

What Could Have Been - The 1987 Cleveland Browns

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}
Friday, August 08 2008 7:00 PM -

Widely thought of as the best Browns team ever post-merger, the 1987 Browns would have likely been in the Super Bowl had Webster Slaughter not missed that block or had Earnest Byner hung on to that football. Would they have beaten the Washington Redskins, who went on to embarrass the Broncos behind the trio of Doug Williams, Timmy Smith, and Ricky Sanders? In this excellent piece, Jesse Lamovsky looks at what could have been with the 1987 Cleveland Browns.



1987 Cleveland Browns

- ~**Record: 10-5 (5-2 H, 5-3 A)**
- ~**AFC Central Division Champions**
- ~**Lost at Denver 38-33 in AFC Championship Game**

The '87 Browns were young at the skill positions (aside from Ozzie, all of their top seven offensive players were under 26), balanced, and explosive, with multiple Pro Bowlers on both sides of the ball and the best quarterback the franchise had seen since Otto Graham, having his best season. They were, and are, the best Browns team since the merger.

The Team & Season

Bernie Kosar peaked in 1987, throwing for 3,033 yards and 22 touchdowns in twelve games (averaged out over a 16-game season, Bernie would have thrown for 4,044 yards and 29 touchdowns). Kosar's 95.4 rating was second only to Montana among NFL quarterbacks. The receiving corps of Slaughter, Brennan, and Langhorne wasn't spectacular, but it was reliable, diverse, and all three averaged over 14 yards per catch for a pass attack that finished third in the NFL in yards per attempt.

Cleveland's two-headed rushing game of Kevin Mack and Earnest Byner wasn't particularly impressive by the numbers- the Browns were only 21st in the league

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in rushing in '87- but yards on the ground didn't tell the whole story of the pair's value. Mack was the team's leading rusher and caught 32 passes. Byner led the team in receptions with 52, and even though he had more receiving yards than rushing during the season, still scored eight touchdowns on the ground. Neither ran for 1,000, but their combined rushing, receiving, and blocking prowess made them one of the game's top power backfields.

A common thought back then was that the Browns were the AFC's best chance to win a Super Bowl, because they had the physical element to their game that could match up with the more rough-and-tumble NFC. Byner and Mack were among the biggest perceived equalizers.

Cleveland's defense was statistically better than the offense, ranking #2 in the NFL against the run and #2 overall. The strength of the unit was its aggressive secondary, with Felix Wright and, of course, Hanford Dixon and Frank Minnifield, by general consensus the best pair of cornerbacks in football. There was almost zero pass rush in the team's 46 scheme, and nose tackle Bob Golic broke his hand in the last regular season game, wiping out the keystone of Cleveland's rush defense. This defense did not play good football in the AFC Championship Game. Statistics lie. The offense was better; was more capable of winning a championship-type of game largely on its own efforts.

Eight Browns made the Pro Bowl in 1987: Hanford Dixon, Frank Minnifield, Clay Matthews, Bob Golic, Cody Risien, Gerald McNeil, Kevin Mack, and for the only time in his career, Bernie Kosar. It was the largest delegation in the league.

The Browns didn't just win; they won convincingly. They finished 3rd in the NFL in points scored and second in points given up (by one point, to Indianapolis). Of their eight non-scab wins, five were by 13 points or more. They held double-digit leads in all but three of its twelve non-scab games, including all of its wins. But Cleveland's 10-5 regular-season record would have given it the second-worst winning percentage of any Super Bowl winner.

There were slip-ups. The scab team lost at the Stadium to Houston, a game the regulars probably would have won. On Week 7 in San Diego, the Browns coughed up a 10-point fourth-quarter lead to ancient Dan Fouts and lost in OT to an iffy Chargers team. Five weeks later, the Browns lost 9-7 to the Colts at the Stadium, thanks to a missed 26-yard field goal attempt by rookie Jeff Jaegar and a Byner fumble inside the Colt five late in the game. Home-field advantage in the

playoffs went to 10-4-1 Denver.

(One of the great what-ifs of Cleveland sports history: Wiped off the schedule by the strike was a Week 3, Monday Night game at the Stadium against Denver. Had the game been scheduled for any other week of the season, the Browns would have had a chance to beat the Broncos on the field, at home, and thus finish with the best record in the AFC. But no Week 3, Denver finished a half-game up, and for the AFC title it was off to Mile High Stadium, an shrieking bitch of a road venue if there ever was one. It may have been immaterial, knowing the quality of the man playing quarterback for Denver, but the Browns would have been better served playing the AFC Championship Game in the House of Thrills than in Mile High. Obviously.)

AFC Championship Game?

Byner scores to tie it. Denver fumbles the ensuing kickoff. The Browns waste the clock. Bahr nails a chip shot at the gun. And it's off to San Diego.

The Opponent

The Browns played at New Orleans and San Francisco, the two best teams by record (25-5 combined) in 1987. They fell on opening day in the Superdome when Bernie Kosar crane-hopped 3 yards for his first and only touchdown of the season to tie the game 21-21 in the fourth quarter, and was promptly sacked twice for safeties to untie it for good. In Week 11 they played the Niners on a Sunday Night in Candlestick. The 49ers were 8-2; the Browns were 7-3. It was billed as a possible Super Bowl match-up/shootout between the master and the young upstart. Cleveland stayed competitive for roughly two-and-a-half quarters, then Montana, Rice and Co blew their doors off, winning 38-24 in a game that wasn't that close. Montana and Rice connected for three of Jerry's 22 touchdowns (in 12 games!), as they torched the Top Dawg in single coverage. This is the only game of the 1987 season in which the Browns were overmatched and given a thorough a**-kicking. Had the 49ers gotten to Super Bowl XXII, this Browns team would not be #1. Or 2. Or 3.

As it turned out, the 49ers got nowhere near the Super Bowl. The Vikings, who lost all three of its strike games, backed into the playoffs, and were a whole lot better than anyone realized, wiped out both San Francisco and New Orleans in back-to-back playoff stunners, handing NOLA one of the worst home losses in

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NFL postseason history and compelling Bill Walsh to yank Joe Montana in the third quarter of his team's 36-24 defeat (one of Minnesota's scores courtesy of a pick-six by Reggie Rutland, the future Najee Mustafa).

Third-seeded Washington, road winners over Chicago in the first round, had to have been pleased to be playing the Vikings in RFK in the NFC Championship Game, and not the Niners in Candlestick. The Redskins squeezed by Minnesota in a game only decided by the margin of Darrin Nelson's hands, and Washington became the only team below a two-seed to win the NFC title during that conference's 13-year Super Bowl winning streak.

The Browns and Redskins were similar teams. Both had gone 8-4 in non-strike games. Both billed themselves as power teams while featuring outstanding passing games. Both teams were playoff-tested, having each gone to the conference championship (and losing) the previous year. Both had rebuilt with major contributions from former USFL players.

Washington could score, its offense pistoned by that Joe Gibbs staple, the great offensive line, and injected with home-run capability by Art Monk, Gary Clark, and Ricky Sanders. The 'Skins had had some turmoil at quarterback during the season, with Jay Schroeder and Doug Williams splitting time, but it hadn't hindered Washington's passing attack, which finished 3rd in the NFL. The running game (George Rogers, Kelvin Bryant, and of course, Timmy Smith) was dependable but not spectacular behind its wall of road-graders. It's easy to believe the absence of Bob Golic could have hindered Cleveland's efforts to stop Washington's counter-heavy ground game. It's difficult to believe Cleveland's defense could have shut down Washington's offense.

But it could have been slowed to a point where Cleveland's offense could have kept up, and maybe more than kept up, against Washington's 22nd-ranked defense. The Browns were on a roll offensively in the '87 playoffs, running up 31 points on Indianapolis, the league's top scoring defense, and putting up 31 more on the Broncos in the AFC Championship Game. Kosar completed 64 percent of his passes in those two games, throwing six touchdown passes. Bernie was red-hot and had six good receivers to throw his feather-soft accuracies to. Bernie was the Man, and the Browns had too many weapons for Washington to stop, even with its great players (Manley; Mann; Green) on defense.

A score? How about Cleveland 30, Washington 27? The Browns were a better

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team than the Redskins. You're welcome to ignore the coaching match-up, by the way. I did.