

Remembering Heartbeats- The Kardiac Kids: Week Two

Written by {ga=jonathanknight}
Wednesday, September 15 2010 6:00 AM -



Thirty years ago this week, the wheels came off the wagon.

While discouraging, a lopsided loss on the road to a strong New England team in the opener wasn't precisely reason for panic. If the Browns could bounce back in Week Two and take down the powerful Houston Oilers before a fired-up Cleveland crowd on Monday Night Football, they could still salvage some optimism for the 1980 season that lay before them.

Yet a win over Houston was anything but a given. Over the previous two seasons, Bum Phillips' Oilers had established a reputation as football's second-best team, denied back-to-back Super Bowl trips only by their divisional brothers the Steelers, who had defeated Houston in the AFC Championship in 1978 and 1979 and then went on to win consecutive titles.

Led by steam engine Earl Campbell at fullback and further buoyed by the acquisition of legendary quarterback Kenny Stabler, the Oilers were determined to get over the hump in 1980, and a tough loss at Pittsburgh in Week One only strengthened their resolve. A second straight divisional loss would cripple Houston's aspirations for the Central title.

On a cool September night, better than 80,000 fans packed into Cleveland Stadium for the

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Browns' home opener and what they hoped would be the day they actually started their season. Up in the booth, Howard Cosell was impressed by the electric atmosphere. "The scene speaks for itself," he told his audience. "A city battling back and coming to life because of Monday Night Football. This city has been in distress and now it's fighting back."

The Browns themselves appeared ready to fight back after being tarred and feathered by the Patriots eight days earlier, grabbing an early lead when Brian Sipe hit ageless Calvin Hill for a short touchdown pass in the second quarter. Still leading 7-3 going into the third quarter, the home team quickly saw things start to sour.

Astonishingly, the Browns' offense controlled the ball for less than four minutes of the second half, and consequently, the Cleveland defense quickly wore down. After an interception return for a touchdown by Elvis Franks that would have made it 14-3 was wiped out on a penalty, the Oilers reached the end zone for the first time and took a 10-7 lead.

Things only got worse. A roughing-the-passer penalty on Lyle Alzado dug the Oilers out of a third-and-29 hole and set up a field goal. With Sipe and Company continuing to struggle and the defense huffing and puffing, Houston put the game away in the fourth quarter with a 10-minute, 16-play drive that ended with another field goal with four minutes left.

As the final gun sounded on the 16-7 loss, the Kardiac Kids were booed off the field by their home crowd. "Even the Titanic made it out of port and stayed afloat for a week or so," Bob Sudyk commented wryly in the Cleveland Press.

Now not only was the Browns' defense miserable - allowing the Oilers to own the football for more than 42 minutes - but now the much-ballyhooed offense looked downright anemic.

Well past midnight, Sam Rutigliano made the long walk up to Art Modell's office to discuss the game with his boss and general manager Peter Hadhazy. The mood of the room was as dark as the autumn night outside. Sam remembered thinking they were trying to determine which one was going to cut his wrists first.

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The Browns, fighting for respect in the toughest division in football, were now 0-2 and had been dramatically outplayed by the first legitimate playoff contenders they'd encountered. They already trailed the defending world champion Steelers – who'd lost a total of just six games in the previous two seasons combined – by two games and were wallowing in last place.

“Unless Sipe and Co. prove otherwise,” glumly predicted Plain Dealer sports editor Hal Lebovitz, “this is going to be a boring season.”

Or perhaps not.