

## What Could Have Been - The 1980 Cleveland Browns

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}  
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In the second installment of this excellent three part series, Jesse Lamovsky continues his look back at what could have been with the three greatest Browns teams of the Super Bowl era. Part II wonders what may have occurred if the 1980 Cleveland Browns hadn't been Red Right 88'ed into submission by Mike Davis and the Raiders. The Kardiatic Kids would have traveled to San Diego to face Dan Fouts and the Chargers, then been matched up against the Ron Jaworski led Eagles in the Super Bowl.



For Would-Be Champion Number Two, we look back on the team that made itself a legend as much by the way it lost as by the way it won.

### **1980 Cleveland Browns**

**Record: 11-5 (6-2 H, 5-3 A)**

### **AFC Central Division Champions**

### **Lost to Oakland 14-12 in AFC Divisional Playoff**

Cleveland won its first AFC Central title in nine years in 1980, finishing 11-5 and winning the championship over Houston on the conference-record tiebreaker. The Browns played in 12 games decided by seven points or less, including ten that were still in doubt in the last two minutes. They won nine of those games, including a 27-24 division-clincher in the season finale at Cincinnati. The Browns also snapped Pittsburgh's six-year streak of division titles, effectively ending the Steeler Dynasty (boo-yah).

### The Team & Season

It was a wide-open year in the AFC, with the fall of the Steelers creating a classic power vacuum. All five AFC playoff teams finished 11-5; all were flawed. The East Champion Bills had offensive balance and the league's top-ranked defense but were physically banged up by the playoffs (Joe Ferguson quarterbacked Buffalo's playoff loss at San Diego on a broken ankle). The West Champion Chargers had the best offense in football but could be manhandled on defense. The Oilers had a one-man offense- Earl Campbell. Oakland was mediocre statistically on both sides of the ball and had been a pre-season pick to finish last in the AFC West. It was a year for a dark horse in the AFC, and the Browns were certainly capable of being that dark horse.

Cleveland had its own shortcomings. The Browns were the worst team in the NFL against the pass, giving up over 4,000 yards. They were not a balanced team offensively, throwing the ball over a hundred times more than they ran it. They won because Brian Sipe was the league's best quarterback, with his team-record 4,132 yards and 30 touchdowns. They had the inside-outside Pruitts: fullback Mike (1,034 yards, 63 receptions), and halfback Greg (50 catches; five touchdowns). They had a duo of savvy veteran receivers and a young star at tight end in Ozzie Newsome. The offensive line- DeLeone, Dieken, and DeLamielleure- was outstanding. And they had a lot of experience in close games; 24 of Cleveland's 32 games in 1979-80 were decided by a touchdown or less. They were not the most talented team in the league by any means; but the Browns knew how to score, and they knew how to win a barnburner.

### AFC Divisional Playoff?

I'll let the late, great Raiders announcer, Bill King describe it:

*Sipe looks, he THROWS... and Ozzie Newsome makes a leaping catch for a touchdown!! The Cleveland Browns called on chutzpah again, and it worked. This crowd is splitting apart at the seams. Cleveland Municipal Stadium is an open-air insane asylum. It looked like Mike Davis was going to get there, but NO! Newsome, out of position, seemingly sealed off from the play, made a desperation lunge, and with 42 seconds to play, the Cleveland Browns, have taken the lead, 18-14. (Dispiritedly) Holy Toledo.*

### The Opponent

After freezing their butts off at the Lakefront against Oakland, the victorious Browns would have then had the pleasure of playing the AFC Championship Game in balmy San Diego against the hyper-powered Chargers.

This was probably the best Charger team of the Don Coryell era. Dan Fouts threw for a league-record 4,715 yards and 30 touchdowns. Most of both the yards and the scores went to his troika of 1,000-yard receivers; Kellen Winslow, John Jefferson, and Charlie Joiner. San Diego's o-line, manned by the likes of Doug Wilkerson, Ed White, and Russ Washington, was a superb veteran unit. And when they rescued Chuck Muncie from the imploding Saints at mid-season, they solidified the running game as well.

And the architect of this scoring machine? He was a drawling, bespectacled assistant coach by the name of Joe Gibbs.

Surprisingly, the Chargers also had a top ten defense in 1980. They piled up 60 sacks, with Gary "Big Hands" Johnson and Fred Dean the main men for the league's most prolific pass rush. But they had a problem stopping the run; the Raiders were able to waste the last 6:43 of the AFC Championship Game, keeping Air Coryell on the sidelines by powering right at a Charger defense that couldn't get a stop and get off the field.

Here's the cold water. San Diego's strengths were the same as Cleveland's, only better. The Browns had Sipe and his 4,132 yards; the Chargers had Fouts and his 4,715. San Diego saw Ozzie Newsome and raised Kellen Winslow. Cleveland had a great offensive line; so did the Chargers. Fouts had the added advantage of being able to throw against Cleveland's woeful pass defense. Meanwhile, Sam Rutigliano's throw-always philosophy played right into the hand of 'Diego's finesse pass-rushers. This would have been a bad match-up.

## The Eagle Factor

Here is the good match-up: a potential Super Bowl XV against Philadelphia. The Eagles were a solid but very unspectacular team, one built by Dick Vermeil out of the bailing wire of low-round draft picks, undrafted free agents, and sturdy veterans, a team that performed above its talent to an extent (you can say the same for the Browns). Philadelphia shot its wad in an emotional NFC Championship win over the Cowboys; they came out flat and lethargic in the Super Bowl, and a relaxed Oakland team took it to them. If nothing else, the '80

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Browns played every game with a high degree of confidence, even bravado; they would not have been flat for a Super Bowl.

So the Kardiak Kids come in at #2, because they had the single best match-up of any Browns team in a Super Bowl. Never mind that they probably wouldn't have beaten the Chargers anyway; just concentrate on the near-certainty that the Kardiak Kids would have been in Vermeil's kitchen in the Superdome.