

NOW KICKING, KELSCH!

By Bob Braunwart & Bob Carroll

When Pittsburgh's Gary Anderson trots out onto the field to kick a point or three, he is upholding a tradition of specialization that began in the Steel City's first year in the NFL. Indeed, it may have saved the franchises.

Had it not been for the staunch right leg of an aging and now all-but-forgotten sandlotter, Terry Bradshaw, Joe Greene, Franco Harris and Company might have been forced to do their winning somewhere other than Pittsburgh. By the time the 1970s rolled around, a Pittsburgh pro football team could have been only a fading memory.

After watching the modern Steelers win four Super Bowls, national writers often forget the forty years of frustration suffered by the team before it achieved its present state. Pittsburghers remember, of course. All those losing years are etched indelibly in their hearts.

Yet even the most virulent Steeler rooter may not remember just how shaky the franchise was in its first few seasons. Then the question was not "will they win," it was "will they survive." Other NFL teams have gone the way of the passenger pigeon -- remember the Dallas Texans in 1952? Remember the Brooklyn Dodgers? How about the Cincinnati Reds, who disappeared in the middle of the 1934 season?

The same sad fate might well have befallen the Steelers.

In 1933 Art Rooney took a chance and bought an NFL franchise. Rooney had previously headed a local sandlot outfit -- the J.P. Rooneys, named for his brother -- but this was his first venture into the big league.

He called his new team the "Pirates," but a glance at its roster showed that it was the Pittsburghers who were destined to walk the plank in 1933. Rooney had scraped around for athletes and ended up signing some of his former sandlotter and several other players who were not at all in demand by other NFL clubs. The lineup was one of the weakest ever to stumble onto an NFL field.

Local football fans were frankly skeptical of the professional game. Pit, under Jock Sutherland, was a national power in college football. Duquesne and Carnegie Tech both played major schedules. Who needed a pro team?

Especially a losing pro team!

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The season began at old Forbes Field on Wednesday night, September 20 (Sunday football would not become legal until after election day) against the strong New York Giants. 15,000 people -- a good crowd at the time -- came out bearing modest hopes. For one half the Pirates played respectable football, trailing only 7-0 at the intermission. However, in the second half, Harry Newman, the Giants' clever quarterback, took over and bombed the Pirates. The final score stood 23-2 and the New Yorkers weren't even breathing hard. By the final quarter, few folks remained in the stands.

Pittsburgh newspapers tried to be kind in the post-mortem, stressing a few acceptable performances by the locals, but there was no disguising that the Pirates' debut had been a disaster.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 2, No. 8 (1980)

Rooney's team was in trouble. Had they been the only game in town, things might have looked better. But if they were to woo any fans from the successful college teams, they needed a victory.

And quick!

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The next Wednesday night the tough Chicago Cardinals came to town. Although they lacked the Giants' firepower, their defense was universally respected.

An all-day rain didn't help, but the meager turnout at Forbes Field was due mostly to the Pirates' inept showing the week before. One newspaper story had 6,000 present. Still fewer, said another account.

Things began badly for the Pirates. By the middle of the second quarter, the Cardinals led 13-0 and were driving for still another touchdown. Many in the sparse crowd were heading mournfully for the exits.

Then a break put the Pirates back in the game. The Cards' Jim Bausch arched a pass towards the end zone. Pittsburgh's Butch Kottler, a sub quarterback, stepped in front of it at the one-yard line, and steamed 99 yards for a touchdown -- the first ever for Rooney U.

On to the field waddled a somewhat controversial Pirate player. Christian "Mose" Kelsch had been playing local sandlot football for many years -- since "about the time that Dewey was steaming into Manila" insisted one reporter. Many folks had wondered why the Pirates had allotted a place on their already weak squad to a now chubby, 37-year-old "has-been" when there were so many players with glittering college reputations standing in unemployment lines. Ol' Mose had never seen the inside of a college classroom.

A moment later, when Kelsch returned to a bench with crowded graduates, having successfully place-kicked an extra point, the fans gave him a polite round of applause. It was nice to see the old man do well.

The freak touchdown seemed to spur the Pirates to stronger efforts and they held the Cardinals scoreless throughout the remainder of the game. However, the Chicago defense lived up to its reputation. With less than three minutes remaining, the Cards still led 13-7.

Suddenly, another break!

Cap Oehler, the Pirates' center, recovered a Cardinal fumble at the Chicago 18. Jim Tanguay sailed a pass to ex-Purdue star Paul Moss at the four. An ill-timed substitution cost a five-yard penalty, but on the next play Moss cut into the end zone and Tanguay zipped the ball right to him. The score was tied!

Out trundled Kelsch. The Pittsburgh *Press* described the scene: "He wore no helmet and his bald head waggled and his double chin quivered as his teammates clustered around him, patted him on his broad back and shouted in his ear to 'make that kick good!'"

The ball was snapped. Mose swung his "ponderous" right leg. The ball sailed perfectly through the uprights. And the Pittsburgh fans -- many of whom became fans at that precise moment -- erupted in joy.

Kelsch grinned all the way back to the bench. A few moments later the game ended with Pittsburgh narrowly on top, 14-13.

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The next day the *Press* crowed exuberantly: "Old Mose has a degree. It's B.P.K. -- Bachelor of Placement Kicking -- and Mose is a post graduate!"

Pittsburgh had an unlikely pro football hero. More important, the come-from-behind victory won enough hearts that the franchise, it least for the time being, was safe.

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According to Pittsburgh folklore, Mose Kelsch was the first "specialist" in pro football. The colleges had used a few men in special spots, but they had no roster limits and could afford to carry a man to do a particular job.

Pro roster limits and substitution rules combined against the idea of specialization, at least, over any length of time. Certainly there were plenty of "specialists-for-a-game," men who, usually because of an injury, were saved for one crucial play.

But Kelsch actually went two whole seasons with the Pirates and never attempted anything other than field goals and extra points.

Later in 1933, Kelsch played the hero again when he kicked a field goal to give the Pirates a 3-3 tie with Brooklyn. Since the team won only three times all season (the other two wins were over lowly Cincinnati and Philadelphia) that tie was one of the high points of the season.

1934 did not go so well for the Pirates or for Kelsch. The team fell to only two wins, and Mose was roundly criticized when he missed a couple of extra points that would have enabled Pittsburgh to tie the Giants.

By the end of the season, he was sharing his kicking duties with young Armand Niccolai, who could also play tackle. Whether Kelsch could have made the squad the next year was problematical.

His untimely death in an auto crash in July of 1935 saddened all Pittsburgh fans and many around the league, where Mose was popular for play and for his sportsmanship.

During his two-year NFL career, Kelsch was not only the oldest player in the league, but he was also older than the team's owner, Art Rooney.

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MOSE KELSCH'S NFL CAREER

	XP	XA	FG	PTS
1933 Pittsburgh	2	3	3	11
1934 Pittsburgh	2	5	1	5
Totals	4	8	4	16