Browns vs. Cardinals Preview: Game 14

When/Where: Sunday 4:05pm Phoenix, Arizona University of Phoenix Stadium

Opponent: Arizona Cardinals **Current Spread:** Browns +6.5

This week the 4-9 Cleveland Browns get a break from winter as they travel to the desert to face the 6-7 Arizona Cardinals. This match up pits two teams that are not headed to the playoffs but will certainly be playing for pride.

The Arizona Cardinals still have a chance to finish with a winning record and if they can't achieve that they will at least look to get even for the year. They are also more than likely playing for their head coach's job.

After giving up draft picks and a pro bowl CB for what they considered a franchise QB, the team and QB have underachieved. If they can end the year on a high note maybe it will convince management that the lockout didn't allow team chemistry to form, and it will give head coach Ken Whisenhunt more time to get the job done.

Cleveland is coming to town with a young team still trying to learn how to win and close out games at the NFL level. The young team has 3 games left including this one. The other two come against teams that are currently tied for the best records in the AFC, so if the Browns

hope to win more games than last year, this may be their best shot at it.

Let's get into what we might see on game day:

Expectations on Gameday for Arizona

Offense- The Cardinals offense has been up and down all year, mainly because QB Kevin Kolb, whom the Cardinals acquired this offseason, has had an injury riddled year and has only started 9 of their games so far with 2 of those starts being games where he made early exits.

The offense has looked better in recent weeks, aiding the Cardinals in their current 3 game winning streak. The offense will either be led by Kolb or his backup Jon Skelton. Kolb got knocked out of the game last week with a concussion, and he has a history of getting them, so the organization will be cautious on clearing him to play Sunday. Skelton has been in Arizona for two years, so no matter who is the QB taking the snaps the Cardinals will be using their full offense.

The majority of the targets when the Cardinals throw the ball will be to all NFL WR Larry Fitzgerald. The Cardinals do an excellent job of moving Fitzgerald around the field so defenses can't easily roll coverage his way. Even if Fitzgerald is covered and double teamed, the thing that makes him special is that he can still make the catch. He is one of those rare talents who still make plays even when he isn't "open".

The Cardinals also mix in two young WRs, Andre Roberts and Early Doucet. Doucet has come into his own this year and has proven he can make big plays and be a consistent weapon when given the opportunity. Last week against the 49ers he had a 60-yard TD so he is a player to keep your eye on in the passing game.

The Cardinals use multiple formations and frequently use bunch and stacked sets. They will also use some wishbone formations where the wing players run routes like a normal slot WR. They also have a good 3rd down back in LaRod Stephens-Howling.

The RB is a solid route runner and elusive after the catch so if you want to win on 3rd down you need to make sure you are aware of where he is.

In the running game the Cardinals have a former Ohio State Buckeye doing the bulk of the work. Beanie Wells is only 57 yards away from a 1,000 yard season and has scored 9 TDs so far this year. He is a big, powerful RB with enough speed to test the perimeter of the defense. If you don't get to him early he can rack up yards in a hurry, which is exactly what he did 3 weeks ago against the St. Louis Rams when he netted over 225 yards on the ground.

The Cardinals are a power run blocking team and will attack you with power lead plays. One play to look for that they run really well is the toss sweep off tackle. Their guards pull well so they use this play really effectively.

As far as game plan goes, you can expect the Cardinals to test the Browns and their 31st ranked run defense. I also expect them to use a variety of screen plays to test the discipline of Cleveland's young defense.

When they attempt big plays in the passing game expect them to attack the middle of the field. The Cardinals like using seam and post patterns with both WRs, and will test the safeties of the Browns.

Defense- The Cardinals use a 3-4 base defense. They didn't start the season really strong as they were breaking in a bunch of young talent so their league rankings are average at best, but it seems like all the young players have adjusted and they are all starting to make plays.

They have two really good DEs in all pro Darnell Dockett and Calais Campbell. These ends are stout against the run and can rush the passer too. Campbell leads the team with 7 sacks so he must be accounted for on passing plays.

The LB core is lead by Daryl Washington who leads the team in tackles. He is a young, active

LB who is explosive and rushes the passer well from the inside LB spot. They start two young OLBs, with rookie Sam Acho coming on during the last half of the season. He plays well moving forward so he needs to be accounted for on passing plays.

The secondary is led by veteran safety Adrian Wilson who is active in both the running game and passing game. Their secondary also boasts super talented rookie CB Patrick Peterson who also doubles as one of the most explosive punt returners in the NFL. CB Richard Marshall is also having a solid year and is second on the team in tackles, so WRs need to make sure to get him blocked on running plays.

For the game on Sunday expect the Cardinals to put a full court press on the Browns with pressure. The defense is aggressive and they run more stunts with the DL than you usually see from teams using the 3-4 which allows them to get their talented DEs matched up against slow footed guards. When they are in the nickel package they bring pressure from all angles and in fact are coming off of a 5 sack game against the 49ers because of it.

Cleveland has struggled to make defenses pay for bringing pressure and expect the Cardinals to try and continue the trend.

Expectations on Gameday for Cleveland

Defense- By far the Cleveland defense has been a much welcomed surprise in this 2011 season. The Browns are ranked in the top ten defenses in points, total yards, and passing yards.

The defense uses a rather simple but disciplined 4-3 scheme led by its young, physical defensive line and LB D'Qwell Jackson. Jackson is 2nd in the league when it comes to tackles and so far has 125 on the year. Jackson is flanked by veteran Chris Gocong who, after being moved to strong side OLB from his weakside OLB position, has come on the last couple of weeks to make some impact plays.

The young DL is led by Ahtyba Rubin and rookies Jabaal Sheard and Phil Taylor. The two

rookies have climbed over the rookie wall in recent weeks and have started living in the opponent's backfield. Rubin is one of the most active DTs in the league and is probably the best in the entire league at lateral pursuit.

The secondary is led by 2nd year pro CB Joe Haden. At last look Haden was leading the league in passes defended and is has proven to be one of the best young CBs in the league. He is also second on the team in solo tackles with 47 so Arizona will need to block him in the running game.

Expect defensive coordinator Dick Jauron to continue relying on his DL to get pressure and you can also expect him to use combo coverage against Arizona WR Larry Fitzgerald. You should also look for Cleveland CB Joe Haden to be Fitzgerald's shadow for most of the day like he has been for most of the elite WRs the Browns have faced this year. Not matter if he is in zone or man coverage, expect him to be over Arizona's star WR.

Offense- Cleveland's offense is usually led by 2nd year QB Colt McCoy but, much like Arizona's signal caller, McCoy is dealing with a concussion suffered last week, so 9 year veteran Seneca Wallace will lead the Cleveland offense.

The Browns lead the league in dropped passes and have sputtered all year but the offense may actually look a little crisper this week with Wallace at the helm because he has spent the majority of his time in the NFL running a version of Pat Shurmur's west coast offense.

So far this year Cleveland's running game has failed to impress as they have been bitten by injuries and inconsistent offensive line play. Peyton Hillis and backup Montario Hardesty are finally both healthy and should both get a full week of practice in, so maybe this will be the week they can pound out some yards.

The passing game has been plagued by a lack of play makers and dropped passes. Rookie WR Greg Little leads the team in catches and yards but he also leads the team in drops. The TEs,

who many thought would have a great year, have not and starting TE Ben Watson has been placed on the IR after suffering his 3rd concussion of the year. In his absence Evan Moore will get the start and you may also see more of rookie Jordan Cameron.

As for what specifically to look for on Sunday from Cleveland, I anticipate this to be the game where they attempt to take advantage of the good weather and Seneca Wallace's experience in the offense while spreading the field with multiple WRs sets.

They will more than likely attack the 3rd corner and the aggressive safeties. The Cardinal's defense is vulnerable to TE flex sets because the outside LBs don't play well going backwards. They struggle playing in space so in addition to using spread formations to attack the safeties in the seams look for Cleveland to use double TE and TE flex sets to attack the flats where the OLBs should be dropping into coverage.

It will also be easier for the Browns to run the ball with the big, bruising Hillis if the field is spread. You can also expect Hillis to be a factor in the passing game because Arizona's young OLBs struggle when they are not rushing the passer on passing plays.

Key Matchups

*CB Joe Haden vs. WR Larry Fitzgerald- If backup Skelton plays he will force the ball to Fitzgerald and this will give Haden a chance for some turnovers. Fitzgerald is tall with long arms so Haden will need to be close to him in order to break up passes or the all pro WR will have a big day.

If the Browns are going to win on 3rd down and get off the field this matchup will be critical. If Arizona's passes are not pinpoint this will also be the opportunity for Haden to make some game changing plays.

*Cleveland's Guards vs. Arizona's DEs and LBs- The Cardinals put a lot of pressure on the offensive guards with their DE/NT stunts. If the Browns want to move the ball the young guards need to pick these stunts up.

In the running game LB Daryl Washington needs to be accounted for and I expect the Browns center Alex Mack to win the NT battle and free up the guards to get the inside backers. If the guards can get to the inside backers it will be a big day for RB Peyton Hillis.

*QB Senaca Wallace vs. S Adrian Wilson- The Cardinals allow the veteran Wilson to press the line of scrimmage and because of this he sometimes plays mind games with QBs, checking to passes and then dropping into coverage. If the Browns QB can catch Wilson out of position they will be set up for some big plays and, on the flip side, the veteran Wilson has been known to bait QBs into throwing into coverage.

*P Brad Maynard vs. PR Patrick Peterson- No beating around the bush here, Peterson is a game changer… simply keep the ball out of his hands. He is a great return guy and for whatever reason he is even better at home….kick it to the sidelines this week.

*Ahytba Rubin/Phil Taylor vs. LG Daryn Colledge- This week Rubin and Taylor have a chance to make some plays in the backfield. Colledge shows on film that he will whiff on occasion and he also gets blown off the ball from time to time. I expect whichever tackle is on his side to have a good day and, if so, this matchup could dictate the Cardinals blocking scheme and disrupt their entire offense.

Prediction

The Cardinals are on a 3 game winning streak and have beaten division leading teams on back to back weekends. The Browns will have to play a really good game in order to win this game on Sunday.

Honestly, I am on the fence about this game. I think if the Browns come out and try to and run over the Cardinals like the 49ers tried last week that the Browns will have similar negative results. If they spread the field and use Wallace's experience with the checks of the WCO the Browns will have much better success.

Well, I am actually going to pick the Browns to rally on the road with an offense that finally figures a way to score TDs instead of FGs and a defense that puts pressure on the QB and causes some errant throws that turn into interceptions.

The reason for optimism probably has to do more with the fact that Sunday is my birthday than anything else. I am hoping the Browns don't ruin my birthday with a horrible performance, so I almost have to pick them to win so I don't become the starter of any negative energy.

Browns fans, enjoy the game on Sunday and as always……Go Browns!

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