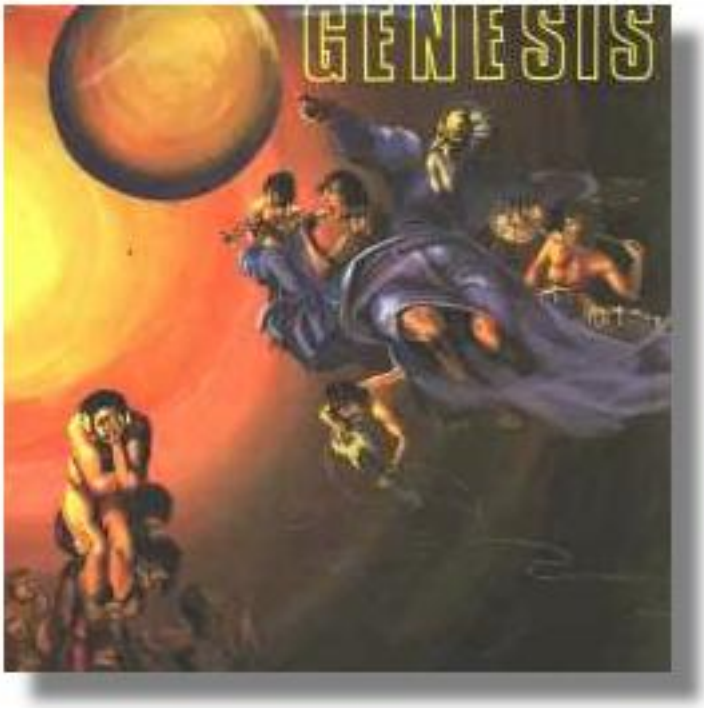

Week 4 – Cleveland vs Cincinnati

As I was writing this article, there was a common theme to a lot of the players I was discussing.

Peyton Hillis. TJ Ward. Joe Haden. Scott Fujita. Seneca Wallace. Ben Watson. Tony Pashos.

The theme is that they were all acquired in the 2010 offseason by Tom Heckert.

Additionally, but for injuries, I have no doubt I would be speaking warmly of Montario Hardesty and Shawn Lauvao as well.

If I were forced - under pain of watching *The Bachelor* - to name the "Keepers" on this team not acquired by Heckert, I would give you Lawrence Vickers, Joe Thomas, Alex Mack, Josh Cribbs, Ahtyba Rubin, Marcus Benard, and Matt Roth. That's it. Seven lousy players. Holy Crapfest, Batman!

Six plus years of player acquisition yielding just 7 players that are current or future "difference makers" is a sad, sad song, especially when I can probably name 7 from this offseason alone. Here, let me try: *Ward, Hillis, Haden, Fujita, Watson, Hardesty, Lauvao.*

Hardesty and Lauvao are, of course, question marks since we haven't seen them play, but from what I did see, I feel that only injury misfortune will keep them from success.

Competent Front Office leadership can right a ship in a damn hurry. If Heckert can duplicate the 2010 progress in 2011 (a tall order with the impending labor situation), then suddenly this is a team with playmakers. Suddenly, the Talent Gap will have closed.

There is no doubt that a Talent Gap exists. This was evident again on Sunday, as the Browns had to physical their way to a lead and hold on as the more talented team made their run. The only option was to out-tough the (classically considered) "better" team. You can't do that every week. That's a hard row to hoe.

So what we're watching is the Genesis of a Real Team - under-talented but not untalented, beginning to become physical, starting to become tough, solid running attack, trying to be opportunistic on Defense. A team that is evolving into something that does not appear based on the New England model, the Seattle model, or the Philadelphia model.

No, this team looks more like the Pittsburgh and Baltimore model. And it's not as far off as you might think. A year, maybe two. Close enough to continue to watch and squint for progress.

If you can't beat 'em, join 'em. Then beat 'em when they're not looking. Or drunk.

Game Recap

The Browns and that other team (allegedly) from Ohio swapped a couple drives, until Kenyon Coleman recovered a fumbled handoff at about midfield with around 5 minutes left in the 1st. Cleveland got a FG out of that, then tacked on a TD in the 2nd after an 87 yard drive was capped by a gorgeous-mous pass from Seneca Wallace to Evan Moore right down the middle. *Browns 10, Bengals 0.*

However, in Browns tradition, no good play goes unpunished, so, after allowing a Cincy FG, Sheldon Brown fell on his face while guarding TO in a one-on-one situation along the sidelines, which resulted predictably in a 78 yard TD. At the end, Owens spelled the word "to" with his arms, which he apparently learned how to spell last week just in case of such a situation. *Brow ns 10, Bengals 10.*

Wallace was picked on the next drive after Chansi Stucky botched the "catch", and it looked like another collapse was in full effect. But Scott Fujita blocked a 44 yard Cincy FG try, and the Browns managed to drive far enough to get a FG of their own right before the Half. *Browns 13, Bengals 10.*

Operation Smasheroo began in the 2nd Half, with the Browns driving 66 yards for a TD capped by a Peyton Hillis run, one of several on the drive that underlined his love of physical contact. Carson Palmer was sacked and fumbled a few plays later, and that turnover resulted in another CLE FG, leaving the Browns with an uncomfortably comfortable lead. *Browns 23, Bengals 10.*

In an attempt to alleviate the pressure, the Bengals went to a no-huddle Offense, and it worked for a while. They drove 76 yards for a FG and 80 yards for a TD on consecutive leads (helped by a personal foul call on TJ Ward for - to paraphrase Chris Tucker in *Friday* - knocking Jordan Shipley the F out).
Browns 23, Bengals 20.

Watching the Browns lose three 4th Quarter leads in three weeks didn't instill the fans with a ton of faith (not to mention the last 10 years of blown saves), and when Cleveland went 3 and Out with about 9 1/2 left in the 4th, you heard more cheer at a Siberian funeral. The Bengals drove, looking good, looking like at least a FG was inevitable, until Chad Johnson picked up an Offensive Pass Interference penalty on 3rd Down at the 31 (saving a Joe Haden pick) and Matt Roth sacked Palmer from behind on the subsequent play, forcing Cincy back out of FG position

and the punt.

With about 4 1/2 left, Headmaster Hillis (PHD of Smash) calmly pounded out the yardage required to run out the clock.

Final: Browns 23, Bengals 20.

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Conclusion

Time of Possession: Cleveland – 30:46, Cincinnati – 29:14

Total Yards: Cincinnati – 413, Cleveland - 295

First Downs: Cincinnati - 21, Cleveland – 21

These numbers clearly indicate that the Browns played ball control while the Bengals opted for a more big-play quick-strike approach, which makes sense considering Cincy falling behind 23-10 in the 2nd Half.

Despite the differing styles, I'm also convinced that the Browns and Bengals are on fairly equal ground. Cincy has more household names, but some of them are overrated/past-their-prime, and they have their share of weaknesses too. They are more talented individually, but, in football, that does not always translate to a superior Team.

Sadly, I do not conclude that the Browns being on par with the Bengals constitutes that the Browns have arrived. No, it just means that Cincy is an overrated team that is really of middle-of-the-pack quality, and will continue to be exposed as thus throughout the season despite a good win here or there.

The AFC North is still a 2 team division, and neither of those teams wear orange.

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Gameballs

TJ Ward – Keep on a-rockin' 'em, baby.

Matt Roth – 2 sacks, one in the most important of moments near the end. Finally developing back into the pass rushing threat he was at the end of last season.

Peyton Hillis - Brian McPeek dubbed him Hammer (or was it Nails?), and it's more fun than a closet full of hookers to watch him run. He didn't really rack up the yards on Sunday, but the body count was nice. I noticed at least a couple defenders pretending like they really needed to tie their shoe when he started coming their way.

Scott Fujita – Blocking the FG was nice, but so was the sack and the forced fumble.

Kenyon Coleman – Just when I thought he was dead, he showed up on the field and actually made some plays. 3 tackles, 1 sack, 2 fumble recoveries - nicely played, sir.

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Honorable Mention

Chansi Stuckey – And we have a WR sighting! Would've been higher, but that pick was all his culpa.

Joe Haden – He gave up some plays, true. But he was physical and didn't let up and doesn't get down. Nothing but high hopes for this guy.

Ben Watson – Once again highly effective, and just this close to a spectacular TD catch.

Tony Pashos – They ran well to the right, and that's the kind of balance we need.

Seneca Wallace – Once again solid if unexciting. A great throw here and there, mixed with a lot of meh. But oh-so much better than what we had at QB last year that, in comparison, his play is like watching Van Gogh paint.

Well, At Least You Didn't Wet Yourself

Eric Wright – Hardly a quality game, but of so much higher quality than his last game that I do have some hope he might recover mentally. Needs to continue to be more physical, and, if he does make a good play, needs to continue to be a show-off ass about it. If you were an ass before, then a return to ass means you've recovered your confidence.

Or it might just mean you're an ass. Too close to call.

Wall of Shame

Mo Massaquoi & Brian Robiskie – Did you gentlemen make a joke at Seneca's wife's expense? Did you put some compromising photos of her on the internet? Send her some suggestive haiku? Or do you just have no business playing the WR position at this level?

Sheldon Brown – The asterisk to Heckert's quality talent acquisition. You can't fall in a situation like that (the 78 yard TD catch). Did you happen into a hyper-gravity zone? Turf monster? Random squirrel (like the one that stopped John Elway)?

Abe Elam – Because there's only one Safety I know who's even on the field, and it ain't Abe.

Brian Daboll – Did you forget that the Browns had more than one Running Back on the roster?

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