

"Make no small plans." Daniel Burnham

"Low expectations sometimes help you out." Rex Grossman 8/11/06 trib/kejohnson

Take a sip. The first one's always free. It'll give you a sense of euphoria, make you want to come back for more. The day may come where it doesn't have quite the effect it first did, but we'll worry about that later. Just be sure to hook up with the man in Lake Forest come November. He doesn't take credit cards, he always digs a little deeper into your pocket during the fall, and he never wavers from his motto when rejigging the figures he prints on that playoff invoice.

Rotundus sursum.

And so it was with the first taste of postseason football to be played under head coach Lovie Smith. A disappointing ending, to be sure, but now his roster has a feel for what it'll be up against come January.

How ironic that Brian Urlacher would respond "we're not the Giants" when asked how the Bears would handle Carolina after Steve Smith and company throttled New Jersey's NFC entry in their first round playoff game. Urlacher sure got it right. After all, the Giants only gave up 23 points to the Panthers in their playoff loss; the Bears defense allowed 29 while getting beat in every phase of the game.

Part of that failure had to do with the loss of Mike Brown early in the first quarter. It's probably no coincidence that Brown has gone from mainstay of the defensive backfield to what seems like a permanent fixture on the injury report since Lovie and his staff decided the undersized Brown would make a better strong safety. Throw in the truncated career of the injured Jerry Azumah, the overly dry roasted Peanut Tillman and the inability of Chris Thompson to cover Steve Smith from the prone position and is it any wonder Jerry Angelo added four players to the secondary during the offseason?

At least the offense showed flashes once Wrecks Grossman returned. Unfortunately, those flashes were little more than flickers of light. Although the Grossman-led offense did manage to put 21 points on the board in the playoff game, it's easy to forget lame-legged Brad Maynard punted, if you can call it that, the first five times they had the ball while the offense was going three-and-out on four of those possessions. All those points came while the Bears were trailing and in desperation mode.

Not that it would have mattered had Wrecks brought them all the way back. Yes, a victory against the Seahawks the following week would have meant a berth in the Super Bowl, but even that would have been fraught with peril. Lovie Smith should have found space for mention of beating teams in the other conference somewhere in those goals he rattled off on the day he was introduced as head coach, as AFC opponents have clocked a frightening .750 winning percentage against his Bears. Until Lovie can figure out a way to do that consistently, calling Jostens to set up an appointment for ring fittings will only be for conference champion hardware.

So, are we staring at a repeat of 2002, or were the 2005 Bears a springboard to something greater? Will an injured Mike Brown again drag the defense down with him, or does Danieal Manning step up and evoke memories of Dave Duerson replacing Todd Bell? Can the offense improve on its 29th ranking of last season and take some pressure off the defense? Has the punter completely

recovered from his leg problems of the past year, or will Brad Maynard Tender Groin be found on the menu at Charlie Trotter's, served with Fingerling Potatoes and a Medley of Summer Truffle and Ramps Drizzled with Shallot-Infused Extra Virgin Olive Oil? To find out, read...

THE SKINNY

9/10 @green bay - Expecting to simply throw the switch once the regular season starts, the Bears' first-string offense is confounded when presented with an opener in a town that still relies on oil lamps and candles. Hobbling Bears DL happy to hear Mister Softee ice cream truck song replace Todd Rundgren's "Bang the Drum" for introductions of packer offensive line. W 1-0

9/17 LIONS - At least you can count on the Bears to finish ahead of Detroit. W 2-0

9/24 @Minnesota - First meaningful game on turf for Wrecks since he blew out his knee here two years ago, also in the third contest. I hate coincidences, but not the Bears chances today. First you control the division...W 3-0

10/1 SEAHAWKS - ...then you control the conference. Losing perennial all-pro left guard Steve Hutchinson is a huge hit to Seattle's running game, as Tommie Harris blows up the middle of the line while Lance Briggs and Brian Urlacher shut down the outside. W 4-0

10/8 BILLS - Bears and the Park District go to arbitration once more, this time to determine who will pay for the installation of drop-down oxygen masks and rocking chairs in the visiting owners suite, where Buffalo owner Ralph Wilson and general manager Marv Levy sip Metamucil smoothies and order prunes from the dessert cart. W 5-0

10/16 @Arizona - Hosting their first Monday night game this millennium, the Cardinals unveil their new stadium and improved team to the ESPN faithful. Too bad the Bears are looking past this game to the week off. L 5-1

10/22 BYE - A good day for local baseball fans to check up on the out of town scoreboard.

10/29 49ERS - San Francisco head coach Mike Nolan petitions the NFL to adopt the use of the "rouge" after the Bears' Nathan Vasher returned a missed field goal 108 yards for a TD in Chicago last year. Bay area residents also ask the NFL for mascara and eye shadow. W 6-1

11/5 DOLPHINS - Counting on a post-game trip to Stone Lotus with Ricky Williams ever since the schedule was announced, John Gilmore is disappointed to learn he's gone and that his connect today is more likely to be the forearm of Miami left end Kevin Carter. Good thing Daunte Culpepper still can't hold onto the ball. W 7-1

11/12 @New Jersey Giants - Giants enthusiasts pummel Alan Alda, who was hired by the Lifetime network to do a live, onsite pregame show focusing attention on the increase in spousal abuse incidents whenever the Bears play at Jimmy Hoffa's gravesite. W 8-1

11/19 @New Jersey Jets - Bergen County battered women's shelters begin to fill up early in anticipation of area fans' response to another visit from the Bears. BearsCare donates icepacks, Ace bandages, cots and Red Bull. During the game, a dyslexic John Gilmore heads through the endzone toward the "Weeb" tribute sign, attempting to score. W 9-1

11/26 @New England - In response to vicious rumors that pro sports teams are located outside the New Jersey/Boston corridor, ESPN dispatches a crew to film buses transporting the Bears from "Camp Miser," the Quality Inn "with a view of Hillside Cemetery" in Lyndhurst, NJ that housed them the last two weeks, as they pass the CT-9/I-95 interchange on their way to visit the Patriots. L 9-2

12/3 VIKINGS - New Vikings head coach Brad Childress is leery when he spots Fred Smoot talking to the driver as the team bus approaches Burnham Harbor, only breathing a sigh of relief when Soldier Field comes into view. Bears don North Division champ caps today? W 10-2

12/11 @St. Louis - With a chance to show a national audience what they're made of, the Bears defense completely shuts down Steven Jackson and Marc Bulger while the offense shreds what passes for defense under the Gateway Arch. W 11-2

12/17 BUCS - On an overcast day, early tailgaters in the South Lot are distracted by sirens and a strange, pulsating light approaching from beneath McCormick Place. As they draw closer, fans realize it's just the mirror balls, strobes and police escort for the passing Tampa team stripper buses. Bears need a win today for conference positioning. W 12-2

12/24 @Detroit - Lovie Smith and new Lions head coach Rod Marinelli exchange early Christmas gifts during Smith's first visit to his old roommate's new home. Smith gets a tie, while Marinelli gets a loss. W 13-2

12/31 packers - Should old acquaintance be forgot? The sooner, the better when it comes to washed-up quarterbacks in urine-stained pants playing their final game. Ideally, the scene we'll remember is of him riding on the cart, grimacing, as it disappears under the northeast corner of the stands. W 14-2

Yes, fourteen and two. It's not far-fetched.

Begin with the most ferocious defense the Bears have fielded in recent years returning intact, and these guys have issues. If Mike Brown was never going to fully heal last season and the Bears were destined to fail without him, perhaps the single best thing that could have happened was forcing the defense to watch their #1 ranking slip away up in Minnesota. By benching his starters and handing the Bucs the title of "NFL's Top Defense," all Lovie Smith did was place a massive chip on his guys' shoulders. Now more than ever, Brian Urlacher and company want to prove their stellar 2005 regular season showing wasn't a fluke. Throw in Lance Briggs in a contract year, Tommie Harris' announced goal of ten sacks and the addition in the secondary of rookie safety Danieal Manning and Carolina veterans Ricky Manning, Jr. and Dante Wesley, two guys who have played in the Super Bowl only to lose on a last second field goal, and you have the makings of an even hungrier squad.

Couple the defense with the easiest schedule in the NFL, for which many national publications appear to think the Bears should apologize. Nevermind that the 2005 Bears had a hand in shaping

that record by winning seven of the eight games they played against teams they face again this year, the lone loss coming against the Vikings on that final weekend. The Sporting News went so far as to pick them to go 8-8 in their preseason preview, which is baffling. If they haven't already, somebody should find that prediction and nail it to the locker room blackboard. The Bears have nine games against teams with new head coaches, including six in the division as well as contests with the Bills, Jets, and Rams. While most of them will be learning the cover-2 this season, the Bears will be demonstrating for them how it's done. Throw in a visit from the 49ers and it's hard to not come up with eight wins with just an average team in these games alone.

Add special teams that can tip the field in your favor and an offense that can control the clock and you have a real good reason to make your reservations for South Beach.

Jerry Angelo addressed the return game with the addition of Danieal Manning (kickoffs) and Devin Hester (punts) in the draft. Manning is now too valuable to risk on returns given Mike Brown's questionable health status, but the way Rashied Davis handled the job in the fake games, they don't need Manning back there. Hester looked fearless in handling ten punts flawlessly, averaging 22.8 yards on the six balls he did return while threatening to go the distance each time.

Robbie Gould is kicking like he spent time with Todd Sauerbrun's Carolina doctor during the offseason. Kickoffs that last year fell to the fifteen are now routinely carrying beyond the five and sometimes into the endzone, and if the preseason is any indication, his distance on field goals has improved as well. Gould was 6 for 7 in his preseason attempts, including a pair of 49-yarders. The real test will come when the leaves are done falling and the ball gets as hard as Paul Edinger's head, who incidentally is available and may come in handy if Gould's accuracy beyond the 40 suddenly vanishes during that three week November swing through the Meadowlands and Foxboro. Mmm-hmm.

The punting game is anybody's guess. Brad Maynard had been Mr. Consistency during his time with the Bears, but a nagging groin injury sustained last season has turned him into a question mark. Maynard's net average dropped by over three yards in 2005, when only 25% of his punts wound up inside the 20, down from a 33% average over the previous four years. And the playoff game was a disaster, including punts of 19, 13, and 29 yards in the first half when the Bears needed him most. That he aggravated the injury during the offseason only heightens the focus on what will be the special teams' weakest link. Considering how quickly kicker Doug Brien got the boot last year, Lovie will probably be keeping recently released Joel Stelly and his booming leg on speed dial.

Which leaves us with the offense. Now that Jerry Angelo has finally gotten around to signing a real backup quarterback, Ron Turner will get to install his entire scheme. The addition of Brian Griese puts Turner in the enviable position of not having to dumb-down the game plan if (when?) Grossman gets hurt or isn't up to the task. Stability on the offensive line, where everybody returns and John Tait becomes the first left tackle to start consecutive seasons since Blake Brockermeier, means solid pass protection and holes for the running game. In Thomas Jones, Cedric Benson and Adrian Peterson, the Bears have three starting-caliber running backs. And Turner will build from there.

Turner has always liked to spread the ball around, but was hamstrung by Kyle Orton's inexperience in 2005. In his first two years as offensive coordinator eleven different guys had double-digit receptions - last year that number was eight. In the '90s he used his fullback as more

than a blocker, giving rise to The Ultraback in his second season as coordinator. That year, Raymont Harris teamed with starting halfback Lewis Tillman in the backfield and finished with 123 carries for 464 yards as well as 39 catches for a 6.1-yard average. Imagine Jones and Benson running a similar set, with Benson catching balls in space out in the flat and a cornerback trying to bring him down. Wouldn't it be fun to see the packers' Al Harris with Benson's cleat marks on his chest this Sunday? Toss in a few more passes to the tight end than the measly 27 they caught last year, and whoever carries the ball won't have to face as many of those eight man fronts. And when they do, Turner can finally rely on his quarterback for more than an overthrown out pattern.

All this adds up to a flip-flop in the time of possession stats and a better rested defense come the fourth quarter. The 2005 Bears offense held the ball just 28:41 per game, almost identical to the 28:36 recorded in Turner's first year back in 1993 - hardly what you would expect from a ball control offense. The excuse in '93 was a team saddled with a spent Neal Anderson in his final season, forcing Jim Harbaugh into a short passing game he wasn't suited for in order to control the clock. Kyle Orton grew similarly overmatched last year as teams keyed on the run and dared him to throw. Contrast that with 1994, when Harris, Tillman, and Robert Green ran for 1485 yards while Erik Kramer and Steve Walsh both completed over 60% of their passes. The result was a 31:37 time of possession and the only Bears playoff victory since Ditka was fired. And in 2006...?

Lost in all of this is that Rex Grossman is still a work in progress. With only seven career starts, the truth is Grossman still has to develop. He undoubtedly has more upside at this point than Griese, but the real question is: when he does top out will he be as good as Griese is right now? I don't have the answer. As those at Halas Hall would be quick to point out, I'm only a fan. But Jerry Angelo, whose record for finding skill position players is spotty at best, seems to think so. Who knows whether Lovie Smith believes it as well, or whether he's parroting the company line. This much we do know: Smith is faced with losing Lance Briggs after the season and his own contract situation still up in the air. Given that, you can be sure the little voice is telling him that it has to happen this year. It's the old story about the playoff window, and how you have to be ready to jump through it when your time comes. It looks like 2006 is the year the football gods have opened it in front of the Bears, one year before their once-every-twenty-two-year schedule, and I don't think Smith will hesitate to make a change if he sees Grossman struggling early with so much on the line.

So forget that the Bears tight end development over the years has been like sweeping leaves in the wind. Nevermind that Jerry Angelo would have spent more wisely signing Bryan Johnson to a contract modeling orthotics for Bill Walton than as a fullback for the Bears. Pay no attention to character or the crime blotter, and the fact that the Bears success in recent years has grown proportionately with the number of annual mug shots taken of their players.

The thing to remember is that the real season starts in January, the month that Ginny will finally get another chance to present her daddy's namesake trophy to her son, The Constant Gardener, in front of the Soldier Field faithful. Here's hoping The Miser doesn't utter any dog-like sounds.

Super Bowl week starts January 28th. Make no small plans.

The Last Bear Fan
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