



The year 2010 might have been a little short on good news for Cleveland sports fans, but it was far from uneventful.

That's why this year's countdown is a little different, rebranded from "Top 10 sports stories" to "10 biggest storylines."

Here you'll find the good, bad and ugly that made 2010 another memorable year in Cleveland sports. Some spots on our countdown will make you dream about the future, some might give you nightmares. But it's all here -- our send-off to 2010, as we wait with equal parts anticipation and trepidation for what 2011 will bring.

Over the last five days of the year, our top 10 Cleveland sports storylines will be unveiled here, leading up to No. 1 on New Year's Eve. Check back daily as the countdown continues.

6. The emergence of Peyton Hillis

September

When Montario Hardesty suffered yet another knee injury in the final game of the preseason, most Browns fans assumed Jerome Harrison would resume his feature back duties. He was red hot at the end of the 2009 season, and we thought he at least deserved a more extended look.

He got that look in the first two games of the '10 season, the Browns went 0-2, and Harrison didn't really do that much. But there was this other guy. Kind of a big dude. The Browns got him in the long-since-forgotten Brady Quinn trade with Denver back in March.

We knew Hillis was a side of beef. What we didn't know is that he is a side of beef mounted on gazelle legs.

Hillis had 17 rushes for 76 yards and scored a couple of touchdowns in the first two weeks of the season. We labored under the assumption that he is a short-yardage back. When you absolutely had to get the first down on 3rd and 2, you called Hillis' number.

But the next week, against Baltimore, Hillis started to prove that he was equally as dangerous on 1st and 10, 2nd and 9 or 3rd and 8.

Hillis amassed 144 yards on 22 carries against Baltimore, and carried 27 times for 102 yards the next week against Cincinnati. Though his rushing production slumped in the ensuing few weeks, he made up for it by exhibiting skill as a backfield receiver.

His greatest day of 2010, at least through the season's first 14 games, was Nov. 7 against New England: 36 receiving yards, 184 rushing yards and two touchdowns.

Though the entire team's performance has started to decline in recent weeks, Hillis has been one of several great discoveries for the Browns in 2010, and a potential major piece of the future. All for the price of a quarterback who is now buried on Denver's bench.

As long as Eric Mangini, or whoever is coaching the Browns in the coming years, doesn't run Hillis into the ground with a crushing workload, the Browns figure to have a potent rushing attack in 2011 and beyond.

5. Haden, Ward, McCoy headline Browns 2010 draft

April 22

On a team filled with urgent needs, the defensive secondary was arguably the biggest for the Browns as they headed into the 2010 NFL Draft.

The Browns ranked 29th against the pass last year, giving up 3,915 yards and 22 passing touchdowns. The defensive backfield was a sieve. The Browns were in desperate need of size and athleticism at both the safety and cornerback positions.

Mike Holmgren and new GM Tom Heckert wasted no time in addressing the defensive backs in the draft, selecting Florida corner Joe Haden seventh overall and Oregon safety T.J. Ward 38th overall.

At 59, the Browns took running back Montario Hardesty from Tennessee, in a pick acquired from Philadelphia.

But the headline-grabbing pick was acquired from Oakland in the Kamerion Wimbley trade. That was the third round pick, at No. 85, used to select Texas quarterback Colt McCoy.

If early returns are an indication, the 2010 draft is the Browns' best in quite some time, and gives us all reason to be optimistic that the Browns can, finally, do what all perennial winning clubs do and build through the draft.

Ward was a starter out of the gate, and leads the team in tackles. Haden was a starter by midseason, and shows promise as an elite cover corner. He has also snagged five interceptions through the first 14 weeks, including a pick in four straight games.

McCoy was pressed into service as the starting QB in Week 6 against Pittsburgh. In what was supposed to be a watch-and-learn year for him, he's thrived when tossed to the wolves, completing 65 percent of his passes for over 1,200 yards -- and that's after missing four weeks with an ankle injury.

If a healthy Hardesty can rebound to share the workload with Peyton Hillis next year, the Browns might have finally hit the draft day grand slam they've desperately needed to hit since re-entering the league 11 years ago.

Now, let's see them do it again on draft day 2011.

4. The death of Bob Feller

December 15

Free agency and modern salaries make a modern Bob Feller an impossible proposition. The modern Indians wouldn't, in their right minds, ever let a 17-year-old pitch in the big leagues without a day in the minors. They'd have too much invested in his development. Even if he could throw Feller's explosive fastball and mind-bending curveball, he'd be lucky to reach the majors before the age of 21.

And the whole idea of a modern pitcher like Feller spending his whole career in Cleveland? Dream on. If Feller pitched for the Indians in the 2000s, he'd already have gone the way of C.C. Sabathia and Cliff Lee, offloaded on a big market team for prospects before the free agency gun could be cocked and placed at the temple of Tribe management.

Feller truly was one of a kind, a man and a pitcher belonging to a different era, when Cleveland was an industrial powerhouse, the Indians won the World Series, and Cleveland baseball wasn't a pushover. Days that aren't coming back anytime soon.

Feller won 266 games and struck out 2,581 batters in parts of 18 seasons. He lost three and a half seasons to the Navy in World War II, and who knows how many wins and strikeouts. He certainly would have won 300. He might have won 350. He might have struck out 4,000.

It's all up for debate. But now those bar debates are tinted with a bit more sadness, knowing that we will never see another Bob Feller in this town.