THE GREATEST PLAY I EVER SAW

DAN ROONEY's 75 YEARS WITH THE PITTSBURGH STEELERS

By Dan Rooney
as told to Andrew E. Masich
and David F. Halaas

Introduction by History Center President
and CEO Andrew Masich and Director of
Library & Archives David Halaas

When Dan first mentioned to us that friends
and colleagues had suggested his story
should be told in a biography, we
encouraged him to pursue the project, not as
a traditional biography but as an
autobiography. We thought the story should
be told from his point of view. At first he
resisted the idea. He is a genuinely humble
man and said, “That’s just not me.” But we

at the History Center, his family, and his
friends persisted. His story is important. He
has made history. The result is the newly
published autobiography Dan Rooney: My
75 Years With the Pittsburgh Steelers
and the NFL.

Over the course of the last two years,
we spent thousands of hours interviewing
him, traveling with him, and just plain
getting to know him. We talked to his
family, who shared their experiences and
insights as well. In addition we met with
players, coaches, colleagues, and friends. We pored over archives, old newspapers, and scrapbooks to fill in missing pieces and confirm Dan's recollections. All in all, his memories are remarkably accurate and vivid, considering they span 75 years—years of great change filled with a bewildering array of people and events. We found a man devoted to his family and friends, a man of abiding faith, and a man of uncompromising dedication to football. Football to him is more than a game. In many ways, it symbolizes the strength and vitality of the people and place he loves—Pittsburgh. You can't really separate Dan Rooney from Pittsburgh any more than you can separate him from football. It's in his blood; it's part of his character. As we worked with the Steelers organization—at the South Side complex, at Heinz Field, on the road—we saw his mark everywhere. The closeness of the organization, from the team and coaches and secretaries to the front office and grounds crew, feels more like a family than a corporation. Steelers Center Jeff Hartings said it best: "We honestly love each other. I honestly felt that I would rather lose a game like this with this team than win a Super Bowl with a team I didn't enjoy playing with."

We found this attitude remarkable, considering this is a five-time Super Bowl

THE PITTSBURGH STEELERS: 75 SEASONS OF HISTORY

HOPE HARVEYS

The Steelers emerged from the sandlots of Pittsburgh's North Side neighborhood. They were known first as the Hope Harveys, after the firehouse and the doctor who sponsored them. Art Rooney played for, coached, and promoted that team and its successors: the Majestic Radios and the J. P. Rooneys.

A sculpture of the Hope Harveys, based on the team photo, by Ray Sokolowski of Rooney & Ray Arts, Inc., www.krooney.net. Ray sculpted it as a tribute to his wife Kathy Rooney's family. Each of the 23 cold cast nickel resin figures stands 14 inches tall, and are part of a series of 30 sets.
championship team with the best record in the NFL over the past 20 years. It's also a very successful business. This didn't just happen. Dan likes to say there are four things that make a winning football team—talent, coaching, closeness, and management. He doesn't talk much about the management part. But make no mistake. From top to bottom, the Pittsburgh Steelers organization reflects Dan Rooney's business acumen, values, integrity, and character. And perhaps most importantly, it reflects his determination to win. You can see it in the Steelers mission statement: "The mission of the Pittsburgh Steelers Football Club is to represent Pittsburgh in the National Football League, primarily by winning the Championship of Professional Football."

Consider: Five Super Bowl championships, Six conference titles, And 20 Steelers elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Dan has been named NFL Executive of the Year, Dapper Dan's Sportsman of the Year, and he's been inducted into the Football Hall of Fame.

"WE HONESTLY LOVE EACH OTHER. I HONESTLY FELT THAT I WOULD RATHER LOSE A GAME LIKE THIS WITH THIS TEAM THAN WIN A SUPER BOWL WITH A TEAM I DIDN'T ENJOY PLAYING WITH."
—Steelers Center Jeff Hartings

By Anne Madarasz, Director, History Center Museum Division and Western Pennsylvania Sports Museum

PITTSBURGH PIRATES TEAM

In 1933, after Pennsylvania revised its blue laws making pro sports profitable on Sundays, Rooney bought an NFL expansion franchise and named his team the Pittsburgh Pirates. They sported the Pittsburgh city seal as their logo and in the early years sometimes played semi-pro or traveling teams to fill out their schedule and generate revenue.

Why name the football team the Pirates? A number of NFL teams took the name of their city's baseball franchise to provide both legitimacy and name recognition. Other franchises who did this include the Brooklyn Dodgers, the Boston Braves (now the Redskins), the Cleveland Indians, and by far the most popular (and used several times) the New York Yankees.
CONSIDER: FIVE SUPER BOWL CHAMPIONSHIPS. SIX CONFERENCE TITLES. AND 20 STEELERS ELECTED TO THE PRO FOOTBALL HALL OF FAME.

He leads off the field as well, serving on the boards of the United Way of America, the American Diabetes Association, Senator John Heinz History Center, and the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. Dan has assisted American Indian nations in education and youth recreation programs. He was the driving force behind the American Ireland Fund, now the world’s largest private organization funding constructive change in Ireland.

Tony O’Reilly, former Heinz Company chairman and co-founder of the American Ireland Fund, described Dan Rooney as “a singular man. The level gaze, the humorous yet watchful eyes, the quiet authority that he exudes are products of many tough battles, many triumphs, and some failures.”

This is the man we have come to know.

The Immaculate Reception
December 23, 1972, dawned cold and gray, but today no one seemed to care about the weather. It had been a long time coming, the kind of day I dreamed about all my life—the first NFL postseason game to be played in Pittsburgh since 1947.

Before the kickoff, thousands of fans gathered downtown under the banners of their heroes—Dobre Shunka (Good Ham) for linebacker Jack Ham, Gerela’s Gorillas for kicker Roy Gerela, and Franco’s Italian Army

THE PITTSBURGH STEELERS: 75 SEASONS OF HISTORY

1938
WHIZZER WHITE SIGNING
Art Rooney made his first major statement with the team in 1938, signing All-American Byron Whizzer White for $15,800. White led the league in rushing that year, but became better known decades later as a Supreme Court justice.
for rookie running back Franco Harris. Other fans—those who couldn't get tickets, and there were only 50,350 who did—packed themselves in cars and buses in search of televisions outside the 75-mile blackout radius. They crammed into motel rooms in East Liverpool, Ohio, and Meadville, Pennsylvania, or chartered buses and drove to Erie and jammed local American Legion and VFW halls. Anywhere with a television set. In some places, people were selling seats in their own living rooms to frantic Steelers fans desperate to see us in the playoffs.

Now, as the big game against the Oakland Raiders began, the built-up emotion and excitement spilled out of Three Rivers Stadium with a volume and intensity that could be heard all the way across the Allegheny River into downtown.

"Here we go, Steelers, here we go! Here we go, Steelers, here we go!"

Inside the stadium the noise was deafening. The concrete deck heaved so violently with every stomp of the crowd, I worried the structure might give way. For most of the game it seemed we were going to
It had been a fierce defensive struggle; first downs were difficult to come by and both teams punted a lot. Daryle Lamonica had started as quarterback for the Raiders, but we intercepted him twice and beat him up so badly they took him out and replaced him with their young backup, Ken Stabler. Gerela's two field goals had given us a 6-0 lead when late in the fourth quarter Stabler dropped back to pass, couldn't find a receiver, and so slipped outside and ran 30 yards for a touchdown. With the extra point, the Raiders had a one-point lead.

Now the packed stands were hushed. The scoreboard told everything: Raiders 7, Steelers 6, fourth-and-10 ... 22 seconds on the clock. It looked like we didn't have a chance. What a shame—the best season we ever had, and our first playoff game. I really wanted to beat Al Davis' Raiders.

As Terry Bradshaw and the Steelers offense broke huddle, I knew this was the last play. But when our players lined up on our 40-yard line, they didn't look like a beaten team. Bradshaw still had his swagger, still seemed as confident and fearless as ever. Turning his head from side to side, he begins

"NOW, I DON'T KNOW IF THE LORD IS WORRIED ABOUT EVERY FOOTBALL GAME THAT'S PLAYED, BUT IN THIS CASE IT SURE SEEMED LIKE A CASE OF DIVINE INTERVENTION."

—Dan Rooney
the count, then takes the snap. Bradshaw's back, out of the pocket, running to his right. He ducks one pursuer, his eyes downfield, looking for a receiver. He shakes loose from the rush, then fires at Frenchy Fuqua cutting across the middle. The ball, Frenchy, and Raiders safety Jack Tatum arrive at the same place at precisely the same time. I hear the collision even from where I'm sitting—four levels up, just above the press box. That's it ... the game's over ... but wait! There's Franco Harris with the ball—where did he come from?—running for all he's worth along the near sideline toward the end zone—Go Franco!--stiff-arming the Raiders' Jimmy Warren, somehow staying in bounds, then in for a touchdown. Unbelievable! The crowd goes crazy—is it really a touchdown? Fans swarm the field, mobbing Franco and Bradshaw. I know there's going to be controversy, so I run down the stairs into the press box where the reporters sit stunned, looking at each other in disbelief.

Everybody is talking, yelling, trying to piece together in their minds what their eyes just saw. They're saying the ball ricocheted off Tatum's pads, shot back 10 yards where Franco made a shoestring catch. Where's the Chief? Seconds before the snap, I remember seeing him head for the elevator so he could be in the locker room to console the players when they came off the field. He missed the whole thing! The most incredible play I ever saw.

Just then the press box phone rings. It's on the wall right where I'm standing, so I answer it. It's Jim Boston, our man on the field, calling from the baseball dugout. He tells me he's got Fred Swearingen, the
referee—the guy in charge of the crew officiating the game—standing right next to him. Boston says Swearingen wants to talk to Art McNally, the supervisor of the officials. I can see McNally in his usual place at the other end of the box. So I yell, “Art McNally! Art McNally! They want to talk to you!” He comes over, takes the phone, and I hear every word he says.

The noise in the press box still hasn’t died down, so McNally is pressing the phone to his ear so he can hear what Swearingen is saying. I don’t know what the ref said, but -

"THAT’S IT ... THE GAME’S OVER ... BUT WAIT! THERE’S FRANCO HARRIS WITH THE BALL—WHERE DID HE COME FROM?—RUNNING FOR ALL HE’S WORTH ALONG THE NEAR SIDELINE TOWARD THE END ZONE—GO FRANCO!"

-Dan Rooney

McNally shouts into the phone, "Well, you have to call what you saw. You have to make the call. Talk to your people and make the call!" Of course, no one had seen the television replay yet—it all happened too quick. So I turn back to the field. The officials are huddled together at the 30-yard line. I know the rule: if the ball bounced off Tatum before Franco caught it, then the play stands and it’s a touchdown. If the ball bounced off Frenchy, then the pass is incomplete, the game’s over, and the Raiders win. I’m straining to see the replay on the TV suspended overhead in the press box.

THE PITTSBURGH STEELERS: 75 SEASONS OF HISTORY

1972

FRANCO — IMMACULATE RECEPTION

On December 23, 1972, Franco Harris made one of the most-discussed and still-controversial plays in football, the Immaculate Reception. The phrase itself is a play on the religious term, Immaculate Conception, implying that the event was divine or miraculous in nature. Broadcaster Myron Cope is credited with first using the term on air. He heard it from Pittsburgher Sharon Levosky, who called Cope the night of the game and suggested the play on words, coined by her friend Michael Ord. Cope used the name on television, and it stuck.
and trying to hear what the commentators are saying.

They’re debating the call: “Did Frenchy touch the ball? Was the catch good?” Finally, Swearingen steps away from the other officials and raises his arms to signal touchdown. The press box goes wild, papers fly, reporters yell at each other—and I run for the elevator.

Now, I don’t know if the Lord is worried about every football game that’s played, but in this case it sure seemed like a case of divine intervention. The locker room is a madhouse. I look for my son Artie, but he’s still out on the field picking up the team’s equipment and running interference for the players making their way through the swarming fans. Across the locker room I see number 32—Franco. I’m not a touchy-feely kind of guy, but after I shoo my way through the crowd I can’t help but give him a big hug. “Franco, that was the greatest play I ever saw!” And I mean it, too. Then there’s the Chief, standing with Coach Noll, players all around them—Joe Greene, Andy Russell, Gerela, Ham, Rocky Bleier, Bradshaw, Frenchy—helmets off and grins as big as can be.

Dad doesn’t say anything, but Chuck steps up and makes a little speech, “You guys played a great game—I’m really proud of you! Now next week we have another big game, so don’t celebrate too long.” Chuck is all business. Can you believe it? He could keep his cool even during the “Immaculate Reception.” That’s what Myron Cope, the voice of the Steelers, later called it. At first I thought it was sacrilegious, but over time it kind of grew on me.
I'M NOT A TOUCHY-FEELY KIND OF GUY, BUT AFTER I SHOVE MY WAY THROUGH THE CROWD I CAN'T HELP BUT GIVE HIM A BIG HUG. "FRANCO, THAT WAS THE GREATEST PLAY I EVER SAW!"

-Dan Rooney

The Immaculate Reception is one of the greatest touchdowns in the history of football, even though Al Davis and coach John Madden complained bitterly about the call and how it destroyed their season and the Raiders dynasty that might have been. Frenchy—ever the showman—added to the controversy by refusing to give a straight answer about whether or not he had touched the ball. But Chuck Noll summed it up: "Well, if Frenchy didn't touch the ball ... and Tatum didn't touch the ball ... well, the rule book doesn't cover the hand of the Lord."

The Immaculate Reception changed not only the history of the Pittsburgh Steelers but the NFL itself. The Steelers went from 40 seasons as the "lovable losers" to a great, great football team. Maybe the best that ever played. The national television audience for that game was huge, one of the largest ever to see a football game. The excitement of that one play captured the imagination of fans everywhere, especially throughout the far-flung Steelers Nation. The moment was so powerful, so memorable that millions of people who saw the game on TV honestly
believe they were in the stands at Three Rivers Stadium that day. The Immaculate Reception immediately entered the realm of sports legend. It is still one of the greatest plays in NFL history and, for that matter, all of sports. This play and this playoff game helped establish pro football as America's passion, surpassing baseball, “America's pastime,” as the number-one sport.

Of course, there are other milestones in the history of the NFL. I saw most of them, because I celebrated my first birthday the same year the Steelers played their first season in 1933. In some ways I think of myself as the Last Steeler, the last of the founding generation of the NFL. I've had the good fortune to know and work with the men who started the league—Wellington Mara, Curly Lambeau, Tim Mara, George Halas, Walter Kiesling, George Marshall, Charley Bidwill, Bert Bell, and, of course, the Chief—men who knew and loved the game and shared with me their values of hard work and sportsmanship and fairness. The National Football League has come a long way since its beginnings, and I'm honored to have been a part of it.

Pro football was born on the muddy fields of Pittsburgh's North Side in 1892—just three blocks from where I was born 40 years later. I guess you could say the game is in my blood.

**AT FIRST I THOUGHT IT WAS SACRILEGIOUS, BUT OVER TIME IT KIND OF GREW ON ME.**

—Dan Rooney

---

**EXHIBIT: SUPER BOWL XL EPHEMERA, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED COVER, BIG BEN’S THUMB SPLINT & GLOVE**

In 2005, the Steelers won an unprecedented three playoff games en route to a Super Bowl match up with the Seattle Seahawks. Their 21-10 victory in Super Bowl XL came with the youngest quarterback in NFL history, Ben Roethlisberger, who sported this thumb splint, on display below, as he threw to victory. From late November through postseason, the splint stabilized a fracture at the base of his proximal phalanx. Cowher returned for one more season, then retired in January 2007 with a 161-99-1 record. The Steelers began their 75th season with only their third head coach in 38 years, Mike Tomlin.