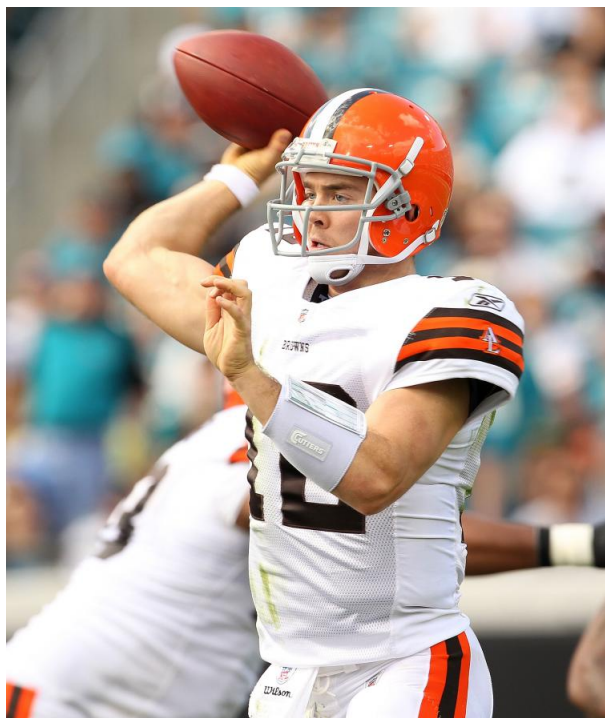


Making Good Use of the Bye Week

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Tuesday, October 11 2011 7:02 AM - Last Updated Tuesday, October 11 2011 9:56 PM



The best thing that could happen to the Cleveland Browns did. They had a bye week when they needed it most.

In the midst of a self-inflicted controversy regarding fan favorite Peyton Hillis and some very questionable play calling in last week's dispiriting loss to the Tennessee Titans, the last thing that head coach Pat Shurmur needed was a game this past Sunday.

What he needed more was a chance to enjoy the weather, visit with the family and clear his head because it's a long season from here on in.

The nice thing about a bye week is that it does offer some perspective on what's taken place to this point. The issues with Hillis and such are important, but what Shurmur needed to do most in the bye week was make a proper assessment of where this team currently stands and why, particularly on offense. Given its relatively poor performance to date, Shurmur's ability to get that righted holds the key to what kind of season this ultimately will become.

When Monday beckoned and the Browns returned to work, a few changes were noticeable. Greg Little is now a starting receiver and Brian Robiskie is not. Tight end Evan Moore is slated

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for more time. Not specifically addressed but a key to making all that work is how Shurmur will go about accelerating quarterback Colt McCoy's maturation process.

Right now McCoy's abilities are being questioned because he had the audacity to throw a few really bad passes in the last few weeks as he was putting together some uneven performances.

But the longer view is that McCoy had an offseason without access to Shurmur and his version of the West Coast offense, a truncated pre-season to learn the system and now 4 starts to run it at game speed. In that context, why should anyone expect anything more than they've received from McCoy to this point?

Taking still an even longer view, virtually nothing McCoy learned from last year is of value to this season. Not one aspect to the Eric Mangini/Brian Daboll offense has been retained. That includes the blocking schemes, the receiving routes and the check downs. In other words, last season McCoy was getting a crash course in Italian. This season, he's had to be conversant in Spanish from the first game forward because the fans expect nothing less than fluency out of the gate.

That's the reality of the situation for Shurmur but he still must push McCoy to make the offense second nature anyway. That's a function of time in grade but it's also a function of study. If Shurmur and McCoy didn't use the down time to work through the nuances that have been causing McCoy trouble, then it was time well wasted and it will show in the next few weeks.

There's also the issue of mechanics. Perhaps that's a function of McCoy not being completely comfortable with the offense just yet, but particularly when it matters most McCoy's mechanics tend to fail him.

When he's comfortable and not feeling like the next play is the make or break play of the game, McCoy tends to do the little things well. His play action fakes are crisper. He moves around the pocket nicely and then sets his feet properly when he passes.

But just like a golfer who reverts to his old swing when the pressure is on the most, McCoy tends to forego what he's been learning when he's really feeling pressure in favor of what's work for him in the past. That means foregoing any real effort to play fake or set his feet. He then whizzes through his progressions that much more quickly in order to justify his natural instinct to

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run as a means of buying time. The problem is that it's not always clear why he's buying time.

The end zone interception against Tennessee is a perfect example. McCoy labeled it a dumb play on his part but it didn't seem to occur to anyone covering the Browns on a regular basis to ask McCoy exactly why it was such a dumb play. Had they not treated it merely as a bit of self-deprecation, they likely would have found out exactly what McCoy meant, which is that the play represented the breakdown of the mechanics he needs to be successful.

He rolled to his right to buy time from a pocket that really hadn't completely collapsed. As he ran, his options grew more limited. Instead of going out of bounds or throwing it out of bounds, either of which is standard NFL moves, McCoy let his college instincts take over and threw across his body into the end zone while getting hit. The pass was at least 10 yards short of his intended target.

So, yea, it was a dumb play but probably not in the way most people think about it. It was a play of inexperience in a league where every defensive back has good speed. It was also outside any of the usual protocol of the offense he was charged with running. McCoy beat himself up not because he's dumb but because he understood that so much about the NFL game is merging his best instincts with the best of what the coaches have given you to succeed. McCoy fell short and knew it.

It's Shurmur's job to ensure that McCoy grows into his role because right now and on the near horizon, there aren't any other options. Some of this will come as McCoy gains experience. But more of it will come when Shurmur gets better at putting McCoy in situations in which he has a better chance to succeed. It is a hand-in-glove existence.

Beyond the issues with McCoy, Shurmur also needed the bye week to assess the rest of his offense because McCoy is hardly that unit's biggest problem. The running game has likewise suffered for the lack of an off season and it too is showing. The schemes seem haphazard at the moment with no real clear path in what Shurmur's trying to get accomplished. Players say that the smash mouth running style of last season is over but that doesn't always seem to be the case.

Hopefully Shurmur used the time to better clarify his own thoughts and then commit to a style

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and a running back and let it play itself out. That question gets answered Sunday at Oakland.

But at least Shurmur did address the ongoing saga of the receiving corps. Right now it's very tight end-centric, which is not a surprise given the style. But it wasn't clear why a playmaker like Moore wasn't seeing more action. Shurmur offered explanations on Monday but did acknowledge that Moore needs to be on the field.

As for the wide receivers, the elevation of Little to a starter is one of the most encouraging signs of Shurmur's deep thinking during the bye week.

Shurmur has come to the conclusion that Robiskie is not a viable option at this point. While good route running is the gold standard for receivers, Robiskie proves on a weekly basis that it isn't the Holy Grail. By all accounts, Robiskie's main strength is his ability to run routes. It's also his main weakness.

There's no jazz to Robiskie's game. If the pattern calls for 6 yards and out, Robiskie will run 6 yards and out. If that doesn't result in him being open, so be it. This is where the weakness comes in. The inability to go off script in the slightest in order to free himself makes it almost impossible for any quarterback to get Robiskie the ball consistently.

Defensive backs study receivers because that's their full time job. The book on Robiskie is simple. It's like following the bouncing ball on a one-note melody. The defensive backs know that there's no chance Robiskie will improvise and thus they understand his every move on the field. Sticking with him is never much of a problem.

Little on the other hand is more artist than technician. You can see that he's more comfortable than Robiskie in occasionally going off script by rounding off a route when the situation calls for it. Do too much of it and the coaches will nail your butt to the bench. But there are split second decisions to make in a game and sometimes it's better to vary from the plan as long as your quarterback is on that same page. You can see a rapport growing between Little and McCoy. Robiskie hasn't been able to build rapport with any quarterback at the pro level.

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The fact that Shurmur is admittedly doing some tweaking is a positive sign for growth. The one thing that he has going for him is that that tweaking is not being dictated by an 0-4 start. What the fans want now is not necessarily playoffs this season but real progress. As the fans well know by now, Shurmur's future depends on it.