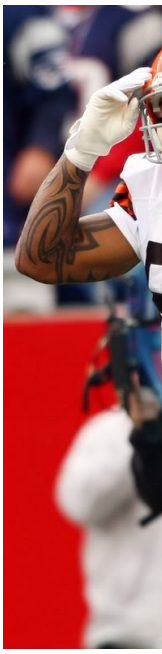
With the dust now settled on the beginning of the season and their bye week behind them, the Browns find themselves at 3-3 with a pretty opportunistic remaining schedule. Amazingly, the Browns final six games of the regular season all come against teams wth losing records and their remaining foes have a cumulative .359 winning percentage. In his latest, Nick Allburn breaks down the Browns final ten games for us, assessing the threat level of each contest.



Before the season began, everybody and their brother identified the first six games as the most crucial stretch for the Browns.

Cleveland was set to face each of its three divisional foes at home, in addition to a New England team that many pegged as the favorite to win the Super Bowl. The Raiders looked like the gimme victory, but they aren't the doormat of the league anymore, and they dealt the Browns a heartbreaking loss. As for the Dolphins, well, nobody expected them to be both woebegone and winless.

The dust has settled, and the Browns have exceeded all realistic expectations, taking a 3-3 record out of the bye week. It's time for the second half of the Browns' season to begin.

At 3-3, the Browns are right in the middle of things. But nothing comes easy in the stacked AFC, where there are nine teams other than Cleveland at .500 or better.

Still, the schedule is about to soften significantly, with six of the Browns' ten remaining opponents coming from two very fragile divisions, the AFC East and the NFC West.

Let"s take a look at the balance of the schedule, which has a .359 combined winning percentage.

Week 8: At St. Louis

Injuries have left the Rams battling the Dolphins, Falcons, and Jets for the first overall pick in next April's Draft. It all started in the preseason, when St. Louis lost their offensive anchor, left tackle Orlando Pace. Things snowballed from there, and the Rams have been forced to deal with injuries to all of their key pieces on offense; Marc Bulger, Torry Holt, Steven Jackson, and Isaac Bruce have all spent time on the injury report.

The Rams don't seem like much of a threat, and there won't be any excuses if the Browns can't beat them. That said, the Browns, namely Derek Anderson, have yet to prove that they can both play well and win on the road.

Threat Level: 3

Week 9: Seattle

The Seahawks are not the same team that lost to the Pittsburgh in Super Bowl XL. In my opinion, they've been one of the league's most overrated teams during the last two seasons.

The departure of guard Steve Hutchinson prior to last season was a devastating blow to the Seattle running game, and they can no longer rely on running stretch plays to the left for five yards whenever they want. Shaun Alexander, who was always more a product of great blocking than great moves, has lost a step, battling injuries during the last two seasons and averaging only 3.4 yards per carry this season.

The Seahawks are quite vulnerable outside of the friendly confines of Qwest Field. If the Cleveland defense can slow down the Seattle offense, even a little bit, this becomes a very winnable game.

Threat Level: 5

Week 10: At Pittsburgh

Will this be the year the Browns finally slay the dragon? My heart is saying ‘yes', but my head is saying ‘no'.

Unfortunately, even with a new coach, Pittsburgh is still Pittsburgh. The Steelers have lost two close games on the road, but they've looked damn close to bulletproof in Heinz Field. Expect lots of Willie Parker and Najeh Davenport, setting up some killer play action from Ben Roethlisberger.

The Browns' only chance in this one is to turn DA, Edwards, and Winslow loose, and let the chips fall where they may. This is the NFL, and anyone can win on any given Sunday, but this is clearly the toughest game left on the schedule.

Threat Level: Midnight (actually, it's 9)

Week 11: At Baltimore

The Ratbirds are in a state of flux. Their defense has gotten a little old, and on offense, they've handed the keys to Kyle Boller. Willis McGahee, not Jamal Lewis, now runs the football. Still, Baltimore is a tough match up on the road.

When the Browns defeated the Ravens in Cleveland, one of the big mysteries was why the Ravens **ever** put the ball in the air. Brian Billick's a jerk, but he''s not a total idiot, and the Browns will be forced to stop McGahee this time around. Once again, Cleveland will need a strong road performance from Derek Anderson to pull this one out.

Threat Level: 7

Week 12: Houston

The Texans are showing signs of life for the first time since their 2002 inception. How much does Atlanta owner Arthur Blank regret trading Matt Schaub to the Texans?

The Texans, like the Browns, can put up points, but have trouble slowing down the opposition. Houston's explosive star receiver, Andre Johnson, should be healthy by week 12, which will add another dimension to the Texans' offense.

Although the Texans have made strides this season, the Browns have to like their chances at home.

Threat Level: 4

Week 13: At Arizona

The Cardinals are going through quarterbacks faster than Takeru Kobayashi mows down Nathan"s hot dogs. By the time week 13 rolls around, the Cards might be trying to coax Jake Plummer out of retirement.

It's easy to see the Cardinals on the schedule and pencil in a ‘W'. But there's no denying that Arizona has improved with Pittsburgh"s former OC, Ken Whisenhunt, at the helm. The Cardinals are currently 3-4, but three of their losses were by a field goal or less.

Depending on whether or not Kurt Warner is healthy, this could be one of the toughest games left on the schedule.

Threat Level: 6

Week 14: At New York Jets

The Jets stink, and that's why their playoff birth last season left many scratching their heads. Chad Pennington has a spaghetti noodle for an arm, and their defense can't stop anyone, yielding an average of 27.4 points per game.

The Browns will score on the Jets, and they should be able to slow down the New York offense. This game should be a slam dunk.

The only fly in the ointment could be Kellen Clemens, the Jets' second-year quarterback from Oregon. With the Jets out of contention, Clemens will likely be under center when the Browns head to the Meadowlands. Clemens has shown

promise in limited action this season, and could be a bit of a wild card.

Threat Level: 2

Week 15: Buffalo

Some thought the Bills might be in postseason contention this year, but at 2-4, they'll have to fight an uphill battle. Buffalo has lost two games by a single point.

Buffalo currently ranks 31st in both total offense and defense, which isn't a recipe for success. Rookie quarterback Trent Edwards has shown flashes while filling in for the injured J.P. Losman, but the Bills have had trouble getting the football to receiver Lee Evans, their best player on offense.

The Bills have a history of overachieving during head coach Dick Jauron's tenure, but in Cleveland Browns Stadium, the Bills shouldn't pose much of a threat.

Threat Level: 2

Week 16: At Cincinnati

The 51-45 Cleveland win over the Bengals in the second week of the season suggests that there won't be much defense in this one. This game is a fantasy footballer''s dream come true.

Cincinnati receiver Chris Henry will be back from his lengthy Roger Goodell-sponsored vacation, which won't help the Browns' chances of solving Carson Palmer and the Cincy offense.

Considering how prolific both offenses have been, and how lousy both defenses have been, anything can, and probably will happen.

Threat Level: 7

Week 17: San Francisco

The 49ers were the sexy pick of many to win the NFC West, and some picked them to go as far as the NFC title game. However, injuries and underperformance have been the flavor of the day in the land of Rice-A-Roni.

Former number one pick Alex Smith has been banged up, as has tight end Vernon Davis, the darling of the 2006 NFL Combine. San Francisco's defense has been adequate, but they haven't been able to score on anyone, averaging only 13 points per game.

The Niners are going to have to prove they can move the football before they'll scare anyone, but at least San Francisco still has the Golden Gate Bridge and Steve McQueen's iconic car chase from *Bullitt*.

Assuming that Old Man Winter wakes up by late December, home field advantage should play a role against the 49ers, who hail from a far more temperate climate. Tony Bennett may have left his heart in San Francisco, but the Niners better make damn sure they don't forget their parkas.

Threat Level: 4

The Browns are better, and the remainder of their schedule doesn't have many scary match ups, if they were in the NFC, they'd probably be playing football in January. But the Browns are in the AFC, the varsity league, where playoff spots aren't simply handed out to those who can walk and chew gum at the same time.

Nine wins with tiebreakers might get you into the bracket, but you need ten wins to like your chances. That means the Browns need to go 7-3 down the stretch. In order to do so, Derek Anderson has to develop some consistency from one week to the next, the defense has to be able to make a stop every now and then, the Browns find ways to win on the road, all while continuing to avoid the injury bug.

Seven to nine wins are attainable, but at least for now, the jury's out on the playoffs.

The Browns are good enough on offense to snatch a few victories from the jaws of defeat, but their defense is lousy enough to give a handful of games away.

Nobody knows whether or not the Browns can put the pieces together and make the playoffs, but the very fact that they're even in the conversation is significant.

For a fan base that's been up against the ropes for years, the ‘07 Browns have given us something far more valuable than a win. For the first time in a long time, they've given us hope.