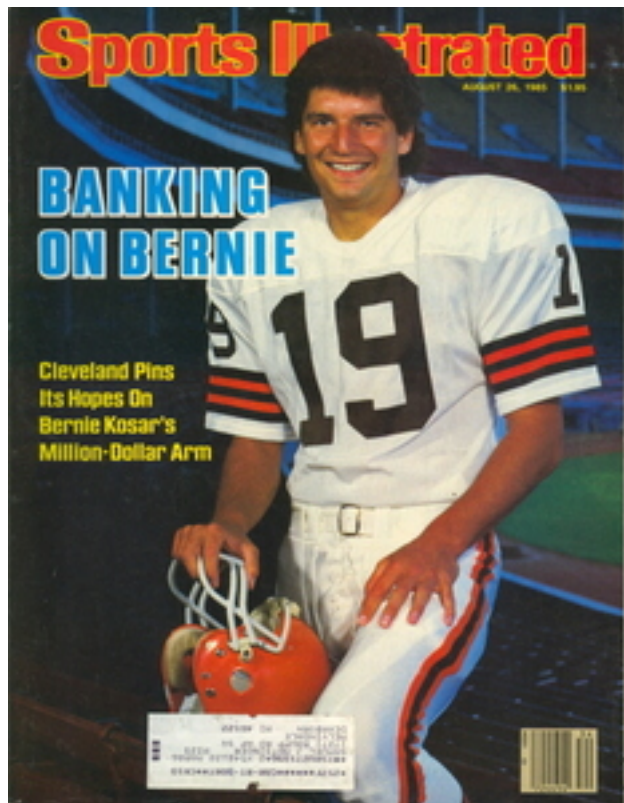


Great Cleveland What-If's: The 1985 Browns

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}

Thursday, August 04 2011 11:00 PM - Last Updated Thursday, August 04 2011 9:34 PM



Here's a What-If you might not remember. It was the year Bernie was a rookie, when Byner and Mack exploded on the scene, and when a .500 record was all it took to buy a ticket to the Playoffs. It was 1985, the table-setting year for the legendary Browns of the late '80s, and it ended in a way that would become all-to-familiar to Cleveland fans. But let's just suppose it didn't.

What if... the Browns hadn't blown a 21-3 lead over the Dolphins in the 1985 AFC Divisional Playoff?

Background: Powered by 1,000-yard rushers Kevin Mack and Earnest Byner and the barking Dawgs in their secondary, [the Browns](#) won the AFC Central Division for the first time since 1980. At 8-8 they were the weakest Playoff qualifier since the adoption of the sixteen-game schedule; as it happened, the Broncos went 11-5 that season but finished third in the powerful AFC West and missed the Playoffs altogether.

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Cleveland was given no chance of defeating Dan Marino and the Dolphins in the Divisional Playoff at the sweltering Orange Bowl. Fresh off an AFC Championship in '84, [Miami had rolled to a 12-4 record](#) that included the only loss sustained by the Chicago Bears that year. But the Browns matched up well: a young and aggressive secondary against Miami's record-breaking passing game and a running attack that could whip the shaky Dolphin defense.

Sure enough Cleveland, clad in fishnet brown jerseys against the south Florida heat, came out throwing roundhouses. While the Dawgs contained Marino and his "Magic Markers" receiving duo of Mark Duper and Mark Clayton, Byner and Mack ripped off yards in chunks against Miami's shaky defense. [When Byner exploded right up the middle for a 66-yard touchdown run](#) early in the second half, it pushed Cleveland into a 21-3 lead. One more solid punch might have been all it took to send the beleaguered Dolphins to the canvas.

They never got it, and midway through the third quarter Dan Marino finally got it cranked up. While the Dolphin defense finally slowed down Cleveland's ground game, Marino led three touchdown drives, the last ending in the go-ahead touchdown with 1:57 to play. Rookie Bernie Kosar had one last shot but was unable to direct a comeback in his old college stomping grounds. Miami's 24-21 victory sent the Dolphins to the AFC Championship Game- and the Browns home for the winter.

What If? You might be wondering why this game made the list. Here's why. The [New England Patriots](#) won the other divisional-round game over the Los Angeles Raiders. New England was a wild-card team, meaning, despite their 11-5 regular-season record, the Patriots would have had to travel to Cleveland for the AFC Championship Game. Hard as it may be to believe given their mediocre record, the Browns would have had the inside track to the Super Bowl had they hung on to beat the Dolphins in Miami.

Had the Browns beaten the Patriots in the AFC Championship Game, they would have faced a somewhat larger obstacle in Super Bowl XX- the 15-1 Chicago Bears, maybe the greatest single-season team in modern NFL history. Chicago, of course, obliterated the Patriots 46-10 in the Super Bowl, holding them to 123 total yards, including just seven on the ground. I was only ten at the time, but I remember that game very well. Watching it was like watching a tabby cat getting thrown into a crocodile pit.

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Still, the Patriots had some disadvantages in that game which Cleveland would not have shared. They had expended a great deal of emotion in beating Miami and shattering their "Orange Bowl Jinx" in the AFC title game (New England had never won in the Orange Bowl prior to that day) and were unable to get back to that level against Chicago. Coach Raymond Berry outsmarted himself prior to the Super Bowl, ditching his punishing ground game for a pass-first strategy that backfired disastrously. Even in the face of Chicago's 46 Defense, it's almost inconceivable to believe Marty Schottenheimer would have adopted Berry's tactic. The Browns had made the Playoffs running the ball; they would have kept running against the Bears. Marty was nothing if not stubborn.

Not that it matters, even in the hypothetical. I'm not inclined to believe, even with the home field and a favorable match-up, that the Browns would have beaten New England in the AFC Championship Game. The reason is simple and singular- Cleveland had a rookie quarterback, and no rookie quarterback since 1945 has ever led his team to an NFL or conference championship. Facing a Patriots defense that was outstanding against the run, Bernie would have had to throw to win- and he didn't have the experience, weapons or scheme to win in a game of that magnitude. Even so, it's an intriguing and, dare I say, underrated what-if.