If this is how the Cleveland Browns' players show their support for an embattled head coach, then it's scary to think of how they might have played if they didn't like Eric Mangini. Needing a win or at least a really good effort to show club president Mike Holmgren that they have made great progress under Mangini, the players instead delivered a stirring testimonial to incompetence as they all but laid down to absorb a merciless beating at the hands of the Pittsburgh Steelers 41-9.

It was the Browns' fourth straight loss and it's now absolutely fair to suggest that if four straight wins to close out last season saved Mangini's job for another year then four straight and particularly ugly losses to close out this season should put the nail in his coffin as a NFL head coach. The Browns finished a season that at times looked promising exactly where they ended the last, 5-11 and left their fans again wondering whether the black cloud hanging over this franchise will ever leave. The answer, Virginia, is not any time soon.

The nightmare started quickly and then the avalanche came as the Steelers scored on each of their possessions in the first half, four touchdowns and a field goal, that gave them a 31-3 halftime lead. It marked the first time the Browns' defense had given up more than 30 points all season and also marked the first time this season that the Browns didn't hold a lead at some point in a game.

Consider it a sign. On the game's second play, McCoy's pass to tight end Ben Watson was knocked up in the air by Watson and intercepted by the Pittsburgh Steelers' version of Ed Reed, Troy Polamalu. (Maybe Reed is Baltimore's Polamalu. It makes little difference. They both destroy Cleveland offenses) On the next play, which means the Steelers' first play from scrimmage in the game, Steelers' quarterback Ben Roethlisberger hit Mike Wallace, who had sprinted past cornerback Joe Haden, for a 56-yard touchdown. The extra point gave the Steelers a quick 7-0 lead and they never looked back.

Wallace figured prominently in the Steelers' next touchdown, which came on their next possession. On 3rd and 3 from the Pittsburgh 47 yard line, Roethlisberger hit Wallace on a short crossing route that he turned into a 41 yard gain. Rashard Mendenhall finished off the drive with a 1-yard touchdown run putting the Steelers up 14-0.

Give McCoy credit, though. With an offensive line that struggled from the outset with Pittsburgh's pass rush and absolutely no running game to speak of, McCoy hung in and kept several plays alive with his scrambling ability, at least early. By the time the game was out of reach, even a scrambling McCoy was of no use.

With the first quarter winding down, the Browns mounted a credible threat that caught life when McCoy hit Mohamed Massaquoi for a 31-yard pass, much of which was the result of Massaquoi slipping tackles, and got the ball to the Pittsburgh 5-yard line. But as has been their problem of late, the Browns' offense couldn't finish the task and because there was absolutely nothing to play for, including apparently his job, Mangini bravely settled for the 19-yard field goal to close the gap just a bit at 14-3.

It may have sounded as if a chorus of boos rained down on Mangini when he sent Phil Dawson onto the field for the chip shot field goal at the end of the 14 play drive that consumed 77 yards and over 7 minutes. But it was more like a light mist mainly because off all the fans disguised as orange seats that sat silently.

The Steelers' offense made Mangini's oddly conservative decision look even more ridiculous when they came right back on their next drive, moving with an ease that made it pretty clear that this was a game this day of men vs. boys. A screen pass to Mendenhall that he turned into a 24-yard gain may have been the drive's signature play. The drive eventually ended where the

Steelers though it would, with one of their players in the end zone with the ball. Indeed it did. It was Mendenhall with a 1-yard run that helped extend the Steelers' lead to 21-3.

Maybe the onslaught was the result of bad karma created by Browns' defensive coordinator Rob Ryan after he took great pains last week in his press conference to talk about the wonderful season his defense has had except for all those late game collapses. There would be no late game collapse this day. It wouldn't be needed.

It's not that things got any worse for the Browns on their next drive because they were about as bad as it could be already. But for the record, things didn't get any better either as McCoy then threw his second interception, a ball overthrown in the direction of Massaquoi that was caught by a diving Ryan Clark instead. Mangini challenged the catch but as the kids might say, this was so not his day. The challenge was denied.

Three plays later the Steelers had their fourth touchdown in four possessions as Roethlisberger hit tight end Heath Miller with a 4-yard touchdown pass. The extra point made it 28-3 and had pretty much anyone still watching wondering whether the NFL has a little known codicil in its bylaws that called for a mercy rule in effect for the season's last game.

The Steelers got the ball back once again on McCoy's third interception of the day. The defense this time held the Steelers to a 41-yard Shaun Suisman field goal. It gave the Browns one last chance before the half, a chance they could do little with. On the plus side, there were no interceptions.

Like a Ginsu knife through a ripe tomato, the Steelers' offense went right through the Browns' offense to start the second half, extending their lead to 38 -3 with a 14-play 77-yard drive that was like sand in the eyes to the entire Browns' organization when receiver Antwan Randel El took the pitch from Roethlisberger on 3rd and goal from the Browns' 3-yard line and hit Hines Ward in the end zone. The trick play was unnecessary, certainly, but for all the times the Browns have used similar methods to score this season it was almost poetic in its irony. It was also the Steelers' sixth straight scoring possession and it cemented the fact that only two things could stop them from the perfunctory resistance being offered: the clock or themselves.

The Steelers opted for themselves as they pulled their starters. At least it let the Browns and

Holmgren know that they are competitive with the Steelers' second string, which is as depressing as it sounds. Using that battle as the barometer, the Browns "won" 6-3. Suisham had a 24-yard field goal early in the fourth quarter and McCoy hit Robiskie for a 20-yard touchdown pass late in the quarter. The two-point conversion attempt failed, naturally.

A word, though, about the touchdown. It wasn't a particularly pretty drive, certainly, but at least McCoy was doing his level best to retain some self-respect after the abuse he had been taking all day from the Pittsburgh defense. The key play on the drive was a 31-yard pass to Josh Cribbs with a face mask penalty tacked on that got the ball to the Pittsburgh 22-yard line. Another first down and then a delay of game penalty put the ball at the Pittsburgh 17. On second down McCoy looked like he had hit tight end Robert Royal for a touchdown but Royal was ruled to not have secured the ball in bounds. A Mangini challenge predicatably failed. Then McCoy hit Robiskie for the touchdown on the next play but it originally was ruled incomplete. Out of challenges, Mangini could only look on helplessly. But a particularly benevolent official came to help out the back judge who initially ruled it incomplete, pointing out that Robiskie indeed had possession in bounds. The original call was overruled and Robiskie given the touchdown.

Other than these mild diversions, the second half was mostly about playing out the string. For the Browns, they just wanted the beating to end. For the Steelers, they just wanted the playoffs to begin.

That the Browns lost wasn't a surprise and, frankly, it wasn't much of a surprise that they were blown out. There was nothing to play for, including a coach the players figured wouldn't be back to hassle them anyway about their lack of effort. But if this particular loss emphasized anything it's that for whatever progress may have been made this season statistically, it was mostly meaningless. The team is neither talented nor well coached and it ultimately showed up where those things always do show up, in the standings. Only a more pathetic Cincinnati Bengals team, a team that beat the Browns a few weeks ago, by the way, kept the Browns from finishing at the bottom of their division.

The Steelers' victory on the other hand gave them 14 of their last 15 and 20 of 22 overall since the Browns returned. It provides the best evidence really of the vast difference between the two teams, their respective coaching staffs and, for that matter, the two franchises.

From here the Browns' franchise will likely start over once again, perhaps as soon as Monday. If

that's the course, and it sure looks like it should be, it won't be a hard transition since the Browns haves done this with annoying frequency. If it does happen, at least we know that the difference this time is that the decision on who will coach this team finally will come from someone far better equipped than someone with the last name Lerner to make it. The only real question at the moment is whether Holmgren will try to find his leader in someone that represents a disciple of his or whether Holmgren will take a long deep breath as he looks in the mirror and decides that the best candidate to raise this franchise out of its generation-long malaise is the man staring back at him.