

Steelers

Takeaways

Player Memories Through the Decades

by
Ron Lippock

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Steelers Takeaways: Player Memories Through the Decades
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Foreword by Terry Hanratty

I grew up in Butler Pennsylvania, just a few miles from Steeler headquarters, then in the Roosevelt Hotel. Little did I know in 1969 I would play for the Rooney Family. I can remember as a kid going to Slippery Rock College to watch the Steelers' training camp practices. Bobby Layne, Big Daddy, Tom the Bomb, and all the other great names. One thing I noticed was how slow they practiced. I learned years later it was what they did the night before that caused the slow movement in practice. The Steelers did not win many games back then, but they were OUR Steelers.

Enter Chuck Noll.

Chuck Noll taught the team, Rooneys and the City of Pittsburgh how to WIN. People throughout the country sort of knew where Pittsburgh was, but when Chuck was finished everyone knew where the Steel City was - you had to go through there to try to win a championship.

Chuck had a plan and he was going to stick with it. Back in the day everyone was trading their draft picks for old vets with a couple of years left. Not Chuck, he was going to build through the draft. He didn't want someone he had to break of their bad habits and teach the Steeler way. I was a rookie with Chuck in 1969, which was a long year, we were 1-13. That was the last year anybody in the country chuckled when they talked about the Steelers from Pittsburgh.

I, like most players, was blessed to have played for the Rooney family. Where else could you walk into a locker room after a game and have Mr. Rooney there to shake your hand, win or lose. I laugh when I see how some of today's owners act - thank you Chief! Three coaches since 1969 - again credit the Rooney family.

So, I thank Ron Lippock and the *Pittsburgh Sports Daily Bulletin* for allowing myself and others to keep up with all of those guys that played before, during and after I played. Those stories take me back to those times spent with my colleagues – both on the field, and most importantly, the times spent off the field – as friends. Many of these stories I've forgotten over the years – and some I didn't even know. How he got us to open up about some of this stuff, I'll never know!

Many of these guys he spoke to weren't household names either – but they were Steelers - and all had unique stories getting to the NFL and of their time as players. Those stories are great reads –personal, funny, some sad – but they opened up for Ron and gave honest accounts of their time in Pittsburgh.

I can say that when I was interviewed by Ron I had no idea what an effect it would have on my daily life. I look forward to reading the interviews. I think Ron's book is a must read for all past, present and future Pittsburgh sports fans.

-Terry Hanratty, Steelers Quarterback 1969-1975

Intro

I was asked when I first conceived of this book: “Why another book on the Steelers? What makes this one....different?”

Fair question – one I asked myself as well. The answers were surprisingly easy for me to come by. At first, I leaned on the fact that I had interviewed over three-hundred former players – from those that played in the 1950s, to those just recently retired. More well-known names like Lynn Swann, Hines Ward, Andy Russell, and L.C. Greenwood, sure. But just as importantly, the literally hundreds of role players and practice squad guys that rarely got the chance to tell their stories before, but whose perspectives on the team, issues and viewpoints were often very different from those of the “big name” players. Many of their stories were extremely personal, interesting, and unique because of those different perspectives and experiences.

The other answer that came to mind though, was that this isn’t intended to be another “Story of the Steelers” book, though you get a strong understanding of the team’s history through the stories and quotes given by all of the players. Rather, this is more the “Stories of the player’s experiences” – of the hundreds that wore the Black and Gold. Not just stories as players. But as *people*, who struggled and grew as men– succeeded and failed - both on and off the field. Who were driven by humor, financial needs, anger, camaraderie, competition and fear...and who were affected positively and negatively by coaches and peers, race, and religion. And by the physical nature of the game itself.

There are stories never told before. And I think as I step back from them and all of the interviews, I understand now why the Steelers appeal so much to their fans. The Steelers players are not larger than life – not bigger than their fans. In fact, their lives and motivations mirror those of their fans. They are the guys next door...easy to identify with, because

most never tried to be larger than life. They never tried to be more important than their fans or teammates. All they wanted to do was succeed. To earn a living. To be great at what they did. And to be accepted and remembered. Just like you and me. You'll see what I mean, I think, as you read these stories and quotes from players.

It Starts at the Top

The Steelers had been a team in flux for a couple of decades prior to the 70s, nothing like the model of consistency we identify them as being today. While the Chief was well-liked and cared for by the players he treated so well, numerous coaching changes, unwise trades, poor drafting – these were the cornerstones of the Steelers in the 50s and 60s. This led to poor seasons, disgruntled players, and ultimately, a change in direction for ownership.

Which is not to say there wasn't a great deal of talent on the team. But a complete organizational and cultural change was required for the team to succeed. And while the Rooney family struggled at first to learn the "business of football", they did in fact do so. They learned from their mistakes, learned patience, and hired Chuck Noll to build the team – the right way.

Coach Noll, with the support and encouragement of the Rooney family and hard-nosed staff, instilled innovation, accountability, leadership, and a culture of winning that required players to support as well as compete with one another.

The Rooneys:

Where to start, when discussing the stories that players told about their time in Pittsburgh? Where else...but with the Rooneys, and the rest of the front office. And it's not that I had to ask the players about their thoughts on the Rooneys over the years. In fact, I'd often refrain from doing so at first because it would consume the conversation. And frankly, to be honest, I was skeptical. So much has been written on the charity and kindness of the Rooney family. To me, it sounded like a kernel of truth that had grown to mythical proportions. Not that I doubted the fact the Rooneys were good, charitable people. But I doubted the extent

– the depth – of that kindness attributed to them. Simply because as owners of a rugged business in a blue-collar city, one expects more gruffness, and less, well, *sweetness*.

But the players dispelled my skepticism. They clearly felt compelled to discuss the impact of the Rooneys on their lives. Because it wasn't just about football with the Rooneys. It was about family. Players were *family*. And as you'll see with the interview excerpts to follow, it didn't matter if you were a Hall of Fame player or taxi squad player – if you were a Steeler, you were treated with respect, sincere interest, and care by the organization. And not just as an active player. You became part of the Steelers legacy.

Below, you'll read about the Chief's involvement in player's personal lives, his tendency to help players financially, disregard for racial concerns of the time, the time he spent with players to get to know them, and more.

You'll also find that there were some players who had experiences with the Rooneys that weren't as pleasant. Not that these occurrences were numerous, but they serve as a good reminder that, for as good as they were, they were still business owners. They still had an obligation to put the team's needs above those of an individual player's, when there were conflicts between those two principles. And those didn't always go over well with players.

Joe Gordon, Former Quteelers Director of Communications:

The Rooney family – the respect they received from all entities in society – their commitment to the community rubbed off on the players. It was a big factor in Noll's success – his character was consistent with the Rooneys and that created high-character teams.

There were few problems then and generally not of the same magnitude of the problems you see today. There were no drugs and steroids were just coming into play. Because of the examples set by Rooney and Noll, there were few issues. When we did have problems, we addressed them to help the player. Very few problems like that happened though. The biggest problems were things like fights in bars – nothing like the problems that exist in sports today.

Society is different too. Athletes weren't as independent like today and were much more respectful of authority than they are today as well.

“Red” Mack, Steelers Wide Receiver, 1961-1963, 1965:

Art Rooney got one pick every draft. I was his pick.

I lived on the North Side of Pittsburgh as a kid – four to five blocks from Mr. Rooney. My parents got divorced and I was living in St. Paul’s Orphanage. We had a team and played St. Mary’s – a big school with brand new uniforms. We were a rag-tag team with torn up uniforms, but we kicked their ass.

After the game a fellow came up to us and took us all out to dinner. The next year we went to football camp and that guy was there again. He bought us all new uniforms.

That guy was Art Rooney.

I don’t know if he remembered me and that’s why he drafted me? I should never have been drafted. I had two bad knees – I had surgeries on both in college.

Mr. Rooney came to practice every day. He knew about your family – if your kids or wife was sick, he knew. I don’t know who gave him that information.

Gene Breen, Steelers Defensive Lineman, 1965-1966:

I was unhappy being sent to Pittsburgh. I came from Lombardi – the greatest team and coach – to a floundering team. We had beer bottles thrown at us by fans – one hit me in the head after I took my helmet off. We practiced in mud, had one shower head in the locker room and no weight equipment.

I was from Pittsburgh – born and raised. Unfortunately, playing for Pittsburgh was my worst experience. Losing was tough for me. After two years in Pittsburgh, I was cut from the team.

I was a military student at Virginia Tech and I got orders to report to Vietnam. Lombardi hired a lawyer for me and got Lou Anderson to get me to attend classes to get my Masters. This got me a two-year deferral.

Then I was traded to Pittsburgh. After the two years were up, the Rooneys wouldn’t help me. They didn’t care about me at all. The military was knocking on my door so I told Rooney I want out – “I’m done with you” I told him. So they cut me.

My paperwork was all in Pittsburgh. I got picked up by George Allen and the Rams and played for the Rams an additional two years. My lawyer saw the cast on my knee that I got from an injury while in Pittsburgh and I wasn't going to be accepted for active duty after that. During my career I had six knee operations but never missed a game but in the offseason. I rehabbed in the Steelers offices – my leg had actually atrophied. Ralph Berlin and the Rams trainer both were supposed to oversee the rehab but Berlin wouldn't sign me in to the building. "I'd probably sue him" he said. I was shocked.

Nancy, my wife, just reminds me to stay positive. But I did experience the negative that I have talked about. I don't want the Rooneys to read this and think I hated them – but my experience in Pittsburgh with them just wasn't good.

Dick Hoak, Steelers Running Back 1961-1970, Steelers Coach 1972-2007:

My last year as a player for the Steelers I suffered a concussion with four games left. I got another concussion the next week. I told my wife I was going to retire and spent two weeks in the hospital.

Every day the Chief came to see me to make sure I was all right.

In 1968, my best year, I was having a good year but the team was not so good. We practiced on the South Side then but got our checks in a hotel where the offices were in Pittsburgh. When I went to get my check I was told the Chief wanted to see me. I went up and he gave me a substantial check and said he knew we're not having a good year, but take this check.

In the last game, after I made the pro bowl, I separated my shoulder a week before the pro bowl. The secretary said Dan [Rooney] wanted to see me. He gives me another check. I told Dan the Chief already gave me one last week. Dan said he knew, but the Chief wanted me to have this one too.

"Red" Mack, Steelers Wide Receiver, 1961-1963, 1965:

The Steelers were a very poor team [in the early 60s] But the Rooneys were good people – very good people.

Mr. Rooney was too nice – he had to get out of the business of running the team. He and George Halas [Chicago Bears] were friends and kept trading and loaning players back and forth until Dan Rooney took over and the team started drafting much better players

I was there in the forgotten years. In '61, there were three teams you didn't want to be drafted by: Washington, Chicago, and Pittsburgh. They were still owned by the original owners and were the cheapest teams in football. Until Art got out of the business and his son took over and Chuck Noll came in – that's when they became a modern team. They got new facilities and paid players. But until then, it was the forgotten years.

Art Rooney was the greatest guy in the world. It just wasn't a viable franchise then. I remember we went to an exhibition game in Richmond, Virginia. They split us up on two DC-3's. The airplanes were patched up – not painted. Buzz Nutter was standing on the steps talking to Coach Parker. He didn't want to get on the plane. He finally got on and asked everyone where the parachutes were!

Lou Michaels, Steelers Kicker and Defensive End, 1961-1963:

I got to meet the finest owner in the U.S. – ever. I also met the secretary who worked at the Steelers front office and married her!

No owner was greater than Art Rooney was.

He took me to the Kentucky Derby, Preakness, and to his farm in Maryland. When I played for Baltimore and kicked four field goals for them against Pittsburgh, he called the owner and told them, "See, I told you, you got a great football player!" He took me for dinner after that game.

He loved people – he'd help anybody and had respect for everyone. I have yet to hear one bad word about Mr. Art Rooney. He was a great man, and I'll hold that opinion to my dying day.

Brady Keys, Steelers Cornerback, 1961-1967:

I started in 1968 with a fried chicken franchise. It grew to 135 restaurants – which then grew into Kentucky Fried Chicken and Burger King franchises.

It was a concept I developed – my own fried chicken batter – when I played for the Steelers. I called Art Rooney in the off-season from Los Angeles and told him what I did – about the idea and asked if he'd help me with money to start the business. All I heard was silence on the line. I had to ask if anyone was still on the line. Mr. Rooney answered back "I am. I'm just trying to figure out how fast to get you the money!"

He gave me ten thousand dollars – which was like one million dollars in those days. And in 1969 people just didn't loan that kind of money – especially to a Black man trying to start a business. I built my first two restaurants with that money.

I just want readers to know the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Rooneys – I owe them everything I am today. They gave me ten thousand dollars and never let me pay it back. They gave me one charge – to be successful. It's been on my mind ever since.

Clendon Thomas, Steelers Safety, 1962-1968:

I played for the best owner in the league – Art Rooney. I appreciated the way he treated me, not only as a boss but as an interested friend. He had a substantial horse farm in Maryland and I had a small operation in Oklahoma so we had a common interest.

After playing Baltimore he took me to his farm on Monday to see his yearlings. While driving back to Pittsburgh, Art shared many stories covering many subjects, our Irish heritage, his amazing history starting the Steelers. I cherish the attention and friendship I received from this gentleman. He also took the time to introduce me to Del Miller, his close friend who won the Hamiltonian harness race with a horse named "Adios" and built the Meadows harness track just outside of Pittsburgh.

Frank Lambert, Steelers Punter, 1965-1966:

Mr. Mara said that, after I got to Pittsburgh and was sure that we had incurred all the expenses we could expect, to send him a note with a total of our expenditures. He required no itemized list. He did not have to do that.

As for Art Rooney, I join the many former players who remember him as a player's owner. He was at most practices. He always

had time to chat with players. His signature hat, topcoat, and cigar are part of an enduring and fond image I have of him.

Before my second season, I pulled a muscle and missed the first three preseason games. I could not punt in practice and was really antsy. I guess he sensed that and one day took me aside and told me that I was the team's punter and I should worry about nothing but healing.

Our strong suit was a tough defense. But, in those years, the Steelers did not yet have a winning culture. I remember that in 1965 we lost several games in the last two-to-three minutes. It got to the point that we wondered if we could hold onto a lead.

I remember visiting with Mr. Rooney in the 1970s and he told me how he wished that I could have played for Chuck Noll. He said that Noll had built an outstanding team primarily through the draft and that he had instilled a winning expectation. Those guys expected to win every game.

Ken Kortas, Steelers Defensive Lineman, 1965-1968:

Dan Rooney was given control of the team...sort of. Art was mellowing. Danny wanted to make something out of it. He was more of a ramrod kind of guy.

After the quarterback debacle, Danny spent money to get a quarterback. They drafted Hanratty but found out he was a rollout quarterback with a weak arm. They said uh oh...So they drafted Bradshaw next year and spent a lot of money. Art would never have done that.

They had no other business on the side. This was their business.

Rocky Bleier, Steelers Running Back, 1968-1980:

When I got back [from Vietnam] Dan Rooney was President and was running the team. He gave me an opportunity and put me on injured reserve. He bought me a year. I made the Taxi Squad the following year – they wanted me to get bigger and stronger. I was then activated in '71. I put on strength and weight, and made the team on my special teams play in '72. We had a terrific year and won the division. In '73 I made the team again with my special teams play. Then in '74, during the fifth

game, there was an injury and I went in and played. We went to the Super Bowl, more afterwards, one thousand yards.

Warren Bankston, Steelers Fullback, 1969-1972:

The Rooney family was so very special. The “Chief” (Art Rooney, Sr.) would call us into his office, give us tickets to the Pirates games, and visit with us as if we were his own kids. Playing at Three Rivers Stadium was a bit rough on the body (hey, artificial turf has come a long way), but now that the stadium is gone, no one can take away the electricity that the great fans of Pittsburgh brought each week.

Chuck Allen, Steelers Linebacker, 1970-1971:

My second year, when I returned to our apartment from training camp, I found out that Roberto Clemente and his family were our upstairs neighbors.

The Rooneys let my wife and I use one of their boxes at the stadium to attend the World Series game. Art Rooney Sr. lived only a couple of blocks from the hospital where I had my knee surgery. I had sent my family home to Washington and Mr. Rooney brought me books to read about past Steelers greats.

Mr. Rooney asked my opinion of Coach Noll. My response was just “Give him a little more time, he just needs a few more players.” Jack Lambert was Noll’s pick two years later. Little did I know the turnaround would be so soon.

Anyway, when I was to get out of the hospital, Mr. Rooney said he would have someone drive me to the airport to return me home. He did – it was his brother who was a priest! How many owners would do this today?

Gordon Gravelle, Steelers Offensive Lineman, 1972-1976:

My time in Pittsburgh was very beneficial to my growth and development as a person and future businessman. I learned more life lessons from the Rooney family, the Steelers management team and the Steelers coaching staff than I had before or have since those few years I spent there.

I was exposed to and learned (through no fault of my own) how a first class organization was run and how the Rooney’s

had established a culture of “people first” where all of the employees, including the players, were treated with dignity and respect. I also learned quite quickly after I was traded that it was not the same at other teams.

Dick Conn, Steelers Cornerback, 1974:

The Rooney family is the best owner in the game. Mr. Rooney (Art) would come around the locker room with that cigar in his mouth and shake hands with every player from Joe Green down to me. He sent me a one hundred dollar check for my wedding and I still have the stub where he wrote me a personal note. I was proud to be a part of the funding for the Art Rooney Statue back in 1990. He was another great influence on my life.

Brad Cousino, Steelers Linebacker, 1977-1978:

I reflect on my NFL career and with the Steelers quite often. I learned so much about the concept of being on a team. Like how to commit to do your job no matter what...and then to trust and expect that your teammates are going to do their job no matter what. I learned an important lesson that it is critical to understand that not everyone can be the star, but that every facet of being on a team is critical to the end result whether you are a starter, a backup, a role player, a practice player, a trainer, equipment manager, coach, ball boy, etc. Very few get the recognition but every aspect is critical to making a group of individuals transform to becoming a world class champion.

I can still remember my first team meeting with the Cincinnati Bengals in 1975 and it was Paul Brown's last year as the head coach. At that meeting there was a major discussion about how the goal was to beat the Steelers. Two years later, the mindset of the Steelers was “how to win another Super Bowl”...it was so obvious that the Steelers ownership, management, coaching, etc. had a completely different mindset as compared to the Bengal organization at the time. In addition, the Steelers ownership and coaches treated their players as family, respecting them and instilling in them the desire to be the best they could be and giving them the necessary tools to succeed.

Not one of the players thought they were a super star and expected star treatment and no one person was above the team.

As a group, virtually everyone was fun to be around. The players, coaches and management treated everyone with respect, including the ball boys.

Joe Bushofsky, Former Steelers Scout:

The Steelers are a great organization and the Steeler Nation all rally around the success of the Steelers. Art Rooney Jr. and Jack Butler played a big part in the Steelers success and although Art Jr. never talks about his accomplishments, he is responsible for many of the good players that the Steelers drafted because he had the guts to stand up and fight for the players that the scouting department felt could help the team.

Just knowing Art and Jack Butler is a privilege and an honor.

Art Jr. was on the road when he first started and after he was named Director of Scouting, he always came to the all-star games (Senior Bowl, etc.) and he and Jack Butler also were present at many games of top prospects.

Tim Rooney, the cousin, spent many hours evaluating the pro players and also studying films of college prospects. The Steelers sent their coaches to work out and evaluate some top prospects at their respective positions if the team scouts had graded the player to make their team...They also studied film, talked with the position coach and checked on injuries, character, etc.

Tunch Ilkin, Steelers Offensive Lineman, 1980-1992:

Even in '87 during the strike, when Rooney heard I was looking for a field to practice on, he called me and told me "There's a key on Marianne's desk that unlocks the gate to the practice field." Marianne was his secretary. He said "You didn't get it from me."

He never threatened me as a player rep during the strike. Many reps were worried about getting cut but I never had to worry about that. He always used to come up to me and ask me "Tunch my boy, how are things in Turkey? Still killing each other each other, just like Ireland?"

Everyone in the organization are all just down-to-earth guys. The humility they have is unbelievable.