

THE LOOKMAN REPORT 2020

Week Seventeen – Destiny Plays Here

“I still think about that play. If he catches that ball, we’re off to Oakland. That drop changed a lot of lives.”- retired QB Kelly Holcomb on the Dennis Northcutt drop in the last Browns’ playoff appearance.

PROLOGUE

The expanded playoffs begin this week, but instead of the typical LMR week in review, the Look Man wants to take the Tailpipe Nation on a trip down memory lane.

Submitted for your approval – a rag tag team of misfits, castoffs and never weres assembled on a hallowed ground to contest a game. A game that would lead one team into Destiny, and the other, ruin. A game that would take place in a spot we like to call – the Twilight Zone.

LAGNIAPPE

The Setup

The Browns 1.0 lived in the postseason under Paul Brown, Sam Rutigliano, and Marty Schottenheimer winning a world championship in 1964, the last year before the Super Bowl era. The 1994 Browns went 13-3 and were poised to compete for the Lombardi in 1995 under a young and unheralded HC named Bill Belichick. Then the bottom fell out.

The 1995 Browns were 3-1 before learning owner Art Modell had brokered a sweetheart deal to move to Baltimore, and beat only Cincinnati (twice) thereafter, including an epic home finale in which fans destroyed the stadium. They returned in 1999 as Browns 2.0, but die-hard Browns Fan was nowhere to be found. The replacement fans were unsophisticated, whiny and wealthy, and the teams lacked passion and skill.

In 2001, the Browns hired HC Butch Davis, an Oklahoman who had turned around the University of Miami Hurricanes after a near-death penalty sentence. The Browns had won only five games since their 1999 return, and Butch led them to a 7-9 record in a year where 8-8 meant playoffs. The key loss was the Week Fourteen game against Jacksonville, in which Zebra Terry (Bottlegate) McAulay overturned the game winning reception after an intervening play had been run. The Browns haven’t gotten a call since and Davis is the only coach to lead the Browns to “a walk in the cake” of the postseason.

Until now.



“Never trust a man who doesn’t drink...”

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The Game

The Browns played Blitzburgh in the AFC Wild Card at Heinz (Ketchup) Field on January 5, 2003. The Stillers had won the AFC North with a 10-5-1 record, in a season that featured a former insurance salesman at QB. (Touchdown) Tommy Maddox had been acquired to back up Kordell (Slash) Stewart, but Head Coach Bill Cowher dumped Stewart in favor of Maddox, ending up with both a starting QB and a discount for bundling auto, home and life insurance.

The Browns sneaked into the back door of the postseason with a 9-7 record and QB Tim (Sofa Boy) Couch was forced to watch the Wild Card game. It was a real shame, too, because Sofa Boy had helmed several thrilling wins over the Tennessee, the Jets, Jags and Dumpster Ducks. In the Baltimore game, he led a 95- yard TD scoring drive with a buck thirty remaining and no timeouts. The Look Man was poised to give him his real name back when he broke his leg in a Week Sixteen win that propelled Cleveland to the playoffs.

QB Kelly (Tires) Holcomb was acquired when Bruce (BA) Arians left to become the offensive coordinator of the Browns. Cleveland had drafted Tim Couch number one overall in 1999, and needed the former Middle Tennessee State QB to teach him Arians' offense.

The history of the Browns 2.0 is indelibly tied to Tim (Sofa Boy) Couch, the supposed franchise savior, and filled out with expansion draft debris from other teams. The star of the defense was DE Jamir Miller, a sack artist and speed rusher. The rest of the team was trash, but over the next two seasons, Cleveland was able to acquire veterans to plug defensive holes, as well as offensive weapons in RB William Green and undersized wideouts like Dennis Northcutt and Kevin Johnson.

Upon hearing the matchup and the date, the Look Man sprang into action, securing tickets for the game and organizing the roadie. The Look Man used the internet to locate a Burgher willing to sell four on the forty-yard line, but payment was an issue. The Stillers ticketholder agreed to a deal where he would mail all of the tickets in exchange for half of the money. He would then establish a meeting spot in Blitzburgh to consummate the deal for the balance of the cash.

It was a different time then; internet e-commerce was not yet born. A gentlemen's agreement was not uncommon, and in point of fact, it reinforced one's faith in Humanity.

So, the deal was set, and the Look Man traveled the six hours to Stillers Country with Stillers Fan and Burgh native ROY on Saturday night. They would meet Brain and Dave-E-Dave on Sunday at the predetermined meeting spot, exchange tickets, and head to the 1:00PM kickoff.

At sunrise on Sunday, the Look Man peered out of the hotel window to see an odd sight: four Yinzers on the rooftop of the adjacent building surrounded by about six cases of beer. It was snowing to beat the band, and these dudes were slamming beers at 6:45 in the blessed AM.

Heinz Field, which had been a beacon of light the night previous, was nearly completely obscured by the morning blizzard. The Look Man estimated that it was coming down at the rate of about two inches per hour. Clearly, this game was going to be epic.

Dave-E-Dave and Brain arrived a little ruffled by a speeding ticket garnered on the Ohio Turnpike, but otherwise in fine form. After the exchange of pleasantries and high fives, we quaffed several road pops and shots of steam, and bundled for a cold afternoon of blood and guts football – win or go home.

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The scene at Heinz was electric; Browns Fan was well-represented, as is common for The Turnpike Bowl, and Stiller Fan was clearly amped up for the contest. There is simply nothing like playoff football to get the blood moving.

A seven-year-old Stillers fan drilled the Look Man in the chest with a snowball, right in front of his parents, who clearly approved of his behavior. The Look Man did the calculus quickly; drill the dad in the throat and start a full-blown riot, or shake it off and watch the game. Yinzers.

So, into the facility. The Browns started fast, scoring two first half TDs on three defensive turnovers. Maddox was confused by the Dawgs D, which had been recast by D-Coordinator Foge Fazio, and the vaunted Stillers running game was stuffed by the snowy track.

The Browns scored first on a short William Green TD run, and followed with a nice Dennis Northcutt TD catch, and a Phil Dawson FG to take a 17-7 halftime lead. Browns Fan was barking about how the Browns were dominating the Stillers, but the Look Man saw it differently: three turnovers and only a ten-point lead at the half didn't cut much ice and the snow threatened to turn the field into quicksand in the second half. The lone Blitzburgh TD was a 66-yard punt return by Antwaan Randle-el, and the Heinz Ketchup bottles had been eerily still.

The Browns jumped out to a 24-7 lead in the third quarter, and Kelly Tires was rolling, hitting speedy receivers on crossing patterns all afternoon. The running game was completely jettisoned, as Green had negative rushing yards for most of the day.

Life was good. Until it wasn't.

Maddox got hot, and Zebra Bill (Toyota) Carollo, a close personal friend of Bottlegate McAulay, started throwing laundry left and right. The Stillers climbed to a 33-21 deficit in the fourth quarter, leading HC Butch Davis and Foge Fazio nearly to fisticuffs. Fazio wanted to keep up the blitz pressure, while Davis wanted to run "Drop 3 Cloud" a prevent defense featuring three rushers and dropping eight into zone.

QB Kelly (Tires) Holcomb, was masterful that day, throwing for 429 yards and dazzling with footwork and moxie. With under three minutes remaining, the Browns needed to bleed the clock, but Holcomb fired incomplete on second down, setting up a third and long.

Dennis Northcutt had been spectacular, catching six for 92 with a TD, and rushing once for five yards. 'Cutt' ran a little skinny flag route, and was wide open for a sweet dime from Holcomb - - - which he dropped.

The rest of the story is history. The Stillers scored a TD by Chris Fuamatu-Ma'afala (the greatest RB name in a while), and tacked on a two-point conversion for a 36-33 win. Holcomb's record passing day ended as time expired, and the soul crushing ride home after a Browns loss began.

Only that isn't the whole story.

This loss resulted in the firing of Foge Fazio, who's departure led to the resignation of Keith Butler, the Browns' linebackers coach, who left to join the Stillers, where he got a ring.

The Browns had two sub-par seasons afterwards under Butch, who was fired during the 2005 campaign. Holcomb lost his hold on the starting QB role, bouncing around to three teams before retiring in 2008.

THE LOOKMAN REPORT 2020

Week Seventeen – Destiny Plays Here

Bruce Arians is now on his second HC stint, whispering up Tom (Zoolander) Brady in Tampa and has a legit shot at a ring in this COVID impacted season. BA devoted a whole chapter of his book, *The Quarterback Whisperer*, to Holcomb, “Like how an artist must feel when all the various individual brushstrokes on the canvas merge to form a beautiful painting. One of the favorite days of my career.”

The Stillers in that game, including Hines Ward, Antwaan Randle El, James Farrior, Kendrell Bell, Joey Porter, Jason Gildon, Deshea Townsend, Mike Logan and Plexiglass Burress are retired. Cowher is in the CBS studio mastering malaprops at an alarming rate (“...they put the kaboosh on that QB...”). That 2002 Stillers team lost the following week before ultimately winning a ring under Bill Cowher a few years later.

Sunday, January 5, 2003 started with two teams looking for legitimacy. It ended with a Stillers playoff dynasty that endures today and seventeen years of futility in Cleveland. That futility includes over a dozen coaches and GMs, a new ownership group, and too many QBs to name. It is the reason why Browns Fan clutches at fugazi straws like (Cake) Baker Mayfield.

Holcomb followed his career playoff performance the next season with 413 passing yards in a 58-48 shootout with Carson Palmer and the Bengals, the second highest scoring game in NFL history. The irony that a running game caused the Browns to lose both contests is not lost on the Look Man. In the NFL, you pass to score, and run to seal the win. That lesson is especially true in the postseason, and especially for the Browns, featuring Nick Chubb and Baker Mayfield, in that order.

The Look Man looks back longingly at that weekend in early 2003 for what might have been. And for what might be on Sunday night.



Holcomb, now retired and living in Nash-vegas

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Week Seventeen – Destiny Plays Here

EPILOGUE

January arrived in full measure in the southeast US this week, as snow flurries reminded everyone that the autumnal equinox is in the rear-view mirror. The weather means rushing the football is de rigeur in if one wants a lengthy postseason run. And those who do not learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them.

COVID continues to be an issue, and the Look Man is pondering a prop bet on whether the postseason will actually finish. Cleveland loses HC Kevin Stefanski, pro Bowler RG Joel Bitonio and SS Ronnie Harrison at the worst possible time. Since position groups practice and study together, we still have the potential for a Super Bowl in Tampa featuring a wide receiver playing QB.

The game is scheduled for The Big Sombrero in Tampa, and we may actually get there. Of course, the events of this week prove that we can take nothing for granted, so in the words of Samuel L. Jackson, “Hold on to your butts!”

Peace,

The Look Man