



Pay no attention to the elitists who would have you believe Major League Baseball is this country's national pastime. It's simply not true unless you add another 'M' to 'MLB' and call it Major Market League Baseball. Football has eclipsed baseball as the sport that Americans watch most and, with the 'amateurs' having last weekend to themselves to start the college season, this week brings the NFL back front and center in our collective consciences.

With that in mind the guys who write about professional football at TheClevelandFan.com sat down over beers and cigars and argued about how the 2010 NFL season would shake out. Or maybe one of us sent an email to the others and begged for help in getting this done before the Vikings and Saints kick it off in New Orleans tonight.

It was definitely one or the other. And here's how we saw it:

Jonathan Knight

AFC East: Patriots

The 2010 TCF Staff NFL Preview

Written by {ga=tcfstaff}

Thursday, September 09 2010 4:30 AM - Last Updated Thursday, September 09 2010 9:04 AM

AFC North: Ravens

AFC South: Colts

AFC West: Chargers

AFC Wild Cards: Jets, Steelers

NFC East: Eagles

NFC North: Packers

NFC South: Saints

NFC West: 49ers

Wild Cards: Cowboys, Vikings

AFC Championship: Colts over Ravens

NFC Championship: Packers over Cowboys

Super Bowl: Colts over Packers

If the Browns catch no significant breaks and no unheralded player or group of players emerges to carry the team, they'll finish 4-12. If they catch lightning in a bottle and everything that can break their way breaks their way, they'll finish 5-11.

That's how little margin there is between disaster and success for a team that - let's face it, gang - boasts maybe three players who could honestly start for most NFL teams. I think the team will genuinely be better in 2010 than in 2009 (in the sense that having herpes is better than having syphilis), but its record won't reflect the improvement.

The good news is that Mike Holmgren appears to be a wartime consigliere and has the team going on the right track, as opposed to laying across it. The .500 mark may be within reach by next year - though I've said that every September for the last decade.

And in that spirit, let us begin Year Eleven of our five-year rebuilding process.

Chris Hutchison-

AFC East - Pats

AFC North - Ravens

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AFC South - Colts

AFC West - Chargers

AFC Wild Cards - Titans, Bengals

NFC East - Eagles

NFC North - Packers

NFC South - Saints

NFC West - 49'ers

NFC Wild Cards - Vikings, Cowboys

AFC Championship - Ravens over Colts

NFC Championship - Vikings over 49'ers

Super Bowl - Ravens over Vikings in the Purple Bowl (blech)

Before the Fake Season began, I predicted 7-9 for the Cleveland Browns.

I was talking with my boy Blue the other day, and he asked me this:

"If you went to Vegas and had to bet your house on the Browns record, what would it be?"

"Seven," I answered. Since I'd, you know, already predicted that.

"The over-under is 6 1/2. So you're taking the Over?"

My mouth opened to say, "Yes!" And that word would not come out.

I mean, come on. I'm betting my house here, people. I like my house.

And if I were truly betting my house... I would go under on 6.5.

I like this team, and I think they will be in almost every contest they play. But they still have a lot of weaknesses too, and many of the teams they play are, you know, better. At least the way it looks right now.

So I'm backtracking to 6-10. May I be as wrong as wrong can be.

Erik Cassano

AFC East: Jets

AFC North: Steelers

AFC West: Chargers

AFC South: Colts

AFC Wild Cards: Ravens, Patriots

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NFC East: Cowboys

NFC North: Packers

NFC West: 49ers

NFC South: Saints

NFC Wild Cards: Vikings, Falcons

AFC Championship: Jets over Patriots

NFC Championship: Packers over Saints

Super Bowl: Jets over Packers

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Browns finish: 7-9, third place

The smartest realization Mike Holmgren has made in his first nine months on the job as Browns president is realizing that a rebuilding team doesn't need a kid under center.

Inexperienced quarterbacking equals poor leadership equals losses. So, out with Derek Anderson and Brady Quinn, in with Jake Delhomme and Seneca Wallace. The Browns drafted Colt McCoy too, but if he sees the field this year, the wheels will have completely fallen off of this team.

The additions of Delhomme and Wallace give the Browns an experience level at the position that they haven't had since the expansion era began 11 years ago. Though Delhomme is still the QB that threw 18 interceptions for Carolina last year, some promising performances versus first-team defenses in the preseason offer hope that the 35 year old can still command a huddle and put points on the board.

With veteran depth at QB, the dynamic athleticism of Josh Cribbs, the thunder/lightning combination of Peyton Hillis and Jerome Harrison in the backfield and an offensive line that might be among the best in the league, this team will score points, and that will keep them in most games -- perhaps even allow them to score an upset or two against the 10th-hardest schedule in the league.

The defense, however, looks porous to say the least. Rob Ryan's sole claim to fame as Browns defensive coordinator is his mastery of Ben Roethlisberger in last year's thrilling upset over the Steelers. He's going to have to scheme like that almost every week for this defense to be effective -- certainly against the pass, where opposing QBs will be able to exploit an undersized and inexperienced secondary. A secondary that might come into its own once rookies Joe Haden and T.J. Ward get their NFL sea legs, but probably not this year.

The Browns will look thoroughly mediocre this year -- good at times and bad at times --which is a major step in the right direction from a team that looked unworthy for major college competition for most of last year. As long as mediocrity is just a stop on the train to Contentionville, I'll be satisfied with that.

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Jesse Lamovsky-

AFC East: N.Y. Jets

AFC North: Baltimore

AFC South: Indianapolis

AFC West: Denver

AFC Wild Cards: Miami, Houston

NFC East: Dallas

NFC North: Green Bay

NFC South: Atlanta

NFC West: San Francisco

NFC Wild Cards: New Orleans, Minnesota

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AFC Championship: Baltimore over N.Y. Jets

NFC Championship: Dallas over Green Bay

Super Bowl: Baltimore over Dallas

For the first time in quite a while there is legitimate reason to be optimistic about the Browns in September. Coming off a four-game winning streak (longest since the Return) to end 2009, the team has improved on paper in just about every facet, from the front office to the quarterback position to the linebacker corps to the secondary.

But you don't go from a team that has averaged less than five wins per year since 1999 to a Super Bowl contender overnight. The Browns are still rife with defects- no franchise quarterback, little experience at receiver and a lack of speed and playmaking ability on the defense, just for starters. The schedule, with seven games against 2009 playoff contenders- including a late October roadie at World Champion New Orleans- looks meaty.

The key is the first two games against Tampa Bay and Kansas City, teams that went a combined 7-25 last season. If the Browns win both they'll run their two-season winning streak to six and perhaps establish the confidence and winning attitude this team has so lacked since the Return. A 2-0 start will also build a buffer going into a stretch of seven straight games against teams that had winning records in 2009.

Either way I think we'll see a season reminiscent of those in the early Bill Belichick years. The Browns will be physical and fundamentally sound enough to stay in almost every game, but not dynamic enough to close most of them out. This team is still a few playmakers short of making serious noise. If you're looking for steady improvement, competitive play, and in general a team that doesn't make you switch off the TV in disgust at halftime, you might be reasonably satisfied with what the Browns put forth in 2010.

Season Prediction: 7-9

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Dave Kolonich

AFC East - New England

AFC North - Pittsburgh

AFC South - Indianapolis

AFC West - San Diego

AFC Wild Cards - NY Jets, Miami

NFC East - NY Giants

NFC North - Green Bay

NFC South - New Orleans

NFC West - San Francisco

NFC Wild Cards - Dallas, Atlanta

AFC Championship - Indianapolis over Pittsburgh

NFC Championship - Green Bay over New Orleans

Super Bowl - Indianapolis over Green Bay

The results of the 2010 season will be far removed from the major stories of the offseason, which have included Baltimore's inexplicable rise to a Super Bowl contender, along with fans of the NY Jets forgetting that their team technically should have been eliminated from the playoffs in mid-December.

Forgetting these unfortunate cases of hype - along with realizing that Brad Childress is the second coming of Brian Billick - should help us focus on the two best teams in the league - Indianapolis and Green Bay.

As for the Browns, year two of The Process will continue and improvement will be shown, but unfortunately, a 6-10 record is probably the most we can hope for. Considering the brutal two-month mid-season stretch of the schedule, the Browns will likely enter December with only 3-4 wins to their credit.

Offensively, the arrival of Jake Delhomme signals a rarity for the passing offense - that of a competent veteran QB. While Delhomme should prove successful, the current offense is geared towards attacking within a fifteen-yard radius. Until the Browns add some more overall speed, the offense will be limited. And while a series of efficient passing performances will be most welcome, it will be difficult for the Browns to score more than two touchdowns on a given Sunday.

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Defensively, 2010 could become a nightmare of sorts. The entire front seven is "built for power" in the words of Eric Mangini. Unfortunately for us, the rest of the league is built to throw the ball. The Browns will continue to struggle defending the pass - despite the upgrades at cornerback – and will be again challenged to pressure opposing quarterbacks.

In a perfect storm scenario, the running game and run defense that we saw at the end of 2009 carries over into the season, while some younger defensive talent emerges. With some luck, the Browns could steal a couple more wins - but in reality, we're basically playing for 2011. A set of still-young wideouts, a rookie right guard and young secondary will suffer some serious growing pains in 2010.

Gary Benz

AFC East - Patriots

AFC North - Bengals

AFC South - Colts

AFC West - Chargers

AFC Wild Cards - Jets, Ravens

NFC East - Cowboys

NFC North - Packers

NFC South - Saints

NFC West - 49ers (by default)

NFC Wild Cards - Vikings, Eagles

AFC Championship - Chargers vs. Jets

NFC Championship - Cowboys vs. Vikings

Super Bowl - Chargers vs. Cowboys

That the Browns are an improved team seems beyond question at this point. That the Browns don't have enough talent to compete with the best teams in the league likewise seems beyond question at this point. The offense should be much improved because of the presence of Jake Delhomme. He brings confidence to the position that hasn't had any in 10 years. Even when Derek Anderson had his magical season of 2007, it seemed like he was as amazed with each completed pass as was everyone else. But Delhomme is in the twilight and behind him is the same uncertainty that has always existed at quarterback. Hence injuries, or the lack thereof, will be the key as always. I like the fact that the Browns want to be a running team and if head coach Eric Mangini proved nothing else last season, when he commits the team to the run it can run.

The big problem again is on defense. On a pure talent level, the secondary is better but it is talent that needs to prove itself out on the field. Rookies T.J. Ward and Joe Haden are going to have growing pains. But I expect Haden in particular to develop quickly once he begins to understand that playing in the NFL requires a far different gear than college. There are plenty of linebackers but I attribute that more to the sameness of the talent in that unit that makes it hard to distinguish between the moving parts than to an overall plethora of talent. There simply isn't much difference between any of the players and it remains the weakest link in a defensive

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scheme that requires it to be the strength. I'm very worried about the defensive line and it's very telling that once again it is relying on someone who hasn't taken a snap in preseason in order to make it work. There are only so many tricks that defensive coordinator Rob Ryan can pull out of his magic hat. Like last year it's weaknesses in covering and in tackling will be exploited by even average offensive teams. Remember Detroit in the preseason? It's foreshadowing.

The Browns are pointed in the right direction because they finally have the right management in place. But they are still a good ways away from being competitive. They will win 5 or 6 games and the fans will celebrate the improvement. That's the life of the Cleveland fan.

Brian McPeck

AFC East - Patriots

AFC North - Ravens

AFC South - Colts

AFC West - Chargers

AFC Wild Cards - Titans, Dolphins

NFC East - Cowboys

NFC North - Packers

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NFC South - Saints

NFC West - 49ers (by default)

NFC Wild Cards - Vikings, Eagles

AFC Championship – Colts vs. Patriots

NFC Championship – Packers vs. Saints

Super Bowl - Colts vs. Packers

That's right, I'll say it today and until I'm proven wrong: the NY Jets are overrated and aren't seeing the NFL postseason. That's a team that was 9-7 last season and acts like the world is their oyster. They do more jerking around in training camp than The Bad News Bears. Their defense might be special but they're still banking on a 2nd year QB and Braylon Edwards as their #1 receiver.

And while I agree the Chargers will win the AFC West it's only because the Crypt-Keeper won't die in Oakland and the rest of the division is busy shooting itself in both feet.

Nope, I'll pass on the trendy Jets and Chargers and take the belt holder in the AFC (Indianapolis) and the best QB on the planet this season in the NFC. Aaron Rodgers is the heir to the MVP throne. If it's this season the Packers win it all.

As for the Browns, they're already better than they were a year ago. I don't care if they win the same number of games (they won't) or not. It's a better organization with capable, competent men in each executive position and I'm thrilled with the prospects of what the organization will

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look like two or three years down the road.

This year: 8-8 if they get every bounce, break and benefit from few injuries. But most likely this team wins six or seven games and actually is in most all of them from start to finish. They have no depth and no stars (other than a Special Teams Freak) but they're no longer a team you can look past because they are competent where they need to be. After the last however many years that's a good place to start.