Gary Benz checks in with his regular Sunday afternoon post-Browns game analysis, and says that while today's loss to the Patriots showed that the Browns still have some work to do, that the gap between the Browns and the upper levels of the league is not as wide as it once was. And that the Browns division wins in September has helped the teams overall confidence, allowing them to hang in this game once it started to slip away from them.

Whatever side of the puzzle that this Rubik's Cube of a Browns team thinks it solved in the last few weeks, the loss to the New England Patriots on Sunday 34-17 served as a sober reminder that there are still five other sides to that cube that need to be solved as well.

It's no sin, of course, to lose to the Patriots. Four other teams have done likewise this season and just about everyone else has as well over the last several. And despite the overwhelming mismatch this game appeared to be at the outset, the Browns under quarterback Derek Anderson were able to hang in early despite great odds and do enough late to at least keep the game from ever getting completely out of control.

The game started out as expected, which wasn't good news. Quarterback Tom Brady and the Patriots marched down the field on their first series in precision-like fashion, pushing their way through Browns defenders as if they were mere

inconveniences. But as much as the Browns front seven was outplayed on that drive they were able to keep the Patriots out of the end zone, forcing them to settle for a field goal.

Demonstrating that even if they were undermanned they wouldn't be intimidated, the Browns and quarterback Derek Anderson looked in control at the outset, immediately pushing back with almost equal ease. That is, until Anderson decided to channel Charlie Frye.

On third down from the New England one-yard line, Anderson scrambled right and threw an ill-advised pass back over the middle late which is as close to a cardinal sin as exists in football. The inevitable interception followed and suddenly, what could have been a lead, however brief, or at least a tie, ended up being the kind of lost opportunity that a team like Cleveland just can't afford against a superior opponent.

Despite that inauspicious start, two other first half interceptions, both of which led to Patriots touchdowns, and significant pressure in the second half, Anderson showed great pluck. When it would have been just as easy to simply crawl into a shell until the game ended, Anderson put together two strong drives, both of which led to touchdowns in the fourth quarter, to keep the game relatively close. Overall, Anderson finished 22-43 for 287 yards, two touchdowns and three interceptions.

The mysterious loss of running back Jamal Lewis after the Browns' first play from scrimmage didn't help the cause and neither did the turnovers. But the story of this loss was mostly the suspect play, again, of the Browns front seven. Unable to pressure Brady at all, the defensive backs were fully exposed and Brady to the surprise of no one took advantage. For example, Brady's first touchdown pass to Donte Stallworth, following Anderson's second interception on consecutive throws, wasn't so much a case of the Patriots going for the jugular as it was the Browns' defensive backs' inability to first keep up and then step up by making a tackle.

Brady's second touchdown, which came late in the second quarter, was just as instructive. Following the Anderson interception to linebacker Junior Seau, Brady was given a short field with which to work, which had to look as enticing to him as does a buffet line to Ted Washington. On first and goal at the seven, tight end Benjamin Watson stayed in to block, though it was hardly needed, then casually drifted out to the left flat where Brady found him wide open. Watson could have moonwalked backward into the end zone while the Browns defensive backs were stuck looking at each other and wondering what just happened. All told, the Patriots rolled up over 400 yards of offense on this defense, 265 of which were off the arm of a mostly flawless Brady. It could have been worse.

What ultimately kept the game closer than it might have or should have otherwise been was a lethargic Patriots third quarter when they had three indifferent possessions, all of which resulted in punts. It would be nice to suggest that it was lethargy induced by a reinvigorated defense, but it really appeared to owe mostly to the Patriots' Monday night game last week against the Bengals.

While this did allow the Browns to remain theoretically in the game, down only by 17 as the third quarter was ending, it felt more akin to how Purdue was theoretically in the game down 17-0 at halftime against Ohio State on Saturday night. You knew, no matter how close the score appeared or would get neither the Boilermakers nor the Browns were likely to string together enough drives to completely close the gap.

Indeed, that's exactly how it played out. Even when the Browns twice got to within 10 points in the fourth quarter, was there anyone who didn't think that New England would reassert their dominance and put the game back out of reach?

Which is, of course, exactly what they did, first by putting together a textbook 10-play 71-yard drive that culminated in Brady's second touchdown to Watson and then taking enough air out of the ball by holding onto it for five of the last six minutes to squelch any chance that the Browns would have enough time to score twice more. After the Browns took over on downs, Anderson's pass to Winslow

with 49 seconds was complete and then fumbled and picked up by Randall Gay who took it in for what was the final margin, giving the Patriots their fifth straight game scoring at least 34 points.

Though the game was actually closer than the final score might otherwise indicate, it really wasn't all that close. It just wasn't embarrassing. But when the Patriots needed to do something, they were able to, which is what you'd expect when two teams on opposite ends of the talent spectrum meet.

The question that a loss like this then engenders is where exactly does this team stand now? When a team swings as wildly as these Browns have in the course of their first four games, finding meaning in a loss in their fifth game of the season remains elusive.

Where the Steelers game seemed to demonstrate that the team had not progressed since the end of last season, an observation essentially confirmed when Frye was first benched and then traded, the improbable victory against the Bengals demonstrated that there may be some skill on the offensive side of the ball but the defense was still sorely lacking. The Raiders game showed that the Browns were too immature to sustain success from one game to the next, even against a bottom-tier team. The Ravens game, finally, showed that playing a complete game was not only within their grasp but possible.

That's why this Sunday's Browns game against the Patriots proved to be such an intriguing game for one occurring so early in the season. The Patriots, at least through four games, looked nearly unbeatable in every phase of the game with the only thing standing between them and a perfect season being the inevitable clash with the Indianapolis Colts.

And while not much about the game Sunday made the Patriots more beatable,

what it did show to Browns fans is that the gap between the Browns and the upper levels of the league is still quite wide though not as wide as it once was. Even then, for the Browns to bridge that gap, there's still much to repair on their side of that bridge before it is steady enough for real travel.

The fact that the Browns did come into this game at 2-2 and not 0-4 seemed to help their overall confidence. It's likely too that they way they were able to hang in when things could have gotten ugly in this game is likely to help, too. For whatever talent they lack, and they do lack considerable talent, the Browns can look back and say with a straight face that they didn't play as if they were in awe of their competition. And that ultimately may be the most important step they've taken in a very long time.