Brandon Freaking McDonald (wow!), Kellen Winslow, Jamal Lewis, Kam Wimbley, DA, Vickers, Grantham. There were certainly no shortage of heroes this weekend for the orange and brown, always a nice problem to have. Who did Nick pick amongst all these options? And who were his zeroes this week for a game in which the whole team played pretty well? It's Heroes & Zeroes time here at TCF.

I hate to break it to you, but the Browns have gotten boring.

Another week, another win, making it five out of six for the team with no logo. No double-digit comebacks, no last second field goals, no overtime. The score was 27-17, but the game wasn't that close, as the Browns took the lead late in the first half, built a comfortable lead in the second half, and then shut the door on the Texans with a steady diet of Jamal Lewis' bruising runs.

Just another day at the office for a team that has vastly exceeded everyone's expectations except for a few extremely inebriated Clevelanders. If the Browns can put together a few more "boring" games, they'll find themselves somewhere they haven't been for nearly five years: the playoffs.

This Week's Heroes

Author"s Note: There aren't enough Dog Bones to go around this week, and that's a great problem to have...

Five Dog Bones: Brandon McDonald

Rookie Brandon McDonald (fourth round pick, Memphis) is one of only four (out of seven) members of last April's draft class who remain on the active roster. At least we know that McDonald's roster spot certainly wasn't wasted.

An injury kept Eric Wright out of the lineup, and gave McDonald a chance to shine in the nickel package. McDonald responded, playing exceptionally well in coverage. The Texans were well aware that the Browns were giving a greenhorn significant time in the secondary, and made a concerted effort to keep Andre Johnson on McDonald's side of the field. But McDonald rose to the occasion, helping the secondary limit the uber-talented Andre Johnson to just 37 yards on three catches.

McDonald''s biggest play of the day was clearly his fourth quarter interception of Matt Schaub, which set up the Browns' final score of the day, a Jamal Lewis touchdown run that erased any doubt. If that wasn't enough, McDonald also had a big day on special teams, making two tackles in kick coverage.

Although it was only one game, it's difficult not to be impressed with McDonald. How McDonald has been stuck behind a stiff like Kenny Wright on the depth chart is beyond me. McDonald looks to have potential as a nickel back, and possibly a starter at some point down the road. Phil Savage's maneuvering on draft day traded quantity for quality, and assuming that Brady Quinn's progressing as rapidly as has been rumored, Savage appears to have added four quality pieces via the ‘07 draft.

Four Dog Bones: Kellen Winslow

During the last two seasons, Kellen Winslow has become the heart and soul of the Cleveland Browns. Do you remember when Winslow was ripped by the media

for stating that "I hate to be brash, but I think my 90 percent [health] is still better than every tight end out there." As far as being a receiver's concerned, I'm inclined to agree with him.

Braylon Edwards can still be inconsistent, but Winslow has given the Browns the kind of reliability that Karl Malone used to deliver on the hardwood for the Utah Jazz. And unlike the Mailman, Winslow delivers almost exclusively on Sundays.

Only once this year has Winslow posted fewer than four catches, and Sunday marked his second game of 10-plus catches, and his third 100 yard game of the year. Winslow leads all tight ends in receptions (tied with Tony Gonzalez), receiving yards, and yards per catch, and ranks seventh in touchdowns. There aren't many receivers in the league more adept at finding holes in coverage and elevating to make the tough catch.

No Browns player is more deserving of Pro Bowl recognition than Winslow. Well, maybe Joshua Cribbs.

Three Dog Bones: Jamal Lewis

"When it gets to be cold and it's November and December, it's my time of year. It's time to run the football." -Jamal Lewis

Jamal Lewis had his second consecutive strong performance, and has exceeded 20 carries in back-to-back games for the first time this season. Lewis appears to be finding a groove, and not a moment too soon, as Cleveland's final four games are in cold weather cities (New York, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Cleveland).

With 29 carries for 134 yards, Lewis helped the Browns bulldoze the Texans.

Lewis added a touchdown which pushed his season total to eight scores, already the third most touchdowns in his career. Lewis has an outside chance to tie or break his career-high of 14 touchdowns (2003), and is quietly compiling a very solid season.

In the past two games, Lewis has been running with a renewed vigor, and his foot injury seems healed. The remainder of the Browns' schedule is composed of at least four teams that they **should** beat. With the exception of Cincinnati and possibly Arizona, there aren't any teams that the Browns should ever trail by more than a possession, so we should see a very balanced attack from Rob Chudzinski"s offense.

These are teams that the Browns should lead in the second half, comfortably in most cases, so Lewis can expect a heavy workload in the games to come. I still think the Browns should be working Jason Wright into the game more, not only as a change of pace, but to ensure that Lewis is fresh down the stretch.

Two Dog Bones: Lawrence Vickers

Lawrence Vickers is now on the short list of my favorite Browns, a list that also includes Steve Heiden, Joe Thomas, and Kellen Winslow.

Although Jamal Lewis received most of the fanfare, Vickers was an integral part of Lewis" success against the Texans. It was an absolute pleasure to watch Vickers lead block for Lewis, blowing up defenders to spring Lewis to the second and third level. Vickers' progression as a blocker over the last year and a half has been amazing, and it's safe to say that he was a steal for Phil Savage in the sixth round of the ‘06 draft.

True fullbacks are an endangered species in the NFL, with many teams switching to a more versatile H-back that's closer to a tight end than a fullback. Teams want

fullbacks that can catch the football and be put in motion before the snap, and they"re willing to sacrifice the power blocking of a traditional fullback for the speed of a hybrid.

The Browns used to have a traditional fullback in Terrelle Smith, and while Smith was a sound blocker, his hands were made of granite and he was often too slow to lead block on sweeps and other running plays to the outside. Vickers is an upgrade over a traditional fullback like Smith in almost every facet of the game; he's faster, a competent receiver, a quality ball carrier, and can still lay the lumber on blocks.

Lone Bone: Todd Grantham

Grantham has taken some major heat from fans for the defense's apparent regression this season, but his scheme got the job done this week. Houston's best offensive weapon is Andre Johnson, and the Browns keyed on Johnson, deciding to force guys like Owen Daniels, Ron Dayne, and Kevin Walter to beat them.

While those three all played a solid game, it wasn't enough without a meaningful contribution from Johnson, their resident superstar. The Browns allowed 314 yards of total offense to the Texans. And while that isn't a great number, it's almost 100 yards less than the 406 yards per game the Browns were yielding prior to the Houston game.

It's only one week, and the defense is still the team's obvious weakness, but maybe this is a harbinger of things to come. If Grantham's defense can achieve an average level of performance, or even mediocrity, the Browns will cruise to a playoff birth and might be a tough out come January.

This Week's Zeroes

Five Demerits: The Rooneys and Pittsburgh Brass

Coming off of a game during which the Browns had few figures ripe for ridicule, the Pittsburgh's management came through in the clutch to get the nod.

Steelers" management decided to re-sod Heinz Field after four WPIAL high school games were played on the ketchup field on Friday, AND the University of Pittsburgh squared off against South Florida on Saturday. Mind you, it wasn't true replacement - the new turf was simply rolled out on top of the field - which might explain why Willie Parker looked about three inches taller this week.

The old field wasn't removed or killed/ground up because it will only stay in place for the remainder of this season. After the season, the new turf will be removed and the original playing surface will be re-exposed and used in the future.

I had a good laugh about this concept when I heard about it prior to Monday night's game, but the result was far worse than anyone could have imagined.

The Steelers/Dolphins game was like watching a pee wee league game where both teams are trying really hard, but you need to keep swigging down coffee to keep from falling asleep due to boredom. Thank God for the superimposed line of scrimmage and first down line provided by ESPN, because the field was marked about as well as Pittsburgh's maze-like streets.

The sad state of Heinz Field left the two teams playing on what looked like a giant green and brown sponge, and the NFL couldn't have been happy with the poor product that was put on display (in HD!).

Why bother with new turf so late in the year? Why hasn't the Heinz Field grounds

crew done a better job with their playing surface? Why don't the Steelers install field turf? Why do Steelers fans think that yellow handkerchiefs look badass? I simply don't have the answers.

But one thing is certain; Monday night's game did little to alter the prevailing (and incorrect) national opinion of Pittsburgh as a dirty, grimy, steel mill city. Fact: there presently are no steel mills within the Pittsburgh city limits. Fact: Pittsburgh is no longer the smog-filled metropolis once described by author James Parton as "hell with the lid off". Fact: Pittsburgh is still filled with toothless, beer-bellied, SteelyMcBeam loving morons. You can't win 'em all.

Four Demerits: Romeo Crennel

Romeo Crennel is such a nice guy that it's impossible not to pull for him. Plus he looks kind of like a walrus, which is a cool animal...

But Sunday was yet another reminder to many Browns fans of why they had major (or maybe even lieutenant colonel) doubts about Crennel after the debacle that was last season. Once again, a time management blunder nearly cost the Browns points at the end of the first half.

With under a minute left, Derek Anderson completed a 12-yard pass to Jason Wright that took the Browns to the Houston 11-yard line. Anderson rushed the Browns up to the line to run another play when the best choice was clearly to use the Browns' final timeout. The Browns called that timeout with 27 seconds remaining, after letting more than 20 seconds run off of the clock.

Those 20 seconds were valuable. At the 11-yard line, the Browns would have had time to attempt a run, or throw a pass short of the goal line if they had called the timeout immediately. The Browns were fortunate enough to find the end zone

on the very next play, but they were lucky that Crennel's time management mistake didn't come back to haunt them.

The time management problems are a microcosm of Crennel's in-game coaching problems. In addition, his teams never seem to adjust well (if at all) during halftime, and he consistently struggles with coach's challenges. What's frustrating about these deficiencies is that things like time management and coach's challenges should be the easy part of the job. Nine year old kids playing Madden Football know how to use timeouts at the end of a half. Hell, Crennel could send me five bucks and his cell phone number and from my living room, I'd let him know what calls he should and should not challenge.

It's frustrating and unfortunate, but I'm still wholly unconvinced that Crennel is the right man for the job. Are we merely witnessing the Peter Principle at work here?

Three Demerits: Rob Chudzinski

Author''s Note: The Browns played well in virtually all facets of the game, so I''m starting to nitpick a little...

Is it just me, or did the first quarter of the game feel like Maurice Carthon was calling the shots on offense? There were several uncreative Jamal Lewis dive plays right into the line that gained next-to-nothing, but the bad mistake was on fourth and one from the Houston 39.

The Browns decided to go for it on fourth down, which seemed like a fairly logical choice, but the play they ran was questionable at best. Chud called Lawrence Vickers'' number - no surprise there, as Vickers has established himself as a competent short yardage back - but for some reason, the Browns ran to the right, not the left.

If the Browns need one yard and decide run the football, Chudzinski better run to the left 100 times out of 99. Joe Thomas and Eric Steinbach are the strength of this offensive line, if not the team as a whole. Call me crazy, but if I'm running the football for one lousy yard, I'm doing it behind my premier guard and tackle.

I don''t expect Chud to make this mistake twice.

Two Demerits: Tennessee Titans

Three weeks ago the Titans were in the catbird seat (has anyone ever actually sat in said seat, is it comfortable, does it recline) at 6-2, with a sleeper hold on a Wild Card birth and an outside should at an outright divisional crown in the AFC South. Oh, how the mighty have fallen.

The Browns' win over the Texans is even more significant because Houston plays in the same division as Tennessee, and the first Wild Card tiebreaker is winning percentage against common opponents. Plus, Tennessee lost to the Bengals, another common opponent, another boon to the Browns' tiebreaker status.

The Titans have lost three straight, and their vaunted defense has allowed 32.3 points per game in those three contests. It's not a coincidence that Albert Haynesworth has been injured and unable to suit up for the last three games.

Haynesworth might be able to play this week against Houston, but the damage might already be done. Question: in this battle between Houston, Jr. and Houston, Sr., will some hayseed down in Texas actually fire up the old " Houston Oilers, Number One
" cassette while driving in his beat-to-shit Ford pickup, and which team will that indigenous ne'er-do-well actually be rooting for? Given the general weakness of Cleveland's remaining schedule and Tennessee's tough upcoming matchups against San Diego, at Kansas City, and at Indianapolis, the Titans' playoff

aspirations may be sinking faster than the
MS Explorer
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One Demerit: Braylon Edwards

Edwards had four catches for 57 yards and a touchdown, but he dropped several Derek Anderson passes that hit him right in the hands. My Michigan-loving friend (it's embarrassing, I know) who shall remain nameless has informed me that Edwards" problems with easy catches dates back to his days with the Maize and Blue.

Edwards is so talented that it makes it all the more frustrating when he doesn't haul in an easy catch. Frankly, these drops are keeping him from breaking through to that "elite" level at which we know he's capable of playing. Some of Edwards' drops are nothing short of mind-boggling, especially after watching one of his leaping, acrobatic catches that defy logic and gravity.

For the Browns' sake, let's hope that Derek Anderson ***isn't*** very accurate this week as Edwards seems to have the most trouble catching anything that's thrown between his belt loops and the top of his socks.

Standings

Author"s Note: At the suggestion of several readers, I'm going to start posting "net" standings in addition to "total" standings. Net standings are the sum of an individuals Dog Bones minus his Demerits.

Total Dog Bones

Offensive Line---23
Joshua Cribbs---17
Kellen Winslow---16
Derek Anderson---16
Braylon Edwards---13

Net Dog Bones

Offensive Line---21
Joshua Cribbs---17
Kellen Winslow---16
Braylon Edwards---9
Kamerion Wimbley---6

Total Demerits

Romeo Crennel---25
Defensive Line---16
Derek Anderson---11
Todd Grantham---10
Brian Billick---8 (t)
Andra Davis---8 (t)

Net Demerits

Romeo Crennel---17
Defensive Line---12
Todd Grantham---9
Brian Billick---8 (t)
Andra Davis---8 (t)

Playoff Picture

Although the Browns still trail the Steelers by a game (and essentially two games due to the head-to-head tiebreaker) in the AFC North, last week greatly strengthened the Browns' shot at a Wild Card birth, and the Browns now control their own destiny. In other words, as long as the Browns keep winning, they'll be playing football in January.

Around the conference, the Patriots clinched the AFC East, and Buffalo, Denver, and Kansas City all lost, putting all three teams' Wild Card hopes in doubt. Denver and Kansas City still have a chance to win the lackluster AFC West. San Diego won to move a game ahead of Denver in the West, and Jacksonville, who leads Cleveland by a game in the Wild Card standings, won their third straight game.

This week's games with AFC playoff implications include Jacksonville at Indianapolis, San Diego at Kansas City, the aforementioned Houston at Tennessee, Denver at Oakland, and Cincinnati at Pittsburgh.

Up Next: 12/2, At Arizona, University of Phoenix Stadium, 4:15

The 5-6 Cardinals should be a good challenge for the Browns, especially on the road. In week 5, the Cardinals lost quarterback Matt Leinart for the season. But no matter, Kurt Warner has stepped in and outplayed the underperforming Leinart, and Warner brings a solid 90.8 quarterback rating into Sunday's game. Not bad for a guy who turned 36 last June.

Edgerrin James is having a decent season, but he's averaging only 3.7 yards per carry, and the Cardinals average only 87.6 yards per game on the ground. James'' struggles, combined with the continued success of Joseph Addai, are making James look more like the beneficiary of Peyton Manning and the Colts' offensive system than an elite running back.

The Cardinals boast a potent air attack, headlined by Larry Fitzgerald. The former Pitt Panther already has 1,000 yards receiving this season. Fitzgerald and Anquan Boldin make a formidable duo, and both receivers have six touchdown catches. Tight end Leonard Pope can be sneaky in the red zone, he only has 17 catches, but four were for touchdowns.

Rookie head coach Ken Whisenhunt has received improved play from his defense, which ranks thirteenth in total yardage and yields 23.5 points per game on average. Although Arizona''s defense is improved, expect the Browns to score in the high 20s or low 30s in the desert.

Derek Anderson should be wary of cornerback Antrel Rolle. The third year DB intercepted Carson Palmer three times when the Cardinals met

the Bengals in Cincinnati two weeks ago.

It could be tough on the road, but I don't see the Cardinals slowing down the Browns' offense. If the Browns can make some timely stops on defense, they''ll pull it out. I expect the Browns to win their sixth game out of seven, and keep the pressure on their playoff competition.

My Call: Browns 31, Cardinals 20