

## Fave Five #5: Browns vs. Cowboys, 1994

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}

Thursday, August 25 2011 11:00 PM - Last Updated Wednesday, September 07 2011 9:25 PM

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There are some people, particularly outside this region, that think rooting for Cleveland and Ohio teams is one long dirge, an endless litany of heartbreak and frustration. And there's a lot of that, to be sure. But to say there's been nothing good about this fan-hood is to oversimplify things dramatically.

Indeed, in the quarter-century and change since I became a fan, I've collected some beautiful memories. I watched the Indians go 100-44 in a season. I watched the Browns of the 1980's compete in some of the best games ever played. (Sure, they lost most of them. But looking back, it was something special just to see them be a part of games of that magnitude.) I watched the LeBron era, with its breathtaking highs and devastating lows, and it was all memorable. I watched Ohio State have possibly the best season any team has had in the history of college football. And I watched Kent State, my true hometown school and nominal alma mater (didn't graduate but spent plenty of money on books, tuition and parking tickets) get to within one game of the Final Four.

Out of all those memories there are five games that stand out- my five favorite games, in order, one for each of my teams: the Browns, Indians, Cavaliers, Ohio State football and Kent State basketball. The list begins right here, right now at Number Five, when one of the last of the "old" Browns teams ventured way down into the heart of Texas- and stole one right from under a modern-day dynasty.

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I'm old enough to remember the Browns competing in, and winning, big playoff games- the [dou](#)

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### [ble-overtime triumph over the Jets](#)

in the '86 Playoffs,

### [the rout of Indianapolis](#)

the following year; the

### [epic battle with Buffalo](#)

in 1989. Those games made for great memories. But my favorite Browns game didn't take place in the "glory days" of the 1980's. Nor was it a playoff game. It took place on a chilly Saturday late in the 1994 season, when Cleveland headed down to Texas Stadium to take on the two-time defending World Champion Dallas Cowboys

After several lean years the Browns experienced a revival in 1994 with a team built in the image of head coach Bill Belichick. Powered by the league's stingiest defense, a basic ball-control offense and a superb special-teams unit, Cleveland ran out to a 6-1 record, the franchise's best start since 1963. They weren't the princes of the city they'd been the previous decade (there were still a lot of hard feelings over Belichick's unceremonious dispatching of Bernie Kosar) and the city was falling in love with the rising Indians, now in brand-spanking new Jacobs Field- but the Browns were winning again, and that was what mattered.

Unfortunately the second half of the '94 season had not been as successful as the first. After their red-hot start the Browns were 3-3 in their last six, hampered by an offense that expended ammunition shooting itself in the foot. Six days prior to the Dallas game the Browns committed five turnovers and eleven penalties in an [ugly home loss to an inferior Giants team](#) . At 9-4 Cleveland was now a game behind the torrid Steelers in the AFC Central race and faced back-to-back road trips to Dallas and Pittsburgh, with a great season threatening to spiral the drain.

Texas Stadium was hardly the ideal venue for a struggling team looking to get healthy. With a roster heavy with present All-Pros and future Hall-of-Famers, including the famed "Triplets-" quarterback Troy Aikman, tailback Emmitt Smith and wide receiver Michael Irvin- the Cowboys were the winners of the previous two Super Bowls and the league's glamour franchise. Despite injuries and the loss of head coach Jimmy Johnson, who [abruptly resigned](#) following the 1993 season, Dallas looked as strong as ever, particularly with Aikman back under center after missing two games with a thumb injury. At 11-2 the Cowboys needed to beat the Browns to keep pace in the battle with San Francisco for home-field in the NFC Playoffs.

But there were more than playoff implications on the line when the Browns went down to Big D. Growing up, the Cowboys always reminded me of the [opening credits of "Dallas"](#) with the montage of gleaming skyscrapers, pumping oil derricks, rich ruthless oil barons (starring in

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Alphabetical Order, of course)... and the overhead shot of modern, antiseptic Texas Stadium, with the hole in the roof

[so God could watch His favorite team](#)

. To me the Cowboys were money, power and privilege.

Cleveland, on the other hand, wasn't the stuff of prime-time soaps. We didn't have modern towers of glass and steel- we had the Terminal Tower. We didn't have a concrete-and-Astroturf football palace- we had Municipal Stadium. If they were glitz and glamour, we were grit and grime. It was more than just a football game on the rare occasions the Browns and Cowboys met, especially when they met in Irving. It was a clash of cultures. It was about more than just getting to 10-4, securing a home playoff game, staying in the AFC Central race. It was about sticking it to the big boys from uptown.

And in the early going the Browns did just that. After stuffing Dallas on three plays the Browns moved right down the field on the top-ranked Cowboy defense, the big play being Vinny Testaverde's thirty-yard hookup with Michael Jackson. But just when it appeared that Cleveland would draw first blood, the error-prone nature of its offense resurfaced. With the ball on the Cowboy eleven-yard line Leroy Hoard took a well-executed screen pass and looked to have an open path to six. But defensive end Charles Haley chased him down and stripped the ball at the two, where it rolled into the end zone and was recovered by for a touchback. Dallas promptly drove eighty yards and took a 7-0 lead on Aikman's scoring toss to Emmitt Smith.

Even at the midway point of the first quarter the game appeared to be over. You simply couldn't give away touchdowns against this Cowboys team in their house. But it wasn't over. After getting the ball back the Browns moved right back down the field again, catching a huge break when cornerback Larry Brown was whistled for a 48-yard pass-interference penalty on a third-and-nineteen play. On the final play of the first period Michael Jackson beat Brown and pulled in a Testaverde rainbow in the corner of the end zone, tying the score at 7-7. As it turned out, that would be the last touchdown Cleveland would score on the afternoon. Belichick's rough-and-tumble defense would now take center stage.

Early in the second period that defense, along with a ball made slick by the previous day's rain, would produce the first Cowboy turnover of the game. After catching an Aikman bullet at midfield Alvin Harper had the wet pigskin knocked free by Antonio Langham. Safety Stevon Moore fell on it and the Browns were back in business. Led by the red-hot Testaverde- who completed his first seven attempts- and the rampaging Hoard, Cleveland moved smartly into field-goal position. Dallas native Matt Stover's 35-yarder made it 10-7 Browns. That was where it stood at intermission, after Eric Turner intercepted a Hail Mary attempt on the final play of the

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half.

Dallas continued to be frustrated offensively as the second half opened. Cleveland's defense was just as tough as advertised- Aikman [admitted as much afterward](#) when he said, "I don't know who would be the best defense we've played if they weren't"- and the fair-haired quarterback, rusty from his two-week layoff, wasn't sharp to begin with. Emmitt Smith ran well with 112 yards but he never took over the game and the Cowboys couldn't get into a rhythm. Dallas's offensive line was generally regarded as the best in football, but Cleveland's deep, mobile defensive front proved more than a match for it. Michael Dean Perry, Rob Burnett and their friends brought pain to Aikman, and although they only sacked him twice they hit him several other times.



With 5:11 remaining in the third quarter the Browns took over in good field position at the Dallas 45-yard line. Moving thirty yards in ten well-considered plays, including Hoard's bullish conversion of a fourth-and-one, Cleveland cashed in on Stover's second field goal, this one from 32 yards, to make it 13-7 with 14:14 left in the game. Sixteen seconds later Michael Irvin slipped on the wet turf while running a slant pattern and Don Griffin filled the vacant area for an interception at the Cowboy 46. It was the third Dallas turnover. Four plays later Stover drilled another field goal from 43 yards and now the Browns were up by two scores, 16-7, with 12:44 left.

Listening to Casey Coleman's broadcast from the shipping & receiving area at the Kaufman's store in Stow (now closed) I was nervous. Field goals were not the way to beat the Cowboys. Sure enough, Dallas's sloppy offense finally found some cohesion, driving to Emmitt Smith's second touchdown to make it 16-14 with 6:21 to play. I got even more anxious when Cleveland was forced to punt on its next possession, giving the ball back to the Cowboys at their own eight-yard line. But Dallas wasn't done with its gift-giving. Aikman and center Mark Stepnoski botched the center exchange, giving the Browns the ball at the Cowboy 16.

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Could Cleveland put it away with a touchdown? Nope. The Browns moved just one yard in three plays and Stover came on again, hitting his fourth field goal to make it 19-14 with 1:49 left. The insurance didn't feel adequate. Despite dominating the tempo, forcing four turnovers and largely shutting down the explosive Dallas offense, Cleveland led by only five in a game they should have put away well earlier. Hoard's end-zone fumble and the continual settling for field goals had left the Cowboys very much alive. This just felt like the kind of game the Browns usually lost.

That feeling increased when Kevin Williams returned Stover's ensuing kickoff all the way to near midfield. Dallas had no timeouts left and needed a touchdown to win, but there was 1:41 remaining to be played, and that was an eternity to the Cowboys. Sure enough, Aikman got things started by rolling right and hitting a diving Alvin Harper at the Cleveland 37. Working methodically, Aikman dumped one short to Emmitt Smith, who was tackled in bounds by linebacker Mike Caldwell after a minimal gain. With the clock running under a minute Aikman threw a dart for Michael Irvin who, being Michael Irvin, got away with a push-off and hauled it in at the 22-yard line. Troy then spiked the ball to stop the clock with 28 seconds left.

Things really went into crisis mode two plays later. After throwing the ball away to avoid the rush of Pepper Johnson and Rob Burnett, Aikman found Kevin Williams, who got down to the seven before being dragged down from behind. Another spike stopped the clock with ten seconds to play. Dallas looked to have at least two shots at the end zone available from point-blank range. Possible targets included Emmitt Smith, Michael Irvin, Jay Novacek, Alvin Harper and Darryl Johnston- men who were legends in their own time. Could the Browns hold them off and preserve the upset? It didn't seem possible at the time.

It seemed obvious that, wherever Aikman went with the ball, he would go into the end zone. Instead he went short to Novacek, who went into motion from left to right and ran a slant short of the goal line. The Pro Bowl tight end gathered in Aikman's quick pass at the two, needing only to turn his shoulders and dive to break the plane. But the wet turf, which had caused problems for both sides that afternoon, betrayed him. He slipped, landed six inches short of the goal line and was covered up by a diving Eric Turner with the clock running. As the Texas Stadium crowd shrieked in disbelief, the seconds ran away... three... two... one... zero.

Listening on the radio, I was incredulous as the fans in Irving. When Novacek caught the ball I figured it was over: how could anyone stop a six-foot-four tight end with momentum from advancing the ball six feet? But when Casey Coleman said, "*He didn't get in!*" I knew. I ran

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whooping around the shipping & receiving area, flapping my arms and yelling, "They beat the Cowboys! They beat the Cowboys!"

Down on the field the Browns were reacting in much the same way. Eric Turner flipped off his shiny orange helmet and ran the length of the field, arm and finger in the air in the sign of victory as his teammates rolled and cavorted on the turf. Bill Belichick ripped off his headset, threw his arms in the air and wrapped defensive coordinator Nick Saban in a bear-hug. Rookie cornerback Antonio Langham captured the mood after the game when he said, "It felt like we won the Super Bowl."

As it turned out, of course, the Browns didn't win the Super Bowl. They didn't even win the division- Pittsburgh clinched the Central the week after the Dallas upset, beating Cleveland in Three Rivers Stadium. A few weeks later the Steelers manhandled the Browns in the second round of the Playoffs, rolling up 238 rushing yards [in a 29-9 rout](#) . Nevertheless, Cleveland's 11-5 record and opening-round Playoff victory make 1994 a far better season than any we've enjoyed since.

And there was also the win over the Cowboys, maybe the best team the Browns have beaten in the last three decades. On one Saturday in December, blue-collar Cleveland stuck it to the league's blue-chip operation, right in its own back yard. I've seen some great Browns victories over the years, in both the regular season and in the playoffs. But for my money, nothing beats the 19-14 win over the Cowboys in Texas Stadium on December 10, 1994.