By JOE KAY

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CINCINNATI — The Bengals have gotten back into contention by blowing out teams at a pace that's nearly unprecedented for them.

A 34-10 win over the Oakland Raiders on Sunday was Cincinnati's third in a row, all by at least 18 points. It's the first time since 1976 that Cincinnati has won three straight by so many points.

A four-game losing streak put their season on the brink at 3-5. Those three emphatic wins have them tied with Pittsburgh at 6-5 for the final AFC wild card spot. The Steelers won their first head-to-head game this season at Paul Brown Stadium.

"The anticipation comes down to these last five (games) now and what they mean and how important they are," coach Marvin Lewis said on Monday. "We're in OK position. We're not in great position, but we're in OK position. And we've got to improve upon it each and every week."

It'll be tough to play better than they have the last three weeks while saving their season. The one downside to the streak: only one of the three wins came against another contending team.

The streak started with a 31-13 win over the Giants, who were in a rut on offense. Next came a 28-6 win over Kansas City, which is 1-10. Then came the Raiders, who have the NFL's worst

defense, giving up 169 points while losing the last four games and falling to 3-8.

Now, there's hope heading down the stretch.

"Even with the four-game losing streak, we never felt like we were out of the playoff race," quarterback Andy Dalton said. "Now we've just got to keep on playing like we're playing, and everything will fall into place."

They've fixed their two of their biggest problems during the winning streak. The offense has finally developed a running game, and the defense has gotten steady pressure on opposing quarterbacks.

BenJarvus Green-Ellis has run for 100 yards each of the last two games. He had the two longest runs of his career — 48 and 39 yards — while piling up 129 overall against the Raiders. Cincinnati ran for a season-high 189 yards against the Chiefs and topped it with 221 against the Raiders.

"We're starting to find the way we like to play, and that style, that attitude is key," left tackle Andrew Whitworth said. "We've got to continue to do it. This isn't enough.

"We feel like the (losing) streak we had in the middle of the season is purely and solely because we felt too good about ourselves and relaxed. I don't think this team is like that right now."

The defense got steady pressure on Carson Palmer in his return to Cincinnati, leaving his back bruised and scraped. Palmer was sacked four times and limited to 146 yards passing because there was seldom time for a play to develop.

"What's really cool is that our offense is clicking now, and our defense is clicking and special teams have been playing great," defensive tackle Domata Peko said. "So when you get us rolling on all cylinders, we're going to be a tough team to beat."

They also went face to face with the Raiders when they thought one of them crossed the line.

Defensive end Lamarr Houston tackled Dalton after a play was blown dead in the fourth quarter because of a false start. Whitworth saw Dalton go down, made his way through several players and went facemask to facemask with Houston, igniting a brawl.

Whitworth and Houston were ejected, along with Raiders defensive tackle Tommy Kelly for coming off the bench. Kelly and Houston ended up on top of Whitworth in the middle of the scrum.

Significant fines are expected when the NFL reviews video of the scrum. Lewis said Monday he doesn't expect Whitworth to get a suspension. He also said Whitworth should have shown better judgment and avoided an ejection.

"He did something we can't have happen," Lewis said. "We can't have that. No way around it. We were in a bad situation. We don't want to make a bad situation worse."

Notes: The Bengals go to San Diego (4-7) next Sunday, followed by a home game against Dallas (5-6). They play at Philadelphia (3-7) and Pittsburgh before hosting AFC North leader Baltimore (9-2). ... The last three-game streak of blowouts came early in the 1976 season, when Cincinnati beat Green Bay 28-7, Cleveland 45-24 and Tampa Bay 21-0. The Bengals finished 10-6 that year under coach Bill "Tiger" Johnson, but failed to make the playoffs.__PUBLIC__