All right all you hungry Browns fans out there, it is time for the first installment of my Kibbles and Bits series. I will use these articles to talk about many topics all under one article umbrella. For example, in this article I will start off talking about the roster and free agency, throw in some notes on training camp reports, and end with a quasi- game preview for the upcoming Packers pre-season game.
Because of the game review being built into this article it may get a little long so let's jump right in and start.

Free Agency
Let's start by talking about the topic that has Cleveland all the buzz and that is cap room and free agent acquisitions.

My initial thoughts were the same as most of you when the clock started ticking on free agency. If you read my roster primer article then you already know I thought the Browns were going to be active players in the free agent frenzy.

So much for that wisdom. I couldn't have been more wrong. The Browns showed early on that they had no intentions of signing any of the big impact players and I was O.K. with that and, in fact, expected that.

I didn't however expect them to basically sit idle during the whole period. They signed Brandon Jackson to be a backup RB which was a good move to shore up a position in which the Browns had a stud starter and a backup coming off of a blown out knee.

They also signed a safety by the name of Usama Young who previously played for the Saints. Young is a player that only has 5 career starts so who knows if he turns out to be a significant contributor or not, but the Browns liked what they saw on film so they brought him in with the hopes he would win the starting safety gig opposite T.J. Ward.

They later signed a 3rd corner in the form of Demitri Patterson who Tom Heckert had a history with in Philadelphia. He will more than likely start at the nickel back and will be counted on to provide depth at the position.

Now, as you can see, the Browns are taking the approach of getting younger as a team and are trying to build the core of this team using the draft. There's nothing with this plan as a whole and I'm with them on that but I also understand that by not bringing in experienced veteran players to both teach the younger players and also provide a measuring stick for comparison, the Browns are choosing to stack the odds against this team winning many games in the upcoming season.
After watching the 2010 season again and studying the team needs I truly understand the roster was riddled with age and our foot speed as a team needed to get faster. I really don't want to question that part of the philosophy. But it is extremely hard for the competitor inside of me to concede anything…..but we should all understand that by playing all these young players and backing them up with even more young players the Browns are essentially saying that finding out which of these young guys are keepers is more important than fielding a team that gives them a better chance to compete.

This is hard for someone like me who gets scolded by his wife for not letting the kids beat him on the Wii. I really don't have a problem staring down a 10 year old if it will give me a competitive advantage so coming to grips with management not setting this team up for the best chance of winning this year was a hard pill for me to swallow.

Now that I have accepted it I can move on and prepare for the upcoming season while watching a sport and team I am passionate about.

The real reason I was so strong and adamant that this year was the year the Brown's roster talent increased was the initial report that teams would have to spend 99% of the cap minimum in cash this year.

That report was premature and incorrect.

The minimum 'floor' for each team doesn't start until 2013. The minimum for 2011 and 2012 is an average of the league and therefore big spending teams (i.e. the Eagles) will balance out the low spending teams allowing teams like the Browns to stay well below the cap.

With the Browns having the ability to stay way under the cap until 2013 look for them to pay a few guys like Joe Thomas and Ahtyba Rubin before their contracts expire. I Also look for them to hold onto their cap space until 2013. That will allow the team to build with young players before they add veterans (and veteran costs) in an attempt to get over the competitive hump and as long as Tom Heckert continues on his current draft reputation that is an executable plan.

Roster

The major portion of free agency is complete and training camp has started but I am not going to go in depth on the roster just yet. Instead I will point out some spots on the team I think can use an infusion of talent.

Once the Pre-Season games get underway and I have some film on players to look at I will write about the roster and how I think various guys will be utilized. For now we will look at some holes.

Besides maybe finding a WR that can be counted on in tough situations to make big plays, most

of my concerns come on the defensive side of the ball. I believe the Browns really should have spent some of their money on providing depth and leadership across the defense and the front seven in particular. The team could have used young veterans at every level of the defense. The LB corps could have used depth and some more proven players to compete. I know most people are worried about D'Qwell Jackson and his health but I am not one of those guys. Both pectoral muscles will be stronger than ever and Jackson doesn't have an injury history beyond those pectoral tears.

My worries actually lie with the other two LBs. Scott Fujita is still a playmaker but he is getting really long in the tooth and Chris Gocong has never been an impact LB since coming into the league.

Honestly, you can tell from Gocong's one year $1.7 million dollar deal compared to the one year $4 million dollar deal that Jackson got (and Jackson didn't even play the last two years) just what kind of player Gocong has proven to be. So far Gocong has not proven to be an impact LB for the Browns or the Eagles and I think the Browns could have upgraded for sure.

The lack of depth at the linebacker position aside, the biggest hole on the roster is on the DL. I understand the type of players they think Phil Taylor and Jabaal Sheard will be, but it is a mistake to enter the year with no proven pass rush. Other than QB play, pass rush can be the most important factor between wins and losses in today's version of the NFL and the Browns best past rusher coming into this season is Marcus Benard. And Benard is not a starter and also has apparently gained too much weight in the off season while preparing to play DE full time.

Benard has 21 games active with 2 games started and 11 sacks. These numbers average out to about 10 sacks a year if you were to take it out over the course of a full season. Those numbers are good and acceptable but he is the only one on the line at all with any real NFL sack history and that is a problem.

Sheard and Taylor are rookies with no NFL data what so ever. Rubin has 2 career sacks in 21 starts and Jayme Mitchell has ZERO starts while being active for 29 games in four years. He

has 5 sacks during that time. I honestly am floored with the lack of proven pass rushers the Browns have on the roster and Cleveland is taking a huge risk relying on 3 starters on the DL who have never started a single game in the NFL especially considering two of the three are rookies.

If the 2011 Browns can't muster pressure on the QB it will be an even longer season than anticipated.

Training Camp Notes

Training camp has started and there are some promising reports coming out. The best news thus far is regarding the progress of the 2011 rookie class and the sharpness that second year players Joe Haden and Ward have shown during camp.

The rookies on the DL have received glowing reports and should greatly benefit from going up against the first string offense every day. You have probably read the stories about Sheard going against Joe Thomas every day. Jabaal could not have gotten a better jump start to his NFL career than going up against one of the better, if not the very best, LT in the game.

The one attribute that Sheard showed more than most DEs coming out of the draft was the ability to use multiple pass rush moves. Going up against the All-Pro Thomas every day will give him an opportunity to figure out when to use what and how to make his moves more effective.

Another rookie benefitting from competition is Phil Taylor. Most days he is going up against another hungry young player in the form of Shawn Lauvao. The young offensive lineman is extremely powerful with a reputation as a mauler. This gives Taylor, a young DL, a taste of the nastier O-Lineman found in the NFL and that is exactly what you want your run-plugging DT to get exposure to.

At the WR spot, Greg Little has also accelerated his learning curve by running with the first team offense in Mohamed Massaquoi's absence. Getting thrown in right away was exactly what a player who hasn't played football in over a year needed as the additional reps help knock away any rust from his layoff. Little has shown flashes of his elite athleticism such as the catch on Family Day where he went up and over two defenders in the corner of the end zone for the score. That play showed off some of his athletic attributes, such as his 41-inch vertical leap, but other plays in camp have shown some of his flaws.

Little is not only a young player in the NFL, he is also inexperienced at the WR position. He has only played WR full time for one year and he didn't play football at all last year. We will be forced to deal with the ups and downs of Little over the course of the year but don't fall into the label trap and place him in any specific category just yet. He is twice the athlete of any of the other WRs on the roster but he also is still a baby at the spot.

He will likely make some plays that will make your jaw drop. Some of those plays will be outstanding ones and some of those will be frustrating. Stay patient and give him a chance to reach his potential. Little is also gaining immense experience going up against a CB like Joe Haden every day in practice and matchups like that can accelerate your learning curve immensely.

Owen Merecic has been steady in camp showing he has all the skills to be an effective FB in the league.

Buster Skrine has shown the blazing speed and the good ball skills he was advertised to have and has even had a pick 6 against Colt McCoy. Eric Hagg has also shown to be active around the ball during seven on seven drills.

With no OTAs work under the belt I will refrain from commenting on McCoy and the passing game until later into camp. I will say (just as I tweeted weeks before camp started) Evan Moore is a beast in the two TE sets and should have a huge year.

You can also tell Colt's shoulder is way healthier than last year. His arm hasn't turned into a rocket launcher but he is no longer throwing Ken Dorsey-like lollipop specials either.

Game Preview
This is only a pre-season game so I won't do a full breakdown, but I do want to point out some things that I will be looking for on Saturday:

**Running game- The first team O-line will have a good test in the quarter of work they get. The Packers were stout against the run last year and I am anxious to see if we can move the ball on the ground effectively.
I also hope to see the Packers struggle some to gain yards against our first team defense. The Packers were not a great running team last year and the Browns defense has been boasting of the Taylor/Rubin tandem against the run and now is the time to start seeing it.

**Passing Game- The Packers have one of the best CB groups in the league to go along with one of the game's most prolific pass rushers (Clay Mathews). This will be a test of the early timing that Colt and his WRs have gained in the WCO. I expect Seneca Wallace and the second team offense to look crisp due to the experience that he has in the offense combined with the experience of Brandon Jackson and Alex Smith who have each played in similar schemes.

We all know Aaron Rodgers is one of the best young QBs in the game so the Packer's passing game will be a good gauge for the Brown's pass rush. It should also test Usama Young at the safety spot while he tries to stop or at least contain Jermichael Finley.

Matt Flynn should provide a good test for all the young secondary members of the second team defense. I also expect Jabaal Sheard to struggle a bit in his first start while going up against the Packers first string, but I expect Marcus Benard to dominate the second team offense of the Packers.

****Players to Watch**

D'Qwell Jackson- It is important that Jackson gets in and makes some tackles at full speed in order to test and gain some confidence in his two robo pecks. If those big guys do what they are expected to do up front, watch for Jackson's great instincts and speed to show up on film.

Titus Brown and Kaluka Maiva- With the lack of depth the Browns have at the LB spots these two guys need to show that they can be adequate replacements if an injury pops up with one of the LB starters.

Buster Skrine- If the Browns are going to be able to compete against multiple WR sets like those the Steelers run, Skrine will need to play well in the sub defense. Watch him playing with the second string in order to gauge his level of play.

DL- Pay attention to all of the second and third string DLs because the Browns need to find some of these young guys to play in the sub package as pass rushers. Hopefully we begin to find out which ones can help.

Quinn Porter and Armond Smith- There is a chance for one of these guys to make the roster and I expect they will get the bulk of second half carries against the Packers. Porter spent most of last year on the Browns practice squad and is the better football player but Smith was a track star and has amazing explosiveness. You'll want to keep your eyes on him if he gets into the game.

****Questions I would like to See Answered**

Can the Browns generate any pass rush?

Who in the world is the Punt Returner behind Cribbs? I know that sounds crazy but if you remember what Chansi Stuckey looked like subbing for him last year you will understand it is a legit question.

Will this group of Rookies flash immediately like Haden and Ward did last year?

Will Greg Little be able to get open against big time corners?

Does Phil Taylor look more like a motivated Shaun Rogers or the “Big Money” version of Gerard Warren?

Is Colt McCoy going through his progressions or is he making the check down his first option?

I’m excited for Saturday to come so we can start to answer some of these questions and get our first glimpse of what the 2011 version of the Cleveland Browns will look like. I have tempered my expectations because of the youth and inexperience of the team but believe me, by no means am I saying the goal isn’t to compete and win every time the team steps on the field. For someone like me that is always the goal.

I do hope for a realistic reaction if/when they don’t achieve a win. Nobody embraces losing and everyone knows the Browns have done their fair share of losing over the years….but management has made a commitment to get younger and faster while they try building long term through the draft.

From my standpoint it is better to understand and accept the direction we are headed instead of going into a meltdown at every disappointing moment. That becomes a little easier to accept once we realize that not only is it a viable plan but it hasn't been implemented by any of the other regimes since the Browns have been back. Therefore we must give it a fair shot to actually work.

Go Browns!

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