Recently overheard from the tipsy uncle at the NE Ohio family holiday dinner, where Uncle Tipski takes some time each year to school the children on their Cleveland sports heritage...

Uncle Tipski: Gather ‘round, kids, I am going to tell you a story about the Cleveland Browns from a long, long time ago. Little Billy, go and fetch me another beer, would ya?

Wait- first, pull my finger-- attaboy. Now go on!

Johnny: But Uncle Tipski, nobody likes the Browns.

Uncle Tipski: Now, I understand that it's kinda hard to go to school and be a Browns fan when your friends are wearing Steelers jerseys. You know, back when the Browns were the best football team in the world, the Steelers were the worst. This is just part of the cycle of life, Jimmy.

Johnny: Johnny.

Uncle Tipski: Name is Uncle Tipski, son. Like I tell your mother, we need to get together more often (produces his old box of Ohio Blue Tips and begins the process of lighting his cigar).

Now, you've all heard about the late 1980s, when the Browns were one of the best teams around. They had their troubles against the Denver Broncos, but there was a whole lot of excitement around here for Browns football. They say that in New York City, the Yankees are treated like royalty. That's not what it's like here. It's better. In Cleveland, the Browns are family and that was especially true then. These were the Browns of Bernie, The Wizard of Oz, and Webstar; Top Dawg and Mighty Minnie; The Cube. Family.

1987 was the year that Earnest Byner fumbled in the playoffs. But the Browns had a good season that year, and he was a huge reason for that.

Earlier that season, there were other, lesser known players who also contributed to their 10-5 record. Players like Keith Bosley, Larry Mason and Perry Kemp. See, there was a player's strike that year, and replacement players took their place for three games. The Browns were 1-1 when the strike hit. Their replacements went 2-1, which mattered a lot because those games counted.

A lot of replacement teams were terrible. Many players were out of shape or not very good. People had various nicknames for the teams, like the "Seattle Sea-Scabs" and the "San Francisco Phoney Niners". But the networks aired the games, and people watched.

The Browns' first replacement game was at New England. The Browns' replacements had only 10 days to prepare, and they beat the Patriots 20-10. The game was sloppy, with bad snaps and other errors that a lot of people laughed at. But the effort was there, and running back Larry Mason gained over 100 yards and scored two touchdowns. Coach Marty gushed over the team afterwards, through the fog of smoke from the victory cigars the replacements were smoking.

Back in Cleveland the next week, the Browns played the Houston Oilers. The Oilers hadn't won

in Cleveland since 1981, but their replacements were better than the Browns' replacements. I heard that some of the striking Browns players drove their cars in front of the ‘scab' bus at 3 miles an hour, just to mess with them and delay their arrival. Playing in a mud pit in front of almost 40,000 fans, the Oilers won, 15-10. Jeff Christianson was the quarterback, and had his second awful game- the crowd knew that the backup quarterback's name was Homer Jordan and started chanting, "HO-mer. HO-mer." Offensive tackle Keith Bosley was becoming a fan favorite (part of the family- someone even displayed a "Wizard of Boz" banner), due mostly to his 6-5, 320lb body. He was huge, especially for the ‘80s- his shoulder pads looked tiny compared to his massive, um, waistline. But he had a costly penalty at one point, putting a hit on someone after the whistle at a crucial point of the game. While the Browns replacements lost, they gained an appreciation for the intensity of the Cleveland fans. Us.

Bosley was an easy target for the TV announcers. Bob Trumpy said he had his own zip code and actually laughed when two trainers tried to help him off the field when he hurt his ankle. Don Criqui said that when Bosley sits down at the training table, he eats like he's going to "the chair." Criqui also said they didn't have Bosley's time in the 40 yard dash because he'd never gone that far. By the way, Keith Bosley did stick for a short time with Tampa Bay after the strike, in 1988.

Come to think of it, Keith Bosley had a similar figure to your Aunt Gertie (HAAAAAAA!).

She'd probably hold her own in a replacement football game, too. Let's be honest, she‘s kicked my butt before! HA! See kids, I can say these things because we're family. Now, if one of your cousins from the other side of the family in Steeler-rootin' Youngstown said that, it would be OK to punch him in the nose. In fact, I think it's a "rule."

(Regaining focus while taking several long drags on the cigar)

So anyway, now the Browns were 2-2 on the season. There were reports that the strike was close to coming to an end. Some of the regular Browns players returned to the team to help get a win and ensure that they'd be set up for the playoff push. Offensive tackles Rickey Bolden and Cody Risien came back. So did defensive end Sam Clancy and kicker Jeff Jaeger. The most noteworthy players returning were quarterback Gary Danielson (Kosar's backup) and receiver Brian Brennan.

This third replacement game was in Cincinnati. I was at that game. Again, there were about 40,000 fans there, but more than half of them had Browns gear on. The barking thing was fresh then, and you heard it everywhere at that game. In the line for refreshments, you'd see a guy with the hat with the dog ears. A guy who looked like he had a bone sticking through his head. The young girls with the dog-bone earrings.

Just a festive atmosphere in Cleveland's backyard.

Well, nobody could stop Danielson and Brennan. They hooked up at will, and it was a nice, enjoyable, relaxing afternoon in the sun for us fans. The Browns won, 34-0. Later, I heard that GM Ernie Accorsi mentioned that in the locker room after the game, there was a huge celebration. The players were hugging each other, taking pictures. Marty gave a speech, saying how proud he was of them. Now, I don't know if he told them there was a "gleam", but you know Marty- it wouldn't have surprised me.

The Browns went to the playoffs in 1987. And they had the "scabs" to thank, to some extent. The replacements weren't very good, but they gave an effort that some of the recent Browns teams could learn a lesson from.

That's all for this time, kids. Go run around some more- it's good for you to be away from the TV- although I fear it is getting close to bedtime. What time do you go to bed, anyway?

Suzie: 9, 8 Central.

Uncle Tipski: Right...

Now, where is that Billy, with my beer?

Thank you for reading.

Danielson is in the photo at top. Below are Danielson and Brennan.

Anyone have any photos of the Browns replacement players? GP

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