The Cleveland Browns, their season long since over, brought a little company along for the rest of the ride into the offseason, stunning and embarrassing the Pittsburgh Steelers Thursday night, 13-6. The loss effectively put an end to the Steelers' playoff hopes, which was the real icing on the cake of a very cold evening. The win also stopped the Browns own 7-game losing steak and 12-game losing streak to the Steelers. Though the offense did enough to win, it was an inspired defense that confused Ben Roethlisberger all night while sacking him 8 times. Gary tells us about it in his latest.

Pittsburgh Steelers, welcome to the dark side.

The Cleveland Browns, their season long since over, brought a little company along for the rest of the ride into the offseason, simultaneously stunning and

embarrassing the Steelers and the thousands watching all around the world Thursday night, 13-6. Making the victory even sweeter for the Browns was the fact that the loss all but ended any chance that the Steelers', last year's Super Bowl champs, have of making the playoffs.

For the Browns, a team of modest talent and more injuries and a team that doesn't look to sniff the playoffs for years, it was a chance to experience what a meaningful victory tastes like as they sent the Steelers to their 5th straight loss and, more importantly, stopped both a 7-game losing streak of their own and a 12-game losing streak to the Steelers.

When the final words on this season are written, no matter what happens next this will serve as the high water mark, and well it should.

Though the Browns offense did enough to win the game, it was a game that most assuredly belonged to the Browns' defense. Disguising coverages all night, the Steelers' Ben Roethlisberger seemed confused and unable to ever fully get into a rhythm.

He repeatedly had trouble finding open receivers, except underneath, and was sacked an astounding 8 times.

Really, there was no negative in the game. Brady Quinn showed good leadership and remained in charge, his relatively modest statistics notwithstanding. But Josh Cribbs, as he's been most of the season, was the player the Steelers really couldn't control.

His 54-yard punt return set up the Browns' first score and he was almost unstoppable for the Steelers' defense out of the

"wildcat" formation.

Although Cribbs only had 8 carries, it seemed like far more since he covered 87 yards.

Rookie Chris Jennings was effective in his own right, adding 73 yards on 20 carries.

This was the game that the dwindling supporters of head coach Eric Mangini had been waiting for all year. The win against the Buffalo Bills didn't register because the Bills are like the Browns, just a little further east. But the Steelers, they have cache. And for this night Mangini can finally legitimately celebrate something. The complete game that his team played against a team that needed the win far more than them is probably going to give Mangini something more to celebrate than just the win. Owner Randy Lerner, who looks to take the easy way out of everything, can use this game as the reason to continue the Mangini experiment for another year.

Maybe that was the Steelers' game plan all along.

From the outset, the Steelers seemed far more bothered by the cold, windy weather than the Browns, repeatedly huddling under parkas and around heaters. Indeed it wasn't until very late in the first half that the Steelers showed any signs of life.

With the elements almost guaranteeing that it would be a game of field position, the ability to control the ball and get first downs would be critical.

The Browns did just that when it mattered most. Their first score, a 30-yard field goal by Phil Dawson, was the culmination of a field position chess match, aided greatly by an inspired defense that sacked Roethlisberger on third down on consecutive series.

The 54-yard punt return by Cribbs put the ball at the Steelers' 8-yard line but a holding penalty pushed the ball back to the 17-yard line and Quinn and the offense couldn't convert the red zone opportunity into a touchdown.

The Browns got to the red zone again after taking over at their own 49-yard line thanks to a Quinn to Mohammad Massaquoi pass that went for 37 yards. But the Browns again couldn't convert the opportunity into a touchdown and again had to settle for another 30-yard Dawson field goal.

As much as they were dominating the game to this point, call it the long shadow of 12 consecutive losses to their most hated rival but there was a feeling that the Browns' two red zone failures would come back to haunt them later.

But as the game wore on it became increasingly apparent that these aren't the Steelers of old, or even the Steelers of earlier this season. T heir next drive, as much as any, laid it out in stark terms.

After starting from his own 26-yard line, Roethlisberger mishandled a snap and lost two yards. He was then sacked on consecutive plays

and the Steelers again forced to punt. For good measure, on the punt the Steelers were flagged for holding which negated a fumble recovery that would have given them the ball at the Browns' 42-yard line and perhaps turned the tide.

Daniel Sepulvada's next punt was down at the Cleveland 40 but a personal foul pushed the ball back to the 26-yard line.

But that changed quickly as Cribbs, already having a big game, ran 37 yards on a direct snap that took the ball to the Pittsburgh 30-yard line. Quinn then connected with running back Chris Jennings for 8-yards and snuck it up the middle for another first down giving them the ball at the Steelers' 19-yard line, their third trip in the red zone.

It was a charm.

Jennings ran straight up the middle for 9 yards and then finished off the drive with a 10-yard touchdown run giving the Browns their first rushing touchdown by a running back this season. Dawson's extra point gave the Browns a 13-0 lead with just 41 seconds in the half.

For the moment anyway, the Steelers looked cold, tentative and beaten.

But looks were deceiving as the Steelers didn't just fold for the half. Ta king over at their own 33-yard line, Roethlisberger quickly moved the Steelers down the field and had a chance for a touchdown but threw behind tight end Heath Miller at the goal line, forcing the Steelers to settle for a 27-yard field goal by Jeff Reed that closed the gap to 13-3 at

the half.

That bit of success seemed to inspire the Steelers out of the gate in the second half. Moving with a crispness that was missing for most of the first 30 minutes of the game, the Steelers quickly went from their own 12-yard line to the 50. But Roethlisberger's pass to Holmes on 3rd and 5 was low and a promising drive halted.

It's at these points that games like these are often won or lost. With the ball sitting on their 13-yard line and plenty of game left to play, the Browns didn't necessarily need to score but they did need to hold on to the ball long enough to let the Steelers' defense know that they weren't going to succumb to the pressure of holding a lead.

And that's more or less what they did, mostly on the back of Jennings who was running often and hard. As a result the Browns were able to change field position, getting the ball to their 45-yard line before being forced to punt.

Hodges punt, though, traveled only 27 yards against the wind and Pittsburgh started their next drive at their 28-yard line.

But the Steelers again went 3-and-out with Roethlisberger again being sacked, this time by linebacker David Bowens. It was the Browns' 6th sack of Roethlisberger in the game and there was still over 5 minutes left in the third quarter. It also represented the first time this season that the Browns were ever in the heads of an opponent.

The Steelers were effectively done.

Or so it would have seemed. The Steelers began to pressure the Browns on both sides of the ball, holding the offense to consecutive 3-and-outs while moving the ball down the field themselves.

But when Roethlisberger missed badly on a pass to Hines Ward (and in fairness to Ward, he looked like he was held though there was no flag), the Steelers had to again settle for a field goal.

They didn't get any closer.

About the only questionable moment in the game occurred after the Steelers took over at their own 39 and

appeared stalled at the Cleveland 34-yard line when Roethlisberger's pass to Miller was short of the mark.

The Steelers were flagged for holding on the play and were going to keep their offense on the field on 4th and 8.

But instead of declining the penalty, which even the officials figured would occurred, Mangini oddly took the penalty pushing the Steelers back further but giving them two more chances to get the first down.

Like most everything else on this night, it worked. Rashard Mendenhall dropped Roethlisberger's 3rd-down pass, forcing the Steelers to punt.

The Browns, using both Jennings and Cribbs effectively, were then able to take a little more than 5 more minutes off the clock before punting. With 6:24 to play and the Steelers

starting at their own 21-yard line, there was the sense that this would be the Steelers' last real chance.

And the Steelers looked for awhile like they were going to make it a classic late season drive by a playoff-caliber team. But after moving the ball into Cleveland territory with just over two minutes left in the game, Roethlisberger was sacked for the 7th time.

With the Steelers facing 2nd and 19, Matt Roth nearly picked off Roethlisberger but the ball it the turf.

After the two-minute warning, Miller picked up 13 of the 19 yards needed on 3rd

down but on 4
th

down Roethlisberger missed badly and almost had it picked off by Bowens.

With 1:43 left and the Steelers down to 1 time out, the celebration was on.

In a season in which so much has gone wrong, most of it self-inflicted, this was the night for a little redemption. It's hard to figure, really, how that could happen.

Statistically the game shaped up as an incredible mismatch.

The Steelers were gaining an average of 130 yards more a game on offense and outscoring the Browns by an average of 10 points a game.

On defense, the Browns were giving up a staggering 400 yards a game while the Steelers, sporting an unusually weak defense themselves, were still giving up 100 yards less a game.

And as bad as the Steelers' defense had been playing, they still were only giving up 78 yards a game on the ground while the Browns were giving up 155 yards a game.

But the actual game turned these statistics on their collective ears. It was the Browns dominating on the ground with 171 yards to the Steelers 75. It was the Browns that outgained the Steelers in total yards, 255-216.

Finally, it was the Browns that beat the Steelers, a sentence I haven't been able to write in 6 years.

For this game to be the actual start of the vaunted Mangini process and not a late season mirage, the Browns need to use it as a spring board, particularly since they play Kansas City and Oakland the next two weeks. If they're able to start a modest win streak, then the off season won't seem as dismal. If past be prologue, though, the one thing we know for sure is it won't come easy.