

REMEMBERING HEARTBEATS- THE KARDIAC KIDS: WEEK FIVE

Written by {ga=jonathanknight}

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The Christmas season may have still been two months away, but 30 years ago this week, the 1980 Browns decided to kick off the season of giving a little early.

After surviving a disastrous start with back-to-back losses, the Kardiak Kids had resuscitated their season with nail-biting triumphs over Kansas City and Tampa Bay and were on the brink of recapturing the magic Mojo of '79. With the mediocre Denver Broncos coming to Cleveland following a short week after an appearance on *Monday Night Football* (and 20-year-old John Elway a sophomore at Stanford trying in vain to lead the Cardinal to a bowl game), the Browns could already visualize getting over the .500 hump and firmly establishing themselves as a force to be reckoned with in the AFC playoff picture.

As had been their custom thus far in the young season, the Browns started slow and the teams were knotted at three heading into the second quarter. After Denver crept ahead with another field goal, Cleveland surged to its first lead when Brian Sipe looped a third-down pass deep down the middle from the Denver 40 and Reggie Rucker made a marvelous over-the-shoulder catch for the go-ahead touchdown to make it 10-6.

After forcing the Broncos to punt on their next possession, the energized Browns offense picked up where it left off, slowly marching down the field with a methodical 15-play drive as halftime neared. With under a minute left in the second quarter, a nine-yard end-around run by Ozzie Newsome set up third-and-goal from the Denver 1.

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Looking for a decisive score that would take the wind out of the Broncos' sails and set the tone for an easy second half, Sipe rolled to his left. For a moment he thought he'd be able to run into the end zone himself, but Denver recovered to cut off his angle. Then, ever the competitor, Sipe refused to give up on the play. He spotted Newsome in the corner of the end zone and tried to flick a pass to him. Even as the ball left his hand, Sipe knew he should be throwing it out of bounds and settling for the field goal. The ball was tipped by linebacker Randy Gradishar and floated to the ground. But instead of hitting the soft grass, it bounced off the back of Denver's Tom Jackson laying on the ground and back up into the arms of Gradishar. As shocked as anyone in the ballpark, Gradishar began rumbling downfield. Ninety-three yards later, the Broncos had taken the lead back at 13-10 with 35 seconds remaining. At the minimum, it was a 10-point swing in the space of twenty seconds. Both the Browns and the capacity crowd that had been enjoying a crisp, pleasant afternoon of football were equally stunned.

The Browns resiliently responded, quickly parlaying a nice return by Dino Hall on the ensuing kickoff into a Don Cockroft field goal to knot the game at 13. Still, the cloud created by Gradishar's early Christmas present hung over the Stadium. Though not as the Browns had hoped, that play did indeed set the tone for the second half.

Time and again, the Browns squandered golden opportunities to take control. Linebacker Robert L. "Stonewall" Jackson picked off Bronco quarterback Matt Robinson on the second play of the third quarter and set the Browns up at the Denver 13. A clipping penalty on Doug Dieken thwarted the opportunity, which faded into the sunny afternoon when Cockroft sliced a 25-yard field goal attempt and the game remained tied.

Denver rebounded with an efficient march into Cleveland territory and the go-ahead field goal as the third quarter waned. The Browns knotted the score again on their following possession and the teams headed into the fourth quarter wondering how a game in which the Browns had so clearly established themselves as the better squad was somehow in doubt.

Once again, the tide appeared to turn in the Browns' favor when McDonald Oden blocked a Bronco field goal three minutes into the final stanza. But a pair of penalties stalled the ensuing drive and after a poor punt by Johnny Evans, the Broncos regained possession in Cleveland territory and took back the lead with a short field goal to make it 19-16 with under six minutes to play.

For as frustrating as the afternoon had been, the Cleveland Stadium faithful weren't worried.

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Over the previous two weeks they'd seen their Kardiak Kids similarly turn easy victories into difficult struggles before coming out on top in the end. This was just the way they played the game, and they figured things would be no different on this first Sunday in October.

Sure enough, Sipe and Company steamed into Denver territory, and after a 15-yard completion to Mike Pruitt, the Browns appeared to be in the driver's seat with a first down at the Bronco 25 with three minutes left. But Joe DeLamielleure was flagged for holding on the play, instead making it second-and-18 from midfield. A 13-yard completion to Mike Pruitt pushed them to the 37, but Sipe's third-down toss fell incomplete.

Now Sam Rutigliano had to make a critical decision. With two-and-a-half minutes left, he faced fourth-and-five at the Bronco 37. Rather than displaying the riverboat-gambler style that had defined the Browns' 1979 season, Sam decided to put the game on the shoulders of his struggling kicker. Don Cockroft, who'd missed from 25 yards earlier, trotted onto the field for a 54-yard attempt to tie the game. Though it was a lengthy kick, several years earlier, this still would have been a relatively high-percentage attempt for the normally reliable Cockroft. But in the final year of his stellar career in 1980, Cockroft wasn't what he once was. His trajectory was true, but the football fell three yards short and Denver took over.

The Browns had one last chance to get the ball back, but when Denver running back Jim Jensen plunged over left tackle for three yards and a first down on third-and-1 at the two-minute warning, that was the ballgame. With the Browns out of time outs, Craig Morton, called on to relieve Robinson in the third quarter, knelt out the final minute, and the Broncos had somehow escaped. Despite out-gaining Denver by more than 120 yards and out-playing the Broncos in essentially every phase of the game, Denver left town with an undeserved 19-16 victory.

Now back under the .500 mark at 2-3, again two games back of front-running Pittsburgh and with the newfound momentum they'd carried into October utterly destroyed, the Browns once again saw the 1980 season slipping away.

Little did anyone know that over the next 11 weeks, the Kardiak Kids wouldn't allow that to happen, putting on one of the greatest shows in the history of football.