

Inches

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It was a game the Cleveland Browns had to win. Not only to keep alive playoff hopes, but to keep in tact an edge that was dulled a bit last week in Pittsburgh. And when Matt Stover drilled a 47-yard field goal with 31 seconds left to give the Ravens a 30-27 lead, that edge looked even duller than the Baltimore Ravens uniforms. But the return prowesses of Josh Cribbs, first with 31 seconds remaining in regulation and then again on the opening kick in overtime, coupled with a suddenly soft and dispirited Ravens defense, allowed quarterback Derek Anderson to twice move the offense into a position for Dawson's heroics.

But to say that the final play of regulation was shrouded in drama understates by a factor of a few hundred thousand the range of emotions that each team and their fans went through in a 15-minute span. Dawson had missed a field goal of

similar length and under similar circumstances last week that would have sent the Pittsburgh game into overtime. But the best kickers are ultimately those with the shortest memories and Dawson certainly showed no lingering thoughts from that Pittsburgh miss.

As good as Dawson hit the kick, its sheer length allowed it enough time to turn from the center of the goal posts toward the left upright. Fortunately for Dawson and the Browns, the ball hit enough on the inside of the upright to allow it to continue to bounce enough forward to literally inch past the crossbar. Then things got interesting.

Instead of falling harmlessly through, the ball hit again, this time at the base of the goal post and bounce back through, confusing even the two officials stationed underneath. After some discussion, the officials apparently decided that because the ball had bounced back through, the kick was not good, sending the Ravens into the locker room with a win they didn't deserve and their fans to their cars to celebrate in the inevitable parking lot gridlock.

Whoever then signaled to the officials that the ball needed to only make it through the uprights and not remain there deserves at least an assist for this victory. The officials discussed it for the next several minutes, reviewed it, discussed it some more and then let Ravens head coach Brian Billick know that he would have to pull his team back onto the field.

The great thing about Billick is that he wears his emotions on his sleeve and the exasperation and consternation that stretched across his face at that moment will be a memory delightfully etched in the minds of Browns fans for years to come. Meanwhile, the Browns had remained on the field hoping that for once they'd get the kind of call that always seems to go against them. They did and now the game was headed to overtime.

The Browns good luck continued by the mere inch between a coin landing on

heads or tails as the Browns won the flip. Stover, eschewing any sort of squib kick when that was the most advisable play, sent the ball to Cribbs, who tormented the Ravens again just as he had done all day and just as he's done to every other team the Browns have played. Cribbs brought it back 41 yards to the Ravens 41-yard line.

Though the Browns offense was mainly impotent throughout the second half, it was clear that the Ravens were emotionally if not physically spent by this point. Anderson moved the ball effectively enough, including a key 18-yard pass to Kellen Winslow II that seemed to take whatever will remained from the Ravens. The combined running of Jamal Lewis and Jason Wright took the ball down to the Baltimore 19. From there, Dawson drilled the game winner, sending the Ravens to the locker room to whine about a game they deserved to lose and their fans to their cars to ponder the fate of Billick in the inevitable parking lot gridlock.

The victory allowed the Browns to avoid back-to-back losses for the first time this season, a sentence I didn't think I'd ever write, let alone have anyone read, this late in the season. With the loss, the Ravens are left to figure out how they could possibly have gone from a team that went 13-3 last year to a team that is 4-6, winless in the division and clearly headed home for the holidays.

But in the spirit of the upcoming holiday season, if Billick and GM Ozzie Newsome really need help understanding what's gone wrong, here's a hint: get an offense in general and a quarterback in particular. The problem with the Ravens starts and ends with their inability of Billick, the self-proclaimed offensive genius, to ever develop a quarterback. Boller may have looked pretty effective in the second half, but that has to be tempered by the fact that it was against one of the worst defenses in the league. Couple the repeated failures at a key position with an aging defense whose best attribute is its ability to jaw with the best of them, and it's no small wonder that the Ravens are falling apart. Good for them.

The Browns, on the other hand, seemed headed in a much better long-term direction. But if they are to ever arrive at their destination, GM Phil Savage needs

to build a defense, fast. Last week, they blew a 15-point lead to the Steelers, which isn't nearly the crime that blowing a 14-point lead against the Ravens is. But more than anything else, what these last two games proved is that achieving success by trying to out slug the other team is fraught with great peril, particularly late in the season. Anderson is still too young and too inexperienced to be counted on time and again to rescue this team while the defense founders.

In many ways, this is a game that shouldn't even have been close. Consider, for example, the first half, as ragged as a first half as you're ever likely to see. Statistically, the Browns lapped the Ravens several times over. Anderson had thrown for 157 yards, Jamal Lewis had run for 59, Jason Wright another 13, and the offense held the ball an astounding 21:31. They even were the recipient of three Ravens turnovers. Yet they had only 13 points. They should have had much more.

But by not finishing drives and taking advantage of the breaks they had, the Browns allowed the Ravens to remain in the game, even though they were only able to muster two first downs and 38 net yards. But the Ravens were the recipient of two Browns turnovers, one which was a gift interception to Ray Lewis that he turned into a touchdown when Anderson threw well behind a slanting Joe Jurevicius and the Browns only held a 13-7 lead.

The precursor to the second half though was that final Ravens drive of the first half, even though it didn't result in points. Boller suddenly looked less like Charlie Frye, but without the mobility, and more like Anderson, the quarterback Billick wishes he still had. Boller was hitting his receivers and moving the team, showing the flashes of promise that has basically kept him in the league and on the Ravens despite an otherwise overall unimpressive body of work.

Indeed, on the first drive of the second half the Ravens looked like they knew what they were doing when they covered 78 yards in eight plays. And when Willis McGahee danced after his two-yard run that ultimately helped Baltimore grab its first lead of the day, 14-13, they seemed to have made the kind of halftime

adjustments that always seemed to elude Browns head coach, Romeo Crennel.

After the Browns were forced to punt on their next drive, the Ravens were unable to move the ball out of the shadow of their own end zone. A poor punt by Sam Koch turned into a Cribbs run back to the Baltimore 11-yard line. A hard run by Lewis, his most impressive of the day, took the ball to the Ravens one-yard line and from there Anderson snuck it in to put the Browns back up, 20-14.

The Browns looked like they had indeed seized the game for good when, on the Ravens next series, Brodney Pool intercepted a Boller pass in the end zone and returned it 100 yards for the touchdown. It was the longest interception return in Browns history and was aided, in great part, by a vicious hit from Robaire Smith during the runback.

But whatever was working for the Browns defense in the first half just as suddenly stopped working for the rest of the second half. The Ravens in relatively short order began exploiting the Browns porous defense both on the ground and in the air, putting together three straight drives that helped them seize the lead with just 31 seconds remaining. It looked to be the kind of ending, frankly, that Browns fans have seen too many times, making the comeback and the win as satisfying as it was surprising.

Statistically, this game stacks up much like many of the other wins the Browns have had all season. Anderson threw for 274 yards. The Browns ran for 177 yards, with Lewis accounting for 92, and they controlled the time of possession. In fact, the return of an inspired Jamal Lewis was one of the more pleasant surprises of the game. And Cribbs, of course, was his usual self.

As bad as the defense played, they still held the Ravens to 368 yards, which is plenty, but well under the 419 yards the rest of the league is averaging against them. Yet as relatively dominating as the Browns were statistically, the game ended up being won by the one statistic that isn't kept; inches, as in the number of

inches a ball needs to carry past the uprights.

With just one Sunday remaining in November and a relatively soft schedule staring them in the face in the weeks to come, the Browns now have the opportunity to do something special. The only thing that really stands in their way is the same thing that's been standing in their way all season, a third-rate defense. And if that defense does prevent them from going where they offensive could otherwise take them, then the disappointment that Cleveland fans felt when the Indians failed to get past the Boston Red Sox in the playoffs this past season will pale in comparison. After all, this has always been a Browns town anyway.