

Owning their Sin

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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It may be darkest just before dawn but in Cleveland it's always darkest just before the Pittsburgh Steelers' game.

With the Browns licking a bunch of sore wounds after a physical beating at the hands of the Atlanta Falcons on Sunday all they get for their trouble is a divisional game against their most hated rival at exactly the wrong time.

The Pittsburgh Steelers are coming off a bye week. They have one of the top defenses in the league and their star-crossed quarterback Ben Roethlisberger is coming back off suspension to a team that played just fine in his absence.

Meanwhile the Browns are down to their third string quarterback already and just re-signed the guy that couldn't beat out that third string quarterback during the preseason. Their best running back is hurting and probably won't play, their receivers are about as visible as Barack Obama at a Tea Party rally and their offensive coordinator has less imagination than the comedian Gallagher.

At least Cleveland Browns' president Mike Holmgren can't say he wasn't warned. I'd say that the wheels have fallen off the Browns' wagon again, but they weren't all that secure in the first place.

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Much of what's being foisted on the Browns at the moment is the culmination of a whole bunch of little sins over a whole bunch of years.

In the Bruce Springsteen song Long Time Comin', a father, talking with the kids tugging at his shirttails, tells them if he had one wish in this God forsaken world, it would be that their sins would be their own. At least the Browns can say they own their sins.

So much of the story about why the Browns both lost to the Falcons and go into this weekend's Steelers game such a mess traces directly to the sins of neglect and abuse that the caretakers of this franchise have committed for over the last decade.

The Browns haven't drafted and developed a credible quarterback since their return despite all the advantages that one poor season after another has given them. That's why the Browns entered the season with a nearly over-the-hill quarterback like Jake Delhomme and a never-going-to-scale-the-hill quarterback like Seneca Wallace.

Delhomme is a serviceable transition quarterback, or at least he would be if he wasn't injured in the same way that Wallace is a serviceable back-up if he wasn't injured. But the fact that both are now injured just highlights how dire the long-term quarterback prospects for this team really are.

What's fascinating is that despite all of this is that by all accounts the Browns' quarterback situation is still better than it was last year, and that's the larger point, isn't it? This franchise's inability to draft and develop a credible starting quarterback, despite its many draft advantages borne of so many terrible seasons, has left it and its fan base clinging to news about whether or not Wallace will be able to give it a go on Sunday. Good God!

It's gotten so bad that the Akron Beacon Journal's Marla Ridenour felt it necessary to resurrect her rather naïve view that perhaps now is the time to give Josh Cribbs the opportunity to play quarterback.

Cribbs is a great athlete and has contributed to this team in several ways over the years. But

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simply because he played quarterback for Kent State years ago doesn't make him a viable quarterback option in the NFL. In the context of Kent State football, Cribbs had a nice career as a quarterback. But it wasn't the kind of career that had pro teams salivating for his services. Indeed, he was signed by the Browns as an undrafted free agent because of his running ability and not because there was ever any thought that he could be a quarterback.

The fact that Cribbs played quarterback in college does give the Browns the opportunity to use him in gimmick situations, like they did on Sunday when he completed a pass to fullback Lawrence Vickers. But to expect Cribbs to suddenly come in, read defenses and run an offense is as ridiculous of a concept as the fact that Ridenour is still writing about football. Fans would yearn for Derek Anderson

Maybe Colt McCoy will surprise everyone and transition right into the NFL game. But he walks into a situation where his own head coach is so unsure about his prospects that he decided to make an injured Delhomme Sunday's back up instead of a completely healthy McCoy.

Maybe Eric Mangini's trepidation about McCoy isn't about McCoy at all but about the two wide receivers Mangini drafted in the second round last season.

On Sunday Mohamed Massaquoi caught 5 passes, which doubled his total for the year. That puts him on a pace to catch 32 balls all season. His fellow second rounder, the guy actually picked just before him, Brian Robiskie, or at least someone wearing his jersey, caught one pass. He has exactly 3 catches all season, which puts him on a pace to catch about 10 balls this season.

Neither Massaquoi nor Robiskie has the speed to be an elite receiver in this league and neither is particularly adept at getting open. Massaquoi shows more promise than Robiskie but that's like saying that the Indiana Hoosiers showed more promise than the Eastern Michigan Hurons did against Ohio State. Put Massaquoi and Robiskie on the only relative scale that matters, other NFL receivers, and you can better appreciate the problem.

The leading receiver on this team isn't even someone who ever played the position until he got to the pros, the aforementioned Cribbs. He looks positively brilliant compared to Massaquoi and Robiskie but again, on the only relative scale that matters, there are probably only a few other

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teams in the NFL, teams like the Browns, on which Cribbs would start at receiver.

But maybe it goes beyond just Massaquoi and Robiskie. The offensive coordinator, Brian Daboll, is literally learning on the job. It was kind of fun to imagine in the offseason all the great schemes he'd come up for Wallace and Cribbs. But reality has hit in the form of a season and Daboll acts as a slave to offensive theory without so much as a hint of innovation.

The concept of having someone like Cribbs line up as a quarterback only to run isn't exactly a new idea and isn't particularly effective anymore anyway. Teams can adapt pretty quickly. It thus falls to Daboll to take it to a new level and he has a couple of athletes on the roster to facilitate it. Either he simply lacks the imagination to pull it off or his head coach lacks the guts to try something more creative than a 4-yard pass from Cribbs to Vickers. But the longer this continues and the more the injuries mount, the more likely this offense is to rival the beast from season's past that literally went game after game without scoring an offensive touchdown.

The Browns have faced long odds in the past, heck it always seems like they have faced long odds. Occasionally they overcome it when emotion trumps an opponent's complacency. But the fans should be entitled to something more than a good effort at this point. Sooner or later someone is actually going to have to fix this mess.

Mike Holmgren, you can't say you weren't warned.