

Dawg's Eye View: Camp Intel

Written by {ga=jta1975}

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I couldn't stop smiling last week as I took the family to Berea for Browns training camp. The smile was, of course, from being around the cracking of the pads again, and certainly not from chasing around my 2-year old all day. Obviously with kids in tow I didn't get to watch every aspect of practice I would have liked, but I got plenty of information and formed plenty of opinions from being out at camp, so let's just jump right in.

Training camp

Atmosphere- Before I went to camp I wondered how active of a coach Brad Childress would be and I quickly found out that he is extremely active and he seemingly could always be seen in a player's or coach's ear. Not in a loud "everyone hear me" way, but he seemed to be constantly coaching.

I also wondered what HC Pat Shurmur would do during practice and you could see him watching most segments and taking notes. For the most part he let OC Childress run the segments and he observed. I also saw him wonder over to certain segments of defensive drills and, he was also intensely watching the special teams segments.

The defensive coaches operated like a machine, moving players to and from stations quickly as they wasted very little time starting their drills. You could really tell these guys are veteran coaches who know what they are doing and are comfortable in the system.

As a whole practice was fast-paced with players moving from segment to segment without much wasted time and the flow was coordinated and fast. One thing I also noticed, especially

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from the defensive players, was a high level of support for each other. Players were really engaged with watching the drills they were doing and cheering each other on. There were a few players that stood out vocally and none was more supportive and encouraging than DE Marcus Benard, who could be seen cheering his teammates on during almost every drill.

The theme of camp this year is unity and the team seemed to be embracing the concept during the time I watched them, which is good because chemistry within the group can go a long way in helping overcome some of the inexperience they will have.

That will be especially important on offense where the two players (Brandon Weeden and Trent Richardson) who will have the ball in their hands the most are rookies. Having good veteran leadership to rely on will be needed while the young players earn their NFL stripes.

Offense- As a whole the offensive unit looked like it was moving at a good pace and their play execution looked a lot crisper than I anticipated. I thought the WRs and the QBs were in good sync for so early in camp, and the RB group looked really explosive.

The first team offensive line was solid in pass protection but I will admit I was a bit disappointed in the push they got in the running game. There was no Phil Taylor or Ahtyba Rubin at practice and I thought the OL would be able to get more push against the other DTs, but they didn't get much on that day.

** As expected Brandon Weeden took every first team rep and looked pretty sharp. His arm strength was on full display and there was a ball thrown to Greg Little on a flag pattern that clearly showed the difference between Weeden and Colt McCoy.

The ball was a rope 30 yards, helmet high and Little made a great, NFL caliber catch on his back shoulder. That type of play is something that can only be made by the NFL QBs with above average arm strength because that is the type of throw that can't have too much air under it or the safety has an easy play on the ball. It was the perfect type of play to see the plus arm the young QB has.

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McCoy took all the second team reps and Seneca Wallace played with the 3rd string. Colt anticipated well and threw the ball with good timing but it was clear to see his best work was in the middle of the field where arm strength isn't a key factor.

** Greg Little looks like a totally different player to me. He ran sharp routes and snatched the ball with ease. There was no double catching and no episodes of stone hands. One of the aspects of his game I wanted to check out was how he played the ball downfield, and he looked much more natural and fluid making plays down the field. Little is primed to really make his mark based on what I saw at practice on that day.

** Mohamed Massaquoi looked as quick as I have seen him so far in his career. He really exploded off the line of scrimmage.....I am waiting to see him take a couple of shots before I get excited about him, but he looked the part on that day.

** Rookie WR Josh Gordon is a really big and athletic guy. He has great hands on anything waist high or above but I did see him struggle a bit with low balls. I guess for a player who stands almost 6-4 bare-footed I shouldn't get alarmed. I don't think he will see many footballs thrown at his knees.....if he does, he isn't being used correctly, so that will be on the coaching staff.

I was also glad to see that he was being thrown right in there and running with the first team on 3 WR sets. He made an awesome catch for a TD in the team portion of practice and he looks like a factor in the red-zone.

** More WR notes.....Josh Cooper didn't get any first team work but he was constantly open against the second team and made a few difficult catches. He is a natural pass catcher and he always seems to find his way open.

Josh Cribbs didn't run one snap during team drills as a WR while I was at camp.....Not one.

** TE Jordan Cameron looks like a TE this year. His body looks thick and strong. He was thrown at all day by McCoy and made some nice catches in the end-zone. He did drop one that hit him

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right in the hands so he needs to be more consistent, but as a whole, he looked good.

As good as Jordan Cameron looked, he wasn't better than Ben Watson. I thought there was a chance the team might be preparing Cameron to start this year, but if what I saw in practice was any indication, they couldn't justify that move at this point. Watson looked great and he reminded me why he is considered one of the TEs who have tremendous athleticism. He made a catch for a TD that was incredible. He went up high caught it over his shoulder and got his feet in bounds with some room to spare. It was a fabulous play and as long as he can stay healthy, he will continue to be a big weapon in the passing game.

** For Cleveland, when they do drills for the OL against the DL, they break up into left and right side groups so rookie RT Mitchell Schwartz was matched up mostly against Jabaal Sheard and Sheard ate him alive a few times. I am sure it will take the rookie a little bit of time to get acclimated to playing on the right side after playing on the left in college so I am not alarmed, but Sheard did make him look silly at times.

Speaking of offensive line play, Alex Mack and either guard doubling a DT is pretty unfair. I don't think I saw a single DT split one of their double teams. LG Jason Pinkston looked really quick and much more powerful than last year.

** I am pretty hard on FB Owen Marecic but I will be the first to admit that he has benefitted tremendously from having an actual offseason. He didn't look like a LB playing FB at all during practice. He looked much more athletic, he was much more fluid, and he actually looked way more natural with the football in his hands. As far as second year players are concerned, I would put Marecic in the top group when it comes to players that look better so far.

He does look more like the part of a FB but I will wait for full judgment until I see an ISO play during preseason where Marecic has to seek out and destroy an opposing LB before I say he has turned into the corner completely.

** Rookie RB Adonis Thomas is as quick as a hiccup. I really think Thomas has a chance to stick around in some capacity (maybe practice squad) because he makes people flat out miss. Thomas has that natural wiggle that can't be taught and he gets up field in a hurry. He is truly a change of pace runner that Cleveland could use.

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Also when it comes to the RB group, Montario Hardesty looks like the player Tom Heckert thought he was getting when he drafted him out of Tennessee. Hardesty looks explosive in every way out there on the practice field. He is clearly over the mental and physical hurdle of his knee injury. On one play in particular Hardesty took a handoff going left, juked a defender who had penetrated and then burst outside, easily getting the corner and turning up field. He looked quick, fast, and fluid.....on that play there was no hesitation whatsoever.

Defense- I didn't get as many looks at the second and third string defenders as I wanted but I made sure to watch the one on one drills with CBs and DL against offensive players

** I didn't spend as much time as I wanted watching the LBs but I did notice a few things and one was the quickness of Kaluka Maiaiva. He has really fast feet and he covers a lot of ground when they do change of direction drills.

Another thing that I noticed was how natural rookie James Michael-Johnson looks in zone coverage. He has that natural ability to drift into passing zones and he makes plays when his hands get on the ball. During a team segment he intercepted a ball and took it to the house. That play made me remember him getting an interception in the Senior Bowl this past winter so, adding it all up, JMJ looks like a player who can make plays in the passing game.

** From what I saw James Dockery is a blanket in man coverage. He was all over the WRs from the second unit. Too bad I didn't get to see him against the better WRs. Second year CB Buster Skrine didn't look impressive and he isn't playing at his timed speed. I am not sure if it is confidence or what, but he was far from impressive on the day I saw him.

CB Sheldon Brown played well in spurts but Cleveland's young WRs were not having a real hard time getting open on him. I saw Josh Gordon and Greg Little beat him fairly easily.

** The starting safeties (T.J. Ward and Eric Hagg) looked quick and covered ground well, but as we have seen in his first two seasons, Ward struggled in the red-zone keeping the TEs from making plays while they used their bodies as leverage. Both safeties did well covering their half of the field in the zone looks.

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Hagg looked comfortable making calls for the back end and he also plays big in the passing lanes. He has really long arms and huge hands so he plays even bigger than his barefoot height measurement of 6-1 3/8. Hagg has really good ability and he could end up being a true draft steal if he can make plays that match his physical talent.

** As expected, rookie DT Billy Winn is nightmare for offensive guards to block when he is pass rushing. He is lightning quick and strong enough to push past the offensive lineman when they are off balance. He still doesn't have the best anchor, but he is really good when he is attacking.

John Hughes plays really strong and is tough to move but he didn't look like he can collapse the pocket. My first sight of him in person confirms what most have said about him being stout at the point of attack, but I saw minimal pass rush out of the big man.

Marcus Benard and Juqua Parker look fast and I saw them both using multiple moves. Another DE who caught my eye was Emmanuel Stephens. Stephens looked pretty explosive going against the backup tackles. It will be interesting to see if he can get a pass rush against better tackles.

** One thing about the defense that is evident when you compare them with Cleveland's defenses of recent years past is their speed. Gone are the bigger, slow moving defenders and in are really quick, explosive athletes. Other than the DTs, the defensive unit can really move and they run to the football really well.

Random thoughts

** I really didn't bring up RB Trent Richardson but he looked as advertised. I don't think practices (where they aren't tackling) is the best place to see all the things Richardson brings to the table, but when things are live Clevelanders will grow to love his style.

** It was really apparent when you watched HC Pat Shurmur on the practice field he is much

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more comfortable in his skin. Having experience and an offensive coordinator has him looking refreshed.

** WR Carlton Mitchell was on the sidelines riding a bike during practice. I don't see how he makes the roster this year. He is a great example of gifted athletes not being able to figure out the NFL or stay healthy.

** It's nice that they hand out tickets to little kids to ensure they get an autograph at the end of practice and my daughter hasn't stopped talking about meeting Trent Richardson.....but it is pretty stupid to limit the autograph session to kids under 12. I had a 15 year old with me who was from a different state and who's not even a Browns fan, but he wanted terribly to get in line so he could get Richardson's autograph, and he couldn't because he couldn't get a ticket.

The people who run the Browns should realize that teenagers are fans too and they need to find a way to embrace them. I felt bad for the kid and came real close to making a scene but I didn't want to spoil it for my daughter.

** Only in Cleveland can a kicker make a crowd roar like Phil Dawson did while I was at camp. There was a segment where the team was scrimmaging on the field that is closest to the media area and the people sitting on the bleachers were being blocked by the rest of the team so Dawson starting kicking FGs in front of the blocked fans.

Dawson proceeded to nail 60 yard FGs one right after the other and the crowd cheered every time he drilled one. He is getting up there in age but he still has a strong, accurate leg. It will be interesting when Cleveland has to (or is able to) find a guy to replace him, because based on the kicking of Jeff Wolfert during practice.....he clearly is not that guy.

All right Browns fans, I plan on going to camp again next week so I will see if any of my early observations changed and I will be on the lookout for anything else I think is interesting.....until next time.....Go Browns!