

PODUNK VERSUS GOTHAM:

THE 1946 BROWNS-YANKEES RIVALRY

by Jack Ziegler

In 1946 America had a new football league - the All-America Conference. In the Eastern division the New York Yankees dominated. In the West the Cleveland Browns emerged as the team to beat, though not without some stiff competition from the San Francisco 49ers and the Los Angeles Dons. A lively rivalry quickly developed between the two divisional champions due in large part to the personalities of their coaches, New York's Ray Flaherty and Cleveland's Paul Brown.

The Yankees with their uniforms of silver and blue and offices on Park Avenue were the blue chip franchise of the new league and Ray Flaherty was their blue chip coach. Flaherty's roots reached deep into pro football. He had played end with Red Grange's New York Yankees in 1927-28. In 1929 Flaherty moved to Steve Owen's New York Giants, becoming a playing coach in 1933 at age 29. In 1936 Flaherty became head coach of the Boston Redskins. In 1937, Flaherty coached the Redskins (now in Washington) to a league championship, a feat he duplicated in 1942. After Navy service in World War II, Flaherty assumed control of the Yankees. The AAC's most high-profile coach felt very good about his personnel: "I have the best material I've ever had, and that goes for the fine Washington teams."

The major power in the West would turn out to be the Cleveland Browns. or as Flaherty snidely referred to them, "a team from Podunk with a high school coach." At 38, only four years younger than Flaherty, Paul Brown seemed the antithesis of his opposite number. If Flaherty was Gotham, pro football in the 20's, an intimate of Grange, Owen, and Sammy Baugh. Paul Brown was the Midwest and amateur football. In 1946 Brown was renowned as a legendary high school coach at Massillon, Ohio, and for winning a national championship at Ohio State in 1942 (the same year Flaherty's Redskins beat the Bears, 14-6, for the pro title). The closest Brown ever came to coaching professionally were the 1944 and '45 service teams he coached at Great Lakes Naval Station. Many wondered how Brown, the self-proclaimed amateur, would fare in the big leagues, especially against Flaherty and the Yankees.

The first match up between the Yankees and the Browns took place in a rainy Municipal Stadium before some 54,000 fans. The Browns operated out of a T-formation with Otto Graham at QB., Marion Motley at FB, Edgar "Special Delivery" Jones at LHB, and Dante Lavelli and Mac Speedie at ends. Red Strader, a Yankee assistant coach, had devised a seven-man rush to stymie the 49er's T-formation attack in New York's opener. Flaherty hoped that Strader's innovation, plus his line's average 13 pound weight advantage, would prove too much for the Browns.

Though both teams were unbeaten at 3-0, a sloppy field betokened sloppy play. The rain and mud caused 15 turnovers, 10 by the Yankees. Two key Yankee turnovers occurred in the first quarter when New York TB Bob Kennedy was picked off twice. A Graham to Lavelli TD pass and a Don Greenwood two-yard TD plunge gave Cleveland an early 14-0 lead. Late in the first quarter, Yankee freshman sensation Orban "Spec" Sanders tossed a 14-yard TD pass to end Jack Russell to make it 14-7, Browns. The Yankee TD had been set up by their strong rush which caused Graham to fumble deep in Cleveland territory.

The 14-7 score remained static throughout the second and third quarters as both teams struggled in a sea of mud. The Browns pulled away in the fourth quarter on Lou Groza's field goal and Jones' 43-yard burst through a tiring Yankee line.

The regular season rematch took place almost two weeks later on Columbus Day at Yankee Stadium. Heavy rain made for slick footing, tricky ball handling, and a modest crowd of 34,000. While Flaherty's single-wing attack rolled up 237 yards to Cleveland's 67, the scoreboard told a different story. The Yankees' best scoring chance happened in the first quarter as Bob Kennedy and Spec Sanders tore off substantial gains. But the Yankees stalled on the Browns' 11, turning the ball over on downs.

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The game remained scoreless until the third period when Spec Sanders fumbled a Tommy Colella punt, Browns' guard Eddie Ulinski falling on it on the Yankee 33. Otto Graham went to Dante Lavelli on a stop-and-go pattern for six points, Lou Groza adding the PAT.

The fourth quarter became a study in Yankee frustration with Bob Perina and Sanders slipping on the wet Stadium grass as they tried to set up for long pass attempts. Late in the game, a tie seemed within reach as New York drove deep into Cleveland territory. But the afternoon ended disappointingly for the Yankees with Eddie Prokop throwing desperation passes from the Cleveland 16 as time expired.

The final 1946 Yankees-Browns game, this time for the AAC championship, took place in Cleveland on December 22. Ticket sales had proved sluggish, no doubt due to a snowstorm on the 20th as well as locals' memories of the frigid 1945 NFL championship between the Redskins and the now-departed Cleveland Rams. The Browns emerged as 14 point favorites and on paper seemed overwhelming. Their 12-2 record included a high-powered 423 points scored on offense and a miniscule 137 points allowed on defense.

The offense featured Otto Graham (17 TDP, 55% completion), who with Glenn Dobbs of Brooklyn, was considered the best passer in the league. Frequent targets for Graham were Mac Speedie (20-564-7 TD's) and Dante Lavelli (40-843-8 TD's). Cleveland's passing attack was nicely balanced by the running of Jones (77- 539-7.0 avg) and Marion Motley (73-601-8.2 avg).

The Yankees' main threat was Spec Sanders who led the league with 709 yards rushing and threw four TDP. An added burden for Cleveland would be dealing with future Hall of Fame tailback Ace Parker, who had missed both regular season games because of cracked vertebrae.

Game day arrived with almost Tahitian temperatures in the low thirties. an improvement over the 1945 ice-box game. The 40,000 fans who did show up (17,000 below the Browns' average hometown figures) bundled up in Army surplus scarves, parkas, and overshoes giving the game a quasi-military flavor (as everyone in the stands doubtlessly remembered. the Battle of the Bulge was ohly two years distant).

The Yankees drew first blood when hometown boy Eddie Prokop (of Cleveland's Cathedral Latin but now wearing Yankee blue) picked off a Graham pass and returned to the Browns 34. A Parker to Jack Russell pass moved the ball to the Cleveland 19. After a Sanders' end around to the seven, three more attempts proved futile and the Yankees had to settle for a Harvey Johnson field goal to take an early lead, 3-0.

The Browns answered quickly with what looked like an 82-yard touchdown pass from Graham to Jones. But Jones stepped out of bounds on Cleveland's 35, the play being called back to that point. Undaunted, Graham drove the Browns downfield to the Yankee three. But three downs netted no gain. On fourth down the New York pass rush smeared Grahan for a 13-yard loss. The Browns had blown a golden opportunity on a day when opportunities would prove few.

The Browns did go ahead right before half time. Graham, returning punts as well as playing defensive back in his first pro season, brought back a Parker punt to his own 30. He then completed seven straight passes to bring the ball to the Yankee 13. On two power plays, Marion Motley reached the end zone. Lou Groza kicked the extra point, and Cleveland led at the half, 7-3.

Halftime festivities featured George Bud's Musical Majorettes. A real crowd-pleaser was the Majorettes' long-legged rendition of "Santa Claus is Coming to Town" with Kris Kringle played by Browns' mascot, "small person" Tommy Flynn. A more serious moment occurred when the Majorettes sang "White Christmas." They were quickly joined by the crowd, who just two years after the Battle of the Bulge, were thankful to be celebrating Christmas in Cleveland and not Bastogne, St. Vith, or Clervaux.

Early in the third quarter, it appeared that the Browns would score when Cleveland defensive end John Yonakor recovered a Parker fumble on New York's 36. However, in three tries the Browns could only move the ball to the thirty where Groza's field goal attempt sailed wide (Groza, hampered by a sprained left ankle, would miss three attempts on the afternoon).

Starting from their own 20, the Yankees moved to their second score. Sparking the drive were three Parker to Russell passes totaling 40 yards. Sanders scored on a two-yard plunge but Harvey Johnson missed the "automatic" extra point, his first miss in 37 tries. The Yankees led the Browns, 9-7.

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The Browns looked like they might answer quickly when fleet Marion Motley broke into the clear in the Yankee secondary. But fleeter Eddie Prokop pulled Motley down from behind, turning a sure TD into a 51-yard gain. The end result was no score -- stalled on the Yankee 12, the Browns sent in Groza, who missed a field goal.

As the fourth quarter ticked down, it appeared the Yankees might win. But a Jones shoetop grab of a Graham pass on third and long gave Cleveland a first down on New York's 42. Jones and Colella carried Cleveland toward pay dirt with the fatal blow a well-threaded Graham to Lavelli TD pass between defenders Sanders and Russell. Groza's point after made it 14-9 with just under five minutes to go.

The Yankees did not roll over. On the kickoff, Sanders almost shook free, only being brought down on the Browns' 46. Shortly thereafter though, Graham intercepted Parker's pass to kill the last Yankee hope. The Browns had swept the Yankees three games in a row, picking up the AAC championship along the way.

As the first season went, so did the two franchises and coaches. Cleveland dominated the AAC, and later the Eastern Division of the NFL in the 1950's. Cleveland's coach, boy-wonder Paul Brown, earned a reputation as the consummate professional, perhaps the best professional football coach of all time. The Yankees and Ray Flaherty moved in another direction. The Yankees, though usually playing the Browns tough, could never beat them (the closest they came was a 28-28 tie in 1947). After posting 10-3-1 and 11-2-1 records in their first two years, the Yankees unraveled to 6-8 in 1948, costing Flaherty his job. Flaherty came back in 1949 to coach the league's shakiest franchise, the Chicago Hornets. But when the AAFC hung it up in 1949, so did Flaherty, retiring from pro football to take up business interests in Spokane.

Sunday, December 22, 1946, at Cleveland

NEW YORK YANKEES		CLEVELAND BROWNS	
Jack Russell	LE	Mac Speedie	
Bruiser Kinard	LT	Ernie Blandin	
John Baldwin	LG	Ed Ulinski	
Tom Robertson	C	Mike Scarry	
Chuck Riffle	RG	Lin Houston	
Nate Johnson	RT	Lou Rymkus	
Bruce Alford	RE	Dante Lavelli	
Lloyd Cheatham	QB	Otto Graham	
Spec Sanders	LH	Edgar Jones	
Lowell Wagner	RH	Don Greenwood	
Eddie Prokop	FB	Marion Motley	

New York Yankees	3	0	6	0	-	9
Cleveland Browns	0	7	0	7	-	14

TDS - Motley, Lavelli, Sanders

PAT - Groza 2

FG - H.Johnson

SUBSTITUTIONS:

NEW YORK: Ends - Bob Masterson, Perry Schwartz, Harry Burrus, Mel Conger; Tackles - Roman Bentz, Darrell Palmer, Roman Piskor; Guard - Mike Karazin; Center - Lou Sossamon; Backs - Harvey Johnson, Pug Manders, Ace Parker, Bob Morrow, Dewey Proctor, Bob Sweiger, Bob Perina. CLEVELAND: Ends - George Young, John Yonaker, John Harrington; Tackles - Len Simonetti, Chet Adams; Guard - Bill Willis; Center - Frank Gatski; Back - Cliff Lewis, Tom Colella, Lou Saban, Gene Fekete, Gaylon Smith, Ray Terrell, Lou Groza.

OFFICIALS:

Referee - Thomas Timlin. Umpire - Ernest (Tommy) Hughitt. Field Judge - Earl Gross. Head Linesman - Lou Goedon. Sideline Judge - Hal Slutz.

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FINANCIAL SUMMARY AAFC CHAMPIONSHIP GAME

Attendance, actual	40,469
Attendance, paid	41,181
Gross receipts	\$171,163.91
Taxesm rental, etc.	\$63,035.69
Net receipts	\$108,125.22
Player Pool (70% of net)	\$75,689.75
Finalists Pool (80% of Player Pool)	\$60,551.82
Winning Team (60% of Finalists Pool)	\$36,331.12
Losing Team (40% of Finalists Pool)	\$24,220.70
Each Brown Player's Share	\$931.57
Each Yankee Player's Share	\$845.88
San Francisco (2nd West) Pool	\$7,568.97
Brooklyn/Buffalo 2nd East)Pool	\$3,784.48
Conference Offices	\$5,406.41
Cleveland and New York Clubs	\$13,516.03