For Browns fans, the first nine weeks of the 1975 season were a torture that had seemed unimaginable just a few years earlier. Cleveland was once the most consistent winner in pro football, with seventeen consecutive winning seasons from 1956 through ’73. But the decline that had begun with the Warfield-to-Phipps debacle of 1970 had reached its nadir by ’75. Under rookie head coach Forrest Gregg the Browns had lost their first nine games by an average score of 30-9, and the prospects for getting out of the winless column in Week Ten didn’t seem favorable- not with the Cincinnati Bengals coming to the Lake Front.

The talented Bengals were making the final season of Paul Brown’s long and illustrious coaching career a vintage one for the master. Brown’s offensive coordinator Bill Walsh presided over one of the most sophisticated and prolific passing attacks in football. Quarterback Ken Anderson was on his way to being the only 3,000-yard passer in the NFL in 1975, and his targets were many and varied: running back Boobie Clark, tight end end Bob Trumpy and a trio of excellent receivers in Chip Myers, future Hall-of-Famer Charlie Joiner and Browns killer Isaac Curtis.

Cincinnati came into the chilly afternoon of November 23, 1975 with an 8-1 record, good for a first-place tie with Pittsburgh in the AFC Central. Having lost to the Steelers in Riverfront Stadium earlier in the season, the Bengals couldn’t afford a slip-up against lowly Cleveland, a team they had beaten four straight times. There was a sentimental motivation as well: this was to be Paul Brown’s final game in Municipal Stadium, a place he had ruled as surely as Shakespeare had ruled the Globe Theatre . The Bengals had all kinds of reasons to win this

one.

Even so, it was the Browns who started fast. Cleveland jumped out to a 9-0 first-quarter lead on a two-yard Greg Pruitt touchdown run followed by a Don Cockroft field goal. It was the first time the Browns had led in a game in over a month, and it didn't last long. Cincinnati quickly countered with a pair of touchdowns- Anderson's 35-yard strike to Trumpy and a four-yard jaunt by Stan Fritts- and led, 13-9, at the end of one period. The Bengals made it 20-9 in the second when Isaac Curtis hauled in his sixth career touchdown against Cleveland on a thirty-yard aerial from Anderson. Although another Cockroft field goal made it 20-12 at halftime, it seemed that the Browns were well on their way to their tenth consecutive defeat.

Cincinnati's lead grew to eleven points at 23-12 on Dave Green's field goal early in the third quarter. But the seeds of a Bengals collapse had been sewn on the drive when a hard hit from Cleveland defensive tackle Jerry Sherk knocked Anderson out of the game. Shorn of their triggerman, Cincinnati's offense, which had been moving almost at will on the ragged Browns defense, went into mothballs.

Cleveland's comeback began with Cockroft's third field goal of the game, a 43-yarder that made it 23-15 at the end of three quarters. It was still a two-score game, but with backup John Reaves unable to move Cincinnati's offense, the Browns had an opportunity to make it up. Starting at midfield after Greg Pruitt's good punt return, Cleveland moved crisply downfield and cut the lead to one on Mike Phipp's scoring lob to tight end Oscar Roan.

Again the Bengals were unable to generate offense and had to punt the football away. Again the suddenly red-hot Browns were quick to take advantage. Phipps connected on his second touchdown toss of the fourth period, hitting Pruitt from 13 yards out, and Cleveland now led, 29-23. The Browns defense then put it away, with safety Jim Hill intercepting a Reaves pass and racing 56 yards for a touchdown. Many in the crowd of over 56,000 at the Stadium stormed the field when it was over. The Browns, after pulling one of the biggest upsets of the 1975 season, were now 1-9. Cincinnati was 8-2, their playoff hopes still very much alive but their division-title aspirations crippled.

Heroes for Cleveland were both expected and otherwise. The sensational Greg Pruitt racked up 121 rushing yards, 106 receiving yards, and 77 return yards for a total of 304 along with a pair of touchdowns. And the much-maligned Mike Phipps had his greatest day, throwing for a career-best 298 yards and two touchdowns without an interception. Cleveland's offense

compiled 439 total yards while the defense forced three Cincinnati turnovers.

Paul Brown's last game at the Stadium ended in that rare outcome for the nattily attired coach- a loss. Forrest Gregg had his first victory as a head coach. And the Browns, though still mired in last place, were at least out of the winless column.