



THOMAS & KATHERINE DETRE LIBRARY & ARCHIVES TREASURES

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Johnny Blood and the 1937 Pittsburgh Pirates (football team)

There was a time when Pittsburgh's sports teams shared more than just team colors. When Art Rooney established his professional football franchise in 1933, he borrowed the name of the city's well-established baseball team, hoping the "Pirates" name would resonate with Western Pennsylvania residents.¹ With professional football a distant second to college football in popularity, Rooney's new team would face tough competition from Pittsburgh's three universities for the attention of fans and the local press.

The team's early years were marked by undistinguished players and a revolving door of head coaches. An image in the Taylor-Karcis family collection at the Detre Library and Archives at the Heinz History Center shows Rooney surrounded by his 1937 squad. The poster was donated by the family of John "Bull" Karcis (#64), the team's leading rusher for the season. A native of Monaca, Pennsylvania, Karcis had previously played for Carnegie Tech and the Brooklyn Dodgers football team. Weighing in at 225 pounds, "Bull" Karcis likely owed part of his success to his considerable size, which rivaled that of linemen of the day.² Karcis later coached the Detroit Lions before returning to Western Pennsylvania to coach high school football.

Johnny McNally (#15), seated next to Karcis in the image, served as the team's player-

coach. McNally played football under the name "Johnny Blood," a pseudonym he created when first trying out for a professional team, so he could retain his collegiate eligibility. He took inspiration from the Rudolph Valentino film *Blood and Sand* when devising his *nom de guerre*, which speaks to the dramatic flair he brought to life.³

Although the 33-year-old future Hall of Famer had put together a remarkable career, primarily as a halfback with Curly Lambeau's Green Bay Packers, McNally's off-the-field antics often overshadowed his accomplishments in the game. The unpredictable player (who inspired George Clooney's character in the film *Leatherheads*)⁴ was known for driving a car onto railroad tracks so he could stop a train he had missed and escaping a locked sixth-



1937 Pirates football team.

HHC Detre L&A, Taylor-Karcis Family Papers and
Photographs, 1889-1961, MSS 437.

Front Row—J. Gildea, Ed. Karpowich, J. Karcis, Coach John Blood, Pres. Arthur Rooney, Asst. Coach W. Kiesling, M. Basras, A. Niccolai, I. Weinstock.
Second Row—W. Holcomb, M. Cara, S. Smith, S. Zaninelli, C. Thompson, B. Haines, M. Fiske, G. Kakasic, B. Raborn, S. Sandberg.

Third Row—Trainer E. Lindstrom, W. Sortet, W. Breedon, V. Sites, J. Cardwell, J. Perko, H. Mayhew, W. Davidson, E. Brett, Equipment Manager McCaffery.


story hotel room by leaping out the window to a neighboring ledge. In fact, his behavior led to a brief stint in Pittsburgh when, in 1934, Curly Lambeau traded McNally to the lowly Pirates as punishment for attending a practice while inebriated.⁵

Already the fourth head coach in the team's short history, McNally replaced Joe Bach, who brought the team to the verge of respectability in 1936 by introducing some much-needed discipline. Though he guided the team to a second place finish with a 6-6 record, Bach was relieved of his duties after clashing one too many times with Rooney.⁶

McNally's approach to coaching was much different than Bach's. He unburdened the team of curfews, made sure their train cars always had an ample supply of beer, and arranged the team's travel schedule to allow for visits to the racetrack.⁷ The intellectual McNally, who had a fondness for quoting Keats and Shakespeare, took a decidedly simplistic approach to coaching. Instead of studying the playbook, McNally's strategy relied heavily on pep talks.

Rooney recalled his former player-coach as having little appreciation for the fundamentals of the game and instead just "...created a lot of nice sayings and expressions."⁸ For example, McNally instructed players to respond to their names during roll call not with the customary "here" but with a loud "Pirates never quit!" Though the 1937 season opened promisingly, with McNally returning a kickoff 92 yards for a touchdown, the team quickly faltered on its way to an unimpressive 4-7 record.⁹

Following the 1939 season, after eight years of failing to break .500 and losing more than \$100,000,¹⁰ Rooney decided to rechristen the floundering franchise. Working with the *Pittsburgh Press*, Rooney held a contest to allow fans to choose a new name for the team. A number of entries, such as the Puddlers, the Ingots, and the Iron Masters, reflected the city's industrial character. Twenty-one people—including a newspaper editor, a Civilian Conservation Corps camp worker, and the girlfriend of the team's business manager—suggested the Steelers.¹¹

Though they finally obtained a winning record in 1942, it would be 34 long years before the Steelers would take home a championship. 

¹ Rob Ruck, Margaret Jones Patterson, and Michael P. Weber, *Rooney: A Sporting Life* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), p. 97.

² Mike Tanier, "The Giants History Countdown: Running Back Tandems," *The Fifth Down* (blog), *The New York Times*, January 21, 2012, <http://fifthdown.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/01/31/the-giants-history-countdown-running-back-tandems/> (accessed June 7, 2012)

³ Ruck, Patterson, and Weber, p. 104-105.

⁴ Lew Freedman, *Pittsburgh Steelers: The Complete Illustrated History*, (Minneapolis: MBI Pub. Co., 2009), p.21.

⁵ Art Rooney Jr. and Roy McHugh, *Ruanaidh: the story of Art Rooney and his clan*, (Pittsburgh: Geyer Printing Company, 2008), p. 46-47.

⁶ Ruck, Patterson, and Weber, p.115.

⁷ Andrew O'Toole, *Smiling Irish Eyes: Art Rooney and the Pittsburgh Steelers*, (Haworth NJ: St. Johann Press, 2004), p. 80.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

¹¹ Ruck, Patterson, and Weber, p. 175.



Smithsonian Connection

Terry Bradshaw's Uniform

Former Steelers Quarterback Terry Bradshaw had a powerful arm and often called his own plays; his skills and team leadership helped form Pittsburgh Steelers' history. Bradshaw played 14 seasons with Pittsburgh, won four Super Bowl titles in a six-year period (1974, 1975, 1978, and 1979), becoming the first quarterback to win three and then four Super Bowls, and led the Steelers to eight AFC Central championships. He was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1989, his first year of eligibility.



Uniform gift of Pittsburgh Steelers Football Team (through Daniel M. Rooney).

Photo courtesy Smithsonian Institution, National Museum American History, Behring Center.