

JUST OUT OF REACH

BUFFALO LOST ITS GRIP IN THE FINAL MOMENTS TO ALLOW CLEVELAND TO ADVANCE IN THE AFC

RICK TELANDER ·

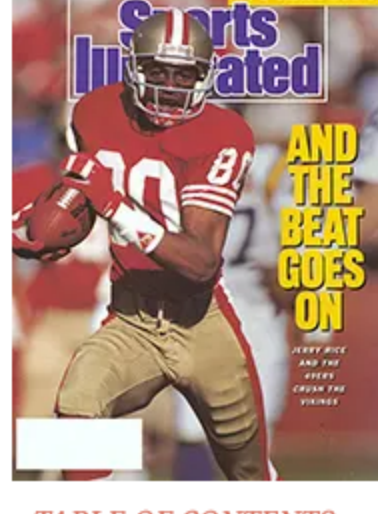
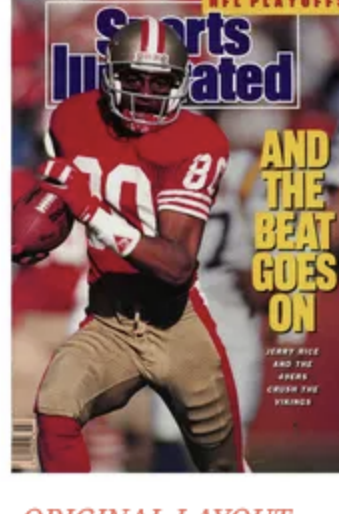


TABLE OF CONTENTS

A lot of people figured last Saturday's playoff between teams from look-alike Lake Erie industrial towns would be low scoring, defense dominated. Your mill workers against ours in a no-wrenches-barred brawl in the muck. After all, during the regular season the AFC Central-champion Cleveland Browns had allowed only 254 points, the second fewest in the conference; had intercepted an AFC-high 27 passes; and had set a team record of 45



ORIGINAL LAYOUT

sacks. The AFC East-champion Buffalo Bills had struggled some on defense in 1989, but they had shut out the New York Jets 37-0 in their regular-season finale and would be starting brute defensive end Bruce Smith and bloodthirsty linebackers Shane Conlan and Cornelius Bennett together for only the fourth time in this injury-plagued season. What's more, the game would be played in Cleveland. That meant ice and mud and a swirling wind cold enough to freeze the whiskers on the Dawg Pound matts.

So what happened? The weather was comparatively balmy (33°), the wind was calm, and the gridiron was as dry as a Milk-Bone. To be sure, Cleveland Stadium's natural-turf field, with the Indians, Browns and frigid winter weather having taken their toll, was ugly—a sort of algae-green conglomeration of paint, dirt, sand and grass clippings—but it offered reasonably firm footing, except to kickers, whom we'll get to later.

In celebration of the favorable playing conditions, the offenses went wild. The final score was 34-30 in Cleveland's favor, even though Buffalo piled up 453 yards to the Browns' 325. Cleveland won because quarterback Bernie Kosar converted 20 of 29 passes for 235 yards and three touchdowns and threw no interceptions; because 230-pound running back Kevin Mack, who spent 33 days in jail for cocaine possession only two months ago, had a game-high 62 yards; and because wide receiver Webster Slaughter got help from his Light Time shoes, the spray-painted Day-Glo wheels that he and a number of other Browns wear and that have all the beauty of highway pylons.

Most of all, though, the Browns won because the Bills' passing attack faltered at the end of the game. On second down from the Cleveland 11 with 14 seconds left, Buffalo running back **Ronnie Harmon** dropped a pass from his quarterback, Jim Kelly, in the end zone. On the next play Kelly saw running back Thurman Thomas break open on the goal line, but his throw was intercepted by linebacker Clay Matthews, and the whole stadium sighed with relief.

"It was one of those games in which it looked like the last team to have the ball would win," said the Browns' first-year coach, Bud Carson. Carson is the defensive whiz who was supposed to have banished from Cleveland's psyche all concern over a recurrence of such things as The Drive, the Denver Broncos' renowned 98-yard, fourth-quarter, John Elway-led march, which knocked the Browns out of the 1987 Super Bowl. But Buffalo's final, 63-yard drive came close to being Drive II.

Earlier in the week, Cleveland owner Art Modell had said, "This defense would never allow [a drive like] that. Never happen in a hundred years." How close do you like your shaves, Art?

"I don't think I've ever been around a team that's played as poorly defensively as we played today," said Carson. And that's saying a bit, because the 58-year-old Carson has coached for a high school, four colleges and six pro teams in 10 states during his 34-year career.

Matthews was so ecstatic over his interception that he fell flat on his back while trying to spike the ball. Recovering nicely, he held the ball aloft for the howling and barking fans as he started for the tunnel. Then he stopped and heaved the ball into the stands. It hit the facade on the second deck, right next to the BIL-JAC DOG FOOD sign, and dropped into the rabid masses. Arf, arf, this pigskin's for you, Cleveland!

The game was so entertaining, with three lead changes and four fourth-down attempts—three of which were successful—that you could almost forget how vital the outcome was for both teams. Of course, the winner would move to the AFC Championship Game, but more important than that, the game would determine which team was in an ascent and which was in a slide.

Both had better records last season. Buffalo was 12-4 in 1988 and was picked by many NFL observers to make the Super Bowl this year. But after winning only one of their last four games, the Bills finished at 9-7. This fade brought out the best in their personalities. Kelly blamed some of the Bills for screwing up. Thomas then took it upon himself to defend his teammates and blamed Kelly for screwing up. After a joint Kelly-Thomas press conference on Dec. 14, ostensibly to bury the hatchet, Kelly said he would no longer talk to the media. Earlier, two Buffalo assistant coaches, Nick Nicolau and Tom Bresnahan, got into a scuffle after a win over the Jets. Said coach Marv Levy of the search for where to pin the blame, "This team is drowning in analysis."

Kelly threw 25 touchdown passes in just 13 regular-season games (he missed the other three with an injured left shoulder) but had eight interceptions in the last four games. His record as a starter was 6-7. Backup Frank Reich's record was 3-0. Who was to blame for what? Who could tell?

Nosetackle Fred Smerlas had said of his team's blown games, of which he figured there were five, "When you keep cutting your own throat, eventually you run out of blood." Last Thursday he said, "We haven't run out completely. We've sewed up the hole, and we're eating red meat."

But sutures were again called for after Saturday's defeat. Both **Harmon** and Thomas accused Kelly of holding the ball too long before passing on the Bills' last two plays. Kelly would not comment on what he said to his two teammates. His last semipublic statement had been the Christmas card he sent out with a photo of himself as a tuxedo-clad Santa surrounded by 10 lovely female "elves" in number-12 jerseys. "And all through the house, not a creature was stirring.... Well, maybe one big mouse," read the greeting on the card. Kelly looked far happier in the picture than he did after last Saturday's game.

Cleveland's story was remarkably similar. The Browns were 10-6 in 1988 and 9-6-1 in '89, though most people thought Cleveland should have improved with the addition of speedy rookie running back Eric Metcalf and the development of defensive tackle Michael Dean Perry. But the Browns stumbled, winning only two of their last six games, and critics began to question everything from first-year offensive coordinator Marc Trestman's game plans to Kosar's sore elbow to Carson's suitability to be a head coach. Players grumbled too.

"I was getting a lot of heat for all the changes I had made," says executive vice-president Ernie Accorsi, who in the off-season had hired Carson and traded former 1,000-yard rusher Earnest Byner. "When we lost to Indianapolis [on Dec. 10] in overtime, I felt like a boxer. By Thursday of that week, it was like the 15th round, and I'm thinking, I'm still on my feet."

Carson persevered, too, and the Browns won their last two games, against the Minnesota Vikings and the Houston Oilers, to win the division crown by half a game. Good thing, because Carson had made it pretty clear he didn't want to hit the road again. He said that his 13-year-old daughter, Cathy, was going to finish high school in Cleveland. So unless she planned on taking up housekeeping by herself, that meant Dad would have to remain the Browns' coach until at least 1993.

A win against Buffalo would mean a lot to Cleveland fans, who well remembered the late-game interception Brian Sipe threw against the Oakland Raiders in the 1981 playoffs and Byner's goal-line **fumble** on what would have been the tying TD against Denver in the '88 AFC Championship Game.

The Bills struck first, on a 72-yard touchdown pass from Kelly to wide receiver Andre Reed 10 minutes into the game. Cleveland's Matt Bahr had already tried a 45-yard field goal but had missed to the right when he slipped in sand that had been spotted around the field to soak up water. He connected on another 45-yarder from almost the same spot at the end of the first quarter, however, and the Browns added a TD early in the second period on a 52-yard bomb from Kosar to Slaughter.

Buffalo answered with a 33-yard Kelly-to-James Lofton scoring pass, which put the Bills in front 14-10. Kosar then hit tight end Ron Middleton with a three-yard touchdown pass, and the Browns led 17-14 at the half.

The Browns took a 31-21 advantage into the fourth quarter following a 44-yard touchdown pass from Kosar to Slaughter, a six-yard Kelly-to-Thomas scoring toss and a 90-yard kickoff return by Metcalf for a TD.

Kelly, who was masterful, completing 28 passes in 54 attempts for 404 yards and four touchdowns, brought the Bills to within four points, 34-30, with an eight-play, 77-yard scoring drive that consumed less than three minutes. He didn't use a timeout, and got the score on a three-yard pass to Thomas with four minutes to go. Thomas would catch 13 passes for 150 yards and two touchdowns, and run 10 times for 27 yards. None of that would matter, however. Buffalo kicker Scott Norwood slipped in the sand and kicked the extra-point attempt into a teammate's back, making a field goal useless to the Bills. "I felt real bad for him," said Bahr of Norwood. "The field has bitten so many people."

Kelly's final drive was stopped by Matthews's interception with three seconds remaining, and Buffalo fans can only wonder what might have happened if **Harmon** had hung on to Kelly's penultimate pass, or if Norwood had made that extra point and then kicked a field goal to send the game into overtime. But why speculate? There were plenty of dropped balls and bouncing balls that could have turned the game around.

One thing's for sure—Slaughter has a racket going with his cans of Nu-Life (#616 Orange) Color Spray. "I'm the Earl Scheib of the NFL," he says.

So, Earl, you doing the Super Bowl?

TWO PHOTOS

TONY TOMSIC

With 14 seconds remaining, **Harmon** had victory in his grasp, but it slipped away.

PHOTO

TONY TOMSIC

Kosar's three completions to Slaughter (below) accounted for 114 yards and two TDs.

PHOTO

JOHN BIEVER

PHOTO

JOHN BIEVER

As Middleton gave thanks for Matthews's goal-line interception, the hero was mobbed.

JANUARY 15, 1990