So I am at work this past week and I overhear a conversation two Giants fans are having about Eli Manning and whether or not he is good team leader. That got me thinking about the Browns and Colt McCoy. Once I actually stopped and thought about it I realized the Browns might have something they have not had in a very long time: a real “Leader of Men” at the QB position.

You know, often times terms like “team leader” get thrust upon people who really don’t understand the concept of being a leader and fall way short of the title. In the NFL guys can become team leaders usually by three ways:

1.You are a stud athlete and playmaker that people tend to follow because they know you can help them win…

2. You are a relationship builder and motivator that can lead through words.

3. You are the hardest worker with the highest motor and earn the respect of your teammates that way.

For the majority of good QB’s in the NFL all three of these things are characteristics they possess, so sometimes fans just assume that playing the QB position automatically entitles a player to be a team leader. That perception is just not reality.

Being a leader on the football field is not too different than most aspects of life. Some people

are what they call “natural born leaders” and some are not. I think most people have worked for a supervisor who in no way, shape or form is an effective leader yet the person still held the title and sat in the chair. Unfortunately sometimes a person can show all the right qualities and potential to lead but fail miserably when put in that situation.

Honestly, it is not too much different in the NFL.

You might think that a guy being an effective leader on a college team automatically qualifies him to be a leader in a NFL environment but being a capable leader in college is only a prerequisite and doesn’t always hold true in the NFL when the level of competition and expectations have increased.

In the sports world there are no computers or policies to hide behind. You don’t have the ability to pass the buck on accountability by putting the blame on someone above you, below you or next to you. Players, coaches, and fans can’t be tricked because the film will always be there as a reference and film doesn’t lie.

Being a successful QB and team leader in the NFL is tough because you have to be all three of the things I mentioned, and in addition to that you have the ball in your hands on every play offensively so if you are not playing well everyone in the stadium knows it including your teammates. More times than not, a bad game for the QB means a loss for his team.

In addition to higher expectations on game days, the foundation of those expectations start with a heavy practice work load and often times a QB’s fate is determined well before Sunday.

Practice

Practice is where a young QB begins to earn his stripes of respect. Depending on how the depth chart shakes out a young QB may have to wait until the last preseason game or actual game week preparations begin in order to start getting attention and turning heads.

For a young 3rd string QB like Colt McCoy (at least when the 2010 season started) you actually don't get that many reps once training camp begins because the lion's share of reps go to the ones and twos. And when you do get some burn it is often times with guys who won't be in the NFL in a few weeks anyway so your supporting cast is subpar and play often looks sloppy.

The last preseason game is usually when the young 3rd string guy gets to play a significant amount of snaps and begins the game with at least second string players. Getting more reps leading up to the game and also playing with a better supporting cast can lead to better results for a young QB.

If you remember that is the exact scenario that played out last year with McCoy. He actually looked bad most preseason until that final preseason game where he went 13 for 13. Once he got more reps leading up to the last game and the skill level of his weapons increased, his quality of play also increased.

This late preseason success started earning McCoy the respect of teammates and it continued once the game weeks started and he was the leader of the scout team. If you remember a press conference by Rob Ryan prior to one of the games at the end of the year where Colt was going to start, Ryan was asked what he thought of McCoy and he said something to the effect of, "He has been eating us up in practice all year. The kid can play".

Statements like that coming from a straight shooter like Ryan are the kind of words that should ring in your ears as a fan because they show the foundation of the trust that Colt started building long before he was thrust into the lineup.

In sports players and coaches are always sizing each other up in practice and the film is always being analyzed no matter if it is practice or games. QBs in particular can earn the respect of his teammates long before they ever faces live game action. This foundation of respect also allows for some level of credibility when McCoy makes a statement like he did before his first career start saying "Guys, you can count on me because I will play well." Because he had already started proving himself in practice he got a jump-start on earning the trust a QB needs from his mates. There were many players that believed in him already because of what they had seen in practice.

Games

Judging Colt's leadership during the games he played was easier for me when watching the games for a second time because I already knew the score. That allowed me to proceed at my own pace reviewing McCoy and watching the little things that he did or didn't do.

In general McCoy did a really good job of leading the team, especially considering he was a raw rookie. But there were two moments in particular that sent chills up my spine because they gave me a glimpse into McCoy's potential as a leader and field general.

The first example was the Jets game and it was actually an example ex-Browns coach Eric Mangini alluded to when he was on NFL Network as a guest. I saw Mangini's interview and went back to my notes knowing that I had written the same thing after re-watching the Jets game.

I had been waiting up until that point in his young NFL career for Colt to be pressed on a drive that was truly do-or-die because I wondered if he would be able to get the team to respond when the stakes were at their highest.

Well, at the end of the Jets game you got just that scenario to play out. The Jets had just taken the lead and the Browns needed to march down the field for a TD that would tie the game. McCoy not only orchestrated the drive, he put three balls in windows that most young QBs can't hit because nerves don't allow them to throw the ball with the type of pinpoint accuracy McCoy showed.

The first impressive pass was the throw to Ben Watson on the right side while Watson was covered on both sides and from behind. McCoy hit Watson right in the facemask with a perfectly placed and timed ball.

The second example was a deep slant (skinny post) that McCoy threw to Evan Moore against Darrelle Revis on his island. This throw was impressive for two reasons; first, it was against Revis. That's never an easy throw when you start with that. Secondly, knowing how big Moore

is McCoy put the ball where he knew only Moore could get his hands on it and Moore made a really good catch.

The third throw was to Mohamed Massaquoi on the TD. It was just a basic slant, but a slant from the 6 yard line is in really close quarters and you need to put that throw right on the money and Colt did just that.

The drive showed me two things that got me excited. It showed me that McCoy has an understanding that although he doesn't have a rocket launcher attached to his shoulders, he has more than enough arm strength to be a good QB in this league. The second and most important thing it showed was that it's extremely difficult to make McCoy look rattled, out of control, or hurried. The really good QBs in this league actually make it look like the game slows down for them in crunch time and on that drive, McCoy looked like he was seeing the game in slow motion…. Now, Stuckey fumbled the rock and we ended up losing but to me that was a telling and very significant moment.

The other time I got chills was actually during the blowout loss to end the season. That final game showed more than any other how hot the fire burns in this kid to succeed and how he is not willing to attach his name to nonsense.

First let's set the scenario: The Browns were completing another season in which they were headed for a top 10 draft pick no matter what the outcome of the final game was. The game was already in hand, 28-3, for the opponents with less than 3 minutes to go in the first half. The Browns had the ball and it was 3rd down and less than five yards to go….Colt drops back to pass and clearly is looking to release the ball quickly but is not able to because the player misses the hot read…he holds onto the ball and ends up getting rid of it for an incompletion just as James Harrison drives him into the ground.

Colt slowly climbs out of the crater his body created from the impact and gets over to the sidelines as he grimaces in pain…a few minutes later he can be seen looking at the photos of the play with coach Daboll…. he yells something and slams his helmet on the ground busting the communication receiver inside the helmet.

Now, I understand some will focus on the childish act of throwing the helmet like he was a

school kid throwing a level 10-tantrum and I get that.

But my eyes saw something much different than that. I saw a moment when the players who didn't already realize that a new level of accountability was coming to Cleveland sure as hell knew it in no uncertain terms right then and there and before that helmet stopped rolling.

Even with his "green" rookie status, Colt McCoy had no problem letting his team know that sloppy play, missed assignments, and mental errors were not going to be tolerated. Even in what some would consider a meaningless game, well, McCoy made it clear that there is no such thing as a meaningless game and he also made it clear that mistake-ridden football was not going to be accepted on his watch.

See, I have watched many QB's roll through Cleveland with basically the same results and when it comes to the last 3, (Brady Quinn, Derek Anderson, Jake Delhomme) they all struggled in the leadership department.

Anderson never will understand how to lead men. He is one of those guys that thinks the QBs job is just to throw the football. He never made the guys stand up tall and could never command respect because he wilted under pressure himself and teammates knew their chances of winning was over once Anderson got that "deer in headlights" look. He was never comfortable in a leadership role and probably never will be.

Quinn was the type who felt like the position automatically granted him the title of King. He rubbed people the wrong way by walking around with the horrible stench of youthful arrogance. It is hard for people to follow when most of them want to see you fail.

Delhomme still said and did all the right things off the field and performed adequately in practice. But he just lost the team's trust in him on game days. That is just as bad, if not worse than losing them in the locker room.

Using these player's failures as examples maybe you can begin to understand where I am coming from. Colt McCoy was telling everyone that this level of play will absolutely not be

tolerated no matter what the circumstances. Mental errors are the easiest to fix, so they should be the least acceptable. By the end of the year against a team you see twice a year every year you shouldn't be missing assignments….period.

To me the message he was sending was absolutely the right one. The delivery can and should be tweaked but sometimes you need to show the severity of the message in order to break habits and begin change. The Browns were lethargic all day against their most despised opponent missing assignments, dropping balls, looking disinterested and these things are not part of a winning team's formula and clearly needed to be pointed out.

The public tantrum was not needed but the smoke coming out of his ears and the fire shooting out of his nostrils were. The Browns need a passionate leader on offense who's fire to win burns white hot. Those are the type of players that don't spend time looking for places to hide or excuses so they can make it another day…they simple find a way to get it done.

As a respected QB (after you meet all of the other characteristics that a good leader needs to display) you can get away with showing some emotion and passion when things are screwed up and it is less likely to be taken in a negative way.

The fire you saw shooting out of McCoy that Sunday afternoon were flames of accountability that this team has needed for a long time and, in my opinion, set the tone for the level of leadership he has shown over this lockout offseason.

If McCoy can elevate his play to a level that is on par with his natural leadership abilities he will have the whole Browns nation burning bright once again no matter how hard the Lake Erie winds try to put them out.

Don't let the baby face fool you, Colt McCoy has the look of a grizzled veteran when it comes to leading his teammates.

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