My Christmas Day prediction for 2012, made a full week before 2011 was even complete, was not so much a prediction as it was a statement. I boldly stated, to anyone that would listen, that the Cleveland Browns will win their division in 2012. On the surface, it looks and feels like a bold prediction that a crazed fan would make for the sake of making a bold prediction, but there is more to it than just that.

Of course, I am far from prepared to properly illustrate how that statement could be anywhere near the truth in this universe or any other, but I have thought about making a case for it being a possibility. Now, in order to predict the future, most especially a rendition of it as preposterous as mine, you have to understand some of the past and all of the present. I've come to realize that presently, the Cleveland Browns are coming off their worst season since re-booting the brand in 1999.

I'm not saying it was arugably one of the worst seasons in the 13-year history of the Expansion Cleveland Browns, I am saying that 2011 was unquestionably the most tragic chapter in the book of the "New Browns". On paper, specifically paper with strictly numbers on it, perhaps there were worse seasons. There were seasons, 1999 and 2000, where the most important number, wins, was lower than this year's total of four. In fact, the Browns have posted their fourth 4-12 record in 13 years by dropping their final six contests this season. Without telling the story that puts those numbers in context, it's a hard sell because 2-14 and 3-13 are clearly less desirable numbers, but I caution everyone not to get too caught up with just the numbers.

Looking back, the numbers do excuse a few teams. The first two teams of the Butch Davis regime, with 7 wins and 9 wins in 2001 and 2002, certainly achieved victory often enough to disqualify themselves from the "Worst Ever" discussion. Romeo Crennel actually led the 2007 squad to 10 wins in what many thought to be a lame duck season for him, so we can safely rule that team out of the mix also. I'm also offering Chris Palmer a pass for taking the job that nobody wanted, and justifiably so, in being the first Head Coach of the Cleveland Browns in the Expansion Era. Plain and simple, the NFL set the franchise up for immediate failure, there's just no two ways about it. Terry Pluto even wrote a book called False Start that detailed the

miserable details of how the league derailed any chance of Cleveland having the fortunate quick start that the Jacksonville and Carolina franchises were blessed with. Much like the kids on the losing team in T-Ball, I am prepared to offer trophies for participation to the '99 and 2000 Browns. Thus, they are granted amnesty in this discussion as well.

Such concessions cannot and will not be granted to Pat Shurmur's Browns of 2011. Look, expectations were low, and I'm fully aware of the circumstances. You can start with the absence of an off-season in a year where the Browns so desperately needed it to adapt to a new coach and a new system. The lockout hurt their rookie coach, their new defensive coordinator, and the many young players on the roster. I get it, and to be truthful, my expectation was a 3-13 season. So, speaking in terms of black and white, this team that I'm calling the worst in New Franchise History, they finished with a better record than I expected them to.

If they would have struggled in the areas where everyone expected them to struggle, but showed promise in other areas, the losses would have been more acceptable, and the season could have been considered a wash. However, the expected issues (grasping the West Coast Offense, adjusting from the 3-4 to 4-3 under Dick Jauron, and overcoming a considerable deficiency of talent on that defense) weren't the bullet points of the struggle that was this pathetic football season. Oh, if only it were that simple.

If it were just a matter of losing, it would be one thing. Fans that can remember those dreadful early years of expansion can understand that you're going to get blown out of the building by certain teams that are better. It happened every week back in those days, but this year was different. They were basically blown out three times, four times if you want to count the Oakland game that they mad look close in the end, but only twice to superior talent. A 31-13 loss to Tennessee in Week 4 proved the 2-1 start to be fradulent, but, like most of the losses this season, exposed certain types of flaws.

Reasonable fans can understand flaws that come with the occasional lack of execution, but things like habitual fundamental errors, lack of heart, and general organizational dysfuntion are unacceptable. That's what we saw from our 2011 Cleveland Browns.

Fundamental Mistakes

In their home opener, the Browns aren't alert enough on defense, and Bruce Gradkowski hooks

up with AJ Green for a Bengals touchdown to take a 20-17 4th quarter lead. Pat Shurmur isn't a seasoned enough Head Coach to recognize what is going on, and fails to call a timeout to prevent the easy score. Perhaps, we can chalk this up to a rookie mistake, but this wouldn't be the documented case of Shurmur being asleep at the wheel.

I also have to address the penalties with the understanding that they happen, but do they have to happen at such critical times? Pass interference, blocks in the back, and face masks are going to happen. I even have a certain level of tolerance for the occasional false start, motion, or delay of game infractions, I really do. However, when a defender jumps off side in a situation where the offense is putting all of their eggs into that basket, that's unacceptable. That's exactly what happened in Week 16 on 4th and 3 with two minutes to go (down 20-14), it even appeared that Joe Flacco was ready to retreat when a certain Browns rookie from Baylor took the bait. And, the Browns shoot themselves in the foot, rather than giving themselves a chance to win the game.

I can't single the lapse in fundamentals out as the "Story of the Season", but this isn't open for interpretation. It's clear as day, you can't succeed in situations where you deny yourself the opportunity to do so.

Heart Can't Take a Break

In the 31-13 home loss to the Titans, I'm okay if the team just had an off day. What I couldn't tolerate was the team's Tin Man act on Jared Cook's 80-yard touchdown reception, and the equal lack of heart on Jordan Babineaux's coast-to-coast interception return in the third quarter . It may be selfish, but I have a short leash for players that quit on this Cleveland Browns fan base.

Fortunately, I don't think we saw the team lack heart very often, at least not often enough for me to be trigger-happy with accusations, but even that one time is too much. That's the thing about heart in the National Football League, it has to be a full-time attribute.

Dysfunction All the Way Up

Where do I begin? We can probably start with one of those rare moments of victory this season, a come-from-behind win at home against the Dolphins. Peyton Hillis did not play in this one because of strep throat, or was it because of his contract dispute? He may have sat that one out because his agent told him to do so, or it might have been because he doesn't fully understand Pat Shurmur's Sick Day Policy. Either way, the Browns won the game and nothing good came of it. You have to give it up for an organization that goes out of their way to turn their hero into a jerk. On the other hand, maybe Hillis is a jerk that we were tricked into liking until the truth came out.

Nothing demonstrates the dysfunction of the Browns as an organization quite like their incompetence in dealing with player safety. Now, it's been a few years since the last batch of staph infections, so to say "same old Browns" or "business as usual in Berea" might be unfair. Now, in regard to the on-field negligence involving Colt McCoy's brain injury was unfortunate, but understandable. I can't say that I'm not unhappy with Shurmur being unaware of a head injury to his quarterback, but the aftermath makes me sick. It was a Thursday Night game so Shurmur didn't have to talk to the media for four days, and he couldn't handle it the following Monday. I know, I know, Mike Holmgren was supposed to protect his de facto nephew, and tried three days later by calling a press conference.

In a little under an hour, he successfully instilled doubt into the mind of even his most loyal supporters/apologists. We were left to wonder who is driving this bus. I admit that I had given Holmgren the benefit of the doubt as an executive until that day, but he was exposed.

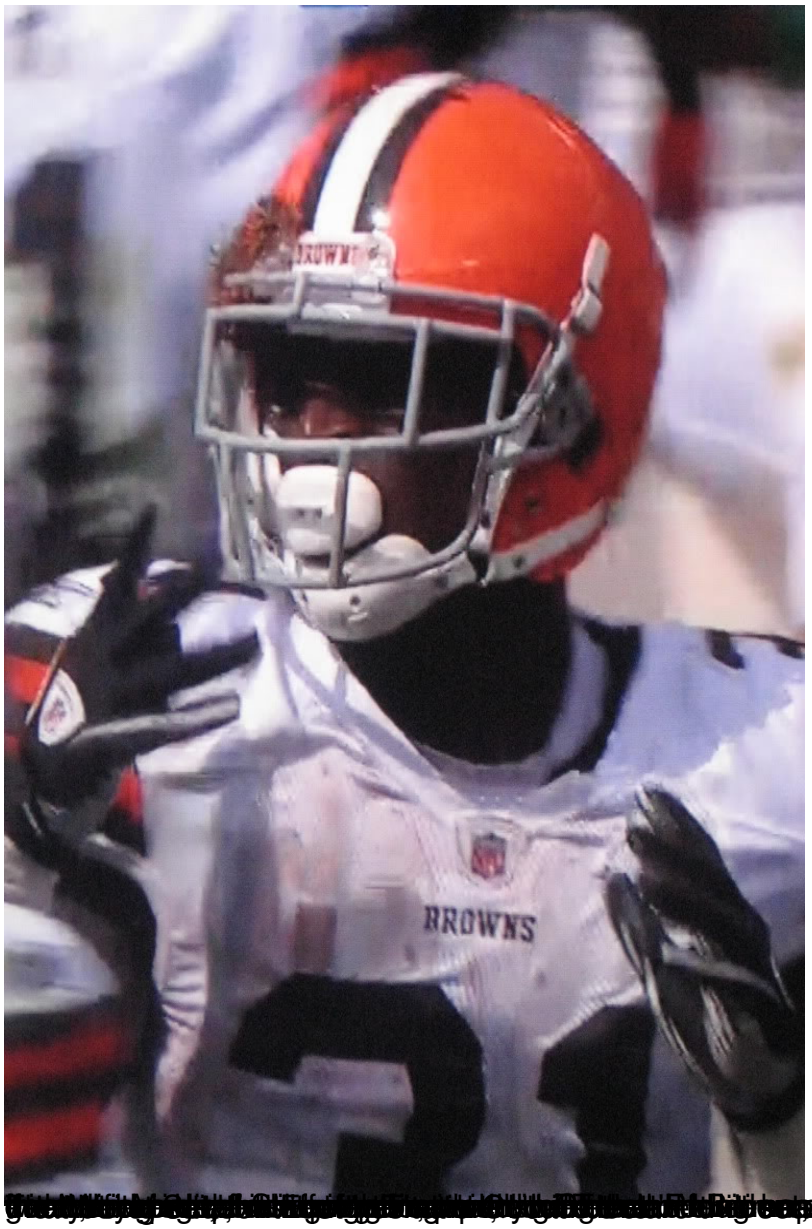
Exposed

Quite frankly, the Cleveland Browns were exposed this year in every way imagineable. While Colt McCoy, the unknown rookie, may have pulled the wool over everyone's eyes before the book came out on him, he wasn't able to hide behind smoke and mirrors. Let's give a point to the naysayers who were not impressed with his surprising poise as a rookie, even if we're not willing to concede he's not the guy.

Whether or not Peyton Hillis is a good guy or bad guy, our video game cover boy did nothing to claim any type of role as the face of the franchise. It went beyond whatever happened with him off the field (he allegedly missed a scheduled public appearance, in addition to the strep throat/contract scandal), as his production was down, whether you account for him missing six games or not. He found the end zone just three times this year, down from thirteen a year ago. His per carry average was also down nearly a full yard. You could blame some of the fall off on

a beat offensive line, but Chris Ogbannaya was able to surpass 90 yards twice in his understudy role.

We found out Evan Moore isn't a sufficient enough blocker as a Tight End to stay on the field. We learned that Father Time had grown tired of stalking Scott Fujita, and decided to attack this year. It's obvious that the Browns stink at the safety position if TJ Ward isn't on the field, and that he's not exactly Ronnie Lott himself when healthy. Montario Hardesty probably wasn't worth the reach that Tom Heckert took in the draft. Jayme Mitchell didn't play a down in 2010 on Rob Ryan's defense, and no one seemed to notice whether or not he played a role in Dick Jauron's scheme, despite being a starter. And, did I mention how much of a void was left by the departure of Special Teams Coach Brad Seely? If I haven't brought it up, Cleveland's Special Teams were atrocious this season.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