

## Browns still haven't mastered art of finish

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By TOM WITHERS

The Associated Press

BEREA — Browns coach Pat Shurmur sounds like a broken record when he talks about his team's broken record.

More times than he'd care to mention, Shurmur has spent his Monday news conferences explaining why his young team couldn't win a close game.

It's been a painful, recurring theme this season for the Browns, who blew a 13-point halftime lead on Sunday in Dallas and lost 23-20 in overtime to the Cowboys, who exploited Cleveland's injury-riddled secondary in the second half and capitalized on penalties — some of them questionable.

"We just have to find a way to finish," Shurmur said. "We have a whole locker room full of winners. This whole organization is full of winners. We just have to put it all together and do it." The Browns (2-8) are perfecting the close loss. According to STATS LLC, Cleveland has lost an NFL-leading 18 games by seven points or less since 2010. This season, the Browns have lost five such games and their inability to finish what they've started has intensified the pressure on Shurmur, who dropped to 6-20 in two seasons and may need a flurry of wins to save his job. On Sunday, the Browns were 67 seconds away from snapping an 11-game road losing streak when it all unraveled.

The Cowboys, aided by two penalties for 50 yards against a Cleveland defense missing top cornerback Joe Haden, drove for a game-tying field goal with two seconds left before winning in OT.

It was right there for the Browns. And once again, they came up short. The losses are growing in number along with the frustration level for players accustomed to winning.

"It's real difficult, because it's a difference when you're losing by 20 points or 30 points," rookie cornerback Trevin Wade said. "But just losing at the end by one score in well over multiple games is really hard and stressful. We're just right under the hump and we just need to find a way to get over."

Shurmur is sure that day will come. He was on a Philadelphia coaching staff that went through a similar experience with losing tight games. He learned there are no shortcuts, and that the only way things will get better is by working and winning.

"You just play. You just keep working on the fundamentals and you develop some mental toughness and then you go and do it," he said. "That's what it is. There are no formulas for it. That's what you do. You put together a locker room of guys that are willing to fight and willing to work and then you do what you can to play the next opponent and then you go do it."

For most of the young Browns, losing is as new as anything else they've experienced in their first year as pros. They came from solid college programs, where winning was routine.

"I've never been on a team that doesn't win," said rookie linebacker James-Michael Johnson, who played at Nevada. "In college, we were all on good teams. In high school, I was on good teams. But I feel like this team and the teams that I've been on there's not that big of a difference. It's not like we're getting blown out and embarrassed.

"Every game we're in until the end."

The Browns didn't help themselves with costly penalties. Dallas picked up 10 first downs on penalties, seven of them called against Cleveland's defensive backs.

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A few of the infractions against the Browns were border-line calls, including an unsportsmanlike conduct penalty on a hard hit by safety T.J. Ward on the game-tying drive, but Shurmur refused to blame the officiating for another gut-wrenching loss.

"I'm not going to go there," Shurmur said when asked if the officials had too much of an impact on the outcome. "The Browns played the Cowboys and it was officiated. That's it."

While Shurmur wouldn't touch the officiating issue, Wade said the inordinate number of yellow flags thrown against the Browns was alarming.

"I was really surprised," he said. "It seemed like every third down or so there was a flag that gave Dallas a first down. It was real shocking and just crazy."

Shurmur won't allow his players to use any excuses for their current state. He's focused on making them better, and anything that steals their attention from improvement or preparing to play the Pittsburgh Steelers (6-4) next Sunday is counterproductive.

If and when the Browns start winning consistently, maybe they'll get the benefit of the doubt on calls. Until then, their only choice is to work on putting together a complete, 60-minute game. The losing may be taking its toll on Browns fans, but Shurmur believes his players haven't been broken.

"Unfortunately, dealing with adversity and developing mental toughness is part of this thing as you're building," he said. "We know there are going to be some tough days. That's unfortunate, but that's where it's at. That's why you just stay with a nice tight focus on the next game."

Johnson is one of the many rookies taking his lumps this season.

He thinks it won't be long before the Browns are giving some back.

"It's frustrating," he said. "You want to win, but at the same time, I know what we have here and who we have coaching that we can win. I know that. I can tell just by being around these people."

"We're going to win one day."

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NOTES: CB Joe Haden's absence Sunday with an oblique injury hurt the Browns, who are 0-5 in games he's missed this season. Haden was injured during practice last week and was a game-time decision that Shurmur said "went right to the wire." Shurmur said the Browns would try to get Haden "ready to go" against the Steelers, who could be down to third-stringer Charlie Batch at quarterback. ... CB Dimitri Patterson said he'll test his injured ankle this week in practice and could return to the lineup after missing five games with torn ankle ligaments. ... Shurmur felt rookie QB Brandon Weeden (20 of 35, 210 yards, 2 TDs) "was pretty efficient" against the Cowboys. Shurmur said Weeden made mistakes and there are "plenty of things he can do better."

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