

Flirting With Ecstasy

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}
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Not that anyone in this town needs reminded, but it's been 44 years since the Browns shut the Colts out in the 1964 NFL Championship Game. Over that time span, the professional sports teams of Cleveland have had some legitimate chances to end that drought. And in Jesse Lamovsky's latest column, he runs down the five closest brushes this city has had with winning a championship since the Browns win in the '64 title game.



Here's a nice, obvious point that can sometimes be forgotten in the cynicism and frustration of sport's longest championship drought- the city of Cleveland hasn't gone 43 years without a championship because it's the city of Cleveland. With the arguable exception of the 1995 Indians, we haven't had the best team in the sport since 1948. The 1964 Browns weren't the best team in the NFL, man-for-man; they played in the weaker conference, Vince Lombardi's Packers had an off-year, the title game was at home, they had the best player on the field, and in the game they meant the most, they played flawlessly. A truly worthy champion- but not the dominant team in the sport, no. Ken Keltner, Lou Boudreau, and Bob Feller played for the last Cleveland team that was the Best in the Game.

But that isn't to say the city hasn't had some prime shots at ending the drought since it began on December 27, 1964. We've had several. Here, in my not-overly humble opinion, are the five best.

5.) 1968 Browns- It's, admittedly, a stretch to include this team in a World Championship conversation at all, because of the 34-0 destruction by Baltimore in

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the '68 Championship Game- one of the most lopsided home losses in NFL playoff history. But, if in some Philip K. Dick-style alternate dimension, the Browns had beaten the Colts for the second time that season, the follow-up would have been a winnable Super Bowl III against the New York Jets.

It's a game of match-ups and momentum. New York, with the quick release of Joe Namath, matched up well against Baltimore's blitzing defense. The Colts had several early opportunities to blow the Super Bowl open but kept missing field goals and turning the ball over, allowing the underdog Jets to stay in it even as they were being outplayed. The longer a supposed mismatch remains close, the more confidence flows to the underdog, and the more doubt flows to the favorite. The Colts, coming off a highly emotional victory followed by two weeks of being feted as unbeatable, were a little bit flat in Miami, and New York, which with respect was an inferior team, took advantage.

The Browns, a prospective favorite as the representative of the supposedly superior league, might have come into the Super Bowl flat as well. But, having gone just 10-4 in the regular season, and considered a very good team but a cut below the NFL elite, they would not have been subjected to the kind of edge-dulling premature lionization that the Colts received. Leroy Kelly and Paul Warfield were better than anyone on Baltimore's offense, which moved the ball very well on New York (324 yards) but shot itself in the foot with five turnovers, including three interceptions on the goal line. If Tom Matte could run for 158 yards against the Jets defense, what could Kelly, the best back in football, have done? On the flip side, the J-E-T-S wouldn't have been a three-touchdown underdog against the Browns, and maybe Broadway Joe wouldn't have been compelled to make the most

celebrated guarantee of victory in the history of sports.

But still, of course, there's that 34-0 devastation at the Lakefront to consider.

4.) 1980 Browns- the Kardiatic Kids are not the best most-merger team in the history of the Browns franchise. That distinction goes to the [1987](#) team. What they had, however, was potentially the best Super Bowl match-up, by far, of any contending Cleveland club.

The opponent at the Super Dome on January 25, 1981, would have been Dick Vermeil's Philadelphia Eagles. Like the '68 Colts, the '80 Eagles hit their peak in the conference championship game, when they hammered the despised Cowboys 20-7 in a wind-whipped, rollicking Veterans Stadium. Not a great team to begin with, they came out for Super Bowl XV in a listless state, and the Raiders took it to them, 27-10. The Eagles were a target of opportunity- any one of the AFC playoff teams could have and would have beaten them, and that included the Browns.

All of that sanguine stuff leaves unanswered the question of how Cleveland's league-worst pass defense would have fared in an AFC Championship match-up with Air Coryell and the Chargers, in San Diego's Jack Murphy Stadium.

3.) 1976 Cavaliers- Almost to a man, members of the Miracle team insist that, had Jim Chones not been injured, they would have not only beaten the Boston Celtics in the '76 Eastern Conference Finals, but beaten them handily. Boston was an aging team- John Havlicek, Paul Silas, and Don Nelson were on their last legs, and Dave Cowens was on the back end of a brilliant but relatively short career- and the Cavaliers, with a healthy Chones, would have been able to bring a lot of depth and balance to bear in a long series. A victory over Boston would have set up a Finals meeting with Phoenix, which won just 42 games in the regular season. Cleveland would have had the better team and home-court advantage in the Finals- and the Coliseum would have been howling-dog insane for those ballgames.

The NBA of the late '70s had a Fall-of-Rome feel to it. The Lakers and Knicks teams that had dominated the Association early in the decade had aged into mediocrity, and in the ensuing free-for-all, in a league with no great

teams, a good team that got hot at the right time could break through the back door and win the whole thing. The 1975 Warriors and the 1977 Trail Blazers may not have been the best teams in the NBA on paper, but they were the best teams in the gym in May, and in May of 1976, if not for a broken foot suffered in practice- *practice*, not a game, not a game...

practice

- the Cleveland Cavaliers could very well have been that team.

2.) 1995 Indians- You'd be hard-pressed to find a team that dominated its league more than the '95 Tribe. They led the American League in batting average, on-base percentage, slugging average, runs scored, home runs, and stolen bases, and had a team ERA nearly a half-a-point better than any other pitching staff in the AL. Their 100-44 record was 14 games better than Boston's 86-58, the second best mark. In 80 regular season and postseason games at Jacobs Field, the Indians were 62-18. It was a surprise whenever this team lost.

So why did they lose the 1995 World Series? Match-ups and momentum. Cleveland's wall-bangers had feasted off of fastballs thrown by right-handed middle-of-the-rotation starters all season. Atlanta had, in effect, three number-one starters in Greg Maddux, Tom Glavine, and John Smoltz. The Indians didn't hit (.179 in the Series), and in low-scoring games had the cracks in their game exposed by the fundamentally sound Braves. The signature play of the Series might be Manny Ramirez being picked off first by Javy Lopez's snap throw in the seventh inning of Game Two, cutting the bottom out of a Tribe comeback in a loss that gave Atlanta a 2-0 Series lead. The Indians pitched well. Atlanta's pitching was better. But it was close-five of the six games were decided by one run, and Carlos Baerga made the final out in three of Cleveland's losses, with Albert Belle left standing in the on-deck circle.

The left-handed Glavine proved impossible to figure out. But the Tribe beat Maddux in the elimination

Game Five at the Jake, and roughly handled the fast-baller Smoltz in Game Three, the first Tribe World Series win since 1948. (Thank you, Herbert Perry.) Had the Indians found a way to take the Series to a seventh game, they would have again faced Smoltz, by far the most favorable match-up of Atlanta's Big Three for Indians hitters. All of the pressure would have been on the Braves, who were trying desperately not to be baseball's answer to the Buffalo Bills of the same period. Even with Charles Nagy on the mound for Game Seven, the stars may have aligned for the Tribe.

If only Baerga would have done... something with those last at-bats.

1.) 1997 Indians- All they had to do was get three outs with a one-run lead in the seventh game of the World Series. When you get that close, there isn't

much to say, other than ask rhetorically why Sandy Alomar wasn't pinch-run for in the top of the ninth, when he stood at third with one out and the Indians leading 2-1, desperately in need of an insurance run. Mike Hargrove could scarcely be expected to go with anyone other than his closer in the bottom of the ninth inning. He could have, and should have, substituted Alomar for a pinch-runner and gone with Pat Borders, a starter with World Championship Toronto teams, to close it out. That one move, not made, might have been enough to get off the schneid.