

Still in the Oven

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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The NFL's preseason plays out like a four-course meal, which each game building on the next. By the fourth game, the accomplished teams are serving desert and relaxing as coffee is served. The not-so-accomplished, on the other hand, have trouble just getting the various dishes to finish cooking at the same time. Through three games this preseason in the kitchen that is the Cleveland Browns, the offense appears to be arriving as scheduled while the defense remains half-baked.

The problem is that the same sorts of things that made this one of the worst defenses in the league last year are still there. The front three can't pressure the quarterback on its own. The linebackers are very average at covering running backs and tight ends. The defensive backfield too often seems in fire drill mode. The domino effect is that teams tend to chew up huge chunks of yardage far too often.

You can chalk up Detroit's first drive, a nifty little 3-play affair that covered 68 yards in just under a minute and a half that gave the Lions an early 7-3 lead, as an anomaly if you'd like, but I have the feeling the coaching staff isn't. First round pick Javid Best ran the Lions' opening play right up the heart of the defense for 51 yards, caught a short pass on the next play that he turned into another 10 yard gain and then watched as quarterback Matt Stafford through a 7-yard pass to Bryant Johnson for the touchdown. Particularly frustrating on that touchdown catch was how Johnson turned corner back Eric Wright inside out in the process.

This was the second straight week that an opposing offense went through the Browns' defense

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on the opening drive like Sherman through Atlanta.

The Browns held the Lions on their next two series and Wright got a measure of redemption when he recovered a Kevin Smith fumble and returned it 44 yards for the touchdown. But as is the attitude of most corner backs in the league, particularly after they've just been burned, Wright acted as if the Johnson touchdown over him didn't matter and pranced into the end zone with the fumble recovery as if he had invented the game. For good measure, he held a brief but elaborate touchdown celebration that looked as if he were simulating throwing craps.

Indeed, it was the perfect metaphor for the defense, not only on Saturday but in general. It's always a gamble with them but too often they look like sidewalk stooges in a game of three-card Monte. Too many times the defensive backs overplayed blitzes and allowed Stafford and the subs that followed easy completions. Too many times there was poor tackling that allowed minor gains to go for 4 or 5 yards.

The Lions are improved, certainly, but they are still a second tier team, just like the Browns. If the defense struggles with them, they'll struggle with any team.

It wasn't all a disaster certainly. Rookies Joe Haden and T.J. Ward played most of the game and gained, if nothing else, more experience. Haden more so than Ward is still struggling, which isn't much of a concern. He's overly aggressive at this point and the resulting interference penalties he's received aren't a surprise. But you can see the progress and the promise that he offers.

The main problem with the defense though starts with the line. As much as head coach Eric Mangini and defensive coordinator Rex Ryan talk up nose tackle Ahtyba Rubin, he's no where close to playing like the injured Shaun Rogers did in his prime or, about 40 pounds ago, take your pick. Maybe Rubin will get there, but he's not there yet. He lacks Rogers' technique mostly and struggles freeing himself from man-on-man blocks. Double teams usually aren't even necessary.

Despite all that Rubin is the best lineman at the moment, which explains exactly why it struggles. The mixture of bodies like Robaire Smith and Brian Schaefering, for example, are just too inconsistent to be counted on.

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That's putting too much pressure on the linebackers which in turn is putting too much pressure on the defensive backs. Until the defensive line improves dramatically, this defense will struggle irrespective of the various schemes Ryan runs to mask its inadequacies.

The offense, on the other hand, offers reason for hope. Too many times last season, and for the few seasons before that, when an opposing team got up by 10 points early, you just had the feeling the game was over. There just wasn't enough skill in the backfield, including quarterback, or at wide receiver to ever make you think that this team could go punch for punch with any other team.

But if quarterback Jake Delhomme continues to play like he has during the preseason, this team will score points. Of course, most thought that scoring runs would be the least of the Cleveland Indians' problems this season and it's turned into one of its biggest problems particularly lately, so you make such predictions cautiously.

Still, so much about the offense looks improved over last season that irrespective of the final scores, the games should be more fun to watch.

For one thing, tight ends Benjamin Watson and Evan Moore can both catch the ball. That seemingly simple skill was mostly absent last season. It made a rookie year even tougher on starting wide receivers Brian Robiskie and Mohamed Massaquoi. But with reliable tight ends and running backs like Peyton Hillis that can catch out of the backfield, there is less pressure on Robiskie and Massaquoi to hit home runs.

Speaking of Hillis, all he does is impress. Like Josh Cribbs, Hillis brings a special passion to the game that's contagious. He runs harder than most and fights for each inch of turf even harder. He also doesn't put the ball on the ground, which will endear him to Mangini more than anything else.

His colleague, Jerome Harrison, on the other hand, is having a very forgettable preseason. Maybe he's just in start-up mode at the moment, but he doesn't look like he has the same burst as he had during the last four games of last season. More serious, though, is his concentration

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seems poor. He fumbled Saturday night, making it 3 fumbles in his last two weeks. For a player that always seems to be floating around the cut line, that isn't a good trend.

Second string quarterback Seneca Wallace wasn't anything special on Saturday night but he's otherwise been the most pleasant surprise this preseason. He's far less patient in the pocket than Delhomme, which is typical of running quarterbacks. When he becomes a passing quarterback who can run, he'll be more dangerous.

What was interesting Saturday night, though, was how offensive coordinator Brian Daboll used Wallace during the Browns' first drive.

On first and 10 from the Detroit 10-yard line, Daboll inserted Wallace into the game for Delhomme, just to give the Lions a different look. But then Daboll had Wallace hand off to Hillis for a 3-yard gain. On the next play, Wallace scrambled right and through the ball away. Delhomme returned for third down and didn't complete the pass to Massaquoi, forcing the Browns to settle for the Phil Dawson field goal.

There was nothing wrong with Daboll's strategy, just its execution. Wallace is in the game at that point because he's a threat to run while in passing formation. It's a dimension that Delhomme doesn't present. But Daboll outsmarted himself by figuring that the Lions would think the same way and thus tried to cross them up with the Hillis run. They weren't fooled. On the next play, Wallace did indeed scramble but from just 7 yards the bodies, both on offense and defense, tend to compress leaving much less running room for the quarterback. Wallace was pressured to the sideline and forced to throw the ball away.

But it's a sequence to remember, mainly because there will be more of it. But like any ingredient in a meal, it needs to be used in moderation. If not, then at the least teams will get used to it. At worst, it will eventually create a quarterback controversy of sorts. Remember the old adage, a team with two starting quarterbacks has no starting quarterback.

The Browns now stand at 1-2 in the preseason which in some sense is probably the most meaningless statistic of all. But it is helpful in one sense. It provides the appropriate caution to fans who saw that a new chef was in town and assumed that now every meal would turn out perfectly.