The Cleveland Browns and Kansas City Chiefs don't play that often, but when they do it's usually memorable. Of the twenty-one meetings between the teams, twelve have been decided by a touchdown or less, two have gone to overtime and two have ended in ties; indeed, the last two ties in Browns franchise history- in 1973 and 1989- have come against Kansas City. But no Browns-Chiefs game contained more action, drama and just plain weirdness than the 2002 opener in Cleveland Browns Stadium.

Not a lot in the way of positives was expected out of 2002, Butch Davis's second season in Cleveland. One thing that *was* expected was an anemic offense. The Browns had finished dead last in the NFL in total offense in each of their first three seasons since the Return. What's more, starting quarterback Tim Couch would miss the first two games of 2002 while recovering from an elbow injury. Backup Kelly Holcomb, who had spent most of his career as an understudy to Peyton Manning in Indianapolis, would start in Couch's stead.

Offense wasn't expected to be a problem for the Chiefs in this, Dick Vermeil's second season at the helm. Powered by quarterback Trent Green, sensational running back Priest Holmes, tight end *extraordinaire* Tony Gonzalez and a magnificent line, the Kansas City attack looked like one of the best in football going into 2002. The problem in western Missouri was a ragged defense. Kansas City had finished 23rd in the NFL in total defense in 2001 and had lost its best player, linebacker Donnie Edwards, to free agency. It would be the easily resistible force of Cleveland's offense against the easily movable object of Kansas City's defense to start 2002.

Kelly Holcomb had thrown a total of 85 career passes going into the hot, sunny afternoon of September 8, 2002. The 29-year old from Middle Tennessee State was an unknown commodity, and he didn't exactly set the minds of Browns fans at ease as this game opened. After a Daylon McCutcheon interception set Cleveland up at the Kansas City six Holcomb threw a pair of incomplete passes, forcing the Browns to settle for a Phil Dawson chip shot and a 3-0 lead. The Chiefs set the tone on their next drive, rolling 73 yards on eight plays and taking a 7-3 lead on Trent Green's strike to Tony Gonzalez, who ran over Corey Fuller on his way to the end zone. The Brown came right back with a 55-yard drive, with Dawson's field goal making it 7-6 at the end of the first period.

Holcomb suddenly found his groove early in the second quarter. After taking the ball at his own 35-yard line the backup needed two passes- a 22-yarder to Kevin Johnson and a 43-yard scoring bomb to Dennis Northcutt- to stake the Browns to a 13-7 lead. Back came the Chiefs, 83 yards in six plays, with Holmes scooting around left hand to make it 14-13, Kansas City. Forget that lead; Cleveland stormed 71 yards in five plays, finishing the drive on Kevin Johnson's 33-yard reverse pass to a wide-open Quincy Morgan, and the Browns now led, 20-14. That made it three touchdowns in about six-and-a-half minutes- and the shootout was on.

Cleveland got the ball to start the second half, and Kelly Holcomb proved that the halftime intermission hadn't cooled him off in the slightest. He completed five consecutive passes and seven of nine on a grinding 14-play, 80-yard drive and finished the march with his third touchdown pass of the day, a four-yarder to rookie Andre Davis, to make it 27-14 with 7:09 left in the period. Kansas City responded with a 33-yard Morton Anderson field goal and trailed by ten, 27-17, as the fourth quarter began.

Early in the period Cleveland looked as if it would put this one away, driving to a first down at the Kansas City 22. But there the drive died, and Phil Dawson's third field goal made it 30-17 with 11:59 to play. Despite being outplayed the Chiefs still trailed by just two scores. They would make up that deficit in a hurry, thanks mainly to Priest Holmes. First the star back completed a 56-yard drive by rumbling 26 yards for a touchdown on a draw play, breaking four tackles on his way to the house. After a Holcomb fumble, Holmes blasted through a huge hole and romped 15 yards for his second touchdown in less than a minute, giving Kansas City a 31-30 lead with 8:12 left.

Holcomb wasted no time atoning for his blunder. Four completions by the erstwhile backup

accounted for all of the 66 yards it took for Cleveland to regain the lead. Holcomb's 44-yard bomb to Quincy Morgan made it 36-31, Browns, with 6:01 left. Unimpressed, Kansas City struck right back, racing 74 yards in six plays and taking a 37-36 lead on Holmes's third touchdown in six minutes, a seven-yard run off right tackle. There was 3:11 to play.

Needing only a field goal to get back out in front, Cleveland went ahead and got just that. Once again Holcomb was the man of the moment, completing his first three passes for 37 yards to put the Browns into Phil Dawson's range. Dawson's 41-yard field goal, his fourth of the game, made it 39-37, Cleveland, with just 29 seconds left. It looked as if the Browns, and their newfound offensive juggernaut, were on their way to the franchise's first win in an opener since the Return.

At this point the dominos began to fall- and they fell Kansas City's way. Holder Chris Gardocki was flagged for a 15-yard unsportsmanlike penalty for taunting the Chiefs after the field goal. Dawson had to kick off from his own 15, and Dante Hall's 19-yard return set up Kansas City in solid field position, at its own 35 with 21 seconds left. Like Cleveland moments earlier, the Chiefs only needed a field goal to retake the lead.

The slow-footed Trent Green got Kansas City's last gasp going with a 12-yard scramble to the 47-yard line, and quickly spiked the ball to stop the clock with four seconds left. Forget the field goal: the only option remaining for the Chiefs was the Hail Mary. Green faded back, waited for his receivers to flood the end zone, and then was rushed by late-blitzing Cleveland linebacker Dwayne Rudd. Rudd grabbed Green and spun him toward the ground, where he disappeared under Rudd and defensive end Mark Word. It looked like a sack, and with all zeros on the clock, it looked like a Cleveland victory.

But wait! From the pile came the ball, spinning up, out and backwards right into the hands of John Tait. On his way down Green had chucked a lateral to the first man in a red jersey he saw, which happened to be his 315-pound right tackle. But Tait knew what to do with the unexpected gift. With a ready-made wall wiping out Cleveland defenders in front of him the big man rumbled down the far sideline. For a moment horrified Browns fans saw their victory slipping away on the unlikely legs of an offensive lineman. Then they drew a sigh of relief as Tait ran out of real estate and was shoved out of bounds by Devin Bush at the Cleveland 25-yard line. *Now* the game was over.

Only it wasn't. A yellow penalty flag lay on the midfield grass. Believing Green to be sacked and

never seeing Tait running with the ball, Dwayne Rudd had torn his helmet off and fired it fifteen yards back toward the other end zone, incurring an automatic unsportsmanlike penalty for removing his bonnet before the whistle. A game cannot end on a defensive penalty, meaning that while the clock showed 0:00 Kansas City had another play to run- and with the penalty enforced at the end of Tait's impromptu gallop they now had the ball at the Cleveland 13. The Chiefs were within easy field-goal range and had gotten there thanks to a 28-yard run by an offensive tackle and a penalty- all with no time left. All that remained now was Morton Anderson's field goal, and it was right down the middle. Kansas City had won, 40-39.

It was a stunning ending to a stunning game. Cleveland's heretofore meek offense had erupted, mainly in the passing game. Kelly Holcomb shredded Kansas City's defense, completing 27-of-39 for 326 yards and three touchdowns with no interceptions. Quincy Morgan had 151 yards on nine catches with two long touchdowns; Kevin Johnson had 96 yards on eight catches along with the touchdown pass. Cleveland's 39 points were the most the team had scored in regulation time since December 26, 1993 against the Los Angeles Rams- a span of 81 games.

Yet all that sound and fury signified nothing. The Chiefs had torn apart Cleveland's defense for 470 total yards. Priest Holmes racked up 122 rushing yards and four touchdowns; Eddie Kennison added 120 receiving yards and Tony Gonzalez chipped in with 87 receiving yards and a score. Trent Green completed 20-of-29 for 276 yards. The Chiefs outgained Cleveland on the ground by a huge margin of 194-59 and scored 23 points in the fourth quarter alone.

Yet despite all of those big numbers by Kansas City, the Browns had the game in the bag. At the end of the day they did what they've done so often since 1999. They found a way to lose.