

## Bengals flub chance to lead AFC wild card chase

Written by Joe Kay

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By JOE KAY

The Associated Press

CINCINNATI — The Bengals flat-out flubbed a chance to put themselves in better shape for a playoff berth.

Penalties. Dropped passes. A game-turning interception. A defensive letdown at the end. They reviewed all of those on Monday as they did a fast-forward to their next game, one that they now feel an urgency to win in order to stay in the race.

A 20-19 loss to the Dallas Cowboys on Sunday left them tied with Pittsburgh at 7-6 for the second AFC wild card. The Steelers and the AFC North-leading Ravens (9-4) both lost on Sunday, giving Cincinnati an opening to improve its chances.

Instead, the Bengals gave up 10 points in the closing minutes, ending their four-game winning streak.

“We have the opportunity to still control our own end, from now until the end,” coach Marvin Lewis said on Monday. “We still have an opportunity to win the division. We still have an opportunity to qualify for the playoffs in a couple of ways. That’s all we can ask for.”

“We let a huge opportunity get away based upon what happened with a couple of other clubs yesterday, and that’s the shame of it. We had a lead, and we didn’t protect the lead very well on offense nor defense. That’s what’s disappointing.”

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Not much time to dwell on it.

The Bengals play in Philadelphia (4-9) on Thursday night. Their season is likely to come down the following week, when they play at Pittsburgh. The Steelers won their game earlier this season in Cincinnati. If the Steelers sweep the series, they'd have the head-to-head tiebreaker for the wild card berth.

There's still an outside chance to win the division if both Baltimore and Pittsburgh fade down the stretch and the Bengals win out.

The loss to Dallas punctured their sense of being a team on the rise.

"Guys are saying 'we've got to get over it quickly,'" cornerback Leon Hall said Monday. "One thing some guys said was: 'don't splinter as a team.' Sometimes when you have a tough loss, you sometimes splinter, which would create bigger problems.

"That was probably one of the messages from yesterday and even today — sticking together, staying with the team like we've been doing all year."

Lewis had his team report for an afternoon meeting, then held a light practice at Paul Brown Stadium in the evening, getting ready for the night game in Philadelphia. Having to move onto the next opponent so quickly seemed to be a benefit.

"I'm not the biggest fan of Thursday games, but I think it does (help)," Hall said. "You don't have Monday, Tuesday to sit around and think about it, the would-of, could-of, should-of type of things. We're already onto the Philly game plan."

What stung the most was how the Bengals let one get away. Dallas put together an eight-play drive that concluded with Tony Romo's 27-yard touchdown pass to Dez Bryant with 6:35 left. The Bengals got the ball back with a chance to put it away, but managed only one first down

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before Andy Dalton was sacked, forcing a punt.

Cincinnati ran five plays on its final possession, all of them passes. Dalton was sacked on a third-and-4 play.

The Cowboys then went 50 yards in 13 plays, winning it on a last-second field goal.

“The bottom line is that we’ve got three games left in the season and we still have a chance to control our destiny, win out and give ourselves an opportunity to be in the playoffs,” offensive tackle Andrew Whitworth said. “That’s got to be the key goal. We’ve got to store this in, let it eat at us and make people pay for it.”

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