

So Long, Jack Lambert

By Vic Ketchman

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The call to press conference went out this morning. And the heart rate quickened just a bit. All indications were this might be it for Jack Lambert, one of the greatest middle linebackers in pro football history, but, beyond that, a legend in Pittsburgh sports that will live longer than any of us.

One o'clock this afternoon was the time. Something earth-shattering was to be announced, said Steeler PR man Joe Gordon.

The romantic side of this reporter, a side his wife fondly remembers, began to consider the possibilities. Maybe it would be the announced signing of Darryl Sims. Maybe Chuck Noll was retiring. Maybe Terry Bradshaw was coming out of retirement.

But there was something to the tone in Gordon's voice. Didn't I hear that tone a few years ago when he called a press conference that would claim Joe Greene's playing life?

I guess this was to be it. All indications were Lambert's had all the toe rehabilitation he can take.

Endings make you think for more than a moment. They make you reflect. You don't just write off Jack Lambert. This one will be like Greene's farewell. For this one, you feel richer for having been there.

In expectation, the recollections began. I'll always remember:

The toothless kid with the straw-like hair who was the instant training camp sensation in the summer of '74.

How, from the very first day, Lambert was always predictably terrible in the traditional Oklahoma drill and how Mike Webster, who dominated Lambert the first day of rookie camp in '74, beat Lambert silly annually and how much Lambert hated not being able to match up during the most macho moment of any summer.

The kid I watched play football at Kent State. The tall kid with the shaved head, missing teeth, high top black shoes and jersey number 99, who was moved from defensive end to middle linebacker when the regular at that position decided football wasn't tough enough for him, then went on to become a body guard for the "Rolling Stones."

The day in 1975 when, after it was announced in the post-game clubhouse Lambert had been named by his teammates as the team's Most Valuable Player, Lambert thanked Glen Edwards for "getting out the black vote."

In any year Lambert was the team's MVP.

The day in 1976 when the Steelers were 1-4 and playing with rookie Mike Kruczek at quarterback, and the Bengals decided they would take some sideline liberties, but picked the wrong sideline and Lambert came running from 30 yards away to knock down an unsuspecting Bengal, much like Lambert did to Cliff Harris in the previous Super Bowl. Lambert inspired all. No one took liberties with the Steelers when Lambert was around.

The scowl.

The bumper sticker on his four-wheel drive: "I don't brake for liberals."

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- # The Monday in the summer of 1980, when Lambert sat in the St. Vincent College press room and fought back tears for his deceased friend, former Steeler field manager Jack Hart.
- # How Hart kept Lambert abreast of all the camp goings-on when Lambert was a hold-out in the summer of '77.
- # The sign on the door of his training camp room, that informed the cleaning lady: "Don't clean this room."
- # The intensity.
- # On the last play of the '76 AFC title game in Oakland, when all was lost including much of the Steelers' honor, Lambert delivered the game's most crunching hit on running back Mark van Eeghen.
- # That Lambert and Greene scuffled a bit on the sideline during a home game in '81, when the Steelers were at the height of their non-playoffs frustration.
- # The blood stains on his pants and how they stood out on a snowy field.
- # That the most conditioned player in any training camp also smoked cigarettes like he was tackling every puff.
- # His dislike of sissy reporters.
- # His respect for the printed word.
- # How he was wronged in games against the Browns, when he was ejected for playing the game the way it was meant to be played; cleanly and with abandon.
- # That cussin' out Lambert gave Jack Ham in a Steeler highlight film.
- # What he always meant to kids, which is to say a figure of what's right with sports, and how Lambert always made the kids say please and thank you for autographs he loved to sign ... for kids.
- # The night Lambert roller skated through the bar and hotel in which the Steelers were staying, after curfew the night before a game against the Chargers in which Bradshaw was intercepted five times and Lambert could've played better.
- # The day (or night because it's always hard to remember which it is in the Astrodome) in Houston Lambert was so exhausted he found it necessary to lie flat on his back along the sideline as he groped for the strength that would allow him to play on, and how he summoned a contingent of reserves to stand around his lifeless body so as Lambert would not crash for all to see.
- # The time in training camp lightning had split a huge tree that sits directly in front of Lambert's dormitory room.
- # A day last summer when he spoke of his love and loyalty for Pittsburgh, the Steelers and the Rooneys, and the strength of conviction in his tone.
- # That same day last summer when he spoke of his distaste for those athletes who only take from the system, then spend it all on drugs.
- # How he only gave.