

## **THE STEEL CURTAIN**

### **The Pittsburgh Steelers Of The 1970s**



To our generation, the city of Pittsburgh is renowned for good professional football. But it wasn't always that way. In 1972, Art Rooney's Steeler franchise had never even played for a championship. They had not enjoyed a winning season since 1963. The hiring of Chuck Noll in 1969 was showing progress, but it was sub-.500 progress—from 1-13 to 5-9 to 6-8 in the 14-game seasons that were the norm until 1978.

All of that was about to change.

In 1972, the Steelers made it to the postseason and won a historic playoff game. A year later, they made it back to the playoffs, demonstrating that 1972 was no fluke. In 1974 they won the Super Bowl. In 1975, they did it again.

1976 and 1977 were modest step-back years, although they were still successful by the standards of most anyone else. Pittsburgh won two more division titles and reached another AFC Championship Game.

The NFL itself changed dramatically going into 1978. The league expanded its regular season schedule from 14 games to 16 games. The number of teams in the playoffs went from 4 per conference to 5. And most important from a historical point of view, significant rule changes were put in place to favor the offense and allow passing games more room to operate.

Pittsburgh responded to the changes by putting together another repeat run, winning the Super Bowl in both 1978 and 1979. This cast of players, mostly the same throughout the 1970s, won two titles in an old-fashioned slug-it-out era and two more in the more pass-friendly era that we've all gotten used to. That's versatility and excellence.

Terry Bradshaw, as the quarterback who has subsequently enjoyed a long career as a Fox Sports pregame studio host, is the face of this Steeler era. But it took a while for Terry to even settle in as the clearly established starter for Pittsburgh. You'll read about his ups and downs, along with the development of a passing game that would include names like Lynn Swann and John Stallworth at wide receiver.

Franco Harris was the linchpin of the running game. Franco's accomplishments are even more impressive when you consider the Steelers didn't have Pro Bowl offensive line talent until the great Mike Webster showed up at center midway through the run. Rocky Bleier, a Vietnam war hero, was an inspirational figure as backfield support for Franco.

What really made this dynasty go was its defense. The "Steel Curtain" drew its name from the "Iron Curtain", which referred to Soviet communism in Eastern Europe. The Iron Curtain didn't stand the test of time. The Steel Curtain has.

This was a defense that had players like Mean Joe Greene and L.C. Greenwood up front. Jack Lambert and Jack Ham were great linebackers. Mel Blount was outstanding in the secondary. And those are just the big names. The Steeler defense of the 1970s is one of the most decorated units in football history. It's what made them great and they were a perfect fit for their blue-collar hometown.

You'll read about all eight seasons of Steel Curtain dominance. Each year ending in the playoffs. Six times in the AFC Championship game. And four times a Super Bowl champ. All eight seasons have their own article published individually on TheSportsNotebook.com. Those articles are pulled together and edited for this download.

Some historical notes for younger readers--the divisional alignment of the era had just three divisions per conference, East, Central and West. Pittsburgh was in the AFC Central, along with current rivals in the Cincinnati Bengals and Cleveland Browns. The Houston Oilers (today's Tennessee Titans) rounded out the division. From 1972-77, there was only one wild-card.

Another important note is that from 1972-74, homefield advantage for the playoffs was done by rotation rather than record--meaning that once you clinched your division, there was nothing left to play for.

With that said, let's get on with our ride through *The Steel Curtain* dynasty years.

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## 1972

A rookie running back was the linchpin. Franco Harris was drafted out of Penn State and promptly ripped off a 1,000-yard season where he averaged 5.6 yards-per-carry. He was joined in the backfield by John “Frenchy” Fuqua, who chipped in 665 yards at better than a four a pop. The production was even more impressive considering a lackluster offensive line that wouldn’t really beef up until they drafted Mike Webster two years later.

Terry Bradshaw was the 24-year-old quarterback. Even allowing for a drastic difference in passing game production in this era, Bradshaw’s 48 percent completion rate and 6.1 yards-per-attempt were poor and near the bottom of the league. The 12-12 TD/INT ratio was actually pretty good in context. Bradshaw was picked off on 3.9 percent of his throws. While in today’s game that would put a QB on the unemployment line, in 1972 it was sixth-best in the NFL.

Ron Shanklin was Bradshaw’s top target, catching 38 passes and stretching the field for better than 17 yards a catch. Frank Lewis added 27 more receptions at nearly 15 per reception. John McMakin, the rookie tight end, caught 21 balls, as did Harris out of the backfield.

Those numbers don’t sound very good to a modern audience. In 1972, the Steeler offense ranked second in the NFL in points scored.



The defense is what this team would become renowned for by the end of the decade and they were already awfully good by 1972. Joe Greene, the Hall of Fame defensive tackle, won the first of two Defensive Player of the Year awards.

Dwight White was a Pro Bowler at the defensive end spot. Pittsburgh had reliable veteran linebackers in Henry Davis and Andy Russell, both of whom punched Pro Bowl tickets. The secondary was led by free safety Mike Wagner who picked off six balls.

What really stands out, at least with the knowledge of history, is the young players that were working their way into the lineup. L.C. Greenwood up front, Jack Ham at linebacker and Mel Blount in the secondary. They were already good enough for the Steelers to rank fifth in the league in points allowed.

Pittsburgh opened the season at home against a good Oakland Raiders team. It was the kind of game the Steelers needed to start winning if their recent improvement was going to turn into real contention. They came out blazing, blocking a punt and recovering it for a touchdown. They picked off Raider quarterback Ken Stabler three times, two of them by defensive back Chuck Beatty. A 141-97 edge in rush yardage kept Pittsburgh in control. They led 34-14 by the fourth quarter and hung on to win 34-28.

The Steelers went on the road to face a pretty good Cincinnati Bengals team, coached by Paul Brown, with Bill Walsh on the staff. Even though Pittsburgh led 10-3 at the half, the running game bogged down. Cincinnati controlled the second half. Some good red zone defense from the Steelers kept it close, but the Bengals booted four field goals and won 15-10.

When Pittsburgh went to lowly St. Louis and trailed the Cardinals 19-18 in the fourth quarter, fans could be forgiven if they thought this was looking like the same old Steelers. But Bradshaw found Lewis for a 38-yard touchdown pass and a 25-19 win averted catastrophe.

A road trip to Dallas, the defending Super Bowl champion, didn't produce a win, but it showed how much progress Pittsburgh was making. The Steelers went toe-to-toe with the champs, each team running the ball well. In an age where there was no real parity in the NFL, close losses, like this 17-13 defeat, still said something about where a team was at.

It set up Pittsburgh for a soft part of the schedule. They went to Houston and beat an awful Oilers team 24-7, keyed by 115 yards from Harris. A home game with lowly New England resulted in an easy 33-3 rout, this time with Fuqua going over the 100-yard mark. And even though Buffalo had the great (and infamous) O.J. Simpson in the backfield, the Bills weren't very good and it showed. O.J. went for 189 yards, but Harris mitigated the damage with 138 of his own, the defense picked off four passes and the Steelers won 38-21.

They were 5-2 at the halfway point. Given the Steelers' history, a tight division race and only one wild-card, there was still every reason to have doubts.

A terrific home performance against the Bengals helped ease the doubts. Bradshaw threw a couple early touchdown passes and delivered a solid 10/20 for 190 yards performance, with no mistakes. He added a third touchdown pass in the second half and the final was 40-17. The following week, against a decent Kansas City Chiefs team, Harris ran for 134 yards and the Steelers chiseled out a 13-7 home win.

Cleveland had been this division's best team in recent years and both games against the Browns were still on tap. The first came on the road on November 19. Pittsburgh dug themselves a 20-3 hole and looked not quite ready for prime time. Harris was having a big day though, with 136 yards. The Steelers came all the way back and took a 24-23 lead...only to have the Browns, who rushed for over 200 yards themselves, rally and win with a late field goal.

There were four games left. Pittsburgh and Cleveland were both 7-3. And they would play again in the Steel City in two weeks.

Before that though, the Steelers had to face Bud Grant's Minnesota Vikings. Even though the '72 Vikings were mediocre, this was the only time in nine years that Minnesota would not win their division. It was a dangerous spot for a young contender.

But Pittsburgh was ready. They dominated the ground game, winning rush yardage 206-95 behind 128 from Harris. They took over a game that was tied 10-10 in the fourth quarter and won 23-10. Cleveland answered with a win over their own. It was time for the big showdown.

By any measurement, this was a changing of the guard moment in the AFC Central. The Steel Curtain defense had its first dominant showing in a really big game. They shut down the ground game. They held the Browns to 59 yards passing. Harris carried 20 times for 102 yards. The final was a 30-0 whitewash.

Pittsburgh's earlier loss to Cincinnati meant they didn't have the tiebreaker, and each of the last two games were on the road. But they were against bad teams in Houston and San Francisco. And the defense was feeling its oats. The D carried the Steelers to a lackluster 9-3 win in the old Astrodome in Houston. And they forced seven turnovers in San Francisco to key a 24-2 win. At 11-3, Pittsburgh was, at long last, going to the playoffs.



Oakland was coming back into town for the divisional round. The weather in Pittsburgh was in climate for an early Saturday afternoon kick on December 23. Neither offense could get much of anything going. After a scoreless first half, the Steelers got a couple field goals and held a 6-0 lead going into the fourth quarter.

It looked like it was going to be enough. But the mobile Stabler took off on a winding 30-yard touchdown run in the final minute. Pittsburgh was down 7-6. They had one last play from their own 40-yard line, but it looked like this fine season was going to come to an end.

Bradshaw threw a pass to the middle of the field toward Fuqua. Oakland strong safety Jack Tatum made a play on the ball and batted it away. Harris, who never stopped playing, was coming up the left sideline. The batted ball had gone into the air. Harris grabbed it at his shoe tops and raced into the end zone.

It was a stunning turn of events, but did the touchdown count? In today's game, there would be no dispute. The ball had never hit the ground. But the rules of the time stated that once a ball touched an offensive player, it was dead. Oakland argued ferociously that the pass had hit Fuqua. Officials conferred. They let the touchdown stand. The Steelers won 13-7.

After that stunning turn of events, all Pittsburgh had to do was face the undefeated Miami Dolphins in the AFC Championship Game. But something big would work in their favor--the rotation system that determined homefield. Thus, the only team to complete a season with a perfect record had to come up to Pittsburgh on New Year's Eve afternoon.

And the Steelers were not intimidated, taking a 10-7 lead into the third quarter. But Bradshaw had been knocked out. Terry Hanratty came in and the offense bogged down. The Dolphins pulled ahead 21-10 by the fourth quarter. Bradshaw came back in and played hurt. He led the Steelers to one touchdown, and got a couple more shots at taking the lead. But the final two possessions of the season ended with interceptions and the 21-17 loss stood.

Of course Miami finished the job and won the Super Bowl. But no one in Pittsburgh could be remotely unhappy with the way this season had gone. The Steelers were finally relevant. And they weren't going away.

## 1973

The 1973 Pittsburgh Steelers came into the season looking to build on a breakthrough year. By that standard, the '73 Steelers came up short. What this team did do, however, was prove that the breakthrough of 1972 was no fluke, establish themselves as a steady contender and set the stage for Super Bowl trophies in the very near future.



Bradshaw was continuing to develop at quarterback. His 49 percent completion rate was poor, as was his 10/15 TD-INT ratio. Bradshaw was intercepted on 8.3 percent of his passes. Even allowing that this was an era when defensive secondaries had a much freer hand under the rules, these were very poor numbers.

What Bradshaw could do was make big plays. His 6.6 yards-per-attempt was more respectable and his receivers could really stretch the field. Ron Shanklin's thirty catches went for an astonishing 23.7 yards a pop. Frank Lewis only caught 23 balls, but those receptions produced over 400 yards. Barry Pearson was a third downfield threat in an era when most offenses struggled to find one big-play target.

Franco made the Pro Bowl, but the second-year back slipped after a 1,000-yard season in his rookie year of '72. Franco rushed for just under 700 yards. More alarming was a nearly two-yard dip in his yards-per-carry, which clocked in at a mediocre 3.7.

Fortunately, Preston Pearson and Fuqua combined for over 1,000 yards on their own behind an offensive line anchored by Pro Bowl guard Bruce Van Dyke. And the Steeler offense was still a solid fourth in the league in points scored.

The defense was keyed by an outstanding front four. Greene was 1st-team All-Pro at the defensive tackle spot. Greene, a future Hall of Famer, drew the attention of opposing blockers and that freed up Greenwood and Dwight White on the edge and Ernie Holmes inside. The other three linemen combined for 23 sacks. Greenwood and White went to the Pro Bowl.

Ham had a breakout year at the linebacker spot, getting the first Pro Bowl ticket of his Hall of Fame career. Ham joined another Pro Bowler in Russell, on the second line of defense. The secondary was manned by ballhawks John Rowser at corner and Wagner at strong safety, who combined to intercept fourteen passes.

Even though the Steeler defense had the bigger names and even though they eventually outpaced their offensive counterparts, they were still the relatively weaker part of this 1973 team. Pittsburgh ranked eighth in the NFL in points allowed.

The Steelers opened the season at home against the mediocre Detroit Lions. The game was tied 10-10 after three quarters. But Pittsburgh was enjoying a massive edge in ball control. They would end up running 83 plays from scrimmage, compared to just 55 for Detroit. In the fourth quarter, Bradshaw found tight end John McMakin on a 24-yard touchdown pass to get the lead. Bradshaw then tossed a six-yard scoring pass to Shanklin that sealed the 24-10 win.

In Week 2, Cleveland came to town. The Steelers showed that 1972's 30-0 rout in December that took control of the division was no fluke. With a 196-84 edge in rush yardage and three interceptions, Pittsburgh coasted to a 33-6 win. They followed that up with a 36-7 romp at lowly Houston, keyed by second half Pick-6s from Russell and Glen Edwards that broke open a 12-7 game. One more rout of a terrible team followed when the Steelers hosted the San Diego Chargers and picked up six turnovers, en route to a 38-0 lead by halftime and an eventual 38-21 win.

At 4-0, it was time for a trip to face contending Cincinnati. The Pittsburgh offensive line did not play well. There was no running game and Bradshaw was sacked four times. The defense allowed 172 yards on the ground themselves and even though some red zone stiffening kept the game close, the end result was still a 19-7 loss.

With Cincinnati making the return trip to Pittsburgh in just two weeks, there was no time to lose in getting back on track. At home against a bad New York Jets team, Harris went over 100 yards in a 26-14 win. It was time for another crack at the Bengals.

When Bradshaw was knocked out early, this game and the entire division race could have gotten away from the Steelers. But Hanratty stepped up and hit Shanklin on a 51-yard touchdown strike in the second quarter. It was the difference in a tough 20-13 win.

Pittsburgh stayed at home to face the playoff-bound Washington Redskins on Monday Night Football, with Hanratty still in the lineup. The one-time hot prospect from Notre Dame who had never quite panned out, Hanratty was making the most of his opportunity to play. He threw two more touchdown passes, while Harris muscled out 90 yards in a 21-16 win.



Hanratty stayed in the lineup at Oakland on November 11. The Steelers had knocked the Raiders out of the playoffs last year and Oakland was on its way back to the postseason. Hanratty took care of the ball and Pittsburgh enjoyed a 5-1 turnover advantage. White, working his defensive end spot, intercepted two passes and the Steelers got a big 17-9 road win.

Pittsburgh welcomed in Denver, a decent team on the fringes of playoff contention. Trailing 13-6 in the fourth quarter, Hanratty went up top to Shanklin for a 42-yard touchdown pass to tie the game.

But deficiencies in the running attack were coming home to roost. Pittsburgh was out rushed 184-83 for the game and Denver pulled away to win 23-13. A week later in Cleveland, the running game failed down close. Having to settle for three field goals meant a 21-16 loss in a game the Steelers had otherwise controlled.

Pittsburgh was still 8-3, but the two-game skid had allowed Cincinnati to get back in the race at 7-4. In the wild-card race, Denver was giving chase at 6-3-2, with Buffalo at 6-5.

Bradshaw was coming back, but Miami--on their way to a repeat title—was not in a welcoming mood on the first Monday Night in December. Bradshaw was intercepted three times. The Steelers were in a 30-3 hole by halftime. They made the final score respectable, but the 30-26 loss still made it three defeats in a row.

What's more, Cincinnati had knocked off Super Bowl-bound Minnesota to move into a tie for first place and the Bengals had the tiebreaker. The good news is that Denver had lost to another playoff team in Dallas, so the AFC Central was looking good to produce the wild-card.

If Pittsburgh could take care of business that is. They hosted Houston and got the ground game rolling against the bad opponent, with a 188-58 edge in rush yardage making up for four Bradshaw interceptions in the 33-7 win. Cincinnati knocked off Cleveland. In the meantime, Buffalo moved up to 8-5. At 9-4, the Steelers were still on track to make it, but they would also lose a tiebreaker to the Bills.

That made Saturday afternoon at San Francisco effectively a must-win spot. Facing a bad team, Rowser sparked Pittsburgh early on with a 71-yard Pick-6 that was the reason the Steelers led 14-7 at the half. Pittsburgh gradually took control in the second half, with a couple field goals extending the lead to 20-7. Finally, Bradshaw hit Lewis on a 50-yard touchdown strike to blow it open. The 37-14 win sent Pittsburgh back to the playoffs.

In a decade that had a lot of great playoff rivalries, the Steelers and Raiders was the one that would end up remembered the best. The following Saturday afternoon they met in the second of what would turn out to be five postseason battles in the 1970s.

Pittsburgh generally fared pretty well, having won the previous year and with two more victories ahead of them. Today, not so much. The Steelers were pounded up front, losing rush yardage 232-65. Trailing 16-7 in the third quarter, Bradshaw threw a Pick-6 that effectively ended the game. The final was 33-14.

After reaching the AFC Championship Game a year earlier, it was a disappointment for Pittsburgh to fall as a wild card in the divisional round this year. But an observer that would have taken a step back, even in the moment, might have noted that after several decades of irrelevance, simply getting back to the playoffs had proven the Steelers were no fluke.



## 1974

There was a quarterback controversy in Pittsburgh when the 1974 season began. Noll had turned to Joe Gilliam over the erratic Bradshaw, the #1 overall pick in the 1970 NFL draft, but mistake-prone and the target of a lot of boos from the home fans. It was a good thing the Steelers were built on defense and the running game—they ranked second in the NFL in both categories.

Franco was a 1,000-yard rusher and a Pro Bowler. On the defensive side, Greenwood and Greene were first-team All-Pro, as was Ham. Russell made the Pro Bowl at age 33, and the unit also included a rookie named Jack Lambert, to go with Blount and Wagner in the secondary

There might have been instability at quarterback and questions at receiver—Swann and Stallworth, who would soon elevate the latter position dramatically, were rookies in 1974—but you could win plenty of games with the defense and running game the Steelers had.



Gilliam played well in the opener, a home date with the Baltimore Colts, who were uncharacteristically awful in 1974. The quarterback went 17/30 for 257 yards and found Swann on a 54-yard TD strike. Pittsburgh cruised to a 30-0 win.

Gilliam followed that up with a huge game on the road at a decent Denver Broncos team. He went 38/50 for 348 yards—monster numbers for a passer in this era. And Gilliam at least partially bailed out the defense, digging the Steelers out of a 21-7 first quarter hole and salvaging a 35-35 tie.

But things started to go awry at home against Oakland. Gilliam went a woeful 8/31 for 106 yards, Pittsburgh turned the ball over four times and took an embarrassing 17-0 loss. At 1-1-1, there was reason to be concerned. The Steelers did not look like a team ready to take that proverbial next step.

The Steelers went to mediocre Houston and got a big day running the football from Preston Pearson, who went for 117 yards on just 15 carries. It was enough to pull out a 13-7 win. A visit to a bad Kansas City team saw Pittsburgh holding a 14-10 lead in the second quarter. Then free safety Glen Edwards came up with a 49-yard Pick-6. It was one of seven interceptions the Steeler defense came up with in a 34-24 win.

Pittsburgh's defensive front came through with six sacks in a home date with Cleveland. The Browns would fall hard this season and the defensive effort, combined with 81 rush yards from Franco, produced a 20-16 win.

They were 4-1-1, but Gilliam had struggled ever since the Denver game. Noll went to Bradshaw. Not that it changed the fundamental nature of how the Steelers won football games. On the Monday Night stage against lowly Atlanta, Bradshaw was an erratic 9/21 for 130 yards. But

Franco produced 141 yards, Bleier added 78 more and Pittsburgh got an unimpressive 24-17 win.

A home date with mediocre Philadelphia was considerably more impressive. The Steelers dominated on both sides of the line of scrimmage, winning rush yardage 238-66 and winning the game 27-10.

At 6-1-1, they were 1 ½ games up on the Bengals and a road trip to Cincinnati was a chance to all but wrap up the AFC Central. It didn't happen. Both teams ran the ball well, but Bradshaw was outplayed by Cincy counterpart Ken Anderson. That was the difference in a 17-10 loss.

There were five games left. Pittsburgh was 6-2-1, with Cincinnati nipping at their heels at 6-3. As far as the wild-card went, Buffalo was 7-2 and with two-time defending Super Bowl champ Miami also in the AFC East and having another big year, it would be difficult for the Central to get two teams into the playoffs.

The Steelers went to Cleveland. Trailing 16-13 in the fourth quarter, this game had the potential to be a disaster. But a field goal tied it up, defensive back J.T. Thomas scooped up a fumble and went to the house and Pittsburgh escaped 26-16. Cincinnati lost and the divisional lead was back to a game and a half.

New Orleans wasn't very good and the Steelers went to the Bayou on the Monday just prior to Thanksgiving. Bradshaw got the show started with a 31-yard touchdown pass to Frank Lewis. Franco ran for 114 yards. Even though Pittsburgh was a little sloppy and committed ten penalties, they cruised to a 28-7 win.

There were three weeks left and they only needed two wins to secure the AFC Central.

But they did not get one of those wins on Sunday against Houston. Bradshaw was simply awful and ended up benched for Hanratty, who was worse. The defense kept them in it, but the final result was a 13-10 loss. The good news was that the schedule makers were sending Cincinnati down to Miami for Monday Night Football. The Bengals lost and the Steelers only needed one more win.

The season finale would be at home against Cincinnati, but Pittsburgh would certainly prefer that it not come to that. They went up to New England. In a physical game against a .500 team, Franco's 136 yards were the difference in a 21-17 win. The Steelers were AFC Central champs. They closed out the season with a 27-3 win over the Bengals the following Saturday afternoon to put an exclamation mark on it.

Pittsburgh's 10-3-1 record was impressive, but if you wanted to be skeptical about their playoff chances, the ammunition was there. With Cincinnati ending up at 7-7, the Steelers had no wins over anyone that finished with a winning record. In the age before parity, simply stringing together wins over a series of mediocre teams wasn't as hard as it is in today's NFL.

But they got one break right out of the chute for the postseason. The rotation format was set up for Pittsburgh to host Buffalo. Had the bracket been seeded, the Steelers would have been in Miami. While the Bills had an exciting young runner named O.J. Simpson, they were making their first playoff appearance and nowhere near on a par with what the Dolphins or Raiders were.



In the early game of Sunday afternoon, Pittsburgh spotted Buffalo a 7-3 lead. Then the Steelers' strength in the trenches began to assert itself.

Bleier took a 27-yard touchdown pass from Bradshaw to give the Steelers the lead. Then Harris bulled through for three short touchdown runs and it was 29-7 by halftime. Pittsburgh finished with 235 rush yards. The defense was in lockdown form, holding Simpson to just 49 yards. The final was 32-14.

They were going to the AFC Championship Game. What's more, Miami had not only been knocked out by Oakland the day before, but it was in a dramatic finish, one of pro football's epic playoff battles. Even though the rotation format was sending the Steelers on the road, there was the real possibility the Raiders might be drained.

Perhaps it was emotional fatigue that made the difference. Maybe Pittsburgh was just tougher in the trenches. Because even though the Raiders led 10-3 in the third quarter, the Steelers were the team controlling the line of scrimmage. And they broke Oakland down in the final period.

Harris ran in from eight yards out to tie the game. Bradshaw tossed a short touchdown pass to Swann. After a Raider field goal, Harris sealed the deal with a 21-yard touchdown run. Harris finished with 111 yards on the ground and Bleier tacked on 98 more. The Raiders had just 29 yards rushing as a team. The 24-13 win sent Pittsburgh to its first Super Bowl.

The Super Bowl venue alone tells you how much the NFL has changed. The game was in New Orleans. What's so unusual about that, you ask? It was at Tulane Stadium. At least they got 80,000-plus in the building to watch the Steelers play the Minnesota Vikings.

Minnesota was in its third Super Bowl in the last six years and still looking for their first victory. The game was a defensive war that appropriately saw the Steelers ahead 2-0 at halftime. But Pittsburgh's basic victory plan—run the ball and stop the run—was again holding firm. Harris was on his way to a 158-yard game and he ran in from nine yards out for the game's first touchdown.

The 9-0 lead in a game like this was huge, but the Vikings blocked a punt, recovered in the end zone and cut it to 9-6. But they couldn't run the ball to save their life—17 yards on 21 carries—and Bradshaw eventually flipped a four-yard touchdown pass to Larry Brown that put it out of reach.

Harris was named Super Bowl MVP in the 16-6 win. He was the right choice, and certainly everyone who watched now knew just how dominant the Steel Curtain defense was.

The Pittsburgh Steelers were the champions of the NFL. It was the first time. It certainly wouldn't be the last.

## 1975

The 1974 run saw the Steelers glide through a soft schedule and get the right breaks in the postseason. But the 1975 Pittsburgh Steelers were different—they were a juiced-up version of the same model and their run to a repeat championship left little doubt about who the best team was.

The AFC Central had been mediocre in 1974, with Pittsburgh the only winning team. There was no such luck in 1975—the Bengals and Oilers each won double-digit games.



The Steelers were ready for the challenge. The Steel Curtain defense ranked #2 in the NFL and sent eight starters to the Pro Bowl, including 1st-team All-Pro members in Greenwood, Ham and Blount. The running game, keyed by Franco, and including Rocky Bleier, finished second. The number two rankings of both the defense and running game replicated 1974.

What separated the 1975 team was the improvement in the passing game. Bradshaw had spent half of 1974 on the bench and Swann and Stallworth were rookies. Bradshaw was now entrenched and Swann had a breakout year. It gave the Steelers the extra element they needed.

That extra element was on immediate display at lowly San Diego. Bradshaw went 21/28 for 227 yards and no mistakes. He threw a 40-yard touchdown pass to Frank Lewis and hit Stallworth on a 38-yard strike. The Steelers rolled, 37-0.

A disappointing home loss to Buffalo followed. Simpson ran wild, for 227 yards. Buffalo would not repeat their playoff run of '74, but they looked the part in Week 2. The score was 30-7 in the fourth quarter and ended a deceptively close 30-21.

Pittsburgh went on to Cleveland. Bradshaw, after opening up sharp, hitting seven of eight passes for 151 yards, was knocked out. No problem. Gilliam stepped in and went 11/15 for 221 yards. Swann and Stallworth each had 100-plus receiving yards. The Steelers blew out a bad team 42-6 and Bradshaw was healthy enough to return the following week.

The Bradshaw-to-Swann combo connected for a couple of touchdown passes at home against Denver to key a 20-9 home win. A bad Chicago Bears team came into Three Rivers next. The Steelers spotted the Bears a field goal and then took over, completely blanketing the Chicago passing game and winning 34-3.

Green Bay was the fourth straight opponent that was headed for a losing season. Pittsburgh faced the Packers in Milwaukee, where Green Bay used to play three home games a year. Bradshaw struggled, but Bleier delivered. 163 yards on 35 carries saved the Steelers in a 16-13 escape.

At 5-1, they were tied with Houston and a game back of undefeated Cincinnati in the AFC Central. Both rivals awaited them the next two weeks.

Bradshaw and Swann showcased the revved-up Steeler passing game in Cincinnati, connecting on touchdown passes of 25 and 37 yards. Pittsburgh also won the old-fashioned way, outgaining Cincy on the ground, 239-69. The Steelers built a 23-3 lead, then hung on for a 30-24 triumph and created a three-way tie for first.

Houston came north and gave Pittsburgh a much stiffer test. The game was tied 17-17 in the fourth quarter. Bradshaw had a good day, 17/28 for 219 yards with three touchdowns. The final TD pass was a 21-yarder to Stallworth to give his team a 24-17 win.

Pittsburgh kept their focus against subpar Kansas City, dominating the rush yardage battle 239-78. Bradshaw went 16/24 for 204 yards and the defense came up with six sacks. The 28-3 rout pushed the Steelers to 8-1. They had to quickly get ready for the Oilers again. This one would be a Monday Night in the Astrodome. And as luck would have it, Cincinnati was upset by Cleveland the preceding Sunday, meaning the Steelers could take sole possession of first place.

Houston wasn't quite ready for prime-time and it literally showed on the Monday Night stage. Dwight White sacked Oiler quarterback Dan Pastorini for an early safety and that set the tone. Harris rushed for 149 yards, and the Steelers coasted to a 32-9 win.

At 9-1, Pittsburgh was in good shape for the playoffs. They had the one-game lead on Cincinnati, along with control of the tiebreaker. As for the wild-card, the Steelers were two games up on the Oilers and had control of the tiebreaker. It would take a major collapse to miss the playoffs.

But there was an extra prize to play for this season. 1975 was when the NFL finally went to seeding and hosting the playoff matchups by record, rather than rotation. Pittsburgh was one game ahead of Oakland in the race for home field advantage.

A road trip to old Shea Stadium to face Joe Namath and the New York Jets was up next. Blount's two interceptions led the way for the Steelers to collectively pick off Namath four times in a 20-7 win. Another bad opponent was up next in Cleveland. Pittsburgh did not play particularly well at home and trailed 17-10 in the fourth quarter. But Bradshaw hit Swann with a couple of TD passes to get the lead, Franco added one more for insurance and the Steelers clinched their playoff spot with a 31-17 win.

Now it was time to focus on the division. The one-game lead on Cincinnati was still holding when the two rivals met in the regular season's penultimate week. Pittsburgh's divisional record edge meant they would still hold the tiebreaker if they lost this game. But the season finale

would be on the road against the Los Angeles Rams, one of the best teams in the NFC, so there was every reason for urgency.



Urgency is exactly what Pittsburgh brought. Bradshaw and Swann struck for an early touchdown pass. Defensive back J.T. Thomas returned a fumble for a touchdown and it was 14-0 by the end of the first quarter. The game ended 35-14 and the Steelers were AFC Central champs. That same day, Oakland lost to Houston, assuring that the road to the Super Bowl in the AFC would go through Three Rivers Stadium.

Bradshaw and Gilliam split playing time in the now-meaningless Saturday night finale in Los Angeles, a game that ended a 10-3 loss. Pittsburgh concluded the season with a 12-2 record.

The Baltimore Colts, one of the AFC's best in the early 1970s and a good team at the end of the decade, were back in the playoffs after a bad 1974 campaign, and they matched up with Pittsburgh in an early Saturday afternoon game that kicked off Divisional Round Weekend.

Pittsburgh trailed 10-7 in the third quarter, but the formula of 1974—dominating the running game on both sides of the ball—was in place. They would win the rushing battle 211-82. Blount came up with an interception that set up a touchdown run by Bleier to give Pittsburgh the lead. Then Bradshaw ran for another TD. With Baltimore making a last desperate attempt to get in the game, Russell scooped up a fumble on his own seven-yard line and ran 93 yards for the touchdown that clinched a 28-10 win.

The AFC Championship was another edition of the great 1970s Steelers-Raiders rivalry. On a frigid day where it was two degrees with the wind chill, it's no surprise that the game was a physical war. After three quarters, the Steelers had mustered only a field goal, but they led 3-0.

They weren't able to overwhelm the Raiders in the trenches—the rush margin was a normal 117-93 in favor of Pittsburgh. But after the teams traded touchdowns, Bradshaw made the big throw—he hit Stallworth on a 20-yard touchdown pass that made it 16-7.

Pittsburgh's defense held on—Oakland got a field goal and got the ball to the 48-yard line. Stabler hit receiver Cliff Branch down to the Steeler 15-yard line, but with no timeouts, Pittsburgh prevented Branch from getting out of bounds and the game ended. The Steelers were returning to the Super Bowl.

Dallas was waiting at Miami's Orange Bowl, and with a 10-7 lead after three quarters, the Cowboys looked poised to become the first wild-card team to win a Super Bowl. But Pittsburgh took over the fourth quarter and it was appropriate that the Bradshaw-to-Swann combo would make this game's signature play.

Pittsburgh blocked a punt for a safety to make it 10-9. Then two deep drives gave them the lead, but both ended in field goals, so it was still a game at 15-10. The Steeler got the ball back, and were on their own 36-yard line when the Cowboy defense threw the kitchen sink at Bradshaw.

Swann was running a deep post and the quarterback read the blitz and let the ball fly just in time. Bradshaw hit the deck and was knocked out—the Orange Bowl was artificial turf at this time and there was nothing to cushion the blow. Not until Bradshaw was in the locker room did he hear that Swann made a circus catch for a touchdown.

The game ended 21-17. Swann had caught four passes for 161 yards and became the first wide receiver to be named a Super Bowl MVP. Ironically, he had suffered a concussion himself in the AFC Championship Game and his status had been questionable leading up to the game. It was fitting that he played, and that it was he and Bradshaw teaming up to make the biggest play of the 1975 Pittsburgh Steelers' Super Bowl run.

## 1976

The 1976 Pittsburgh Steelers were looking to make history. They had joined the Green Bay Packers and Miami Dolphins as the only teams to win consecutive Super Bowls. With the biggest stage in professional sports then only a decade old, those were also the only three teams to have two championships at all, regardless of whether they were repeats. The '76 Steelers bid for a historic trifecta was sustained by a historically good defense, but undermined by injuries on offense.



The great Steel Curtain defense was led by Jack Lambert, who took home Defensive Player of the Year. Joe Greene at defensive tackle was a two-time winner of Defensive POY and “Mean Joe” enjoyed another Pro Bowl season in 1976. So did L.C. Greenwood up front.

Jack Ham was 1st-team All-NFL at another linebacker spot. The entire secondary—Mel Blount and J.T. Thomas at the corners, Mike Wagner at strong safety and Glen Edwards at free safety—were all Pro Bowlers.

In fact, the only Steeler defensive starters to *not* make the Pro Bowl were Dwight White up front and Andy Russell at linebacker—but both had Pro Bowl resumes throughout their career. All of which makes it seem redundant to say that the

Pittsburgh defense was the best in the NFL for points allowed.

But on offense, Terry Bradshaw went through an injury-riddled campaign where he missed six of the fourteen games. Bradshaw's final numbers of 48% completion rate, 6.1 yards-per-attempt and 10-9 TD/INT ratio weren't as hideous as they would be today, but they were still only in the

middle of the league. That's in spite of having the great field-stretching Lynn Swann, who averaged better than 18 yards a catch, on the outside.

At least the Steelers could run the football. Franco Harris ran for over 1,100 yards. Rocky Bleier stepped up with the best statistical season of his career with a 1,000-yard campaign. The quality of the running game, combined with the defense setting them up in good situations, allowed the Pittsburgh offense to rank fifth in the league for points scored.

The hottest rivalry in the AFC—perhaps in all of football—was the Steelers and Raiders. And this 1976 season would open with Pittsburgh-Oakland out west for the 4 PM ET national television audience.

Bradshaw played well and made big plays, going 15/27 for 253 yards. A third-year receiver named John Stallworth, still coming into his own, had a big day with six catches for 94 yards. Pittsburgh led 28-14 in the fourth quarter. Then, inexplicably, the defense collapsed. Oakland rallied for 17 points and handed the Steelers a 31-28 loss.

The negative momentum continued for the first half against a good Cleveland Browns team back at home. Pittsburgh trailed 14-0. But with the defense recovering four fumbles and Harris running for 118 yards, the Steelers took over the second half and got in the win column, 31-14.

A difficult early schedule continued against what would prove to be a really good New England Patriots squad. Bradshaw again played well, going 20/30 for 291 yards. Swann and Frank Lewis combined for nearly 200 yards receiving. But with a 20-9 lead in the third quarter, the defense *again* inexplicably collapsed, allowing three consecutive touchdowns. A 30-27 loss at home was a tough pill to swallow.

And there was no rest in sight—not with a Monday Night date at perennial 1970s contender Minnesota coming up. An excellent Vikings defense sacked Bradshaw five times, intercepted him four times and beat Pittsburgh 17-6.



The poor start to the season hit its low point six days later in Cleveland. Not only was Bradshaw again sacked four times. Not only did the Steelers lose again, this time 18-16. But Bradshaw was knocked out. The Steelers were 1-4 and the offense was now in the hands of Mike Kruczek, a rookie out of Boston College.

The Steelers weren't just in trouble. Their back was to the wall and we weren't even halfway through October. But maybe the Bradshaw injury is what the defense needed. Because it's at this point in our story that the 1976 Steel Curtain defense becomes the unit they are historically remembered as.

Cincinnati came to town with a chance to deliver a dagger blow. Pittsburgh dominated the line of scrimmage to the tune of a 201-75 rush yard advantage. Harris carried 41 times for 143 of those yards. The Steelers stopped the bleeding with an easy 23-6 win.



They went on to play a bad New York Giants team. Even with a sloppy effort resulting in 15 penalties, Pittsburgh's 230-88 edge in the ground game resulted in a 27-0 win. More of the same came the next week at home against mediocre San Diego.

The Steel Curtain sacked future Hall of Fame quarterback Dan Fouts five times, recovered four fumbles and rolled up a 255-44 advantage on the ground. A game that was only 3-0 after three quarters ended 23-0.

Bradshaw returned in time for a road trip to Kansas City. Facing a bad team, the ground advantage was an overwhelming 330-34. With the defense also intercepting four passes, they spun their third straight shutout, 45-0.

A key home game with Miami was on deck. The Dolphins were struggling to regain their own Super Bowl form from earlier in the decade. In a late afternoon game that both teams had to have, Bradshaw was again knocked to the sidelines.

Kruczek came on and did his job—he gave the football to Harris and Bleier, who went for 110 yards apiece. And the rookie let the defense win the game for him. The Steelers delivered 14-3.

They were 6-4, but there was a long way to go. With the Colts and Patriots enjoying monster seasons in the AFC East, the wild card was off the table. The Steelers and Browns both trailed the 8-2 Bengals by two games.

What Pittsburgh did have going for them was another game with Cincinnati, one in which they could also ensure the tiebreaker. And the Bengals still had to play in Oakland, where the Raiders were en route to the AFC's best record. So a realistic path to the playoffs was there.

The Steelers hosted the Oilers and won 32-16, blowing open a close game after halftime. That set up the late afternoon battle in Cincinnati on the Sunday after Thanksgiving.

The Bengals got an early field goal. With Kruczek in the lineup, that three-point deficit seemed pretty big. But the kid made some big throws to Swann, who caught five balls for 97 yards. Bleier and Harris keyed a 204-110 edge in rush yardage. That wasn't the landslide advantage the Steelers had been rolling up, but it was enough to keep Cincinnati from any more points. And a third-quarter touchdown gave Pittsburgh a 7-3 win.

Pittsburgh hosted Tampa Bay the following Sunday. This was the Buccaneers' first year in the league and they would finish winless. The 42-0 rout was completely expected. Even better was that Bradshaw played the second half. He would be ready for the playoffs...if there was to be a postseason in Pittsburgh.

Monday Night held the key. That was when Cincinnati and Oakland took the field. There was talk that maybe the Raiders should tank, for the purpose of keeping the Steelers out of the playoffs. But Oakland not only had integrity, they still needed a win to lock up home field advantage. The Raiders won 35-20.

Pittsburgh improbably controlled its destiny the following Saturday afternoon down in Houston. With Bleier and Harris both going over the 100-yard mark and Bradshaw tossing a 21-yard touchdown pass to Swann, a comfortable 21-0 win sewed up the AFC Central.

The Steelers might be the 3-seed, but with nine wins in a row—five by shutout—and the last two Super Bowl trophies sitting in their offices, they were now the team to beat. Pittsburgh was installed as a solid (-3.5) road favorite in Baltimore for the divisional playoff game the following Sunday.

It turned out the oddsmakers underestimated how hot Pittsburgh was. Bradshaw opened up the game with a 76-yard TD strike to Lewis. A missed PAT followed, although kicker Roy Gerela later added a field goal and it was 9-7 going into the second quarter.

Then the game got out of hand. Harris ran for one touchdown. Bradshaw went up top again, this time 29 yards to Swann. A field goal made it 26-7 by halftime. Bradshaw finished the afternoon at 14/18 for 264 yards, three touchdowns and no interceptions. By today's standards, that's a really good performance. But the standards of 1976, with more physicality allowed by defensive secondaries and more interceptions generally, it's positively dazzling.

Pittsburgh was peaking. A third straight AFC Championship date with Oakland was at hand and the Steelers were again a comfortable (-3.5) road favorite. But now the injury bug hit the backfield. Harris and Bleier were *both* knocked out in Baltimore. The running game that had carried this offense all season long was sidelined.

On the day after Christmas, Bradshaw couldn't take the game into his own hands. He still made some downfield throws, but the final numbers were 14/35 for 176 yards. The rush yard advantage, such a big edge for Pittsburgh during the win streak, turned on them to the tune of 157-72. When the Steelers fell behind early 10-0, they were not going to catch up. It was 17-7 at half and ended at 24-7.

There would be no third consecutive Super Bowl triumph, a feat that no one has accomplished now almost 50 years later. This was the first of two seasons where the Steel Curtain took a modest step back from greatness.

## 1977

Pittsburgh had "slipped" in losing in the AFC Championship Game in 1976. But that loss had been riddled with injuries and Pittsburgh still had the best defense in the league. There was every reason to see '77 as a year they returned to the top. Instead, the season saw regression across the board and it required some breaks simply to earn a sixth consecutive playoff trip.

Franco continued to be reliable on offense. The future Hall of Fame running back went for over 1,100 yards and was 1st-team All-NFL. Swann had a Pro Bowl year on the flanks, catching 50 balls for 789 yards.

Stallworth was starting to emerge as a big-time threat on the other side, catching 44 passes for nearly 18 yards a pop. Bennie Cunningham was a reliable tight end.



Bradshaw was pulling the trigger on the offense and Terry could make big plays. His 8.0 yards-per-attempt was the best in the league. But his TD-INT ratio was 17-19. While that's considerably more normal for this era than it would be today, the interceptions still amount to over 6 percent of his total passes. And that ranked 20th in the 28-team league. The completion percentage of 52 percent was mediocre.

Even so, the offense wasn't the problem. With the running game and the boom-or-bust passing attack, the Steelers ranked seventh in the NFL in points scored.

Pittsburgh's Steel Curtain defense had been its crown jewel and the D was coming off a '76 campaign where they had spun five shutouts in what was then a 14-game schedule. This year, there was drastic slippage.

The Steelers still got Pro Bowl years from Greene and Lambert. Ham was 1st-team All-NFL. Blount intercepted six passes from his cornerback spot. Steve Furness and White combined for 15 sacks up front. But it wasn't enough. Pittsburgh tumbled to 17th in the NFL in points allowed.

A home game with subpar San Francisco opened the season on Monday Night. The defense picked up where they had left off, allowing just four completed passes. Harris ran for 100 yards and the Steelers won 27-0.

It set up another visitor from the Bay Area—a more hated one. Pittsburgh and the Oakland Raiders had met five previous times in the playoffs in this decade alone, including the past three AFC Championship Games. The Steelers were 3-2 in those games, but the Raiders were the defending Super Bowl champs. Pittsburgh had played the previous year's playoff game without Harris or fullback Rocky Bleier. This was their chance to show the loss had been a fluke.

In today's NFL world, this would probably be a Sunday Night Game. At the very least, in the late afternoon TV window. In the world of 1977, it was a 1 PM ET kickoff. And it showed that the 1977 Pittsburgh Steelers might not be what their recent predecessors had been.

Bradshaw was intercepted three times. He was sacked five times. A 16-7 home loss showed that there was going to be no immediate re-establishment of the old guard.

The Steelers went on to face mediocre Cleveland. Trailing 14-7 in the second quarter, Bradshaw hit Frank Lewis on a 65-yard TD strike. Terry went on top again, 14 yards to Swann in the third quarter. With a 218-80 edge in rush yardage, Pittsburgh pulled away to win, 28-14.

A road trip to Houston showed that the Oilers were an up-and-coming contender in the old AFC Central Division that they shared with the Steelers, Browns and Cincinnati Bengals. Pittsburgh turned the football over nine times and lost 27-10.

The Steelers and Bengals had gone to the wire for the division title the previous season and would do so again this year. Cincinnati came into old Three Rivers Stadium for Monday Night Football. Playing in 18mph winds, the Pittsburgh D picked off four passes and chiseled out a 20-14 win. Then they got a revenge home win over Houston 27-10 behind a 16/24 for 227 yards performance from Bradshaw.

A late Sunday afternoon home visit to the Baltimore Colts was up next. The Colts were a consistent contender, but one the Steelers had usually handled—like the previous year's 40-14 blowout in the playoffs in Baltimore. This one went down differently. Pittsburgh committed 17 penalties and Bradshaw threw five interceptions. They trailed 24-0 in the third quarter before making the final score a cosmetically respectable 31-21.

Another big road game was up in Denver where the Broncos were emerging as a legitimate contender for the first time in their short history. The Steelers again dug a huge hole, this time 21-0. Bradshaw was sacked six times by Denver's "Orange Crush" defense. The final was 21-7.

At 4-4, Pittsburgh needed to stop the bleeding when Cleveland came into Three Rivers. The big-play passing attack was ginned up. Bradshaw was 13/21 and those 13 completions went for 283 yards. Swann and Stallworth each had 120-plus yards receiving. This time it was the Steelers getting the big lead, 35-10, before hanging on to win 35-31.

It was time for another big game. The Dallas Cowboys, another one of this decade's outstanding teams and on their way to a Super Bowl title in 1977, were coming in for a late Sunday afternoon kick. The game was tight at halftime, with Pittsburgh's 14-13 lead coming thanks to a missed extra point from Dallas.

But the Steelers were pounding the football. Harris rolled up 179 yards on the ground. Bradshaw found Stallworth on a 28-yard touchdown pass. In their best performance of the season, Pittsburgh won it 28-13.

The AFC Central was very balanced, but no one stood out. That was enough for Pittsburgh's 6-4 record to still be tied with Cleveland at the top. Houston and Cincinnati were both 5-5. It was anyone's race to take in these final four weeks.

The Steelers went to old Shea Stadium in New York to play the lowly New York Jets. Pittsburgh did not play well, giving up over 200 yards on the ground. But five interceptions, two from free safety Glen Edwards, were enough to get out of Queens with a 23-20 win. In the meantime, the Bengals lost, while the Browns and Oilers won. Pittsburgh was 7-4 and the field was chasing at 6-5.

Another bad opponent, the Seattle Seahawks in their second year of existence, came to Three Rivers. The Steelers again played less than inspired football and were in a 13-13 tie after three

quarters. But Bradshaw's 22-yard TD pass to Swann triggered a fourth quarter outburst and Pittsburgh won 30-20. Good news came from elsewhere in the league—while Cincinnati kept the pressure on, Cleveland and Houston both lost, falling two games back.

What the Steelers did *not* have was the tiebreaker on Cincinnati—at least if they lost their second game to the Bengals. That made an early Saturday afternoon game between the two teams seem like a de facto winner-take-all battle.

In a game where the temperature was (-17) with the wind chill, Bradshaw threw an early Pick-6. Even though Terry turned it around and went 20/39 for 246 yards, the defense was not playing well and allowed over 300 passing yards. Pittsburgh lost 17-10. They were 8-5. So was Cincinnati. The tiebreaker was gone. Denver and Oakland, jousting in the AFC West, had a stranglehold on the wild-card. It was all but over.

But not so fast. Cincinnati still had to go to Houston, a game that was far from a sure thing. Pittsburgh was closing the season at mediocre San Diego. Steeler fans were able to watch with delight in the early TV window on the final Sunday, as the Oilers knocked off the Bengals 21-16.

Pittsburgh again had control of their fate. They spent the first half in San Diego showing that this team wasn't what previous editions of the Steel Curtain had been, falling behind 9-0. They spent the second half showing that whatever their flaws, they were still the Steelers, pulling out a 10-9 win and crawling back into the postseason.

For the second straight year, Pittsburgh was the 3-seed. Last year, they were highly regarded enough to be a road favorite in both of their playoff games. This year, as they went to Denver, they were a modest two-point underdog.

In the late afternoon on Christmas Eve, two franchises that have since developed a nice playoff history, met for the first time in postseason play. For three quarters, they traded blows and the game was tied 21-21. But Bradshaw's play was pedestrian, 19/37 for 177 yards and three picks. The Steelers committed ten penalties. They only forced one turnover of their own. The fourth quarter got away and ended with a 34-21 loss.

1977 was still a good year by any reasonable measurement. It was still the sixth straight year in the playoffs and the fifth AFC Central crown in that timeframe. But it wasn't what Pittsburgh Steelers fans had gotten used to. Not to worry though. The 1977 regression was just a blip on the radar.

## **1978**

The Steelers were a combined 22-5-1 in the 1974-75 regular seasons. That had slipped to 19-9 over the previous two years.

In the NFL of today, with its top-to-bottom parity, this sort of decline would be barely a blip on the radar screen. But in the more top-heavy environment of the late 1970s, this left the 1978 Steeler

team needing to re-establish its dominance. They did that in spades, and became the first team in the Super Bowl era to win the Lombardi Trophy three times.

This was the year of the big rule changes mentioned above. The changes to what defensive backs were allowed to do was even known casually as “The Mel Blount Rule”, in tribute to the physical cornerback. Pittsburgh adjusted to the rules change better than anyone.



A team that had won its Super Bowls on the strength of the running game, now became pass-oriented. Bradshaw stepped up and won the MVP award. Swann was a first-team All-Pro, and Stallworth emerged as a big-time target. The Steelers ranked 2nd in the NFL in yards-per-pass, making up for the fact the running game went down to 22nd in the league.

Whether the offense moved by air or by ground, whether it was Bradshaw-to-Swann or Franco running the ball, the Steel Curtain defense was still the immovable force that anchored this franchise. Greenwood and Greene were now 32-years-old, but were both still Pro Bowlers.

Blount was still one of the game’s top corners, able to adjust to the new rules. Donnie Shell was a top strong safety, and the linebacking core, led by Ham, having a 1st-team All-Pro season, and Lambert, was the NFL’s best. It added up to a defense that was the best in the NFL in points allowed.

Pittsburgh opened with two easy games, at Buffalo and against Seattle, and won both. A Week 3 road trip to Cincinnati should have been a tough test. The Bengals had been a consistent contender in the middle part of the 1970s. But the Steelers’ easy 28-3 rout on September 17 foreshadowed the Bengal collapse to a 4-12 campaign.

The Cleveland Browns had gone 6-8 the year prior, but were getting better. They had started the season 3-0 and had the core of a team, around quarterback Brian Sipe, that would win the AFC Central in two years. Pittsburgh hosted their archrival for Week 4 on September 24 and it would be the first real test of the 1978 season.

Bradshaw and Sipe both struggled to erratic 14-for-32 days and the teams combined for 19 penalties. The defenses were in control, and the Browns led a field goal war by a 9-3 count in the fourth quarter. Pittsburgh rallied the only way one could in this game—with two consecutive field goal drives that forced overtime. The Steelers became the team that finally cracked the end zone, when Bradshaw found tight end Bennie Cunningham for a 37-yard scoring strike and a 15-9 win.

Pittsburgh went to New York and beat the Jets to move to 5-0. The Steelers’ October 8 game at home with the Atlanta Falcons was their first against a team that would eventually make the playoffs. Pittsburgh met the test easily. Harris ran for 104 yards, Stallworth caught six balls for 114 yards, and after a slow first quarter, Pittsburgh heated up and won 31-7.

It was time for the return trip to Cleveland. The Browns were now 4-2, and would ultimately finish 8-8. Their slippage from the strong start would be evident in this game. The Steelers trailed 7-6 early on, but Larry Anderson brought a kickoff back 95 yards for a touchdown and the rout was on. Pittsburgh played a clean football game, with zero turnovers and coasted to a 34-14 win.

With a record of 7-0 it was time for Pittsburgh to make its first appearance on the Monday Night stage. They were hosting the up-and-coming Houston Oilers, with a dynamic rookie running back in Earl Campbell. There would be considerable MVP support for Campbell at season's end (while Bradshaw won the AP award, other organizations picked Campbell). The Oilers, while still looking for consistency with a 4-3 record, were beginning a two-year run that would see them as Pittsburgh's primary foil in the AFC.

Houston certainly made a statement on this Monday Night, playing a brilliant game in handing Pittsburgh their first loss. The Steelers held Campbell to a manageable 89 yards, but Oiler quarterback Dan Pastorini was an efficient 13-for-19 for 160 yards and no interceptions. The Houston defense completely collared the Pittsburgh rushing attack, and took away Swann and Stallworth. Bradshaw was only able to hook up with tight end Randy Grossman (9 catches, 116 yards) and that wasn't going to be enough in a 24-17 loss.

The season's first loss began a stretch where Pittsburgh began to look alarmingly human. They narrowly won two home games with bad teams, the Kansas City Chiefs and New Orleans Saints. Bradshaw had to throw a late 24-yard touchdown pass to Rocky Bleier to escape the Saints game with a 20-14 win.

Pittsburgh traveled west to face the Los Angeles Rams on what was then a rare Sunday Night kickoff, a special edition of Monday Night Football, which had two prime-time games this week. The Steeler problems persisted. Facing an opponent that would make the NFC Championship Game this year and the Super Bowl a year later, the Steelers again could not run the ball. This time they couldn't stop the run either—LA's John Cappelletti ran for 106 yards and the Rams had a 10-7 win.

A home win over Cincinnati was no less alarming. The final score was 7-6, both teams committed five turnovers and Bradshaw threw four interceptions. The Steelers now had a five-week stretch that had seen them either barely escape bad teams, or lose to good ones because they couldn't run the ball. What's more, the only win of note was still the Atlanta game. If you wanted to doubt the Steelers, they were giving you reasons.

Pittsburgh went to San Francisco for Monday Night Football. The 49ers were on their way to a 2-14 season, and were still a year from getting Joe Montana to play quarterback. It wasn't an inspiring performance—the Steelers turned it over four times—but at least the 24-7 win came without giving the fan base a nervous breakdown.

The Steelers were also being saved by their division and the conference. Houston had lost the week after their Monday Night triumph. No other team in the AFC would finish with a record

better than 11-5. And for whatever struggles Pittsburgh was having, they were still 11-2. Again, this not being the age of parity, it was fair to question if they were really a top-heavy favorite going into December, but they were still winning more than anyone else.

Pittsburgh made a revenge trip to Houston on Week 14. The margin in the AFC Central was two games, but if Houston could trim the lead to a single game, and take the tiebreaker, it would make for a very interesting finish to the regular season. But this time, the Steelers ran the ball. Harris ran for 102 yards, Rocky Bleier added 66 more and a hard-fought 13-3 victory clinched the division and the #1 seed in the AFC playoffs.

The Steelers closed out with wins over the Baltimore Colts and Denver Broncos. They would rematch with the latter for the divisional playoffs two weeks later. Denver followed up their conference championship year of 1977 with an AFC West title and #3 seed for the playoffs. Houston won the wild-card game and prior to 1990 there was a rule that teams from the same division could not meet prior to the conference championship game. So Houston went to 2-seed New England, and Pittsburgh got set to host Denver.

Over the next four weeks, covering two AFC playoff games and the Super Bowl, any doubts that one might have had watching the 1978 Pittsburgh Steelers were washed away.

The Pittsburgh-Denver game was the first of the Divisional Round weekend, and after the Broncos got an early field goal, the Steelers stripped the game of its drama. Harris, on his way to a 105-yard day, ran for two first-half touchdowns and it was 19-10 at the half. Bradshaw broke it open in the fourth quarter with a 45-yard touchdown strike to Stallworth and a 38-yarder to Swann. The Pittsburgh defense owned Denver all afternoon in a 33-10 win.

Houston upset New England, a team that collapsed from internal dissension prior to the playoffs. The Oilers arrived in Pittsburgh with rain and sleet hitting the artificial turf that was in old Three Rivers Stadium. The Steelers adjusted, getting first-quarter touchdown runs from Harris and Bleier. Bradshaw threw second-quarter touchdown passes to Swann and Stallworth. The defense locked up Campbell, and the game was a turnover-fest. Pittsburgh had an ugly five miscues, but Houston turned it over nine times. It was 31-3 by halftime and ended 34-5.

It was time for the ultimate showdown in the Super Bowl with the Dallas Cowboys. The Steelers and Cowboys, along with the Miami Dolphins and Green Bay Packers, were the only franchises that had two Super Bowl wins. The winner of this game would be the first to three.

Dallas was coming on strong, having won six straight to close the season, and then went to Los Angeles to rout the Rams 28-7 in the NFC Championship Game. The Cowboys and Steelers would combine to play an outstanding Super Bowl game.

It was back-and-forth in the first half. Bradshaw was stripped by Cowboy linebacker Mike Hegman, giving Dallas a defensive score, but Bradshaw was locked in when throwing the ball. He would finish with a then-record 318 yards and a seven-yard pass to Bleier gave Pittsburgh a 21-14 lead going into halftime.



A key sequence of plays in the third and early fourth quarter swung the game. Dallas was driving for the tying score. On third-and-fourth, tight end Jackie Smith was alone in the end zone and got a perfect pass from quarterback Roger Staubach. Smith dropped the ball and Dallas had to kick a field goal.



Pittsburgh started driving and was aided considerably by a controversial pass interference call on defensive back Bennie Barnes on Swann. It set up a 22-yard scoring run by Harris. Then a fumble on the ensuing kickoff gave the Steelers yet another touchdown. Now it was 35-17 and the game was close to over.

Dallas made it interesting, scoring two touchdowns and lining up for an onside kick with 22 seconds left. But Pittsburgh covered the kick and the game was over. Bradshaw's season of emergence ended with his first Super Bowl MVP award.

The 1978 Pittsburgh Steelers had completed their return to the top of the NFL world. It wasn't always easy, and it didn't always seem preordained, but they saved their best football for the end and made history in the process.

## 1979

Bradshaw was still at the height of his playing days. Franco was still a powerful running back. The receiving tandem of Swann and Stallworth was now one of the best in the game.

The offensive line was anchored by future Hall of Fame center Mike Webster. And The Steel Curtain defense was intact. There was no reason to think Pittsburgh couldn't go all the way again.

The season opened on Monday Night up in New England. A pedestrian effort had Pittsburgh trailing 13-6 in the fourth quarter. Bradshaw found Sidney Thornton, a young running back who would get playing time at Bleier's expense, on a 21-yard scoring pass to tie the game. The Steelers ultimately won 16-13 in overtime.



Houston came in for the home opener in Week 2. On this September day, the Steel Curtain showed the defensive dominance in last year's AFC title game wasn't all about the weather. Campbell was held to 38 yards and Oiler quarterbacks Dan Pastorini and Gifford Nielsen were intercepted a combined five times. Pittsburgh won 38-7 and sent a clear message about who the team to beat still was.

A couple of shaky performances against poor opponents followed. In a late afternoon start at St. Louis, the Steelers trailed the Cardinals 21-7. Losing

seven fumbles on the day didn't exactly help. But Pittsburgh rallied with a fourth-quarter burst that won the game 24-21. Then at home against Baltimore, it took a couple of long Bradshaw TD passes--47 yards to Stallworth early and 28 yards to Cunningham late--to survive the Colts, 17-13.

The Philadelphia Eagles were a playoff team under head coach Dick Vermeil and a trip to the eastern side of the state didn't go well. The Steelers turned it over four times and took a 17-14 loss. The offense responded with a vengeance in Cleveland a week later. Bradshaw threw three early touchdown passes. Franco rambled 71 yards for a touchdown, the highlight of a 153-yard game. Thornton carried 18 times for 98 more yards. Pittsburgh led 28-0 in the second quarter, 30-14 by half and won 51-35.

But then they turned around and came up completely flat in a road game against a bad Cincinnati Bengals team. They turned it over nine times and lost 34-10. At 5-2, there was no reason to hit the panic button, but Chuck Noll's defending champs weren't looking the part at this stage of the schedule. The biggest games were still ahead. And Pittsburgh would take the upcoming three-game home stretch to reassert themselves.

Denver, on its way to a third straight playoff appearance, visited Three Rivers for Monday Night Football. Pittsburgh dominated both sides of the line of scrimmage, to the tune of a 236-53 edge in rush yardage. They cruised to a 42-7 win.

An even bigger game came the following Sunday when Dallas paid a visit. In a sign of how different television priorities were in the late 1970s, this Super Bowl rematch between the league's two signature franchises kicked off in the early afternoon window on Sunday.

Those that were able to see the game saw a physical battle. Dorsett gained 73 yards for the Cowboys. But Harris gained 102 for the Steelers and was supported by Thornton's 68. Holding a 7-3 lead in the third quarter, Franco ran 48 yards for a touchdown and Pittsburgh won 14-3.

The next visitor was the Washington Redskins, on their way to a 10-win season where they would miss the playoffs by a single point. In a 7-7 tie in the second quarter, Bradshaw went to his tight ends. He found Cunningham and Randy Grossman for TD passes. The rout was on. Stallworth and Swann had 100-yard receiving games and the Steelers won 38-7.

Pittsburgh followed up this three-game tour de force by going to mediocre Kansas City and putting a 30-3 beatdown on the Chiefs. Bradshaw threw a 26-yard TD pass to Stallworth, tossed a 16-yarder to Swann and the result was never in doubt. The Steelers were surging at 9-2 and another big showdown was at hand.

San Diego, with their high-powered passing attack keyed by quarterback Dan Fouts, was challenging Pittsburgh for the 1-seed. The Steelers visited the Chargers on November 18. And the winning streak came to an end.

Digging a 21-0 hole by halftime didn't help. Pittsburgh got a touchdown in the third quarter and was driving to get back in the game when Bradshaw threw an interception that came back 77

yards the other way. It was one of five picks that Bradshaw threw and this one was the killer blow in what ended as a 35-7 loss. San Diego had the inside track to home field advantage.

The Steelers stayed flat for three quarters at home against the Browns and dug a 27-13 hole going into the fourth quarter. Both Bradshaw and Cleveland counterpart Brian Sipe were having big days, with 300-plus passing yards. But the Browns couldn't run the ball and salt the game away. The Steelers could, with Franco going off for 151 yards. Pittsburgh rallied to tie the game and then won it 33-30 in overtime.

A week later, at home against the Bengals, Bradshaw threw an early 58-yard touchdown pass to Swann. The Steelers jumped out to a 24-3 lead. When Cincy closed it to 24-17, Bradshaw went 72 yards to Swann to re-extend the lead. The 37-17 win extended Pittsburgh's record to 11-3. They were going to the Astrodome to face Houston on Monday Night Football.

The Oilers were 10-4. The Steelers would hold the tiebreaker even if they lost this game and settled for the head-to-head split, so their backs weren't against the wall. But they could avoid having to fight to the finish. What's more, a recent Chargers loss had given Pittsburgh a one-game lead in the race for the 1-seed.

Instead, Campbell finally broke through against the Steel Curtain, rushing for 109 yards and that was the difference in Houston holding a 20-17 lead as Pittsburgh lined up for a late onside kick. The Steelers recovered. Officials ruled the ball had not traveled ten yards. The league would later admit it was a blown call, but there was no recourse to instant replay in those days. Pittsburgh had to live with a loss.

A mediocre opponent in Buffalo was still the only roadblock to the AFC Central title Franco carried 21 times for 100 yards. Bradshaw went 14/27 for 209 yards. The Steelers cruised to a 28-0 win in front of the home fans. The following night, the Chargers and Broncos played for the AFC West title. A Denver win would vault Pittsburgh back to the 1-seed. Alas, it didn't happen. The Steelers settled for the 2-spot behind San Diego.

After a week off, Miami was the opponent in the early Sunday afternoon spot in the divisional round. The Dolphins were only six years removed from their own glory days when they won three straight AFC titles, two straight Super Bowls, one of which produced the only perfect season of the Super Bowl era.

But while names like quarterback Bob Griese, running back Larry Csonka and offensive lineman Larry Little were familiar, the team wasn't as good. At 10-6, it was a nice playoff-caliber club. The Steelers were Super Bowl-caliber and they played like it.

Furthermore, both teams knew the winner would host the AFC Championship Game. Houston had come out of the wild-card round and upset San Diego the day before. Everything was right there for the Steelers. Bradshaw was 21/30 for 230 yards, while the defense held Miami to 25 yards rushing. The final was 34-14.

The weather for the AFC title game wasn't icy and slick this time, but Campbell didn't have much more luck running this year than he did the previous season. The Steelers held him to 15 yards on 17 carries. But this year's Houston team didn't roll over.

Houston had talent in other areas of their team, notably two excellent outside linebackers in Robert Brazile and Ted Washington, along with a very good secondary. Safety Vernon Perry, who had intercepted four passes in San Diego the week before, continued his astonishing postseason play by picking off Bradshaw and taking it 75 yards to the house, giving Houston the early 7-0 lead. After the teams traded field goals, Bradshaw got in gear and rifled touchdown passes to Cunningham and Stallworth, sending Pittsburgh to halftime with a 17-10 lead.

Houston was driving for the tying touchdown in the third quarter when the play by which this game is remembered took place. Pastorini lofted a third-down pass toward the back right corner of the end zone for tight end Mike Barber. He caught it, tried to drag both his feet and get them inbounds. Did he do it and maintain possession?

The officials conferred. As NBC, then the network of the AFC, showed repeated replays, even instant replay couldn't tell anything conclusive. The ruling was an incomplete pass. Houston had to settle for a field goal. And even though there was a lot of game left, it all effectively ended there. Pittsburgh got a field goal of their own and then tacked on an insurance touchdown. They were going back to the Super Bowl, with a ticket to Pasadena.

There wouldn't be a rematch with the Cowboys in Hall of Fame quarterback Roger Staubach's final year. As enticing as that sounded, top-seeded Dallas had been stunned by the 9-7 Los Angeles Rams in the divisional playoff. The Rams then shut out Tampa Bay, who was the #2 seed, in an ugly 9-0 NFC title game.

Los Angeles had been a consistent contender throughout the 1970s and had a Super Bowl-worthy team several times, even if they kept coming up short. It's ironic that the most mediocre of their 1970s playoff teams would be the one to make a Super Bowl.

Los Angeles still gave Pittsburgh fits. They scored an early touchdown, kept the Steeler offense under control and led 13-10 at half.

They would intercept Bradshaw three times before it was over, and an upset bigger than any Super Bowl game since Joe Willie Namath guaranteed the 18-point underdog Jets would beat the Baltimore Colts in 1968 seemed in the offing. Even when Pittsburgh reclaimed the lead at 17-13, the Rams came right back and scored on a halfback pass from Lawrence McCutcheon to Ron Smith.

One thing Bradshaw was doing was gunning the ball and his mistakes hadn't made him gun shy. Trailing 19-17 and the game in the fourth quarter, he stepped back and rifled a deep post to John Stallworth. It was over the receiver's wrong shoulder, but Stallworth reached back, caught it and stayed on the dead run into the end zone for a 73-yard scoring play.

It would be easy to say that play broke the Rams' back, but the record says otherwise. Ferragamo led his own team right back down the field, but Lambert came up with an interception to kill the drive. Now it was Franco's time to take over and Harris eventually plunged over from the 1-yard line for a clinching score in a 31-19 game.

Bradshaw's 309 passing yards made him game MVP for the second straight year, but a heckuva case could be made for Stallworth, whose spectacular catch saved the game, or Lambert, who'd been in the middle of things all day on defense and made the key pick.

What mattered to the Steelers though is that they won their fourth Super Bowl before anyone else even got to three.

## **EPILOGUE**

The slogan "One For The Thumb" animated Pittsburgh's push for a fifth Super Bowl trophy in 1980. That didn't pan out. The Steelers were competitive, but went 9-7 and missed the playoffs. It signaled the start of a decade where the franchise was often competitive, but never a true Super Bowl contender.

The signature players began to age, and then depart. Pittsburgh still made the playoffs in the strike year of 1982, but lost quickly in the first round. They won the AFC Central in 1983, but with a record of 9-7, it wasn't overly impressive and they were quickly blown out of the postseason.

What's most notable about that '83 team is the heroic effort from Bradshaw, whose elbow was basically shot, to make his only start of the season in the penultimate week and lead the way to a win that clinched the division. It was also the last game Bradshaw would play.



Noll continued to coach the Steelers through 1991. They won another division title in 1984. An upset of John Elway's Denver Broncos in the divisional round got Pittsburgh back to an AFC Championship Game. But they were blown out by Dan Marino's Miami Dolphins and no one was particularly surprised.

Cleveland, Houston and Cincinnati all rose in the latter part of the decade. Pittsburgh necessarily fell, but they still had one more big memorable moment--making the playoffs in 1989 and then stunning the Oilers in the wild-card game at Houston.

That was Noll's last trip to the playoffs.

The road to a fifth Super Bowl ring would take considerably longer. While Pittsburgh was the first to four titles, San Francisco and Dallas both beat them to five. Particularly galling to the Steelers was that the Cowboy's fifth crown came in a Super Bowl win over Pittsburgh following

the 1995 season, a game where quarterback Neil O'Donnell suddenly forgot how to communicate with his receivers at key moments.

But in the race for six rings, the Steelers would be first. With Ben Roethlisberger at quarterback, Pittsburgh won in 2005 under the leadership of Bill Cowher. They did it again in 2008 with Mike Tomlin on the sidelines.

The Patriots have subsequently matched the feat of winning six crowns, all during the Tom Brady era. The Steelers can proudly say their six rings are a measurement of long-term franchise success over a period of decades. And no decade was better than one where *The Steel Curtain* held sway.

