While there was much to be determined in the fuzzy AFC playoff picture with two weeks remaining in the season, for the Browns, one scenario was crystal clear: beat the Minnesota Vikings in Week 15 and secure their first postseason berth in eight years.

Ironically, Bud Grant's purple warriors had the same mission. With a triumph over the visiting Browns at frosty Metropolitan Stadium (future site of the Mall of America), the Vikings would clinch their seventh NFC Central crown in eight seasons.

On a surprisingly "mild" day for mid-December in Minnesota (thermometers hovered in the mid-20s), both teams looked primed for the playoffs on their initial possessions. Minnesota quickly crossed midfield and were primed to score the game's first points, but Rick Danmeier's 45-yard field-goal attempt three plays later fell short. It was the beginning of a long day for Danmeier.

The Browns responded with an impressive drive of their own. Converting on a trio of third-down situations, they reached the Viking 18, where Brian Sipe hit Calvin Hill over the middle for the game's first touchdown.

The two division leaders spent much of the remainder of the first half exchanging punts. After Danmeier's second miss of the afternoon, at the two-minute warning, Sipe lofted a long pass for Dave Logan, who broke off his route to come back to reel in the under-thrown football for a 41-yard pickup to the Minnesota 9. A play later, Sipe rolled around right end on a bootleg for a touchdown. Though Don Cockroft missed the ensuing extra point, the Browns' lead was now a comfortable 13-0 at the half. Back in Cleveland, fans could already envision football in January.

But the Vikings weren't about to abandon their hopes of accomplishing the same mission. Quarterback Tommy Kramer, in the middle of what would prove to be the finest day of his career, led his offense down the chilled turf on a 98-yard drive capped by a 31-yard touchdown pass to tight end Joe Senser. Yet once again, Danmeier failed to provide points by bouncing the point after off the left upright. It was 13-6, but the two kickers had already combined to squander eight points. Considering what was to come, any one of the quartet of missed kicks would have made a colossal difference.

The Browns bounced right back. Aided by a 30-yard pass to Ricky Feacher on third-and-15, they maneuvered inside the Minnesota lead and pushed the lead back to double digits with a short Cockroft field goal. The Vikings responded in kind with a drive of their own that ended with a short Danmeier kick – his first successful one of the day in four tries – to make it 16-9 with just seconds remaining in the third quarter. The stage appeared set for an exciting fourth quarter.

But the Browns, showing a maturity not even dreamed of back in September, then seemed to take all the drama out of the proceedings. Taking over at their own 17, they slowly stomped their way down the field, almost entirely on the ground. Finally, with Metropolitan Stadium as subdued as Minneapolis in a snowstorm, Cleo Miller crashed over the goal line from the 1 to complete an epic 16-play, 73-yard drive that milked nearly eight minutes off the clock.

The Browns now led 23-9 and were only seven minutes and 16 seconds away from the playoffs. But considering the season that had preceded this contest, to simply outplay an opponent and win easily would have been utterly disappointing.

Following the Kardiac Kids-approved script, Kramer quickly pulled the Vikes back into it. In four

plays, Minnesota was at the Cleveland 7, where running back Ted Brown took a screen pass and scampered into the end zone. But before the crowd could begin to get truly excited, Danmeier's extra point was blocked, keeping it a two-score deficit at 23-15 with 5:01 to play. The Browns were still in control of what had become a zany game.

And there they remained as Mike Pruitt bulled for positive yardage on the next three plays to pick up a first down and melt another two-plus minutes. The Vikings called their first time out after another Pruitt run with 2:18 remaining and fans began filing out of the ballpark.

With another first down, the Browns could clinch victory. But rather than sticking with Pruitt for another safe running play on second-and-eight at the Cleveland 41, Sam Rutigliano got greedy. Wanting to both surprise the Vikings and go for the jugular, he called for Sipe to pass for the game-clinching first down. Cleveland's matinee idol spotted Reggie Rucker in the flat and fired a pass toward him, but Minnesota cornerback Bobby Bryant stepped between them to intercept the football. The Vikings were still in what appeared to be an insurmountable hole, but they had new life.

Now forced to throw on every down, Kramer connected with tailback Ahmad Rashad three times in the next five plays, the final time on a crossing pattern over the middle from the Cleveland 12 for a touchdown – Rashad's first score in 10 games. Danmeier's extra point was good this time to cut the lead to 23-22, but just 1:35 remained. And when Clarence Scott recovered the onside kick in the following moments, the Vikings' spirited comeback appeared would still be nothing more than a footnote to an historic Cleveland victory.

After Cleo Miller picked up three yards on first down and Minnesota called its second time out, Mike Pruitt bulled his way on a sweep around left end for five more, apparently setting up a very makeable third-and-two at the Viking 36. But Cody Risien was penalized for illegal motion, wiping out the play and setting up second-and-12. Minnesota's last time out was sandwiched between a pair of Mike Pruitt runs, and with the Vikings helpless to stop the clock, it ticked down under 30 seconds.

Winding the play clock down to zero with 23 seconds showing on the game clock, the Browns called time. Sam now had another critical decision to make. It was fourth-and-two at the 36. He could roll the dice and call for another run to Pruitt, who had already picked up 42 yards in the fourth quarter alone. If he could just push forward for six more feet, the Browns were in the playoffs.

But Sam had already been burned once by gambling in the final minutes. He opted to play it safe and called on Johnny Evans to punt. But instead of pinning the Vikings in the shadow of their own goal post, Evans' kick bounced into the end zone for a touchback – meaning the net result of the kick was a mere 16 yards. But it seemed inconsequential. The Vikings would still have to travel 80 yards in 14 seconds with no time outs.

It was Bud Grant's turn to get creative. Knowing the Browns would leave the middle open and protect the sidelines to prevent the Vikes from stopping the clock, he called for a schoolyard play that could only work in a game as bizarre as this. Kramer tossed a short 10-yard pass to Joe Senser – a play the Browns were more than willing to allow. But as the Cleveland defenders swarmed to Senser to attempt to tackle him in bounds and end the game, he lateraled the football to Ted Brown streaking along the sideline. With the clock now ticking down under 10 seconds, Brown crossed midfield and stepped out of bounds at the Cleveland 46 after picking up and additional 24 yards.

Five seconds remained – time for one last play. Considering the Vikings had apparently just used up their allotment of good fortune on the previous play, the odds against going 46 yards in one desperate swoop were about a thousand to one.

Kramer dropped back and lofted a pass high and deep into the right corner of the end zone. Both Thom Darden and Ron Bolton saw the football spiraling down and both had the same thought: knock it out of bounds before anything silly happened. And just as they'd been trained, they both leapt up to do just that. The problem was, each man impeded on the other's motion, so neither got a clear shot at the ball. Instead, neither hit it clearly, and it spun slowly behind them.

Ahmad Rashad – who almost hadn't played in the game because of a tender knee – casually reached out his left hand and the football fell into it like an apple falling off a tree. Dick Ambrose immediately wrapped up Rashad and brought him to the ground, but it didn't matter. Rashad was in the end zone.

Eleven days before Dec. 25, the Vikings had experienced a genuine Christmas miracle.

What remained of the Minnesota crowd went berserk. Players piled atop one another in the corner of the end zone as if incapable of believing what they'd just witnessed. Neither could the Browns. The scoring drive: two plays, 80 yards, 14 seconds. Perhaps even more stunning, Tommy Kramer completed the day having thrown for 455 yards against the Browns vastly improved defense.

The officials quickly brought order to the anarchy and forced the Vikings to kick the meaningless extra point. Appropriately, Rick Danmeier's kick was blocked – his third botched point-after of the day and the sixth missed kick of the game.

But it didn't matter. With an improbable 28-23 win, the Vikings were in the playoffs. The Browns, after one of the most stunning defeats in NFL history, were still on the outside looking in. And their one-game advantage in the division was vaporized as the Oilers coasted to an easy victory in Green Bay.

It would all come down to the finale in Cincinnati, where Forrest Gregg's once-forlorn Bengals would enter the contest riding a three-game winning streak. With a win, the Browns would clinch a playoff berth and the division. With a loss, they'd return to Cleveland and begin the longest winter of their lives.

"What did you expect from the Browns?" Bob Sudyk asked his *Press* readers. "Certainly not a casual clinching of a playoff spot a week early."

"This game was a tough one to swallow," offensive guard Henry Sheppard confessed. "But I guess that's why they call us the Kardiac Kids."

They hadn't seen anything yet. The Kardiac Kids – and all who had fallen in love with them – were about to experience the ultimate climax to the most memorable regular season in Cleveland Browns' history.