



CURATOR'S CORNER

By Emily Ruby, Assistant Curator

The Bling's the Thing in Super Bowl Rings

Take a quick glance at the first Super Bowl championship ring, won by the Green Bay Packers for the 1966 season, and the ring from their 2011 season win, and you are immediately struck by the difference: the bling. The design of the rings' tops evolved from one central diamond to 92 diamonds. The same phenomenon can be seen with the Steelers' rings—their first, won in Super Bowl IX for the 1974 season, pales in comparison to the ring acquired in their six-pack win from the 2008 season.

These changes in the design and opulence of Super Bowl rings symbolize an evolution in professional sports over the past four decades. The advent of nationally televised games, especially Monday Night Football, which premiered

in 1970, changed the business of professional sports, generating large amounts of capital that has benefited both the owners and the players. Since the 1970s, professional athletes' salaries have increased more than 1,000 percent and the value of a team such as the Green Bay Packers is now estimated at more than \$1 billion.

Super Bowl rings were not given out until 1967, but the style of baseball's World Series

rings, which have been awarded yearly since 1926, changed little through the early '80s. Most rings awarded in that period featured a single diamond in the center, similar to the design of early Super Bowl rings. The diamond-encrusted rings from recent championships complement the high-profile lifestyles of today's professional athletes, who are often national celebrities with paychecks to match. The rings also speak to the centrality of professional sports in society, and to the fact that millions of people—almost 112 million in 2012—witness the Super Bowl as it happens.

Sporting championships have become major cultural and entertainment events and their participants have become idols. Their clothes, cars, homes, and even their "laurels" or awards reflect this phenomenon.

In addition to the prestige that comes with winning the National Football League championship, there is great honor to wearing the winner's ring. Unlike the Lombardi



The Steelers' Super Bowl XLIII ring, win number 6.

Photo courtesy Pittsburgh Steelers, photo by Mike Fabus.

Visitors to the Western Pennsylvania Sports Museum can view Franco Harris' ring from Super Bowl IX. He became the first African American MVP of a Super Bowl game.

Ring courtesy Franco Harris, photo by Paula Andras.



trophy given to the team as a whole, personalized rings are given to each player, engraved with their name and number. The NFL pays up to \$5,000 each for 150 rings; if the team wants to spend more than the allotted amount—and they do, thousands more—they must pay for it, as well as for any additional rings.

Jostens, the company known for crafting all types of class and sports rings, created the first Super Bowl ring and has won the bid more times than any other company. Jostens designed all but one of the Steelers' rings; L.G. Balfour designed the ring for Super Bowl XIII. The winning team works with the jeweler on the design, and the rings often represent the personal tastes and style of the owners or players. In the Steelers' case, Dan Rooney has always played a strong role in the ring design, although players are allowed input. Jerome Bettis gave a few recommendations for the Super Bowl XL ring and Hines Ward sketched some ideas for the last Super Bowl ring. One unvarying element to the Steelers ring: it is always black and gold. The first four

Steelers rings displayed an increasing number of diamonds to represent each Super Bowl win, except for the ring for win number three (Super Bowl XIII), which is surrounded by a few more diamonds. But the rings from the most recent wins show a definite increase in the bling, reflecting both the times and the desire to keep up with other teams, such as the Patriots, whose ring from Super Bowl XXXIX boasts 124 diamonds and when set on its edge rocks back and forth to symbolize the team's symmetry and balance.

Five people on the Steelers' staff can trace the evolution of the team's Super Bowl rings on their own hands: Joe Greene (four as a

player and two as a scout), Dan Rooney, Art Rooney Jr., Chuck Noll, and scout Bill Nunn. Dick Hoak has five rings with the Steelers and 22 people have four rings with the Steelers from the team's 1970s wins.

Visitors to the Heinz History Center can view former Steelers fullback Franco Harris' Super Bowl IX ring, and other Super Bowl and NFL artifacts, up close during the *Gridiron Glory* exhibition, October 6, 2012, through January 6, 2013. 