Nothing like losing the battle but winning the war.

Beaten statistically all day, the Cleveland Browns nonetheless finally let another team make the critical 4th quarter mistakes and as a result, took themselves out of the winless column thanks to a hard fought 23-20 win against the Cincinnati Bengals. In the process, the Browns may have also found themselves an identity and his name is Peyton Hillis.

For the second straight week Hillis ran for more than 100 yards, none bigger than his 24-yard run just before the two-minute warning that took the ball from the Cleveland 46 yard line to the Cincinnati 30. With the Bengals using their remaining time outs prior to the Hillis run, that run effectively sealed the win and all that was left was for quarterback Seneca Wallace to do was take a knee three times and the Browns had their first win of the season.

The Browns' win simultaneously broke a 3-game losing streak against the Bengals and halted a Bengals 8-game winning streak against the AFC North.

If you're a fantasy football player looking just at the box score, the game was a statistical mismatch in favor of the Bengals and you're happy, particularly if you started quarterback Carson Palmer or receiver Terrell Owens. Palmer was 25-36 for 370 yards and two touchdowns and the Bengals also had 67 yards running. Owens meanwhile gave the Browns' secondary fits all day. He had 10 catches for 222 yards. Based those statistics fans in both Cleveland and

Cincinnati are probably wondering exactly how the game ended up as it did.

A lot of the answer to that question depends on how you want to look at things. Technically, the difference in the game was a 44-yard field goal attempt by Bengals placekicker Mike Nugent that was blocked by linebacker Scott Fujita late in the first half. The Browns, behind some timely completions from quarterback Seneca Wallace, were able to turn that block into a 34-yard Phil Dawson field goal as the half ended. It was a 6 point turnaround that was the difference in the game.

But it was really far more than that. While Owens was running wild in the secondary and screaming on the sidelines when the Bengals didn't have the ball about how the Browns' defense couldn't stop him, Palmer was making one timely mistake or another that kept the Bengals out of the end zone. Although he missed on only 11 passes, it seemed like every one of those misses couldn't have come at a worse time.

Consider, for example, what turned out to be the Bengals' last drive. Starting at their own 14-yard line, Palmer was picking apart the secondary as the Bengals made their way all the way down to the Cleveland 37-yard line. Palmer then missed a short pass over the middle to receiver Andre Caldwell and, two plays later, missed Chad Ochocinco on a short pass. Ochocinco didn't help matters by being flagged for an interference penalty and Eric Mangini didn't help matters by accepting the penalty. On 3rd and 13, Palmer was then sacked at the 45-yard line, forcing a punt with just under 5 minutes remaining. It was one of 4 sacks Palmer endured, mostly because he seemed indecisive at just the wrong moment.

But it wasn't just Palmer's strangely inconsistent play that was the difference either. Credit must go to the ability of the offense behind Hillis to put the game away with nearly 5 minutes remaining as Palmer helplessly watched.

Hillis, though, was more than just that last drive. Taking nearly as much punishment as he was dishing out, he gained the tough yards the entire day that forced the Bengals' defense to respect the run. That opened up enough of the passing game for Wallace. Let's also mention that there was another signature run for Hillis, this one in the form of a blast he put on safety Roy Williams when Williams made the mistake of trying to tackle Hillis near the shoulder pads. It knocked Williams back about 3 yards and then out of the game.

Wallace, meanwhile, continued to make a case for supplanting putative starter Jake Delhomme. If Delhomme was brought in to essentially better manage the game than the former pretenders behind center for the Browns, and he was, then serious consideration should be given by Mangini to continue riding Wallace instead. He's doing just fine in that regard.

Wallace didn't have the glamor statistics that Palmer put up but he was quietly effective anyway, hitting 18 of 30 passes for 184 yards. He had one touchdown, a beautiful 24-yard pass to tight end Evan Moore in the first half that stretched the Browns' early lead to 10-0. Wallace still makes some poor decisions, including an interception, but nothing that the Browns couldn't at least overcome this week.

As for the defense, anytime it can hold a potentially explosive offense to 20 points, it should be considered a good day. But further analysis will reveal that so much of what went wrong for the Bengals was self-inflicted on offense that it certainly isn't time yet for the defense to claim elite status.

One of the lingering questions would be how cornerback Eric Wright might respond after absorbing a week of watching countless replays of him chasing Baltimore Ravens' receiver Anquan Boldin. It was a mixed bag, at best.

It looked like the Browns adjusted their defense to give Wright a slightly less demanding role. Defensive coordinator Rob Ryan had Wright pinching up in run support and getting help while watching Chad Ochocinco. The task then fell mostly to Sheldon Brown to cover Owens. Ochocinco had only 3 catches for 59 yard while Owens ran wild. But Wright was often out of position and late on coverage and still seemed out of sorts for most of the day. Either there is something physically wrong with him or he's lost his confidence. Either way, this is a situation that will likely end up with rookie Joe Haden starting sooner rather than later.

And what would a week be without Ryan using the blitz as a sword instead of a shield and looking nearly reckless in the process? Another ill-timed blitz in the first half seemed to wake up the Bengals at just the wrong time and looked, for awhile anyway, like it was just the medicine that the Bengals' constipated offense needed.

With the Browns having taken an early 10-0 lead Ryan called for an all-out blitz on 2nd and 13

from the Bengals own 22 yard line. This time it was Brown on an island with no help and as he tripped, Owens pulled in what turned out to be an easy 78-yard touchdown pass that helped tie the game at 10-10.

The Browns' offense seemed as stunned as the crowd by that turn and on its next possession turned the ball right back over to the Bengals after Chansi Stuckey defelected a short pass from Wallace into the arms of Bengals' cornerback Leon Hall. But after a 25-yard completion to Owens, Palmer missed three straight times and then Fujita block Nugent's field goal attempt, essentially taking Ryan off the hook and the Bengals lost whatever momentum they had.

As if to prove the point, the Browns then stretched their slim halftime lead to 10 on their second possession on the back of some timely completions by Wallace, some hard running by Hillis and a few mistakes by the Bengals' defense, including an interference penalty that kept the drive alive. Hillis finished it all off with a 1-yard run.

The Browns then had a real chance to put the Bengals away midway through the third quarter when Palmer fumbled and it was recovered by Kenyon Coleman at the Cincinnati 13-yard line. But the Browns couldn't punch it in from there and settled for a Dawson 22-yard field goal that gave the Browns a slightly more tenuous 23-10 lead.

It looked even more tenuous when the Bengals marched right back but they again came up short in the red zone and had to settle for a 25-yard field goal by Nugent with just over a minute remaining in the third quarter.

Following a Browns' punt, the Bengals then put together their most effective drive. On 3rd and goal from the Cleveland 7-yard line, Palmer looked to have missed receiver Jordan Shipley in the end zone, but safety T.J. Ward pummeled Shipley with a late helmet-on-helmet and was flagged for the personal foul. Ward probably should have been ejected from the game and will surely be fined substantially. Palmer then shoveled a pass to running back Brian Leonard for a 4-yard touchdown that brought the Bengals back to within 3 points.

But the Bengals couldn't find any more after that and, as a result, look like about the third best team in the AFC North.

The win will surely put a bounce back into the steps of a Browns' team that looked like it might have to endure a very long stretch before victory would come their way. Now the trick of course is to follow it up with another win against a Pittsburgh Steelers team that will have serial offender Ben Roethlisberger back at quarterback. Things never look easy for this team but at least for one weekend nothing looks impossible.