

Yesteryear: 1985 Playoffs @ Miami

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}

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Very few football fans- even most of the fans partial to the Browns- looked askance at the ten-and-a-half-point betting line for



Cleveland's AFC Divisional Playoff match-up with the Dolphins on the afternoon of January 4th, 1986. On paper the game looked as lopsided as any in the history of NFL postseason football.

Miami, the defending AFC Champion, had rolled to a conference-best 12-4 record, including [the famed Monday-Night beating of the otherworldly Bears](#)

. The Dolphins owned a seven-game winning streak going into the Playoffs, and they owned the game's biggest passing weapon in record-setting quarterback Dan Marino. Dandy Dan hadn't enjoyed the ungodly success of the previous season, when he shattered the single-season yardage and touchdown record, but he still threw for more yards than anyone in football and his targets remained potent: the "Magic Markers" of Clayton and Duper, wily veteran Nat Moore and pass-catching back Tony Nathan.

Don Shula's prolific offense enabled him to cover for Miami's major weakness: a sieve-like defense. The Dolphins were balanced and bad on that side of the ball: 23rd against the run, 22nd against the pass, 23rd

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overall. Of special interest to Cleveland was a run defense that had given up over a hundred yards in all but three games. But the outliers didn't seem to matter going in. After all, this game would be played in the sub-tropical heat and squalor of the Orange Bowl, where the Dolphins had gone unbeaten in the '85 regular season.

Cleveland's profile was as distinct from Miami's as the winter weather in those cities. The Browns were all parts good, bad and mediocre throughout 1985 and the result split the difference. Fresh off a 5-11 stagger in 1984, Cleveland started 4-2 in '85, lost the next four and then won four of the last six to finish 8-8. There were no passing fireworks to be found here. Instead the Browns ground out yards with a tandem of baby bulls. 23-year old Kevin Mack and 23-year old Earnest Byner each topped 1,000 yards, the first time that had happened in nearly a decade.

In his first full year as a head coach Marty Schottenheimer took it slow with rookie sensation Bernie Kosar, consigning him to a rudimentary offense that attempted to control the clock and limit mistakes. Cleveland's strengths came in the young runners, Pro Bowl tight end Ozzie Newsome, the aggressive Dawg Defense and a superb special teams coached by young assistant Bill Cowher. The total package was unimpressive. It was, however, good enough to win the AFC Central Division- the first time any team had won a title of any kind in the NFL without a winning record.

The last .500 team to reach the Playoffs in a full season was the [1969 Houston Oilers](#) who gleaned an AFL Wild-Card spot out of a 6-6-2 record. That team was immediately [buried 56-7 by Oakland](#) in its first playoff game. The Browns, who had been [blown out by the Jets](#) in their season finale and who had given up more points than they'd scored in 1985, seemed pre-ordained to the same fate at the hands of the Dolphins, who looked destined to meet the Bears again in New Orleans for Super Bowl XX.

And Miami looked every bit the superior team as the game opened on a sunny, 70-degree Saturday in South Florida. The much-maligned Dolphin defense stuffed Kevin Mack on third-and-short to end Cleveland's first drive on three plays. After Jeff Gossett shanked the punt Miami got the ball at its own 42 and drove quickly to a 51-yard field goal by Fuad Reveiz. The

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Dolphins led 3-0 with four-and-a-half minutes gone, and it seemed as if there was more where that came from.

There was, indeed, more. After an exchange of punts Cleveland took over at its own 18-yard line midway through the first quarter and began ripping off yards in chunks against Miami's defense. From Mack, to Byner, to veteran speedster Curtis Dickey, the Browns ran nine straight times, averaging more than seven yards a pop, to move the ball to the Miami 16. On the tenth play Bernie Kosar finally went to the air- and it worked handsomely. Ozzie Newsome, mismatched with rookie linebacker Alex Moyer, was wide open down the middle and took Kosar's strike into the end zone. With 1:24 left in the first quarter it was 7-3 in favor of the Browns.

Marino was having problems. Cleveland cornerbacks Hanford Dixon and Frank Minnifield were erasing the Magic Markers, and the other Browns defenders were confusing the All-Pro quarterback with a multitude of looks. This combination would result in a huge momentum-swinging play. After intercepting Kosar the Dolphins moved deep into the Cleveland red zone, looking for the go-ahead score. On third-and-goal from the eight Marino was blitzed by linebacker Eddie Johnson and forced a bullet to Clayton, who was being blanketed by Minnifield. Safety Don Rogers intercepted at the goal line and raced all the way to the 45-yard line before being tripped up. The Browns now had a chance to expand their lead as the game moved toward halftime.

They did just that. Staying almost exclusively on the ground Cleveland worked its way downfield, dealing body blows to Miami's finesse defense. On third-and-eight from the Dolphin 21-yard line the Browns landed a hammer. Faking an end-around to rookie tailback Herman Fontenot, Kosar gave the ball to Earnest Byner on the trap. With tackle Rickey Bolden running interference, Byner rambled to the ten, cut back, broke two tackles and fell into the end zone as the partisan Orange Bowl crowd shrieked in collective disbelief. Matt Bahr's extra point gave the Browns a 14-3 lead with less than a minute remaining in the half.

The halftime numbers were not encouraging to the Dolphins. Cleveland already had well over a hundred yards rushing on Miami's defense, with Byner and Mack both on pace to reach that figure, and was dominating time of possession as well as the scoreboard. Miami's big-play offense was nearly non-existent, with neither Mark Clayton nor Mark Duper making a catch. And things were about to get even worse for the Dolphins and the dazed contingent at the Orange Bowl.

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Cleveland's defense immediately picked up where it had left off in the first half, stuffing Miami on its first series of the third quarter. The Browns took the ball at their twenty. Two running plays gained only one yard, setting up third-and-nine. Kosar, who had dazzled fans in this same stadium as an All-American at the University of Miami, then kept the drive alive by hitting Clarence Weathers for a first down at the 34.

On the very next snap Earnest Byner struck for what remains the longest run in Browns postseason history. Taking the handoff on a trap, Byner reached the second level thanks to blocks by Kevin Mack and Dan Fike, faked out linebacker Mark Brown and was free. Getting a key block from Clarence Weathers, the second-year pro from East Carolina turned up the speed and outraced the Dolphins 66 yards to the end zone. With 11:22 remaining in the third quarter the Browns now led, 21-3.

Up to this point only two NFL teams had comeback from deficits of eighteen points or more to win a Playoff game. Detroit had overcome a 27-7 third-quarter deficit to beat San Francisco in the [1957 Western Conference Playoff](#) , and Dallas had overcome a 21-3 second-quarter deficit to beat the 49ers in the ['72 NFC Divisional Playoffs](#) . It could be done before; certainly it could be done again, especially by a Dolphins team that had scored 428 points during the 1985 regular season. But they were going to need some breaks to do it.

The breaks were not long in forthcoming. Facing second-and-long on their first possession after Byner's long touchdown, the Dolphins got a huge boost in momentum when Don Rogers was whistled for a questionable personal foul for drilling Mark Clayton in the helmet. Eleven plays later Marino hit veteran receiver Nat Moore for a six-yard touchdown and it was 21-10 with 5:13 still remaining in the third quarter.

Miami wasted little time in cutting even further into the deficit. After forcing a punt the Dolphins took over at the Cleveland 49 and got back into the end zone in five quick plays. The touchdown itself was devastating not just for the seven points it put on Miami's side of the scoreboard, but for how it happened. Taking an inside handoff at the 31-yard line, rookie tailback Ron Davenport sliced into the second level, flat-out ran over Don Rogers and was gone. The rare show of physical dominance by the Dolphins made it 21-17 with time still remaining in the third quarter. It also woke up the Orange Bowl crowd in earnest. From here on out the Browns would be on their heels.

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The game seemed over right there. But it wasn't. Cleveland grimly hung onto its narrow lead deep into the fourth quarter. But the Dolphins had finally sold out to stop the run and the primitive Browns passing game could not make them pay. Miami took over on its 27-yard line with 7:21 remaining. On the second play of the drive Tony Nathan circled out of the backfield, received Marino's short pass, avoided safety Chris Rockins and weaved his way down to the Cleveland 34. Seven plays later, with 1:57 to play, Ron Davenport went over from the one for his second touchdown of the afternoon. It was now 24-21. Miami had come all the way back.

Cleveland took the ball at its 25-yard line with 1:51 to play. There was still time to salvage the game. But Bernie Kosar couldn't duplicate the heroics he had made routine as a collegiate in this same stadium. Time ran out on the Browns before they could even get close to scoring range and the game was over. The heavily favored Dolphins had survived, 24-21. They would move on to their second consecutive AFC Championship Game. The Browns, still seeking their first postseason victory since 1969, would go home for the winter.

But they had fought a valiant fight. Cleveland's bruising offense had gashed the Dolphins for 251 rushing yards. 161 of those- a franchise record- had come courtesy of Earnest Byner. The Dawg Defense had held Dan Marino to just 238 passing yards on 45 attempts. The Browns had exposed Miami as a soft, one-dimensional team. A week later another underdog, the New England Patriots, would hang 255 rushing yards on the Dolphins in a 31-14 upset at the Orange Bowl.

It was a bitter end to the 1985 season. But the Browns were young and would be back. Over the next four seasons Cleveland would compile a 41-21-1 regular-season record, win three AFC Central Division Championships and reach the AFC Championship Game three times. In each case the ending would be just as cruel as it was in the Orange Bowl on January 4th, 1986. That forgotten afternoon in Miami would set the tone for the remainder of the decade- in ways both good and bad.