**1. That old feeling**

What a difference a month makes. Four weeks ago the Browns were 1-4 and getting ready to start third-string rookie Colt McCoy in Pittsburgh with subzero expectations. The team had definitely shown improvement, but they were having trouble closing out games and the prospect of starting McCoy excited no one.

Four games later we sit at 3-6 after splitting a four game stretch against Super Bowl contenders who have a combined record of 32-10. The defense has stiffened, the offensive line is above-average, Peyton Hillis has established himself as (yeah I'll say it) an elite back, and Colt McCoy looks like the most promising Browns rookie quarterback since one Bernard Joseph Kosar. As rough as this loss to the Jets feels right now, if we keep things in perspective, we have plenty to be happy about.

And I'm not the first to say it – but although they returned in 1999, I finally feel like the Browns are back. I woke up Sunday morning and showered, shaved, ate, put on the colors, and did some homework. But around noon it hit me – I was nervous again. I haven't felt anxiety before a game since late 2007. At one point during the game I had to fight off a Remote Toss. That, my friends, is a terrific sign.

I spent the vast majority of the last two seasons watching the Browns like an objective, emotionless Vulcan. It seems like those days are gone, and I couldn't be happier about it. After gritting our teeth through another tough Tribe season and watching a certain someone head south this summer, it's going to be really fun to watch everyone fall in love with the Browns all over again. I don't know about you, but I'm more ready to get hurt again.

**2. Greater than the sum of its parts**

When you think of “explosive offenses,” the Jersey Jets might not come to mind, but you can make a strong argument that they have the best offensive line in the league. This Browns defense will always be vulnerable to some coverage breakdowns because of the lack of depth and overall inexperience of the secondary. Eric Wright’s continued existence doesn’t help either, but I digress. The point is that if a team can run consistently on the Browns, then the Browns might be serious trouble, and the Jets are tough enough up front for their tandem of Shonn Greene and LaDanian Tomlinson to do just that.

Although Greene and LT2 did pile up a combined 129 yards, the Browns only allowed a stingy 3.4 yards per carry, which was great to see. Wildcat quarterback Brad Smith actually gave them more grief, carrying for 39 yards on 7.8 YPC.

Mark Sanchez had a nice day throwing the football, but if the Browns had hung onto a couple of those late sacks that he evaded, they might be celebrating their third straight win tonight. I know that there were three missed field goals, but the defense really didn’t give up that many points when you consider that they gave up 456 yards in five quarters of football, and they held the Jets to just 3 points in the second half.

Rob Ryan put together another dynamite game plan this week, and once against left me wondering what he could do if we give Tom Heckert another winter or two to improve this roster. Here’s hoping that Ryan doesn’t get poached by a team with a head coaching vacancy for at least one more season.

**3. Shaun isn’t dead**

While we’re talking defense, Shaun Rogers looked like his 2008 self again. Although he didn’t show up on the stat sheet, Rogers was constantly double-teamed and still managed to harass Mark Sanchez with regularity.

To compare Rogers' attitude to Randy Moss' is unfair, but I don't totally buy that Rogers' issues this season have been purely related to his mysterious ankle injury. His motivation hasn't totally been there this year, but maybe the team's upturn has poured some gas on the big man's fire. Regardless of the reason, if Rogers can play the rest of the season like he did on Sunday, he can give the defense an entirely different dimension.

**4. The aforementioned Eric Wright**

What more needs to be said? Wright was toasted again today, most notably on Santonio Holmes' game-winning touchdown catch and Jericho Cotchery's impressive overtime catch in the middle of the field. The Cotchery catch was worse because the guy hurt himself early in the play, and Wright could have easily defended the pass if he hadn't already given up on the play.

Wright's confidence was clearly rocked when he was torched by Anquan Boldin back in week three, and he hasn't recovered. My guess is that his lack of confidence combined with the pressure of a contract year has gotten to Wright. It will be very interesting to see what the market is for Wright, and whether or not he's back in Cleveland next year.

Personally, I feel for the guy. Whether you're playing sports, heading into your job, or taking an exam, there's nothing worse than totally losing your bearings and feeling. I hope Wright can get things turned around because he is still vitally important to the defense, but the season is now over 50% complete, and I'm done holding my breath.

**5. Peyton Hillis is the epitome of rugged masculinity**

Maybe it's just me, but I find myself waiting for a team to bring some Kryptonite and make Peyton Hillis look like a real boy. It hasn't happened yet.

When healthy, Hillis has been an unstoppable force, and he had another solid day against one of the league's best run defenses, picking up 82 yards on a healthy 4.3 YPC. Hillis is such a powerful runner that it's easy to forget he's also the team's number two receiver. My spider sense tells me Hillis will be a good candidate for a new contract this winter.

**6. Insert "Colt" pun here**

As much as I thought the risk-reward proposition was attractive when the Browns grabbed Colt McCoy in the third round, I was very skeptical about the Texan's pro prospects. Obviously four games do not make a career, but Daniel "Colt" McCoy is certainly on his way to proving me wrong. If he can pull it off, I will never be more excited to issue a *mea culpa.*

Like I said earlier, McCoy has been the most impressive young Browns quarterback we've seen in a generation. His extensive college starting experience and excellent preparation skills are evident, as he never seemed overwhelmed even against blitz-happy defenses like the Steelers and Jets.

McCoy is undersized, lacks the cannon of a Matthew Stafford, and doesn't have the mobility of a Michael Vick. What he seems to have is that elusive "it" that separates good pro quarterbacks from the ranks of career backups.

I don't want to climb aboard the bandwagon just yet, because we still have to see how McCoy handles the league's adjustments during the balance of the season, but I've purchased my ticket and my bags are packed.

**7. Yeah…about those fumbles…**

The fumbles clearly have to stop. This team is good enough that if Colt McCoy takes care of the football and makes a few plays, they're going to win more games than they lose down the stretch. And although losing multiple fumbles in a professional game is inexcusable, we should at least be happy with *why* the fumbles occurred.

Hillis and Stuckey fumbled not solely due to carelessness, but because they were fighting for extra yardage. You can say what you want about Eric Mangini – the guy certainly isn't perfect – but he has these players ready to run through a brick wall for him. This Browns team fights

harder than any I've ever watched.

In that regard, I can excuse the fumbles last week. However, playing hard and playing smart don't have to be mutually exclusive, and that's what the Browns need to work on down the stretch.

Chansi Stuckey had to recognize that the Browns were almost in field goal range, and that ball security was much more important than picking up one or two extra yards. Peyton Hillis has to realize that defenders are punching at the ball because they think he's fumble-prone, and that he needs to cover up more when he's taking contact at the end of a run. (On a side note, Phil Simms made the great point that Hillis' bulging arms probably make it tougher for him to secure the ball one-handed.)

If the Browns combine the effort and desire that they've clearly demonstrated in the last few games with some situational know-how, then they're going to be a very dangerous opponent.

**8. Strategery**

There has been plenty of talk about how Eric Mangini handled this game down the stretch, particularly in overtime. I won't fault him for trying to throw for a first down, and if anything the Browns weren't aggressive enough.

Even at 4-5 the Browns' playoff hopes would be on life support, but at least they'd be alive. With five losses already, a tie would hurt the Browns much more than the Jets. The Browns really had nothing to lose and shouldn't have been thinking about preserving the tie at all.

If you want to argue that the tie would be good for morale, I'll bite. But whatever Mangini's thoughts, they weren't executed with any consistency. If you're thinking tie, then you run three

times, hopefully pick up the first down, and if nothing else you've created some room to punt.

But if you're really playing for the win – and it's what they should have done – then you not only should be throwing, you should be thinking "four down territory" during all of your overtime possessions.

Kicking the extra point after the fourth quarter touchdown was just as big, if not a bigger issue. The Browns were outgained and needed two missed field goals and a late touchdown drive just to force overtime. Starters Scott Fujita, Sheldon Brown, Joshua Cribbs, and Billy Yates had been knocked out of the game, and the Browns really had nothing to lose. They should have just taken their chances that Peyton Hillis could gain two yards for a two point conversion to end the game right there.

Even if they had lost, Mangini probably would have been praised for actually having the guts to go for the win. Part of the problem with most NFL coaches is that they don't want to put themselves in a position where someone can point the finger at them for a controversial decision that resulted in a loss. All too frequently conventional wisdom is treated as gospel, resulting in coaches who are too scared to take a risk. Mangini may regret that decision in hindsight.

**9. Playoff races heating up**

Although the Browns would now basically have to win out to make the playoffs (and Romeo Crennel's '07 squad serves as a reminder that even 10-6 guarantees nothing), the NFL playoffs are the most exciting event in sports, and we're just about at the time of year when teams will start to separate themselves. Largely for my own indulgence, let's take a quick look at how the divisions are shaking out.

*AFC East*

The Patriots and Jets are both for real and should be counted among the four or five elite teams in the AFC. There is almost no doubt that both of these teams will be playing in January; it's just a matter of who will win the division. That makes the way the Browns played them the last two weeks even more impressive. The Dolphins are 5-4 with a mess at quarterback, although I wonder if Tyler Thigpen will really be that much worse than Chad Henne. Bill Parcells has really helped right the ship in Miami, but I fear that regardless how good the rest of their team is, they may be stuck in that 7-10 win purgatory unless Chad Henne takes a sudden leap forward or they find a better alternative at quarterback.

*AFC North*

Home, sweet home. Given the recent attrition the Steelers have endured with serious losses on the offensive line and Aaron Smith heading to injured reserve, I'd put the Ravens ahead of the Steelers. That's fine by me – I don't have to deal with Ravens fans running around in filthy urine-colored jerseys making grunts and clicks at me through their toothless mouths. Unfortunately it would take a serious collapse for the Steelers to miss the playoffs. It is worth noting that the Browns whipped the Saints and Patriots one week before each of those teams beat the Steelers. If only the transitive property applied to the NFL. The Bengals' window has closed suddenly, with Carson Palmer's washed-upness finally rearing its ugly head.

*AFC South*

There's an interesting race here with all four teams separated by only two games. In the coming weeks, I'll bet that we see the Colts and Titans take the division race down to the wire, while the Jags and Texans fade away. The Colts also might just be a paper tiger, and they'll be tested with dates against the Pats, Chargers, and Titans in the next month. Whoever loses the division race may have a tough time beating out the second place teams in the East and North for that last Wild Card spot.

*AFC West*

Although the records aren't exciting, the West should give us a great race down the stretch.

The Chargers and Raiders both look like teams nobody wants to play right now, and one of those two should beat out the upstart Chiefs. Josh McDaniels has sure run the Broncos into the ground in a hurry, hasn't he?

*NFC East*

We basically know that it's going to be the Eagles and Giants, but we're not sure about the order. Whoever is left out will have to fight with the second place squads from the North and South for those two playoff spots. It is truly a delight to watch meddling owners Dan Snyder and Jerry Jones fail – it makes Randy Lerner look like Einstein for backing the Brinks truck into Mike Holmgren's driveway.

*NFC North*

The Vikings are 3-6 and basically out of this thing, so will Brett Favre just go away? On a side note, if you haven't seen the "Wrangler Open Fly Jeans" SNL sketch , it's a great way to spend the next 69 seconds of your life.

I keep waiting for the Bears to fall apart, and they keep making my wallet lighter. I still think that the Packers will beat out the Bears, who have a brutal schedule down the stretch, and have Jay Cutler just itching to throw down a four interception game. I know that there's very little love for Michigan in this space, but you have to feel a little for the Lions. They are turning that thing around and playing really hard each week, but Matt Stafford just seems snake-bitten.

*NFC South*

The Falcons, Saints, and Bucs are all separated by just one game. The Bucs have to come back to earth at some point, right? They are 6-3 with a minus-18 point differential, and they have road games with San Francisco and Baltimore, then a home date with the Falcons coming up. I would bank on them losing at least two out of three, and ultimately coming up short in the Wild Card race. It is still a great season for Tampa. The Falcons and Saints are both playoff teams, and both have soft schedules down the stretch. Carolina had better take a long, hard

look at Jimmy Clausen, because they've got a good chance to win the Andrew Luck sweepstakes.

*NFC West*

What a train wreck of a division. The Seahawks have a one game lead over the Rams at 5-4, making them the only team over .500. I want to pick the Rams to come back and win this thing, but who the hell knows?

Mike Holmgren doesn't look like a fool for allegedly offering tons of draft picks and a jelly of the month subscription to the Rams in exchange for the right to draft Sam Bradford. Watch for the 49ers to make a late push, but at 3-6 I don't think they're so much better than the Rams and Seahawks that they can catch them both. The poor Cardinals fans (all four of them) have gone from Kurt Warner to Derek Anderson in a year. That's like watching *Caddyshack* on Monday night and popping in
*Caddyshack II*
on Tuesday. Yep, that bad.

**10. Up next: at Jacksonville, EverBank Field, 1:00, CBS (DirecTV 707)**

The underrated benefit of becoming a good team is getting better commentators. Last week we were unexpectedly treated to Jim Nantz and Phil Simms. Simms isn't the best (nor is he the worst), but Nantz has a voice that could make a wolverine purr. This week we're back to our old pals Bob Macatee and Rich Gannon. Oh well, it was fun while it lasted.

If you've stuck around for the entirety of this column, you already know how I feel about the Jaguars. I don't think that they're a playoff contender, and they're a great measuring stick for the Browns because of how they've played their schedule.

The Jags are 5-4, but their wins have come against Denver (can score, no defense), Indy (overrated and a 3-6 team without Manning), Buffalo (bless them, they try), Dallas (I heard Romo's ex is getting engaged?), and Houston (see: Denver). Their losses have come to San

Diego (25 points), Philly (25), Tennessee (27), and Kansas City (22), all of whom are varying degrees of good. If the Browns are an above-average team right now (records notwithstanding) – and I believe they are – then they go into Jacksonville and win this game, even if they are a little shorthanded. Let's get it done, men.

**Prediction: Browns 27, Jags 20**