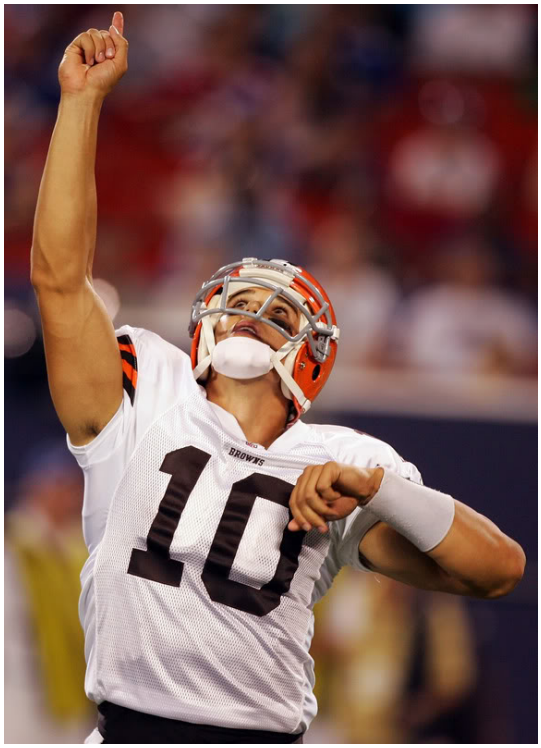
No sport lends itself to the instant overreaction of fans like football. You wait all week to watch the team play, and you're very emotionally invested in their performance. When the Browns win, you're on cloud nine for the day's remaining hours, and that feeling carries well into the next few days. When the Browns lose, you mumble under your breath, yell at strangers, kick the dog, and vent in our message forums. On The Morning After, Nick takes an objective look at last night's loss.



Let's get it out of the way right now: the Browns had their clock thoroughly cleaned by the Giants last night. Did anyone really expect this team to ride off into the sunset? If so, those folks received the Monday Night Football equivalent of a cold shower, complete with shrinkage.

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Jump into your DeLorean and set the time coordinates for early September of 2007. There was far less cause for optimism last year following Browns' loss to the Steelers in the opener, but this time around we have legitimate reasons to believe this team will play better. Had last night's game been the opener against the Cowboys, which is now less than three weeks away, I'd still be inclined to

preach perspective. But considering that this was manifestly an exhibition/pre-season loss (depending on which moniker you despise the least), there is no reason to get too worked up about what we witnessed last night. Before we all start buying ourselves some rope and carving " BROOKS WAS HERE " into the rafters, here's five reasons not to fret.

1. Romeo loves vanilla.

When I say "vanilla," I'm referring to the game plan and play calling on offense, which were about as exciting as eating an all cottage cheese lunch for a month. Before Anderson left the game we saw next to nothing in terms of a vertical passing game - Anderson's strength. Part of that can be chalked up to Edwards' absence, but it's also fair to say that Crennel and Chudzinski were hesitant to show the Giants their full blown offense.

There are numerous reasons to believe that Crennel didn't want to give the Giants any legitimate tape to watch before these clubs meet again in October. The Derek Anderson bomb passes were nonexistent. Chud's play calling wasn't the least bit creative, which is extremely uncharacteristic of the anti-Carthon. The Browns didn't work too hard to establish Jamal Lewis, who was replaced just before Derek Anderson suffered his concussion. There wasn't a single Josh Cribbs trick play - and we're supposed to see half a dozen or so per game this year. And the kicker? Derek Anderson's favorite target was Charles Ali. That's correct, Charles Ali, as in "backup fullback Charles Ali." It seems pretty clear that the Browns didn't want to compromise the playbook just to make a push for a meaningless pre-season win, and it's tough to argue with that strategy. The offense will be fine when they start playing real games.

2. *"You...complete me."* *(Author's Note: I prefer Heath Ledger's take on this line to Tom Cruise's.)*

Every team deals with injuries in the NFL, and the Browns and Giants are not exceptions. Braylon Edwards and Shaun Rogers were on the shelf for the Browns last night, and the Giants were without their top three receivers (Plaxico Burress, Amani Toomer, Steve Smith). While neither team was at full strength, there's probably credence to arguing that the Browns were hurt more by losing Edwards and Rogers than the Giants were by losing their receivers.

Burress is an excellent receiver but the Giants play a run-heavy offense, making his presence less critical to the Giants than Edwards' is to the Browns. Not to mention that this season could conceivably establish Edwards as the best young receiver in the league. Beyond Randy Moss, you'd have a hell of a time convincing me that the Browns are a better team swapping Edwards for any other receiver. Edwards' ability to separate, adjust, and haul in a jump ball is a huge part of what Derek Anderson and the Browns do on offense. Except for Joe Thomas there isn't a player on the roster who's more vital to the Browns' success than Edwards, and the offense is more Ford than Ferrari without him.

By the same token, Rogers is arguably the Browns' most important defensive player. If you want to see how important a dominant nose tackle is to a 3-4 defense, take a look at how ordinary Pittsburgh's defense appeared last week against Buffalo, one of the league's worst passing offenses in 2007. With Pittsburgh's starting nose tackle (Casey Hampton) riding the pine, Buffalo's Trent Edwards looked like a Pro Bowler, dissecting the Steelers like a biology student carves up a fetal pig. Plugging Rogers into the middle of the Cleveland defense won't cure all that ails them, but it will make a big difference.

3. The snowball was rolling down the hill.

The Browns were shafted by some goofy stuff that simply doesn't happen very often during the course of a 16-game season. First Eric Wright was torched in man coverage, leading to a huge pass interference call, which was soon compounded by 25 more yards in penalties. Then Andra Davis took a swing at someone at added another 15 yards to the team's penalty yardage. The Giants scored their second touchdown on a free play which was set up when Robaire Smith jumped offsides.

Derek Anderson, as streaky a quarterback as you'll find in the NFL, didn't play long enough to find his rhythm, and he clearly missed Braylon Edwards. A false start penalty on Kris Griffin set up a punt by the D-Zaster from the Browns' one yard line which was blocked and converted into a safety by New York. Zastudil's free kick was then returned for another touchdown by former Akron stand out Domenik Hixon, which three touchdowns (two receiving) in less than one quarter.

Do you see what I'm getting at? This stuff isn't normal, especially in rapid succession. Well, that stuff doesn't happen when Paul Ernster isn't your punter, anyway. So yes, the Browns' starters were socked in the grill by the Giants'

starters, but it generally wasn't in a way that's going to give the Browns problems on a weekly basis.

4. The corners (read: Eric Wright) were more sink than swim.

Wright and Brandon McDonald definitely had their problems, but they were in a ton of single coverage. In fact, it looked like Mel Tucker wanted to put them on an island during a risk-free game just to see what would happen. The results weren't positive, but these guys are both in only their second years, so there will obviously be a learning curve.

Wright in particular was owned by Sinorice Moss and Domenik Hixon, whether it was just trying to stick with Moss on a fly pattern or struggling to play bump and run on Hixon in the red zone. But we watched Wright struggle early last year, too, before his light seemed to switch on. While Wright and B-Mac are both very green, they're also very talented, and it's still the lack of cornerback **depth** that should be the real concern.

5. Opening night jitters? Overconfidence?

Were the Browns nervous because this was a prime time, nationally televised game? Could they have believed all of the hype they'd been receiving, giving them a falsely inflated level of confidence? Did the gap between Michael Strahan's front teeth look way bigger in real life, creating one of those "it's so weird I can't look away" distractions? Whatever it was, let's hope the Browns got it out of their system.

If overconfidence due to their new found status as media darlings was the problem, the Browns should have plummeted back to earth last night. Maybe the Browns needed a reminder that they aren't nearly good enough to just show up and post a win - nobody in the NFL is. We should remember that this team blew a couple of prime opportunities to beat lesser teams and lock up a playoff spot (Arizona, Cincinnati) last season, losses for which there weren't many excuses.

Derek Anderson seemed to tighten up when he struggled a bit in his limited playing time, and he's always struck me as a guy who might be a little too self-aware, particularly of national TV cameras. Let's call it like it is: when all eyes were on Anderson last season and he had something to lose (e.g. at Cincy, Pro Bowl), he blew it. But just like the rest of the team, DA has to learn to handle that

pressure if the Browns are going to go anywhere this season, and part of handling pressure is simply getting used to it. It's better that Anderson and friends get acclimated to the pressure cooker now than week one against Dallas, or, God forbid, week two against Pittsburgh.

In conclusion...

Let's not forget that the starters looked solid less than two weeks ago against the Jets, even though the Jets certainly aren't on the same level as the Giants. It's a total cliché, but this still is only pre-season, and shaking off the rust is a big reason why these games exist. So should you be overly worried about the Browns' poor showing last night? Probably not. Now, if the starters go out and lay an egg against Detroit and Chicago, that will be a different story. Until then, consider my cautious optimism very much intact.