

Barely Scraping By

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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The best measure of a team's progress is not always how many times it plays above its abilities. Sometimes the best measure is how a team plays when it's expected to win. The Cleveland Browns went into Sunday's game with the Carolina Panthers as a prohibitive favorite for one of the few times this season and instead played down to their level of competition, if that's possible when you're only 3-7, and eked out a 24-23 field goal when the normally reliable Carolina kicker John Kasey missed a 42-yard field goal as time expired.

To say it never should have come to that is an understatement on the level of describing the Michigan Wolverines football program has challenged. It was a game the Browns should have won easily against a team they thoroughly dominated in the first half; a team that had only scored 20 points one other time this season.

The Panthers were able to get into the position for a winning field goal when Jimmy "Don't Call Me Brady" Clausen was able to move his team from its own 4-yard line down to the Cleveland 24 with 56 seconds remaining and no time outs against a Cleveland defense fighting the ghosts of collapses past.

Clausen's mini rally also was aided greatly when the always random Rob Ryan, Cleveland's defensive coordinator, was just random enough to forgo a prevent defense in favor of pressuring Clausen. It left linebacker Chris Gocong on running back Mike Goodson and Goodson then turned a rather routine sideline pass designed to stop the clock into an amazing 32-yard run. Clausen then hit receiver Brandon LaFell for 23 more yards that stopped the clock with 5 seconds remaining, although it appeared that LaFell was down within the field of play which would have allowed the clock to run out.

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That bit of Irish luck set up what should have been some heroics for both Clausen and Kasey and instead turned into a nightmare akin, but not on the same level as, the meltdown suffered by Boise State Saturday night.

The last minute theatrics notwithstanding, let's dispense with some of the obvious. The Panthers are an awful team. They are Cleveland Browns circa 2008 and 2009 awful. All season they've played with little passion or emotion knowing full well that they do not have the personnel to compete. Their fate is in the hands of mediocre running backs and another Notre Dame quarterback that looks like adjusting to the next level will be a significant challenge. Their linebackers seem almost clueless on even the most basic of play action passes and the secondary tackles like they are trying not to break a nail.

Let's also dispense with this. The Panthers should have been out of the game halfway through the second quarter when Cleveland running back Peyton Hillis scored his third touchdown of the game. When a team is 10 games into the season and has scored 20 points only once, it would seem a miracle on the order of Grilled Cheezus if they could match the Browns' point total after the third Hillis touchdown. Besides, given how things were going, you just knew the Browns could always score some more. Right? Well, not exactly.

A second half in which Jake Delhomme nearly justified every reason Carolina head coach John Fox let him go this last off season, coupled with some poor play by the offensive line against a very average defense, a defense of their own that is prone to collapsing at the worst possible moments and a few very questionable coaching decisions, put the game in doubt until Phil Dawson hit a 41-yard field goal with just under 3 minutes remaining.

From there it was a nail biter this defense always promises, though it shouldn't have been either. With Carolina needing to get into field goal range Clausen showed Carolina fans that the "new Delhomme" may be the same as the "old Delhomme" as he threw an interception to cornerback Joe Haden with 1:27 remaining to effectively seal the victory.

Of course, the operative word there is "effectively" because Carolina still had 3 time outs remaining and when the Browns couldn't get a first down, they punted with just over a minute remaining. Reggie Hodges punt bounced out at the 4-yard line setting up the Nantucket sleigh ride that was that final minute before the Casey miss secured the Browns' 4th win of the season. That miss and a bundle of other mistakes that make the Panthers the Panthers dropped them to 1-10 on the season.

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Fox, the network and not the Carolina Panthers head coach John, knew this wasn't exactly a marquee match up. They assigned Chris Rose and Torry Holt to the game as the announcers. Rose has the kind of lazy, laconic tone that is more suited for narrating nature films and Holt, well, the best that can be said is maybe he'll get better behind the mike. It was his first network game and he showed that maybe he's better than Matt Millen if only because Holt stuck to the very basics of analysis while Millen is busy trying to be cute.

Until the second half, which we'll get to, believe me, the Panthers had one highlight and it was their first drive and with it they broke a couple of tendencies for both teams. The Panthers hadn't scored a first quarter point all season and the Browns' defense hadn't yielded an opening drive touchdown in 23 straight games. But the Panthers came out running very effectively through a porous Cleveland front seven. Goodson was finding the holes his offensive line was opening and Clausen hit a key third down pass to keep the drive along. And just like that the Panthers had a 7-0 lead stunning themselves, the Browns, and fans in both North Carolina and Cleveland.

If there was a gut check time in the game for the Browns, and that's a little dramatic to even suggest of a game of this insignificance, it looked like it would be here. With Jake Delhomme starting at quarterback for the first time since the season opener and against the team that holds his heart strings, no one knew quite what to expect.

But Delhomme played like a veteran, hitting his first 5 passes, including one to Brian "The Ghost" Robiskie," in driving the Browns' offense right down field. The key pass was a 24-yard pass to Chansi Stuckey that took them down to the Carolina 8-yard line. Offensive coordinator Brian Daboll then tried a little trickery as he had Hillis attempt a half back option pass to a wide open Ben Watson in the end zone. Hillis threw behind Watson. Delhomme then was flagged for intentional grounding on the next play setting up a 3rd and goal from the 20-yard line.

As if on cue, though, the Panthers played like their record and were flagged for two penalties on Delhomme's pass to tight end Evan Moore at the end zone, either one of which would give the team a first down. The Browns took the unnecessary roughness call and had it 1st and goal at the Carolina 9-yard line. Hillis then ran it in from their to tie the score at 7-7.

The Browns then scored on their next possession with the help of a Panthers' defense that

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committed two third down penalties to keep the drive alive and give them the ball at the Carolina 35-yard line. Delhomme then hit Mohamed Massaquoi on a 20-yard pass and Hillis ran it to the 4-yard line. On the next play Hillis then plowed up the middle for his second touchdown and a 14-7 lead.

The Browns' third possession should have pushed the lead further, it just didn't. With the Browns 3rd and inches from Carolina 8-yard line, Daboll eschewed a quarterback sneak for the easy first down and instead had Delhomme hit Moore on a quick hitter. It worked until Moore fumbled on the 2-yard line and it was recovered by Jason Williams.

But the Panthers couldn't get a first down and were forced to punt. With Cleveland taking over at their own 40-yard line, Delhomme and Hillis quickly moved in for what turned out to be Hillis' third touchdown of the half on a 6-yard run. It gave the Browns what would seem to be a pretty much insurmountable 21-7 lead.

The Panthers were able to move the ball far enough on their next two drives to get in position for two Kasey 40+ yard field goals that brought the score to 21-13 near the end of the first half. And, oh yea, Delhomme tried to make it more interesting by fumbling deep in Cleveland territory with 33 seconds remaining in the half, but he recovered, effectively ending the half.

With the Panthers now within 8 but Cleveland with the ball to start the second half, this was the Browns' opportunity to smack down an opponent that had been smacked around by most everyone else all season. Instead, Delhomme threw an interception on the half's first play to Jon Beason and suddenly the Panthers had the ball at the Cleveland 32-yard line.

The Panthers, however, again couldn't convert the turnover into points (insert your own Browns-Jaguars joke here) when John Casey missed a 46-yard field goal. The drive ended for the Panthers oddly when head coach John Fox won a challenge but lost a ruling. On a key third down play, Clausen seemingly connected with LaFell. The referee however ruled that LaFell had stepped out of bounds first and then came back in to make the catch, which is a penalty. Fox challenged and was proven correct. LaFell never did step out of bounds. But referee Jeff Triplette ruled that LaFell didn't maintain possession through the catch forcing the Casey field goal attempt.

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Not to worry, though. Delhomme wanted to prove that he still bleeds Panthers blue. On his next pass he was intercepted, this time by Captain Munnerlyn (a fabulous name, don't you think?) who sprinted down the sideline for the touchdown, getting the Panthers to within 1 at 21-20.

From there, the Browns and Delhomme went into button down mode. Everyone knew the next drive would feature Hillis, Hillis and more Hillis and maybe a few safe passes, which is exactly what it did feature. It ended as it inevitably would, with a punt.

The Browns used a similar formula on their next drive as well and it had pretty much the same effect, or at least it would have if not for the Panthers running into Reggie Hodges on the punt that gave the Browns enough yardage for the first down. From there the Browns moved further down field but on 4th and 1 from Carolina 25 yard line, head coach Eric Mangini strangely elected not to push it to a 4-point game with a relatively safe field goal from Phil Dawson and instead ran Hillis into the line for no gain, turning it back over to Carolina with 11:33 to play.

And of course what happened next was a predictable as the plot of the next episode of Three and a Half Men. The Panthers drove down just far enough to get into Casey range and this time he connected with a 43-yarder to give the Panthers the 23-21 lead. A team that was as utterly beatable as the Panthers were now holding a lead late in the game.

It's probably a measure of how far Delhomme has fallen and how quickly Colt McCoy has risen that Browns fans worldwide were hoping that the task would rest on McCoy and not Delhomme to lead the team back to a victory. Delhomme has a recently history of connecting his passes with players wearing the opposing colors after all. If this were a piece of fiction about a nearly washed up quarterback with one last shot at redemption then it would be easy to write that Delhomme buckled his chin strap, went into the huddle and told the team that he'll lead them to victory and then did just that. But this isn't a piece of fiction, and thus those preceding sentences will be lost forever.

Delhomme more or less did his job, going 5-5 on the next drive but he was done in a bit by Mangini who did something even stranger than going for it on 4th and 1 instead of trying to extend the lead. On 1st down from the Carolina 33 yard line, Delhomme completed a pass for 8 ½ yards to Robiskie. The Panthers were offside. If they had accepted the penalty, the Browns would have had it 1st and 5 at the Carolina 28 yard line and 3 attempts to get the first. Instead they declined and then couldn't get the extra 1 ½ yards when Hillis was stopped short and then

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Delhomme was as well on a sneak. This time they smartly went to Dawson who kicked the 41 yard field goal that gave the Browns the 24-23 lead with under 3 minutes remaining, setting up a wild finish that at least allowed Browns fans to still smile when it was all over.

For his part, Delhomme didn't show too many signs of rust. There were a few of course and the interceptions were just the garden variety ones fans have come to expect. On the day he was 24-35 for 245 yards and those two interceptions. He rediscovered Robiskie and Massaquoi as Robiskie had 7 catches for a robust 50 yards and Massaquoi had 4 catches for 40 yards.

Hillis had an impressive 131 yards and 3 touchdowns but somehow it seemed less impressive because he was twice stopped short on key runs late in the game that could have secured the victory. That isn't necessarily Hillis' fault, of course, as the offensive line was getting pushed around like a plate of yams at Thanksgiving. Still, it took the shine off a day in which Hillis became the first Cleveland running back since Kevin Mack in 1986 to have 10 rushing touchdowns.

It's a bottom line business and an ugly win is always better than a pretty loss. Yet fans are probably less enthused about this team than they were a few weeks ago after the loss to the Jets. It's just the way it works sometimes. But the Browns' next 3 games are all very winnable and if they can comply fans will forget about this near disaster and how they feel at the moment just as quickly as they forgot about that win and how it felt against the Saints.