This was it.

The four-month roller-coaster ride that was the 1980 season for the Cleveland Browns came down to four quarters on the slick artificial turf of Riverfront Stadium on Sunday, December 21.

With a win, the Kardiac Kids would clinch the AFC Central Division title and secure their first playoff appearance in eight years. With a loss, one of the most remarkable seasons in NFL history would come to a stunning end - with the high-flying Browns losing their last two games to squander a chance at glory.

Meanwhile, under former Browns' coach Forrest Gregg, Cincinnati had shown marked improvement over the last month of the season, winning three straight after dropping nine of their first 12 games. By extending the winning streak to four games to close out the campaign, the Bengals would finish 7-9 - a three-game improvement over the year before - and set the tone for even more progress in 1981.

More importantly, nothing would please Gregg and Paul Brown more than wrecking the Browns' fairy-tale season.

For the Browns, it was a playoff game. For the Bengals, it was the Super Bowl.

With the priorities clearly established, it wasn't surprising when the Bengals took charge early on a sunny but cold afternoon. Behind youngster Jack Thompson, starting for injured veteran Ken Anderson, the Bengals drove across midfield on the opening drive. It appeared they'd be forced to punt when a third-down pass intended for tight end Pat McInally fell incomplete, but in the process of breaking up the play, Browns' safety Thom Darden drilled McInally in the head, knocking him out cold and drawing a 15-yard personal foul penalty. McInally would be taken off the field on a stretcher, and the tone for a physical battle along the Ohio River was set. Three plays later, new Bengals kicker Jim Breech just cleared the crossbar with a 42-yard field goal to open the scoring.

Then it was the Cincinnati defense's turn to draw first blood. The Bengals pinned Mike Pruitt for a 12-yard loss on an ill-conceived screen pass on the first play and forced the Browns to punt as the hometown contingent of a divided sellout crowd roared.

After an exchange of punts, the Browns finally got rolling on their third possession. On the first play of the second quarter Brian Sipe hit Dave Logan for a 65-yard gain to the Bengal 9. But the play was costly, as Logan injured both his knee and ankle and was lost for the day. Even worse, on the next play, Sipe fumbled and the Bengals recovered.

Now it was the Bengals' turn to get things rolling. Charles Alexander exploded off right tackle on third-and-one from the Cincinnati 33 for a 32-yard gain, expounded by a facemask penalty on Thom Darden - his second personal foul on the day.

Two plays later, on third-and-three from the Cleveland 13, Thompson scrambled through a gaping hole in the line and bounced off a pair of would-be tacklers and into the end zone to make it 10-0. The game was taking on an eerily similar feel to the Browns' last two season finales in Cincinnati, when the Bengals had ended promising Browns' seasons with disheartening defeats.

But these Browns were simply too confident to let things get out of hand. They caught a huge

break after Sipe was sacked by Eddie Edwards on third-and-19, apparently forcing another punt, when Cincinnati defensive lineman Wilson Whitley was flagged for taking a cheap shot at Doug Dieken after the play, giving the Browns a gift first down. In that moment, the flavor of the game changed.

Sipe then completed four straight passes, the last a 43-yard touchdown bomb down the sideline to Reggie Rucker to get the visitors on the scoreboard with seven minutes to play in the half.

Fortune again smiled on the Browns six minutes later when a Johnny Evans punt hit Cincinnati linebacker Reggie Williams and bounded into the arms of Cleveland's Dino Hall at the Bengal 17. Three plays later, Don Cockroft kicked the tying field goal and the teams went to the locker room knotted at 10.

After a lousy start, the Browns appeared to have momentum. But that would change on the second play of the third quarter, when Sipe was picked off by former Ohio State star Ray Griffin (Archie's little brother) and he returned it 48 yards for a touchdown. The Bengals had the lead once again.

Now Sipe was angry. He knew the only reason the Bengals were in this game was because the Browns kept handing them Christmas presents four days early. "I remember thinking," he would say later, "this was one of those moments when you find out what kind of character you have. A lesser team would have folded."

With his focus now laser-sharp, the Browns answered quickly. Three straight completions to Ozzie Newsome pushed the Browns across midfield. Then from the Cincy 35, Sipe rolled to his right and lofted a perfect toss to Ricky Feacher - Logan's replacement - down the right sideline for the game-tying touchdown. The second half wasn't quite three minutes old, but the teams had already exchanged exclamatory touchdowns.

More big plays would soon follow. On the second play of the Bengals' ensuing series, Ron Bolton intercepted Thompson, and three plays after that, Sipe launched another long pass for Feacher. The man his teammates called "Hollywood Dude" reeled it in for a 34-yard touchdown to put the Browns ahead, 24-17. After catching just two touchdown receptions all year going in, little-used Feacher had now scored twice in four minutes. The see-saw, emotional first five

minutes of the second half had symbolized the excitement and the ups and downs of the Browns' entire magical season.

After squandering a pair of scoring opportunities on their next two series - including a missed 33-yard field goal by Breech - the Bengals atoned for another fumble on a punt return to keep the Browns from adding to the lead. Then, on the final play of the third quarter, Thompson lofted a long pass down the left sideline to McInally - who'd returned to the game after Darden's vicious hit. McInally caught it over his shoulder at the Cleveland 15 and scrambled into the end zone to tie the contest once more.

It would all come down to the final 15 minutes.

Gradually, the offensive fireworks gave way to a fierce defensive struggle. The Bengals slowly tiptoed across midfield midway through the period and reached the Cleveland 20 before Thompson was picked off by Darden at the 9. But Sipe returned the favor when he tossed another interception on a long pass a play later. The Cleveland defense forced a crucial three-and-out and McInally shanked the ensuing punt. It traveled just 15 yards and the Browns offense took over at its own 45 with six minutes to play.

Sam Rutigliano knew this was it - this was the drive that would define the game. If the Browns could parlay the mistake into points, they'd control the final few minutes of the game. If they couldn't, the pendulum of momentum would once again swing back to Cincinnati.

After a pair of Sipe completions gave the Browns a first down at the Cincinnati 44, Sam switched gears. Six straight running plays would follow, with Mike Pruitt leading the way, rolling up 27 yards to propel the Browns inside the Bengal 5. After stopping a Sipe bootleg on third-and-goal from the 2, the Bengals called time with 1:29 remaining.

Out trotted Don Cockroft, who'd endured the rockiest of his 13 seasons, to put the Browns ahead. And Cockroft calmly booted a 22-yard field goal to make it 27-24. But as followers of the Kardiac Kids had learned time and time again all season, the game was far from over.

As if the dramatic tension couldn't have gotten any thicker, Forrest Gregg demonstrated once more how important this game was to the Bengals. He pulled back Jack Thompson and inserted Ken Anderson, who hadn't played in two weeks, to try to rally for the tying or winning points in the final minute.

With the clock ticking down under a minute, Anderson hit wideout Steve Kreider for a 22-yard gain to the Cleveland 43, then tight end Dan Ross for nine more to the 34. Anderson tossed a pass out of bounds with eleven seconds remaining, setting up the play of the day.

Too far out for Breech to attempt a game-tying field goal, Gregg called for a pass downfield near the sideline that was designed to stop the clock and set up that final field goal. Anderson connected with Kreider once again, this time at the 13 with six seconds on the clock, but before he could even think about getting out of bounds, he was blasted by Ron Bolton and folded to the Riverfront astroturf as the clock ticked down to zero.

In that moment, the Browns became the champions of the best division in football. It was the climactic moment of a storybook season.

Players and coaches spilled out onto the field, embracing one another and yelling like schoolchildren incapable of understanding what had just happened. Lyle Alzado and Reggie Rucker hoisted Sam Rutigliano onto their shoulders and carried him off the field. The celebration continued in the locker room and even carried onto the short flight home, during which the players belted out several lines from the popular "The 12 Days of a Cleveland Brown Christmas" song now getting serious airplay on northeast Ohio radio stations.

When they landed in Cleveland that evening, more than 15,000 fans had braved the 11-degree wind chill to greet them - though this time, learning from the triumphant return from Houston three weeks earlier, the team's arrival was rerouted to an area of the airport that could withstand the throng of well-wishers.

The atmosphere was both divine and surreal - mirroring the entire season. Who and what came next was irrelevant. The 1980 Browns had dethroned the defending world champions, sprinted past the heir apparent, and had taken on mythological status in their hometown. For a city that just two years before had declared bankruptcy, the Kardiac Kids were the greatest Christmas

gift Cleveland had ever received.

“Scripted in heaven or Hollywood,” Jim Braham wrote in Monday’s Press, “what other ending could have fit Cleveland’s Kardiac Kids?”