

THE IMMACULATE RECEPTION

FRANCO CATCHES ETERNAL FAME

By Gene Collier

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On the 25th anniversary of what many consider to be football's most famous play, Franco Harris and the Immaculate Reception were celebrated at the David L. Lawrence Convention Center in Pittsburgh. The following story by award-winning columnist Gene Collier appeared the Sunday before. It is presented here by permission of the Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette*.

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Holy cats, that big number on the calendar is what – 1997? – so you're right, Mogambo; the total years elapsed since the Immaculate Reception is again divisible by five, meaning, of course, drop everything. Pull up a chair.

Were this 1996 or 1998, 24 or 26 years after one of most replayed moments in American history, we might just mention it in passing, but by immutable law of pop culture we are compelled to round up the usual suspects: Harris, Bradshaw, Madden, Tatum, McNally, Sabol, Boston, Fuqua, Noll, Ham, Fleming, Gordon and Cope.

The point is to see if they can remember even less about it now than they could five or 10 years ago and possibly create some additions to the half dozen or so myths that grew up around it in the first place.

Let's weed that field first.

Myth One, Always and Forever: I watched the game on TV.

Reality One: No, you didn't. Unless you drove way ahta tahn first. It and every home game in 1972 was blacked out in Pittsburgh, and so was the following week's playoff game here against Miami. By a 1973 Act of Congress, games sold out by Thursday of game week could no longer be blacked out, and no Steelers home game has been blacked out since.

Myth Two: I heard Myron call it on the radio. [Steeler radio color man and popular sports talk show host Myron Cope.]

Reality Two: Myron left the radio booth – “My salvation!” says Jack Fleming – with two minutes to play and was standing in the corner of the end zone at which Harris had aimed himself. “It wasn't worth missing out on being part of the call,” says Myron. “It's played more than any other call in history. I might have gotten a few words in edgewise.” Ya think?

Myth Three: I was there.

Reality Three: You too? Fifty-thousand, three-hundred and fifty were there, or one person for every 10 who so claim.

Myth Four: It was the first use of instant replay.

Reality Four: It was the first use of a redirected forward pass to trigger a postseason touchdown after the discovery that lithium could be used as an effective treatment for manic depression (you could look that up), but it was not the first use of instant replay. Neither Jim Boston, the Steelers operative who led

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referee Fred Swearingen to the dugout telephone after Harris' disputed touchdown, nor Art McNally, the then-supervisor of NFL officials who awaited the call, nor Steelers exec Joe Gordon, who handed McNally the phone in the press box and stood next to that end of the conversation, can remember a television monitor being employed at either location.

There was a monitor in the dugout, but it was kept there by network technicians who used it mostly to monitor scores of other games, for amusement purposes only. Although this monitor might have been visible from the visiting owner's box on the opposite side of the field and might even have shown up in one of NBC's shots of Swearingen in the dugout, it was not used in deciding the outcome of the play. "I couldn't swear that Swearingen even knew it was there," says Boston. "It was right to the phone, turn around, run to the middle of the field, signal touchdown, and get the hell out of there."

Myth Five: Had the ball hit the carpet before Franco got there, the Steelers might never have evolved into the dynastic entity that made the '70s what they were around here.

Reality Five: Pish-Posh. All those great players, most of them at the beginning of their careers, with Swann and Stallworth and Lambert and Webster on the way? "Conjecture," says Jack Ham. "That's what the lawyers say, right? "That's conjecture Your Honor!"

Yet it had its significance.

"A lot of guys started really believing after that," says Chuck Noll. "It was a gradual thing. I didn't have to sell it to them as much as it had to be sold to the fans. There was such a negative feeling about the team for so long, there was still a lot of that S.O.S. stuff [same old Steelers] out there. Guys were out in the community always hearing that negative stuff. It probably took something like that play to sell it to the fans."

Myth Six: Swearingen asked McNally in the press box if stadium security was robust enough to ensure him and his fellow officials safe egress should he rule that what had just happened was something other than a game-winning touchdown. Told that stadium security was not particularly failsafe, that he was, in fact, in deep, uh, stuff, he bolted from the dugout, faced the frothing 50,350, and signaled touchdown.

Reality Six: McNally literally cackles himself into a wheezing silence at this one. "Ha! People put two and two together I guess," he says. And this being 25 years later, invariable get nine.

But that's enough on mythology.

Let's go to the audio, and to the proven memories.

Hold onto your hats; here come the Steelers out of the huddle.

That's Fleming, then the Steelers play-by-play radio voice, talking to Pittsburgh on the blacked out Saturday afternoon of Dec. 23, 1972. Over the next 24 hours, NFL Films would pour his melodious baritone like molasses over an historic video tapestry as they edited images shot under a typical flat gray Western Pennsylvania sky.

"Nobody got the complete play," says Steve Sabol, the head of NFL Films but on that day the cameraman charged with shooting the Oakland Raiders' sideline. "We found, almost by accident, a tight-lens, telephoto shot from our guy in the end zone, who for some reason he still can't explain, decided to isolate on Franco. The technology wasn't like it is today, so splicing this together was like cutting the Hope diamond. The minute you made that cut on the negative, that's how generations of American football fans were going to see it."

Did he say almost by accident?

The Immaculate Reception is what happened when about 12 little accidents inflamed about 12 big ones in about 12 seconds.

It's down to one big play, fourth down and 10 yards to go.

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That's Fleming talking to Pittsburgh, but mostly to God, with 22 seconds left in a game the Steelers led for nearly 59 minutes, but now trailed 7-6 because Oakland quarterback Ken Stabler had fled 30 yards down the sideline to the game's only touchdown with 1:13 remaining. "I thought we should have won the game, 6-0," says Jack Ham. "And that's what I was thinking sitting on my helmet at the 50 when the last play started." Now Fleming was asking for a miracle, because there would be nothing particularly big about Oakland keeping the Steelers from scoring from 60 yards away. In the historical record of the sport, that would be a small play. Fleming said it was time for one big play. How big, he didn't specify, nor could he possibly imagine.

Post-Gazette sports writer Phil Musick wasn't talking to God, but he knew the handiwork.

"The god of this game's all-time losers smiled down through a ghostly gray sky yesterday," Musick thudded into his typewriter, "and in the last desperate seconds of a mean, bitterly-fought game, did truly wondrous things."

Terry Bradshaw at the controls, and Bradshaw is back and looking again ...

That's Fleming beginning the call that football historian Beano Cook says will be remembered more in the middle of the next century than "Ask not what your country can do for you ..." but not so much as "A day that will live in infamy." How does Beano know this stuff? It's unbelievable. Next to Beano, the Psychic Friends Network is an accounting firm.

Out on the Parkway East, in what is more than an urban legend, two bettors went into the Squirrel Hill tunnel at precisely that moment. They both had Oakland and 2 ½. They did not have Fleming's benevolent god, nor Musick's god of the game's all-time losers. When they came through the tunnel's western mouth, they could hear the roars.

"Dammit," one said.

"So what, they kicked a field goal," said the other.

"Listen to that! That ain't no damn field goal roar! God! What have I done to deserve this?"

Bradshaw, running out of the pocket, looking for somebody to throw to ...

That's Fleming reacting to the collapse of Bradshaw's protection. Raiders defensive end Tony Cline swipes at him like a bear and nearly gets enough of his black-and-gold sleeve to change history. But Bradshaw gets upright again and steps back and to his left. He windmills his right arm around defensive tackle Horace Jones and plants his right foot between the 28 and 29, just outside the right hashmarks, 11 ½ yards behind the line of scrimmage. Harris, standing still at the 35, taxis and takes off for immortality.

The now broken play is 66 circle option, sent in by Noll and designed to go to Barry Pearson on a post route. Raiders safety Jack "They Call Me Assassin" Tatum runs with Pearson, but comes off of him when he sees Bradshaw's protection evaporate. Tatum heads toward Fuqua.

"I lined up in the backfield and came out to the left and I was thinking, 'I am wide open.' I was waving my hands," says Fuqua. "I looked at Tatum and saw him plant his foot and come off the post. He was coming straight to a point inside of me. If Bradshaw throws that ball to the outside, Tatum tackles me and the game is over, but he threw it to the inside, between me and the defender."

Bradshaw had lost the whole picture when he ducked away and scrambled.

"When you scramble you take your eye off what's happening downfield," says Bradshaw. "When I looked up again to see what I could fine, the only thing I could see was Frenchy. I was about to get hit. I just unloaded."

Fires it downfield ...

That's Fleming describing the pass that will travel 37 yards forward to the Oakland 34 then, because of the decision Tatum is making at this instant, 8 ½ yards backward to the 42 ½.

"I just tried to time it so that I'd get there the same time as the ball and make sure he doesn't catch it," Tatum said years later. "I wasn't trying to intercept it or anything. I was just trying to make sure he didn't catch it."

And there's a collision!

That's Fleming the instant the football and Frenchy and the Assassin intersect like tangents in some impossible trigonometry problem, each with its own confounding properties of force, mass, acceleration.

"I've told Jack this on several occasions: 'If you don't come up there trying to kill me, the game is over,'" says Fuqua. "I knew he was coming to hit me. I had to leave me feet to dive for the ball. It really was pass interference. He got to me before the ball got to us. I think the referees weren't looking at that. The referees were ready to go home. Tatum closed his eyes and nailed me. Fortunately, I was in the air. The air, fortunately, gives."

Tatum could have handled the play with any standard set of defensive principles and ended the game. Instead he timed it to put a hurt on somebody. Out of that collision, the football shot backward in a silly, 25-foot arc.

And ... IT'S CAUGHT OUT OF THE AIR!

"I don't recollect seeing the ball at all," says Harris, then a Steelers rookie. "I knew Brad threw it, and just from my training at Penn State, I just went toward where I thought it was going, you know, to maybe throw a block or recover a fumble or something. Before I knew it, I had the ball. It was just a blur."

The memories at that point, perhaps due to overexposure to the slow motion replay, all contain a reference to time warp.

"It seemed like an eternity from the time Tatum and Fuqua collided to the end of that play," says Gordon. "It probably took a second or two. The thing I remember most, it's almost frozen in my mind because I was standing in the press box on a direct line to where Franco caught the ball, is this vivid picture of him reaching down to catch it. It's one of the most phenomenal, spectacular athletic plays I've even seen, his ability to make that catch in the cold, with a wet, heavy ball, so close to the ground."

Fuqua saw it in Tatum's face.

"I was lying on the ground looking at Tatum, the first thing I saw after the collision was a smile from ear to ear on his face," Fuqua says. "And then, like in slow motion, I'm not kidding, I saw that smile turn to a frown. That's the way it really looked. I saw a smile, over-excitement, and joy just melt away."

"And I got a glimpse of Franco as he went by."

Tatum had just begun to walk off the field when Harris caught the ball.

"After I hit Frenchy I thought the game was over," Tatum said. "I didn't see Franco catch the ball. I thought, 'He's sure in a hurry to get to the locker room.'"

The ball is pulled in by FRANCO HARRIS!

"When I got the ball, the only thing I could think of was, 'Get into the end zone,'" Harris says. "I didn't want to have us attempt a field goal or anything else."

Harris got the ball on the left hashmark just outside the 42. He straightened out of his swooping reception and banked toward the near sideline. Tight end John McMakin, standing near the 37, turned toward Harris and got a brushing block on Oakland linebacker Phil Villapiano, who would later describe it as "the biggest clip in the world."

Raiders safety Jimmy Warren became Harris' one man to beat. Warren had a suitable angle, but not enough momentum to bump the 230-pound Harris over the sideline. Harris stiff-armed Jimmy Warren at the 13.

Harris is going for a TOUCHDOWN FOR PITTSBURGH!

"I was still down on the turf," says Bradshaw. "I just hear this roar. When I hear this roar, I knew it was caught. I thought, 'You really are amazing. You put that baby right in there.' Then the roar got really big, outta hand. Before I could get up, I knew I'd thrown a touchdown. I didn't know how. I was feeling pretty good until somebody told me it was bouncing all over the field."

As the world went over one edge of the field, Raiders coach John Madden came over the other.

"He's a little upset," McNally noticed.

"My argument," Madden said years later, "was never whether the ball hit Tatum first or Fuqua first [which would have meant Harris' catch was illegal under the rules of that era] and I didn't dispute any decision. My thing was that they didn't call anything! They didn't know. They had a huddle. I ran out there. We're fighting' for our football lives. They don't know what happened. Then the guy goes and talks on the dugout telephone. I never did find out who he talked to or what they said. But somebody gave me that phone. I made a trophy out of it. It's in my house."

McNally disputes that no call was made.

"Adrian Burk, the back judge, covered the play and signaled touchdown as soon as Harris crossed the line," McNally says. "Pat Harder, the umpire, was up around the 35; he thought it was a touchdown. The other three officials were not in a position to rule."

When McNally saw the officials convening on the field, he tried to get word to them via walkie-talkie that, should there be any question on the rule, the officials were to consult alternate official Fred Wyant, who was wearing a white jacket in the end zone. Before that was accomplished, Swearingen left the conference and sought out Boston on the Steelers' sideline.

"Fred knew I was in charge of the stadium, the field conditions, the security, and he was to check with me the day of the game as part of his routine," Boston says. "I was standing at the 25. Franco ran right by me on the way in. Swearingen spotted me, I wasn't looking for him. I sure as hell didn't want to take him to any phone."

But take him Boston did, and the conversation, by every independent account, was very brief.

"He never asked me about the rule, and he never asked me about what I saw," McNally says. "All he said was, 'Two of my men say that opposing players touched the ball.' And I said, 'everything's fine then, go ahead.'"

Swearingen put the receiver back and Boston said, "What do we got?"

"We got a touchdown," came the answer.

Did they ever.

When NFL Films undertook its 100-greatest-touchdowns project in 1993 and ranked them in the 50-minute video, the Immaculate Reception was No. 1.

"There aren't many plays that have their own nickname," says Sabol. "That play is like one of those heirlooms handed down from generation to generation."

Next Saturday at the convention center, Fuqua says he'll hand over his heirloom's missing chip: the truth about whether the ball hit him.

"I can't take it to the grave," Fuqua says. "I've made up my mind I'm going to tell the fans of Pittsburgh first, on the 20th of December. I told The Chief [the late Art Rooney, the club's founder] that I'd been offered some nice money to reveal it, and he said, 'Aw, Frenchy, keep it Immaculate.'"

"I can't believe 25 years has blown by so fast. First I said I'd wait 10 years, then 20. I've been talkin' about this with my best buddy, Wilford Hawkins, and I asked him, 'What would happen if I told the truth? Would

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we get bad calls? Would there be hurt feelings?' After really thinking about it, it's time to bring to light what happened."

Aw, Frenchy, I think some light is getting through.

Funny, when we asked Ham what he saw from that seat on his helmet at the 50, No. 59 says, "I anticipated a flag being thrown."

Because ...

"You can't touch the ball twice."

Really.