The only things missing were the snow and the mud. But in every other way, the Browns 27-17 victory over the Houston Texans felt like the kind of late November win that a team marching toward the playoffs needs if they are going to play meaningful games in December. And at this point, there is no question that the Browns are going to play meaningful games in December. Gary hits on yesterday's HUGE Browns win over the Texans.

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Flashy offenses with four and five wide receiver sets are nice but they're built for the warmer weather. If you're going to win late in the season, particularly in Cleveland, it's going to be with tight ends that can make the tough catches in bad conditions, running backs that can ground out the hard yards when the footing is poor and an opportunistic defense that pounces at just the right time to drain whatever life might remain in the opponent. And that's exactly the formula that the Browns followed on Sunday. In fact, it could not have been better executed.

It was a game, indeed a win, which belonged mostly to those tight ends, running backs and an opportunistic defense. Tight end Kellen Winslow II, running back Jamal Lewis, and a defense that forced three turnovers, two of which led directly

to 14 points, ultimately were the difference in a game that the Browns had to win to keep alive what is surely turning into a Christmas miracle of a season.

And what a difference it was. Time and again, the Texans had no answer for Winslow, the clear front runner among a number of deserving Browns for a berth in the Pro Bowl. Going into the game he was the leading tight end in terms of total yards, yards per catch, yards per game and most receptions of more than 20 yards. Coming out of the game he did nothing to hurt that status. He had 10 more receptions, giving him 62 on the season, 107 receiving yards, and caught his fifth touchdown pass of the season. Winslow may not be causing fans to forget Ozzie Newsome just yet, but he's well on his way.

When the Texans return to their practice complex on Monday to review film of the game, what they'll see mostly is Winslow everywhere the Browns needed him to be. But should they focus more closely, two plays late and one play early will no doubt stand out.

The set up to the first of those two late plays came early in the fourth quarter. After punter Dave Zastudil hit one of his few decent punts of the game, to the Houston 11, the defense was able to hold the Texans to a three-and-out. The Browns got the ball back on the Houston 34 after Josh Cribbs returned the Matt Turk punt to the Texans 34 yard line. If the Texans had any hope of remaining in the game, it was critical that they hold the Browns right there.

But on second and 10 with just under 11 minutes left in the game and the Browns clinging to a seven point lead, quarterback Derek Anderson found Winslow deep down the middle for 21 yards, putting the ball at the Texans 13-yard line. The Browns couldn't get the ball in the end zone, but a Phil Dawson 27-yard field goal pushed the lead to 20-10 with 8:35 left.

On the Browns next possession, which came quickly on the heels of Brandon McDonald's first career interception, Anderson again hit Winslow on second down,

this time for 20 yards, putting the ball at the Houston eight yard line. Two plays later, Lewis scored from the one yard line, putting the game completely out of reach.

The third key play by Winslow was the seven yard touchdown pass he caught just before the end of the first half. In a drive that started out with much promise, stuttered in the middle and recovered late, Winslow made sure it didn't end for naught, catching Anderson's ill-advised pass in triple coverage. If this were college and Winslow were in the running for the Heisman trophy, it would have been his signature play. But this isn't college and Winslow's not vying for the Heisman. It still was a signature play. It also gave the Browns momentum heading into the locker room and a blueprint for the second half. It also gave them a lead they never relinquished.

It is in these situations where offensive coordinator Rob Chudzinski seems particularly adept. Though he gets deserved credit for bringing innovation to an offense that was literally starving for a direction under previous coordinator, Maurice Carthon, one of the secrets to Chudzinski's approach is his abject refusal to give up on the run. He knows that it holds the key to long-term success, even though Anderson is playing well beyond anyone's expectations.

In the first half, the Browns offense was wildly and unusually out of balance. There were only 10 rushing attempts compared to 22 passes. But the Winslow touchdown allowed Chudzinski to restore that balance, which is not as easy as it sounds. Staying true to the running game takes an equal measure of patience and confidence by the offensive coordinator. More often than not, the tough yards early in the game that make it seem as if the run is not working often become the big gains later in the game.

Lewis had 29 carries, 21 of which came in the second half. He also had 137 rushing yards, 94 of which came in the second half. Even that though doesn't tell the whole story. In that second half, the Browns first possession, a three-and-out, featured two passes. But on that next possession, Chudzinski changed course

and decided to pound the ball a luxury that a vastly improved offensive line and a back like Lewis affords him. Lewis was up to the task. From that point on he had two carries of 10 yards each and another two of 15 yards each. Sprinkled among them were numerous carries of five and six yards, all of which served to keep the Texans defense on their heels.

What was perhaps most impressive and where Lewis' leadership mattered most was on the Browns last possession. After the Browns had seemingly pushed the game out of reach, 27-10, with just under six minutes left, the Texans came right back, going through the Browns defense like a hot knife through a stick of butter, closing to within 10 with just over three minutes left.

Following the onside kick that Browns defensive back Nick Sorenson fielded at the Houston 39 yard line, Lewis single-handedly closed out the game with six straight carries, the most important of which was the 15-yard gain to the Houston 23 just before the two minute warning. Another Lewis 5-yard gain forced the Texans to burn their final time out and from there the Browns were able to close out the game.

The offense, of course, has been the story of the season. The defense, of course, has likewise been the story of the season, but for vastly different reasons. Going into the game, the Texans were the near statistical equivalent of the Browns offensively, which means they're a pretty good group overall. Indeed, the conventional wisdom, exercised in the form of all the fantasy football players that added Schaub to their lineups this week, suggested that the Browns defense was likely in for a long day. But on this day, in late November, the much maligned group stood up when it mattered most instead of standing down.

And it's not as if the Texans were awful on offense, at least statistically. Schaub, in fact, was 22-36 for 256 yards and two touchdowns. But if you're struggling defensively, then you at least should be opportunistic, and that is what the Browns were on Sunday. They intercepted Schaub twice and recovered a fumble by tight end Owen Daniels just as it looked like the Texans were poised to score. In fact,

though the defense was giving up yards by the chunk, the turnovers they created each came at a critical point.

The first was an improbable interception by linebacker D'Qwell Jackson that he grabbed about two inches from the turf off a deflection by fellow linebacker Andra Davis just as Houston was entering Cleveland territory early in the second quarter. The second was the aforementioned fumble by Daniels that came at the Cleveland 30. The third, the interception by McDonald, was the most satisfying. With Houston desperate to get back into the game following the Dawson field goal early in the fourth quarter, Houston had the ball at its own 20. On the first play from scrimmage, Antwan Peek sacked Schaub, one of only two sacks the Browns had all game, for a 12 yard loss. On the next play, a desperate Schaub threw for Pro Bowl receiver Andre Johnson but McDonald was there for the interception.

A few words about McDonald, the Browns fifth round pick this past off-season, seems appropriate. Thus far, he's seen relatively limited duty. Though he was ultimately credited with only one tackle on Sunday along with that key interception, in his first extended play of the season he proved to be a bright spot in a defensive backfield that has spent most of the season chasing receivers unsuccessfully. Johnson, whom McDonald was forced to cover most of the day, caught only three balls for 37 yards. If nothing else, he's earned another long look next week, which he'll likely get if Eric Wright is unable to go.

At this juncture, the Browns stand at 7-4 and a trip to Arizona next week to face a Cardinals team that is finally starting to show some life. Though no team remaining on the schedule currently had a winning record entering play on Sunday, the one downside is that three of the five remaining games are on the road where the Browns are just 2-3. The upside in all of it, though, is that this is a Browns team that has not only proven to their fans that they can win when they have to, they've proven it to themselves.

When the story on this season is ultimately written, it will contain many story lines. There will be the one featuring the coming of age of players like Winslow, receiver

Braylon Edwards and Anderson, who had another solid day on Sunday, completing 24 of his 35 passes for 253 yards and two more touchdowns, giving him 22 on the season, well within reach of the Browns single season record of 30 held by Brian Sipe. He also had one interception. There will be another story line recounting the redemption of Lewis, a player who looked mostly through not only last season but several times this season. But the main story line will be one of rebirth, of a franchise and a fan base and the win against the Texans, on a cold day in late November, will be one of the reasons why.