

## A Small Bit of Redemption

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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The game didn't carry the same cache as the other Cleveland-Miami game that took place earlier in the week, but at least the result wasn't the same. Giving Cleveland fans a small level of redemption against all that is South Beach, the Browns beat the Miami Dolphins 13-10 in a game noted more for its tedium than its elegance.

Usually when a game features a kind of tit-for-tat where one team's scoring effort immediately is matched by the other's it can result in some pretty exciting football. This game featured plenty of tit-for-tat. What it didn't feature, though, was anything approaching exciting football. Each inept offensive series seemed to be matched in kind by the other team. The few scoring drives that there were likewise were quickly matched making one wonder why each team felt so compelled to merely mirror what its counterparts were doing.

Nonetheless, the dam had to break at some point, though most would have bet it would have been in overtime. For a second it looked like the break would be in the most predictable way possible when Browns' quarterback Jake Delhomme, under pressure with less than two minutes remaining and needing to convert on third down, gift wrapped a pick-6 pass to cornerback Roland Carroll. But Carroll apparently hadn't fully read the script and dropped the ball, forcing the Browns to punt.

After Reggie Hodge's 9th (yes, 9th) punt of the day left the Dolphins at their own 25-yard line, Henne missed on his first two passes and then put the ball in the hands of defensive back Mike Adams off of a David Bowens deflection. Adams returned it to the Dolphins' 3-yard line. It was Henne's 3rd interception of the day. With the Dolphins having only one time out remaining, the Browns positioned themselves for a game winning field goal as they wound the clock down to 4

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seconds. Phil Dawson, making up for a miss earlier in the game, nailed the chip shot 23-yarder for the victory that now puts the Browns' record at 5-7 with 4 games remaining.

Until this late turn of events, the game tapes of this match up seemed destined to be sold on some late night infomercial for natural sleep aids. It was nearly as boring as a Friday afternoon lecture on microeconomics.

Indeed if you hadn't realized that both the Browns and the Dolphins actually had more or less their full complement of players, you'd swear that the NFL lockout had already taken place by the way this game was played. Depending on whether the person talking is an offensive or defensive coordinator, there was either great defense taking place on both sides or poor offense. I watched it. The offenses were a problem.

Consider, first, the Browns. With a game plan that read, "hand off right to Peyton Hillis, pitch left to Hillis, screen pass to Hillis, punt" the Browns seemed content apparently to bore the Dolphins into submission. It didn't work, which is why the Browns ended up punting 5 times in the first half and 4 more in the second..

Consider next, the Dolphins. They have two good running backs in Ronnie Brown and Ricky Williams and seemed content to run them with reciever Brandon Marshall out. It was mildly effective. What wasn't was quarterback Henne's passes which is why Brandon Fields had 3 punts in the first half. What's misleading there is that one of Miami's drives ended in a blocked field goal attempt and two others ended abruptly with interceptions.

One particularly underthrown pass by Henne to a wide open Brian Hartline resulted in cornerback Joe Haden getting his 4th interception in the last 4 games and his 5th of the season. But the Browns, naturally, followed that up with a quick 3-and-out.

A particularly overthrown ball by Henne landed in the hands of safety Abe Elam and that led to Cleveland's first points off a Phil Dawson 31-yard field goal. The Browns' drive that ended in the field goal offered its own measure of frustration even as it gave the Browns the lead temporarily.

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Either offensive coordinator Brian Daboll was skittish about giving Delhomme anything but safe passes to ponder or Delhomme was too skittish to to anything but throw underneath unless it was safe passes long that couldn't be intercepted, like the overthrown pass to Chansi Stuckey in the end zone or the underthrown sideline pass to Mohamed Massaquoi.

The Browns' lead didn't last long as the Dolphins, naturally, tied the score on their next drive, a drive that was mostly a marker for the entire first half. A few decent plays and a Matt Roth roughing penalty put the Dolphins on the Cleveland 40-yard line with 1:25 remaining. From there the Dolphins went backwards thanks to a sack by Shaun Rogers and an offensive pass interference penalty. After Henne threw short on a 3rd and 27 yard play, Carpenter came in and nailed, barely, a 60-yard field goal, a Dolphins' record, to tie the game with just a few seconds remaining in the half.

It was only fitting that a game this tedious should remain as tied as it was when it started.

If you were looking for adjustments at the half, at least by the Browns, your time would have been better spent looking for the ghost of St. Nicholas. The Browns took the opening kick of the second half and proceeded to run exactly the same things with exactly the same way results, including another Hodges punt.

The Dolphins likewise didn't go in much for the adjustment thing either and matched the Browns with their own ineffective drive to start the second half.

On their next possession the Browns did seem to be putting together a decent drive when Delhomme thanks to a down field pass to Watson that went for 22 yards that got the ball to the Miami 26-yard line. But a short pass, a run that went for no yards and a sack forced the Browns to attempt a 47-yard field goal. Dawson's kick hit the left upright squarely and bounced away benignly, leaving the score tied. Meanwhile the Dolphins' thumbs kept twiddling.

The Dawson miss was actually a measure of synchronicity with Dolphins kicker Dan Carpenter whose 41-yard field goal off the Dolphins' first drive of the game was blocked by Rogers.

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The Browns finally put a touchdown on the board on their next possession and it came, not surprisingly, by throwing a change up at the Dolphins in the form of some down field passes. Starting with the ball at their own 6-yard line following a Fields punt and a holding penalty on the kick, Delhomme found Massaquoi downfield for 37 yards, quickly moving the ball to their 46 yard line. Delhomme then found Watson for another 15 yards. But it was a short crossing pattern by Massaquoi where the Dolphins' defender fell down that took the ball to the Miami 3 -yard line. Then Delhomme found Watson at the goal line for the touchdown that helped push the lead to 10-3 with just over a minute remaining in the third quarter.

The Dolphins tied the game on their next possession, naturally, by putting together their only effective drive of the day as well. It covered 80 yards in 11 plays and marked the first time the Dolphins had been in the red zone all day. It culminated with a Henne pass to tight end Anthony Fassano for 11 yards that helped tie the score 10-10. They didn't get in the red zone again.

That touchdown occurred with over 10 minutes remaining and from there it was a race to see when this thing might end because how was more or less predicted.

It's probably a measure of the fading confidence that Daboll and head coach Eric Mangini have in Delhomme that they kept him in check most of the day. It's probably also a measure of Delhomme's own fading confidence that he abided dutifully. It was only when he was forced into relying on his own instincts near the end of the game that the real Delhomme returned and it was almost a disaster.

Still Delhomme didn't turn over the ball and was 24-34 for 217 yards and one touchdown. Hillis, bottled up all day by a Dolphins defense that had little to do other than key on him, had only 57 yards on 18 carries. He did have 7 more receptions though but for only 22 yards. If there was a star on offense it was Watson who had 10 catches for 100 yards and the one touchdown.

On defense, as long as Brown and Williams were kept in check, and they mostly were, the Dolphins didn't present much of a scoring threat. The defense did tackle well and cornerback Joe Haden had his best day as a pro as he pounded more nails in the coffin of former starter Eric Wright. And though Henne was only sacked once, he was harassed all day and never could find a rhythm.

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Henne had a forgettable day certainly with the 3 interceptions, particularly the late one to Adams. He was only 16-32 for 174 yards. More to the point, though, Henne seems to lack the arm strength necessary to stretch a defense anyway. It certainly didn't help that Marshall was out and Hartline missed the second half. But the other side of that is that the Browns have been playing without wide receivers all year so the sympathy for Henne is limited. Brown had 50 yards on the ground while Williams added 48.

The Browns are in spitting distance of having a winning record and travel to Buffalo next week. But if they are going to finish this season like they did last season, they will need more of a spark than Delhomme can provide. If Colt McCoy isn't ready, it may be time once again to see what Seneca Wallace has to offer because with the Browns' game plan so obvious, it's going to take something more than a steady diet of Hillis to finish this season strong.