

## **PENNSYLVANIA POLKA**

By Bob Braunwart, Bob Carroll & Joe Horrigan

Although the Pittsburgh Steelers and Art Rooney are jointly celebrating 50 years in the NFL with this 1982 season, the bond between The Prez and his team was nearly severed forty one years ago. In fact, during a period of about four months, Mr. Rooney and the Steelers seemed unlikely to be ever again coupled.

The maneuver mystified fans at the time and has confused historians ever since. The simplest explanation -- and one that is often printed -- is that the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Philadelphia Eagles exchanged teams. While there is some truth in that interpretation, it is hardly a completely accurate explanation of one of the most bizarre moves in sports history.

As the 1940 season neared its close, Art Rooney could see little progress made by his football team in eight years of NFL headknocking. It must have been particularly galling to a man with Rooney's history; he'd been a winner at virtually everything he'd put his mind to. Whether as a baseball player, horse handicapper, politician or investor, he was used to coming out on top. But the Steelers had been a unique and continuous disappointment.

The causes were many. Good players went down with injuries or retired precipitously, leaving gaping holes in the line-up. Some of the coaching would have rolled Walter Camp in his grave. And the cash flowed mostly out.

From its first season in 1933, Rooney U. had consistently lost money -- usually in annual chunks of \$20,000 or \$25,000. Rooney estimated the eight season debit at \$100,000, and the first profit -- a paltry \$5,000 in 1940 -- certainly couldn't offset that. Nor did that profit seem at all likely to grow or even continue. A poor relationship with the Forbes Field folks, with the Steelers fiddling second to the baseball Pirates, didn't help.

After eight seasons without a winning record, the fans were as disenchanted as Rooney. The name change to Steelers in 1940 had not disguised the "same old Pirates" who'd walked the plank since the franchise arrived.

Taking it as a whole, Rooney believed he had neither a nucleus of good players nor the monetary reserves with which to build the team into a winner. And, with World War II on the horizon, it seemed likely that good players would become even harder to come by.

Then young Santa Claus arrived.

Early in the 1940 season, a prominent New York sportswriter introduced Rooney to 28-year-old Alexis Thompson, enamored with owning a football team and possessing the wherewithal to buy anything he darn well pleased. Young Mr. Thompson had inherited a six million dollar steel fortune at the age of 16. After attending Yale he went to the lucrative position of vice-president of a highly successful drug company.

On the night of October 20, a few hours after the Giants belittled the Steelers 12-0, Rooney and Thompson met in New York to discuss changing the club to "Thompson U." There were no results, in part because Thompson wanted to move the team to Boston and Rooney did not cotton to leaving his hometown bereft of pro football.

Thompson's faith in Boston may seem a little strange in that Beantown, after several trials, had shown itself nearly as fertile for an NFL football franchise as - say - Fargo, N.D. But his own base of operations was in New York City, making Boston nearly in his back yard. Pittsburgh, on the other hand, was to Thompson only slightly more accessible than Outer Mongolia.

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Undaunted by his first turn-down, Thompson followed Rooney to Green Bay the next weekend. The Steelers lost 24-3, and Thompson lost his bid for the Steelers by an equally decisive score.

Having twice put temptation behind him, Rooney announced on November 10 that he was keeping the franchise and keeping rotund Walt Kiesling as his coach. Perhaps prompting his decision was the fact that the Steelers had just registered their second (and last) victory of 1940 -- a 7-3 humbling of Philadelphia.

The Eagles, though slightly better in the ledger were even worse than the Steelers in the standings. More than one fan suggested that together the two Pennsylvania clubs could not make one good NFL team. The observation was both astute and prophetic.

Events in the next month are murky. From later accounts we can deduce that Rooney's friend, then-Philadelphia owner Bert Bell, did quite a bit of fast talking to Thompson.

Finally, in the first week of December just before the NFL Championship Game, a series of secret meetings were held in Philadelphia. Present at various times and among others were Bell, Rooney, Thompson, Kiesling, Bell's 1940 assistant coach Hienie Miller, and Greasy Neale, who was penciled in as 1941 Eagle coach.

They reached an agreement and announced it to the world on the morning of December 9. The date has no doubt contributed over the years to the confusion about just what was agreed on. Pro football had not yet achieved "lead story" regularity on the sports pages, but on the morning of December 9 the entire athletic fraternity stood aghast at the Chicago Bears' 73-0 lambasting of the Washington Redskins the day before. Small wonder that many people overlooked the transaction involving two "losers", Pittsburgh and Philadelphia.

Even in Pittsburgh the consternation level stayed safely out of the red, but they were interested. At the Rooney home, young Dan was told the family connection with the Steelers had ended, but "we're still in the football business." Meanwhile, Art Rooney told the press, "I certainly hated to give up the franchise in the old home town, but it would have been poor business to refuse the proposition for a second division ball club at the terms which were offered." He refused to blame either the fans or the newspapers for the team's problems.

Rooney had sold his Pittsburgh franchise to Thompson -- for \$160,000, according to Thompson -- and then turned around and bought a half-interest in Bell's Philadelphia franchise -- according to rumor. But, to confuse the issue, the rosters were thoroughly scrambled. In one version, Rooney-Bell merely kept a few of their favorite players around for auld lang syne. More accurately, Thompson acquired two "name" backs -- Merlyn Condit and Billy Patterson -- for show, and Rooney-Bell got all the linemen they felt they needed to make their team a winner. (SEE ACCOMPANYING CHART)

Ironically, the most important player handed on was named Thompson. At the time he was a one-eyed, scatter-armed tailback who couldn't run, but Tommy Thompson became with the Eagles one of the outstanding quarterbacks of the NFL.

Although it was announced that Alexis Thompson would keep his team in Pittsburgh for a year (with Neale as his coach), it was no secret his heart was in Boston. What was not so widely known was that Bell and Rooney planned to field a "Pennsylvania team" as soon as Thompson left. Tentatively called the "Keystoners," the team would split its home games between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. Some have speculated that they hoped to talk the NFL into letting them play all home games -- six in one city and six in the other.

In the meantime, the NFL draft, held on December 10, added to the confusion in the newspapers. Either Rooney or Thompson owed the Bears a draft choice for Billy Patterson. Nobody was quite sure who held the rights to Leon Gajecki, a Penn State center drafted as a junior by Rooney. And, who drafted first? Bell's team had finished behind his new partner's! These and other small problems that perplexed sports writers were worked out.

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So, during the winter of 1940-41, Thompson was in Pittsburgh with the Steeler franchise and a mixed roster of former Steeler and Eagle players. Bell and Rooney were in Philadelphia with the Eagle franchise, a mixed roster, and big plans.

Thompson, however, was not enthusiastic about spending a year in Pittsburgh. Nor was Rooney overjoyed with the prospect of a year's exile.

Thompson announced his team would undergo still another name change to "Iron Men" and then sat on his franchise doing nothing. In the spring, Rooney telephoned Thompson to ask when he planned to open a Pittsburgh office. It was then that he learned just how unhappy Thompson was to be relegated to the Steel City.

"Then I got an idea," Rooney explained later. "I asked him how he'd like to make a switch and let me stay in Pittsburgh and take over the Philadelphia territory himself. That suited him because Philadelphia is so much closer to this New York headquarters, and that's how it was worked out."

On April 8, 1941, Pittsburgh learned that Rooney U. was back. "I know we've gone around in circles," Rooney admitted, "but I guess we're settled now."

Thompson was happy. Rooney was happy. Even Bert Bell seemed happy although he was being sued by couple of former Eagles, unhappy at being deposited in Pittsburgh. Before the next season rolled around, a few players were shifted back to their former cities, usually to keep them from retiring.

To review: did the Eagles and Steelers exchange teams? No, but they did exchange a great number of players in what amounted to a massive trade, as announced on December 9, 1940. Much of this was obscured when Greasy Neale cleaned house in Philadelphia before the '41 season.

Did the Steelers and Eagles exchange franchises? Yes, on April 8, 1941. Thereby, Bell and Rooney gained the right to put their team of ex-Eagles and Steelers in Pittsburgh and Thompson gained the right to put his team of ex-Eagles and Steelers in Philadelphia.

Did it make any difference? That depends on how you look at it. In 1940, the Eagles and Steelers won only three games between them. But in 1941, the Steelers and Eagles won all of three games between them! But Thompson had his druthers and Rooney-Bell had some badly needed cash.

In the medium view, Thompson and Philadelphia gained Greasy Neale, a civic treasure who built the Eagles into a powerhouse during the next decade.

And, in the long view, Pittsburgh kept Art rooney, for which Steeler fans should be eternally grateful.

### PLAYER SHIFTS, announced December 10, 1940 To Thompson

#### From Rooney (Pgh)

\*-Bill Sortet - E  
\*-San Boyd - E  
S-Armand Niccolai - T  
S-John Woudenberg - T  
\*-Don Campbell - T  
\*-Stan Pavko - G  
\*-John Perko - G  
\*-Ted Grabinski - C  
\*-Joe Maras - C  
\*-Billy Patterson - B  
--Merlin Condit - B  
E-Lou Tomasetti - B  
\*-Swede Johnston - B  
\*-Hank Bruder - B

#### From Bell (Phil)

\*-Red Ramsey - E  
\*-Joe Carter - E  
E-Phil Ragazzo - T  
\*-Clem Woltman  
\*-Ted Schmitt - C  
E-Foster Watkins - B  
\*-Joe Bukant - B  
S-with Rooney-Bell  
in 1941  
E-with Thompson in  
1941  
--with Brooklyn in  
1941

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S-Coley McDonough - B  
E-Tommy Thompson - B

\*-Did not play in  
1941

## To Rooney-Bell

### Rooney Keeps

S-George Platukas - E  
S-Walt Kichefski - E  
\*-John Klumb - E  
S-Clark Goff - T  
S-Ted Doyle - T  
S-Carl Nery - G  
S-Jack Sanders - G  
S-Boyd Brumbaugh - B  
S-John Noppenberg - B  
\*-George Klick - B  
S-Rocco Pirro - B

### Bell Keeps

S-Don Looney - E  
S-Joe Wendlick - E  
S-George Somers - T  
\*-Ross Thompson - T  
S-Elbie Schultz - G  
S-Dick Bassi - G  
S-Chuck Cherundolo - C  
S-Moose Harper - C  
S-Elmer Hackney - B  
\*-Frank Emmons - B  
S-Elmer Kolberg - B  
\*-Chuck Newton - B  
\*-Fran Murray - B  
\*-Don Jones - B