It's been a rough go of things for the Browns against the Steelers for the last 15-20 years. But that's not the way things used to be. Or the way things ought to be. Unbeknownst to many younger Browns fans, the orange and brown DOMINATED the Steelers through the fifties and sixties, and it wasn't until 2006 that the Steelers finally knotted the series at fifty-five wins apiece. A FANTASTIC column from Jesse Lamovsky.

The Browns and the Steelers met for the first time on Saturday night, October 7, 1950 at Forbes Field in Pittsburgh. It was Week Four of the 1950 season, Cleveland's first in the NFL, and the Browns, fresh off basically dominating the All-American Football Conference to death, had already put their new lodge brothers on notice with a 35-10 opening-night thrashing of the two-time defending NFL Champion Eagles. The Steelers, still without a title of any kind in their eighteenth year in the NFL, were struggling offensively (as usual) and off to a slow start (also as usual).

A sellout crowd of over 35,000 watched the home team take an early 3-0 lead before the Browns rattled off 23 unanswered points and cruised to a 30-17 victory. Otto Graham scored the first-ever Cleveland touchdown on a Pittsburgh defense with a one-yard plunge in the first quarter, and Dub Jones followed with a pair of scores to break the game open. Three weeks later, 40,714 at the Lakefront watched the Browns complete the season sweep with a 45-7 runaway, displaying their big-play offense in the form of three long touchdown passes by Graham and a 69-yard scoring run by Marion Motley. Cleveland went 10-2 and won its first NFL Championship that December. Pittsburgh finished 6-6, which back then was pretty good by their standards.

The initial tone had been set, and would stay set, for two full decades.

Cleveland beat the Steelers eight straight times to open the series, still a record (albeit one Pittsburgh has designs on tying September 9). Occasionally the games were close (a pair of one-point thrillers in 1952) occasionally they were not (a pair of shutouts in 1951), but the results were invariably the same. Pittsburgh didn't beat Cleveland for the first time until a 55-27 bombing in Week Four of the ‘54 season, a cathartic rout promptly followed by four more Cleveland victories in succession.

Like Eric Stratton, Rush Chairman, the Cleveland Browns were damn glad to meet the Pittsburgh Steelers.

The competitive gap narrowed somewhat during the late Paul Brown era of the late ‘50s and early 60's, as the Browns weren't the dominant force of the Otto Graham days, and the Steelers, under Raymond "Buddy" Parker, were enjoying a veritable renaissance of mediocrity. But by the late ‘60s, the gap was again a yawning chasm- while the Blanton Collier Browns put on one of the last bursts of true title contention in franchise history, the Steelers suffered through perhaps their darkest period ever, going 14-53-3 in the last five years of the decade.

For twenty years, it was the Browns on top, and the Steelers on bottom. The Browns were the team that found can't-miss stars and low-round sleepers in the draft; the Steelers were the team that squandered their picks and, on a couple of occasions, lost their first-round selection to the American Football League. It was the Browns that expected to play for a World Championship every season, while the "culture of losing" had seeped into the soul of the yellow-and-black nation like pollutants into the Monongahela. The Browns were a sleek, streamlined corporation; the Steelers were a cut-race grocery operation. It was natural. It was right. It was truly, The Way Things Ought to Be.

From the 1950 season, Cleveland's first in the NFL, through the 1969 season, the last before the merger that sent both clubs to the AFC:

- Cleveland's record against Pittsburgh stood at thirty-two wins and eight losses.
- Pittsburgh swept Cleveland once, in 1959. Cleveland swept Pittsburgh eleven times.
- Pittsburgh finished ahead of Cleveland in the standings once, in 1962, when the Steelers went 9-5 (a franchise record for wins at that point), and the Browns, in the turmoil of Paul Brown's last season, went 7-6-1. Cleveland still swept the series that year, routing the Steelers by 27 and 21 points. The teams finished tied in the standings once, in 1956 (resulting in the pre-draft coin flip that spared the Browns the indignity of passing on Jim Brown).
- Cleveland had winning streaks of eight (1950-54), and six (1967-69) against the Steelers. Pittsburgh's longest winning streak against the Browns was two, twice (1959 and 1963-64).
- Between 1950 and 1971, Cleveland played in sixteen postseason games, including ten NFL Championship Games, and won four NFL titles. Pittsburgh didn't play in a single postseason game, unless you count their loss to the Lions in the 1962 Playoff Bowl (and the records don't.)
- Cleveland had one losing season out of twenty- in 1956, when they went 5-7- and nineteen winning seasons. Pittsburgh had four winning seasons, two .500 seasons, and thirteen losing seasons out of twenty.

The models for the Browns and Steelers were their respective patriarchs. Paul Brown's persona- cold, efficient, precise- became that of his organization. Like the Bill Walsh 49ers (their spiritual descendents), the Browns of the ‘50s didn't bludgeon their opponents as much as they surgically dissected them with finesse and flair. The coach cultivated a team image of crisp professionalism; his players wore jackets and ties on the road, and he was fond of calling them "the Yankees of pro football." Any behavior detrimental to the team was punished swiftly and severely. Terry Pluto, in his book *Browns Town 1964*, described the coach unceremoniously releasing a team captain who had committed a drunk-driving offense the day before.

It was a looser ship in Pittsburgh. The cigar-chewing Art Rooney, legendary for winning his fortune in one day at the track (allegedly), was a civic grandfather in Steel City with a grand-dad's soft spot to his

character, a fondness for the underdog that all too often led to his team being the underdog on Sundays. The Steelers in those days were a halfway house for the unwanted and unlamented of the NFL; like Al Davis's old-school Raiders, without the success. In an unconscious nod to the Chief's youth as a boxer, the Steelers were known for, if nothing else, being one of the most physically rugged teams in the league year-in and year-out. Teams that beat Pittsburgh on the scoreboard with ease on Sunday afternoon found getting out of bed on Monday morning a good deal more problematic.

The teams' offensive philosophies marked a contrast between the modern and the archaic. In Cleveland, Paul Brown, the man who moved football into the classroom, was introducing baffled defenses to the prototype of the misnamed West Coast Offense and revolutionizing the passing game in pro football. Meanwhile, like men stubbornly gripping their blunderbusses in the face of rifled musket fire, Pittsburgh still trotted out the wizened Single-Wing formation, a relic from the pre-historic days of football. The Steelers wouldn't adopt a modern T formation-based offense until 1952 , long after every other NFL team had done so.

Aside from the presence of Mr. Rooney himself, the Steelers, organizationally, were as unstable as South American politics. Coaches changed- seven in twenty years- as did philosophies. Youth movements were started and shelved in favor of "win now" approaches that rarely resulted in much winning. Some good players were lost in the shuffle, most notably John Unitas and Len Dawson, who were drafted within three seasons of one another and threw a total of seventeen passes for the Steelers. Unitas was cut in the preseason of 1955 by Coach Walt Keisling. Two years later, Keisling passed on Jim Brown, drafted Dawson fourth overall, then was fired a few months later

and replaced by Raymond "Buddy" Parker, who buried Dawson on the bench behind his imported veteran, the great Bobby Layne. Even Jack Kemp came and went as a reserve at one point. But failure was the constant.

Stark testimony to the extent of Cleveland's dominance in those days: the Steelers knotted the series at fifty-five wins apiece in the second meeting of the 2006 season. Despite the five Super Bowl victories, despite the Steel Curtain, despite Swann and Stallworth, Franco, the Bus, and the Sixty Minute Men; despite Mike Phipps and Paul McDonald, despite the 3-13's, and the 5-11's, despite expansion, despite the fact that the Browns haven't finished ahead of the Steelers in the standings since 1989, despite all of the glories of the Steelers and the miseries of the Browns, it has still taken Pittsburgh thirty-four seasons to crawl out of a hole Cleveland dug in twenty.