

Burned Again

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Sunday, September 26 2010 6:35 PM - Last Updated Monday, September 27 2010 2:03 PM



When Cleveland Browns head coach Eric Mangini was harping at his players earlier this week about the mental mistakes that were killing this team, maybe defensive coordinator Rob Ryan should have been paying attention.

With the Browns in the lead as the fourth quarter started and the the Baltimore Ravens seemingly playing from their heels, Ryan dialed up an ill-advised all out blitz on Ravens quarterback Joe Flacco, a call that left cornerback Eric Wright all alone to cover Anquan Boldin. Boldin and Flacco couldn't have found a better match up and made Wright look foolish, just as they had done twice previously in the game, as Boldin grabbed an easy touchdown pass in the end zone to give the Ravens a 21-17 lead. More importantly, the touchdown completely shifted the momentum of the game and ultimately led to the Ravens 24-17 victory, the final points coming on a Billy Cundiff 49-yard field goal.

It would be hard to overstate how ill-advised Ryan's call really was, but let's at least set the context.

For the third straight game, the Browns went into the locker room with the score 14-10 and a 2-game history of showing no ability to score in the second half. But with star-in-the-making Peyton Hillis running like Mike Alstott the entire day, the Browns were able to take a 17-14 lead with just seconds gone in the fourth quarter.

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The statistics will show that the score came on a Seneca Wallace to Ben Watson 1-yard touchdown pass. But it was a touchdown set up by a 46-yard run from Hillis and a 15-yard roughing penalty by safety Tom Zbikowski tacked on when Zbikowski tackled Hillis out of bounds, mostly out of frustration. Hillis had been overpowering the Ravens defense all day and had rushed for over 140 yards by that point.

After the Phil Dawson kick off, the Ravens took over on their own 31 yard line and seemed to be getting mostly in their own way early in the drive with a pair of false start penalties and a roughing penalty on tight end Todd Heap. But the Ravens started picking away, eventually moving into Cleveland territory. Flacco then hit Heap for 14-yards down to the Cleveland 32-yard line.

The Browns' defense held the Ravens on the next two plays, setting up that crucial 3rd and 5 play at the Cleveland 27-yard line. Hold here and a Cundiff field goal and a tie game looks to be the worst that can happen. Ryan, though, had other ideas and decided that a little carpe diem was in order, sending 8 players at Flacco. But Flacco's offensive line fended off the blitz, Boldin made Wright bite on a head fake right then went left and grabbed the 27-yard pass for the touchdown.

You could feel the air come out of the Browns' balloon and for all practical purposes the game was over. The Browns did have time and a chance at the end of the game to move into a position tie the game, but Wallace tried to his Josh Cribbs on a long pass down the sideline on a 3rd and 2 with just over 4 minutes to play but missed badly. The Browns were forced to punt and never got the ball again.

Any football coach will tell you that when you live by the blitz you die by the blitz as well and that's exactly what the blitz-happy Ryan did. What made the call so strange is the fact that it left Wright all alone on Boldin and Wright had already more than proven he couldn't cover Boldin, having given up two other touchdowns to him, one for 8-yards in the first quarter and a second for 12 yards in the 2nd quarter. It was exactly the wrong call at the wrong moment on the wrong player and all it did was cost the Browns the game.

In all, Boldin had 8 receptions for 142 yards, most of which were against Wright. Maybe Wright, who is usually pretty reliable, was starting Boldin in his fantasy league or maybe it wasn't Wright at all, but Brandon McDonald slipping back onto the team donning a Wright jersey. Whatever else it was, though, it was clearly Wright's worst game as a professional.

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It would be easy to point out that Boldin on Wright is a mismatch of major proportions given Boldin's size and Wright's lack thereof, but these kinds of match ups are common in the NFL. The real question now will be how Wright will respond to such a public flogging.

Ultimately, the loss was expected, just not the way it happened. The Browns played the Ravens competitively throughout, which is the surest sign of progress given how poorly the Browns played the Ravens last season.

The Browns defense mostly dared Flacco, who had been struggling, to beat them and all Flacco did was respond. Finding ample time throughout the game to set his feet and scan the field, Flacco was 22-31 for 262 yards and the three touchdowns to Boldin.

But even with Flacco returning to form, the Browns, behind Hillis and Wallace, were certainly keeping it interesting.

In the first half, with the Browns down 14-3 and looking as if their best chance to get in the end zone would have been if safety T. J. Ward could have held on to a sure pick-6 interception on Flacco's first pass of the game, Hillis went to work and the Browns got back into the game.

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