Bolstered by the four-game winning streak to end the 2009 season, the addition of Mike Holmgren as team President, a solid draft and the slicing of the Gordian Knot that had been the quarterback situation, the Browns enter 2010 cautiously optimistic that the previous season's strong finish was a harbinger rather than a mirage. No one expects a Super Bowl; progress- more consistency, more victories- is the watchword for this season.

The majority of outside pundits don't see many victories for the Browns, however. Most preseason predictions have them settled into their accustomed spot at the bottom of the competitive AFC North. There aren't enough playmakers on the roster, new quarterback Jack Delhomme is 35 and coming off a horrible final season in Carolina and the division as a whole, with rugged Baltimore, nemesis Pittsburgh and enigmatic-but-talented Cincinnati, is too deep for this Cleveland team to make headway. The Pessimism is natural, warranted for a club that has gone 9-23 since the fun-but-fluky 2007 season- and fully shared by Browns fans. Unlike the heady late summer of '08, fans are not putting together "Super Bowl" chants during training camp in Berea. Seven wins would almost be cause for celebration.

Still, a forgiving opening slate gives fans cause for a little hope that things might be different this season. Cleveland opens the season with games against Buccaneers and Chiefs teams that went a combined 7-25 in 2009. Momentum and confidence are critical in football; if the Browns can win both games and start 2-0, they might be able to ride sheer belief into a special season- "special" meaning 8-8 or somewhere in that neighborhood, of course.

Week #1: Cleveland 17, @ Tampa Bay 6

Cleveland's first opener away from home since 1995 is a success as the Brown fight to a prosaic victory in sweltering Tampa. Jake Delhomme owned a 5-1 career record at the New Sombrero and makes it 6-1 but he doesn't exactly shine, throwing for only 108 yards and being picked off once. Just as it had been at the end of 2009, Cleveland's offense is, for the most part, landlocked. Jerome Harrison picks his way to 95 yards on 22 carries with a touchdown, while rookie Monterio Hardesty adds 42 on eight totes. The Browns rush for 168 yards as a team and control the clock while a steady defense coaxes three turnovers out of young quarterback Josh Freeman. The conservative, grind-it-out style adds up to only the second 1-0 start for the Browns since the Return.

Record: 1-0

Week #2: Cleveland 24, Kansas City 10

The Browns haven't won many games by large margins since the Return but they put a number on Kansas City, out-gaining the Chiefs 327-234 and breaking out to a 17-3 halftime lead. Jerome Harrison picks up right where he left off against Kay See in 2009, opening the scoring with a 49-yard scoring sprint and rolling up 112 yards on 27 carries. Delhomme, taking advantage of play-action opportunities opened by the styling of the Ghost, bombs the Chiefs for 202 yards and two touchdowns, one a 35-yarder to Mohamed Massaquoi. While reputed offensive guru Todd Haley stands woodenly and watches, Cleveland's defense limits Kansas City to a late garbage touchdown. The Browns are now 2-0 for the first time since 1993 and like a junior-high boy in a strong breeze, Cleveland fans are excited.

Record: 2-0

Week #3: @ Baltimore 24, Cleveland 17

The Ravens are the odds-on favorite in the AFC North going into the season, and their 0-2 record going into the showdown is as surprising as Cleveland's 2-0. Baltimore needs a victory to stay alive in the division- and they get it. The score is tied 10-10 late in the third quarter when the Browns commit their first major defensive breakdown of 2010- and Ray Rice goes 73 yards to put Baltimore in the lead. Ray Lewis intercepts Delhomme on Cleveland's next possession, and Joe Flacco shrugs off his resemblance to Anthony Perkins and goes up top, 39 yards to Mark Clayton to make it 24-10. A 19-yard Delhomme-to-Harrison touchdown flip cuts the deficit to seven, but the Browns can get no closer. The game is punctuated by shoving matches and scrums and while Cleveland is outscored, it is not out-hit.

Record: 2-1

Week #4: Cleveland 28, Cincinnati 27

Jake Delhomme directs a dramatic, 83-yard drive and hits Ben Watson from two yards out with 29 seconds to play as Cleveland comes from behind to tip the Bengals in front of a roaring sellout at CBS. The Browns quickly jump to a 14-0 lead but can't put away their little brothers from the south; Cincinnati scores 17 unanswered to lead 17-14 going into a wild fourth quarter. Leading 27-21 with 3:48 left, the Bengals recover a Chansi Stuckey fumble and have an opportunity to run the clock out. But Cleveland's defense forces a three-and-out and gives Delhomme and Co. enough time to pull the game out.

Record: 3-1

Week #5: Cleveland 22, Atlanta 19

Every good team needs some luck and the Browns get a whole lot of it in their second consecutive thrilling home win. Up 19-14 and seemingly on their way to a 3-2 survival of a rough opening stretch with 1:09 to play, everything suddenly goes wrong for Atlanta. First a botched snap on a punt gives the ball to the Browns at midfield, causing Cleveland fans to clink drinks in

tribute to Ryan Pontbriand. Delhomme then throws four straight incomplete passes- but the fourth is waved off. The Falcons have too many men on the field. On the next play they are caught with too few men around Mohamed Massaquoi- and the ex-Georgia Bulldog hauls in a 43-yarder to put Cleveland on the doorstep. Two plays later Josh Cribbs takes a snap out of the Flash formation, rolls right, straightens- and hits Brian Robiskie for the game-winner with 26 seconds left. Instead of being 2-3, the Browns are 4-1 and in first place in the AFC North all by themselves.

Record: 4-1

Week #6: Cleveland 24, @ Pittsburgh 13

The Steelers enter the afternoon with a mediocre 2-3 record but figure to get healthy against the Browns, losers of six straight at Heinz Field. Instead they are ambushed by a fierce Cleveland defense. Ben Roethlisberger, corpulent and out of rhythm on the heels of his four-game suspension, is sacked five times and fumbles twice, while Rashard Mendenhall is bottled up all afternoon. Pittsburgh gains only 228 total yards. Meanwhile Delhomme leads a mistake-free attack and Josh Cribbs does his usual thing to the Steelers, picking up 150 yards on returns and 55 more on runs out of the Flash. Pittsburgh fans are suddenly aware that their team has lost two in a row to the Browns, their longest losing streak since 2000 to their formerly down-at-the-heel rival- and didn't score a touchdown in either game. Cleveland meanwhile is now two full games in front of Baltimore and Cincinnati and three ahead of Pittsburgh in the AFC North.

Record: 5-1

Week #7: @ New Orleans 42, Cleveland 24

Cleveland's heretofore impressive defense is shredded in the Superdome b y the defending Super Bowl Champions, who spot the Browns a 10-7 second-quarter lead and then explode for 28 unanswered points. Joe Haden, having an excellent rookie season after replacing injured Brandon McDonald in the starting lineup three weeks earlier, finally shows his age; Drew Brees picks on him mercilessly and completes three touchdowns over the youngster, two to Marques Colston and one to Robert Meacham. The Saints total a whopping 495 yards, 367 off the arm of

Brees. Louisiana native Jake Delhomme is solid- 24-of-37, 248 yards, two touchdowns and only one pick- but he's fighting with tugboats against the roaring howitzers of NOLA's offensive fleet.

Record: 5-2

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Week #9: New England 27, Cleveland 20

In a crackling, emotion-packed reunion between teacher Bill Belichick and student Eric Mangini, Cleveland quarterback Jake Delhomme leads a late comeback from a 20-13 deficit, tying the score on a 12-yard shot to former Patriot Ben Watson with 1:58 left. Unfortunately, the Browns have left too much time on the clock- and Tom Brady takes advantage against a passive Cleveland defense. With 72,000 at CBS apoplectic with every play Brady picks apart Rob Ryan's soft zone, hitting Wes Welker four straight times to lead New England down the field. With the ball at the Cleveland 23, well inside field-goal range, Brady crosses up the Browns with a play-fake. Randy Moss leaves Eric Wright on a double move and receives Brady's perfectly-thrown touchdown pass with 49 seconds to play. It is now 27-20 in favor of the Patriots and that's how it ends after Delhomme's desperation Hail Mary is batted down at the gun. Cleveland is now 5-3, losers at home for the first time, and the momentum from the team's best start since 1994 is starting to fade like smoke in a strong breeze.

Record: 5-3

Coming up Next: Part II of the 2010 Browns Season in Review