

Despite loss, Bengals in control of AFC North

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By JOE KAY

Associated Press

CINCINNATI — The Bengals returned from their weekend off in better spirits and still in very good shape in the AFC North, thanks to everything that happened while they were away.

Cincinnati's four-game winning streak was snapped last Thursday in Miami with a 22-20 overtime loss set up by turnovers. They got a weekend off and returned on Monday still holding a 2-game lead in their division.

Not bad at all.

"We are still sitting in a good situation," safety Chris Crocker said Monday.

The Bengals (6-3) are in control of a division going through an uncharacteristic down year. The defending Super Bowl champion Ravens fell to 3-5 with a 24-18 loss in Cleveland on Sunday. The Browns (4-5) moved ahead into second place, while Pittsburgh (2-6) is in last coming off a 55-31 loss to New England.

The Bengals can open significant ground between themselves and the Ravens with a win on Sunday in Baltimore.

"For me, I want to win out because that means a lot for us going forward toward the playoffs,"

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Crocker added.

Their biggest challenge is recovering from serious injuries to several key players on defense.

Top cornerback Leon Hall is out with a torn Achilles tendon. All-Pro defensive tackle Geno Atkins tore the anterior cruciate ligament in his right knee during the loss to the Dolphins. Middle linebacker Rey Mauluga missed the game with an injured left knee and a concussion. Safety Taylor Mays is gone for the season with a dislocated right shoulder.

Left tackle Andrew Whitworth also missed the game at Miami with an injured right knee that limited him during training camp. It's unclear when he'll be able to return.

The loss of Atkins will hurt deeply. He led NFL interior linemen with 12½ sacks last season and was the Bengals' leader this season with six.

"He's a dominant force inside that demands attention," defensive end Michael Johnson said. "Anytime you've got somebody like that that brings pressure up the middle and demands attention in the middle, either in the pass game or the run game, it give you more opportunities to be 1-on-1. You just have to keep going."

Tackle Brandon Thompson, a second-year player from Clemson, will get more plays in Smith's spot. He played in only three games last season.

"I don't really see any pressure in it," Thompson said Monday. "I understand Geno's a great player. I'm not going to try to come in and be Geno."

The Bengals have one of their deepest teams in years. They had fewer injuries than average in the opening weeks, when they moved ahead in the division. Now they've got to try to maintain the lead without Atkins and others.

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"It's another loss of a significant player on our football team," Whitworth said. "He's a very good football player and somebody that helps this team win. The truth is you go out there each week with a group of 40-plus guys, they have to win the game together. So this game will never change that way. That's why football is great.

"We still have a chance to go out with 40-plus guys and try and win games, and we still have a lot of great football players."

NOTES: The Bengals put Atkins on injured reserve Monday and thought they had filled his spot when they signed second-year defensive tackle Christo Bilukidi, a sixth-round pick of the Raiders last year. Bilukidi played in the first five games with Oakland and was waived. The NFL voided his deal with the Bengals later Monday because his work permit from Canada was no longer valid when his job with the Raiders ended. He has to reapply for a permit. ... The Bengals filled their open spot on their practice squad by signing rookie linebacker Bruce Taylor, who played all four preseason games in Cincinnati and was waived.