



Week 1 – Cleveland at Tampa Bay

There's no damn reason I should be talking about another loss. But no one can snatch Defeat from the jaws of Victory like the Cleveland Browns.

They were clearly the superior team (and there won't be many opportunities for us to say that from here on out) for the better part of 3 Quarters. But combine huge costly mistakes with the panic that comes from not knowing how to win (at least not games that are meaningful) and you have a frustrating, mind-numbing loss.

When you know how to win, you can pull out a game like that. You see it happen all the time with the winning programs: How many times do you see the Colts pull out a game they have no business winning? The Steelers? The Patriots? They don't lose their focus or poise. They don't freak out. They don't say "*Aw, hockey pucks, we blew our chances and Oh! No! Not! Again!*"

The Cleveland Browns lose half their games before they take the field. They are a losing franchise.

They did close the 2009 season on a 4 game winning streak, and I had hoped that would carry over. And it might have, too. Had they scored a TD in the 2nd Quarter to go up 21-3, they might have cruised and destroyed the Bucs, which would have made it 5 wins in a row, the longest winning streak in the NFL (including the New Orleans Saints).

Maybe they would start to truly believe.

But now... this loss wasn't just a loss. It was a tragedy. I know that I flirt with melodrama when I say this, but, it very well could have a profound effect on the rest of the season. How? You choke away this game against a team that you really should have beaten, probably the easiest team on your entire schedule. What happens in the games that follow should a thing or two go wrong, especially against better teams? How will it get into their heads? How will they react?

How many more games will they lose (rather than getting beaten)?

Game Recap

Tampa got the ball first and drove to about midfield before the D managed to stop them, but the Browns punted it back pretty quickly. Cleveland D stiffened quickly this time, forcing the Bucs to a 3 and Out on a Fujita/Benard sack.

The resulting good field position was not wasted. The Browns converted a 3rd and 12 at about midfield with a delayed handoff to Peyton Hillis, who plowed a defender on his way for a 1st Down. The next play, Delhomme floated up a deep pass which the TB Safety misplayed (he really could've picked it) and Mo Massaquoi caught it with nary a soul around, allowing him to trot into the End Zone for a 41 yard TD. *Browns 7, Buccaneers 0.*

Thanks to a Pass Interference call on Sheldon Brown and a 33 yard run by Josh Freeman down the sideline (it looked like the Browns defenders were 1. slow and 2. expecting him to run out of bounds), Tampa got a FG. But Cleveland just went on another drive and would have had another long Mo Mass TD pass (out on the grass out of the morass) but for a miscommunication between he and Jake about the route. No matter. They simply held Tampa to another 3 and Out and scored their TD on the next drive - a 10 yard run around the left side by Hillis following a 39 yard gallop by Jerome Harrison. *Browns 14, Buccaneers 3.*

The Browns looked poised to put nails in the coffin before Halftime when Mike Adams picked a floaty pass from Freeman and returned it to the CLE 45. Yes, yes, on 1st and 10 from the TB 39 with about 40 seconds left, Delhomme, who had been making intelligent decisions and mostly accurate throws all day, decided to hurl one as he was being sacked. This colossally stupid pass was picked by Ronde Barber and returned all the way to the 3, where the Bucs got a volleyball TD pass on the next play (bad throw, ball hits Brown in hands, he bats it up in the air, Tampa WR Mike Williams catches it). Just like that - 10 or 14 point swing puts the Pirates back in the game. *Browns 14, Buccaneers 10.*

I wrote in my notebook: *That pass was dumber than sticking your own [male organ] in your ear.*

(I don't know exactly what that means.)

The Browns got the ball first after the Half, and looked poised to atone for the earlier gaffe after Evan Moore caught a mid-range pass from Delhomme and trotted up the sidelines for a 49 yard gain. Then, with 1st and 10 at the TB 15, lightning struck twice: Hillis fumbled and TB recovered.

Having wasted 2 golden opportunities and letting the Bucs hang around, the Browns O seemed to wilt. The Defense remained strong throughout the 3rd, harassing Freeman and holding TB to two 1st Downs, but Jake had lost his Groove completely, and Daboll's play calling got foully conservative. After the turnover, the Browns went on 4 successive 3 and Outs.

In the 4th, the Dam that was the Browns D finally broke. Starting at the CLE 47, Freeman got two completions, the second a perfect 33 yard TD pass to Michael Spurlock over Joe Haden,

who not only got beat on the play, but got beat while committing a penalty. With 6:45 left in the game, the pressure was squarely on the floundering Browns O. *Buccaneers 17, Browns 14.*

So Delhomme responded by slinging passes all over creation, not really remotely close to anything wearing an orange helmet. Out of his own End Zone, he threw a miserable pick off his back foot, giving Tampa the ball at the CLE 39 with time to burn. The Bucs marched methodically to the Browns 2, looking to put Cleveland (its football team and the whole city) out of its misery, but TJ Ward forced a fumble there, and the Browns had feeble life.

With 2:16 left at their own 3, the Browns readied for a historic drive. It would not inspire poetry. Yes, it took over a minute for them to move 16 yards, where they had a 4th and 4. Instead of using one of their THREE time outs, they opted to hurry up (sort of) to the line and run the play. Of course, they weren't set, they got a penalty, and the 4th and 9 attempt floated harmlessly to the turf to cap one of the most depressing losses since... last year.

Final: *Buccaneers 17, Browns 14.*

Conclusion

Time of Possession: Tampa Bay – 32:21, Cleveland – 27:39

Total Yards: Cleveland – 340, Tampa Bay - 288

First Downs: Cleveland - 15, Tampa Bay – 13

These numbers don't accurately depict the domination the Browns were enjoying prior to Hillis'

fumble. A lot of Tampa's TOP advantage came from the 9+ minutes they had the ball in the 4th Quarter, as well as a good chunk of their yards.

My conclusion is that the Browns beat themselves in this one. If you have an opponent like the Bucs, you put 'em down when you have the chance. You step on their neck, put the barrel to their temple, and you pull the trigger. Instead, they kept Tampa alive, let them get off the floor, flailed away at them, and tired themselves out to the point where they actually lost the fight.

Gameballs

TJ Ward – In his first game, he led the team in tackles (7 solo, 3 assists), forced an errant pass/interception on a QB hit, and forced a fumble which kept the Browns on life support a little bit longer.

Evan Moore – The leading Receiver (3 catches for 87 yards) for Cleveland on this day. His combination of size, hands, and effectiveness mean that he's the real #2 WR.

Marcus Benard – 1.5 sacks, and had another wiped out by offsetting penalties. Seemingly any time he's in the game, he's making a play.

Honorable Mention

Mo Massaquoi – A nice catch for the long TD, and was open several other times. Would've had a huge game had Delhomme been able to find him more often.

The Defense – Nice recovery from the lame Preseason, really shut Tampa completely down until they started to tire in the 4th Quarter.

Wall of Shame

Sheldon Brown – I'm continually unimpressed by his soft coverage.

Reggie Hodges – Certainly doesn't help in the War of Field Position.

Peyton Hillis – It's hard to put him here when he did so much good too, but two fumbles is too many. The second one - the one that was lost - was a backbreaker.

Josh Cribbs – Not sure if I've ever put him here before, but, on top of being generally ineffective, he fumbled a punt (Browns were lucky to retain) and ran a kickoff return out from 8 yards deep in the End Zone that ended up pinning Cleveland at their own 12... right after TB had scored the go-ahead TD.

Joe Haden – Probably unfair for one play, but you can't get beat like that, home slice.

Jake Delhomme – Much more on this below.

Brian Daboll & Eric Mangini – Same.



Jake Delhomme should be considered the primary concern for this team.

He may very well be hurt. His limping coincided quite nicely with his sudden decline in his accuracy and decision making. Perhaps his boo-boo prevented him from stepping into his passes, leading to the plethora of throws off his back foot that floated and fluttered like ripped kites.

Or he might simply do a lot of stupid shit when he panics and presses.

Either way, after he threw that godawful pick that kept the Bucs alive, he started looking like Brady Quinn incarnate.

Now, to be fair, he came out in the 2nd Half and led the team on what should have been a scoring drive (if not for the Hillis fumble). But that second drive-killing turnover really seemed to unnerve him. He was crap after that, looking for all the world every bit as bad as he did last year.

Part of this is to blame on the coaches. He was playing like feces. His confidence was shaken. He was hurt enough that the staff could have used his injury to give Seneca Wallace a series or

two, just to shake things up, just to give Jake a chance to calm down.

Normally, you do not rotate QB's like you do RB's. For instance, there is no reason to rotate Jake with, say, Brady Quinn, because they have very similar skill sets. However, Jake Delhomme and Seneca Wallace have very different skill sets. You bring Wallace in to not only give the D a different look, but to give Delhomme a chance to get back into his head.

Right now, Jake's confidence is very fragile. Just throwing him out there for failure after failure (like they did in the 2nd Half) doesn't help his psyche at all. It also doesn't give your team the best chance to win.

It is clear to me that Jake - at this juncture - isn't the type of guy that "fights through" his rough patches. No, he just presses more and makes more and even worse mistakes. So there is no advantage to keeping him out there through thick and thin because his thin just leads to thinner and thinner and Kate Moss. You need to get him out of the game for a little while so he can re-focus.

This is very simple. You tell Delhomme before the game that Wallace will get a series or two just to take advantage of his mobility and skill set. That way, Jake is expecting it, and doesn't feel like he's being "benched". Then you do exactly what you say and bring Wallace in here and there, especially if Jake is struggling and the O has stagnated.

And if Wallace is infinitely more effective than Delhomme, you ride the wave.

It was almost criminal to watch the coaching staff throw a hobbled Delhomme back out there time after time when they easily could have supplemented some Wallace snaps or some more Wildcat/Cyclone/Flash/Whatever.

