

## Beaten Down and Broken

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Sunday, October 02 2011 4:05 PM - Last Updated Sunday, October 02 2011 4:31 PM

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If a team is going to lose it might as well do so in epic fashion. At least the Cleveland Browns got that part right and not much else as they were pummeled at the hands of the Tennessee Titans, 31-13.

If there's any consolation to the fans, it's that the players will have to watch films of this mess all week. The fans won't have to look at this again.

There were enough missed tackles of all shapes and sizes that helped the Titans build a 24-6 lead late in the third quarter. And while those missed tackles are worth considering, and they will be, the signature play of the day came just at that point, the Browns down 24-6 and with the ball.

Starting at their own 18 yard line, Colt McCoy and the Browns looked as if they were finally putting something together with plenty of time to still do so. Eighteen points isn't an insurmountable lead and while the offense was once again waking up late, at least they now looked like they had the sleep out of their eyes.

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After an 18-yard pass to Ben Watson took the ball to the Titans' 29-yard line and gave the Browns a first down, McCoy was flushed from the pocket and ran to his left. As he was spotting Peyton Hillis come across the back of the end zone, McCoy was hit and severely under threw the ball into the waiting arms of safety Jordan Babineaux at the 3-yard line.

Now let's freeze the action right there for a moment.

This wasn't a case of McCoy throwing it in the flat to a defensive player who jumped an out route and had essentially an open freeway to the end zone. Instead, Babineaux was surrounded by Browns players when he caught the ball. Nonetheless, Babineaux weaved his way first down the side lines and then through the middle of the field on his way to the end zone. As he was doing so, Babineaux was hardly touched as literally no one on the offense made any real effort to disrupt his journey.

Maybe they all had the Titans' defense in their fantasy league.

The Babineaux touchdown gave the Titans a 31-6 lead that was as safe as about 94% of the plays that head coach/offensive coordinator Pat Shurmur was calling all day.

Maybe it's a measure of the Browns' resilience or a measure of how confident the Titans felt at that point, but McCoy and the Browns did actually respond to that rather deflating touchdown return by Babineaux (and yes, I keep saying his name because it's kind of fun to type it). Employing a no-huddle offense and simultaneously making the case for sticking with that strategy from here on out, the Browns put together a 15 play 69 yard drive that culminated in a 18-yard touchdown pass to a wide open Watson in the end zone. It brought the Browns to a more respectable 31-13 score but probably frustrated the fans even more.

Why? For the same reason that last week's win frustrated the fans. It's not exactly clear why the Browns' offense struggles so often and yet can look so good in spurts. As if to prove the point, following the Watson touchdown the Browns got the ball right back after a Mike Adams interception and the offense went right back into slumber mode thanks mostly to underneath passes that had no chance of getting additional yards anyway or dropped passes. The lack of

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production there didn't seal the Titans' victory but only because it had already been sealed much earlier.

There are any number of places to start when considering why this offense struggles. But let's start with the running game.

One of the things that Shurmur is going to have to decide pretty quickly is whether he has two running backs or one starter and a backup. Hillis, either still suffering the effects of last week's illness or in Shurmur's dog house for some unspecified reason, yielded a fair amount of his playing time to Montario Hardesty. All that really did is give neither player a chance to stay in the offensive flow long enough to be effective.

But the other thing to keep in mind is that Shurmur really didn't seem all that committed to the run anyway, so it probably didn't matter all that much whether it was Hillis or Hardesty in the backfield. You can blame it on the fact that the Browns were so far behind as the reason for the offensive imbalance, but the game plan looked from the outset like the running attack was being used solely as a decoy.

I'm going to freeze the action right here for another moment. As much as I've praised McCoy and still believe he's a long-term answer at quarterback, he has more work to do, particularly if he's going to sell this offense to opposing defenses. At times he does a very nice job on play action passing because he actually concentrates on trying to make the play look initially like a run. Too often, though, McCoy goes through the motions and makes a perfunctory move that fools no one, especially the linebackers who are supposed to freeze in place thus giving the tight ends the extra step they need to get open.

For a quarterback and a head coach that rely so much on the tight ends, you'd think McCoy would be good at this move. It's not that he's bad, it's that he's inconsistent. This has to get better for the play action to be much more effective.

Back to the action.

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The West Coast offense isn't necessarily designed to stretch defenses but it also seemed like Shurmur's primary goal throughout was to try and give McCoy more confidence in the passing game by calling for so many short underneath routes. Mission accomplished, I suppose. McCoy had a boatload of completions (40-61) and a decent amount of yardage (350) but ultimately that accounted for just 13 points and that is never good enough.

Part of the reason, of course, is that the Browns wide receivers just aren't very good. Mohamed Massaquoi had 6 quiet receptions. Brian Robiski had his first three catches of the season none of which were particularly meaningful. Josh Cribbs, until he proves differently, is on the field simply as a decoy. His route running just isn't consistently good enough for defenses to worry about him. That leaves Greg Little who, though playing well in spurts, is still learning.

As a result, McCoy has to consistently lean on his three tight ends, who are mostly reliable, and the running backs to keep the passing game moving forward. But one of the more obvious points proven in that regard is that Hardesty can't catch very well with nearly as many drops (4) as receptions (5).

Put that together and in that context, the 13 points really isn't that hard to explain, yardage gained and time of possession notwithstanding.

It's a fair point if you want to argue it that when a team only scores 13 points it shouldn't expect to win. I wouldn't necessarily disagree. But it's only part of the story as to why this loss was so complete. The other part of the story is the defense played like it was starting to believe its press clippings.

One of the reasons the Titans didn't seem like they had the ball much had to do with their ability to score quickly early on when good defensive play was needed most and gotten least.

After going 3 and out on their first possession, the Titans rectified it on their next. Starting from their own 40-yard line following a Phil Dawson kick off that went out of bounds (which took the shine on his 48-yard field goal moments before) Matt Hasselback moved the Titans quickly down the field finding tight end Craig Stevens for an 18-yard touchdown pass. It put the Titans up 7-3, a lead it didn't relinquish.

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The thing about the Stevens catch is that it was the result of a mental mistake by safety T. J. Ward. With Stevens heading toward the left corner of the end zone, Ward worked back toward the middle instead. Stevens was wide open as a result.

But an even bigger defensive blunder came on Hasselback's next pass, which followed a Browns drive that led to a Dawson 51-yard field goal. On first and 10 from their own 20 yard line, receiver Jared Cook ran right past linebacker Scott Fujita, who was on the coverage. Defensive back Usama Young was late helping out (which is being generous because Young was actually nowhere to be found initially) and then took a horrible angle to Cook while Fujita ran futilely behind. Young wiffed at the tackle and Cook went the distance untouched. That pushed the lead to 14-6.

The Titans then pushed the lead even further with a minute remaining in the second quarter on a 4-yard pass to Damien Williams. But the real back breaker on that drive was two plays earlier when Nate Washington turned a short pass into a 57-yard gain that got the ball to the Cleveland 4 yard line in the first place. Chalk that one up, too, to poor tackling and a general lack of effort. It's really the same thing.

It matters little that from that point forward, the Titans only had 3 more points on offense. They didn't need any more. The damage was done.

As much as last week's last minute win was a confidence builder, this week's loss was that much more demoralizing. It would be one thing if the Browns had kept some of the momentum from that victory but instead they came out as if they were 0-3 instead of 2-1. In other words, just when the team answers one question, it raises a whole bunch of new ones.

Where do they go from here? To the bye week and then to Oakland next, but that's logistics. Where they really go is in Shurmur's hands. And like all the coaches who have tried and failed before him, he probably won't find enough time, the bye week notwithstanding, to figure it all out.