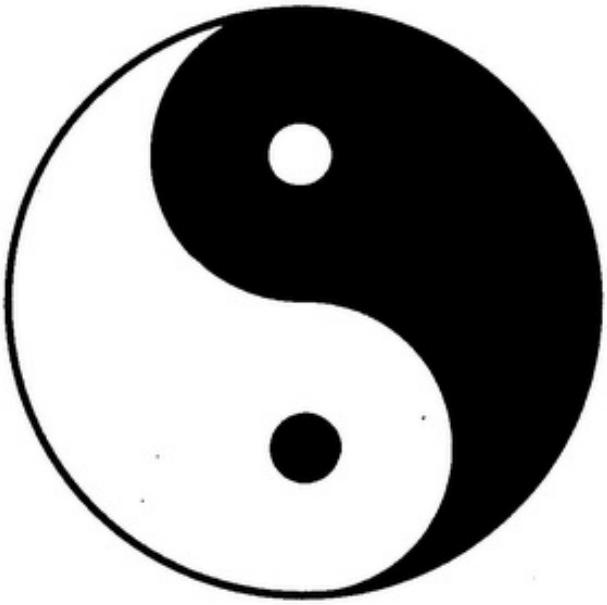

Preseason Week 2 – Cleveland vs St. Louis

The crowd eagerly packed the stadium, rife with enthusiasm for the potential Super Bowl match-up of the Browns and the Rams. Anticipation was so thick, you could cut it with a knife (or perhaps a piece of tissue paper). The constant precipitation did nothing but grow the burgeoning excitement like emotional weeds.

(A slight exaggeration? Perhaps.)

And then the game happened.

'Twas not a horrible affair. 'Twas not an event to fill us with dire disappointment.

Nor was it something to load us with hope and anticipation.

It was just there. It was a Preseason game that gave us nothing.

Point: The Browns completely dominated the game from a yardage and possession standpoint. For most of the contest, they were clearly the better team.

Counterpoint: The Rams' starting QB - AJ Feeley - was in for one series (before getting hurt), and led them on a quick 'n' easy TD drive. Steven Jackson was only in for that one series too, and was effective. The Browns starters played far longer than the Rams'. The pass protection was icky.

Point: The Browns were without pretty much their first two strings on the right side of the OL, so it's only natural that they didn't fare that well against another team's starters (albeit, the Rams). They're also breaking in a lot of new starters and rookies, not to mention wanting to get Seneca Wallace some time with the first team, so it makes perfect sense that they should play the starters longer.

Counterpoint: Every good thing that happened was our Starters vs. their Reserves. The Rams had a rookie backup at QB and a backup at RB and the O Coordinator was obviously limited to a 5 play list. While it's nice that the Browns 1st string D dominated that squad, it would've been better had they generated a little pass rush.

Point: It's the Preseason - they're not going to blitz every down.

Counterpoint: Well, they shouldn't need to blitz every down.

Point: What they were doing was working just fine.

Counterpoint: I'd hope so - we had starters going against their 3rd stringers. There's no way they should've lost that game against a team as bad as STL.

Point: Maybe it wasn't easy to overcome the 65 fumbles?

Counterpoint: And what about that? Dome team comes into bad weather team's stadium, and bad weather team is the one that can't handle it? The Offense looked awful.

Point: Only until the fumbles stopped.

Counterpoint: Nah, they still looked bad. Delhomme regressed out there.

Point: He had a 118 passer rating!

Counterpoint: Oh. My. God. That was not a 118 performance and you damn well know it. He wasn't awful, but he wasn't great either. That TD pass was a thing of ugly.

Point: Who cares? It was still a TD pass. It was right where it needed to be. He led them up and down the field once the initial dropsies got cured.

Counterpoint: Against backups! For the RAMS!

Point: You just can't enjoy anything, can you? Life is one great big turd sandwich for you, ain't it?

Counterpoint: No, it's the great big rose garden I've been walking around in every Fall for the last 11 years. What flavor is your peyote?

Game Recap

The game began in a downpour, and stayed there. Cleveland got the ball first and mishandled the ball early and often, going 3 and Out. The Rams got the ball in good field position and marched down the field under the mercurial guidance of the immortal AJ Feeley, piercing the Browns defense like a knife through hot helium for a TD drive that involved mainly runs and passes to wide open Tight Ends. *Rams 7, Browns 0.*

Jake Delhomme fumbled the snap a couple plays later, and STL recovered. But Feeley was done for the night - he hurted his piggie - so in came Number One Overall Ridiculously Overpaid Rookie Sam Bradford. He did little to nothing. His 3rd Down pass attempt into the End Zone was knocked away nicely by Sheldon Brown, and a FG ensued. *Rams 10, Browns 0.*

Jake & Co. once again looked amiss and punted again (thanks to the ineffectiveness of that remade right side of the OL), but the Browns got a 3 and Out of their own, and all was looking good until Josh Cribbs fumbled the punt (just as he looked ready to break out to the races) and that was 4 fumbles, 2 lost for the Browns in less than a quarter. This faux pas also resulted in a FG. *Rams 13, Browns 0.*

Now them Browns was good and mad. Acting like fools, giving points away. Jake suddenly started hitting his mid-range checkdowns and Peyton Hillis started just running over people. On one run, he plowed at least half of the Rams D. He never did go down.

That drive continued through a 4th Down conversion and ended with a wounded duck TD pass to Ben Watson, who made a fantabulous one handed grab whilst dragging both feet in the back of the EZ. Watson may truly be a weapon this year. *Rams 13, Browns 7.*

Cleveland held again on D, and Jake led another nice drive that ended on a failed short 4th Down conversion (although I'm happy to see Mangini going for it so much). But the Defense once again shut down the Rook, and another fine drive by Delhomme netted a FG just before half. *Rams 13, Browns 10.*

Bradford was once again ineffective to start the 3rd, and Seneca Wallace (now in) drove the team impressively 78 yards for a TD, capped by a pretty pass and catch by Josh Cribbs (who might actually be a WR factor this year). Seneca's next possession was looking good too, but he was intercepted on a long pass towards Carlton Mitchell, who made a poor play on the ball and was essentially to blame for the pick. *Browns 17, Rams 13.*

The rest of the game was the Keith Null, Colt McCoy, and Brett Ratliff show... which means it was full of blah. Null "led" the Rams to 2 Field Goals (with some help from another fumbled punt, this one by Steptoe). McCoy didn't complete a pass and was harassed like a Kardashian. Ratliff got in with under 2 minutes left, and got picked. The End.

Final: Rams 19, Browns 17.

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Conclusion

The Browns WERE the superior team. 5 turnovers to 0 does not help. They really had every chance to win the game anyway - they were dominant for a majority of it. But the win streak ends at 5. Does the House of Cards follow?

Relax. It's the Preseason.

Through 3 Quarters (all that really mattered):

Time of Possession: Cleveland – 25:32, St. Louis – 19:28

Total Yards: Cleveland – 275, St. Louis - 108

First Downs: Cleveland - 15, St. Louis – 6

Usually, I'd be more excited about those stats. However, I cannot forget the only drive that STL's first unit had, nor can I forget that a majority of the Browns' first units played into the 3rd Quarter, and the Rams had some 3rd stringers out there. So... grain of salt, grain of salt.

Gameballs

Eric Wright – One of the best games I've ever seen him play. He was very aggressive, with multiple tackles in the backfield, and a couple of near picks. His pass interference call was excrement.

Ben Watson – For that TD catch alone (and he had several other solid plays as well).

Peyton Hillis – Very effective after contact. The Browns have some quality depth at the RB spot.

Honorable Mention

Sheldon Brown – Solid coverage and a beauty of a hit.

Jake Delhomme – Overcame a bad start and moved the ball well thereafter. Not spectacular, but solid.

Blake Costanzo – Several big hits on the enemy.

Derreck Robinson– The one Defensive Lineman I saw getting actual penetration.

Chansi Stuckey – Might make a nice living on short crossing routes this year.

Seneca Wallace – Another TD, and some just beautifully thrown passes.

Wall of Shame

Fumbles – Not good.

Billy Yates – To be fair, he's a possible 3rd stringer, and he did improve as the game went on. But against the ones, he looked hopelessly in over his head.

Brian Robiskie – For wearing a cloak of invisibility most of the game, especially on a block that he missed on a WR screen that almost got Cribbs killed.

Mike Adams – Usually this guy is solid, but he got beaten badly in coverage several times, and

against 2nd and 3rd stringers to boot.

OL Depth – Pray for health.

Carlton Mitchell – Just horrible. Basically was responsible for an INT and flat dropped a 1st Down on the penultimate play of the failed 2 minute drive.

McCoy & Ratliff – Neither played horrible, and both were the victims of drops. But they just don't look like they belong out there, and my faith in them is - at this juncture - minute. McCoy needs to stop pulling the ball down and looking to run so quickly.

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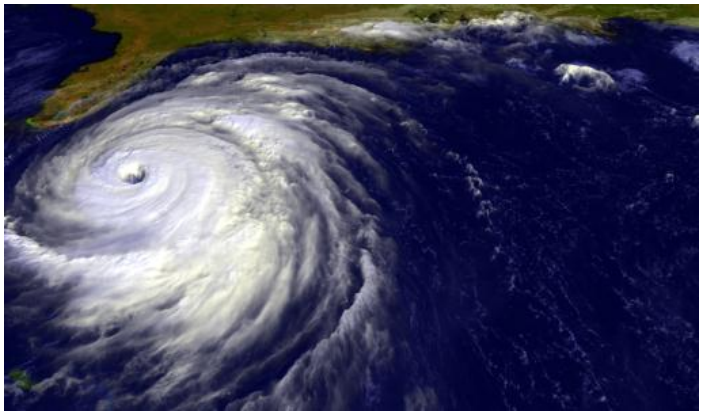
I feel sorry for a QB in Cleveland.



We are so inured with QB failure here in NEO that we expect failure with unprecedented certainty. The names roll off our tongues like famous natural disasters: *Hurricane Couch, Tropical Storm Wynn, Dustbowl Pedersen, Cyclone Holcomb, Earthquake Garcia, Plague of Locusts Dilfer, Wildfire McCown, Tsunami Frye, Hailstorm Anderson, Tornado Quinn.*

Blech - I just threw up in my mouth.

So Delhomme comes here off a bad season, and he's GOT to suck, right?

And Wallace? Well, he's just another career backup who's too short.

McCoy is the second coming of Charlie Frye, and Ratliff is a never-has-been never-will-be.

Delhomme hasn't lit the world on fire in 2 outings, but he's been solid, which is a marathon away from what we've had here. Even I find myself getting on his case after not really playing that badly. Poor guy can't get a break. We (the fans) can't wait to crucify him. Can't freakin' wait.

That's what we like to do here in Downtroddentown; that's how we get by. Take it out on the QB. He's guilty of every bad thing that happens in this world short of global warming. And he's probably responsible for that too.

Yet if Jake were some 2nd year mid-round dime-a-dozen QB, we'd probably be buying jerseys in record droves.

Year after year after GD year I say it: Let's wait until they've proven their failure before tacking 'em to the cross. It'll probably come painfully quick enough.

Another thing - I wouldn't even read that much into the Offense in the Fake Games.

You just KNOW that they will be mixing a healthy helping of Wildcat/Flash/Cyclone packages. That's why you haven't seen any of it this Preseason.

And don't discount Wallace getting a series here or there, just for a changeup.

Yes, I know that isn't done very often in the NFL. Looking forward to it anyway. A team SHOULD utilize all it's weapons to their maximum potential, and a standard traditional Offense isn't it.

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Something that gives me some fear: The Defensive Line.

I say this with the caveat that we won't see a true Browns D Line until the season starts and Shaun Rogers rejoins the team... but they cannot get any penetration.

Rubin I'm fine with. As Nose Tackle, it's not his job to get penetration. His job is to occupy two blockers and not get driven down the field. But those ends have to hold their ground and shoot the gaps somewhat better than what they're doing, because Cleveland cannot generate an ounce of pressure with bringing LB's, Safeties, and even Corners on the blitz.

Now, if the blitz is the only way you can create pressure, then that's what you have to do. But the formula for beating it has been easy - pick on the middle of the field with your Tight End.

The Safeties are either too young (Ward, Asante) or too crappy (Elam, Adams, Ventrone, Sorensen) to cover mobile TE's consistently in the open field. The Linebackers are a little too slow. Even a Nickel back like Brandon McDonald gets beaten for TD's.

This might be an ongoing problem all year, so get used to it (and get opposing Tight Ends into your fantasy lineup). Like I said, maybe this changes once Rogers returns. Maybe Ward grows quickly enough to win those one-on-one battles (he won one against the Rams).

Or maybe, like I mentioned last week, a Joe Haden or a Sheldon Brown has to play some Safety.

Unfortunately, I think it will eventually come to that. As much as you'd like to keep Brown & Haden both part of your nickel package, you might have to throw McDonald in at nickel and play a physical CB at Safety.

Don't be surprised when it happens. Mangini & Ryan are smart enough and inventive enough to do "whatever it takes" on Defense.

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Bradford vs. McCoy: The NFL Version - Round 1

(I wonder if there will ever be a Round 2)

Advantage: Bradford. He wasn't overly effective, but he did throw some nice balls, and he looked the part. McCoy has a ways to go.

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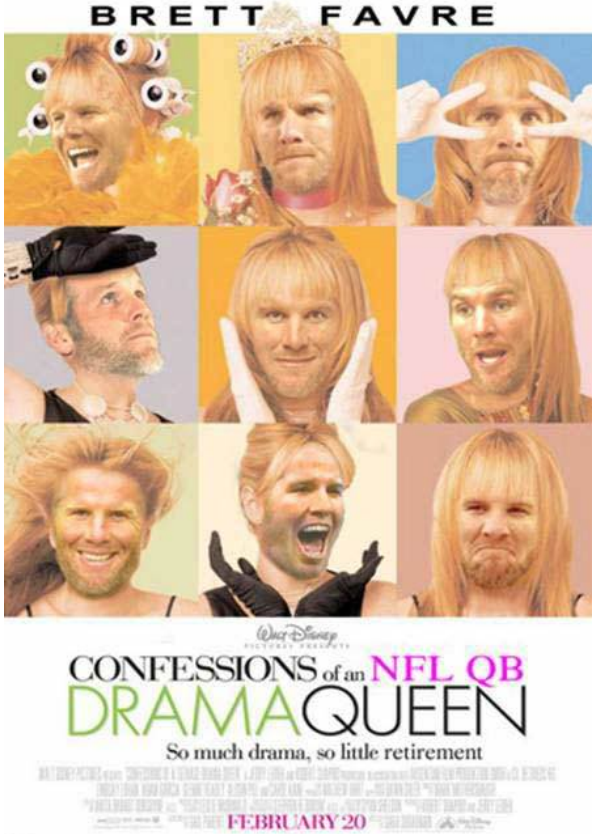
Huh-oh! Manow-anoo-ee!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