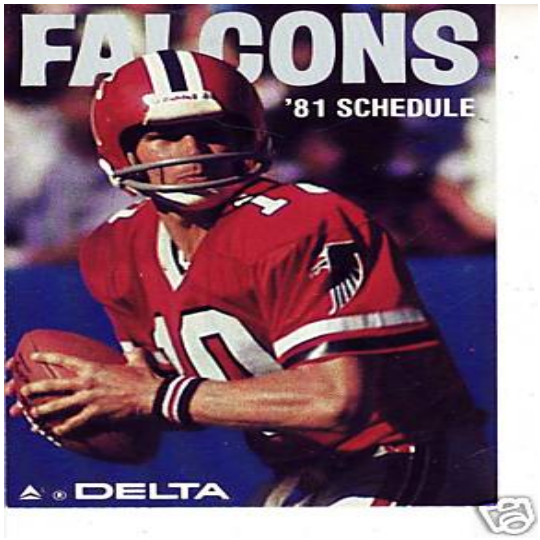

The Cleveland Browns and Atlanta Falcons were among the NFL's biggest surprises in 1980, and both had seen their Super Bowl dreams crushed in heartbreaking fashion on the same afternoon. Cleveland's story- the Kardiac Kids and Red Right 88- are well known here. But Atlanta's rise was even more sudden and unexpected- and its fall was perhaps even more devastating.

In 1980, boasting the second-youngest roster in football, the Falcons emerged from the lower depths of the NFC to post a league-best 12-4 record, earning the home-field advantage throughout the playoffs. On January 4th, 1981 at sold-out Fulton County Stadium they met the Dallas Cowboys in the NFC Divisional Playoff, kicking off immediately after Cleveland's season ended at the hands of the Raiders. For three-and-a-half quarters the Falcons dominated Dallas on both sides of the ball, building a 27-17 lead with 6:30 to play.

But with victory and a berth in the conference championship game in sight Atlanta's youthful defense, with five rookie and second-year starters, suddenly imploded under the pressure of the moment and the veteran Cowboys. Calling on its deep reservoir of big-game experience, Dallas mounted two touchdown drives in the last six-and-a-half minutes, the second climaxed by Danny White's touchdown toss to Drew Pearson with 42 seconds left, to steal the game, 30-27. The loss still ranks as probably the most galling in the history of the Falcons franchise.

Despite their early postseason exits, great things were expected from Cleveland and Atlanta going into 1981. But only one of the two teams was fulfilling expectations when they met at Municipal Stadium on the warm afternoon of September 27th, 1981. The Falcons were flying high at 3-0, having scored 92 points in lopsided wins over the Saints, Packers and 49ers. Atlanta's offense bristled with weapons: rocket-armed quarterback Steve Bartkowski, rampaging fullback William Andrews, mighty-mite receiver Alfred Jenkins and a superb offensive line anchored by three Pro Bowl blockers. Its "Grits Blitz" defense, coordinated by future Browns nemesis Jerry Glanville, had forced 12 turnovers and scored four touchdowns in the first three games.

The Browns, on the other hand, were struggling. They were ambushed in the Monday Night home opener, giving up 535 yards in a disastrous 44-14 loss to the Chargers. The next week the offense and kicking game collapsed in another home loss, to Houston. A win in Cincinnati's Riverfront Stadium got Cleveland out of the winless column, but the Browns needed a victory over Atlanta to get back to .500 and keep pace in the ultra-competitive AFC Central Division.

Atlanta didn't take long to display the form that made it one of the league's last undefeated teams. After recovering a fumble the Falcons took a 3-0 lead on a Mick Luckhurst field goal late in the first period. Early in the second period Alfred Jenkins beat rookie cornerback Hanford Dixon and hauled in an 18-yard touchdown toss from Bartkowski. It was now 10-0 Atlanta, and the crowd of more than 78,000 was acutely aware that the Browns had now been outscored 63-17 at Municipal Stadium thus far in the season. Something had to give.

What gave, as it turned out, were the Falcons. And the giving began after Mike Pruitt's 13-yard touchdown catch sliced Cleveland's deficit to 10-7 midway through the second period. First, Atlanta's Reggie Smith fumbled away a punt return at his own 27-yard line. Brian Sipe found Ozzie Newsome in the end zone three plays later to put the Browns in front, 14-10.

Less than a minute later the Browns were back in the end zone, thanks largely to Atlanta's favorite weapon- the turnover. Robert L. Jackson stripped Alfred Jenkins after a reception and Clay Matthews recovered at midfield. A Sipe-to-Dave Logan aerial and a pass interference penalty put the ball at the one, and Sipe bootlegged it in from there to make it 21-10. Cleveland had scored three touchdowns in about half a quarter to take control of the game.

They kept control in the second half. Early in the third quarter Mike Pruitt put the Browns out in front 28-10 with his second touchdown, an 11-yard run. Another Bartkowski-to-Jenkins

touchdown in the fourth quarter served only to make the score a respectable 28-17. Cleveland had beaten what was thought to be one of the best teams in football and had done it handily, out-gaining the Falcons 385-262 and forcing four turnovers.

As it turned out, though, this anticipated Super Bowl preview wound up as just an afterthought in a long season. The Falcons hadn't really recovered psychologically from the playoff loss to Dallas the previous season: despite scoring 426 points and putting seven players in the Pro Bowl, they would lose seven games by five points or less and sink to a 7-9 finish in 1981. Atlanta would not return to serious Super Bowl contention until 1998, when the heroes of 1980 were long off the scene.

The Browns fared even worse: after scuffling to a 5-6 mark they collapsed completely, losing their last five and finishing a dismal 5-11, a reversal of their 1980 record. They would not return to contention until the latter part of the decade, when Marty Schottenheimer's teams- counting only Ozzie Newsome, Clay Matthews and Cody Risien as Kardiac-era holdovers- reprised the glory and the heartbreak that was 1980.

Those Browns, and those Falcons, serve only as pro football cautionary tales. When you have a window of opportunity, you'd better step through it posthaste. Because you never know how long it's going to stay open.