Literally from Sunday's first play, the question facing the Cleveland Browns in their game against Arizona was not just whether they could overcome the Cardinals, but whether they could also overcome themselves. In the end, they couldn't do both and lost a game that did not feel nearly as close as the 27-21 final score might otherwise appear, even after considering tight end Kellen Winslow II's near miraculous touchdown grab on the game's final play. Gary recaps today's tough loss.

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Looking every bit like a developing team suddenly thrust into the middle of a playoff race, the Browns stumbled and bumbled out of the gate and found themselves spending much of the rest of the game trying to first overcome and then get out of the way of themselves. And each time it seemed like they were about to do just that, they made still another mistake and now instead of putting some distance between themselves and the rest of the AFC wild card wannabes, they are barely clinging to a playoff spot at 7-5.

If it were simply a case of listing all of the various missteps that led to the loss, it wouldn't do justice to the context. Just noting, for example, the several personal fouls the Browns committed might cause one to gloss over Simon Fraser's head butt that cost the Browns 15 important yards at the end of the game. That penalty, a final fitting gesture on a day littered with them, put the Browns in a bigger hole than they already were in after following Neil Rackers 19-yard field goal that stretched the Cardinals lead to 27-21 with 1:52 left in the game.

In the end, the Browns got the result they deserved.

If you spend your life reading tea leaves or deciphering signs, how this game would ultimately unfold was evident early. On the first play from scrimmage, quarterback Derek Anderson was flagged for intentionally grounding, though not because he was under pressure so much but because he inexplicably threw into the left flat with no Browns receiver anywhere close. You may go the rest of your life and never see intentional grounding on the first play of a game again. Unfortunately, it wasn't Anderson's only mistake.

On a third and eight from the Cardinals 41 yard-line, Anderson threw low and inside to receiver Tim Carter on a play that required Anderson to pretty much do the opposite. Roderick Hood was there to accept Anderson's gift, returning the tailor-made interception 71 yards for a touchdown. Unfortunately, it wasn't Anderson's only mistake.

On the very next series, he fumbled the snap from center Hank Fraley, which defensive lineman Antonio Smith recovered at the Cleveland 44. For the moment, Anderson was through and now it was the defense's turn.

After Cardinals quarterback Kurt Warner missed receiver Bryant Johnson on third and four, the ball fell harmlessly to the ground. Inexplicably, cornerback Leigh Bodden immediately kicked the football downfield, leading to a delay of game flag, a five yard penalty, and a Cardinals first down. Four plays later, with a Robaire Smith offsides penalty thrown in for good measure, Warner hit tight end Leonard Pope for a five-yard touchdown pass and with less than half the first quarter gone, the Browns were already down 14-0.

It should be noted that on that play, linebacker Leon Williams had Pope covered initially. But Williams couldn't hold coverage for even one Mississippi and a second later found himself two steps behind Pope, a pass Warner couldn't miss no matter how injured he might have been. It was the first of two consecutive mistakes by Williams, which, unfortunately for this game wasn't any kind of record. On the ensuing kickoff, the first that the Cardinals had actually kicked to returner Josh Cribbs, Williams was caught holding, nullifying an otherwise nice return to the Cardinals 35-yard line.

A few additional mistakes for good measure, including another Anderson interception, and thus did the Browns find themselves as their own worst enemy and the game was still in its formative stage.

But as they've done for most of the season, the Browns offense, fueled by Anderson and running back Jamal Lewis, heated up. Late in the first quarter, Anderson led the Browns on a drive that should have yielded more than the Phil Dawson 37-yard field goal. Still, it was a start. Then, in the middle of the second quarter following a Mitch Berger punt, Anderson and the Browns consumed the next six minutes, moving 80 yards in 10 plays to put the game back within reach at 14-10 as the half ended.

On the one hand, the fact that the Browns were only down four at the half was an

indication of the state of the Cardinals offense. On the other hand, so dominant were the Browns statistically in that half that it's hard to believe they weren't up by 20. Cleveland had 14 first downs, Arizona had six. Cleveland was 3-5 on third down while Arizona was 0-3. Cleveland had 205 total yards, Arizona had 90. You get the picture.

But if the Browns thought that this domination would serve them well going into the second half, it wasn't the only mistake they'd make from that point on. After a mostly lethargic third quarter by both teams, things turned suddenly for the worse when Cribbs, bumping into Devon Holly, muffed a Berger punt late in the quarter and deep in the Browns' territory. It wasn't their only mistake.

On first and goal, following another obligatory Browns penalty (roughing on Sean Jones for a horsecollar tackle), Warner hit a wide open Pope in the end zone. This was an even easier touchdown opportunity than Pope's first grab, apparently too easy, and he dropped it. But in the process Pope practically handed the ball to Chaun Thompson, who, not surprisingly, proceeded to drop it as well. Warner then hit a wide-open Johnson two plays later for the touchdown that put the Cardinals up 21-10.

Apparently, though, the Browns need to work from behind and just as apparently aren't above putting themselves in a position to ensure that's the case. After Cribbs nearly fumbled the ensuing kickoff, Anderson hit receiver Braylon Edwards on the second play from scrimmage for what appeared to be a 67-yard touchdown pass. The Browns though had to sweat out a replay challenge by the Cardinals after it appeared as though Edwards may have been down by contact. Fortunately, the Browns were on the right side of the ol' "inconclusive evidence" dodge by the officials and the Browns were now within five. That's when the fun began.

Wanting to get the game to within a field goal, the Browns decided to go for the two-point conversion. With Anderson behind center and Cribbs in the backfield, Anderson backed away and starting walking toward Edwards as if to call an audible. The ball was then snapped directly to Cribbs who appeared to want to run, only to then find a wide open Winslow in the end zone.

But the Cardinals came right back, pushing the lead to six on a Neil Rackers 33-yard field goal with 12:10 left in the fourth quarter. Consecutive three and outs by both teams led to a Berger punt to Cribbs who did what he does, taking the ball from the Cleveland 16 down to the 47. But a promising drive came up short just when the Browns had the ball inside the 10. Dawson's second field goal closed the gap again to three, 24-21, but this time with only six minutes remaining.

This was the point where it would be nice to write that the much maligned defense again found a way to make the key plays late. Instead, the mistakes continued. With the Cardinals needing to run the clock, virtually everyone in University of Phoenix Stadium knew that the ball would be going to Edgerrin James. But knowing what's coming next and being able to stop in are sometimes mutually exclusive and the Cardinals moved the ball all the way down to the Cleveland one on the heels of eight runs by James.

But as hard as James ran during that final series, the Cardinals were aided by, what else, a couple more key mistakes, the biggest of which was defensive back Brodney Pool's personal foul. After the Browns put the Cardinals in a passing situation, one of the few the Cardinals would need, Warner connected on a 15-yard pass to Steve Breaston, which was immediately and effectively turned into a 30-yard play when Pool pushed Breaston to the ground after he was already out of bounds. Even when the Browns defense finally tightened at the goal line and the Cardinals were forced to kick a field goal, too much time had slipped through the Browns fingers, undone were they ultimately by the mound of mistakes they had piled up the previous 58 minutes.

The final drive was courageous and semi-effective, even after Fraser's aforementioned penalty turned what would have been a 67-yard field into an 82-yard field. But with no timeouts remaining and Anderson and his receivers unable to complete a sideline pass to stop the clock, Anderson was forced to throw deep on the remaining two plays. The final throw, to Winslow, was a remarkable grab, unfortunately out of bounds. It was the last mistake of the game.

Statistically, the Browns mostly handled the Cardinals all day. Anderson was 21-41 for 304 yards, his two early interceptions offset by two more touchdown passes. Edwards, after being mostly silent for the last few games, had 7 catches for 149 yards, aided by the 67-yard touchdown grab. But statistics don't always translate to results, particularly when a crush of mistakes is interspersed.

Though the loss was hardly critical to the Browns playoff chances, it gave the Steelers unneeded breathing room in the AFC North. It also gave the Browns all the reminder that they need that the playoffs aren't given, they're earned. And the best way for the Browns to earn their keep at this point is to not to just acknowledge that mistakes were made but to actually do the hard work of first correcting and then learning from them. Next week's game against the New York Jets would be a good place to start.