In the new "Yesteryear" feature, Jesse Lamovsky takes a look at a previous meeting between the Browns and their next opponent. Today we go back to 1989, when the Browns visited old Tampa Stadium to take on the Buccaneers.

Vinny Testaverde, Eric Metcalf and a ball-hawking defense combined to lead the Browns to a win.

This could have been a description of any one of a number of games from the 1994 season, when Testaverde was Cleveland's quarterback, Metcalf its explosive runner-receiver-return man and its defense among the stingiest of the 16-game era. But in this case, it describes a game from the 1989 season, when Metcalf was a sensational rookie, the defense was Bud Carson's blitzing, playmaking creation… and Vinny, alas, was the quarterback of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

Bud Carson's inaugural season as head coach of the Browns was only eight games old, but it already had been packed with some of the highest highs- and lowest lows- in recent franchise history. Cleveland got off to its first 2-0 start since 1979, opening the season with the historic 51-0 rout of the Steelers in Three Rivers Stadium. The Browns had also finally put one over on the Broncos, beating Elway and Co. on a Matt Bahr field goal at the gun. Interspersed among these days of glory were a sporadic offense and one of the ugliest losses in years- a 17-7 home defeat to those same Steelers in which Cleveland committed seven turnovers. The Browns were 5-3, tied with Cincinnati for first place in the AFC Central- but the ride to the top had hardly been a baby-smooth one.

Browns fans may have been confused by the inconsistencies of their team, but there was no confusion regarding the promise of its first-round draft pick. Rookie tailback Eric Metcalf had been sensational thus far, running for three touchdowns, catching two more, averaging over 26 yards per kick return and even throwing a touchdown pass in a victory over the Oilers the week prior to the Tampa Bay game. The son of former St. Louis Cardinal star, Terry Metcalf, Eric had already made the signature move of his career- the darting, dodging fake-out of two Bengals in a Monday Night game at Riverfront Stadium- and was already being called the most exciting playmaker the town had seen since the heyday of Greg Pruitt.

The Tampa Bay Buccaneers were not quite as scintillating; indeed, they were well on their way to their seventh consecutive losing season in a streak that eventually reached fourteen years. After starting out 3-2 the Bucs had reverted to form with three straight losses, including a 56-23 massacre at the hands of the Bengals the week prior to the Cleveland meeting. Much of the blame for the swoon lay on the defense, which had been scorched for 482 yards by Cincinnati and had coughed up at least 350 yards in each of the previous five games.

There *was* some rare optimism in Tampa, however, mainly due to the improvement of Vinny Testaverde. In 1988 Vinny had suffered through one of the worst seasons in the history of modern quarterback play: 13 touchdown passes, 35 interceptions (the second most in NFL history), a 47.6 completion percentage and a pathetic 48.8 rating. But thus far the '89 Testaverde looked like considerably better than his shabby '88 personification. Going into the Cleveland game the third-year man owned a solid TD-to-INT ratio of 12-10 and had developed a couple of excellent targets in wide receivers Bruce Hill and Pro Bowler Mark Carrier. Vinny still wasn't completing fifty percent of his attempts, but he wasn't throwing the ball to the other team at a historic pace, and that in itself was progress.

Even against this sad-sack opponent the Browns had no margin for error. Only a game separated the four members of the tightly packed AFC Central and a slipup in the Big Sombrero might be fatal to Cleveland's division-title hopes. Moreover, the Browns would have a difficult test next week in the Seattle Kingdome, a house of horrors for them ever since the Seahawks entered the league along with the Buccaneers in 1976. The Buccaneers were bad, but the Browns weren't good enough to take them lightly.

The sun-splashed 70-degree weather and stark roofless outline of Tampa Stadium was pure Gulf Coast as the teams met on November 5, 1989; but the crowd had a heavy North Coast flavor. Entire sections of the Big Sombrero were occupied by woofing, bone-waving Cleveland fans. This was not a strange phenomenon in the salad days of the late '80s; whenever the Browns played in Sun Belt locations like Tampa, Miami, San Diego and Los Angeles there was always a heavy Cleveland presence.

But those Browns fans didn't have much to cheer about as the game opened. Tampa Bay started fast, driving eighty yards on the opening possession and taking a 7-0 lead on Lars Tate's one-yard touchdown plunge. Cleveland responded immediately with its own eighty-yard drive, capped off by Metcalf's first spectacular play of the afternoon. Taking a swing pass from Bernie Kosar, the speedy rookie dashed down the far sideline, cut right, left three Buccaneers grasping at air, and danced into the end zone to complete the 24-yard scoring play. Just like that it was tied, 7-7.

In the second period Vinny Testaverde, so careful with the football thus far in '89, reverted to his old freehanded ways. A Frank Minnifield interception set up the Browns deep in Tampa Bay territory, and they capitalized on Kosar's scoring strike to rookie Lawyer Tillman to take a 14-7 lead. On Tampa's next possession Testaverde had his pass tipped by Mike Johnson and picked off by Felix Wright, who weaved 27 yards through the Buccaneers for a touchdown. Moments later Testaverde threw another interception, this time to Thane Gash, and Gash's 15-yard scoring return made it 28-7. It had taken mere moments for the Browns to turn a tie score into a three-touchdown bulge.

After a Testaverde-to-James Wilder touchdown cut the margin to fourteen, Metcalf was at it again. His 25-yard kickoff-return jumpstarted a seventy-yard touchdown drive, one he contributed to with a 15-yard scamper off a screen pass. At halftime the Browns led, 35-17, and seemed to have things well in hand.

As it turned out they did not. When he wasn't throwing the ball to the opposition, Vinny had Tampa's offense moving crisply through the vaunted Cleveland defense. The Buccaneers would outgain the Browns on the day, 398-271, and in the third quarter Testaverde again hit James Wilder with a scoring pass to make it 35-24. With an entire quarter left to play it seemed as if Tampa Bay would have more than enough time to complete the comeback and spring the upset.

At this point Eric Metcalf again stepped neatly onto the main stage. With the Browns facing 2nd-and-8 at the Tampa Bay 43 as the fourth quarter began, Bernie Kosar handed the ball to Metcalf around left end. Freezing the backside linebacker with a feigned reverse to Reggie Langhorne, Metcalf rounded the corner, got a nice block from Ozzie Newsome, and was in the clear. After sidestepping a would-be tackler Metcalf cut back to the right, left cornerback Ricky Reynolds standing there and raced all the way across the field to the end zone. Metcalf's second spectacular touchdown made it 42-24 Browns, and from there Cleveland hung on for a 42-31 victory.

Young Eric Metcalf had enjoyed one of his best days as a pro. He carried 17 times for 87 yards and a touchdown, caught seven passes for 52 yards and another touchdown and amassed 94 yards on three kickoff returns for a total of 233 all-purpose yards. The attacking defense forced four turnovers, turning three of them into Cleveland touchdowns. As for Vinny, he was 27-of-50 for 370 yards and two touchdowns- but he threw four interceptions, which proved fatal to Tampa Bay's cause. Five years later a matured Testaverde, along with his favorite receiver Mark Carrier, would help lead Cleveland to its last playoff victory to date.