

2010 Browns Season in Review, Part II

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}

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The Browns entered the season's second half on a sudden downward turn after their 5-1 start. Losers of two straight, they still held the lead in the AFC North- but it was a tenuous one. And unfortunately for the nervous fans of Cleveland, bracing themselves for the inevitable drop of the other shoe, things would get worse before they got better.

Week #10: N.Y. Jets 24, Cleveland 7

For the third straight week the Browns face a top-level NFL opponent- and for the third straight week they are exposed. The powerful Jets dominate Cleveland up front from whistle to gun, outgaining the Browns 197-76 on the ground. Shonn Greene is the main dominator, with 142 rushing yards and two touchdowns. His 8-yard scamper gives the Jets a 7-0 lead on the opening possession of the game- and with a flat Cleveland offense offering little resistance that is pretty much that. Delhomme is disastrous: 12-of-29, 117 yards, three interceptions- and Seneca Wallace plays most of the fourth quarter. After a 3-0 start in front of the home folks the Browns have lost two straight at CBS and three in a row overall. Things are starting to unravel.

Team Record: 5-4

Week #11: Cleveland 13, Jacksonville 10

Cleveland's offensive lethargy continues, but the Browns are still good enough to beat the

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woeful Jags in front of a Browns-heavy crowd in Jacksonville. At least 40 percent of the fans in the stadium are barking their support of Cleveland and it seems to inspire the defense, which bounces back strong from the ugly show against the Jets. The Browns hold Jacksonville to 189 total yards and are overpowering after the Jags drove to a touchdown on their opening possession. Only Jerome Harrison shows up- picking patiently for 107 hard-earned yards and Cleveland's only touchdown which made it 7-7 just before halftime. The Browns then win a brutal battle of field goals 2-1 and with it the game.

Team Record: 6-4

Week #12: Carolina 24, Cleveland 20

The Browns drop their third consecutive home game in gut-wrenching fashion. Cleveland jumps out early over a struggling Carolina team. The Browns lead 17-0 midway through the second quarter, then just kind of shuts it down- and the Panthers crawl back. The lead goes from 17-7 to 20-7 going into what turns into a catastrophic fourth quarter. Cleveland turns it over three times in the fourth. All three are fumbles. The first sets up the go-ahead score for the Panthers, making it 21-20. The second sets up a field goal that makes it 24-20. The third, a botched center exchange between Alex Mack and Delhomme with 1:28 left, kills Cleveland's final chance. The Browns hear boos as they leave the field. They're 6-5 and trending downward.

Team Record: 6-5

Week #13: Miami 17, Cleveland 14 (OT)

The final leg in the Florida World Tour of 2010 gets flexed to Sunday Night, the better to publicize the first meeting between Cleveland and Miami sports teams in the wake of LeBron James's defection to the latter city- and the frustration continues under the arcs. The Browns continue to struggle offensively as teams sell out to stop the run and the average quarterback and average receiver corps can't make the connection with consistency. Cleveland comes back late in this one, tying it with 3:05 left on a score generated by Ricky Williams's fumble, but the Dolphins win the overtime coin toss and drive to a game-winning field goal against a tired Cleveland defense. The Browns are now 1-5 after their 5-1 start and have dropped to .500 for the first time all season.

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Team Record: 6-6

Week #14: Cleveland 27, Buffalo 10

With the season spiraling out of control, Joshua Cribbs- who up to this point had been having an off year by his standards, with no return scores- suddenly flashes his greatness. Cribbs returns the opening kickoff 98 yards for a touchdown to give Cleveland a 7-0 lead before the crowd is even settled in. Late in the second period the Bills punt to Cribbs, for whatever reason, and the Golden Flash takes it 65 more yards for six. He then completes his troika of special-teams spectacles by recovering Buffalo's fumble of the opening second-half kickoff. That sets up a 12-yard strike, Delhomme to Massaquoi, and at 21-0 the Browns are home free.

Team Record: 7-6

Week #15: Cincinnati 31, Cleveland 17

Many a promising Browns season has sunk along the shores of the Ohio, and once again it is the Bengals that put Cleveland's playoff hopes in serious jeopardy. Carson Palmer negotiates the tricky winds of Paul Brown Stadium for 224 yards and three touchdowns as Cleveland's ball-control strategy fails at the hands of an atypically leaky defense. The game is tied at 17-17 early in the fourth quarter when Palmer finds Chad Ocho Cinco for a 32-yard touchdown, and from there the Bengals are in control. They salt it away with a Cedric Benson insurance score late in the fourth quarter and knock the Browns a full game behind Baltimore in the AFC North race. If Cleveland loses at home to the Ravens next week, Baltimore clinches the division.

Team Record: 7-7

Week #16: Cleveland 14, Baltimore 6

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Snow is flying and the game-time temperature is sixteen above as the Browns and Ravens meet in the game that will likely decide the division winner. Consistency has eluded Baltimore all season- the Ravens have beaten league powers New England, Atlanta and New Orleans but were stunned at M&T Bank Stadium by the lowly Bucs a month earlier. At 8-6 they're a disappointment considering the preseason hype, but Baltimore can still clinch the North with a win today. If they lose, however, Cleveland can clinch the title next week against Pittsburgh based on its superior division record (4-2 to 3-3.)

So both teams need this game desperately; and the desperation is played out in a game custom-made for fans of old-school, blood-and-guts, defensive football. The Browns and Ravens play to a scoreless tie after one half. Other than two long field-goal attempts- one apiece- which both fail, neither team seriously threatens to score.

Cleveland gets the first real break of the game early in the third quarter- and not surprisingly, Josh Cribbs provides it. Taking a line-drive punt on the run at his 39, Cribbs explodes through Baltimore's defensive wave and dashes 42 yards before being forced out-of-bounds at the Ravens' 19-yard line. Here the Browns flash their power, running the ball five straight plays before Monterio Hardesty slams over from two yards out. Cleveland leads, 7-0, with 9:46 to go in the third.

Baltimore responds with its best drive of the game, all the way to a first-and-goal at the Cleveland 3. On first down Le'Ron McClain slams to the one. On second down Joe Flacco's play-action pass falls just out of the grasp of rookie tight end Ed Dickson in the end zone. On third down it's McClain again and this time he is stood up at the line of scrimmage, unable to learn forward over the goal line. John Harbaugh goes for it on fourth-down and calls for a fake dive to McClain and pitchout to Ray Rice. But Sheldon Brown isn't fooled; he strings out the play and Rice can't get to the corner as a wave of Orange engulfs him at the five-yard line. Cleveland's defense has held, and a mighty roar goes up from 72,000 chilled fans packing CBS.

After stonewalling Baltimore's offense twice more, the Browns begin the ball-control drive that they anticipate will put away the shutout. With less than three minutes left Cleveland has a first down inside Baltimore territory, and the clock is running. But 16-year veteran Ray Lewis, who has been pounded by Browns blockers all afternoon, finally makes a play. He rips the ball away from Jerome Harrison and Haloti Ngata falls on it at midfield. Cleveland fans are stunned, waiting for the inevitable to follow.

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It does. Flacco, who has had an awful time throwing through the wind, suddenly finds his groove. He zips five straight completions through Cleveland's defense; the fifth, a 21-yard aerial to Mark Clayton, puts the Ravens in the end zone for the first time. Exactly two minutes are left, and Baltimore is an extra point away from tying the game and, in all likelihood, sending it to overtime.

There aren't many simpler plays to execute in pro football than the point-after-touchdown. But here, with the division title on the line, the Ravens can't execute it. The snap doesn't reach holder Sam Koch on the fly; it skims the ground before it gets there, like a flat stone skipped off the surface of a pond. Koch scoops it up and attempts to roll out looking for a receiver but is crushed by Jason Trusnick and loses the ball. The Browns recover the loose pigskin and remain in front, 7-6.

Cleveland recovers Baltimore's onside kick. The Browns are attempting merely to run out the clock- until Jerome Harrison puts the game away for good. Taking a second-down handoff the Ghost bursts through the stacked Ravens defense and dashes 48 yards for the clinching touchdown. Down 14-6 Baltimore still technically has a chance to tie, but Cleveland's defense quickly snuffs out a feeble Ravens drive, and that's it. The Browns are one win away from clinching the AFC North Championship.

Team Record: 8-7

Week #17: Cleveland 20, Pittsburgh 14 (OT)

It has been a generation since the Browns played for the division title on the season's final Sunday. More than 72,000 fans, many of whom can't remember Kevin Mack carrying the Oiler defense into the end zone on that wild Sunday night in '89, pack Cleveland Browns Stadium to see if their upstarts could pull it off- and in doing so sweep the Steelers for the first time since 1988.

Pittsburgh is here to play spoiler. Hampered by Roethlisberger's suspension and an aging defense, the Steelers never have gotten untracked; they're 7-8 and eliminated from the playoff chase going into the finale.

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They nearly take Cleveland right down with them. Roethlisberger stuns the crowd a minute-and-a-half in when he hits Mike Wallace with a 66-yard touchdown strike. The Steelers dominate early, but can't build on their 7-0 lead. Late in the half Josh Cribbs runs down a bouncing punt and glides 62 yards with it, all the way to the Pittsburgh 5. Harrison takes a pitch to the end zone two plays later and going into halftime the Browns are tied, despite being outgained 203-79.

Cleveland's offense asserts itself on the opening possession of the second half. Mixing the run and pass beautifully the Browns grind 69 yards on 13 plays, taking the lead on Delhomme's flip to Ben Watson. Now it is Cleveland's turn to control things- and Rob Ryan's defenders fall all over Roethlisberger, sacking him four times in the second half. With five minutes left the Browns drive to the Pittsburgh 23 and have a chance to put the game away. But Phil Dawson's 40-yard try hooks right- and predictably, the Steelers take advantage. They drive 70 yards in six smart plays and tie the game 14-14 on Rashard Mendenhall's 13-yard burst with 1:59 left.

Except for the renegade Steelers fans in the stands, CBS is a morgue. Cleveland has to punt on its final possession of regulation and Pittsburgh gets it back at midfield a half-minute remaining. But Marcus Benard sacks Roethlisberger on the first play and the Steelers are forced to settle for a Hail Mary that is batted down. The Browns will have to work overtime to win the North.

Pittsburgh wins the toss, elects to receive, and begins a slow march that sends agony shooting through CBS. The Steelers have a first down at the Cleveland 39 when Roethlisberger, under pressure, shoots a fastball for Heath Miller. The ball ricochets off Miller's shoulder pad and is picked off by Sheldon Brown, who returns it to midfield. Three plays later, with 3rd-and-8 from the Pittsburgh 48, Delhomme throws a flanker screen to Josh Cribbs. His path cleared by devastating blocks from Joe Thomas and Alex Mack, Cribbs scissors 29 yards downfield before he is dragged down at the 19.

The goal now is to position the ball for Phil Dawson. But Monterio Hardesty doesn't follow the script. With Lawrence Vickers cleaning out James Harrison, Hardesty cuts off-tackle, scoots outside and dives over the pylon ahead of two Steelers defenders. It's over. The Browns have won the game, have won the AFC North for the first time ever- and to the surprised delight of all Cleveland, there will be a home Playoff game by the Lake Front this season.

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Team Record: 9-7

Coming Up Next: Part III of the 2010 Browns Season in Review