

THE REGULAR SEASON: PASSING THE TEST



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 first two installments, *The Prelude* and *The Preseason*, the Steelers were tickled that their litigious 1977 was over, because the only field where they had any consistent success that season was the courtroom. In addition to all of the lawsuits and counter-suits, there was inner turmoil in the form of holdouts, walkouts and plenty of moaning about money.

In the offseason following 1977, Chuck Noll got out the big broom and got right to work. Not all of them were problems, but Noll either cut or traded Jim Clack, Frank Lewis, Reggie Harrison, Ernie Holmes, Jimmy Allen and Glen Edwards. Twelve Super Bowl rings among them, but Noll was in full-blown "whatever it takes" mode.

Just as significant to what the Steelers were about to accomplish in the upcoming season was the outcome of the 1978 NFL spring meetings. Offensive linemen were going to be allowed to use their hands to pass-block, defensive backs were going to have to break contact with a receiver beyond 5 yards of the line of scrimmage, and a side judge was going to be added, in effect, to call more pass interference penalties.

While everyone else was looking at how this was going to hinder the Steelers defense, Noll was plotting to see how it was going to help his offense.

It had been one of the routines that eventually became a tradition under Noll. On the Saturday before the opening of the regular season, the Steelers put on their uniforms and got together to pose for that year's team picture. Before the photographer packed away his equipment for the day, someone came up with an idea for a photo that would prove to be prophetic.

There were only four players in this photo. Terry Bradshaw, Lynn Swann, John Stallworth and Bennie Cunningham. The quarterback and his receivers.

Once the games began, there was no adjustment period. No easing into things. Noll un-



Someone knew something when the idea was brought up to have quarterback Terry Bradshaw (12) pose with wide receivers Lynn Swann (88) and John Stallworth (82) and tight end Bennie Cunningham (89) before the start of the 1978 season.

leashed his new offense right away, and the results were impressive, if not immediately recognized as trendsetting.

The Steelers opened with a 28-17 win over a Buffalo Bills team that would finish 5-11, but in that game Bradshaw completed 14 of 19 for 217 yards, and afterward Rocky Bleier summed up the afternoon succinctly, "Our passing attack was the big difference in this game."

The next week, the Steelers defeated Seattle, 21-10, a game in which Franco Harris rushed for 64 yards and Bradshaw passed for 213 and two touchdowns. What followed was a road win in Cincinnati, where Harris rushed for 73 yards and Bradshaw completed 14 of 19 for 242 yards and two more touchdowns.

The focal point of the offense had shifted from Harris' legs to Bradshaw's right arm, and Noll not only recognized that and embraced it, but he also was actively trying to nurture it.

"I think he's more confident that he's ever been before," said Noll about Bradshaw that September. "That makes a difference. And everybody's helping each other. The quarter-

backs are helping the receivers, and the receivers are helping the quarterbacks. He's getting the ball to Bennie Cunningham and our running backs as well as the wide receivers, which has helped."

A 28-17 win in New York against the Jets put the Steelers at 5-0, and the recipe for the victory was more of the same. Bradshaw completed 17 of 25 for 189 yards and three touchdowns, and Swann accounted for seven of those catches for 100 yards and two of the scores. After the game, Joe Greene said, "The story was the offense."

While Bradshaw's passing numbers through the first five games of 1978 might seem pedestrian by today's standards, they were cutting edge at that time, especially for the Steelers. Still, the most dramatic change of all, the person who deserved the most credit, was Noll.

In the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* the day after the win over the Jets: "The Steelers pounded home the lesson once again yesterday at Shea Stadium. Stopping the run is no longer enough