If the Browns team that opened the season against the Pittsburgh Steelers wasn't the best barometer by which to judge them, then neither was the game last week against Cincinnati. Instead, says Gary Benz, the true measure of this team seems to be the jumbled ball of confusion and contradictions that lost against Oakland Sunday afternoon.

If the Browns team that opened the season against the Pittsburgh Steelers wasn't the best barometer by which to judge them, then neither was the game last week against Cincinnati. Instead, the true measure of this team seems to be the jumbled ball of confusion and contradictions that lost against Oakland Sunday afternoon.

With a chance to "string" together consecutive victories for the first time in four years, the Browns instead gave their fans just enough hope and just enough pain to remind them of the difference between fantasy and reality.

The last drive was the most instructive. With just over a minute left, no time outs and 91 yards between them and the goal line, the Browns and quarterback Derek Anderson stumbled, stuttered and yet somehow found a way to move the ball within relatively easy field goal range with just three seconds remaining. But, of course, the prospect of the first two-game winning streak in four years was too much weight to bear. The line collapsed up the middle and Phil Dawson's kick barely got three feet off the ground before it was blocked, giving the Raiders their

first win of the season. You're welcome. Glad to oblige.

And if the last drive wasn't the most instructive, then surely it was the play of Anderson generally. He wasn't Charlie Frye vs. Pittsburgh awful, but he wasn't Anderson vs. Cincinnati good, either. Instead he showed he's every bit the project that almost found himself on the outside looking in when the final cuts were announced at the end of the pre-season.

Anderson threw two interceptions on Sunday that were every bit as bad as Cleveland fans have come to expect from their quarterbacks in the last several years. On the other hand, he threw one touchdown, ran for another (in a drive in which he was 6-7) to bring the Browns within two points late in the fourth quarter, and ultimately put the team in position to win the game at the end. But in the end, what really matters, at least for Anderson, is that he survived for another week against the only measure being applied to him these days: playing just well enough so that GM Phil Savage isn't forced to pop the cork too early on Brady Quinn.

If the loss to Oakland wasn't necessarily unexpected, it was nevertheless disappointing for the same reason that virtually every loss is disappointing. Once again, the team, particularly early, simply seem unprepared. And if lack of preparation wasn't the issue, then it was lack of focus. In either case, why is it that much more often than not, that's the aftertaste that lingers with this team?

Head coach Romeo Crennel may scratch his head over this and even may own up to the fact that it's his responsibility, but it just doesn't seem like this preparation thing ranks very high on his priority list.

Exhibit A was the Browns' first possession. On the very first play from scrimmage, tight end Kellen Winslow committed pass interference that immediately put the team in a hole. After temporarily digging themselves out of that jam, Anderson then was sacked and fumbled backward, ultimately losing 24 yards. A delay of game penalty, a false start penalty and the Browns were just as quickly facing third and 40 (yes, 40!) from their own 20 yard-line, exactly where the drive started. One drive, three penalties, one fumble. Only an optimist would call it bad luck.

Exhibit B was the drive in the second quarter that led to Sebastian Janikowski's third field goal in the first half. With 4:45 left in the first half, the Browns started their drive at their own 27 and immediately found themselves first and 10 at their 42 following a Raiders pass interference penalty. On first down, Anderson missed badly to tight end Steve Heiden. On second down, Anderson's short pass to Tim Carter was complete but was called back because of an illegal formation. That pushed the Browns back to second and 15 and ultimately third and fifteen because of another poorly thrown pass by Anderson to Heiden. Finally, put in a hole by players who can't seem to line up correctly, Anderson completed the trifecta of lousy passes by throwing to Kirk Morrison of the Raiders as if he was the intended receiver. Morrison took it back to the Cleveland seven, setting up the field goal.

The fact that the Browns found themselves within striking distance at that point is a tribute mostly to the fact that the Raiders suffer from the same sort of issues that plague the Browns: penalties, fumbles and a general inability to capitalize on the poor play of the other team by scoring touchdowns when they need them most. And the fact that the Browns were able to actually put themselves back into it was due mostly to kick returner Josh Cribbs. His 99-yard kick return following the Janikowski field goal provided just enough of a spark and a wake-up call to remind the Browns that they were playing the Raiders and not the Patriots. A Lamont Jordan fumble a few minutes later allowed the Browns to get a late second-quarter field goal by Dawson and suddenly what should have been a Raiders blow-out was only a 16-10 game.

Despite the contradictions and conundrum that the Browns offense presents, the one constant this season has been the defense. It's been awful in every way you'd care to define the word. And at every critical juncture Sunday, save perhaps for the last drive when the Raiders didn't seem all that interested in getting a first down anyway, it allowed a mostly inept Oakland offense to make the play it needed to in order to, ultimately, eek out its first victory of the season, even if they had to survive a makeable Browns field goal to get there.

This is a defense, folks, that has huge problems. The backs couldn't even hang with the mostly mediocre Oakland receivers. The convenient, though correct, excuse is that it is banged up. But it's been banged up since the start of training camp, which means that Savage hasn't done enough to find sufficient reinforcements. Again, as in last week and the week before and probably next week too, Eric Wright was outclassed, getting badly burned on Oakland's first touchdown. And it could have been worse. Though the Oakland quarterbacks, combined, were only 14-26 for 226 yards, they were done in several times by dropped balls, with Mike Williams being the main culprit.

Certainly we'll hear all week how there was still much to build on in the loss and some of that may be true. Cribbs, for example, continues his march toward the Pro Bowl and Braylon Edwards again played particularly well. But ultimately the few positives were once again undercut by too many negatives—dropped passes, missed receivers, fumbles, penalties and blown coverages. The team you saw is, unfortunately, exactly what you thought.

With this loss, it won't be so much back to the drawing board for the Browns as it will be back to the wishing well, as in wishing that they could find a way to continue enough momentum from week to week to actually convince its fans that progress is being made. It was nice to hear that Savage refused to call last week's victory against the Bengals a signature win, mostly because of the defense. But this wasn't necessarily a signature loss, just typical. More's the pity.

So while Oakland fans are celebrating the Raiders return to the win column, for however brief that may be, Cleveland fans can at least say that in the other Cleveland/Oakland game that also took place Sunday, their team was on the right side of that one. And when you think about it, that was the much more meaningful game anyway.