Week 16 Game 15

When/Where: Saturday 1:00pm Baltimore, MD M&T Bank Stadium

Opponent: Baltimore Ravens **Current Spread:** Browns +13

This week, on Christmas Eve, the Cleveland Browns travel to Baltimore, MD to face a familiar division rival in the Baltimore Ravens. This is a rematch of a week 13 matchup in Cleveland where the Ravens won by a score of 24-10.

Anytime division Rivals face off it is a heated contest but this contest always carries a bit of extra emotion since the Browns snuck out of town and became the Baltimore Ravens. Most of the pure hatred has mellowed but as long as these teams play bitterness will always be an undertone to the game itself.

The first contest was dominated in the trenches by the Ravens who piled up 290 yards rushing while surrendering only 59 yards rushing to the Browns. The rushing totals also allowed the Ravens to dominate time of possession holding the ball 15 more minutes than Cleveland which greatly helped the Ravens cause and hurt the Browns.

Both teams are coming off of losses after Cleveland suffered an overtime defeat to the Arizona Cardinals and Baltimore got dismantled by the San Diego Chargers.

Baltimore has not lost back to back games all year and is still trying to win the division while battling the Pittsburgh Steelers for supremacy, so this will be an uphill battle for the young Browns team.

Let's peek inside the game as we try and anticipate what to expect from these teams on gameday.

Expectations on Gameday for Baltimore

Offense- The Baltimore offense is led by 4th year QB Joe Flacco and workhorse RB Ray Rice. The Ravens team as a whole is much better off when Baltimore runs the ball more than passing the ball but offensive coordinator Cam Cameron sometimes loses focus and throws the ball too much which throws the team out of whack like it did last week against the Chargers.

In the first contest against Cleveland the Ravens pounded the Browns with Ray Rice who gained 204 yards on 29 carries and they also got 76 yards from Ricky Williams, Rice's backup.

When the Ravens run the ball, you can expect the Ravens to continue to pound the ball using their combination blocking. Sometimes they use zone concepts and sometimes they use power on man concepts…either way they are a physical group up front. The Ravens have also started to use cut blocks this year in the zone scheme and they have produced good results so expect to see some more of that on Saturday.

With the effectiveness of Baltimore run game against the Browns, you can also expect them to play off of that and use the play action pass. The Ravens will be without veteran WR Anquan Boldin on Saturday so expect them to take shots down the field with rookie speedster Torrey Smith. Smith leads the team in receiving TDs with 7 and has a 17.9 yard per catch average so you can expect the Ravens to attempt gaining yards in chunks with the rookie.

Baltimore's two TEs have combined for 85 catches and 6 TDs on the year and TE Ed Dickson

was the team's leading receiver in the first contest against Cleveland so you should expect him to get plenty of targets in game two.

The overall look of the Ravens offense will be encompassed by plenty of "big" formations using multiple TEs so they can run the ball with power and still present the possibility of passing to their TEs.

The game plan will be a model of the first game so expect the majority of their offense to come from the ground, but you can also anticipate them taking their shots down field a few more times at home than they did in week 13 in Cleveland.

Defense- The Ravens defense has been their money maker every since LB Ray Lewis came on the scene in Baltimore 16 years ago. They are in the top 5 in almost every defensive category in the league and are currently ranked 3rd in yards allowed per game.

In the first game LB Ray Lewis didn't even play and the Browns only mustered 59 rushing yards so expect rushing yards to be even harder to come by in this contest because Lewis is back in the lineup.

Lewis is the Ravens leading tackler while DE/OLB Terrell Suggs is the leading sack man with 13 so far on the year. The Ravens also have all pro DT/DE Haloti Ngata who wreaks havoc in the trenches as well rookie DE Pernell McPhee who is second on the team in sacks with 6. McPhee is looking for a repeat performance of game one where he acquired 2 of his 6 sacks on the year.

The secondary is led by future hall of famer safety Ed Reed who has 3 interceptions so far and they are also getting good play from CB Ladarius Webb who is leading the team with 4 ints. Webb is an added pain in the side when he is on special teams as a returner and he made a big play in the first contest as he returned a punt for a TD in that game.

As a whole you can expect the Ravens 3-4 base defense to be tough and aggressive at the point of attack and send plenty of LB pressure throughout the game. Even though their

secondary is coming off of a bad game against the San Diego Chargers last week you can expect the Ravens to use plenty of pressure on passing downs and rely on man coverage behind it with Ed Reed playing free lance center field looking to make plays.

Expectations on Gameday for Cleveland

Defense- The Cleveland defense is led by LB D'Qwell Jackson who is 2nd in the NFL with 138 tackles this year. The unit as a whole is greatly improved from years past and is outplaying expectations while keeping the Browns in most of their games this year.

The Browns use a base 4-3 defense that typically plays strong fundamental football. The Browns used more pressure schemes last week than in weeks pass and even featured some zone blitzes while dropping rookie DE Jabaal Sheard into coverage a few times. For most defenses that is nothing unusual but in general this year the Cleveland defense has been one that doesn't use many gimmicks or lop sided pressure schemes and when they have it was the RDE that dropped into coverage and not the LDE.

Outside of LB D'Qwell Jackson, Cleveland has not gotten good LB play and that fact combined with a low scoring offense has made for a defense that struggles against the run as we saw in game 1 against the Ravens.

The Browns have a young DL that is anchored by DT Ahtyba Rubin and rookies DT Phil Taylor and DE Jabaal Sheard. Sheard is playing extremely well right now and is coming off a 2 sack game which grew his season total to 7.5.

The Browns secondary is led by 2nd year pro Joe Haden who is having a great year and currently is 4th in the league with 17 passes defended.

When it comes to game plans for Cleveland's defense you can expect the same it has been all year, base and sound with a few pressures to keep you on your toes. It does seem that LB Chris Gocong who was moved from his weak side OLB spot to the strong side after LB Scott Fujita was injured is playing at a high level and has helped the run defense improve over the

last few weeks. This improvement if it continues, should allow the Browns to get the Ravens in some 3rd and longs situations and allow the young DL to get pressure on Ravens QB Joe Flacco.

Offense- For the second week in a row the Cleveland offense will be led by 9 year veteran Seneca Wallace who is filling in for 2nd year player QB Colt McCoy. Wallace filled in nicely last week and although he didn't lead the team to victory played well enough to earn a 92 QB rating and zero interceptions.

The running game came back to life last week also with RB Peyton Hillis looking like he is finally operating at 100%. The Browns have struggled to run the ball all year and although running against the Ravens in the first meeting didn't result in a ton of yards, Hillis actually averaged 3.8 yards a carry, which isn't bad.

In the Browns running scheme, they use a power blocking scheme and often times get their young guards blocking on the move as they execute trapping and pulling kick out plays.

The passing game got a tremendous boost last week when rookie WR Greg Little finally had a breakout game that was topped off with a 76 yard TD catch. QB Seneca Wallace is very experienced in the west coast offense of Pat Shurmur and will continue to display his knowledge of the offense and movement skills in this game.

The Browns have lost TEs to the IR in recent weeks but they still have their best catching TE healthy in Evan Moore. In the first game the Browns targeted the TEs a combined 11 times so you can expect the position to be a big factor in the success of Cleveland's passing game on Saturday.

When it comes to game planning against the Ravens the best way to move the ball on them is usually in formations that spread them out while attempting to make their LBs play in space.

Last week the Chargers were effective at spreading the Ravens and running the ball. They did an excellent job of keeping the Ravens off balance and therefore were always playing downhill

and they didn't allow Baltimore to be the aggressor.

If Cleveland is going to move the ball against the Ravens they will need to spread Baltimore out and use the strong Peyton Hillis on inside and off tackle running plays. They will need to have some success gaining positive yards on 1st and 2nd down so they are not always making attempts to convert 3rd and long.

Short distances on 3rd down will allow Cleveland to work the TEs and RBs in the LB zone areas. If Baltimore gets too aggressive on passing downs expect the Browns to use more screen passes and passes to the RBs in the flat areas.

The key for the Browns will be moving the chains and winning the time of possession battle. In the first game the offense was horrible at converting on 3rd downs so if the Browns want a different outcome that is the one area that the offense should focus on.

Key Matchups

*CB Joe Haden vs. Baltimore WRs- In the first game the Ravens WRs only caught a combined 3 balls but Baltimore was able to abuse the Browns on the ground so it wasn't even noticed. I expect the Ravens to take a few more shots down the field in this game and it will be critical that Haden stay disciplined and patient as he waits for them to take their shot.

As a side note, I expect Joe to have a great game playing in front of tons of family and friends because he is from Maryland and should have a huge showing for the holiday. As a matter of fact, he could have his best game of the year on Saturday if the Browns can slow down Ray Rice and force Flacco to throw the ball more.

*DT Phil Taylor/DT Ahtyba Rubin vs. Baltimore Guards- No matter how you spin it the Browns DTs need a better showing than they had in game one if the Browns want a chance at winning.

LB D'Qwell Jackson can't be expected to make every single tackle so the Brown's DTs need to get of blocks and get down the line of scrimmage. They have seen the zone blocking scheme once and should understand how to sense those cut blocks the Ravens have gotten famous for this year. If they do that effectively they will boost their chances of winning by huge amounts.

*QB Seneca Wallace vs. Ed Reed- Ed Reed is a big play waiting to happen and Wallace needs to account for Reed on every play. If he can't get Reed to bite on some routes in order to move him around it will be only a matter of time before Reed picks one off.

The Browns will need to be better than 3-14 on 3rd downs which is what they were in the first game. If Cleveland wants to move the ball down the field without relying on big plays…winning the Ed Reed "game" will go a long way at accomplishing that.

*Browns Coverage Teams vs. PR Ladarius Webb- The Browns have had problems on punts this year and in the first game against Baltimore they were victimized by Ladarius Webb as a returner. He took a punt and ran 76 yards for a TD. The Browns were also burned in overtime last week when they allowed a 32 yard return that as a key factor in them losing the game. If they don't control the return game of Webb they will draw the short straw again and lose the game.

*RT Tony Pashos vs. DE/OLB Terrell Suggs- Pashos has been on ice skates all year and was victimized in game one against the Ravens. If the Browns have any hope of a passing game they will need to help on Pashos's side. Cleveland QB Seneca Wallace is elusive and athletic but if he has to elude on every drop it will be a long day and more than likely in a losing effort.

Prediction

This prediction is as straight forward as it gets. The Ravens have not lost back to back games all year and they steam rolled the Browns in Cleveland during their first meeting. I expect the Ravens to be in a bad mood coming off of a loss and I anticipate them being motivated for the win to stay alive in the division race. They know that the Steelers play the Rams this week and if they want to win a division title they can't get surprised by Cleveland.

The Browns defense will put up a solid effort but I think Ray Lewis will have his defense playing fast and physical while insisting QB Seneca Wallace use every ounce of his athleticism to stay upright. This will produce a win for the Ravens and the 11th loss for my beloved Browns.

As always Browns fans...try and enjoy this Christmas Eve contest and remember that Santa needs to show up tonight so don't drink too much eggnog trying to numb the pain if the Browns lose…..Merry Christmas and Go Browns!

Follow me on twitter @jasonA_tcf