

Bengals stay in playoff chase with ragged win

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By JOE KAY

The Associated Press

CINCINNATI — A ragged win on the West Coast has given the Bengals a sense that everything is coming together with the playoffs on the line.

Even coach Marvin Lewis sees them as a team on the rise.

A 20-13 win in San Diego on Sunday gave Cincinnati (7-5) a four-game winning streak and kept the Bengals in the middle of the playoff chase. They remained tied with Pittsburgh for the second AFC wild card, although the Steelers currently hold the tiebreaker because they won in Cincinnati this season.

The Bengals have turned into one of the NFL's hottest teams — their four wins have come by 18, 22, 24 and 7 points — at the right time.

"This team is getting better each week," receiver A.J. Green said. "A lot of people said it was out of our reach to make the playoffs, but I feel like we have momentum on our side coming down the home stretch of the season."

It could come down to the last two games against the AFC North teams they've been trying to catch for years.

The Bengals play at home on Sunday against Dallas (6-6) and the following Thursday at Philadelphia (3-9), which is tied for worst record in the NFC. They finish with games at Pittsburgh and home against AFC North leading Baltimore (9-3).

The Steelers beat the Ravens 23-20 on Sunday behind third-string quarterback Charlie Batch, chopping Baltimore's three-game lead to only two. Suddenly, the division title is up for grabs with four games left.

"We're obviously in the hunt for this thing," quarterback Andy Dalton said.

Even Lewis, who is careful not to give his team much praise after a win, referred to the Bengals as a "rising" team after they overcame three turnovers in San Diego and pulled it out in the fourth quarter. It was the first time since September that Cincinnati had to pull one out at the end.

His biggest concern on Monday was that his team doesn't let it all go to their heads.

"We were able to kind of shake the cobwebs a little bit and break up the glee club, because we've got to do better," Lewis said. "It wasn't good enough yesterday in a lot of areas.

"Everybody is patting them on their backs about what they're doing. Well, we haven't done anything. We just got back to even, and now we have to move forward. These last four are what counts."

The win in San Diego was a significant step. The Bengals played their sloppiest game in a month, turning the ball over three times. Dalton had an interception returned for San Diego's only touchdown. The defense allowed the Chargers to drive inside the Cincinnati 20-yard line in the final minutes before getting an interception.

The Bengals have a young offense that will be playing under its biggest pressure the next four weeks.

"There's still a lot of young players playing a lot of football," Lewis said. "Three rookies started on offense yesterday (center Trevor Robinson, guard Kevin Zeitler, receiver Marvin Jones).

That's a lot. That tells you where we are with things. You have to realize that."

Last season, the Bengals, who finished 9-7, reached the playoffs as a wild card despite losing

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three of their last five games. With the weak AFC — Cincinnati is one of only seven teams with a winning record — there's a chance to get in again, though it will probably require a better finish than last year.

"I think we are a far better football team than we were last year when we finished the season," Lewis said.

NOTES: Rookie WR Mohamed Sanu had surgery Monday on his broken left foot, ending his season. Sanu hurt his foot in practice last Thursday. Sanu had been emerging as a complement to Green, starting the last two games. Overall, he caught 16 passes for 154 yards and four touchdowns, ran five times for 15 yards and threw a 73-yard TD pass to Green. ... Lewis had no updated information on the severity of RB Cedric Peerman's sprained ankle from Sunday.

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