



Browns fans thought they had reason to be excited as the 2008 season opened. Cleveland had surprised the football world with a 10-6 renaissance in 2007 and with largely the same cast back the next year the expectations were high. Browns fans serenaded their team with chants of “Super Bowl” during the muggy days of training camp.

By November those sweet words had turned sour, along with a season that was threatening to spiral out of control. The Browns were 3-6 going into their Monday Night meeting with the Bills at Ralph Wilson Stadium and fresh off a pair of brutal home losses to Baltimore and Denver. Cleveland had built double-digit leads in both games, only to let them slip away with meltdowns on both sides of the ball. The Super Bowl dreams were long gone. In their place were dire forebodings of a death march that had only just begun- one that could claim the life of the regime of head coach Romeo Crennel and general manager Phil Savage.

Buffalo had its own problems. The Bills had opened with a soft and chewy schedule and ate through it, winning their first four games against teams that would finish a combined 16-48. But when the slate got rugged in October, Buffalo began to fade. By the time Cleveland came to Orchard Park the Bills were 5-4, losers of three straight, and rapidly slipping out of playoff contention. Buffalo hadn't made the postseason since 1999 and hadn't finished with a winning record since 2004. Bills fans who had once watched juggernauts were now watching peons- and they were getting frustrated about it. It was two unhappy teams and an unhappy crowd that gathered at Ralph Wilson Stadium on the chilly night of November 17, 2008.

No one partial to the Bills got any happier as the game got underway, although Leodis McKelvin did rip off 38 yards on the opening kickoff. (McKelvin, or the threat of McKelvin, would loom large throughout the evening.) Second-year quarterback Trent Edwards had performed poorly during his team's three-game losing streak and on the first play from scrimmage had his pass tipped by Shaun Rogers and picked off by Kameron Wimbley. The response of the Cleveland offense to this turn of fortune was three plays, four yards and a punt. But Buffalo's gift-giving was just beginning.

Having hit one Cleveland linebacker in the hands, Trent Edwards hit another when his third pass of the game was intercepted by Andra Davis at the Buffalo 49. Here the Browns at least took partial advantage. Brady Quinn, starting his second game in place of the benched Derek Anderson, inched his team down to the 23-yard line. Phil Dawson's field goal gave Cleveland a 3-0 lead with barely five minutes gone in the game. Two possessions later Edwards was intercepted by Brandon McDonald at the Buffalo 12, his third pick in six pass attempts. Three plays resulted in a loss of four yards and Dawson's second field goal made it 6-0 at the end of the first quarter.

Every seasoned fan knew the Browns would pay later for those missed opportunities. But at first they continued to pour it on. After a Buffalo punt Cleveland put together a 95-yard drive, this time getting all the way into the end zone. Braylon Edwards had long become the number-one scapegoat for the exasperating season, but he starred on this drive with three catches for 48 yards. Joshua Cribbs took it in from the two on an end-around and it was 13-0 in favor of the Browns with less than ten minutes remaining in the half.

Not wanting to risk a long return, the Browns elected to pooch the ensuing kickoff- and the strategy backfired. Fred Jackson returned the short kick all the way to the Buffalo 41 and the Bills were in business. Six plays later they were in the end zone courtesy of Marshawn Lynch's

18-yard catch-and-run and Buffalo was right back in it, down just 13-7. Cleveland had missed its chance for an early knockout. The fight was on, such as it was.

Buffalo forced a quick three-and-out and kept up the pressure on its next drive. Mixing Wildcat plays with the momentarily accurate right arm of Edwards, the Bills ground their way to a first down at the Cleveland 12. Like the Browns, Buffalo failed to cash in fully, settling for a Rian Lindell field goal at the halftime gun. Even with a lousy turnover ratio of +3, Cleveland's lead was only three at 13-10. After blowing double-digit leads in back-to-back games, a three-point halftime lead was awfully flimsy. Bills fans, on the other hand, must have been apoplectic about the way their team was playing at home on Monday Night in a game they desperately had to win.

The second half started slowly, with the teams trading punts on their first possessions. Cleveland got going first, moving from their 37 to the Buffalo 26 to set up another Phil Dawson field goal that made the score 16-10. After another short kickoff put the Bills at their own 42 they moved to a first down at the Cleveland 20. Buffalo failed to score the go-ahead touchdown, settling for another Rian Lindell field goal and a 16-13 deficit as the game moved into the fourth quarter. A game both teams needed was turning into one neither seemed particularly hell-bent on winning.

At this point Jerome Harrison dropped onto center stage as if by parachute. The third-year tailback from Washington State had rushed for a total of just 127 yards in the previous nine games. But he ripped off the longest run from scrimmage for the Browns all season on the opening play of the fourth quarter. Taking a pitch left, Harrison got big blocks from Joe Thomas and Charles Ali, sifted through a wash of would-be tacklers, popped free and raced 72 yards for a touchdown. The stunning score gave Cleveland a 23-13 lead. It was the third week in a row the Browns led by double-digits in the second half. Which meant the Bills had them right where they wanted them.

Buffalo's comeback began on the kickoff immediately after Harrison's touchdown jaunt. Ditching the squib-kick strategy that had served Cleveland so poorly all night, Phil Dawson elected to kick deep to Leodis McKelvin. Big mistake. Taking the kick at his two-yard line, McKelvin veered left, broke a couple of arm tackles, turned Dawson inside-out and was gone, 98 yards for a touchdown. Just like that it was 23-20, and millions of Browns fans turned away from the television, shook their heads and said, "Here we go again."

## Yesteryear: 2008 @ Buffalo

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The game was starting to slip away. And Cleveland continued to have problems finishing drives. The Browns drove all the way to the Buffalo five-yard line on their next possession with a chance to score a back-breaking touchdown. But they couldn't get it into the end zone and settled for Phil Dawson's fourth field goal and a 26-20 lead with eleven-and-a-half minutes remaining. Another potentially game-clinching drive ended badly when Brady Quinn misfired on a pair of passes, forcing a punt back to the Bills with a little over five minutes left.

Frustration was mounting on the field- and off. Back at his underground lair, Phil Savage had been engaged in an escalating e-mail war with a Browns fan all game long. Finally, late in the fourth quarter, having been blasted by the fan one too many times, Savage went on tilt. He hit "Send" on the response that would live in Cleveland infamy, inviting the fan to ["go root for Buffalo"](#) and, while he was at it, to have intercourse with himself. Why Phil Savage was trading e-mailing with fans, barbed or otherwise was beyond anyone, but the exchange added an extra dose of rotten to what was becoming a high, ripe night of football.

Buffalo's return units again proved near unstoppable, as Roscoe Parrish returned the punt 34 yards to the Cleveland 48. The Bills then did what neither team had done well the entire game-finished a drive. With the big play a twisting, tackle-breaking 28-yard run by Marshawn Lynch, the Bills moved down the field in five plays, scoring on Trent Edwards's one-yard sneak. With two-and-a-half minutes remaining Buffalo had taken its first lead of the night, 27-26. Cleveland, it seemed, was on its way to a third demoralizing loss in a row.

But the Browns weren't done yet. Hitting on passes to Braylon Edwards and Kellen Winslow, Brady Quinn moved his team to the Buffalo 39-yard line before the drive stalled. With fourth-and-long, less than two minutes left and no better options available, Romeo Crennel sent out his field-goal unit. A year earlier Phil Dawson had hit a pair of circus kicks in a snowstorm as the Browns prevailed over Buffalo, 8-0. This time he nearly outdid himself. Kicking with the wind, Dawson drilled it straight, true, and good from 56 yards out. With 1:39 to play Cleveland was back in front, 29-27.

Buffalo had one last chance. Taking over at his 44-yard line after yet another short kickoff, Trent Edwards promptly hit future Brown Robert Royal with a 22-yard pass to the Cleveland 34. With a minute-and-a-half left the Bills had plenty of time to go for the jugular against a defense that hadn't seen a lead it couldn't piss away. Instead, with the wind blowing across his face, head coach Dick Jauron went Republican. Three running plays netted five yards. With 43 seconds left Rian Lindell came on to attempt the go-ahead field goal from 47 yards out. Seven years earlier as a member of the Seattle Seahawks, Lindell had beaten the Browns in Cleveland with a

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52-yarder. Not this time. The snap was good, the hold was good, but the kick was wide to the right. The game was over. Cleveland had hung on, 29-27.

But it wasn't a victory to savor. No one knew it at the time but it would be the last victory for the Browns in 2008- and Jerome Harrison's 72-yard scamper would be the last offensive touchdown of the season. Cleveland lost its last six games to finish 4-12, a bitter disappointment after the promise of August. The meltdown cost Romeo Crennel his job- along with Phil Savage, whose departure was probably greased by that infamous e-mail to the fan.

Buffalo fared little better. The Bills won in Kansas City a week after the Monday Night debacle but their swoon then continued, all the way to a 7-9 finish. They have lingered at the bottom of the AFC East ever since, going 10-28 from that 5-1 start in 2008 to the present day, going into Sunday's meeting at the Building Formerly Known as Rich Stadium- a meeting once again involving two of the lesser lights of football.