

# **LOWELL PERRY**

By Mark A. Latterman

On a brisk sunny day in Old Forbes Field in 1956, the Pittsburgh Steelers were playing the New York Giants.

A skinny 15 year-old boy and his dad were cheering the Pittsburgh Steelers new rookie star, Lowell Perry as he roared whippet-like around the New York Giants' fabled 1956 defensive line and headed full-throttle for the open field. The boy's cheers turned to tears when Giants' star, Roosevelt Grier crunched Perry from behind and linebacker Bill Svoboda hit him from the side simultaneously, filling the stadium with a sickening "crack" which silenced the Steelers' faithful. I will never forget my sadness as the stretcher carried my new hero from the field. Perry's pelvis was fractured, his hip dislocated and he never played pro football again.

Lowell was a great two-way All-America star for the University of Michigan in the 1950's. He played offensive end and defensive safety, and the great 1952 Wolverine team went to the Rose Bowl that year. While Lowell was the second round draft choice for the Steelers in 1953, he was required to complete his military officer training obligations prior to entering pro football. Fortunately, Perry was assigned to the famous Bolling Air Force Team that included collegiate and pro greats like Al Dorow, Tommy O'Connell (former Illinois and Cleveland Browns star), and Notre Dame great Johnny Latiner. Lowell was recognized as the outstanding football player in the Service.

Lowell joined Pittsburgh in 1956 and was clearly headed for Rookie Of The Year honors prior to his career-ending injury. Even though he only played in five games, he was among the team leaders in pass receiving, kick-off and punt returns. He also had the longest pass reception that year for 75 yards. While Lowell languished in traction in a Pittsburgh hospital for 13 weeks after his injury, frequent visitors included, in addition to Steeler owner Art Rooney, the great boxer Billy Conn and Yankee star Yogi Berra. Lowell feels that this hospital stay was the "turning point in his life" because he decided to go to law school and completed his studies at night while working for the Steelers.

When Lowell's short playing career was over, the Steelers provided him with the opportunity to be the first black assistant coach in the National Football League. Art Rooney paid Lowell the same salary that he would have received had he played that year so that he could attend law school.

After Lowell left the Steeler organization, he held several notable positions, including legal counsel for the National Labor Relations Board, Chairman of the Equal Opportunity Commission (a position recently made newsworthy by Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, who also served as Chairman of the Equal Opportunity Commission), and his present position as Director of the Michigan Department of Labor.

Lowell has stayed active in the National Football League. He has been on the National Football League Charity Board since 1974, along with Congressman Jack Kemp, Commissioner Paul Tagliabue, and the late George Halas.

In comparing football players of the 50's with the players of today, Lowell feels the players he played with were tougher and more dedicated to winning than the players of today. He feels that today's players are not as dedicated because of the high salaries they are paid in comparison to the salaries the players made in the 1950's.

Even though Lowell's injury happened 37 years ago, it is still indelibly etched in my mind. To me, Lowell Perry will always be the Steelers' great new star, racing to the goal line.