Week 13 – Cleveland at Miami

In the movie *Unforgiven*, Clint Eastwood tells Gene Hackman "*Deserve's got nothing to do with it* " right before blowing his head off with a rifle. You see, Hackman's character was convinced he didn't deserve to be killed by a no-account assassin like Eastwood's character. But he got his brains splattered all over the saloon nonetheless.

There are many out there that feel the moderately ugly Browns product that we've seen the last couple weeks didn't deserve to win against either Carolina or Miami, but here they sit, 2-0 in those games nonetheless.

Did they "deserve" to lose the Jets game? Did they "deserve" to lose the Jags game? (OK, yeah, they probably did). Did the Cavs "deserve" to get screwed by what's-his-name? Did the South Florida fans "deserve" the 1997 World Series Championship? Did Farrah Fawcett "deserve" to die? Did the TV Show *Small Wonder* "deserve" a green light?

Deserve's got nothin' to do with it. There just IS. The Browns won the last 2 games, and the wins count the same as if they'd won both 51-0 (like they did one glorious game in early 1989).

Regarding the feelings about these 2 wins, I understand both sides of the coin. On one hand, they play up or down to the level of the opponent, the Offense is as exciting to watch as a 3 hour staring contest, and they are really accomplishing nothing more right now than screwing up their draft slot (and the more subversive elements are probably scared this will help Mangini keep his job).

On the other, the Browns are maybe getting back some of those should've-won games from earlier in the season, they're learning to win, shedding the laughingstock label they've worn for so many years, and they've got a real shot at .500 despite the 1-5 and 3-7 start.

In the end, I think my personal disappointment in recent developments stems from this: When the Defense, the QB play, and the Running Game all click at the same time, the Browns can be Damn Good. Damn Damn Good. Witness what they did to the New England Patriots, a team that subsequently went on and beat the living tar out of several good teams in a row. So when you set THAT performance as the bar... well, squeaking out a one point win against the hapless Panthers and an unsightly victory against the mediocre Dolphins just leaves you feeling a little unfulfilled.

The key is that your entire team isn't going to play a perfect game every Sunday. In fact, on very few Sundays will all facets work as expected at the same time. The Defense played very well against the Fins on Sunday - its best performance since the Pats (thank God for tackling drills) - but the QB play was just average, which helps to make the Run Game ineffective. If we weren't somewhat hampered by having to play a backup QB in Delhomme (because that's exactly what he is), that might've opened up the Run Game and we would've blown the Fish out of the water like a stick of nitro.

Still, if you ask all 10 Miami fans, they'll tell you that if they weren't hampered by their soon-to-be-backup QB, they too might've blown the Browns out.

That shows exactly where the Browns are - they can hang in with anyone, they can beat anyone if they play a good game, but most weeks it'll come down to whether or not they or their opponent has the most inadequacies and whether or not they or their opponent makes the most mistakes. The Browns are *Saturday Night Live* - not ready for prime time players.

At least they look like they might be getting there.

Game Recap

If you like Offense, most of the 1st Half was a struggle to watch. Both teams punted the ball back and forth with great frequency. Hillis struggled for yards against 8-9 man fronts, and the passing game was largely of the checkdown variety. The Dolphins moved the ball a bit better than the Browns did, getting a few more first downs here or there, getting 10-20 more yards per drive, but, in the end, there were few scoring threats for either of them after Miami's first drive of the game ended up with a blocked 41 yard FG attempt.

Chad Henne's 2nd pick of the day - a just awful throw that was stolen by Abe Elam - finally put Cleveland in position to deflower the scoreboard as they started their drive at the MIA 28. From there, a powerful 14 yard drive netted them a FG and a strong 3 point lead. ***Browns 3, Dolphins 0.***

The Fins managed a 60 yard kick right before Half to tie things up, but the 2 teams spent most of the 3rd Quarter squandering possessions again. Naturally, field position became as precious as Gollum's ring, and the inept Browns Offense didn't have it very good at their own 6 with about 5 minutes left in the period. But - to my jaw-dropping shock - Delhomme threw a 37 yard (that's in the air, kids) pass to Mo Massaquoi, and that seemed to open up the field for the crossing routes and intermediate Tight End passes the Browns had been trying to use all day. A 33 yard catch and run by Mo Mass got them to the 3, and Ben Watson caught an easy TD on the next play. ***Browns 10, Dolphins 3.***

Cleveland is nothing if not a gracious guest, and, seeing that they had sort of taken control of the game, politely ceded it right back to the Fins by allowing a fairly routine 80 yard drive right after that to start the 4th. Henne actually looked competent for most of that drive, and the Wildcat - which they used extensively (and effectively) on all their scoring drives. The only other team that used it that much against the Browns this season was the Jets - and it worked for them too. Hopefully other teams don't catch on... ***Browns 10, Dolphins 10.***

What followed was either 2 good Defenses going toe-to-toe or 2 poor Offenses refusing to take control of a tight contest. The Browns went 3 and Out. Momentum to Miami. Miami went 3 and Out. Momentum to Cleveland. 3 and Out Browns. 3 and Out Dolphins.

With about 3:30 left, the Browns finally eked out a 1st when Delhomme quick-snapped the Dolphins into a penalty, but a Miami sack killed that drive, and Jake's 3rd Down ill-advised-sure-to-be-a-Pick-6-thank-God-he-dropped-it pass almost ended the game. Reggie Hodges (who had another strong game) punted it away.

At his 25 with 1:34 left, Henne had a chance to be a hero. He responded by misfire, misfire, and a ball that was tipped by David Bowens at the line of scrimmage right into Mike Adams' arms, which he returned to the MIA 2. A couple kneel downs later, Phil Dawson trotted out and nailed the bunny winner. Suck it, Miami.

Final: Browns 13, Dolphins 10.

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Conclusion

Time of Possession: Miami – 30:36, Cleveland – 29:24

Total Yards: Miami – 281, Cleveland - 252

First Downs: Miami - 17, Cleveland – 12

Like I said, the Fins got a little more here and a little more there, but it was apparent that neither team significantly outplayed the other. The Halftime stats were even more lopsided: Cleveland only had 4 First Downs to Miami's 10 and 79 yards to Miami's 160.

Neither team deserved to lose this game (the way neither really deserved to win it), but, as in most contests (except, of course, the JAX game), turnovers were the most essential stat.

Miami 3, Browns 0.

Well, fine, yeah, maybe Score is THE most essential stat... Browns came out on top of that one too.

Gameballs

Joe Haden – So... tell me again why we had to wait for Eric Wright to get hurt to get Haden in the starting lineup? All he does is make plays. And that doesn't even count his INT, which was probably his worst play of the day (he was toasted, but Henne was kind enough to underthrow the ball by 15 yards). The Browns left him on an island almost the whole time, and he rose to the challenge, freeing the Safeties up to help stop the run game. Numerous tackles and passes defensed - Greg Gumbel and Dan Dierdorf couldn't stop drooling over the guy. Suh's got Defensive Rookie of the Year wrapped up... but Haden will be on most people's All Rookie team.

Ben Watson - As pure a pass catcher as, say, Kellen Winslow Deux? Probably not. But solid, very solid, and had 10 catches for 100 yards and TD in this game.

Chad Henne - One of the Browns' best players in this game. You've gotta feel for Miami, since they were hoping Henne would be The Answer, but it looks more like this barkin' mad tat-of-a-lad clad in orange and light blue pad speakin' of bad gonad named Chad is The Problem. And if you don't have a Franchise QB on your roster, you can't move forward towards the Lombardi until you get one.

Honorable Mention

Jake Delhomme – No turnovers (luckily) this time, and that quick snap to catch MIA with 12 (or 13) men on the field near the end of the game was very intelligent.

Abe Elam – Continues to thrive since Joe Haden became starter. I wonder if there is any correlation...?

Shaun Rogers – Another blocked FG, another sack, and a great shoelace tackle on Henne on 3rd Down to help preserve the win. Just wish he would/could play more.

David Bowens – Playing some ILB, making plays again. A couple tipped balls to negate big plays, and created the tip at the end that Adams picked to effectively win the game.

The Entire Defense – After a couple of poor performances against hardly-stellar Offenses, played their best overall game since the Patriots win. Looked like tackling might've been the topic du semaine.

Mo Massaquoi – Dropped a sure TD right before Half, but otherwise had a very solid game.

Wall of Shame

Matt Roth - Whiffed on a dead-to-rights sack early, then achieved a personal foul right before Half that led to 3 points. That was about all we saw of him.

Right Side of Offensive Line - When there was pressure, that's where it came from. Maybe someone over there might wanna block Cameron Wake with about 2 minutes left and the game on the line?

Whoever Calls the Personnel Packages - Not a single carry for anyone other than Hillis again.

Brian Daboll - I'm sure he's partially to blame for the above, but he really gets this for one single play: 1st and 10 on the MIA 18 with 2:05 left in the 1st Half. Since it's right before the 2 minute warning and it's Cleveland, the easy prediction is for the Browns to run the ball in order to take advantage of the free Time Out at 2:00. I yell at TV "PLAY ACTION! PLAY ACTION! THEY'LL BE EXPECTING THE RUN!"

What does Daboll do? Runs the ball anyway. Dolphins all over it. Gain of zero. Shocking.

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For the first time in 3 games, a Browns QB threw a pass over 25 yards. Two of 'em, in fact.

Now, I for one have been an advocate that you have to at least have the pretense of a deep threat, even if you don't have one, the same way that passing teams need to have a pretense of a running game, even if they don't really have one. Even if you have minimal hope of completing the pass, you have to throw the ball deep a couple times a game just to back the enemy off the line of scrimmage a bit. Even if the wind is swirling and the snow is falling sideways, you send a Receiver deep and throw it at him (even if you instruct your QB to make sure it lands 5 yards out of bounds).

And, who knows? Attempting deep balls might even get a lucky result. WR's looking back for the ball have all sorts of advantages over the CB's looking at them. You might get an Illegal Contact. You might get a Pass Interference. Or you might have a WR make an adjustment on a ball and come down with an actual completion.

Sure, you might get the occasional pick, but deep balls often act as de facto punts, and it's damn hard to drive the length of the field on 5 yard slant plays.

For instance, let's look at the results of the two 25+ yard pass plays the Browns attempted Sunday in Miami:

1. From the MIA 25, Delhomme threw a ball over the middle to Stuckey in the back of the end zone. Stuckey was hit as he tried to get his feet down and dropped the ball. An incompletion, but very close to a TD pass.

2. From the CLE 9, Delhomme threw a 37 yard pass to Mo Massaquoi. The ball was not perfect

by any means, but Mo Mass was able to make an adjustment and the catch, and that sparked the Browns' lone TD drive.

There is simply no excuse I will accept for not tossing up at least 2-3 of these per game.

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Jake Delhomme has been the subject of much derision the last few weeks (some of it from me), but, in an effort to maintain at least a semblance of perspective, let me just ask this question:

Would you rather have Derek Anderson or Brady Quinn in there?

(If you answer yes, let me know how drugs are at the facility where you are currently institutionalized.)

Thing is, if you go down an NFL roster and look at what some teams are throwing out onto the field, Delhomme's probably middle of the pack. Miami (Henne), Arizona (Anderson/Hall/Skelton), Carolina (Clausen/Moore), Oakland (Campbell), Tennessee (Young/Collins/R. Smith), San Fran (T. Smith, A. Smith), Buffalo (Fitzgerald), Minnesota (Favre/Jackson), Washington (McNabb), and even Cincy (Palmer) all have questionable to awful QB situations as of right now.

I believe that a lot of the flack that Delhomme gets is from 3 reasons:

1. His penchant for bad INT's. When he throws a pick, it's not just a pick; it's often a Pick 6.

2. The ultra-conservative play calling when he's in the game.

3. The concept that he's starting despite perceived superior options being available.

I try to remember that #2 and #3 are not his fault. Those sins (if you consider them thusly) belong to the coaching staff, and may have to be answered for at the end of the year.

To make Delhomme our whipping boy for the mistakes of others is probably not fair - a fact I will try to remember when I'm screaming at my TV come Sunday.

More inexcusable than the coaching staff's seemingly masochistic need to start Delhomme over Wallace would be the idea that they feel that McCoy's injury was a lucky break for them to insert Jake back in the lineup. I've seen many speculate on this possibility, and I just pray that it is false.

After watching the effectiveness of the Offense under the guidance of both McCoy and Delhomme, I have to conclude that Mangini et al are TRYING to get fired if they think that starting Jake is the better option.

Reading an article on CBS Sportsline by Clark Judge this week, I came across some interesting tidbits:

What makes the deal so compelling is that Cleveland had decided it was finished with Quinn. In fact, it shopped him for weeks with no one interested and was this close to waiving the guy until McDaniels came to the rescue. He expressed interest in Quinn before, so the Browns figured they'd check with him again before cutting Quinn loose.

They discovered that not only was McDaniels still intrigued by Quinn but was willing to offer the Browns the running back they coveted. That was Hillis, who'd come to coach Eric Mangini's attention when Hillis played against Mangini's New York Jets in 2008 and ran for a then-career-high 129 yards and a touchdown.

Mangini liked everything about the guy and made a mental note then to track him if he ever became available. But he wasn't alone. When Heckert was the GM in Philadelphia, he was on to Hillis, too, figuring he'd be a perfect fit for the Eagles.

Of course, nothing ever happened until the Browns put Quinn on the market, and then it happened in a hurry. Once Denver was interested, it was easy for Mangini and Heckert to zero in on a target, with both agreeing that Hillis could improve the Browns with his running, his ability to catch the ball out of the backfield and his toughness.

But they didn't stop there. Instead, they somehow convinced Denver to throw in two draft picks -- a sixth-rounder in 2010 and an undetermined 2011 choice that probably becomes another sixth -- to sweeten a deal that, frankly, helped make both clubs what they are today.

In Quinn, McDaniels thought he was getting a future starter. Instead, he's the team's third-stringer and hasn't played a down this season. In Hillis, the Browns knew what they were getting, and what you see today is the product of a club that did its homework.

I suppose the part of that that is news to me is the fact that no one was interested in Quinn, which I can understand but still find a little surprising because there's usually at least a couple teams out there willing to take a chance on a high-profile young QB as a project.

The fact that Denver was the ONLY team is somewhat shocking, making the fact that the Browns were able to consummate a deal (rather than the Broncos just waiting for Cleveland to waive him) all the more impressive.

For the record:

2 Draft Picks of Undetermined Results + **Peyton Hillis** = 962 yards rushing (4.4 avg), 436 yards receiving (8.2 avg), 53 receptions, 13 TD through 12 games.

Brady Quinn = 0-0, 0 yards passing, 0 yards rushing, 0 TD, 0.0 QB rating through 12 games.

Now that's what I call good value.

And now for some random speculation which is part Ha-Ha and part Hmmmmmm!

The Browns are Offensively challenged. Brian Daboll is the Offensive Coordinator. Brian Daboll might be the sacrifice the Island (Mike Holmgren) demands at the end of the season. Supposed Offensive guru and native Northeast Ohioan Josh McDaniels just got fired in Denver and will probably need another successful stint as O Coordinator if he expects to ever get another Head Coaching gig.

Then Mangini told the press Wednesday morning: "*In going through the experience, I'll give*

the dust a little time to settle and then I'll definitely give him a call and talk to him and see if there is any way I can help. "

Ha-Ha! Hmmmmmm...

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I know I promised not to watch the Cavs-Heat last Thursday, but my girlfriend and I decided to get a drink after my daughter's school Christmas program that night, and what happened to be on the TV? Why, the Cavs-Heat! Weird coincidence.

I was only able to make it through one quarter (the 2nd) of that debacle. I've heard the 3rd was even worse, but, by that time, I was safely at home watching the Eagles-Texans game.

Here's my impression of the Cavs players:

Hi LeBron! Remember me? How's it goin', man? Awesome to see ya! You're lookin' good!

So, what's been up? You guys lookin' for a [enter player's position here]? Ya never know, we might get to play together again! Do you miss me the way I miss you? Things have been weird around here since you left. Just so you know, I think Gilbert and the fans are dicks. I got your back, dog! We're still friends, right?

And so on and so forth.

The youngsters on the Cavs' squad reverted back to fawning little sisters when big bro LeBron walked through the door. And once you're a little sister, it's very unlikely you'll ever magically grow male genitalia halfway through your career.

Yes, it was disgusting to watch the Little Sisters let LBJ do whatever he wanted, just laid down for him, joking with him, letting him chat with them while they sat on the bench... all the while underlining the foul morass of fake competition that the NBA has become. I've never seen a league so horribly broken, and I've spent YEARS watching college football flop around uselessly.

As I'm sure you recall, I put a self-imposed ban on watching any NBA except the Cavs prior to this season because of the crap collusion which is threatening to turn it into an 8 team league (with a bunch of non-BCS conference patsies to fill out the schedule). I'm now extending the ban to the Cavs, because I don't have any desire to watch those gutless eunuchs stink up the floor for another second. I'd give even a bad team my support if I thought they gave a damn. I don't.

I was a proponent of trying to salvage this season, but I've seen enough. Go ahead and blow it up, Gilbert. Nuke away, pal.

Not that it matters - the Little Sisters will be more than happy to do the job for you.

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Next Up

Buffalo Bills (2-10).

This is the kind of game that Browns fans will EXPECT to win, and if you're a Browns fan, you really shouldn't EXPECT anything. Just because Cleveland's good enough to beat the best team in the league doesn't mean they can't lose to the worst. And the Bills aren't even the worst.

This is a team that took the Steelers, Ravens, and Chiefs to OT (and had good chances to win all 3). The Offense has been much more effective since they mercifully flushed Trent Edwards and replaced him with Ryan Fitzpatrick. The Defense has stepped it up too.

Now, the Bills certainly played like crap last week, and one might wonder if maybe they've decided their best bet is to throw themselves into the Andrew Luck sweepstakes (it might be). But if they are indeed committed to winning still, then the Browns will have their hands full in this game, and I can easily see them losing it.

Bills 26, Browns 22.

Person I Like Aaron Goldhammer More Than

Joe Theismann, NFL Network Analyst

I don't really have anything against Joe Theismann, human being. But Joe Theismann, color analyst on the NFL Network's 3-man Thursday night team with Matt Millen and some other

random dude... yeah, I've got something against that guy.

First, his voice. Let's say he was speaking in French, and I had no idea WHAT he was saying. I would still hate the guy because of the whiny tone and pitch in which he said it. I'd watch the game and say to myself "*Whatever the hell that guy is saying sucks*."

If Joe Theismann came to my house and read me one of my favorite books - let's say One Flew Over The Cuckoos Nest - then I'd listen to him and say to myself "*That book sucks*."

Joe Theismann has that kind of awful power.

Second, what he says is just as bad as how he says it. That's like multiplying zeroes.

To paraphrase a conversation during the game, you might hear Millen and the Other Dude discussing whether or not a runner's forearm was down before the ball came out. Then Theismann would chip in "*Michael Vick's gotta see that and make a different decision*."

Problem is, the play has nothing to do with any QB, and the Eagles aren't even playing in the game.

Millen: "*You've always gotta be careful with Devin Hester on kickoffs. He's a threat to return it to the house on any given play*."

Theismann: "*The Wide Receiver is really responsible for coming back for the ball. I don't put that on the Quarterback at all*."

Millen: "*They just kicked off, Joe*."

Theismann: "*If you don't have time to look down the field, the Quarterback can be pressured into throwing the Linebacker at the Goalpost* ."

Millen: "*Uh... what?*"

Theismann: "*Watch Lawrence Taylor on this play. He finds a way to grab the snuffle and punt the skiff into the Kraken* ."

Silence as Millen looks at the back of Theismann's neck to see if maybe there's a switch that can be used to power poor Joe down.

Find the switch, Matt. Find the switch.