

FRANCO HARRIS, 1970s

Pittsburgh Steelers.

While introducing Harris in 1990 at his induction into the Pro Football Hall of Fame, Steelers teammate Lynn Swann remarked, “Franco was my roommate for eight years in hotels the nights before football games. We were friends. I lived with this man and watched the intensity. I would talk to him at night while he would tell me how badly he wanted this championship game, how he needed this championship game and when he put that helmet on and he was pacing in that locker room, walking back and forth, gathering all his forces together to take on the opponent, everybody got charged for that, everybody saw the intensity in Franco Harris and everybody knew if we had the chance to score, we had to do it because Franco was there leading the way. We won four Super Bowls on the shoulders and legs of Franco Harris.”¹



FRANCO HARRIS

17 SECONDS (AND A LOT MORE) IN 17 IMAGES

BY ANNE MADARASZ

Franco Harris is best remembered for a play that unfolded over 17 seconds on a chilly Saturday afternoon in Three Rivers Stadium. At 3:29 p.m. on December 23, 1972, Harris scooped up the football that had just ricocheted off the Raiders Jack Tatum and scored the winning touchdown in the Steelers first ever divisional playoff victory. Known since that day as the Immaculate Reception, the legend of the play and its impact have only grown in the ensuing 50 years. Voted the greatest play in football history during the National Football League's (NFL) 100th anniversary, it has become a defining moment in Pittsburgh's sports history.

But Franco Harris's story encompasses much more than that one play. The son of a World War II veteran and his Italian-born wife, Harris became a standout three-sport athlete at his New Jersey high school. His size, speed, and offensive power at Penn State earned him a first-round nod from the Steelers in the 1972 draft. Though his season started slowly, Harris's abilities garnered an AFC Offensive Rookie of the Year award and attracted a devoted group of fans, the "Italian Army."

After becoming the first African American and Italian American to be honored as a Super Bowl MVP in 1975, Harris contributed to three more championships with the Steelers in the 1970s. This earned him a coveted spot in the Pro Football Hall of Fame's 1990 class. Off the field, Harris built a successful business and demonstrated a commitment to family and community that continues to this day. Franco stayed in Pittsburgh after retiring from football in 1984, becoming an iconic symbol of the new identity crafted for the city during the 1970s—a true champion in the City of Champions.



**FRANCO HARRIS WITH FATHER, CAD,
AND MOTHER, GINA, 1970s**

Private collection.

Born in 1950 at Fort Dix, an Army post south of Trenton, New Jersey, Franco Harris grew up nearby in Mount Holly. His father, Cad Harris, had served in the Army during World War II, and while stationed in Italy, he met Gina Parenti. After marrying, she joined him in the United States where they raised a family of nine children. The third of those nine children, Franco grew up in a predominately African American neighborhood and identified

himself as Black.² But Italian language, food, music, and culture were also common in his home, and Harris had a real interest in that heritage, even traveling to Italy in the summer of his sophomore year in college.³

Franco's mother squirreled away the \$700 reenlistment bonus her husband got from the Army, adding to it until they could buy and move into a home next to Rancocas Valley Regional High School. Franco and his older

brother Mario worked to earn spending money by busing tables, delivering newspapers, and even picking blueberries. On Saturdays when Franco was a teenager, they took the bus to Fort Dix and shined the soldiers' boots and shoes.⁴

FRANCO HARRIS ELUDES DEFENDERS, FROM RANCOCAS VALLEY “RED OAK” YEARBOOK, 1968

Private collection.

Sports became central to the Harris boys' lives. A three-sport athlete in high school, Franco preferred baseball and basketball to football, but he witnessed the better opportunities offered by football. After his brother Mario received an athletic scholarship to college, Franco realized that sports provided an avenue to further his education. He focused on football, playing both ways as a fullback and defensive end for Rancocas Valley High School. In his first varsity game as a sophomore, he ran 84 yards for a touchdown and, as a junior, scored a school record 20 touchdowns in a single season. When *Kick-Off Magazine* named him one of the best 44 players in the country after his junior year, the scholarship offers began to roll in.

In addition to playing varsity baseball and serving as co-captain of the basketball team his senior year, Harris participated in clubs. A Glee Club member freshman year, he sang in the Concert Choir as an upperclassman. Popular with classmates, he was voted “Most Athletic” his senior year.



RANCOCAS VALLEY REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL JERSEY WORN BY FRANCO HARRIS, c. 1966

Private collection, photo by Carrie Hadley.

Franco began wearing #32 in high school to honor Cleveland Browns fullback Jim Brown, who completed his Hall of Fame career in 1965, when Harris was a high school sophomore. Though he wore #34 at Penn State, Harris spent his career as a Steelers player as #32. No one at Rancocas Valley or on the Steelers has worn that number since Franco Harris.





FRANCO HARRIS, COACH JOE PATERNO, AND BOB PARSONS, PENN STATE, 1971

Private collection.

Franco carefully considered the scholarship offers he received, eventually choosing Penn State and enrolling in the school of Hotel and Restaurant Management. Joe Paterno's Italian heritage and his promise to Franco's mother to look out for her son helped sway the family. Playing primarily as a blocking back at Penn State, Harris still generated 2,002 rushing yards with 24 touchdowns and caught 28 passes for 352 yards and a touchdown. He contributed to the team's 11-0 season in 1969 and victories in the 1969 Orange Bowl and 1971 Cotton Bowl. Harris credits Coach Joe Paterno's teaching to always "go to the ball" with putting him in the right place to make the Immaculate Reception.



FOOTBALL FROM FIRST NFL TOUCHDOWN SCORED BY FRANCO HARRIS, OCT. 15, 1972

Private collection, photo by Carrie Hadley.

Though Harris showed a glimpse of promise in the preseason, he struggled early in the regular season. His breakout game came in week five against the Houston Oilers. Harris scored his first NFL touchdown in the second quarter on a one-yard rush to put the Steelers ahead 10-7 and picked up 115 yards on 19 carries in the 24-7 win.

Two weeks later against Buffalo, Harris dominated the offense. He scored three touchdowns, two on the ground and one pass reception. His 138 yards rushing earned Harris the AP Offensive Player of the Week. Then Franco gained 100-plus yards of rushing the next five games. The Steelers now had the offensive power to match the team's skill on the other side of the ball and excitement for a winning season began to build.

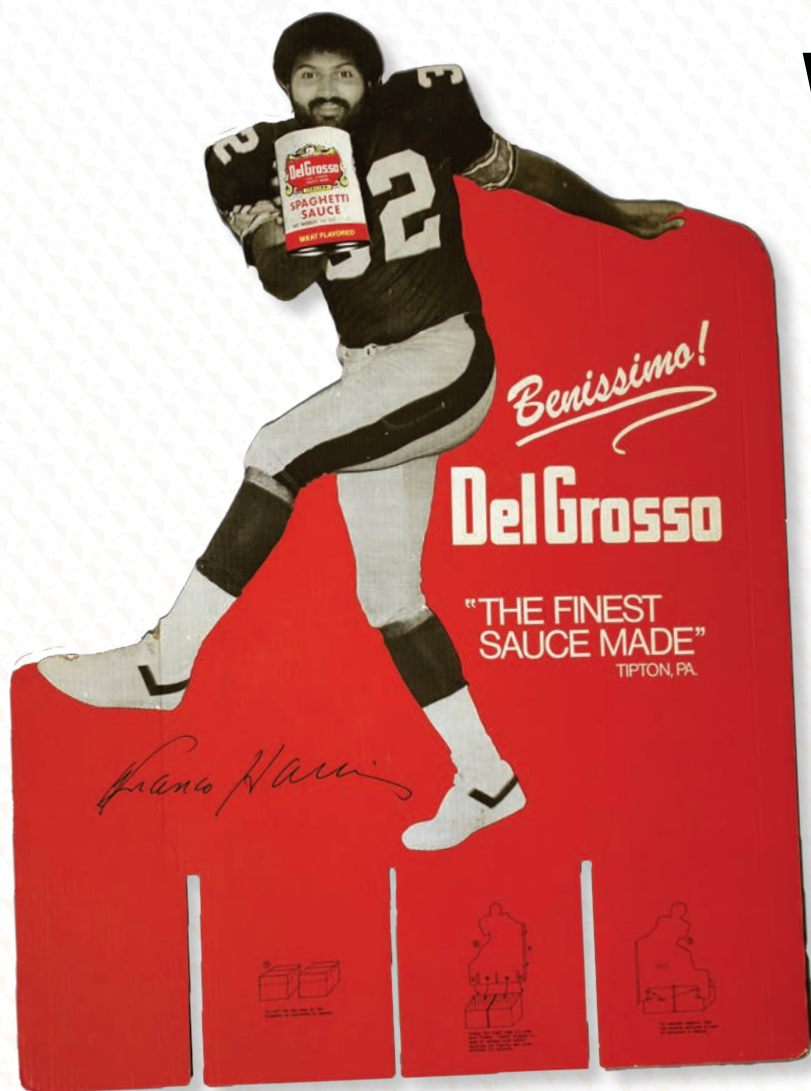


FRANCO HARRIS'S ITALIAN ARMY HELMET, 1972

Private collection, photo by Carrie Hadley.

East Liberty businessmen Tony Stagno and Albert Vento founded the “Italian Army” in honor of Franco Harris and named him a five-star general when it formed in November 1972. Almost immediately, they became the most recognizable fan group in Steelers history. Originally made up of second-generation Italian Americans from the East Liberty neighborhood, this fan group celebrated Franco’s heritage and reinforced their own ethnic pride and traditions by including Italian food, wine, and gear in their game day traditions. Their military dress and boisterous stadium antics—which included clever signs, Italian flags, and lavish tailgates featuring Old World food and wine—greatly contributed to football fever during the City of Champion years.

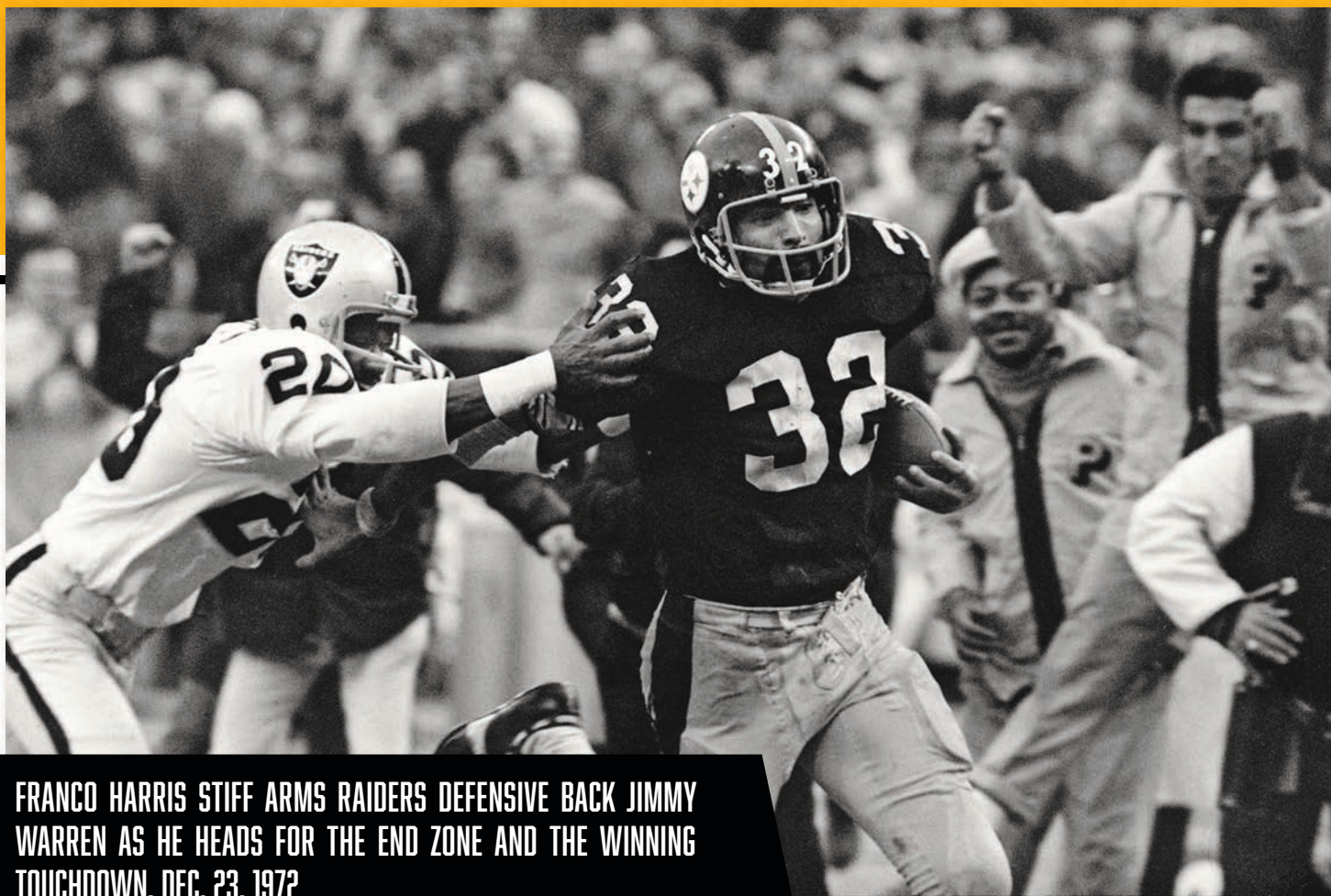
The Army inducted their most famous officer while the team prepped in California for the final game of the 1972 season against San Diego. Myron Cope invited Frank Sinatra to meet Franco and join his army of fans. When Sinatra agreed, Cope contacted Stagno and Vento to fly out and oversee the “induction” ceremony. Coach Chuck Noll, a fan of Sinatra’s music, allowed this interruption to practice to occur. The Steelers went on to defeat San Diego and earn a berth in the playoffs against the Oakland Raiders.



DELGROSSO ADVERTISEMENT FEATURING FRANCO HARRIS, 1970s

Private collection, photo by Carrie Hadley.

Popularity as a player generated endorsement opportunities for Harris. His Italian American roots made him a natural choice for DelGrosso Foods, a regional third-generation family-owned business specializing in pasta sauces. Harris began collaborating with the company in the 1970s, even filming a television commercial with his mother, Gina, promoting DelGrosso sauce. The relationship has endured, and in 2022 the company introduced a new product, Immaculate Marinara Sauce. To commemorate the 50th anniversary, 50 cents from each jar of this limited-edition product is to be donated to Pittsburgh charities designated by Harris, including the Franciscan Sisters of the Poor.



FRANCO HARRIS STIFF ARMS RAIDERS DEFENSIVE BACK JIMMY WARREN AS HE HEADS FOR THE END ZONE AND THE WINNING TOUCHDOWN, DEC. 23, 1972

Courtesy of Pittsburgh Steelers, photo by Harry Cabluck/AP.

Voted the top play in NFL history in 2019, the legend of the Immaculate Reception has only increased in the past 50 years. On December 23, 1972, with just 22 seconds left in an AFC Divisional playoff game at Three Rivers Stadium, and with the Oakland Raiders leading the Steelers 7-6, quarterback Terry Bradshaw faced a fourth-and-10 situation from the 40-yard line. He dropped back to pass but was flushed from the pocket. Spotting Frenchy Fuqua, Bradshaw sailed a pass down the middle. Fuqua and Oakland's Jack Tatum reached for the ball; it popped from their arms and rookie running back Franco Harris snatched it up at shoelace level. As Harris raced into the end zone, Three Rivers Stadium erupted in celebration. After a delay, the game officials ruled the play a touchdown. Roy

Gerela kicked the extra point with just five seconds left on the clock. As time ran out the Steelers emerged victors 13-7.

Later, as the players departed the locker room, the play gained new meaning in a bar nearby. Pittsburgher Michael Ord had been among the 50,000 plus fans at the stadium. After the win, he and his friend Sharon Levosky went out to celebrate. In an NFL Films documentary, he recalled the night, "Growing up Catholic I remembered the feast of the Immaculate Conception. So, I climbed up on a table... and I banged on a glass." Ord announced, "I would like to, from this day on ... refer to this day as the feast of the Immaculate Reception." The bar erupted in cheers.⁵

That evening Ord's friend Sharon Levosky shared the term with sportscaster Myron Cope

who loved it and used it on his 11:00 p.m. broadcast. When Cope used the term on air, associating a religious miracle with a football moment, the immortalization of the Immaculate Reception began. The name stuck and the legend of the play was born. That game marked a turning point in Steelers fortunes. The team won the first of four Super Bowls two years later, initiating a dynasty in the 1970s as the Steelers captured four Super Bowl championships.



**FAMILY PHOTOGRAPH OF JIM AND MARY BAKER WITH SON BENJAMIN
AND BABY SAM IN *THE PITTSBURGH PRESS*, DECEMBER 28, 1972**

Courtesy of James C. and Mary A. Baker and Family.

On the morning of December 23, 1972, Jim Baker rushed to bring his wife and infant son home from the hospital before heading off with nephew Bobby Pavuchak to the Steelers AFC Divisional playoff game. He settled in at Three Rivers Stadium, unaware that he would become part of one of the greatest stories in sport that day. As rookie running back Franco Harris raced into the end zone to score the go-ahead touchdown, the crowd at Three Rivers Stadium erupted in celebration. Baker grabbed his nephew and joined the hundreds of fans jumping onto the field.

Baker headed for the end zone where security staff struggled to push the fans back. After a 15-minute delay, the game officials ruled the play a touchdown and set the ball for the extra point. The ground crew failed to raise

the nets and the ball sailed through the uprights, hit the concrete wall behind, and bounced into the end zone. Baker dove for it, battling a pack of fans. He latched onto the ball and had his nephew tuck it under his coat as they ran for the parking lot.

Once home, Baker posed for pictures and began bragging about his hard-won trophy from the game. Baker's brother-in-law, a photographer for *The Pittsburgh Press*, brought a reporter to the house and a story on the ball ran five days later with a family photo. Baker has preserved the ball for 50 years, sharing it with the public only on rare occasions.



FRANCO HARRIS WATCHES FOOTBALL FILM WITH SECURITY SOLDIERS NEAR THE JOINT SECURITY AREA, PANMUNJOM, SOUTH KOREA, 1974

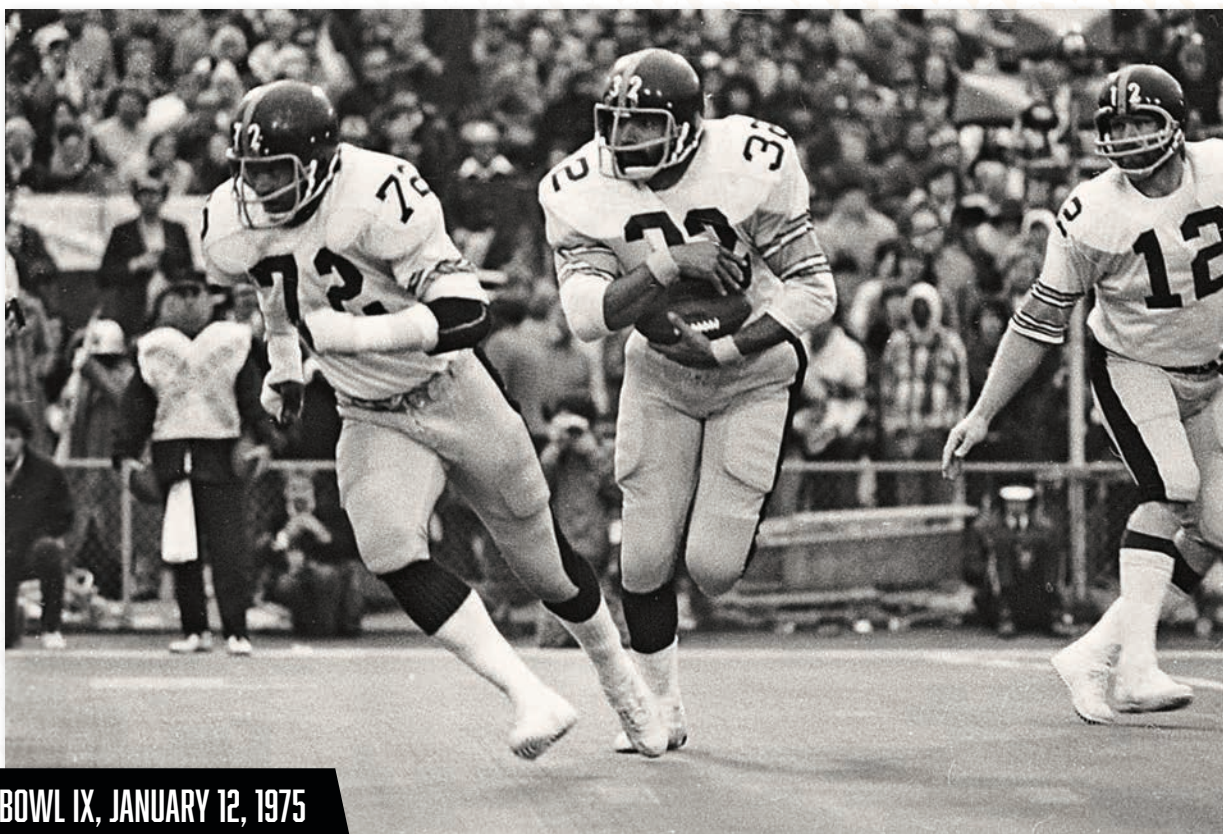
Private collection.

Harris's contributions on and off the field brought recognition and made him increasingly sought after by the NFL and by community organizations. Even as a rookie, Franco involved himself in community work, once saying, "Wherever I go to play, I want to live in that city and get involved in that city, become that city."⁶ Growing up in a military household, Harris personally experienced and understood the costs of service on military men and women and their families. He saw it firsthand at home and in the Steelers locker room where he witnessed teammate Rocky Bleier's efforts to recover from the injuries he had received in Vietnam.

Even as the Vietnam War caused conflict on the home front, Harris had supported our troops. In 1974, he traveled with the USO to visit and honor the nation's military. Carrying on an NFL tradition that began in the 1960s, he joined players John Gilliam, Bill Munson, Jim Mandich, Art Thomas, Diron Talbert, and Jack Youngblood on a USO tour to Korea. The son of an Army sergeant who served both in WWII and Korea, Harris developed a camaraderie with military personnel that lasts to this day.

TROPHY, AFC ROOKIE OF THE YEAR, OFFENSE, AWARDED TO FRANCO HARRIS, 1972

Named AP Offensive Player of the Week after the week seven game against Buffalo, Harris dominated the offense. His six straight games with 100-plus yards of rushing coupled with his regular season total of 1,055 rushing yards, and a Pro Bowl nomination, earned Franco this prestigious award.



SUPER BOWL IX, JANUARY 12, 1975

Private collection.

The Immaculate Reception became a harbinger of what was to come as the Steelers continued to use the draft to build a team that eclipsed all others in the 1970s. In 1974, the Steelers won the AFC Championship and headed to the team's first Super Bowl. Franco Harris dominated the offense. His record 158 yards of rushing eclipsed the entire output of the Minnesota Vikings offense. Harris's touchdown on a nine-yard run in the third quarter ensured his Most Valuable Player award. He became the first African American and Italian American to be named as Most Valuable Player in a Super Bowl.



FRANCO WITH CHILDREN, 1970s

Private collection.

FRANCO HARRIS AT A UNITED WAY ACTION HOUSING RALLY, PITTSBURGH, 1970s

Private collection.

In 1976, the NFL named Harris their Man of the Year. Named in honor of Walter Payton since 1999, the Man of the Year Award has been given since 1970. Considered one of the most prestigious awards in sport, it recognizes players for excellence on and off the field. Throughout his career and since, Harris has taken a special interest in causes that affect children, including health care, education, and athletics. He served for eight years as the Pennsylvania Chairman of the Governor's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports. His community work has also included serving as a spokesperson for organizations such as Easter Seals and the National Multiple Sclerosis Society. In 1997, he was honored as the National Multiple Sclerosis Volunteer of the Year.

Increasingly Harris has also spoken out for causes related to social justice and equality. Dan Rooney described him as “deeply principled” when the two spoke at an anti-Ku Klux Klan rally in downtown Pittsburgh.⁷ The National Urban League honored him with their Whitney M. Young Award, and Harris took an active role in the presidential campaign of Barack Obama. For his dedication, loyalty, and devotion to those in need, teammate Joe Greene called him simply, “Mr. Pittsburgh.”⁸



FRANCO HARRIS, TERRY BRADSHAW, AND GERRY MULLINS ARRIVE IN CALIFORNIA FOR SUPER BOWL XIV, JANUARY 14, 1980

Pittsburgh Steelers.

The Steelers faced the reigning champion Dallas Cowboys in Super Bowl XIII, a game that featured a combined 26 future Hall of Famers, 16 of them players. Both teams sought a third Super Bowl win, both had already won two that decade. Just as in Super Bowl X, the Steelers won this matchup, 35-31. Harris led the Steelers in rushing with 68 yards with one touchdown on a 22-yard run. A year later, the Steelers won their second back-to-back Super Bowl of the decade. Their record of four Super Bowl wins in a span of just six years has never been equaled.

FRANCO, DANA, AND DOK HARRIS AT THE IMMACULATE RECEPTION MONUMENT UNVEILING, DECEMBER 22, 2012

Private collection.

Franco Harris played his final football in Pittsburgh in 1983. A contract dispute with the Steelers during training camp led to the Rooneys releasing their long-time star. Like many residents of the region, Franco was forced to leave town for work, playing the last eight games of his career in a Seattle Seahawks uniform. But Franco came home again, returning to Pittsburgh after he retired in 1984. He had planned for his life after the NFL, drawing on his degree from Penn State to begin a foray into the food industry. Causes that he had supported, healthy food habits and nutrition for children, sustaining military personnel, influenced the trajectory of his career and the founding of his company Super Bakery. In addition, he continued to contribute to the life and well-being of his adopted home of Pittsburgh. Social justice, equality, care for the community, all figured large in the time and effort he has given to local and national causes.

The fans have never forgotten Franco and the impact of the Immaculate Reception. All the elements that made the play memorable—a game-winning play as time ran out, questions about the rules and its legality, a rookie just emerging as a star, an Army of fans there in the stadium, a franchise winning its first playoff game, a name that referenced the on-field miracle that had occurred, a dynasty born—have resonated through the years. As with many legends, a hero emerged at the center of the story. And what came after changed the city and its people.

When we see that 17 seconds of grainy film, we are transported and, in some sense, reunited in our wish for one man, his team, and our city to arrive in the end zone, finally triumphant. The victories that came after,



the gold jackets at the Hall of Fame, generated a pride that the region leaned into during the tough economic years in the 1980s. That feeling of belonging and sharing in something positive has lasted for 50 years, magnifying that 17 seconds and infusing it with a new resonance and power.

When the spot of the Immaculate Reception was marked as hallowed ground on the 40th anniversary, Franco celebrated as he has most years. He gathered his wife, Dana, and son, Dok, his teammates, and his extended family and friends to join in the unveiling. And he invited all of Steelers nation to remember, not just his achievement, but what the team and the city have achieved. Hearing about the retirement of Franco's jersey this season, President Barack Obama congratulated Franco for his success in football, but also as "a role model and community builder."⁹ He recognized someone who took 17 seconds and turned it into a lifetime with meaning. 🌟

Anne Madarasz is Director of the Western Pennsylvania Sports Museum and Director of the History Center's Curatorial Division.

¹ "Enshrinement Speech," Lynn Swann Introduction, August 4, 1990, <https://www.profootballhof.com/players/franco-harris/>.

² "Franco Harris: That's a Nice Back Man," Ira Berkow, *Lansing State Journal*, Lansing, MI, Dec. 16, 1972, p. 32.

³ Nicholas Ciotola, "Franco's Italian Army," *Western Pennsylvania History*, Winter 2001–02.

⁴ "Franco Harris: Still Goal-Bound," Sean Somerville, *Baltimore Sun*, Sept. 22, 1996, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-1996-09-22-1996266123-story.html/>.

⁵ "NFL's Greatest Play, The Immaculate Reception," Joe Smeltzer, Nov. 18, 2021, <https://www.history.com/news/immaculate-reception-franco-harris-steelers/>.

⁶ Gary M. Pomerantz, *Their Life's Work: The Brotherhood of the 1970 Pittsburgh Steelers, Then and Now* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013).

⁷ "Sharing Some of My (and maybe yours) Favorite Dan Rooney Stories," Alex Kozora, *SteelersDepot*, April 14, 2017, <https://steelersdepot.com/2017/04/sharing-favorite-dan-rooney-stories/>.

⁸ "Gold Jacket Spotlight: Franco Harris, Pro Football Hall of Fame," <https://www.profootballhof.com/news/2022/gold-jacket-spotlight-franco-harris,-%E2%80%98pittsburgh%E2%80%99/>.

⁹ Note sent by President Barack Obama to Franco Harris, September 2022, courtesy of Franco and Dana Harris.