

Losing His Inner Winner

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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There probably is some place in Hell especially reserved for the Cleveland Browns these days or, more particularly, their fans. The cruelty with which each game unfolds to their very eyes isn't just dispiriting, it's numbing in the same way that watching Dancing with the Stars is numbing.

Staring blankly, they've lost the will to live.

The Browns' loss to the St. Louis Rams is only consequential if you thought the team had higher aspirations for the season. Since no sane person did, then it's just a loss among many. The way it ended and the pain inflicted was certainly something special but on a macro level, so what?

Well, plenty, but I'll get to that in a moment.

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One of the great pleasures of writing about the Browns is the ability to step away from it from time to time in the same way that one of the great pleasures of banging your head against a wall is how good it feels when you stop. So it was that I stepped away from Sunday's game to regroup from all the bad football that's been played in the name of the Browns for so many years, particularly all the years I've been doing this for this web site.

Ok, so I lied just a tad. I didn't step away from Sunday's game in order to regroup. I had better plans for the day; plans that didn't include anything to do with Cleveland Browns' football. But the fact that I could so easily step away for the day and not give it a second thought was a far bigger surprise than the fact that the Browns found a new and dumber way to lose one of the only remaining winnable games on their schedule.

It wasn't always this easy.

I was a long-time season ticket holder at the old Cleveland Stadium. When Art Modell, morally and fiscally bankrupt as he was, decided to take a blowtorch to his reputation and move the team to Baltimore, I was as pissed as any die hard. I work in business and understand the dynamics and can fully appreciate the fact that difficult and unpleasant decisions must get made. But the larger point for me when it came to the Browns and Modell was the simple fact that despite all the incredible built in advantages that comes with owning a NFL team, he was still managing to lose money. That was a marker for his inept ownership and the real reason the team never went to the Super Bowl. Modell was a bumbling, incompetent fool of the first order who had no discernable skill other than to charm people with the same quips over the years.

When the Browns returned, it wasn't quite the same and anyone who pretends otherwise is not being truthful with him or herself. It's not just that the new Cleveland Browns Stadium had none of the character (or the plumbing problems) of the old Stadium, though that was part of it. It was simply that whatever compact existed between fan and team was ripped to shreds when Modell took his team and left town with the tacit permission of the rest of the NFL.

In the intervening years, the Browns have attempted to rebuild that bond and have done about as bad a job as possible in that regard. The moneyed ownership has been aloof. The decision-making process has been almost universally circumspect. The product on the field has been consistently awful. If they ever need another case study at the Harvard Business School on how not to build a brand or how to destroy customer loyalty, then someone ought to be

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documenting the Browns more carefully for future generations.

Stepping away from a meaningless game and stepping away completely are two different things and thus I return to contemplate the game I didn't see. As this Football Monday beckoned, the day after when all the analysis and all the paralysis that accompanies each game, I find myself in a far different frame of mind. Not having watched the game and actually still not having seen any highlights (which, in a 13-12 loss, how could there be any?) I have a sobering sense anyway that I've seen this game before, mainly because I have, for years.

Honestly, was there anything about the Browns' offensive ineptitude on Sunday that surprised anyone outside of maybe Chris Ogbonnaya going all Boyce Green for a game and gaining 90 yards?

Ok, maybe there was one surprise. It's that head coach Pat Shurmur was so desperate for any kind of win that he completely buttoned up the offense when it was inside the 10 yard line late in the game, purposely playing for the field goal that never came.

He can explain his tepid thinking all he wants but the bottom line is that Shurmur has confidence in only one player, Phil Dawson. That is how far things have fallen.

It wasn't even that Shurmur didn't trust the offense to score a touchdown, although given how rarely that occurs that might have been part of his thinking. It was more so that he didn't trust the offense to hold on to the ball in order to give Dawson an opportunity to kick the winning field goal, which is a far more damning assessment.

That is a bad message on a fair number of levels. The first, of course, was the lack of confidence Shurmur showed in his quarterback, Colt McCoy, as well as the lousy receivers on this team. That may be understandable as well as the fact that Shurmur wanted the Rams to burn time outs by keeping the ball on the ground. Fair enough, but who in the name of Woody Hayes in his prime calls for a handoff to a tight end who hasn't had one carry the entire year? Or to a tight end at all? It would have been far more sublime if Josh Cribbs hadn't recovered the fumble.

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This is where my world and their world perfectly collided yesterday. I didn't have to witness it first hand and hallelujah for that. As I sit here now I savor how uplifting it really was not to have watched that highly ironic series of plays. Had I been watching I'm sure I would again have gained a deeper appreciation as to why Elvis used to keep a loaded hand gun nearby when watching television. When you have that kind of money, sometimes the only real answer to your frustrations is to shoot out the screen.

On another level Shurmur's play calling speaks very poorly of his hand-picked offensive coordinator, Pat Shurmur. I can't even imagine the internal dialogue he had to come up with to call a play that was either too cute or too stupid by half, take your pick. Maybe he felt the site of McCoy handing off to Alex Smith would leave the Rams so gobsmacked that Smith would waltz into the end zone untouched. Maybe he just wasn't convinced that a fumblerooskie would work. Maybe he had a bigger brain freeze than Ryan Pontribriand. Yea, let's go with that.

Shurmur is learning and so a few rookie mistakes are to be expected. But the moment he lost his guts to try and force the Rams to win the game with under two minutes by scoring a touchdown instead of field goal, what happened next on the botched field goal was as inevitable as Ted McGinley joining a dying sitcom.

You can't instill winning in a team that hasn't won if you aren't a winner yourself. I'm not suggesting that Shurmur isn't a winner but I am suggesting that unless he can keep his nut sack in tact during a game's more crucial moments, to the extent that a game against the Rams can have any crucial moments, he'll never be a winner and neither will his team.

Shurmur hasn't lost the team yet but as sure as Kim Kardashian finding another athlete to exploit he will lose this team if he doesn't find his inner winner and fast. If Shurmur doesn't understand that the reason his team and its fans are emotionally devastated yet again is not the loss itself but the pathetic way in which he made it transpire through his own timidity, then he might as well simplify his life and go back to being a lifelong assistant coach.

Shurmur had the game in his hands and panicked, like LeBron James. Predictably, the results were the same, both on and off the field.