

# Pittsburgh: Sports City

By Rob Ruck

**Sport, as much as steel,** casts an indelible image of Pittsburgh to the world. For over a century, Pittsburghers have used it to tell a story about who they are. In that tale, sport reflects the sacrifice and commitment, strength and spirit many identify with Pittsburgh itself. It's about working hard and playing harder, losing but persevering, and in the end, becoming the City of Champions.



Billy Conn's  
Light-Heavyweight  
Championship belt.



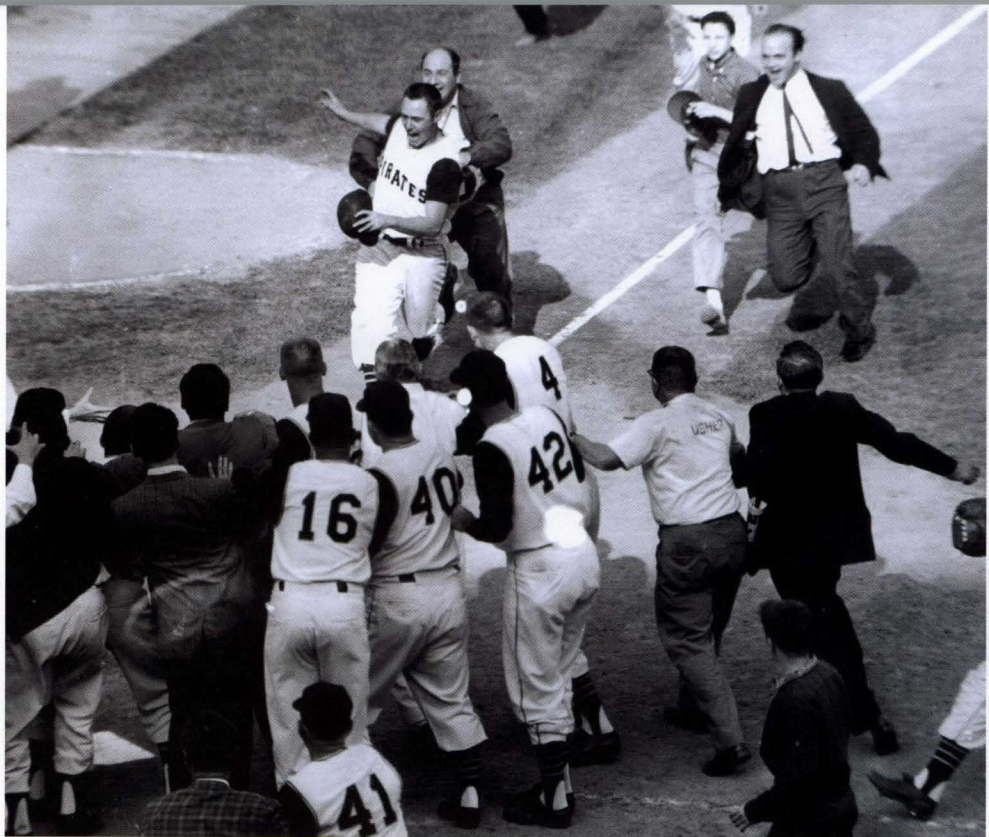


Courtesy Franco Harris

Shoes worn by Franco Harris during his "Immaculate Reception," December 23, 1972.

No city of comparable size achieved such success in 20th century American sport, especially at the professional level. The Pirates, Crawfords, Grays, Steelers, and Penguins won a score of championships while creating some of sport's most unforgettable icons and epiphanies: Honus Wagner scooping up dirt and pebbles along with the ball from his position at shortstop; Josh Gibson swatting a ball farther than anyone ever had seen before; Bill Mazeroski rounding third, leaping into the air, and heading for home to end the 1960 World Series; Roberto Clemente unleashing a throw from right field; Franco Harris catching a football off his shoestrings in the 1972 playoffs. And Art Rooney, rumples and unfazed, puffing on a cigar, watching it all happen.

During the 1920s and '30s, Pittsburgh was one of the only cities with three powerful college football teams: Pitt, Carnegie Tech, and Duquesne. Pitt under Jock Sutherland continued Pop Warner's tradition of winning national championships, while Tech beat Notre



AP World Wide Photos

Bill Mazeroski approaches home plate after his home run that won the 1960 World Series.

Dame twice and Duquesne defeated Miami in the Orange Bowl. Most of these college players came from Western Pennsylvania, where high school football became part of the community bedrock.

The region's boxing champions – from Garfield's Harry Greb and Monaca's Teddy Yarusz to Lawrenceville's Fritzie Zivic and East Liberty's Billy Conn – underscored the city's bruising athletic persona during the 1930s and '40s, when as sportswriter Roy McHugh has put it, Pittsburgh was a fight town. During these years, the Pittsburgh Crawfords and Homestead Grays also made the city the crossroads of black baseball in the Americas.

By the 1970s, Pittsburgh reigned as the City of Champions. Though basic industry was collapsing around it, the city experienced a charmed athletic decade. The Pirates came from behind to win the 1971 and 1979 World Series, the University of Pittsburgh garnered a national football championship in 1976, and the Steelers triumphed in an unprecedented four Super Bowls. From the South Side to the pages of *The New Yorker*, observers remarked on the comfortably multi-racial nature of Pittsburgh's teams. Others noted the string of homegrown Hall-of-Fame quarterbacks: Johnny Unitas, Joe Namath, Joe Montana, Jim Kelly, and Dan Marino. Sport became Pittsburgh's persona: tough, hardworking, and resilient.

By then, most people identified Pittsburgh sport with its professional teams. But the roots of that sporting excellence reached back to the fertile soil of the sandlots that dotted Western Pennsylvania's





One of the thousands of games played by Pittsburgh's sandlot teams in the early 20th century.

working-class and black neighborhoods early in the 20th century. On those sandlots, Pittsburghers created a sporting life of their own that did more than plant the seeds for the city's emergence as a citadel of professional sport. That sporting life helped several generations come to terms with their lives in Pittsburgh.

Even more remarkably, the city's record of unrivalled achievement has been largely homegrown. Pittsburgh sport came mostly from Pittsburgh and Pittsburghers. Unlike the contemporary sporting story of cities able to import expensive, play-for-hire warriors, Pittsburgh's greatest sporting figures have either been natives of the area or have become lifelong Pittsburghers.

Historically, much of the impetus for organizing the city's sporting life came from within the neighborhoods. From McKees Rocks to McKeesport, from Beltzhoover to Bellevue, boys and men and girls and women organized themselves into teams and leagues, boxed in neighborhood fight clubs, and participated in multi-sport athletic clubs. They won Olympic, national, and international championships in rowing, swimming, boxing, running, and basketball. Their efforts built three of sport's legendary franchises – the

Homestead Grays, the Pittsburgh Crawfords, and the Pittsburgh Steelers – and created hundreds of lesser-known sandlot baseball, football, soccer, and basketball teams.

These clubs – the McKees Rocks Rangers, the Garfield Eagles, West View, the Loendis, the Harmarville Hurricanes – left their mark on opponents' bodies and their own neighborhoods' psyches. Though they often struggled, sacrificed, and lost, these athletes persevered and triumphed in the end, to the greater glory of themselves, their neighborhoods, and their city. As rugged and diverse as the city itself, these athletes and teams showed off Pittsburgh to the world, and just as importantly, to Pittsburghers themselves.

Their own commitments of resources, energy, and hope have made Pittsburghers passionate about sport, but that was not the only reason for their ardor. In sport, more than most aspects of life, Pittsburghers encountered each other on equal footing. When the city's teams or heroes faced those from afar, sport allowed all of Pittsburgh to align on the same side. If sport has provided generations of immigrants to the United States with a means to become Americans, it has allowed many a way to become a part of Pittsburgh.



For African Americans and other newcomers – especially those arriving from Southern and Eastern Europe between the 1880s and World War I – sport played an especially powerful role. Fostering cohesion and bolstering identity within groups of people, sport promoted interaction across racial, ethnic, and class lines. Pittsburghers – and the whole tri-state region – identified with their teams and united behind them. All Pittsburghers can revel in their athletic accomplishments.

It's a history unlike that of any city in the United States. ⚙

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Pittsburgh Steelers

Chuck Noll is carried off the field following the Steelers 1972 Divisional Championship.



Game ball from Duquesne University's 1937 Orange Bowl game.

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