

A Bitter Goodbye

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Wednesday, March 10 2010 10:25 AM - Last Updated Friday, April 02 2010 8:50 AM



Talk about a noisy withdrawal.

Former Cleveland Browns quarterback Derek Anderson was sent packing by the team on Tuesday and he let the door hit him in the ass on the way out. In an email to the Lake County News-Herald, Anderson unloaded a few years worth of frustration by dumping not on the team that won't be paying him nearly \$10 million for the 2010 season but the fans who suffered through one awful performance after another for the last two seasons.

Anderson has since apologized, more or less. He now says he was just speaking out of frustration. Really? I'd call it bitterness but that's a minor debate. Whatever it was it apparently stems from his supposedly getting cheered when he was injured in a November 2008 game against Indianapolis. Give the guy this, he can throw verbal zingers as hard as he throws a football. Unfortunately, though, it comes with pretty much the same completion rate.

Since Anderson has no appreciation for context I'll set it. It was a home game on the last Sunday in November. The season was already mostly lost as the Browns entered the game with a 4-7 record. Brady Quinn, who had been starting after head coach Romeo Crennel had finally, mercifully had pulled the plug on Anderson, had been injured. Nonetheless, Crennel had anointed Quinn his starter and said it would remain that way for the upcoming 2009 season.

But with Quinn now injured, Anderson had still another opportunity to change Crennel's mind. The Colts were a good team, but not necessarily great that seasons and the Browns were playing them close on this particular Sunday, mainly because Peyton Manning was very average, at best, on this day He had thrown two interceptions and fumbled twice. The Colts

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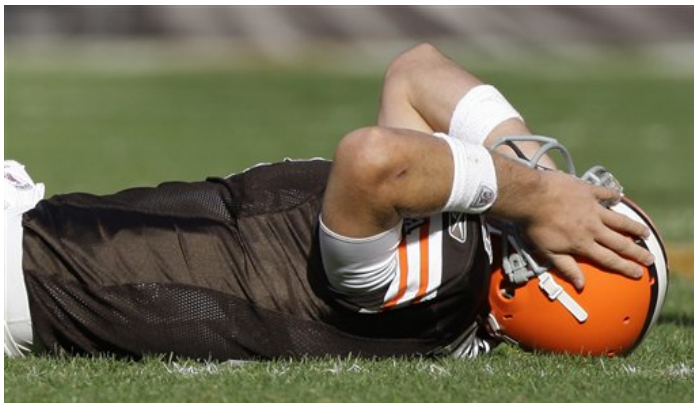
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were gifting the game to the Browns and yet Anderson, in what became a very disturbing pattern, couldn't get the offense in a position to capitalize.

There were 10 minutes remaining and the Browns were nonetheless clinging to a 6-3 lead, a lead that shoulda coulda been much larger. Anderson dropped back to pass and lost his grip on the ball. Colts defensive end Robert Mathis picked it up and, in the words of Chris Berman, rumbled, bumbled and stumbled 37 yards for the game's only touchdown.

It was an exquisite metaphor for all of the team's and Anderson's struggles that season. The Browns lost the game, their second straight and the second straight in which they couldn't score a touchdown. The fans were frustrated. They had a right to be.

When Anderson then went down near the end of the game with an injury, some fans cheered. But what Anderson still apparently fails to appreciate is that the smattering of cheers wasn't for his injury but because that appeared to be the only way Crennel would make still another quarterback change. The fans had watched Anderson fall all over himself for nearly two straight games, playing one ineffective series after another, and had seen enough.



Maybe Anderson has blocked all of that context out of his mind, but the fans haven't. A season that promised so much had spiraled out of control on the wings of a selfish, undisciplined receiver in Braylon Edwards who figured if he just showed up he'd be great; the worst free agent signing ever in the form of Donte Stallworth who milked a quadriceps injury for most of the season; and, a quarterback in Anderson who simply couldn't perform under the weight of the expectations created by his 2007 season.

There were more culprits responsible for that lost season, of course, like Crennel. But

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Anderson was as much to blame as anyone when he couldn't marshal the leadership skills his position requires to help right a ship that was drifting aimlessly from almost the first pre-season game forward.

It's interesting that Anderson in his email blast admitted that "at times I wasn't great" but he'd have been far more honest with himself if he would have eliminated the words "at times" from his email. Anderson's cause wasn't helped much by the loads surrounding him like Edwards and Stallworth, but Anderson also struggled mightily with both his decision making and his accuracy, particularly on short passes.

No one will ever be able to take from Anderson the one great season he's had in the NFL. For Browns fans, it was a season for the ages and, in truth, one of the greatest seasons ever by a Browns' quarterback. And while performing at that level is difficult enough, the harder work comes in following it up. Anderson, like Edwards, simply couldn't do it and, like Edwards, that's on him.

It's refreshing to hear (or read, in this case) a player speak his mind, even if he is misguided. Fans and media clamor for it after being fed a near non-stop diet of pabulum by athletes who have been taught to make inane and safe statements. But if an athlete is going to expose himself like that, he at least ought to get the key facts right.

It's interesting that Anderson spared from his wrath the massive mismanagement by the Browns, from the owner to the coaches, for the impact that may have had on his career. On the other hand, it makes perfect sense. The team enriched him well beyond what his talent deserved. When former general manager Phil Savage picked Anderson off the Baltimore scrap heap and brought him to Cleveland, it literally made the guy's career.

Indeed, but for Savage deciding sometime around the first series of the first game of the 2007 season that Charlie Frye wasn't a viable NFL starter Anderson would have found himself carrying a clip board until the inevitable injury to Frye gave him an opportunity halfway through another lost season. Then, at season's end, the Browns would have simply cast Anderson adrift as an unrestricted free agent after drafting Quinn.

Anderson, to his credit, took advantage of the opportunities 2007 presented and was able to

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then parlay his impending free agency into a multi-million dollar contract. Good for him. But the down side of his club friendly contract was the deferral of a bonus of a nearly \$2 million bonus until 2010. Clauses like that always serve as off ramps for teams to get out of relationships that just aren't working out. This one clearly wasn't.

It's understandable that Anderson might be a tad angry about missing out on that \$2 million bonus, not to mention the nearly \$8 million salary he would have been paid for 2010. But he'd garner much more respect if he instead had simply acknowledge that he didn't come close to earning either payment.

Now Anderson finds himself looking for another team and there will be one for him. Anderson is the near perfect backup, like Kelly Holcomb. In small doses and when expectations are slight, he occasionally can perform. He crumbles when the stakes are raised and as a result he's just not anyone's solution as a long-term starter.

At the rate that starting quarterbacks get injured, a viable backup is essential. As long as Anderson recognizes that this is his destiny, he'll make decent money from a variety of teams over the next several years. If he thinks he still deserves to start then he's likely to carry an unhealthy grudge for the rest of what will end up being a much shorter career.

The real pity in all of this is what it's done to the Browns' quarterback situation. Anderson's 2007 season certainly presented the Browns with a dilemma since they had just drafted Quinn as the starter-in-waiting. Savage's sin in all of this was not the contract he gave Anderson (it was club friendly) but the fact that he didn't parlay Anderson's season or Quinn's lofty draft status into a decent trade opportunity. That set the team back as much as anything.

Instead Savage dithered and it ultimately led to where the Browns are now seriously considering Seneca Wallace, eh gads, as their starter.

As for Anderson, I wonder when reality will set in. As he said in his email exit "I hope and pray I'm playing when my team comes to town and roll them." That could happen of course but if he's playing, then his team is in trouble because it will already be down one key starter.