

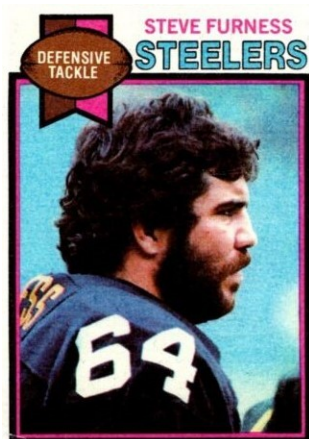


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Steve Furness

This article was written by Matt Keddie.

Decades ago the Pittsburgh Steelers held training camp at the University of Rhode Island in Kingston, RI. Team executive Dan Rooney recalled, “It had great fields, but this is funny, I remember the academicians weren't too thrilled that we were going to be there. They were like, 'What are we doing bringing a professional football team around here?’ But I'll tell you, when we left, they were our biggest champions.”¹ The decision paid off for the Rooneys because it lured one of the greatest players in Rhode Island history to the Steelers in 1972, Steve Furness.



Standing at roughly 6'4” and 255 pounds, he was a fifth round choice of the 1972 draft class that included Hall of Famer Franco Harris.² Looking at him, you never would think he was a defensive lineman. That did not matter to Furness or to his teammates because he worked harder than anybody, recalled teammate and Hall of Fame linebacker Jack Ham. “He worked so hard to be a football player. Some guys are just great athletes, but he just had to work hard.”³ Head coach Chuck Noll said, “Coming from a small college, he was a very, very consistent player who did a heck of a job for us.”⁴

Furness' greatest moments occurred during Super Bowls IX, X, and XIII. In preparation for Super Bowl IX he practiced all week and maintained readiness in the event Dwight White, who suffered an illness that week, was unable to play. White ended up playing, but Furness maintained professionalism saying, “Dwight deserved to play. It was his

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position all year.”⁵ In Super Bowl X Furness started in place of Joe Greene due to injury. He recorded a sack of Dallas Cowboys' quarterback Roger Staubach, one of seven sacks recorded by Pittsburgh en route to a 21-17 victory. Greene later said that he (Furness), “played extremely well that day and the team went on without me and sacked the quarterback seven times.”⁶ Later in Super Bowl XIII, Furness filled in for the injured Greene, contributing a sack and two tackles as the Steelers once again beat the Cowboys, 35-31. Commenting on Furness stepping up Greene said, “Anytime we called upon Steve, he delivered.”⁷ Ham also stated, “People don't realize how important he was to this team. Steve was right there for us and we didn't miss a beat with him against the Cowboys.”⁸

Furness' son, Zack, a communications professor, reflected on his father fitting in with the team's culture, “The reputation of the Steelers then – it was a blue collar team. The guys they brought in were blue collar guys – they weren't from polished backgrounds. They were blue collar, hard-working guys. They were less about ego and more about the team. I think that's why the team resonated so well with so many people – the reason they were so embraced. It was one of the few times where the myth and reality were pretty much the same.”⁹ As a result, Furness earned the nickname, 'Buckethead' because, “[Well], he used his head like a battering ram to gain leverage on offensive lineman.”¹⁰

- 1 Donaldson, Shane. “When the Steelers Held Training Camp at URI,” uri.edu, June 7, 2016, <https://web.uri.edu/quadangles/when-the-steelers-held-training-camp-at-uri/>.
- 2 “1972 Pittsburgh Steelers Draftees,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed December 5, 2022, https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/pit/1972_draft.htm.
- 3 Bair, Jeffrey. “Former FB Player Steve Furness Dies,” apnews.com, February 10, 2000, <https://apnews.com/article/968eda23430ec8759e671d45f692d08e>.
- 4 Bair, Jeffrey. “Former FB Player Steve Furness Dies,” apnews.com, February 10, 2000, <https://apnews.com/article/968eda23430ec8759e671d45f692d08e>.
- 5 Bair, Jeffrey. “Former FB Player Steve Furness Dies,” apnews.com, February 10, 2000, <https://apnews.com/article/968eda23430ec8759e671d45f692d08e>.
- 6 Bair, Jeffrey. “Former FB Player Steve Furness Dies,” apnews.com, February 10, 2000, <https://apnews.com/article/968eda23430ec8759e671d45f692d08e>.
- 7 Bair, Jeffrey. “Former FB Player Steve Furness Dies,” apnews.com, February 10, 2000, <https://apnews.com/article/968eda23430ec8759e671d45f692d08e>.
- 8 Bair, Jeffrey. “Former FB Player Steve Furness Dies,” apnews.com, February 10, 2000, <https://apnews.com/article/968eda23430ec8759e671d45f692d08e>.
- 9 “Exclusive with Zack Furness, son of Steelers 70's defensive lineman/coach Steve Furness,” steelerstakeaways.com, July 13, 2021, <https://steelerstakeaways.com/exclusive-with-zack-furness-son-of-steelers-70s-defensive-lineman-coach-steve-furness/>.
- 10 “Exclusive with Zack Furness, son of Steelers 70's defensive lineman/coach Steve Furness,” steelerstakeaways.com, July 13, 2021, <https://steelerstakeaways.com/exclusive-with-zack-furness-son-of-steelers-70s-defensive-lineman-coach-steve-furness/>.

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Furness won four championships with the Steelers. In his first five seasons, he played sporadically, never starting in more than six contests. During 1977, he became the full-time starter at defensive tackle alongside Joe Greene, LC Greenwood, and Dwight White.¹¹ Sacks were not an official statistic until after he retired in 1982, but he accumulated an unofficial 31.5 sacks as a Steeler. His strongest statistical season was 8.5 unofficial sacks in 1977, followed by 7.0 in 1979.¹²

Pittsburgh was routinely ranked at the top of the league in total defense during the 1970s. From 1972 to 1981 Pittsburgh never won fewer than eight games, won seven AFC Central division titles (six consecutive), and four AFC Championships. The four Super Bowl championships in six years won by the team is a feat yet to be repeated.¹³

Stephen Robert Furness was of Armenian descent. His maternal grandparents immigrated to the United States from the Ottoman Empire following World War I. He was born on December 5, 1950 in Providence, RI. He attended Bishop Hendricken High School in Warwick, RI where he was a standout athlete.¹⁴ He then attended the University of Rhode Island on a football scholarship. The Rams were far from a football power.¹⁵ Furness was also an Olympic caliber athlete in hammer throwing.

In 1999, *Sports Illustrated* published a list of the 50 greatest sports figures from Rhode Island. Furness was ranked #14. He was also inducted into the University of Rhode Island Athletic Hall of Fame in 1987.¹⁶

Furness spent nine of his 10 professional seasons (1972-1980) in Pittsburgh. Prior to the 1981 season, he was traded to the Tampa Bay Buccaneers for a conditional draft pick.¹⁷

1 1 “1977 Pittsburgh Steelers Roster & Players,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed December 5, 2022, https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/pit/1977_roster.htm.

1 2 “Steve Furness,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed December 5, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/F/FurnSt20.htm>.

1 3 “Pittsburgh Steelers Franchise Encyclopedia,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed December 5, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/pit/>.

1 4 Malkasian, Andrew. “A Deserved Recognition: Steve Furness,” thesteelstudy.com, accessed December 5, 2022, <https://thesteelstudy.com/2021/04/24/a-deserved-recognition-steve-furness/>.

1 5 Malkasian, Andrew. “A Deserved Recognition: Steve Furness,” thesteelstudy.com, accessed December 5, 2022, <https://thesteelstudy.com/2021/04/24/a-deserved-recognition-steve-furness/>.

1 6 “The 50 Greatest Sports Figures from Rhode Island,” SI.com, December 27, 1999, <https://vault.si.com/vault/1999/12/27/the-50-greatest-sports-figures-from-rhode-island>.

1 7 “Steve Furness,” ProSportsTransactions.com, accessed December 5, 2022, <https://www.prosportstransactions.com/football/Search/SearchResults.php?Player=furness&Team=&BeginDate=&EndDate=&PlayerMovementChkBx=yes&submit=Search>.



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Describing his reaction Zack said, “I think he was shocked. He found out when he came to camp and [Mike] Webster told him how sorry he was to hear he was traded.”¹⁸ The Buccaneers cut him after training camp, prompting him to sign with the Detroit Lions for the 1981 season. With the Lions, Furness played in nine contests, making two starts and recorded an unofficial 3.0 sacks.

He retired following the 1981 season, playing in a total of 106 games, making 49 starts.¹⁹ Furness did not wait to immediately get into coaching. The following year, 1982, he accepted a position with Michigan State University to coach the defensive line under former Steelers assistant coach George Perles.²⁰ The two helped lead the Spartans to the 1987 and 1990 Big Ten championships, a win in the 1988 Rose Bowl (20-17 over the University of Southern California), and three Top 20 rankings. The success may have resulted from Furness' attitude of forming close relationships with the players. Zack recalls, “When he was at Michigan State, he would have players come to the house for dinner once a year. That was really important for me as a privileged kid who grew up in the suburbs to meet kids and learn about them, many came from families with little money – one-parent families with no money.”²¹ Zack also described his dad’s coaching acumen as, “My dad wasn't the type to dismiss players at first glance – if they looked too small or slow. He had an eye for spotting guys that were the ones you had to watch out for regardless of how they looked – the guys who played well beyond their size. He could recognize those guys as coach.”²²

Furness left Michigan State for the Colts in 1991, staying just one season in Indianapolis. The Colts turned in an abysmal 1-15 record, resulting in the entire coaching staff being fired. Bill Cowher hired Furness to come to Pittsburgh for the 1992 season as the team's defensive line coach.²³ Furness was fired after the 1993 season, ending his foray into coaching, despite the team being among the best run defenses.

1 8 “Exclusive with Zack Furness, son of Steelers 70's defensive lineman/coach Steve Furness,” steelerstakeaways.com, July 13, 2021, <https://steelerstakeaways.com/exclusive-with-zack-furness-son-of-steelers-70s-defensive-lineman-coach-steve-furness/>.

1 9 “Steve Furness,” ProFootballReference.com, accessed December 5, 2022, <https://www.pro-football-reference.com/players/F/FurnSt20.htm>.

2 0 Bair, Jeffrey. “Former FB Player Steve Furness Dies,” apnews.com, February 10, 2000, <https://apnews.com/article/968eda23430ec8759e671d45f692d08e>.

2 1 “Exclusive with Zack Furness, son of Steelers 70's defensive lineman/coach Steve Furness,” steelerstakeaways.com, July 13, 2021, <https://steelerstakeaways.com/exclusive-with-zack-furness-son-of-steelers-70s-defensive-lineman-coach-steve-furness/>.

2 2 “Exclusive with Zack Furness, son of Steelers 70's defensive lineman/coach Steve Furness,” steelerstakeaways.com, July 13, 2021, <https://steelerstakeaways.com/exclusive-with-zack-furness-son-of-steelers-70s-defensive-lineman-coach-steve-furness/>.



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Furness went on to work in real estate. He suddenly and unexpectedly passed away on February 10, 2000 as a result of a heart attack in the presence of his fiance, Peg Bombich.²⁴ Their wedding date was set for August 4. She described her life with Steve, saying, “My life with Steve was like a six-year honeymoon. So, how can I forget?”²⁵ Bombich recollects one of the happiest moments in their relationship was when they visited his family in Rhode Island for the holidays. She said, “With all the traveling, he hadn't been back for a holiday at his Rhode Island home in years. So, on what turned out to be the last Thanksgiving of his life, we visited his mother. You can't imagine the joy it brought. His mother invited relatives who hadn't seen him for ages – aunts, uncles, cousins. And, it was emotional for Steve as it was for them.”²⁶

2 3 Bair, Jeffrey. “Former FB Player Steve Furness Dies,” apnews.com, February 10, 2000, <https://apnews.com/article/968eda23430ec8759e671d45f692d08e>.

2 4 Takach, Carole. “Valentine for a super Steeler: Fiancee recalls short season with Steve Furness,” triblive.com, February 9, 2003, <https://archive.triblive.com/news/valentine-for-a-super-steeler-fiancee-recalls-short-season-with-steve-furness/>.

2 5 Takach, Carole. “Valentine for a super Steeler: Fiancee recalls short season with Steve Furness,” triblive.com, February 9, 2003, <https://archive.triblive.com/news/valentine-for-a-super-steeler-fiancee-recalls-short-season-with-steve-furness/>.

2 6 Takach, Carole. “Valentine for a super Steeler: Fiancee recalls short season with Steve Furness,” triblive.com, February 9, 2003, <https://archive.triblive.com/news/valentine-for-a-super-steeler-fiancee-recalls-short-season-with-steve-furness/>.

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