



It was the day after Christmas, 1954, and the two most dominant franchises in professional football were about to square off in the NFL Championship Game for a third consecutive season. There was no ESPN to hype it, no NFL Films to document it, and no Super Bowl trophy to hoist after it, but with 12 future Hall of Famers on the field that day, it's not a stretch to say that there was no better ticket in sports than "Browns versus Lions" ...Yes, Cleveland and Detroit.

To understate via cliché, times have changed. Only five current NFL franchises have never played in the Super Bowl, and the New Orleans Saints could very well escape that club this year. Two of the remaining teams are just expansion pups--Jacksonville and Houston--and the other two, of course, are Cleveland and Detroit. Add in the fact that this Sunday's Browns (1-8) vs. Lions (1-8) matchup is already getting buzz as a last second entry for Worst Game of the Decade, and it's easy to understand why most people have forgotten the once revered stature these teams held in the NFL's pre-golden era. Between the two of them, Cleveland and Detroit took home six of the 10 NFL titles in the 1950s (3 apiece), going head to head four times in the process. They were proud franchises playing for proud fan bases.

As for the rivalry itself, few could deny that the Lions hold the bragging rights. In the two teams' first championship encounter at Cleveland Stadium in 1952, Detroit escaped with a 17-7 victory. A year later, they repeated the feat at Briggs Stadium in Detroit, winning 17-16 on a dramatic touchdown toss from Bobby Layne to Jim Doran in the final moments. All told, the Browns had dropped 8 straight contests to the Lions heading into their Boxing Day showdown in 1954, including a 14-10 loss just one week earlier in a comparatively meaningless regular season finale at Cleveland Stadium. That game had originally been scheduled for October 3rd, but was postponed thanks to the Cleveland Indians hosting (and losing) game 4 of the World Series. As a result, the Browns and Lions both missed out on what would have been their off-week heading into the Championship, and the NFL was left with what amounted to a bizarre warm-up game for the big contest that loomed. As a further consequence, fans filing into Cleveland Stadium on December 26th were left feeling a sense of déjà vu from the weekend prior, and not surprisingly, expectations were fairly low that their Brownies would be able to prevail.

Cleveland was only a 3 point underdog heading into the '54 Championship Game, but the team's four-year drought against the Lions and three consecutive Championship Game defeats (starting with a loss to the Rams in 1951) left many doubting whether coach Paul Brown and his aging team could still win the big one. Had there been sports talk radio or internet message boards back then, we can safely assume much of Cleveland would have been calling for the head of their legendary coach. But Brown had confidence in his team, particularly golden boy quarterback Otto Graham, who was supposedly playing in his final game (he eventually went Favre and elected to come back and play one more year).

In some ways, the previous week's loss proved to be beneficial for the Browns, as the frustration of their struggles with coach Buddy Parker's aggressive, pass-heavy Lions squad had finally hit a boiling point. Unwilling to let another championship slip through their grasp, the team rallied together and vowed to beat Detroit at their own game-- taking risks, making big plays, and going for the jugular.

On an unseasonably warm afternoon by the lake, it didn't take long for Otto Graham and company to show that they'd turned over a new leaf. Trailing 3-0 early in the first quarter, Graham hit third-year halfback Ray Renfro for a 35-yard touchdown strike, catching the Lion secondary completely off guard. During the season, Graham had tallied career lows in pass attempts and touchdown throws, and in his previous Championship Game encounter with Detroit, he'd been rendered nearly useless, putting up a Derek Anderson-like line of 2 for 15 for 20 yards. Not this time.

Off a Lion turnover, Graham hit Pete Brewster for an 8-yard touchdown, giving the Browns a 14-3 edge at the end of the first quarter. In the second quarter, he hit Renfro for another long TD pass and rushed for two more himself, taking Cleveland into the half with a commanding 28-10 lead.

Paul Brown's clever use of Renfro and young running backs Maurice Bassett (who had replaced Marion Motley that season) and Chet Hanulak had the Lions confused and overwhelmed for the first time in the clubs' many meetings. Meanwhile, the Browns aggressive-as-promised defense gave the usually dependable Bobby Layne fits all day, forcing him into 6 interceptions (including two-a-piece to Len Ford and Ken Konz). Graham had little problem cashing in the turnovers, and the barrage continued in the second half, as the Cleveland faithful were treated to a 56-10 blowout and the first Browns championship since 1950 (wow, a four year wait!).

It was a storybook performance for the Browns and certainly the highlight of their heated rivalry with the mighty Lions, but it wasn't the final chapter either. While the Browns went on to win the title again in 1955 over the Rams, they would encounter the Lions one final time in the 1957 NFL Championship in Detroit. By now, Graham had retired and been replaced by Milt Plum, but a young rookie running back named Jim Brown gave the team hope. Unfortunately, the Lions got their long-awaited revenge nonetheless, clubbing Cleveland 59-14 behind a phenomenal performance from newly acquired QB Tobin Rote.

The Lions and Browns only met a handful of times in the decade that followed, and never again in the postseason. After the AFL-NFL merger, both franchises saw their fortunes fade. And as the sport grew (odds are there will be more people at this Sunday's game in Detroit than the 43,000 who attended the '54 Championship), the legacies of Otto Graham, Bobby Layne, Len Ford, Jack Christiansen, and the rest of those storied teams has been gradually overshadowed by the follies and punchlines of their modern day descendents.