



It would be one of my fondest desires to just spend this entire article looking forward to the season, but I am compelled to mention the 4th Fake Season game, if only in passing.

Speaking briefly about the game (if we must), it clearly demonstrated the lack of depth the Cleveland Browns possess (don't possess?). Both of the Bears line units (Offensive and Defensive) noticeably pushed the Browns around like they were grocery carts. Chicago's QB's were poised and hitting wide open Backs and Receivers, whereas Cleveland's were... well, not.

Injuries have already reared their ugly heads. Brandon Jackson is gone for the season. Ouch. Eric Steinbach is toast too. Pain. Titus Brown is down for a while, Chris Gocong might not be ready... and the LB corps was already DNA strand-thin.

If the Browns were able to maintain their team health on a go-forward basis and Jason Pinkston and Armond Smith fill in admirably for their fallen comrades, then we might have a pretty decent team.

But there is no team that is immune to injury fever (at one level or another), and the 3-5 other starters that will be on IR by Week 5 will sink this team.

Let's be honest - the Browns Front Office has no illusions about a Championship this season. They did not compose this team to make a real push at the Playoffs. They built it to get younger, to get faster, and to gain experience for a year or two down the road when Cleveland might actually have a legit shot at the upper echelon. They shunned expensive, short-term

veteran depth for rookies and undrafted free agents. They fully expect to get better, but they also fully expect to lose as much as they win.

One could question this approach, seeing as the NFL is a quick-change league and it seems hardly fair to sacrifice a season before it starts, especially when the franchise has known nothing but dead seasons for so long.

But one might also reason that they know what they're doing (or attempting to do), and the logic may pay off, especially when I have to agree that this team is likely Top 15 pick fodder whether they pick up a slew of 1 year vets or not. So as much as it pains me to drag the 2011 season to the altar in its infancy, sometimes the football gods demand their sacrifice.

Thus, my conservative and wary prediction for this season is 6-10.

Yes, I am aware that the schedule is favorable. You start off with a mediocre-at-very-best Bengals team with a rookie QB, followed by a likely Manning-less Colts team. The Browns could very well be able to string together a solid start.

But with a team this young and this thin, I'll buy it when I see it's for sale.

Reasons To Watch Then Now That You Went And Deflated My Hopes

The Development of Colt McCoy and the West Coast Offense.

Phil Taylor and Jabaal Sheard and Whether or Not They Can Be Difference-Makers

Can Peyton Hillis Do It Again?

Are Joe Haden and TJ Ward as Badass as They Seemed Last Year?

The Potential End of the Non-Blackout Streak.

Paddy Shurmur, Paddy Shurmur, Paddy Shurmur.

Game Balls

Auston English – Two more sacks. All this guy does is produce. First, I was happy to see him make the team. Then disappointment to see him cut. Then relief to see him make it through to the Practice Squad. Might be my Fake Season Defensive MVP.

Brian Robiskie – I kind of wondered what he was even doing playing, then remembered that he's supposedly the 4th or 5th WR (depending on who you talk to). He looked like a starter amongst backups vs. the Bears. Really might have a solid year.

Armond Smith – This kind of player is what 2011 is all about. Many harped that the Browns desperately need a proven vet at that slot, but I'm glad to see that Heckert entrusted it to Smith. He's explosive and has tons of potential as a 3rd down back (provided, of course, that he can hold onto the ball). If this year is a developmental year (and it is), then he's the poster boy for guys that should be getting developed.

Honorable Mention

Jarrett Brown – Really came along the last 2 weeks of the Fake Season. Showed some great touch on his TD pass to Rod Windsor. He would've got a Game Ball, but then he turned around and threw that horrible pick near the end. Would've been an interesting developmental prospect.

Marcus Benard – Yes, it was all against backups, but finally started showing some of the explosiveness that you expected from him.

Rod Windsor – Earned himself a Practice Squad spot with his last-ditch 3 catch, 55 yard, 1 TD effort.

Dane Sanzenbacher – Nice little undrafted prospect the Bears go themselves there.

Wall of Shame

The Refs – Again. In the 1st Half, the Browns had 8 penalties, the Bears 0. Now, some of those 8 were deserved. Some were highly questionable. But the disparity was friggin' ridiculous. The Fake Season better be their warm-up or else Mike Holmgren threw up in the Head of Officiating's car.

Seneca Wallace – Lordy, that was not a pretty performance. Sure, he was under considerable pressure, but he handled it like a 6th Round rookie. Please stay healthy, Mr. McCoy.

Backup Offensive Line – That's probably how Mount Union's O Line would look against Ohio State.

Depth – Deplorable. Desperate. Deviant. Diluted. Dangerous.

Regarding The 2011 Draft Picks

Phil Taylor - A week after blowing the Eagles' O Line apart, he was once again invisible (this time against backups). That's 3 out of 4 Fake Season games where he was largely small. Makes you wonder if he really is that good or if Philly's Line is really that bad. Still, I'm not worried about him.

Jabaal Sheard - I AM worried about this guy. He played against the Bears too, and managed to do little outside of pick up penalties.

Greg Little - Dropped an easy pass and seemed to garner little playing time vs. Chicago. But, unconcerned am I.

Jordan Cameron - Had to check, but, yes, he did catch 2 passes. My feeling on this guy is that he'll start to make a difference in the 2nd half of the season.

Owen Marecic - The Browns dropped Lawrence Vickers for YOU? You who flubs passes around with stone hands, who runs straight up with all the power of feather pillow, who makes us long for more Tyler Clutts?

Four Fake Season Games does not a career make. Hell, even an entire rookie season does not a career make. But Mr. M is looking like a big step down in quality from his predecessor and a huge black mark on Tom Heckert's draft gradecard.

Buster Skrine - Didn't do much in the game, but appears to be a real solid pick and contributor.

Jason Pinkston - Ditto what I said about Skrine.

Eric Hagg - Kind of surprised he didn't end up on the PUP.

Regarding the Offensive Line

Starters: *Joe Thomas, Jason Pinkston, Alex Mack, Shawn Lauvao, Tony Pashos*

Backups: *Oniel Cousins, John Greco, Steve Vallos, Artis Hicks*

Practice Squad: *Dominic Alford, Jarrod Shaw*

Cut: *Branndon Braxton, Calton Ford, Phil Trautwein*

The starting line is actually pretty decent, especially if Pinkston can hold his own in place of Steinbach and Pashos doesn't suck. And even if Pinkston isn't The Man, it appears that the Browns brought Artis Hicks in (waivers) to take his spot anyway, at least according to Shurmur's comments:

"[Artis is] a very veteran guy that's played guard and tackle, so we're going to get him up to speed as quickly as possible. □ Right now, we've got Jason Pinkston in there, but we'll see. There's a little bit of work left to do, and we're really not saying right now who the starter's going to be."

That sounds to me like they're not overly comfortable with the Rook starting. Which actually helps the depth, since we should probably assume that Pinkston is at least one quality backup.

Are there others? Hard to say. Cousins, Greco, Vallos... let's hope we don't find out.

Regarding the Quarterbacks

Starters: *Colt McCoy*

Backups: *Seneca Wallace, Thaddeus Lewis*

Cut: *Jarrett Brown*

I assumed that Brown would get cut, and I just as quickly assumed he'd be snatched onto the Practice Squad. Then along came this mysterious Thaddeus Lewis person, whom the Rams tried to sneak through waivers and the Browns seemed ecstatic to steal.

Shurmur: *"He's a guy that we will try to develop and get him ready to play. □ That's what you do with backup quarterbacks. You try to develop them first into a dependable backup and then hopefully to a guy that can maybe start. He came to St. Louis as an undrafted free agent, and then he actually did a terrific job."*

Heckert (when asked why they were keeping 3 QB's): *"I think it's more the fact that we really like [Lewis]. Like I said before, I think we probably weren't going to go in that direction. We were probably just going to stick with two, but this kid, we really liked him. Obviously, Pat coached him, but we talked about him last year when he was available. He was on their practice squad all last year and we talked about possibly trying to get him. He's a guy we loved in the draft when he came out and he's just a very talented kid. He's very accurate, I think he was 70 some percent in the preseason. I think he was 70-something last year. He's got a strong arm, he's a good athlete. We just like everything about the kid and we're really excited to have him."*

Hey, I liked Brown's potential just as much as the next guy, and I can safely say I haven't seen Thad Lewis take one snap at any level of football, but that kind of talk has me very intrigued. Maybe I'm just gullible.

As far as the actual starter and backup - Colt is still an enigma, but I've liked what I've seen in him many time in the Fake Season and even last year. Truly discovering if he's a Franchise QB is really what the 2011 season is all about. And Seneca... well, you know what you get in Seneca. He's a decent backup, but please don't demonstrate your naiveté by calling for him to start by Week 3. If Colt's not getting it done, Wallace is only a finger in a dam.

Regarding the Running Backs

Starters: *Peyton Hillis, Owen Marecic*

Backups: *Montario Hardesty, Armond Smith*

Practice Squad: *Tyler Cutts, Quinn Porter*

Injured Reserve: *Brandon Jackson*

Nothing surprising here. But it's still a big unknown, though. Hillis, you know. He's gonna run hard. He's gonna bull over people. He's gonna try to leap Safeties. He's gonna take a beating.

Hardesty HAS to stay healthy and garner significant snaps for this not to be a big issue. Seeing as he's taken all of - what? - 10 snaps in the last 2 years (all in the Fake Season) is not comforting. But I'll just have to assume that his knee is as good as any other surgically repaired knee in the league and he'll be there and actually produce.

Smith easily outplayed Porter and deserved his spot, although I thought Porter played well enough to get a PS look, and the Browns agreed.

The interesting spot is where the Browns saw fit to use a precious Practice Squad spot on a Fullback, Mr. Clutts. It's not like no one's ever used a PS spot on a FB before, but it isn't exactly commonplace either. It wasn't like Clutts was lighting it up.

I have to assume that this might be some kind of internal backup should Marecic prove to be a monumental bust. But, despite his Fake Season awfulness, I just don't see it happening. It might take a little while for Cleveland to warm to Owen, but I think it'll come.

Regarding the Wide Receivers and Tight Ends

Starters: *Ben Watson, Mo Massaquoi, Josh Cribbs*

Backups: *Evan Moore, Greg Little, Brian Robiskie, Jordan Cameron, Jordan Norwood, Carlton Mitchell, Alex Smith*

Practice Squad: *Rod Windsor*

Cut: *LJ Castile, Chris Matthews, Demetrius Williams, Evan Frosch*

(Bet you didn't even know there was an Evan Frosch on the team, did you? Neither did I.)

I grouped the WR and TE together because they will be used in a lot of similar ways in a WCO. To me, Moore and Cameron are really more Receivers anyway.

I've heard all Summer about how awful the Browns WR corps is and how Colt McCoy will die without weapons and how Cleveland absolutely must get some veteran help and blah blah blah.

Now, I'm not against getting some veteran proven talent to come in and make these guys work for their spots, don't get me wrong. But I am not one that feels the WR/TE spot is as dire as many allow.

Watson is a good pass-catching TE. Moore is a solid Receiver and will get a lot of playing time (as demonstrated by his contract extension). None of Mo Mass, Cribbs, Robo, or Little is Elite (although Little has some potential to be), but they're not horrible either, and you still have to put a guy on them. Cribbs and Robo have both made strides as NFL Receivers in the last year, and we haven't yet had a chance to see what Massaquoi or Mitchell brings to the table in the WCO. Plus, Norwood's one of those slippery sonsabitches that drives Dime Backs and Safeties crazy.

You may think that I'm crazy by stating that the world would be foolish to sleep on this squad. But I've got no money on it, so I state it nonetheless.

Regarding the Defensive Line

Starters: *Jayme Mitchell, Phil Taylor, Ahtyba Rubin, Jabaal Sheard*

Backups: *Scott Paxson (DT), Brian Schaefering (DT), Emmanuel Stephens (DE), Marcus Benard (DE)*

Practice Squad: *Auston English, Brian Sanford*

Cut: *Andre Carroll, Travis Ivey, Ko Quaye, Derreck Robinson*

This is where I start getting scared.

You're playing a 4-3. Defensive Linemen need rotated in and out with more frequency than any other unit. Two of the starters are Rookies and unused to 16 game seasons. Schaefering is a decent backup, but Paxson was cut 6 times and played in 1 NFL game ever (in 2008 - no tackles) and Stephens has played in 0. Benard has never played an NFL snap at DE.

That means 5 of your 8 D Linemen COMBINE to boast one NFL game played at their current position. Experience is on short order in this zone.

I thought there was no way that a big body like Travis Ivey would be gone. I thought there was no way that a high-motor guy like English would be Practice fodder.

I'm worried that these guys are going to get worn the hell down. Not just as the season goes on, but as games go on. They'll be just a quivering pile of goo by Week 9.

Man, that Run D is going to Suck. Put a pin in that, stick it to your wall, underline it with Sharpie and accentuate it with glitter.

Regarding the Linebackers

Starters: *Scott Fujita, D'Qwell Jackson, Chris Gocong*

Backups: *Kaluka Maiava, Titus Brown, Quinton Spears*

Practice Squad: *Benjamin Jacobs*

Cut: *Sidney Tarver, Steve Octavien, Eric Gordon, Archie Donald, Brian Smith*

One might argue that the D Line will be fine with Linebackers shooting the gaps, clogging the lanes. But sadly the Linebacking corps is not only meh, it's injured.

Jackson is, I believe, a very good LB in a 4-3 system. He has a lot to prove. Gocong has a lot to prove too, like he's not too hurt to contribute and that his failures in Philly's 4-3 are in the past.

Maiava is a decent backup, and Brown shows a lot of potential... but he'll be out a little while with a high ankle sprain. So they're starting the season with a 5 man rotation that might be just 4 if Gocong can't go. And one of those guys (Spears) is an undrafted Rookie from Prairie View.

You start to see a trend here on Defense... everywhere, in fact... the Powers That Be are putting a Titanic-load of faith in the Electric Youth.

Regarding the Defensive Backs

Starters: *Joe Haden, Sheldon Brown, TJ Ward, Mike Adams*

Backups: *James Dockery, Dimitri Patterson, Buster Skrine, Usama Young, Eric Hagg, Ray Ventrone*

Cut: *Coye Francies, Carl Gettis, Ramzee Robinson, DeAngelo Smith*

Finally, an area where the guys that got cut were actually pretty decent, underlining the quality of those who were kept. I thought both Smith and Robinson had some nice plays during the Fake Season, and I had high hopes for Francies once upon a time (he seems to have become somewhat timid since his promising Freshman campaign).

Haden and Ward are Pro Bowl caliber dudes. Brown is approaching the down slope of his career, but can probably be serviceable for one more go. Adams is just a tough player (despite his lack of high-end talent).

Of the backups, Young was supposed to start until injuries sidelined him long enough for his job to get stolen. Ventrone is a solid Special Teamer, Dimitri Patterson is decent, and Skrine is an exciting Rookie. Dockery is a guy who intrigues me - he's aggressive, perhaps to a fault, but certainly stood out. Sometimes it was in a good way, sometimes in a bad... regardless, he was at least making some kind of impression.

But the best secondary in the world cannot save a weak Front 7, so we (I) must hope and pray

that we (I) are wrong in our (my) assumptions.

Regarding Predictions

AFC Division Champs: New England Patriots, Houston Texans, Pittsburgh Steelers, San Diego Chargers.

NFC Division Champs: Green Bay Packers, New Orleans Saints, Dallas Cowboys, St. Louis Rams

AFC Wildcards: Baltimore Ravens, New York Jets

NFC Wildcards: Atlanta Falcons, New York Giants

(That's right. The Dream Team doesn't even make the Playoffs.)

Super Bowl: Houston Texans vs. Atlanta Falcons

Champs: Falcons

If I get half of that right, I'll be more flabbergasted than [Tiki Barber](#) .

Regarding Whatever

***This was an exciting US Open for the future of American tennis. For the longest time, the US presence in the tennis world has seemed to be headed for annihilation, but out of the blue comes a crop of young tennis players that showed a ton of promise. On the men's side, you have Donald Young and Jack Sock (which until a week ago I thought was just a prop from the opening scene of American Pie). On the women's side, you have Christina McHale, Sloane Stephens, Coco Vandeweghe, and Madison Keys.

Keep special mind of that last one. Keys, the youngest of the bunch at 16, is already 5'10 and looks like she could put a hand-to-hand combat beatdown on any woman on tour not named Serena Williams. Power, speed, size, serve... all she needs is experience and she'll be a Top 10 player. If she keeps her head together (always a big if in tennis), that'll happen within 3 years.

***A guy in my fantasy league kept Peyton Manning, and who can blame him? The draft was a week ago - everyone in the world expected him back by Week 1 or Week 2 at the latest. But he made the mistake of waiting until late to draft his backup... Chad Henne.

Yipes.

Some guys still try to convince me that Henne will be good. I fell for that 2 years ago. I even

fell for that last year. He's been around long enough that he is what he is, and that ain't good.

***The Jags cut David Garrard and are starting the immortal Luke McCown. So, the inevitable question is: When/If Jacksonville gets the #1 overall pick, will they take Luck? And if they don't, as I assume they won't since they just picked Blaine Gabbert really high, what kind of freakin' ransom will they collect for the pick?

That would be a bidding war worth tanking for.

***One thing about Paxson, if you've been cut 6 times and you still find a way to maintain the kind of desire, drive, and football shape that is required to finally make a roster, that is a damn impressive feat. At 28, most guys would've moved on to the used car business long ago.

***I don't know what the Pats are waiting for in regards to signing Randy Moss. Maybe it's just the 2nd week of the year so they don't have to guarantee his contract, but if it's not, I just don't understand how bringing him hurts a team with as solid a core as New England's.

***Why does a guy like Jim Tressel take a stupid Replay Analyst Assistant job? Is he really that bored? Or is this part of his transition into NFL coaching where he won't have to worry about violating some mamby-pamby rule every time he turns around?

Next Up

Cincinnati Bengals □ (0-0).

Week 1 of the season is never Do-Or-Die. Except when your entire fanbase will jump ship if you lose.

The Bengals should not be good this year. Andy Dalton was drafted too high and is a Rookie making his first ever NFL start. Cedric Benson is overrated and only really ever looks good against crappy Run D teams like the Browns. The team has guys in and out of hospital beds as often as they're in and out of jail. Mike Brown is reviled by pretty much everyone, even his kids and his dog.

The Browns should not lose this game at home.

But everyone knows that. And no one knows if the Browns will be any good either.

Thus, this game scares the shit out of me.

If Benson can run the ball, that will take pressure off Dalton, and he'll be able to find the members of his young but talented WR corps. I think that will happen.

So it really comes down to the Browns O vs. the Bengals D. At this juncture, never having seen this Offense for a full game at full strength for Cleveland, I really don't know. I mistake or two

here and there will decide this uncomfortably close and sloppy affair.

Browns 24, Bengals 23.