Hard as it may seem to believe, it's been 30 years since the Kardiac Kids lit up Cleveland like a roman candle and captured the city's heart by swashbuckling to the top of the toughest division in football with a style and panache we haven't seen in the three subsequent decades.

For as exciting and as memorable as the 1980 season was, there was no inkling then that it would be so revered all these years later. Of course, most subsequent Browns teams have cooperated by showcasing brands of football that make cleaning out gutters look like fun. Plus, living through the morbid experiences of Paul McDonald and Spergon Wynn playing quarterback has only underlined the amazing abilities of Brian Sipe and the offense he masterfully choreographed like a symphony orchestra.

But before things got lyrical, 1980 started off a bit rough for the good guys in orange hats. Thirty years ago this week, Sam Rutigliano's Browns opened a season of mild expectations with a stern test. Their soft-as-a-Twinkie defense would be matched with one of its toughest challenges of the season right off the rip: quarterback Steve Grogan and the high-flying offense of the New England Patriots.

Right away, we would see if the Browns defense, now led by a bespectacled young coordinator named Marty Schottenheimer, and its switch to the 3-4 alignment would be any better in 1980, or if it would continue to weigh down the lethal Cleveland offense. Ranked 24th out of 28 teams in total yardage allowed the year before, the defense was the team's obvious Achilles' heel. "This is the worst defense in Browns' history," Dan Coughlin wrote in the *Plain Dealer*. "Anytime the Browns score 40 points or more, they have less than a 50-50 chance of winning."

True enough, the ’79 Browns – who’d acquired the nickname “Kardiac Kids” for their ability to win close games and send hearts racing – were entertaining primarily because leads were rarely held and the offense was often put in a position to have to score late to steal a victory. While this may have resulted in some exciting football, it wasn’t leading to the playoffs – a magical kingdom the Browns hadn’t visited in eight long years.

And with no defense to speak of, the Browns couldn’t hope to compete in the street-tough AFC Central Division – home to the thuggish Pittsburgh Steelers, winners of four of the previous six Super Bowls – and their paisley-blue caporegime, the Houston Oilers. Surviving those four games each year was like living through *The Amityville Horror*.

Adding insult to injury, with the beleaguered Cleveland defense on the brink of being cared for by the state due to neglect, members of the front office looked like donkeys when they swung a key but seemingly unnecessary trade the week before the first game. Rather than attempting to fortify an admittedly weak defense, Art Modell and Co. set out to strengthen what was perhaps already the strong suit of the entire team when they traded for Buffalo’s All-Pro offensive guard Joe DeLamielleure. Not only had the Browns’ brain trust ignored the team’s greatest weakness as if whistling past a graveyard on a foggy night, it also now threatened to blow up the camaraderie and chemistry of its potent offensive line.

Things would only get worse. By a half-hour into the opener, the Browns’ 1980 season was already an Irwin Allen disaster movie.

The Patriots held the ball for eleven of the first fifteen minutes of the game and throughout the first half controlled the Browns like a sickly calf at a rodeo. Yet with guile and a little good luck, the Browns – donned in their orange pants and mesh brown jerseys on a hot, sunny day in Foxboro – only trailed 13-3 at the half. But in the third quarter, things got silly fast. The Browns fumbled on their first possession and Grogan hit Stanley Morgan for a long touchdown pass to make it 20-3. By early in the fourth quarter, it was 34-3 and embarrassing for everyone.

Brian Sipe and Co. scored a pair of meaningless late touchdowns to make the final more respectable. Yet fans could still sense the buzzards circling over their beloved Browns, who

hadn't lost a season opener in five years. The defense looked as miserable as advertised, allowing 452 total yards, nearly twice that gathered by Cleveland's offense – which, as it happened, hadn't looked nearly as sharp as it had the year before.

If they got ripped apart like this by the talented-but-tame Patriots, what would the monstrous Steelers and Oilers do to them in the coming weeks? The prospect sent a shudder down the spines of Browns fans.

"I just hope that you guys, the media and the fans of northern Ohio, hang in there with us, have faith in us," Lyle Alzado said afterward in the face of impending doom, "because we're going to be all right."

With Bum Phillips' Oilers – the second-best team in football – waiting for them in a Monday-night encounter eight days later, things looked far from "all right" in that first week of September, 1980.