

The Steagles

Hybrid Team Zany Moment in Steelers' Past

by William Ecenbarger
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It was the worst of times and it was the strangest of times in 1943. Homemakers went from store to store looking for a stick of butter. The Hit Parade included "He's 1-A in the Army and He's A-1 in My Heart." Night baseball was canceled to save electricity, the Indianapolis 500 was canceled to save gasoline and the U.S. Open was canceled to save rubber (used to make golf balls).

And for the struggling National Football League, it, too, was the strangest of times. The Eagles had just become the Steelers and the Steelers had just become the Eagles.

And then they became the Steagles.

Historically, the two Pennsylvania franchises, both in their 11th season, were among the weakest in the league, and as the wartime draft took more and more professional football players, it became clear that neither could survive alone. And so, in 1943, they merged. Officially, the team was named the Phil-Pitt Eagles- Steelers, but to fans the headline writers everywhere, they were the Steagles.

Ironically, the two teams joined forces just one year after they had traded cities in one of the most complicated and little-known transactions in the history of American sports. But let's go back to the beginning....

It is no coincidence that the Steeler and Eagle franchises began in 1933. It was in that year that voters in both cities repealed the law banning professional sports on Sunday.

In Pittsburgh, Art Rooney gave his team a strong local flavor, recruiting players from the University of Pittsburgh and other area colleges. He called his team the Pirates, after the city's big-league baseball team.

In his first eight years of operating the Pittsburgh franchise. Rooney estimated he lost \$100,000.

Meanwhile, the Eagles were owned by a syndicate headed by Bert Bell, but the team lost \$80,000 and 21 games in its first three seasons.... One by one, the investors dropped out, and by the end of the 1935 season Bell had the Eagles to himself. The following year, the Eagles were shut out six times.

Bell became the coach, general manager, scout and public relations director, and took to hawking tickets on downtown Philadelphia street corners. Because the rent was cheap, the team played in the 102,000 seat Municipal Stadium before at least 100,000 empty seats. One rainy Sunday, 50 people showed up for a game against the inept Brooklyn Dodgers; Bell invited them up to the covered press box, where he provided free coffee and hot dogs.

In 1940, the Pirates were so bad that Rooney sold them at the end of the season to Alexis Thompson, a 26-year-old steel heir from Boston frequently described in the press as a well-heeled New York playboy. Thompson renamed the Pirates the Ironmen, but he planned to move the franchise to Boston and play games in Fenway Park.

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Rooney and Bell had become close friends during the early NFL years, and so, soon after he sold the Pittsburgh franchise, Rooney bought a half interest in the struggling Philadelphia operation. The plan was to field a combined Philadelphia- Pittsburgh team called the Keystoners that would play home games in both cities.

But Thompson decided not to move. So a switch was engineered. The Philadelphia franchise, now owned by Rooney and Bell, moved to Pittsburgh, and the Pittsburgh franchise, owned by Thompson, moved to Philadelphia.

After the deal was made, Rooney told a reporter for the Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph:

The original proposition was that Thompson would buy the franchise and take the Pittsburgh club to Boston and Bell and I would pool our interests in a Philadelphia-Pittsburgh club, splitting the home games between two cities.

"But then Thompson changed his mind and said he'd keep the club in Pittsburgh.... Then I got an idea. I asked him if 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 his New York headquarters, and that's how it worked out."

Before the 1941 season, Rooney emphasized the break with the past by sponsoring a contest to give the new team a name and the Steelers emerged.

Bell began the season as the Steelers' coach, but after two losses, Rooney hired Buff Donelli. Bell continued his part- ownership of the Steelers until 1946 when he was elected NFL commissioner. He held that post until 1969 when he died of a heart attack at Franklin Field in Philadelphia during a game between two teams he had helped form - the Steelers and the Eagles.

Donelli tried to coach the Steelers and the Duquesne University team at the same time. Five losses later, Commissioner Elmer Layden ordered the Steelers to get a full-time coach, and former Steelers (Pirates) player Walt Kiesling was hired. The Steelers won one of their last four games.

The 1942 Steelers had their best year in history, 7-4, mostly because of the presence of Bill Dudley, who was their best runner, best punter and best defensive player. But Dudley was drafted right after the 1942 season, and there was considerable doubt that either of Pennsylvania's professional football franchises could field a team in 1943.

On January 18, 1943, the Office of Price Administration abruptly banned all pleasure driving, and almost overnight, private automobiles disappeared from the nation's roads. Restaurants folded up, and not a single one of the 15,000 thoroughbred racehorses in America was running.

Railroads were still the keystone of the national transportation system, but they had not recovered from the Depression. Rolling stock was scarce, and the transportation of troops and military supplies took precedence.

The Office of Defense Transportation announced in July that professional football teams would reduce their travel by 37 percent in 1943 by cutting the size of rosters from 33 to 28 and by revising their schedules.

President Roosevelt never firmly declared a policy on professional sports during the war. But FDR was explicit on one point: No professional athlete subject to the draft would be deferred.

Fathers were being drafted by 1943, and the pool of quality players shrank. NFL owners found themselves fielding teams composed of 4-Fs, inexperienced youths and overripe veterans.

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At the league's meeting, a motion to suspend the 1943 season was narrowly voted down. One of its advocates was Eagles owner Thompson, who was now an Army corporal.

Because of the manpower shortage, the NFL instituted one of the most profound rule changes in its history - free substitution. Purists had opposed the idea for years on the theory that real football players ought to "go both ways" - play offense and defense. Although the depleted NFL rosters prevented the development of platoons until after the war, free substitution paved the way for today's separate offensive and defensive teams and the various specialists.

The NFL allowed the Cleveland franchise to suspend operations because of heavy losses to the war effort. And to complete the reductions from 10 to eight teams, the league authorized the merger of the Philadelphia and Pittsburgh franchises.

Thompson, Bell and Rooney required all of the Steagles to work at least 40 hours a week in defense plants. The team wore the Eagles' green-and-white uniforms and trained at the University of Pennsylvania's River Field for three hours, Monday through Saturday, at 6 p.m.

"You worked all day, and you practiced all night, and by the end of the day you were tired as hell," remembers Jack Hinkle, the team's offensive star, who now lives in Norristown, Pennsylvania. Hinkle, who had been discharged from the Army Air Force because of stomach ulcers, worked at the Bendix Aviation plant in North Philadelphia along with several teammates.

Hinkle recalls being paid \$135 per game, or \$1,350 for the season, which he said was about average for 1943. "Most of us played because we loved the game."

Even though the player limit had been reduced to 28, there were usually only 25 Steagles on the roster for games. Hinkle recalls that the Steelers and Eagles got along very well during the 1943 season, but the coaches were another matter. From the beginning, Philadelphia coach Earle "Greasy" Neale and Kiesling were at each other's throats over strategy and personnel. A major point of contention was where the new players would go after the merger was dissolved. "There was a big blow-up about halfway through the season when Neale called one of the Steelers a statue of (excrement)," said Hinkle. "Kiesling pulled all of the Steelers off the practice field."

The Steagles started out like champions. In their opening game at Shibe Park on October 2, they defeated the Brooklyn Dodgers, 17-0, as the defense, led by former Steelers, held the visitors to minus 44 yards rushing. The following week at Shibe, the Steagles upset the mighty New York Giants, 26-14. On the downside, the Steagles fumbled 10 times to set an NFL record.

The bubble burst the following week at Chicago's Wrigley Field where the big bad Bears crunched the Steagles, 48-21. On October 24, the Steagles lost to the Giants, 42-14, before 42,481 fans at the Polo Grounds.

In all, the Steagles played four games at Shibe Park, drawing crowds of about 33,000 each time. There were smaller attendance figures for the two games played at Forbes Field. They finished the season 5-4-1 - making it the first winning season ever for the team named the Eagles and only second for the Steelers.

With Neale and Kiesling increasingly at each other's throats, the Steagles were dissolved after the season.

The Steelers merged with another one of the league's weakest teams, the Chicago Cardinals, and this hybrid lost all 10 games in 1944. They were often called the Carpets - instead of the Car- Pits - because everyone walked over them.

(William Ecenbarger is a free-lance writer based in Mount Gretna, Lebanon County.)