

THE RIVALRY

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This month, the Cleveland Browns and the Cincinnati Bengals enter the 17th season of their cross-state rivalry. While the rivalry is still too young to have the intensity of any given Browns-Steelers game, the first meeting between the Browns and the Bengals – on August 29, 1970 – stands as a classic. On the surface, the game was just another meaningless pre-season warm-up contest. But the underlying dynamics made it one of the most eagerly anticipated and noteworthy games in the history of Cleveland sports.

The Browns faced a mirror image of themselves on that hot, humid night on the Ohio River in the Queen City. Both teams had been created in the image of Paul E. Brown, the focal figure in the early days of Ohio's pro football feud. Brown had been the coach, general manager, founding father and guiding genius of Cleveland's pro football club since its birth in 1946. His innovations (messenger guards, facemasks on helmets, classroom teaching of players) and incredible success (10 championship appearances in his first 10 seasons) would earn the Massillon native a spot in the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

But by 1961, when Art Modell, a 35 year old television and advertising man from New York, engineered the purchase of the Browns, Cleveland had gone four years without a title. A conflict between Brown and Modell was inevitable. Brown had enjoyed dictatorial power over the football aspect of his club since it was founded (and named after him). He expected his players to perform, obey his every command and keep any complaints inside the locker room. Modell, on the other hand, wanted camaraderie with his employees and urged them to speak out. As both the owner and a fan, Modell would naturally question some of Brown's decisions.

Meanwhile, the club continued to play less-than- championship-quality football.

Future Hall of Famer Bobby Mitchell was traded for Heisman Trophy winner Ernie Davis, who never played a down with Cleveland before dying from leukemia. Brown was criticized for his play-calling and a failure to communicate with the players. Whether you believe Paul Brown's side of the story, told in PB: The Paul Brown Story, or pro-Modell accounts, it is obvious that the two men could not coexist atop one football team. On January 9, 1963, Modell dismissed Brown as a coach and general manager. Brown's assistant, Blanton Collier, was named head coach. Fans awaited the day Brown would lead a new team against his old one.

Modell hastened that day by acting at the request of Governor James Rhodes to help the city of Cincinnati gain a pro football franchise. "I was the key to the city of Cincinnati getting the franchise and Paul Brown returning to football," Modell says today. "Jim Rhodes came to me and said he would like to get an NFL franchise for Cincinnati." Modell boosted a Cincinnati franchise with Brown in charge. Brown returned to football as coach, general manager and part owner of the Cincinnati Bengals, an American Football League expansion franchise born in 1968, following the merger agreement of the NFL and AFL.

Cleveland's last years in the old NFL were among the most eventful in the club's history. The Browns won the 1968 and 1969 NFL Eastern Conference championships with upset victories against the Dallas Cowboys, but lost NFL title games to the Baltimore Colts and Minnesota Vikings. Star wide receiver Paul Warfield was traded to Miami for the chance to draft quarterback Mike Phipps. In 1970, with the completed merger of the American and National Leagues, the Browns, Bengals, Pittsburgh Steelers and Houston Oilers formed the Central Division of the American Football Conference. As a bonus, the Browns and Bengals would meet in an exhibition game.

Exhibition or not, both coaches knew that game would be special. Brown said, "That will be the biggest day of my life." Cleveland coach Blanton Collier said, "I know we'll have to be ready for a great effort."

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Return with us to Saturday night, August 29, 1970, in Cincinnati. The game has all the elements of a classic, with Brown facing his old club for the first time. Under the popular Collier, Cleveland is 69-27-2. Only Don Shula's Colts had a better NFL regular season record from 1963 to 1969. The Bengals are a motley expansion team with just seven wins under its belt. The Browns feature seven All-NFL performers. Cincinnati's biggest star, quarterback Greg Cook, is out for the season with an injured shoulder. His placement is journeyman signal-caller Sam Wyche (now coach of the Bengals). For added spice, there is the still-hot rivalry between the AFL and the NFL. And, of course, the north-south conflict; the Browns representing Ohio's largest city, against its smaller, southern Ohio rival.

There is a play-off atmosphere for the game. Stouffer's Cincinnati Inn, the Browns' hotel, is decorated to the hilt, complete with a carpet resembling a football field and assistant managers dressed as referees.

The 57,112 screaming fans in attendance, including 900 who paid \$3.75 for standing-room-only tickets, have trouble telling the teams apart. Cincinnati's uniforms are almost carbon copies of Cleveland's; the biggest difference is the bold "BENGALS" inscribed on Cincinnati's helmets. The dapper, stern Brown looks no different than when he stood on Cleveland's sideline.

Framing the event is the spanking-new Riverfront Stadium. With its astroturf field and computerized scoreboard, Riverfront is the prototypical NFL stadium of the 1970s, a far cry from venerable Cleveland Municipal Stadium.

Pro Bowl quarterback Bill Nelsen leads the Cleveland offense. His 16-yard pass to wide receiver Fair Hooker puts the Browns in enemy territory. One play later, a blown defensive coverage leaves tight end Milt Morin open down the middle. Nelsen hits Morin with a 41 yard touchdown pass, the first score in the Browns-Bengals rivalry.

On Cleveland's next possession, two catches by Gary Collins and one by Hooker drive the Browns to the Bengals' one-yard line.

All-Pro running back Leroy Kelly goes over the left side into the end zone. Don Cockroft's second extra-point gives Cleveland a 14-0 first-quarter lead.

Content with his starters, Collier fields his younger players. Paul Brown stays with his regulars. Four completions by Wyche, including a 16-yarder to tight end Bob Trumpy, march the Bengals goalward. Running back Jess Phillips scores on a one-yard touchdown dive.

In his only play of the night, Phipps fumbles a handoff to Kelly. Cincinnati recovers at the Cleveland 22. One play later, Collier sends his starting defense back in, but the fired-up Bengals still capitalize with a game-tying touchdown.

Pressured by the blitzing Bengals, a Nelsen pass is intercepted by cornerback Ken Riley. Horst Mulmann gives Cincinnati a 17-14 halftime edge with a 42-yard field goal.

Opening the second half, the great Leroy Kelly cuts loose, rumbling across the astroturf to set up Cockroft's 39-yard, game-tying field goal. But Cleveland's momentum is short-lived. When Nelsen is pressured into a weak throw, defensive end Royce Berry intercepts and races 40 yards for the go-ahead touchdown. The animated Bengal tiger on the scoreboard roars approval of a 24-17 home team advantage.

Cincinnati's defense stymies the Cleveland running attack and continues to blitz Nelson. Late in the third quarter, Wyche engineers a 64-yard march. The 25-year old quarterback hits Trumpy twice, then nails Chip Myers with a six-yard touchdown pass.

Two touchdowns behind, the stunned Browns rally midway through the final quarter. Nelsen finally eludes the fierce Bengals rush, scrambling to connect with second-year wide receiver Dave Jones for 58 yards. He finds Kelly with a seven-yard touchdown pass. Cleveland regains possession with two minutes and 44 seconds to play. Near midfield, Nelsen's fourth-and-five toss to Chip Glass falls incomplete with 46 seconds left. The Bengals run out the clock.

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Accepting one game ball (Wyche got the other), Brown says, "Thank you. This is one ball I'll keep. I'll promise you that. It'll go in our trophy case." The Browns locker room is silent. Co-captain Jim Houston says, "We're disappointed we didn't win for Art. We knew how much he wanted to win."

Looking back 18 years later, Modell says, "We were not prepared for the AFL brand of football, the bump-and-run, the dependency on the passing game. I thought we would dominate the league throughout the '70s." In fact, the '70s was the worst decade in the history of the Browns.

The frustrating '70s have given way to the exciting '80s. The rivalry, dominated early on by Modell and Brown, now features coverboys Bernie Kosar and Boomer Esiason. The Browns have twice emerged from Riverfront Stadium with the AFC Central Division title. In 1980, the passing of Brian Sipe and Don Cockroft's clutch field goal gave the Browns a heart-stopping 27-24 victory over the last-place Bengals. In 1986, Cleveland and Cincinnati finally met in the game to decide the Division title. Kosar, Marty Schottenheimer and company engineered a brilliant 34-3 rout – Cleveland's sweetest win against its cross-state competition.