

## A Formula Loss

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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In a season where more questions are being raised than answers given, here's one thing that we do know. The San Francisco Bay Area doesn't bring out the best in the Cleveland Browns. But then again, not much does.

In a game that in some ways resembled the earlier loss to the Oakland Raiders, the Browns lost to the Raiders' nearby cousin, the San Francisco 49ers, 20-10 and in the process cemented the formula that's become all too predictable: good defense, bad offense, few chances, another loss.

The closeness of the score, like it did in Oakland, suggests a more competitive game than fans probably feel like they witnessed, thanks in part of a questionable call by 49ers head coach Jim Harbaugh early in the game. It kept the game closer early than it should have been and allowed what could have been a rout to become a far better game than it started out, though "better" in the context of the Browns' offense is a very relative term.

At least the Browns got into the end zone this week. It needed to do more, much more, however, and that's why it lost the game.

As it was, though, it looked at the outset like the game would be a total team failure. Early on the Browns' defense looked as if it didn't realize that running back Frank Gore played for the 49ers. The offense, early and late, looked as if it never grasped the concept of a blitz, wanting nothing more than to complete a few passes, gain a few yards on the ground and then get on a plane and head back to Cleveland, which is strange because the weather in San Francisco looked perfectly delightful.

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Needing to get off to a quicker start than they've managed to at any other point this season, the Browns instead fumbled on the second play of the game, turning it right over to the 49ers. It set up a 4 yard run by Gore that gave the 49ers a quick 7-0 lead.

Now the Colt McCoy naysayers will put the blame for that turnover on McCoy because technically he did fumble the ball while in passing formation. But a blitzing Ahmad Brooks blew past right guard Tony Pashos without giving him a second thought and clobbered McCoy before he could ever take a stance.

The 49ers made it 10-0 on a drive that started at their own half-yard line, featured a 26-yard run by Gore and a key first down on a tackle eligible play, for goodness sakes, but ended in just a 29-yard David Akers field goal when the Browns defense decided to stiffen before the rout was on too quickly.

Indeed that rout would have been on with the 49ers next drive if, first, the 49ers running game, which had been very effective to that point, could have punched it in from one yard in three separate attempts, and second, if Harbaugh had not attempted to gain a measure of swagger by eschewing another easy field goal on 4th and goal. Gore up the middle went for no gain and the Browns took over on downs. It kept the game in manageable territory.

But the 49ers just came right back anyway, moving methodically down field with the Browns defense providing only intermittent resistance. Quarterback Alex Smith, looking in the first half exactly like a quarterback with a good running game and getting no defensive pressure, found receiver Michael Crabtree on a way-too-easy 2-yard pass to push the score to 17-0.

A Phil Dawson 52-yard line at the end of the first half brought the Browns marginally closer at 17-3 but it hardly brought them back into the game. The Browns were being dominated in every way possible and for good measure Gore had over 100 yards in the first half alone.

Meanwhile the Browns' offense, without Peyton Hillis (and Montario Hardesty, who went out early with some sort of calf problem), without a credible receiver, and without a credible right side of the offensive line, looked as lost as you'd expect. It's a measure, really, of the Browns'

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offensive ineffectiveness that the only points they seem to get these days are on Dawson field goals that travel in excess of 50 yards. They treat the red zone and the end zone like in laws that they can't stand visiting.

The defense, though, inexplicably found its sea legs in the second half, and pretty much shut down the 49ers until it mattered most. The 49ers, mired all second half in the kind of offensive funk that is standard in Cleveland, stopped moving the ball. Gore, getting banged around, suddenly became ineffective, gaining just a handful of yards the entire second half. He ended with 125 yards on a day that started as if he'd gain 300. That, unsurprisingly, brought Smith back to, well, being the Smith of his first 6 years in the NFL, and again allowed the Browns' to hang around in a game in which they were otherwise being dominated.

Things got a little uncomfortable for the 49ers when McCoy and Josh Cribbs hooked up on a 45-yard touchdown early in the 4th quarter that brought the Browns to within a touchdown with plenty of time to play.

But just when the defense needed to step up one more time, it collapsed thanks in part to a critical D'Qwell Jackson face mask on Gore on 3rd and 3 from the San Francisco 32 yard line. Gore was stopped short of the first down but the personal foul gave the 49ers a new set of downs. From there they kept the chains moving, thanks in large part, and I mean that in two ways, to an 18-yard pass to 300+ pound nose tackle Isaac Sopoaga, who lined up as a fullback on the play. It was nearly the identical play that Smith completed earlier to tackle Joe Staley that went for 17 yards.

The Sopoaga completion brought the ball to the Cleveland 14-yard line and set the 49ers up for a 26-yard field goal by Akers that sealed the game. A few mad dash plays near the end of the game padded the stats of the offense but the game was well over by that point.

The most frustrating aspect of the loss is the same thing that has been frustrating this team throughout the season. A good, solid defensive effort essentially wasted by an offense that is so lacking in talent at the moment that it really has very few opportunities to score.

As an example, consider a few key moments in the second half when matters really could have turned in the Browns' favor.

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In a preview of what the second half would turn into, the Browns' defense held the 49ers to a quick three and out to open the second half and a Josh Cribbs punt return brought the ball into 49ers territory. But on 3rd and 2, offensive coordinator/head coach Pat Shurmur called for one of the most ill-conceived plays on his cheat sheet. He had receiver Greg Little go in motion and then stop in the backfield. McCoy took the snap and Little swung out left, essentially taking a pitch from McCoy that everybody saw coming, including the 49ers. It lost 8 yards and forced another punt.

Then there was the next series which again followed a 49ers 3 and out. Again looking as if it had some momentum, the Browns' offense got a jump start when McCoy hit tight end Ben Watson on a simple out pattern that Watson, through pure effort, turned into a 29-yard gain. But two plays later McCoy, scrambling, unleashed a pass to a double-covered Little in the end zone that resulted, naturally enough, in an interception. It was another momentum killer even as the defense continued to try and put the offense in a position to succeed.

McCoy wasn't awful, but neither was he great. He lost the handle twice on the snap and had the other fumble early in the game. The interception he threw was pure folly, a college kid toss that may have worked in Texas but doesn't tend to work in the pros. But he also was 22-34 for 241 yards and the touchdown pass to Cribbs that gave the Browns some hope. He continues to get pounded on by opposing defenses and still answers the bell for the next play. At the very least, you have to admire his pluck.

The running game was awful. Chris Ogbonnaya, subbing for Hardesty most of the game, had just 37 yards on 11 carries. That said, he still looks to be an improvement at this point over Hardesty, who has trouble picking up blitzes, trouble catching the ball out of the backfield, and lacks any sort of burst of speed when the situation demands.

On a comparison basis, though, the statistical tale was surprisingly close after it was decidedly titled in the 49ers favor after the first 30 minutes. This was due to the Browns' defense essentially holding the 49ers to few second half yards. That's of little consequence, though, because those are only the small consolations in a business that demands wins.

The Browns take to the road again next week, this time against the Houston Texans. But it matters little where these games are contested. Unless the formula changes, the outcome

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again should hold no mystery.