

DAN ROONEY

Pro Football Hall of Fame Class of 2000

By Joe Horrigan

Since its inception in 1933, the Pittsburgh Steelers franchise has been under the watchful leadership of just two men. The first was team founder Art Rooney, who was a guiding light during the early years of the National Football League when teams struggled just to survive. His selfless dedication to the Steelers and the NFL for more than four decades earned him pro football's highest honor, election to the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

However, despite Rooney's never-ending dedication to his team, the Steelers during that period, except for brief respites, suffered through repeated losing seasons. It wasn't until January, 1975 that the team won its first league title, and by that time, "The Chief," as Rooney was respectfully known, had passed the leadership torch on to his eldest son, Dan.

Dan Rooney, who literally grew up with the Pittsburgh Steelers, blended his father's vision and loyalty with a smart and effective management style. The result was a transformation of the Steelers from perennial basement dwellers to a model organization and 25-plus years of unprecedented prosperity that continues today.

Considered one of the most influential voices in team and league operations, Dan Rooney, like his father before him, has been recognized for his lifetime of dedication and unparalleled successes with election to the Hall of Fame.

The oldest of five boys, Dan was born in Pittsburgh on July 20, 1932 and grew up on the city's North Side. A good athlete, Rooney played quarterback for North Catholic High School. In his senior year he was chosen as the second-team quarterback for the city's Catholic All-Star team, an honor that at the time left him feeling somewhat slighted. "Some of my teammates told me I was better than that quarterback from St. Justin's who was chosen the first string quarterback on the All-Star team," he recalled. In retrospect, however, he admits with a smile that the junior from St. Justin's – Johnny Unitas – may have been better.

A LIFE WITH THE STEELERS

Dan's entire life, it seems, has been involved with the Steelers. Coincidentally, the playground where he and his brothers once played football is now a parking lot at Three Rivers Stadium, home of the Steelers. He began attending training camps when he was five years old and by the time he was 13 was handing out equipment and running errands. For several years he served as the team's water boy. His first serious job was as training camp manager.

Rooney went on to attend Duquesne, graduating in 1955 with a degree in accounting. Following his graduation, he returned to work full-time with the Steelers. Although the son of the owner, Dan did not start out as a senior executive as one might have expected. "When I graduated from college, the first thing I got into was player personnel. But then in 1957, we hired Buddy Parker as our coach. It was a big break for me because Parker didn't want anything to do with the front office," Rooney said. "Because I was in the office every day, the league people would call for me. If they wanted something done, they knew I'd be there, so I got to know the people in the league office and with the other teams. So I just grew into doing more and more things because of the contacts I made."

If there was a single event that marks when Rooney truly ascended to the position of the day-to-day manager of the Steelers it was a day in 1965 that he accepted Parker's resignation as head coach. "That put me on a new basis," he recalled. "Parker often used to say he was going to quit. I had talked to my father and said that we couldn't be cutting players because Parker was upset with one game's

performance, or couldn't be trading players because he was angry with them. We had to deal with some kind of continuity and with a basis of reason."

So, when Parker called Rooney after a preseason loss to the San Francisco 49ers, to inform him of a less-than-sensible trade he wanted to make, Rooney drew his line in the sand. He told Parker to calm down and that he would talk to him in the morning about his proposed trade. Parker upset by Rooney's challenge to his authority, threatened to quit, to which Dan replied that he would also discuss that the next morning. "I called my father and told him that we were going to accept Parker's resignation if he gave it the next morning, and my father agreed. And the next morning, Parker stuck with it." After Parker left, Dan continued to run the front office. Although Art Rooney still retained veto power, the younger Rooney was clearly the man in charge.

To the public, however, the low-key Rooney was largely unknown. His years of involvement and intimate understanding of the organization's operations were not a matter of public record. So, as the team with a woeful past continued to frustrate its fans, they began to question whether Dan Rooney, the team's vice president and general manager, was the right man for the job or just the benefactor of nepotism. As the public looked for someone to blame for the team's lamentable state of affairs, Rooney, quite unfairly, became the target.

Not only was Dan being held accountable for the team's present situation, he was being blamed for the past. In a 1971 interview he related an example of the sometimes-ridiculous way in which he was expected to answer for some of the organization's past sins.

"A reporter called me yesterday, and the first thing he asked was, 'What happened with Luckman?'" Rooney said. "I told him, 'Just hold on a minute.'" The Steelers had in fact given away the draft rights to Sid Luckman, a future Hall of Fame quarterback, but that was in 1939, the year Rooney started grade school.

While there was nothing Dan Rooney could do about the failures of the past, he was determined not to repeat them in the future.

Following the departure of Parker, the head coach position was filled first by Mike Nixon, and then by Bill Austin. Rooney dismissed Nixon after one losing season and Austin after three. The message was clear. No longer was the team going to be mired in mediocrity. A new era was about to dawn in Pittsburgh, "The Dan Rooney Era."

Even Dan Rooney, however, can't pinpoint a specific move that transformed the bumbling Steelers into the pride of the NFL. One thing is certain, though, change came to Pittsburgh and it came on a fast track.

THE DAN ROONEY ERA

In 1970, the Steelers moved into a new home, Three Rivers Stadium. Here Dan demonstrated his wide range of organizational skills as he drew up a complex of offices and team facilities that became a model for new stadiums throughout the league, not to mention the envy of every team owner. "It's enough to give our players an inferiority complex," said then-Cleveland Browns owner Art Modell.

Another important element in the Steelers' successful transition was Dan's decision to separate scouting from coaching, recognizing that no coaching staff, no matter how hard working or competent, has the ability to search out and evaluate college football players. The results were immediate. The Steelers from 1969 to 1974 drafted seven future Hall of Fame players. But perhaps Rooney's most significant move came when he hired Chuck Noll as head coach.

"I interviewed Chuck Noll the day after his team, the Baltimore Colts, lost Super Bowl III to the New York Jets," he recalled. "It was right after the game, so there was no way he could have prepared for the interview. It struck me right then. Here is an extremely bright person who has his feet on the ground, knows what he is doing."

Noll was immediately put on Rooney's short list. "When I came back to Pittsburgh," he recalled, "I said to my father, 'Chuck Noll is a guy we have to keep on the list. Chuck Noll is a guy you have to meet.'" After meeting Noll, the senior Rooney agreed with his son's assessment and a deal was made. During Noll's

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23-year career with the Steelers, the team won four Super Bowls and never went more than four years without making the playoffs.

As significant as it was for Rooney to hire Noll, it was equally significant that he was confident enough in his pick that he didn't fire him after he began his tenure with three losing seasons. Rooney had showed no such confidence in either Nixon or Austin.

In 1973, after the Steelers posted a 10-4 record and earned a Wild Card berth in the playoffs, Rooney was named *The Sporting News* NFL Executive of the Year, an honor voted on by the NFL's general managers. Dan's response upon learning of the honor was, "You're kidding," as he thought someone was pulling his leg. Suddenly, the reserved "behind-the-scenes guy" was front and center and being acknowledged by his peers for the near miraculous turnaround of the Steelers' franchise. "I think it was a combination of things, people, and timing," he humbly offered. "It was Chuck Noll coming at the right time, Artie's (Art Rooney, Jr.) work with personnel, the new stadium. It might have happened with any one of them – but it did happen with that combination."

The turnaround continued in 1974 as the Steelers won the first of six consecutive AFC Central titles and the first of four Super Bowls.

PRESIDENT DAN

In 1975, after 20 years of working in nearly every conceivable capacity Dan Rooney was "officially" named president of the Steelers. "When I became president in 1975, not much changed," he claimed, still trying to deflect credit. Rather than accept the responsibility for the team's successes, Dan preferred to remind people of his father's accomplishments.

"From day one until this day," he told an interviewer in 1987, "my father set the tone on how the Steelers operate. He is a people person. He has always said what the people think is important, and that we have to think that way. He very much felt that everyone was his equal and that they should be treated that way, players, coaches, girls in the office, everybody. You must treat people with respect. Hopefully, some of that has rubbed off on me and I follow that."

At the same time Rooney was using his formidable skills to mold a model sports franchise, he also emerged as one of the most active figures in NFL operations. His league functions have included membership on the board of directors for the NFL Trust Fund, NFL Films, and the Scheduling Committee.

In 1973, he was appointed Chairman of the league's Expansion Committee that added Seattle and Tampa Bay to the NFL in 1976. He was named Chairman of the Negotiating Committee in 1976, and in 1982 he contributed to the negotiations for the Collective Bargaining Agreement for NFL owners and the Players Association. Recognized by both sides for his patience and reasonable voice of moderation, he again played a key role in the labor agreement reached in 1993 between the NFL owners and players. He is currently a member of the eight-person Management Council Executive Committee and the Hall of Fame Committee, the NFL Properties Executive Committee, and the Player/Club Operations Committee.

"They put him in areas where they need a little leadership, and he seems to have the ability to get people to cooperate," said former New York Giants general manager George Young. "He has great credibility."

A humble family man that shies away from attention, Dan Rooney has not let success change him or influence his values. Although he may not be as publicly outgoing as his father, who passed away in 1988 was, Rooney remains one of Pittsburgh's most involved executives in civic affairs. He serves on the boards of the United Way of America, the American Diabetes Association, the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation, Presbyterian University Hospital, Duquesne University, and The American Ireland Fund.

Dan Rooney's contributions to pro football, the Steelers, and the city of Pittsburgh are many. Although he is proud of his accomplishments he rarely sites them. Still, his false modesty has not prevented the civic and sports communities and in particular, the Pro Football Hall of Fame's Board of Selectors, from recognizing his innumerable achievements. With his election to the Hall of Fame, Dan Rooney joins not only his father, but also an elite fraternity of men who individually and collectively represent the best the sport has offered.