**FOOTBALL'S FERTILE CRESCENT**

# Pittsburgh sandlots no place for the faint of heart

**By Eric Poole**
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The story of Western Pennsylvania football begins in the boxing ring.

Before the days when anyone with a closet full of belts and three initials could declare a slate of boxing champions in weight classes at 12-ounce intervals, the term "World Boxing Champion" meant what it said.

And in those days, from 1923-1926, Harry "The Pittsburgh Kid" Greb sat atop the middleweight division.

Greb's promoter was a Duquesne University graduate from the North Side of Pittsburgh, a guy who could have boxed in the Olympics, but instead opted for minor league baseball before turning to putting on sporting events.

Promoting was Arthur J. Rooney's path to fame. In fact, it was his path to the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

In the early 1920s, he joined a radio shop owner to form -- and play for -- football teams such as the Majestic Radios, as well as the Rooney Reds, along with his brothers Dan and Jim, and finally, the Hope Harveys.

Occasionally, the champion pugilist joined his promoter on the gridiron and Greb's presence wasn't the only similarity between the two sports Art Rooney became famous for promoting.

"My mother always said that they would brag about how good (his football teams) were," recalls Dan Rooney, Art's son and the current Pittsburgh Steelers president.

"Because if they were losing a game in the fourth quarter, they started a fight and therefore the game would end and they would say, 'We didn't lose,'" Dan Rooney recalls.

One of those games Rooney didn't lose was played in the late 1920s, when a highlight for his sandlot teams was the yearly train trip to Johnstown for a season-ending contest. The arrangement was helped by the fact that both the Johnstown mayor, and the promoter for that city's team were part of Rooney's legion of friends.

But the friendships were tested one year when the game ended in a fight that saw Johnstown's mayor de-pantsed.

And de-walleted.

The mayor caught Rooney at the train station where the Pittsburgh team was looking to make its getaway, Dan Rooney recalls.

"(The Johnstown mayor) got my father and said 'Art, one of your hoodlums stole my wallet and I want it back. . . I know you didn't take it, but someone on that train has it and I know that you can get it.'"

According to the story, Art Rooney recovered the wallet before the train reached Pittsburgh.

A few years later, politics placed Art Rooney in the path of sports history. In 1933, the fledgling National Football League took the kind of risk that it can afford to avoid today.

Anticipating a referendum that would repeal Pennsylvania's "blue laws", which outlawed sporting events on Sundays, the league offered franchises to a pair of sports promoters: Bert Bell in Philadelphia and Art Rooney right here in Pittsburgh.

“It was more from an operations standpoint than these big-money men," says Dan Rooney. "(Bell) was a great player at the University of Pennsylvania and . . . was a promoter the same way my father was."

The two men later became fast friends. Bell, who died in 1959, rose to the post of league Commissioner, to be succeeded by Pete Rozelle.

Like the league, Art Rooney took a gamble. He won the league's $2,500 entrance fee in a good day at a horse track and started the Pittsburgh Pirates, who would change their name to the Steelers in 1941.

"It really did get started through these sandlot teams. In fact, I would say that a goodly number of the players, maybe half the players that were on the Steelers (then the Pirates) were players that had come from the sandlot teams," says Dan Rooney.

Considering the number of times Rooney's sandlot football games escalated into fights, it isn’t surprising that the first National Football League game played in Pittsburgh was, at least technically, illegal.

Like Art Rooney, the league won its gamble as of Pennsylvania voted down the "blue laws” the following November, over the vehement oppo-sition of the state's clergy.

But the laws hadn't officially been signed out of existence by the Sunday following the election, making the Pirates' first Sunday home game illegal.

Knowing that if local clergymen were able to seize upon that technicality, professional football in Pittsburgh would be finished almost before it began, Art Rooney set to work.

He appeared in the office of Franklin McQuaide, Pittsburgh's police superintendent, the Friday before the contest and asked McQuaide for the names of the people who had the power to raid the game.

McQuaide replied that there were two people who could do that; the first was the sheriff of Allegheny County, and McQuaide was the other. Art Rooney immediately produced game tickets for the police superintendent, thwarting the churchmen's efforts to stop pro football in Pittsburgh.

The Steelers lost the game, as they would do so often for the next 40 years before qualifying for the NFL playoffs in 1972.

**Tough game, tough men**

Even at 70, Roland Casasanta of Coraopolis looks like he still could wreak some havoc on a football field.

He is only a few pounds over his playing weight of 140 and his sinewy forearms ripple with almost every movement.

“(Playing football) gave me some strength or something,” he says, citing the infirmities of friends his age and younger. “I’m 70 years old and I do aerobics twice a week, I play golf twice a week, I’m forever remodeling.

“I think I can attribute that to all my activities.”

Casasanta remembers when a full-time job was no excuse for not practicing six days a week and playing on the seventh. He was a pulling guard in the Honus Wagner League, light-heavyweight division.

“One year, they put us in the heavyweight division and we played against a lot of ex-Steeler players and got killed physically, mentally, brutally, whatever you want to say,” Casasanta recalls. “The next year, they put us back in with the light heavyweights.”

In the 1950s, the Honus Wagner League -- possibly the only sandlot football league to be named for a baseball hall-of-famer -- was one of at least eight leagues and conferences com-peting with a weight-class structure.

Casasanta’s Yellowjackets squads won the light-heavyweight championship five out of six years in the league.

One of the other teams in the league was officially called State Correctional Institute -- Pittsburgh (SCIP).

Unofficially, it was known as the Western Penitentiary team and, eventually, the Pittsburgh Stealers.

“You'd talk to the guy across from you, say, ‘What are you in for,’ and he'd tell you, `Murder,’ or ‘I'm in here for life.’" Says Casasanta. “So you had to play like you were in there for life, because if not, they ate you up.”

There are two reminiscences common to most veterans of games at SCIP.

The first is a snickering comment: “They couldn't play away games," which each former player says as though it were an original thought.

The second is the wall of the prison, which was only a yard beyond one of the sidelines.

“This is sandlot football, you’d play on some strange fields, they're not these well-manicured football fields,” says Moon football coach Mark Capuano, who played for the Sto-Rox Rangers from 1971-78.

At the time, the league was called the Greater Pittsburgh Football League (GPFL) and the weight limit was 220 pounds, up from 175 pounds in Casasanta’s day.

“I remember hitting the quarterback one time, just plowing him right into the wall and killing the guy into the wall of the penitentiary and they're carrying him off the field. But that was the out of bounds.”

Tom Liberty, who has successfully resurrected the football program at Quaker Valley High School, coached the Stealers from 1982 until the program ended in 1987, when a new cell block was built on the footbaII field.

“I think that everyone I met said that it was eerie coming into the prison,” says Liberty. “They put this blue stamp on you, that shows up on the infrared (light) and everyone said that they were worried that their sweat would wash it off.”

Capuano remembers the hand stamp.

“The guard was always saying, ‘Make sure that doesn’t wash off, because you’re not getting out of here unless you’ve got that stamp on your hand.’ I thought he was kidding, but I’d always put a little extra tape on it to make sure it didn’t wash off.”

But though the prison teams were, by definition, made up of felons, the actual games usually went off without incident, except for the fact that the prison crowds always rooted against the home team. So in one sense, the Stealers did get to play away games.

**The end of the day**

The on-field fist fights that were common at the league's inception returned at the end. Bob Tosadori, GPFL commissioner from 1982 to the league's demise in 1989, says fighting was a near-constant problem.

"I went to court two or three times over the league. You know, forfeits that I made, and protests.”

The last time Tosadori went to court might have put an end to the GPFL. In 1989, the league’s final season, players for the North Side Express got into fisticuffs with players from Springdale.

The league had six teams in 1989: 15th Ward (Hazelwood), East End (Homewood), North Side, South Side, Springdale and Sto-Rox.

According to eyewitness accounts, the North Side team started the fight, which drove the officials from the field at the end of the fourth quarter.

Tosadori declared the game forfeited to Springdale, and North Side suspended from the league for the rest of the season, which put him back in court.

“I so happened to be hospitalized when we had to go before the squire, so I had to make them play the game again instead of just forfeiting it to them,” says Tosadori.

The commissioner also had to reinstate the Express, who qualified for the playoffs and advanced to the championship game, which they lost, ironically, to Springdale.

Tosadori wanted to bring the league back for the 1990 season, until he saw that the situation was only deteriorating.

“I don’t want to bring personalities into it, but one or two guys got up and started to say, ‘We want this, we want that,' and one of our oldest teams, Sto-Rox representative, said ‘I don't have to listen to this bullcrap.’ And he walked out."

By the time the meeting was finished, so was the league.

Art Rooney died in 1988 at the age of 87. Sandlot football survived him by only a little more than a year.

**NFL TOPS**

**POINTS SCORED, SEASON**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Paul Hornung, GB | 1960 | 176 |
| Gary Anderson, Min | 1998 | 163 |
| Mark Moseley, Was | 1983 | 161 |
| Gino Cappelletti, Bos | 1964 | 155 |
| Emmitt Smith, Dal | 1995 | 150 |
| Chip Lohmiller, Was | 1991 | 149 |
| Gino Cappelletti, Bos | 1961 | 147 |
| Paul Hornung, GB | 1961 | 146 |
| Jim Turner, NYJ | 1968 | 145 |
| John Kasay, Car | 1996 | 145 |

**RUSHING YARDS, SEASON**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Eric Dickerson, LARm | 1984 | 2,105 |
| Barry Sanders, Det | 1997 | 2,053 |
| Terrell Davis, Den | 1998 | 2,008 |
| O.J. Simpson, Buf | 1973 | 2,003 |
| Earl Campbell, Hou | 1980 | 1,934 |
| Jim Brown, Cle | 1963 | 1,863 |
| Walter Payton, ChiB | 1977 | 1,852 |
| Jamal Anderson, Atl | 1998 | 1,846 |
| O.J. Simpson, Buf | 1975 | 1,817 |
| Eric Dickerson, LARm | 1983 | 1,808 |

**YARDS GAINED PASSING, SEASON**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Dan Marino, Mia | 1984 | 5,084 |
| Dan Fouts, SD | 1981 | 4,802 |
| Dan Marino, Mia | 1986 | 4,746 |
| Dan Fouts, SD | 1980 | 4,715 |
| Warren Moon, Hou | 1991 | 4,690 |
| Warren Moon, Hou | 1990 | 4.689 |
| Neil Lomax, StL | 1984 | 4,619 |
| Drew Bledsoe, NE | 1994 | 4,555 |
| Lynn Dickey, GB | 1983 | 4,458 |
| Dan Marino, Mia | 1994 | 4,453 |

**YARDS GAINED RECEIVING, SEASON**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Jerry Rice, SF | 1995 | 1,848 |
| Isaac Bruce, StL | 1995 | 1,781 |
| Charley Hennigan, Hou | 1961 | 1,746 |
| Herman Moore, Det | 1995 | 1,686 |
| Michael Irvin, Dal | 1995 | 1,603 |
| Lance Alworth, SD | 1965 | 1,602 |
| Rob Moore, Ariz | 1997 | 1,584 |
| Jerry Rice, SF | 1986 | 1,570 |
| Roy Green, StL | 1984 | 1,555 |
| Michael Irvin, Dal | 1991 | 1,523 |