

DAWG POUND DAYS

The Browns Of The 1980s



The 1980s Cleveland Browns were the high point in the modern era of a franchise that hasn't enjoyed much success since winning three championships in the first half of the 1950s and again in 1964. When the Super Bowl era arrived in the NFL, the Browns disappeared from its biggest games. But in the 1980s, Cleveland consistently got close and this compilation provides a detailed narrative of the six seasons where the team gave its proud city real hope.

You'll read about the following...

*In 1980 they were "The Cardiac Kids" and Brian Sipe enjoyed an MVP year at quarterback before one bad decision in the bitter cold of the playoffs undid the season.

*After four years of mediocre-to-poor teams, Marty Schottenheimer took over and in 1985, the Browns were still mediocre—at 8-8, but good enough to win a division title. They had Dan Marino's heavily favored Miami Dolphins on the ropes in the playoffs before a rally broke their hearts.

*That success—and the heartbreak—was just an appetizer for what was ahead in 1986 and 1987. In both years, the Browns were among the best teams in football. Schottenheimer oversaw an excellent defense and Bernie Kosar was one of the most accurate passers in the league. There was just this little hurdle named John Elway in their way. Cleveland lost to Denver in consecutive AFC Championship Games, both of which rank among the best playoff games in NFL history.

*1988 was marred by injuries, especially at quarterback. It took all of Schottenheimer's coaching guile—along with a memorable comeback orchestrated by a veteran backup QB with a history of doing such things—to get the Browns back to the playoffs. Management rewarded the coach by firing him.

*That was the beginning of the end, but there was one last hurrah under new coach Bud Carson. Cleveland won a thrilling finale to secure the division title and a playoff victory over Buffalo was no less dramatic. There was just this Elway guy in their way in the AFC Championship Game and another loss ended the Browns season.

Each season is an article previously published on TheSportsNotebook.com. They have been edited for this compilation.

The franchise hasn't been anywhere close to prominence since the 1980s. Perhaps in a new era where the city has overcome its championship drought thanks to the NBA's Cavaliers, and baseball's Indians nearly did the same, the Browns time will come too. For now, the 1980s Cleveland Browns are what brings about the warm memories in this era of frigid exile.

The names of that era are all here. Everyone from Marty to Bernie to the Hanford Dixon & Frank Minniefield combo at cornerback, to Kevin Mack and Earnest Byner in the backfield to the game-breaking explosiveness of Webster Slaughter. Let's take a trip back into the Dawg Pound of the 1980s...

1980

The football-crazed city of Cleveland was hungry in 1980—maybe not starving, as is the case today—but the Browns were on a bit of a dry spell. After making the playoffs in 1971-72, Cleveland had been out of the money, while the rival Pittsburgh Steelers won four Super Bowls in that same timeframe. The 1980 Cleveland Browns returned to the playoffs and in memorable fashion, with a series of exciting wins that gave them the nickname “The Kardiak Kids”.

Sam Rutigliano had taken over as head coach in 1978, and the first two seasons ended with records of 8-8 and 9-7, so Cleveland was on the brink of a breakthrough. No player broke through with more force than quarterback Brian Sipe—he threw for over 4,100 yards, tossed 30

touchdown passes and won the MVP award, spreading the ball around to Dave Logan, Reggie Rucker, future Hall of Fame tight end Ozzie Newsome and versatile running back Mike Pruitt.

The Browns also had offensive balance. Three Pro Bowlers were on the offensive line, Doug Dieken, Tom DeLeone and new right guard Joe DeLamielleure, a future Hall of Famer. This front five cleared the way for Pruitt to gain over 1,000 yards. The running back also led the team with 63 catches and punched a ticket to the Pro Bowl.

It added up to a team that finished eighth in the NFL in scoring in spite of playing in a division—the old AFC Central—that included the Steelers and the Houston Oilers, the runner-up in the AFC each of the past two years.

The defense was more about a team effort, with only 31-year-old defensive end Lyle Alzado making the Pro Bowl, but they were still pretty good and finished 12th in the NFL. The Browns would be tested quickly, with a road game at New England, where the Patriots had been a consistent winner in the late 1970s and then a Monday Night home date with the Oilers.

Nothing happened in Foxboro on September 7 to suggest a special season. In fact the opposite was suggested—Cleveland only rushed for 48 yards and fell behind 34-3 in the fourth quarter before scoring a couple meaningless touchdowns.

The Browns played better at home for the national audience but again could not run the ball in a 16-7 loss. They were in a quick 0-2 hole in what was the NFL's toughest division.

Rookie running back Charles White, fresh off a Heisman Trophy season at USC in 1979, stepped up at home against the mediocre Kansas City Chiefs. With the score tied 13-13, White ran for one touchdown, caught another and came out of the backfield for seven catches in all in a 27-13 win.

Sipe had his first big game of the year at Tampa Bay, throwing for 318 yards in a 34-27 win that got the Browns off the mat as September ended.

If we peek ahead six years, the Denver Broncos would become the ultimate nemesis of Cleveland. This Broncos team was average and John Elway was just a sophomore in college, but it didn't stop Denver from coming to the shores of Lake Erie and stealing a win. Cleveland led 10-6 in the first half and was driving for a touchdown to put them in control when Sipe threw an interception that ended up in the opposing end zone. The Browns lost 19-16 and slipped back under .500.

The quarterback cleaned up the mistakes the following week in Seattle and Pruitt was able to run over a poor Seahawks team for 116 yards, leading a decisive 27-3 win.

Cleveland was hanging in contention, and now was when The Kardiak Kids started to show.

They trailed 21-13 at home against a subpar Green Bay Packers team. There was no two-point conversion in effect, so this was a two-score deficit in the fourth quarter.



Sipe threw a 19-yard touchdown pass to Newsome and then found Logan on a 46-yard strike. Sipe finished with 391 yards on the day.

The hated Steelers were in town next, struggling to find their footing. Terry Bradshaw was out for this game and backup Cliff Stout appeared ready to break Cleveland's heart. The Steelers led the Browns 26-14 in the fourth quarter. Sipe flipped a short TD pass to Pruitt and then found Newsome over the top on an 18-yard touchdown pass to steal another victory.

A Monday Night home date with the Bears wasn't quite as dramatic, but it was still close. Pruitt ran for 129 yards, while the defense held the great Walter Payton to 30 yards in a 27-21 win. Cleveland won its fifth straight game in Baltimore (where the Colts were in the AFC East, and not a division rival).

Pruitt and White combined for 180 yards on the ground and Sipe was calmly efficient, 22/29 for 212 yards and no interceptions. The final was 28-27, but Cleveland led by 15 points in the fourth quarter.

The Browns were now 7-3 and tied with the Oilers for first place in what was then a four-team division where only the Bengals were a non-contender. The Steelers were 6-4, and it served to heighten the drama for Cleveland's visit to Pittsburgh on November 16. The Browns had a chance to put a stake in the heart of their rival and with the Steelers hoping to win a third straight Super Bowl, this game had the attention of the nation, even if it was an early afternoon kickoff.

For three quarters and change it looked like Cleveland would do just that. They intercepted Bradshaw and led much of the way. But the Browns weren't running the ball and Sipe only went 15/34 for 178 yards. The lead was still 13-9 late in the game when a touchdown pass by Bradshaw with 11 seconds left cost Cleveland the game. They slipped into a second-place tie with Pittsburgh.

The good news was, that was the last high point for the Steelers and the Browns were able to respond well at home against Cincinnati. Sipe threw four touchdown passes and for 310 yards on the day in a 31-7 win. Both of their division rivals lost, so Cleveland was back in a first-place tie when they went to Houston for a late Sunday afternoon kickoff.

Houston's running game, with Earl Campbell, was the most feared in the NFL, but it was

Cleveland who won the battle of the trenches. Little-known Cleo Miller ran for two early touchdowns and the Browns outgained the Oilers on the ground 121-114. Even though Sipe only threw for 93 yards, he took care of the football and Cleveland's 5-1 edge in turnovers led to a 17-14 win.

There was a bit of a letdown against the lowly Jets the following week at home, where Cleveland trailed 14-10 in the fourth quarter, a game they were a (-9) favorite. The running game was non-existent. But Sipe stepped it up, threw for 340 yards on the day and a short TD pass to Pruitt pulled out a 17-14 win. Cleveland was now 10-4, one game up on Houston and two games up on Pittsburgh.

The Browns owned the tiebreaker on the Steelers, so that race was over, and also on the Oilers. Therefore a win in Minnesota would clinch the division. But now the comeback script turned on Cleveland. They led 23-9 in the fourth quarter, but gave up two consecutive touchdown passes. A missed extra point looked ready to bail out the Browns, but the Vikings had time for one more play with the score 23-22.

Minnesota had the ball on the Cleveland 46-yard line and wide receiver Ahmad Rashad ran down the sideline. The defenders were with him, but the ball kept getting batted around, never knocked to the ground. Rashad finally grabbed it and stepped into the end zone. The Browns had lost a 28-23 stunner. The Oilers won in Green Bay, so the AFC Central remained up for grabs.

What's more, a playoff berth was not yet secure. In this era of three divisions with two wild-cards, the AFC West already had one wild-card secured, with the Raiders and Chargers both in. The Oilers had also clinched at least a wild-card. The reason the Browns had not was that the Patriots were in hot pursuit at 9-6. If Cleveland lost in Cincinnati, Houston could win and take the AFC Central outright, while New England could win and steal the last playoff spot on the head-to-head tiebreaker at 10-6.

The Bengals were 6-9, but this was a team just a year away from going to the Super Bowl. They also wanted badly to wreck the Browns' season and they nearly pulled it off. Cleveland trailed 17-10 before scoring two consecutive touchdowns to get the lead. Cincinnati tied it back up 24-24.

But Sipe solidified his MVP case, throwing for 308 yards, spreading the ball to nine different receivers and ultimately setting up a field goal with 1:25 to play. Cincinnati's last desperate drive got them to the Cleveland 31-yard line, but out of timeouts, the Bengals were unable to set up a field goal try. The Browns were AFC Central champs.

All five playoff teams in the AFC finished 11-5, and Cleveland ended up as the #2 seed behind San Diego. Oakland won the wild-card game, but the rules prior to 1990 prevented teams from the same division playing each other in the second round. The Browns would host the Raiders

in the early Sunday afternoon game of divisional round weekend.

Temperatures were brutally cold and a 21 mph wind created conditions that were (-20) degrees with the wind chill. The field itself was frozen, and Browns' kicker Don Cockroft missed two field goals, and another was messed up with a bad snap. All that factored into Rutigliano's thinking on the fateful final drive.

Cleveland trailed 14-12 and reached the Oakland 14-yard line with 14 seconds left. Rutigliano decided to have Sipe throw the ball in the end zone, not trusting Cockroft enough to simply set up a field goal. Sipe thought he had Newsome in the back of the end zone. But the quarterback didn't see defensive back Mike Davis in front and the interception ended Cleveland's season in heartbreaking fashion.

I think Rutigliano overreacted to the field conditions. Yes, Cockroft had missed the two field goals, along with an extra point. But he had also made two field goals of 30 yards, about the same distance he would have been lining up for here. Throwing the ball in these conditions—particularly against a Raider secondary that had a deserved reputation for ballhawking—carried its own set of risks.

In fairness, the coach did clearly instruct Sipe that if no one was wide open, to just throw it away. Sipe also took a risk not really necessary. The unfortunate result was a playoff heartbreak for a city that's had too many.

But the tough ending in the bitter cold can't obscure how much fun the 1980 Cleveland Browns were. They dethroned a Super Bowl champ in their division, produced an MVP and rattled off a series of exciting wins on their way to the playoffs. That's the more important legacy of this team.

1985

Marty Schottenheimer enjoyed a long and successful career as an NFL head coach, one marked by tough running games, good defense and, regrettably, a lot of playoff heartbreak. All of those were present in his maiden voyage at the helm of the 1985 Cleveland Browns.

Midway through 1984, the Browns were falling apart at 1-7 when Schottenheimer got the job in midseason. The team finished on a respectable note, splitting their last eight games and setting the tone for Marty's first full year.

In addition to the coaching change, the Browns were breaking in a new quarterback. Bernie Kosar, a local high school product who had won a national championship for the Miami Hurricanes in 1983, was in his rookie year. Kosar opened the season on the bench behind 34-year-old Gary Danielson, but the rookie would ultimately start ten games.



The passing production was, to be kind, rather modest. Kosar completed 50 percent of his throws for a low 6.4 yards-per-attempt.

It was the running game that drove the Browns. Earnest Byner and Kevin Mack were both 23-years-old and each bulldozed for over 1,000 yards and Mack made the Pro Bowl. They did it in spite of an offensive line that lacked Pro Bowl talent of its own.

There wasn't a lot of talent at the wideouts, but the Browns did have a great tight end. Ozzie Newsome was perfect for a quarterback who excelled in the short game, as Kosar did.

Newsome caught 62 passes for 711 yards and enjoyed a Pro Bowl year of his own.

Cleveland's offense was 23rd in the NFL in points scored, but the defense more than picked up the slack. A pair of outside linebackers, Chip Banks and Clay Matthews Sr. (father of the current Green Bay Packer linebacker of the same name) combined for 17 sacks and each made the Pro Bowl. So did nose tackle Bob Golic, the brother of current ESPN radio personality Mike Golic. The secondary was led by strong safety Al Gross who intercepted five passes.

A home game with the Cardinals, who then played in St. Louis, saw the veteran Danielson start at quarterback and he threw two touchdown passes in bringing the Browns back from a 17-3 deficit to lead 24-17. But Cleveland lost the turnover battle 3-0, the game went to overtime and St. Louis won 27-24.

The Browns hosted the archrival Steelers, who had won the AFC Central the previous two years and reached the AFC Championship Game in 1984. The Cleveland running game asserted itself, winning rush yardage 145-54 and the football game 17-7. A visit to a playoff team in Dallas didn't go as well, a 20-7 loss where the Browns' token touchdown came at the end.

Mack got rolling in San Diego, with 130 yards and the Browns overall ran for 275 yards in a 21-7 win over a mediocre opponent. In a home game with the eventual AFC champion New England Patriots, the Browns turned it over five times...and still managed to win 24-20. Kosar came in and went 9/15 for 105 yards.

The Oilers were a bad team, but like the Browns, they had a quarterback whose NFL journey was in its infancy, in this case Warren Moon. The game in the Astrodome was ugly for a half and Cleveland trailed 6-0. But Kosar was able to make big plays, his 8/19 going for 208 yards, including a 68-yard touchdown pass to Clarence Weathers, The Browns won 21-6.

Kosar again played reasonably well in a home game with the Los Angeles Raiders, going 10/22 for 140 yards. In fact he outplayed counterpart Marc Wilson, who was 15/36 for 213 yards. But this was a rare game where Cleveland didn't have the edge in the backfield. Los Angeles' Marcus Allen was in the midst of an MVP year and the Raiders ultimately finished 12-4. The Browns came up just short 21-20. They lost another home game a week later to the ten-win Washington Redskins, getting just 97 yards rushing in a 14-7 defeat.

Two big divisional road games, at Pittsburgh and Cincinnati were next and the losing continued. In the rain at old Three Rivers Stadium, the Browns were outrushed 155-66 by the Steelers and lost 10-9. A week later, they couldn't contain the passing combination of Boomer Esiason-to-Cris Collinsworth took a 27-10 beatdown at the hands of the Bengals.

With a four-game losing streak and 4-6 record and visit from the woeful Buffalo Bills was just what the doctor ordered. Byner ran for 109 yards, Mack added 94 and Cleveland churned out a 17-7 win. Cincinnati made their return trip across the state the following week and Mack rolled up 117 yards in a 24-6 payback win.

The AFC Central was weak in 1985, and the Browns' 6-6 record actually had them tied for first with the Steelers. What's more, the Bengals and Oilers were each in pursuit at 5-7. It was excitement driven by a shared mediocrity as the season hit the homestretch.

Cleveland paid a visit to the Meadowlands to face Bill Parcells' New York Giants who would ultimately reach the second round of the NFC playoffs. Both teams were built on defense so the scoring outburst that ensued was quite unexpected. The Browns trailed 33-21 and Kosar was struggling, Schottenheimer turned to Danielson and the veteran delivered two fourth-quarter touchdown drives to steal a 35-33 upset. By day's end, Cleveland was in sole possession of first.

Kosar returned to the lineup at mediocre Seattle a week later and played well, going 18/31 for 249 yards. But this time, the running game failed and the defense couldn't contain Seahawks' quarterback Dave Krieg. The 31-13 loss enabled Cincinnati to pull even in the division race at 7-7, with Pittsburgh and Houston both losing.

The Oilers were now 5-9 and the Browns were a (-10) favorite when Houston came to the Dawg Pound for the season's penultimate game. Kosar played mistake-free football, going 14/28 for 161 yards. He ran for one touchdown and flipped a short TD pass to Newsome for a 14-7 lead. Two more short touchdown passes in the third quarter extended the lead to 28-7 and the Browns hung on 28-21.

Cincinnati lost, and the Bengals and Steelers were both 7-8, one game back of the Browns at 8-7. Cleveland had the tiebreaker against both teams, but if a three-way tie occurred, the Bengals would take the AFC Central. Moreover, the Browns had a difficult road trip to face the New York Jets, a 10-5 team facing a win-or-go-home scenario.

The good news was that the schedule was no easier for the Bengals or Steelers. Cincinnati had to go to New England, who was identical to the Jets—dealing with a must-win at 10-5. And the Steelers had to face the Giants, who also had their back to the wall to qualify for the postseason. In summation, all three teams were on the road against superior opponents who had everything to play for.

Cleveland and Pittsburgh were each in the Meadowlands, as the Steelers played on Saturday afternoon at the Giants. Any sense of drama to the AFC Central race was snuffed out when the Steelers lost. The Browns could celebrate on Saturday night as they wrapped up the division. The following day, Cleveland did make a little history—in their 37-10 loss they became the first team to reach the playoffs without a winning record, finishing 8-8.

The playoff format prior to 1990 had five teams per conference making it, with three division winners and two wild-cards. So even with the mediocre record, the Browns still got a week off before going to Miami. The Dolphins were the defending AFC champs and Dan Marino was the 1st-team All-NFL quarterback.

In a Saturday afternoon game that opened the divisional round weekend, Cleveland was ready to shock the world. They ran for 251 yards, and Byner scored two touchdowns. When he rumbled 66 yards for a score in the third quarter, the (+10.5) underdog Browns were ahead 21-3.

But alas, there was no passing game—Kosar was just 10/19 for 66 yards and Marino came blazing back. The Dolphins scored two touchdowns before the third quarter was out and finally got the game-winner with a little less than two minutes to play. Cleveland had its heart broken in a 24-21 loss.

1986

The 1986 Cleveland Browns came closer than any team has in franchise history to reaching the Super Bowl. After a stellar regular season and an epic playoff win, it took the signature moment from one of the NFL's signature players to deny them at least a chance at the Vince Lombardi Trophy.

Bernie Kosar was in his second year as starting quarterback and the growth in his game was evident. He threw the fewest interceptions-per-pass than any other QB in the league. And that didn't come at the expense of production in the passing game—Kosar's 58% completion rate and his 7.3 yards-per-attempt were both slightly above the league average.

Kosar benefited from a juiced-up receivers' corps that got a lift from rookie Webster Slaughter, a legitimate deep threat. Slaughter caught 40 balls for 577 yards and was a perfect complement to the possession-style of Brian Brennan, who caught 55 passes for 838 yards.

The combination of a smart quarterback and an innovative offense coordinator in Lindy Infante kept a lot of people involved in the passing game. Reggie Langhorne caught 39 passes, as did 30-year-old tight end Ozzie Newsome. Herman Fontenot was a terrific target out of the backfield, catching 47 passes. Earnest Byner caught 37 more, and even the more bruising fullback, Kevin Mack, got in the act with 28 catches.

No team with Marty Schottenheimer as its coach is going to neglect the running game. Mack led the way with 665 yards and veteran Curtis Dickey added 523. The Browns had a Pro Bowl offensive tackle in Cody Risien and by the time you put all of this together it added up to the fifth-best offense in the NFL.

The defense ranked eleventh and was keyed by two excellent corners. Hanford Dixon was 1st-team All-Pro, while Frank Minnifield made the Pro Bowl. Two other starters also made it to Hawaii, outside linebacker Chip Banks and nose tackle Bob Golic. The 3-4 defensive scheme got a further boost from the defensive ends, with 34-year-old Carl Hairston and Reggie Camp combining for 16 sacks.

Cleveland had as tough a test as you could want for Week 1—they had to go to Chicago, where the Bears were coming off a dominating 1985 Super Bowl run and primed for another run where they would go 14-2. The Browns lost 41-31, but the fact Kosar went 23/40 for 282 yards against a defense considered one of the best of all-time a year earlier gave some reason for hope. Had the Browns not shot themselves in the foot with 11 penalties, they might have won the game.

A road date with the Houston Oilers was next. For the second straight week the Browns were outrushed by a substantial margin and they trailed 13-9 in the fourth quarter. Kosar took over, finding Langhorne on a 55-yard TD strike and then leading another drive that ended with a Byner touchdown run. Cleveland hung on to win 23-20.

The problems in rushing yardage disparity hit rock bottom on a Thursday night home game with Cincinnati. The Browns were crushed 257-83, and this time they couldn't protect Kosar either. He was sacked four times in an embarrassing 30-13 loss. The hangover seemed to linger for a while in a home game with a poor Detroit Lions team ten days later. It was 7-7 in the third quarter before Gerald McNeil's 84-yard punt return for a touchdown lit a spark and the Browns won 24-21.

Pittsburgh was in a stretch of mediocre seasons, but a road date in old Three Rivers Stadium was never easy. This one wasn't either. The game went back-and-forth, but the difference was that Cleveland stretched the field better, the prime example being Langhorne catching four passes for 108 yards. A four-yard touchdown run from Byner ultimately pulled out a 27-24 win.

The Kansas City Chiefs would make the playoffs this season and they came to the Dawg Pound next. Trailing 7-0 in the second quarter, Kosar threw short touchdown passes to Byner and Newsome. The defense was able to shut down the KC running game and sack quarterback Todd Blackledge four times. The result was a 20-7 win.

But the Browns gave it right back a week later when the lowly Green Bay Packers came to town. After taking a 14-3 lead at the half, Cleveland was unable to run the ball and put the game away. They ultimately blew it 17-14. There was no solace in the moment and the only one in retrospect was that the Packers still saw something in Infante, making him their head coach two years later.

Minnesota was a contending team that would compete to the end for a playoff spot and Cleveland's road trip to the old Metrodome saw them dig a quick 17-3 hole. It was the special teams, coached by Bill Cowher, that again lit a spark. A Viking field goal attempt was blocked and brought back for a touchdown. The running game found its traction for the first time this season and Dickey rushed for 106 yards, including a 17-yard TD run in the fourth quarter. A pair of short field goals put the Browns over the top in a 23-20 win.

Cleveland churned out a 24-9 win at awful Indianapolis. Kosar struck quickly with a 14-yard TD pass to Brennan and a 72-yard scoring play to Fontenot, both in the first quarter. Kosar finished 15/25 for 238 yards and three touchdowns in the easy win.

Two big games against the Miami Dolphins and Los Angeles Raiders were on deck. These had been the two best teams in the AFC in the first part of the 1980s—the Browns had lost playoff games to both— and each was fighting for its life this time around. Any new up-and-comers had to deal with the old guard first.

The Dolphins came in on Monday Night and the Browns asserted themselves on the ground. Led by Dickey's 92 yards, they enjoyed a 168-56 edge on the ground. The more experienced Kosar was a match for Marino this time around. He was 32/50 for 401 yards, while Marino threw for 295 yards. The only downside was red-zone execution—on three trips inside the 10-yard line Cleveland settled for field goals and it made the 26-16 final closer than it had to be.

Miami would fall short of the playoffs, as would the Raiders who were on deck next. But the oddsmakers still weren't buying on the Browns, making them a 6 ½ point underdog in the Los Angeles Coliseum. Cleveland played down to expectations this time. Kosar was sacked six times, the offense only generated eight first downs and they lost 27-14.

The Browns were still 7-4 and had two straight divisional home games coming up, with Pittsburgh and Houston. The Steeler game was another back-and-forth affair and this time the Cleveland offense was on its game.

They got 35 first downs in this game, allowed no sacks and Kosar was 28/46 for 414 yards, spreading the ball to nine different receivers. The game went to overtime tied 31-31 when Kosar went 36 yards to Slaughter to win it.



More overtime thrills awaited against the Oilers, who only won five games, but had Warren Moon at quarterback and would become a playoff perennial the very next season. The Browns trailed 3-0 after three quarters. Kosar was uncharacteristically sloppy, throwing three interceptions. But the defense bailed him out, picking off Moon and backup Oliver Luck (father of Andrew Luck) six times. Mack ran for 121 yards and Cleveland eventually tied it 10-10 and then got a field goal in OT for the win.

Cleveland was 9-4 and leading the Central. Cincinnati was just a game back though. There was a head-to-head battle coming up in two weeks in Cincy, where the Bengals could pull even and sweep the season series.

First things first. The Browns had to beat Buffalo, a poor team in 1986, but one with Jim Kelly at quarterback. It wasn't easy, and it took 141 yards on the ground, balanced between Mack and Dickey, combined with a 3-1 turnover edge to scrape out a 21-17 road win.

Cincinnati held serve and set up the showdown game. In the meantime, the other leading contenders in other divisions—the Jets, Patriots and Broncos had all lost, dropping them to 10-4. Cleveland had the superior conference record meaning that if they could stay atop the Central, that would translate into a #1 seed for the playoffs.

Again though, first things first. The Browns were a three-point underdog in Cincinnati. Cleveland completely flipped the script from that awful Week 3 Thursday Night performance. This time Mack ran for 93 yards. Kosar was 13/29 for 246 yards, a lower percentage than he was used to, but stretching the field with Slaughter and Langhorne. Cleveland clinched the division with a 34-3 rout.

Cleveland began preparations for the home finale with San Diego with the idea they needed to win in mind. But on Saturday, Denver lost its regular season finale, and the Browns clinched the top seed. They still rolled over the four-win Chargers 47-17, dominating every which way and Brennan catching seven passes for 176 yards.

The playoffs were at hand. After a week off, the Browns hosted the New York Jets. After a 10-1 start that had New York thinking about a Jets-Giants Super Bowl (the Giants were the top seed in the NFC and would ultimately win it all), the Jets collapsed and lost their last five games. But they righted the ship with a 35-15 win over the Chiefs in the wild-card game and even though the Browns were installed as a (-7) favorite, this game would push them to the very brink.

It was an early afternoon game on Saturday and the Jets caught the Browns napping with a 42-yard flea-flicker touchdown in the first quarter. Kosar responded by leading a 98-yard drive, capped off by a 37-yard pass to Fontenot that tied it. The teams traded field goals in the second quarter, the Jets getting theirs on a late defensive lapse by Cleveland where they allowed immobile quarterback Ken O'Brien to scramble for a fourth-down conversion.

Cleveland's offense began to bog down. There was no running game to speak of and the Jets scraped out another field goal for a 13-10 lead after three quarters. The Browns were forced to throw constantly—Kosar would put the ball in the air a playoff-record 64 times. Even with a quarterback as smart as Bernie, you're asking for trouble with that. Early in the fourth quarter he threw an interception in the end zone. And as the game hit the crunch point, Kosar threw another interception in his own end that set up a 25-yard touchdown run by Freeman McNeil. There was 4:14 left and Cleveland trailed 20-10.

The comeback began on 2nd-and-24 from their own 18-yard line. After throwing an incomplection, Kosar was roughed by Jets' defensive end Mark Gastineau. Given new life, the Browns drove for a touchdown that ended with a one-yard plunge from Mack.

Cleveland's defense was amazing all day long. They got a playoff record of their own, nine sacks. But they were never better than on the run defense that followed this touchdown, stuffing the Jets quickly and getting the ball back for Kosar. The Browns were on their own 32-yard line, there were 51 seconds left and they trailed 20-17.

Slaughter got loose down the right sideline and Kosar put it on the numbers for a 63-yard touchdown pass. Cleveland actually had a chance to win it in overtime, but settled for a short field goal that produced overtime.

Another big play from Kosar, this one a 35-yard pass to Langhorne down to the Jets 5-yard line had everyone ready to celebrate. Cleveland went for the field goal immediately...and shanked it. But the defense wasn't letting the Jets go anywhere.

With 2:38 to go in the first OT, the Browns got the ball for the final drive. Mack's running was starting to finally chew up yardage. Cleveland got the ball into the red zone again, now early into the second overtime. Four years earlier, kicker Mark Moseley had won an improbable MVP award when he was with the Washington Redskins. All of Cleveland now just wanted him to make a simple chipshot. Moseley delivered and the Browns had an amazing 23-20 win.

So much about this game would be ironic the following week and only in Cleveland could fate turn around and slap them back so quickly. One week later, with Denver coming in, it was the Browns who had control of the game late, 20-13. It was the opponent who led a 98-yard touchdown drive. This time it was John Elway, starting the drive with little more than five minutes

left and with it effectively announcing to the world that he had arrived as an elite quarterback. And it was the Browns on the short end of a 23-20 overtime loss.

It's that drive—or The Drive—that lingers in NFL lore and in the hearts of Cleveland fans. And given the franchise has yet to even reach the Super Bowl, maybe that's inevitable. But the 1986 Cleveland Browns in particular deserve a better fate.

They went from fringe playoff team in 1985 to true contender in 1986. They won a historic playoff game of their own. And given how good the New York Giants were, no one was probably beating them in the Super Bowl anyway. Let's cut these Browns a break in the historic legacy and remember all the good that they did.

1987

1987, for good and bad, was more of the same. The Browns were an excellent team, complete and well-coached. And come January, there was heartbreak in Cleveland.

It was the third year in the league for quarterback Bernie Kosar, who was coming into his own as a star. Kosar completed 62% of his passes for 7.8 yards-per-pass, both near the top of the NFL. His TD-INT ratio was 22/9. He spread the ball around to a group of receivers led by big-play threat Webster Slaughter and possession receiver Brian Brennan. Tight end Ozzie Newsome was nearing the end of the line, but still caught 34 passes.

Kosar also made good use of his backs in the passing game. Earnest Byner's 52 catches led the team and big Kevin Mack caught 32 more. Mack added 735 yards rushing and made the Pro Bowl. Cody Risien anchored the offensive line with a Pro Bowl year at right tackle and with a brilliant coordinator in Lindy Infante, the Browns ranked third in the NFL in points scored.

Marty Schottenheimer's defense was loaded with talent. Pro Bowl players included nose tackle Bob Golic and outside linebacker Clay Matthews. The Browns also had the best cornerback tandem in the league with Pro Bowler Frank Minnifield and 1st-team All-Pro Hanford Dixon.

Cleveland's D was stingy against both the run and the pass and they ranked second in the league in points allowed. When you add the special teams boost they got from Pro Bowl return man Gerald McNeil, there was nothing this team didn't do well.

But they didn't do it well in a season opener at New Orleans. They were beaten in the trenches, being outrushed 191-93 and allowing four sacks. In a 21-21 game in the fourth quarter, two of these sacks were for safeties. It turned out this Saints' team was much better than anyone thought and went on to win twelve games. At the time, with New Orleans having never made the postseason in two decades, it looked like a pretty big disappointment.

A home game with Pittsburgh was tied 10-10 in the third quarter when Cleveland finally got clicking. Kosar threw an 11-yard touchdown pass to McNeill. Matthews took an interception 26 yards to the house, one of five picks the Browns defense got on this day. The final was 34-10 and in a normal year the stage was set for a big Monday Night battle against Denver.

But 1987 was anything but normal. The players went on strike. All Week 3 games were canceled and replacement players were summoned. For three weeks, these replacements would take the field and the games would count in the final standings. For the Browns, this stretch included two divisional games that would end up being important in a tight AFC Central race.

The first game was a non-division battle in New England and running back Larry Mason, a 26-year-old from Southern Miss, became the latest runner for Schottenheimer to make into a star. He pounded the Pats for 133 yards on 32 carries and the Browns won 23-10.

Cleveland's quarterback was Jeff Christensen. He came from Eastern Illinois, a school whose quarterback legacy includes Tony Romo, Mike Shanahan and Sean Payton. Christensen didn't work out in a home date with the Houston Oilers, throwing three interceptions in a 15-10 loss.

The resolve of the regular players was starting to wilt and some were crossing the picket line to resume playing. One of them for Cleveland was backup quarterback Gary Danielson, a former starter on a playoff team with the Detroit Lions and current CBS college football analyst. Brennan was another one to cross. The Danielson-to-Brennan combo ate up the replacement Cincinnati roster. Danielson went 25/31 for 281 yards and four touchdowns. Brennan caught ten balls for 139 yards and the result was a 34-0 rout.

With the strike settled, the NFL was back to normal for Cleveland's Monday Night home game with the Los Angeles Rams on October 26. Browns' defensive back Felix Wright returned an interception 40 yards for a score to key a 20-0 lead. It was one of four turnovers the D produced in a 30-17 win

Cleveland went to San Diego, who ended the season in mediocrity, but got off to a quick start and was in first place deep into November. The Browns led 24-14 after three quarters, but did not run the ball and allowed Charger quarterback Dan Fouts to tie the game and ultimately lost it in overtime, 27-24. Cleveland came back blazing against woeful Atlanta. Kosar threw a 54-yard touchdown pass to Slaughter to get it started and a balanced running game led by rookie fullback Tim Manoa keyed a 38-3 rout for the home fans.

Buffalo was a mediocre, but improving team with a young Jim Kelly at quarterback. Each team returned a fumble for a touchdown and neither one ran the ball all that well. But Kosar was further along in his development than Kelly at this stage, and also had more help. Kosar went 24/34 for 346 yards, spread the ball out to nine different receivers and led a 27-21 win.

A big game at Houston was up on November 22 and Cleveland was in a hole to the Oilers due to a head-to-head loss with the replacement players. The Browns made up for it in spades in the Astrodome. Minnifield intercepted three passes, the defense forced six turnovers in all and the result was a 40-7 romp.

Cleveland was rolling, but a trip to red-hot San Francisco, who finished with the best regular season record in the league was next. Kosar played well, going 26/37 for 275 yards and they were within 21-17 at the half. But Joe Montana was too much for the defense, throwing for four touchdowns and the Browns lost 38-24.

There were four games left and with a 7-4 record, Cleveland was in first place in the AFC Central, but Houston and Pittsburgh were just a game back. A 9-7 home loss to Indianapolis where Kosar was erratic and the running game non-existent was a big blow. The Oilers and Steelers both won and there was a three-way tie atop the division.

Cincinnati came in next. Not only was this a rivalry game, but the Bengals had the makings of a good team, one that had a winning record in 1986 and would go to the Super Bowl in 1988. But the strike had messed them up and 1987 was proving a lost season. Kosar threw an early 22-yard touchdown pass to Slaughter, one of three TD passes before halftime. It was 35-10 after three quarters and the final score was deceptively respectively, 38-24.

The Steelers also won, but the Oilers lost. The Browns made their position stronger with a 24-17 road win over the Los Angeles Raiders. Kosar's receivers dominated, with Slaughter and Brennan combining for 13 catches and 194 yards. Pittsburgh lost and Cleveland was able to clinch a playoff berth. But the AFC Central was not assured—they were a game up on both rivals and Houston would win a three-way tiebreaker. Moreover, with the Browns having to finish the year in Pittsburgh, a loss meant that the Oilers would need only to defeat the collapsing Bengals to take the division.



The Browns-Steelers game in old Three Rivers Stadium was in the early afternoon on Saturday. Neither team got much of a running game going, but Kosar played well, going 21/36 for 241 yards. And the proud veteran Newsome was clutch, catching six balls for 94 yards.

Cleveland's 19-13 win assured them of the division and at least the #2 seed in the AFC playoffs. They still had hope of the top spot, but that ended late Sunday afternoon when Denver beat San Diego.

After a week off, Cleveland began the divisional round of the playoffs with the early afternoon kick on Saturday. The offense would have a chance to make amends for its worst performance of the season with Indianapolis in Municipal Stadium on a 16-degree afternoon.

Odds makers were bullish on the Browns, installing them as a decisive eight-point favorite in spite of the earlier head-to-head result and the Colts having pulled off a blockbuster midseason trade for Hall of Fame running back Eric Dickerson. Cleveland started strong, with a 15-play/86-yard drive to begin the game, ending with Kosar's 10-yard touchdown pass to Byner.

After Indy answered with a touchdown of their own, the Browns marched right back to the Colts 2-yard line. Kosar threw an interception in the end zone. He was able to make some amends with a 39-yard touchdown pass to Reggie Langhorne in the second quarter, but Indianapolis answered again and the game went to the locker room tied 14-all.

From the perspective of history, we know that Marty Schottenheimer, an excellent coach though he was, had his problems in the postseason. Even from the perspective of 1987, we know the Browns had underperformed in this spot last year, needing a miracle to pull out a win over the Jets in the divisional round. And we certainly know the heartbreak history that has been Cleveland sports in general. So when the Colts opened the second half by driving to the Browns 20-yard line, Cleveland fans couldn't be faulted if they reached for the panic button.

But this was going to be a different day. The Brown defense pressured Colt quarterback Jack Trudeau, hit him as he released the ball and it landed in the hands of Felix Wright. It would be Cleveland that drove for the go-ahead touchdown to make it 21-14.

The Browns' ground game was starting to take over. Byner rushed for 122 yards and on the flip side, they held Dickerson to 50 yards on 15 carries. A short field goal early in the fourth quarter gave Cleveland some breathing room at 24-14 and Kosar later flipped a two-yard TD pass to Brennan.

That all but sealed it, although Indy scored with 1:07 left and then recovered an onside kick. Minnifield finished it off by intercepting a pass and going 48 yards to the house to finish the 38-21 win. Kosar had gone 20/31 for 229 yards and again spread the football around, again using nine different receivers with no one catching more than four balls.

The stage was set for the rematch. Cleveland and Denver in the AFC Championship Game. The teams were seen as dead even, with the Broncos status as a three-point favorite attributable only to the game being played at Mile High Stadium.

Turnovers marred the opening of the game. Kosar threw a pass to Slaughter that was right in his arms, but it bounced up and ended as an interception, resulting in a quickie Bronco touchdown. Mack fumbled near midfield. The Brown defense appeared to have held on 3rd-and-goal, but Minnifield was flagged for defensive holding. It set up another touchdown.

By halftime, Cleveland was down 21-3. They got a turnover of their own with a Wright interception and cut it to 21-10, but quickly let Bronco receiver Mark Jackson turn a short slant

into an 80-yard touchdown play. Down 28-10, there was no reason to think the Browns would make it a game.

But that's what happened. Kosar got locked in and he led three straight touchdown drives. Denver had a field goal mixed in there and the game was tied 31-31. The Broncos reclaimed the lead at 38-31 with four minutes left. Kosar, who finished this game 26/41 for 356 yards and only the fluke interception as a mistake, was as hot as hot could be. He led the Browns right back inside the 10-yard line. It was apparent only two things could stop the Cleveland offense—a turnover, or if they failed to get the ball in overtime.

In the tough history of Cleveland sports, this play is one that lives in infamy. Byner took the ball and looked headed for the end zone. Watching the game as a 17-year-old, me and my dad were pulling for the Browns and had already started to cheer as Byner lunged toward the end zone. Only Denver safety Jeremiah Castille had come from behind and stripped the football. Castille recovered it with little more than a minute remaining. The game was all over, save for a token safety the Broncos took to avoid punting from their own end zone. It ended 38-33.

As tough as the 1986 loss had been, this one seemed worse at the time. The year before, everyone saw the eventual champion New York Giants as close to unbeatable and they were. This time around, the 1987 edition of the Washington Redskins was the least imposing of any of the great teams produced in the Joe Gibbs era. There was a feeling the Browns had fumbled away a Lombardi Trophy. The fact the Redskins trounced the Broncos 42-10 might have alleviated a bit of the pain, but surely not much.

1988

The franchise and city were hungry for a Super Bowl breakthrough, but instead of 1988 turning into a breakthrough, it ended up marred with injuries and an early playoff exit.

Cleveland's strength was defense. They had the best cornerback combo in the league with Frank Minnifield and Hanford Dixon. Outside linebacker Clay Matthews Sr. was a Pro Bowler who recorded six sacks. The first three draft choices were used on defense and the best pick was defensive tackle Michael Dean Perry. The brother of William, the famous "Refrigerator" for the Chicago Bears, Michael Dean wasn't as renowned, but he was a better football player. Perry got six sacks of his own and began a career that would see him make several Pro Bowls.

The defense ranked sixth in the league in points allowed. Under normal circumstances, that would have been more than good enough to make Cleveland a legit Super Bowl contender again. But this was anything but a normal year on the offensive side of the ball.

Bernie Kosar was one of the top quarterbacks in the game and his numbers were there again in 1988—his 60% completion rate was the second-best in the league. He was in the top 10 in

yards-per-attempt, and he was smart with the football. 1988 was also his most frustrating year, with seven missed games due to injury. The result was a revolving door at quarterback.

Cleveland didn't have a particularly good offensive line and while running backs Earnest Byner and Kevin Mack were good, they didn't have good years in '88. Both averaged less than four yards per carry.

The problems at quarterback led to low production among the receivers. Brian Brennan was the possession guy and Ozzie Newsome a solid tight end. The best of the group was big-play threat Webster Slaughter—and he missed half of the season. Byner's 59 catches ended up leading the team.

Cleveland opened the season at lowly Kansas City and Kosar was knocked out with an injured elbow. Gary Danielson was in his final year in the NFL and he stepped in. Danielson was by no means spectacular, but he was competent and in an ugly 6-3 win that was all the Browns needed.

Danielson started the next week in a home game with the mediocre Jets. The offensive line played poorly, allowing four sacks and failing to clear any running room. Danielson ended up yanked for Mike Pagel, which made no difference in a 23-3 loss.

Cleveland still didn't have a touchdown when they met Indianapolis on Monday Night Football. Pagel broke the offensive drought with a 14-yard TD pass to Newsome in the first quarter. Pagel later went 17 yards to Slaughter and Cleveland won 23-17.

A road trip to Super Bowl-bound Cincinnati went poorly. Even though the Browns defense contained Boomer Esiason, on his way to an MVP year, they were pummeled on the ground. Cleveland lost the rushing battle 213-68 and they lost the football game 24-17.

The Browns went to Pittsburgh, a team that hadn't made the playoffs since 1984 and was on its way to a 5-11 season. In a sign of how much respect Cleveland was losing, oddsmakers installed the Steelers as a slight favorite. Cleveland spent a half playing down to those expectations and trailed 9-7 at the half.

Pagel got the offense moving in the third quarter, but two drives inside the 10-yard line both ended in field goals and the Browns still clung to a 13-9 lead when Pittsburgh began driving in the fourth quarter. Defensive back Brian Washington stepped up with an interception and 75-yard return for a touchdown that sealed the game and the ultimate 23-9 win.

More quarterback woes came up with a home game against Seattle. Pagel was knocked out and another veteran, Don Strock came in. The Seahawks would win the AFC West in 1988 (the division they occupied prior to the realignment of 2002), but were a mediocre 9-7. No

matter—Cleveland turned it over four times, gave up nearly 100 yards on the ground to Seattle running back Curt Warner and lost 16-10.

Another home date with a future division champ was up next as Buddy Ryan's Philadelphia Eagles came to the Dawg Pound. Mack turned in his best game of the year, running for 100 yards on sixteen carries. Strock threw a 15-yard touchdown pass to Slaughter in the third quarter. The 19-3 win was impressive, but it came at a price—this was the game Slaughter hit the injury list.

But on October 23 in Phoenix, Bernie was coming back. He picked up where he'd left off last season, throwing a couple first-half touchdown passes and building a 14-0 lead. When the Cardinals rallied for a 21-20 lead, Kosar threw a 25-yard strike to Reggie Langhorne. Although Kosar threw three interceptions, he also passed for 314 yards and led a 29-21 win.

A bigger win came on the final Sunday of October over Cincinnati. The defense again contained Esiason and now they had some offensive firepower to help them. Kosar went 18/28 for 210 yards and no mistakes. Clarence Weathers caught seven balls for 140 yards and the Browns won 23-16.

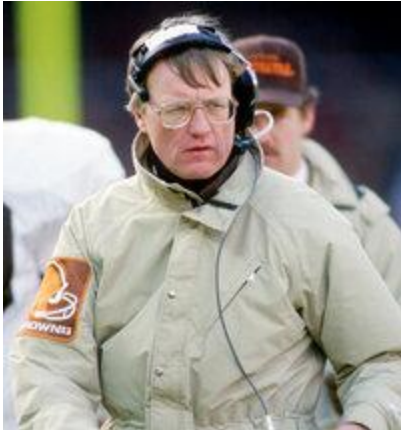
Cleveland seemed to have some momentum going into a pair of high-profile road games. The Oilers (today's Tennessee Titans) joined the Bengals and Browns in the playoff hunt. Cleveland would go to Houston on Monday Night and then travel to Denver for a late Sunday afternoon national TV game.

The games couldn't have gone much worse. The Browns only rushed for 44 yards in Houston, dug themselves a 21-3 hole and lost 24-17. They lost three fumbles in Denver, were carved up by John Elway and lost 30-17. At 5-5, the season was slipping away.

Cleveland righted the ship at home against Pittsburgh, taking care of the ball and forcing four turnovers. Langhorne caught a 77-yard touchdown pass from Kosar in the third quarter to seal a 27-17 win. It set up a big battle in the nation's capital. The Washington Redskins were the defending Super Bowl champs, but they were also struggling at 6-5. Both were proud teams. Both had a long way to go to make the playoffs, and the loser of this game could realistically forget it.

On a rainy day at old RFK Stadium, the Browns found their running game. Mack muscled his way for 116 yards. Trailing 13-10 in the fourth quarter, Byner rambled 27 yards for the winning score. The Browns were still alive and they kept it going with a 24-21 home win over Dallas. Kosar was brilliant, going 19/27 for 308 yards and three TD passes. The fact the Browns could only muster 27 rush yards against one of the worst teams in the league—this was the Cowboy team that would get Tom Landry fired and Jimmy Johnson brought in—was still a matter of concern.

Cleveland was 9-5 and in spite of all the injuries, still were in good shape to make the playoffs. Cincinnati had the Central under control and Houston was also 9-5. New England and Indianapolis were giving chase for the two wild-card spots, but the Browns were in control and had a Monday Night trip to a weak Miami team. And Slaughter was coming back.



Naturally, Kosar would re-injure himself in this game and be shut down for the season as Cleveland dug a 31-17 hole. Strock was summoned. The veteran backup had made his reputation as a reliable #2 right here in Miami, most famously when he nearly brought the Dolphins back from a 24-0 deficit against the Chargers in an epic 1981 AFC divisional playoff game.

On this Monday Night, he reminded the folks of South Beach what he could, leading consecutive touchdown drives to tie the game. But Dan Marino threw for over 400 yards and had the last word. The Browns lost 38-31.

The loss meant Cleveland no longer controlled their playoff destiny. Houston had one wild-card nailed down. New England was in control of the next spot. The Browns were hosting the Oilers on Sunday, but unless the Patriots lost in a late Saturday afternoon game it wouldn't matter.

Cleveland turned to an unlikely source for help—John Elway and Denver, who were hosting New England. For once, Elway did the people of Cleveland a solid and delivered a 21-10 win. The Browns had a shot.

It was a shot they were ready to cough up. Strock threw an early Pick-6 and Cleveland trailed Houston 23-7 in the third quarter. This was before the two-point conversion existed in the NFL, so it was a pure three-score deficit. For a team that had offensive problems, the season was all but over.

But Strock still had some comeback magic and authored another memorable comeback. He threw a short touchdown pass to Byner. Then Byner ran for another and cut the lead to two. Strock finished with 326 passing yards and his 22-yard strike to Slaughter sealed a 28-23 comeback. Cleveland was not only in the playoffs, but they moved past Houston in the tiebreakers. The teams would rematch in the AFC wild-card game and that game would be played in the Dawg Pound.

It wouldn't be the 1988 Cleveland Browns if we didn't have one more quarterback injury. Strock was knocked out in the playoff game and Pagel came in. It was a sloppy game with 22 combined penalties. The record book tells you Cleveland lost 24-23, and you might think it was another playoff heartbreak. In reality, the Browns were down 24-16 and got a touchdown with 31

seconds left. With no two-point option, the only drama surrounded the onside kick. When that didn't pan out, Cleveland's season was over.

Schottenheimer had done his most impressive coaching job yet in making the playoffs, but it wasn't enough for owner Art Modell. Marty was fired. 1988 could have just been an unfortunate blip on the radar because of injuries. The poor reaction by ownership turned it into a long-term disaster.

1989

The new coach was Bud Carson, a veteran defensive coordinator most recently with the New York Jets, but never a head coach.

Carson did produce a good defensive team in Cleveland. The '89 Browns finished fourth in the league in points allowed thanks to a standout front four. Defensive tackle Michael Dean Perry was a 1st-team All-Pro and finished with seven sacks. Al Baker and Carl Hairston were getting long in the tooth, at age 33 and 37 respectively, but they combined for 14 more sacks. Linebacker Clay Matthews Sr. was a Pro Bowler, as was corner Frank Minnifield.

The offense had problems and it started in June when power running back Kevin Mack was arrested in a drug bust and missed the first twelve games of the season. The Browns lacked Pro Bowl talent on the offensive line and a combination of shifty Eric Metcalf and burly Tim Manoa didn't produce good results.

Cleveland still had Bernie Kosar behind center and he could run a controlled passing game as well as anyone. His 59 percent completion rate was sixth in the NFL. That stat alone tells you it was a different world when it came to passing statistics. So does the fact that Kosar's 18-14 TD/INT ratio was actually pretty good. He was intercepted on 2.7% of his passes and that was fourth-best among starting quarterbacks.

Kosar didn't have a strong arm, so there wasn't a lot of downfield passing action. His receiving corps was also fairly one-dimensional, but at least that dimension was something special—Webster Slaughter caught 65 balls and the speedy wideout averaged a dazzling 19 yards-per-catch.

Reggie Langhorne caught 60 balls, mostly in the mid-range game and Metcalf came out of the backfield to catch 54 more. Otherwise, Brian Brennan's production dropped at wideout and 33-year-old tight end Ozzie Newsome was past his prime.

The Browns opened the season with a game at Pittsburgh in the late Sunday afternoon TV window and the Cleveland defense put on a show. Matthews started the scoring by returning a fumble for a touchdown. Defensive back David Grayson had two Pick-6s. The Browns won the

turnover battle eight-zip, a statistic I'm reasonably confident usually portends victory. They won 51-0.

Cleveland's D kept up the scoring in a Week 2 home game with the lowly New York Jets. They intercepted four passes, two by Felix Wright and one by Thane Gash that ended up in the end zone. It was enough for a 38-24 win.

The first loss came in a Monday Night road trip to defending AFC champion Cincinnati. The Browns were beat up in the trenches, losing the rush yardage battle 187-92 and allowing Kosar to be sacked six times in a 21-14 loss.

A familiar foe in John Elway and Denver came to the Dawg Pound. Kosar threw a nine-yard TD pass to Slaughter to grab an early lead. The Browns defense took over from there and forced Elway into a rough 6-for-19 passing day. Kosar was efficient, 25/38 for 216 yards and the result was a 16-13 win.

Another great quarterback in Dan Marino was up next in a road trip to Miami. Kosar and Marino both played reasonably well, but neither offense ever really broke through. The Browns ended up losing a tough 13-10 game in overtime. It got worse at home against Pittsburgh the following week—Kosar threw four interceptions, the Browns turned it over seven times in all and they lost 17-7.

The Browns were back on the Monday Night stage, this time hosting Chicago. Mike Ditka's Bears had reached the playoffs each year since 1984 and won a Super Bowl in 1985, but '89 would be a lost season in the Windy City where they struggled to 6-10. Kosar was razor-sharp, going 22/29 for 281 yards. And with a 17-0 lead in the third quarter, he and Slaughter hooked up on a 97-yard touchdown pass. The final was 27-7.

Cleveland hosted the Houston Oilers next. The Kosar-to-Slaughter combo kept cranking out the big plays. Trailing 10-7 in the third quarter, they connected on an 80-yard TD strike. After Houston went ahead 17-14, Kosar hit Slaughter on a 77-yard scoring play. The Browns won it 28-17.

Cleveland kept rolling at a bad Tampa Bay team. Kosar drastically outplayed Vinny Testaverde, the quarterback who succeeded him at the University of Miami. Bernie was efficient, 18/22 for 164 yards and three touchdowns. Testaverde was forced to throw fifty times and while he got 370 yards, it also resulted in four interceptions. More important, it resulted in a 42-31 win for the Browns in a game that was never all that close.

It was the defense's turn to deliver in a 17-7 win over mediocre Seattle. The Browns intercepted three passes, including one by Perry. They held the Seahawks to 46 rush yards. Cleveland was 7-3 and ready for an old friend to come to town.

Schottenheimer had taken the head coaching job in Kansas City and had gotten an immediate turnaround, taking a bad team and at least getting them to the point of being average. In shaky weather conditions the Browns and Chiefs played to a 10-10 tie. Four days later on Thanksgiving in Detroit, the Cleveland offense struggled even in the climate-controlled Silverdome. They got nothing going, the defense allowed a big day to the Lions' rookie running back Barry Sanders and the day ended with a 13-10 loss.

The promising season continued to take a turn for the worse when Cincinnati came across the state and spun a 21-0 shutout. The Browns were now 7-5-1 and trailing the Oilers by a half-game in the AFC Central. The Steelers and Bengals were both hot on their heels at 7-6 and four other teams—the Colts, Dolphins, Raiders and Chiefs—were in the middle of a mad scramble for the two wild-card spots.

Cleveland still controlled their fate, but they gave that away in Indianapolis. Despite taking a 17-7 lead, four turnovers resulted in a 23-17 overtime loss. The Browns had now played three overtime games, lost two and tied one. They were pushed to the brink and had a difficult schedule ahead—playoff-bound Minnesota and a road trip to Houston—along with needing outside help.

First things first—Cleveland needed to win a football game. The field at the Dawg Pound was frozen when the Vikings came in. Langhorne worked it well, catching six balls for 140 yards. Kosar functioned as well as could be expected, going 17/38 for 250 yards and avoiding mistakes. Trailing 17-14 in the closing seconds, veteran kicker Matt Bahr hit a field goal to send it to overtime.

Finally, overtime brought good results, though it took some trickery. Lining up for a 24-yard field goal, Carson decided not to risk it again on the frozen surface. Cleveland ran a fake and holder/backup QB Mike Pagel tossed a TD pass to wide-open linebacker Van Waiters. Elsewhere in the division, Cincinnati had crushed Houston 61-7, giving the Browns the help they needed.

The season finale at the Astrodome would be a Saturday night affair and it was winner-take-all for the AFC Central and #2 seed in the playoffs. If the Browns lost, there was a mathematical chance they could still grab a wild-card although a lot would have to break their way. The stakes were about as high as they could be for a regular season game.

Kosar came out blazing. He found Metcalf on a 68-yard touchdown pass and later hit Slaughter from 40 yards out. The Browns were rolling at 17-0. Houston's explosive offense led by Warren Moon came back and took a 20-17 lead with less than five minutes to play. In a season that had been a wild display of ups and downs, it was time for one more ride on the roller-coaster.

Cleveland first drove into field goal range and then got to the 4-yard line with under a minute to go. Mack had returned to the lineup and that start of December and though he'd yet to make an

impact, this was the kind of situation he was built for. A touchdown run sealed the 24-20 win and an improbable AFC Central title. Had the Browns lost, they would have ended up being nudged out for the playoffs by Schottenheimer's Chiefs, an ironic twist the front office was undoubtedly even happier to avoid.

After a week off, Cleveland hosted Buffalo on early Saturday afternoon in the divisional playoff round. The weather was what you might expect for northeast Ohio in January, which is to say it was frigid and the field was frozen. And that made an impact from the beginning to the end. Bahr missed an early field goal when he slipped. A couple plays later, Felix Wright slipped and allowed a safe pass from Bills' quarterback Jim Kelly to Andre Reed to turn into a 72-yard touchdown play. The Browns moved back into field goal range and this time Bahr delivered, with a 45-yarder.

In the second quarter, the scoring began to open up. It started with another addition to the Kosar-to-Slaughter highlight reel, this one a 52-yard TD pass. Kelly responded with a 33-yard touchdown pass of his own to James Lofton. Cleveland drove back and Kosar flipped a three-yard touchdown to Ron Middleton. Cleveland led 17-14 at the half.

The Browns relied on winning the turnover battle in this game and an interception set up a 44-yard touchdown pass from Kosar to—who else?—Slaughter. The Bills responded when Kelly found running back Thurman Thomas on a short TD pass, but Metcalf immediately countered by taking the ensuing kickoff to the house. It was 31-21 and the city of Cleveland was smelling a third AFC Championship Game appearance in four years.

After trading field goals, Buffalo got another Kelly-to-Thomas TD pass. While the Browns' defense did a yeoman's job against the run, holding Buffalo to 49 rush yards, Thomas tormented them out of the backfield, catching 13 passes for 150 yards. But after this touchdown, the conditions became a factor again when Bills' kicker Scott Norwood slipped on the extra point. The margin stayed at four points, 34-30.

That proved decisive. Kelly, who was brilliant with 405 passing yards, drove Buffalo to the Cleveland 11-yard line. There was time for two more plays, but the missed PAT ensured that a field goal could not be one of them. Kelly threw to the end zone, but Matthews came up with the final big play, an interception on the goal line and the win was secured.

Cleveland had survived Kelly's onslaught by only having one turnover themselves, getting a bit of a running game from Mack—12 carries for 62 yards—and having the big special teams play from Metcalf. They were again one step from the Super Bowl.

And again, the hurdle was John Elway and again, it didn't well for the Browns. They started slowly, digging a quick 10-0 hole, but were within 24-21 after three quarters. Kosar wasn't playing well though and he finished the day 19/44 for 210 yards and threw three interceptions. Elway did play well, 20/36 for 385 yards and three scores. Denver pulled away and won 37-21.

1989 was the last real high the Cleveland Browns have had. As a head coach, Carson proved to have been more or less riding Schottenheimer's coattails. The following year, the Browns started 2-7 and Carson was fired. They've made the playoffs exactly twice since then and never to the AFC Championship Game again. The late 1980s Cleveland Browns were great fun to watch, but this was their last hurrah.