The Browns are coming off of their bye week so this week's article won't be filled with game analysis so instead we will talk about some first quarter (of the season) observations. I will also talk about some things I would like to see the Browns do as they finish the remaining 12 games of the 2011 season.

At 2-2 over the first 4 games most would say the Browns are right about where they expected them to be, which is a .500 team. I actually agree from a pure record standpoint but I have been a bit surprised on how the team has performed on both sides of the ball.

I am pleasantly surprised at how the defense has competed and performed over the first quarter of the season but I am also a little disappointed at how the offense has performed.
Because of the youth and inexperience I expected the defense to struggle early as the young players figured out the NFL game and for the most part they have not. I also expected the offense to benefit from a philosophy switch that went away from the smash mouth approach of the past coaching staffs to a west coast offense and a 'take what the defense gives you' mentality and up until this point they haven't had the success that I anticipated.

The reality of the season so far is that the offense is struggling to find its way and the defense seems to have a much better grip on how it wants to play the new 4-3 scheme. Offensively the Browns have not found the running game that they relied on last year and they are still trying to figure out who fits in what spot when it comes to the passing game.

Defensively there seems to be a better understanding of what to do and how to do it which probably stems from a much simpler approach under defensive coordinator Dick Jauron. They will throw a wrinkle or two into the equation, like they did in week 3 against the Dolphins, but for the most part they have taken the approach of keeping it simple and doing it well.

If you have been reading my weekly articles you already know many of my thoughts and opinions already, so bear with me as some of this maybe retread.

Let's take a closer look and get into some specifics on the first quarter of the season both offensively and defensively.

Things I Liked

Offense- As a general statement I like the way the offensive line has protected Colt McCoy. The Browns have given up 6 sacks so far, and projecting that out over the duration of the season the Browns are on pace to give up 24 sacks which would have made them the 4th best in all the league based on last year's team totals. Ironically that is exactly where they stand in this year's rankings.

*I have been particularly impressed with the interior linemen's pass protection. I think they have done a good job of creating an area for Colt McCoy to step up into. Both young guards have played LT in college so the biggest challenge in pass protection they face is probably anchoring against a bull rush and dealing with the strength of NFL DTs, and both have shown the ability to do so.

*I also have liked the production the TEs have given the offense. I think the TE position is a strength in the passing game and it has showed. 28 catches and 4TDs over four games is great production for the position.
*Another aspect of the offense that I have liked is the effectiveness of the hurry up offense so far. You can really see Colt McCoy's comfort level sky rocket when he gets to operate out of the shotgun formation.

Defense- The defense has by far been the most impressive unit in my eyes. I didn't expect the unit as a whole to be good but they have surprised me with their gritty play. In particular the play of the inexperienced DL has been really good.

*The secondary has also shined and they are ranked fourth in the NFL giving up under 200 yards a game. The scoring defense is 6th in total points allowed, and over the first four games the defense has also done a good job of forcing FGs in the redzone as well as getting off the field on third down. Opponents are only converting one in every 3 third down into a first down so far this year which is a 10 percentage point improvement over last year.

*Through the first 4 games the starting DTs have combined for 3.5 sacks. The starting DEs have also combined for 3.5 sacks giving the starting DL a combined 7 sacks, which is great for only playing 4 games. As a group the defense is on pace to get 44 sacks which would be 15 better than last year.

*I have been impressed with Dick Jauron and his in-game play calling. He seems to sneak some pressure packages in just when you get used to the Browns playing vanilla, so he is keeping offenses and their coordinators on their toes.

Players Who Standout on Film

If you have read previous articles from me you already know the majority of players that stand out when I re-watch the games, but here is a recap of the best ones so far.

Good

D'Qwell Jackson is all over the field. He was 3rd best tackler in the NFL before the bye week and he also is tied for the team lead in sacks with 2.5. He is playing lights out and it is not a shock to me at all, but I think some had forgotten that he led the league in tackles his last healthy year with 154. Jackson is a ball magnet and always has been.

I think his career will be very similar to London Fletcher who has been making tackles at a high rate every since he came into the league over 13 years ago, but who is just now getting his proper respect.

I can hear all of the Jackson haters now…. "but all of his tackles are five yards down the field". Enough already…the next thing out of their mouths will be how Chris Gocong and his 10 tackles in 4 games is just as good. Please, stop the madness and give Jackson his respect before we end up wondering why T.J. Ward is leading the league in tackles after Jackson is gone.

Joe Haden- Haden has been one of the best CBs in the league over the first four games. He has muscled up and mugged WRs from the start. He is the perfect blend of speed, athleticism, and strength for the position. I don't think teams will allow him to break up five passes like he did in week one, as I think they have learned their lesson. When Joe is focused there aren't many better in all the NFL.

Ahtyba Rubin- I will gladly eat a little crow on this one. I didn't think Rubin would be an impact DT in the 4-3 and I was wrong. He has been stout, disruptive, and he hustles more than any DT in the NFL. I don't think you could ask for too much more in a DT. The guy is on pace to get 10 sacks and if he does that is an all-pro year for sure.

Jabaal Sheard and Jayme Mithchell- Honestly I was waiting to see what Jayme Mitchell was every since Tom Heckert mentioned him as a player he wanted to resign. I was disappointed with his play during the preseason but he flipped a switch once the regular season started and hasn't turned it off. He is pretty stout at the point of attack and is much more physical than I thought he was during preseason. He has enough pass rush to keep OTs honest and he is playing fairly well on the right side.

The rookie Sheard has flourished since moving to LDE in the second game. He is more explosive off of the ball and progresses through his moves faster on that side. He can beat most RTs in the league with multiple moves and he is constantly getting primary and secondary pressure on the QB. He is steadily getting better against the run, and he will need to continue improving in that area, but he looks like a difference maker on the left side and that is exactly what this defense needed.

Dimitri Patterson- Patterson has been stellar against the slot WRs we have faced so far. The Browns have not been used or abused by any of the slot WRs that they have gone up against and Patterson is the reason why. He has proven to be an excellent inside defender and the Browns have had better success on getting off of the field on 3rd downs because of it.

Joe Thomas- I am only putting Thomas under the good category for his pass blocking. I have

not been impressed by his work in the running game and he has also made some mental mistakes early in the season that we are not used to seeing from him. I saw him get a false start penalty and I also saw him miss couple assignments that resulted in negative plays. The missed assignments could have been miscommunication between him and the rookie Jason Pinkston but Thomas is the veteran and should be the one communicating the correct calls. He has shown his usual dominance in pass protection and for a LT who faces the very best rushers week in and week out that is critical.

Alex Mack- I know I recommended it before and I am doing it again, please try and focus on him for a few snaps and you will see him own some D-lineman. Mack is playing really well and is one of the top centers in football right now. He should also get credit for helping the two young guards that play next to him, because as a unit the interior line has been solid and he is a big reason why.

Colt McCoy-I am going to put McCoy in the good category regardless of the critics that have issues with the lack of downfield passing. The reality of no big plays so far is one that has plenty of blame to share, not just Colt's play.

Most will bring up the missed throw to Josh Cribbs as their smoking gun and, yes, it was a big mistake and he flat out missed a wide open WR. There is no way around that fact. There are however other factors in the downfield passing game being absent. Some of those factors are: scheme, timing, experience, lack of speed at the WR position, trust, and an inconsistent running game. All of these issues are a part of the equation when talking about the lack of explosive passing plays and deserve to share in the blame.

When you look at the numbers Colt has put up through the first 4 games you may actually be in for a shock when you realize that he is on pace for 24TDs, 12ints, and 3900 yards to go along with a potential 8-8 season. If you ask most people before the season started about these numbers they would have taken them in a heartbeat and even called it a successful season. I understand the offense sputters at times but he can't and shouldn't shoulder all the blame. Putting him in the good category has more to do about progress than stats anyway, I just wanted the critics to know what type of pace he is on. I understand all of the numbers won't carry through but they are what they are right now and you can't take that away.

I really have seen a big difference in a few categories since week one and to me the biggest leap has been in his pocket presence. He is climbing up through the pocket as opposed to bailing from false or light pressure. He has also gotten faster at going through his progressions as well as ball placement on his throws.

Big plays will come as the ball gets to guys like Greg Little a bit more and if you ask me would I be happy with the numbers I mentioned above if they were accompanied by an 8-8. At this stage of the team and Colt's career, I would consider the season a success for Colt and the Browns.
I am not crowning him the king of our future but at this point I am not willing to take his chance away. I will be looking for him to take the next steps of growth which should be where can start to dictate instead of just settling.

Greg Little- Little shows up both in the passing game and the run game. His physical, aggressive style when blocking jumps out just as much as his ability to beat man coverage. His conditioning has improved every week and his level of play should increase as he gets back into football shape.

The Bad
Chris Gocong has one good game out of the 4 so far and he is not making the impact plays you expect from your weakside LB. Ten tackles in four games is not getting the job done. Some will say that he is a good blitzer but from where I stand his pressure is usually a step or two late.

Alex Smith- Smith is a player that gives high effort but provides minimal results. He is a willing blocker but doesn't get much movement once he engages and his hands are not reliable in the passing game. He has dropped too many passes and isn't a good enough blocker to warrant keeping him on the field over any other TE if he is going to drop balls. Evan Moore is a bad blocker but Alex Smith dropping balls can be drive killers and point takers. The rookie Jordan Cameron needs to work on his blocking so the Browns can use him and his superior athleticism instead of relying on Smith.

Armond Smith- In the limited snaps Armond Smith has gotten he has failed to impress. He is not an elusive RB, he is a RB with blazing speed. But that is not enough to survive in the NFL. In the NFL you need to be able to make defenders miss to be a niche player and unless he can beat you with his pure speed it looks like Smith will struggle making defenders miss. We already have a pro bowl caliber return man so I don't think Smith and his speed will ever be useful to this team, especially if he can't beat the first defender.

Beginning of the game scripts- The scripts that coach Shurmur has put together for the start of games either aren't being executed like he designed or they are not good plays because the Browns have been horrible in the first quarter so far this year. They have managed only 107 net yards and 3 points in the first quarters this year….that is not getting it done. The Browns need to start games better than that.

Mental lapses- In the Browns two loses so far the defense has been struck by mental lapses. Giving up that TD to rookie A.J. Green against the Bengals when they failed to line up and missing the tackle leading to an 80yd TD against the Titans totally changed the flow of those games the Browns ultimately lost. The young defense needs to get better at dialing in and staying there.

Personnel Review

The roster looks much improved as a whole and the majority of drafted players from the last two years seem to be playing well and, like a few of the free agent pickups from the 2010 season, Dimitri Patterson is playing very good football so far.

Starting this week the top 3 draft choices from the 2011 draft will be starting and five rookies in all are getting the starting nod. For that to happen you either had a tremendous draft or a weak roster. I think it is a little bit of both in the Browns case.

If you combine the 2010 draft class into the group, The Browns are starting 9 players from the last two drafts, which is a pat on the back to Tom Heckert and his staff.
I think Heckert has done a great job as a whole but I don't agree with everything he has done either. The biggest head scratcher to me is, and will be for a while, the drafting of a FB in the fourth round when there were still some very talented players to choose from.

To take the statement a step further, when you take into account the minimal impact a FB has in Pat Shurmur's offense I think the move was an even bigger question mark.
I also thought the roster should have had some more veterans in backup roles but at the end of the day…. if a fourth round pick and players who don't even start are my biggest problems with the moves made, I think Heckert is doing an excellent job.

Going Forward

Playing time- I would love to see coach Shurmur form a better structure for playing time at the WR position. In my opinion the passing game is suffering from the play everyone mentality. I hope he chooses a group and lets them play.

Play calling(offense)- The Browns could use some more screens. The pump fake to the RB and then throwing backside to the TE or WRs is one that I would also like to see more of. Getting the ball to Cribbs, Watson, and Little with a couple lineman leading the way should gain yards in chunks and will help make for some explosive plays.

Play calling(defense)- It was nice to see the zone blitzes and DB pressures during the Miami game as the defense had 5 sacks, 6 tackles for loss, and 8 QB hits in that game. The Browns could use some more aggression like they showed against Chad Henne going forward. Mixing in some more aggressive defenses will make the base defense even more effective if they are giving similar pre-snap reads.

Titus Brown- Brown is a player I want see more of now that he is healthy again. He will show up on special teams immediately and I think he will perform well if given the chance on defense.

Carlton Mitchell- Mitchell is a player the Browns had high hopes for but he got hurt in training camp and has yet to be active on game day. With his size and 4.4 speed, he may be the player the Browns need to take the top off of the defense. We will see if he gets a shot.

Jordan Cameron- The rookie TE needs to work on playing the H-back position that Alex Smith plays. He has superior athleticism and would be an asset in the passing game. He may not get a chance because I think the Browns are getting him ready to replace Ben Watson when Watson's contract is up next year. I hope this isn't a redshirt year.

Running game- I want the Browns to stay committed to running Peyton Hillis going forward. He needs more touches and that is plain and simple.

Defensive Tackle rotation- The Browns have been using a weird system where they sub both DTs and DEs together. I would like to see the DTs get more rest. I think they should start using

Brian Schaefering on third and longs and, even if they don't want it , they need to sub Rubin and Taylor out some more as they seem to wear down in the fourth quarter.

RBs- More Hillis and Hardesty sets in short yardage. If they are going to gimmick and not use isolation plays for short yardage at least put Hillis at FB. I know it didn't work on the 4th down play but you have to keep giving the same look and do different things off of it. Over time defenses will have to worry about different plays from the same formation and that is always good.

Hurry up- The last thing I want to talk about is the idea of the Browns using the hurry up offense at different points in the game. It is pretty obvious that Colt McCoy is the most comfortable when he is in the shotgun spread formations. I think it would be great to use the two minute, fast paced offense at various points in the game to gain some rhythm and momentum.

Having a RB like Hillis who has great hands makes this idea look even better. They don't have to pass the whole time either, having the nickel and dime packages on the field would put the bruising Hillis at an even greater advantage and the more DBs on the field for him to run through the better.

This could also give the offense the first quarter jump start they are looking for and get the opposing team's DL even more gassed which would be a good thing later in the game if the Browns are trying to run the ball to ice a win.

So far in the first quarter of the 2011 season the Cleveland Browns have had some ups and downs which should be expected for a young team that had no real off-season. I have been impressed by some and disappointed by others but I think most can see that they are on the right track.

I am a bit alarmed that the only two wins have come against teams yet to win a game this year, but teams don't create the schedule, they just play it. If the young offense continues to grow and the defense can find a way to produce some big plays the season will have a better than expected ending. For now, I am happy with the .500 play and I look forward to seeing this young team get better throughout the year.

As long as we keep moving forward I think most fans myself included will be accepting of the 2011 Pat Shurmur coached Browns. If they continue to make the same mistakes and don't seem to be figuring it out you will surely begin to hear the moaning and groaning of those claiming it is the same old Browns.
The one thing I would ask fans to remember when evaluating this version of the Cleveland Browns is that by no means are these the same old Browns.
This is the first time since our return to football that management has started a full blown youth movement. The end of the season record may not end up being too much different than we have been accustomed to, but make no mistake about it: we are heading down a path that is brand new path.

This is our first chance to sit back and watch a young team grow so keep that in mind when

those thoughts of “here we go again” begin to take over the brain. Many of us are stained from the countless “new” regimes bringing in their over-the-hill veterans and overpaid “B” players fronting as top notch talent. But these young players are not those same impostors, many of them are making mistakes that we have seen made over and over again, but they are making them for the first time as professionals, so keep that in mind the next time you want throw a shoe through the TV.

If they fail or are incapable of fixing those mistakes then we can get disgruntled and write them off but in the mean time let’s just watch and see if they can figure it out……Go Browns.

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