



AP Photos

Browns linebacker Clay Matthews (57) celebrates after his last-second interception preserved victory over Bills in AFC divisional playoff game

Browns Drive Off Demons

By Rich Cimini

Cleveland — This time, the Browns stopped The Drive.

The Browns came perilously close yesterday to reliving one of the most painful chapters in their history. Bills quarterback Jim Kelly, rekindling memories of John Elway's celebrated 98-yard touchdown drive three years ago in the AFC championship game, engineered a frantic two-minute drill that put Buffalo on the brink of completing a remarkable comeback.

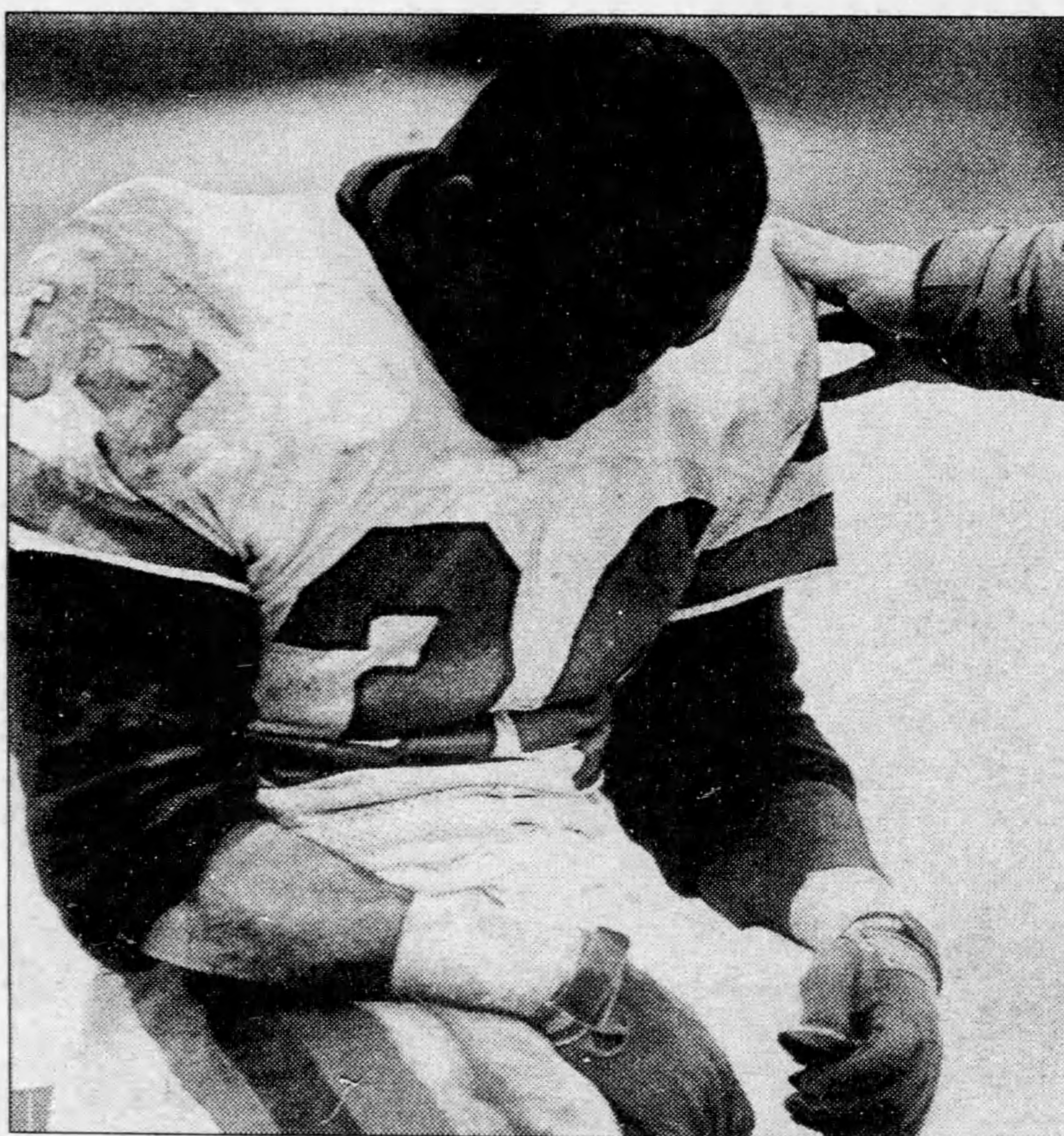
Kelly, whose team trailed 34-30 with 2:41 remaining in a thrill-a-minute divisional playoff game at Cleveland Stadium, moved the Bills from their 26-yard line to

the Browns' 11. The Browns, who led 34-24 with 6:50 left, seemed destined for another crushing playoff loss, but this time they were saved by the man who nearly destroyed their season two weeks ago.

Linebacker Clay Matthews, whose ill-advised lateral in the regular-season finale against Houston almost cost the Browns the Central Division title, redeemed himself yesterday with The Interception. He picked off a pass intended for Thurman Thomas at the 1-yard line with three seconds remaining, preserving the Browns' 34-30 victory.

"I'd like to point out that I got down with the ball real quick today," said a smiling Matthews, whose clutch play put the Browns in Sunday's AFC championship game against the winner of today's Broncos-Steelers divisional game.

Matthews' interception, one play after Ronnie Harmon dropped a pass in the end zone, was one of several big plays in a game that lasted 3 hours, 42 minutes. An expected defensive struggle turned into a shootout, in which the teams gained 778 yards of total offense. And that doesn't include Eric Metcalf's 90-yard kickoff return for a touchdown, which gave the Browns enough



Bills' Thurman Thomas is down after late drive failed

of a cushion to compensate for their defensive lapses.

Metcalf's third-quarter score gave the Browns a 31-21 lead, a mere 15 seconds after the Bills closed to within 24-21 on a 6-yard pass to Thomas. "That might have been the big play in a game of big plays," Bills coach Marv Levy said of Metcalf's brilliant run.

Browns coach Bud Carson, commenting on the game in general, said, "I haven't been involved in a game like this in many years. You're not, if you want to remain a defensive coordinator."

The Browns couldn't stop Kelly, who enjoyed one of the most prolific games of his career. He completed 28

of 54 passes for a career-high 405 yards. Nine passes were dropped. Kelly, operating a wide-open attack that caught the Browns by surprise, threw four TD passes, including a 72-yarder to Andre Reed and a 33-yarder to James Lofton. He also threw two scoring passes to Thomas, who had 13 receptions for 150 yards.

Kelly's counterpart, Bernie Kosar, also had a big day. Kosar was 20 of 29 for 251 yards and three TDs, including scoring passes of 52 and 44 yards to Webster Slaughter.

"Going into the game, I didn't think either of us would be able to throw that well," Kosar said. "But from a quarterback's standpoint, it was fun to be in a game like that."

Not fun for Kelly. The controversial quarterback had a chance to stage one of the great comebacks in playoff history, but he fell just short. It was some drive, though. He converted a fourth-and-10 (17 yards to Don Beebe), a fourth-and-1 (10 yards to Reed) and a third-and-10 (11 yards to Thomas).

In fact, the Bills should have won, but Harmon dropped Kelly's pass in the back of the end zone with 14 seconds left.

The Bills' other huge mistake was committed by Scott Norwood, who missed an extra point after Thomas' second TD with 4:00 remaining. The missed point loomed large in defeat, because it prevented the Bills from trying a late field goal to force overtime.

Norwood, claiming he slipped, kicked the ball into his blockers.

"The field was iced over," he said. "I knew that in the pregame and I went out early, but it got worse as the game progressed."

Harmon declined to talk about his miscue. Thomas, commenting on Harmon's drop, took a dig at Kelly, which is nothing new.

"Ronnie told me in the huddle that if Jim looked a little sooner, it would've been a touchdown," Thomas said. "He looked too long at Andre. [By] the time he looked at Ronnie, it was too late."

Thomas also blamed Kelly for the interception, say-

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couldn't quite do the job against Minnesota this season. Our line is not a big line, but it's a quick line. Minnesota's defensive line is the quickest in the league. That's why we matched up pretty good with them."

The 49ers' offense made only one mistake in the first half, when Craig fumbled at the Vikings' 9-yard line on the opening series. For the next 7:23, the Vikings held the ball, pounding 70 yards in 14 plays before settling for a 38-yard field goal by Rich Karlis. It took the 49ers 14 seconds to regain control of the game. On the first play after the kickoff, Montana hit Rice with a 15-yard pass on a crossing pattern, and Rice turned it into a 72-yard score as he has so often.

"That had a big impact," rookie coach George Seifert said of Rice's TD. "It wasn't necessarily total demoralization or a big knockout, but it had to affect them after they scored first."

What made it worse was the way the 49ers went 74 yards in seven seemingly effortless plays the next time they got the ball to score on an 8-yard pass from Montana to tight end Brent Jones. An interception by Chet Brooks at the Vikings' 21 set up another 8-yard TD pass from Montana to wide receiver John Taylor, and Montana hit Rice on a 13-yard play 1:03 before halftime for a 27-3 lead.

There was nothing the Vikings could do to stop the 49ers, who sealed off back-side pressure from the rush and repeatedly sprung Craig for big gains on runs designed to cut back against the pursuit of the Vikings' linebackers. "Some plays, they weren't even rushing," Collie said of the Vikings. "They looked like they were frustrated. Barton said it was like playing pinball. I stopped Millard on one play, and he stopped [defensive tackle Al] Noga, and they ran into each other. I looked at Harris, and he was laughing. It was a fun game because of things like that."

Vikings coach Jerry Burns switched from Wade Wilson, who completed 9 of 17 passes for only 84 yards, to Tommy Kramer in the third quarter. After Kramer threw the interception that Lott took back for a TD, Burns went to third-string QB Rich Gannon, who threw an interception that Tim McKyer returned 41 yards to the Vikings' 4 to set up Craig's TD. Suddenly, a playoff game looked like a preseason game.

Maybe the Vikings were getting an early start on their 1990 training camp. They need it. The preseason favorites to win the Super Bowl thought they had the last piece when they traded for running back Herschel Walker. But he never fit in, and the Vikings couldn't handle the pressure of the big expectations.

They lost to the 49ers 34-9 at this stage of the playoffs last season and fared worse yesterday. "We were never in the ballgame," Burns said. "Joe Montana is a great football player. He's cool, and he's hard to pressure. We wanted to pressure him and make him throw quickly, and we didn't accomplish that."

So, the Team of the '80s won its first game in the '90s, but Montana reminded everyone this is still the 49ers' decade. "We're still playing in the '80s," he said. "This is an '80s season for us."

AP Photo

49ers lineman Kevin Fagan pulls down Vikings' Wade Wilson for sack after getting help from Pierce Holt

Browns Halt Bills' Rally

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ing he threw too late. "For a split-second, I was open," said Thomas, who created a recent controversy by criticizing Kelly on a TV show in Buffalo. "Jim probably held the ball a little too long."

Kelly, continuing his self-imposed silence, didn't speak to the media afterward.

Matthews was chatting up a storm. Of his interception, he said: "I was hoping [Thomas] would go somewhere else, but I had him all the way. One of his linemen must have shielded Kelly's view of me. The next thing I knew, the ball was headed for me."

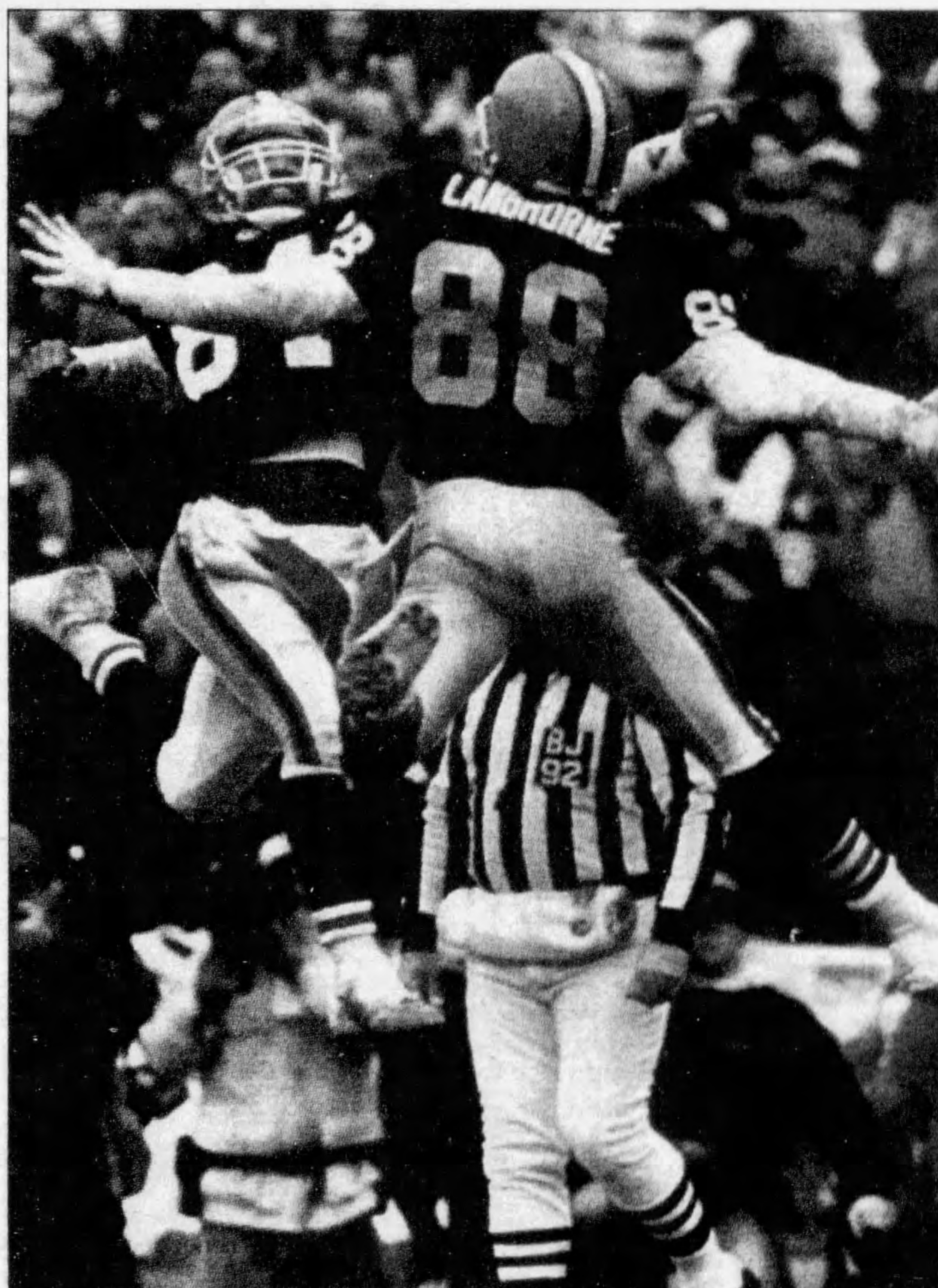
Kelly's dramatic drive conjured up memories of Elway's drive three years ago, when the Broncos defeated the Browns, 23-20, to go to the Super Bowl. "To be honest with you, I wasn't thinking about The Drive," Matthews said. "At that point, I was too tired to do much of anything."

Kelly made sure of that. After Matt Bahr's 47-yard field goal, which made it 34-24 with 6:50 left, Kelly led a 77-yard drive in 2:39, culminating with a 3-yard TD pass to Thomas with 4:00 to play. "That was embarrassing," Carson said.

After a Cleveland punt, the Bills took the ball with 2:41 to play, 74 yards away from victory. They made it to the 11 before The Interception.

"What an ending," Bills nose tackle Fred Smerlas said. "It's like we were about to get a spoonful of food in our mouth and, all of a sudden, we dropped the spoon."

That wasn't the only thing they dropped.



UPI Photo

Webster Slaughter and Reggie Langhorne (88) exult after TD