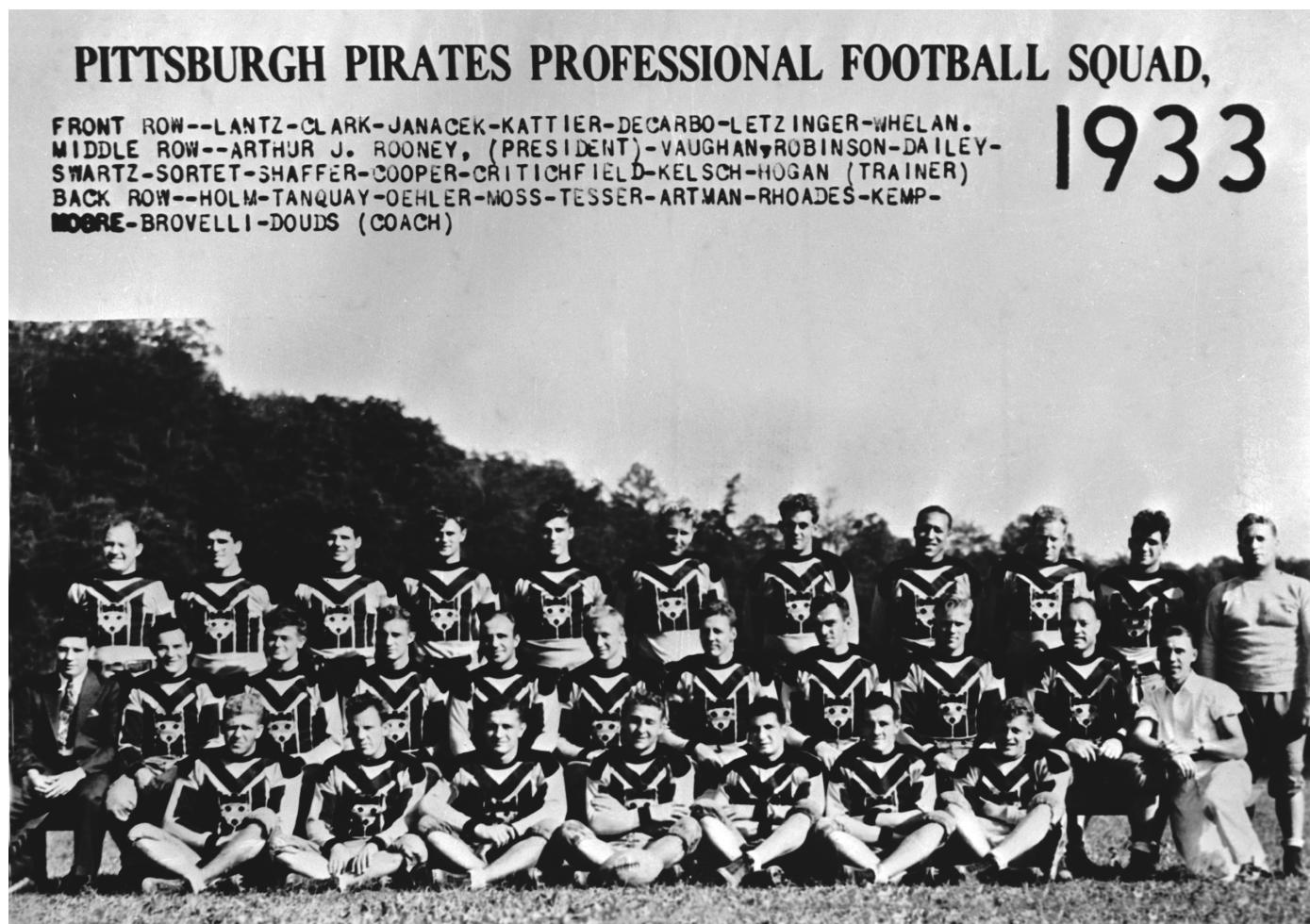




Beginnings (1933–1947)

IN THE OH-SO-HUMBLE BEGINNING, they were Pirates. They were transients and ruffians and gridiron soldiers of fortune in a three-river town that cleaved to other games as recreation. They were displaced citizenry with no firm day of the week on which to play because the Pennsylvania Blue Laws still hadn't been repealed by the time the team first set sail in late 1933.

True, there existed a National Hockey League entry by that same name in Pittsburgh eight years earlier. But this new bunch adopted the moniker and hues of the fabulously successful baseball team that occupied the same Forbes Field. In a region waging a tempestuous love affair with amateur football, these professional Pirates could hardly get to first base.



1933 team photo: Notice that Art Rooney is second row, far left. Coach Jap Douds is last row, far right. The third player in, from Douds' right shoulder, is Ray Kemp—the first African American player in franchise history and one of few in the NFL until Marion Motley and Company in 1946. (Courtesy of the Pittsburgh Steelers)

College football ruled. From the farms of immigrants, from the coal patches and steel mills that attracted waves of Irish, Germans, and Eastern Europeans, around the thriving neighborhoods of Polish Hill and Swissvale arose a thump of shoulder pads and leather helmets. Carnegie Tech, Pitt, Washington and Jefferson—these were local colleges that skirmished on fall Saturdays for the right to play in the Rose Bowl. Each did earn an invitation to that prestigious game: the granddaddy of them all.

Crowds flocked to their fields, their games, their embrace. These professional Pirates? Not so much.

They were swashbuckling bad.
Stayed that way for decades, too.

Art Rooney Jr., son of the founder, about the early going: “I mean, how many winning seasons did we have in 30 years? We were always apologizing.” Between 1933 and 1945 they had just one winning season. The majority of those years, they won three games or fewer.

Pat Rooney Sr., one of Art Rooney Sr.’s twin sons: “Pro football started playing on Sundays because colleges had Saturday wrapped up. You couldn’t play football on Sundays because of the Blue Laws. That’s why the Eagles and Steelers came around in the same time.

“The colleges didn’t want anything to do with the pros. They wanted to separate it. The pros were the bastard child. Carnegie Tech and Pitt—we were sort of a nonfactor in all that stuff. I can remember when the baseball Pirates were first [in Pittsburgh, colleges second]. We were really the third sport . . . until we moved into Three Rivers Stadium.”

A generation before he was known as the Chief or the Old Man, or even Sr., Art Rooney had coal-black hair and a pocketful of either cash or tickets from the racetrack—or both. He long had operated semipro football and baseball teams around Western Pennsylvania, barnstorming with both as player, coach, and owner. He was still a few years from launching the boxing gym and promotion business with pal Bernard McGinley.

It was 1933, and the political bent in Rooney—also a few years prior to his election campaign for an Allegheny County row office—caused him to take a flyer on this young professional football league. After all, Pittsburgh was found to be the birthplace of professional football, in a style a gambling man could appreciate: William “Pudge” Heffelfinger accepted \$500 to play one contest for the Allegheny Athletic Association on November 12, 1892, and the rival Pittsburgh Athletic Club demanded the game be declared an exhibition so a ringer couldn’t disrupt betting. On his own, Rooney had already spent years fielding a successful team of sandlotters, the Hope Harveys.

So he worked to petition for entry into what was called the National Professional Football League. At the same time, he worked to convince Pennsylvania’s lawmakers to repeal the Blue Laws, allowing Sunday football, baseball, even motion pictures.

A railroad ticket cost \$1 to Youngstown, New Castle, and Ellwood City. Stewing chickens ran you 59 cents apiece. A nice Hollywood frock for ladies set you back \$16.75 at Joseph Horne Company. Hitler was the chancellor in Germany. Honus Wagner turned 59. The baseball Pirates opened spring training in Paso Robles, California. And the league meeting came to Pittsburgh for what the papers called a “confab,” with

representatives of teams from Portsmouth, Ohio; Brooklyn; Boston; New York; Staten Island; Chicago (Bears and Cards); and Green Bay, Wisconsin.

In the February 25, 1933, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* columnist Harvey J. “Chilly” Doyle opined:

Pittsburgh fans will welcome the professional football officials who will meet here today and tomorrow. While this has never been in modern times a professional football center, the strides the big league game is making in other cities offer hope that Pittsburgh may be ready to support such an enterprise.

Art Rooney, the former athlete, is interested in bringing the professional game here.

There was a time in Pittsburgh, shortly after the boys came home from the Spanish-American War, that professional football flourished here to such an extent that the college game would not attempt to compete with it. College games were played on Friday and the professionals held sway on Saturdays.

Some of the boys played both on college teams and professional teams at the time.

Anything that will help widen Pittsburgh’s clean amusement side deserves encouragement.

On July 8, 1933, the Pirates were approved for a franchise in the 10-team loop. The entry fee: \$2,500. Rooney had that in track winnings, though his big day at the races came later in that Depression decade.

Art Jr.: “He could not get into professional baseball because he was a gambler. The NFL had bookmakers and bootleggers and him. Dad said he paid \$2,500 for a franchise, and they [told him] that they would have given it to him for nothing. He always said a lot of the guys who played sandlot with him could play in the National Football League.

“He ended up changing the league.”

Awaiting the November 7, 1933, blue-law referendum, the new franchise opened on a Wednesday night—September 20—under the lights at Forbes Field. (On any given Wednesday? Nah.) Player-coach Jap Douds from W&J told the *Post-Gazette*: “We have boys just out of college who are strong and fast and are imbued with confidence and desire to win.”

The Pirates conjured one first down.

They scored just two points, on a safety.

They charitably donated the first score in franchise history, \$400-a-game Angelo Brovelli tossing an interception that New York’s Ken Strong returned for a touchdown.

The *Post-Gazette*’s Jack Sell wrote the next day’s story, as he would for decades covering what he called “the Rooney men.”

The New York Giants proved real Gridiron Goliaths last night at Forbes Field when they ruined the debut of Pittsburgh’s golden jerseyed Pirates in the National Professional League by running and passing their way to a brilliant 23-2 victory before a surprising crowd of about 25,000 local well-wishers.

The local entry made a gallant effort to match the skill of the invaders, but showed conclusively the lack of players with experience in the paid-to-play class, especially in the late periods of the battle when the cool, clever victors piled up their big margin.

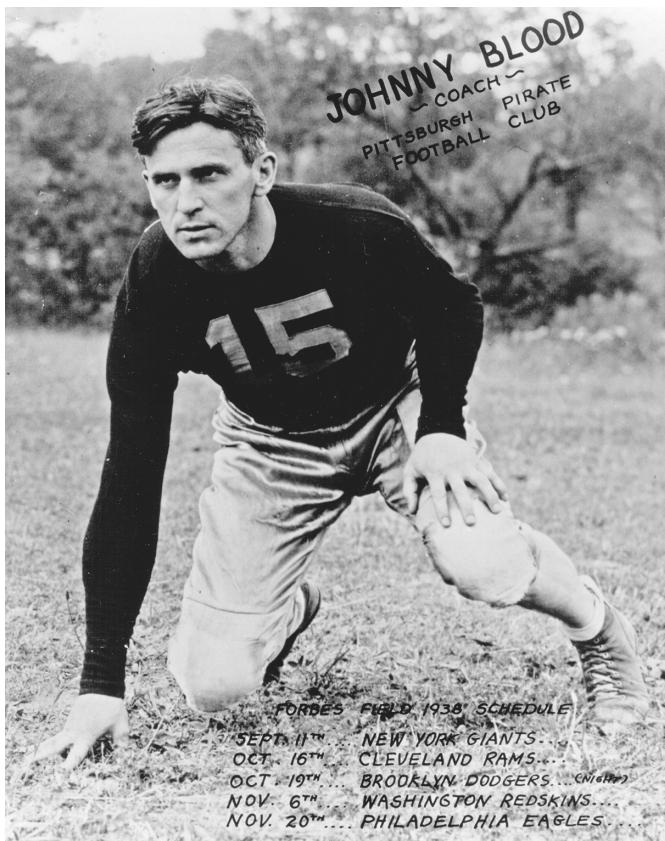
Pittsburgh should've gotten used to it.

That was professional football under Art Rooney for almost another 40 years.

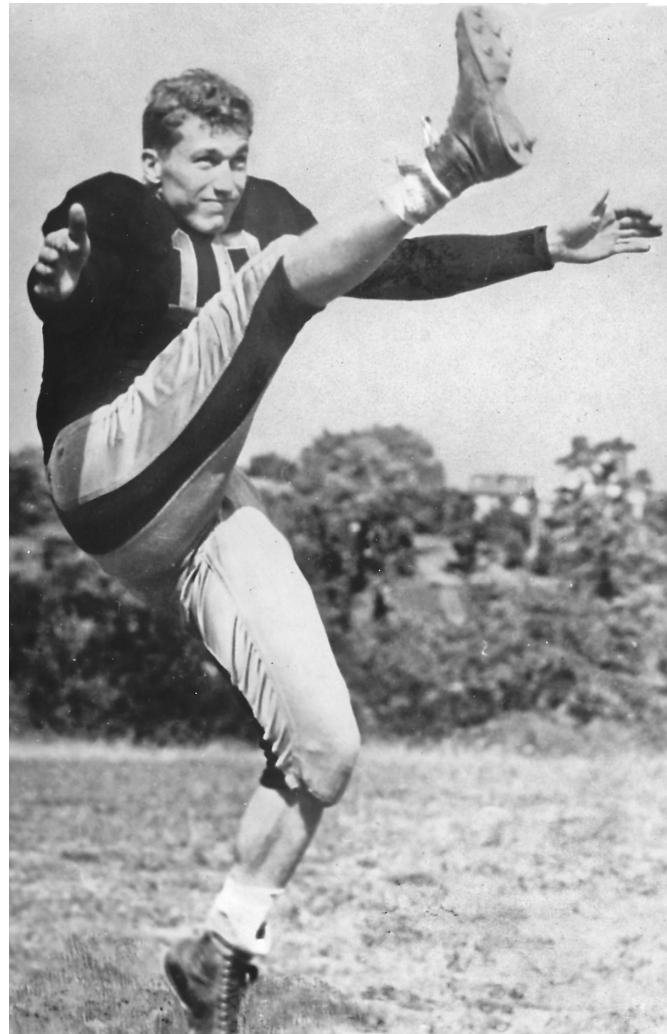
Doyle opined in his post-debut commentary: "Unless this early sign is completely wrong, the professional game has come here to stay and will improve as time goes on. . . . It will never, however, I believe equal the college game as a spectacle or as a thriller. Fans will like [a] little less of the expert and a little more of the college spirit."

Rooney gave it the old professional try. He brought in a washed-up player named Johnny "Blood" McNally, one of the most colorful and reckless athletes in American sports history—his best scrambling came after curfew or just as the team's train departed the station. Then Rooney, who had claimed losses of \$10,000 in the 1934 season with Blood playing for him, made him player-coach in 1937. It would figure that Blood would go AWOL for a game and go winless in nine consecutive games, including the first three of the 1939 season.

Creating a hoo-ha over the first bonus baby in pro-football history, the fellow more often known as penurious became a pariah in his own league for giving Colorado halfback Byron "Whizzer" White the sum of \$15,800 to skip Oxford and a Rhodes scholarship to play in Pittsburgh. Pirates, indeed. Even



Johnny "Blood" McNally even as the coach was a selling point—this was a promotional device showing the 1938 Pittsburgh Pirates home schedule. A sign of the times: three of the games listed there were played on different days of the week, sometimes months apart. (Courtesy of the Pittsburgh Steelers)



Whizzer White kicks long before he takes a seat on the most important bench in America—the Supreme Court. (Courtesy of the Pittsburgh Steelers)

Rooney's partner/accountant from the start, Milt Jaffe, quit him over that transaction.

White led the league in rushing with 567 yards, and more than three-quarters of a century later the franchise awaits another rookie to top that category. From the sound of it, yards weren't easy for him that 2-9 season, either.

Jim Klingensmith, the late Pittsburgh Post-Gazette photographer: "I used to go over to Art's office all the time and smoke a cigar. He told me a story one day. The first game at Forbes Field, the linemen were making \$4,000 a year and [White] was making almost \$20,000. They called his number and he hit the line—he didn't go any place, couldn't make any yardage. The second time, he hit the line, and couldn't go anywhere. The next time they called his number to carry the ball, Art said, [White] asked the linemen, 'Could you please open a hole big enough for me to get through?' They said, 'We're making \$4,000, you're making [\$15,800]. Make your own hole.'"

White made good, anyway. He left for Oxford after that season, as both sides initially agreed, and landed Rooney

\$5,000 of his investment back in a swap with Detroit. Much later in life, White became a U.S. Supreme Court Justice, but that still didn't help Rooney.

When Walt Kiesling directed the club to its first victory of 1939—in the 11th and final game of the season—a scant 9,663 were in Forbes Field to witness it. Fewer still likely admitted as much in later years. Kiesling was a character himself. Enshrined in the Pro Football Hall of Fame for his lineman career, he became a pal of Rooney's betting on the horses, a constant companion, and his go-to coach. Rooney hired him thrice to coach his club, each time as an interim or clean-up man. Discounting the shared 5-4-1 season with Greasy Neale and the 1943 Philadelphia Eagles—and also discounting the shared 0-10 season as the 1944 Card-Pitts—Kiesling had one winning season in the seven he coached solo over three separate terms.

In other words, Kiesling was a three-time loser, 30-55-5 all told.

And then Rooney sold out.

He handed over the Pittsburgh Steelers—newly renamed after a fan contest—to a millionaire playboy/heir, 28-year-old Alexis Thompson. So Rooney told the public prints after the 1938 season, Thompson had offered for years to buy the club for \$50,000 and move it to Boston. They finally consummated the \$160,000 deal in December 1940, the day after the Chicago Bears won the league championship by 73-0 behind the fancy passing of quarterback Sid Luckman . . . whom they drafted with a first-round pick they received in trade from Rooney and his woebegone Pirates. But that's for later in this book.

Problems began to arise with the deal. The league refused to allow Thompson to move the renamed Pittsburgh Iron Men to Boston. Rooney in the meantime purchased half of the Philadelphia Eagles from his pal and their owner-coach, Bert Bell. It was a complex transaction that involved 18 players changing addresses. As it turned out, they swapped franchises with Thompson four months after the original sale, and Rooney was back in Pittsburgh business with the Steelers. In a weird quirk, the swap caused the franchises to operate under each other's original charter: Pittsburgh under Philadelphia's, Philadelphia under Pittsburgh's. But it's only paperwork.

In 1941, the Pittsburgh Steelers went through one victory and three coaches—Bell followed by Buff Donelli, the Duquesne University coach who tried to work the two teams at once, followed by Kiesling yet again.

Chuck Cherundolo, center 1941–1942 and 1945–1948: “They were a bottom-class team [in perception around the league]. I really don't know why. Holy hell, I was satisfied.

“[Those Steelers] were just ordinary football. Actually, they didn't get good until . . . I don't remember when they got good.”

Roy McHugh, longtime sportswriter, columnist, and editor at the Pittsburgh Press: “They were regarded more or less as a sad, lost team. The Card-Pitts. The Steagles.”

A funny thing happened on the way to those wild World War II years.

The Steelers won. Once.

Kiesling directed them to a 7-4 season in 1942. Yes, that fall of '42, they lost the opener to Philadelphia, which won only one other game that season, and lost the next game at Washington, which lost only one game that season. Then Big Kies' Steelers won seven of their final nine games, but didn't

make the postseason—their record still was only fourth-best in the 10-team league.

The reason the Steelers got so good? It was all “Bullet” Bill Dudley, the rookie from Virginia, at age 23. He passed for 438 yards and two touchdowns, he rushed for a league-leading 696 yards and five more touchdowns, he punted, he intercepted three passes (Cherundolo had one), he topped the league in punt returns, and he topped the league in kickoff returns, where he scored yet another touchdown. That triple crown of league-leading categories has never been duplicated.

Cherundolo: “We had a helluva year that year.”

After that, their 1940s went haywire.

THE '43 STEAGLES

Players such as Bill Dudley and Chuck Cherundolo were among the hundreds league-wide pressed into military service. Rationing came to the NFL as well as the rest of America: rosters were cut from 33 to 28, and travel was reduced by one-third to assist with the war effort. Players worked defense jobs in the off-season, too. So two seasons after their 1940–1941 sale and swap, the ownership parties—Alexis Thompson was an army corporal by then—were reunited for the Steelers-Eagles spawn. They came to be called the Steagles, courtesy of *Press* sports editor Chet Smith.

In their two Pittsburgh home games that strange season, they wore Philadelphia green and white—the only hiatus of the black and gold in franchise history.

They somehow emerged a winner, at 5-4-1. But in inimitable Pittsburgh fashion, they managed to finagle their way into the NFL record book: Most Fumbles, Game—10 on October 9, 1943, versus the Giants. (They also set a Steelers defensive standard that not even the Stunt 4-3 of the 1970s could touch: Fewest Yards Rushing Allowed, Game—minus 33 . . . one week earlier versus Brooklyn.)

Al Wistert, Eagles tackle-guard-defensive tackle 1943–1951: “I remember I was real surprised when I got to Philadelphia and found out that we were combined with Pittsburgh. The manager of the team [Harry Thayer] who signed me to a contract out in California, he never said anything about this. So it was a complete surprise to me. It ended up fine; it all came out all right. But I was really surprised to find out we were combined with the Steelers.

“Guys got along pretty well.” Even when aligning alongside youngsters unfit or untapped for military service. Even when aligning alongside old-timers or fellows against whom you would compete for the next several years. “Yeah, that was strange . . . but not too bad. We could manage that.”

“Greasy” Neale was our coach and Kiesling—Walter Kiesling. They both coached the team. We players got along better than the coaches did. Greasy Neale . . . he was a very dominant personality. He had to run the show wherever he was, you know. And the other guy wasn't used to that. So that's the way it worked.”

It worked, period. Neale handled the offense, Kiesling the defense. Despite going a collective 2-1-1 against them, the players who formed this Pitt-Phila conglomerate—as it was officially listed—finished one game behind playoff-bound Washington and the New York Giants in the Eastern Division. These were the hatchlings of the 1947 NFL championship finalist Philadelphia Eagles. On the way to that

title match, the Eagles had to beat a club brand-new to the postseason: the Pittsburgh Steelers. But, again, that's getting ahead of the story.

It was something of a watershed year for the NFL, with the introduction of helmets and unlimited substitution that prompted two-platoon football, but more pointedly it was a watershed for the Pittsburgh franchise. For one thing, 1943 brought its first box-office success. Moreover, their headquarters moved up . . . an entire floor, to the second from the first. Their previous office, facing the parking lot at the Fort Pitt Hotel, had a window that most everyone used as a backdoor, hoisting it and climbing through it to get into the hotel faster instead of walking all the way around the block.

Cherundolo: “Matter of fact, I did that myself. For anyone on the first floor of that hotel, you did.”

Carl Hughes, the Steelers beat reporter for the Pittsburgh Press and later Kennywood Park’s longtime president: “The [Rooney-Barney McGinley] boxing carried the football club in those days, because they made money on boxing. And Art’s winnings. I’m sure Barney put in a lot of money, too. [But boxing] was the big thing then. It was second only to Major League Baseball. Pro football was nothing. I remember when Bert Bell came to town. He would have the hotel put a cot in the office that the boxing club and the football club shared.” Bell could outshoot boxing matchmaker Jack Mintz on another phone, forcing Mintz under the desk to carry on conversations. The boxing club staged fights at Duquesne Gardens, Forbes Field, wherever, so Mintz was making a lot of matches. “There were only three employees then. Joe Carr was the ticket manager. Fran Fogarty was the business manager. And Jake Mintz.” When your amalgamated football team is playing four games in Philadelphia’s Shibe Park and only two in Forbes Field, how many employees would you need?

Say this for the Steagles of 1943: They were better than the 1944 wartime hodgepodge, the Car-Pitts.

Wistert: “Oh, yeah. Muuuuch better.”

THE '44 CAR-PITTS

Any alliance between what were for decades considered—rightly or wrongly—the most miserly men of the NFL, Charles Bidwill and Art Rooney, wasn’t a good idea.

Wartime forced spasms. This one hurt.

In 1943, a year earlier, the Chicago Cardinals went 0-10 and lost on average by 24-10.

In 1944, they merged with the Steelers that remained from the Steagles, and somehow the team got even worse: 0-10 and lost on average by 33-11.

Their nickname was supposed to be Card-Pitts, probably because Cardlers, Steelinals, or Card-Steels just didn’t roll off the tongue. Given their horrendous nature, it naturally morphed into Car-Pitts, as in: everybody walked across them.

Carl Hughes, the Steelers beat reporter for the Pittsburgh Press and later Kennywood Park’s longtime president: “How bad? The Car-Pitts? They didn’t win a game. I don’t remember any close games. The players changed all the time. It depended if they got back from the service. They’d practice a couple of days; then they’d play.

“You couldn’t give away tickets.

“I do remember a story about [Bidwill as] the owner. . . . He and his wife, the story goes, went to Comiskey Park to see

a game—it wasn’t a Steelers game. It was raining all day, and nobody came to see it. [Employees] came up to him and said, ‘Mr. Bidwill, can we postpone it?’ He said, ‘My wife and I are here. Go ahead and play.’

“In those days, every day before the game, we stopped at a racetrack out of town. It was routine. Art, of course, was a big bettor. And everybody got used to it. The players went, too. Art was a great host. If you went, he’d buy you lunch or something.”

Johnny Grigas was a running back for the Car-Pitts, and a successful one despite the circumstances. Entering the ’44 season finale, he was in second place close behind the Giants’ Bill Paschal in the race for the NFL rushing title. Apparently, Grigas wanted none of it.

Hughes: “He didn’t show up for the final game at Forbes Field. The game was so one-sided, on one of the last plays they gave the ball to the Bears center, Bulldog Turner—he’s in the Hall of Fame. And he ran [48 yards] for a touchdown, very easily. Big guy. So that’s what precipitated an argument at the club [later]. . . .

“Afterwards, I went to [Grigas’] roommate, Don Currihan. ‘He left me a note. I didn’t even see him. I was at the hockey game last night, and he left me a note.’ In the note, Grigas wrote to Currihan that he was going back to the “stud farm.” Hughes remembers that phrase running in the next edition of the *Press*, but an editor upon reading it yanked the phrase as too racey. “Art Rooney after [that] home game had all the writers from the visiting team together and took them down to a club on the South Side that had a house of ill repute upstairs. I remember [the Cardinals’] Motsy Handler was co-head coach with Walt Kiesling. Monk Anderson was one of the Bears’ coaches. He and Handler got into a big argument. I remember Anderson yelling, ‘You were a fumbler when you played.’ Rooney tried to get between them, and then they put them in separate rooms. The Bears and the Cardinals, of course, hated each other [from sharing Chicago].”

Ed Kiely, publicity director and longtime aide-de-camp: “All I can remember is: ‘When are you gonna win?’ They used to call Rooney cheap and everything. You’ve got to get the players. Coaches are good, but the players are better.”

JOCK TIME

Carl Hughes: “In ’45, Jim Leonard was the Steelers coach, and they’d lost fourteen straight games [dating to the end of ’43], as I recall. Probably still a Steeler record.” It was, anyway, until 1969–1970 and 16 losses in a row under some guy named Charles Henry Noll. “They were playing the New York Giants. And ended their 14-game losing streak at the Polo Grounds. So, anyway, on the train back, the club car was sold out—Art bought drinks for everybody.”

Perhaps it was less a toast to Leonard, who won two of his final seven games as coach, and more for the man who would replace him.

Go back to 1938, when Pitt deemphasized football—at the expense of a legendary coach. Dr. John Bain Sutherland, better known as Jock, immediately left the university where Pop Warner transformed a Scottish immigrant and wrestler into a football star and future coach. Art Rooney wanted to hire him right about the time of Sutherland’s first footfall off campus. Sutherland preferred to converse with Rooney in private, at the Fort Pitt Hotel. When the story got out, he sat



The famed Jock Sutherland agrees to patrol the professional sidelines in Pittsburgh after having negotiations years earlier with Art Rooney about leaving the Pitt Panthers' sideline to coach the then-Pirates. (Courtesy of University of Pittsburgh athletics)

out the 1939 season and instead took the coaching position with the Brooklyn Dodgers' NFL club for a reported \$18,000. Two years later, he went into the navy.

Rooney reached out to Sutherland again in October 1945, but he declined to talk in detail because Leonard was still on the Steelers job.

Hughes, about sharing a seat with Rooney on a train trip to the Cleveland Rams-Washington Redskins NFL championship game in Cleveland, December 16, 1945: "He asked, 'Atom [Hughes' nickname], what do you think of Bert Bell as commissioner?' Bert was his partner, and I liked him very much. I said, 'Bert would be terrific, but you already have a commissioner, Elmer Layden.' He was trying to give me a story: The next day, Bell was named commissioner.

"That same trip, we met Jock Sutherland in his naval uniform. Was handsome as hell in that uniform. And they signed him up to coach."

Art Rooney Jr.: "He brought Jock in. That was a brilliant move. He was a penny-pinching Scotsman. Fit right in with the Chief."

Sutherland told friends, "I'm back home." Amid postwar treaties and a mine explosion, it was front-page news in the

Pittsburgh Press. He was named vice president and awarded a percentage of the gate. That worked out rather well for him: Forbes Field sold out for the 1946 and 1947 Steelers seasons, primarily due to his celebrity and his strength as a domineering teacher and coach. It probably didn't hurt that Sutherland personally wrote every single season-ticket holder a letter, either.

Sutherland moved the team offices to the Union Trust Building, kept the team in the single wing, and changed the face of the franchise.

Tim Rooney Sr., third-born son of Art Rooney and a camp ball boy at Alliance College in Cambridge Springs, Pennsylvania, at the time:

Jock Sutherland was our coach. He was a very, very strong disciplinarian. He used to work the players unbelievably. Scrimmage and scrimmage and scrimmage. What happens then, which is hard to believe when you think of football today and football then, we had to have somebody on the floors in the dormitories staying up at night to make sure no one snuck out and quit. They'd have sneak-outs so they could just disappear. They were fodder just for practice.

I remember one day, I was walking from my dorm to the dressing room—the dressing room in those days wasn't a dressing room as such; it was a gymnasium at the school. The lockers and hangars were put up around the basketball floor. I was with Jock Sutherland, and he had his arm on my head: "Are we going to scrimmage today?" I ask. He says, "We'd like to scrimmage, but we don't have enough players."

. . . Money was very short. You went on trains or on buses. It was tough sledding with the players and everything. Just making it. Just making sure you didn't go bust. Even as young kids, we were very cognizant of the fact that it took a lot of money to run a football team.

The players in those days were wonderful, wonderful people. Wages were hard to believe. You were talking about thousands of dollars, small thousands of dollars. These guys were making less than \$5,000. Funny thing is, a lot of times you had a pretty good player, but when they'd get married they had to quit. It was hard enough taking care of themselves, you know.

Joe Walton, longtime NFL player and coach, whose father, Tiger, worked as line coach under Sutherland: "Dad always said he was a very stern guy, ran a very tight ship. Pretty stubborn, too."

Chuck Cherundolo, center 1941–1942 and 1945–1948: "Never said a word. When he spoke to you, you stood up and listened. 'Do it this way.' And, you know, that was the way you were going to do it. That's what made him a good coach."

Roy McHugh, longtime sportswriter, columnist, and editor at the Pittsburgh Press: "He got rid of [league MVP Bullet Bill] Dudley after '46 [and a 5-5-1 record]. They didn't get along. With Sutherland, everything had to be done by the book, his way. The single wing, which of course was becoming obsolete since 1941, the 73-0 [Bears–Redskins 1940 NFL championship rout]. Everybody went to the T formation after that. Except Sutherland, who learned the single wing from Pop Warner." Dudley, a future Hall of Famer, was a quintuple threat—defensive back, passer, rusher, field goals, and returns.



Quarterback Charley Seabright; halfback Tony Compagno; quarterback Bob Cifers, whom the Steelers received from Detroit in the Bullet Bill Dudley trade; and halfback Paul White, circa 1947. They helped to make the finest—and first playoff—Steelers team in the franchise's first 40 years of existence, at 8-4. Then coach Jock Sutherland died unexpectedly the next April. The franchise made the playoffs only once more over the next 24 seasons. (Carnegie Library Archives)

"Sutherland told him: 'You're a great player, but I don't have to have great players to win.' And they had a better record in '47 without Dudley than they had before."

Al Wistert, Steagles/Eagles tackle-guard-defensive tackle 1943–1951: "I'm surprised by that. Because Bill Dudley was the kind of a guy, I'd want guys like him on my team any day. But that's the way it goes, I guess."

Further toiling to improve the franchise, Sutherland hired the first scout in Steelers' history and reputedly only the second in the entire NFL. Pat Livingston didn't merely serve as a scout, though. McHugh talked about the taciturn coach once dispatching Livingston to fetch his suit at a dry cleaner. An argument ensued over the 25 cents in change from the dollar he gave Livingston. It became the sticking point between the two, and next thing anyone knew Livingston was a sportswriter at the *Press*.

McHugh: "Of course, nobody knew [Sutherland] had the brain tumor."

Sutherland's Starless Steelers, as they were nicknamed, went 8-4 in 1947. After losing two of their opening three games, they reeled off seven victories in their final nine regular-season games—including a 35-24 triumph over Philadelphia constructed on three fourth-quarter touchdowns. End Val Jansante and rookie guard Red Moore were the only Steelers to share a first-team All-Pro stage with the Eagles' Wistert and Detroit's Dudley, among others.

The franchise record to date for victories resulted in the franchise's first playoff game in its decade-and-a-half history. Coaches from around the "National League" convened in Pittsburgh for the annual draft that Friday night at the Fort



Tailback Johnny Clement, aka "Johnny Zero" (for the number he wore), scores a touchdown at Forbes Field, circa 1946–1948. (Carnegie Library Archives)

Pitt Hotel. Les Biederman wrote in the game-day *Pittsburgh Press*: "A 15-year dream, nursed and coddled with heartaches and plenty of red ink, becomes a reality today for owner Art Rooney and his Cinderella Steelers. . . . The Steelers are sentimental choices because of Rooney's plight down through the years." Before 35,729 at Forbes Field at the end of an exciting pro-football week in Pittsburgh, the Steelers were blanked by Philadelphia, 21-0, en route to the Eagles' NFL-championship-game loss to the Chicago Cardinals. Interesting how those former mergers all fared in 1947.

For the Pittsburgh franchise, the suddenly brightening fortunes turned bleak . . . again.

Scouting through the South the next spring, driving from Washington, DC, to Durham, North Carolina, to New Orleans, Sutherland endured some sort of episode and went missing for days before he was discovered dazed in a field in Bandana, Kentucky. The Steelers hadn't heard from him between March 28 and the April 8 date he was found wandering that field with his briefcase. He spent two days in a Cairo, Illinois, hospital. "Nervous exhaustion," doctors originally diagnosed him. He

had complained of headaches for two weeks before he left on the scouting mission, but an examination at a Pittsburgh hospital found nothing worrisome.

Sutherland was flown back to Pittsburgh, helped off the plane by protégé Johnny Michelosen, and nestled into the Steelers station wagon driven by publicity director Ed Kiely. Twenty-eight hours later, he was in the operating room for two surgeries on a malignant brain tumor. He died the next day, April 11, 1948. The banner headline across the top of the next day's *Post-Gazette*: "Jock Sutherland is dead at 59."

Steelers part-owner Barney McGinley compared it to the sad football day Knute Rockne passed. Chicago Bears coach George Halas called Sutherland undoubtedly the best coach in the NFL. The *Press* editorialized: "Pittsburgh has lost its most celebrated citizen. . . . He was universally admired, uncommonly esteemed and genuinely mourned."

Ernie Accorsi, general manager for Cleveland, Baltimore, and the New York Giants: "The Chief always told me, 'We would've won if he hadn't died.' That's the only would-have-been he ever said."