On December 17, 1945, Northeast Ohio toasted its world champion Cleveland Rams in a celebration that doubled as a mournful farewell. As many fans already knew, the team would soon be relocating to Los Angeles. Exactly 50 years later—December 17, 1995— the franchise that had once replaced those Rams now faced an eerily similar fate, as the original Cleveland Browns played and won their final game before a grieving crowd at Municipal Stadium. Clearly, those who don't learn their history are doomed to repeat it.

In Part One of this two-part series , we looked at the Cleveland Rams' rise from pro football's Depression-era doormat to its dominant, post-war champs, as rookie QB Bob Waterfield finally delivered Cleveland its long-sought NFL Championship in 1945. In typical Cleveland fashion, though, that's where the story turns dark and complicated. Rams owner Dan Reeves, threatened by the arrival of a second Cleveland pro team in 1946 (Mickey McBride's buzz-worthy Browns of the AAFC), decided to pick up stakes and start his franchise's title defense anew in sunny California. Abandoned by the NFL, Cleveland football fans quickly turned their heartache into an unhealthy devotion to their new team, and the seeds were thus planted for an unforgettable showdown and the final act of this little Shakespearian drama: the 1950 NFL Championship Game.

Setting the Stage

Like all good dramas, there was a slow buildup. Between 1946 and 1949, the Rams and their former city existed in completely separate worlds, as far away professionally as they were

geographically—kind of like a bitterly divorced couple. Out on the west coast, UCLA grad Bob Waterfield was back in his old comfort zone, but the L.A. Rams had no luck defending their title. The team would scuffle for several years and turn over most of its roster before getting back to the NFL Championship in 1949—a game in which the Philadelphia Eagles clubbed them by a 14-0 count.

Meanwhile, Cleveland had its new love: Otto Graham's unstoppable Browns—winners of a Tom Emanski caliber back-to-back-to-back-to-back AAFC Championships. In 1950, the NFL finally took notice and swallowed up the AAFC, taking on the 49ers, Colts, and Browns as new franchises in the process. Despite Cleveland's nice resume and star power, most national observers wrote them off as small fish from a tiny pond. The skeptics were abruptly silenced in the first week of the 1950 season, however, when Paul Brown's boys shocked the world and massacred the defending champion Eagles 35-10 behind Graham's 3 TDs and 346 yards passing.

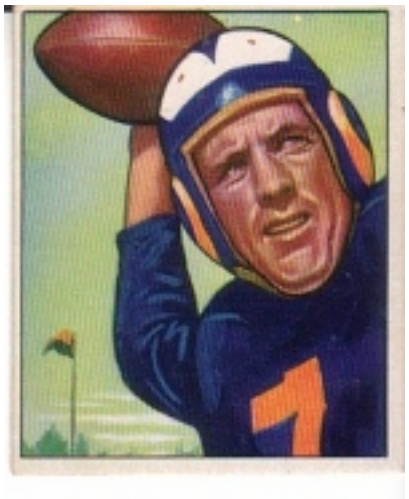
A week later, on the other side of the country, the Los Angeles Rams pistol-whipped the New York Yanks 45-28. They were led not by Waterfield on this occasion, but by his much ballyhooed 24 year-old understudy, Norm Van Brocklin.

Far apart as they'd been all these years, the Rams and Browns had developed a curiously similar philosophy for winning. Rams head coach Joe Stydahar, much like Paul Brown, saw the passing game as the future of football. And like Brown, he had the guns to carry out his plans, as Waterfield and Van Brocklin would throw for over 3,500 combined yards by season's end, with standout receivers Tom Fears and Elroy "Crazy Legs" Hirsch catching over 120 balls and 14 touchdowns between them (numbers even superior to the Browns' great Dante Lavelli and Mac Speedie).

The Browns and Rams were also both at the forefront of integration. A year before Jackie Robinson joined the Dodgers, Paul Brown had already signed the great Marion Motley and Bill Willis to join the inaugural Browns, saying he wanted the best players, regardless of race. The 1946 Rams also added two black players in the form of UCLA stars Woody Strode and Kenny Washington, but in that instance, the integration had actually been part of Dan Reeves' contractual obligation with his team's new home, the Los Angeles Coliseum.

In any case, with the NFL's more traditionally-minded teams stuck in the lurch, the Rams and Browns each enjoyed six-game winning streaks during the fall of 1950. And more amazingly, when forced into tie-breaking divisional playoff games, both teams managed to upset opponents that had defeated them twice during the regular season (the Browns over the Giants, the Rams over the Bears). This set up the NFL Championship match-up that Clevelanders had been dreaming of—the Browns (11-2) against the Rams (10-3). Today vs. Yesterday, for all the marbles, on Christmas Eve.

The 1950 NFL Championship: "The Greatest Game I Ever Saw"



As if there weren't enough drama already, the Rams had lost Van Brocklin to broken ribs in the Bears game, meaning that Bob Waterfield would be under center and center-stage for his first game at Municipal Stadium since he'd gone out a champion five years earlier. He was in Cleveland again, it was Christmas time again, the title was on the line again, and he was

wearing the same uniform. But this time, Waterfield and the Rams would be the villains. That surreal shift in the storyline wasn't lost on anyone, but the prodigal son's return was just one of a dozen reasons why this game was every bit as epic as the Ice Bowl, Super Bowl XXV, or any other more commonly referenced NFL classic.

The problem is, this was 1950, and football was still decidedly the nation's second love. Case in point, just two years after piling 86,000 people into Cleveland Stadium for one game in the 1948 World Series, only 30,000 passed through the turnstiles at the same venue to see the Browns meet their predecessors for the NFL title. Still, those in attendance would have a story to tell for generations to come-- about the day Bob Waterfield came back to town and Automatic Otto was up to the challenge.

"Looking back on it, it was the greatest game I ever saw," Paul Brown later said. "Not just because of the game itself, but because of the tremendous exhibition of passing both teams put on. Both of us were the leaders in a modern day revolution of switching the emphasis from running to passing."

For his part, Waterfield silenced the Cleveland hecklers with almost LeBron-like ruthlessness in the first minute of the game, connecting with Glenn Davis for an 82-yard touchdown strike on the Rams' opening possession. Predictably, Graham responded swiftly, finding Dub Jones for a 27-yard score to even things up. But a banged-up Cleveland defense broke down again, as Rams running back Dick Hoerner capped a long drive with a 3-yard touchdown run to make it 14-7 Los Angeles after one quarter. Graham would hit Dante Lavelli for six before the half, but Lou Groza missed the extra point, giving L.A. a narrow 14-13 edge at the break. Groza would eventually redeem himself.

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