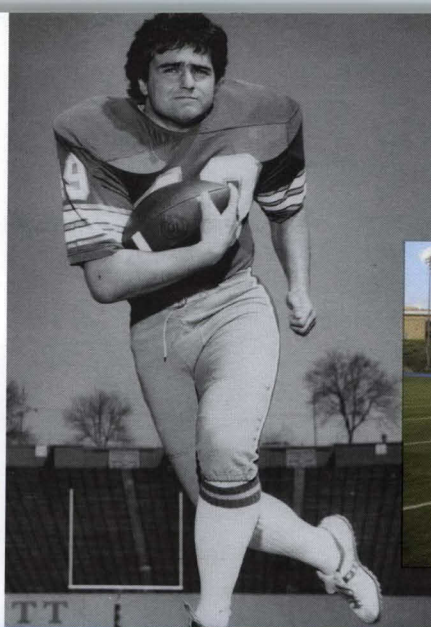


For the Fun of the Game

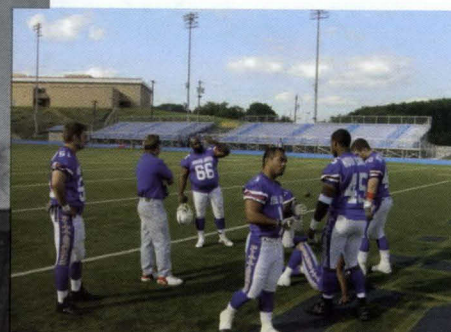
Sandlot and Semi-Pro

By Eric Poole





Edward Brosky



author

The Pittsburgh Colts warm up on the field at East Allegheny High School before a 2004 game.

The Steelers played at Forbes Field in the 1950s.

Pittsburgh Steelers

O

n a sunny afternoon in July 2000, Edward Brosky stood in front of the Professional Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio.

Perhaps he had dreamed of standing on those steps three decades earlier when Johnny Majors recruited him from Chartiers Valley High School to play running back for the University of Pittsburgh, but Brosky never rose higher than second on the Panthers' depth chart.

A guy named Tony Dorsett saw to that.

Dorsett won the Heisman Trophy in 1976, when he and Brosky were both seniors, and went on to a successful career with the Dallas Cowboys and Denver Broncos. He was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1994.

Brosky made it to Canton six years later but could only still dream of joining the Professional Hall – he was here to enter the American Football Association Semi-Pro Football Hall of Fame, which honors minor league and semi-pro players.

Today, Brosky owns and coaches the Pittsburgh Colts, which has played on-and-off for more than a quarter century in the North American Football League's Great Lakes Region. He founded them in the 1970s; the team played throughout the Middle Atlantic States, as did another local team, the WolfPAK, which boasted Joe Gilliam at quarterback. Today, the Colts play their home games at East Allegheny High School in North Versailles.



The Garfield Eagles, from Pittsburgh's East End, became the region's premier black football team in their two decades of play. They were sometimes called "the Homestead Grays of football," a nod to that dominant, popular black baseball team. The Eagles, seen here in 1943, went undefeated in 1931 and 1932.

Even though he had played for the Colts and the Pittsburgh Ironmen after graduating from Pitt, it was Brosky's coaching record that put him in the AFA Hall of Fame. He won titles in an alphabet soup of leagues in 1981, 1982, 1986, 1998, and 1999.

The Colts changed their name for a while – becoming the Carnegie Bulldogs in 1984 – and joined the Greater Pittsburgh Football League. By then, that regional league (formed in the 1940s) had grown to include the Pittsburgh Cubs, Pittsburgh Stealers (at Western Penitentiary), Butler Eagles, 15th Ward (Hazelwood) Volunteers, South Side Sooners, East End (Homewood) Raiders, Springfield Bulldogs, Oakland Vikings, and Bloomfield Rams (more on them later). Despite so many members, the league would not last the decade, folding after the 1989 season.

Under Brosky's coaching, the Bulldogs reached the GPFL championship game in 1984 and '85 but lost, respectively, to the Penn Hills Titans and Sto-Rox Rangers.

A year later, his team was back in the title game, this time against the North Side Express. It appeared that history would repeat itself as the Express took a 21-7 lead after the first quarter. The Bulldogs, however, chipped away at the lead and tied the score by the end of regulation. Brosky, who coached

and played fullback during the game, saw his team win on a 28-yard field goal in double overtime.

"That was one of the most physically draining games I've ever been in," he recalled. "We started the game at 7:30 and it wasn't over until 20 after 12. I think it went down as one of the longest games in GPFL history as well as one of the most exciting."

During his semi-pro/sandlot career as a player and coach, Brosky has crossed paths with a number of athletes who had once been professional players: NFL Pro Bowler Carlton Haselrig, who was the Mid-Atlantic League MVP in 1998; former Steelers' quarterback Joe Gilliam; and ex-Pitt quarterbacks Tommy Yewcic and Darnell Dinkins.

Since 1997, Brosky's team is once again called the Colts. He describes his teams as being about equal in talent to a good small college team, in part because his rosters include many players from that level.

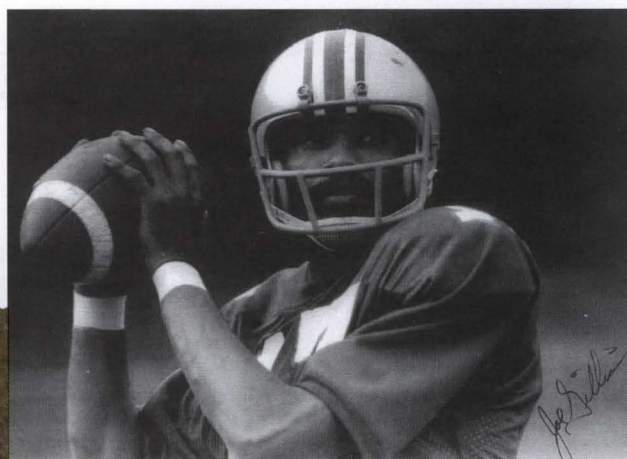
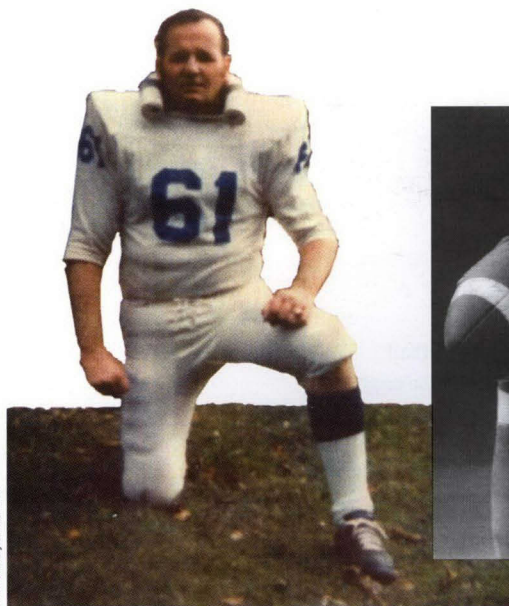
"You got some players who maybe were converted linebackers, or running backs who played in colleges and we made them offensive linemen," said Brosky. "Skilled high school linemen, again, who didn't have the size to play at the major college level, but definitely had the desire, they had the intelligence and they also had the hands and feet to play at this level."

As the owner of a small operation, Brosky is a combination coach, promoter, publicist, and general manager. He admits that means a lot of work for no money and little recognition, a reality that might result in the ultimate demise of semi-pro football in the region. But for Brosky, success and failure in football isn't a matter of a paycheck, or even wins and losses.

"It comes down to a person's self-perception and the picture they want people to see," he says. "No, this isn't professional football. There's no way it could be, because there isn't the money there. But you can still represent professional standards without having that financial backing."

Tom Averell has been involved in regional semi-pro football, first as a player and now as an organizer, for a generation. Here, he is pictured in his Washington General's uniform in 1978.

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Joe Gilliam, the first black quarterback to start for the Steelers, played for a number of minor league teams such as the Pittsburgh Colts, after being released by the Steelers in 1976.

The first documented professional football player, according to the Professional Football Researchers Association, is believed to be William "Pudge" Heffelfinger, who received \$500 in 1892 to play for the Allegheny Athletic Association against the Pittsburgh Athletic Club. Proof of the payment was discovered when an AAA account ledger surfaced in the early 1960s, providing a wealth of information to football historians. It revealed that Heffelfinger indeed was paid to play for the Allegheny Athletic Association on November 12, 1892. Further, a second player, Sport Donnelly, was paid \$250.

Even after the discovery of the ledger, some questioned the claim, in part because of Heffelfinger's denials, which themselves had more to do with his aspirations of coaching college football. At the time, professional sports of all types had an unsavory reputation. Because he knew he would effectively be blackballed from coaching college football if it were revealed, Heffelfinger repeatedly denied that any cash payments were made.

Twenty years later, another man who sometimes operated on the fringes of social convention – but, unlike Pudge Heffelfinger, had little compunction about it – got involved in semi-pro and sandlot football. Art Rooney counted Cumberland Posey, owner of the Negro National League baseball's Pittsburgh Crawfords, among his friends; this at a time when sports were segregated. Dan Rooney, who succeeded his father as president of the Pittsburgh Steelers before retiring in 2003, said Art Rooney would loan Posey money to meet operating expenses, then refuse repayment of the loan.

Before becoming a football promoter and NFL team owner, Art Rooney's forays into athletics included boxing, a sport in which he was a talented amateur. In a 1997 interview, Dan Rooney said his dad's football games were sometimes as violent as his boxing matches.

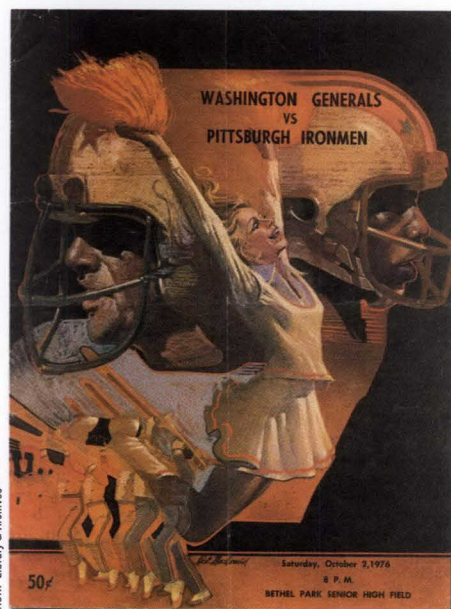
"My mother always said that they would always brag about how good they were," said Dan. "She always told us that they never lost a game, because if they were losing a game in the fourth quarter, they started a fight and therefore, the game would end and they could say, 'We didn't lose.'"

Art Rooney owned and promoted several teams, many of which were sponsored by North Side businesses like Majestic Radios (and went by that name). There also were the Rooney Reds and the Hope Harveys. Often, he would play on the teams along with brothers Dan and Jim.

"They played in Wheeling, they played in Morgantown, they played in Erie," recalled Dan Rooney. "Just totally surrounded the area with their teams."

Art Rooney's involvement with sandlot or amateur teams was, in Dan's opinion, one reason why the National Football League awarded Art the Pittsburgh franchise in 1933, the year son Dan was born. It didn't hurt that, in those Depression years, Art was also able to pay the league's entry fee.

Two decades later, in the fall of 1955, Dan Rooney was driving down West Liberty Avenue toward the Liberty Tubes with his father in the passenger seat and Steelers coach Walt Kiesling in back. At a red light, they saw a familiar face behind the wheel of a car next to them. The guy in the car was John Unitas, who Kiesling had cut from the Steelers a few months earlier. Dan Rooney knew Unitas; the two had both been quarterbacks for their Catholic high school teams, Rooney at North Catholic, Unitas at St. Justin's. As seniors, Rooney was second-team for the All-Pittsburgh Diocese. Unitas was first-team.



While semi-pro football organizations lack the budgets of their NFL peers, small touches like game programs (this one from 1976) help them present a professional image to the community.

"I speeded up and got beside him," said Dan Rooney. "My father rolled down the window and said, 'I'm Art Rooney.' He said, 'I know who you are.' I waved to him and my father said, 'I wish you all the luck; I hope you get picked up and you become a star in the National Football League.'"

At the time "the Chief" said those words, the chance of his – and Jonny Unitas' – wish coming true appeared to be farfetched. After being cut by the Steelers, Unitas took a job as a laborer while waiting for a phone call from an NFL team. He worked on a construction crew as a "monkeyman," climbing onto heavy equipment – sometimes as high as 120 feet above the ground – and lubricating the machine's moving parts. He kept his skills sharp by playing for the Bloomfield Rams.

"I was just playing to keep my hand in the game," said Unitas in a 1997 interview (he passed away in 2002). "It sure wasn't for the money; we only made \$3 a game."

That certainly wasn't enough money to entice the former Louisville star to quit his day job. Still, Unitas dominated during his partial season (1955) on the Rams, which played their games at Arsenal Field in Lawrenceville. He would later equate the talent level he faced with Bloomfield as that of a pickup team, although there were some "excellent players and excellent guys."

The call he was waiting for came from the Baltimore Colts, who had lost a quarterback

to a broken leg. Within five years, Unitas had two NFL championship rings and was on his way to becoming one of the greatest quarterbacks ever to play the game.

Unitas' journey from monkeyman to Hall-of-Famer remains one of the great Cinderella stories in sports history, but even if the Colts hadn't called him, Unitas already had a second NFL chance set up.

"I was scheduled to go to Cleveland's camp the next year," he said.

At the time, the Browns were expecting a quarterback spot to open up with the expected retirement of Otto Graham after the 1955 season.

Had Baltimore not taken Unitas, he might have played instead for the Browns and lined up alongside Jim Brown, one of football's greatest running backs; it would have been a stunning combination.

Stories like those of Unitas are the exception. Likewise for Dave "Rooster" Fleming, who tried out for the Steelers out of high school; he ended up playing for the Homestead Ironmen before beginning a career with the Hamilton Tiger-Cats of the Canadian Football League. Most sandlot and semi-professional football players find that regional leagues are not a career but simply offer an opportunity to play the game into their adult years.

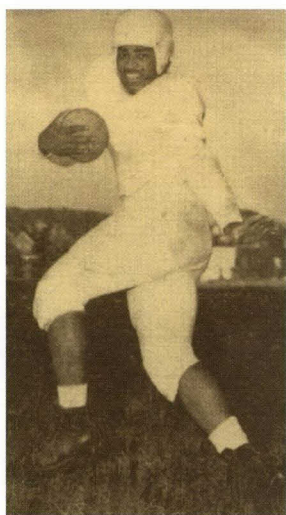
That's what drew state Sen. Jack Wagner and Mark Capuano, now Moon High School football coach, into the Greater Pittsburgh Football League. Both played in the 1970s, during what might have been considered the golden age of sandlot football in Western Pennsylvania.

Wagner, a Marine Corps veteran who was injured in combat during the Vietnam War, began his GPFL career in 1969.

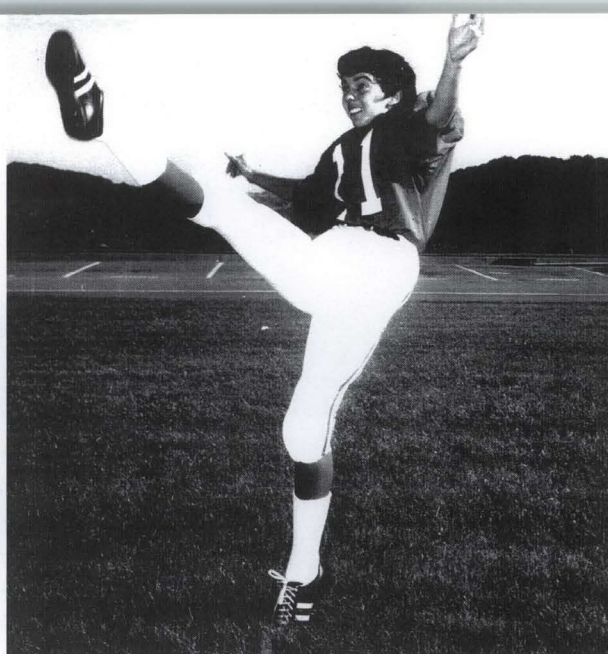
"My brother Pete and some of his buddies were playing for the East End Chiefs, which was a team over on Larimer Avenue," said Wagner in a 1997 interview. "Really, it was as good of sandlot ball as you would find anywhere in Western Pennsylvania."

Two years later, the Wagner brothers founded the Royals in their native South Hills. Jack Wagner was a 185-pound defensive end for the Royals, and eventually, the Beechview Bulls.

Before playing as a running back for the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Cleveland Browns, Charley Scales competed for the Duquesne Ironmen. After the pros, Scales coached the Pittsburgh Powderkegs, a women's pro football team.



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Gift of Charley Scales

Linda Hodge, Pittsburgh Powderkegs women's football team, 1971.

"Those games, amazingly, did get 500, 1,000 people to some of them, which I consider to be a heck of a crowd for a sandlot game," said Wagner. "Like I can remember the time the South Hills Royals played the East End Chiefs. We had a heck of a crowd for that game."

"You went to Hazelwood to play, both sidelines were generally filled with people."

Before joining the Sto-Rox Rangers in 1971, Capuano had aspirations of playing football at the highest level. As a stand-up defensive end at North Carolina State – Bill Cowher's alma mater – the Neville Island High School graduate was a two-time all Atlantic Coast Conference team selection and was voted outstanding defensive lineman in the 1969 Liberty Bowl.

Capuano was invited to Steelers' camp in 1969 as a 210-pound outside linebacker.

"When I tried out for the Steelers, it was outside linebacker and they had guys who were about 235, 240," he said in a 1997 interview. "Size was always a problem for me."

After being cut by the Steelers, Capuano got a job as a teacher at Moon, but decided to give his pro football dreams one last fling in 1970. He joined a team in the Continental Semi-Pro League that worked as a feeder system for NFL teams.

"What happens in these kind of leagues, you would get paid maybe \$150 a game, they wouldn't make a lot of guarantees," said Capuano.

When a teaching job promised by the Richmond team didn't materialize, he decided to head back to Moon and joined the Sto-Rox Rangers. He played for the Rangers until 1978.

"On Saturday, you would just go there and basically, you're dressing out of your car. When the game was over, you still had your equipment on, threw your stuff in the back of the trunk, kept your pants on, went down to some local tavern somewhere and celebrated a win or a loss."

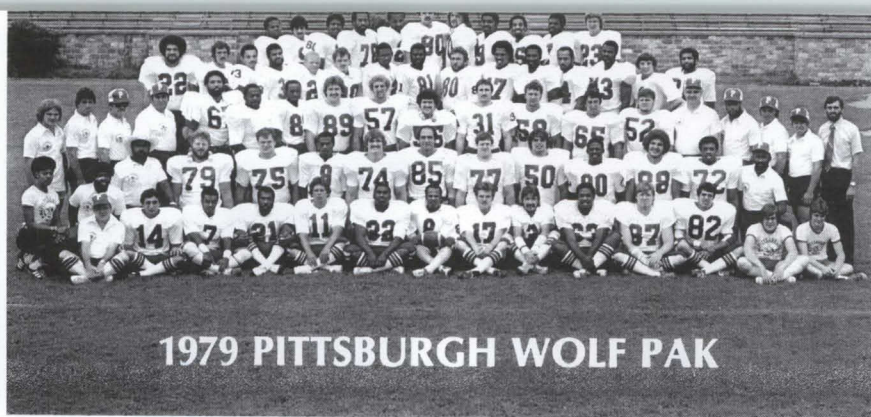
Capuano might have envisioned playing in Three Rivers Stadium while he was in the Steelers' camp; instead, he played home games in

the McKees Rocks Bottoms neighborhood near the Ohio River, and in Western Penitentiary. Until 1986, when construction of a new cell block covered the field, the prison had a football team called the Pittsburgh Stealers. (Spelling intentional!) Many of the players – including Capuano – who played in games at Western Pen, make the same remark: "They didn't play away games."

"You go in there and you'd get that stamp," said Capuano. "The guard was always saying, 'Make sure that doesn't wash off, because you're not getting out of there unless you got that stamp on your hand.' I thought he was kidding, but I'd always tape it to make sure it didn't wash off."

By the time he finished his GPFL playing career in 1978, Capuano had experienced a surreal brand of football. In addition to the games at Western Penitentiary, he also played against the Oakland Vikings at Frazier Field, a baseball outfield only 90 yards long. If a team ran for a long touchdown, they didn't get credit for the score. Instead, the offensive team got the ball at the 10-yard-line and had to punch it into the endzone again to get the points. (Coincidentally, the 90-yard football field has since been remade into the outfield of Dan Marino Field, named after one of pro football's all-time greats.)

Throughout these strange circumstances, Capuano grew to appreciate his teammates and opponents, who subjected themselves to



1979 PITTSBURGH WOLF PAK



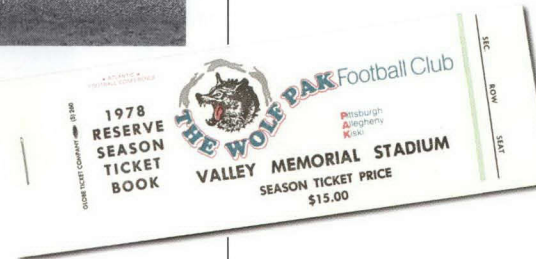
FIRST ROW: Head Trainer: Fred Orendi, Tom Nagy, Brian Peeks, Mike Jones, Mike Flannery, Keith Steward, Paul Murray, Tom Rickey, Dave Timpson, Mike Jackson, Ed Wojcik, Rip Odato, Ballboys: Jan & Dan

SECOND ROW: Trainers: Jan Casson and Curtis Chambers, Head Coach: Luther Palmer, Rusty Manfield, Leo Henne, Calvin Glover, Tim Fruehan, Tom Mirakos, Rege Becker, Jeff Langhans, Julius Foy, Bobby Schrantz, Ben Carter, Offensive Coordinator: Hubie Bryant

THIRD ROW: Equipment Manager: Dave Orendi, Trainer: Harry Orbin, Strength and Flexibility Coach: Bob Brucker, Offensive Line Coach: Joe Mallino, Ron Graham, Ernie Livingston, Ron Davis, Mike Kepico, Mike Miloser, Bobby Allen, Gary Bonn, Mark Amolik, Ron Latronica, Ed Walker, Defensive Line Coach: Mark Fruehan, Backfield Coach: Jesse Taylor, Defensive Backfield Coach: Al Fletcher, Trainer: Mike Mitas, Team Physician: Dr. Richard DiSanti

FOURTH ROW: Joe Herndon, Fred Doubl, Mike McCloud, Kevin Thompson, Kenny Scales, Ed Orendi, Clyde Howard, Jerrald Rose, Terry Edwards, Mike Mathis, Washington Alston, Bobby Hutton, Chuck Harper, Dave Havers, Ed Farmer

FIFTH ROW: Jerrold Howard, John Serrao, Clarence Forston, Tom Jackson, Wayne Jackson, Bobby Hood, Keith Rogers, David Jones, Mike Finch, Anvil Wallace, Randy Shook



the physical abuse of football for little or no remuneration.

"You're not getting any money for this," said Capuano. "Probably the greatness about that is just that guys are playing for the fun of the game. Think about that; guys just love to play, and that's wild."

Jack Wagner says that's culturally ingrained in Western Pennsylvania, an area where men worked in the mills and mines, but as children had played football in the streets and backyards.

"I think it says something about this area in terms of its love for football and the passion for the game. I mean, growing up, football was my life as a kid. I hate to say this, but football was more important than school."

"Football was something, it seemed like it was something we ate, slept and breathed. I think it has a whole lot to do with the work ethic of the people around here."

The people and teams mentioned here do not make up, by any means, a comprehensive list of those who participated in sandlot and semi-professional football in Western Pennsylvania. There were the Pitcairn Mohawks, who boasted Western Pennsylvania coaching legend Pete Antimarino, and players like John "Duke" Sumpter, a 1950s-era quarterback who many sandlot aficionados compared favorably with Unitas. Local fans will finally be able to learn many of their stories in the new Sports Museum. 🌟

All interviews for this story were conducted by Eric Poole. Interviews of Dan Rooney, Mark Capuano, and John Unitas were done in early 1997 for "Football's Fertile Crescent," which appeared in June and July of that year in the *Coraopolis Record* and *Carnegie Signal-Item* of the Gateway Publications weekly newspaper chain. Portions of the Ed Brosky interviews were done in 1997 for "Football's Fertile Crescent"; other interviews with Brosky have never before been published. Interviews with Sen. Jack Wagner in 1997 and '98 have never been published. Additional information was taken from the Professional Football Researchers' Association web site.

Eric Poole is a staff writer for the *Ellwood City Ledger*. He also has been a contributing writer for *Pittsburgh Sports Report*, *Rugby Magazine*, and *Coffin Corner*, the official publication of the Professional Football Researchers association. Poole is a three-time Golden Quill Award winner, including the 1999 sportswriting award for "Football's Fertile Crescent," a three-part series for Gateway Publications on sandlot and semi-professional football in southwestern Pennsylvania.



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