

Yesteryear: 1978 vs. N.Y. Jets

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}

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On a bitterly cold December afternoon in 1978, in a Cleveland Stadium that was more than half-empty, the phenomenon known as the Kardiak Kids was born.

It had been an up-and-down year for Cleveland and its rookie head coach Sam Rutigliano. The Browns began the 1978 season with three straight wins then lost six of their next eight to fall out of contention in the tough Central Division. Cleveland stood at 7-7 going into their meeting with the New York Jets at the Stadium on December 10th, good for a modest third in the division.

There had been bright spots. Quarterback Brian Sipe, third-year receiver Dave Logan and rookie tight end Ozzie Newsome were having a breakout season leading an offense that would finish the season ranked fifth in the NFL in total yardage. But the defense was one of the league's worst and the schedule was demanding, with seven games against 1978 playoff qualifiers. Rutigliano had infused new energy into the organization but it hadn't translated into contention. The Browns seemed marooned in the netherworld of mediocrity.

Their opponents, the New York Jets, were among the surprises of the league. After limping to a 9-33 combined record from 1975-77 the Jets were 8-6 and still breathing in the playoff race going into the 1978 season's final two weeks. New York had used a series of good drafts to build a stable of young talent: receivers Wesley Walker and Derrick Gaffney, tight end Mickey Shuler, tackles Marvin Powell and Chris Ward, center Joe Fields, defensive linemen Joe Klecko and Abdul Salaam. It was an embryonic version of the team that would become [one of the most colorful in football](#) during the 1980's.

The Browns-Jets donnybrook did not incite a tidal wave of interest on the North Shore. A little

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over 38,000 fans braved the sixteen-degree temperature and minus-one degree wind chill to see an end-of-season game between teams that hadn't made the playoffs in years and were all but mathematically eliminated from playoff contention this year. The cold had turned the field into a lunar landscape as a weak sun shone on the proceedings.

At first it didn't look as if the Browns would need a comeback to dispatch the Jets, a team they had never lost to. Ron Bolton's thirty-yard return of Wesley Walker's fumble put Cleveland in business at the New York 31 [on its first possession](#) and Calvin Hill's one-yard plunge gave the Browns a 7-0 lead less than five minutes into the game. Cleveland again used a short field to widen its lead early in the second period.

[Keith Wright's 37-yard punt return](#)

started the Browns at the Jets 23. Two plays later Sipe floated a touchdown pass to Greg Pruitt, who had circled out of the backfield and beaten linebacker John Hennessy. Don Cockroft's point-after made it 14-0.

New York [finally began to counterpunch](#) after Pruitt's touchdown. A good kick return from Bruce Harper started the Jets in good field position at their 40. A nineteen-yard pass from quarterback Matt Robinson to Gaffney and a fifteen-yard personal foul on Thom Darden got them into field goal range and Pat Leahy's 45-yard kick made it 14-3.

[The Browns immediately responded](#)

on the arm of Brian Sipe. Completions to Reggie Rucker and Ozzie Newsome keyed 63-yard drive that ended with 26-yard Don Cockroft field goal, restoring Cleveland's two-touchdown lead.

At this point New York began to show the resilience that would make this game a thriller. Starting with another good kick return from Bruce Harper the [Jets moved 59 yards in ten plays](#) for their first touchdown. Harper, the man who started the march, finished it with a three-yard scoring reception, and it was now 17-10 in favor of the Browns.

The teams then took turns giving the football to the other. A Sipe interception and a fumble by the Browns gave New York two chance to tie the game before the half, but Clarence Scott and Thom Darden defused both threats with interceptions of their own. The score remained 17-10 at halftime. Despite committing three turnovers and being outgained 246-126, the Jets were still hanging around, a break or two from taking control.

Cleveland started out the second half much as it had the first- by scoring. [The Browns moved](#)

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[sixty yards in ten plays](#)

on their first possession of the half, with Cockroft's 22-yarder making it 20-10. The game then lapsed back into burlesque.

[Matt Robinson's third interception](#)

stopped a New York drive and when Cleveland gave the ball right back on a fumble, Robinson uncorked pick number four, this one

[right to linebacker Dick Ambrose on the goal line](#)

. It was the fifth turnover of the afternoon for the Jets.

Ambrose returned the theft all the way to the Cleveland 42, and now the Browns moved to knock the Jets right out of the football game. A 35-yard Sipe-to-Rucker connection set up first-and-goal from the New York seven, and Sipe's two-yard bootleg made it 27-10 with 1:18 left in the third period. With the Jets mistakes piling up and the temperature falling, it seemed as if this one was over. In fact, it was only beginning.

New York's comeback began at the start of the fourth quarter. After Cleveland's third fumble gave the Jets the ball at their own 36, Robinson drove his team [64 yards in nine plays](#) , whipping a sidearm shot four yards to tight end Mickey Shuler for the touchdown. Pat Leahy's extra point made it 27-17 with 9:12 left to play. Moments later the Jets got the ball back at their 25 and again drove downfield, Robinson leading them

[75 yards in six plays](#)

. Bruce Harper scored his second touchdown, breaking several tackles on a twenty-yard reception, and it was 27-24 with 3:50 remaining.

Evidently figuring on a deep kickoff the Browns were caught unawares when the Jets went for the onside kick. [New York recovered it](#) at the Cleveland 47 and the now red-hot Matt Robinson went back to work. A pair of completions by the second-year man from Georgia set up the 39-yard Pat Leahy field goal that tied the game, 27-27, with 2:36 still left to be played. In a span of about six-and-a-half minutes the Jets had erased Cleveland's 17-point lead- and matters were about to get far worse for the Browns and their chilled fans.

Leahy's ensuing kickoff took two hops off the frozen turf and settled into the arms of Keith Wright at the Cleveland seven. Wright took off up-field, cut back against the grain and as he reached the thirty-yard line [was stripped of the football](#) . New York's Darnell Powell picked the ball out of the air and raced all the way to the eight-yard line before being tripped up. Three plays later [Kevin Long crashed over from the one](#) and the Jets, having scored 24 points in eight minutes, now led 34-27 with 1:12 left. It was their first lead of

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the day.

At this point Cleveland's offense hadn't touched the football for nearly half the quarter, having sat on the sidelines through three Jet scoring drives, one onside kick and one fumbled kick. New York had possessed the ball for almost the entire fourth period. But if Brian Sipe and Company were cold they didn't show it. With the last-minute flair that would make them famous in the coming years, the Browns drove [73 yards in less than a minute](#) to the tying touchdown, Sipe connecting with Calvin Hill for the 18-yard score that made it 34-34 with fourteen seconds left. Both teams had seemingly won the game in the fourth quarter. Now they would play a fifth.

Cleveland won the coin toss and received the kickoff, and that was when [Greg Pruitt took over](#). The little speedster from Oklahoma had been hampered by injuries in 1978 but he was healthy now, and he owned the overtime, starting with his return of the kickoff all the way to the New York 49. Three runs from Pruitt put the ball on the Jets five, setting up a 22-yard Don Cockroft kick for the win. Cockroft drilled it right down the middle and the game was over: Cleveland 37, New York 34.

Despite the weather and a combined ten turnovers both offenses had piled up big numbers. Matt Robinson had three touchdown passes to go with his 289 yards. For the Browns, Brian Sipe threw for 283 yards and two scores. Greg Pruitt finished with 238 combined yards rushing, receiving and returning. Cleveland racked up 519 total yards in the win, with New York adding 369- much of that in their fourth-quarter comeback.

It was the type of game that would become very familiar to Browns fans in the coming years. In 1979 and 1980 the Browns would become known as the Kardiak Kids, with games won or lost in the fourth quarter and overtime on an almost weekly basis. But the magic really began in a sparsely populated Cleveland Stadium on the icy afternoon of December 10th, 1978.