



It's been a long time since the Browns were viewed as the bullies on the block.

Not since the days that Don Rogers and then Eric Turner patrolled the defensive backfield and not since the days that running backs Kevin Mack and Ernest Byner were dishing out as much punishment as they were taking have the Browns truly looked like a physical, punch you in the face type of football team.

And while this Browns team has yet to achieve anything of substance (much less more than one win), for the first time in nearly 20 years Peyton Hillis and TJ Ward have instilled a physical presence in both the offense and the defense as 2010 hits the quarter pole.

Hillis and Ward: Hammer & Nails. It's got a nice ring to it all of a sudden.

A lot of discussion in the past couple days has centered around whether the hit that Ward laid on Bengals rookie WR Jordan Shipley was helmet-to-helmet, late or, bottom line, a cheap shot.

Sitting just 30 yards or so away from the spot where Ward lowered the boom I have to tell you that in live action it looked like none of the above.

I also have to tell you that I don't care if it was any of the above.

You see, I've spent the better part of the last 11 years watching Browns defensive players get swatted away like gnats. I've watched Percy Ellsworth and Sean Jones get lost in coverage and get physically man-handled by bigger, stronger receivers. I've watched Brodney Pool make a few big hits only to see him be the one helped off the field and to spend the next 8 weeks with nausea, light sensitivity and a proclivity for getting severe headaches every time someone slammed the refrigerator door closed.

So no, I'm not interested in whether the Bengals thought Ward's hit on Shipley was cheap or late. Not only because it wasn't but because the Browns are better served if teams are wondering where the hell TJ Ward is and what's on his mind when their receivers run a route. And if, as former Browns coach Sam Rutigliano likes to say, those receivers can hear a cat sipping milk from a 100 yards away and they have their heads on a swivel, well, the Browns defense benefits from just the mere presence of Ward in their lineup.

A lot of Browns fans shook their heads and frowned when Ward was selected in the 2<sup>nd</sup> round of the past draft. He didn't have the name recognition or straight line speed that USC's Taylor Mays had coming out of the Pac-10. But what Ward clearly has is the ability to be in the right spot and the ability to erase not only his own mistakes but those of his teammates with a lethal hit. Having an eraser in the defensive backfield, a human missile that knocks guys out, immediately upgrades your entire defense.

Aside from his devastating ability to hit you, Ward has shown himself to be very solid in coverage and also technically efficient in tackling. If he gets to you you're going down. Typically it's just a question of how hard you're going down and if/when you'll be getting back up.

Looking back on draft day it's easy to see now what the Browns saw when they took Ward out of Oregon.

It's also easy to see why the Browns asked for Peyton Hillis as part of the Brady Quinn trade with the Denver Broncos.

What Ward brings to the defense Hillis brings to the offensive side of the ball.



Hillis is a 6'4", 245lb battering ram of a running back who's run right through the hearts of two straight AFC North opponents despite both Cincinnati and Baltimore knowing that he was coming. It's not like defenses have to spread themselves thin trying to account for the speedy and wide open receivers the Browns are putting on the field and Seneca Wallace is not being confused with Peyton Manning in anyone's defensive meetings.

No, it's pretty much Hillis right now if you're looking for a key to any Browns offensive success. And for right now that's fine with me. Hillis demonstrated early on in his rookie year with the Broncos that he was a versatile player, capable of running the ball hard and, blocking in the passing game and catching the ball out of the backfield. He also demonstrated before that at Arkansas that he was willing to do whatever it took to win football games when he went from the first option in the Razorback offense to supporting Darren McFadden and Felix Jones later in his college career.

In fact, you could argue the Browns found more than they were looking for out of Hillis. He was likely acquired because he's a more versatile version of fullback Lawrence Vickers (who is simply blowing guys up in his own right every Sunday) and the thought was that Hillis would excel in some formations that are more west coast offense oriented.

Hillis isn't going to hit you many, if any, homeruns. And I agree that at some point, if the Browns are to take another step forward in their development, that they need a homerun threat, whether it is out of the backfield or in the receiving ranks. But while he won't hit you many homeruns, Hillis will hit you.

Ask Bengals bad-ass safety Roy Williams if that's the case. Williams came into the league with the reputation as a guy who couldn't cover his head with a hat but who could flat out rock your world in run support. But on Sunday it was Williams who limped off the field with his tail between his legs after Hillis rolled over him in the Bengals' secondary. Williams did not return.

And that's the flip side to having Ward patrol the defensive secondary. Guys do not want a piece of what Ward is bringing. Likewise, linebackers and defensive backs don't want anything to do with Peyton Hillis once Hillis builds up a three step head of steam. There was more than one Baltimore writer questioning just how much enthusiasm some of the Ravens LBs and DBs had in tackling Hillis a couple of Sundays ago. That's not going to change. For as long as I've been watching football and for all the years I spent watching Hanford Dixon and Frank Minnifield dominate the cornerback position in the NFL, the very last thing either of those guys wanted to deal with was Christian Okoye or Ickey Woods with a huge head of steam.

Minnifield was smaller but a far more willing tackler and he'd throw himself into the fray, but he would be mf-ing the entire defense and coaching staff after each time he had to make a hit on a big man. That attitude hasn't changed. Little guys (and medium sized guys) want no part of a big guys coming at them with momentum behind them. It's an equalizing factor even for a team with no receiving threat like the Browns.

Now, this being Cleveland, we clearly have to discuss the downside to all of this physicality. You look around the league at the biggest hitters and the most physical players and you'll notice that guys like Bob Sanders and Ed Reed and Troy Polamalu don't typically play more than 10-12 games per season. The reason is that there is a huge physical price to pay for playing so physically. No matter how much of a force or a bad-ass you are the body pays a toll for big hits whether you're dishing them out or taking them.

Guys like Hillis and Ward, if they don't get help and they are alone in carrying the offensive and defensive burden, well, they're going to miss games. The Browns need to make sure they mix in James Davis or Jerome Harrison to keep Hillis as fresh as possible and guys like Eric Wright and Sheldon Brown need to lock up receivers so that Ward's chest, arms and legs aren't the last line of defense.

But the physicality that Hillis and Ward bring is important for this team at this time. Building an attitude and identity of toughness and violence is something this team and this town has been looking for over the last 20 years.

And when you're looking to build something where nothing has stood for ten years you can do worse than starting off with a hammer and nails.