Before anything else, we know now the Cleveland Browns will not go winless in 2012. That became a certainty around 3:50 PM EDT on Sunday when safety Sheldon Brown, whose has had trouble covering just about every receiver he's faced this season, picked off Bengals quarterback Andy Dalton and went in for a touchdown giving the Browns an insurmountable lead in their 34-24 victory.

We also know that the Browns will not go winless in their division in 2012. For all the reasons we already know, the Browns have had trouble with Pittsburgh, Baltimore and Cincinnati for the last few years. Actually more like the last 12 years. You'd think that dumb luck coupled with the fact that the Browns see each of these teams twice a year would account for more wins in their division then they've had. The Browns unfortunately have been mostly dumb at making their own luck and thus as satisfying as Sunday's win was, it was more satisfying simply because it killed two

Cyclops with one win, so there is that.

We also know that if quarterback Brandon Weeden could play against Cincinnati every week, he'd make the Pro Bowl this season. Weeden has a quarterback rating that is around 92 vs. the Bengals and around 52 vs. the rest of the league (a limited sample, to be sure). It's an odd circumstance, but if you're going to own an opponent it might as well be one in your division.

The Bengals aren't awful in the same sense that the Browns are awful, but the Browns don't represent the best barometer against which to measure awful. You can't go nearly 11 months without a win without sinking to the bottom of pile. The Bengals live in the vicinity with a bunch of other teams, but they're closer neighbors to the Browns then they'd care to admit.

The Bengals have averaged a tidy 6.5 wins each year since 1999, the time period that parallels Browns 2.0. (If you want to go back further, the 10 years prior to that were even worse when they averaged 4.6 wins.) Given all the built in advantages of an incumbent team, the Bengals have squandered them like a barfly squanders brain cells on a Saturday night. It's just that the Browns, residing in the same division, have been even worse so we don't tend to notice the disquieting level of suck coming from the Queen City.

But if you were a member of the Brown family, I'm sure you'd see things differently, particularly if your primary goal is to run things as cheaply as possible. In a testament to frugalness that looks like patience to those who don't know better, the Brown family, the cheapest owners since fictional Vegas showgirl Rachel Phelps inherited the fictional Cleveland Indians in the too-true-life movie Major League, changed course about 10 years ago. They had been going through their own series of incompetent head coaches with little to show for it except angina so they hit upon something else. They hired Marvin Lewis and have let him toil for the last 10 years despite his having more than proven that as a head coach he makes a nice coordinator.

But in a sense I see where they're coming from. By sticking with Lewis they avoided having their capital structure infected by Lernerism, the malady by which an in-over-his-head-and-indifferent-about-it-anyway owner hires coach after coach as a way of placating fans and then pays them off on contracts they never deserved in the first place. By hanging on to Lewis, the Brown family has avoided the messy divorces that Lerner has gone through with everyone he's ever hired and as a bonus have seen their average win total creep up to just under 7 wins a season in those 10 years.

That kind of backdrop in some measure explains why a 29-year-old rookie quarterback can look so great against the Bengals. They have a habit of making boatloads of other quarterbacks look good, too.

But let's not take the sheen off of Sunday's victory just yet. That will come soon enough anyway. There's 10 more games left in the season and plenty of opportunities to either build on or squander the good will generated by that win. You'd like to think the Browns have it in them to run counter to type but the last time a Cleveland team did something it wasn't supposed to was, well, 1964.

So say it again and be happy. The Browns won't finish the season winless. With the victory, they've rejoined the ranks of the merely awful, matching the win totals thus far of 4 other teams. It's officially a battle for next year's number one draft choice.

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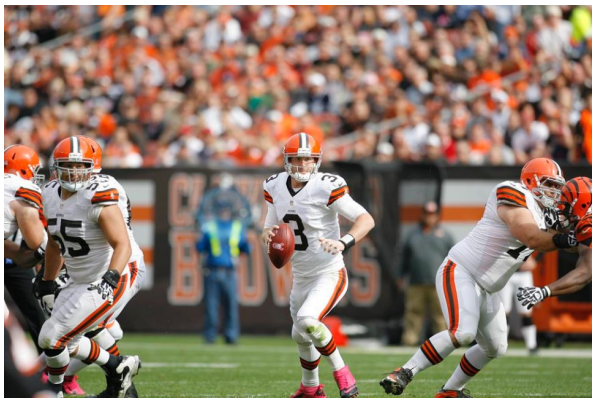

Six games into the season, it's probably safe to conclude that the Browns' offense is better than last year's mess to the tune of nearly an extra touchdown per game. Some of that is undoubtedly skewed by the simple fact that they have played the Bengals in fully one-third of those games. That's actually worse news for the Bengals than the Browns.

The Bengals have given up the third most points in the AFC and fully one-third of those games have been against the Browns, a team with one of the worst offenses last season. (Not for nothing, but the Browns and Bengals have given up the same number of points so the Browns, too, are tied for third-worse in the AFC, which in turn skews the Bengals' relatively lofty offensive stats as well).

Weeden continues to be an interception machine. His 10 lead the league but guess who's right behind him? Yes, that Andy Dalton with 9. Weeden is 29th in the league with a 55.2% completion rate, yet he's 9th in league in overall yards. If he were completing 60% of his passes, which is at the bottom of what is considered good, he'd be around 6th or 7th overall in the league in passing. Would that mean anything in the win column? Probably not, but Weeden isn't embarrassing himself out there, either.

What Weeden is doing is getting a good amount of yardage for his completions. The bomb to Josh Cooper on Sunday certainly helped, but it's also clear that Weeden likes to throw

downfield and Shurmur likes Weeden to throw downfield. It's also why Weeden is an interception machine.

What's somewhat stunning about Weeden's numbers is the fact that, charitably, the Browns' receiving corps is in transition. To be more honest, it's a receiving corps that's made up of essentially 4 slot receivers, a speedy project, and a couple of minor talents at tight end. Cooper and the other Josh, Gordon, are relatively intriguing. It would be more useful, though, if one or the other was fast enough to legitimately play on the outside.

Greg Little was supposed to take a step forward this season and hasn't. I'd say he's regressed but that's only if you measure it against where you thought he'd be or where he should be given his draft status. In actuality, he's pretty much the same butter fingered receiver as a year ago.

In Sunday's game, as in last week's loss, Little comes across as someone who's entered the witness protection program and is trying to preserve his new identity. He remains, from a contribution perspective, Precious Little. He caught 3 quite harmless passes for a grand total of 18 yards.

But there is a glimmer of light. On Sunday Little seemed to take his blocking duties far more seriously than at any time this season. That perhaps is the best sign that a receiver understands he's on the coach's shit list and wants to get off it. No one seems willing to trust Little on what might be an important reception so they keep him interested for now by sending a few passes his way while watching to see if he pouts the rest of the time. For what it's worth, Little doesn't appear to be pouting.

We've picked on Little plenty because there's been plenty to pick on. But perhaps there's no player on the Browns' current roster that is offering less right now than fullback Owen Marecic. Browns fans are used to management overpromising and under delivering, so the fact that Marecic is lousy when we were told he'd be good is of no moment. What is of the moment is how truly awful Marecic has been. The only one contributing less to the team right now is Mike Holmgren but another game like Sunday's and Marecic will take over that spot as well.

Ostensibly a fullback, Marecic's main job is to open holes for Trent Richardson. He's been a spectacular failure. Time and again running plays get blown up because of a missed block by

Marecic. On the surface it looks like Richardson is having a more difficult transition to the NFL than Weeden when the opposite should be the case. But one of the reasons Richardson is struggling is that he gets virtually no secondary blocks.

The offensive line is doing a credible enough job blocking to allow Richardson some room to maneauver but when teams stack 7 or 8 in the box there simply isn't enough linemen to go around. That's why it's important for a player like Marecic to add some support by helping open the holes that Richardson is supposed to run through.

Watching Marecic block is like watching Alex Rodriguez bat in the post season. If he's not outright whiffing at an opposing lineman or linebacker, he's chipping at him in a way that's hardly noticed by the opposition. At most, when it comes to blocking Marecic's nickname should be Snafu because he causes only minor inconveniences to the opposition. Indeed you can make the argument that whatever success Richardson's had thus far is more than he deserves.

Occasionally Marecic's also called on to run the ball or be an outlet receiver. He had a grand total of 4 rushing attempts last season and has none this year. He's been thrown to 5 times this year and has dropped every one of them, including two on Sunday. In other words, the only reason his failures aren't felt on a grander level is simply because head coach Pat Shurmur has all but eliminated his chances to fail. Why he's ever given any chance remains a mystery.

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Part of the reason Shurmur has felt his shorts getting a little tight in the seat has to do with his rather odd play calling in crucial situations. But if you want to maintain any credibility as a critic, you have to acknowledge when the calls go the right way as well.

In particular were the back to back plays midway through the 4th quarter that led to the Browns taking a 27-17 lead. The first play was a 3rd and 1 pass from the Cincinnati 26 yard line. It was a situation that screamed "run," particularly given how well Montario Hardesty had been running. But Weeden faked the handoff and hit tight end Jordan Cameron for what became a 23 yard gain, down to the Cincinnati 3-yard line.

The Browns were then forced to call time out because, apparently, no one else on the offense could get set in time given how giddy they were over a gutsy call finally working. During the time out, Shurmur essentially called for the same play when a few runs into the line would have been far more expected. It worked again as Weeden found a wide open Ben Watson for the 3-yard touchdown. It was as fine a series of play calling as Shurmur has had since he's been in Cleveland.

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I'd say it was an appropriate way for Randy Lerner to go out as majority owner, but for that to be true Lerner would have to actually show up at the game to experience it first hand. By all accounts Lerner disappeared the day the papers were signed and hasn't been seen in Berea since.

The fact that it was owner in waiting Jimmy Haslam III in the locker room after the game smiling and shaking hands tells you as much about the difference between Haslam and Lerner as does the fact that one is self-made and the other self-involved.

I believe Haslam when he says that he'll make no moves until the season is over, but his presence has already made a huge difference. He's not local but there's no question he's already embraced his ownership in a way that Lerner never could. I don't know whether or not he'll be a good owner and I would say it can't get any worse than it was under Lerner, but then I remember that I said the Browns couldn't get any worse once they hired Holmgren, Tom Heckert and Shurmur, but then that trio ripped off a tidy little 11-game winning streak (12 in the division). So yea, things can actually get worse.

That said, I don't look for it. Haslam is a successful working businessman. That doesn't always translate, of course, but it's always nice when the owner understands the value of a hard day's work. Lerner couldn't relate and never wanted to anyway. I look for Haslam to bring a business discipline to this franchise that it's lacked for years. That of course hasn't helped the fortunes of the Bengals for the last 20 or so years, but to paraphrase an old Bengal, they don't live in Cleveland. Our expectations have always been much higher.