

## Great Cleveland What-If's: The 1980 Cleveland Browns

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}

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In the newest installment of the "What If?" series, we look at the Kardiak Kids, the 1980 season, and a poor throw on a cold day that ended it all.

### ***What if... Brian Sipe hadn't been intercepted at the end of the 1980 AFC Divisional Playoff against Oakland?***

Background: Winning nine games by six points or less, the [1980 Browns](#) stunned the football world with an 11-5 record and the championship of the AFC Central, considered by general consensus the toughest division in football. Coach Sam Rutigliano was a proponent of long passes and long chances, and putting his daring theories in practice was quarterback Brian Sipe, who took NFL MVP honors with 4,132 yards and thirty touchdown passes.

1980 was a fluid year in the NFL. The two-time defending Champion Steelers were down, going 9-7 and missing the Playoffs. Six of the ten postseason participants had never played in a Super Bowl. All five AFC Playoff teams were 11-5 while the top three NFC teams were 12-4. Nearly every team had a reasonable chance to go to the Super Bowl. It was a wide-open year, one that could be captured by a team of Destiny- a team like, say the Cleveland Browns.

On January 4<sup>th</sup>, 1981, the Browns met the Oakland Raiders in Divisional Playoffs. [The game-time temperature was one degree](#), the wind chill minus-37, making this the coldest NFL game since the Packers-Cowboys Ice Bowl of 1967. The Arctic conditions grounded both teams' potent offenses, turning the game

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into a grim battle for survival. Cleveland's explosive attack failed to generate a touchdown; a [42-yard interception return by Ron Bolton](#) and two field goals accounted for all of the Browns points. Oakland scraped together a pair of Mark van Eeghen touchdown plunges and led, 14-12, in the fourth quarter.

With just over two minutes left Oakland still led 14-12 and faced fourth-and-short at the Cleveland 14-yard line. Raider coach Tom Flores had a choice- try a 31-yard field goal, which would make it 17-12 and force the Browns to score a touchdown to win, or go for the first down and an opportunity to run out the clock. Flores wanted no part of a Browns offense that could explode at any minute. He went for it. [Van Eeghen was stuffed for no gain](#) and the Browns had the ball back.

Flores's wariness of Cleveland's offense quickly proved founded. As he had done all season, Sipe quickly got cranked up, hitting Ozzie Newsome and Greg Pruitt for long gains and driving the Browns 73 yards to the Raider 13 in just over a minute. A field goal attempt was an option, but with 49 seconds left Rutigliano wanted to take one more shot at the end zone.

History remembers the ensuing play call simply as "Red Right 88." The full name was Red Slot Right, Halfback Stay 88. Reggie Rucker and Ozzie Newsome were to run downfield into the end zone, taking their defenders with them and opening up the middle for a crossing route by Dave Logan, the primary receiver. According to Rutigliano, Logan was open- "I'm already celebrating," he recalled in his autobiography, *Pressure*.

But Sipe wasn't looking at Logan. He had zeroed in on Ozzie Newsome, who had a step on safety Mike Davis in the end zone. Sipe threw for his tight end. The pass hung up in the wind, allowing Davis to time to get in front of Newsome. Not known for his ball-hawking skills- "Mike had the worst hands of the guys in our secondary" Flores admitted- Davis intercepted the pass and hit the icy turf in front of a staggering despairing Newsome. The crowd of 77,665 at the Stadium went dead silent. Seemingly everyone who was there that bitterly cold day invariably brings up that eerie silence.

What If? Coach Sam has taken a lot of heat for his decision to throw the football. And had it been a warm September afternoon the heat would be justified. But it wasn't. The ground was rock-hard and uneven and the ball was, in the words of Bill Livingston, "like a boulder." Don Cockroft was playing his last game, an old-time straight-ahead kicker with physical problems. His holder Paul McDonald, rookie from sunny USC, was petrified by the conditions. The Browns

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were going into the open end of the Stadium, where the winds were worst. Cleveland had already missed two field goals and had an extra point blocked at that end- the latter by 6'7" linebacker Ted Hendricks, the NFL's top kick-stuffer. This was no chip shot.

Cleveland hadn't gotten that far by sitting on the football. Had they sat on it and Cockroft missed- as was entirely possible- Rutigliano would have been pilloried for getting conservative instead of putting the ball in the hands of his great passing attack one more time. The Browns were true to themselves when they put it in the air on Red Right 88. They did what they'd done for three years leading up to that moment. They died with their boots on, and that has to be respected.

Enough of that- Sipe hits Logan, he hits pay dirt standing up, Browns win, 19-14. They move on to the AFC Championship Game in San Diego against the Chargers. Now, here's where it gets tricky. The Browns were dead last in the NFL against the pass, and the leaky unit would have been severely tested in San Diego's Jack Murphy Stadium. [The Chargers](#) were the greatest air show the league had ever seen. Throwing to three 1,000-yard receivers- John Jefferson, Kellen Winslow and Charlie Joiner- Dan Fouts had piled up a record 4,715 yards through the air. Cleveland's secondary would have been target practice for Air Coryell.

San Diego's defense also had its weaknesses. With their front line of Fred Dean, Louie Kelcher and Gary "Big Hands" Johnson, the Chargers were an excellent pass-rushing team, but they weren't so tough against the run. In their actual AFC title-game match-up, the Raiders put San Diego's lights out by grinding out the final seven minutes against the weary Charger defense. Cleveland's superb offensive line could have stood up nicely against San Diego's pass rush, and the pounding runs of Mike Pruitt would have been there. Still, San Diego was more talented than Cleveland. The Chargers boasted four future Hall-of-Famers to Cleveland's one, and they were at home. The Browns would have scored their points, but it's likely that San Diego would have scored more.

But... if the Browns had gotten by the Chargers, they would have had a favorable match-up in Super Bowl XV at the Superdome. Dick Vermeil's Philadelphia Eagles had finished with a better record than Cleveland at 12-4, but they expended an enormous amount of energy and emotion in their NFC title-game victory over archrival Dallas and had their reservoir of spirit further drained by Vermeil's strict pre-Super Bowl regimen. [Philadelphia came out lethargic](#) for Super Bowl XV and the Raiders took it too the Eagles 27-10. Beating San Diego would have been far tougher than beating Philadelphia. Of course, we'll never know.