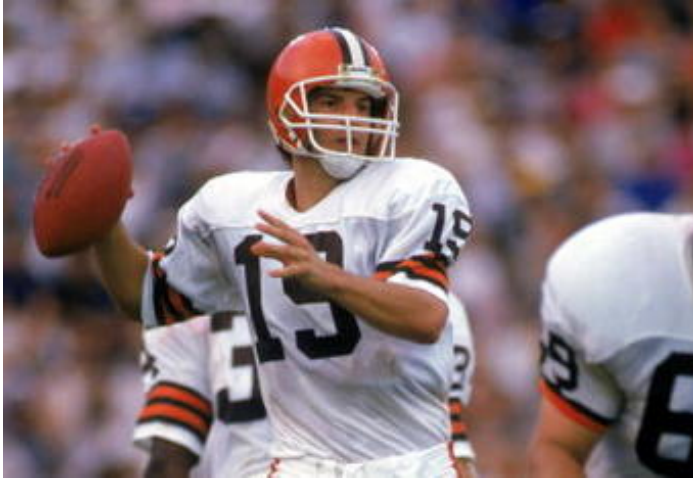


## Lessons of the Past

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Wednesday, November 17 2010 1:19 PM - Last Updated Wednesday, November 17 2010 1:36 PM

---



History isn't always repeatable, but it is instructive. Cleveland Browns, 2010 edition, meet the Cleveland Browns, 1985 edition.

Though the current NFL season is just past its midpoint and there is enough that can happen in the remaining 7 games to make any sort of historical evaluation impossibly premature, enough has happened so far to give dying fans enough water to actually begin quenching their thirst.

The Browns have completed a very difficult portion of their schedule against the league's elite teams and came out of it a very respectable 2-2. The formula for getting to the playoffs in football is more or less the same as it is in baseball: beat up the bums and split with the contenders.

The reason the Browns aren't in the playoff hunt right now is because they haven't beaten up the bums, at least not yet. They are, however, more or less splitting with the contenders and it's that fact that has gotten everyone's attention. The clues to whether or not they can follow the formula more closely comes in the form of that 1985 season.

While the 1985 and 2010 Browns aren't quite identical twins, they at least are fraternal. There are plenty of parallels on which reasonable conclusions can be drawn.

Both seasons were set up with miserable seasons the previous years. In 1984, the Browns went 5-11 and Sam Rutigliano was fired mid year and replaced by Marty Schottenheimer. The

## Lessons of the Past

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Wednesday, November 17 2010 1:19 PM - Last Updated Wednesday, November 17 2010 1:36 PM

---

2009 Browns certainly weren't any picnic with things getting so bad at one point that Randy Lerner decided to essentially demote head coach Eric Mangini and hire Mike Holmgren as team president late in the year. In each case, that set the table for what followed next.

The 1984 Browns had significant building blocks already in place. Ozzie Newsome was in his 6th season. The offensive line was still relatively solid, although it would be the last seasons for Doug Dieken and Joe DeLamielleure. Earnest Byner was a rookie.

The defense was solid, featuring the likes of Bob Golic, Clay Matthews, Chip Banks, Frank Minnifield, Hanford Dixon and Al Gross and rookie Don Rogers. Matt Bahr and Steve Cox were the kickers.

Indeed when you go through that 2004 lineup, you're left scratching your head as to how it won only 5 games. Oh yea, now I remember. Paul McDonald was the quarterback. They used the offseason to remedy that glaring weakness, manipulating their way to getting Bernie Kosar in the supplemental draft.



## Lessons of the Past

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Wednesday, November 17 2010 1:19 PM - Last Updated Wednesday, November 17 2010 1:36 PM

---

The 2009 Browns didn't have nearly the same number of building blocks as their 1984 counterparts and thus their record makes much more sense. But there were some decent pieces in place, including players like Joe Thomas, Josh Cribbs, Phil Dawson and a young but developing linebacking corps. They lacked receiving talent (still do) but perhaps more importantly, they lacked a credible quarterback.

The Browns took a short, mid and long-term approach to solving that problem in the offseason. They signed Jake Delhomme as a short-term answer. They brought in Seneca Wallace, a 6-year veteran back up, with the idea that Cleveland might be his best shot to earn the status of starter. They then drafted Colt McCoy in the third round. McCoy was certainly high profile, but the NFL cognoscenti convinced themselves that he had a weak arm so he dropped in value and into the Browns' laps.

The Browns also tried to address their running game. Despite his accomplishments, this coaching staff, like the one before them, never quite felt the love for Jerome Harrison. They decided that Peyton Hillis, as hard-nosed of a runner as exists in the game at the moment, was more to their liking and went out and got him by trading Brady Quinn.

The signing of Bernie Kosar, the drafting of Kevin Mack, the emergence of Brian Brennan, the leadership of Gary Danielson and the maturing of the blocks already in place helped turned the 1985 Browns into AFC Central champs, albeit with a very modest 8-8 record.

While the signs were certainly present during that season that the team was turning back around from the disaster of 1984, it still wasn't quite yet a winner. The entire season was played around the .500 mark. It was just that a very mediocre division allowed the Browns to emerge as champs.

But that emergence was actually the key to its ascent. It allowed them to face the mighty Miami Dolphins in the first round of the playoffs. The Dolphins had finished the season 12-4 and were favored to win the Super Bowl. But in that playoff game, the Browns raced to a 21-3 third quarter lead mostly on the strength of Byner's running. But the Dolphins' defense finally stiffened, the Dolphins' offense work up, and the Browns ended up losing the game 24-21.

Still, the disappointment of that loss, a loss that was expected, buoyed the team and its fans.

## Lessons of the Past

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Wednesday, November 17 2010 1:19 PM - Last Updated Wednesday, November 17 2010 1:36 PM

---

They entered the 1986 season still basking in the previous season's afterglow and went on to win 12 games. Kosar had a game for the ages against the New York Jets in the first round and well, we all know what happened the following week against Denver.

This year's Browns aren't likely going to win the AFC North. They have 6 losses already and their division is much stronger than the 1985 version. Indeed, it is more likely than not that this team will end up with a losing record.

But games like the last three, especially the last two, have a way of transforming a franchise. Much like 1985, various events this season have coalesced to create a kind of excitement in this team that has appeared only sporadically in the last 10 years.

The injuries to Delhomme and Wallace conspired to put McCoy in a spot even top management wasn't relishing. And instead of things going predictably bad, they went better than anyone had a right to expect. Whatever McCoy's physical shortcomings might be that caused him to drop in the draft, he has more than made up for them in the form of a presence, an "it" factor that suggests that for once the Browns are off the market for a quarterback.

But he's also aided by Hillis, who likewise has exceeded even the most optimistic projections that anyone could dare conjure. Together, those two are aided by an offensive line that is actually getting better, not worse. And all those elements are being aided by a defense that is better than the sum of their parts, week in and week out. In other words, the elements that need to work together are doing just that. The bugs are still being worked out, but the finished product can actually be clearly imagined.

As a result, this team enters each subsequent week with a swagger, a confidence that suggests it clearly understands that better days are ahead.

This doesn't mean, of course, that these Browns will go on to become one of the league's elite next season like the 1985 Browns did, but the fact that the concept can be contemplated without garnering a derisive laugh says something about where this team is headed.

## Lessons of the Past

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Wednesday, November 17 2010 1:19 PM - Last Updated Wednesday, November 17 2010 1:36 PM

---

Let's just hope, for all our sakes, that if these Browns eventually do end up going down those same roads, they aren't facing today's equivalent to John Elway in the backfield. Another 25 years of purgatory would be difficult to take, especially at my age.