

# THE '76 STEELERS: A (Steel) Curtain Call

By Ed Gruver

Even greatness, it seems, is no guarantee for glory.

On the day after Christmas, 1976, the Pittsburgh Steelers saw their run at an unprecedented third straight Super Bowl title end in sunny California with a 24-7 loss to the Oakland Raiders.

Some 33 years later, the defeat still stings members of a team many believe was the greatest in Pittsburgh's proud history.

"I've never played in a game where our two star running backs were out," middle linebacker Jack Lambert said once. "I've made the comment a couple of times, 'Give us a six-pack, and we'll go out and play (the Raiders) again.'"

Injuries suffered the week before in a playoff win over Baltimore sidelined Steeler backs Franco Harris and Rocky Bleier for the AFC championship game against the arch-rival Raiders. The loss was crushing, since Bleier and Harris had become just the second backfield tandem in NFL history to each rush for more than 1,000 yards, joining the Larry Csonka-Mercury Morris pairing in Miami, who had accomplished the feat in '72.

To compensate for the absence of his starting backfield, Pittsburgh head coach Chuck Noll installed a three-tight-end offense featuring Larry Brown, Bennie Cunningham and Randy Grossman, with fullback Reggie Harrison as the team's lone setback.

The result was disastrous, and seemed to confuse Steelers' quarterback Terry Bradshaw more than the Oakland defense. Noll tried to simplify Bradshaw's assignments by calling plays from the sideline, but the Steelers still didn't get a first down until midway

through the second quarter. By then, the Raiders already led 10-0. Noll wisely scrapped his three-tight-end offense late in the second quarter for a more conventional split-back set, and with Frenchy Fuqua joining Harrison in the backfield, the Steelers finally scored when Harrison bulled in from three yards out.

The touchdown trimmed Pittsburgh's deficit to 10-7, but the Raiders responded with a late TD before the half, then added two more second-half scores to secure the victory. Minus any pressure from the Pittsburgh offense, the Raiders ran down both the clock and the Steeler defense with long, time-consuming drives. Oakland ran 69 offensive plays, 51 of them overland, and rang up 15 first downs. On the field for much of the warm, sun-soaked afternoon, the Steel Curtain finally gave way, surrendering 228 yards rushing.

"It was," said Lambert, "the most frustrating game I've ever played in."

The frustration was heightened by the opinion of many in the Steelers organization that the 1976 team was the best in franchise history. The two-time defending Super Bowl champions entered the season prohibitive favorites to win a third straight world title. *NFL Report '76*, the league's official television guide, stated that "Pittsburgh equaled the Packers and Dolphins (with consecutive Super Bowl titles) and so you look at Chuck Noll's lineup to try to find the first sign of cracks, of old age, of some kind of weakness. Only you can't find any."

But the Steelers stumbled out of the gate, losing four of their first five games and falling into last place in the AFC Central Division. Following an 18-16 loss at rival Cleveland in Week Five, a loss marked by Browns' tackle Joe "Turkey" Jones' crippling hit on Bradshaw, Lambert sat stunned in the Steelers' somber locker room.

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Turning to linebacking mate Jack Ham, Lambert shook his head and asked, "What is going on?"

With Bradshaw out for two games with a neck injury, the Steelers turned to the two staples that had carried them to two straight Super Bowl victories – defense and the running game.

What followed was a devastating streak of excellence unmatched in NFL history.

Hosting division rival Cincinnati the next week in a "must win" game, the Steelers shut down the Bengals, 23-6. Interestingly, their victory was sparked not by any locker room pep talk or on-field play, but a sideline confrontation between Lambert, the club's enforcer, and Bengals' linebacker Bo Harris.

With Bradshaw out, the Steelers were down to one QB, backup Mike Kruczek. On a play in which he was forced to scramble, Kruczek headed for the safety of the sideline. Harris met him there, and sent the Steelers' lone QB sprawling with a borderline late hit. Enraged, Lambert ran the length of the sideline and hammered Harris in retaliation.

The sideline showdown sparked the sagging Steelers. After surrendering a combined 110 points over the first five games, the Steel Curtain clanked shut the rest of the season.

"Our goal," said defensive tackle Joe Greene, was to shut 'em out. Shut 'em out."

The Steel Curtain succeeded beyond belief. After grudgingly surrendering six points to Cincinnati, Pittsburgh put together one of the greatest sustained runs of defensive excellence ever seen. Looping and blitzing out of a "Stunt 4-3" alignment that featured Greene and fellow tackle Ernie Holmes angled on the center's nose, the Steel Curtain shut out the New York Giants, San Diego and Kansas City in succession, and did not allow a touchdown in 22 straight quarters, an astonishing feat.

Masterminded by assistant coaches George Perles, the architect of the innovative "Stunt 4-3", and Bud Carson, the defensive dominance continued with a 14-3 win over Miami. Following a 32-16 victory over Houston, Pittsburgh closed the season with a 7-3 win over the Bengals in a Cincinnati snowstorm, and blanked both Tampa Bay (42-0) and Houston (21-0).

The Steelers finished the regular season with nine straight wins, fueled by a defense that did not allow a TD in eight of the last nine games and that shut out five of its final eight opponents. The ultimate accolade paid to the Steel Curtain may have come from Bengals' QB Ken Anderson. Catching up with Lambert, Greene, Ham and Co. following Cincy's loss, a bruised and weary Anderson said simply, "You guys are awesome."

As stellar as the Steel Curtain was, the Pittsburgh ground game proved just as peerless. The turnaround began in the same Oct. 17 game against Cincinnati that the Steeler defense had first stated its case. With Kruczek handing off to Harris an NFL record 41 times, Pittsburgh gouged out 23 points with their patented trapping game.

In an era when most teams were still pulling and sweeping in the old Lombardi method, Pittsburgh coaches Dan Radakovich and Dick Hoak preached a complicated trapping scheme that required their offensive linemen to be quick thinkers as well as quick on their feet. Steeler linemen were small but muscular, so Radakovich taped Pittsburgh's jersey sleeves to their bulging biceps, leaving larger defensive linemen with nothing to grab and leaving nothing to the imagination of Pittsburgh fans.

Just as Perles and Carson proved revolutionary with the "Stunt 4-3," Radakovich taught Steeler linemen Mike Webster, Gerry Mullins, Jon Kolb, Jim Clack, Sam Davis, Gordon Gravelle and Ray Mansfield the innovative "lock-out" technique, where Steeler linemen locked-out pass-rushers by extending their thick arms straight-out in a punching motion. The technique is now common practice throughout the NFL.

Fronted by a mobile line that one opposing coach said "starts trapping as soon as they step off the bus," Harris and Bleier excelled running quick-hitters and counters and both rushed for over 1,000 yards.

By the time the AFC Central Division champion Steelers swept into Baltimore to meet the Colts in a first-round playoff game on Dec. 19, Pittsburgh had established team records for fewest points allowed (138) and rushing yards (2,971). Playing a Colt team that had won the AFC East with an 11-3 record, the Steelers peaked with a 40-14 win that saw Harris counter-trap his way to 132 yards rushing and a now-healthy Bradshaw hit on 14-of-18 passes for 264 yards and three TDs.

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With their offense rolling up 526 yards and the Steel Curtain defense holding thousand-yard back Lydell Mitchell to just 55 yards and the Colt offense to 170, Pittsburgh appeared to be on track for a third straight Super Bowl appearance.

"I knew we had a super team, but I didn't know we had anything like this," Clack smiled following the win over the Colts. "Three little wins is all it takes to win the Super Bowl."

The Steelers never got them. Injuries to Harris and Bleier grounded the high-flying ground game, and the Steel Curtain finally gave way one week later against the revenge-minded Raiders.

It's a loss that still stings the '76 team, largely because of the backfield injuries. Bleier called the '76 Steelers "probably the best team ever, except for the injuries."

Harris agreed. If the Steelers had been healthy, he opined, their season would have had a different ending.

"We would have won three (Super Bowls) in a row," he said.