There is no excuse for what happened Sunday afternoon at Cleveland Browns Stadium.

The Pat Shurmur Era got off to an inauspicious start as the Cincinnati Bengals, picked by some to be the worst team in the NFL, made the Browns look clueless in their 27-17 win. The comedy of errors vacillated between the ridiculous and the sublime as the Browns, playing their in-state rivals in front of a raucous sellout crowd, made fools of themselves.

And don't think anything else happened. The Cleveland Browns committed the NFL's cardinal sin...they came into a game completely unprepared. As a result they looked foolish.

The first indication that the Browns had no idea what they were doing came in the first quarter when the team was flagged for six penalties in the first 15 minutes of action. A lot of them weren't even penalties of aggression...they were penalties of stupidity; false starts, late hits, neutral zone infractions, etc. Cincinnati built up a 13-0 lead while the Browns shot themselves in the foot time and time again.

The second indication that the Browns were not yet ready to play football for keeps was the punting fiasco. How a team can enter a season with Richmond McGee as its punter is beyond comprehension.

McGee could not make the team in Philadelphia or Chicago...where he spent some time in

training camp and on the practice squad...and had never had an actual punt in an NFL game prior to Sunday. Eight punts for a 36.0 yard average should be enough evidence that he should probably never punt in an NFL game again.

I understand Reggie Hodges, who handled the punting duties for the Browns last season, was lost for the year to an Achilles injury. However, punting is such a critical part of the game that every option has to be explored when deciding who will punt the football for your team. There had to have been better out there than McGee. I know there was. Take any random high school soccer goalie and he could probably do better than average 36.0 yards per punt.

The Browns offense was putrid in the first quarter, going three-and-out on its first two possessions while mustering just three rushing yards. Shurmur could not have gotten off to a worse start as a head coach.

"A season full of mistakes in the first quarter," he said. "No excuses. I don't care if you're a rookie. I don't care if you've been in this thing for 12 years, and I don't care if this is your last game. You can't make mistakes."

It's funny how Shurmur talked about there not being any excuses, because he sure came up with a big one for the game's most critical play. The Bengals caught the Browns' defense napping with 4:28 remaining in the game and the Browns holding a 17-14 lead. The Cincinnati offense broke its huddle quickly, lined up, got set for the requisite one second, then snapped the ball. The Cleveland defense was still in a huddle, resulting in no one covering rookie wide receiver A.J. Green. Bengals back-up quarterback Bruce Gradkowski lofted the ball down the field in Green's direction, and all Green had to do was run under it and grab it before trotting into the end zone untouched.

This gave the Bengals the lead for good, but Shurmer had an excuse.

"They quick-snapped us," Shurmur said. "I'll have to watch the tape, but it's my understanding they changed personnel, lined up and then quick-snapped. There's rules that go along with that, so we'll see. My understanding is when the offense changes personnel, the defense is allowed to do so as well and have time to do it."

NFL coaches don't whine about things like this. They bite the bullet, take the blame and then make damn sure it never happens again.

One final problem Sunday, a problem that also points to a lack of preparation, was the abysmal play calling. There were plenty of questionable plays called, but the biggest and most poignant example of Shurmur not quite being ready for prime time came when the Browns faced a first-and-goal from the four. Peyton Hillis took a handoff up the middle for a small gain on first down. This was followed by a pair of fade passes that were knocked away from their intended receivers.

Hillis is a bruiser, as is second-year rookie running back Monterrio Hardesty. Why Shurmur ran the ball just once is confusing. Why he eschewed the run in favor of two fade passes...which take a ton of familiarity between quarterback and receiver as well as more room to operate than the Browns had...is stranger yet.

A quick slant, maybe. A tight end pop was a possibility. A designed roll-out where Colt McCoy has the option to throw or run was another option.

Heck, with Hillis in the backfield, the Madden Football cover boy, the Browns should have stuck the ball in his gut three more times. Even if you can't get in the end zone on fourth down (if it would have came to that) the Bengals inept offense would have been pinned down deep in its own territory.

The play-calling led me to believe the coaching staff did not study enough film or put enough time in game-planning for the Bengals' weaknesses...of which there are plenty. The Browns scored just 17 points on a young, sub-par defense while allowing an offense led by rookie Andy Dalton and career back-up Bruce Gradkowski to put 27 points on the board. Amazing.

Maybe Shurmur had first-game jitters. Maybe he was not able to communicate the game plan properly to his team. Who knows? What is known is that the Cleveland Browns put forth a pathetic effort on Opening Day in front of a passionate fan base that has been waiting a very long time for a winner. There is no excuse for it.

I wonder if Randy Lerner kept Eric Mangini's phone number.