

Fifty Years Ago . . .

December 24, 1950

Los Angeles Rams vs. Cleveland Browns

By John Thorn

(From *Pro Football's Ten Greatest Games*, Four Winds Press, 1981)

On this frigid Christmas Eve, with a thirty-mile-per-hour wind blasting off Lake Erie, only 29,751 hardy souls are here in Cleveland's cavernous Municipal Stadium; more than 50,000 seats are vacant. What a pity – for never before has an NFL title game presented so intriguing a matchup.

The hometown Browns, named after their head coach Paul Brown, are the new boys on the block, and all season they have had to prove that they belong. When the rival All American Football Conference raised the white flag after the 1949 campaign, the NFL agreed to absorb three of its clubs: the Baltimore Colts, the San Francisco 49ers, and the Browns. Cleveland had been the powerhouse of the AAFC, winning the championship in each of the conference's four years while losing a total of four games. They did it with Marion Motley, a mammoth fullback who inspired comparison with the great Nagurski; with Bill Willis, a brilliant middle guard who showed that speed counted for more than weight at his position; and with Lou Groza, maturing into the finest field-goal kicker the game had ever seen. But most of all, they did it with the devastating passes of Otto Graham to ends Mac Speedie and Dante Lavelli.

But had the Browns merely been big fish in a small pond? Nearly everyone in the NFL thought so. George Preston Marshall, owner of the Washington Redskins, said, "The worst team in our league could beat the best in theirs." Yet in the first game of the 1950 season, the Browns humiliated the NFL champion Eagles 35-10. Afterwards the Eagles' coach, Greasy Neale, referred to the Browns as a "basketball team"; so the next time the two teams met, Coach Brown ordered Graham not to throw a single pass. He didn't, and the Browns won again.

In fact, Cleveland's only two losses during the regular season came at the hands of the New York Giants, and produced a tie for the conference crown and a playoff game which the Browns won 8-3. The Los Angeles Rams also had to play an extra game to get here today. During the regular season they had lost twice to the Chicago Bears, then defeated them 24-14 in a playoff to repeat as conference champs.

If the Browns, who threw the ball one play out of three, are a basketball team, what are we to call the Rams? They passed more often than they ran, averaging thirty-eight tosses per game, while establishing new records for passing yardage, total yardage, and points. They defeated their opposition by such scores as 70-27, 65-24, 51-14, and 45-14. And in a game against Detroit they scored 41 points – *in the third quarter*. At the heart of the Rams' offense are quarterbacks Bob Waterfield and Norm Van Brocklin and receivers Tom Fears and Elroy Hirsch.

Ironically, the Rams too had their origin in an "outlaw" circuit, the American Football League of 1936, when their home town was ... Cleveland. The Cleveland Rams were admitted into the NFL the following season, and only five years ago, behind the heroics of rookie quarterback Waterfield, won the championship right here on this field! In 1946 the Rams packed their bags and went west, leaving little love behind.

So who is to turn up his nose at whom? That's the question as Lou Groza tees up the ball (the Browns won the toss and chose the wind advantage). And we're off! The ball descends end over end to V.T. "Vitamin" Smith, a bowlegged little scatback who has returned three kickoffs for touchdowns. Not this time, though; Vitamin is swallowed up at the 18.

The gaudily outfitted Rams (gold jerseys and ram-horned helmets) open in a conventional full-house T, with all three backs – former Army All-American Glenn Davis, powerful fullback Dick Hoerner, and Smith

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– behind Waterfield. This initial test of the Browns' 5-3-3 defense was planned two weeks ago. L.A.'s offensive coach, Hamp Pool, had been viewing the Browns' game films when he noticed that Cleveland's right linebacker would key on the offense's left halfback – that is, if the back went out for a pass, the linebacker would cover him; but if the back stayed in to block, then the linebacker would double up on the left end. It is this tendency that Pool will seek to exploit.

As Waterfield barks the signals, Smith goes in motion to the right. At the snap from center Fred Naumetz, Waterfield fades to pass. Hoerner and Davis stay in to block. Right end Hirsch cuts outside. Left end Fears breaks over the middle – trailed by right linebacker Tony Adamle, as planned. Davis holds his blocking position for only a moment, then flares a few steps and sprints upfield. Tommy James, the Browns' right cornerback who had moved toward the middle with Fears, reacts hurriedly and slips on the frozen turf. The fleet Davis glides by, catches the soft pass in the clear at his 45, and leads safety Ken Gorgal a merry chase all the way into the end zone.

An eighty-two-yard touchdown pass on the first play from scrimmage – this is unthinkable in a championship game, when tradition and common sense dictate caution. How will the stunned Browns respond?

The answer is not long in coming. After Cleveland's Ken Carpenter returns the kickoff to the 30, Graham fights fire with fire. Three consecutive short completions – to right end Lavelli, to right halfback Dub Jones, and to Lavelli again – advance the ball to the Cleveland 46. Otto rolls left to pass a fourth time, but after a pump fake, he tucks the ball in and scampers for twenty-two yards. A plunge by Motley nets only a yard, but on second down Graham hits Jones on a flare-out and up, behind Tommy Keane, for a thirty-one-yard score. Groza provides the PAT and at 3:10 of the first quarter this racehorse game is 7-7.

Smith returns the kickoff only to the 19, where the L.A. offensive unit takes over. (This is the first year of free substitution, though a few players on each team will see action both ways today.) On first down Waterfield fires a square-out to Tom Fears for five. Fears has been the NFL's top receiver in each of the last three seasons, reaching his pinnacle in 1950 with a record eighty-four catches; an incredible eighteen of these came in a game against Green Bay. Shifty rather than fast, he runs his routes with such precision that no back can hope to cover him one-on-one. (The trouble is that Hirsch, on the opposite end, must also be double-covered because of his moves and speed; and with Davis set out as a flankerback, the Rams' passing attack can seem unstoppable.)

On second down Waterfield drops back yet again while Fears runs a corner route with a double fake – to the outside, then to the middle, and back toward the left corner. The ball is perfectly thrown. Fears runs under it for a forty-four-yard gain.

Now, with the ball on the 32, the Rams try the overland trail, and it works splendidly as well. The big gainer is a fifteen-yard burst to the 3 by Smith, through a hole created by left guard Jack Finlay. On the next play Dick Hoerner also follows Finlay to plunge over the goal line. Contrary to accepted practice, the Rams have used the pass to set up the run.

Remarkably, neither team scores on its next possession. After an exchange of punts, the Browns take over on their 35. A pass to left end Mac Speedie is incomplete, but Woodley Lewis had his arms wrapped around Speedie before the ball arrived. The interference call puts the ball at midfield as the first period comes to a close. After Motley gains over the middle, Speedie collects a screen pass and hobbles to the L.A. 26. A great receiver who led the AAFC three straight years, Speedie cannot live up to his name today: He pulled a leg muscle in Thursday's practice, and his principal value to the Browns is as a decoy.

Graham is sacked for a loss to the 35, but goes for the bundle on the very next play. He sends Lavelli down the middle, where he splits defenders Lewis and Keane and races for paydirt with a half step advantage. He extends his arms at the 8, cradles the ball, and continues into the end zone. Groza readies for the automatic extra point with Tommy James to hold. But Hal Herring's snap sails high in a gust of wind and James must lunge to haul it in. Realizing that a kick would be blocked, James races to the right and throws to Tony Adamle in the end zone. Adamle gets his mitts on it, but cannot hold on. The Browns have missed their first PAT all season long, and the Rams retain the edge by one point: 14-13.

Ordinarily we might expect to see Norm Van Brocklin enter the game now; the second-year quarterback split duties with Waterfield during the season. In the playoff against Chicago, however, Van Brocklin broke a rib on the third play of the game and is being held out this afternoon. If the Rams are operating at

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less than peak efficiency, though, you'd have a hard time convincing Cleveland. With Waterfield firing passes to Fears and Hirsch, and sending Dick Hoerner through and around the confused Browns' line on delays, traps, and a Statue of Liberty, the Rams quickly bring the ball to the enemy 7.

The Browns cannot seem to stop the Rams, but fortunately for them the Rams blunder and stop themselves. After a holding penalty pushes them back to the 26, Waterfield sends Fears over the middle and underthrows him; Gorgal steps in front of Fears, scoops up the low throw at the 16, and returns thirty-three yards.

The Browns need to control the ball now, to pick up a few first downs and give their defense a breather. But three plays produce a loss of twelve, and Horace Gillom comes on to punt.

Hurrying to avoid a block, Gillom flubs the kick a mere nine yards; here come the Rams again. Waterfield throws to Fears for ten, then to Hirsch for eight. He fades again, holds the ball aloft as if to pass, and lets it be plucked from his hand by Smith, circling behind him in the Statue of Liberty. Cleveland's right end Len Ford smells the play coming, however, and nails Vitamin for a fourteen-yard loss. Big Len had just entered the game; he had not even taken part in a practice session since October 15, when a Chicago Cardinal slugged him in the jaw and broke it.

Ford's play is only a momentary setback. A personal foul against Cleveland and another pass to Fears soon have L.A. knocking at the door again. On third down and eight at the 10, Waterfield fakes a reverse and takes it up the middle himself, but is stopped at the 8. The Rams will have to settle for the easy field goal. But Waterfield, usually a reliable placekicker, sees his attempt from the 16 drift wide. The Browns have slipped off the hook once more. Badly outplayed in this quarter, they are delighted to trail by only one point at intermission.

Coaches Paul Brown and Joe Stydahar review the events of the first half with their assistants, and offer words of wisdom to their players. But most of all, I suspect, the teams welcome halftime for the chance to get out of the biting cold.

Whatever coach Brown tells his Brownies at the half, it works. The Browns receive the kickoff and zip through the Rams' defense. The key play is a twenty-nine-yard screen pass to Gillom, who has replaced the ailing Speedie for the second half. Then, with the ball on the Los Angeles 39, Graham flares both halfbacks, thus tying up the L.A. backs; Gillom hooks over the middle, taking a safety with him and leaving poor Tommy Keane to cover Lavelli by himself, an impossible task. Otto lifts a lob pass to Lavelli, running a post pattern. Keane's desperate leap for the ball is short by inches, and the Browns regain the lead, 20-14. The question now is whether coach Brown has similarly inspired his defense.

Smith returns Groza's kick to the 29, and Waterfield peppers the Cleveland secondary anew. He fires passes to Smith and Fears for a first down at his 45, then tosses to Smith for thirty-eight yards. Denied twice inside the 10-yard line in the second quarter, the Rams now replace guile with force. The ball goes to Hoerner for eight, then one, and then three; first down at the 5. Three more carries by the six-foot-four-inch fullback take the ball to the 1. The team trails by six, and Waterfield did miss that chippie in the second quarter, so Stydahar has his team go for it. The call is to Hoerner for the seventh straight time, and he crashes over for the touchdown. Waterfield adds the point: 21-20.

Woodley Lewis's kickoff is downed in the end zone for a touchback. From the 20 Graham pitches to Motley, who has been held in check by the surprisingly staunch L.A. line (the Rams allowed their opponents a whopping 25 points per game this year). The NFL's leading rusher in 1950, this 238-pound tank will finish the day with a mere six carries for nine yards. Motley is the only Brown back to wear cleats on the frozen turf – the others wear sneakers. He circles left end and gets out past the 25 before he is hemmed in by tacklers. Perhaps frustrated by his inactivity in the first half, he reverses field, giving up ground to the 14 as he awaits blockers. But before his linemen can regroup to aid him, Motley is caught in a pincers action by Ram ends Larry Brink and Jack Zilly. The ball squirts loose, bouncing back to the 6 where Brink picks it up and trots into the end zone. In twenty-one seconds, the Browns have transformed a 20-14 lead into a 28-20 deficit. The icy stadium is silent.

Seemingly demoralized, the Browns come up empty on the next three downs and punt. The Rams smell blood and stay aggressive, threatening again. But again the gods smile on the Browns at the moment of their impending doom. Just a minute before the end of the quarter, Warren Lahr leaps to pick off a Waterfield pass at the 21 and brings it back to the 35. There is still plenty of time, but the ground game

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has not worked at all. Coach Brown, who sends in all the plays for Graham through alternating messenger guards, decides to move upfield through the air, but not by throwing deep and hoping to get rich quick – an interception now could be fatal. Brown prefers the safe pass to the sideline: the receiver goes downfield five or ten yards, then cuts outside; but instead of turning at a right angle, he comes back toward the line of scrimmage, gaining a step or two on the defensive back that cannot be made up.

It is precisely this sort of pass that Graham throws to Lavelli for five straight completions covering only twenty-two yards. At the L.A. 43, with fourth down and one yard to go, Graham sneaks for three. Then a combination of five rushes and three more passes to Lavelli puts the ball on the 14. One of the passes is a seven-yarder completed on fourth and four; one of the runs is a three-yard rollout by Graham on fourth and three.

On almost every play this quarter the Browns have been lining up in a double-flanker, with Rex Bumgardner set wide to the left, Jones to the right, and only Motley behind the quarterback as a potential blocker. This formation puts tremendous pressure on the Rams' 5-2-4 defense, particularly the linebackers, who are forced to cover one or both of the backs one-on-one. With the ball at the 14, Graham spots Bumgardner cutting for the left corner of the end zone, blanketed by linebacker Fred Naumetz. He throws the ball low. Bumgardner reaches out to make a nifty catch, keeping his feet in bounds for the critical moment, then careening into a snowbank on the sideline. Groza adds the point, and the Browns close the gap to 28-27, with ten and a half minutes to play.

Two uneventful possessions follow, each culminated by a booming punt; Gillom cans one for sixty-eight yards, making up for the nine-yarder earlier, and Waterfield contributes to his fifty-yard average for the day, a championship record. On the Rams' next crack at the ball Waterfield, not sitting on his slim lead, puts the ball in the air – but linebacker Tommy Thompson dives to intercept at the L.A. 47. Is this the break that will turn the game around for the final time? Cleveland fans squirm in their seats.

Graham throws a twenty-two-yarder to Jones; the Browns are well within range for a go-ahead field goal. Now Graham bootlegs the ball around left end – but is blasted from the blind side and coughs up the ball! Mike Lazetich recovers for the Rams at the 24, and a disconsolate Graham trudges off the field with only three minutes to play.

As he reaches the bench with his head down, Graham is met by coach Brown, who pats him on the back. "Don't worry about it," Brown says. "We're going to get them anyway." Brown is not a dreamer – he knows that the Rams will now try to play the clock, and that if the defense can hold them, the offense should get one last crack. And more important, he knows what kind of a quarterback he has in Graham. Otto had entered Northwestern University on a basketball scholarship – oddly appropriate, considering his later success in the AAFC, the "basketball league" – before going on to Big Ten stardom in football. Brown was coaching Ohio State when he first noticed Otto; as soon as Brown was offered the helm of the Cleveland entry in the yet-to-be-founded AAFC, he knew that Graham was the man he wanted to run his T offense, even though Graham had been a single-wing tailback in college. Otto learned the mechanics of the T so well that in his ten years as a pro he led the Browns to the championship game *all ten times*.

As expected, the Rams keep the ball on the ground, hoping to pick up at least one first down while using up precious seconds. But Hoerner hits the Cleveland line twice for no gain, and on third and ten Davis's slant off right tackle yields only six yards. Waterfield booms a fifty-four-yard howitzer to the Browns' 16; Cliff Lewis fields it and dashes up to the 32, where he steps out of bounds. The clock shows 1:48 to play.

Graham fades to pass but finds no one open. With only Motley back to block, he cannot linger in the pocket waiting for a receiver to break free – a sack would be devastating now. Tucking the ball under his arm, Otto shows his single-wing training, bolting outside around the rushing right end for 14 yards, stepping out of bounds on the Cleveland 46.

Fading again, he spots Bumgardner open in the left flat and hits him for fifteen; Rex skips out on the L.A. 39. Now Otto drops back a bit deeper to give himself a little more time – he's going for the big one, to Jones in the end zone. But Dub is well covered by Naumetz, who actually has a better shot at the ball. The pass hangs; it looks as if it's to be intercepted, assuring a Ram win ... but Naumetz's frigid fingers can't hold it, and the ball drops to earth.

Thus reprieved, Graham fires to Jones for seventeen, placing the ball on the L.A. 22, once again well inside Lou Groza's range. With a minute left, will Coach Brown call for running plays to wind down the

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clock and position the ball between the goalposts?

No. Graham again finds Bumgardner open in the left flat after beating his defender on a Z-out pattern. Rex steps out at the 11 and stumbles into the snowbank with only forty seconds remaining. Brown now calls for a handoff to Bumgardner solely to move the ball in from the left hashmark and afford a better kicking angle. In the huddle, however, Bumgardner suggests that Otto keep the ball himself. Rex's hands are wet and cold from falling in the snow. "I was afraid I might fumble," he will say after the game. "I knew Otto wouldn't."

And Otto doesn't, moving the ball toward the center and forward one yard. With Hal Herring poised to snap, Tommy James kneeling to hold at the 16, and Lou Groza standing two and a half steps behind the placement, the game hangs in the balance. The snap is true, the hold flawless, and the kick ... perfect! Thousands of fans stream down from their seats and onto the field. The police try to shoo them to the sidelines, for though the Browns are in front 30-28, twenty seconds remain to be played.

Order is restored, and the teams line up for the kickoff. Groza's boot is taken at the 12 by Jerry Williams who, incredibly, nearly breaks away before being tackled at his 47. As the Rams' offense races onto the field, we notice that something has changed. Number 7, Waterfield, is not coming out. Standing over center is Number 25, Norm Van Brocklin, cracked rib and all. He will throw one long bomb and concern himself with the pain during the off-season.

Norman fades back to his 40 and fires the ball some fifty-five yards in the direction of Glenn Davis, who is covered tightly by Warren Lahr. At the 5, Lahr and Davis leap for the bomb. Lahr comes away with it for his second intercept of the afternoon, but Davis continues to grapple for the ball while dragging Lahr into the end zone. Will he wrest the pass away for a touchdown? Will the officials rule a safety? Neither – the play is whistled dead at the 5 as the clock runs out.

The team from the other side of the tracks has done it. They have defended the honor of all those who struggled for recognition in the old AAFC, and established themselves as the class of the NFL for years to come. The Rams? They can hold their heads high after an effort like this, and their revenge will be sweet in next year's championship match. But this day belongs to the outcasts, the upstarts, the revolutionaries – the Browns.

SCORING

| | | | | | | |
|---------------|----|---|----|----|---|----|
| Rams | 14 | 0 | 14 | 0 | - | 28 |
| Browns | 7 | 6 | 7 | 10 | - | 30 |

LARm - Davis 82 pass from Waterfield (Waterfield kick)
Cle - Jones 31 pass from Graham (Groza kick)
LARm - Hoerner 3 run (Waterfield kick)
Cle - Lavelli 35 pass from Graham (bad snap)
Cle - Lavelli 39 pass from Graham (Groza kick)
LARm - Hoerner 1 run (Waterfield kick)
LARm - Brink 6 fumble return (Waterfield kick)
Cle - Bumgardner 14 pass from Graham (Groza kick)
Cle - FG Groza 16

TEAM STATISTICS

| | Rams | Browns |
|---------------------|-------------|---------------|
| First downs | 22 | 22 |
| Rushing yardage | 106 | 116 |
| Passing yardage | 301 | 257 |
| Punt return yardage | 14 | 22 |
| Passes | 18-32 | 22-33 |
| Interceptions by | 1 | 5 |
| Punts | 4-51 | 5-38 |
| Fumbles lost | 0 | 3 |
| Yards penalized | 48 | 25 |

INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS

RUSHING

LARm - Hoerner 24 for 86 yards; Davis 6 for 6; Smith 4 for 11; Pasquariello 1 for 1; Waterfield 1 for 2.
Cle - Graham 12 for 99; Motley 6 for 9; Bumgardner 5 for 2; Jones 2 for 4; Lavelli 0 for 2 (lateral from Graham).

PASSING

LARm - Waterfield 18 of 31 for 312 yards; Van Brocklin 0 of 1.
Cle - Graham 22 of 33 for 298.

RECEIVING

LARm - Fears 9 for 136 yards; Hirsch 4 for 42; Smith 3 for 46; Davis 2 for 88.
Cle - Lavelli 11 for 128; Jones 4 for 80; Bumgardner 4 for 46; Gillom 1 for 29; Speedie 1 for 17; Motley 1 for -2.