

2010 Browns Season in Review, Part IV

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}

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Super Bowl XLV: February 6, 2011 @ Cowboys Stadium, Arlington, Texas

Cleveland Browns (9-7) vs. Dallas Cowboys (13-3)

Browns fans wake up the Monday morning after the AFC Championship Game- not a few nursing savage hangovers- to find that their team and city have suddenly become national darlings. They're discovering something- while the city was in contempt when it came to LeBron, it is legitimately respected as one of the premier football towns in the country. Cleveland's Super Bowl trip is touted as a "great thing for the game" and pundits all over hail the redemption of the city's long-suffering fans. Dallas Cowboy play-by-play man Brad Sham, whose team will meet the Browns in the big game, admits that "for this week at least, the Cleveland Browns are America's Team."

That doesn't mean the national press outlook on the Super Bowl is very rosy. To put it bluntly, Cleveland is given absolutely no chance of winning. The Dallas Cowboys look awesome. They roll into the Super Bowl with a league-best 13-3 record. NFL MVP Tony Romo has had a spectacular season, throwing for 4,236 yards with 37 touchdown passes to just 12 interceptions. Unlike in previous years Romo continues his regular-season success into January, outdueling Drew Brees and Aaron Rodgers in Dallas's playoff victories over the Saints and Packers. And he has a lot of help: the three-headed backfield monster of Marion Barber, Felix Jones and Tashard Choice; tight end Jason Witten, and receivers Miles Austin and rookie sensation Dez Bryant. The Cowboys roll up 467 points in the regular season, second-most in the NFL.

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Dallas's defense is almost as impressive as its offense. Led by All-Pro linebacker DeMarcus Ware the Cowboys pile up 48 quarterback sacks and hold the opposition to just 249 points. Both cornerbacks, Mike Jenkins and Terence Newman, are Pro Bowlers, and the front seven, with Ware, Brady James, Igor Olshansky and others, is as good as any in football. Dallas will send ten men to the Pro Bowl, the most of any team in the National Football League.

So we have a match-up of a team with a 13-3 record, ten Pro Bowl players and a +218 point differential against a team with a 9-7 record, four Pro Bowl players and a -6 point differential. And the 13-3 team is playing in its home stadium. Considering that many observers are calling the Browns the worst team to ever play in a Super Bowl, this game looks as if it's over even before it begins- even if Wade Phillips is coaching the favored team.

Writers in the Metroplex certainly think so. "Remember those Super Bowls against the Bills?" one Dallas scribe asks rhetorically. "Two Cowboy victories by a combined score of 82-30? Get ready for another Super Stomping of another downtrodden Rust Belt town. The Drive? The Fumble? Just call this one the Blowout." The scribe (who shall remain nameless) predicts a final score of Dallas 56, Cleveland 10. Vegas doesn't think it's going to be *that* bad; still, Dallas is established as a fifteen-point favorite, the largest spread since San Francisco was favored by eighteen over San Diego prior to Super Bowl XXIX in 1995.

Not surprisingly, the media seeks out the assessments of former Cavalier and noted Cavalier LeBron James in regards to the match-up. LeBron, whose Heat are cruising along at 46-12 when the Super Bowl gets underway, provides a somewhat surprising response. "I think the Cowboys are going to win," says the Artist Formerly Known as the King, "but even though I'm a die-hard Cowboys fan I'd kind of like to see the Browns win. The people there deserve a championship."

What follows in Arlington is even more surprising.

If the Cowboys are expecting the Super Bowl to be a quasi-home game, they are sorely disappointed. The game may or may not be a replay of the eviscerations of Buffalo- but the crowd in Jerry World is more reminiscent of Dallas's match-ups with the Steelers when, in the

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words of John Facenda, "Pittsburgh hard hats outnumbered Dallas Stetsons three-to-one." Entire sections resemble pumpkin patches, with orange resplendent everywhere. For a supposed neutral-site game played in one of the contestants' own stadiums, the crowd is pro-Browns to an arresting degree. "I couldn't believe it," a Cowboy says later. "This is our own building, and it's the Super Bowl. If I was freezing my ass off and getting hit with snowballs I would have thought it was a Browns home game."

Dallas wins the coin toss and elects to receive. On second-and-five from his own 29-yard line Tony Romo fades back. Jason Witten is covered fifteen yards downfield, Marion Barber is open in the flat; but Romo is too full of himself and the Super Bowl. He tries to stick the ball into his tight end. David Bowens cuts in front, intercepts, and carries the ball to the Dallas 27 before being hauled down. Cleveland has gotten the game's first break.

Tony Romo has not played in a Super Bowl. Jake Delhomme has. On the possession following the interception the aging journeyman shows his comfort and composure. On third down from the 22 Delhomme catches the Cowboys in a blitz and lofts a screen pass to Jerome Harrison, who weaves his way down to the two before being forced out of bounds. On the next play Delhomme freezes the Cowboys with a play fake and arcs a touchdown toss to his favorite red-zone target, Ben Watson. With 12:46 remaining in the first period the Browns have taken a 7-0 lead.

Cleveland's defense thwarts the next two Cowboy possessions with brilliant third-down plays. First, Ahtyba Rubin stands up Marion Barber on third-and-one, forcing a punt. The next time Dallas has the ball Eric Wright makes a finger-tipped break-up of a long pass intended for a streaking Miles Austin. After one quarter the 7-0 lead still stands.

The Cowboys finally get their act together as the second period gets underway. Dallas drives 79 yards on Cleveland's defense, getting the big play on a 45-yard burst by Felix Jones. The Cowboys have a first-and-goal at the one. No messing around: they're going to give it to Marion the Barbarian and let him blast away to the tying touchdown. But Tony Romo can't execute this most simple play. He bobbles the snap, than fumbles it as Cleveland's defensive line closes in. Kaluka Maiava falls on the ball at the five-yard line. A frustrated Romo exchanges words with center Andre Gurode on the sideline.

For the second time in two games the Browns put together a 90-plus yard drive- 95, to be exact, on thirteen crispy-executed plays. The biggest is a 32-yard catch and run by Mohamed

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Massaquoi which places the Browns at the Dallas three. Jerome Harrison does the honors from there, taking a pitchout and scooting round right end for the score. With 4:46 left in the half the Browns, fifteen-point underdogs at the beginning, lead 14-0. The announcers proceed to show a statistic which causes Cleveland fans either excitement or dread, depending on their levels of cynicism: no team has ever lost a Super Bowl after being ahead by fourteen points.

After an exchange of punts the Cowboys throw together a quick drive that carries down to the Cleveland 30-yard line. A field goal at the halftime gun reduces the Browns lead to eleven at 14-3. The yardage is nearly even: 165 for the Browns, 164 for the Cowboys. The two Dallas turnovers are the difference. Everyone agrees that if the 'Pokes can stop giving the ball away they'll be all right in the second half. At some point the league's most potent offense is going to catch fire.

Unfortunately for that offense, it is on the sidelines watching Josh Cribbs receive the second-half kickoff. Nervous at the prospect of Cribbs breaking the game open, Dallas's kicker attempts to guide the ball away from him- and flubs it out of bounds. Cleveland will start the second half in excellent field position at its own 40-yard line.

It takes three plays for the Browns to take full advantage. On first down from the Dallas 48 the one weakness of the Cowboy defense- a weak safety unit- rears its ugly head. When Mohamed Massaquoi runs a hitch-and-go Mike Jenkins lets him free, confident he has safety help over the top. He does not. Ken Hamlin has jumped Chansi Stuckey's slant route, and when Massaquoi makes his turn up-field there is no one within ten yards of him. All Delhomme needs to do is play pitch-and-catch and the second-year receiver strolls into the end zone with the ball aloft. Just as they did in the first half the Browns have struck quickly out of the locker room and now lead, 21-3.

After being stymied for an entire half Dallas now fires away with the full power of its offensive arsenal. Romo hits four different receivers on the next drive while the Cowboy runners churn away for 47 yards on six carries. On the twelfth play of the march Romo keeps it himself, diving over from a yard out. With 7:01 left in the third Dallas trails, 21-10- and with their offense the Cowboys are right back in it.

The news worsens for Cleveland. On their next possession the Browns are overwhelmed by a ferocious Dallas rush, losing nine yards in three plays. Dave Zastudil's punt wobbles only 34 yards and the Cowboys are back in business at their own 46. With his confidence swelling with

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every play Romo whips his team downfield, and when he finds Witten for eighteen yards right down the seam, Dallas has a first-and-goal at the Cleveland four-yard line. The Browns have played superb red-zone defense all season; they'll have to do it again to maintain control of a Super Bowl that suddenly seems on the verge of slipping away.

As it turns out the Browns don't need four plays to turn away Dallas's scoring bid. After Barber plows down to the one Romo play-fakes and rolls to his right, looking for Jason Witten in the end zone. But Kaluka Maiava is on him in seconds and belts Romo as he makes the throw. The ball pops straight up in the air, is plucked away by Sheldon Brown- and the former Eagle is off to the races. With the Cleveland sideline waving him home Brown dashes 94 yards for the touchdown. The Cowboys had been one yard away from making the score 21-17. Now, thanks to Tony Romo's third turnover- all leading directly to Cleveland touchdowns- they trail 28-10 with time running short in the third period.

Dallas has now had the ball twice inside the Cleveland five-yard line without scoring a single point. The Cowboys are shell-shocked and show it on their next possession, going three-and-out. The Browns get the ball back on their own 32 with 2:01 remaining in the third. They would then put the game out of reach with a magnificent eight-minute, 14-play, 68-yard drive. Most of the march consists of Jerome Harrison and Monterio Hardesty running the ball over, around and through a demoralized Dallas defense. Facing one of the NFL's best run defenses, Cleveland amasses 152 yards on the ground- a good bulk of it coming on this drive.

With the Browns perched at the Dallas two-yard line, Delhomme gives the ball to Harrison one more time. It's the same play on which the Ghost scored his first touchdown- a pitch around right end- and it has the same result. Harrison gets the corner, leaps past the pylon- and with 7:57 left the Browns now lead, 35-10. And with that it starts to sink in to Browns fans that their team is on the way to a World Championship.

From there it's a matter of running out the clock. Playing soft and conceding the middle of the field, Cleveland's defense gives up one last desperation drive, with Dallas going 76 yards in 13 plays. Romo finds Witten in the end zone with 1:58 left to make it 35-17. The Browns recover an onside kick, and that's it. Jake Delhomme, the Super Bowl MVP with a 21-of-29, 223-yard, two-touchdown masterpiece, kneels down one last time and the game is over.

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Cleveland has just pulled off the biggest upset in Super Bowl history- and has played a near-perfect game to do it. The Browns don't turn the ball over and commit just three penalties. The Cowboys actually out-gain Cleveland 424-375. But they commit three turnovers- two while on the verge of scoring touchdowns- and are whistled for eight penalties. As they've done all season, the Browns have let the opponent make the mistakes.

As the game ends the Fox cameras pan the crowd. Not a few of the fans in orange have tears in their eyes. "Look at the emotion," play-by-play man Joe Buck intones. "You don't think those people have been dreaming of this moment for a long time?"

The best valediction is delivered by Fox analyst and former Cowboy Troy Aikman. "I remember playing in Cleveland in the season opener one season (1991) and just thinking about the history of that stadium and that organization," the Hall of Famer says as Cleveland winds down the clock. "To play in that stadium against that team was very special to me as a young player because of all the great players who'd been there before me- Otto Graham, Jim Brown, Leroy Kelly, guys like that."

"And you know, I'll always be a Dallas Cowboy at heart, but I feel very privileged to be able to be here and see the Cleveland Browns win the Super Bowl, just knowing their history, knowing what the fans in the city of Cleveland have gone through over the last twenty years and how they support this team through thick and thin. It feels like we're witnessing history and that's very special."

"People last year talked about Saints fans deserving to see their team win a Super Bowl and they did. But to me there is no bunch of fans that more deserve to see their team hoist the Vince Lombardi trophy than Cleveland Browns fans. To see them come up short all those times against John Elway, to see them moved to Baltimore, to go through some tough years with the expansion team- you want to talk about some people who deserve this kind of reward, you have to start with the people in Cleveland."