

Jack Deloplaine

This article was written by Anthony Balbo.

To define a cult hero in football, one would describe him as someone who isn't known nationally, but is a beloved member of his team's hometown. For the Pittsburgh Steelers back in the late '70s, a perfect example of a cult hero was a little-known running back named Jack Deloplaine. He epitomized the lunch pail, hard-working type of player that Steeler fans have always taken in as one of their own.



Jack Deloplaine was born April 21, 1954 in Pottstown, Pennsylvania to Jack and Dorothy Deloplaine. He attended Pottstown High School where he played football and basketball. Later, Deloplaine would be elected to the Pottstown, Pennsylvania Sports Hall of Fame.

Deloplaine played football in college for Salem University in Salem, West Virginia. Salem in the 1970s was an NAIA school. Today, it hosts 835 students and no longer offers football. As one would imagine, very few players make it to the NFL from Salem University. Perhaps the best known of the few was Orson Mobley, who was a tight end for 5 years with the Denver Broncos in the late 1980s. As for Deloplaine, he was a star running back for Salem. He rushed for 4,033 yards in his career with 48 touchdowns. His best season came in 1975, when he scored 22 touchdowns, which made him the leading scorer in the NAIA that season. Deloplaine was voted Salem's most valuable offensive player. He was also named to the NAIA All-American team in 1975. Later, he was honored with the Hardman Award, which is given annually to the best amateur athlete in



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West Virginia. There have been some very notable athletes that have earned that award such as Jerry West, Randy Moss, Curt Warner, Jeff Hostetler, and Mary Lou Retton.

Deloplaine was drafted by the Pittsburgh Steelers in the sixth round, overall pick number 182, of the 1976 NFL Draft. Despite his successful college career at Salem, he might have been completely overlooked had it not been for the fact that Salem University is only two hours away from Pittsburgh and his accolades had to have caught the eye of Steeler scouts and front office personnel, leading to the drafting of Deloplaine. At least, it couldn't have hurt his cause.

In 1976, the Pittsburgh Steelers came to training camp as the two-time defending Super Bowl champions and were looking for an unprecedented third straight Lombardi Trophy. Under Chuck Noll, the Steelers were known for ferocious defense and a ball control offense that depended heavily on the running game for its success. The Steelers were *loaded* with dynamic, powerful, and experienced running backs coming into the 1976 season. Leading the way was Hall of Fame fullback Franco Harris. He shared starting duties with halfback Rocky Bleier. Backing them up were veterans John "Frenchy" Fuqua and Reggie Harrison. Also, on the roster was one of the few rookies who made the team in 1975, Mike Collier, who was mostly a kickoff returner that season, but had a few carries here and there. Adding to their already crowded backfield was the signing of World Football League all-time leading rusher, Tommy Reamon, who was drafted in 1974 by the Steelers in the ninth round out of the University of Missouri, but chose to sign with the WFL instead. Reamon played for the WFL until it folded in the middle of the 1975 season. With all that talent in the Steelers backfield and with very few people knowing who he was, there was very little chance given to Deloplaine to make the Steelers roster.

Every season and in every training camp, there's always someone known as the camp darling. That person is someone nobody has heard of, but continually sticks out in practice for the plays he makes and the hustle that he shows. In the 1976 training camp of the Steelers, no question that man was Jack Deloplaine. Local broadcaster and sportswriter Myron Cope, the inventor of the Terrible Towel, quickly gave Deloplaine the nickname of "Hydroplaine" due to the success he had running, hustling, and sloshing his way through wet conditions both in camp and in pre-season games. Most of the games that the Steelers played in 1976 were played in very rainy conditions, but that's where Deloplaine stood out.

The first pre-season game for the Steelers was the College All-Star Game in Chicago. Every season, the defending NFL champion would take on a group of rookies that had yet to arrive in training camp, but were amongst the best of the drafted players. This game would be stopped late in the 3rd quarter due to a storm with dangerous lightning,



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torrential rainfall, and heavy winds. Before the stoppage, Deloplaine lived up to his “Hydroplaine” nickname as he got his first action returning a free kick following a Steeler safety. He brought it in at the Pittsburgh 43, broke several tackles, and was finally brought down at the All-Stars 27-yard line. This was done by sloshing through the beginnings of the heavy rainstorm.

The next pre-season game against New Orleans saw Deloplaine have even more success as he carried 11 times for 83 yards, which led the Steelers in rushing. He picked up 45 of his total in the first half with the veterans still in the lineup. Quarterback Terry Bradshaw said of Deloplaine, “He’s fast, son! He really showed me a lot tonight.”

The next game was in Philadelphia, again in a rainstorm. Deloplaine led the Steelers in rushing again with 83 yards on 14 carries on the rain-soaked artificial turf of Veteran’s Stadium. Deloplaine commented on his nickname saying, “Everyone thinks I’m a waterman just because Salem College had sent them two films of me runnin’ through the rain and I don’t especially like the water. I picked up that name, and now I can’t get rid of it.”

Another rainstorm followed the Steelers to their next pre-season contest at Washington’s RFK Stadium. Again, Deloplaine led the Steelers in rushing as he gained 51 yards on 9 carries in Pittsburgh’s 27-7 victory. A 10-yard carry by Deloplaine set up a 4-yard touchdown pass from Bradshaw to tight end Randy Grossman for a 21-0 lead on the first drive of the second half.

The Steelers finally came home after four games on the road. They faced the lowly New York Giants and were shutout, 17-0. Deloplaine, playing in dry conditions, fumbled in one of his few carries of the evening.

In the penultimate contest of the 1976 pre-season, the Steelers traveled to Dallas for their final road contest. The 90-degree heat along with heavy humidity caused several Steelers to leave the contest early, including Deloplaine. It was later revealed that Deloplaine also suffered a partially separated shoulder and a bruised left thigh after gaining only eight yards. The injury forced Deloplaine to miss the final pre-season contest, a 41-6 thrashing of the woeful New York Jets.

Despite the fact that Deloplaine missed most of the last two pre-season games, he had impressed head coach Chuck Noll enough to make the Pittsburgh roster. It might have helped his cause that the NFL expanded the roster limit to 43 from 40 the previous year. Regardless, Jack Deloplaine from NAIA Salem College in West Virginia was a Pittsburgh Steeler.



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Deloplaine played mostly on special teams in the first half of the 1976 season. He was on coverage units, but there were no official tackling statistics back then. Deloplaine was also a kickoff and punt returner. The only time he touched the ball in the season opening loss at Oakland came on two kickoff returns, which gained a total of 28 yards. He had a monster game returning kickoffs two weeks later against New England when he returned seven kickoffs for a total of 189 yards. He also returned two punts for 16 yards.

The Steelers got off to a miserable start in 1976, losing four of their first five games. Deloplaine carried only once in the season's first six games. It was a five-yard gain late in a 31-14 win at home against Cleveland in the second game of the season.

Things picked up from there for Deloplaine, as well as the Steelers. The Steelers won their last nine games and won the AFC Central Division. Deloplaine carried the ball a bit more often after the first six games. In the last eight games, Deloplaine carried 16 times for 86 yards. Remember, the Steelers had a crowded backfield in 1976, so any carries were precious.

In Week 7 on the road against the winless New York Giants, the Steelers shutout the Giants, 27-0. Deloplaine carried four times for 17 yards. He also rushed for a touchdown from 11 yards out in the middle of the 4th quarter. However, it was called back on a holding penalty against wide receiver Frank Lewis. Deloplaine also returned two punts for 50 yards against the Giants.

Two weeks later against the Chiefs in Kansas City, Deloplaine had the best game, statistically, of his career. In a 45-0 throttling of the Chiefs, Deloplaine ran the ball six times for 64 yards and scored the only two touchdowns of his career. He also returned two punts for 18 yards.

For a rookie, especially an undrafted rookie, Deloplaine had a solid season. In all, he rushed 17 times for 91 yards and two touchdowns. He also caught one pass for three yards in the home finale against Tampa Bay, a 42-0 whitewash of the expansion Buccaneers. Deloplaine returned 17 kickoffs for 385 yards, an average of 22.7 per return. He also returned 17 punts for 150 yards, an average of 8.8 per return. This was on top of coverage duties on special teams.

The season ended prematurely for Deloplaine in the regular season finale at Houston, a game the Steelers had to win in order to earn the AFC Central Division championship. In the middle of the third quarter, Deloplaine returned a punt for five yards, but on the play he sprained his knee and it was later determined that the severity of the injury would end his season and he was placed on the Injured Reserve List.



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The injury was very unfortunate for both the Steelers and Deloplaine. Pittsburgh defeated the Oilers, 21-0, in the Astrodome, thus the Steelers won the AFC Central. The next week, they travelled to Baltimore to play the Colts in the divisional round of the playoffs. Pittsburgh stomped Baltimore, 40-14. That was the good news. The bad news was that their two starting running backs, Franco Harris and Rocky Bleier, were lost to injuries in the game and would not play in the AFC Championship Game in Oakland the following Sunday. With Deloplaine's injury, that left only veterans John "Frenchy" Fuqua and Reggie Harrison to carry the ball. Had he not been hurt, Deloplaine could have been very helpful to the Steelers running attack that they relied upon so heavily in their early championship seasons. Alas, it was not to be as Oakland defeated Pittsburgh, 24-7, denying the Steelers of an opportunity at a "three-peat."

The 1977 season was not as successful for Deloplaine as his rookie campaign. While the Steelers lost Fuqua to retirement, they added rookies Sidney Thornton and LaVerne Smith along with former New Orleans Saints back Alvin Maxson to go along with returnees Deloplaine, Harris, Bleier, and Harrison. Due to nagging knee injuries and a crowded backfield, Deloplaine was limited to only eight games in 1977. His last game came in Week 11 in a 23-20 win for the Steelers against the New York Jets at Shea Stadium. Deloplaine had no statistics in the game. In all, Deloplaine carried only twice in 1977 for seven yards. He had no receptions, one kickoff return for 18 yards, and one punt return for seven yards.

In 1978, the Steelers lost Harrison, but added rookie Rick Moser from Rhode Island University. However, with the new rules in place that favored passing, Deloplaine's spot on the roster was tenuous. In the end, Moser beat out Deloplaine for the final spot in the Steelers backfield to start 1978. Deloplaine was released on the final cutdown before the start of the regular season.

The Washington Redskins quickly signed Deloplaine and he appeared in their first two regular season games against New England and Philadelphia, but played sparingly. In fact, he didn't have a carry nor a reception nor return in either game and was used exclusively in kick coverage. After the second game, Deloplaine was released.

Despite being undefeated through their first six games, the Steelers were unsatisfied with their special teams. Knowing that Deloplaine was an excellent special teams player, Pittsburgh released Alvin Maxson so that they could re-acquire Deloplaine. Maxson, while a decent ball carrier, wasn't going to get many carries with Harris, Thornton, and Bleier in the backfield, and he was considered to be a weaker special teams player than Deloplaine. Thus, Deloplaine was signed in favor of Maxson in hopes of improving the special teams.



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During the 1978 season, it was on special teams that Deloplaine spent most of his playing time. He was a coverage man on the kickoff and punt teams, and was used primarily as a blocker in the return game. Deloplaine had no punt returns in 1978 and had only one kickoff return, which went for only 19 yards. That kickoff return came in a snowstorm in the home finale against Baltimore. It was a meaningless game since the Steelers had clinched the AFC Central and home field advantage throughout the playoffs in their win at Houston the week before. In that same game, Deloplaine carried six times, but for only nine yards. He had carries in only two other regular season games. Deloplaine rushed for 34 yards on only three carries in a Week 7 contest in Cleveland, a game the Steelers won handily, 34-14. The other game that he carried the ball was in the season finale in Denver, when he rushed twice for six yards. In all, he carried 11 times for 49 yards. Deloplaine had no pass receptions during the season.

In their two AFC playoff games, the Steelers won their first two playoff games easily. They defeated Denver, 33-10, in the divisional round, and Houston, 34-5, in the AFC Championship. The ease in which Pittsburgh won both games provided Deloplaine with his first and only post-season action. Against Denver, he had a four-yard carry and a punt return for 21 yards. In the AFC Championship, Deloplaine carried three times for 28 yards and had one kickoff return for 21 yards. In Super Bowl XIII against Dallas, Deloplaine was used exclusively on special teams.

In 1979, the Steelers front office realized that their starters, Franco Harris and Rocky Bleier, were getting up there in years, so they knew that they had to add youth to their backfield. Pittsburgh's first draft choice was running back Greg Hawthorne out of Baylor University. Three rounds later, the team added University of Michigan standout running back Russell Davis. The Steelers also signed running back Anthony Anderson from Temple University as an undrafted free agent. The chances of Deloplaine making the Steelers roster with bad knees and being mostly a special teams player made his chances of earning another roster spot unlikely. Pittsburgh kept Harris, Bleier, Sidney Thornton, and Rick Moser from the 1978 squad, as well as the aforementioned rookies. Jack Deloplaine was once again an ex-Steeler.

He soon signed with the Chicago Bears and suited up for them for five games, from Week 3 to Week 7. While contributing only on special teams against the Dallas Cowboys in Week 3, he had no carries, but two receptions against the Miami Dolphins in Week 4 that gained 13 yards. Deloplaine earned carries in each of the next two games. He carried three times for 11 yards in Week 5 against the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and four times for only seven yards in a Week 6 contest against the Buffalo Bills. In the aforementioned game against Tampa Bay, Deloplaine started at running back for the only time in his career. He only saw special teams action again the next week against the New England



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Patriots. At that point, Deloplaine's chronic knee issues resurfaced as it had become swollen and needed to be drained. With that, the Bears released him.

Two weeks later, Deloplaine became a Pittsburgh Steeler for a third time. The Steelers resigned him and he suited up in Week 9. For the second time in six weeks, Deloplaine faced off against the Cowboys. He had no offensive snaps and played exclusively on special teams. He had no tackles and picked up a clipping penalty on a first quarter punt return by Theo Bell.

Deloplaine arrived at Three Rivers Stadium the following Sunday expecting to suit up against the Washington Redskins. As he arrived, however, head coach Chuck Noll told Deloplaine that he was waived and that someone else was being used to take his roster spot. It had become apparent that his knee troubles were no longer making him a viable option, at least for a Super Bowl contender. Thus, Deloplaine's career was over.

Jack Deloplaine would probably never be known outside Steeler Nation. But with his "Hydroplaine" moniker and his special teams hustle, he became beloved in Pittsburgh. In all, Deloplaine carried 37 times in his career for a total of 165 yards. He also caught three passes for 16 yards. In the return game, Deloplaine returned 19 kickoffs for 422 yards and 18 punts for 157 yards. He had one start at running back in his career, in Week 5 of the 1979 season against the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. Deloplaine also scored two touchdowns in his career, both in a Week 9 contest in 1976 against the Kansas City Chiefs. He retired at the end of the 1979 season.

After retiring from professional football, Deloplaine worked as a labor foreman in a Pittsburgh area state prison. He also enjoyed spending time as a football coach in the Pittsburgh area both at the youth and high school levels. Upon retiring from his job as a labor foreman, he moved to Anderson, South Carolina where Deloplaine died August 2, 2022. After his death, Deloplaine's eyes were donated, giving unselfishly so that someone else may have sight.

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