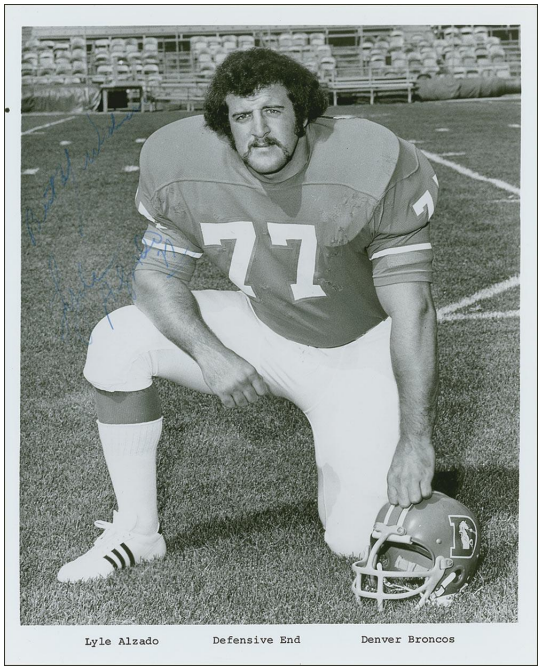

1979, 1980, and 1981. Is it really thirty years ago?

Does it seem so long ago that…

In world news:

Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Tehran, Iran after nearly 15 years of exile? The move set in motion the Iranian hostage crisis.

Saddam Hussein rose to power in Iraq, after his predecessor “resigned”?

Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher ascended to the leadership of the United States and Great Britain?

Reagan nominated the first woman to the US Supreme Court- Sandra Day O'Connor?

Reagan was shot?

East Germans were still prevented from fleeing to the west by the guarded and fortified Berlin Wall?

Former Beatle John Lennon was shot and killed in New York City, just as he was publicly emerging from several years of lying low and “Watching the Wheels”?

Mount St Helens erupted in Washington?

I**n entertainment**:

Michael Jackson broke through as a solo pop star, with the release of his album Off the Wall?

Eleven fans were killed during a crowd crush for unreserved seats before The Who concert in Cincinnati? The band was performing a dress rehearsal of *Eminence Front*, and the crowd outside the facility thought the concert was starting.

The video game Pac Man was released?

In sports:

The young US hockey team shocked the seasoned

Soviet team in the medal round of the 1980 Winter Olympics in the “Miracle on Ice” in Lake Placid? It was during a time of Cold War tension. They went on to defeat Finland for the gold. Speedskater Eric Heiden was another hero.

US president Jimmy Carter issued a US boycott of the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow, and instituted the military draft registration, in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan? The Soviets would return the gesture in 1984, boycotting the LA games.

Major League Baseball resumed from a strike with the All-Star Game in Cleveland's Municipal Stadium?

Yeah… thirty years was a loooong time ago.

Similarities to today are interesting, though. Back then, Chrysler was bailed out with government loan guarantees- a foreshadowing of present-day auto and bank bailouts. Also, the West carefully monitored an emerging nuclear bully in the Middle East that promised to destroy Israel (today, it is Iran. Then, it was Iraq. The Israeli Air Force would take proactive measures to destroy their nuclear reactor).

Hopefully, another similarity between today and that era is the Browns emerging as a contender after a stretch of bad football (yeah, I know- that team actually did have a quarterback… did I just say that out loud? In fairness, Brian Sipe didn't turn into Brian Sipe overnight...)

The Kardiac Kids of 1980 boasted the likes of Sipe, Newsome, Dieken, Darden , Bolton… well here, have a listen for yourself . The player whom some considered the emotional heart and soul of that team was defensive end Lyle Alzado.

Alzado had arrived in a deal with the Denver Broncos prior to the previous season. Along with the newly-reacquired Jack Gregory, he was to solidify the defensive end position for the Browns. That team that had a potent offense, but no pass rush to speak of. Alzado volunteered

to switch from the left side to the right- this fit what the team needed, and he enjoyed a fine season despite playing much of the time with a sprained knee.

Alzado was not only a leader on the field (earning league honors as a player), but also in the locker room. He accepted a role as a go-to source for the media. He constantly challenged teammates to try harder. He dared teammates and fans alike to believe. He had no patience for pessimism. Or whining.

Oh, and the summer before the Browns acquired Alzado? He took on heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali in an eight-round boxing match at Mile High Stadium in Denver. (He'd been a Gold Gloves champion in his youth). Observers noted that while he lost to the freshly-retired Ali (of course), he did not embarrass himself. He employed some of Ali's own 'rope-a-dope', and a couple of times he actually bear-hugged the champ and carried him from away from the ropes! This bout was held during a contentious contract negotiation with the Broncos, and Alzado began to wonder aloud if he should pursue a professional boxing career. The Denver front office was comprised of old-school football men- and anything short of a full commitment to the team was unacceptable. This prompted the deal to the Browns, for a modest return of draft picks.

Browns head coach Sam Rutigliano had been an assistant coach in Denver when they had drafted him.

While with the Browns, however, Alzado also was a loose cannon. As a carryover from his Bronco days, he was prone to wild and abrupt mood swings. His compassionate side was often on full display while he was assisting youth charities. But with NFL opponents? Or even with teammates? He was liable to be extremely violent and out of control. And unpredictable: he was known to sneak back onto the field after being told to stay out of a game due to injury. And after the gut-wrenching loss to the Oakland Raiders in the playoffs in 1980, a rumor circulated that Brian Sipe changed the play call from a run to a pass just prior to the fateful Raiders interception in the end zone (Red-Right 88). Rutigliano has maintained the call was for a pass. The source of the rumor has been attributed by some to Lyle Alzado.

His personal life was reported to be shrouded in a cloud of domestic violence and the neglect of his young son. (His ex-wife recounted multiple times when officers showed up at their house. Alzado greeted them calmly, and the visits “always” ended with the player signing autographs

for them.) She spent time in the hospital as a result of the abuse. He had allowed that his own father had been a heavy drinking street fighter in New York City, and had left their family when Lyle was in high school.

Nobody from the Browns claims to really have known at the time that Alzado was a heavy anabolic steroid user (also human growth hormone, which was harvested from cadavers).Even his roommate, Jerry Sherk. Later in life, he admitted using oral steroids back to his junior year at tiny Yankton College (today, a converted correctional facility) in South Dakota. Over the years, he switched to the injected form (never administered in the locker room, and sometimes assisted by his wife). At one point, Alzado mentioned that he'd spent $30,000 per year, in gyms around the country, for steroids. Later in his career, teammates would joke about the “baseball” in his pocket- an enlarged area where he continually stuck himself. He said he distributed steroids to Browns players, who took them at their homes.

In the mid 1980s,steroids were very common. They were available by prescription as a healing aid. I recall one of my roommates in college. He was a wrestler, and began taking oral doses after they'd been offered to him. Not only was he not a high-profile athlete- our wrestling program was only a club sport!

As is common with users, Alzado was emotionally addicted to steroids. The effect has been compared to anorexics, only instead of fearing looking big, steroid addicts fear looking smaller. They also were Alzado's ticket to the NFL, and to quit using meant quitting the pro football life which was his identity. Teams tested for steroids, but players easily passed while using. And there was no test for HgH.

Alzado's 1981 season was hampered by injuries, and the Browns traded the veteran to the Oakland Raiders (a rival of the Broncos) for an eighth round draft pick. He was insulted at the paltry return. Raiders coach Tom Flores has chronicled the low ebb of Alzado's psyche at the time. He showed confidence in the player, and was rewarded with a classic Raider reclamation project. Alzado helped the newly-moved Los Angeles Raiders to a Super Bowl victory in 1983. Raider roommate Howie Long and his other teammates parroted the comments Alzado's Browns teammates had made, years earlier. Alzado was mercurial and unpredictable. Long called him “Three-Mile Lyle”, after the nuclear facility which had recently melted down. Alzado suffered an Achilles injury in 1984, and retired from football. A high-profile comeback was attempted in 1990, at age 41. Alzado was off the steroids, and he surrounded himself with physical trainers, dieticians and herbal specialists. He played in one exhibition game before a knee injury sidelined him for good.

The wild Alzado was highly camera-friendly , appearing in several television commercials , shows, and movies. He was a sought-after interview , and Johnny Carson loved him. Lyle Alzado died from brain cancer in 1992, before making a passionate, public appeal to eliminate steroid use. He was convinced the drugs were the cause of his terminal condition. Doctors maintained that while steroids could cause such complications as liver and kidney damage, they had never been identified as a cause of brain cancer.

Video profile of Alzado

Start at 5:10 for some footage of #77 of the Browns.

Start at 3:30- Alzado gets rolled up on a bit in a game- keep watching for a Thom Darden highlight before some more footage of Alzado Also, President Ford with Modell.

Thank you for reading.