In his "Morning After" piece, Erik Cassano says that Carolina is what the Browns want to be when they grow up. A solid veteran team that showed yesterday that they can win without their best. And a group that digs deep and comes up with big plays when they need them. And those are two things this Browns team has been consistently unable to do.

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Panthers 20, Browns 12
Record: 1-4

The Panthers are what the Browns want to be when they grow up.

In a game when both offenses looked impotent, both defenses had a chance to pick up the slack. The practiced Panthers defense did just that, giving Jake Delhomme and the offense enough breathing room to scratch out an ugly, eight-point win.

At some point in the future, the Browns would love to hitch Kamerion Wimbley to the wagon and ride him to paydirt the way the Panthers did with Julius Peppers Sunday. Peppers netted just one sack and five tackles, but he was in the backfield all day harassing Charlie Frye, stunting the running game, being a pest.

The Carolina defense was good enough that the 13 points Carolina's offense produced was enough to win the game.

But let's not get too far ahead of ourselves. The Panther defense was good Sunday, true. But it's not like they'd be confused with the 2000 Baltimore Ravens. Cleveland's offense also deserves credit for being, once again, a tangled mess of penalties, botched plays and confusing playcalling.

Any time the Browns managed to grasp a shred of success, a penalty or dud play would suck the life right out of the drive. It would be upsetting if it wasn't so common. Instead, it's just annoying. By season's end, it will probably be accepted as the norm.

Once again, the offensive line struggled to protect Frye and open holes for Reuben Droughns. Frye was sacked twice but flushed from the pocket numerous other times. Peppers' lone sack of Frye caused a fumble and turnover shortly before halftime.

The blame can't all be placed at the feet of the O-line, though. Frye and the receivers also deserve some of the spotlight.

Frye, at times, looks like he should be holding a clipboard instead of playing. Frye is getting the full Tim Couch treatment of learning on the fly behind a porous offensive line that causes him to get the tar beaten out of him weekly. The difference between Couch and Frye is the Frye is far more mobile. That's a double-edged sword. One on hand, Frye can scramble, but he also tends to lead with his head far more than his legs when in the open field. Someday, that might result in him leaving the field on a cart.

Frye doesn't have the most reliable targets in the world in Dennis Northcutt and Braylon Edwards, who were both plagued with the dropsies again this week. When your starting tight end (Kellen Winslow) and your third receiver (Joe Jurevicius) have the best hands in your receiver corps, it doesn't bode well for your long passing game.

Winslow and Jurevicius combined for 11 catches and a total of 83 yards. Deep threats Edwards and Northcutt: four catches and 38 yards, though Northcutt did leave the game near halftime with a rib cage injury.

Stat of the week: in 12 career starts, Frye has thrown zero fourth-quarter touchdown passes and seven fourth-quarter interceptions. He's still young, but that's not a good trend by any means.

Cleveland's defense continued to look like the burgeoning force on the roster. They still allowed too many big running plays, this time to DeShaun Foster, but showed positive, if inconsistent, ability to stop Carolina drives and get into the backfield.

Daven Holly and Brodney Pool were the emergency starters at cornerback. On paper, you'd think Steve Smith and Keyshawn Johnson would have had a field day. But they were held in check, netting 11 catches and 129 yards between them. Johnson had the lone Carolina TD.

The Panthers were held to six second-half points by the Cleveland defense, which allowed the Browns to at least put the fear of an upset into the heavily-favored Panthers. But every time kick returner Josh Cribbs -- who totaled 162 yards in kickoff and punt returns -- put the Browns' offense in good field position, the drive invariably stalled and the Browns settled for a field goal.

Great for people who have Phil Dawson on their fantasy team. Bad for the Browns.

All second half, up until the final few minutes of the game, it appeared the Browns were one big play from getting back into the game, but the play never came.

When the big play was needed, the Panthers defense, not the Browns offense, came through.

That's the mark of a championship-caliber team. Even on a Sunday ripe for a letdown, playing a last-place team on a soggy field, the Panthers were still able to make the plays to win the

game.

For the Browns, it's lesson time. The Panthers just gave them an excellent primer on how to win a game in spite of yourself. That's a lesson the Browns desperately need to learn. Luckily, they have two weeks to study before their next game.

Up next: Denver, Oct. 22, 4 p.m.