Now with a couple days and a holiday behind him, Gary's had some time to stew on last Sunday's loss to the Bungles, and feels that too many times under Romeo Crennel the team seems overwhelmed by its circumstances. And that it may have cost the Browns the playoffs this time. Gary also hits on the e-mailers this week, many of whom thought the Browns should have went to Brady Quinn last week after DA started struggling.

With another game, another challenge always in front of them, professional athletes can't afford to let the setbacks linger. At least if they want to continue to be professional athletes. Fans, on the other hand, have no such constraints. That's why, even if the Browns do back into the playoffs after this weekend's games, the loss to the Cincinnati Bengals will still linger...and linger...and linger. It's what happens when a team can't quite meet the expectations that come with transforming from a mere surprise to an actual contender.

Easily the Browns 19-14 loss to the Bengals was the most disappointing since the Browns returned in 1999. But on the list that is disappointing Cleveland sports teams losses, at best it only makes the lower half of the first page, which says more about the history of Cleveland sports than anything else.

The reason this loss even makes the list at all is a matter of context. The Browns

were the feel-good story of the year, even with the Indians in the American League Championship Series and the Cavaliers in the NBA Finals. Having been pasted in their opener, the Browns were re-invented under a virtual rookie quarterback in Derek Anderson and a first-time offensive coordinator in Rob Chudzinski. Entering the penultimate game of the regular season they were 9-5 and seemingly on a roll. They controlled their own playoff fate and were coming off an important win, a shutout no less, the week before against the Buffalo Bills. With the weather worsening, the run game under Jamal Lewis was looking as solid as ever and even the defense seemed to be improving, if not statistically, then at least in results.

The Bengals were the Browns' mirror opposites and not simply because their record was 5-9. The Bengals, collectively were a mess, playing for nothing much in particular and for a head coach who already had publicly declared that his team needed a whole heap of new players next season just to get competitive. The once-feared offense, with a glamour quarterback and a trio of seemingly talented receivers, was struggling to score touchdowns. In a related development no doubt, the running game was struggling even before its number one back went down to injuries. The defense never seemed to have recovered after these same Browns had dropped 51 points on them in the season's second week.

But almost from the opening kickoff through the final tick of the clock, the Bengals looked to be a team headed for the playoffs and the Browns a team headed for a quick exit after the regular season's final weeks.

The Browns had a chance to seize the momentum from the outset when the Bengals Glenn Holt fumbled the opening kickoff seemingly into the arms of Devon Holley. But in what would turn out to be just one of about 243 examples of lackluster intensity (if there even can be such a thing) Holley let Holt grab the ball back during the scrum that followed. If Holley had finished the play, the Browns would have been first and 10 at the Bengals 25 and poised for a quick score from which the Bengals may never have recovered.

That play certainly didn't determine the course of the game any more than punter Dave Zastudil's failure to secure a perfect snap on the Browns field goal attempt on their first drive, but yet in a way they both actually did. Small moments in a much larger game to be sure, but also revealing of a team clearly playing with their hearts in their throats.

The Bengals, on the other hand, were playing exactly how quarterback Carson Palmer said they'd play earlier in the week-loosely. But that really isn't the best description, actually. At least early on they played with an intensity of a team that seemed to be on their way to the playoffs instead of into the ether in another week. Running back Kenny Watson was running as hard as any back has run against the Browns this season. Halfway through the second quarter, Watson already had 82 yards on only 13 carries The Bengals literally were pushing the Browns around the field, particularly the Browns defense, all game. The Browns didn't necessarily back down, at least not completely, but neither did they rise up either. But the saving grace was the fact that the Bengals were 5-9 and it was easy to see why-an abject inability to finish drives. It's what kept the game closer than it otherwise should have been throughout.

When a player or two has a bad game, there's not a whole lot anyone can do. That kind of thing will always happen. But when a team collectively can't get out of first gear, it usually stems from a lack of preparation for the task at hand. And when that happens, the failure isn't individual, it's institutional. The question is, why? In this case, the answer is always the same.

It's fair to assume that head coach Romeo Crennel emphasized to his young team all week exactly what was at stake in the Cincinnati game. But whatever words he chose certainly didn't resonate. The Browns looked like every Ohio State team did against Michigan under John Cooper.

That's why any Crennel-for-Coach-of-the-Year talk has always seemed so misplaced. The collapse on Sunday was unexpected but in retrospect is hardly surprising. In his two plus seasons as head coach the book on Crennel is pretty

well written. When he's at his best, it's evident because nothing overtly ridiculous seems to be happening on the field. When he's at his worst, as he was against Cincinnati, the team looks every bit as disorganized as the teams he coached during his previous two seasons. Too many times under Crennel the team seems overwhelmed by its circumstances. It's a common theme in nearly every loss and is evident by the sheer number of mental mistakes that get made. This time, it may very well have cost the Browns the playoffs.

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The collapse of Derek Anderson, on the other hand, is a far smaller concern. This was Anderson's first really big test and it's of no great moment that this very inexperienced quarterback failed, at least until he fails again under similar circumstances.

Yet it is interesting how many fans seem to be losing confidence in Anderson so quickly, despite all that he has accomplished to this point. Many of the emails I received questioned why Crennel stayed with Anderson despite his struggles instead of bringing in Brady Quinn.

It hardly seems necessary to point out the obvious, but it would be hard to imagine a worse spot to bring Quinn in for his first taste of regular season NFL football. It may be a fair criticism of Crennel that he never did find any spot duty for Quinn during the regular season, but not having found any previously, putting in Quinn during the second half of a must-win game on the road against a division rival already brimming with confidence seems like an odd place to start.

The argument for using Quinn last Sunday was basically that things couldn't get any worse. Anyone who really believes that hasn't watched enough NFL football to know that things can always get worse. But even if that were the case, then a better argument could have been made for putting in Ken Dorsey, who at least has played regular season football.

Of all the mistakes Crennel has made this season, failing to use Quinn last Sunday wasn't one of them.

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As ridiculous as the suggestions were about using Quinn last Sunday, they were hardly the most ridiculous of the week. That honor goes to those who were urging the Browns to rest their starters this week against San Francisco, under the theory that it doesn't matter whether the team wins or loses this week.

Through the quirk of the schedules, it is true that the Browns can win this week and not make the playoffs and can lose and still make the playoffs. That's simply the result of the fact that the Browns are playing a non-conference game, the outcome of which makes no difference in the wild-card tiebreakers that will be relevant to the Browns' fate. But that's hardly a reason to celebrate, let alone a reason to give the starters a break they don't deserve. More importantly, Crennel already has "issues" when it comes to motivating his team. Sending them a message that they are free to equate this Sunday's game against the San Francisco 49ers with the fourth preseason game isn't going to help with that problem, either.

What this team needs most right now is more work, not less. Anderson may not throw any interceptions from the bench, but neither does the bench give him the experience he needs to better deal with adversity. As for the defense, if the starters rested, how would anyone know anyway?

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Question to ponder: Why should Tony Dungy care if the Browns make the playoffs? Here's a clue: he shouldn't. His obligation is to his team and his quest for another Super Bowl. As Dungy could rightly point out but hasn't: it wasn't his

team that lost to both Oakland and Cincinnati.

One more, since it's still technically the holiday season: Which was the last team to make the playoffs with the worst ranked defense? The 1964 Browns, according to CBS Sports during last Sunday's telecast. But that's a very deceiving statistic. First, it was only a 14-team league. Second, that's only true so far as yards yielded. The defense gave up the fifth fewest points, over 100 less than the New York Giants. That's a far more meaningful statistic, particularly in such a small league. But hey, it made a nice little tidbit for the announcers to drop into the broadcast, even if it wasn't well researched or considered.