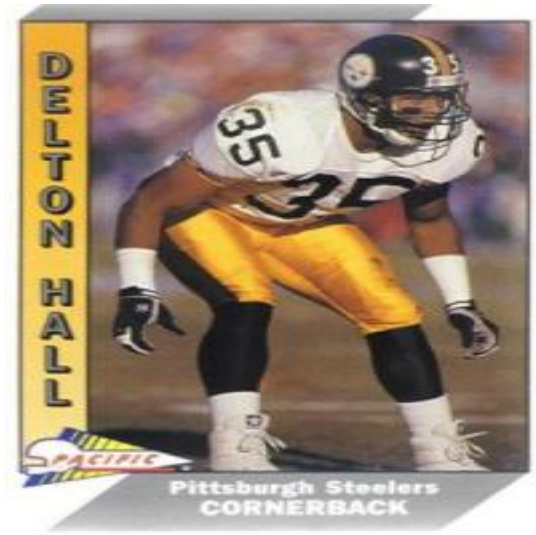

In 1987 the Cleveland Browns were on a mission. Their Super Bowl dreams had been shattered by John Elway and the Denver Broncos the previous January and they were determined to not let it happen again. This year the Browns would take the final step and reach the Super Bowl for the first time in franchise history.

But that goal was in jeopardy as the final week of the 1987 season hove into view. The Browns had been maddeningly inconsistent all season- dominant one week , lackluster the next . With one game left in the strike-shortened season Cleveland was 9-5, a rather pedestrian mark considering the talent and ambition of the squad. A playoff berth was assured- but the length and difficulty of the road to San Diego and Super Bowl XXII was anything but.

The AFC Central championship was still up for grabs in the final weekend. Cleveland led the Oilers and Steelers by a game in the division, but the Browns weren't out of the woods yet. If they lost and Houston won its finale over Cincinnati- a likely scenario with the Bengals a woeful 4-10- the upstart Oilers would win the Central crown on the strength of its superior division record to the Browns. Cleveland would be one of the two Wild Card entries, a position that would guarantee them at least two road games on the way to the Super Bowl.

If the Browns won, on the other hand, they would be Central champions and no worse than the second overall seed in the AFC Playoffs. If they won and Denver lost its finale to the San Diego

Chargers, Cleveland would have home-field advantage throughout the postseason. There were penthouse possibilities going into the afternoon of December 27th, 1987- but the rank odor of the Wild-Card outhouse was close at hand.

The situation was dicey; the site of Cleveland's 1987 season finale was even more so. The Browns would have to win the Central in what had long been a house of horrors for the franchise- Pittsburgh's Three Rivers Stadium. Cleveland had finally broken its sixteen-game losing streak in Three Rivers the previous season. But the big cement ashtray at the conflux of the Ohio, Alleghany and Monongahela was still littered with the crushed-out butts of brown-and-orange hopes. You could scarcely pick a worse location for a Browns team looking to win a big game.

The Steelers still had playoff aspirations of their own. Chuck Noll's team was an uneasy mix of old- dynasty holdovers like John Stallworth, Mike Webster and Donnie Shell- and new- rookies like Hardy Nickerson, Rod Woodson and Thomas Everett. A shadow of the team that had dominated the NFL in the 1970's the Steelers were potent enough to carry an 8-6 record into the final-week showdown with their archrivals from Cleveland. They needed to beat the Browns- something they hadn't done since the ninth week of the 1985 season- to make the postseason. A loss and they would stay home and watch the playoffs on television.

Cleveland had reason to be confident going into the finale. In the first meeting between the teams, back in the season's second week, the Browns had mauled Pittsburgh, intercepting Steelers quarterbacks six times on the way to a 34-10 rout . Mark Malone, who had been the guilty party on five of those picks, limped into the rematch with a dismal 6/17 touchdown-to-interception ratio. Not surprisingly, the mustachioed signal-caller from Arizona State was booed loudly by the Three Rivers crowd as the teams came out for pregame warm-ups. Pittsburgh owned the league's worst passing offense; Cleveland owned what was widely considered the best secondary in football. It looked like a match made in heaven for the Browns.

But fundamentally, Pittsburgh was still Pittsburgh. They could run the football and they could stop the run. Their defense was solid, aggressive, with a penchant for forcing turnovers. And they were tough to beat in Three Rivers Stadium. If Cleveland wanted to win an AFC Central Championship in 1987, they were going to have to do it the way Smith-Barney made money - they were going to have to earn it.

Early on, however, it looked as if the Browns were going to stage a reprise of their September thumping of their black-and-yellow rivals. Cleveland took the opening kickoff and drove to a Matt Bahr field goal that made it 3-0. Late in the first period the Browns took over in good field position at their own 47 and marched 53 yards in seven plays to the game's first touchdown, on Kosar's two-yard floater to backup tight end and former replacement player Derek Tennell. Bahr's extra point was blocked by rookie cornerback Rod Woodson but Cleveland still had a 9-0 lead- a seemingly comfortable margin against Pittsburgh's anemic pass attack.

Cleveland had shut down the Steelers in the earlier meeting with a variation of Buddy Ryan's 46 "Bear" defense. Now, with his team's back against the wall, Pittsburgh's young defensive coordinator Tony Dungy shook out his own version of the 46- and the red-hot Cleveland offense went cold. A Gary Anderson field goal cut the Steelers deficit to 9-3. After Lee Johnson shanked a punt and Pittsburgh drove to a first-and-goal at the Cleveland ten it looked as if the Steelers would take a 10-9 lead into halftime. But Malone's errant pass was picked off in the end zone by Eddie Johnson, preserving Cleveland's narrow margin as the teams repaired to the dressing rooms.

The second half began as a physical tug-of-war. Cleveland built its lead to 12-3 on Matt Bahr's second field goal, from thirty yards out. Pittsburgh countered at the start of the fourth quarter with a 27-yard Gary Anderson boot that made it 12-6. With nearly fifteen minutes left to play it was still anybody's game.

Cleveland began its first drive of the final period from its 24-yard line. Kosar opened the march in style, beating a Steelers blitz and hitting Webster Slaughter down the middle for a 26-yard gain. Rookie Delton Hall, who had been warring physically and verbally with Slaughter all day, then made his first major contribution to the Cleveland cause, taking Web-Star down with a clothesline tackle and drawing a fifteen-yard personal foul penalty. Three plays later, on 2nd-and -15 from the Pittsburgh forty, Kosar again beat the blitz and found a sliding Ozzie Newsome for a twenty-yard gain. Pittsburgh had blitzed Bernie Kosar to no avail for the better part of two years, and two plays after Newsome's reception the Steelers were once again burned by the same tactic, as Kosar hit Brian Brennan for a first-and-goal at the eight.

Moments later the real fun began. Pittsburgh's defense stopped the Browns cold on three straight plays but after the third play a fight broke out between Cleveland tackle Paul Farren and Steelers linebacker Mike Merriweather. At this point Delton Hall, known affectionately to the black-and-yellow faithful as "Beltin' Delton" decided to square accounts with Webster Slaughter. Hot on the heels of the Farren-Merriweather rumble fisticuffs developed between the Pittsburgh cornerback and Cleveland receiver. In the scrum the field judge was knocked to the Three

Rivers turf.

Farren and Merriweather received offsetting unsportsmanlike penalties. No harm done there. But Beltin' Delton's ferocity was another story. The rookie was hit with another unsportsmanlike penalty, an infraction that resulted in a fresh Cleveland first down. To the consternation of Chuck Noll and the partisan crowd, Hall was also ejected from the game. While Pittsburgh found itself shorn of a key defensive starter, the Browns happily accepted a first-and-goal at the four, their drive still very much alive.

It took two plays for Cleveland to take advantage. On second-and-goal from the two, Earnest Byner skirted right, got a big block from Kevin Mack on cornerback Dwayne Woodruff and hit the pylon for a touchdown. Bahr's extra point made it 19-6 with 9:36 to play. With Pittsburgh's offense unable to find the end zone thus far, it looked like a dead issue- especially after Mark Malone threw his second interception of the day, setting up the Browns at Pittsburgh's 47.

It wasn't. Three plays after Malone's interception Bernie Kosar threw behind Clarence Weathers and was picked off by reserve defensive back Cornell Gowdy, who sailed 45 yards for a Pittsburgh touchdown. The Steelers were back in it, down 19-13 with more than seven minutes still remaining. If their defense could get another stop, perhaps Mark Malone could rally the troops for a game-saving touchdown drive. Stranger things had happened to the Browns over the course of their checkered history at Three Rivers Stadium.

Cleveland needed a long, time-consuming march to preserve the game. And they got it. Keeping things landlocked, Kosar handed off to Byner and Mack time and time again, moving the chains and keeping the clock ticking. Starting at their own 23, the Browns pounded out 61 yards on twelve plays, all but one of them simple handoffs to their two bruising backs. Pittsburgh's defense was unable to get the stop it needed. Mark Malone never did get his chance for redemption. The Steelers would run a total of one offensive play in the entire fourth quarter. When time ran out in this hard-hitting game the Browns were 19-13 winners- and AFC Central Division Champions for the third consecutive season.

The game had been a street fight. But Cleveland had responded to every Pittsburgh challenge, beating the Steelers physically as well as on the scoreboard. "You have to play a complete game to beat the Pittsburgh Steelers," Eddie Johnson said afterward . "You have to play like the Pittsburgh Steelers." With everything riding on the outcome, the Browns had done just that. And the last *coup de*

grace had been applied to the Three Rivers Jinx.