

## 2010 Browns Season in Review, Part III

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}

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### Regular Season in Review

Cleveland finishes the regular season with a 9-7 record, tied with the 2002 team for second-best, record-wise, since the Return. It isn't an overly impressive mark and the peripherals are even less so: the Browns are actually outscored on the season, 314-308.

Offensively the Browns are led by Jerome Harrison, who proves 2009 wasn't a fluke by rolling up 1,157 yards with a 4.4 yards-per-carry average and a total of 9 touchdowns rushing and receiving. Aably abetting the Ghost is rookie Monterio Hardesty, who adds 509 yards and 3 touchdowns. The H&H combo gets the statistics, but a lot of backs can get yards behind the powerful effort up front. Joe Thomas chalks up the usual Pro Bowl berth; he's joined in Honolulu by Alex Mack and Lawrence Vickers, who gets his just due for being a pure, bad-assed football player.

Reasonably healthy for the first time in a while, Jake Delhomme picks spots, limits mistakes and finishes the campaign with 2,888 yards, 18 touchdowns and 16 interceptions while completing 59% of his passes. Seneca Wallace chips in with 224 yards passing and one touchdown pass. Mohamed Massaquoi improves with 868 receiving yards and newcomer Ben Watson helps out with seven touchdown catches as Delhomme's prime red-zone target, but Cleveland's receiving corps is as dry and bland as matzo without horse radish. Nevertheless, guided by the steady Delhomme, the Browns improve from dead last in passing to 22<sup>nd</sup>- not good, but not awful enough to derail everything else.

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Defensively Cleveland is also much improved, especially against the run. The secondary tightens up with the additions of Joe Haden and Sheldon Brown and a breakout year from Eric Wright, who intercepts 8 passes and earns a Pro Bowl berth. The linebackers are solid, with Kaluka Maiava the surprise performer and the defensive line, anchored by Shaun Rogers, is stout in the running lanes. It's by no means a cast of stars, just an anonymously solid group in the grand Belichickian tradition.

No one gives the Browns much of a chance as the Playoffs open. Despite their #4 seed Cleveland is generally considered the weakest team in the AFC Field. Not a few prognosticators pick the Browns to lose at home in the first round to the talented young Houston Texans.

### **AFC Wild-Card Playoff: Cleveland 31, Houston 21**

After years of stops and starts, the Houston Texans have finally harnessed their vast potential, making the playoffs for the first time since entering the NFL in 2002. Winners in six of its last eight, despite a brutal second-half schedule, Houston rolls into the postseason ranked in the top ten in both total offense and total defense. Ignoring the 21-degree cold, they go right to work early in Cleveland's first home playoff game since January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1995, holding the Browns to three-and-out on the game's opening series, then driving 71 yards to Matt Schaub's scoring toss to Kevin Walter. With barely five minutes gone the Texans lead, 7-0, and look every bit the AFC dark horse they're reputed to be.

Houston gets the ball back moments later and resumes its assault, driving all the way to the Cleveland 19. But there, the Browns finally make a play on defense. Pressured by Matt Roth, Matt Schaub throws behind Owen Daniels, and D'Qwell Jackson makes the drive-killing pick. One play later Delhomme fakes a handoff to Jerome Harrison, fades back and finds Chansi Stuckey wide-open down the middle of the field. 81 yards later, the score is tied, 7-7. Seemingly unfazed by the 14-point swing, the Texans go right back down the field, 77 yards in seven

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plays, and regain the lead on Steve Slaton's five-yard scamper. Houston leads 14-7 after one period and has already piled up 188 yards of total offense.

Fueled by a twisting, turning, 39-yard kick return by Josh Cribbs, Cleveland takes advantage of a short field and drives to a field goal that makes it 14-10. Again Houston responds, but with a first down in Cleveland territory Schaub is sacked for a nine-yard loss and the drive dies. But the Browns haven't quite solved the riddle of Houston's offense yet. With time winding down in the half the Texans embark on another impressive drive, Schaub employing Andre Johnson and Owen Daniels heavily against the harried Browns defense. With 2:32 left before intermission Houston is at the Cleveland 18. Here the Texans turn back to their ground game to eat up yards and time- and for the second time today, disaster strikes the visitors in the red zone. Matt Roth meets Steve Slaton in the hole, gets his helmet right on the football, and the pill pops out- right to Ahtyba Rubin, who makes a diving stab at the 20. As it turns out, Houston has all but run out of opportunities to waste.

Coach Mangini plans to play conservatively, run down the clock and get into the locker room with the score a manageable 14-10. On first down Jerome Harrison runs a sweep to the left. When the Ghost puts a quick move on Bernard Pollard he is suddenly free down the near sideline. 42 yards later he is dragged down from behind, and now Cleveland scraps its caution and goes for the downs. Three quick Delhomme completions- the last a 21-yard Ben Watson catch-and-run- place the ball on the one. Then Lawrence Vickers takes a quick hitter and bangs into the end zone with 21 seconds to play in the half. Despite being outplayed for long stretches the Browns lead 17-14 at the break.

The third quarter belongs to the Cleveland Browns. Cleveland runs 25 plays in the stanza, picks up 156 total yards and controls the ball for 12:48. Houston runs five plays, picks up two total yards and controls the ball for 2:12. The Browns also dominate the Texans in the one area that really matters- the scoreboard. They outscore Houston 14-0 in the third, with Jerome Harrison scoring the first touchdown and Ben Watson the second, and move into the final period with an authoritative 31-14 lead. With the icy wind rattling in off the lake, the Browns ahead on the scoreboard and fans firing snowballs at the Houston bench, it seems like the good old days at Municipal Stadium all over again.

The Texans score a garbage touchdown late in the game to make the score respectable but it doesn't matter. Cleveland has its first postseason victory since Mumbles topped his mentor the Tuna way back on New Year's Day '95, and although it will probably be their last, the 72,000 at CBS aren't about to let that kind of Cleveland-style negativity spoil the party. Hours after the game the streets of the city are alive with drivers leaning on horns and rusty whoops strained

through alcohol and hard-used vocal cords.

### **AFC Divisional Playoff: Cleveland 28, N.Y. Jets 9**

Joyful as the ride has been for the Browns, it's expected to screech to a halt in the new Meadowlands Stadium. The Jets are 12-4 going into the Divisional round, tied with Indianapolis for the best record in the AFC. Mark Sanchez has improved since his rookie year and is aided by one of the league's best running games well as a resurgent Braylon Edwards, who puts together the second 1,000-yard season of his career and snags 9 touchdown passes. Rex Ryan's aggressive defense gives up just 233 points, second-fewest in the NFL. The Jets are 7-1 at home and have already punished the Browns in Cleveland. They are installed as eleven-point favorites in the re-match, and CBS cues up the obligatory "Cleveland Sports Failure" montage for when New York puts the game away.

The odds makers neglect two factors in setting that line, however. The first is the tricky winds at the Meadowlands, which can make throwing the ball a nightmare for any quarterback. The second is the New York quarterback himself. Mark Sanchez is better than last year- but that doesn't mean he's good. Sanchez's 73.5 QB rating is below average, and his 16-18 touchdown/interception ratio isn't inspiring either. Sanchez's 2009 Playoff joyride had been all-road, all the time. This game would be played at home amidst the unforgiving winds- as well as some pretty unforgiving fans.

New York wins the toss, elects to receive, and it quickly becomes apparent that the Sanchez is a little off on this bitter day. Mark's first pass dives to the turf three yards in front of Justin Keller; his second, to Braylon Edwards, is nearly intercepted. The punt is devoured by the wind, carries only to the New York 48- and the Browns take advantage of the field position. Six plays later Jerome Harrison crashes over from the one, and just five minutes into the game it's 7-0 Cleveland.

Cleveland's defense suffocates the Jets for the rest of the period, but early in the second Delhomme throws late over the middle and is intercepted at midfield by David Harris. Four plays move New York to the 31-yard line. On third down Sanchez has Braylon wide open down the far sideline, but the stone-fingered receiver can't hang on at the goal line. The Jets have to settle for a 48-yard field goal by Jay Feely and a 7-3 deficit.

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Still trailing by that same score, New York takes over on its own 13 with 2:11 left in the half. With the wind at their back the Jets elect to be aggressive. On first down Sanchez drops straight back, scans the field, and fires a bullet ten feet over the head of intended receiver Dustin Keller. Brandon McDonald intercepts and takes the ball all the way to the New York 13-yard line. On first down Delhomme drops off a screen pass to Jerome Harrison, and the Ghost gets a couple of blocks and leaps into the end zone to make it 14-3, Browns, at halftime.

Josh Cribbs makes it 21-3 without Cleveland's offense needing to touch the football. Taking the opening kickoff of the second half at his own 8, Cribbs starts right, cuts back to the middle behind a block, cuts right again to avoid the flailing kicker and is gone- 92 yards for a touchdown. The crowd in the Meadowlands is apoplectic.

The Jets are good football team, but they are not built for 18-point comebacks. Cleveland's defense stacks against the run, daring Sanchez to beat them- and he can't do it. His second interception, this one by Eric Wright, sets up the Browns at the Jets 44-yard line near the end of the third quarter. From there Cleveland pounds it out. Seven consecutive runs move the ball to the New York one. With 10:44 left, Delhomme fakes to Harrison and hits Ben Watson straddling the back line of the end zone for the touchdown that puts it away. The Jets score a late touchdown but that only serves to bring the score into neat inverse of the Sanchez's 9-of-28 passing performance. Eric Mangini gets the Gatorade shower in celebration of a win over the team that fired him three years ago.

Browns fans can't believe this is happening. Their team has won its first postseason game on the road since 1969. It is in its first AFC Championship Game since 1989. And the next afternoon brings another stunning development. Top-seeded Indianapolis falls in Lucas Oil Stadium to Baltimore, the last seed. The road to the Super Bowl will go through Cleveland- and the Browns will have a chance to finish what John Elway had interrupted 24 years earlier.

### **AFC Championship Game: Cleveland 19, Baltimore 16 (OT)**

The party in Cleveland begins long before the 3:30 kickoff. It is a party a generation in the making. After two decades of failure, relocation, and more failure, the Browns are one game away from the Super Bowl. They've been this close five times before- in 1968, '69, '86, '87 and '89- and have been stopped short each time.

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All five of those futile appearances were made by the team that moved to Baltimore after the 1995 season. That team is in Cleveland today, trying to deny the Browns on their sixth attempt to reach the Super Bowl. Despite being a popular preseason pick to play early-February football in Jerry World, the Ravens have had a strange, inconsistent season, finishing just 9-7 and losing the division title on a tiebreaker. But Baltimore found its rhythm at just the right time. In the first round the Ravens manhandled the Broncos in Denver, 24-0, and followed up the shutout with a stunning upset of the second-seeded Colts in Lucas Oil Field. Baltimore rolls into Browns Stadium a solid touchdown favorite, almost everyone's choice to put a stop to Cleveland's sudden uprising and restore order to the AFC balance of power.

The 72,000 fans packing Cleveland Browns Stadium don't care about the odds. They are in full throat, rabid at the sight of the hated purple of the Ravens. This is the kind of payback that can't be scripted: an opportunity to go to the Super Bowl, and do it against the demon spawn of Art Modell's short-sightedness and stupidity. For the first time since 1986 the Browns are hosting the AFC Championship Game- and John Elway is nowhere in sight.

But Joe Flacco is. And it takes about five minutes of game time on this unseasonably warm 36-degree day- roughly the amount needed for Flacco to drive the Ravens 75 yards for a touchdown on the game's opening series- to turn CBS into the world's largest outdoor morgue. Baltimore quickly leads, 7-0- and the way the Ravens defense starts out it looks as if that one touchdown might be enough. Cleveland picks up one first down in the opening quarter and punts three times. Delhomme is 2-for-9 to start out and the vaunted Browns running attack is going absolutely nowhere.

But the Ravens are unable to add to their lead. They drive into Cleveland territory twice more in the half but are waylaid by a sack and a missed field goal. Late in the half the Browns finally get a break when Ray Rice fumbles the ball away at the Baltimore 42. Cleveland gets two first downs but no more, and Phil Dawson is called upon to salvage some points. He does, his 39-yard field goal slicing through and cutting the margin to 7-3 at the end of the first half. The Browns are lucky to not be down by more. Baltimore is dominating statistically, outgaining its hosts 178-71. Just like the playoff opener against the Texans, Cleveland is being outplayed yet is hanging around.

Josh Cribbs ensures that the sputtering Cleveland offense doesn't need to drive the field to start the second half. Cribbs takes the third-quarter kickoff, bolts straight up the field, sheds an ankle tackle, heads right and trucks 82 yards before being forced out of bounds at the Baltimore 19. Three plays later Delhomme hits Massaquoi in the end zone and the Browns have their first lead, 10-7. There are less than two quarters to play for the Super Bowl, and Cleveland is out in

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front.

They aren't for long. On its second possession of the half Baltimore drives 59 yards and ties the game on a field goal. After forcing a three-and-out from Cleveland's offense, the Ravens move all the way down to the Browns 16-yard line. On third down from the 13 Flacco finds Ed Dickson open in the end zone... and overthrows him. Another field goal moves Baltimore back in front, 13-10. That's the way the third quarter ends.

Cleveland hasn't mounted a decent drive all afternoon as it receives a Baltimore punt at its own 35 with nine minutes left. It doesn't look as if it's going to happen this time either as two plays account for two yards, putting the Browns in a 3<sup>rd</sup>-and-8 hole. But Domonique Foxworth is whistled for pass interference on Delhomme's subsequent incompleteness, giving Cleveland a free first down at midfield- and that seems to awaken the slumbering Cleveland offense. Delhomme completes his next four passes which, along with a 12-yard Jerome Harrison run, position the Browns on the Baltimore nine. Seneca Wallace enters the game at quarterback and hits Brian Robiskie on a quick screen. Robo bulls upfield, bounces off a would-be tackler and stretches forward into the end zone, giving the Browns a 16-13 lead with 4:52 left.

The crowd in Cleveland is berserk- but only momentarily. Phil Dawson stuns the 72,000 into silence when he bounces the extra-point attempt off the upright. Baltimore now only needs a field goal to tie. CBS play-by-play man Jim Nantz is of no help. "They might start calling that 'The Miss' when this one is said and done," the Nantzer intones.

Baltimore then does what it has been doing all day- move the football. Flacco, having a brilliant afternoon, guides the Ravens all the way to a 3<sup>rd</sup>-and-1 on the Cleveland 11-yard line with 1:13 remaining. It's a ripe play-action opportunity, but Baltimore coach John Harbaugh goes conservative and calls for Le'Ron McClain on the dive play. He is stuffed at the line of scrimmage and the Ravens are forced into their third field goal, tying the game 13-13 with a minute left. Cleveland kills the remaining clock in the second half- and it's off to overtime.

Baltimore wins the coin toss in overtime and, naturally, elects to receive. Seven plays after the kickoff the Ravens are perched at the Cleveland 48, with a 3<sup>rd</sup>-and-5 upcoming. Flacco sends Mark Clayton deep down the near sideline and has him wide open inside the twenty- but Clayton lets the pass go off his hands. Baltimore will have to punt- and it's a beauty, hitting inside the fifteen and bouncing and rolling out of bounds at the Cleveland five-yard line.

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At this point the Browns have been outgained 398-209. They need at least some sort of drive, if only to change field position. Here it is as it unfolds:

1<sup>st</sup>-and-10, Cleveland 5: Delhomme swings a pass out to Harrison, who is forced out of bounds at the 11.

2<sup>nd</sup>-and-4, Cleveland 11: Monterio Hardesty is stacked up after a gain of one.

3<sup>rd</sup>-and-3, Cleveland 12: Dehomme finds Robiskie on a quick slant, and Robo hangs on as he is blasted by two Ravens.

1<sup>st</sup>-and-10, Cleveland 19: Josh Cribbs takes a direct snap and sweeps left for a gain of four.

2<sup>nd</sup>-and-6, Cleveland 23: Delhomme re-enters and promptly finds Ben Watson down the middle for a gain of 13. The Browns have another first down and the crowd is starting to buzz as the drive really gets rolling.

1<sup>st</sup>-and-10, Cleveland 36: Delhomme keeps the hot hand, finding Chansi Stuckey on a down-and-in at the Baltimore 49.

1<sup>st</sup>-and-10, Baltimore 49: Harrison goes off tackle for a gain of two.

2<sup>nd</sup>-and-8, Baltimore 47: Haloti Ngata doesn't get many sacks from his nose-tackle position but he gets one here, collapsing the Cleveland pocket and burying Delhomme for an eight-yard loss.

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3<sup>rd</sup>-and-16, Cleveland 45: Operating out of the shotgun, Delhomme takes the snap, surveys the field- and finds Mohamed Massaquoi tucked in a hole in the Baltimore zone. Delhomme drills it in there; Mo Mass hauls it in and hits the ground at the Baltimore 35. It's a twenty-yard gain, another Cleveland first down- and now the crowd isn't buzzing. It's roaring.

1<sup>st</sup>-and-10, Baltimore 35: Harrison again, this time off left tackle- and this time he finds daylight, bouncing outside and picking up sixteen yards before being forced out of bounds. The Browns are now in field-goal range. Up in the booth Phil Simms thinks Eric Mangini shouldn't run another play from scrimmage: "Jee-im, Ah think the Browns should just kick it raht now. Don't fool around handin' in it off."

1<sup>st</sup>-and-10, Baltimore 19: Instead, the Cleveland offense stays on the field. Cribbs comes in at quarterback, takes the snap and plows straight forward. He's only trying to move forward a few yards and position the ball on the right hashmark, but no one on Baltimore's defense wraps him up and Cribbs suddenly pops free. He spins off the stack and rumbles all the way to the Ravens four-yard line before being dragged down.

1<sup>st</sup>-and-10, Baltimore 4: Now Eric Mangini brings out his field-goal unit. Phil Dawson is the only player remaining from the Browns team that took the field against Pittsburgh on that ominous Sunday night in September, 1999. Earlier in the game he missed the extra point that might have put this game away in regulation. Now, at the climax of this 11-play, 91-yard marathon, he has a chance to send the Browns to the Super Bowl.

The crowd goes eerily silent as the field-goal unit sets up, as if a single sound might shatter everything. Ryan Pontbriand's snap is perfect. Dave Zastudil's hold is perfect. And when Phil Dawson puts his right foot on the ball, there is no doubt. The silence is broken by roaring even before the 21-yard kick flies straight through the uprights.

The odds makers may not have given the Browns much of a chance, but Jim Nantz has his line ready for the occasion. "Cleveland, you've had the Drive, you've had the Fumble... how's the Super Bowl sound?"