The Browns had a chance Sunday. They had a chance, and they blew it. End of story. The Browns choked the same way the Indians choked when they had a chance to close out the ALCS. They were in a position to advance, they came out tight, made panicky mistakes and lost. That's it. The Browns now need Tennessee to lose to an Indianapolis team sure to be resting starters next week, and Erik Cassano doesn't see it happening.

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The Browns choked the same way the Indians choked when they had a chance to close out the ALCS. They were in a position to advance, they came out tight, made panicky mistakes and lost. That's it. Thanks for playing, we have some lovely parting gifts for you.

I can't see the Browns going to the playoffs now. I know there's all that fine print about how the Browns can make it in with a Tennessee loss to the Colts next week. But when you shoot yourself in the foot as gruesomely as the Browns did Sunday, the fates always seem to align against you.

If the hand of fate lands where I think it's going to land, the Titans are beating the Colts next Sunday. The Colts, locked into the AFC's second seed, have no need to play their starters for more than a series or two. Whether they finish 14-2 or 13-3 is of little consequence to the defending Super Bowl champs. They sure as heck have no vested interest in helping the Browns.

It appears Cleveland will have to be satisfied with a 10-6 or 9-7 finish and a near miss of the playoffs. But, hey, it's a five- or six-game improvement over last year, right? Right?

Somehow, when you get this close and fail, the satisfaction of vastly exceeding ev eryone's
wildest expectations doesn't wash the bitter taste out of your mouth.
Sunday's 19-14 loss to the undermanned and supposedly-outclassed Bengals is a loss with a lot of potential fallout and long-reaching ramifications.
The only winner on the Cleveland sideline was Brady Quinn. Over the span of three hours, he went from surefire benchwarmer to back in the starting quarterback fray for 2008. Derek Anderson gave Quinn the opening as he took a hatchet to the reputation he spent all season crafting as one of the league's rising QB stars.
Anderson was, quite simply, embarrassing. On the biggest stage of his career, his legs turned to Jell-O. And when Anderson goes weak in the knees, we all know what's going to happen next: he's going to cave to his QB hammerhead instincts and throw the ball as hard as he can, defensive coverage be damned.
Anderson was certainly helped by a couple of inexcusable drops off the normally-sure hands of Lawrence Vickers and Joe Jurevicius. But that was only a small fraction of Anderson's woes. Most of them were self-inflicted with disastrous results.
All four of his interceptions were of the "What in the H-E-double-hockey-sticks was he THINKING throwing that?" variety. Even the deflected interception that short-circuited the drive to start the third quarter was thrown too low to a screened-off Kellen Winslow, who was being swarmed by black jerseys.
All told, Anderson's wild arm led directly to 13 Bengal points at the end of the first half and killed two would-have-been scoring drives in the second half.
It's a long-way-around way of saying that Anderson lost the game. Singlehandedly . Yes, that's harsh. But it's also true. Take Anderson out of the equation, and the Browns played a solid game all around. The defense didn't allow the Bengals into the end zone on the occasions when an Anderson pick didn't pin them against their own goal line.
The offensive stat lines were peppered with nice individual performances in spite of Anderson's miscues: Braylon Edwards, eight receptions for 52 yards and two touchdowns to pass Gary Collins for a new Browns single-season record; Kellen Winslow, seven catches for 73 yards; Jamal Lewis, 21 rushes for 92 yards.
The turnover battle was even closer than you might have realized as the Bengals nudged the Browns 4-3. Bengals QB Carson Palmer was picked twice and running back Kenny Watson was stripped of the ball in a critical late-game turnover that gave the Browns a chance to win.
But when your starting quarterback sabotages you with four interceptions, all on

terrible throws and all with dire consequences, it's just too much to overcome. Perhaps not even Anderson yet realizes how much damage he did on Sunday. Not only did he deliver the Browns' playoff hopes a potentially-fatal blow, not only did he raise an enormous red flag concerning his ability to perform competently -- let alone win -- in a playoff environment, he might have just shrunk the market greatly for his services in 2008, should the Browns choose not to retain him. Unless Anderson can rebound in a big way and the Browns can still find a way into the playoffs, Anderson will arrive in restricted free agency as a choker, the saboteur who ruined the Browns' 2007 playoff run. Atlanta, Miami and any other team in the market for an upgrade at quarterback is going to almost certainly think twice about making a play for Anderson.

If the Browns slap the franchise tag on Anderson, they would be doing it with an eye toward keeping him, because no team's GM in his right mind would sacrifice a first- and third-round draft pick to acquire a QB who makes the kinds of rookie mistakes a team would have to endure if they had just drafted a kid out of college and played him as an NFL frosh.

For Anderson and the Browns, the prevailing attitude is probably to suck it up and get ready for San Francisco next week. Even if they're no longer in the driver's seat, the Browns are still alive in the race for the final AFC wild card slot.

But this loss to Cincinnati might not go away as easily as that, and it goes beyond the haunting thoughts of what might have been, should the Browns find themselves cleaning out their lockers a week from Monday.

For a team that needed stability at the QB position, they now have a rapidly-brewing controversy. For a QB who needed to assert himself as a winner, he now faces a murky future as a franchise building block. For a fan base that has waited so long for playoff football, it might be time to start counting down the days until pitchers and catchers report.