

## REMEMBERING HEARTBEATS: The Kardiak Kids-The Playoffs

Written by {ga=jonathanknight}

Wednesday, January 05 2011 12:00 AM - Last Updated Wednesday, January 05 2011 5:29 AM

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After two weeks of euphoric revelry as the city of Cleveland embarked in an immense, long-overdue celebration in tribute to a beloved champion, on Jan. 4, 1981, the Browns would take the field against the Oakland Raiders in an AFC Divisional Playoff.



The Raiders, four years removed from their only Super Bowl title, were still one of the most revered and feared teams in football. Though they'd yielded the AFC West title to San Diego, the Raiders were as dangerous as any team remaining in the playoffs, as evidenced by their domination of the powerful Houston Oilers in the Wild Card Game the week before. Though the Browns were on a magical ride and were considered the favorite, even the most confident fan expected a battle.

Even before the game began, it promised to be memorable. Thermometers around Cleveland dipped to one degree, with the wind chill factor dropping to a dangerous 36 below zero. And naturally, with the conditions so harsh, the playing field was just as unusual, more resembling marble than turf, creating all kinds of footing problems.

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From the opening moments of the game, it was evident that the weather and the state of the field were going to affect both teams. The always-confident Raiders looked hesitant on their first three plays before punting to the Browns, who received a standing ovation as the offense took the field for the first time. Yet Brian Sipe and Co. fared no better on their first series and punted right back to Oakland.

That's the way much of the first quarter played out as neither team crossed midfield until Sipe zipped a pass over the middle to Reggie Rucker for 20 yards to the Raider 40. Hurrying to get in one final play before the quarter ended and the Browns would have to switch to the open end of the stadium where the field conditions were even worse, Sipe launched a long pass for Rucker in the end zone that bounced off his frozen hands and fell away. Rucker, meanwhile, found himself unable to stop and he skidded all the way out of the end zone and fell down the stairs to the Indians' dugout 20 feet away.

At the opposite end of the field, Don Cockroft attempted a 48-yard field goal on the third play of the second quarter, but it fell short. A play later, Jim Plunkett was hit by Henry Bradley and fumbled the football. Marshall Harris recovered at the Oakland 23 and the frozen crowd roared. The Browns had caught the first true break.

It appeared they'd cash in after Sipe skated for a 10-yard gain on first down, but the offense stalled and Cockroft was once again called upon, this time to attempt a much more realistic 30-yard attempt. But his kick skewed left and the game remained scoreless - and, with the

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kicking units all but neutralized and the offenses thwarted, appeared would remain so for a long time.

After another exchange of punts, the Browns cashed in on a field-induced Raider mistake. On third-and-four from the Oakland 32, Plunkett fired a pass toward wideout Bob Chandler along the right sideline, but Chandler slipped as he made his cut. Bolton maintained his own footing and cradled the football into his chest at the 42, then carefully maneuvered his way along the sideline and into the end zone for a touchdown with 6:10 remaining in the half.

The Stadium crowd, feeling suddenly warmer, came to life in the realization that in these bizarre conditions, this may wind up being the game-winning play. The newfound confidence buckled slightly when Cockroft's point-after attempt resembled a dying quail and fell short of the goal post – his third miss of the day. Still, the Browns led 6-0 and it was difficult to imagine many more points being scored.

The Raiders quickly changed that mentality. With momentum against them, they embarked on an unlikely 13-play, 65-yard drive highlighted by a 26-yard toss from Plunkett to Chester on third-and-13 from the Cleveland 28. Two plays later, fullback Mark van Eeghan crashed off tackle and into the end zone and Chris Bahr (older brother of Matt) successfully converted the point after to give the Raiders a 7-6 lead with 18 seconds left in the first half.

The Browns' optimism of minutes before was extinguished somewhat, but in taking the lead, the

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Raiders had proven that driving the field and converting kicking opportunities were indeed possible.

In that spirit, the Browns mirrored the Raiders on the first possession of the third quarter, driving 48 yards to the Oakland 13, where Cockroft finally connected on his fourth kicking attempt of the afternoon to give the Browns back the lead at 9-7.

They were poised to add to it when they marched inside the Raider 20 on their next series, but before Cockroft got a chance to attempt a 36-yard field goal, the football slid through the hands of holder Paul McDonald and the play was busted.

With the Cleveland defense standing steadfast, forcing another Oakland punt, the Browns got the ball back in Raider territory and came away with points when Cockroft was perfect on a 30-yard field goal attempt with 2:40 remaining in a fast-moving third quarter. The Browns were controlling the contest and had gradually built a five-point lead.

But as the fourth quarter began, the Raiders put together the most successful drive of the day for either team. Starting at his own 20, Plunkett gradually directed his team across midfield, primarily through the air. From the Browns' 1, van Eeghan burst through the line for his second score of the day and Bahr's point after was good. With 9:22 left, it was the Raiders now in the driver's seat, 14-12.

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Things looked even worse for the home team over the next few minutes. After an exchange of punts, the Browns took over at their own 25 with 4:39 left – a situation that seemed certain to spark the heroics of the Kardiac Kids. Instead, on first down, after Sipe scrambled for 11 yards, he fumbled, and the Raiders recovered at the Cleveland 24.

Those who'd been following them all season knew this was no way for the Kardiac Kids to go down. And they wouldn't be disappointed.

Facing fourth-and-inches at the Cleveland 15 with less than three minutes to play, Oakland coach Tom Flores decided to go for it. Van Eeghan was crushed at the line of scrimmage by linebackers Robert L. Jackson and Dick Ambrose and the Browns took over as the crowd roared.

Now was the time. Two minutes and 22 seconds remained.

Sipe hit Ozzie Newsome for 29 yards along the left sideline. The Raiders were penalized for

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illegal contact, giving the Browns a first down after an incomplection on third-and-10. Sipe floated a pass down the sideline to Greg Pruitt for 23 yards and Pruitt stepped into the sideline with 1:19 left. A play later, the Browns caught the Raiders on their heels and Mike Pruitt took a handoff on a draw and exploded for 14 more to the Raider 14. The Browns called time with 56 seconds remaining.

The Stadium crowd had been expecting this all afternoon, and here it was: the perfect Kardiak Kids finish. But with the conditions so treacherous, Sam Rutigliano had a decision to make: call on Cockroft to attempt a field goal, or continue to ride the wave with his red-hot offense.

For as rocky a day and as shaky a season as Cockroft had, Sam had more confidence in his offense at this point. He'd run two more plays, then call for his kicker.

Mike Pruitt bulled forward for a yard to the 13 and the Browns called their second time out with 49 seconds left. As he gave Sipe the play, a pass, he instructed his quarterback to throw the football away if nobody was clearly open. Sipe jogged back onto the field and gave the call to his teammates: "Red Right 88."

Sipe dropped back and, seeing Logan, his primary target crossing over the middle at the goal line, well-covered, his eyes darted to Ozzie Newsome crossing the opposite direction in the end zone. As Sipe cocked his arm to throw, Oakland defensive back Burgess Owens, who had been tailing Logan, reversed direction to aid Mike Davis on Newsome. But by the time Sipe realized

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it, the ball was already in the air.

With Owens forcing Newsome into taking extra steps, he was now unable to create separation between himself and Davis, who closed the gap and was now running stride for stride with the Browns' tight end. Newsome could only watch as the ball floated into the arms of Davis, who toppled to the rock-hard ground with the biggest interception of his career.

Cleveland Stadium, which had been as electric and alive as it had been at any point in the half-century since it was built, suddenly became a tomb.

Jim Plunkett kneeled down twice, and that was it. In one horrible instant, the fairy-tale season of the 1980 Cleveland Browns, one of the most thrilling in NFL history, was over.

Thirty years later, the debate rages on whether opting for one more pass was the right call. Even the players themselves are divided, as they are when asked how the Browns would have fared in San Diego for the AFC Championship the following week had Red Right 88 not been destined for disaster.

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Instead, it was the Raiders who suddenly became a team of destiny, first upsetting the Chargers and then the Philadelphia Eagles in the Super Bowl to become the first wild card team to win a title.

Even today, the Kardiac Kids and their fans wonder if it shouldn't have been them. Whatever the opinion, the final act of the Kardiac Kids' year-long drama – and the memories they provided over the course of four magical months that fateful autumn – will be remembered forever.