Both Browns fans and players have sadly grown accustomed to meaningless games late in seasons, but this version of meaningless was far different than most. Neither a pre-season tune-up nor a get-out-of-Dodge end-of-the year sleepwalk, the game was mostly an opportunity to recalibrate after last week's disaster with the underlying goal to be ready for a playoff birth that may never come. Gary hits on todays win and the potential start of the Brady Quinn Era in his Sunday night column. Editor's Note: Updated to reflect the Titans victory over the Colts.

As much as Browns players should be used to playing in meaningless games in December, so too should Browns fans be used to watching meaningless games in December. It's been that way for years with this franchise. But this version of a meaningless game was far different than most. Neither a pre-season tune-up nor a get-out-of-Dodge end-of-the year sleepwalk, the game was mostly an opportunity to recalibrate after last week's disaster with the underlying goal to be ready for a playoff birth that may never come.

Bowing in respect to the ambiguities presented, the Browns played neither overtly good nor preposterously bad in beating an awful San Francisco 49ers team being led by their fourth quarterback, 20-7. It was all the effort they really needed on this day and all they really would have needed a week ago against Cincinnati, but that's a lament for another time, beginning around 11:30 p.m. on Sunday when Tennessee beat Indianapolis in the Sunday night game.

The win, of course, did nothing to change the playoff calculus. A loss would only have altered it marginally. But psychologically, the victory was important even if the playoffs must wait another year.

The victory gave the Browns their seventh home win this season, their most ever, and re-established Cleveland Browns Stadium as a true home field advantage. It also represented their best record since 1995 when they went 11-5 under then genius-in-training, Bill Belichick. On the down side, if the Browns do not make the playoffs, the win represents only the second time in franchise history that this team won at least 10 games and didn't make the playoffs. The last time that happened was in 1963, when a 10-4 Browns team finished second in the NFL's Eastern Conference to the New York Giants. The Giants lost to the Chicago Bears that year in the NFL championship game.

With no weather issues for the first time in the last three weeks, the Browns offense still looked stuck somewhere between second and third gear, particularly in the second half. Running back Jamal Lewis wasn't to blame. He continued his late season surge, running hard and gaining 128 yards on 26 carries. It gave Lewis over 1300 rushing yards for the season. But quarterback Derek Anderson, until his injury and even after his return, was more of a culprit, running more cold than hot, a 45-yard touchdown pass to Braylon Edwards notwithstanding. Anderson was victimized by the same things that have tended to hamper him every time he is "bad" Derek—poor decision making. He also seemed a bit gun shy.

That much was evident early anyway, just as it was against the Cincinnati Bengals a week ago. After the Browns defense held the 49ers to three and out on their first possession, Josh Cribbs took the punt back to the 49ers 33 yard line. Moving the ball with some effect, Anderson then threw to a well-covered Kellen Winslow and San Francisco cornerback Walt Harris stepped in for the easy interception.

Anderson temporarily rediscovered his groove two possessions later, however, hitting a wide open Braylon Edwards who was streaking back a defenseless Nate Clements for a 45-yard touchdown, which was notable mostly for the penalty called on Edwards afterward for unsportsmanlike conduct. Edwards took offense

when Clements tried to tackle him while in the end zone by turning and taunting the beaten Clements. But that penalty notwithstanding, the catch was important as it pushed Edwards past Webster Slaughter for the most receiving yards in a season. On the day, Edwards had three receptions for 67 yards, giving him 1289 yards on the season, well past Slaughter's 1236 yards in 1989. Winslow wasn't too far behind, either. His 62 receiving yards on Sunday gave him over 1100 for the season.

The Edwards touchdown pushed the score to 14-0. The Browns first touchdown came on a Cribbs 76-yard punt return. That, coupled with his 53-yard return after San Francisco's first possession gave him 129 return yards and the game was barely 11 minutes old. For the game, he had 192 yards and that doesn't include the 94-yard kickoff return that was called back. It was affirmation that Cribbs' Pro Bowl selection was well-deserved.

But other than the touchdown pass to Edwards, Anderson was throwing conservatively against a depleted 49ers defense, opting more for screens and quick outs than anything much downfield. That's what five interceptions in less than two games will do for a player's psyche. The injury, though, which wasn't serious, provided the perfect cover for head coach Romeo Crennel to do what many fans were clamoring for anyway—put in Brady Quinn.

But before that could occur there was the little matter of the defense. Even a struggling team struggles less against the Browns, particularly if they have any sort of running attack. Though 49ers running back Frank Gore has been somewhat of a disappointment to fantasy football league owners around the country, he still entered the Browns game with over 1000 yards rushing. That was more than enough to keep the Browns front seven on their heels and the defensive backs skittish, at least in the first half, and it showed mightily as Weinke took the 49ers down the field and closed the gap to 14-7 with a seven-yard touchdown pass to Darrell Jackson. The drive was helped by Gore's running and a questionable roughing the passer call on linebacker Kamerion Wimbley.

But after that bit of interference was cleared, in came Quinn with just over three minutes left in the half. Let the record show that Quinn's first completion came with 1:59 left in the half, a 15-yard toss to tight end Steve Heiden. Let the record also show that at 1:19 and again at 1:07, Quinn should have had the first touchdown pass of his career. But Edwards dropped the first pass, which is never unexpected, and Winslow dropped the second, which was quite unexpected.

Still, there were at least two positives. First, Quinn looked comfortable playing. It helps, of course, to have a good offensive line, but frankly Quinn looked the same as he did in the preseason, calm and in charge. If nothing else, it's pretty clear that he's been doing more in the last 17 weeks than just making Subway commercials. Second, by moving the team into the red zone, Quinn gave Phil Dawson his first chance in two weeks to kick a field goal. By converting the 23-yard chance, which pushed the score to 17-7, coupled with the two extra points earlier in the half, Dawson also entered the record books, pushing past Lou Groza for the most points by a Browns kicker in a single season. In all, Dawson ended the regular season with 120 points, five more than Groza's 115 in 1964. It also tied Dawson for second in season scoring with Leroy Kelly, who had 120 points in 1968. Jim Brown holds the record with 126 points in 1965.

The game, hardly in doubt even at halftime, had only one remaining mystery: whether Crennel would stay with Quinn in the second half or tempt fate further by putting Anderson back in. Mystery solved. Crennel went right back to Anderson, his starter, and it didn't even take a coin flip. The truth is, though, that it hardly mattered. Ken Dorsey could have moved this offense against that team. Heck, Jimmy Dorsey would have been at least even money to throw a touchdown pass against the 49ers, assuming of course he had receivers who wouldn't drop it in the end zone.

Anderson took the team on a 12-play, 69-yard drive that didn't result in any points (do you see a pattern here?) and that probably shouldn't have been anyway.

Cribbs had taken the second-half kickoff 94 yards for what should have been his second return touchdown of the day. It was called back, however, on a holding call against Lennie Friedman that seemed more imagined than real. Anderson moved the team capably enough, but when running back Jason Wright dropped a touchdown pass in the end zone (do you see another pattern here?), the call went out to Dawson. But Clements, playing in front of family and friends, blocked the 25-yard attempt.

It hardly mattered. Weinke and the 49ers were unable to move the ball then or for the rest of the game. For the next quarter and a half, the game was mostly a death march toward the final gun, punctuated only occasionally by something semi-interesting, like a couple of Willie McGinest sacks (the Browns had five in all), a couple of good Jamal Lewis runs and a 49-yard field goal by Dawson that pushed the score to 20-7 with just over 10 minutes left in the game. It was the only points scored in the second half. By the end, it looked every bit like the fourth preseason game in both form and substance, particularly when the Browns backfield featured Jerome Harrison and Charles Ali late in the game.

Nonetheless, it did make more than a few fans loudly wonder, then, why Crennel was keeping Quinn nailed to the bench. But nailed did he remain to the bench. The only thing it really cost the Browns was the chance to get a better feel for Quinn under actual game conditions, which one can only assume mattered more to General Manager Phil Savage than it obviously did to Crennel.

Unquestionably, a 10-6 record is a successful season by any measure, particularly when the NFL seems designed to yield mostly 9-7 and 7-9 records. But more than just that visceral success, it validated the direction Savage has set for this team. First he overhauled the offensive line by first signing free agent guard Eric Steinbach and then resisting the call to draft a skill player with the first pick and instead opting for left tackle Joe Thomas. That move alone resulted in an astounding 35 less sacks than the previous season. He then brought in a hungry Jamal Lewis, threw his faith in the quarterback he stole from the Ravens rather than the quarterback he drafted in the third round, and rounded it off by taking control of the coaching staff by handpicking Rob Chudzinski as offensive

coordinator. Crennel is getting the attention nationally for the Browns success by people who aren't paying attention, but the person most deserving of post-season accolades is Savage, for executive of the year. And no matter that the season officially ended Sunday evening, the real meaning to be wrung from this season is that for the first time in a long time, Cleveland has a real football team.