For the first 55 minutes or so, it was a game that Cleveland Browns fans had seen before. Last season. And the season before that. And the season before that. But this time it wasn't the Browns on the receiving end of another late season beating. Instead, they were the ones in the suddenly unfamiliar role of doing the beating, taking the measure of a lousy New York Jets team. But the last five minutes turned suddenly interesting and more than just a bit scary as the Browns hung on to win 24-18.

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The win moved the Browns to 8-5 on the season and guaranteed them only their second non-losing season since 1999. More importantly, the win, coupled with an overtime loss by the Tennessee Titans, gave the Browns a more solid grasp on the last wild card playoff spot with just three games remaining. It also moved the Browns to within a game of division-leading Pittsburgh Steelers who were on the receiving end of their own beating at the hands of the New England Patriots.

This game had the potential of being a gotcha game for the Browns. The fact that the Jets weren't very good was hardly a secret. After a stinging, self-inflicted loss to the Arizona Cardinals the week before, it was hardly a foregone conclusion that the Browns could regroup in time. Indeed, the smart money was probably against it. But like it's been most of the season, just when you think the Browns will zig, they zag. Not only did they regroup, they almost completely reversed the mistake-prone game of just a week before, at least for most of the game anyway.

But a team prone to the kinds of mistakes that the Browns are prone to make allowed a beaten Jets team to scrape their way back into the game late. The final mistakes though belonged instead to the Jets in general, head coach Eric Mangini in particular. But it was close. With just 50 seconds remaining and the Browns suddenly clinging to a six-point lead and the Jets kicking off, Browns linebacker Leon Williams was offside on the Jets kick. Try to remember the last time you saw a player on the receiving team go off side on a kickoff. Good luck.

The Williams penalty nullified a Jets penalty when Nugent's kick off, which he sent deep when the Browns were expecting it to be onside, went out of bounds. It forced a re-kick and this time the Jets went for an onside kick instead. Fortunately, receiver Joe Jurevicius snatched a bounding ball from the bottom of the pile that allowed the Browns to finally close out the game.

For the first 55 minutes, it was hard to believe the game would come to that. It was a relatively efficient, mistake-free affair for the Browns, more notable for the relatively rapid pace at which the game was progressing than anything else. But behind Lewis, quarterback Derek Anderson, receiver Braylon Edwards and the re-emergence of an incredibly pliable but oddly opportunistic defense, the Browns did enough of what they had to do when they had to do it against a Jets team that seemed far more interested in escaping a cold, driving rain than finishing the game, let alone win it.

But things rarely go as they seem with this team and the final five minutes seemed to last nearly as long as the first 55 minutes and featured nearly as many points scored. In that time, the Browns nearly imploded, saved only by Jurevicius, Lewis and some very odd calls by Mangini. Illustrating just how far they've come this season, the Browns never did make that final mistake that Mangini counted on. At the same time, it also illustrated how far the Jets need to go.

Mangini, who apparently has taken his nickname of Mangenius a little too seriously, basically outsmarted himself with the game within reach. With just over five minutes left and running the no huddle with great effect, Jets quarterback Kellen Clemens moved the Jets quickly down the field in nine plays covering nearly 70 yards in 2:28, sneaking it in from the one yard line to bring the Jets to within five at 17-12. But the Jets couldn't convert the two-point attempt and were forced to then rely on the onside kick as a last gasp. At least it seemed like a last gasp at the time.

It's funny how a lack of preparation will jump up and grab you by the throat at precisely the wrong moment. The Browns were not able to handle the kick and the Jets took over again and again moved the ball quickly. But when the Jets were unable to convert on third and 10 from the Browns 20 yard line, Mangini, acting as if his team was the one fighting for the playoffs, opted for another Nugent field goal to get within two at 17-15 with 1:48 left and three time outs remaining. At this point, the only thing certain about Mangini's thinking was that he didn't believe Clemens would convert on fourth and 10.

Given the situation, the better play would have been for Mangini to actually kick deep and hope his defense could hold a conservative Browns to a quick three and out and decent field position that would at least give the Jets a chance to get it back into field goal range. After all, it was a Browns three and out in just 42 seconds midway through the fourth quarter that set up this entire mess in the first place. But Mangini opted instead for an onside kick, apparently under the emerging theory that that the Browns had never practiced the onside kick from the

receiving side given how they handled it the first time. It was the wrong decision.

Jurevicius fielded the onside kick and the Browns didn't just get the first down they needed, they got more. Lewis, demonstrating the perfect veteran presence, ran twice for six yards and on third and four from the Jets 31, put together his best run of the season, a 31-yard rumble into the end zone with several Jets hanging on to give the Browns their final score and a seemingly insurmountable lead.

But nothing is every easy or cheap for the Browns. The Browns, not wanting to kick to Leon Washington, had Dawson dribble the ball. Washington fielded it anyway at the Jets 29 and returned it to their 40. From there the Jets moved to the Cleveland 17 with 37 seconds left. But the Jets, needing two scores and now having no time outs left, opted to kick a field goal on first down. It brought the score to 24-18 and set up the final, failed onside kick that Jurevicius again recovered.

For the game, Anderson was a modest 16-29 for 185 yards, two touchdowns and one interception. Anderson now has 26 touchdowns on the season, inching ever closer to the franchise single season record. His Oregon neighbor and rival, Clemens, was 24-41 for 286 yards but two interceptions.

Edwards only had three catches for 63 yards, two of which were on a crucial second half touchdown drive, and another touchdown, giving him 13, which does tie him with Gary Collins for the single season franchise record. And Lewis carried the ball 21 times for 118 yards and two touchdowns, one of which was through the air. On the season, Lewis has 921 rushing yards and seems certain to get over 1000 for the season. In fact, with any luck, both Edwards and Kellen Winslow II will both go over the 1000 yard mark, joining Edwards who already has over 1100 yards for the season.

The chaos of the final five minutes was a dramatic departure from the mostly laconic pace of the rest of the game. In fact, the way the first half unfolded, the game moved along so quickly and uneventfully that it seemed as if both teams needed to get out of the Meadowlands to get in some Christmas shopping. There were turnovers by both teams, which could have been critical but weren't, and neither team was able to sustain much of anything until late in the second quarter.

After the Browns took over with 6:09 left in that quarter, they put together a 10 play, 80-yard drive to take a 7-0 lead with just 1:15 left. The key was Anderson's 14-yard pass to Edwards who not only made a spectacular catch, but capped it with a spectacular effort to get both feet in just as the two-minute warning sounded. Mangini challenged the catch. That he lost the challenge shouldn't be a surprise given the closeness of his relationship with perennially replay-challenged Browns head coach Romeo Crennel. It cost the Jets a time out that they'd regret just a short time later. Two plays later, Anderson rolled right, hit Lewis for an easy 7-yard touchdown.

Not to be lost in that drive was the fact that offensive coordinator Rob Chudzinski unveiled a few additional wrinkles involving Josh Cribbs. With Cribbs lining up as a wide receiver, Anderson hit him an 18-yard pass, but Kelly Rhodes, who earlier had intercepted Anderson, drilled Cribbs in the small of his back. Cribbs bounced right back up, only to find himself airborne two plays later after lining up in the backfield and receiving a pitchout from Anderson for four yards. If nothing else, the two plays highlighted the real risk of trying to increase the role of one of the NFL's premier kick returners.

Showing a similar urgency, the Jets took the ensuing kickoff and moved quickly downfield. But with only two timeouts remaining as a result of the failed Mangini challenge, the Jets were forced to alter their strategy. Thus when Washington failed to get out of bounds on Clemens' pass that took the ball to the Cleveland 17, the Jets were forced to use their last time out with only 10 seconds left. After

Clemens' quick fade pass to Laveranues Coles was overthrown, in came Nugent. But demonstrating that he's learned a few things this season, Crennel tried to freeze Nugent by calling a timeout just before the kick. It mattered not. Nugent nailed it as the half ended with the score 7-3. It didn't seem that close, even given the fact that the Jets actually could have had the halftime lead if not for a Kellen Clemens' interception to Sean Jones on third and goal from the two early in the second quarter.

The Browns, who have had their share of troubles making adjustments in the second half, shed that reputation quickly. After taking the opening kick in the second half, they put together a quick five play, 61-yard drive that belonged mostly to Edwards. He took about a 15-yard pass from Anderson and turned it into a 45-yard gain, down to the Jets five yard line, but not without some excitement first. Trying to get into the end zone, Edwards fumbled, out of bounds fortunately. On the next play, Edwards made another nice grab of the Anderson fade pass for the touchdown that ultimately gave the Browns a 14-3 lead.

The Jets inched to within eight on a Nugent 41-yard field goal midway through the second quarter, 14-6. But a Phil Dawson 49-yard field goal early in the fourth quarter pushed it to 17-6 and seemingly out of reach, a sentiment even the Jets seemed to share when Brandon McDonald intercepted Clemens on the next series. It was the fast-rising McDonald's second interceptions in three games. But the Browns couldn't find a way to close out the game with just 6:30 remaining. The quick three and out set up the chaos that ensued until the final gun sounded.

The Browns ultimately regrouped with just enough time to find themselves sitting, albeit uncomfortably, in the driver's seat for the second wild card spot. But next week's home game against the Bills, who themselves are in the same hunt as the Browns for that playoff spot, suddenly looks much tougher than it did a few weeks ago. Lying in wait for them as well is a dangerous Bengals team the following week. The Browns also still cling to a chance of winning the division as well,

particularly with the Steelers facing Jacksonville, Baltimore and St. Louis in the remaining three weeks.

How it all plays out is anyone's guess and whatever that guess may be, it will probably be wrong. And for every bit of fun it may be, it will also be at least as frustrating. Sunday's game wasn't the most exhausting the Browns have played this season, nor even the most unpredictable. What it was, though, was another gentle reminder that whatever is left to accomplish this season is probably not as great as what this team can ultimately accomplish with a sound defense, a better veteran presence and a more disciplined approach.