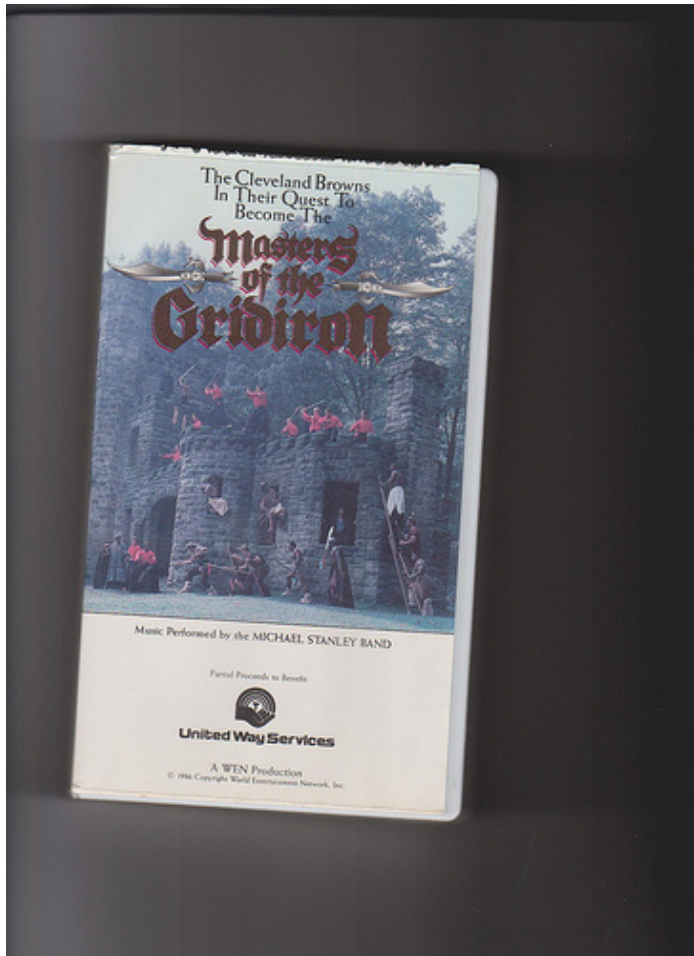


## Masters of the Gridiron: 25 Years Later

Written by {ga=jonathanknight}

Friday, November 04 2011 5:00 AM - Last Updated Thursday, November 03 2011 9:16 PM

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Just after Christmas in 1986, I walked into a Cleveland record store and quickly scanned every square inch with my wide, 10-year-old eyes.

Not finding what I sought, and too shy to inquire myself, I had my father ask the hairy guy behind the counter if they had it.

The cashier, who smelled like a burning mattress, shrugged casually. "Nope," he replied in the gravelly voice required of someone who worked at a 1980s record store. "All out."

Heartbroken, I slouched back out into the inky winter night, having to remain contented with

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what I'd already received for Christmas.

Yet in that moment, feverish with love for the 12-4 division-champion Cleveland Browns, everything else Santa had scored for me was nonsense. There was only one thing that could have made that Christmas complete, and, dammit to hell, I couldn't find it anywhere.

I wanted...no...I needed [Masters of the Gridiron](#) .

### Like the Shuffle, Only Different

If you're familiar with *Masters of the Gridiron*, you likely have a story much like this and can understand how it was capable of either making or breaking that Christmas of 1986, whether you were 10 years old or 50.

If you're not familiar with *Masters of the Gridiron*...oh, my. Where to begin?

How can one possibly describe something that brought together He-Man, Tiny Tim, Mike Pagel, the Michael Stanley Band, and a live bear?

I suppose you'd have to start out the way many stammering fathers uncomfortably begin telling their sons about sex:

"You see, when fans love their football team very much, sometimes the football team will get together and create something so delightfully random and silly that it will make the fans' hearts swell with pride."

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Even if you don't know about *Masters of the Gridiron*, you've certainly heard of the "Super Bowl Shuffle." Tragically, we all have.

In late 1985, as the Chicago Bears were wrapping up a rhapsodic regular season in which they simply disemboweled opponents with a colorful cast of characters that even today remain household names, they whipped up a quasi-rap tune with a \$59 Casio keyboard and created a music video with the production quality of an episode of *Lawrence Welk*, primarily starring colossal white guys in football uniforms trying to dance. Then, as if it were a biological weapon, they released it upon the public.

It was ugly, arrogant, obnoxious, and embarrassing. So naturally, this being the 1980s, America loved it.



It added to the Bears' growing legend, and when they steamrolled to a world title a month later, they - and the "Super Bowl Shuffle" - were forever etched in sports history.

*Masters of the Gridiron* was kind of like that - except for the part about it being a national sensation. And the shuffling. And, come to think of it, the Super Bowl.

While it did have a song - and a halfway decent one at that - it also had a story, not unlike Michael Jackson's "Thriller," which reinvented the genre of the music video a couple of years earlier.

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But instead of featuring the King of Pop, *Masters of the Gridiron* centered on a center.

### The Baabarian

Mike Baab wound up having a very respectable 11-year career in the NFL, highlighted by two tours of duty with the Browns. He was an underrated member of the team, essentially becoming the glue that held the offensive line together.

But for all that, *Masters of the Gridiron* is probably what he's best remembered for.

It all started with his penchant for Conan the Barbarian comic books, a passion he picked up waiting for a haircut one day when he was a student at the University



of Texas.

After he'd been a mainstay with the Browns for a few years and the Cleveland Stadium bleachers began to resemble a rough draft of a Salvador Dali painting, a group of fans labeled themselves "Baab's Barbarians" and began dressing up like medieval warriors and cheering Baab on during games.

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And Baab himself - who would often acknowledge the fans by pretending to draw an imaginary sword on the field and pointing it at them - was labeled with the fabulous nickname "Baabarian."

Thus, in the aftermath of the "Super Bowl Shuffle" and "Thriller," these elements just begged to be developed into a made-for-charity video. So Baab, with his wife serving as producer, was thrust to the forefront as a thespian.

But it wasn't just about the Baabarian.

A dozen players participated, likely in exchange for free ribs from Tony Roma's. And with their boundless theatrical enthusiasm, stoked by barbeque sauce, the narrative effortlessly came to life.

### And Now, Our Story...

We begin in the Browns' locker room as the players prepare for a game then take the field, and we're treated to actual sideline footage of the Browns' 1986 victory over Detroit. In a fictional sidebar, Mike Baab is knocked unconscious and his teammates gather around him to see if he's all right.

At the command of a cloaked figure who may or may not be George Voinovich, Baab awakens as the Baabarian - topless and covered with charcoal stains - and is sent on a journey that will "test all of his warrior skills."

Curious, the Baabarian responds with perhaps the greatest line of dialogue ever written: "What is this great journey you seek to send me on, oh ruler of the city by the lake called Erie?"

(Diagram that sentence. I dare you.)

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The cloaked figure explains that the Baabarian is being sent in search of a great ring, which is now in the possession of the mysterious Lord of the League. Once the Baabarian is victorious, the figure explains, the city by the lake called Erie would be home to the Masters of the Gridiron.

So, by standing on a rock and blowing into a beer bong, the Baabarian calls forth his fellow warriors - the, ahem, "clan of Modella" - to help him.

And this is the point at which *Masters of the Gridiron* starts cooking with gas.

His companions come from across the land - from the Planes of Passrushan and the Hills of Linebacka to the Mines of Offencia and the Hamlet of Interceptus.

Among them are Golican (Bob Golic), Hairstone (Carl Hairston), Clayrock (Clay Matthews), Mackmaulus (Kevin Mack), and Bynthor (Earnest Byner - whose name is actually misspelled in the credits).

They gather before the Baabarian, ready for their epic quest - each wearing whitewashed Cookie Monster slippers and a bathmat around his waist.

They arrive at the palace (in fact Squire's Castle in Willoughby Hills) of the Lord of the League (the ukelele-toting Tiny Tim) and are suddenly under attack from his

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[1986 @kaighwriter](#) [shares opinions about the amazing Cleveland sports calendar year of](#)