Though the weather in and around Cleveland was sunny, breezy, and generally perfect in mid-September of 1980, then as now, dark storm clouds loomed over the Browns.

With the home team now at 0-2 after a pair of disheartening losses, the buzzards began circling around the swashbuckling heroes once known as the Kardiac Kids. In an apparent fit of insanity, columnist Bob Dolgan suggested that rookie Paul McDonald should get a shot at quarterback in the hope that he would ignite an offense struggling with Brian Sipe at the controls. In the *Press*, Bob Sudyk also more-than-subtly directed the Browns to begin playing for the future and simply hope that Houston and Pittsburgh would wane soon. “The Browns are not going to win it this year, not next year,” he explained.

Adding to the overall sense of dread, that week the Browns admitted a colossal mistake in personnel judgment: they released that year’s second-round draft pick, defensive end Cleveland Crosby, after he hadn’t played a single down in either of the first two games. Citing “addition by subtraction,” the Browns vowed never again to make another draft-day mistake so painfully conspicuous. (Have they? *You* make the call.)

And the hits just kept on coming. With Marv Levy’s Kansas City Chiefs coming to town for a Week Three encounter on Sept. 21, optimism became even harder to find. A month before, the Chiefs had obliterated the Browns in their first preseason game, 42-0. Anything even resembling a similar performance by the Browns would serve as a death sentence for the entire season. A quiet, unspoken sense of desperation had crept into the Cleveland locker room.

Sam Rutigliano recognized it, and in his pre-game remarks to the team, he did what he did best. He encouraged his guys to relax and have fun - to go out there and play fast and loose just like they'd done the year before. Everything else would take care of itself.

Still, the Browns' lethargy continued. Kansas City crept to a 6-0 lead in the second quarter on a pair of field goals before unsung Browns wideout Keith Wright ignited the team with a 50-yard kickoff return that set up a short touchdown run by rookie tailback Charles White. With the modest home crowd of 63,000 finally stirring, the Browns had an opportunity to add to the lead in the final seconds of the half, but Don Cockroft hooked a 38-yard field goal and the margin remained a single point.

On their first possession of the third quarter, the Browns offense marched 79 yards and Sipe hit Wright for a 12-yard score. But Cockroft's tough day continued when his ensuing point-after was blocked. With the two-point conversion still 14 years away from becoming NFL reality, that one point would represent an entire scoring possession - and naturally, come back to haunt the Browns.

Still leading 13-6 as the third quarter slowly melted away, the Browns regained possession, then handed the football right back to the Chiefs on a Mike Pruitt fumble. Four plays later, the game was tied.

Maintaining their newfound energy, the Browns quickly answered. From the Kansas City 31, Sipe looped a pass over the middle to Charles White, who caught it at the 20 and wove his way through four defenders and dove into the end zone after a marvelous catch-and-run. With 159 total yards for the game, it was a terrific day for the rookie, and fans envisioned more to come from the lightning-quick tailback from Southern Cal.

Continuing to make an easy afternoon difficult, the Browns blew another chance when Cockroft missed yet another 38-yard field goal early in the fourth quarter. With the kicking game floundering, the Browns' lead remained seven and was in jeopardy when the Chiefs drove to the Cleveland 11 with nine minutes left. But fullback James Hadnot fumbled, and Browns lineman Elvis Franks recovered.

Sipe and Co. then switched gears and began chewing up the clock. Fueled by powerful runs by

White and Mike Pruitt, the Browns slowly cruised to the Kansas City 33, where they faced fourth-and-14 with under a minute to play.

Then, as events would tend to unfold for the Browns over the next four months, things got bizarre.

With Cockroft struggling, a 50-yard field goal seemed like far too much of a gamble, so Sam sent out his punt team, apparently to pin the Chiefs deep in their own territory. Instead, he had punter Johnny Evans take the snap and try to catch K.C. completely off guard by having him curl around right end. Evans was pummeled at the 32 - 13 yards short of the marker. Sam had gambled and lost.

Out of time outs, the Chiefs desperately scampered across midfield, reaching the Cleveland 42 with 18 seconds left. K.C. quarterback Steve Fuller's next pass was off-target, which would have set up fourth-and-10, but Browns lineman Jerry Wilkinson was penalized for lining up offside. Now at the 37 with 11 seconds showing, Fuller launched two straight lofty passes into the right corner of the end zone that the Browns defended - the second of which appeared to clinch the game as the clock hit zero. But once again, Wilkinson was penalized for being offside, moving Kansas City five yards closer for one final play with no time showing.

Fuller's next pass was aimed at wide receiver Carlos Carson in the end zone, and both Carson and Browns defensive back Clinton Burrell leapt for the ball. There was contact as the ball caromed to the grass, and the goal-line official tossed a flag at their feet. The crowd groaned, visualizing the forthcoming defensive pass-interference penalty that would give the Chiefs yet another play, this time from the one-yard line, to try to tie the game.

But the fans sighed with relief when Carson was the one fingered for offensive interference. Finally, after a final minute that seemed to take a half-hour to play, the 1980 Browns had nervously tumbled into the win column.

While there were welcome signs of improvement, particularly by the offense, which rolled up 352 total yards, for many fans and writers, the win over the Chiefs seemed like a mirage. The Browns should have won easily, right up to their last possession when Sam had made his curious decision not to kick the football.

“Sam, your lucky number came up this time,” Bob Schlesinger warned in the *Press*. “But if you continue to throw boldness to the wind in that situation, your luck is sure to run out.”

But for now, Sam’s luck was alive and well. The Kardiac Kids had drawn first blood and three wonderful months lay just over the September horizon.