Grigas Quits the Card-Pitts
By Carl Hughes

Pro football 60 years ago was a game played in the mud when it rained, by backs who were known as triple threats if they could run, pass, and kick. One of those triple threats in 1944 was a fullback from Holy Cross, name of Johnny Grigas.

That year, though, he was playing for an unusual wartime team in the National Football League known as the Card-Pitts. It was a combination of the then—Chicago Cardinals and then—and now—Pittsburgh Steelers.

You won’t find Johnny Grigas in the Pro Football Hall of Fame at Canton, Ohio. You probably won’t even find him in the NFL’s record book, but he could have been.

Because Johnny Grigas, before the last game of the 1944 season, was just 15 yards away from being pro football’s leading rusher. He never got any closer that December, since the bruised and battered fullback of the last place team didn’t think it was worth the $350 a week he was paid to chase that title over a frozen gridiron against one of the league’s fabled teams—the Chicago Bears.

Today, being leading rusher could add a hundred grand or more to any back’s next contract. But that’s getting ahead of our story.

That weekend in December the news was dominated by the Army and Navy—both on the front pages and the sports pages.

Patton’s tanks were pushing toward the Rhine. MacArthur had returned, as promised, and his Yanks were slugging it out with the Japanese in the monsoon mud of Leyte. Meanwhile, the “Game of the Century” was won by Davis, Blanchard, and mates as unbeaten Army whipped equally undefeated Navy.

Nobody much cared nor long remembered that pro football was winding down its season. It had been a long one for the Card-Pitts. They hadn’t won a game, nor would they.

That was nothing unusual for the Cardinals, though. They hadn’t won a game the previous season either. So it’s more understandable why a young man of considerable pride who suffered through both of those bitter autumns could lose his enthusiasm for the game.

While most of the sports world was eagerly looking toward Philadelphia and the Army-Navy
showdown, Bert Bell left home, as usual, for the weekend and traveled to Pittsburgh. Along with Art Rooney, he was co-owner of the Pittsburgh-half of pro football’s odd couple.

Again as usual, Bert arrived at Steelers headquarters on the second floor of the Fort Pitt Hotel (room 243) and ordered a cot moved into the office shared with the Rooney-McGinley Boxing Club. If it seems unusual that star fullbacks made only $350 a game, the owner sleeping in the office to save expenses may put things more in perspective.

“Bert’s worried about having enough money left after this season to get his kid into college,” Rooney confided. “I'm just hoping to have enough left to get my kids a card in the bricklayers union.”

Fortunately for their offspring, both were able to hold out until television came along and made pro football a hot property. Bert, in fact, became the league’s commissioner in 1946 and made decisions about TV contracts that changed the game and enriched the owners.

But it was still a game of 60-minute players as the 1944 season wound down. Domed stadiums and carpeted fields were yet to be conceived.

That Saturday, the team Bell and Rooney shared with Chicago’s Charlie Bidwill took its last workout at Forbes Field. The turf was torn and rutted. A cold, steady wind slowly froze it in place.

As if that wasn’t discouraging enough, the prospect of playing the hated (by the cross-town Cardinals, at least) Bears made a dismal finish nearly certain. The Monsters of the Midway had won easily earlier in the season at Wrigley Field, and now had additional ammunition in Sid Luckman.

The famed quarterback had missed the first game with the Card-Pitts. He was on the North Atlantic with the Merchant Marines, but now ensign Luckman—the NFL’s MVP the previous year—had returned to help his old team.

A brooding Johnny Grigas went back to his hotel room after the workout on Saturday tired and depressed. “They had just about
worked me to death all year," he recalled. "I carried the ball four out of five times, and took a real physical beating."

Grigas also was the passer and punter. "My big play was the option pass or run," he said. Unlike Luckman, who became famous as a pioneering T-formation quarterback and seldom took a hit, Grigas rarely was untouched.

So the thought of facing the awesome Bears on a frozen field left him literally cold. "It had been building up a long time," he insisted, "and that night I'd decided I'd had it."

While his roommate, end Don Currivan—a fellow New Englander from rival Boston College—attended a hockey game that Saturday evening at Duquesne Gardens, Grigas sat down to write his farewell note.

"Dear Management and Coaches," it began:

Think what you may of me, but I sincerely believe it is in all justice to fly the nest. When your mind is changed because of the physical beating week in and week out, your soul isn't in the game.

I tried to win and worked hard, but the work horse, as I am termed by the newspapers, is almost ready for the stud farm. In closing all I can say is that I'm deeply sorry.

Good luck and may the team win just this one.

"I tried to talk him out of it," Currivan said. "Told him to sleep it off." But waking up on Sunday morning, he found a note addressed to himself: "Did not want to wake you. Funny thing, everything seems so
Grigas left for Boston, where he played three years for the NFL Yanks. Grigas Family

mixed up. I'm going home now. Best of luck, Johnny.”

So the league's second leading rusher slipped out, paused outside a cold Forbes Field and then caught a train back to New England.

His team not only didn't win “just this one” but was humiliated, 49-7. End Tony Bova played the entire game—at fullback. The Card-Pitts had minus two yards rushing for their efforts.

It was a laugher. Bulldog Turner, pro football's premier center of the era, and at 230 pounds a huge man in those days, scored the final touchdown.

Turner recalled it years later in an interview for Myron Cope's book, *The Game That Was*: Two or three of our players got kicked out for fighting, so George Halas let me go in and play halfback for one play. We used a play we hadn't run since training camp, and I got through that damned line. The last guy was a little ol' kid, can't remember his name, that saw me coming and I was coming full steam.

So he started getting lower and lower and lower, getting himself ready for me. And I started lowering down like I was going to run right over him. But the funny thing, he froze. I just sidestepped, and ran in for a touchdown, and he was still standing there. It was a forty-eight yard run and that's the only time I ever ran from scrimmage. Matter of fact, I was running so hard I couldn't stop and ran right into the grandstand wall.

Who else ever had a forty-eight yard running average?

It was the first and last run from scrimmage for the legendary Bulldog, but not for Grigas. He was traded to the Boston Yanks and played three seasons, unfortunately missing out when the Cardinals—back in Chicago and on their own—made up for it all with an NFL championship just two years after he walked out on them on a really cold, gray December dawn.

“I'm glad for Art Rooney. He had a hard time in those days,” Johnny said, years later. “They were hard for all of us, but he forgave me and never has forgotten me.”

“Incidentally,” Grigas was asked, “who did beat you out for the rushing title in '44?”

“Some kid from the Giants” was his answer. Like Bulldog, he couldn't remember the name.

For more on the war-time Steelers teams:


Carl Hughes was the Steelers writer for *The Pittsburgh Press* when these incidents, including Art Rooney's remark to him, took place. He left the *Press* in 1956 to accept a position of assistant manager at Kennywood, where he retired as chairman in 1999.