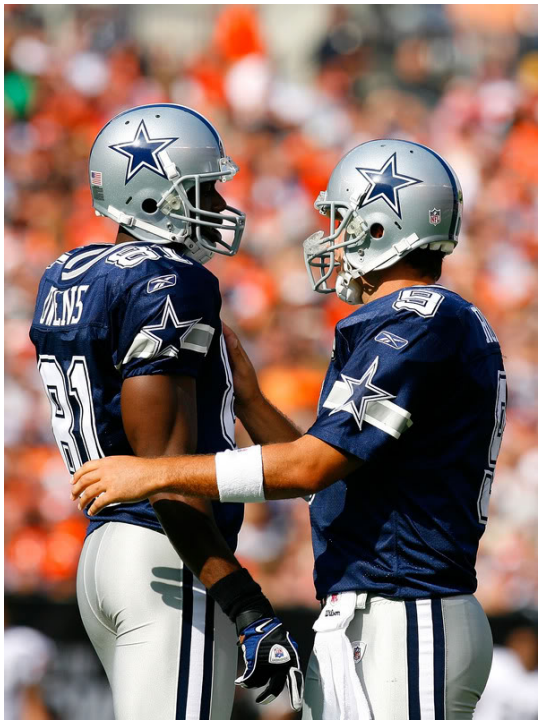
Tell your expectations to just shut up. The Cleveland Browns, entering a season in which much, maybe too much, is expected, demonstrated that the preseason was indeed a dress rehearsal for the regular season, going down hard to the Dallas Cowboys Sunday 28-10 in a game nowhere near as close as the final margin. As he will do once again all this season, Gary Benz delivers our readers a little instant analysis on today's loss.



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The 18-point margin is deceiving. It was as complete a defeat as one could imagine. The Cowboys were able to pass and run nearly at will and did more than enough on defense in applying a hard lesson to a team that was simply outclassed. About the only Cowboy's decision worth questioning was why, after winning the coin toss, they decided to defer their decision to the second half. With as potent of an offense as there may be in the NFL, it seemed odd that Dallas would forego the opportunity for a quick score and the tone that would set for a chance at a quick defensive stop. It mattered little. While not stopping the Browns' offense immediately on their first possession, they stopped it quickly enough.

The Cowboys, behind quarterback Tony Romo, put together the kind of textbook 10-play 80-yard drive that had the look and feel of what could very well turn into a recurring theme for the Cleveland defense. At least it was on this day. The Cowboys initially chose not to run at the strength of the defense, instead sending running back Marion Barber to the edges. Meanwhile, Romo was a perfect 5-5 on the drive, essentially playing pitch and catch as the defense, even with several blitzes, couldn't come close to making him sweat.

It was the start the Cowboys wanted and the Browns feared and it begged for an appropriate response. Getting that and more, quarterback Derek Anderson led the Browns on marathon 16 play, 78-yard drive to tie the game at 7-7, capped off by a two-yard toss to tight end Kellen Winslow. It was the team's high water mark for the day. The drive was aided greatly by two Dallas penalties, the most critical of which was a third down interference call on cornerback Adam Jones, who essentially tackled receiver Braylon Edwards as Anderson's pass was headed his way. More importantly, the drive consumed nearly nine minutes, which had the intended effect of keeping the defense off the field.

If defensive coordinator Mel Tucker used the extra time to make whatever defensive adjustments were necessary after the first Dallas drive it didn't show. Romo, Barber and the rest of the company went right back to work, barreling through the defense with one big play after another and in short order, following a Romo to Terrell Ownes 36-yard touchdown pass, Dallas had recaptured the lead for good. On the play, Owens had two steps on cornerback Brandon McDonald. You probably won't see a bigger mismatch in the NFL this year.

With the pace being set by the Cowboys offense, it was a rather large request to ask the Browns offense to continue to respond in kind. Indeed, after that first Cleveland drive, it was mostly just a series of fits and starts for the offense. It didn't help that Edwards was dropping more balls than he was catching and otherwise looked mentally distracted for most of the day. Yet, you can't lay too much blame for the loss at the feet of the offense. With most of its starters back, the offense, with the exception of Edwards, had a certain crispness at times that had eluded them throughout the preseason. But the joint pressure applied by both the Dallas and Cleveland defenses was simply too much for the Browns'

offense to overcome.

Still, with less than three minutes left in the first half, the Cowboys only had a 14-7 lead. Unfortunately, they also had the ball inside the Cleveland red zone. They used the time wisely. A hands-to-the-facemask penalty on McDonald against Owens, took the ball to the Cleveland 15-yard line. A tipped pass on first down, a short Barber run on second set up a third and six that Romo converted with a seven-yard pass to Owens. It looked like Owens had scored but the officials marked it down at the one. Cowboys head coach Wade Phillips didn't even bother to challenge. Instead he just sent Barber in for the easy score with 26 seconds remaining in the half for an insurmountable 21-7 lead.

As the second half beckoned, the wisdom of Dallas' decision to defer after winning the opening coin toss became apparent. But an offensive pass interference call on Owens pushed Dallas into a third and 15 on that opening series. The defense then put its first real pressure on Romo as he was forced to throw it away. With Dallas pinned back, the Browns took over after the punt at midfield with the chance it needed. Instead, they quickly went three and out. Dallas took over and put together its third long drive of the game, with rookie running back Felix Jones running straight up the heart of the defense and taking with him whatever was left of it, for an 11-yard run and a 28-7 lead.

Down 21 points and forced to all but abandon the run, the Cowboys defense was able to simultaneously lay back and tee off, denying Anderson any real chance to find the home field rhythm he possessed last season. The closest he came was late in the third quarter and early in the fourth when he led the Browns to their best drive since the first quarter, mixing in a little of his own scrambling with a little running by Lewis and a few key passes, including an 18 yarder to receiver Steve Sanders, that took the ball down to the Dallas 24 yard line.

From there, the drive appeared stalled and on 4th and 3 at the Dallas 17. Head coach Romeo Crennel then seized the moment as only he can by deciding to kick a 34-yard field goal, which kicker Phil Dawson converted. With just 10:31 left in

the game, it was a bizarre decision unless Crennel was betting the "under" in some sort of coaches' pool. As meaningless as that decision ultimately was, it nonetheless sucked whatever life was left in the stands and on the sidelines. The Cowboys then held the ball for the rest of the game. At least the crowd got an early start for the parking lots.

As lopsided as the game was, it could have been worse. Romo, perhaps bored with all the time he had to throw, made his only mistake of the game when cornerback Eric Wright stepped in front of a pass intended for Owens in the end zone. Cowboys' coach Wade Phillips then decided to mostly sit on the ball at the end of the game with it sitting deep in Cleveland territory.

Overall, a potent Browns offense that was rolling up over 350 yards a game last season was rendered mostly impotent, running up a meager 205 yards. Without an opportunity to fully mix in the run, particularly in the second half, it was hardly a surprise. For the game, Anderson was 11-14 for 114 yards and one touchdown. Lewis, in just 13 carries had 62 yards.

Meanwhile, his counterpart, Romo played like a MVP in the making. It wasn't difficult. On nearly every pass play, at least two receivers were open downfield and with enough time to both survey the field and wave to girlfriend Jessica Simpson squirreled away somewhere in a suite, Romo had no trouble finding them. On the day, he was 24-32 for 320 yards, one touchdown and one interception. Barber, before going out with an injury, ran for 80 yards and two touchdowns while Jones added another 60 yards rushing and a touchdown. Owens, toying with McDonald all day, had five catches for 87 yards and one touchdown. Tight end Jason Whitten meanwhile had six catches and 96 yards.

Overall the Cowboys amassed 487 yards against what might be the NFL's worst defense.

While the game may not have been a complete embarrassment, it was embarrassing enough. It also was an eye opener that demonstrated the difference between expectations and execution. It's the latter and not the former that keeps teams playing in January. And on that count, this much is clear: the Browns still have many steps to take.

The defensive problems were well known going into the game. Nonetheless, with a rebuilt defensive line, more was expected, less was delivered. Barber and Jones ran free while Romo lounged in the backfield. It's a scene fans better get used to.

As everyone inside and out of Berea knew, it isn't going to be any easier in the Browns' second week, facing a Pittsburgh team smarting just a bit from all the preseason hype coming Cleveland's way. Though the Browns' defense played a mostly better second half, it didn't play nearly well enough to give the Steelers any reason to be concerned.

Last year, general manager Phil Savage made the most dramatic move of his career after the first week, jettisoning starting quarterback Charlie Frye in favor of Anderson. It was the move that ultimately turned the season around. Don't look for a repeat performance. The Browns defense simply needs too much help.