Whether by design or whether by whimsy, the Browns always seem to play climactic late-season games in Cincinnati. From Sam Rutigliano to Romeo Crennel, from Brian Sipe to the Moose from Scappoose, from orange pants to black shoes, for better or for worse, many a Cleveland season with meaning has come to a head on the cold, windy shores of the Ohio River. Such as it was late in the second-to-last week of the 1986 season when the Browns invaded Riverfront Stadium for a game that would decide the championship of the AFC Central Division.

Entering the game the Browns were at the front of the division pack, but they hadn't looked overwhelming in getting there. The 10-4 record was impressive enough, tied for best in the

AFC. The outliers were not. The Browns had outscored their opponents by just ten points- a figure more befitting a .500 also-ran than a contender. Most of their wins were close- seven by six points or less- and many were against NFL bottom-feeders. Cleveland had squeaked to victories by margins of three and three in overtime over Houston (3-11), three over Detroit (5-9), four and six in overtime over Pittsburgh (5-9) and four over Buffalo (4-10) and had lost at home to Green Bay (3-11.)

The home choke against the dismal Packers had been bad. But Cleveland's most lopsided loss of 1986, also at home, had come against the same Cincinnati team they were preparing to play for the division crown. Three weeks into the season the Bengals came into Municipal Stadium and silenced a Thursday-Night sellout with a 30-13 romp, pounding the Browns for 257 rushing yards and holding them without an offensive touchdown. The Browns, who were especially outplayed in the second half, seemed to get exposed that night by a more explosive, more athletic rival.

Cincinnati stood at 9-5 going into the December 14 rematch, a game off the pace in the AFC Central. Its talent, particularly on offense, was superb. With Pro Bowlers Anthony Munoz, Max Montoya, Boomer Esiason and James Brooks, with big performers like Cris Collinsworth, Eddie Brown and 260-pound fullback Larry Kinnebrew, the Bengals were the league's top offensive team in 1986. A week before the Cleveland rematch Cincinnati went into Foxboro and emasculated the AFC East-leading Patriots, rolling up 584 yards of offense in 31-7 rout. When the Bengals were on, they were capable of not just beating but embarrassing any team they played.

The problem was they weren't always on- far from it. Cincinnati had lost in lopsided fashion to the Bears and Steelers and dropped a game to lowly Houston. They were a team with higher highs than the Browns- and lower lows as well. The inconsistency of the Bengals was as striking as their talent. Yet all they needed was a second win over Cleveland, a team they had already dominated on the road, to virtually sew up their first division title since 1981. The Bengals had come close to the crown but failed to close the deal in head coach Sam Wyche's first two seasons. Now here was their third and best chance. Looking at the venue and the recent history between the teams, it was difficult not to favor Cincinnati.

Cleveland would clinch the division with a victory; Cincinnati would clinch with a victory and another in the finale against the reeling Jets. Cleveland's Wild-Card chances were very good even with a loss; Cincinnati's were in grave danger should they lose. Cleveland had outs. Cincinnati did not. One would expect the Bengals, with their harebrained head coach Sam Wyche, to come out swinging on this sunny, thirty-degree afternoon in the suburbs of Kentucky-

not the Browns and their phlegmatic leader Marty Schottenheimer.

Expectations began to change immediately following Gerald “the Ice Cube” McNeil’s return of the opening kickoff. On the first play from scrimmage from the Cleveland 32-yard line, Bernie Kosar faked a handoff to Kevin Mack, pumped and went long for Reggie Langhorne, who had raced right by Bengals cornerback Louis Breeden down the far sideline. Langhorne took Kosar’s perfect strike over his shoulder and raced all the way to the Cincinnati two-yard line before being knocked out of bounds. With the exception of the sizable and delighted Cleveland contingent, the sellout crowd of more than 58,000 in Riverfront Stadium was stunned.

On the very next play, Kevin Mack nearly gave all of the momentum back. Jackknifing into the line, Mack (whose own fumble proneness has been overshadowed by that of Earnest Byner) was hit by linebacker Reggie Williams and had the ball squirt out. After several tense seconds reserve tight end Travis Tucker came up with the football to preserve the possession. It was already becoming that kind of a day for both teams. Two plays later Mack slammed over from the one and it was 7-0, Browns, with less than a minute-and-a-half gone in the game.

No one thought a seven-point lead was remotely safe against the league’s number-one offense on its home ground. Sure enough, the Bengals wasted no time with their counterpunch, driving on their first possession to the Cleveland four-yard line. But on third-and-goal from the five, defensive end Sam Clancy got a piece of a potential Esiason touchdown pass, forcing the Bengals to call on kicker Jim Breech. The Breecher’s 23-yard kick was true, making it 7-3. As it turned out, Cincinnati’s only real chance to get in the end zone had come and gone.

Cleveland’s reservoir of big pass plays, meanwhile, still had not emptied. With 1:13 left in the first quarter the Browns again exploded a bomb in the Cincinnati secondary. On first down from the Bengals’ 47-yard line Kosar again play-faked to Mack and looked long, this time down the near sideline for Webster Slaughter. The jheri-curled rookie put a double move on Lewis Billups that sent the cornerback stumbling and was wide open when he took Kosar’s long pass. Two pass plays totaling 113 yards, two touchdowns, and it was 14-3 Browns at the end of the first quarter.

Three long quarters remained to be played- but the Bengals were in serious trouble. The vital organs of their famed offense were not functioning. James Brooks and Larry Kinnebrew had run wild up in Cleveland. But they were finding the yardage miserly on this day. Hanford Dixon and Frank Minnifield had defused Boomer Esiason’s deep threats. And Cincinnati’s famed offensive

line was getting whipped by an inspired Cleveland front. The Browns, meanwhile, were just getting started.

Upon getting the ball back late in the first half after a shanked Jeff Hayes punt, Bernie Kosar put away his long-range guns and began to pick apart the Bengal defense. Loosing fullback Kevin Mack for bruising runs and winging pinpoint shots to his receivers, the second-year pro led the Browns downfield against the clock, setting up Mark Moseley for a 39-yard field goal attempt. The last straight-ahead kicker to ever play in the NFL, Moseley super-toed the kick through and it was 17-3 in favor of Cleveland as the teams repaired to the dressing rooms.

Cincinnati had averaged 28 points over its previous six games. Even after being badly outplayed for a half, there was still a hope for the Bengals to rescue the outcome. Those hopes died on Cincinnati's first two possessions of the second half. The first fizzled out at the Cleveland 28 when Sam Wyche eschewed another field goal and failed on a fourth-down gambit. The second ended in complete disaster when the harassed Esiason was intercepted by Cleveland safety Felix Wright at the Cincinnati 34.

With the knockout punch in sight, Kosar turned to his infantry to mop up. Kevin Mack carried on all six plays of the ensuing drive, ending it with a one-yard touchdown plunge to make it 24-3. Cincinnati's subsequent three-and-out and another poor punt set up the Browns at the Cincinnati 36-yard line and Kosar went right back to work. On third-and-six from the 32 the lanky young quarterback rolled right, away from onrushing Bengal lineman Eddie Edwards, and launched a perfect parabola to a sideline-straddling Herman Fontenot at the Cincinnati eight.

Two plays later, the ball once again bounced Cleveland's way. Much like Kevin Mack in the first quarter Curtis Dickey was stripped as he slammed toward the goal line. The football skittered into the end zone where an alert Webster Slaughter jumped on it for his second touchdown of the afternoon. The lead swelled to 31-3 with 1:06 left in the third quarter. It was the third fumble for the Browns and the third time they had recovered their own fumble. A Hanford Dixon interception and another Mark Moseley field goal served only to punctuate the rout.

When it finally ended at 34-3, Cleveland had scored its most lopsided win ever over the Bengals and the second-most lopsided in the series. The volatile Bengals had scored a season low in points and gained a season low in yardage. The Browns rolled up 372 yards, did not turn the ball over and committed just three penalties, playing a near-perfect game. It was the best the team had played, on the road, in a big game against a quality opponent, since the 1969 NFL

Playoff win over the Cowboys at the Cotton Bowl- Cleveland's last postseason victory.

That distinction wouldn't last much longer. A week later the Browns clinched home-field advantage throughout the AFC Playoffs with another rout, this time of San Diego. Cincinnati took its frustration out on the Jets, blitzing the New York Sack Exchange 52-21 behind 621 total yards from the offense Cleveland had shut down. But it was too late for the Bengals. Their 10-6 record was not good enough for playoff qualification. They would sit at home and watch as the Browns went on to their incredible, heartrending run in the 1986 postseason.