



After Phil Dawson missed that Field Goal, tell me you didn't think to yourself: "*They're going to lose this game*"

Tell me that wasn't the first thing that jumped into your mind.

Liar.

The Browns lose a lot of games in ordinary ways too, but when it seems that they might accidentally win, they sometimes have to use extraordinary methods. No one is more creative in formulating new ways to lose than Cleveland town.

Now, missing a short FG late is hardly new. They did that just last week. So blowing several opportunities to put the game away and letting victory slip through their grimy fingers seemed downright mundane.

Stopping the enemy on the one yard line as time expired... now that was new.

What else is new is the almost imperceptible yet undeniable improvement of the Offense.

It started last week against the Rams and continued into this game. Colt making quicker decisions. The line protecting better and opening holes for an increasingly effective running game. The Wide Receivers making plays down the field. Pat Shurmur not sucking as much with his play selection.

It didn't pay off with a bevy of points, but the Browns rushed for 150 yards and didn't punt the last 39:27 of the game (3 punts the first 3 series, 0 punts the last 5) against a solid Jacksonville Defense (#3 overall). The run game in particular was working extremely well as the game wore on, that final drive that should have put the game away a good example.

I've seen many laud the Defense, but I don't necessarily agree. They let unimpressive rookie Blaine Gabbert check them down to death and convert too many 3rd Down opportunities, and the only reason that Maurice Jones-Drew wasn't more effective is that they didn't run him enough (although I must commend them for holding the NFL's 2nd leading rusher under a bill).

But this was the best team that the Browns have beaten this year (I know, that ain't sayin' much), and it was their strongest win. They really should've kicked the Jaguars asses. If they don't drop some easy picks, if Colt doesn't throw that ridiculous INT, if Phil Dawson doesn't gag an easy FG... what this team needs more than anything is to learn how to win. From the Head Coach to the Long Snapper, the Cleveland Browns don't have any experience consistently doing that on the NFL level.

They proved it by choking away the Rams game last week. And they tried real hard to choke this one away too. That last drive by the Jags was like ripping off an eyebrow with duct tape.

But they didn't (almost in spite of themselves). Jack Del Rio didn't call a Time Out until there was 8 seconds left (for reasons completely unknown) and didn't run MJD from a yard out. Joe Haden was barely able to rip Jason Hill's arm down and break up the would-be TD pass. D'Qwell Jackson was able to cover Mike Thomas on the final play. Browns win.

And you saw how much it meant to them. You saw Colt dying on the sidelines during that final drive, running onto the field in relief and joy as the final pass hit the dirt.

Games like that might not mean a lot to the fans. "*Meh, it's just the Jaguars,*" they grumble. Especially the draftniks that actively want the Browns to tank for a higher pick (I understand draft picks easing the pain of losing, but I can never purposely hope they lose).

But it means something to the players, and it would be immeasurably valuable if this team can somehow, some way, continue this development and win a couple of these AFC North games coming up and really set the table for a meaningful 2012 season.

Stats

Time of Possession: JAX - 30:53, CLE - 29:07

Total Yards: CLE - 334, JAX - 303

Yards Passing: JAX - 195, CLE - 186

Yards Rushing: CLE - 148, JAX - 108

First Downs: JAX - 23, CLE - 20

Turnovers Forced: JAX - 1, CLE - 0

Sacks: JAX – 2, CLE - 1

Final Score: □ Cleveland 14, Jacksonville 10

I was actually surprised they were this close. Cleveland's Offense seemed noticeably more effective than Jacksonville's, yet it was pretty even. The most important advantage the Browns had was in the rushing game, which featured a completely unexpected *OG-outrushes-MJD* phenomenon.

Truly, this game was a battle of like teams - offensively challenged, strong Defenses, questionable QB play. Yet both QB's had flashes of excellence (Colt was clearly better, though) and neither D dominated the way they probably should have.

But that's the NFL for you. There is one super-elite team (Green Bay), several very good teams, a few decent teams, and then a huge morass of mostly-suck. Fully half the league is just as bad as the Browns, and if they all played only each other they'd all end up 8-8.

One could call it the sacrifice of parity, but I'd say that parity would feature a world where one of these Muck Teams (CLE, SD, KC, DEN, SEA, STL, WAS, CAR, MIN, ARI, MIA, BUF, NYJ, IND, TEN, JAX) had a chance at beating the Packers.

They don't.

Game Balls

Chris Ogbonnaya - Really got it going in the 2nd Half, but what impressed me most was cramping mid-run, then coming back one play later for another good carry. He's cemented a place on this team go-forward, just how much of a place we shall see.

D'Qwell Jackson - Can we just get this guy an extension already?

Offensive Line - I can't find anything to complain about, and it had been so easy before the last couple games. Especially impressive against the JAX tough D.

Honorable Mention

Colt McCoy - It's not like the O Line has changed. It's not like the WR's have changed. It's not like Shurmur's not the guy calling the plays. Sure, they're all performing better, but the key to the Offensive improvement has clearly been improved QB play. More decisive, stretching the field, scrambling effectively when he needs to... Plus, the dude is just tough. He's so small, it almost seems obscene to watch him get beaten like an orphan, but he takes it and keeps fighting. He may not be the answer, but you gotta like the guy.

Jason Pinkston - Not getting beaten nearly as often, and had a beautiful block on the Og TD run, pulling out and taking the would-be tackler down.

Phil Taylor - Solid again, 9 tackles, a couple for loss. A foundation type player.

Jordan Norwood - That was a sweet juke you put on that guy. Could that be a playmaker that I

see?

Wall of Shame

Joe Haden - Two weeks in a row down here. Not happy, Joe. But you deserve it. You got beat on a bunch of slants by a mediocre Rook QB and a bunch of no-name Receivers. Dropped a few more picks. A nice PI call in crunch time. Just barely avoided giving up the winning TD. What's wrong with you, cochise? Sunshine was actually *going after you*. Embarrassing, man.

Sheldon Brown - A Sheldon can do your income taxes. If you need a root canal, Sheldon's your man... but coverin' and tacklin' is not Sheldon's strong suit. It's the name. 'Guard me Sheldon, you're an animal Sheldon, tackle me big Shel-don.' [Doesn't work](#) .

Usama Young - Couldn't guard Mercedes Lewis if Lewis were chained up and locked in a coffin which was locked in a closet which was in San Quentin.

Phil Dawson - Tell ya what, Phil, you kick it right down the middle and you don't have to worry about the Refs missing the call.

Steve Tasker - As a TV announcer, it is part of your job to know that Shaun Lauvao's name is not pronounced "Loo-ah-voe".

Regarding Tailoring Your System

In the last few weeks, I've heard a lot of complaints about Pat Shurmur not tailoring the Offense to fit Colt McCoy's strengths, namely running a lot more shotgun plays and rolling him out of the pocket.

And they use Tim Tebow's success in Denver as an example of doing that.

I must respectfully disagree with this notion.



Right now, Tebow is an awful pocket passer. If you grade him on his NFL-caliber QB skills, he's probably one of the worst in the league.

John Fox & Co. in Denver realized this after the Detroit game, so they severely adjusted their play calling to incorporate a majority of option elements, an Offense that hasn't worked consistently in the NFL since God was a kid.

Like the Wildcat a few years ago, it sometimes takes NFL Defenses a little while to remember

how to stop these things. Once they remember, then those gimmicks don't work any more. There's a reason they stopped running those things ages ago - NFL defenders are just too fast.

This option Offense that Denver is running isn't even as effective as the Wildcat. When first re-introduced a couple years ago, the Wildcat was fairly effective on a consistent basis. The Bronco Option only seems to work at the end of the 4th Quarter. Opponents with competent Offenses will bury Denver way before Tebow-Time arrives.

That Offense is bad and will likely get worse, and the Denver Defense can only carry the team so long. They might be able to win a few more games - they might even vie for a playoff spot in the weak AFC West. But you can rest assured that no team will win on a regular basis - much less contend for a championship - running that antiquated and stupid system. So they're just delaying the inevitable transition.

In the long run, this course of action is disastrous. Not only are you not developing Tebow at all, not seeing if he can actually run big-boy NFL Offenses, but you are getting just enough success that you'll probably have to also waste next year "finding out what Tebow has".

Ah, but at least for a few games in the middle of the season, the Bronco fans got to enjoy Tebow-mania. What the Broncos are doing is a nice story, but that story will end soon enough and they'll still have no idea if Tebow can play QB in the NFL. If you don't take your lumps now, you'll take them later; Denver is ignoring the big picture.

I don't defend Shurmur much, but I'd much prefer he try and see if Colt can run a pro-style system (complete with snaps under center) rather than coddle him with a system that won't ever get the Browns anywhere and will result in *maybe* a few more wins. Colt has to show he's got the skills to play NFL QB, and no amount of shotgun plays is gonna beat the elite teams if he doesn't.

Shurmur does need to get more creative/innovative to kick-start this thing, but I'd much rather have the way he's doing it as opposed to pointless dog-and-pony show that Fox is throwing out there.

The point is not to win games; it is to win a championship. Winning now is a nice perk during the quest to build a championship team, but, in the end, inconsequential.

Regarding the Rookie Wide Receivers

Greg Little is only the 4th best rookie WR in the class... and that ain't a bad thing.

Stats aside, here's how I rank the rook pass catchers that I've watched this season: 1. AJ Green (clearly elite), 2. Torrey Smith (a home run hitter), 3. Julio Jones (talented but injury-prone), 4. Greg Little.

I'm of a mind that Heckert would've taken AJ Green had he fallen, but he didn't. Obviously, he could've taken Jones, but got an Offer He Couldn't Refuse. And Smith went the pick before the Browns took Little - I was wanting Smith at that time (I was pissed when the Ravens took him) and I wouldn't be surprised if Heckert did too. So, really, "settling" for the 4th best Receiver in the draft was the best he could do, and being 4th best in that class doesn't mean he's not good (and it sure doesn't mean he's not the best WR on the team).

As for that Offer... The Browns get Greg Little (42 catches, 438 yards), Phil Taylor, Owen Marecic, and a 2012 #1 and #4 for Julio Jones (30 catches, 498 yards). How can you argue Cleveland got the best of that? For the love of... even comparing Little and Jones is almost a wash. Sure, you can argue that Jones would clearly be outperforming Little if he wasn't hurt, but ability to stay healthy is part of the package.

Just ask Montario Hardesty.

Regarding the AFC North

The AFC North has 24 wins in total, second in the NFL behind only the NFC North's 26 (it helps to have an undefeated team inflating the numbers). The next closest is the AFC East with 20, and a bunch with 19. Top to bottom, the AFC North appears to be the toughest division in the league.

Which makes the Browns closing schedule - 5 of their remaining 6 against the AFCN - so daunting. Cleveland may indeed improve from earlier in the season and have nothing to show for it.

What really stands out with these teams is the quality of the Defenses. The 4 AFCN teams are ranked #2 (Pittsburgh), #4 (Baltimore), #5 (Cleveland), and #6 (Cincy) in Total D. All 4 have allowed less than 200 points, with the Bengals having allowed the most with 195. Only 4 other teams in the entire NFL have allowed less than 200 (JAX, SF, HOU, and MIA - all teams that the Browns have played).

So Colt & Co. have their work cut out for them, especially seeing as they have scored only 145 points this year. Only 4 teams (JAX, IND, STL, and KC) have scored less, and they're the types of teams whose company you don't want to keep.

Regarding the QB Class

If Colt isn't the guy, the Top 4 QB's of the 2012 class were on full display on Saturday night. All of them came away looking very tempting.

I've detailed Andrew Luck (Stanford) many times before, and I still feel he is a sure-fire prospect, just a complete package. But we can't sneeze at Matt Barkley (USC), Robert Griffin III (Baylor), or Landry Jones (Oklahoma) either.

Barkley was stellar in beating the Ducks in Oregon. He throws a gorgeous ball with nice accuracy and velocity. Not the biggest guy or the most mobile, but plenty big enough (certainly bigger than Colt).

And RG3? Key-ryst, that guy is impressive. Just 6'2, but he definitely didn't look short out there. Fast as all get out, but seems to scramble to throw more than to run, which is the sign of a QB at heart. And throws a nice ball with a strong arm. His TD pass with a few seconds left was just short of amazing. Probably has the most upside of the group.

Even Landry Jones, who I feel is clearly last in this pack, showed his NFL potential. He has the best size (height-wise) and throws a really good ball as well. Sam Bradford is a tough act to follow in Oklahoma, but he might end up being the better QB (and still being the 4th QB drafted).

I know, I know, we all really want Colt to show us that he's "The Guy". I agree. If he could do that, it would allow the Browns to fill a different hole with that pick. But if he isn't, one of those 4 guys would instantly be the best QB to wear a Cleveland uniform since the early 90's.

Regarding Whatever

***Even in the largest jersey I've ever seen, Tony Pashos still looks like a water balloon that has been stuffed through a straw.

***That sure was an empty looking stadium Sunday.

***Dick Jauron is as conservative as freakin' Shurmur. I understand not wanting to live and die by the blitz, but unless your front four is dominating you need to sprinkle it in more than once a freakin' Half, dude. ESPECIALLY against a rookie QB.

***At the end of the first Half, JAX punted and their gunners played Keystone Cops by batting it around and into the End Zone. I swear that watching the Jags sometimes felt like watching Teal Browns.

***It seemed like the Browns emptied their Practice Squad onto the field. Guys like Scott Paxson and Emmanuel Stephens got tons of playing time. I'm not complaining, just found it interesting.

***I think I'm rooting for a Green Bay-New England Super Bowl. That would be a classic QB duel (one I hope the Pack would win).

***Sunshine - aka Blaine Gabbert - is destined for mediocrity. I didn't like his game coming into the NFL, I don't like it now. His arm is just OK. His accuracy is not so great. But the most damning thing against him is how he throws when someone is in his face. He doesn't step up and take the hit - he shrinks back and shies away and just throws the ball up for grabs. That shit won't fly in the NFL, son.

***My wife saw Peyton Hillis standing on the sidelines and asked me "*Is he ever going to come back?*"

"*Eventually, I guess,*" I replied.

"*Ogbannaya hurts his hammy and he's out one play. Hillis hurts his and he's out the whole season. What a little bitch,*" she stated, then left the room.

To be fair to Hillis, Og only had a cramp and Peyton's on her fantasy team. That's how everyone who has him in fantasy feels.

Next Up

Cincinnati Bengals (6-4).

OK, don't be ridiculous. Don't try and tell me the Browns have "no shot" to beat the Bengals on Sunday. Of course they do. This is the same team that they really should've beaten in Week 1. Now, yes, Andy Dalton has improved and the combination of good D, strong running, and competent QB will probably sink Cleveland. But I'd be very surprised if it were a blowout, and I would certainly not be shocked to see the Browns pull the big U.

However, I'm not putting Benjamins on it.

Bengals 20, Browns 17.