

REMEMBERING HEARTBEATS: The Kardiac Kids Week 14

Written by {ga=jonathanknight}

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With fans still reveling in the Browns' memorable victory in Houston seven days earlier, Week 14 essentially became an early holiday party in Cleveland.

The celebration began Thursday night when the Browns and their fans settled in to watch the highly anticipated, nationally-televised grudge match between the Steelers and Oilers – a rematch of the previous two AFC Championships. Though for all the hype, the winner would still be trailing the Browns in the division standings and the loser would be all but eliminated from the race. Four days after getting bounced by the Browns, Houston won a fierce defensive struggle, 6-0, and the defending world champions were now on the brink of oblivion in this topsy-turvy 1980 season.

The first weekend in December brought unseasonably mild temperatures to northeast Ohio, and more than 78,000 fans packed into the old ballpark on the lake to see if the Browns could keep the magic going in the final home game of the season.

By that weekend, the Kardiac Kids had become a national story. Suddenly now newsworthy from coast to coast, the Browns were deluged with media attention. Sports Illustrated, Sport Magazine, the New York Times, and Newsweek all sent reporters to Berea that week to compose feature articles.

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With the 3-10 Jets in town on Pearl Harbor Day, many saw it as a free pass to the Browns' 10th victory. Those who truly knew the Kardiac Kids, however, knew it couldn't – and wouldn't – be that easy. And true to form, the Browns found themselves in a dogfight early.

Each team marched down the field on its first possession, only to see a long field-goal attempt fall short. They mirrored one another again with an exchange of interceptions in enemy territory and the game remained scoreless midway through the second period. The Browns finally drew first blood on a short Don Cockroft field goal, and the slim lead held until halftime as neither offense could hit its stride.

That changed quickly in the second half. The Browns marched 77 yards in 14 plays on their first possession and made it 10-0 when Mike Pruitt took a handoff up the middle for a nine-yard touchdown. The enthused crowd roared with approval, tasting another easy victory like the last home game against Cincinnati two weeks before.

It took the Jets five plays to shatter those hopes. Quarterback Richard Todd pushed New York into Cleveland territory, then hit speedy wideout Johnny "Lam" Jones for a 39-yard score to cut the lead back to three points.

A nice kickoff return by Dino Hall set the Browns up at midfield, but they couldn't cash in, failing to convert on a wacky fake-punt, end-around handoff to receiver Willis Adams on fourth-and-18 from the New York 37.

The Jets continued their newfound momentum, sprinting into Cleveland territory. On the fourth play of the fourth quarter, the AFC's worst team then surged ahead when Todd hit tight end Mickey Shuler in the end zone from five yards out to make it 14-10, Jets.

Like egg nog that had been left out too long, the holiday-party atmosphere was beginning to curdle a bit at the edges.

As if sensing this, the Browns instantly refueled their fans with yuletide joy. On the next play, Brian Sipe hit Reggie Rucker for a 45-yard gain to the New York 23. And four snaps after that,

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Sipe threaded the needle once again, slicing a pass through the New York defense from the 5 to Greg Pruitt crossing over the middle for the go-ahead touchdown with 9:27 to play. The party was back on.

To no one's surprise, the Jets came right back, traveling from their own 18 to the Cleveland 40. But for the first time in the second half, the Browns' defense rose up and stymied the kelly-green visitors, forcing a punt. The Jets would never see the football again.

Sipe and Co. took over at their own 8 with 5:04 to play. Mixing effective runs to Mike Pruitt with quick passes to his backs, Sipe guided the Browns to a quartet of first downs, not once having to face the pressure of a must-have third-down conversion. After he connected with Greg Pruitt for a nine-yard gain to midfield with 1:28 to play, the Jets took their final time out, then watched helplessly as Sipe took to a knee three times as time expired.

It may have been a bit harder than expected, but the Browns were victorious once again, snagging their eighth victory in nine weeks and improving to 10-4 on the season. Still a game up on the Oilers and two up on Pittsburgh with two games to play, the Browns controlled their own destiny. By picking up wins on back-to-back road trips in which they'd face mediocre Minnesota and struggling Cincinnati, they would secure their first playoff berth in eight years and first division title in nine.

But, as had been the case all season, it couldn't – and wouldn't – be that easy.