Considering the almost eerie lack of intrigue surrounding this weekend's Browns vs. Rams showdown in Cleveland, it seems a fitting time to revisit the Hollywood-level drama that originally intertwined and defined these once proud franchises some 60 years ago. It's a story that begins chronologically with the Rams, but geographically in Cleveland-- with an epic twist book-ended by two of the greatest games in football history-- the 1945 and 1950 NFL Championships.

More than likely, we have all had that recurring pipe dream in which today's expansion Browns miraculously take the AFC Championship over their former selves-- the Ravens-- in a transcendental battle of good vs. evil and ego vs. id, thus restoring balance to the force and glory to Cleveland, etc etc. What most of us fail to realize, however, is that this seemingly ridiculous scenario actually DID play out-- under almost identical circumstances-- over half a century ago. There was a beloved Cleveland team, a controversial exodus, a new beginning, and-- for the lucky fans of that bygone era-- a thrilling and satisfying final showdown. But to fully appreciate what the Browns helped Cleveland regain in 1950, you have to start by looking back at what the city had lost... it's first true NFL love, the Cleveland Rams.

Introducing Your Cleveland Rams

Nearly a decade before Paul Brown’s legendary squad made its debut in the upstart All-America Football Conference, the Rams had already been introduced as Cleveland’s shiny new

representative in the well-established National Football League. From 1937 to 1945, the monstrous (and relatively new) Municipal Stadium would serve as the primary home of the Rams and the headquarters for a vital era in Cleveland football that now seems largely forgotten-- shipped off to Los Angeles, perhaps, with the rest of the team's gear.

In many respects, the odds were stacked up against the Cleveland Rams from the get-go. While professional football was on the rise in the '30s, the country was in the midst of the Great Depression and on the doorstep of World War II. Even in the NFL—the most stable pro football league by a wide margin—it was hardly unusual for teams to fold overnight under the strain of mounting debts. The Rams themselves had actually played their first season, 1936, in an early version of the American Football League. But as a good indicator of the times, their scheduled Championship Game matchup with the Boston Shamrocks was canceled when the Boston players refused to step on the field, citing unreceived paychecks. As a result, the Rams won the title by default, even though the Shamrocks (owners of the best record in the league) are usually credited as the league champs in most subsequent records. Meanwhile, there were several other AFL teams that actually moved or shut down operations *in the middle* of that 1936 season, which tells you about all you need to know.

Fortunately, the following year saw Cleveland lawyer Homer Marshman and his business associates pay $10,000 to retain ownership of the Rams franchise and jump to the legitimacy of the NFL, replacing the departed St. Louis Gunners in the league's Western Division.

Only four players were carried over from the original Rams, and the team got off to a predictably inauspicious start, finishing 1-10 while splitting its games between League Park and Cleveland Stadium. In 1938 (a 4-7 season) they were forced to play several home games on Shaw High School's field, and in 1939—despite the best efforts of MVP halfback Parker Hall—the Rams still managed no better than third in the division. After another mediocre campaign in 1940, Marshman claimed to be hemorrhaging money trying to keep the franchise afloat, and he finally sold the Rams to grocery magnate Daniel Reeves and Fred Levy, Jr. for $100,000 (an ROI that looked pretty good at the time). The new ownership quickly showed signs of awakening the sleeping giant that was Cleveland's football fan-base, as the Rams stirred up some interest with a pair of wins to open the 1941 season. But by December, the team had dropped nine straight, and thanks to a day that would live in infamy, the public's attention had shifted to far more

pressing matters.

Many of the Rams (including owners Reeves and Levy) were enlisted in the military by 1942, and in ’43, the team was so undermanned that it was actually forced to sit out the entire season. The organization regrouped for another disappointing effort in 1944, but a year later, Reeves (now as principal owner) would celebrate VJ Day with as much renewed hope as anyone. The end of the war had also marked a new beginning for his football team, highlighted by the addition of first round draft pick Bob Waterfield— a former star quarterback at UCLA and another in a long line of anointed saviors for a beleaguered Cleveland franchise.

Bob Waterfield: Cleveland's Shooting Star

By 1945, the Rams had narrowly survived a depression, a world war, an ownership change, and seven consecutive losing seasons. Now, at the dawning of a new golden era in football and America as a whole, Bob Waterfield and Co. were poised to deliver Cleveland to the top of the NFL. Incredibly, they achieved their goal. But even more incredibly, it’s a feat that would be almost instantly jettisoned from Cleveland's supposedly elephantine sports memory—replaced instead with visions of an infant franchise from a rebel league with a local coaching legend at the helm.

By 1945, former Massillon High School and Ohio State coach Paul Brown had already been named head coach and general manager of a new professional team that would serve as a founding franchise of the All-America Football Conference in 1946. The as-yet unnamed club would be playing its home games in Municipal Stadium and theoretically making a direct run at the dwindling fan-base of the hard-luck Rams. By most accounts, the Rams would need a miracle season to turn the tide and fend off the demise of the franchise. By the fall of ’45, it seemed as though their miracle had arrived in the form of Waterfield—a player not only strong-armed and skilled enough to turn around the Rams’ fortunes, but marketable enough to transcend his sport and expand the local fan-base like no one before him.

Bob Waterfield's Better Half

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