By Halloween of 1999, the three-year buildup of anticipation of Browns for the Return of their franchise had dissipated, scattered to the four winds by the numbing reality of expansion football. Starting with the 43-0 opening-night massacre at the hands of the Steelers, Cleveland lost its first seven games by a combined score of 161-53. The new Browns couldn't stop the run, couldn't stop the pass, couldn't run, couldn't block, and most damagingly, couldn't score- an anemic average of 7.6 point per game. Other than a one-point loss at home to the sorry Bengals, Cleveland hadn't even been competitive.

All of the loose talk in the preseason about being competitive, about winning seven or eight games, had narrowed down to a wafer-thin goal: not becoming the first NFL team to go winless over a sixteen-game schedule. Cincinnati had presented an opportunity to get into the win column, and the Browns had flubbed it. Another opportunity would arrive on Halloween afternoon, October 31st, 1999, in the Louisiana Superdome against the 1-5 New Orleans Saints.

Longtime Saints fans knew all about expansion football. They knew all about bad football, period, and they were getting another heavy dose of it in 1999. Nothing had gone right for New Orleans, starting on draft day when head coach Mike Ditka traded every one of their picks for the rights for Heisman-winning tailback Ricky Williams than posed with Ricky in a bizarre wife-and-groom shot for *Sports Illustrated*. The honeymoon was over: through six games Ricky was averaging 3.6 yards per carry, hadn't scored a touchdown, had fumbled three times and was so reticent and diffident that he conducted interviews while wearing his helmet.

Passing-wise, the Saints had attempted to manage their quarterback problem by acquiring every signal-caller in the NFL named “Billy Joe.” But neither Tolliver nor Hobert could apply a spark to the anemic New Orleans air game, and neither could stay healthy. With the running game fizzing and the passing game bouncing erratically from one Billy Joe to another, the Saints were doomed almost from the start. After opening the season with a win over Carolina, New Orleans dropped five in a row, the first four losses featuring blown fourth-quarter leads, the fifth a 31-3 shellacking at the hands of the Giants. This was a team ripe to be taken, even by one as inept and talentless as the Browns.

Games between more-or-less equally bad opponents are usually a.) tightly contested and b.) horrendously played. The Browns-Saints showdown of ’99 was both. The contestants accounted for six turnovers, fourteen penalties and countless other mistakes both mental and physical. Neither team could beat the other so much as beat themselves enough to lose or not enough to lose. The stakes were modest: pride for the Saints, avoidance of a winless season for the Browns. Other than its historic significance it was a game best forgotten quickly.

It was the hometown Saints that got the afternoon’s first break in the opening quarter, when Cleveland punt returner David Dunn was separated from the football and New Orleans recovered deep in Browns territory. Four plays after the fumble Billy Joe Hobert dumped a five-yard touchdown pass to Keith Poole, giving the Saints a 7-0 lead.

Having gotten a gift from the Browns, the Saints now began to give with a generosity that would have made Santa Claus blush. In the second quarter Hobert was picked off by Cleveland defensive end Roy Barker, one of Carmen Policy’s ex-49ers, who rumbled to the New Orleans 22-yard line. Moments later Tim Couch threw the first of three scoring passes, hitting Marc Edwards from 27 yards out to tie the score. Injured on the play that resulted in the interception, Hobert left the game and was replaced by Billy Joe Tolliver. This Billy Joe led the Saints to a Doug Brien half-ending field goal and a 10-7 lead at intermission.

The gift-giving of the home team continued early in the second half. A fumble recovery and return by Darius Holland set up the Browns at the New Orleans 22-yard line. Two plays later Couch threw his second touchdown pass, this one to Kevin Johnson, to give Cleveland a 14-10 lead. New Orleans answered with a drive that ended in Doug Brien’s second field goal, cutting the margin to 14-13 entering the fourth quarter.

Thanks to a Ricky Williams fumble Cleveland had an opportunity to increase the lead early in the period but Phil Dawson was wide left on a 46-yard field-goal attempt. New Orleans responded with a march that looked as if it would end in the go-ahead score… until Ricky fumbled again, this time at the Cleveland 14-yard line. Again the misfiring Browns offense was unable to capitalize and gave the ball back to the Saints with time running short.

This time the Saints were up to the challenge. Tolliver drove his team 35 yards in eight plays, all the way to the Cleveland 29-yard line. After Lamar Smith ran eight yards on a draw play to get New Orleans into field goal range, Tolliver had an opportunity to run the clock down to the final few seconds and set up a kick to win at the gun. For some reason, however, the quarterback called timeout with 29 seconds still remaining on the clock. If Doug Brien made the field-goal attempt, Cleveland would have another possession and another chance to win it.

Sure enough, Brien's 46-yard attempt was right down the middle, giving the Saints a 16-14 lead. With 21 seconds left Cleveland took over at its own 25-yard line. There was no time for an honest drive; only a miracle would do. Leslie Shepherd set up the miracle with a 19-yard reception to the Cleveland 44. With two seconds left the Browns took their final timeout to discuss the only option they had in that situation.

The option was, of course, a Hail Mary. The Saints had been victimized by such a play the previous week in New York, when Giants receiver and Cleveland native Joe Jurevicius hauled down a 53-yard scoring alley-oop to end of the first half. The chances of it happening once were slim; the chances of it happening twice in two weeks were somewhere short of astronomical. Yet these *were* the Saints, and this *was* Halloween. It was the right day and the right place for strange happenings.

The name of the play call was " 258 Flood Tip ." Three receivers- Kevin Johnson, Leslie Shepherd and Darrin Chiaverini- would line up on the right and make a beeline for the end zone. Couch would roll to the right to buy time and make the throw, which hopefully would reach the end zone and once there be tipped and caught by someone wearing a shiny orange helmet. That it would get to the end zone was not a given. 56 yards is a long way to throw a ball with the kind of arc a Hail Mary requires. But again, it was the only option available.

At the snap of the ball Johnson, Shepherd and Chiaverini took off. So did Couch. Flushed out of the pocket by the strong rush of Saints defensive end Brady Smith, the rookie quarterback rolled out and fired a prayer up the right sideline to the end zone, where his troika of receivers

was gathered. Saints defensive backs Sammy Knight and Tyrone Drakeford were there as well. Each leaped for the football and did the one thing they absolutely were *not* supposed to do in that situation- tipped it back up into the air.

Kevin Johnson, the rookie from Syracuse who had become Tim Couch's go-to receiver, was there. Straddling the sideline, Johnson pulled in the football, kept his feet inbounds and fell to the turf. Watching from the sideline, Mike Ditka fell flat on his face in disbelief as the arms of the officials shot skyward. Touchdown and ballgame- Cleveland 21, New Orleans 16. The expansion Browns had their first win. They would not go 0-16.

For the Saints the loss was almost a microcosm of their 1999 season. They had dominated statistically, outgaining the Browns 351-243- including a 231-62 edge on the ground- running 79 plays to Cleveland's 42 and accruing 25 first downs to Cleveland's nine. Ricky Williams had pounded out 179 yards on forty carries, part of a New Orleans offense that held the ball for two-thirds of the game. Yet because of five turnovers, six penalties, a premature timeout and a Hail Mary pass, the Saints had for the fifth time that season lost a game in which they were leading in the fourth quarter. And this time the loss was to arguably the worst NFL team in two decades.

With the pressure of 0-16 lifted, the Browns then did what a lot of lousy teams do after a win- they went right back to losing, getting mauled at home by the Ravens, 41-9. Two weeks later, however, they won their second victory on the road. This time the victim was Pittsburgh, the team that had humiliated the Browns on opening night. Once again the win came at the gun, when Phil Dawson booted a 39-yard field goal into the teeth of the wind. Two last-second miracle victories: these are the only things that kept the '99 Browns from going 0-16.