

Meltdown falls on Browns' shoulders



Jarrett Bell
Columnist
USA TODAY

CLEVELAND – They can't pin this one on the refs.

No, Cleveland Browns, look in the mirror and see the egg on your face for what it is.

You blew it.

Sure, there were way too many head-scratching calls that went against Cleveland in the 32-28 setback that left the Browns (2-4) still in search of their first home victory of the season.

But there were even more cases of Browns' blunders – in strategy and execution – that left much to the imagination of what might have been.

In the aftermath, though, Baker Mayfield was willing to make a charitable donation in order to get it on record that he thought the Browns were big-time victims of shabby officiating.

"I'll probably get fined for saying this, but it was pretty bad today," he said.

He grumbled about the illegal blind-side block penalty on Jarvis Landry that wiped out a dazzling, cross-field catch-and-run by Nick Chubb that would have moved the chains. He whined about the officials missing a face-mask penalty the Seahawks apparently committed against Chubb during a goal-line pileup. And like his coach, Freddie Kitchens, he thought Landry crossed the plane of the end zone on the fumble that wasn't reversed by instant replay.

Tough breaks. Mayfield, who also maintained, "the refs are never an excuse," had some legitimate beefs as referee Adrian Hill's crew dropped 19 flags on the two teams to underscore some of the general sloppiness on display.

Just don't believe the Browns were robbed – unless they burglarized themselves.

Quick, Roger Goodell, pass a new rule: Teams that commit five or more turnovers can't complain about officials ... even when the calls and replays don't always match up.

No, this loss falls at the feet of the undisciplined team that committed five turnovers, had a punt blocked, blew a



Browns quarterback Baker Mayfield congratulated Seahawks counterpart Russell Wilson after Seattle hung on for a 32-28 victory. SCOTT GALVIN/USA TODAY SPORTS

20-6 lead and inexplicably kept tempting fate with some questionable play-calling near the goal line.

Before that Landry fumble early in the fourth quarter, the Browns, trailing 25-20, had two cracks from the Seahawks' 1-yard line. Yet rather than try pounding it in with Chubb, who finished with 122 rushing yards, Kitchens put it on Mayfield's arm. And the third-down fade pass to Odell Beckham Jr. didn't come close to being completed. On fourth down, Kitchens called a play that had Mayfield in a shotgun with an empty backfield. Mayfield threw a quick pass to Landry that resulted in the fumble.

The Browns dodged that episode as the Seahawks were penalized for having 12 men on the field. After Chubb was stuffed on the ensuing fourth down, the Browns forced a punt and started the next drive with prime field position that led to the TD. Yet with the lost challenge, they also lost a timeout that could have come in handy at crunchtime.

Ah, crunchtime. Mayfield's last pass of the day, a fling to the flat for running back Dontrell Hilliard, was behind the target. So much for a game-winning

drive, which the Browns were clearly thinking when they took over with 3:30 remaining. Instead, Mayfield's errant throw resulted in a too-easy interception for K.J. Wright. Ballgame.

On the season, that was interception No. 11 for Mayfield (who has thrown for five TDs). That's no way to win.

Look at Russell Wilson, having an MVP season for the Seahawks. He passed for 295 yards with two TDs and didn't commit a turnover. Composure was his ticket. When his team trailed by 14 points early, he didn't flinch. When the radio receiver in his helmet malfunctioned, he stayed cool and started calling his own plays in up-tempo fashion as if it were no sweat. He ran his number of fourth-quarter game-winning victory drives to 30, more than anyone else since he entered the NFL in 2012.

Sure, the Seahawks have been through a lot over the years, with a handful of veterans still in tow from the Legion of Boom glory run. They know not to panic.

Then again, if Mayfield hadn't thrown a pick just before halftime, maybe there would have been no need for

last-minute drama. The Browns were set up beautifully, leading 20-12 with second down from the Seahawks' 10-yard line inside the two-minute warning. But Mayfield's throw for Landry in the end zone was a bit behind the target, and Shaquill Griffin deflected it into the arms of Tedric Thompson – a turnover that Wilson's Seahawks converted into an 88-yard TD drive that was pretty much a 14-point swing.

So as much as the Browns were vexed by the officials, their frustrations shouldn't come anywhere close to the disdain they should have for their own blunders.

There were several cases when Mayfield was on the mark but his targets muffed or outright dropped the passes. There were first downs negated by holding penalties. Missed tackles. Busted coverages. A lot of teaching moments on video, with a bye week to use for corrections.

Kitchens praised his team for the effort and was encouraged by the efficiency early in the game – which ultimately was undone by the turnovers. Sugar-coating the bottom line won't cut it. And tight calls or not, the coach admitted that some of the penalties (nine for 83 yards) were disturbing because they reflected a lack of concentration.

"Sometimes, it is playing with emotion instead of passion," he said, alluding to the roughing-the-passer and late hit calls. "During the play, it's technique, being lazy or not doing your job. There are several things. We do not ever practice penalties."

Maybe that's not a bad idea, because whatever the Browns are practicing, they just can't seem to get it right with enough consistency.

Still, it's a long season. Being 2-4 is not a death sentence. This team that entered the season with so many expectations, so much hype and, yes, so much swagger, has time to rally to make a playoff push, especially with a schedule that seemingly becomes less grueling down the stretch.

But to live up to their hope, the Browns surely need to learn to not beat themselves.

These might be the growing pains, but at the moment they reflect a reality.

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