such traits can only take you so far.

Which is why the Holmgren hire in Cleveland now makes more sense than ever.

While I applaud Mangini for the effort he gave in trying to mold the Browns into a more disciplined, physically and mentally tougher bunch, yesterday's matchups again affirmed the obvious in the NFL. That is, to play and win at a championship level, you have to pass the ball.

Running Jerome Harrison some 35 times a game is terrific in a situation where the lakefront wind swirls around and the wind chill hovers near zero; however, eventually the Browns have to establish some type of threat from their passing

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game.

Which brings us to Holmgren...and the quarterback situation....and the mess at wide receiver.

Before yesterday's championship games, I was more intrigued by the Holmgren hire in terms of the much-needed organization and functional stability that he could bring to the franchise. Of course, recent history has painfully made us aware that the lawlessness and overall futility of vision enabled by Randy Lerner during his ownership tenure was the biggest obstacle to the team's success.

And in case you're scoring at home...that's roughly the 8,000th time I've mentioned this...

However, yesterday affirmed another positive regarding Holmgren's arrival in Cleveland. For the first time in a long time - possibly since the Lindy Infante era of offensive playcalling - the Browns finally have an offensive-minded leader at the helm of the franchise.

Talk about some good timing.



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In less than two weeks, the Colts and Saints could engage in a Super Bowl shootout for the ages, as both Peyton Manning and Drew Brees lead offenses that are easily capable of putting up 40 points or more. Compare this to the average Browns effort of 2009, where we were almost spoiled to see the team break the century mark in passing yards.

And while there are certainly some difficult questions to be answered this offseason - namely how Holmgren and Mangini will mesh together - perhaps this season's playoffs will serve as a blueprint for the future.

Or, in other words - the game has changed...which necessitates a change on the Browns part.

For the Browns to truly compete at a championship level, the lack of offensive weapons has to be addressed. And while some detractors would point to the departures of K2 and Braylon, the problems exist at a much deeper level.

As it stands now, the Browns are critically weak at the quarterback and wide receiver positions. In a league that is now set up to reward the pass, these are two areas that urgently need upgraded. The Browns of the future cannot expect to become contenders using dated offensive schemes that rely on taking the ball out of the quarterback's hands.

Regardless of any progress that some may think Brady Quinn made late in 2009, the bar has been raised far above even the most idealistic visions Browns fans may have for the brittle QB. The same can be said for the team's wideouts, who while still young and raw, do not seem to possess the type of game-changing skills required of a championship contender.

Which once again brings us back to Holmgren...and Tom Heckert and every other new member of the Browns' front office.

The bottom line is this: while it's obvious that Mangini's plan began to take shape throughout the year and was very effective in December, there are limits to his overall philosophy. While Mangini left unchecked could certainly deliver this team back to respectability, it's obvious that Holmgren holds the key to the Browns' eventual hopes for a championship...one in which they will have to basically outscore another opponent.

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Let's hope he was watching Sunday.