

THE PRESEASON: FOCUS TOTALLY ON FOOTBALL



This season marks the silver anniversary of the 1978 Pittsburgh Steelers, proclaimed the best in NFL history by NFL Films. The 1978 Steelers earned the distinction as the best ever by winning a fantasy tournament created by NFL Films that included many of the best teams from the different eras in league history.

To commemorate the 1978 Steelers, who helped the franchise become the first ever to win three Super Bowls, *Steelers Digest* is presenting a four-part series looking back at the events that shaped that season. The four parts are titled, *The Prelude*, *The Preseason*, *The Regular Season* and *The Playoffs*.



By BOB LABRIOLA
Editor

In the previous installment, *The Prelude*, the Steelers had to be tickled that 1977 was over, because the only field where they had any consistent success was the courtroom. Ernie Holmes was acquitted of cocaine possession charges; Chuck Noll was cleared of charges brought by George Atkinson over the "criminal element" remarks; and Mel Blount dropped his defamation lawsuit against Noll for including him in the "criminal element," which happened under cross-examination by Atkinson's lawyer.

In spite of it all, in the NFL it's turmoil in the locker room that affects the on-field product, and there was plenty at Three Rivers Stadium. A rookie died in a car accident during training camp, Jack Lambert held out, Mel Blount held out. Glen Edwards, Jimmy Allen, Ernie Holmes all moaned about money. Guys walked out and came back, and Noll took them back.

But times were about to change.



It was March 1978, and where the NFL owners had convened for their annual meetings it was sunny. What they were doing appeared to cast a dark cloud over football in Pittsburgh, but Noll had a different vision. It was sold to the public as a concern for "the increased emphasis on defense," but what the NFL suits wanted was more scoring to juice the Nielsons. So they changed the rules.

Offensive linemen could use their hands to pass-block, defensive backs had to break contact with a receiver beyond 5 yards of the line of scrimmage, and a side judge was added, in effect, to call more pass interference penalties. While everyone else was looking at how this was going to affect the Steelers defense, Noll was seeing how it was going to change his offense.

But first, fetch the broom. The big broom.

Before it was over, Jim Clack, Frank Lewis, Reggie Harrison, Holmes, Allen and Edwards were gone. Twelve Super Bowl rings among them. Not all were problems, but each one was

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— JOE GREENE



in the way, and Noll was in full-blown "whatever it takes" mode. "We're trying to rid ourselves of distractions," said Noll. "We can't have another season like last year. We've got to work like hell to get the distractions settled. Trading is only one of the ways to do it."

The moves were interpreted as a sign of a major rebuilding project, but the Steelers actually were working at the football version of Darwinism. They were adapting to their environment.

On July 2, 1978, a *Pittsburgh Press* story under the headline, "Revised Bump-And-Run Rule Suits Terry Bradshaw Fine," revealed a little about how the Steelers planned to do that.

"I think a quarterback will now be able to adjust to his routes and maybe get rid of the ball a little quicker," said Bradshaw. "I think you'll have the same basic coverages, but I think the bump-and-run will go out the window. This is gonna stop all the people laying all over the receivers' backs. And that could definitely help me, because a lot of times what has held us up is receivers getting jammed by a cornerback who is all over him."

In the first round of the 1978 draft, the Steelers had picked cornerback Ron Johnson, who became a starter when Allen was jettisoned and J.T. Thomas was diagnosed with a blood disorder that would threaten his life and suspend his career for the season. Thomas' illness was one of two offseason issues that got in Noll's way, and he himself was the cause of the other.

The NFL had and still has a rule prohibiting players from wearing shoulder pads during minicamp, but the rule was observed with a glance and a wink through much of the 1970s. Teams prohibited the media from watching

minicamp practices, but the Steelers made the tactical blunder of allowing reporters in the locker room before the players had a chance to remove their pads.

The story was written, and Noll lost his poise. He actually accused the newspaper of espionage, but after an initial flurry of sound bites, Noll went underground and didn't reappear until camp was about to open a month later. The Steelers were disciplined by the NFL in the form of forfeiture of a No. 3 draft choice in 1979, but Noll had avoided becoming the very type of distraction he was trying to purge from his team.

Once camp opened and the focus was all about football, the first play of the first scrimmage of the summer? A pass.

There were four preseason games, and the Steelers won two and lost two, but there was something encouraging about this .500 record. There was a momentum building, and those close to the team certainly felt it.

"The biggest difference in this camp compared to last year is that this camp is about football, not gossip," said Joe Greene. "Everything that's happening in this camp is about football. That's not saying we're going to go out there and kick butts, but that's saying we're going to be going about our business, what we're being paid for."

Never a man to toss about unwarranted accolades, Noll's excitement for the season would turn out to be prophetic. "I have a pretty good feeling about this team right now."

In Part III, The Regular Season, the Steelers unleash an awesome offense on the rest of the NFL.