

What Could Have Been - The 1986 Cleveland Browns

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}
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There is a select, a very select, list of Cleveland Browns teams that might have been capable of winning it all in the 40 years they've been playing Super Bowls without us. And in Jesse Lamovsky's latest, he takes a look at what could have been for the 1986 Browns. Had it not been for The Drive, would the Browns have fared any better in the Super Bowl against a very strong New York Giants team? Our resident historian goes back in time.



Playing "let's pretend" stops being fun when you're about eight, but in lieu of an actual, non-Madden appearance, that's all we've got when it comes to the Browns and the Super Bowl.

There is a select, a very select, list of Cleveland Browns teams that might have been capable of winning it all in the 40 years they've been playing Super Bowls without us. The criteria for cracking the list is simple: the team had to have a legitimate chance to win it all, as well as have a chance to win the game they lost to prevent them from, possibly, winning it all. So the 1968 Browns, who would have had a good chance to beat the Jets in Super Bowl III, get left off, because of their annihilation by the Colts in the NFL Championship Game. There go the '69 Browns, who were dominated by Minnesota in the title game and likely would have been beaten by Kansas City's great team in SB IV. The '89 and '94 teams aren't here: not only did both teams get smoked in the playoffs; neither had an even decent chance of beating the 49ers in a Super Bowl. The 1972 wild-card team, near-conquerors of unbeaten Miami, would have had to go to Three Rivers for the AFC Championship. No way the Browns win that game.

That whittles the list down to three. Three teams, in 40+ years, that have had even a semi-legitimate chance to win a Super Bowl Championship for Cleveland. We start with team #3 ...

#3. 1986 Cleveland Browns

Record: 12-4 (6-2 H, 6-2 A)

AFC Central Division Champions

Lost to Denver 23-20 (OT) in AFC Championship Game

Record-wise, this is the winningest single-season team in Browns history, and the only Browns team to win home-field advantage through the playoffs. And, of course, the Browns team that came the closest to going to the Super Bowl; at home, in the lead, late in the fourth quarter of the AFC Championship Game.

The Team & Season

The Browns may have overachieved in getting to 12 wins. They were mediocre statistically: 12th in the league in offense, 16th in defense. They weren't overpowering, especially against inferior teams: the Browns beat six 6-10-or-worse opponents by a total of 22 points and lost at the Stadium to 4-12 Green Bay. They didn't blow anyone out until the back-to-back routs of Cincinnati and San Diego to close the regular season, but they generally found a way to win.

They won thanks to the passing game and great special teams. New offensive coordinator Lindy Infante designed the aerial attack, and Bernie Kosar came into his own in '86, throwing for 3,854 yards and 17 touchdowns in an offense that lacked a consistent run component because of injuries. Touchdowns by Bill Cowher's special teams were huge in three victories: an 84-yard punt return by Gerald "Ice Cube" McNeil in a 24-21 win over Detroit; a 30-yard blocked punt return by Felix Wright in a 23-20 win at Minnesota; and a 100-yard kickoff return by the Cube in the team's first-ever win in Three Rivers Stadium, 27-24.

The Browns got better as the season went on. They lost two of their first three games, and were only 4-3 after the loss to the winless Packers. They then won eight of their last nine and their last five, losing only to Jim Plunkett and the L.A. Raiders in Week 11.

The biggest win came in Week 15, when the Browns traveled to Cincinnati to play the Bengals, with the division squarely on the line. A Cleveland victory would clinch the AFC Central Championship. A Cincinnati victory would give the Bengals a season sweep of the Browns and a hammerlock on the title. Cincinnati was favored to win: it was in Riverfront, they had beaten the Browns handily in Week 3 in the Stadium, and in those days the Bengals were always thought of as one of the most talented, if enigmatic, in football. Cleveland had a cast of low-round draft

picks and USFL refugees, a second-year quarterback, and a habit of putt-putting to uninspired wins against uninspiring opponents. The Browns really weren't considered all that good.

That perception would begin to change on Cleveland's first offensive play, when Kosar dropped back and hit Reggie Langhorne with a bomb that carried inside the Cincinnati 5. Kevin Mack barged in to give the Browns a quick lead, and the woodshed was open for business. The Browns held the league's number-one offense out of the end zone and humiliated Cincinnati, 34-3. The road rout clinched the division and made the Browns legitimate Super Bowl contenders in the AFC for the first time. In fact, it made them favorites. And when the Browns buried San Diego 47-17 in the season finale, commentators said, for the first and only time, "The road to the Super Bowl goes through Cleveland!"

The Browns not only had the best record in the AFC, they were its hottest team; only the New York Giants, winners of seven in a row and 14 of 15, were on a bigger roll going into the playoffs.

AFC Championship Game?

On first down from his 2, Elway fades back, slips on a patch of wet dirt, and gets pinned for a safety. Ballgame. Anyway...

The Opponent

New York rolled into the Super Bowl having beaten its last three opponents by a combined score of 121-27. They manhandled the 49ers in the Divisional Playoff 49-3, knocking out Joe Montana and dealing Bill Walsh his most lopsided defeat as a coach, and shut out the Redskins 17-0 in the NFC Championship Game.

New York was 14-2 during the regular season, tied for the best record in football with the Bears. Its defense was almost a carbon copy of Chicago's from 1985: the league's top run D, mixed with a pass rush that created 43 turnovers and protected a mediocre secondary (e.g. Elvis "Toast" Patterson). New York's front seven was outstanding, especially at linebacker, where the corps of Taylor, Carson, Banks and Reasons was without peer. With a corps of no-name receivers, the offense scored 371 points, overpowering teams with the league's 6th-ranked rushing attack spearheaded by little Joe Morris, and a passing game centered on Mark Bavaro, the league's best young tight end.

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The Giants didn't always look overpowering in the Monday papers; they won nine games by a touchdown or less. What was impressive was the quality of the competition they beat, and how. The Giants beat 12-4 Washington three times, twice during the regular season, once in the playoffs, and increased their margin of victory in each game. They beat 10-5-1 San Francisco twice, once in the regular season and again in the playoffs, and increased their margin of victory in the second game. They beat 11-5 Denver twice, once in the regular season and again in Super Bowl XXI, and increased their margin in the second game. With Parcels and Belichick at work, opponents were as outmatched on the sideline and in the press box as they were on the field.

The key to everything would have been Bernie Kosar. Bernie at 23 would have been the youngest quarterback to start in a Super Bowl. He hadn't even been the confirmed starter going into training camp; he played well in pre-season but won the job by default when an injury sidelined Gary Danielson. Kosar was already a wizard at beating blitzes, but this was Lawrence Taylor, Leonard Marshall, Carl Banks, Belichick with two weeks to prepare, etc. Cleveland was for all intents and purposes without Earnest Byner, who hadn't carried the ball a single time in the playoffs. The Giants had given up a total of 69 yards on the ground to the 49ers and Redskins. Curtis Dickey and Herman Fontenot's ability to crack New York's defense was a thin reed to hang onto. Bernie would have had to win the game by throwing the football, a lot.

So was victory against this juggernaut possible? Could the Browns get some belated payback for 1958? Well... Denver was only up 10-9 at halftime of Super Bowl XXI, but they had dominated the first two quarters in the air; Elway lit up the Giants for 187 yards in the first half, but the Broncos had two trips into the Giant red zone in the second quarter, including a first-and-goal at the one, and came up empty (Karlis missed two chip shots; I've always resented those two misses more than the one he made in Cleveland. And yes, he made it). Bernie could have beaten New York's pass rush enough to move the team reasonably consistently. They could have gotten a big play or two on special teams. Don't tell me Simms goes 22-for-25 against Cleveland's secondary. And the Browns had beaten the Giants in the '85 regular season (which, of course, meant absolutely nothing). The heart says, maybe. The brain says, Giants 27, Browns 14.

Which still would have been better than what the Broncos did.