Before Saturday night's preseason exhibition between the Cleveland Browns and the St. Louis Rams, club president Mike Holmgren did his best to level set Browns' fans by telling them to temper their enthusiasm. To coin a phrase, Mission Accomplished.

Saturday's 19-17 preseason loss to the woeful Rams wasn't the buzzkill slap in the face it could have been had this been the regular season. But it was a reminder, gentle at times bludgeoning at others, that this team remains a work in progress.

You could point to the 5 turnovers and other mistakes and jump to the conclusion that it looked like Romeo Crennel was back in charge of the team. You could also point to the rather easy time perennial journeyman quarterback A.J. Feeley and a bunch of guys who couldn't sell a jersey with their name on it

to fans in St. Louis had in that first series against the defense and conclude that any of the dozen or so defensive coordinators that preceded Rob Ryan in the last 10 years were back in charge.

But even in all that mess you could still see what was most apparent: progress isn't always a step forward. Sometimes there are steps to the side, perhaps a half-step back. If the NFL didn't keep score in preseason games, it would probably be easier to see the positives in Saturday night's game.

But fans aren't so constrained by the quaint notions of meaningless final scores, neither are the writers covering this team. So, tossing aside the score like a Jerome Harrison fumble, the Browns still were able to make progress on Saturday night in ways that give hope that come the

regular season they'll be able to overcome teams like the Rams with relative ease, relative being the absolute operative word.

Quarterback Jake Delhomme wasn't as sharp as his opening drive against Green Bay in the previous week but in some ways what he did Saturday night was more impressive. If Delhomme and the first team offense had had their way with the Rams defense from the opening bell, Mangini might have given Delhomme an early exit and fans might get the idea that this team is a playoff contender.

Instead Delhomme struggled a bit, from his own opening bobbled snaps, to a few missed throws. That will happen with any quarterback, including Tom Brady or Peyton Manning. But where Browns fans were used to seeing its quarterbacks struggle some, then struggle some more and then struggle for good, Delhomme was able to right the ship long enough to put together an impressive drive 77-yard drive to put the team back on track and keep the game from being the disaster it looked to be early on.

As he did last week, Delhomme used the various weapons he had at his disposal effectively in that drive to keep the Rams' defense, which, frankly, isn't very good, off balance. The drive featured the running of Peyton Hillis, throws to the tight ends and wide receivers and, finally, a good throw in the back of the end zone to tight end Ben Watson for the score. Watson's impressive catch was first ruled out of bounds but a challenge by Mangini overturned the initial call. It's preseason even for the officials.

Delhomme had a chance to actually put the Browns ahead on his next drive but overthrew receiver Brian Robiskie in the end zone. The drive ended without points when Hillis was stopped on 4th and 3 from the Rams' 17-yard line.

The call for Hillis up the middle, which immediately sounds far better than Metcalf up the middle ever did, may have been an ill-advised call but in the context of a preseason game it made sense. The Rams defense was having trouble wrapping Hillis to that point and the Browns already know that Phil Dawson can kick field goals. Mangini may take a gamble on 4th and 3 in the regular season as well, but probably not with a pedestrian off-tackle run. But this is the preseason and it's exactly the kind of experiment that should be run.

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