

The Little Things

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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It's always the little things. A fumbled snap here, a deflected pass there that can make all the difference in a football game. Throw in an untimely turn of an ankle and that pretty much sums up the 20-10 loss the Cleveland Browns absorbed at the hands of the Atlanta Falcons on Sunday.

The loss dropped the Browns to 1-4 on the season.

From a scoring standpoint, the key play was certainly Falcons' defensive lineman Kroy Biemann's improbable 4th quarter interception and run for a touchdown off a Jake Delhomme pass that Biemann deflected. Biemann, tipping the ball in the air and then rolling to the ground as he secured it, got up and rumbled his way to a 41-yard touchdown that was the margin of difference in the game.

But perhaps the real key play was when starting Browns quarterback Seneca Wallace turned his ankle late in the first half. It's why Delhomme was in the game in the first place, a game he wasn't quite physically ready to play in and it showed.

Exhibit 1: With the Browns clinging to a 7-6 halftime lead, the Falcons started the second half with the ball. On 3rd and 2 from the Atlanta 34-yard line, linebacker Scott Fujita stripped the ball from Falcons' quarterback Matt Ryan which defensive lineman Kenyon Coleman recovered at

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the Atlanta 25-yard line. It was the kind of break a team like the Browns need to be successful.

But on 3rd and 2 from the Atlanta 2-yard line, a rusty Delhomme lost the handle on the snap and only a heads up play by running back Peyton Hillis allowed the Browns to get some points out of the opportunity, a 19-yard field goal by Phil Dawson that gave him the team record for field goals.

Exhibit 2: The Biemann interception. Though Biemann's effort was extraordinary, it was set up by the fact that an already mobility-challenged Delhomme was rendered even more so by the high ankle sprain that had sidelined him the last three weeks. It kept Delhomme in the pocket searching for passing lanes and hoping the blocking would hold long enough. But Biemann broke through quickly and was closing in on Delhomme for a sack when the interception occurred.

Exhibit 3: After the Biemann touchdown the Browns took over with just under 4 minutes remaining and still clinging to a theoretical chance. Delhomme had the Browns driving but as he got the offense inside the Falcons' 20-yard line and just under 2 minutes remaining, Delhomme was picked off again, this time by linebacker Stephen Nicholas. It brought an ignominious end to the game and perhaps Delhomme's tenure as a Browns' starter for awhile, pending the outcome certainly of whatever x-rays, MRIs or other medical machinations are administered to Wallace.

Despite the rather pedestrian display by Delhomme, it really is hard to place too much blame on him for the loss. Simply, he was injured, just less so than Wallace. Unable to move effectively in the pocket and unable to plant and throw the ball with much zip, Delhomme ended the day 13-23 for 97 yards and those two interceptions. Nothing about his play, given the circumstances was much of a surprise.

It didn't help Delhomme's cause either that the running game was similarly hampered by injuries. Peyton Hillis, the emerging emotional center of this team, injured his hip in practice last week and was hobbled entering into the game. All he did thereafter was aggravate the hip a bit more and probably two or three other body parts as well as the game wore on.

The Hillis highlight of the day, though, was a great one-handed catch on a ball that looked to have been overthrown by Wallace. Hillis was able to secure it, however, for a 19-yard

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touchdown pass. But it came at a price as Hillis limped off the field, further limiting his effectiveness for the rest of the game.

Jerome Harrison replaced Hillis but was mostly ineffective. Hillis returned in the third quarter for what amounted to spot duty. A run here, a pass there, but limited in his ability to stay on the field.. But every hit he absorbed looked to be another adventure in pain. Hillis had to repeatedly return to the sidelines.

Though he only carried the ball 10 times, it seemed like more, mainly because he wrings every last inch out of every carry. He also caught 4 passes for 49 yards and the 1 touchdown. Harrison had 6 carries for only 6 yards.

The Hillis touchdown/injury might never have happened, however, had head coach Eric Mangini challenged what looked like a bad call by the referee on a Wallace pass in the end zone to Mohamed Massaquoi a few plays earlier. At first glance it did look like Massaquoi didn't get both feet in before stepping out of the back of the end zone. But further replays seemed to confirm that Massaquoi already had gotten two feet in before his third step hit the white line. Mangini didn't bother to challenge the call but the issue was rendered moot a few moments later with the Hillis touchdown.

While the Browns' offense was struggling with injuries, the Falcons' offense was struggling with a Browns' defense that was showing itself to be quite resilient.

For the first half anyway, it looked like it would be the Falcons that would walk away from the game with a loss and blaming it on squandered opportunities. With the Browns' defense pressuring and frustrating Falcons quarterback Matt Ryan for most of the first half, the Falcons were unable to turn two long possessions into anything more than 6 points.

The first covered 66 yards in 4 minutes, 21 seconds and was aided by two personal fouls on Browns defenders for roughing. Yet when Ryan needed to make a play late in the drive and down near the Browns' field goal, he was forced out of the pocket and forced to throw the ball away in order to preserve the field goal.

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The Falcons next drive was much the same thing, just longer. It covered 70 yards and took over 7 minutes and yet ended much the same way, with Ryan scrambling on a crucial third down near the Browns' end zone and then throwing the ball away away.

The best spin the Falcons could put on both drives was that at least they were wearing down the defense for later in the game on an unseasonably warm October day. But in truth, it was inspired play by the Browns' defensive front 7 and good coverage in the secondary that was the real story of both drives and allowed the Browns to go into halftime with the lead.

For the most part, the Browns' defense played well throughout the day. It did allow Michael Turner to rush for 140 yards, the first running back to go over 100 yards on the Browns' defense this season, but it was a quiet 140 yards. It kept drives moving, certainly, but Ryan was never able to much capitalize on it.

The defense had really only one breakdown but it was a costly breakdown. After the Dawson field goal pushed the Browns lead to 10-6, Atlanta took over at its own 32-yard line. On second down, defensive back Sheldon Brown went down after colliding with tight end Tony Gonzalez. With Joe Haden replacing Brown for one play, Ryan hit tight end Justin Peelle on a short pass right at Haden that Peelle turned in to a 15-yard gain. Brown then came back into the game only to find himself in single coverage with receiver Roddy White. Ryan hit White in stride in the end zone for a 45-yard touchdown that gave the Falcons a lead that they never relinquished.

A win is sometimes costly and a loss is never welcomed and this loss in particular will probably linger longer because of the injuries. Right now the Browns' are banged up and could really use a bye week. Unfortunately the Pittsburgh Steelers and the New Orleans Saints stand in the way of a needed week off.

For now, though, the Browns collectively will have to adapt to the attitude of Hillis and just keep answering the bell anyway. With their lack of depth it probably won't be good enough against either the Steelers and Saints but if the season's first 5 games are any indication, at least you get the feeling that the Browns will find a way to keep each game within reach. For a team struggling to regain relevance in a league that could care less, it constitutes good news and the surest sign yet that progress is being made.