While he considers Hillis "our running back," Shurmur understands the importance of getting both backs into a rhythm.

BEREA, Ohio - Browns coach Pat Shurmur defended his use of Peyton Hillis, saying the bruising back did not get less playing time on Sunday against Tennessee because of his unresolved contract issue or punishment for missing Cleveland's game last week with strep throat.

Shurmur was emphatic that Hillis' role this season is not being influenced by ongoing negotiations with the Browns on a contract extension.

"Absolutely not," Shurmur said. "That's a non-issue."

Too bad it's not the only one.

But Hillis' sickness last week -- he sat out the Sept. 25 game against Miami -- is lingering around the Browns like a bad cold.

On Sunday, ESPN's Adam Shefter reported there were whispers in Cleveland's locker room that Hillis' contract issues were a contributing factor in him missing the Dolphins' game.

Shurmur addressed the report following Sunday's 31-13 loss to the Titans and spent a large portion of his news conference on Monday talking about Hillis' status.

As far as Shurmur's concerned, the matter is over.

"The young man was sick and he didn't play," Shurmur said. "OK, that's the end of it. He played yesterday and I think that's what the important thing is. Two weeks ago he didn't play. We played the Miami Dolphins and won. Yesterday, he was a significant contributor and we didn't win."

If some of the Browns doubt Hillis was sick, they're not saying so publicly. Shurmur said he would put more validity in the report if the source was identified.

"When information gets out you obviously like to see names attached to it," he said. "I am aware enough to know that there are all kinds of ways information spreads now. I've expressed to the team that I would prefer that we keep business in-house and I think sometimes that's hard to do.

"I can't really control how the team feels about certain situations other than we're constantly talking about being very professional, about doing your job and doing those types of things."

Shurmur said he did not hear any players "grumbling" about Hillis missing the game.

Shurmur was pressed on whether he spoke directly with Hillis before last week's game, and who made the final decision for the 25-year-old not to play.

"He and I had a conversation," Shurmur said. "My understanding was that he was ill and he didn't play. That's my understanding and so we moved forward and that's when Hardesty played a lot. Yesterday, (Hillis) was healthy and he played and he started and did a good job."

Shurmur was asked if he thought Hillis appeared ill.

"Yes, he looked sick," Shurmur said, keeping his cool amid the barrage of questions. "I'm not trying to talk around it. He was ill and he looked ill."

Hillis has spent the past few days defending his decision not to play. He said he lost "10 to 12" pounds while he was sick and chose not to play because he had no energy and wouldn't have helped the team.

On Monday, Browns right tackle Tony Pashos and rookie wide receiver Greg Little were in their teammates' corner.

"Peyton's our guy," Pashos said. "He's a stud. The whole city of Cleveland loves him. That's my boy and I want to have as many yards as possible because it makes everybody's job easier."

Said Little, "I don't take those sources to be very credible. I just think that's coming from very thin air. I think Peyton is a big enough competitor that he wants to come out and play on every Sunday and wants to do well. I don't second guess his talent at all and I think Peyton is one of the best backs in this league."

On Sunday, Hillis had 10 carries and was targeted on six passes by quarterback Colt McCoy in the Browns' 31-13 loss. Hillis essentially split time with second-year back Montario Hardesty, who had seven rushing attempts and was thrown to nine times.

The Browns are trying to figure out how best use the pair, who have only played three games together. Until they do, there will be games when Hillis gets more touches, and games where Hardesty has the bulk of the workload. It all depends on the game plan, Shurmur reasoned.

While he considers Hillis "our running back," Shurmur understands the importance of getting both backs into a rhythm.

"Peyton needs to play most of the time and I think he played 50 or so snaps, I think 55. Hardesty played in the 30s and there were times when they were in their together," he said. "Peyton will get and should get more snaps and more carries. That's just natural."

Shurmur was also adamant that Hillis, one of the Browns' most popular players following his breakout 1,200-yard season in 2010, has a vital role in Cleveland's West Coast offense.

Do Browns fans need to accept that Hillis will not have to "carry the load" as he once did?

"That part is hard for me because I wasn't here a year ago," Shurmur said. "I know he is a terrific player. He's a big part of what we do. The running back in any offense, especially ours, is a very important piece and he needs to touch the football."