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# Day of the Dawg

*A Football Memoir*

**Hanford Dixon**

**with Randy Nyerges**

Gray & Company, Publishers

*Cleveland*

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To my parents, kids, and Bud Holmes

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Chapter One

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## Dawn of the Dawgs

The heat and humidity were stifling. Who could believe that just five months Day of the Dawg: A Football Memoir ago these same Lake Erie breezes, now vainly attempting to spread some relief from the eye-stinging sweat, callously dumped mountains of snow on these very grounds?

It was training camp for the 1984 Cleveland Browns. My fourth year in the NFL already.

We had just missed the playoffs the year before. We slugged out a victory over the goddamn Pittsburgh Steelers in the final game of the 1983 Day of the Dawg: A Football Memoir season, featuring a Jack Lambert ejection as Day of the Dawg: A Football Memoir he clobbered Brian Sipe on the sideline right in front of our bench. Maybe he was trying to even the score for Joe “Turkey” Jones’s backflip pile-driving of Terry Bradshaw in 1976. While a victory over the Steelers is Day of the Dawg: A Football Memoir always sweet, we then got the bad news that we had missed the playoffs on a tiebreaker.

Brian had been lured away by a pile of Donald Trump cash to the New Jersey Generals of the United States Football League. Day of the Dawg: A Football Memoir Southern Cal golden boy Paul McDonald, who had patiently caddied for Brian for four years, put down his clipboard, untangled his headset from his Paul McCartney hairdo and took the helm. Terry Nugent and Tom Flick competed for the backup spots. They had some fine wide receivers to throw to as well.

The Browns’ defense over the previous few years had had some issues with pressuring the quarterback. And as we scrimmaged that day, McDonald and company were rifling the ball through the thick August air with ease. I called out to our defensive linemen to get some pressure on them. Of Day of the Dawg: A Football Memoir course, we didn’t hit quarterbacks during practice—too many dollars and blow-dried hairstyles were at stake. But we needed Day of the Dawg: A Football Memoir to get on those guys. We needed to get into their heads. In the NFL, an ordinary quarterback can look pretty good if he gets enough time to throw. And a good quarterback can become very ordinary Day of the Dawg: A Football Memoir if someone like a snarling Mark Gastineau is in his face sucking the air out of the quarterback’s nose.

I quickly flashed back Day of the Dawg: A Football Memoir to my boyhood days in Theodore, Alabama. I remembered seeing a dog chase a cat down Simpson Lane, the dirt road that led to my house. “Look, guys,” I told the defensive linemen between plays, “if you can’t get at these guys, then what the hell are Bradshit and Fouts going to do to us? (Never mind that Bradshaw had just Day of the Dawg: A Football Memoir retired.) Think of the QB like he’s a cat, and you’re a dog. The dog needs to catch the cat.”

We lined up for another play.

“He’s the cat, you’re the dog. Don’t let him get away,” I shouted as I retreated to my right cornerback position. Then to help them remember, I let out a few barks. We ran the play, and

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then before the next play, I let out a few more barks. Pretty soon, it was a matter of routine. It was to let the linemen know they were like dogs, and they were to catch the cat.

Fans regularly attend preseason practice there at Lakeland Community College in Kirtland, Ohio, about a half-hour's drive east of Cleveland. One of the first things I noticed after my arrival in Cleveland in 1981 was how crazy and obsessive Cleveland Browns fans are. Yes, other teams have very strong and loyal fan bases across the country, but here in Cleveland the fans are just sheer nuts. The Browns dominated the local sports scene. They had dominated the NFL in the 1950s, and because of the many lean years by the Cleveland Indians and, later on, the Cleveland Cavaliers, Cleveland was a football city first and foremost.

It didn't take long for the fans attending practice to start barking as well. We'd line up for a play, I'd let out a few barks and the fans, sometimes thousands in attendance, began barking too. This kept on going and going throughout the couple of weeks that practices were open to the public.

Frank Minnifield had come to us from the USFL's Arizona Wranglers. He missed most of camp as legal entanglements from his transition from the Wranglers to the Browns were worked out. That probably was a good thing, too, since Frank had just played in the USFL title game a few weeks prior and was nursing an arch strain. At 5-9 and 185 pounds, Frank was not a big guy. He blew out his knee during his rookie year in the USFL. But he had guile. Gallons of it. And with his 4.4 speed, he was just a terrific one-on-one defender who could fly with the fleetest.

The barking at practice continued during training camp. The fans were really getting into it. A year passed, and just before the 1985 season, I got word that someone in the Browns' front office wanted to see me. It's not unusual to be called into the coach's office here and there, especially for a smartass troublemaker like me, but rarely do the front office Day of the Dawg: A Football Memoir people call you in. I stopped by this administrator's office, and, being the businessman that he was, he got right down to business.

"Hanford," he told me, "all this stuff about dogs and barking and everything is a Day of the Dawg: A Football Memoir distraction. We're not the Cleveland Dogs. We're the Cleveland Browns. We don't have a logo on our helmets, and we're not about to. And we already have a mascot."

Yeah. A sexually ambiguous, pointy-eared fairy in a stocking cap. Over the years, I'm sure it struck Day of the Dawg: A Football Memoir terror into the hearts of elf-phobics like Dick Butkus, Chuck "Concrete Charlie" Bednarik, and Mean Joe Greene. Even Browns owner Art Modell hated that emblem and actually purged it from official use Day of the Dawg: A Football Memoir in the late 1960s. But since there was nothing to replace it, it still was the closest thing the Day of the Dawg: A Football Memoir Browns had to a mascot.

"Well," I said, "I think it's kind of taken off on its own. And hey, the fans like it."

No one on the coaching staff seemed to have a problem with it. Just the pointy heads in the front office. Why would they consider it an on-field distraction if the coaches had no problem

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with it?

“I know,” the administrator said. “But we need you to just concentrate on football. That’s what we pay you for, not to lead some dog circus.”

I left the meeting a bit stunned. This barking thing was stirring our defense and giving the fans something to join in with us. I told Frank about the meeting, and he had one of Day of the Dawg: A Football Memoir his usual devious solutions.

“Get your ass over to my apartment, Hanford. We’ll take care Day of the Dawg: A Football Memoir of this.”

I headed over to Frank’s apartment after practice one Day of the Dawg: A Football Memoir day, just before our opening exhibition game of the 1985 season, against the goddamn Steelers. Frank rolled out a long blank banner and grabbed a paintbrush. We painted “Dog Pound.”

“What are we going to do with that?” I asked as Michelangelofield finished his masterpiece.

“We’re going to hang this in front of the bleachers before the Steelers game. We’re going to call it the Dog Pound.” Yes, we originally spelled it Day of the Dawg: A Football Memoir correctly, but the “Dawg” moniker evolved in the media. The first mention of the dog (still grammatically proper) phenomenon appeared in *The Cleveland Plain Dealer* on September 25, 1984.

Cleveland Stadium was a cavernous, two-deck, 80,000-plus- seat stadium built on a landfill. Originally the stadium was going to hold 100,000 seats, but cost overruns quickly required some changes, and engineers cut out 20,000 seats. Still, it was big. It was built to accommodate almost any event, from football to baseball to track, boxing, you name it. It was once even modified for a motocross event. For baseball, the center-field wall was a steroidious 470 feet away, with lower-deck box seats descending to field level. That might be OK for baseball, but that created many sight obstructions for football. Posts and pillars supported a roof, but again those posts obstructed the view for many otherwise good seats in both decks. On the east end of the stadium was a separate section made up of benches—the bleachers. Even though the view was unobstructed, these were definitely the cheap seats. Well into the 1970s, you could watch a Cleveland Indians game from the bleachers for 50 cents. These seats were often Day of the Dawg: A Football Memoir the last to be sold, and in the ’60s and ’70s, you would often find Day of the Dawg: A Football Memoir it filled with Steelers fans when they were in town. Can you Day of the Dawg: A Football Memoir imagine that Day of the Dawg: A Football Memoir now? The Dawg Pound filled with Steelers fans? It was in the bleachers where the most vocal, crazy, and, yes, intoxicated fans could be found.

The locker rooms, especially for the visiting team, were cramped and crude. In the visitors’ locker room, players hung their clothes on rusty nails hammered in the concrete brick wall. The shower, which often featured no hot water, flooded the coaches’ office. Ernest Givins of the Houston Oilers called it a “rat hole.” Yes, but it was our rat hole.

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Years later, when proposals were being considered to build a new stadium on the site, some suggested the new digs should have a dome. But that would have turned The Dawg Pound into The Poodle Parlor. That's not the way we do things in Cleveland. Football wasn't meant to be played in a sterile, climate-controlled environment on a cushy carpet with tofu and soybeans sold at the concession stand. It was meant to be played on sandy mud painted green, with blinding rain, snow, and razor-like winds whipping in off Lake Erie cutting into your icicle-dripped face.

## Day Of The Dawg A Football Memoir

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