



John Michelosen

This article was written by Matt Keddie.

The name John Michelosen is synonymous with success in western Pennsylvania football history. At Ambridge High School he was a standout quarterback and halfback who won the PIAA Class A State Championship in 1932.¹ He received such praise that, “fans who know their football say that Johnny Michelosen, Ambridge halfback, throws a pass better than most of the college boys.”² At the University of Pittsburgh, he was an established quarterback under mentor and legendary head coach Jock Sutherland, winning back-to-back national championships in 1936 and 1937. As a coach, Michelosen led the Panthers for 11 seasons, compiling a 56-49-7 record.³ He might be most known for his civil rights activism, breaking the color barrier in the 1956 Sugar Bowl which became the first integrated bowl game in the Deep South. At the professional level, he coached the Pittsburgh Steelers from 1948 to 1951, earning a 20-26-2 mark.⁴ His 20 victories were the most wins in franchise history at the time, and he became the second Steelers coach to post consecutive non-losing seasons.⁵



Michelosen's story cannot be told without John Bain “Jock” Sutherland, whom he worked alongside at the collegiate and professional levels over several decades. The two first met in 1933 following Michelosen's senior season at Ambridge. Cognizant of the local talent, particularly of Michelosen, Sutherland recruited him to play quarterback at the University of Pittsburgh.⁶ The Pitt football team was among the nation's premier programs, having won 53 games and earned three Rose Bowl berths from 1927 to 1933.⁷ The Panthers were



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in the national media not only as a result of their success, but due to its gruesome scheduling, playing other national powers like Notre Dame, Nebraska, the University of Southern California, and Minnesota, as well as local powerhouses Carnegie Tech (now Carnegie Mellon University) and Duquesne University, year in and year out.

Michelosen played on the freshman football team in 1934. He competed for the starting job on the varsity in 1935 against Arnold Green and Bob McClure. Michelosen won the starting job and led the Panthers to a 7-1-2 record, highlighted by a 35-0 win over local Washington & Jefferson College.⁸ Pitt's only loss was a narrow, 9-6 game against Notre Dame that was decided on a last second field goal.

In 1936, Michelosen played quarterback and halfback, splitting time with Arnold Green. The Panthers were declared national champions by a variety of selectors, at 8-1, despite the team turning down several postseason bowl invitations.⁹ This was a result of tensions between university officials and the football team. The university administration accused the players of demanding benefits and monetary compensation. Because of the prestige of participating in the Rose Bowl, the university administration pleaded for the players to reconsider their decision. In a move to get back at them, the players once again voted to not participate in the game by a slim margin of a single vote.¹⁰

Michelosen was drafted 102nd overall in the 12th round of the 1938 NFL Draft by the Philadelphia Eagles. Instead of playing, he chose to venture into the coaching ranks as Sutherland retained him as Pitt's quarterbacks coach. The Panthers remained in the national spotlight, spending most of the season as the top ranked club.¹¹ However, they suffered a stunning 20-10 defeat to Carnegie Tech on November 5th. And then three weeks later, a 7-0 loss at Duke to finish with a disappointing 8-2 record. The 1939 season was Sutherland's final year at the helm of the Panthers, due to tension between the two parties with the school's decision to begin to deemphasize athletics. Michelosen was sent overseas in an effort to introduce American football across Europe. Upon his return, the school relieved him from his coaching position.¹²

Michelosen followed Sutherland to coach in the NFL with the Brooklyn Dodgers. Sutherland appointed him as the backfield coach in 1940.¹³ Prior to their arrival, the Dodgers had just one winning season in the last 10 years. Sutherland and Michelosen changed that, leading the team to a second place finish in the NFL's Eastern Division with an 8-3 record, behind the NFL runner-up Washington Redskins.¹⁴ During the season, the Dodgers split the two-game series with Washington.

The Dodgers featured the league's top ranked scoring defense, holding five of its 11 opponents to less than 10 points. Brooklyn's roster consisted of several former Pitt Panther players including backs Dick Cassiano and Ben Kish, tackle Frank Kristufek, and



guard Steve Petro.¹⁵ The team's feature players were fullback Pug Manders, and tailback Ace Parker. Parker led the Dodgers in passing with 817 yards and 10 touchdowns. He was also a versatile threat running and receiving, totaling an additional 508 yards from scrimmage. Manders earned a spot on the Pro Bowl team, while Parker was a unanimous first-team All-Pro.¹⁶

The Dodgers returned in 1941 with another second place finish at 7-4. They were one game behind the NFL runner-up New York Giants, despite sweeping them during the regular season with 16-13 and 21-7 victories. Brooklyn was knocked out of postseason contention on November 16 in a 14-7 loss to the Pittsburgh Steelers.¹⁷

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- 1 Orochena, David. "Perspective Of An Average Steelers Fan: John Michelosen, Ambridge All-Star," steelersdepot.com, June 4, 2021, <https://steelersdepot.com/2021/06/perspective-of-an-average-steelers-fan-john-michelosen-ambridge-all-star/>.
 - 2 Orochena, David. "Perspective Of An Average Steelers Fan: John Michelosen, Ambridge All-Star," steelersdepot.com, June 4, 2021, <https://steelersdepot.com/2021/06/perspective-of-an-average-steelers-fan-john-michelosen-ambridge-all-star/>.
 - 3 Orochena, David. "Perspective Of An Average Steelers Fan: John Michelosen, Ambridge All-Star," steelersdepot.com, June 4, 2021, <https://steelersdepot.com/2021/06/perspective-of-an-average-steelers-fan-john-michelosen-ambridge-all-star/>.
 - 4 Orochena, David. "Perspective Of An Average Steelers Fan: John Michelosen, Ambridge All-Star," steelersdepot.com, June 4, 2021, <https://steelersdepot.com/2021/06/perspective-of-an-average-steelers-fan-john-michelosen-ambridge-all-star/>.
 - 5 "John Michelosen," ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/coaches/MichJo0.htm>.
 - 6 Orochena, David. "Perspective Of An Average Steelers Fan: John Michelosen, Ambridge All-Star," steelersdepot.com, June 4, 2021, <https://steelersdepot.com/2021/06/perspective-of-an-average-steelers-fan-john-michelosen-ambridge-all-star/>.
 - 7 "Pitt Panthers School History," sports-reference.com, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://www.sports-reference.com/cfb/schools/pittsburgh/>.
 - 8 Orochena, David. "Perspective Of An Average Steelers Fan: John Michelosen, Ambridge All-Star," steelersdepot.com, June 4, 2021, <https://steelersdepot.com/2021/06/perspective-of-an-average-steelers-fan-john-michelosen-ambridge-all-star/>.
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Following the season, with World War II escalating, Michelosen joined the Navy as a flight instructor and spent the next four years (1942-1945) serving his country. He returned from the war in time for the 1946 season and served as an assistant coach with the Steelers under Sutherland.¹⁸ Pittsburgh had suffered an awful 0-10 mark in 1944 and a disappointing 2-8 record in 1945. Though with promising back Bill Dudley, the 1946 season proved to be a positive for the team. Dudley led the league in rushing attempts (146) total touches (150), and rushing yards (604) helping the Steelers to a 5-5-1 record, the club's best since 1942.¹⁹ Dudley was named second-team All-Pro by the Associated Press and was chosen to the first team by Pro Football Illustrated, the *New York Daily News*, and the UPI.²⁰

The Steelers had their best season in franchise history, to date, in 1947. The team recorded an 8-4 record, tying for first place in the NFL East Division with the Philadelphia Eagles. The teams split their two regular season meetings that created a one-game playoff in Pittsburgh on December 21 to determine who would play the West Division champion, Chicago Cardinals, for the NFL title.²¹ The Eagles handled the Steelers easily, 21-0 at Forbes Field. Philadelphia played aggressive, tight defense, holding Pittsburgh to just 154 total yards. The Steelers were overwhelmed, achieving just seven first downs, and committing two turnovers.²² Unfortunately for Pittsburgh, the team would have to wait another 25 years for a playoff berth.

During the off-season, Sutherland passed away unexpectedly of a brain tumor, causing Michelosen to take over the head coaching duties. At 32 years old, he was the youngest coach in the NFL.²³

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 - 1 5 "1940 Brooklyn Dodgers Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees," ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/bkn/1940.htm>.
 - 1 6 "1940 Brooklyn Dodgers Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees," ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/bkn/1940.htm>.
 - 1 7 "1941 Brooklyn Dodgers Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees," ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/bkn/1941.htm>.
 - 1 8 Orochena, David. "Perspective Of An Average Steelers Fan: John Michelosen, Ambridge All-Star," steelersdepot.com, June 4, 2021, <https://steelersdepot.com/2021/06/perspective-of-an-average-steelers-fan-john-michelosen-ambridge-all-star/>.
 - 1 9 "1946 Pittsburgh Steelers Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees," ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/pit/1946.htm>.
 - 2 0 "Bill Dudley," ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/D/DudlBi00.htm>.
 - 2 1 "1947 Pittsburgh Steelers Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees," ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/pit/1947.htm>.
 - 2 2 "Divisional Round – Philadelphia Eagles at Pittsburgh Steelers – December 21st, 1947," ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/boxscores/194712210pit.htm>.



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The 1948 season started off with a tight, 17-14, defeat at the hands of the Washington Redskins. The Steelers rebounded to win their next two games against the Boston Yanks and a rematch with Washington, though two separate three-game losing streaks caused the season to trend downward. The team finished at 4-8, largely due to a lack of a consistent offense. Pittsburgh averaged just 16.7 points per game and did not have a solid answer at quarterback.²⁴ They rotated between Ray Evans, Johnny Clement, and Joe Gasparella in the single-wing offense. The trio combined for a total of 28 interceptions against just eight touchdown passes. The performances frustrated the defense, who was ranked in the top half of the league in most statistical categories such as points allowed (fourth), yards allowed (third), and first downs allowed (third). Four of Pittsburgh's eight losses were by one possession (seven points or less).²⁵

The Steelers improved in 1949 with a 6-5-1 record and a second-place finish. The defense remained strong, ranking second in points allowed. Again it was the offense that limited the club's success. There was still not a definitive answer at quarterback, with Jim Finks, Bob Gage, and Joe Geri splitting the action.²⁶ The offense yielded 18 interceptions and turned the ball over a total of 27 times, second worst in the league. On the bright side, the emergence of end Elbie Nickel provided some promise for future seasons. Nickel led the league with 24.3 yards per reception and his 26 receptions for 633 yards paced the Steelers. Geri led the team in total offense, passing for 554 yards and adding 543 additional yards from scrimmage.²⁷

Michelosen's third year as head coach saw a 6-6 mark. The offense continued to sputter, breaking the 20 point plateau in just three of its games. They had hoped to improve on this in 1950, but that was not to be as they finished outside the playoffs again. The Steelers boasted the fourth ranked defense, but finished dead last in points scored (15 points per game).²⁸ In its first two games against the New York Giants and Detroit Lions, respectively, Pittsburgh ran for only 34 and 54 yards, losing both contests.

2 3 “Youngest NFL Coaches (Modern Era),” profootballhof.com, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://www.profootballhof.com/football-history/youngest-nfl-coaches-modern-era/>.

2 4 “1948 Pittsburgh Steelers Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/pit/1948.htm>.

2 5 “1948 Pittsburgh Steelers Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/pit/1948.htm>.

2 6 “1949 Pittsburgh Steelers Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/pit/1949.htm>.

2 7 “1949 Pittsburgh Steelers Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/pit/1949.htm>.

2 8 “1950 Pittsburgh Steelers Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/pit/1950.htm>.



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Geri continued to serve as the team's workhorse. He carried the ball 188 times for a team high 705 yards, an average of 3.8 yards per carry which ranked third in the NFL, behind Philadelphia's Frank Ziegler and Cleveland's Marion Motley.²⁹ The performance earned him a trip to the Pro Bowl and a first-team All-Pro selection by the Associated Press, *New York Daily News*, and the UPI. Geri ran for a season high 145 yards in a 30-17 loss to the Cleveland Browns. The next week he ran a season high 29 times helping the Steelers defeat the Giants, 17-6.³⁰ The win over New York was the Steelers' signature victory of the season. The Giants finished at 10-2, tied at the top of the division. In the game, Geri was also the team's leading passer, throwing for 159 yards and a touchdown while also adding two extra points and a field goal. The touchdown came on a 58-yard strike to Nickel in the first quarter.³¹

The 1951 season was Michelosen's last as the Steelers' head coach. The team again struggled on offense due to the lack of stability at quarterback. The team utilized an ineffective platoon of Chuck Ortmann, Geri, and Lynn Chandnois.³² The trio combined for 24 interceptions. Off to a dismal 0-3-1 start, Pittsburgh never won consecutive games, finishing at 4-7.³³

Michelosen returned to the University of Pittsburgh in 1952 as the team's backfield coach. The Panthers were in the midst of a coaching shuffle. Prior to Michelosen's arrival, Len Casanova, Red Dawson, and Tommy Hamilton had little success leading the team.³⁴ Pitt turned to Michelosen to be the head coach in 1955.

In his first year, he guided the Panthers to a 7-4 record and a Sugar Bowl berth against Georgia Tech. It was the most wins a Pitt team achieved since 1938, Sutherland's final season.³⁵ The Panthers knocked off a top five Duke team on the road, 26-7, and a top ten West Virginia squad at Pitt Stadium in the Backyard Brawl, also 26-7. The regular season concluded with a 20-0 shutout of arch-rival Penn State in State College, Pennsylvania.³⁶

On January 2, 1956 Pitt was set to square off against Georgia Tech at Tulane Stadium in New Orleans. Because the south was still segregated, the state of Georgia protested that

2 9 “1950 Pittsburgh Steelers Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/pit/1950.htm>.

3 0 “Joe Geri,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/G/GeriJo00.htm>.

3 1 “Pittsburgh Steelers at New York Giants – October 15th, 1950,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/boxscores/19501015nyg.htm>.

3 2 “1951 Pittsburgh Steelers Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/pit/1951.htm>.

3 3 “1951 Pittsburgh Steelers Rosters, Stats, Schedule, Team Draftees,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/pit/1951.htm>.

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Pitt's Bobby Grier, who was African American, not participate in the game.³⁷ The University of Pittsburgh stated, "Bobby Grier will sleep, eat, practice, and play with his team at the Sugar Bowl."³⁸ The game went on as scheduled and Grier played. The Panthers and Yellow Jackets played a highly competitive game with Georgia Tech squeaking out a 7-0 victory. Pitt had opportunities to tie the game in the second half, driving inside the red zone twice, but losing each possession on turnovers.³⁹ Then, on the game's final possession they were stopped at the five-yard line as time expired. Ironically, the Panthers squared off against Georgia Tech in the Gator Bowl the following season.⁴⁰ Despite the Panthers loss, history was made with the first African American player participating in a college bowl game in the Deep South. Pitt finished ranked No. 11 in the country.

The Panthers put together consecutive seven win seasons, with another excellent year in 1956, but again fell to Georgia Tech in their Bowl game, this time by a 21-14 score. Pitt was ranked throughout the year and defeated two top ten opponents in Syracuse and Miami (FL). They finished ranked No. 13 in the Associated Press poll.

In 1957, Pitt regressed to a 4-6 record, rebounding slightly in 1958 with a 5-4-1 mark.⁴¹ Of note was a tie to top ranked Army, 14-14, at Pitt Stadium, which eliminated the Cadets from national title consideration. Army finished ranked fifth. The 1959 Pitt team went 6-4, but the program began a downhill slide in the early 1960s.⁴² After a 4-3-3 year in 1960, the 1961 club finished 3-7, which may have been Michelosen's worst team. In 1962, Pitt improved to 5-5 with victories over Baylor, California, UCLA, Syracuse and Army.⁴³ This set up one of the school's greatest seasons in 1963.

The '63 Pitt Panthers may have been one of the best college football teams never to play in a bowl game during that time. They went 9-1 with their only defeat coming against

3 5 "Pitt Panthers School History," sports-reference.com, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://www.sports-reference.com/cfb/schools/pittsburgh/>.

3 6 "Pitt Panthers Schedule and Results," sports-reference.com, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://www.sports-reference.com/cfb/schools/pittsburgh/1956-schedule.html>.

3 7 Orochena, David. "Perspective Of An Average Steelers Fan: John Michelosen, Ambridge All-Star," steelersdepot.com, June 4, 2021, <https://steelersdepot.com/2021/06/perspective-of-an-average-steelers-fan-john-michelosen-ambridge-all-star/>.

3 8 Orochena, David. "Perspective Of An Average Steelers Fan: John Michelosen, Ambridge All-Star," steelersdepot.com, June 4, 2021, <https://steelersdepot.com/2021/06/perspective-of-an-average-steelers-fan-john-michelosen-ambridge-all-star/>.

3 9 Maisel, Ivan. "'The South Stands at Armageddon': Breaking the Sugar Bowl color," ESPN.com, February 26, 2019, https://www.espn.com/college-football/story/_/id/26027623/the-south-stands-armageddon-breaking-sugar-bowl-color-barrier.

4 0 Maisel, Ivan. "'The South Stands at Armageddon': Breaking the Sugar Bowl color," ESPN.com, February 26, 2019, https://www.espn.com/college-football/story/_/id/26027623/the-south-stands-armageddon-breaking-sugar-bowl-color-barrier.



Navy that was led by elite quarterback Roger Staubach.⁴⁴ The Panthers wanted another shot at the Midshipmen, but they never got it. No doubt this was Michelosen's greatest coaching job praised by team captain Al Grigaliunas who said, "John was a very modest leader and a very good person. He was a very calm person who knew what he was doing. He had a group of assistant coaches who were focused on making sure we knew what we were doing."⁴⁵ Michelosen had great talent in back Paul Martha, Fred Mazurek, and Rick Leeson. Mazurek said, "Maybe that one loss helped us in the sense that we had a renewed focus. Now, with that 1963 team, because of that one loss and not getting into a bowl, we're known as the 'No Bowl' team and end up getting a lot of recognition."⁴⁶ Bowl invites were awarded prior to the end of the regular season, but due to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, Pitt's contest against Miami (FL) and regular season finale with Penn State were rescheduled. Michelosen left the decision up to the team whether to participate or not. Grigaliunas said, "The (Penn State) game was rescheduled and the major bowls had made their commitments. The only choices we had were minor bowls and we all decided to say, 'The heck with it. Let's stay home.'"⁴⁷ Mazurek said, "I knew he felt satisfied that the job he had done was the best he could do. He was a very upstanding type of guy. He was very dedicated to his players. He was just an all-around good guy who really appreciated the university. He was a Pitt guy through and through."⁴⁸

Unfortunately for Michelosen, over the next two seasons the Panthers won only three games each. Following the 1965 season, Pitt athletic director Frank Carver released him from the coaching position. In 11 seasons at the helm, Michelosen amassed a 56-49-7

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- 4 2 "Pitt Panthers School History," sports-reference.com, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://www.sports-reference.com/cfb/schools/pittsburgh/>.
- 4 3 "1962 Pitt Panthers Schedule and Results," sports-reference.com, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://www.sports-reference.com/cfb/schools/pittsburgh/1962-schedule.html>.
- 4 4 Chiappazzi, Andrew. "The Greatest Stories: John Michelosen's right man for Pitt's 'No Bowl' team," TheTimesonline.com, April 24, 2016, <https://www.timesonline.com/story/sports/2016/04/24/the-greatest-stories-john-michelosen/18565819007/>.
- 4 5 Chiappazzi, Andrew. "The Greatest Stories: John Michelosen's right man for Pitt's 'No Bowl' team," TheTimesonline.com, April 24, 2016, <https://www.timesonline.com/story/sports/2016/04/24/the-greatest-stories-john-michelosen/18565819007/>.
- 4 6 Chiappazzi, Andrew. "The Greatest Stories: John Michelosen's right man for Pitt's 'No Bowl' team," TheTimesonline.com, April 24, 2016, <https://www.timesonline.com/story/sports/2016/04/24/the-greatest-stories-john-michelosen/18565819007/>.
- 4 7 Chiappazzi, Andrew. "The Greatest Stories: John Michelosen's right man for Pitt's 'No Bowl' team," TheTimesonline.com, April 24, 2016, <https://www.timesonline.com/story/sports/2016/04/24/the-greatest-stories-john-michelosen/18565819007/>.
- 4 8 Chiappazzi, Andrew. "The Greatest Stories: John Michelosen's right man for Pitt's 'No Bowl' team," TheTimesonline.com, April 24, 2016, <https://www.timesonline.com/story/sports/2016/04/24/the-greatest-stories-john-michelosen/18565819007/>.



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record.⁴⁹ He was 5-5-1 against arch-rival Penn State, 6-5 against West Virginia, and 5-5 against Notre Dame. After Michelosen, Pitt's football program entered a very dark time, enduring three consecutive 1-9 seasons. They would not reach another bowl game until 1973 when the legendary Johnny Majors was coach.⁵⁰

Michelosen moved on to scouting with the San Francisco 49ers beginning in 1966. It was a position he held until his death on October 17, 1982 when he suffered a sudden heart attack.⁵¹

He was inducted into the Pennsylvania Sports Hall of Fame in 1970 and is also a member of the Beaver County Sports Hall of Fame.⁵² His 56 wins ranks fourth in Pitt football history, and is just one of six Panthers head coaches to win 50 or more games. His 11 seasons as head coach is second only behind his mentor, Jock Sutherland, who coached Pitt for 15.⁵³

4 9 Orochena, David. "Perspective Of An Average Steelers Fan: John Michelosen, Ambridge All-Star," steelersdepot.com, June 4, 2021, <https://steelersdepot.com/2021/06/perspective-of-an-average-steelers-fan-john-michelosen-ambridge-all-star/>.

5 0 "Pitt Panthers School History," sports-reference.com, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://www.sports-reference.com/cfb/schools/pittsburgh/>.

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5 2 "John Michelosen Dies at 66; Football Coach in Pittsburgh," nytimes.com, October 20, 1982, <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/10/20/obituaries/john-michelosen-dies-at-66-football-coach-in-pittsburgh.html>.

5 3 "Pitt Panthers Coaches," sports-reference.com, accessed February 26, 2023, <https://www.sports-reference.com/cfb/schools/pittsburgh/coaches.html>.