There's a reason a football game is two halves. After playing an almost perfect first half and essentially dominating the bully who's been stealing their lunch money for years, the Cleveland Browns found out precisely what it means to be a playoff caliber team. And they also found that they're not quite there yet after losing to Pittsburgh 31-28 on Sunday when Phil Dawson's 52-yard field goal attempt fell just short. Gary opines on the tough loss.

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The story of the game though for the Browns was that of a nearly perfect first half and a mostly imperfect second half that put them on the wrong end of a game that was there for the winning. Call it part growth process, call it part voodoo. Just don't forget that mostly it was the will of Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger that sent the Browns back to Cleveland, scratching their heads and wondering what to do next.

The loss to the Pittsburgh Steelers on Sunday, while hardly crippling to their playoff aspirations, may nevertheless linger in other ways, particularly given how the game started. It has in the past. But when the first half gun sounded and the

Browns found themselves up 21-9, things couldn't have looked better. In fact, you'd be hard-pressed to find a more perfect first half played by any Browns team in recent memory.

How perfect was that first half? Take your pick:

- After holding the Steelers to a three and out on their initial drive, the Browns put together a 17 play drive that seemed to last longer than the television show *Viva Laughlin.*
But unlike the fate of that short-lived show, the Browns didn't get cancelled, instead finishing off their third opening drive touchdown of the season. They had one such drive in each of the last two seasons.

- Head coach Romeo Crennel successfully challenged a call for the first time in what seems like the modern era. It didn't just lead to better field position. It lead to a Braylon Edwards touchdown, giving him 10 on the season and putting himself within three of Gary Collins' single season record.

- The Browns S&M defense, and that would be for smoke and mirrors, found a way to keep a prolific Steelers offense out of the end zone, forcing the Steelers to trade touchdowns for field goals, which helped the Browns build their 12-point halftime lead.

- That same S&M defense had the only sack of the first half, a crucial third down sack of Ben Roethlisberger by linebacker Antwan Peek late in the first half while the Steelers were unable to bring down Browns quarterback Derek Anderson, though it wasn't for lack of effort.

- That same S&M defense caused the only turnover of the first half, a nifty pick of a Roethlisberger pass intended for Santonio Holmes by Brodney Pool deep in the Pittsburgh end of the field, leading to the Edwards touchdown.

- The Steelers, repeatedly unable to punch, could only watch while Anderson and offensive coordinator Rob Chudzinski time and again were making the Steelers defense look like, well, the Browns defense.

- And finally, Cleveland fans got the double bonus of finally getting to see CBS broadcast a game in high definition and not having to endure the likes of Ian

Eagle and Steve Beurlein miscalling another game.

And even as the Browns came back onto the field for the second half, things seemed to be setting up well, what with a steady rain falling and a field and ball looking decidedly more difficult to control.

But that only proved to be true for the Browns in general and Jamal Lewis in particular. After trading two non-descript possessions each, the Steelers got the break they were looking for when Kent State's James Harrison stripped Lewis of the ball at the Browns' 34-yard line. Four plays later, Roethlisberger found Hines Ward dancing by himself in the left flat for a 12-yard touchdown pass, allowing the Steelers to close within five at 21-16.

Meanwhile, the Browns could muster nothing in their next drive, as Anderson missed a wide-open Kellen Winslow II on third down and three, forcing the Browns to punt again. If ever there is a point where games can be won or lost, this may have been it. The Steelers took over from their own 15 with the kind of momentum and swagger that made prior Browns teams crumble.

But this is the S&M defense capable of, well, freaky things. A crucial second down sack of Roethlisberger, the Browns third of the game, put the Steelers in third and long, which they ultimately couldn't convert. Suddenly, things were looking brighter. Unfortunately, when the Browns got the ball back they were facing the reality of having already had four second half possessions, three of which were three and out and the fourth the Lewis fumble, and a quarterback almost completely out of rhythm.

It would be nice to say that at that moment the Browns recovered their lost mojo, but not quite. In fact, if anything, the Browns looked as sloppy by this point as they had all season, finding themselves in a third and 22 (later a third and 17 after a silly Steelers offside penalty) through a combination of penalties and poor execution. Fortunately, as the Browns were fiddling around, the third quarter mercifully ended. It was thus left for the S&M defense and a stumbling offense to find a way to hang on for one more quarter.

But the Steelers are not just the Browns' white whale; they're also a pretty fair football team. Hitting with a bit more chippiness than they showed in the first half and making the kind of plays that good teams make late, the Steelers took the Browns to Sunday school on the next drive. Needing to make a play, any play, on third and 10 from the Cleveland 30, all Roethlisberger did was take off for the longest run of his career, a 30-yard gallop for a touchdown. For good measure, the Steelers completed a perfunctory two-point conversion against an obviously dejected defense, putting the Steelers ahead 24-21 with just under 12 minutes to play.

It would be nice to say that at that moment the Browns recovered their lost mojo, and this time it was as true as it was temporary. In one of the most stunning plays of the season, kick returner Josh Cribbs first fumbled the ensuing kick off and was then forced to field a slipper bally at the goal line with the Steelers closing in. But Cribbs, as calm as Browns fans were nervous, picked up the ball and started down the sideline, tiptoeing gingerly while avoiding all variety of Steelers defenders in the process. When he approached the 30-yard line, Cribbs suddenly found an impressive convoy of blockers in front and to his left and patiently followed it as it escorted him into the Steelers end zone.

Steelers head coach Mike Tomlin, looking every bit as befuddled as, well, you know who, tossed the challenge flag only to find himself on the wrong side of that review, a place where, well, you know who usually finds himself and later did.

And just like that, a three-point deficit was now a four-point lead and it was the Steelers instead who seem dumbfounded. Well, most of them anyway. Unfortunately, that didn't include Roethlisberger. All he did was calmly and professionally lead the Steelers right down the field, converting three crucial third down plays, including a 10-yard run to the Browns two that led to Roethlisberger's second touchdown pass of the game, this time to tight end Heath Miller. After a poor first half, Roethlisberger ended with a line that read 24-34 for 278 yards, two touchdown passes and one touchdown run.

The momentum now stripped from the Browns for the second time in just minutes, they had nothing left on their next drive, going three and out with just 2:54 left and a short 2:54 at that because the Browns only had one timeout after inexplicably blowing two surrounding Crennel's ill-fated execution of a challenge to the Miller touchdown.

It wasn't so much that Crennel challenged the touchdown that was the problem; it was the way he did it. Crennel called one timeout after the touchdown so that his coaches could review the play. Then he went ahead and challenged, lost it, and with it went another timeout. Given the situation, had Crennel merely challenged the touchdown at the outset he at least would have saved a time out.

It proved to be critical. Forced to use their final timeout on the next Steelers drive, a conservative three and out, the Browns got the ball back with a little over a minute left. A short Steelers punt to Cribbs, who was devestating the Steelers all day with his returns, got the ball to the Steelers 38-yard line. But a holding penalty cost the Browns that good field position and they were forced to use what remaining time they had left to try and essentially get back to the same spot to allow Dawson a chance to send the game into overtime.

And that's basically what they did. Joe Jurevicius grabbed a poorly thrown ball at the 35-yard line and one yard short of the first down; a ball that would have been better had it been dropped. Instead, Anderson was forced to spike the ball on third down to set up the Dawson kick with 11 seconds remaining. For a brief moment it looked good, just like the Browns did in the first half. In the end, it fell short, just like the Browns did in the second half.

Though Anderson had three touchdown passes for the fourth time this year, he was only 16-35 for 123 yards, after a strong start. Overall, the Browns only had 163 net yards on offense even though Anderson wasn't sacked once. In fact, Cribbs 205 yards in kick returns far outpaced the offensive output. Still, the Browns found a way to score 28 points, which is actually quite stunning. In previous years, with the kind of statistical disparity that was this game, the Browns

would have been lapped, twice.

There are never any good losses, of course, but if you can plot them on a scale put this one on the bad loss side, not quite Ohio State/Illinois, but in that range. A win in a hostile environment against one of your main rivals who just happens to be one of the best teams in the league would have meant something much more than respectability for this team. It would have meant legitimacy and there's a huge difference between the two.

Crennel has been named coach of the week by the NFL twice this year and a win in Pittsburgh might have gotten him his third. But whatever coaching ability he possesses that got him those two awards in the first place is nothing compared to what it will take for him to push his team past this loss and into the realm of true playoff contenders. Whether he can pull that off is wildly uncertain. But if he can accomplish that task, and he must, he will have earned the inevitable coach of the year award that will follow.