Appropriately, at the halfway point of the season, the 1980 Cleveland Browns would receive the equivalent of a midterm examination. Were the Kardiac Kids finally legitimate playoff contenders, or simply teasing their fans the way they had each of the previous two seasons?

On the final Sunday of October - a cold, rainy afternoon in which temperatures only reached the lower 40s and occasional snow flurries were forecasted – the hated Pittsburgh Steelers would strut into town having triumphed in the previous two Super Bowls and not having lost to the Browns in four long years.

While the Browns needed a win to prove their own legitimacy, the Steelers themselves were at a crossroads. Now at 4-3 after losing two straight home games, Chuck Noll's squad was suddenly in the unusual position of sharing first place in the AFC Central. Some Steelers felt the voracious hunger of the previous few seasons had diminished, but injuries had also played a key role. Coming into Week Eight, eventual Hall of Famers Terry Bradshaw, Franco Harris, Lynn Swann, John Stallworth, and Jack Lambert would miss the game in Cleveland.

But even without the heart of the Pittsburgh roster on the field, the Browns had their work cut out for them. Throughout the 1970s, the mere appearance of the black-and-gold helmets and jerseys were enough to thwart any Browns momentum. Going into their fateful first encounter in 1980, the Steelers had triumphed in 11 of their last 12 matchups with the Browns. Neither Brian Sipe nor Sam Rutigliano had ever defeated them. But this time, going into the game, it just felt different for Browns fans, as if a torch were about to be passed.

By halftime, it no longer did.

With Youngstown State alum Cliff Stoudt at the controls on offense in place of Bradshaw, the Steelers came out and established themselves early, intercepting Sipe on the Browns' first possession and parlaying the turnover into a 12-play, 75-yard drive that ended with a touchdown. After Pittsburgh stopped the Browns on three straight plays on their second series, punter Johnny Evans couldn't handle the fourth-down snap and the Steelers recovered at the Cleveland 32. Moments later, it was 10-0, and the capacity crowd was groaning with familiarity.

Donned in their brown jerseys and orange pants at home for the first time in 1980, Sipe and Co. responded with a touchdown drive of their own, but the Steelers padded their lead with a long drive and a short Matt Bahr field goal just before the half to make it 13-7. Yet for as bad as things had gone in the first two quarters, the Browns' hole was not that deep. Unfortunately, by the middle of the third quarter, it would be.

On the second play of the third quarter, Mike Pruitt fumbled at the Steelers recovered in Browns territory. Seven plays later, running back Greg Hawthorne, filling in for Franco Harris, bounced into the end zone from the 3, and the Steeler lead was 13.

Once again staring disaster in the face, the Browns offense rose to the occasion. They quickly marched to the Pittsburgh 8, where they faced fourth-and-three. Sam, wanting to strike while the iron was hot, decided it was time for one of his trademark gambles. Mike Pruitt took a handoff on a sweep around the left side but was stonewalled a yard short of the marker. The threat averted, the Steelers took over.

Still not giving up, the Browns quickly got the ball back and stormed right back to the Pittsburgh 6. On third-and-goal, Sipe hit Greg Pruitt in the end zone to make it 20-14, and with four minutes left in the third quarter the Browns were up and kicking. Three plays later, they were back wallowing in the cold October mud.

On third-and-eight from the Pittsburgh 27, Stoudt hit replacement wideout Theo Bell on a crossing route over the middle and Bell broke free for a 72-yard gain. The Steelers pushed the ball into the end zone on the next play and the lead was back to 12. The Browns caught a break when Bahr's point after hit the left upright, but things were continuing to go sour on the

lakefront. And they were about to get even worse.

Once again showing the resolve of a playoff team, the Browns bounced back. Ozzie Newsome made a marvelous diving catch at the Pittsburgh 7 for a 30-yard gain, but Sipe was hit by Steelers lineman Steve Furness on the play and strained his shoulder. Rookie Paul McDonald quickly scampered in from the sideline to try to guide his new team into the end zone in his first legitimate professional action. He promptly fumbled his first snap from Tom DeLeone, and, appropriately, Furness recovered. As the game toiled into the fourth quarter and the bleak gray sky over the Stadium became even darker, the Browns again appeared doomed.

But like an underdog heavyweight fighter in the late rounds, the Kardiac Kids refused to go quietly. Sipe returned and marched his team 73 yards on its next possession and cut the margin when he again hit Greg Pruitt for a short touchdown pass. Unfortunately the newfound momentum was halted again when Don Cockroft missed the extra point - his fifth failed conversion of the season - and the Steeler lead remained 26-20 with just over nine minutes to play.

Following another quick Pittsburgh three-and-out, Sipe and his comrades got cooking. Long passes to Dave Logan and Reggie Rucker pushed them inside the Steeler 20, and on third-and-seven from the 18, Sipe looped a pass over the Pittsburgh secondary into the soft hands of Ozzie Newsome for the game-tying touchdown with 5:38 remaining. With the foundation of the ballpark literally shaking from the roar of the capacity crowd, Cockroft split the uprights on the extra point and for the first time, the Browns led, 27-26.

Appearing rattled for the first time in nearly a decade, the defending world champions went three and out on their next possession, but quickly got the ball back and marched to midfield with just over two minutes remaining. With this incredible game hanging in the balance, the tension was palpable on the lakefront. On third-and-five, Stoudt was flushed out of the pocket by Clay Matthews and his pass intended for Jim Smith was intercepted by Ron Bolton. The Stadium was literally rocking once again.

A key 10-yard completion to sparingly used wideout Willis Adams on third-and-six helped the Browns milk the clock down to 16 seconds before relinquishing possession, and after two desperation plays by Pittsburgh were halted, the Browns had triumphed by a single point in one of the most memorable games in the thirty-year series between the turnpike rivals.

“This is worth a million bucks to all of us,” Sipe said in a postgame interview on NBC. “We’re feeling like champions right now.”

And for the second straight week, Sipe had played like a champion, tossing for 349 yards and four touchdowns to overcome an avalanche of self-inflicted adversity. Despite spotting the Steelers three turnovers and failing to score on three separate trips inside the Pittsburgh 20, the Browns had somehow found a way to win.

Cleveland Press editor Bob Sudyk, who in previous weeks had criticized the Browns for not possessing a “killer instinct,” simply threw up his hands. “Hell, I give up,” he wrote in Monday afternoon’s edition. “I like it better the way they do it. They are simply the most thrilling sports attraction, win or lose, that our town has seen in years.”

It had been two straight weeks of thrilling Kardiac Kids football, and the boys in orange and brown were just warming up.