

The Steelers' Greatest Victory

By Bob Barnett

If you asked the average Pittsburgh Steeler fan to pick the Steelers' greatest victory ever, he/she would probably select the 1972 AFC playoff victory over the Oakland Raiders which included Franco Harris' "Immaculate Reception," or one of the 1974, 1975, 1978, or 1979 Super Bowl victories. Wrong on any of the above.

All of those victories, great as they were, were won when the Steelers were winners and the victory was just one more win in an otherwise successful season. It is easy to win when you are already a winner. Great victories are won by underdog, outmanned losers who, with the stink of defeat around them, rise up and smite their heavily favored opponent. Kind of the David and Goliath thing.

For the Pittsburgh Steelers, the greatest victory ever occurred on a cold December 1 in 1952.

You might argue with that. You might even say I am a little prejudiced because I saw that game as a nine-year old at his first pro football game. But consider this, all the elements for a great victory were in place: the Steelers certainly did stink and their opponents were truly Goliaths – the league-leading New York Giants.

You might argue that the Steelers weren't actually that bad back in 1952 despite going into the Giants game with a 3 wins and 6 loss record. They had lost twice to the co-league leading Cleveland Browns by one point each time, and had lost three other games by a total of 15 points. In fact, they might just as easily have been 8-1 – except they were losers.

The Steelers were a tough physical team with Bill McPeak (DE), George Tarasovic (DE), Ernie Stautner (DT), and Jack Butler (DB) on defense. The offense was led by quarterback Jim Finks; halfbacks Ray Mathews and Lynn Chandnois; fullbacks Ed Modzelewski and Fran Rogel, along with veteran end Elbie Nickel.

The Steelers' coach that year was Joe Bach. Bach had previously coached the Steelers in 1935-1936 but had been fired by owner Art Rooney. Rooney, who had been the best man at Bach's wedding, rehired Bach just before the 1952 season began. Bach changed the Steelers' offense from an old-fashioned, hard-nosed, single wing to a modern passing "T" formation.

"We always had real great personnel with the Steelers, but lousy coaching," recently recalled Lynn Chandnois, a Steeler halfback from 1950-1956. "Now Bach was a good coach, and he was starting to turn the team around in 1952."

Going into the game with the Steelers, the Giants had a 6-3 record and were in a three-way tie with the Cleveland Browns and Philadelphia Eagles for first place in the Eastern Division. Interestingly enough, the three top teams in the division were playing the three bottom teams (Cleveland-Washington and Philadelphia-Chicago Cardinals).

The Giants' defense was loaded with Al DeRogatis (DT), Arnie Weinmeister (DT), Em Tunnell (DB), and someone named Tom Landry (DB). The offense, which had been the team's weak link, featured the NFL's leading ground gainer, Ed Price (FB), Kyle Rote (HB), and Charlie Conerly (QB).

Despite their strength, injuries had been a problem for the Giants that season and Conerly was a questionable starter for the Steelers game with a bruised shoulder. Rookie halfback Frank Gifford remained behind in New York to nurse a leg injury.

During the night of November 30 and the early morning hours of December 1, the first snow of the winter fell. Game day was one of those beautiful early winter days which occur in Western Pennsylvania when the temperature hovers just around the 30 degree mark and the snow is just damp enough to stick to everything. My father woke me early that Sunday morning because the normal one hour drive from our

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home in West Virginia's northern panhandle would double because of the snow. I did not have to worry about my father cancelling the trip; my uncle had given us reserved seat tickets almost on the field at the goal line, and football fever was on him.

The drive to Pittsburgh was fun. My father repeated all his old high school football stories, for about the tenth time. But I loved those stories, and with each story I egged him on, demanding more detail. Lunch at "The Clock" restaurant, only a short walk from old Forbes Field completed our pre-game ritual.

The field looked beautiful. The grounds keepers had carefully removed the tarp with the snow on top and had piled the snow around the edge of the playing surface. The grass looked like an emerald in a snow-white setting.

I really can't remember much about the game except the opening kick-off which in fact set the tone for the whole game.

Chandnois, however, remembered the game clearly, particularly the opening kick-off. "The trouble with kick-off return men today is that they stand there and wait for the ball to come down. I liked to take the ball on the run. In fact the pitchers mound in Forbes Field was just to the side of the line and I used to like to stand on the mound to get a good start down hill."

The Giants kicked off, and true to form Chandnois caught the ball on the dead run at the nine-yard line. Not a Giant touched him. It was a 91-yard kick-off return for a touchdown. Exactly 17 seconds into the game the Steelers had a 7-0 lead. The Steelers rang up a second touchdown by Chandnois in the first quarter, and scored twice in the second quarter on passes from Jim Finks to Elbie Nickel (21 yards) and to Ray Mathews (42 yards).

The situation looked bad for the Giants.

Then disaster struck. Their regular quarterback, Charlie Conerly, and their back-up quarterback, Fred Benners, were both injured during the first half. In those days, NFL teams only carried two quarterbacks. Even Kyle Rote, who had served as an insurance quarterback in such emergencies, had been put out of the game with a concussion.

The second half quarterback duties fell to Tom Landry who had handled the ball only as a punter and defensive back.

The third quarter was played evenly with both teams scoring a touchdown. The Giants score came on a 70-yard flea-flicker pass from Tom Landry.

But the final quarter was a nightmare for the Giants. The Steelers scored four unanswered touchdowns: one on a blocked kick, one on a short run following a Landry fumble, and two on passes. Near the end of the game, the Steelers even toyed with the Giants by putting linebacker Jerry Shipkey in at fullback and defensive back Jack Butler in at flanker.

The 63-7 final score clearly reflected the devastation of the Giants. Not only were the Steelers an offensive machine that day, but the defense also intercepted seven passes, recovered two fumbles, scored on a blocked punt, and crushed the Giants physically. "We always played the Giants tough," recalls Chandnois, "but in that game we couldn't do anything wrong."

At a press conference on Monday, Giants' coach Steve Owen confessed he would have problems fielding a team for the next game because of injuries caused by the Steelers. Owen also told the press he would have to split the quarterback duties between Landry and Kyle Rote.

Landry finished the season with 11 completions in 47 attempts for an anemic 23% completion rate, but more of a problem was the 7 interceptions he threw. He never played quarterback again.

For the Giants, the Steelers' win ruined their chance to win the Eastern Division championship. The loss to Pittsburgh put them one game behind the Browns with two to play. A Giants loss to the cellar-dwelling Redskins the following week by 17-27 clinched the championship for the Browns.

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For the Steelers the crush of the Giants was the high point of the 1952 season. They split their last two games to finish the season with a 5-7 record.

For my father and me, it was a perfect day. After all, how many times does a person get to see his favorite team's greatest victory ever.