Maybe the best way to really know that NFL football is back was how quickly the mind-numbing nature of exhibition games sets in. It didn't take long.

The Cleveland Browns beat the Green Bay Packers on Saturday night in a surprisingly easy fashion, 27-17. The starters played well, for the limited time they were out there, and overall it gave a nice little vibe to the upcoming season.

That doesn't mean it wasn't the mostly typical boring preseason game. It was.

For the average fan, which means pretty much everyone except stats geeks and assistant coaches, exhibition games, particularly the first one of the season, lose any sense of luster once the starters disappear at the end of the first quarter/beginning of the second. From there it's a race to stay awake, which is why I've been advocating for years that the game start no later than 4 p.m. (Ok, that last part is not really true, but it just occurred to me and it's actually a pretty good idea, isn't it?)

Of course none of that will stop Browns fans from dissecting the team's exhibition opener and the point that stands out above all others was was how in sync the offense under quarterback Colt McCoy looked with but just a few practices dedicated to learning a new system under their belt.

McCoy isn't always going to complete virtually everyone of his passes, so we can probably disregard for the moment the 9-10, 135 yards, one touchdown pass and another touchdown drive level of production. But it shouldn't really be that much of a surprise that he looked sharp.

First of all, McCoy is an accurate passer. It's his stock in trade. Second, this kind of offense plays to every one of his strengths. He moves around with ease in the backfield, can throw on the run and isn't required to throw 40 yards down field all the time in order to keep the team moving. I don't know if you can say McCoy is a "system" quarterback but if he were, this would be his system.

Before moving off the topic of McCoy, one thing I noticed from the small but obnoxiously vocal anti-Holmgren/pro-Mangini branch of Browns fans is how quickly they are to minimize any contributions from McCoy. In that vein, everything Mangini did was vastly misunderstood by a too anxious fan base while anything either Mike Holmgren (or his general manager surrogate, Tom Heckert) or McCoy does is consistently dismissed with a "we'll see, won't we?" sort of attitude.

I'm not sure McCoy is the second coming of Tom Brady, but right now, with essentially 8 regular season starts and exactly one truncated off-season in which he knew he would enter the next season as starter, McCoy has looked consistently far more impressive then any other Browns' quarterback in the new era of the franchise, Derek Anderson's one sublime season notwithstanding.

True, that's not saying much because McCoy is essentially competing against no one for that honor, but that still doesn't diminish his performance thus far.

Consider for example his work last season. About the best you can say about the Browns' offensive schemes under former head coach Eric Mangini is that they were too clever by half. A lack of overall talent on offense often leads coaches to devise gimmicky schemes to deflect attention from the inability to go toe-to-toe with most other teams in the league. And if that's why Mangini's offense looked so confusing most of the time, then so be it.

But McCoy came into that mess and took charge as best as anyone could. Jake Delhomme, when he wasn't injured, played mostly shell-shocked from a career that had gone on a season

or two too long. Seneca Wallace showed the usual flashes that backups tend to but also all the flaws that backups tend to when forced to play for longer periods of time. It was McCoy, the throw in 3rd round pick, that came in and looked more like a starter than either of Delhomme or Wallace.

Not everything McCoy did was brilliant, of course. But he never lost his composure (even when those around him were losing theirs) and made the best of a confusing situation. Forced into the apprenticeship role, his reps from training camp through the regular season were limited. He basically had to learn by watching, not doing. Still, it was clear he paid attention and when given the chance his throws were accurate and the offense moved. Only the most strident Mangini supporters, who had little tolerance for a Holmgren pick succeeding, wouldn't admit as much.

Fast forward to Saturday night's exhibition opener. McCoy, in charge, looked like he and the team had been working with this new offense for years, not weeks. In some sense, McCoy actually had been in that system for years because it's mostly what he played in college. The wonderful thing though to watch was that his college experience had actually translated to the pro game in a way that should give all fans comfort that the team finally has a quarterback around whom it can build.

As for the rest of the game against the Packers, despite the way the team was playing thank goodness for the remote control and a relatively compelling Indians game on Sportstime Ohio.

That's not to suggest anything about the way the team played. It is to suggest that from the point the starters left the game until the game ended seemingly 6 hours later, there was nothing much going on to inform the average fan. For the coaching staff, though, that surely wasn't the case.

The garbage time of exhibition games that bore us to tears is the critical time in which decisions are made about the last 10 or so players to make the final roster. Coaches are looking at all the nuances of technique and positioning, things the average fan isn't trained to see let alone understand. It's important because the best teams in the NFL are those with the most depth. But for fans watching, it has about as much entertainment value as a video of someone listening to a book on tape.

It's always good to start with an actual victory in the preseason. But the real point of the game, as head coach Pat Shurmur said prior to game, was to check the team's progress. On that level, it was quite comforting to see progress made and actual, legitimate building blocks in place.

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It will be interesting to check Saturday night's television ratings for the Browns game vs. the Indians game but if you want a clue as to how that turns out, look no further than the fact that the Browns exhibition opener had almost double the attendance as the Indians, or at least double the announced attendance of the announced attendance of the Indians.

If past is prologue, the television ratings will be similar proving, if nothing else, that Cleveland is a Browns town first and foremost.

It's remarkable, actually, that with the Indians clearly in the thick of a pennant race garner about half the interest as a Browns team in the thick of another reboot. But this town likes its football.

At this juncture of the season the Indians are, at the very least, an interesting if not completely compelling team. They are borderline awful on defense (with an infield dominated by rookies and a rookie in center field), are in the bottom half of the league in scoring runs, and yet remain strongly in contention because of a pitching staff that is far better than anyone imagined when the season opened.

It's not exactly a recipe for winning the World Series but it is enough at the moment, or should be anyway, for keeping fans interested. And while most fans seem to be keeping at least one eye on the team, they aren't showing up at the ballpark. The Indians are 25th in the league in attendance averaging just over 22,000 fans a game. By contrast, Minnesota, which is having a mostly nightmare of a season due to injuries, is still averaging over 39,000 fans per game, a staggering differential.

Certainly the usual culprits will be cited for the weak attendance: a bad economy, a dwindling population, a front office that's consistently come up short. But what seems to be taking place is a shift away from the generations long theory that the Indians are one of those "sleeping giant" franchises where fans, starved for a winner, are just looking for a reason to spend their money on them. Despite all its shortcomings as a pennant contender, the team has hung in their well enough, particularly against tough competition the last few weeks, to force fans to take better notice. Even the front office has cooperated by pulling off a rather important late season trade to make the team stronger.

Unfortunately with the Browns season now getting into full swing it's unlikely that much will change in the minds of Indians fans, most of whom really don't believe in their heart of hearts that this team came make the playoffs. Maybe it will take a few seasons for this to change but at least it's mid-August and the Indians are playing meaningful baseball. That's all you can really ask.

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