The game may have ended up as most expected, but at least the Cleveland Browns didn't go down without a fight. Playing with their third string quarterback against a Pittsburgh Steelers team that would blitz a team quarterbacked by Dick LeBeau's mother just because they can, the Browns nonetheless held their ground for most of the game before coming up short in a closer-than-it looks 28-10 loss.

The storyline going into the game may have been the return of Steelers' quarterback Ben Roethlisberger from a league-imposed suspension for unsavory personal conduct he still denies, but the overarching storyline for Browns' fans was Colt McCoy's first start in a season where Browns' management had hoped he'd just be a passive observer.

But McCoy gave a good accounting for himself, hanging tough in the face of relentless blitzing from one of the league's best defenses, throwing accurately and getting his first NFL touchdown late in the fourth quarter. Having survived this game pretty much in tact, indeed after having gained confidence as the game wore on, no one associated with the Browns need fear McCoy's next start, which irrespective of the health of Seneca Wallace, should be next week against New Orleans.

On the day McCoy was a very respectable 23-33 for 281 yards, 1 touchdown and 2 interceptions.

The record book will reflect that McCoy's first touchdown pass went for 12 yards to tight end Ben Watson with just over 4 minutes in the game. But this was no preseason, 4th quarter garbage time touchdown. It brought the Browns' back to within 11 points just after the Steelers had taken the lead on a touchdown following a muffed fair catch by Chansi Stuckey (more on

that in a moment) with just under 6 minutes remaining in the game.

True at that moment the game was effectively over, McCoy nonetheless put together a tidy 70-yard drive in which he went 4-5. It featured a 28-yard pass to Evan Moore and the touchdown pass to Watson. Given how he had been knocked around all game, it was as pleasant a surprise as it was unexpected. Browns fans are used to seeing their quarterbacks just crawl back into a shell when the going gets that tough.

The Browns, though, were showing some spunk. They tried and failed at an onside kick, looking to make the score even closer. After the Steelers punted, McCoy went back to work but threw his second interecption, this time to Lawrence Timmons. Three plays later, Roethlisberger connected with Mike Wallace for a touchdown and the final margin of victory. It was Roethlisberger's third touchdown pass of the day and second to Wallace.

If this Browns' season is all about tracking progress, then here's a statistic that will make fans feel better. For the 6th straight game, the Browns had a lead, this time an early 3-0 on Phil Dawson's franchise record 235th field goal. But the counterpoint, unfortunately, is that for the 5th time in those 6 games, the Browns permanently relinquished that lead and now find themselves pretty much where they were a season ago, 1-5 with injuries mounting more quickly than subpoenas at a Cuyahoga County commissioners meeting.

At least they didn't lose another quarterback. Well, sorta, they did and it's a loss that could prove to be far more difficult for the team to absorb if kick returner, receiver and part-time quarterback Josh Cribbs is out for any extended period of time.

Cribbs, running from the wildcat formation early in the second quarter, collided with former Kent State teammate James Harrison and was knocked cold. Cribbs was able to leave under his own power but was taken into the locker room and didn't return. If T.J. Ward is the barometer then Harrison should get an nice letter from the NFL and a strongly worded request that he donate part of his salary for what amounted to a helmet-to-helmet hit on Cribbs. Oddly, with an official right there and watching Harrison lead into his tackle of Cribbs with his helmet, he didn't bother to throw a flag.

But Harrison was hardly through. A short time later and for good measure, Harrison also blasted

a an essentially defenseless Mohamed Massaquoi in the helmet as well and likewise wasn't flagged. The hit knocked Massaquoi out of the game yet didn't garner a penalty, either. If the league lets the Cribbs hit go it will only be because they won't let the Massaquoi hit go. In truth, Harrison deserves double the Ward fine.

With two starting receivers out, Stuckey became the primary receiver and the putative punt returner, which is how he got into a position to muff a return in the first place. Stuckey did catch 4 passes for 46 yards. Watson, though, was the leading receiver with 6 catches for 88 yards and the touchdown. Running back Peyton Hillis also had 6 catches, for 49 yards.

With Cribbs no longer an option of any sort, the entire burden of facing the Steelers fell to McCoy. It's a similar dilemma that more than a dozen or so other quarterbacks for the Browns have found themselves in over the last decade and if nothing else, McCoy proved he wasn't overwhelmed, which gives him a leg up on most of the others already.

Offensive coordinator Brian Daboll helped out by simplifying the game plan a bit. There were plenty of runs that featured misdirection and a number of screens designed mostly to keep the pressure off McCoy. When McCoy did drop back, he showed a mostly accurate arm while also absorbing a beating at the hands of a blitzing Pittsburgh defense.

McCoy's day didn't get off to the kind of start that anyone outside of Pittsburgh and the surrounding suburbs wanted. After taking the opening drive and moving into Steelers' territory, McCoy threw into heavy traffic and saw the ball tipped and then intercepted by safety Ryan Clark.

The Steelers, though, couldn't capitalize. With Roethlisberger and the hard running of Rashard Mendenhall, who had 84 yards on 27 carries for the day, the Steelers offense was putting together an impressive drive. It ended abruptly however on 3rd and 4 from the Cleveland 14-yard line when Roethlisberger overthrew Wallace and into the waiting arms of cornerback Joe Haden. It was Haden's first career interception and his 62-yard run afterward was easily the most exciting run of the Browns season, returning it 62 yards. It led to the Dawson field goal and the 3-0 lead.

That lead lasted as long as the Steelers' next drive. Roethlisberger then went to work, hitting

Emmanuel Sanders on a 22-yard pass and then, under pressure from linebacker Matt Roth, hitting Wallace for a 29-yard touchdown. Wallace had turned cornerback Eric Wright the wrong way near the end zone a for the score. It gave Pittsburgh a 7-3 lead.

Despite Roethlisberger looking mostly like he had been playing all season, the Browns' defense still kept the game close. It's hard to know, certainly, but a case could certainly be made that the game may have been even closer if defensive coordinator Rob Ryan was just a little less reckless.

His schemes tend to keep opposing quarterbacks guessing. The linebackers, particularly Matt Roth and Scott Fujita, are playing better than any group of linebackers in the last 10 years. As a unit, the Browns' defense hits hard. Yet, Ryan's love affair with his cleverness continues to cost this team.

Every Steelers big play came on a Browns blitz. Roethlisberger's first touchdown, a 29-yarder to Wallace, came on the heels of a blitz that left, guess who, Wright flailing once again. Roethlisberger's second touchdown, an 8-yarder to Hines Ward, came on an all out blitz that again left Wright exposed. Ward caught it short of the goal line but Wright was out of position and whiffed on the tackle. Had it been made, the Steelers would have had to settle for a field goal and the game would have been that much closer.

The reason the Steelers can get away with blitzing so often is that they have talented defensive backs that can cover and tackle. The reason the Browns can't ever seem to get away with blitzing is that they have a patchwork defensive backfield that features two rookies, a 9-year veteran, Sheldon Brown, who has lost a step and 4th year player in Wright who hasn't taken the next step in his development that most expected.

Things don't get any easier next week for the Browns as they travel to New Orleans. Drew Brees will have 6 weeks of game films to study all the various blitzes that Ryan will throw at him and, if Cribbs doesn't return, the Saints' defense will spend most of their day covering tight ends. For good measure, they won't have to worry much about kicking away from the Browns' return teams, either.

It's far from the best case scenario for the Browns, but then again, when was the last time the

best case scenario fell the Browns' way anyway? Exactly.