

Hollow Gestures

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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Tracy Boulian / AP

It's always interesting when a player takes on the burden of losing a game himself.

I remember when Bill Nelsen was quarterbacking the Browns around the 6th century B.C. (actually it was 1970) and after a forgettable performance apologized to the fans. I was pretty young then but I still remember how ridiculous it seemed that Nelsen was offering such a heart felt apology. Indeed, I can still hear Pete Franklin mocking Nelsen. It was a hollow gesture and Franklin knew it.

That's pretty much how I feel about Eric Wright and his apology to the fans for his truly pitiful performance against the Baltimore Ravens on Sunday. It's a ridiculous, meaningless gesture that does little to explain why the Browns lost.

First of all, and no particular offense to Wright, but I doubt his sincerity. Professional athletes have a common trait. They never take real blame for anything, particularly when it happens on the field. It's a necessary defense mechanism so that they can stay focused on the next play or the next shot.

LeBron James is never going to accept any blame for the team's meltdown last summer. He'll go to his grave thinking he gave his best effort and that it a stifling Boston Celtics team. Tiger Woods never misses a three foot putt. If it goes off course it's because there was a spike mark that suddenly reared its ugly head.

The same goes for Wright, especially Wright. Cornerbacks get burned all the time. It's part of the job. The minute they start worrying about their last mistake is as quickly as they'll make the

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next one.

So yes, even as Wright sounds contrite I doubt he really feels that he was singularly responsible for the loss.

And you know what? He wasn't. There are several reasons the Browns lost that game and Wright's comparative lack of talent is just one of them.

If you want to find other culprits, consider for the moment that Ravens quarterback Joe Flacco must have felt like the Browns were only playing with about 4 or 5 defensive backs. He felt almost no pressure the entire day, whether it was from the mediocre defensive line playing straight up or on any of the 387 blitzes that defensive coordinator Rob Ryan dialed up.

Baltimore has a good offensive line, but it's not the greatest in the history of the game. Indeed, that same, vaunted offensive line had trouble with both the New York Jets and the Cincinnati Bengals, which is why Flacco played so tentatively in both those games.

When pressured, Flacco gets rattled and when he gets rattled, he throws interceptions.

But on Sunday the defense had little opportunity, save for Flacco's first pass of the game, to even sniff at an interception. That's because Flacco had whatever time he wanted to find whichever receiver might be open.

This gets us to the next culprit responsible for Sunday's loss. It wasn't just Wright who couldn't cover a receiver. None of Cleveland's linebackers seem to have any clue on how to cover a tight end. The reason the Browns really didn't sniff at an interception all day (again, save for Flacco's first pass) was because whichever receiver he wanted to throw to was as wide open as receivers in this league ever get.

It looked like a 7-7 drill on Sunday except that the Browns' 7 were told to stand in place like

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pylons while the receivers maneuvered their way around to get to an open spot. If Flacco had wanted to, he could have completed a pass to tight end Todd Heap on every play. It seemed like it was almost out of boredom that he went to Anquan Boldin anyway. And when he tired of throwing to Boldin, he went back to Heap.

I can only imagine the bitching that T.J. Houshmandzadeh must have been doing to Flacco in the huddle when he wasn't getting his share of touches. He was open most of the day, too, but there's only so many ways to distribute the football.

But lest anyone think this is an aberration, it's not. This gets us to the next culprit in the loss. The Browns are easily one of the least talented teams in the league. They may be fighting Buffalo for the actual title but come mid December they'll settle that where it should be settled, on the field.

Let's not forget about the Browns' coaching staff, either. There's a lot to like about Ryan, there really is. He speaks his mind, he's brash, and he's even a tad reckless. He brings an attitude that this team hasn't had in years. But he can be cowboy reckless and Sunday was a perfect example. Ryan simply had no business calling for an all out blitz that would leave Wright exposed given how poorly Wright had been playing all day.

Ryan knows his defense isn't very talented but sometimes he lets the schemes get in the way of that fact. The first two games of the season gave Ryan a sense that maybe his defense was developing faster than he thought. As a result he got himself into a chess match on Sunday forgetting that he only had about half the pieces. The checkmates came fast enough and, frankly, the score could actually have been worse.

While Ryan is the obvious goat, at some point head coach Eric Mangini has to step in and save Ryan from his own tendencies. After Wright gave up the second touchdown to Boldin, Mangini called Ryan over to explain what happened. That conversation will probably be lost to history but if it had been conducted in text messages or on Twitter, there would have been plenty of "wtf"s from Mangini and plenty of "?" back from Ryan. Meanwhile, Flacco and Boldin would probably be texting each other a bunch of "LOL"s.

Then of course there were the usual gremlins that are now becoming part of the team's overall

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makeup. On Sunday there were 8 more penalties, plenty of the "offsides" and "false start" variety. Quarterback Seneca Wallace had an untimely delay of game penalty and then of course was that pitch to a running back who wasn't expecting it. Wallace to the blame for that, like a good quarterback should, but it was clear that he and running back Peyton Hillis were simply not on the same page.

It's a myth that this team needs to play a perfect game to win, but just barely. Based on the results of these first three games and considering the swath of competition, I'd say 98% would suffice. The problem though is that it isn't even 50% there right now which, oddly, is probably improvement since the Browns for most of last season were an incredibly inept team.

In some sense Eric Wright probably was one of the reasons the Browns lost to the Ravens but in the larger sense, this team just isn't good enough yet for just one person to have that kind of impact.