

Despite the impressive win on Monday night, there was one thing very disturbing about the victory. Penalties. Stupid penalties. A total of 10 penalties for 55 yards, many of which occurred when players flinched at the line of scrimmage.



These guys were impostors, right?

The Browns we've come to know and loathe don't piece together three ugly losses to start the season followed by an ugly win against the worst team in the league's backup quarterback, take a week off to gather some extra rust, and emerge as 21-point victors over the Super Bowl champs on Monday Night Football.

Something sinister happened in Berea over the span of those two weeks. Alien abductions? Mass hypnosis? DNA experimentation? Whatever happened, these Browns weren't those Browns.

Or were they?

If you look closely, the evidence is there. Comb through Derek Anderson's re-emergence, pick your way around Rob Chudzinski's unleashing of the offense and look past the return of Braylon "Gluefingers" Edwards. There it is.

Penalties. Stupid penalties. A total of 10 penalties for 55 yards, many of which occurred when players flinched at the line of scrimmage.

Yep. These are definitely the Cleveland Browns. The only difference is, the avalanche of false starts and sprinkling of holding calls and illegal shifts didn't cost

them the game. No matter how many times the offense put itself in 5- and 10-yard holes, Anderson and Co. continued to move the ball.

Even when the Browns were at their best last season, this was the case. They didn't stop committing penalties, they moved the ball in spite of their repeated self-inflicted injuries.

It might seem kind of nitpicky to scold the Browns for their penalty problems when they're coming off one of the most significant wins of the new franchise era. If the offense overcame the penalties enough to stick the ball in the end zone three times, that's the point, right?

The answer is yes. For one game, anyway. A game in which Eli Manning threw three interceptions, two of which were picked off deep in Cleveland territory, killing would-be scoring drives for New York. A game in which the Giants racked up five of their own penalties for 38 yards.

But one applause-worthy win doesn't make the penalty problem go away. It's still a giant elephant sitting in the room. If we're not talking about it, it only means we're ignoring it.

The elephant has cost the Browns games in the past, and it will continue to cost the Browns games in the future if steps aren't taken to correct the problem. The offense won't always be able to dig itself out of penalty-induced holes, and the Browns certainly can't rely on a three-pick performance from the opposing team's quarterback every week.

It's a difficult-to-pinpoint problem if you're not in the huddle or on the Browns sideline. There doesn't really seem to be a pattern. It doesn't matter if you've been in the Browns' system forever like Ryan Tucker or are feeling your way through your first year like Rex Hadnot. It doesn't matter if you have a Pro Bowl on your resume or you're a third-stringer. At some point, you probably have been guilty of jumping the gun on the snap.

The false starts tend to arrive in waves, so whenever there is a glitch, it seems to take a few plays for things to settle back down. That's why I think the problem might have its roots in the huddle or on the sideline and not at the line of scrimmage.

[The Plain Dealer's Terry Pluto](#) noted that the Browns might have been somewhat intimidated by the Giants' ferocious pass rush, which might have led to a bout with the yips as offensive linemen awaited the snap. Against the Giants, that does make sense. But that wouldn't account for this having been a problem seemingly every week of every season for years.

Making an educated guess based on the evidence available, it seems like it might be a communication problem. Maybe even something as simple as certain players unsure of which "hut" the ball will be snapped. If Anderson goes to a silent count, the problem gets immediately compounded by a lack of a verbal cue.

There are certain situations where false starts are more forgivable. On the road, in a noisy stadium, even someone with the ears of a hunting dog would probably still have trouble hearing the snap count. But that would seem to be more of an issue for receivers detached from the line than offensive linemen and tight ends who are closer to the quarterback.

But at home, in familiar territory, that shouldn't be an issue. Certainly not to the tune of 10 flags.

I think this is a byproduct of the Browns' larger in-game communication problems. An epidemic of false starts and illegal procedures could very well be linked to the Browns' other game management misadventures, such as Romeo Crennel's infamous decision last year to call a timeout to decide whether to challenge a play, which failed, costing the Browns two timeouts for the price of one.

That is an extreme example, and it would be unfair to pin mistakes at the line of scrimmage exclusively on the head coach, who is usually standing about 500 or 100 feet away from the play. But it's not too much of a stretch to think that if the messages from the sidelines are garbled, confusing or late in arriving, it would lead to some confusion in the huddle and by extension the line of scrimmage.

That might not be the case all the time, but it could be the case a significant percentage of the time, if only because the Browns' prior game management blunders suggests it.

Whatever steps the Browns' coaches need to take to correct the problem, the time to take those steps is now. There is a lot to feel good about in the aftermath of Monday's beatdown of the Giants, but it could all go up in a puff of smoke in the

coming weeks if the Browns' offense isn't able to overcome its penalties, killing drives and turning wins into losses.