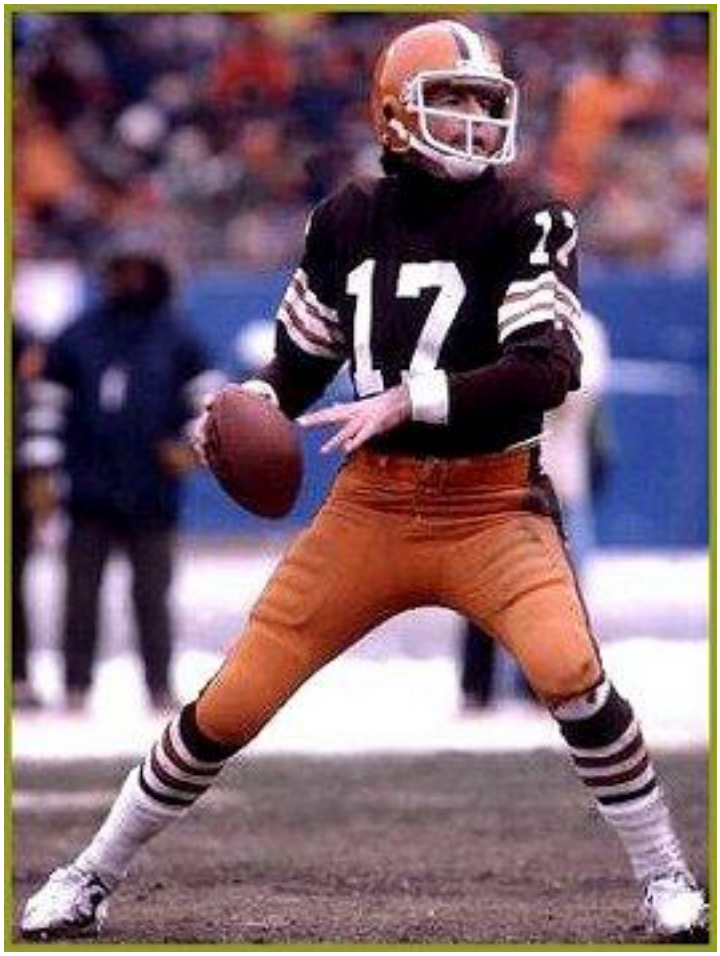

In a season already studded with highly anticipated matchups, Week 13 of the 1980 campaign would deliver the biggest regular-season game the Browns had played in more than a decade.

They would stroll into the antiseptic confines of the Houston Astrodome for an old-fashioned brawl with Bum Phillips' seasoned Oilers with sole possession of first place in football's toughest division hanging in the balance. Both teams were 8-4. Both had seen talented, playoff-caliber editions of their squads be overshadowed by the Steelers throughout the past decade. And with the Steelers fading fast, both saw Nov. 30 as a golden opportunity to move into the driver's seat toward the AFC Central crown.

Though both teams were noted for their offensive identities - the Browns for the aerial adventures of Brian Sipe and his cavalcade of wideouts, the Oilers for the power running of Earl

Campbell and the intelligent game management of wily veteran quarterback Ken Stabler - this Sunday afternoon would be a defensive slugfest.

The Browns caught the first major break of the day before most fans had settled into their seats. Houston fumbled the opening kickoff and Cleveland recovered at the Houston 18. Two plays later, unheralded Cleo Miller crashed up the middle for a six-yard touchdown and a 7-0 Browns lead 62 seconds into the contest.

The Oilers handed the Browns another golden opportunity late in the first quarter when Stabler fumbled at the Houston 33, but the Browns could do no damage when Don Cockroft's 50-yard field goal sailed wide right - his fifth miss in three weeks.

Less than a minute later, the Browns picked up their third takeaway of the first quarter when Ron Bolton intercepted Stabler at midfield and returned it to the Houston 26. Four plays into the second period, Miller scored his second touchdown of the game from the 1, and thanks to the Oilers' generosity, the Browns were in control, 14-0.

But naturally, it couldn't be that easy.

Using Campbell as a battering ram, Houston marched 75 yards in 11 plays and cut the lead to seven. With Houston's early charitable nature tamed and the Browns playing things close to the vest offensively, neither team threatened to score again before the half.

But just as they'd done in the first two periods, the Browns started the third quarter with a bang. On the second play, Cleo Miller burst through the line and weaved his way downfield for a 50-yard run to the Houston 16. The Oiler defense stiffened and the Browns were forced to settle for a short Cockroft field goal to make it 17-7, but once again they had a two-score lead in a game in which points were at a premium.

Matching the title-bout feel of the game, the Oilers struck right back. Stabler hit fellow former Oakland star Dave Casper with a pair of long passes: a 27-yard strike to move Houston into Cleveland territory, then a 30-yard scoring spiral to make it 17-14. In a two-minute stretch, the

teams had traded touchdowns. Now they would spend much of the rest of the game trading punts.

The Browns would not cross midfield for the remainder of the day, leaving the outcome of the contest solely in the lap of Marty Schottenheimer's defense, which had been dominated by Houston 11 weeks earlier on a Monday night in Cleveland. But two-and-a-half months later, this was an entirely different unit.

First, it stuffed the Oilers cold after a promising drive reached the Cleveland 40 late in the third quarter. Midway through the fourth, with Campbell being harnessed by the Browns, Stabler maneuvered his team inside the Cleveland 25 before stalling. The drive then proved fruitless when Toni Fritsch missed a potential game-tying field goal from 38 yards out with five minutes left. The Kardiac Kids had dodged another bullet, but the Oilers' chamber wasn't empty yet.

Stabler and the Oilers took over at their own 27 with just over three minutes left and picked up a quick first down. Then a play later, he went to his old reliable target Casper for a 20-yard completion into Cleveland territory. But as he was being tackled, Casper was stripped of the football by Thom Darden and the Browns' Judson Flint recovered. With 2:16 remaining, the Browns had a first down at their own 43 and an opportunity to kill the clock.

But that kind of finish wouldn't have been worthy of the Kardiac Kids.

Houston's defense stood tall, stuffing Mike Pruitt on third-and-two at midfield at the two-minute warning. Following the ensuing punt, Stabler & Co. took over at their own 22 with 1:40 to play needing a field goal to send the game to overtime.

On first down, Stabler hit Casper for the sixth time on the day, this time streaking down the middle for a 43-yard gain to the Cleveland 35 - already borderline field-goal range. The Astrodome crowd roared as the Oilers took their final time out and the Browns were suddenly in danger of letting a critical victory slip through their fingers.

After an incomplete pass, Stabler dropped back again as the clock ticked under 90 seconds.

Once again he tried to connect with Casper, but this time led his tight end a step too far. Closing in on the football at the Cleveland 24 was veteran cornerback Clarence Scott, who intercepted it and returned it to the 33 before being tackled with 1:17 remaining. The Kardiac Kids had done it again.

Brian Sipe twice took a knee, and it was all over. Despite their celebrated offense collecting only 193 total yards, their lowest output of the season, the Browns joyously danced off the field with sole possession of first place following their most important victory of the season.

“It was a game won by character,” Sam Rutigliano said afterward, “and this is a team of oneness. It has been like this all year.”

For as jubilant as things were in the Browns locker room, a party was also getting started back in Cleveland. After the conclusion of the game telecast, WKYC Channel 3 ran a notice along the bottom of the screen announcing the team’s expected arrival time and gate number at Hopkins Airport later that evening.

By 9 p.m., two hours before the scheduled landing, the airport and all roads and exits leading to it were jammed with well-wishers. When the team arrived, the concourse was a mob scene and airport security had to escort the players through the mass of adoring humanity. It took them nearly two hours to reach their cars.

It was one of the most memorable displays of fan affection any Cleveland team had ever seen. But for as dramatic and incredible as the day had been for the Browns on the field and off, there was still work to be done. Three games remained, and while they now controlled their own destiny, with the Oilers and Steelers still right on their heels, the 9-4 Browns couldn’t afford the slightest slip-up.

After what had happened on that final day of November, 1980, no one in Cleveland was anticipating anything but a magical finish.

“This is a suspicious old factory town, finding comfort in ‘knowing all along’ that things won’t turn

out right," Bob Sudyk wrote in Monday's *Cleveland Press*. "Well, Our Browns are making us believe in something once again."