

A PERFECT SEASON

By Lawrence Lee, Jr.

Now that the 1998 NFL season has come to a close, we can reflect on another great year of football. Probably the longest-lasting story of this past year was the Denver Broncos' quest to become only the second team in history to have an undefeated season, after the 1972 Miami Dolphins. Or would they be the fourth?

Occasionally, when there are discussions of a possible perfect season - remember the 15-1 1985 Bears - the reporter/analyst/former athlete will mention that the 1972 Dolphins were the only perfect team in "NFL history". Technically, that's true. The 1920 Akron Pros, 1922 and 1923 Canton Bulldogs, and 1929 Green Bay Packers all went undefeated, but their perfection was marred by ties in each case.

Nevertheless, the Dolphins are not the first perfect team in *pro football* history, they are the fourth. But of the previous three, two can be dismissed. Not everyone would agree that the 1937 American Football League or the 1948 Canadian Football League were major leagues, but, that aside, two of the three possibilities have other problems.

The first team to play an entire season and not lose a game was the 1937 Los Angeles Bulldogs of the AFL. I dismiss this team - for comparative purposes - for two reasons. First, I have found various sources that list the Bulldogs' 1937 record as 8-0-0, but other sources list it as 9-0-0. So there appears to be a question of even what the record actually is. Second, while searching through the 1937 sports pages of the *New York Times*, I found games that the Bulldogs played, yet weren't included in the standings - so they weren't considered "official" games. If the Bulldogs lost any of these games, would their season still be considered "perfect"?

The CFL's Calgary Stampeders of 1948 went 12-0 during the season, but they must also be dismissed. If you include the playoffs, it wasn't a perfect season. In 1948, the Western Conference final was decided in two games, with the total points winner going on to the Grey Cup. The Stampeders tied Regina in the first playoff game, 4-4. So although it was an "undefeated" season, it was not "perfect".

There is, however, one other team that played a "perfect" season, a team which certainly ranks up there with the 1972 Dolphins, the 1985 Bears, the 1998 Broncos, etc.

That team is the 1948 Cleveland Browns of the AAFC. The '48 Browns went 14-0 during the season, then won the AAFC Championship Game with a 49-7 rout of the Buffalo Bills.

Although few argue that the AAFC qualifies as a major league, the Cleveland Browns have not gotten proper recognition and respect.

Let's take a game-by-game look at the 1948 Cleveland Browns.

9/3/1948: Cleveland 19 - Los Angeles Dons 14 At Municipal Stadium. Attendance: 60,193.

For the first three quarters, it was all Cleveland. Lou Groza opened the scoring with a 51-yard field goal early in the first quarter. In the second, Otto Graham completed a 70-yard drive with a 17-yard TD pass to Ara Parseghian.

Late in the third quarter, the Dons were pinned on their own 1-yard line. The Browns scored a safety when Glenn Dobbs attempted to pass. Graham again led a Cleveland scoring drive, this time culminating in a 6-yard run by Bill Boedeker. Four Los Angeles drives had been stopped deep in Cleveland territory - two by interceptions, two by fumbles. But LA managed to score twice in the final minute. A 5-play drive ended with a John Kimbrough TD run with 33 seconds left to play. The Dons recovered the onside kick,

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Dobbs hit Joe Aguirre for 37 yards to the 9, then again for the TD. The Dons tried another outside kick, but this time it was recovered by the Browns.

9/12/1948: Cleveland 42 at Buffalo Bills 13
At Civic Stadium. Attendance: 35,340.

Otto Graham was the player of the game, throwing for two TDs, and running for a third. Mac Speedie caught ten of Graham's passes, and Marion Motley ran for 136 yards. The Browns scored twice in the first quarter, on an 11-yard pass to Bob Cowan and an 18-yard Motley run. In the second, Buffalo scored on a 25-yard run by Julie Rykovich. Cleveland scored on a 10-yard toss from Graham to Speedie. Chet Mutryn's 12-yard run for Buffalo closed the scoring to 21-13 at the half.

Graham ended a 77-yard drive in the third with a 1-yard run. In the final quarter, Cleveland scored twice more. A 23-yard TD run by Tommy Colella was Colella's only carry of the game. Dean Sensenbaugher ended the Cleveland scoring with a 4-yard run.

9/17/1948: Cleveland 28 at Chicago Rockets 7
At Soldier Field. Attendance: 30,608.

Otto Graham was again the star of the game, passing for three TDs and running for another. The first Cleveland TD came on a 12-yard Graham run in the first quarter. When Bill Boedeker caught a 4-yard pass in the second, the score was 14-0. The Rockets scored their only TD in the second when Angelo Bertelli (1943 winner of the Heisman Trophy) passed 13 yards to Elroy Hirsch. After an interception in the third led to another score, Cleveland finished it out with a 39-yard TD pass from Graham to Bob Cowan.

9/26/1948: Cleveland 21 - Chicago Rockets 10
At Municipal Stadium. Attendance: 37,190.

The Rockets began by scoring on their very first play - a 74-yard pass from Jess Freitas to Eddie Prokop (a former Brown). Three times in the first half the Browns reached inside the Chicago 10-yard line, but were stopped by the Rockets. An 18-yard field goal by Jim McCarthy made the score at the half 10-0, Rockets. (It was only the second time in three years the Browns were held scoreless at the half.)

Apparently coach Paul Brown's halftime pep talk worked, because in the second half, it was the Rockets who were shut out. In the third, Cleveland's Weldon Humble intercepted a Chicago pass, and the Browns scored on a 37-yard pass from Otto Graham to Bill Boedeker. After the Rockets were forced to punt on their next possession, Cleveland drove down the field again, scoring on a 43-yard Graham pass to Dub Jones. The Browns finished the scoring on the third play of the fourth quarter, with a run by Boedeker.

10/5/1948: Cleveland 14 at Baltimore Colts 10
At Memorial Stadium. Attendance: 22,329.

A cold, windy rain was the setting as the Browns were behind at the half, 10-7. Two plays after the opening kickoff, Baltimore scored on a pass from Y.A. Tittle to Billy Hillenbrand. Edgar Jones tied the score with the first of his two TDs, in the first quarter. Early in the second, Rex Grossman's field goal put Baltimore ahead for the rest of the half. Jones scored his second TD on a pass from Graham in the third, which put the Browns ahead for good. This was the thirteenth straight game in which Otto Graham threw a TD pass - a new AAFC record.

10/10/1948: Cleveland 30 - Brooklyn Dodgers 17
At Municipal Stadium. Attendance: 31,187.

Although the Browns' running attack outgained the Dodgers 262 yards to 94, the game was tied at 17-17 after three periods. Cleveland went out in front in the first quarter, scoring first on an Edgar Jones 8-yard run. Late in the quarter, Lou "The Toe" Groza added a long field goal to make it 10-0, Cleveland. Brooklyn came back in the second to tie it with a Mickey Colmer 2-yard run, and a 36-yard field goal by Lee Tevis. At the half, it was all tied at 10-10.

In the third, the Browns went ahead again when Bill Boedeker climaxed a 79-yard drive with a 10-yard TD run. But the lead wouldn't last. When Groza attempted a 45-yard field goal, the Dodgers' Mike Harris

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blocked the kick, and Hank Foldberg returned the ball 51 yards for a Brooklyn TD. Going into the final quarter, it was again a tie game. But the Browns roared back to win the game, scoring twice in the fourth on runs by George Young (12 yards) and Marion Motley (3 yards).

10/17/1948: Cleveland 31 - Buffalo Bills 14 At Municipal Stadium. Attendance: 28,054.

The Cleveland running attack was the star of the game, outgaining Buffalo 209 yards to 82. (But the Bills led the way through the air, 260 yards to 219.) The game was barely three minutes old when Edgar "Special Delivery" Jones caught an Otto Graham pass and ran all the way for a 44-yard score. But Buffalo evened the score later in the period on a Jim Still to Alton Baldwin 22-yard TD pass. Lou Groza added a 45-yard field goal, and Marion Motley ran over from the 3 for a score. At the end of the first, it was 17-7, Cleveland. Neither team could add to their score in the second.

But the Browns did in the third. Cleveland extended its lead to 24-7 on a Graham-to-Mac Speedie 15-yard toss. After several previous drives into Cleveland territory had ended prematurely, Buffalo finally added a second score when George Ratterman hit Lou Tomasetti from the 9. With less than a minute to go in the game, the Browns added their final TD, a 30-yard pass from Cliff Lewis to Speedie.

10/24/1948: Cleveland 35 - New York Yankees 7 At Municipal Stadium. Attendance: 46,912.

Otto Graham was the leading force as the Browns dominated those "other" New York Yankees. Graham completed 21 of 30 for 310 yards, threw four TD passes, and ran for a fifth. Graham's second pass of the game was intercepted by New York's Lowell Wagner, who ran it back to the Cleveland 5-yard line. But the Cleveland defense held on four straight plays, the Yankees were stopped on the 1. Later in the first, Graham led the Browns on a ten-play, 99-yard drive; a 29-yard TD pass to Dante Lavelli opened the Cleveland scoring. (This was Lavelli's first action since suffering a broken leg in a pre-season game.) In the second, Graham added a 63-yard toss to Bob Cowan, and a 9-yarder to Mac Speedie. At the half, it was 21-0, Browns.

In the third, Graham led a 75-yard drive, completing five straight passes, then running 22 yards for the score. After this run, Graham sat out the rest of the game. The Yankees finally got on the board with only 30 seconds left in the game. Pete Layden threw a 34-yard scoring pass to Buddy Young, following Otto Schnellbacher's 51-yard interception return.

11/7/1948: Cleveland 28 - Baltimore Colts 7 At Municipal Stadium. Attendance: 32,314.

Cleveland's twelfth-straight victory (over two years) came at the expense of the Baltimore Colts, "Special Delivery" Jones scoring twice for the Browns. With seven minutes gone in the first quarter, the Colts' try on a fourth-and-1 play failed. The Browns scored in two plays, with Jones going over from the four. In the second, Otto Graham and Marion Motley led the Browns on a 72-yard drive, with Motley scoring on a 22-yard run up the middle.

Jones scored his second TD in the third quarter, on a 4-yard reception from Graham. Early in the fourth, a Lou Groza field goal attempt sailed wide. But the Browns recovered a few minutes later, when Lin Houston recovered a Baltimore fumble on the Colts' own 20-yard line. An offside penalty against the Colts moved the ball to the 15, where Ara Parseghian scored on a power play through the middle. Baltimore finally managed to score with seven minutes to play. Billy Hillenbrand caught a Y.A. Tittle pass, and raced down the sideline for a 69-yard TD.

11/14/1948: Cleveland 14 - San Francisco 49ers 7 At Municipal Stadium. Attendance: 82,769.

This game was advertised as the game of the century, with both teams having undefeated records. The crowd of 82,769 was the largest ever to see a professional football game to that point. On the opening kickoff, the 49ers' Forrest Hall received Lou Groza's kick on the 10-yard line. After a 4-yard return, Hall fumbled, and Cleveland's Lou Saban recovered. On the second play from scrimmage, Otto Graham ran around the right side for a 14-yard score - with the game only 45 seconds old. Later in the first, San Francisco completed a 16-play, 80-yard drive, when Joe Perry ran over the left side from the one. In the

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third quarter, a Cleveland 84-yard drive was completed when Edgar Jones scored on a 4-yard run over the left tackle. Just before the end of the game, Cleveland's Tom Colella intercepted a 49er pass, and the Browns moved to the San Francisco 14-yard line, where time ran out.

11/21/1948: Cleveland 34 at New York Yankees 21 At Yankee Stadium. Attendance: 49,981.

The football Browns/Yankees rivalry apparently has a different script than the baseball Browns/Yankees. To date, in eight games between the two gridiron teams, there has been one tie, and seven Browns victories. With the game barely four minutes old, Marion Motley scored the first of his two TDs, when he caught a pass from Otto Graham and ran 78 yards for the score. Minutes later, Edgar Jones scored on a fourth down run from the one. Score: 14-0. The Yankees came back fast and strong, scoring two TDs to tie the game in a 90-second span in the second quarter. Pete Layden threw a 29-yard strike to Bruce Alford, and Otto Schnellbacher ran an interception back 40 yards for a score. But then the Browns came roaring back, scoring 13 points before the half ended, on a Bob Cowan 9-yard run and two Lou Groza field goals (34 yards and 18 yards). At the half, it was 27-14, Cleveland. Advancing 68 yards in 8 plays, Marion Motley extended the Browns' lead in the third on a 12-yard run. By this time, Cleveland coach Paul Brown was using his second-string players. In the fourth quarter, the Yankees closed the gap, but it wasn't enough. On fourth down from the 1-yard line, Bob Kennedy ran for a TD to finish the scoring.

11/25/1948: Cleveland 31 at Los Angeles Dons 14 At L.A. Memorial Coliseum. Attendance: 60,031.

In the first quarter, Glenn Dobbs led the Dons on a 75-yard drive in the first seven minutes of the game. Walt Clay finished the drive with a 1-yard run. The Browns came right back, scoring on a 49-yard Graham-to-Lavelli pass. Later in the second, Dobbs personally accounted for 74 yards of an 80-yard scoring drive, and Clay again scored from the one. In the final minute of the half, Graham directed the Browns to the tying score, Bob Cowan catching a 17-yard TD strike.

The third quarter was all Cleveland. Otto Graham - who would complete 16-of-32 for 239 yards - completed a drive by going over from the one. Lou Groza added a 36-yard field goal later in the period. Before the third was over, Cleveland's Cliff Lewis intercepted a Dobbs pass on the 19-yard line. On the next play, Tony Adamle ran for a TD. There was no more scoring as the Browns rolled to the victory. The stage was set for a rematch with the San Francisco 49ers three days later.

11/28/1948: Cleveland 31 at San Francisco 49ers 28 At Kezar Stadium. Attendance: 61,000.

With their latest victory, the Browns clinched the Western Division championship. Otto Graham, playing with an injured knee, led the Browns. Of Graham's four TD passes, the first came barely a minute into the game. After the Browns recovered a San Francisco fumble, Graham threw a 40-yard scoring pass to Dante Lavelli. Lou Groza's 21-yard field goal later in the first would prove to be the difference in the game. But the second quarter was all 49ers, as they came back to lead at the half, 14-10. Joe Perry ran over from the two for the first score, and Frankie Alber threw to Alyn Beals for the first of his three TD passes.

In the third, the 49ers extended their lead with Albert's second TD toss to Beals. San Francisco appeared to be in charge, but the Browns came back strong. Two long drives and an interception led to three Otto Graham TD passes - to Dub Jones, Edgar Jones, and Marion Motley. By the fourth quarter, Cleveland was ahead, 31-21. San Francisco closed the gap in the fourth, on Albert's third TD pass. When Cleveland took possession, they began a time-killing drive, consuming seven minutes. By the time the 49ers got the ball, there was less than a minute to go.

12/5/1948: Cleveland 31 at Brooklyn Dodgers 21 At Ebbets Field. Attendance: 9,821.

The newspaper headline says it all - "Browns Vanquish Dodgers, 31-21, To Complete Season Undefeated". It wasn't as close as the score would indicate, because all the Dodger points were scored only after Cleveland coach Paul Brown put in his second-stringers. Late in the first quarter, Cleveland capped an 8-yard, fifteen-play drive with a 1-yard run by Dub Jones. In the second, a 54-yard Graham-

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to-Lavelli pass made it 14-0. At the half, it was 21-0, thanks to Graham's TD run at the end of a 91-yard drive.

Within the first four minutes of the third quarter, Cleveland extended its lead to 31 points, after Lou Groza kicked a 37-yard field goal and Horace Gillom caught a 25-yard TD pass from Graham. Coach Brown then pulled his regular players. It was only now that the Dodgers, led by rookie Bob Chappuis, managed to put points on the board. Late in the third, Chappuis threw 38 yards to Bob Hoernschemeyer for the first Brooklyn points. In the final quarter, the rookie's passing put the Dodgers in position for a 3-yard scoring run by Hoernschemeyer. The final Brooklyn score came when Chappuis passed to Monk Gafford for 60 yards. With four minutes to go, Paul Brown put his regulars back in. Led by Graham, the Browns stuck to the ground game to run the clock out. Cleveland's opponent in the championship game would be either the Buffalo Bills or Baltimore Colts, who were to play for the Eastern Conference title.

AAFC Championship:

12/19/1948: Cleveland 49 - Buffalo Bills 7

At Municipal Stadium. Attendance: 22,981.

It all came down to this one game. If the Cleveland Browns didn't win the AAFC Championship, their perfect 14-0 regular season record would mean little - if anything. But the championship contest turned out to be no contest at all. The Browns overwhelmed the Buffalo Bills by a score of 49-7. The key to Cleveland's victory was their defense; intercepting five passes, recovering three fumbles, and limiting the Buffalo running game to 63 yards. Six of the turnovers led to Cleveland touchdowns, and the Bills were able to make a sustained drive only twice. Marion Motley scored three times for the Browns, and Edgar "Special Delivery" Jones scored twice. The game began somewhat slowly, the score being 14-0 at the half. Cleveland scored in the first quarter on a 3-yard run by Edgar Jones. Early in the second, George Young recovered a fumble by Buffalo's Red Bumgardner and raced 18 yards for the score. That closed out the first half scoring.

The second half had just begun when Tommy James intercepted a pass by the Bills' George Ratterman and returned it to the Buffalo 22 yard line. A short Cleveland drive ended with Otto Graham throwing for a 9-yard score to Edgar Jones. Cleveland recovered a fumble on the Buffalo 42, then moved to the 29. Motley bulled over the right side and ran all the way to make the score 28-0. Buffalo finally scored on its next possession, driving 80 yards. Jim Still hit Alton Baldwin with a 10-yard TD pass. But that was the only score the Bills would manage. On the second play of the final quarter, Motley eluded a defender at the Buffalo 31 and raced all the way for his second TD. Intercepting another Buffalo pass on their own 40, the Browns scored again, culminating a six-play drive with Motley's third TD. The Bills continued passing the ball, trying to close the gap. Cleveland team captain Lou Saban scored the final Browns TD when he intercepted a Buffalo pass and ran it all the way, 39 yards, for his first TD in three years with the Browns. Cleveland thus ended their perfect season with a near-perfect championship game victory.

(TRIVIA NOTE: For their victory, each Cleveland player would receive \$594.18.)