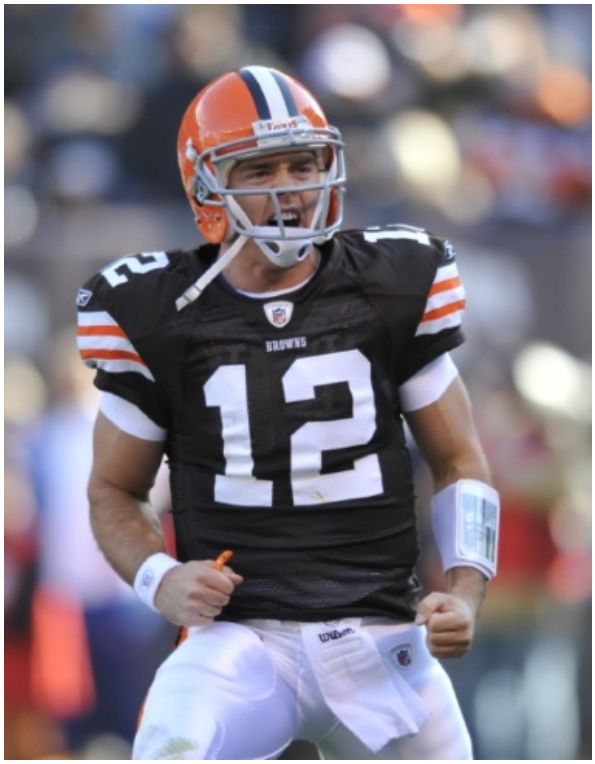

In this week's version of Kibble & Bits we'll wrap up the preseason and look toward the regular season. The preseason allowed us to get a small piece of what the season will bring for the 2011 Cleveland Browns. We did get answers to a few questions but the real answers won't come until the real games start and the secrecy of the coaching staff begins to get put on game tape.

From a head coach's perspective, there are a few different ways you can approach preseason games and when I watched the tapes for a second time I began to understand Pat Shurmur's approach. After re-watching the preseason and comparing some of the offensive plays and trends to what I saw when watching the Shurmur offense of the 2010 Rams, I saw some differences that I think were planned.

In general I thought the Browns would focus their preseason on trying to find out what they do well and what they can't do well but after actually watching the preseason I think Shurmur took a different approach.

The Browns used the lockout to study the players they had on offense, specifically QB and WR, in order to determine what the guys they had at those positions could do well in this style of offense.

Once Shurmur understood that, I think he used practice to reinforce those thoughts and he then used the preseason games to work on the areas that needed improvement.

When you look back at the preseason games and examine what the first team offense did, I think the two biggest examples I can make to back up my thoughts on Shurmur's philosophy are the lack of running plays and the emphasis on down field throws.

Most would agree that Colt McCoy excels at the short passing game but needs improvement getting the ball downfield. Colt took more than his fair share of shots downfield during the preseason and I think that was by design.

During the season I expect to see the Browns feature some things we didn't see much of this preseason like screen passes, rubs and picks in the short passing game, and many more passes in the middle of the field.

Defensively I think the preseason focus was two-fold: The Browns needed to get the existing players in a 4-3 groove because the last coaching staff utilized the 3-4 and I also think they wanted to get the rookies on the fast track to learning the NFL game.

If these things were in fact some of the Brown's goals, I think Pat Shurmur and his staff did a pretty good job of executing them.

Preseason is much like bad tasting medicine….you understand that it is needed and will only help you but that knowledge doesn't make the stuff taste any better. Rather, it just soothes the mind so swallowing it becomes a little easier.

Accepting the bad football from players who more than likely will never play meaningful snaps in the league is needed in order to find players that can help while also sharpening the skills of the players who will be huge factors in a team's success or failure.

There were some specific things that caught my eye during the four games of the 2011preseason so let's recap some of the good, the bad, and the ugly.

The Good

**There were a few really good things that came out of preseason and the one I want to start with is probably the most important, and that is the health and development of McCoy.

First off, McCoy physically looks much more like a NFL QB than he did last year. The shoulder injury Colt sustained during the Texas Bowl Game his senior year didn't allow Colt to really train and get stronger in his upper body during his rookie season and it showed not only in his stature but in his play.

Even though he only started 8 games last year he really seemed beat up and tired in the final two weeks of the 2010 season. It was apparent in both his play and his body language that he was really drained. He already is known as a QB who doesn't possess a rocket for an arm but his passes struggled to cut through the December weather. He threw 6 picks in his last two games of the season.

His body looks much stronger this year than last and it is directly related to the fact that Colt was allowed to lift weights with his upper body. His shoulder healing allowed him to build strength that he just didn't have last year and his throws are much sharper and much crisper than they were a year ago. He will never be able to sling the football like Derrick Anderson but the good thing is that you don't have to in order to win football games in the NFL. It is clear watching him throw this year that he can make all the throws necessary to succeed in this offense and in this league.

The developmental side of the improvement is clear from the tempo you saw Colt playing with. He understands the speed of the game in the NFL and he has adjusted accordingly. You also see the work he has put in on his passes to the outside of the field.

Three passes in particular stuck out as indications of his improvement. The first was the TD pass down the right sideline to Josh Cribbs in the first game. That ball was perfectly paced and placed. The throw was strong enough that the WR didn't have to cut speed to catch it but soft enough where he didn't get run out of bounds by the throw.

The second was the TD to Evan Moore down the right sideline in the second game. Yes, that was a great job of Moore getting his feet down in bounds but the throw allowed him to do so. The timing and placement once again made it so only McCoy's guy had a chance at it.

If I had to pick from the three plays, my third example is the most impressive because the throw came against arguably the best overall CB in the game, Nnamdi Asomugha. McCoy placed a perfect ball down the left sideline to Brian Robiske in the third game that truly showed he has been working on the deep sideline balls. He put the ball over the outside shoulder of the WR that is right up there with the best QBs in the league as far as placement. If Robiskie didn't catch that ball nobody was going to and Robiske did catch it. He was called for offensive pass interference but I am going to disregard that horrible call and focus on the great throw.

These three throws more than any other plays this preseason have me excited for the potential of the 2011 passing game with Colt McCoy at the helm.

**Another good image I have from the preseason is D'Qwell Jackson flying around the field. He looked great flying to the ball in this 4-3 defense and there are two plays in particular that stick in my mind:

The first was a play in game one against the Packers where Jackson saved a HUGE gain (if not a TD) on a basic off tackle run by James Starks. The play was an off tackle run in which both the play-side DE and the SLB got man handled and Jackson's instincts and speed saved the day after he beat the center on a block and scraped outside, tackling the ball carrier for a 6 yard gain. Instead of the defense allowing a big play it ended up giving up a 6-7 yard play. Jackson's speed and instincts will cover up for what I think will be poor play against the run by our DEs this year. I think those guys will end up thanking Jackson quite a few times before the season is over.

The second play is an example of how an "undersized" LB can make plays in the backfield in

the 4-3 defense. The play came against the Eagles in game 3 and it was supposed to be an off tackle run to the right side and Jackson read it immediately, shot the “A” gap and tackled the RB in the backfield while he was running east and west, never allowing him to square his shoulders to get north and south.

This play is exactly what Jackson can do if the big guys up front do their job. He won’t make too many plays where he out muscles a guard, sheds a block and makes a TFL… but if you give him a second to shoot a gap and play down hill, he will make a ton of tackles and they will not all be five yards down the field like we were accustomed to our LBs doing in recent years.

The last thing in my good column for the 2011 preseason is the ripple-free waters. By ripple-free I mean no drama. For the first time in a long time I don’t see or feel any negative undertone from the organization itself. No turmoil in any level of the organization. From the President down to the starting QB, there is absolutely no confusion or question marks hanging over anyone.

The President, GM, Coach, QB are all in place without any turmoil. Yes, Pat Shurmur and Colt McCoy are doing it for the first time….but there is no masked man with an axe looming in the shadows.

McCoy has to prove his worth as a NFL QB in order to keep his job long term but there are zero questions short-term on who is going to lead this team through the season.

Shurmur has yet to win a meaningful NFL game but there are no questions of the coach and management being on the same page. No hidden agendas or ulterior motives are clearly visible to the fans or media.

Even with the lockout during the offseason, this has been the calmest vibe emanating from this organization in a very long time. That is a testament to the leadership throughout the building.

The Bad

**There are a few things I would consider bad about this preseason and most of them have to do with the defense. I have not been impressed at all with the ability of our players as a whole to win one-on-one matchups

Not everything in this league is about scheme. Sometimes you just need to have the better players and the defense as a whole has been what I would consider flat and outworked.

Look, I understand they played most of the preseason with backup players starting in the back seven but that is no excuse for the lack of energy or urgency I saw.

The DEs in particular seem to be a weak point when looking at the preseason footage. I saw them really struggling to win one-on-one matchups and other than a flash or two I really didn't see anything to get excited about. Defense starts up front and I hope someone up front starts to play with some fire. While I saw guys in the back end like Jackson and Haden bringing the energy and passion, the line needs to pick up the effort level and start winning some individual battles.

**The biggest problem I saw from the offense was also with trench play. In general Alex Mack and Shawn Lauvao were the only two guys I saw getting movement on their man in the running game. We seemed to do well on the movement plays (sweeps, traps) but the power plays didn't seem to go as well.

The sample was very small so I am not going to harp on it too much, but they have to play better than that over the course of the season.

**The last thing I will talk about in the bad column was the handling of sub-packages on defense. I really wish they would have tried some different combinations of DL in nickel and dime packages. I really didn't like the fact that the in season DL combinations were not tested in live competition.

I understand the coaches wanted the line to try and get a feel for each other but to me it is just as important to get the pass rush in sync for the sub package. If you can't get off the field on

third down in this league it will make for a very long game and season for the defense.

The Browns have been on the bad end of a 3rd and 8 too many times in recent years. If we don't change that it will continue to lead the way to a tired and soft defense in the second half of the games and the second half of the season.

The Ugly

**Two things go in the ugly category for sure and the first is sloppy play. Way too many penalties plagued the Browns this preseason. All kinds of penalties as well as repeat offenders were seen. After having Eric Mangini do a good job of cleaning up mistakes as a head coach I think we will notice the mistakes even more now that he's gone.

You can have any opinion you want on Mangini as a coach but the one thing that he didn't tolerate was mistakes and certainly not the same mistakes. Coach Shurmur and his team of assistants need to emphasize the negative effect of penalties and correct the sloppy play.

**The other item in the ugly category is depth. It is really scary how bad our backups played when matched against the opponent's starters and even some of their second string players.

With the combination of a youth movement and a relatively quiet free agent signing period, Tom Heckert and his front office have created a team that lacks big time in experience and proven ability.

Inexperience itself doesn't worry me as much as the quality of players behind that inexperience. I am all for getting younger, but I really have issues with the mindset of being young just to be young.

I go back to the DL as an example of a unit that has zero players that have ever done what they will be asked to do in this kind of defense at a NFL level. I think some veterans to lead the way

would have gone a long way in the development of the young players.

Impressed

There were a few players that impressed during the preseason. There were some that really jumped out when I watched the game a second time and focused on specific players and levels of the team.

McCoy and Jackson I already talked about and here are a few others:

Brian Robiske- When I went back and watched Robiske play, I really began to respect the pro's pro that he is. Robiske is a smart football player who really understands what defenses are trying to do. He also has started to do the things to set up DBs for future plays that make guys like Donald Driver and Derrick Mason last for years in the league without being the biggest or fastest guys on the field.

For example, Robiskie will run routes a certain way when he knows he is a late option in the play specifically to set up a route when he is a primary option. This constant "working" on a DB is exactly what savvy veterans do over the course of a game that allows them to get open at critical points of a contest against players that are actually more talented than them. The Eagles game is a prime example of this. If you can get open against that secondary you are no slouch, and Robiskie is not.

Shawn Lauvao & Alex Mack- I mentioned them earlier in regard to their run blocking but it isn't limited to that because they are good in pass protection also. These two young linemen will be staples on this team for many years to come. I actually felt sorry for a couple of DTs I saw them own on double teams.

Evan Moore- Most people saw this guy dominate catching the ball the very first time he got playing time catching passes from Brady Quinn. This TE will be a mismatch for years to come. He has the best hands on the team without question and the body control he has shown this preseason will be the attribute that makes him known in every football house across the country

as he takes the fantasy football world by storm.

Titus Brown and Kaluka Maiava- These two LBs jump out when re-watching the games. Titus is a natural 4-3 MLB and a powerful hitter. He made a fabulous play shooting the “A” gap against the Lions to make the tackle in the backfield….he has really grown in this defense.

I think some people forget how good of a football player Maiava is because he is a bit undersized. The guy was the Rose Bowl MVP in 2009 on a team that had Brian Cushing, Rey Maualuga, and Clay Mathews III. He can flat out play football and, just like Jackson, is flourishing in this defense. Gocong may be listed as the starter but to me Maiava is the better LB. The difference is size; Gocong is 6-2 263lbs and Kaluka is 5-11 230lbs. If the listed sizes were swapped, Maiava would be in the pro bowl and Gocong might not be in the league. Maiava is also really solid in pass coverage.

Greg Little- I have long been a fan of Little’s physical ability but the thing that has impressed me this preseason is his mental capacity. I have seen him play every WR position on the field, and for a rookie with only one full year of previous WR experience that is quite impressive. The fact that he didn’t even play football last year makes it even more impressive. Add the mental with his physical and he really has a legitimate shot to be a special player.

Disappointed

Usama Young- Young was signed and basically handed the starting safety job but the guy can’t even get on the field. He sat out the first week in accordance with league rules on when free agents can practice with their teams and he has been hurt every since. He hasn’t practiced or played in games so who knows what he is all about. He was given a 3 year, $6 million dollar contract and has yet to play.

Jayme Mitchell- All offseason Tom Heckert kept mentioning his name as a player the Browns wanted to re-sign once they could so I was expecting him to be a good player. In the preseason he has given me no reason to get excited. I have seen him manhandled in the running game and he has not shown the ability to beat RTs one-on-one. Maybe he was getting the feel for starting in this league or maybe he was working on secondary moves…but I am still waiting to see what all the hype was about.

Seneca Wallace- I thought Wallace would be great this preseason because he was in this type of offense for so long in Seattle with Mike Holmgren but he has been sub-par. He got his money in the offseason and now looks disinterested and unmotivated. When I watched the games again and paid attention to the reads he was making I realized that for someone who has been running this offense as long as he has, he missed a lot of open players in the passing game. His presence as a whole has been unimpressive.

Carlton Mitchell and Mohamed Massaquoi- These guys have not been on the field and that is a disappointment. I was eager to see how each has progressed and, because of injury, it is still a secret.

Undecided

Ahtyba Rubin- I am still trying to figure out if Rubin will be a good DT in this system. I thought he showed signs last year of being able to make plays in the backfield but I have yet to see that in the preseason. He is a perfect NT in the 3-4 but based on the preseason games the jury is still out if he can make impact plays in the 4-3.

James Dockery- Nothing against James Dockery but I have seen a young CB look dominant in preseason before (Coye Francies) and not develop into a good player in the league. I want to see Dockery make an impact on special teams once the regular season begins before I consider him a keeper, and I hope he keeps working to achieve more than Francies did.

Buster Skrine- The rookie seems to struggle adjusting to NFL level players. He has always gotten by because he has been quicker and faster than everyone he played. He is no longer a far superior athlete and he is struggling to master the technique you need to play CB in the NFL. If he is dedicated to being the best he can be you will see him get better as the season goes on. He should make a difference on the kick coverage teams but I don’t expect him to make an impact in the defense until later in the season.

Random Thoughts

*The Artis Hicks signing is great. He is the type of player that is needed in every meeting room. He has been a starter in this league on some very good lines and can help mold young players both by example and words. He is a better player than Jason Pinkston, so if he does get a fair shake at winning the starting spot I think he will win that competition hands down. If he doesn't end up starting he will be a valuable backup at multiple positions.

*The Artis Hicks comments leads me into my next thought about Jason Pinkston. Pinkston is not ready from a technical standpoint to start. He is struggling with changing some of his LT ways. For example I saw him try and use inside leverage and ride a DT out with his left hand as the DT was pass rushing. A left tackle can use this technique and ride a defensive player on the outside because the QB is taught to step up in the pocket. As a guard you can't use this technique because the QB is too close to you and the defensive player can just reach out and grab the QB. It will take Pinkston time to re-train himself.

*After a shaky start, Joe Haden settled down nice against the Eagles and virtually took DeSean Jackson out of the game. Joe didn't seem jumpy and he simply kept Jackson in front of him.

*Attention to detail. I really don't understand why Marcus Benard is listed as a LB on the official team roster. He is clearly a DE. Austin English was listed the same way when he was on it and he was clearly a DE. I know I am whining about nothing but I notice the details…Fix it.

*It is really a shame that Benard is not at the same weight and conditioning level as he was last year. I can't believe it was not communicated to him before the lockout started to stay at his 2010 playing weight. When I watched the 2010 season again he really jumped off of the tape, but he doesn't have the same explosion so far this year that he had last year. He had 7.5 sacks last year and from what I saw from the rest of the pass rush in preseason the Browns will need at least a repeat performance, if not an improvement.

*Expect to see some trips formations from a double TE base set. I can envision getting the ball into the hands of Cribbs and Little on some hitches with the other player and Moore blocking on the outside. Cribbs and Little are the type of run after catch guys that can make defenses pay.

*Don't be surprised if the Browns take advantage of the good weather in the early part of the season and pass the ball more than they run. As a rookie Shurmur had Sam Bradford fifth in all the NFL in pass attempts per game and when Shurmur was in Philly, Donavan McNabb was fifth in attempts his first year starting. Remember, in this offense… a short pass is being used the same as a running play would.

In closing, Pat Shurmur's first camp went well. I think you saw his philosophy at work when it comes to an increased practice tempo. He really showed that he is the type of leader who is a non-stop communicator and teacher. Watching the press conferences on a daily basis you have seen him settle into the role as head coach and his confidence and comfort level has increased accordingly.

The passing game of the first team has been crisper than anything we have seen in a long time. The penalties have put up a red flag but with game planning and the narrowed focus of the regular season that can be cleaned up pretty easily.

The roster depth is and will be an issue but if you make a concerted effort like this organization has to get younger and build through the draft it will be at least another season before the depth starts to look "good".

There are two areas in particular that will have a big effect on the success of the season as a whole and they are Colt's ability to consistently complete deep and intermediate passes down the field so defenses can't pack it in on us, and our defense's ability to get pressure on the QB.

If the Browns have success in these two areas we will obviously have a much better season than we will if they don't. As with any NFL team, injuries will be a factor in the teams overall success but it will be particularly important to this team because we will be so young and have so little depth.

Offensively I expect to be able to score points but defensively I have my concerns about being able to stop the other team from doing the same.

I am excited that the training wheels are coming off and we will get to see what our future looks like. Enjoy the season and as always…..Go Browns!

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