If it wasn't quite destiny, it was inevitability. When Browns kicker Phil Dawson nailed an improbable 49-yard field goal just before the end of the first half, in that one brief moment in the entire half when the wind and the snow stilled, there wasn't a person watching who didn't know right then and there that the Browns were heading to the playoffs. As he does every Sunday evening, Gary Benz hits on todays Browns game.

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It would be hard to overstate the impact Dawson's kick had on the rest of the game. The fact that the Browns even tried it was a questionable call. The score was only 5-0 at that point and a miss would have given the Bills good field position with 1:25 and all three time outs. The smart money was on a pooch punt which clearly would have sent the Browns into halftime with the lead anyway.

But give head coach Romeo Crennel credit. By taking that chance, given the stakes, he was just as clearly sending a message to the beleaguered defense that he had confidence that they could make a stop if necessary. When the kick cleared the upright byjustthismuch, hitting Dawson's new best friend-the center support bar-in the process it provided a lethal one-two punch of emotion that effectively lifted the Browns above the elements, above the competition and, most

likely, on into the playoffs. We'll know more next week as Tennessee prevailed late against Kansas City to deny the Browns from clinching with two games remaining.

The 8-0 score at that point had to seem like at least a two-touchdown lead to the Bills. And, as it was, it mostly was. Of course, the Browns and their fans had to endure the now common late charge by a team on the ropes. The only real bullet the Browns had to dodge in the second half came on the Bills very last drive. In 1:51, the Bills were able to move the ball better than they had all day and better than even they had a right to expect.

The key to the drive was Bills quarterback Trent Edwards' 20-yard pass on fourth and 10 that took the ball to the Cleveland 15. Edwards was forced to spike the ball on first down to stop the clock, leaving three plays, 20 yards and a two-point conversion between his team and overtime and the possibility of salvaging their dwindling playoffs hopes.

But on fourth down and five from the Cleveland 10, the Bills elected to try for the first down instead of the touchdown. Edwards tossed a swing pass to Freddie Jackson that linebacker Chaun Thompson and safety Sean Jones snuffed out immediately, holding Jackson to no gain. The Browns took over with three seconds left. Anderson took a knee and the Browns found themselves sitting at 9-5 and tied for first in the AFC North with Pittsburgh, which lost at home to Jacksonville, 29-22. And though it had no playoff implications whatsoever, the Dolphins winning their first game of the season at the expense of the Baltimore Ravens was just as satisfying.

In retrospect, Crennel's gutsy call in the first half was mostly informed by the fact that the Browns were able to move the ball effectively enough throughout that half, the score notwithstanding. Give offensive coordinator Rob Chudzinski credit on that one. The elements were irrelevant to him. The Browns stuck to a balanced attack, running 16 times and passing 18 times in that first half, keeping the Bills off-balance throughout. With the poor conditions refusing to let up, a

heavy dose of the ground game in the second half was expected.

It helped, of course, that running back Jamal Lewis ran like a Browns running back has to run late in the season. He carried the ball 15 times for 80 yards in that first half, pushing him over the 1,000 yard mark for the sixth time in his career. This running gave Anderson enough time to find Braylon Edwards and Joe Jurevicius just often enough to keep drives alive long enough to keep the ball out of the Bills' hands.

While the near collapse at the end created enough anxiety to make one forget about the blizzard swirling about, it wasn't enough to take the shine off all that had taken place to that point. In particular, the drive the Browns and Lewis put together with 6:04 left in the game and the ball sitting on their own three-yard line evoked memories of the actual good ‘ol days, pick your era.

On first down, Lewis ran for 13 yards. On the next play, he gained another nine. On the play after that, he got another first down with a five-yard run. Not finished, he ran for three more yards on the next play. Then, for good measure, Jason Wright ran for 10 yards and another first down. Eventually, though, the Browns found themselves stalled with the ball sitting on the Buffalo 48-yard line, one-half yard short of the first down and two minutes remaining.

For a moment, it looked like Crennel was in full gambling mode, sending Anderson and the offense back on the field. A first down and the game would be over as the Bills were out of time outs. But it was a ruse, Anderson trying his level best to draw the Bills offside. He could not and was forced to call time out. Out trotted Zastudil, who hit a line drive that returner Jim Leonard fielded and brought back to the Bills 30-yard line for that last final drive.

There would be no faulting Crennel for punting at that point. In fact, attempting to gain the first down, even as well as the Browns ran all day, would have been reckless, particularly given how poorly the Bills offense had played all day. But

sometimes the right call can cost you as much as the wrong call. Fortunately, it wasn't this time.

It was pretty clear early on that this wouldn't be a day for padding the stats, at least from Anderson's perspective. The wind was blowing at near gale force throughout the game. Balls sailed high. Others fluttered. Most were off target. Anderson was 7-18 for 109 yards in the first half and completed only two passes in the second half, finishing with 137 yards and no touchdowns. But more important than all of that was the lack of interceptions, even though two of Anderson's first three passes could easily have been picked off. Several others were close. In fact, for as miserable as it was, neither team turned it over, which actually is pretty incredible.

But it was a day for Lewis to pad his stats. He carried 33 times for 163 hard-fought yards. As important as each yard was, even more so was the attitude he displayed in the process. Time and again, he punished the Bills defenders with his runs and never even came close to losing the ball. It was exactly what general manager Phil Savaged envisioned when he signed Lewis in the off season.

It was also a day for the defense to pad their league worse stats. Going into the game, opposing teams were averaging over 27 points a game and 390 yards. But on this day, the defense, aided greatly by an inept Buffalo offense, pitched a shut out and yielded only 232 net yards. For perspective, going into that final drive, Edwards was only 9-21 for 64 yards. On the final drive he was 4-12 for 60 yards. Those four completions in the final drive accounted for more than 25% of the offensive output for the day.

It may not be enough to pull the Browns defense out of the cellar, statistically, but at 9-5 and poised to get into the playoffs, they clearly have bragging rights over the Bills and the Detroit Lions, the two teams the Browns defense have been alternating with all season for that bottom spot on the statistics page.

With two games remaining, the Browns take their act on the road to Cincinnati, which lost to San Francisco on Saturday night. That loss, along with Baltimore's loss to Miami, greatly raised the odds that the AFC North will have two new head coaches next year. The Browns then come home for what will hopefully be an early New Year's Eve party against San Francisco.

The Steelers have a fairly easy road as well, although they have a quick turnaround this week with a game Thursday night at St. Louis. It's on the NFL Network, which always raises the question: if a game is played on a network that no one gets, did it really take place? They finish at home against the Ravens in what should be Brian Billick's last game. Tennessee, which can't afford a loss, plays the Jets and finishes up against Indianapolis, with Peyton Manning likely watching from the sidelines.

All of this, though, can be rendered irrelevant if the Browns can just finish what they started. And for good measure, let's hope for a weather repeat of this week. Everyone, in unison: Let is snow, let it snow, let it snow.