

Chapter 1

Discovering the Beautiful Game

My first sports memories are from Cleveland, Ohio. I spent time there with my Aunt Rubye and her husband Uncle Clem who cared for me while my mother finished college.

Clem loved the Cleveland Browns. He had season tickets and on Sunday, we'd bundle up and take the trains across town to the cold, cavernous, mausoleum that was Cleveland Municipal Stadium. Those were the glory days of the Browns and everyone loved Hall of Fame running back Jim Brown.

Like any kid from Cleveland, I wanted to grow up and be the second coming of Jim Brown. Two other players became my personal favorites – legendary Hall of Fame kicker Lou Groza and wide receiver / punter Gary Collins.

Clem gave me a Lou Groza set with a helmet, football and kicking tee for Christmas when I was eight. There weren't always other kids around to hang out with so I started kicking the football. Hours passed with me setting up the tee and kicking the ball from one end of the driveway to the other.

Kick it long; kick it high; or drop it on a spot. Long before broadcasters made the coffin corner punt fashionable, there were chalk squares on the pavement or tin cans (made of real tin) for my targets.

In the fall of 1968, I moved to Winter Park, Florida, to live with my mother and grandparents. Florida was only a thousand miles away from Cleveland but it was like moving to another planet.

There was a distinct culture shock going from the friendly integrated Northern suburbs to the segregated South. Somehow, on my previous trips to Florida, the white and colored restrooms and water fountains didn't really register with me.

Now that Florida was home, it meant learning that being black wasn't like it was in Cleveland. People quietly informed that white people were not to be trusted. Be careful. Don't argue. Be respectful. Even among black adults, there was a sense of formality that felt so much different, so much more restrictive than living in an Ohio suburb.

In the midst of that change, the Civil Rights movement caused dramatic changes in the perception people had of race and politics. Television brought shocking images of the civil rights struggle into the living room. Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy died that year at the hands of assassins. There was a sense of despair from some of the older people in the black community but new voices urged change forward.

Florida sports back then consisted of football and baseball. Spring and summer was baseball season and the fall and winter, football season. Soccer didn't exist. I loved baseball but sometimes it bored me to tears because there