

NAVY FULLBACK COPELAND GAINING THE HARD YARDS, C1

EXPANDED COVERAGE: Anxious RG3 watches from the sidelines
Linebacker Jackson leads way as opportunistic Redskins defense makes its case

38  21 

GAMEDAY

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The Washington Times

washingtontimes.com/sports/football

Washington leads the crowded NFC East by virtue of a tiebreaker and controls its playoff destiny



ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTOGRAPHS

Rookie Kirk Cousins (left) passed for 329 yards — the most by a Washington quarterback this season and the most by a Redskins rookie since 1987 — and two touchdowns to Leonard Hankerson (right) in Washington's 38-21 win over Cleveland. Below, Cousins congratulates Hankerson after a 54-yard score during the first quarter.

FALLING INTO PLACE

Don't try to grasp it, just enjoy the ride

CLEVELAND

At a certain point, a winning streak becomes a form of group hysteria, almost — an altered state. There's no understanding it, really. It just is.



DAN DALY

"It's something you can feel, but it's hard to explain," Barry Cofield said after the Washington Redskins' 38-21 win over the Cleveland Browns on Sunday, their fifth straight.

You could "feel" this "something" when rookie Kirk Cousins, in his first NFL start, threw a pass through "a small window," as Mike Shanahan put it, and Leonard Hankerson caught it for a 54-yard touchdown that tied the game at 7. Cousins rolled out on the play and "had a lot of options," he said. "I could have run [for a good gain]. But I felt like there was a lot of space over the top with no safety there. I counted on Hank to make me right, and he did."

You could "feel" this "something" when Santana Moss fumbled at the Cleveland 19 in the late going, and Pierre Garcon recovered the bouncing ball 11 yards downfield (two weeks after Josh Morgan had turned a Robert Griffin III fumble into a TD against

» see DALY | R4



By RICH CAMPBELL
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

CLEVELAND | Don Cousins stood in the front row of Cleveland Browns Stadium and leaned over the wall to greet his son. Throughout Kirk Cousins' football career, Don has embraced the brilliance of a shared moment anytime another dream is realized. So the pride beamed from Don's face as Kirk approached, victorious and smiling.

"We did it," Kirk said, as Don recalled. "We did it."

And they celebrated together a crucial Washington Redskins win and Kirk's moment of validation.

"If I die tomorrow, I could say I started a game in the NFL and we won. It's a good feeling."

— Kirk Cousins

The fourth-round rookie quarterback replaced injured star Robert Griffin III on Sunday and, in his first career start, continued the Redskins' magical late-season run by deftly operating their base offense in a comfortable 38-21 victory over the Cleveland Browns.

"If I die tomorrow, I could say I started a game in the NFL and we won," Cousins said. "It's a good feeling."

The Redskins, with a trail of fire behind them, won their fifth straight game and surged into a three-way tie for first place in the NFC East with the New York Giants and Dallas Cowboys. With two weeks remaining in the season, Washington (8-6) holds the three-team tiebreaker advantage because of a superior head-to-head winning percentage against the others.

This team that appeared buried six weeks ago is two wins from its first division title in 13 years.

"All I know is we've got to win

» see REDSKINS | R2

EXPANDED REDSKINS COVERAGE THROUGHOUT THE SEASON: WASHINGTONTIMES.COM/SPORTS/FOOTBALL

NOTEBOOK

Griffin maintains knee was sound enough to play

By NATHAN FENNO
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

CLEVELAND | Robert Griffin III wanted to play.

Instead, the Washington Redskins rookie quarterback was inactive and watched from the sideline as his team hammered the Cleveland Browns on Sunday.

"I feel like I could play this week," said Griffin, who twice mentioned his unhappiness with not playing in a four-minute postgame news conference.

The decision to hold out Griffin as he recovers from the mild sprain to his lateral collateral ligament in his right knee suffered last week didn't make the quarterback happy. Coach Mike Shanahan said team doctors didn't believe Griffin's knee was healthy enough for game action.

"He did not want to let his teammates down," Shanahan said. "At the end of the day, the doctor did not feel that he was ready. ... The doctors are very impressed at how he's coming along, but I can't tell you anything [more] until the doctors clear him."

Two-and-a-half hours before kickoff Sunday, Griffin went through a series of warm-ups at Cleveland Browns Stadium after being limited in practice all week. He looked healthy, other than a slight limp as he walked off the field with a large brace protecting his right knee. But the decision had been announced the night before to start fellow rookie Kirk Cousins.

Griffin's status remains day to day. "He wanted to go out there so bad," cornerback DeAngelo Hall said of



Injured Redskins quarterback Robert Griffin III congratulates fellow rookie Kirk Cousins after Cousins passed for 329 yards and two touchdowns in Washington's 38-21 win over Cleveland. It marked the Redskins' fifth straight victory.

Griffin. "It was good for him to pass the car keys to someone else."

Griffin's absence left third-stringer Rex Grossman active for the first time this season after starting 13 games in 2011.

Polumbus, Alexander injured

Right tackle Tyler Polumbus' afternoon went from bad to worse. In the first half, Jabraal Sheard blew past him and sacked quarterback Kirk Cousins.

Then Polumbus didn't return in the second half after suffering a concussion. Veteran Jordan Black replaced him.

Per the NFL's concussion protocol, players diagnosed with concussions aren't permitted to speak to the media.

Linebacker Lorenzo Alexander received a scare of his own after crashing into Josh Gordon while making a tackle late in the second quarter. At first, Alexander thought he separated his right shoulder. Instead, the injury turned out to be a stinger.

Center Will Montgomery departed in the game's final minutes with a left knee injury. Guard Kory Lichtensteiger switched from guard to center to replace him. After the game, Montgomery walked without a limp.

Forbath can't miss

Kai Forbath remains perfect. The rookie kicker drilled a 44-yard field goal in the second quarter to extend his made field goal streak to 14 for 14. He hasn't missed since the Redskins signed him as a free agent in October.

The Redskins haven't missed a field goal since Oct. 7, when Billy Cundiff was 1 for 2 in the loss to the Atlanta Falcons. That game cost Cundiff his job.

More records for Morris

Despite a slow start, rookie running back Alfred Morris finished with 87 yards on the ground. That pushed him into seventh-place on the Redskins' single-season rushing list.

With two games remaining, Morris has 1,319 yards rushing, just 197 yards behind Clinton Portis' 2005 team record.

Morris' 27 carries were his second most this season, topped only by his 28 carries in the season opener at the New Orleans Saints.

● Rich Campbell contributed to this report.

REDSKINS 38, BROWNS 21

Washington	7	3	14	14	-38
Cleveland	7	7	0	7	-21

First Quarter

Cle—Richardson 6 run (Dawson kick), 8:41.

Was—Hankerson 54 pass from Cousins (Forbath kick), 2:16.

Second Quarter

Was—FG Forbath 44, 5:46.

Cle—Richardson 1 run (Dawson kick), 1:11.

Third Quarter

Was—Morris 3 run (Forbath kick), 13:14.

Was—Hankerson 2 pass from Cousins (Forbath kick), 7:40.

Fourth Quarter

Was—Royster 4 run (Forbath kick), 11:19.

Cle—Benjamin 69 pass from Weeden (Dawson kick), 10:11.

Was—Morris 8 run (Forbath kick), 5:00.

A-65,083.

	Was	Cle
First downs	25	13
Total Net Yards	430	291
Rushes-yards	35-122	15-58
Passing	308	233
Punt Returns	2-18	2-15
Kickoff Returns	1-22	7-191
Interceptions Ret.	2-25	1-37
Comp-Att-Int	26-37-1	21-35-2
Sacked-Yards Lost	2-21	2-11
Punts	5-42.6	6-42.0
Fumbles-Lost	2-0	1-0
Penalties-Yards	6-45	5-30
Time of Possession	36:17	23:43

INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS

RUSHING — Washington, Morris 27-87, Cousins 3-22, Young 3-10, Royster 2-3. Cleveland, Richardson 11-28, Cribbs 1-16, Weeden 1-9, Hardesty 2-5.

PASSING — Washington, Cousins 26-37-1-329. Cleveland, Weeden 21-35-2-244.

RECEIVING — Washington, Garon 6-65, Moss 5-57, Morgan 4-60, Paulsen 4-47, Hankerson 2-56, Royster 2-30, Morris 2-6, Young 1-8. Cleveland, Little 5-74, Cameron 3-34, Gordon 3-27, Richardson 3-4, Massaquoi 2-16, Watson 2-12, Smith 2-8, Benjamin 1-69.

MISSED FIELD GOALS — None.



Kirk Cousins' 329 yards passing are a Redskins season high.



Redskins rookie running back Alfred Morris churned out two touchdowns and 87 yards in Washington's 38-21 win over Cleveland.

REDSKINS

From page R1

the next two games," veteran safety Reed Doughty said of next week's trip to Philadelphia and the season finale at home against Dallas. "If we win, we're in the playoffs. That's a great place to be." Cousins' grand performance in relief positioned them there.

He rebounded from a slow start to finish 26-of-37 passing for 329 yards, two touchdowns and an interception. His passer rating was 104.4. Knowing Griffin might return next week made it even more special.

Cousins eventually thrived in the offensive scheme the Redskins ran last season, the one in which the less-dynamic Rex Grossman threw for 3,151 yards. Cousins shredded the Browns' defense with play-action passes buoyed by misdirection behind the line of scrimmage.

Offensive coordinator Kyle Shanahan shelved the pistol formation and quarterback zone-read option runs that Griffin has thrived off of during his rookie season, and the Redskins still reached the 38-point mark for the

fourth time this year.

Cleveland's linebackers were determined to stop rookie running back Alfred Morris, and that opened space for Cousins and Redskins receivers to attack.

"They made it their job to stop our run, and they did a great job," said Morris, who ran for 87 yards and two touchdowns. "We started using that against them. They were stacking the box, so we was, like, play-action."

Cousins was nervous before the game. That was clear to Don Cousins, who had seen his son start slowly enough times at Michigan State and at Holland Christian High School.

He threw an interception before he completed a pass. And he was 1 for 6 for 4 yards on Washington's first four drives, none of which netted a first down.

"It's like he gets a feel for the game and he gets stronger as the game goes on," Don Cousins said. "I think, just, he hasn't played. It took a little while for him to get his feet underneath him."

But it all changed on the first play of Washington's fifth series. Cousins faked a handoff to Morris and rolled to his right. Cleveland strong safety T.J. Ward

sprinted forward on the play, leaving receiver Leonard Hankerson open deep.

Cousins zipped a pass among three defenders. Hankerson juggled the ball but caught it as he went to the ground. He got up, untouched, and ran the 5 yards into the end zone.

"It was a great read by the quarterback," said Hankerson, who caught both of Cousins' touchdowns. "He went through his progression, saw the safety comes down, and if everybody comes down, I'm over the top."

Although the touchdown pass seemed to settle Cousins, he was outwardly steady in the huddle.

"Just a positive attitude," left guard Kory Lichtensteiger said. "It shows good leadership for him and good maturity because he knew the momentum was definitely going the other way, and I think he knew that he had to be the voice in the huddle to step up and calm everybody down."

Cousins' confidence resulted from his extensive preparation. He quarterbacked the first team offense during all four practices leading up to Sunday's game. He usually works exclusively with the scout team.

On Sunday morning, about 12 hours

after Cousins learned he would start in Griffin's place, he expressed satisfaction to his father.

"He said, 'You know, Dad, I have done all the preparing I can do,'" Don Cousins recalled. "There's nothing more I can. I've watched the film. I've worked on the plays. There's just no more hours in the day to do anything more. It has got to be good enough."

Boy, was it good enough. His 329 yards were more than Griffin has thrown for in any game during his storied rookie season.

Afterward, Kirk Cousins finished his last television interview outside the Redskins locker room and set out to find his family and friends. He estimated his contingent included 30 relatives of all ages, high school friends and former college teammates.

They broke into applause when Kirk arrived.

Before Kirk greeted his father, he stopped to pose for a few pictures. Cousins wrapped his arm around defensive lineman Doug Worthington's girlfriend's 6-year-old son, Isaiah. Isaiah wore a No. 10 jersey that read "Griffin III" across the back.

Nearby, Don Cousins smiled.

NFL WEEK 15

Top performers

Saints QB Drew Brees 307 yards, 4 TDs
Texans WR Andre Johnson: 151 yards, 1 TD
Vikings RB Adrian Peterson: 212 yards, 1 TD

RAVENS

Denver's 'D' does in reeling Baltimore

By DAVID GINSBURG
 ASSOCIATED PRESS

BALTIMORE | Denver didn't need Peyton Manning to beat the Baltimore Ravens.

In a surprisingly easy victory, the Broncos' defense did most of the work while ruining Jim Caldwell's debut as an NFL offensive coordinator.

Chris Harris returned an interception 98 yards for a momentum-turning touchdown, and Denver cruised past the skidding Ravens 34-17 Sunday for its ninth straight win.

Manning threw for 204 yards and a score in his ninth consecutive win against Baltimore, the first with the Broncos (11-3).

Down 10-0 late in the first half, the Ravens had a first-and-goal at the Denver 4 when Harris stepped in front of Anquan Boldin, picked off a pass by Joe Flacco and sprinted down the right sideline with Flacco in pursuit. The quarterback tripped up Harris, who tumbled into the end zone, leaving Flacco flat on his stomach and with a cut lip.

It was the longest regular-season interception return in Broncos history, and it turned a close game into a rout.

The Ravens (9-5) were playing their first game under Caldwell, who replaced the fired Cam Cameron. Baltimore's offense sputtered in the first half, gaining only 119 yards and committing two turnovers that led to 10 Denver points.

Baltimore has lost three straight — including two in a row at home for the first time since December 2007. The Ravens trailed 31-3 in the fourth quarter before Flacco threw touchdown passes of 31 and 61 yards to tight end Dennis Pitta.

Caldwell's debut was a resounding flop. Flacco went 20 for 40 for 254 yards, lost a fumble and threw an interception. Ray Rice ran for 38 yards on 12 carries, and the Ravens produced just 56

yards rushing.

For three weeks, Baltimore has needed one win to clinch a fifth straight trip to the playoffs. The Ravens still lead the AFC North, but their lead has shrunk to one game with two to play.

Denver, on the other hand, appears poised to reach the postseason with confidence and momentum. The AFC West champion haven't lost since Oct. 7, at New England.

This was supposed to be a test for Denver, which had never won in Baltimore and was eager to face a quality opponent on the road.

The Broncos didn't need any heroics from Manning because their defense was dominant.

Baltimore's first offensive series under Caldwell lasted three plays and did not end well. Flacco fumbled on a third-and-1 plunge and the Broncos recovered at the Denver 47, which led to a 27-yard field goal for a 3-0 lead.

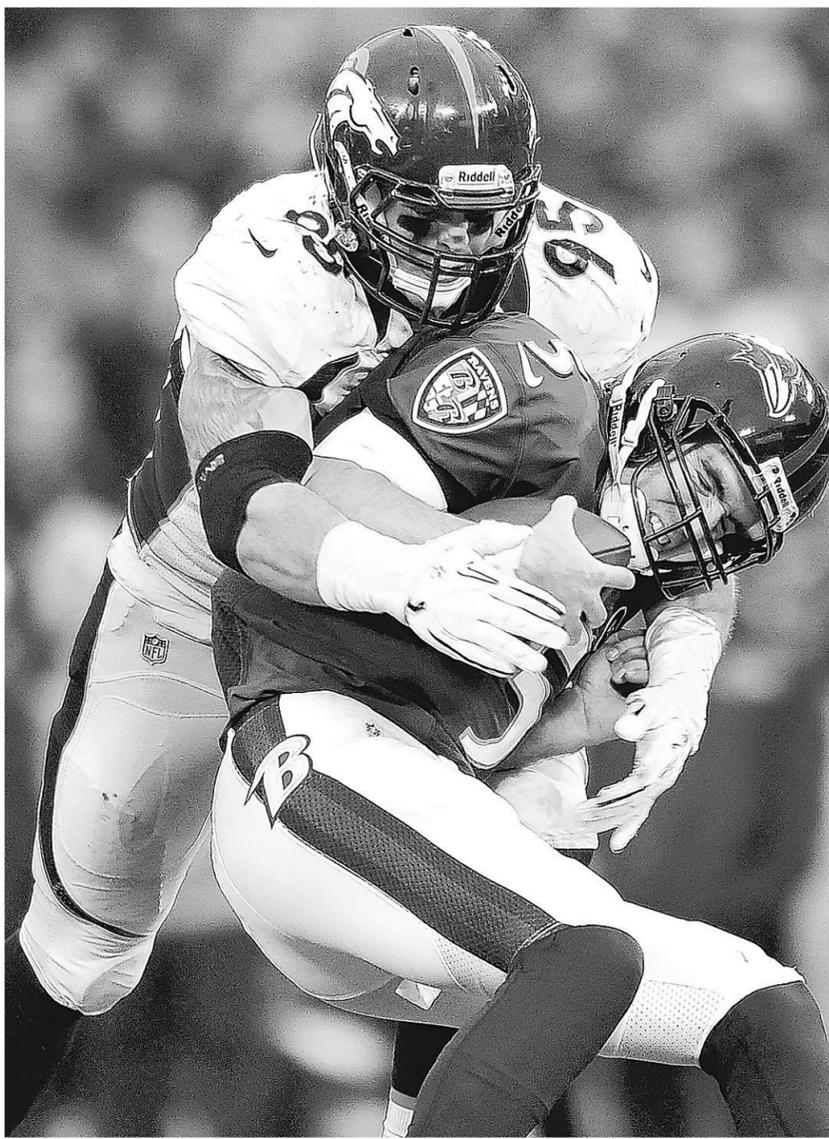
In the first quarter, Baltimore totaled 21 yards on 12 plays, punted three times and lost a fumble.

Denver went up 10-0 when Jacob Hester ran in from the 1 to cap an 11-play, 78-yard drive. Baltimore answered with three more unproductive plays before punting. On their fifth drive, the Ravens finally got their initial first down — on a 14-yard run by Bernard Pierce with eight minutes left in the half.

Pierce eventually left the game with a concussion and so did wide receiver Torrey Smith, who hit his head after attempting to make a leaping catch near the sideline in the third quarter.

Denver pulled away with two third-quarter touchdowns. Manning threw a 51-yard scoring pass to Eric Decker, and after the Ravens went three-and-out, Knowshon Moreno ended a 39-yard drive with a 6-yard run to make it 31-3.

Decker caught eight passes for 133 yards and Moreno finished with 118 yards rushing on 22 carries.



Baltimore quarterback Joe Flacco is sacked by Denver defensive end Derek Wolfe. It was a long afternoon for Flacco, who lost a fumble and threw an interception that was returned 98 yards for a score.

ROUNDUP

Falcons deliver message, loud and clear

ASSOCIATED PRESS

ATLANTA | The Atlanta Falcons wanted to make a statement.

And did they ever deliver one Sunday to the defending Super Bowl champions.

Coming off an ugly loss and criticized for failing to impress even when they won, the Falcons turned in their most well-rounded performance of the season with the playoffs approaching. Matt Ryan threw three touchdowns passes, and the defense handed New York its first regular-season shutout since 1996, routing the Giants 34-0.

Julio Jones caught a couple of scoring throws from Ryan, who broke his franchise records for completions and passing yards in a season. Ryan finished 23 of 28 for 270 yards.

The Falcons, who already have clinched the NFC South, moved a step closer to home-field advantage throughout the conference playoffs. One more win would ensure that any postseason contests before the Super Bowl are held at Georgia Dome.

Manning had his lowest-rated game since 2007 for New York. The Giants (8-6) also went 0 for 3 on fourth down and missed a short field goal attempt.



Atlanta wide receiver Julio Jones makes a touchdown catch over New York Giants cornerback Jayron Hosley, one of Jones' two scores in the Falcons' 34-0 victory.

Cowboys 27, Steelers 24 (OT)

ARLINGTON, TEXAS | Brandon Carr intercepted a pass from Ben Roethlisberger to set up Dan Bailey's 21-yard field goal in overtime, and the Dallas Cowboys beat the Pittsburgh Steelers 27-24 on Sunday.

The Cowboys won a Bailey kick on the final play for the second straight week. Carr intercepted Roethlisberger's pass along the sideline and returned it 36 yards to the 1. Bailey's kick came after Tony Romo took a 2-yard loss to put the kicker in better position.

Dallas (8-6) moved into a three-way tie with Washington and the New York Giants in the NFC East. The Redskins hold the tiebreaker.

Packers 21, Bears 13

CHICAGO | Aaron Rodgers threw three touchdown passes to James Jones as Green Bay turned back Chicago to clinch its second straight NFC North title. The Packers have won six straight in the NFL's oldest rivalry and 12 straight against division opponents.

Brandon Marshall had a 15-yard TD

catch for the Bears, who have lost five of six and are in danger of missing the playoffs after beginning the year 7-1. Green Bay linebacker Clay Matthews continued his torture of Chicago quarterback Jay Cutler with two sacks, and Alshon Jeffery hurt the Bears with three offensive pass interference calls late in the second half.

Saints 41, Buccaneers 0

NEW ORLEANS | Drew Brees made easy work of the league-worst pass defense with four touchdown passes in New Orleans' rout of Tampa Bay.

Brees passed for 307 yards, and the Saints blanked the Buccaneers for their first shutout in 17 years. Brees connected on his scoring passes with tight end David Thomas, running back Darren Sproles and receivers Lance Moore and Joe Morgan. Mark Ingram added an 11-yard touchdown run.

New Orleans also bottled up

standout rookie running back Doug Martin, holding him to 16 yards on nine carries.

Vikings 36, Rams 22

ST. LOUIS | Adrian Peterson ran for a season-best 212 yards, including an 82-yard touchdown that fueled Minnesota's 23-point second quarter in a victory that spoiled the St. Louis' home finale.

Peterson has 1,812 yards rushing, leaving him 294 shy of breaking the NFL's single-season record of 2,105 by Eric Dickerson of the Los Angeles Rams in 1984. Peterson, less than a year removed from a serious knee injury, has two games left — at Houston and home against Green Bay — to top Dickerson.

Texans 29, Colts 17

HOUSTON | Andre Johnson had 151 yards receiving and a touchdown, Bryan Braman scored a special teams

touchdown on a blocked punt and Shayne Graham kicked five field goals as Houston clinched its second straight AFC South title. Indianapolis had won three straight, but rookie quarterback Andrew Luck couldn't do much against Houston's inspired defense.

Seahawks 50, Bills 17

TORONTO | Rookie quarterback Russell Wilson ran for three touchdowns and threw for another in leading Seattle to a romp over Buffalo. Wilson scored on runs of 14, 25 and 4 yards and then hit Zach Miller for a 4-yard touchdown in helping the Seahawks score 31 points on their first five possessions.

Dolphins 24, Jaguars 3

MIAMI | Rookie Ryan Tannehill passed for two score, Reggie Bush ran for 104 yards and Dan Carpenter kicked three field goals to lead Miami past Jacksonville. Tannehill was 20 of 28 for 220 yards with no interceptions for a season-best QB rating of 123.2.

Panthers 31, Chargers 17

SAN DIEGO | Mike Tolbert scored twice against his former team, and DeAngelo Williams turned a tipped pass from Cam Newton into a 45-yard touchdown reception as Carolina whipped San Diego and eliminated the Chargers from playoff contention for the third straight season.

Cardinals 38, Lions 10

GLENDALE, ARIZ. | Greg Toler brought back an interception 102 yards for a fourth-quarter touchdown, the longest return in franchise history, to seal Arizona's 31-10 victory over Detroit, snapping the Cardinals' nine-game losing streak.

The Cardinals intercepted Matthew Stafford three times, returning two of them for touchdowns and setting up a TD with the other, while sending the Lions to their sixth straight loss.

Raiders 15, Chiefs 0

OAKLAND, CALIF. | Sebastian Janikowski kicked five field goals, Darren McFadden rushed for 110 yards and Oakland shut out Kansas City. The Raiders overwhelmed the Chiefs to snap a six-game losing streak.

NFL STANDINGS

AMERICAN CONFERENCE

EAST	W	L	T	PCT	PF	PA
y-New England	10	3	0	.769	472	274
N.Y. Jets	6	7	0	.462	245	306
Miami	6	8	0	.429	264	279
Buffalo	5	9	0	.357	306	402

SOUTH	W	L	T	PCT	PF	PA
y-Houston	12	2	0	.857	394	280
Indianapolis	9	5	0	.643	309	358
Tennessee	4	9	0	.308	271	386
Jacksonville	2	12	0	.143	219	383

NORTH	W	L	T	PCT	PF	PA
x-Baltimore	9	5	0	.643	348	307
Cincinnati	8	6	0	.571	355	293
Pittsburgh	7	7	0	.500	302	291
Cleveland	5	9	0	.357	280	310

WEST	W	L	T	PCT	PF	PA
y-Denver	11	3	0	.786	409	274
San Diego	5	9	0	.357	299	312
Oakland	4	10	0	.286	263	402
Kansas City	2	12	0	.143	195	367

NATIONAL CONFERENCE

EAST	W	L	T	PCT	PF	PA
Washington	8	6	0	.571	381	350
Dallas	8	6	0	.571	327	338
N.Y. Giants	8	6	0	.571	373	304
Philadelphia	4	10	0	.286	253	375

SOUTH	W	L	T	PCT	PF	PA
y-Atlanta	12	2	0	.857	371	259
New Orleans	6	8	0	.429	389	379
Tampa Bay	6	8	0	.429	354	349
Carolina	5	9	0	.357	296	319

NORTH	W	L	T	PCT	PF	PA
y-Green Bay	10	4	0	.714	344	292
Minnesota	8	6	0	.571	319	308
Chicago	8	6	0	.571	321	240
Detroit	4	10	0	.286	330	380

WEST	W	L	T	PCT	PF	PA
San Francisco	9	3	1	.731	316	184
Seattle	9	5	0	.643	350	219
St. Louis	6	7	1	.464	258	315
Arizona	5	9	0	.357	224	302

x-clinched playoff spot
 y-clinched division

THURSDAY'S GAME

Cincinnati 34, Philadelphia 13

SUNDAY'S GAMES

Washington 38, Cleveland 21
 Denver 34, Baltimore 17
 Green Bay 21, Chicago 13
 New Orleans 41, Tampa Bay 0
 Minnesota 36, St. Louis 22
 Houston 29, Indianapolis 17
 Atlanta 34, N.Y. Giants 0
 Miami 24, Jacksonville 3
 Carolina 31, San Diego 7
 Arizona 38, Detroit 10
 Seattle 50, Buffalo 17
 Oakland 15, Kansas City 0
 Dallas 27, Pittsburgh 24, OT
 San Francisco at New England, late

MONDAY'S GAME

N.Y. Jets at Tennessee, 8:30 p.m.

EXPANDED REDSKINS COVERAGE THROUGHOUT THE SEASON: WASHINGTONTIMES.COM/SPORTS/FOOTBALL

QUARTERS

1 It took 10 seconds to turn Kirk Cousins' first quarter as a starting quarterback from pretty weak to pretty good. On the first play of a drive, he rolled right and found Leonard Hankerson with a 54-yard scoring pass and the Redskins tied the score at 7. That was Washington's first first down of the game. Earlier, Cousins threw an interception to set up the Browns' touchdown. Cleveland only had to cover 6 yards, doing it in one play with a Trent Richardson touchdown.

2 Kai Forbath, the rookie kicker who has yet to miss, hit a 44-yard field goal with 5:46 left in the half to give the Redskins a 10-7 lead. Cleveland then went on its first real drive of the game. The Browns gained 63 yards in their first six drives, but on this one, they covered 75 yards and capped it with Richardson's second touchdown of the day. It gave Cleveland a 14-10 lead at the half.

PLAY OF THE GAME: Kirk Cousins' first NFL start started badly. He completed only one of his first six passes. Another was intercepted, setting up an easy Cleveland score. But late in the first quarter, Cousins opened a drive by finding Leonard Hankerson with a 54-yard touchdown pass. Perhaps it would have happened anyway, but Cousins was a different player from there. He finished 26 of 37 for 329 yards and two scores. So he was 25-31 after that 1-6 start.

3 The Redskins took control very early in the quarter. Rob Jackson intercepted Browns rookie quarterback Brandon Weeden on the second play to put the Redskins to work on Cleveland's 15. Alfred Morris finished the ensuing drive by scoring from 3 yards out. Later in the quarter, Cousins found Hankerson from 2 yards out and Washington went into the final quarter with a 24-14 lead.

4 Talk about continued control. Washington scored a touchdown on four of its first five possessions in the second half and would have had another had it not chosen to let the clock run out. Evan Royster ran one in early in the final quarter and Morris ran in another late in the quarter. After his slow start, Cousins finished with 329 passing yards and his first NFL victory as a starter.

NUMBERS

104.4: Kirk Cousins' passer rating in his first NFL start. Robert Griffin III only has had four games with a higher rating.

5: Consecutive victories for the Redskins, their longest streak since weeks 13 through 17 of the 2007 season.

2: The number of teams Redskins coach Mike Shanahan is undefeated against in his career — the Browns (4-0) and the Cardinals (5-0)

2,300: Washington's rushing total for the season after gaining 122 against Cleveland. This is the first time since 1985 they've gained that many.

NEXT

REDSKINS AT EAGLES
1 P.M. SUNDAY, FOX



What more could you ask for than a chance to control your destiny in the final two weeks of the regular season? How about facing a team that has lost 9 of 10 in the first of those weeks? Well, the Redskins have been good little boys lately, having won five straight to move into first place in the NFC East. A possible further reward this holiday season is a matchup with the sputtering Eagles two days before Christmas. Washington began its improbable rise in the standings with a 31-6 victory in Week 11 against Philadelphia. Like the Redskins, the Eagles have an all-rookie backfield, with Nick Foles and Bryce Brown. Unlike the Redskins, those first-year players haven't been the difference-makers that Robert Griffin III, Alfred Morris and, with Sunday's big game, even Kirk Cousins have been. If the Redskins do not suffer a letdown and extend their winning streak to six, they will face the rival Cowboys at FedEx Field in Week 17 with a chance to secure their first division title since 1999.



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Philadelphia rookie quarterback Nick Foles was under pressure all night in Thursday's 34-13 loss to Cincinnati. He was sacked four times during the Eagles' first meeting with the Redskins in Week 11.



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Redskins cornerback DeAngelo Hall has Browns receiver Josh Gordon under cover during Washington's 38-21 win in Cleveland. Several members of the defense contributed to the Redskins' fifth straight victory, one that put them in first place in the NFC East.

REDSKINS 38, BROWNS 21

DEFENSE MAKES CASE

Jackson here, there and everywhere in harassing Browns' Weeden

By NATHAN FENNO
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

CLEVELAND | Rob Jackson is a big man. So big, in fact, you wouldn't think a quarterback could miss the 6-foot-4, 266-pound outside linebacker camped in the middle of the field with all the subtlety of an elephant.

Somehow Brandon Weeden, the Cleveland Browns' 29-year-old rookie, did.

"I guess," Jackson said with a wide smile, "he couldn't find me."

One play into Sunday afternoon's second half at Cleveland Browns Stadium, Jackson snatched Weeden's errant pass from the unseasonably warm air. And the Washington Redskins' defense, abused by opponents and maligned by fans this season, had another momentum-sapping play en route to a 38-21 victory.

Yes, that Redskins defense. The same one ranked 31st in the NFL against the pass. The same one ravaged by season-ending injuries to three starters. The same one that surrendered 30 or more points four times. The same one with a battered secondary seemingly held together by duct tape and chewing gum.

Facing an erratic quarterback, youthful only in professional experience, and a team spiraling to its 10th losing season in the past 11 years proved the ideal solution.

The Redskins confused and harassed the mistake-prone Weeden all afternoon. Not the least of which was Jackson's third-quarter interception. Thrust into the starting lineup after Brian Orakpo's season-ending injury in September, Jackson has become a fixture in the defense's

"We knew there was going to be a lot on our shoulders. We fought for every yard. ... It never felt like we gave them a yard."

— Cornerback Josh Wilson

resurgence in recent weeks.

For all of Jackson's size, the fourth-year player is quick enough to cause havoc in the backfield (he sacked Weeden and forced a fumble) or look natural dropping back into coverage (his three interceptions this season are more than starting cornerback Josh Wilson). Jackson has sacks in each of his past three games, as he grows more comfortable with his expanded role and understanding what opposing offenses want to do.

"He really makes everyone around him, especially me, want to raise my game to play at his level," fellow outside linebacker Ryan Kerrigan said. "He's on fire right now."

Jackson gushed about Kerrigan, too: "He set the standard. I can't be average. I can't be mediocre. I have to step up my game to his intensity. He makes a big play, so I make a big play."

Kerrigan matched Jackson's efforts, spending extended time inside the Browns' backfield, chasing Weeden, swatting passes and generally causing trouble. But Jackson's interception blew any energy out of the three-quarters full stadium that the steady wind off Lake Erie hadn't already sent away.

Weeden, with a strong right arm that caused the Browns to use a first-round pick on him in

April's draft, couldn't find open receivers deep (with the exception of a botched coverage that resulted in a late 69-yard touchdown grab). So, he settled for short passes like the one Jackson grabbed as he stood in the middle of the Redskins' zone defense.

Up to that point, the Browns held a 14-10 lead. Three plays after the interception, Alfred Morris plunged into the end zone and the Browns never led again.

Play after play, the Redskins attacked. Weeden had nowhere to go, and gifted rookie running back Trent Richardson was limited to 28 yards on 11 carries. Cornerback DeAngelo Hall blitzed so often he joked he begged permission to drop back in coverage to catch his breath. Ageless linebacker London Fletcher intercepted Weeden on another badly thrown ball. Even lineman Barry Cofield contributed his first sack in six weeks — followed by his Taser celebration dance.

With starting quarterback Robert Griffin III watching from the sideline because of his injured right knee and Kirk Cousins making the first start of his young career, the defenders felt extra responsibility to keep the game close.

"We knew there was going to be a lot on our shoulders," Wilson said. "We fought for every yard, we fought for everything. It never felt like we gave them a yard."

Added Jackson: "I feel like we're just getting started."

In the locker room, television lights clicked on around Jackson after he tugged on a T-shirt. A few linemen reclined nearby and roared with hoots and laughter at each of his words. No one could miss him.

DALY

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the New York Giants). On the next snap, Alfred Morris went crashing up the middle for the Redskins' final score.

"I was just doing what our coach tells us to do: 'Keep playing through the whistle, block [downfield] for your guys,'" Garcon said.

You could even "feel" this "something" when the secondary snoozed off in the fourth quarter and gave up a 69-yard touchdown pass to the Browns' Travis Benjamin. Why? Because when the secondary did likewise in the fourth quarter at the Meadowlands in Week 7, before The Streak started, it cost the Redskins the game. This time it just reduced their lead from 31-14 to 31-21 — and left them a mere Forward Fumble from victory.

Don't spend too much time trying to comprehend all this. Some things are unknowable. Suffice it to say a Redskins team that was 3-6 and searching for answers is 8-6 and has the upper hand in the NFC East — thanks to the Atlanta Falcons' 34-0 flogging of the Giants (also 8-6, but on the wrong side of the tie-breakers). Two more wins, over the Eagles in Philadelphia and the Dallas Cowboys at FedEx Field, and Washington takes the division.

Stranger still, the Redskins are doing it in a way no NFL club has ever done it. "They don't expect rookie quarterbacks to win in this league," Garcon said, "but we're doing it." They did it for 13 games with first-round-pick Robert Griffin III, who sat out the Cleveland game — restlessly — with a sprained right knee; and they did it Sunday with fourth-round-pick Cousins, who didn't know for sure he'd be starting until the quarterbacks meeting the



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Redskins fans show their support at Cleveland Browns Stadium. Washington's 38-21 victory, the Redskins' fifth straight, made venturing into enemy territory all worthwhile.

night before.

Before friends and family, the Redskins' "other" first-year QB, pride of Holland, Mich., carved up the Cleveland defense for 329 passing yards, two touchdowns, a .703 completion percentage and a 104.4 rating. (RG3's rating for the season: a league-leading 104.2.) He threw an early interception that helped the Browns jump on top 7-0, but after that he and his mates got it going and there wasn't much the home team (5-9) could do to stop them.

"It shows you what the guy's all about," Shanahan said. "You've got to keep your composure [after a pick]. You've got to fight through. ... He's got a lot of confidence. You can see that in practice."

Clearly, Cousins' performance in the pre-season — and his ability to produce coming off the bench against Atlanta and Baltimore — convinced the coach that he could handle

a pressure situation like this. Let's face it, not every team has a Plan B at quarterback, a guy who can keep the wins coming while the No. 1 heals. Griffin is physically capable of playing Sunday, no doubt, but, according to Shanahan, it wasn't medically advisable for him to do so, not seven days removed from a sprained knee. As long as Cousins is around, there should never be any need to rush RG3 back into action, to take any risks with him whatsoever. You can't put a price on that, especially with a commodity as valuable as Robert.

"He's been a huge part of our success this year," Moss said. "But I was glad we got a chance to show what we can do without him, with our backs to the wall."

Obviously, the offense was different with the less-nimble Cousins at the controls. You didn't, generally speaking, see the option stuff, the pitch plays, the scrambling for drive-saving first downs — Griffin's specialties. But there's more than one way to play quarterback in this league. And besides, Kirk showed some pretty good mobility on occasion, one time running for 17 yards.

"I think as much as Robert wants to show people he can be a pocket passer — which he can — I want to show people that I can move around a little bit," Cousins said.

As starting debuts go, it didn't rank far below RG3's coming-out party in New Orleans earlier this season (320 passing yards, two touchdowns, 139.9 rating). Unbelievable. But instead of trying to grasp this phenomenon — "something you can feel" but not "explain," in the words of Barry Cofield, who went through it with the 2007 Giants — why not just sit back and enjoy the ride for as long as it lasts? The Redskins have left the Real World and are off in another dimension. Ain't winning grand?