

Watching the Paint Dry

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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It wasn't so much the effort or even the turnovers that did in the Cleveland Browns on Sunday against the Baltimore Ravens. It was the simple fact that the Ravens were a better team playing with motivation against a team whose season can't end soon enough. In a result that need not have been predicted by Nostradamus, the Ravens beat the Browns 20-10 and clinched a playoff spot in the process.

The turnovers didn't help, certainly. Quarterback Colt McCoy threw three interceptions and Mohamed Massaquoi had a fumble after a reception. But the turnovers merely ended fairly promising drives that were serving mostly to keep the score closer than the game actually was. The effort, too, seemed better than it had been the previous two weeks, but it too served merely to mask the differential in talent between the two teams.

In truth, it was a snooze-inducing borefest where the final result was never really in doubt as the Browns now are ending the season exactly the opposite of how they ended the last season — on their way to possibly losing four straight as their run game has all but abandoned them at exactly the time it tends to kick in for good teams.

How snooze-inducing you ask? Well, technically, the game was close at the half. But within mere seconds after the second half started, the game's final score took place. From there it was a lazy Sunday afternoon with both teams holding the ball long enough to keep the game moving with little if anything to disrupt the clock's inevitable march to 00:00.

I'm not going to accuse the players on each side of going through the motions, but let's just say

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that Baltimore wasn't worried about winning, Cleveland wasn't worried about losing and they all just looked like they'd rather be somewhere warm, even if that happened to be a smelly locker room.

If you missed the second half (and the first half wasn't exactly action packed either), here's the summary and I'll do my best to stretch it out to make it look like more happened than it did.

First, with the Browns only down 13-10 to start the second half they looked to catch the Ravens napping on the opening kick of the second half by having Dawson attempt an on-side kick. Like a joke cigar in a Tom and Jerry cartoon, it blew up in Cleveland's face when the ball didn't travel 10 yards before going out of bounds, giving the Ravens the ball at the Cleveland 36-yard line.

On the first play of scrimmage afterward, Flacco escaped a sack and ran for 15 yards down to the Cleveland 21-yard line. Flacco then found Derrick Mason in the back of the end zone on the next play as Sheldon Brown did everything but actually apply handcuffs to Mason to prevent the catch. The touchdown pass and Cundiff extra point gave the Ravens a quick 20-10 lead.

From there the second half resembled a game of shuffleboard on a Tuesday afternoon at Del Boca Vista retirement home, except less exciting.

The Browns did "threaten" to do something positive in the second half in a drive that started at the 9:36 mark of the fourth quarter. Alas it ended when McCoy, at the Baltimore 27 yard line, overthrew Mohamed Massaquoi at the goal line and it was intercepted by, who else, Ed Reed. Reed returned it to the Baltimore 29 yard line with 4:35 remaining in the game. It was Reed's second interception of the game. That now gives Reed, I think, an interception against every Cleveland quarterback he's faced since the Browns returned in 1999. (Note to editor: Don't bother to fact check that stat. It doesn't matter. Even if it's not true, it seems like it should be.)

After that the players on both sidelines donned coats to block out the wind and some plays were run. Then the game ended, the coaches shook hands. A few players said "hi" to someone on the other team and headed for the locker room. Ravens head coach John Harbaugh could now prepare in earnest for the playoffs. Browns head coach Eric Mangini could now prepare for what likely will be his last game as a member of the Browns.

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But let's not wallow. Maybe it was a game that was mostly negative for the Browns but there were a few positives to chew on. First, though the Ravens were keyed on stopping running back Peyton Hillis (they succeeded) the Browns' defense was equally keyed on stopping Anquan Boldin after the display he put on in the first match up between these teams earlier in the season. The Browns' defense succeeded. Boldin had 2 catches for 15 yards.

Second, intimidation. The Ravens figured on intimidating McCoy just because they are, well, the Ravens and have one of the league's All Pro Mouths in the form of linebacker Ray Lewis. It didn't work. McCoy once again didn't look over-matched. He didn't look great, either, but it wasn't because he was intimidated.

Third, the lead. For the 15th straight game this season and 19th straight overall, the Browns had a lead at some point in the game.

Finally, rookie cornerback Joe Haden had another interception, his 6th of the season. Oh yea, one more thing. Brian Robiskie had another touchdown catch. Heartfelt story about a coaching father and his semi-blossoming son to follow.

Admittedly those are the kinds of positives a fan has to take when he knows, just knows, that his team doesn't have enough talent to compete week in and week out with the league's better teams. And as painful as it is to acknowledge for many, the Ravens are one of the league's better teams. They didn't do anything particularly fancy or well against the Browns on Sunday but did most things well enough, including forcing three turnovers in the first half and another in the second half. It wasn't necessarily a dominating performance but it wasn't as if the Browns were ever really threatening to win, either.

The Browns' opened the game well enough, moving it effectively by having McCoy throw quickly. But McCoy threw an ill-advised pass to the inside of Massaquoi near the goal line and it was picked off at the 4-yard line by cornerback Lardarius Webb. If nothing else, it was an effective punt.

The Browns' defense then held the Ravens offense and after a nice punt return by Josh Cribbs,

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took over at the Baltimore 40-yard line. After McCoy hit tight end Ben Watson on a nice out pattern for a first down, offensive coordinator Brian Daboll pulled out the bag of tricks he'd been ignoring for weeks. It was about time because without what I'm about to describe, there actually were no Browns highlights the entire game.

With Seneca Wallace at quarterback and a troika of receivers to the left, Wallace handed off to Hillis who handed off to Massaquoi who then found Brian Robiskie in the end zone for a 29-yard touchdown pass. The thrown ball wasn't a beauty, more Jake Delhomme than Peyton Manning, but it hung up long enough for Robiskie to make a nice adjustment and cradle the ball just before it hit the ground. Harbaugh challenged the call but it was upheld. The Phil Dawson extra point made it an early 7-0 lead.

The Ravens responded with a 16-play 80-yard drive but stalled at the Cleveland 9-yard line when quarterback Joe Flacco threw high to Boldin, forcing the Ravens to settle for a Billy Cundiff 27-yard field goal. The Ravens got right back in business when Massaquoi fumbled after a short pass from McCoy on the Browns' next offensive play and it was recovered by linebacker Jameel McClain who returned it to the Cleveland 20 yard line. Flacco then hit T.J. Houshmandzadeh on a 3rd and 5 for a 15-yard touchdown that helped give the Ravens a 10-7 lead.

On the Browns next drive, McCoy was again intercepted, by Reed, naturally, who returned it to midfield. The Ravens tried some trickery of their own on their next play when Flacco attempted a flea-flicker but saw it nearly intercepted at the goal line by safety T.J. Ward. The Ravens were able to get one first down on a Flacco scramble but couldn't get another and again settled for a field goal, this time a 40-yarder from Cundiff that extended the Ravens lead to 13-7.

The Browns drew to within 13-10 just before the half with a 30-yard Phil Dawson field goal that followed a 10-play 50-yard drive. It looked for a moment like McCoy might get the Browns lead at the half but he threw high and late to Robiskie who had a step on the coverage down the right sideline.

From there, the Ravens added 7 more points seconds in the first half and it was smooth, if cold, sailing from there.

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Statistically it wasn't as if any particular player on either team had a great day. Flacco, for example, was only 12-19 for 102 yards. But he had the two touchdown passes and was intercepted once. McCoy was 15-29 for 143 yards and the three interceptions. Perhaps the best pass of the entire day was the Massaquoi to Robiskie touchdown. Ravens running back Ray Rice led all rushers with 92 yards on 25 carries. Hillis had 35 yards on 12 carries but in fairness it appeared as though he injured his back on the game's second play. Mike Bell (you know, the guy the Browns got for Jerome Harrison) had 27 yards on 7 carries.

With one game remaining, the Browns can at least grab a final measure of pride, not to mention a better record than a year ago, against a Pittsburgh Steelers team that is already playoff bound and thus slightly less motivated. It's probably a game the Browns won't win. They certainly won't be favored. But it is perhaps one last chance to at least show club president Mike Holmgren that they do want Mangini to remain the head coach. Based on the last 3 performances however, I'm not so sure they care.