

# The Playoffs: A dominant run



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 three installments, *The Prelude, The Preseason and The Regular Season*, the Steelers had re-made their team after a 1977 season that included lawsuits, holdouts, walk-outs and plenty of moaning about money.

In the offseason following 1977, Chuck Noll either cut or traded Jim Clack, Frank Lewis, Reggie Harrison, Ernie Holmes, Jimmy Allen and Glen Edwards. Twelve Super Bowl rings were gone. Then came the rules changes, the ones that opened up the passing game, and 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.

In finishing 14-2 during the regular season, the Steelers did to their competition what Ghengis Khan did to his. Nine of their 14 wins were by double-digit margins; Terry Bradshaw tied for the AFC lead in passing yards, and the offense also averaged 143.6 yards rushing per game while converting 48 percent on third downs. The defense contributed to this marauding persona by recording 44 sacks and 48 take-aways.

It was just the second season in which the NFL used records to determine home-field advantage for the playoffs, and that allowed the Steelers to sleep in their own beds until they had to leave for Miami, for Super Bowl XIII and for an appointment with history.

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In the wild card games in each conference, Houston, 10-6 in the AFC Central Division, beat Miami, and advanced to the next round against New England. The Steelers and Broncos had the week off and then prepared to face each other, as the mutual dislike bubbled to the surface.

Broncos coach Red Miller bristled at the oft-repeated suggestion that his defending AFC champions were nothing but a fluke, and Jack Lambert seethed over Denver's Randy Gradishar being selected the All-Pro middle linebacker in-



**Terry Bradshaw's passing was the difference in a 35-31 Super Bowl victory that wasn't as close as the score might indicate.**

*Digest Photo/KEN KEIDEL*

stead of him. The Steel Curtain was tired of the Orange Crush, and a pregame incident brought that into sharp focus.

L.C. Greenwood walked onto the field and strolled past an area where a group of the Broncos were loosening up. In Greenwood's hand was an orange, and once they noticed him, he smashed it against a wall.

The Steelers built a 19-3 lead on a couple of touchdown runs by Franco Harris, but the Broncos closed to 19-10 and seemed to be building some momentum before Joe Greene killed that by blocking a 29-yard field goal attempt by Jim Turner.

Then as they had all season, the Steelers offense took advantage of an opponent's mistakes with quick strikes that put the game away.

Within a 32-second span, Bradshaw passed to John Stallworth for a 48-yard touchdown and to Lynn Swann for a 38-yard touchdown. Game over, 33-10.

"The big play was the key to the whole thing, of course," said Noll, "and Terry was at the hub of it all. It brings you to the dilemma of which came first: the receivers or the quarterback? We'd like to think you can't do one without the other."

In the other AFC Divisional Playoff game, the Oilers kicked the Patriots' butts, 31-14 in Foxboro. It turned out to be a Steelers-Oilers rubber match for the AFC Championship, and Broncos defensive end Lyle Alzado weighed in with a prediction.

"Bradshaw was incredible," said Alzado. "I can't believe it. I knew if Terry got hot, we'd be in trouble. He's got radar on that bleeping ball. If Terry plays that way, they're going to win the Super Bowl. I know that."

In the NFC, the defending Super Bowl champion Dallas Cowboys were hosting the Los Angeles Rams, and the prevailing opinion was that the AFC Championship Game would be more interesting, and definitely more violent.

"It's going to be a bloodbath," said Oilers quarterback Dan Pastorini, who already had donated some of his to this rivalry. "I just hope we have enough survivors to make it to the Super Bowl if we win."

Greene was a bit less graphic, bordering on poetic. "I think it's very appropriate that we play them for the AFC Championship. I was rooting for them. Not because we wanted to play them. It was something natural. I was feeling good for them."

It was Jan. 3, four days before the game, and the weather in Pittsburgh offered 9-degree temperatures with 16 mile-per-hour winds. Oilers coach Bum Phillips was bringing a dome team into this, and he didn't want to make it an issue.

"You can't practice being miserable," said Phillips. "It'll be an emotional game, and it won't really matter if it's cold or hot, or whether it rains or snows. I don't think we'll use weather as an excuse. I'm not worried about the weather. I'm worried about Pittsburgh. We've both got to play in it. It ain't gonna be colder on our side."

As usual, Lambert's perspective was unique. "The only time I mind the cold is at halftime, when you're wet and cold and you don't have time to change into anything. I feel a helluva lot worse for the fans. All they've got under them is that cold cement."

Game day arrived, and the outcome was de-

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