When we think of the Browns' recent miseries against Pittsburgh - reflected by Cleveland's 2-20 record against the thugs from the Steel City over the past 10 years - the term "jinx" may come to mind.

But those who have followed the Browns for a while know that for as miserable as the rivalry has been over the past decade, it still hasn't inflicted as much pain as Three Rivers Stadium did.

Twenty-five years ago this week, all that suffering was exorcized with one of the greatest wins in Browns' history.

Put simply, from 1970 through the middle of the next decade, Cleveland Browns fans could count on three things: death, taxes, and losing in Three Rivers Stadium.

After utterly dominating the Pittsburgh Steelers no matter where they played for the first 20 years of the rivalry, a new, shadowy era began when Three Rivers opened. Suddenly, for reasons beyond the understanding, the Browns simply couldn't win in Pittsburgh.

In losing the first 16 games they played at the concrete cookie-cutter along the banks of the Allegheny, Monongahela, and Ohio rivers, they'd lost in every imaginable fashion: they were blown out (five times), shut out (once), beaten in the final two minutes (four times), and defeated in overtime (twice). By the beginning of the 1980s, the losing streak was known simply as "The Jinx."

No one could explain it. True, the Steelers were the best team in football for much of the 1970s and generally didn't lose at home to anyone. But in six of those 16 matchups, the Browns either had a better record going in or would finish the season with a better mark than the Steelers. And yet they'd lost each and every one.

The Browns became as flabbergasted as their fans, brainstorming bizarre ideas to try to break The Jinx. They'd tried different modes of transportation. They'd stayed in different hotels. Sheer genius struck in 1985 when Browns' public relations staffers brought chunks of dirt from Cleveland Stadium and sprinkled them all over the Three Rivers Astroturf. Crazy as it sounds, it almost worked - but the Browns blew a lead in the final minutes and lost on a field goal with nine seconds left.

Most figured if the Browns couldn't win in Pittsburgh on their 1986 visit - a sun-soaked October Sunday - they never would. The 1-3 Steelers had plunged from their once-lofty status and now were one of the worst teams in football, having been outscored by nearly 60 points in their first four games.

The Browns hadn't been all that much better in splitting their first four contests, watching their defense get overwhelmed in losses to the Bears and Bengals and playing just well enough to hang on for narrow victories against perennial doormats Houston and Detroit. A month into the season, the '86 Browns didn't look much stronger than they had during their mediocre - albeit division-winning - 1985 campaign.

But a win in Three Rivers had the potential to change everything.

Cleveland radio personality Pete Franklin got involved this time, telling Browns' head coach

Marty Schottenheimer he had nothing to worry about in 1986. Franklin would be attending his first Browns-Steelers game in Pittsburgh and he guaranteed the Browns would win.

Adding to his entertaining heroics, that week Franklin endorsed a rap song written to inspire the Browns to victory, appropriately titled “Break the Jinx.” He played it over and over on his talk show:

Oh, believe me now we’re gonna break that Jinx

Go down to Three Rivers and beat those finks.

Pigskin Pete guarantees the win

And if we don’t, it’ll be a sin.

In the early going, it appeared the rap may indeed have put the whammy on the Steelers, as they committed a handful of mistakes and the Browns surged to a 10-0 lead.

Then The Jinx began to kick in. The Browns‘ sharp start deteriorated, and after they fumbled twice in three offensive plays, the Steelers took a 14-10 advantage with just under two minutes to play in the half. It looked like Part 17 of The Jinx was unfolding.

Then the smallest man on the field altered the course of Browns‘ history.

Five-foot-nine-inch, 142-pound Gerald McNeil - nicknamed the “Ice Cube” in honor of how difficult he was to handle - took the ensuing kickoff at his goal line and sprinted the length of the field for a 100-yard touchdown that gave the Browns back the lead and, more importantly, halted Pittsburgh’s momentum. And as it happened, McNeil’s touchdown - the first Cleveland

kick return for a score in 12 years - would prove to be the difference.

The teams traded punches in what became a physical second-half brawl. McNeil went from hero to goat when he fumbled a punt after the Steelers‘ first possession, and Pittsburgh cashed in to take back the lead.

The teams traded field goals and Pittsburgh led 24-20 early in the fourth when the Browns‘ special teams caught two huge breaks - the kind that always seemed to go against them in Three Rivers Stadium. First, the Steelers returned McNeil’s favor by fumbling a punt that the Browns recovered at the Pittsburgh 35.

Then, three plays later, a missed 43-yard field goal by Matt Bahr was wiped out on a running-into-the-kicker penalty that gave Cleveland a first down. Three plays after that, Earnest Byner exploded up the middle for a four-yard touchdown run to give the Browns a 27-24 lead with 8:35 to play.

They were poised to tack on some insurance points with just under five minutes left, but Bahr somehow missed a 24-yard field goal after making 40 straight from inside 30 yards. High above the field in the press box, Pete Franklin wondered aloud if the building truly was haunted.

Meanwhile, Browns’ fans rolled their eyes and covered their faces. They’d seen this before, and they hunkered down for the inevitable, painful conclusion.

Pittsburgh followed the script, driving to the Browns‘ 35 with 1:38 to play, already within range for dependable kicker Gary Anderson to attempt a game-tying field goal.

Then came perhaps the most bizarre playcall in Steeler history. On second down, quarterback Mark Malone awkwardly ran an option play and fumbled on a hit by Browns‘ lineman Sam Clancy. Pittsburgh running back Ernest Jackson scooped up the fumble and ran two yards, then Clay Matthews stripped the football from *him*.

This time, Browns‘ safety Chris Rockins recovered at the Cleveland 29. After a replay review, the play stood, and the Browns had the football with 90 seconds left. They weren’t out of the woods yet, though. On second down, the Browns crossed up Pittsburgh with a 38-yard pass from Bernie Kosar to Reggie Langhorne that allowed them to run the clock out.

The impossible had happened. After 16 years of agony, at 4:12 p.m. on October 5, 1986, The Jinx was over.

The Browns had gone down to Three Rivers and finally beat those finks.

This is the fifth in a series of articles celebrating the 25th anniversary of the amazing Cleveland sports calendar year of 1986

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