

WE'RE FROM THE TOWN WITH THE GREAT FOOTBALL TEAM*

My Life as a Pittsburgh Steelers Fan

By David Villiotti, April 2008

PREFACE

Having catalogued my life by the ups and downs of the Pittsburgh Steelers Football Club, and having surpassed the half century mark in age, I endeavored to author a memoir of my life as a fan. This perhaps would be suited for a time capsule for my children, or alternatively as a project for a publisher whose business was really, really slow.

For the past few years, I've written a number of articles, under the screen name, Swissvale72 for a few Pittsburgh Steelers related websites, most notably, and of longest duration, was an association with Stillers.com, prior to my falling into disfavor with management.

This manifesto had its beginnings during my weeks of teeth-gnashing after the Steelers lost to the Jacksonville Jagoffs (er...Jaguars) in the 2007 NFL Playoffs, whereupon I compiled page upon page of cathartic scribblings. I had just started to "let it go" when the NFL admitted they had erred in a late non-call in that game which would have brought the Steelers victory. Had that happened, they would have surely gone onto their 6th Super Bowl title, and I would still be dancing in the streets of New England, "behind enemy lines," where I've resided for over half my life.

The greater part of this manuscript however, was written amid the pastoral beauty of Prince Edward Island in the Canadian Maritimes, where I've been fortunate enough to own a cottage on the Gulf of St. Lawrence since 2001. Of course, this ownership was made possible by the US Dollar having been worth over \$1.50 CAD at the time. There's no way on God's green earth that this would have been possible now, what with the Loony outpacing the Dollar in today's moribund economy.

As you might have guessed, I'm given to digressions, and this rambling will be no exception. I ventured to my PEI seaside paradise, a veritable writer's haven, in March, 2008 intent on writing not only this piece, but also a work-related project, as well as starting on a long overdue diet. Toward this end, I brought all of my sustenance along with me; two bags of Tostitos, four cans of tuna, and a case of beer. One should note that since I was traveling to Canada, I brought Labatt's Blue, brewed in Canada, and sold there for \$18 a 12-pack. It's imported to the US, where in New Hampshire, the Live Free or Die State, I can buy this import for \$8 a 12-pack, and carry it back over the border. Nifty, eh? My favorite beer is actually a New Hampshire product, Smuttynose Pale Ale, but at \$14 a 12-pack, was too rich for my blood presently.

Enough of this preamble; on to the story.

*From "The Steelers Polka" by Jimmy Psihoulis

JANUARY, 2008

It is the winter of my Steelers Discontent. The Black & Gold have been dispatched from the playoffs at their earliest juncture in 14 years, victimized by their rookie head coach playing "not to lose" with a 1-point lead and 3 minutes remaining...and losing. This abrupt exit generates the most excruciating of fates, needing to suffer through three more football weekends absent my team. When January comes up on the calendar, the goal as a Steelers fan is to live to fight another day, play another game, extend the season. The Steelers season ends, and days are darker, winter is colder, life is simply less happy.

I've also been suspended, for the next several decades, from Stillers.com, the website that I've frequented for the past 10 years, the site which I served as a staff writer for the past three seasons, and off-seasons, composing "frivolous bullshit."

Thus, left with a football team prematurely eliminated, and a writing addiction unfed, I've sat down with my lone resources, the 2007 Pittsburgh Steelers Media Guide, and a memory completely unfiltered of all things Steelers, to begin my story.

BEHIND ENEMY LINES

Having moved to New England in 1979 in pursuit of the present-day "Mrs. Swiss," this region offered proximity to the seacoast, which was important for a seafood glutton like me, though I still say the best fish sandwiches going are at the Oyster House on Pittsburgh's Market Square. Settling in New Hampshire to work in 1985, and to live in 1991, the majestic White Mountains were easily accessible, and the Live Free or Die State offered neither a sales tax, nor a state income tax. Of course, for that privilege, I pay high as hell property taxes whilst hauling my trash to the town dump every Saturday, and sinking money into a new pump for my well, and, a homeowner's worst fear, replacing my septic system at the reasonable cost of \$10K about 3 years ago.

On matters football, living in New England was a breeze when I first took up residency in 1979. Pittsburgh was in the midst of the City of Champions era. The Patriots were laughing stocks of the league. In fact, I didn't even feel like I was "behind enemy lines," as the Patriots were irrelevant, no threat at all to the Pittsburgh Steelers dynasty. I was much more cognizant of the CleveBrownies spies. I was living in Haverhill (pronounced Hey-vrull), Massachusetts in the mid-80s when a nice couple, with a dog, moved in across the street. I greeted them, one of those fairly rare times when I'm appropriately social, then after a few minutes of aimless chatter, I was aghast, and retreated to the sanctuary of my own home. "I can't believe it," I told Mrs. Swiss, "I come all the way up here to

Massachusetts, and The Enemy moves in across the street. How did they find me here?" They were from Ohio, Browns fans, and the Browns, behind Bernie Kosar, were finally winning at TRS, winning the AFC Central Division, losing heartbreakers in the AFCCG to the Denver Broncos. I proceeded to water their plants while they were on vacation (plants...sissy browns fans). I can't recall their names, having immediately and forever after that initial conversation referred to him as simply "The Enemy." I still enjoy my chance meetings with Browns fans. I was at my son's school concert last spring, and ran into a Browns fan who I'd not seen in some time. "Hey Jim," I said happily, "not seen ya in awhile. We gonna own you again this year?" And I laughed like hell, as Jim, stone-faced, did not smile. And, guess what, we DID own the CleveBrownies again last year. I know, I know. It might not happen this year. Ya know what?? It **will** happen. And as recently as this April, at my kids' swim banquet, I met a very friendly Browns fan. I was cordial. I was magnanimous. I only once reminded him that we've taken his team for 9 in a row. He told me that he makes a yearly trip to Cleveland for a Browns game, and that last season he had been seated nearby a former Brown. Did I remember a player by the name of....Joe Jones? My eyes glazed over, I frothed at the mouth, tremors took over my body. He invited me to his home for his Annual Browns/Steelers Party. One of the attributes of aging is knowing oneself, knowing one's strengths, but also one's foibles. I can guarantee that if I attend this event, there will be no follow-up invitation. Speaking of invites, the mild-mannered guy that does investments for my place of employ is from Cleveland, a Browns fan, though I tell **him** what's going on with his team. Every year he suggests we watch a Steelers-Browns game, "get the wives together." "Uh, Bill," I say, "I'm not sure that's such a good idea."

Anyway, back to the dastardly New England Patriots. Starting in those same mid-80s, every August when the pre-season started, I would say to my Patriots friend, Stupid Charlie, "Chaw-lee...Hall of Fame Game today. Let's see, we've got Terry Bradshaw and Mel Blount going in. How many Patriots are being inducted? What's that? None, you say. Oh, too bad. How many Patriots are in the Hall of Fame. NONE?? Get out!!"

And so it went every year. The Patriots were the harmless hosts. The Steelers were the legendary guests. The Patriots were always blacked out, rumored to move to St. Louis, or Hartford. The Sox were always first in the hearts of New Englanders, followed by the B's, the legendary Big Bad Bruins of Bobby Orr, Phil Esposito, Pie McKenzie, et al, still the heroes on the frozen ponds of New England. Include the Celtics, winners of 11 championships in 13 seasons, and resurgent with Bird, McHale, Parrish, and the Patriots were relegated to 4th and last in the hearts and minds of the New England professional sports fan. Then there are those haughty New Englanders that will attend sporting events if their ivory tower connections result in "complimentary" admission. This crowd though, is inclined to exit prior to conclusion, lest they miss the opening of the Henry Wadsworth Longfellow reading in the Back Bay.

Want to make a New Englander ape-shit? In the same sentence, say “Bill Buckner, Ben Dreith, Too Many Men on the Ice.”

I paid the Patsies little mind until the Fog Bowl of '96, one of my most miserable days as a football fan witnessing a massacre of my beloved in Foxboro, at which time I came to despise the New England Patriots, and their undeserving fan base. Then, came the '01 and '04 AFCCGs, and my heartless sentence of needing to fly from Pittsburgh, back to New Hampshire with legions of Patriot fans, and my disdain grew.

I'm now living in occupied territory, the only region of the country where we as Steelers fans can't talk shit with impunity. It doesn't stop me though. I still do. It's just that I must engage in Gorilla warfare; I'm a terrorist in New England. I persist with my mantra of 5>3. I pick my spots. I also am atypically outgoing when it comes to my people, fellow Steelers fans. It's not often that I strike up a conversation with perfect strangers. Have on some Steelers gear though, my hand's extended; my ugly mug is beaming. I'm traversing New Hampshire, taking my kids to one of their countless swim meets and pass a vehicle with a Steelers sticker; I'm laying on the horn, flashing the thumbs up sign, much to the embarrassment of my offspring.

Sometimes, my hatred for the Patriots is so intense, that I must also root against the Red Sox, with whom I have no beef. The Sox continue to rule New England. Super Bowl angst? No problem; pitchers and catchers reported within days following. It's just “Manny being Manny.” My reasoning for turning on the Sox at times is thus. Both teams have the same fans, and I want those Patriot fans, some to whom I'm related by marriage, to know no joy.

The last two years, priceless!! The Patriots' seasons ending with respective losses in the final minute of the AFCCG and Super Bowl. Last year, the Pats blew a 21-3 lead; this year the previously undefeated Pats picked a helluva time to bring the heat, going man up on Plaxico!! I fling open my back door, I scream with delight in the direction of Neighbor Chuck. I come into work beaming. I drive through Dick's Sunoco down the street, horn blaring, waving my Terrible Towel. I listen to the buffoon Fred Smerlas, and the fathead Pete (The Meat) Shepherd on Boston's WEEI, cry and moan and make excuses. Nirvana!!

The light shone on expatriates in New England late in the night of this year's February 3rd. Living Behind Enemy Lines, in New England, sucks. But sometimes, we get to have a shit-eating grin of which there's no quit. 5>3.

FAMILY OF ORIGIN...SWISSVALE DAGOS

December 15, 1963: Sitting with my dad, watching a pre-game interview with end (no “wide receivers” in those days), Buddy Dial, just before the Steelers kick

off against the New York Giants in the season finale. Should the Steelers win or tie, they'll proceed to the NFL Championship Game for the first time in their 30-year history. Dial, dressed in a suit and tie, standard gentleman's attire for going on TV in the day, lifts his wing-tip, revealing "Go Steelers" written in chalk. Dad says, "If I had a hundred bucks, I'd bet it on the Steelers." Well, it's a good thing that Dad was a struggling dago barber, as Ed Brown, the drunkard that played quarterback for the Steelers picked the worst of weeks to go on the wagon. With a week of sobriety under his belt, Brownie misfired with his passes all day, the Steelers lost to the Giants, 33-17, and went home to once again, watch the Championship Game on TV.

Dad served in Hawaii during WWII, The Big One, wrote to his buddy's female cousin from the time he entered the Army in January, 1942, until he came home in October, 1945. He met his pen pal for the first time then, heard her voice for the first time, and married her on December 1st. He was a Rankin Dago, she an East Liberty Guinea. His brood hailed from Naples (Neapolitan), hers from Calabria (Calabrese). Mom's dad had lost touch with five cousins in New York, one of whom was a priest, the other four were Mafioso. It turns out that these boys were Murder Incorporated boss Albert Anastasia (Mom's maiden name) and his brothers. Mom denied this until the day we saw a picture of Albert (who was shot to death in a barber's chair in New York in '58) and anyone could see that Uncle Louie, Mom's brother, was a spitting image of him. Mom's dad passed away when she was 16, whereupon my Nunna wore different shades of black for the remaining 53 years of her time on earth. Her dad's passing forced Mom to drop out of school, and go to work to help support the struggling family. Mom and Dad settled in the Boro of Swissvale, a municipality abutting the City of Pittsburgh. They moved into Dad's family home on Woodstock Avenue, right across from the Moose where my uncle, Oney Ferarri, can still drink on Sunday morning. The home that they lived in, at the time, was inhabited by both of my grandparents, all of Dad's four siblings, and two additional spouses. Nine months, 19 days after the wedding day, on a Sunday that the Steelers won their opener against the Chicago Cardinals, 14-7, my brother Tony was born. His shoulders were so big coming out that Mom swore he'd be her first and last. Mom and Dad lived on the 3rd floor of Woodstock Avenue until the birth of their second son, Ron, named after Death Valley Days, Twenty Mule Time Borax, Ronald Reagan. After that, my Aunt Tess and Uncle Angelo Iole took up residency on the 3rd floor, and had their two babies, while Mom and Dad bought their first home.

Uncle Oney lives there by himself now. Well, he lives there with his westerns (his porn collection; what's an 88-year old to do?). Oney's other prize possession is his nickel slot machine, always used by Oney to earn beer money during holidays. He'd offer all family members a "fast count" of about a dozen nickels to get started, then rig the thing so that nobody would hit whilst emptying their pockets of all other change and singles. The exception was when I brought the future Mrs. Swiss over to meet Oney, and the first nickel she put in....jackpot...an

accomplishment that I've yet to achieve. Oney was on the phone to Mom, "Get this lover outta here," he said. Oney still calls Mom daily; I think he always had a thing for her. As late as last October, he was making a pitch to be Mom's roommate when she stayed overnight for my niece's wedding at the Airport Holiday Inn.

Anyway, Dad went to Barber School on the GI Bill, fathered two more boys, of which I was the youngest, and worked long hours cutting hair at Tony's Barber Shop in Swissvale, until "the goddamn Beatles ruined my (his) business." I didn't know at the time, and wouldn't know until I was in my 30s that Dad was actually saying "Doddamn," as being a good Catholic, he would never take the Lord's name in vain. Speaking of Catholicism, I dodged a bullet at birth that may well have plagued me throughout life. Dad wanted to name me Pius, after the Pope. Common sense prevailed, and my brother Tony, not quite 9, was assigned the task of naming me. He chose David, after Davy Crockett, he of the coonskin cap, popular at the time. It's a damn good thing that Tony didn't use the power that had been invested in him with naming rights to mess with his Baby Bro. On the contrary (and please, get used to the digressions), Tony liked the name so much that he named his son David. I, in turn, named my boy Anthony. Dad had this thing with names. He wanted to name his second son Alfonso, after his dad. Except no one called my Grandpap Alfonso; he was Mike. Anyway, my grandma, Alfonso's wife, said, "Don't you dare hang that name on that boy." And thus, he was Ronald Alfonso. I have no middle name; there weren't enough to go around. One more thing on names, just to tell the whole story, before we get into football. Dad and his two brothers all spelled their last name differently. Uncle Joe, the youngest, kept the original spelling, "Vigliotti." Dad and Uncle Chuck spelled it "Villiotti" and "Veyliotti" respectively, the varieties being due to the handwritten transcriptions of their last name when they were enrolled in school.

Mom and Dad were very good friends of Johnny Catanzano, original owner of Swissvale's Triangle Bar & Grill. In fact, Dad ate the first battleship created by Johnny Catz, the 27-inch hoagie for which the Triangle remains famous. "Good sandwich, doddamnit," said Dad. I would later work in this same Triangle Bar, making these battleships, 6 at a time, and tending bar as a 19-year-old. Of course, one needn't have been very conversant with mixed drinks to bartend at the Triangle...not many ingredients in a shot of "Dirty Bird" (Old Crow).

My Steelers fandom didn't really come from Dad. He was much more the baseball fan. My football passion came from my brother, Tony, nearly 9 years my senior. I've only recently learned the trauma to which Tony was subjected in the late '50s. He reported being too sick to go to church one Sunday, but evidenced a remarkable recovery when Uncle Louie called from his East Liberty home, having an extra ticket to the Steelers game, wanting to take young Anthony. "Nope," Dad said into the receiver, "Anthony was too sick to go to church; he's not going to some doddamn football game." Tony, ever since, has

categorically rejected organized religion. Tony's first game was the '64 opener, right before he went off to his freshman year at Penn State. He got to go with the bookies that hung out at Uncle Chuck's gas station. Somehow, I don't think that the books had been to church that morning. Oh, Steelers lost to the Rams, 26-14.

Tony never strapped on the pads, or put on a helmet, but was a studious football fan nonetheless. He was my first coach, subjecting me to his personal version of "Station Boys" in the summer of '67, prior to my entering 8th grade. Tony may not have been well-schooled on technique, but he did convey toughness to his little brother. Tony, a Penn State student, would return home from his summer job, take me out to the backyard with my pads and helmet, and proceed to kick my ass unmercifully for the next two hours. His favorite drill was to place a dollar bill on the ground, tell me that I could keep it if I could grab it, then use a combination of feet, knees, fists and elbows to knock me down, and keep me down. I did manage to grab the dollar a few times though. Dad would come out to the porch, yell at Tony, "Leave that kid alone, doddamnit." I would respond, weakly, "Its okay, Dad.....I like it." Never one to excel in sports requiring eye-hand coordination, hitting a baseball, raquet sorts, etc.; I was able to hold my own catching a football, due to a Tony Special. He would have me place my back against the wall, and like a Santa Ana firing squad, stand ten feet away, and fire passes at me with all the strength he could muster. Rather than be impaled, I learned to catch with my hands.

Brothers 2 and 3, Ralph and Ron, were latecomers, bandwagoneers, as Steelers fans. When Tony was away at Penn State, they would tease me about the Steelers, make me cry. Steelers would lose a heartbreaker, as they were wont to do, and they would suggest that we feed the Steelers to Fuzzy, our dog. Come 1972, Ralph and Ron, along with so much of the local populace, became big-time backers of the Black & Gold.

THE EARLY YEARS: PITT STADIUM DAYS

A lifelong addiction was born on September 19, 1965. I was a lad of 10 for my first trip, taken with my 19-year-old brother Tony on the morning of September 19, 1965. It cost \$4 to sit in the lower end-zone. The aging edifice rose into the sky as one climbed Oakland's De Soto Street. I remember the cigar smells, the signs around the 10 yard line that said "Paydirt" with an arrow pointing toward the goal line, the band playing "Fight On." I also remember, later in the decade, seeing Willie Stargell and Dock Ellis, among the commoners in the cheap seats, wrapped in fur coats, and swilling shots from a common bottle of whiskey. There were no Terrible Towels, no Steelers Fight Song. The Steelers played that '65 season under the tutelage of Mike Nixon, hastily promoted from the staff of Raymond (Buddy) Parker when the still 3rd winningest coach in Steelers history abruptly walked out in a dispute over personnel with the owner's son, Dan Rooney. This Nixon was not "The One."

That September day, the Steelers, ahead 9-7 at the half, went down to the eventual NFL Champion Packers, 41-9. Tony, always one to enjoy his walks, convinced me to walk home, Oakland to Swissvale, quite the hike, in exchange for his buying me a Steelers pennant. My favorite player, John Henry Johnson, was injured on the Steelers opening possession, and would never again set foot on an NFL field as a player. I met John Henry in October of that year at an autograph session at the East Hills McDonald's in Penn Hills. Dad, encouraging his shy youngest son by pushing him forward, his "baby" as he was fond of introducing me, even into adulthood, said to John Henry, about me, "He thinks you're better than Jim Taylor," to which John Henry replied, "Man....that's sayin' somethin'." John Henry's autograph stayed in our Swissvale home for almost 35 years, somehow disappearing when Dad passed away in 1989 and Mom sold the house.

My next trip to Pitt Stadium was on Halloween, Steelers versus Dallas Cowboys. Steelers had won their first game a week earlier, against the Iggles, behind Jim Bradshaw's 3 picks, after 5 consecutive losses to start the season. The most painful of these losses was a loss to the Browns at Cleveland in the final 2 minutes on the Saturday night of World Series weekend, a Steelers-Browns tradition.

This was my first experience with a wonderful Steelers practice of the time, "Youth Day." It's amusing following ticket sales now on E-Bay. The Steelers would regularly draw less than 20,000 fans in the mid-60s. Youth days were offered about 4 times a year, where fans aged 16 & under, who knew someone that worked in town, could buy a ticket for one dollar at the Steelers downtown ticket office during the week. These tickets were in the North EZ, and sold full price for \$3, less than the South EZ, as it required the fan to traverse the full length of Cardiac Hill. What a walk!! My dad dropped my fat little 10-year-old ass off at the foot of DeSoto Street, and I thought I'd never make it up the hill. For future games, I convinced Dad to drop me off at the top of the stadium, then I'd walk through the gates and join the Steelers peasantry. At the last game of the year, I'd give Dad two bucks for gas, felt like a big shot. Of course, 2 bucks then filled the tank halfway. We'd go to 9:00 mass at Madonna Del Costello in Swissvale, dubbed "Big Winky's," as it had the same roofline as the abutting hamburger joint on Braddock Avenue. There were a trio of Catholic churches in Swissvale. There was Madonna, the Dago church, St. Anselm's, know simply as St. A's, the Irish church, and St. Barnabas, the Hunkie church. Anyway, after church, Dad would run me down to Oakland. Ten years old...by myself at an NFL game!!

The Steelers 2nd straight victory on this day that they masqueraded as an NFL football team would be their final win of the season. They almost made it 3 in a row the following week, but lost a lead over the Cardinals in the final two minutes on a long-TD to Billy Gambrell, whereupon scoundrels Ron and Ralph teased me, bringing me to tears. This was the game where Larry Wilson, the original

practitioner of the safety blitz, playing with a pair of broken hands, picked a pass and took it in for a TD.

I went back again with Tony a few weeks later to see the Steelers battle the Washington Redskins. It wasn't much of a battle; Redskins won 31-3 in a driving rainstorm. Tony and I sat faithfully in our upper EZ seats, not leaving until 9 seconds remained, and having a discussion prior to doing so about whether we should leave early. My brand new coat shrank. Mom gave Tony hell.

My final Pitt Stadium trip of the season was for the finale against the Eagles. The highlight of a 47-13 loss was Marv Woodson taking a pick back for a TD for the Steelers. We saw a record setting performance that day, as Tommy Wade threw 7 interceptions for the Black & Gold. He was yanked, and Bill Nelson threw another pair.

The '66 season brought new coach Bill Austin, hired off of the staff of Vince Lombardi's champion Packers. There were other candidates waiting in the wings, but apparently a good word from Lombardi was enough for Steelers owner Art Rooney, and he called off the rest of the interviews. The season was off to a promising start as the Steelers led the Giants by 11 in the 4th quarter, on September 11, but then Homer Jones, from Pittsburg, Texas, caught a 98-yard TD and did something novel...he spiked the ball! I had certainly never before seen a spike, and Homer Jones may have been the originated this long-standing celebration, though memory tells me that the other candidate was Elmo Wright of the University of Houston, who combined the spike with exaggerated knee-pumping. The Steelers trailed by 3 late, but a Mike Clark FG salvaged a tie. After a win the following week, the Steelers were undefeated after 2 games!! . After 5 straight losses, I attended my first Steelers-Browns game. There were busloads of Cleveland drunks rambling up Cardiac Hill, hanging out the windows, screaming unintelligible phrases....big, red bulbous noses. I experienced the fights in the bleachers, the fires. Lou (The Toe) Groza missed an extra point, Paul Martha made a late pick in the red zone, Steelers won, 16-6. I held a sign saying "Bomb the Browns." I was back the following week carrying a "Cut the Cards" placard and the Steelers beat St. Louis. The Steelers concluded a 5-8-1 campaign with two road wins, scoring 104 points. Roy Jefferson caught 4 TDs in the season finale against the expansion Falcons. The '66 season was my first of 3 straight years of attending all 7 games, usually by myself as Tony was off studying at Penn State. With the 4 youth days, it cost me all of \$13, earned .from my Pittsburgh Press paper route

Gayle Sayers took the opening kickoff of the '67 season back for a TD, but the Steelers crushed the Bears, 41-13 that day, holding the Kansas Comet to 2 yards rushing on 7 carries. The following week I saw Jim Bakken kick an NFL record 7 FGs in the Cards 28-14 win over the Steelers, the first of 5 straight Steeler losses (5-game losing streaks were popular in those days for the "Rooney men," as dubbed by the Press). I made my way down to the field in a rainstorm at the

conclusion of the season finale, a loss to the Redskins. I said "Good game, Sonny," to Mr. Jurgensen, to which he replied with a snort. The following week, the Steelers concluded the season with a win over the champion Packers, the last team to beat a Lombardi-coached Packers team. The Steelers finished 4-9-1.

The '67 season was also my first season of organized football, a 165 pound, 12 year old eighth grader. I didn't play much on the team dominated by 9th graders. When I advanced to 9th grade, I started both ways for Dickson Junior High, losers of all 3 games. I went on to play high school and college football, but the biggest wackjobs I had as coaches were in Junior High, Head Coach "Henny" Clougherty, and his trusty assistants, "Uncle Frank" DeLucia and "Piggy" Hudale. Swissvalians, or Valers, regularly elicited colorful nicknames. Growing up, Jim Ofkansky was "Yapus;" John Shields was "Schmo. Bobby McDonough was "Gladys," his Mom's name. The three Ludwig boys were all "Limey" as their mom emigrated from England. The Pozek brother were "Hunky" as they were were, well....Hunkies. And my all-time favorite...Petie Ledwich was "Jackass." Okay, 1968 opening game, Dickson Junior High vs. Edison Junior High. I erred in my positioning late in the game, continuing to line up off of the tackle's outside shoulder even when said tackle split several yards off of the guard. The Edison halfback ran through the gap for a big-gainer, and the next play, did the very same thing. We came out on the short end of a 7-0 score. Later that week, at a pep rally which the entire school attended on a mandatory basis prior to our only home game, Henny, per his usual practice, lined up all of the players on stage, put his arm around each one in turn, and said a few kinds words. When he came to me, he said "Villiotti here stunk like shit last week. He doesn't do better this week; his ass'll be on the bench." True story....and I wasn't surprised. We weren't pass protecting too well in practice one day. Henny had the entire line, all seven of us, take our stances, then he proceeded to walk down the line, kicking each one of us in the ass. I was used to this. Kicking me in the ass was one of Dad's favorites as well....must have been a generational thing. Ralph and I had to do dishes one day, but instead proceeded to spray the kitchen with the sink hose. Dad came in, said, "Get the hell outta here, doddamnit," and kicked us in the ass. A kick in the ass, versus having to wash the dishes? A no-brainer; that was a good trade on any day. Assistant Coach Uncle Frank mastered the feat of making a player run a lap for punishment, whilst giving chase and kicking the player in the ass. Try that sometime! Uncle Frank was a postman by day, a coach by afternoon. Uncle Frank was pinched though in some gambling sting; he was running numbers, I believe. He lost his post office job, after going "postal" on us almost daily.

Back in the late '60s, Tony and I were regulars at St. Vincent's sharing the hillside with a couple dozen other Steelers fanatics. And now, they draw thousands?? We'd adjourn to a local pitch & putt following the morning session, reconvene for the afternoon. The Steelers intra-squad game was held annually at Jeannette Stadium, nice digs for a high school team. Patrons were free to go

down to the field pre-game and collect autographs. I got a ton, none of which I've kept.

The '68 season opened with 6 straight losses. Dick Shiner and Kent Nix were the Donner & Blitzen of Steelers quarterbacking. The Steelers faced the Eagles in the "O.J. Simpson Bowl." The Battle of the Titans was tied, 3-3 at the 2-minute warning, with the Iggles facing a 4th & 1 at their own 10 yard line. The Eagles called in a running play, attempting to pick up the first down. The Steelers defense rose up and stopped them, and a few plays later called in Booth Lusteg, known for practicing by kicking paper cups on the sideline, to kick the game winner. In retrospect, was this really such a bad move by the Eagles? Had they punted, with no overtime provision, there would be no way that this hapless bunch could secure a victory. More likely, the Steelers would gain possession in Eagles territory, and be in position to drive but a few yards (goalposts were on the goal line), and then kick the game winner. Go for it, pick up the yard, and maybe the Eagles put together a winning drive. At any rate, neither the Steelers nor the Eagles produced the worst record. The Eagles drafted Purdue star Leroy Keyes with the 3rd pick, and the Pittsburgh Steelers, after winning a second game, and tying another, held the 4th pick, and selected relatively unknown defensive tackle Joe Greene from North Texas State. "Joe Who?" proclaimed the Pittsburgh dailies. The third round of the '69 draft brought OT Jon Kolb from Oklahoma State, and in the 10th round the Steelers selected a lanky defensive end from Arkansas AM & N by the name of L.C. Greenwood, and then picked his stockier college teammate on the defensive line, Clarence Washington, one round later.

Of course, Bill Austin had been dispatched into the Pittsburgh night by that time, and Mean Joe was the first selection of new coach Charles Henry Noll, participating in the NFL Draft the day after his hiring. Noll was the Steelers second choice. They had been turned down by Penn State Coach Joe Paterno, having then completed his 4th year at the helm of the Nittany Lions as well as his 2nd consecutive 11-0 season. Noll was hired from the staff of Don Shula, whose Colts had been defeated by the Jets and Joe Namath (Roll Tide) in SB III, the greatest upset of all time. These were the days of course, prior to ESPN, and the proliferation of sports, and related events on TV, that the draft was held on a Tuesday, and followed by a few fans via radio reports from Steelers headquarters. These were also the days where a teenager from Swissvale became a seer of early Steelers picks for a few years. Tony and I had an annual tradition, on Draft Eve, of making our respective calls for the Steelers first pick. In '69, I made the call of Mean Joe Greene. In '70, along with every other football fan in the Free World, I correctly chose Terry Bradshaw, QB of Louisiana Tech. It was in 1971, on Draft Eve, that I cemented my stellar rep, however. I followed my selection of Frank Lewis, WR of Grambling, by stating, again on Draft Eve, that in the second round, the Steelers would select Johnstown

linebacker Jack Ham, of Penn State. I made the call of Franco Harris, RB of Penn State in '72, whereupon my draft prowess met its kryptonite.

The new coach had a celebrated beginning with an opening day victory in '69 over the Lions, Warren Bankston breaking several tackles with his 13 yard sprint around left end for the winning TD. There would be no more celebrations that season, as the Nollmen (a term coined by Pat Livingston of the Press) proceeded to lose 13 straight games. Celebrated though, was the play of the rookie DT. Mean Joe was a pleasure to watch, and soon becoming everybody's hero. I was now a high school sophomore, trying to model my play after Mean Joe. I did get my ass kicked out of a game that year against Duquesne, something Mean Joe did several times during his initial campaign. Prior to being ejected, I suffered the embarrassment, when lined up in the center of the front line on the kick return team, of having the kickoff hit me square in the head, recovered by the Dukes. I wonder if that ever happened to Mean Joe? I started for the Swissvale Gold Flashes that year, at Middle Guard (no nose tackles back then). As the only sophomore to earn a letter, my varsity jacket was absolutely my proudest possession. A few years later, though, Ralph wore it while he worked on cars. My attendance record was broken that year. Tony (now a college graduate) and I made a decision to attend the Steel Bowl basketball tournament, held every December at the Civic Arena with Pitt, Duquesne and two other foes, and skipped the season finale, a loss to the Giants.

Pitt Stadium memories concluded as far as the Pittsburgh Steelers were involved. There were some college football memories worth noting, though.

I fondly remember a number of Pitt-Penn State battles. It seemed like they played every year at Pitt Stadium for awhile. Being a Penn State fan, I spotted a friend Pitt and 44 points for a mid-1960s bet, and won, as PSU trounced the Panthers, 65-9. I remember Joe Paterno berating backup QB Mike Cooper for throwing a TD pass when he was under orders not to throw. I remember the PSU contingent chanting, "Shit on Pitt." I remember the Franco Harris-Lydell Mitchell duo beating Pitt 28-7 in 1971. I remember watching Tony Dorsett of the National Champion Panthers keying 2 close victories against Syracuse and West Virginia in '76. I remember my lime green Plymouth losing its transmission fluid in the middle of Oakland just before one of those games. I remember making it to the game; I don't remember what happened to the car. I remember watching Notre Dame beat Pitt on a hot-as-hell day to open the '77 season. Finally, for me, was a Penn State upset of Pitt, 15-13 in '78 as Pitt failed on a late 2-pt. conversion try. I wasn't there for this one, but who could forget Penn State falling behind a heavily favored Dan Marino-led Pitt team in '81, then storming back for a 48-14 shellacking!!

Pitt Stadium....splinters in the ass, spit on the ground, fires in the bleachers....a few memorable wins....quite the place for a 10-year old!!

FORBES FIELD MEMORIES

In addition to being a football treatise, certain other aspects of Pittsburgh life merit comment. The old ballyard, located in Oakland on Forbes Avenue, within the “campus” of the University of Pittsburgh, named for the British general of French & Indian War fame, who is credited with naming our City, was a fan’s delight. Babe Ruth hit his final homerun at Forbes Field. It happened to be the first ball to clear the right field roof, and was one of 3 homers that The Babe hit that day. There was never a no-hitter pitched at Forbes Field. And of course, Forbes Field contained the famed “Alabaster Plaster” infield, causing a sure double play ball in the bottom of the eighth inning of the 7th game of the 1960 World Series, to strike Yankee shortstop Tony Kubek in the throat, preserving the Buccos’ at-bat, which they turned into a 9-7 lead on their way to a 10-9 victory an inning later.

I can’t really begin on Forbes Field memories without more background on my dad, Tony the Barber. I’ve never met the type of fan like Dad was of the Pittsburgh Pirates. He went to a slew of games at Forbes Field, watched every game that was televised on Channel 2. He listened to every game on KDKA, all summer long, on our front porch, or at the shop. Oh...I almost forgot; he HATED the Pirates, rooted against them every night!! Here’s why:

1. Traded his favorite player, KiKi Cuyler, when he was a boy. He was previously a Pirates fan, as was the rest of his family. His dad, my Grandpap, “Mike,” smashed the family radio when Gabby Hartnett hit his “Homer in the Gloamin’ for the Cubs on September 28, 1938, ending the Pirates’ pennant hopes.
2. Regularly disappointed by Pirates management on promotions, facility practices, etc. Examples:
 - a. My first game was supposed to be a bring your kid, gates open early, meet the players, get autographs, etc. Well, the Pirates neglected to say that this only applied to holders of box or reserved-seat tickets. We were bleacherites, sitting there amonth the proletariat, right-field grandstand sitters at best.
 - b. Pirates ALWAYS shut out the lights within 5 minutes of the conclusion of a night game. This drove Dad crazy!!
 - c. Parked right behind the right-center field iron gate one night. Pirates locked the gate! He could see his car from his seat, but had to walk all the way around the park to get to the doddamn thing!
3. Could not abide Bob Prince, the Gunner. I won an ashtray once for my dad at Kennywood. The ashtray had a picture of a horse’s ass standing at a bar, and said “There’s one in every bar.” Dad glued the Gunner’s picture to said ass. Dad would scream at the radio, laugh like a hyena when the Buccos lost a close one. He would yell, “Princell (his nickname for the Gunner), I hope they run your ass outta town on a boxcar,” or better yet, “Hey Prince....go shit in yer hat and pull it over yer ears.” As

an aside, I loved the Gunner's description of the announcing of a hockey game, "We got the puck; they got the puck; we got the puck; they got the puck." Ever listen to a hockey game in French? I just did; Bruins vs. Les Habitants. It was in the car with my family, and I was being intentionally annoying, something that I do occasionally. I wonder if even the French can follow it though.

4. A bit later, could not abide Dave Parker, the Cobra (called him "Ol Bubble-Ass") or John Candelaria, who never pitched more than 5 innings (but what a 5 the Candyman pitched).

As a last note on Dad, he could have gone to the 7th Game of the 1960 World Series. One of his customers offered him his choice of tickets for Game 6 or Game 7. "Series'll never go 7," said Dad. Mom and Dad went to Game 6....Bucs lost 11-0. The next day Maz homers to bring the World Series title to Pittsburgh. Dad was cutting hair; Mom was making sauce, when the City plunged into mass hysteria.

This was Dad's luck though. A numbers guy came by his shop every day, pre-lottery. Dad always bet 619, as our street address was 1619. Sure enough, on more than one occasion, the numbers guy didn't show, Dad didn't put a bet down, 619 hit. By the way, Mom had some dago book of dreams, connecting every possible dream to a number. Dream about a manicotti, play 242. Sex dreams? Maybe they were all in the 900s? I got Dad a knick-knack once, of a ship, said, "With my Luck; when my ship comes in, I'll be at the airport."

I didn't really start watching the Bucs until the '66 season. I watched the opener on TV from Atlanta, the Braves' first season there. Tony Cloninger pitched 13 innings for the Braves and blew out his arm. He was never the same; the Bucs won. For the season's first couple of weeks, I pretended to root against the Bucs, maintaining an alliance with Dad, but I secretly harbored an affinity for the hometown team. I rode the 61B, the streetcar, from Swissvale to Oakland, alone, for Bucco games. I saw Koufax beat the Bucs, 4-1 on a Saturday afternoon. He had a shutout until the ninth when Roberto Clemente put one over the right field screen.

Clemente, as has been said often, was sheer majesty. After Kirby Puckett died a little while back, I heard Mike & the Mad Dog from New York's WFAN say that statistically, Puckett and Clemente were the same player. But there was so much more to Clemente!! It gives me chills when I think of him charging a single to right, throwing behind the runner taking the wide turn at first, nailing his ass, uncorking one to the plate, almost going head over heels he threw so hard!! Clemente rounding second, all arms and legs charging to third, sliding in safely. Banging out those hits to right!! Doddamn....Clemente was a special ballplayer!

I snuck down into the boxes behind home plate one game. I watched the same pitch served up 8 consecutive times to Clemente, two strikes, low & away. He fouled off the first 7, then swung & missed. I remember one game though, on the radio from Chicago, where the Bucs trailed the Cubs by a run, two out in the ninth. Clemente fouled off 13 consecutive pitches by Ferguson Jenkins & his Orchestra (dubbed so by the Gunner), then took Ball 4. Stargell doubled him in; Bucs won in extras.

Clemente was a fearsome hitter. I remember seeing him break Bob Gibson's leg with a line drive back through the box in '67 at St. Louis. This is from Clemente: The Passion & Grace of Baseball's Last Hero by David Maraniss: "Don Drysdale, the fearsome Dodgers right-hander, acknowledged that his fear of a screaming line drive off Clemente's bat helped drive him from the game....The moment that finished Drysdale's career came on August 5, a Tuesday night in the dog days of the summer of 1969. He was on the mound at Chavez Ravine. Clemente came to the plate and smacked a line drive to center, the ball leaving the bat with such velocity that Drysdale could hear it buzz past him. ...Drysdale then 'had the sensation of a bug crawling on his neck: he reached and flicked at it. Leaning down for the resin bag, he noticed a runny substance on his finger, and still feeling the irritation, he reached up and discovered his ear was bleeding. The ball had actually taken the skin off the top of his ear on its way to center field.' He stayed in to pitch to one more batter, the young catcher, Manny Sanguillen, who was a Clemente disciple. The gopher ball that Drysdale threw to Sanguillen was his last pitch in the major leagues."

Sometimes I sat in the right field grandstand for a buck and a half. Usually, I opted for the dollar seats in the leftfield bleachers. I often went to Sunday doubleheaders with Dad; a buck for 2 games. Willie Stargell was right in front of us in left, Matty Alou in center. He hit .357 his first year with the Bucs, after batting about .230 the previous year with SanFran. Donn Clendenon at first, Maz at 2nd, Gene Alley at short (what a DP combo), Bob Bailey at 3rd, Pags at catcher, Bob Veale, Steve Blass, et al on the mound.

The refreshment stand in the bleachers was well-situated. It wasn't behind the stands, in the concourse, but rather right up against the bullpen fence, so you actually walked closer to the field to go to the stand, didn't have to miss any play. At game's end, they would give us all the hot dogs they had grilled, in a cardboard box, no buns though. That was how they tracked inventory. So we'd leave via this little gate right next to the leftfield foul pole, stuffing our faces with about a half-dozen dogs, a fat kid's delight

I saw several shot over the right-field roof, most notably the Giants' Willie McCovey....golf shots, and of course, by Willie the Starge. I saw the Bucs take a doubleheader from the Mays-McCovey Giants in '66. I sat by myself in the grandstand, looked down at Clemente, waved my Green Weenie. The

Green Weenie was introduced by the Gunner, and was the Bucco version of the Terrible Towel, without the staying power. It was intended to jinx the opposing pitcher

Forbes Field was a massive ballpark. It was .436 in straight-away center, 457 in left-center, a reach so far that the batting cage was stored out there, in the field of play, 365 to left, 375 to right center, only 300 to right, but there was the screen. The scoreboard was in left with the Longines clock sitting atop.

Great ballpark, Forbes Field.....great Bucco baseball.

TONY

Yes, I've already written about my Family of Origin, but I've made an Executive Decision (only executives on this writing team) that Tony merits his own chapter. Nearly 9 years my senior, Tony was forever in a caretaking role with me, and as a young adult, as Dad realized, could have claimed me as a dependant had not my parents done so.

Tony established his credentials as a hog early in life. As a toddler, Baby Tony was once left in his high chair within a fat baby's arm's length of a dozen donuts that were scheduled as snacks for company. When snack time came for the guests, all that was left for Mom to serve were a dozen donut "rings" as the little blimp munched around each and every hole. Due to his voracious appetite, Tony was nicknamed "Bustaloon," with that being Americanized to "Buster," which I called him until he threatened me with a severe ass-whippin' if I continued. A kindergartner when Tony was in 8th grade, our lone year attending the same school was marked by Tony, always the fast walker, applying a vice-like grip to my neck, locking his arm at the elbow, and pushing this 4-year-old to school with incredible speed. As an aside, I remember that kindergarten year, and the following first grade year, for two instances. The first was not knowing my last name, and responding when another child with the same first name, decidedly non-Dago last name, was called. Our fam apparently passed on a few things genetically. When lost at Kennywood as a young lad, Tony reported himself to authorities, whereupon the loudspeaker broadcast throughout the Park, "Will the mother of Buster Anthony report to Lost & Found." In first grade, the Pirates were in the World Series against the Yankees. My class was given the choice by our teacher of watching the World Series in class, or walking down the fire escape. No Brainer!! We chose the fire escape. Tony listened to Maz' series winning homerun while walking home from his freshman year at Taylor Allderdice High School (preceding our move of one block, from inside the City limits, to Swissvale) as our parents, probably still steamed that they had chosen the wrong game to attend, wouldn't let him cut school (poor Tony; it's a wonder he still talks to Mom).

By the way, please forgive these digressions. It's what I do. Back to Tony. Whenever my kids complain about sharing, and balk at the prospect of needing to share a room at times on a family vacation, I remind them that Tony and I shared not only a room, but shared a bed. Ralph and Ron shared a room, replete with twin beds. Tony and I? Our room had one double bed. Mom would always hear me groaning at times during the night. Don't think anything funny. I would roll over the imaginary mid-line of the bed; Tony would punch directly down the mid-line to ensure my retreat. We shared the bed for years. It wasn't so bad for me, but poor Tony. He was a high school Senior, still sharing a bed with his little brother.

Tony graduated from Penn State in '68, and thus was in prime position for becoming a Steelers season-ticket holder when Three Rivers Stadium opened in 1970. I remember reviewing the slick color brochures with him, and throwing in my two cents on which seats he should request. Of course, back then, prospective season ticket holders, being small in number, had their choice. Tony decided to forgo the 50 yard line option (a decision that would haunt him a bit 30 years later), and chose seats in the South End Zone, Upper Deck, first row, between the goalposts....awesome seats!! From the 40 yard line in, we were right on top of the play. On the transition to Heinz, the Steelers weren't offering Personal Seat Licenses (PSLs) for end zone seats, and there was no Upper South End Zone, so Tony put in his request for sideline seats. A 31-year season ticket holder at the time, Tony was assigned seats in Section 516, the next to last sideline section, between the goal line and end line. Tony knew five-year ticket holders that have seats on the 40. Unbeknownst to Tony, I wrote to Dan Rooney on his behalf. Mr. Rooney wrote back, hand-signed the letter; didn't change Tony's seats though. I had previously written to Mr. Rooney, offering to send him \$50 as my fair share when the new stadium was under consideration, as I figured my tax dollars would not be tapped as I was out of state. Mr. Rooney thanked me, but told me he couldn't take my money. He did confide in me then, though, that he was endorsing, Barack Obama, "the underdog," for President in 2008.

Tony's more intense during the game than I am, given to fits of rage, where I'm more given to fits of whine. Seriously, something will happen in the first quarter, I'm still bitchin' about it at the 2-minute warning. Tony's explosive...turns all red, screams at the TV, gets right up next to the TV, pointing at it. Once the game's over, he's able to let it go, however. Me, I hang on to it until the next week, or like now, through the winter, into the spring, might let it go around summer.

Tony's also a writer of some renown. Unlike his little brother, who specializes in "Frivolous Bullshit," Tony writes serious, well-researched useful information. His literary/media career started when he penned a letter to Myron Cope about his anticipation of each year's NFL draft. This led to Myron inviting Tony onto his show as a guest. His draft interest then led him to create "Pittsburgh Pigskin" a newsletter that covered Pittsburgh area football at all levels. I was even drafted as a reporter and sent on assignment to Morgantown to conduct an interview

with the WVU coaching staff in '76. One of the plum assignments that Tony kept for himself was attending the NFL draft at Steelers headquarters. Although his primary observation was that they served good food, he got to mingle with the media and was even selected by Stan Savran as being trustworthy enough to hold the money in the media's pool for the Steelers first draft choice. Art Rooney Jr, later fired by his brother, took a liking to Tony, though he looked like Rocky Bleier, and even took him into the draft war room. Tony, ignoring the dirty looks of Chuck Noll, got to ogle the draft board before he was led from the room. Marriage and children got in the way of the Pigskin, so he was forced to abandon the enterprise.

Tony then proceeded to do a study of the NFL draft that he sold to a number of NFL teams. He reviewed every draft choice made from 1971 through 1985 and assigned ratings to the players based on the number of years they played in the NFL, the number of starts and the number of Pro Bowls. He then summarized that information by round, by position, by college, etc. For example, he found that of all the first rounder, 77 were pro bowlers, 174 were starters for the equivalent of 4 full seasons, 98 played at least 5 years but didn't start for 4 years, 39 players played 3 or 4 years and 19 played 2 or less. Did I mention that Tony was an accountant? People say that accountants are actuaries with a personality, but I really do wonder.

Tony's also able to make a few dollars on his work, whereas I beg people to read my shit for free. Over half of the NFL teams purchased Tony's work; it financed a family trip to Disneyworld. Ladd Herzog, then of the Oilers ordered 5 copies, then lost his job a week later. Maybe 'ol Bud Adams was micro-managing the expense line.

Tony's latest work, in his retirement at an early age, while Mrs. Tony still gets up and goes to work each day (he does make the right moves), is an analysis of the major league baseball draft for the years, 1965-1999. Each year has taken him approximately 14 hours, using two computers, to enter the information on spreadsheets. Then the analysis begins. He hopes to peddle these to the MLB franchises for \$1K/per.

Tony's the holder of an amazing record that might be unmatched anywhere. Tony's attended countless games at Three Rivers, Penn State's Beaver Stadium, Heinz Field....he's never once made a Men's Room trip, never had to pee during a game. It's due to a combo of low liquid intake, good Dago bladder, and attitude. Once Tony plants his ass in a seat, there it remains. We had a routine for games at TRS. We'd get in the car, Tony would pull out the tickets, and say, "I've got the ducats." We'd arrive at the Stadium; travel the escalators to the Upper Deck. Our first glimpse of the scoreboard was always at 12:14pm...true story. We'd put our asses in the seats pre-game, and neither one of us would rise until game's end. Anyway, Tony's first date with Mrs. Tony, a Munhall girl,

was to a Steelers game on Halloween, 1976. Steelers beat the Chargers, 23-0, but lead by only 3-0 entering the 4th quarter. Mrs. Tony, at some point, told Tony that she was thirsty. He told her that he'd gladly pay for her drink, but she'd need to fetch it herself, 'cause no way was his ass moving. Thirty-two years later, they're still together. Mrs. Tony will watch games with Tony, but she persists in saying annoying shit, so his preferred perch is upstairs alone, on the edge of his bed, watching the small TV. This bladder thing must be in the genes though. Tony's son, spending his freshman year of college in Florida, once drove from the Jacksonville area direct to Pittsburgh without once stopping to pee.

Oh, this doesn't really fit here, but it's a story worth telling. During the Stanley Cup run, Tony went to quite a few Penguins games, brought his kids, with his son being around 8 at the time. There seats were right above the runway where the Pens exited the ice. Kids were forever hanging over the rail, begging for a souvenir. After one loss, affable (sic) Penguin goalie Tom Barasso offers his stick to my nephew, says, "Here; take this fuckin' piece a shit." Treasured moment.

REST OF THE BOYS

The four of us drove my poor mother crazy while Dad was "doing heads" (Dago barber lingo for "haircuts") until 7 or 8 o'clock at night, before his doddamn business was ruined, of course. I clearly remember Mom saying to me, as an 8-year old, "I'm gonna put you in a home!" and thinking, "What's this 'home' that Mom's talking about?" Little did I know that I'd start working in a children's home, Pittsburgh's Pressley Ridge School, on the North Side's Marshall Avenue, when I was 21, and 32 years later, I've not found my way out of the Home.

My brother Ralph was bad, pure and simple. Mom would say, "I hope when you have kids, they're just like you." Mom would be nursing me, so I'm told, and Ralphie's standing there, having a tantrum. "That's **my** mommy!", "Ralphie was reported to cry out. Ralph was destructive, always breaking our toys on purpose. In fact, Ron, the scientist of the family, on one of our family trips downtown, came home with a starfish that he was going to dissect. Ron laid the starfish out in his basement laboratory, arranged all of his scalpels and other implements of dissection. Along comes Ralphie with a hammer, says, "We've gotta make sure it's dead," smashes the specimen, whereupon Ronnie, now the Mad Scientist, chases him around the cellar with a hatchet.

I remember Ralphie literally having his mouth washed out with soap, big bar of Ivory between his teeth, tears streaming down his face. I remember Mom absolutely whaling on him one day as well, just beating the shit out of him. Mom's favorite tool was one of Dad's razor straps from the shop. We hid that on her for a couple years. I'd be lined up in grade school with my classmates, ready to leave school, and Dad would come walking in. "Ain't that your dad?" said one of the other boys. "Yeah, "I would reply, matter of factly, "he's here about my

brother.” Uncle Oney dubbed Ralphie, ironically, “Angel.” One Christmas, Nunna’s handing out stockings full of good stuff for all of us, at her East Liberty row house, and for the hell of it, she filled Ralphie’s stocking with coal and ashes. Funny shit!! Except Ralphie didn’t think it was so funny, hurled that stocking right into the middle of Larimer Avenue.

Ralphie was a little fat kid, too. He was so fat, matter of fact, that Mom would buy him men’s jeans, for the larger waistline, cut them off at the knee. Ralphie slimmed down though, was a singer in a rock & roll band in junior high, The Tracks of Time. He was at Penn State for a semester, McKeesport that is. He kept coming home to meet his GF, now his wife of 35 years, for lunch. I’ve known my sister-in-law since I was 10 years old, since her dad took over the little butcher shop down the street from our house. Ralphie then worked there, stocking shelves, probably making out with her behind the lemon ice. Ralphie went to mechanic’s school after dropping out of Penn State, then he got sick of grease, enrolled at Point Park, after the age of 40, and graduated on the same day as his daughter. He went on to earn his MBA.

Ralph earned his Steelers stripes finally in '05. The guy that had the heart attack when JB fumbled against Indy got all the pub. Well, Ralph had his heart attack BEFORE the game, was sweating profusely. He wouldn’t go to the hospital though ‘til the game was over. He went to his first Steelers games since the Immaculate Reception last season. God was testing his commitment, I think. Ralph, with his daughter, sat through the torrential downpours of the Baltimore and Miami Monday Nighters. He was in the house for the Jax playoff game as well.

Ralph’s different than the rest of us. We’re all mostly mild-mannered. With Tony and I, the Steelers ignite passions that are otherwise dormant. Ralph, on the other hand, looks for opportunities to hurl f-bombs, other invective and raunch. The Steelers provide him a convenient vehicle to do so.

Ron’s football career was limited to half a day. He was a big boy, the Swissvale High coach at the time talked him into going out for the team his sophomore year. Ron, nicknamed “Mr. Pip” by Uncle Oney, went to the morning practice the first day of two-a-days, came home, went to sleep, and didn’t arise until the next morning. He was all done. He went to Penn State though, and thus became a fan by osmosis. Ron hates Pitt, even though he earned his MBA down in Oakland. Ron moved to Colorado in '81, still keeps his Penn State season tickets, even though he’s not been back to a game since he went Westward Ho.

1970s: UNPARALLELLED

The decade in which I was introduced to the joys of sex, spent my 4 college years (best years of our lives, as it were), and eventually met Mrs. Swiss, also brought us the best professional football team of all time, and it was ours!!

The '70s started quietly enough. There was the move to the new stadium, but the Nollman followed up their '69 campaign of 13 consecutive losses with 3 more to open the season prior to registering their first win, finally defeating the Buffalo Bills, 23-10, on October 11 at TRS. My own season as a high school junior, which began with my getting my ass kicked, pancaked repeatedly, versus Yough, had ended prematurely in the season's 2nd game, felled by torn cartilage in my left knee against South Fayette. After surgery, I attended a late season game amid snow and ice, against Green Bay, on crutches, falling on my ass at least once. The 1970 Steelers had some great moments in the middle of the season, winning 5 of 8 games, prior to dropping their final 3. There was the Monday Nighter versus Cincinnati featuring a halfback option pass by Dick Hoak for a TD, as well as the absolute destruction of the Cleveland Browns, 28-9, beginning an annual tale of woe for the Brownies in Pittsburgh that would not end until 1986. The season finale in Philadelphia was notable for 2nd year tackle Joe Greene, complaining of being held, eventually picking up the football off of the line of scrimmage, walking off the field, and hurling the ball far into the Veterans Stadium stands. This was also the game in which Frenchy Fuqua ran for 218 yards in a losing effort, a record that stood for 36 years until bested by Fast Willie Parker on a Thursday Nighter against the Browns in '06. Of course, rookie quarterback Terry Bradshaw, the #1 pick in the draft, was horrible in 1970, throwing for only 6 TDs, while hoisting 24 interceptions. His passer rating was 31.3. Third round draft choice Mel Blount, a cornerback from Southern was burned early and often.

With all of the deserved hullabaloo over the 1974 draft, the '71 draft is forgotten, yet provided players of considerable import to the years which were to follow. Wide receiver Frank Lewis of Grambling was drafted first, and while not remembered as fondly as the receivers that were to follow, made some important contributions to the first two Super Bowl runs, leading the team in receiving in 1974. Drafted second of course, was Jack Ham, out of Penn State by way of Johnstown, the perfect linebacker, absolutely flawless. One of my frustrations in life centered on Jack Ham's helmet, purchased by Tony in a Channel 13 auction for \$250. Helmet, worn by a Hall of Famer that I could look at, that I could touch. I just couldn't fit the damn thing on my fat head!! The '71 draft also brought guard Gerry Mullins out of USC and defensive end Dwight White out of East Texas State, both in round #4. During a training camp TV interview, young Dwight was asked to describe his pass rush technique, "Well basically," he said, "I just try to off the cat." Larry Brown, drafted as a tight end, but converted to tackle in 1977, was drafted out of Kansas in the 5th round. The Steelers' second choice in the 8th round brought Texas Southern defensive tackle Ernie Holmes. Mike Wagner, a defensive back out of Western Illinois, was drafted in the 11th round, and would be a fixture in the Steelers secondary for the next 10 years.

Another pick of note, though he only stuck around for 3 years and wears no Super Bowl ring was Craig Hanneman, drafted as a guard out of Oregon State in round #6. Hanneman's remembered for 3 things. He left training camp to drive home to Washington (State of, Russ Grimm) to see his girlfriend who was breaking up with him. Secondly, he lost contain with 1 minute left in the '72 Divisional Playoff versus Oakland, whereupon Ken Stabler ran outside left end for a 30 yard TD, setting the stage for the greatest play in football history. Most importantly though, Hanneman said these words to the author Roy Blount, Jr., "We're all crazy fuckers. We're all about three bricks shy of a load," thus creating the title of the greatest sports book of all time.

The '71 season brought a bit of improvement, a 6-8 record, with the Steelers winning their first 5 at home, prior to dropping the final pair. The opener was an absolute heart-breaker at Chicago, with the Steelers holding a 15-3 4Q lead. The defense had been stout, and I clearly remember, following a penalty on a late Steelers punt which allowed the Black & Gold to retain possession, that maybe they would have been better off simply surrendering the ball to the Bears well into Chicago territory. Sure enough, a turnover soon followed, cutting the lead to 15-10, and the Bears scored late to win. I left the house with my GF, enraged.

That fall brought more rage, but oh, what joy. The Swissvale Gold Flashes team, of which I had been named "Mr. Gold Flash 1971" bringing me the honor of standing in gym shorts and t-shirt in front of a crowd while my coaches dressed me, item by item, was on its way to a season perhaps unparalleled in futility. Not only were we winless in 9 games, but we failed to score in 5 of those games. Prior to a game against the rival Duquesne Dukes, a sign in Swissvale High School read, "Hail Mary, Full of Grace, Let's Beat Duquesne to Save our Face." We were laughing stocks. The season ended as my high school career had began in September, 1969, at Yough High School, on the short end of a 7-6 heartbreaker. Whereas in '69, we had failed to score after a first down at the Yough 2, eventually missing a short field goal, my senior season ended on a failed 2-point conversion in the game's final minute. I knew then that I had to play college football, that my playing days could not end so.

The Flashes were in position to tie due to a pass from punt formation by punter/tight end Rick Kuhn. Kuhn went on to pitch in the Cincinnati Reds farm chain, and then to Boston College to play basketball, after which he spent a few years in a federal pen, convicted of fixing BC games during his playing days.. Kuhn was the vehicle employed by Rocco and Tony Perla, whose sister was a classmate of mine and quite hot. Their dad owned a Maytag dealership in Swissvale, always had the Maytag van parked in front of their house on Schoyer Street, right across from the junior high. Rocco, three years my junior was a good kid, but Tony, 4 years my senior was a bad actor from way back, with connections to Henry Hill, the gangster featured on Goodfellas. Rocco and Tony were such knuckleheads that after convincing Kuhn and two teammates to fix the game, they would go to the BC game, known friends of Kuhn from

Swissvale, and root unabashedly against Kuhnle's BC team. Kuhnle thus became the most famous Swissvale athlete since Dick Groat, Duke basketball All-American, and National League batting champion and MVP in 1960 as shortstop for the World Champion Pittsburgh Pirates.

Back to the Steelers, sort of. On Monday night, October 18th, at Kansas City, wide receiver Dave Smith, from IUP, was celebrating as he danced toward the goal line, holding the ball aloft, when said ball came dislodged absent any contact, and skipped through the end zone for a touchback. The Steelers lost, 38-16, but the Burgh was still intoxicated with joy as the Buccos the previous day had defeated the Baltimore Orioles, 2-1, in game 7 of the World Series, on the strength of a Roberto Clemente homerun, a Jose Pagan double, and a masterful pitching performance by Steve Blass, who would not be able to find the plate during the following campaign. Horns honked well into the night. It was the first major Pittsburgh championship that I could remember clearly, the previous one having been the 1960 Pirates' theatrics, though the basketball Pipers had won the first ABA Championship in '68 with Connie Hawkins (I was in the house at the Civic Arena for game #7...another story for another time). Anyway, the GF and I took off after Jackie Hernandez threw to Bob Robertson for the final out, and conducted our own celebration in Schenley Oval. While I think that any comparison of Bill Cowher to Chuck Noll is foolhardy, I still maintain that Cowher's record of only once coming up on the short end after having an 11-point lead is given short shrift. During the '71 season alone, Noll twice lost leads exceeding this margin, the opening day loss to Chicago, and then a 21-3 lead in Miami that turned into a 24-21 defeat. TB was a little better in '71, 13 TDs, 22 picks, 59.7 QB rating.

I graduated from Swissvale High in '72, and was off to tiny Lebanon Valley College to play for the Flying Dutchmen, and maybe to study a bit. I had no idea of a major, but it wasn't going to be music...or religion...two fields of study for which the small Methodist school was noted. I was fired from my summer job as a janitor in the Swissvale Public Schools, basically for being a lazy shit. It was the first of 3 summer firings, though they told me they were "laying off" the summer help a couple weeks early. I checked around. It seemed like the only kid "laid off" had been me. Anyway, as luck would have it, I wasn't going to be able to watch much Steelers football that year, as I was going to school in Iggles territory, and the pre-season brought hope of this being a really good Steelers team. Ordinarily not a proponent of placing much stock in the pre-season, this one was different. The Steelers were 4-1-1, and the game that stands out was the encounter with the Atlanta Falcons the weekend before I left for LVC. Franco Harris, the #1 draft pick from Penn State, ran wild, as did Steve Davis, a selection the previous year from Delaware State. The following week, by the way, DE Bubba Smith of the Colts, he of "Kill Bubba Kill" fame at Michigan State, caught his cleats in a sideline chain (still employed in those days), tore up his knee and was never the same again. Of course, Noll's preference on draft day was for Houston RB Robert Newhouse, who went to the Cowboys and had a

“nice” career. But Franco....Franco was the missing link that the Steelers needed. Other pieces of the puzzle added that year, of most import, were #2 pick, tackle Gordon Gravelle from Brigham Young. No other eventual Super Bowl starters came from that draft, though the 11th round brought a brash young quarterback, Jefferson Street Joe Gilliam from Tennessee State.

The '72 season was magic, though I was reduced to following it via short clippings in the Philadelphia Enquirer, weekly phone calls home on the single pay phone from the 2nd floor of Hammond Hall, and maintaining hope weekly that a Steelers clip would be featured on the Halftime Highlights of Monday Night Football, narrated by Howard Cosell. A significant win against Oakland opened the season, and the Steelers split their first 4 games. They then won 9 of their final 10, losing only at Cleveland after having reeled off 5 straight victories. Franco was magnificent, giving rise to Franco's Italian Army and the birth of several other fan brigades at Three Rivers, among them Gerela's Gorillas and Dobre Shunka (Great Ham). I never understood though, the love affair with Gerela. He was horrible in the playoffs, missing as many playoff extra points. 6 in 42 tries, as Gary Anderson would miss throughout an entire, 13-year, Steelers career, including 438 regular season and playoff attempts. My theory is this. The mission of the Gorillas was actually to put the whammy on opposing kickers. Perhaps they needed more coursework in curses, as they seemingly jinxed all kickers, even their own. I saw no Steelers game that year until week #12, December 3rd vs. Cleveland, a 30-0 Steelers triumph. Much to my pleasant surprise, the Philly network affiliate then televised the following week's game against Houston, where Joe Greene single-handedly took over the game after a host of Steelers offensive injuries. The Steelers won 9-3, took care of business the following week in San Diego, 24-2, and Chuck Noll was carried off the field as the Steelers had their first Division championship in their 40 year history, having won their final 3 games by a congregate score of 63-5. I came home from LVC for Christmas break on Friday, December 22, was in the house for the Immaculate Reception the next day, and once again on a 70-degree New Year's Eve as the '72 season came to a close versus the Dolphins in the AFCCG. I filed these eyewitness accounts:

December 23, 1972: Steelers-13 Raiders-7

Immaculate Reception....Kiss my Ass if you think I'm lying about being there. I just got home from my first semester at Lebanon Valley the night before. My GF had a "special treat" for me in the parking lot during a Swissvale High School basketball game. Then we went to my house, made a sign honoring Dwight White, "Sic 'em, Mad Dog" to attach to the TRS rail the following day. Unbeknownst to us, during the same eve, TE Bob Moore of the Raiders was getting his ass kicked, actually getting his head clubbed by Pittsburgh's finest as he tried to enter the Hilton. He played the next day with his head wrapped. December 23rd dawned, and I went with my 3 brothers and Tony parked in the Chatham Center Garage for some unknown reason. Again, he likes to walk. He parks on the foot of the Hill District for an event on the North Side! I can't

honestly say I saw the IR unfold. I saw a collision, then I saw nothing, until Tony was grabbing me, saying "He's got it; he's got it!" Franco's running down the sideline, into the end zone, and then TRS is ballistic. Then it's silent when the crowd realizes that there's been no TD signal. The ref trots back out to midfield, signals TD, the place goes absolutely berserk. The Fat Fuck John Madden is going berserk, too, on the Raider sideline, though not berserk with joy. Y'know who else parked in the Chatham Center Garage? The Gorilla, yeah.....as in Gerela's Gorilla. Saw the ape get in his car, drive away, fully clad....true story.

December 31, 1972: Dolphins-21 Steelers -17

It was Miami weather in Pittsburgh on New Year's Eve....'bout 70 degrees. Bradshaw gets hurt in the first quarter. Larry Seiple's fake punt leads to the Dolphins tying the game early. This game was the only time I saw Joe Greene owned... by Miami guard Larry Little. Jim Kiick runs behind Little twice on 4th & 1s. Bob Griese, who had been out with an injury much of the year, subs for Earl Morrall at halftime, hits Paul Warfield (one of the finest receivers I've ever seen) on a crossing pattern for a big gain early in the 3rd quarter to stake Miami to a lead that they never relinquished. That night, Penn State loses to Okalahoma in the Sugar Bowl. In the wee hours, Roberto Clemente's plane goes down. Happy Fuckin' New Year

My freshman season with the Flying Dutchmen was nondescript. I was a second string defensive tackle on a 4-5 squad. The guy in front of me had a bad enough shoulder that I was able to get on the field enough to earn a letter, eventually bringing me a Golden Pass "in recognition of earning 4 varsity letters in a single intercollegiate sport." Said pass earns me admission to any LVC athletic event. I've never used it.

The '73 Steelers draft was no great shakes. The Steelers did select DB JT Thomas out of Florida State with their first pick, but bombed on all of their 8 picks in rounds 2 through 7. Only with their first pick in the 8th round could they celebrate again with the selection of linebacker (and rigger) Loren Toews out of California. Then they went back to sleep for the rest of the draft, 17 rounds in all. The '73 season was one of promise, both for the Pittsburgh Steelers, and (please don't laugh) the Lebanon Valley College Flying Dutchmen. Perhaps my greatest sports disappointment came in early September, when our LVC squad, with my holding down the starting defensive right tackle spot, traveled in a torrential downpour to Chichester, Pa. to take on the Widener Pioneers, who starred Billy (White Shoes) Johnson, he of the NFL's 75 year All-Time team, who averaged 11 yards per carry, and 35 yards per punt return in our D-III conference. We were strong, ready to play, but as we exited the bus, we were told not to unpack on this Friday evening, as the field was to be lit by a portable apparatus which could not be set up in this weather. Our choice was to stay overnight and play the next day, or reschedule at season's end. Our team, regrettably, voted to return that night to Annville and reschedule for November. I tore the MCL in my

left knee in the season's 4th game against Swarthmore (a collection of hippies and freaks from throughout the planet), prematurely ending my season, and after a 2-0-2 start, we dropped the final 5 games. The season ender? Widener kicked our asses. Billy White Shoes scored 5 times and we were on the short end of a 40-something to single digit score.

The Steelers bolted off to an 8-1 start. I saw a few more games. I was home for my brother's wedding in October, scheduled on the day of an LVC football game. After a brutal 7-7 tie against the Muhlenberg Mules and their veer, so popular in the college game in the '70s, I dashed to the airport, un-showered, knee still taped, and was off on my first flight ever, Harrisburg to Pittsburgh. The next day, the Steelers beat the San Diego Chargers, and Johnny Unitas, 38-21. There were nationally televised contests and additional trips to Pittsburgh to see my orthopod. Joe Willie Gillie threw 3 TDs in a Monday Night victory versus the Over the Hill Gang Redskins. That day, I had walked into the locker room at Pitt Stadium, seeking advice on rehabbing my knee, and I'll be forever indebted to the Pitt trainer that took a few minutes to talk with me, give me some material. Tony Dorsett was walking about, as was Johnny Majors. The following week, with Terry Hanratty at the helm, the Steelers won at Oakland, 17-9. Hanratty hit Shanklin with a bomb. Ray Mansfield noted there being swears scrawled on the football. He'd go out over center, look down, see "Fuck You" staring back at him. Three consecutive losses followed this game, and the suddenly 8-4 Steelers needed to take their final two games to gain a playoff spot. They did so, but then were quickly dispatched at Oakland in the first round of the playoffs on December 22nd.

The day after Christmas, I was admitted to Shadyside Hospital, after much wrangling with my orthopod, to repair my torn MCL. Long before the sports medicine revolution, and the advent of the arthroscopy, a doc had to open up your knee just to see what was going on. I was always the youngest patient in my orthopod's waiting room by about 40 years, at least. He wanted me to wait on the surgery until March; wanted me to "quit playing that damn football." Our family doctor from Swissvale, Ralph Leighty (another famous Ralph), the same physician who encouraged my mother to smoke to help with her nerves after a miscarriage, got me admitted, as he was Chief of Staff at Shadyside. I had the surgery before New Year's. One of the darkest periods of my life followed.

I need not say much about the 1974 Draft, 4 Hall of Famers among the first 5 picks. In the meantime, I had had a setback in my recovery. After nearly 3 months in a bent-leg cast, on crutches, my cast came off (I was hoping to be free to walk again) to reveal a reaction of my body to the staple that held ligament to my bone. It had healed sufficiently, but another surgery followed to remove the staple, and my rehab was delayed. It was not until May that I could run, and there was sufficient doubt about my ability to play my junior year. I was able to come back, however, and regain my starting DT spot, and we won our final two games, including a 33-6 win over sister school Albright, shutting down their vaunted wishbone, for a 5-4 final record.

It was a historic Steelers season. Following a brief players' strike, Joe Gilliam won the starting QB position in camp, and came out of the box fast. After a 4-1-1 start though, Terry Bradshaw was re-inserted as the starter for the Monday Nighter versus Atlanta. After two wins, TB was replaced following a loss at Cincinnati, and although the Steelers beat the Cleveland Browns with Hanratty at the helm, his 2 for 15 performance, with 3 interceptions, one of which was returned for a TD, resulted in Bradshaw re-entering the fray for the balance of the campaign. I was able to attend two regular season games at TRS, both shutouts, 30-0 in the opener versus the Colts, and a 27-0 pasting of the Iggles, which I attended with an Iggles fan, an LVC teammate. Returning home for Christmas break, I was in the TRS House for the playoff win against Buffalo, and then sat in my Swissvale living room with my parents and brothers for the greatest Steelers victory of all time, a 24-13 win at favored Oakland, in the 1974 AFCCG. I watched SB IX from an LVC dorm, and won a bet enabling me to play the Steelers Fight Song, the Jimmy Pol version, repeatedly. It would have been broken via a hammer ceremony on the LVC Quad, had the Steelers lost. Joe Greene wore a Steelers ski cap for the post-game interview. He had seemed to have a glow about him, but maybe it was just me. Well...my state of mind. Captain Andy Russell handed the ball to Art Rooney, who held it aloft. Finally, the Steelers were champions!!

The 1975 draft brought no help to the Pittsburgh Steelers. No one drafted made a meaningful contribution to any of the Super Bowl championships unless you count 14th round pick Mike Collier's fumbles in the AFCCG. Of course, the Steelers lost 5 fumbles that day, so why pick on Collier. Oakland lost their share, with Jack Lambert recovering 3. My senior season at LVC was the best that the Flying Dutchmen had had in awhile, and the best that they would have for years to come. After dropping our opener, once again to Widener, we reeled off 5 wins in a row, by solid margins, 19-0, 34-6, 38-3, 55-12, and 33-14. We then dropped two in a row, to the Franklin & Marshall Diplomats, per usual, and to Albright as we missed a field goal late in a 14-12 loss. We capped the season with a win at Western Maryland, and my playing days were over. The 6-3 final season yielded a 4 year mark of 17-17-2, a damn sight better than my high school aggregate of 3-22-2. Following the '75 LVC season, per my usual routine, I added a few pounds. At the time, my Abnormal Psychology class was studying body types: ectomorphs were skinny little shits, mesomorphs were muscular, endomorphs were fat fucks. The professor, Dr. Love, offered an example, "Mr. Villiotti is a mesomorph, fast becoming an endomorph. Bitch!! What is it about me? First Henny Clougherty in 9th grade, now Dr. Love? Then, just a few years ago, during my annual physical, my doc says to me, "You could be well built if you lost a few pounds." Huh? What's that mean? "If you weren't such a fat fuck, you might look awight?"

I saw no Steeler regular season games at TRS that year, but during Christmas Break, I waited through the night for playoff tickets that would go on sale at 10am. Arriving around 11 the night before, I partied through the night, and then

the line began to queue at around 6am. At around 6:15am, I had to pee. I couldn't remove myself from the line, however, so my bladder did yeoman's work. I purchased 4 tickets to that week's game against the Baltimore Colts, whereupon I limped a 40 yard dash, and let go against the stadium wall. A pair of LVC buddies who were due to come in for the game got snowed in in Vermont, so it was me and LVC wide receiver Sam Hussey (always introduced himself as "Hussey, as in whore") that went to TRS, and I sold the remaining pair to Swissvale friends, Nick Conti and Rob Campayno, both since deceased. The Steelers held a 21-10 lead with the Colts in the Steelers red zone, when Andy Russell picked up a fumble and lumbered about 93 yards for a TD. It took ol' Andy about 5 minutes to do so. The next week, I sat with Tony for the 1975 AFCCG. Here's what happened:

January 4, 1976: Steelers-16 Raiders-10

On a cold, icy, Steelers beat the Raiders in the AFCCG for the second straight year. The Fat Fuck Madden won some games against us, but the Emperor, Chuck Noll, owned that Fat Mother-Fucker. Two 4Q TDs for the Steelers were scored right in front of us. First, Franco, stiff arms Neil Colzie, runs about 25 for a score. Then, Stallworth outleaps Colzie, again from about 25 yards out. There were 9 fumbles that day.

Once again, I was back at LVC for Super Bowl X, and the Steelers were two-time SB champions.

The '76 draft did bring some help; TE Bennie Cunningham from Clemson was the top pick, followed by OL Ray Pinney from Washington. The second pick in round #2 was QB Mike Kruczek from Boston College. Who was to know the role he would play with this team as a rookie. Theo Bell, a WR from Arizona, was picked up in the 4th round, and the 6th round brought first DL Gary Dunn from Miami, then RB Jack Deloplaine from Salem (W.Va.). The Steelers held a 28-14 lead at Oakland in the opener, with about 4 minutes left, but somehow found a way to lose in regulation. I was at TRS the next two Sundays, a win against the Cleveland Browns without much difficulty, but then the Steelers went down to New England, 30-27, as Roy Gerela missed a 48-yarder as time expired. After a Monday night loss at Minnesota, I traveled to Cleveland with Tony and 4 of his buddies. They had an extra ticket. I could have it in return for driving these 30-year-olds, in my hunk o' junk vehicle. There we were in cavernous Cleveland Municipal Stadium, wind made famous by Boston Red Sox pitcher Dennis (Oil Can) Boyd who said, "That's what they get for building a stadium next to an ocean." This was the game, of course, where Joe (Turkey) Jones spiked Terry Bradshaw, head first, into the turf, and Mike Kruczek took over at QB. The Steelers lost, 18-16, and I drove 5 sleeping drunks home from Cleveland, as I pondered the fate of my team, now led by a rookie QB.

The Steelers reeled off 9 straight wins, surrendering a total of 28 points, only giving up a TD in one of the 9 games. Mikey K. was undefeated in his starts despite never throwing a touchdown pass. Even though I was back in Pittsburgh,

I didn't see every game. See, pickup "tackle" football games were held in Swissvale every Sunday at 1pm. Playing was still too hard for me to resist. We all gathered at Bobby Carlisle's house though for a late-season 4pm game against the Bengals. It was the season's 12th game, and the Steelers had to have this game to keep their playoff hopes alive. Even with a win, they still would need help. In the snow, Franco ran for a 2nd half TD, and the Steelers hung on late for a 7-3 victory. It seemed to be a season impending doom, however. Going into this game, the Bengals had lost only twice, to the Colts and earlier to the Steelers. They had reeled off 5 straight victories, and were 9-2. The Steelers still trailed by 1 game with 2 games remaining, and it appeared that 9 straight victories by the Steelers still would not be enough to gain a playoff spot. The Bengals final games were both on the road, at powerhouse Oakland, and at the lowly New York Jets. Oakland was favored, but the prevailing thought in Pittsburgh was that the "Raidas," who had already clinched home field advantage throughout the playoffs, would tank the game, thus depriving the hated Steelers of a playoff spot. It certainly looked like this would happen when Isaac Curtis scored early for the Bengals. But on this Monday Nighter, Oakland took over the game, won handily, and when the Steelers easily dispatched of the Oilers, 20-0, the following Saturday in Houston, the Steelers had made the playoffs. I started my "life's work," at Pressley Ridge School, two days later. The dismantling of the Baltimore Colts in the first round of the playoffs was also the dismantling of the Steelers backfield, as both Franco and Rocky Bleier were lost to injury. A plane flying into the Baltimore Memorial Stadium stands shortly after game's end proved to be an ominous omen. The next week, running Reggie Harrison in a one-back set, the Steelers lost at Oakland in the AFCCG. Chuck Noll would identify it as his worst coaching move, as the Steelers had too little time to prepared for the one-back, two tight end set.

The Steelers got some help in the 1977 draft, hitting on their first 4 picks, LB Robin Cole from New Mexico, RB Sidney Thornton from Northwestern Louisiana, DT Tom Beasley from VA Tech, and WR Jim Smith from Michigan. A trio of fifth round picks were used to draft QB Cliff Stoudt from Youngstown State, G Steve Courson from South Carolina, and LB Dennis (Dirt) Winston from Arkansas. I don't know why I attended no Steelers games in 1977 while living in Pittsburgh. It may have been due to Sunday afternoon pickup football in Swissvale, it may have been due to job changes, which found me working at Pressley Ridge in summer, trying out the Pennsylvania state liquor stores in the fall, and then another children's home in Virginia when December rolled around. There was actually a 4th position prior to my going to Virginia. It was with a children's home in Hagerstown, MD. When I told my boss that I couldn't continue on after three days on the job, he boomed into the telephone, "YOU fucked ME, Baby....YOU fucked ME, Baby." I think it was a good decision to leave. Anyway, my State Store job initially placed me on Pittsburgh's North Side, within hailing distance of TRS. Ray Pinney came in one day, and I also had the opportunity to load a case of booze into Lynn Swann's silver Mercedes. It was prior to the Baltimore game, which the Steelers lost. When I reminded Swannie of this prior to the 2006

Steeler opener, when he was holding court in the Heinz Field lots while running for governor, he said, "Oh....we must've been going over to Franco's place." The Steelers play in '77 had their fans believing that they were hung over. A 9-5 record necessitated another Bengals late-season loss, this time to Houston on the season's final day, in order to bring a playoff spot to Pittsburgh. Swannie sent attaché cases to all of the Oilers. Sadly, the Steelers lost to the Broncos in Denver in the playoffs' first round, on Christmas Eve. The games were spaced only 3 hours apart, both AFC games were held on Saturday, and the overtime affair between Baltimore and Oakland meant that even watching in Pittsburgh, we didn't get the Steelers-Broncos game until the second quarter. Oh...Joe Greene kind of punched Paul Howard in the stomach during this game, in plain view.

The 1978 draft wasn't particularly helpful. After choosing Eastern Michigan CB Ron Johnson first, the Steelers received special teams help with the 3rd round selection of punter Craig Colquitt from Tennessee, and DB/returner Larry Anderson from Louisiana Tech. That was it. The Steelers reeled off 7 straight wins to start the season. Working in Virginia, I didn't make it to a regular season game, but was in Pittsburgh for the first round of the playoffs. I sat with a Virginia friend in Vincent's Pizza the night before the game, and watched Woody Hayes punch out a Clemson player, thus ending his Fuckeye career. After the 33-10 Steelers victory, we drove back to VA for a New Year's Eve party the next day. I was due to attend the AFCCG the following week against Houston, but in one of my all-time regrets, icy roads caused me to wimp out. Word had it that a special contingent that attended from Donora would've made it worthwhile. Steelers took out the Oilers, 34-5, and won SB XIII two weeks hence.

There wasn't a whole lot of help in the '79 draft. The question as to what happened during the '80s is answered when examining these drafts, with no free agency to compensate. First round pick Greg Hawthorne never did much, nor did 2nd rounder Zack Valentine. The Steelers picked up WR Calvin Sweeney from USC in the 4th round, and besides catching TBs final TD in '83, what did he do? CB Dwayne Woodruff came out of Louisville in Round #6, and K Matt Bahr from Penn State, also in the 6th round, enabled the Steelers to get rid of Roy Gerela. Of course, Bahr lost his job to the absolute stiff, David Trout, in '81. I had relocated to New England for the '79 season, having proposed to a native New England girl, the soon to be Mrs. Swiss. It was a glorious fall. The We Are Family Buccos, behind Willie Stargell, got off the mat after a 3-1 deficit and defeated the Orioles for another World Series crown. The Steelers lost 4 times, and were showing signs of aging. They were screwed out of a chance to beat Houston in a Monday Nighter on the season's next to last weekend, when a late onside kick recovery was called back. San Diego had home field throughout, and looked to be a formidable foe, but Houston beat them in the first round, then the Steelers beat Houston in Renfro-gate to win the AFCCG. The Steelers were down to the Rams in the 4Q of Super Bowl XIV. I committed to jump in the lake outside the house I shared in New Hampshire if the Steelers lost. My buddy, the

Giants fan, noticed that my Terrible Towel was not on the TV. He corrected the situation, and then Bradshaw to Stallworth on 3rd & 10, and the Steelers had their fourth ring in six years to close the decade.

WHY ROY GERELA?

This would be my question for Bob “Plague” (not his real nickname; I’m making that up) Bubanic of Port Vue. The 70-year-old (if he’s still “kickin;” no pun intended) retired supervisor from the Allegheny County Greenhouse in South Park, was the Gorilla, long-remembered, with his cronies, in his Upper North End Zone perch at Three Rivers Stadium. Greenhouse? So the “Gorilla” supervised the growing of daisies, tulips and rutabagas for a living?

But “Why Roy Gerela?” The scant bit of research that I’ve conducted has already rendered my hypothesis useless. Roy Gerela, to me, was the lone unlikable Steeler from the dynastic seventies. Besides living next door to my brother Tony for years, and never uttering a word, one simply could never count on Gerela to make a kick. He’s oft-remembered for having his head patted by Cliff Harris following a miss, whereupon Jack Lambert tossed Harris’s sorry ass to the ground, avoided ejection, and unleashed the energy that propelled the Steelers to victory in Super Bowl X.

My theory was that Mr. Bubanic happened to have a Gorilla suit on hand, and was itching to wear it to a Steelers game. However, my scholarly efforts have yielded the knowledge that Mr. Bubanic and his entourage first rented the monkey suit for \$60, then conducted a raffle and purchased the costume for \$250. My research did not uncover the particular items that the group raffled off. Interestingly, Mr. Bubanic’s Port Vue neighbor, Thaddeus Majzer, now 77 (if he’s still around) was the founder of Dobre Shunka (“Good Ham”) properly honoring the Steelers Hall of Fame linebacker. As recently as 2004, Mr. Majzer still held season tickets, having done so since the Steelers’ Forbes Field days.

Again, “Why Roy Gerela?” My research, in the form of the Pittsburgh Steelers Media Guide, 1979 edition, has revealed Roy Gerela to suck even worse than I had remembered. Usually, one’s faded memories tend to be exaggerated. Not in this case; Gerela was terrible! After being cut by the Super Bowl champions in favor of rookie Matt Bahr prior to the 1979 campaign, Gerela was picked up by San Diego, connecting on 1 of 7 FG attempts in 3 games. His 10 year record from 1969-1978, indicates the following record on FG attempts:

20-29 yards....59 of 74

30-39 yards....50 of 86

40-49 yards....30 of 79

Over 50 yards...ONE of 14 (and the one, a 50-yarder, was his rookie year with the Houston Oilers)

Gerela missed 13 regular-season extra points during this skein. He was, of course, perfect on PATs during his two years in Houston, missing all 13 during his 8 years in Pittsburgh.

Playoffs? Gerela was even worse. To wit:

*Extra points....he missed 6 of 42 attempts. Thankfully, 5 of his 6 misses came during Super Bowl campaigns.

*He was 3 of 6 from 30-39 yards

*He was ONE of six from 40-49 yards

*He was 0 for 2 from 50+

I will credit Gerela with making the tackle on the opening kickoff (a reverse to Thomas "Hollywood" Henderson) during SB XIII, thereby injuring his ribs, missing two later FGs prior to donning a corset (he and Kiera Knightly) and making two 4Q attempts (from 36 & 18 yards) subsequent to the Harris head tap. Oh, just to ensure his legacy though, he missed the Steelers' final PAT after the Bradshaw bomb to Swannie.

So...the question remains, "Why Roy Gerela?"

1980s: DARK DECADE

After my team closed the 1970s with four Super Bowl victories in a 6-year span, I was married in August, 1980. I would celebrate a Silver Anniversary before the Steelers would win another Super Bowl. I'm not blaming anyone...just sayin'.

The 1980s started out well enough, with 2 wins to commence the 1980 season, but then the sky sorta fell. This Steelers edition lost twice to the Bengals, both when kicker Matt Bahr failed to convert late kicks. There was also a missed extra point in a one-point loss to the Browns. The key to the season was a December Thursday Nighter in Houston, which the Steelers entered with a record of 8-5. A win and a playoff spot was likely. The Steelers lost, 6-0, and as was the case in 2006, the defending Super Bowl champion failed to qualify for the playoffs.

The 1981 season was no better as the Steelers opened with a pair of losses. I returned to TRS after a 3-year hiatus, driving from New England with Stupid Charlie. I made perhaps the gravest mistake of my marriage career, by seating my bride with Stupid Charlie, while I sat with Tony. One of the worst non-calls ever occurred in this game, as Pats QB Matt Cavanaugh (five years removed from guiding the Pitt Panthers to a national championship) stood with his back

foot a full half-yard out of the end zone, but no whistle blew. The Steelers nevertheless led, 21-7, in 4Q, but the Pats battled back to tie it in the final minute. Stupid Charlie was going berserk in the second deck's first row. Mrs. Swiss was displeased at this display, concerned that Stupid Charlie would be dumped over the railing by incensed Steelers fans. This would have been fine with Mrs. Swiss, but she was a bit concerned that she would be sent along with Stupid Charlie, as she was unable to conceal her Bostonian accent. In OT, it was $12 + 88 = 6$, as Bradshaw threw to Swann for the winning TD. Unaware of the goings on above us in the Upper Deck, I was convinced that this game, an overtime Steelers victory, had finally converted Mrs. Swiss, finally made her a Steelers fan. I awaited her presence at the designated post-game meeting place with great anticipation. "How'd you like it," I exclaimed, all wide-eyed when she came into view. "Don't you EVER do this to me again!!" she said, without breaking her quickened pace toward the Allegheny.

Mrs. Swiss has never been back to a Steelers game, though after touring the Great Hall at Heinz last spring after a walk for charity, she said that she wouldn't necessarily "mind" going to a Steelers game, "one that's not so crowded," though. What's with these people? Her brother, wanting to attend Steelers-Pats in Foxboro last year, finds standing room tickets for sale on E-Bay. "Hey Dave," he says, "would they let me bring in a beach chair?" Sure Clay, why don't you pack a chaise lounge! Mrs. Swiss is an equal opportunity bannee. She's also been banned, by me, from going to her home region's Fenway Park. She's the anti-fan, though her family mildly has enjoyed sports. Years back, we would take her parents to one Red Sox game a year. The last such trip was in '86, the year of the Red Sox World Series appearance against the Mets and Bill Buckner's gaffe of biblical proportions. It was a late September Friday night, with the Sox locked in a tight pennant race against the Blue Jays, who were in town, and the pitching matchup was Roger Clements versus Jimmy Key. Mrs. Swiss was in a jovial enough mood, as the game proceeded at a quickened pace with scoreless inning upon scoreless inning. After nine such scoreless innings, Mrs. Swiss rose from her seat, and when queried by me on where she thought she was going, conveyed her understanding that the game was over, as nine innings had been played. Upon learning of the concept of extra innings, Mrs. Swiss's mood soured rapidly, and when the Sox loaded the bases in one of the extra frames and 30-some odd thousand fans rose to their feet as one, Mrs. Swiss was perhaps the lone Fenway inhabitant that remained seated. Sox lost 1-0, in 14 innings, and after bearing continual complaints, I levied the ban on Mrs. Swiss. She said that she had accomplished one of her lifetime (or at least marital) goals, and has never returned.

Upon our return to Swissvale following the Steelers vanquishing of the Patriots, a chagrined and defeated Stupid Charlie bypassed a dago feast that my mother had prepared, and went directly to bed. Payback accrued to us (actually Mrs. Swiss was double loser, triple when you consider her choice of husband) the next day, when Stupid Charlie, attempting to make a side living as a comedian,

told us the same Stupid Charlie jokes over, and over, and over again, on our loooong drive back to New England.

David Trout, the little runt from Pitt, having beaten out Matt Bahr, missed 8 out of 46 EXTRA POINTS for the season, including three in a victory over the Browns. Terry Bradshaw was injured, Cliff Stoudt broke his hand punching a mechanical bull in Seattle and after winning 3 in a row to stand at 8-5, and the resurgent Steelers turned to Mark Malone to quarterback them to the playoffs. Wasn't happening. Malone acquitted himself well enough during a Monday Nighter in Oakland, but the Steelers lost, 30-27, lost a close one to the Super Bowl bound Bengals the next week, then dropped their finale to go 8-8.

The Steelers were fast out of the gate in '82 against the backdrop of a looming strike. Rookie kicker Gary Anderson, having been picked up off of the waiver wire, kicked 5 FGs in an opening Monday Night victory at Dallas, then the Steelers beat the defending AFC champion Bengals in OT. Then came the strike, with play not resuming for 8 weeks. Quite simply, that strike SUCKED. The Steelers finished the abbreviated season at 6-3, and with 8 teams from each conference qualifying for the playoffs, drew the San Diego Chargers, at TRS, in the playoffs' first round. There were no prime-time playoff games, but rather two games scheduled for each of the 1:00 and 4:00 slots on Saturday and Sunday. The New England affiliate did not carry the Steelers, and for the only time in their history (save the 1947 playoff game), I did not see a Steelers playoff game. The Steelers led early, and had a 28-17 lead late in 4Q, when TB bone-headedly lofted a pass on a 3rd down play, where he had an open field for a first down in front of him. The pass was picked, the Chargers scored on a 4th down play, then scored again in the final minutes to win, 31-28. It was Terry Bradshaw's final playoff game.

The Super Bowl Steelers, those twenty-one players with 4 rings, were being lost to attrition, either retiring or being waived. Sam Davis and Gerry Mullins left following the final SB season. Mike Wagner, Dwight White, Rocky Bleier and Steve Furness were gone following the 1980 season. The class of '69, Joe Greene, LC Greenwood and Jon Kolb finished their Steelers careers in 1981, as did Randy Grossman. Jack Ham and Lynn Swann called it quits following the playoff loss to the Chargers.

Nineteen eighty-three would be the final call to arms for Hall of Famers Terry Bradshaw, Franco Harris (as a Steeler), and Mel Blount, and for Loren Toews as well. Of course, TB's '83 season consisted of one-quarter of football, going 5 for 8, and throwing 2 TDs versus the New York Jets in the final football game at New York's Shea Stadium, a game that the reeling Steelers badly needed to make the playoffs. After a TD to Calvin Sweeney, TB left the field clutching his ailing right elbow, never to return again. With Cliff Stoudt at the helm, the Steelers had started 9-2, but then lost 3 in a row. The victory over the Jets cemented a playoff spot, but the Steelers were dispatched quickly on New Year's Day in Oakland, a game in which they could have jumped out to a 7-0 lead, but Chaz Noll chose to

kick a 1Q FG from about 2 inches away. The Steelers also switched to a 3-4 defensive scheme in 1983, one that they continue to employ.

Franco was cut while holding out prior to the '84 season, appearing briefly in a Seahawks uni, and this Steelers edition never won, nor lost, more than two games in a row. There was stellar play and heartbreak in 1984. The Steelers handed the eventual SB Champion 49ers their lone loss of the season, in San Fran, 20-17. The following week, the Steelers lost to the Colts, 17-16, on a 57-yard tipped pass in the game's final seconds. The season's best was in late December when the Steelers had to win at Oakland at 4:00pm on the season's final Sunday in order to make the playoffs. Oakland stood to improve their position with a win, but a fierce Steelers defense keyed a 13-7 win. Oakland's lone score came on a 4th down in 4Q where the receiver was clearly out of bounds, but alas, no replay. Oakland got the ball back, but Donnie Shell intercepted, Mark Malone ran for a first down, and the Steelers exhausted the clock. "Can a 9-7 team find happiness in the playoffs," asked Chaz Noll. They found happiness against the 13-3 Denver Broncos, even though Gary Anderson missed 3 FGs. Frank Pollard scored on as tough a 2-yard run as one would ever see, and the Steelers were on to the AFCCG. The Dan Marino led Dolphins erased a Steelers lead in the final minutes of the first half, scored again after a Pollard fumble, scored again following the second half kickoff, and ended a solid Steelers season with a 45-28 victory. Jack Lambert, plagued by turf toe, hung up his cleats. Larry Brown retired as well.

Four barren, playoff-less years followed, with an aggregate record of 26-37. The lone winning campaign was the other strike-plagued/replacement player year of 1987, where the Steelers 8-7 mark left them short of the playoffs as they dropped their final two. The first of these two was the infamous game in Houston where Chaz Noll grabbed Jerry Glanville's hand for the post-game shake, and wouldn't let go, berating Glanville for his team's dirty play. This was also the first game that I listened to via long-distance telephone hookup. In the day, before all the unlimited long-distance deals, calling Tony at kickoff, hanging up at halftime, calling back, cost me about \$25. I also had the advantage of Tony's expert analysis between plays. Sometimes, he couldn't contain himself and would need to let me know the result of a play before I could hear it from Myron.

It was also in '87 that Mrs. Swiss and I took polar opposite exit strategies for our trip back to New England following a Pittsburgh Dago Thanksgiving. She wanted to leave early Sunday morning; I, of course, wanted to stick around for Steelers-Saints. The compromise? I bought a 5" b&w car TV. We adjusted our route, traversing Route 22, rather than the Pennsylvania Turnpike (nation's first), so as to pick up Channel 6 from Johnstown. With Mrs. Swiss driving the little Corolla around the treacherous turns amid the snow as we proceeded past Holidaysburg, Nanty Glo, and Port Matilda, I watched the Steelers, on the small shaky screen, blow yet another 11-point lead, and a late Saints goal line stand gave them the 20-16 victory over the Nollmen, at TRS. Twenty years later and counting, I still pack this same trusty little tube if ever watching a Steelers

network telecast away from the friendly confines of my home base, just in case there's a power failure on the road trip, which, by the way, has never occurred. Better safe than sorry!!

John Stallworth and Donnie Shell called it quits following the 1987 campaign. Mike Webster was off to Kansas City following the 1988 debacle. All of the wearers of 4 rings were gone. In my ongoing quest for order and symmetry, particularly in my Steelers World, I've come upon a remarkable realization. If one includes JT Thomas among those Steelers wearing 4 rings, which technically he is not, as he was not on the roster for the '78 season due to illness (Steelers Media Guide lists his career as '73-'77 & '79-'81), then the twenty-two 4-ring wearers neatly comprise all 22 offensive and defensive positions.

I returned to TRS in 1986, after a 3-year hiatus. For 3 consecutive years, I made a weekend out of it with Stupid Charlie, seeing the Steelers lose to the defending AFC Champion Patriots, 34-0 in 1986 (prior to my learning to despise the Patsies), taking in a win over the Bengals in '87, the first game post-strike, and witnessing a shellacking by the Houston Oilers, 34-14, in '88.

In the meantime, I turned Stupid Charlie onto the planet's best pizza, Vincent's Pizza on Ardmore Boulevard in Forest Hills, close to the Turtle Creek line. When Stupid Charlie earned his graduate degree in '87, some of his friends offered to take him out to dinner anywhere east of the Mississippi. "Take me to Vincent's Pizza in Pittsburgh," said Stupid Charlie, and off they went.

I remember driving by Vincent's Pizza as a young boy of 8, then stopping in for the first time as a teenager. It's safe to say that nothing's been done to alter this historic landmark in the intervening years. "Upper Mon Valley Deco" in architectural style, Vincent's is located on a lot sometimes shared with tractor-trailers, and houses the pizza shop, where nothing but pizza was sold until a few years back, and one can walk through a doorway, past the Men's Room, which served as a condom outlet in high school, into the lounge, adorned with plastic grapevines. Until the '90s, no one touched the pies but Vince. Vince, shirt opened to his navel, abundant gold chains, cigarette ash extending over his pie-making, was ghost-like due to being covered with flour. Vincent's was open from 5pm-2am, closed Mondays, sometimes Tuesday, though one could begin to place orders at 4:45pm. Dial 271-9181, and the voice on the other end always, always, always said, "Pizza....Ardmore Boulevard." Closed when Vince vacationed, Vince's adoring fans would await his return on lawn chairs set up in his parking lot, and bestow a hero's welcome upon his entry. The quality took a dip when the local health authorities forced Vince to replace his ovens, and the joint has apparently conceded that scrawling the pizza orders on the wall is not the best of practices. The oblong shaped pie doesn't grace a box; therefore the pies are laid on sheet of cardboard, wrapped with heavy paper, with the ends stapled. Do NOT carry on your lap, or place in your vehicle if concerned with your vehicle's interior. The hallmark of a Vinnie's pie is its greaz...so one is advised to come prepared for pickup. I once erred in ordering my favorite, a

large pie with Canadian bacon (and the ONLY time I eat Canadian bacon is on a Vinnie's pie....this topping costs \$5, but is worth it....all toppings come by the fistful) and simply asked for a large pie with "bacon." They gave me bacon, and it was a veritable grease pit. Lastly, do NOT have Vinnie's as a pre-game meal....not if you want to enjoy the Steelers game. Particularly for the Vinnie's Virgin, this pie WILL fuck with your insides. And oh, take a jug of water to bed with you. If you're looking for standard, consistent pizza, don't come to Vinnie's. The sign still advises, "This isn't Burger King. You take it our way or you don't take the Son of a Bitch at all."

Stupid Charlie once prevailed upon Ralph to mail him a Vinnie's pie. Of course, given Stupid Charlie's New England accent, Ralph mistook "Mah-tin (Martin) Avenue" for "Mountain Avenue" and the pie came back to Pittsburgh. Good 'ol Ralphie just shipped it out again. As soon as the pie arrived, Stupid Charlie called me, barely able to contain himself. I rushed over to his place, where the pie was in the oven. It smelled kind of funny though. Upon exiting the oven, we did notice quite a bit of green topping on the pie, which happened to be mold. It damn near killed us to throw away that pie.

There were few games of note during this stretch. One notable exception was the '88 rematch in Houston. Merrill Hoge fought his way into the end zone with a Bubby Brister pass in the game's final minute to win this Sunday Nighter over a playoff-bound Oiler team that stood to improve its position. It was the season's first snowfall on this December 4th evening in New England, and Mrs. Swiss wanted to go for a stroll with me. We may have gone out after the game.

The final season of the decade was a welcome departure from the previous few years, and was Chaz Noll's final playoff run. My 95-year-old grandmother passed away the day before the opener against Cleveland, thus providing me an opportunity to actually see the season's first game. I couldn't fly into Pittsburgh on Saturday night, as our fantasy draft was being held, so I took an early flight on Sunday morning. When Tony picked me up, we both knew what the pressing topic of conversation would be. It was a one-day wake, but a marathon, going from noon-9pm. What would we do? The closest relative to Nied's Funeral Home in Swissvale was Uncle Oney. We called old Oney, had him stuff a b&w TV in his car, and set it up in Charlie Nied's backroom. We visited Nunna during commercials from 1-4. I think we pushed the envelope too far that day. God must've been pissed. The CleveBrownies pasted the Steelers, 51-0.

The Steelers lost in Cinci the following week, 41-10, and it looked to be a terrible season. One of the turning points was the rematch in Cleveland, a game that the Steelers won, 17-7, largely on the strength of their defense. Todd Blackledge, starting at QB that day was, in a word, awful, and posted a 36.9 QB rating for the year. Tony, in his Pittsburgh living room, with his then 5-year old son, was berating Blackledge all day long. The following night, with his wife and daughter both present, Blackledge appeared on Tony's TV during the evening news. "Look Dad," said my nephew, "there's Asshole!" The Steelers were still limping

along with a 4-6 record when they beat the San Diego Chargers on the day that my daughter was born. They took 5 of their final 6, but needed plenty of help to qualify for the playoffs. Oakland, after losing in Seattle the previous week, lost to the Giants in their finale. Indy lost at New Orleans. And then, on Christmas night, the MinniVikes beat the Cincinnati Bengals, thrusting themselves, and the Pittsburgh Steelers into the NFL Playoffs. It was the third time in recent history (1976, 1977, and 1989) that a Bengals loss in the final two weeks had left them on the outside looking in, home for the playoffs while the Steelers season continued.

The Steelers traveled to Houston on New Year's Eve, considerable underdogs. They tied the game late, and then won it in overtime on a 50-yard Gary Anderson field goal. I leaped backwards over my living room couch. The following week, double-digit underdogs at Denver, the Steelers twice held 10-point leads, but gave up a late TD to the John Elway-led Broncos. They trailed by a single point with two minutes remaining, and the Bubster put a first down pass right into the hands of VMI rookie Mark Stock. Clang!! Two plays later, a fumble was recovered by Denver and the Steelers season was over. Mark Stock's Steeler career was over as well.

WHY MRS. SWISS HATES THE STEELERS

She finally said it during the glorious off-season following SBXL. I knew it was coming. "I sure hope the Steelers don't win the Super Bowl next year. You're ridiculous." It was similar to her reaction to the news that I'd been hired/appointed/drafted to write articles at Stillers.com. "Great, something else for you to be an idiot about."

I'm sure it had its roots in our respective upbringings.

I was born in a steel mill town....Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
She was born in a shoe mill town...Lawrence, Massachusetts

I was a barber's kid
She was a PK (that's Preacher's Kid)

My dad took me to Pittsburgh cultural events....Pirate baseball at Forbes Field, Diamond Belt Boxing at the Civic Arena, dropped me off at Pitt Stadium for Steelers games when I was 10.
Her dad took her to Massachusetts cultural events....museums, symphonies.

Digression #1: I went to the symphony once in Pittsburgh: Allman Brothers Symphony at the Civic Arena in '74

While her dad was praying, "Dear Lord....we give you thanks...."
My Dad was screaming, "Smear his fuckin' ass," as L.C. Greenwood chased Ken Anderson.

Digression #2: My dad was actually careful about the F-bomb. The first time, I heard him drop one was when I was 18, talking about one of his Knights of Columbus colleagues, Ross Cioppa..."Ross, that brownnose fucker," he blurted out one night when he and my mom were sitting on the front porch. "Tony, what did you say," said Mom. "I...I....I, said Ross was a brownnoser, Mary....that's what I said." "No you didn't," scolded Mom. Meanwhile, I was engaged in a serious case of LMFAO.....good luck with this one, Dad!!

We got married with her thinking that this Steelers thing would get better. Truth is, I've gotten worse.....much worse.

Maybe Mrs. Swiss hates the Steelers because I sat and watched a Steelers-Cowboys pre-season game in the midst our honeymoon in 1980.

Maybe Mrs. Swiss hates the Steelers because I made her sit with Stupid Charlie, during an '81 overtime victory, won on a Bradshaw-Swann TD pass. Surely, I thought, this will make her a fan. "Don't ever do this to me again," she exclaimed....thoroughly embarrassed by the behavior of Stupid Charlie.

Maybe Mrs. Swiss hates the Steelers because I made her drive back from Pittsburgh in a 1987 November snowstorm, while I watched the Steelers (...lose to the Saints) in my newly purchased 5" B&W car TV.

Maybe Mrs. Swiss hates the Steelers 'cause I collaborated with my Uncle Oney to bring a TV to my grandma's wake for the '89 opener. (God was pissed....Steelers lost, at TRS, 51-0).

Maybe Mrs. Swiss hates the Steelers 'cause I jumped backwards over the couch, shrieking with delight, waking the baby as Gary Anderson split the uprights to beat the Oilers in OT in the '89 Wild Card game.

Maybe Mrs. Swiss hates the Steelers 'cause I gave my in-laws the Bum's Rush out of the hospital room when my son was 10 hours old, knowing that was my only hope to watch the '92 Steelers-Bills Divisional Playoff when he was 12 hours old, freshly circumcised.

Digression #3: First, and only time in my life that I believed in karma. Opened a girls' home in the face of stiff neighborhood resistance on Thursday, Anthony was born on Friday, Steelers football on Saturday....no way we could lose....we lost!!

Maybe Mrs. Swiss hates the Steelers 'cause I brought our family to the Rutland, VT. Holiday Inn in '93 to watch Steelers-Browns. They picked up a Plattsburgh, NY station. All NE stations had the then shitty Patriots on. Steelers lost on a pair of Eric Metcalf punt returns. Nine-month old Anthony was screaming in the

middle of the night. I was assigned to sit in the lobby with him.

Maybe Mrs. Swiss hates the Steelers 'cause when Neighbor Susan called over during the Steeler-Patriot game in '93, telling Mrs. Swiss that there was a fire in the woods out back, and "could Dave check it out, 'cause Chuck's not home,"....I said that I would do so at halftime. She objected; threatened to call the Fire Department...".Go ahead," I said, "that's why they're there."

Maybe Mrs. Swiss hates the Steelers 'cause I consistently refer to Steelers-Browns '94 Divisional Playoffs as the closest thing I've ever had to a religious experience.

Maybe Mrs. Swiss hates the Steelers 'cause a week later, I screamed uncontrollably, "Fuuuuuck, Fuuuuuck, Fuuuuuck" when O'Donnell's pass to Barry Foster was batted away, denying the Steelers a SB appearance.

Maybe Mrs. Swiss hates the Steelers "cause I did a somersault when Steelers beat the Lions at the final gun of the '95 opener, thereby kicking 2-year-old Anthony in the nose, dropping him straight to the floor. That .ended the celebration prematurely. The next week though, after a Steelers TD, Anthony cried out, "Daddy...daddy....kick me in the nose again."

Maybe Mrs. Swiss hates the Steelers 'cause I stuffed my ears with cotton while accompanying her to a Saturday matinee performance of The Nutcracker during the '95 Steelers-Pats game. Should have known that no ballet-goer would be talking football, but one can never be too careful with these things.

Maybe Mrs. Swiss hates the Steelers 'cause I went to Pittsburgh on consecutive weekend during the '97 playoffs, leaving her home with the kids to battle the Flying Squirrels.

As I always tell her, "You'll never understand; you're not from Pittsburgh."

SHIT I HATE ABOUT THE NFL

Everyone's entitled to my opinion. Don't get me wrong. I love the NFL. And in comparison to the way the other leagues are run, I particularly like....

- a. The Salary Cap: It's vital to the competition. The Yankees can piss away \$46mil on a guy that sucks, and it doesn't matter. The NFL has really leveled the playing field.
- b. Replay: I love that the priority is getting the call right. Hell with this embracing of human error. Why do we want to treasure mistakes being made, when they can be corrected?

Anyway.....here's what sucks though, about the NFL.

1. Pussy Rules (it might be too much to ask to once again legalize the head slap, but consider):
 - a. Illegal Chuck: Put in place in response to the play of the Pittsburgh Steelers of the '70s. Adopted in 1978, the Steelers immediately unleashed a prolific passing attack. What's wrong with this rule? It counters the natural order of the game. If you want to chuck the receiver all the way down the field, prior to the ball being in the air, thus absorbing the risk of getting your ass burned, why make that illegal? College ball still allows it. The risk is on the defender.
 - b. Early Release on punts: This stupid penalty cost the Steelers dearly in Arizona last year, as the re-kick was taken to the house, by a kid from Woodland Hills no less. Again, if I want to release all of my blockers as soon as the ball is snapped, thereupon taking on the risk that my punt might be blocked, why should I be prevented from doing so?

In both a & b, the natural order is being fucked with. There's already a risk/reward quotient at hand. Why legislate it out? I'll tell you why. It's for the benefit of the casual fan, who wants to see more scoring....that's why. Well, hell with them!! Keep the game pure!!

Further, look at the vicious cycle this creates. The illegal chuck makes it harder to cover receivers. What happens? Teams pass more. It's harder to defend, coverage-wise. What happens? Teams put more heat on the QB. What happens? More injuries to the QB. What happens? More pussy rules to protect the QB....leading to....

- c. The proliferation of personal fouls, like "blow to the head." Whenever a defender touches Tom Brady's helmet and gets flagged for 15, Brady has the audacity to be all pissed off about it. Hey Tom....that's why you wear a helmet. Too soft, too much bullshit. I'm not a huge fan of the college game, but I like that they're not nearly so anal about late hits. It's football...expect to get hit!!

2. The Bye Week

I abhor the Bye Week. It was one thing when we had an odd number of teams in the league, but now there's no need. I know the players like it, but so what!! Super Bowl could be moved back into January with no bye week....not that that matters. Football season starts, we start to establish our rhythms, routines, and then... Bye Week. Other thing that sucks is that for a few weeks, your team has one more or one less game than other teams in your division, like baseball!! You start to talk about a one-game lead in the LOST COLUMN. Only thing a bye week is good for is if

you have some choice about some stupid family event that will require you to sacrifice a Sunday. That's not a good enough reason to keep it though. Bye bye Bye Week. Get rid of it.

3. Full price for pre-season games

It's the least of our problems, but charging full price for a game that doesn't count? That's some bullshit. It's like paying full price for lottery tickets that pay off in jellybeans. Or full price for condoms with pinhole leaks. Or full price for a Danny's hoagie with no meat, a Vinnie's pizza with no greaz, you get the idea.

Thing is, we all know that if pre-season games cost less, they'd just charge more for the real games....they're getting their dough one way or the other.

4. Country Music & Big-Ass Vehicles

There's some assumption, based on demographics I guess, that all football fans are fond of Country Music & Big-Ass Vehicles. I happen to hate 'em both. I hate any vehicle bigger than mine, and. it seems more often that not, the national anthem in big games is sung by some country music dipshit....Clint Black or Toby Keith (never trust someone with 2 first names). Just for the hell of it, they should have some freak with multiple piercings and mascara sing the anthem during the Super Bowl....or some other freak like Boy George.

That's all the shit that I hate about the NFL that I can think of, for now.

'90s: CHANGING OF THE GUARD

Chuck Noll had two years remaining as Head Coach of the Pittsburgh Steelers. The 1990 campaign ended in most disappointing fashion on a Sunday Night in Houston. Needing a victory to make the playoffs, the Steelers allowed backup QB Cody Carlson to slice and dice them, losing 34-14. Noll's final campaign brought a losing record, 7-9, but a pair of 17-10 victories versus the arch-rival Browns and Bengals on which to close the season.

Bill Cowher was hired to replace the legendary Noll, still the only coach to win four Super Bowls, and Cowher paid immediate dividends. The Steelers won the opener at favored Houston in '92, started off 3-0, came from 13 points back to beat Houston at TRS, and were moving along at 10-3 when QB Neil O'Donnell was injured. Backup Bubby Brister, formerly a starter of so much promise, lost the next two games while putting a total of 9 points on the board. After beating the Browns in the finale, Bubby told reporters that everyone "can kiss my ass." The Steelers had clinched home field advantage throughout the playoffs under

their rookie head coach, and earned a first round bye. When defending AFC Champion Buffalo overcame a 35-3 deficit to beat Houston, the Steelers matchup was set.

On Thursday, January 7th, a work struggle for me spanning two years had been resolved, and was a major victory. On Friday, January 8th, my son was born. Not one to place emphasis on karma, I nevertheless felt as though there was no way the Steelers could lose. My in-laws came to the hospital to visit their daughter, and their new grandson. I gave them the bum's rush out the door, and sat down in front of my the 9-inch screen in Mrs. Swiss's hospital room, 12-hour old son in hand, to watch the Steelers beat the Bills. Except the Steelers didn't beat the Bills. Maybe we should've kissed Bubby's ass, or at least played him instead of O'D who was considerably off his game, the Steelers losing by a considerable margin of 24-3.

The '93 season was a roller coaster. After an 0-2 start, the Steelers ran off a skein of 4 straight. Steelers-Browns were being televised to much of the nation, but not in New England, as the lowly Patriots would be on the affiliates. I discovered that the Holiday Inn in Rutland, Vermont picked up the affiliate from Plattsburgh, New York, so I packed the family in the car on Sunday morning, and off we went on the 4 hour jaunt to Rutland. The Steelers overcame a 14-0 margin, and led 23-21 late when Terry Metcalf, for the second time that game, returned a punt for a TD. Steelers lost 28-23. My 9 month old son was a beast at 4am. I drew the assignment of sitting with him in the lobby. Being able to see the Steelers on Sunday was still an iffy proposition, and I treasured every opportunity. Of course, the early December game against the Patriots was televised, and the Steelers overcame a 14-0 deficit in that contest as well. It was during 2Q that Neighbor Susan, who earlier that week had delivered her 4th child, called to say that Neighbor Chuck was at work, there was a fire in the woods out back of our houses, and "could Dave go check it out." "Dave will go check it out at halftime", I told Mrs. Swiss. Incensed, she threatened to call the Fire Department. "Go ahead," I said, "that's why they're there." This game almost brought a brutal loss, as down 3 points, Drew Bledsoe attempted to sneak on 4th down for a TD with seconds remaining. The TV announcer said that he'd scored, but there was no signal. Levon Kirkland had made the stop, with Bledsoe pulling the ball back ever so slightly as he was about to cross the goal line. The Steelers once again needed help to make the playoffs with a 9-7 record. On the season's final day, the Patriots beat Miami, and that night, Houston beat the New York Jets and the Steelers were in. The Steelers played at Kansas City in the Wild Card round on my son's first birthday. It was the first of many playoff heartbreakers under Bill Cowher. A late lead vanished on a blocked punt, and a 4th down TD pass to a receiver who should've been incarcerated for domestic violence. The Steelers, after holding a pair of 10-point leads, lost to Joe Montana and the KC Chiefs.

The 1994 season was a watershed year in my fandom. My primary frustration in living in New England, bar none, was the inability to watch my Pittsburgh

Steelers on football Sundays. As if it wasn't enough to have the loser Patriots pre-empt potential Steelers broadcasts, I had to contend with the Giants being featured as well. Every year, the highlight of my off season was the release of the NFL schedule, so I could review the number of Steelers national TV games. Prior to opening day, the Boston Globe would release the tentative schedule of broadcasts for the year, subject to change of course. And change it sometimes did, much to my chagrin. Prior to the proliferation of sports bars, there were years, such as '88, where I saw as few as 3 Steelers games, and to view these 3 I traveled once to TRS, and another to a friend's home in Milo, Maine, the Great North Woods, in order to pick up the telecast from Bangor. Every Sunday, I would be enthused during pre-game, then forced to bear the moribund Patriots, reduced to waiting interminably for the 10-minute ticker, while hoping for a highlight. Now and then, I'd celebrate with a long-distance phone hookup to Tony, sometimes calling late during a close game to catch the final minutes. Sometimes I couldn't reach Tony, so I'd call Mom around 1pm. "But I'm going out grocery shopping," she'd say. "That's okay, I'd respond, "just turn Myron up nice and loud, put your phone beside, and go on out. Hang up when you get home." I often went shopping for a satellite dish. I was disadvantaged by my techno-dumminess though, and the respective geek that I would talk to was never sufficiently a sports fan, didn't really understand my dilemma. "Oh, you'll get plenty of sports," they would say. "I don't want plenty of sports," I would reply. "I want Pittsburgh Steelers football. Can you guarantee that I'll pick up every Pittsburgh Steelers game?" The best any said geek could tell me was that I would get **most** Steelers games. I would have the same refrain. I would explain how my sanity would be challenged if unable to pick up the season's most important game, and I would exit the satellite shack.

All of this changed forever in 1994, however. I had actually been able to see 5 of the season's first 11 games when DirecTV gave birth to NFL Sunday Ticket, an absolute godsend. It was not yet a fait accompli. While Mrs. Swiss had actually suggested that I purchase a small satellite dish in celebration of my 40th birthday a few months hence, I had to have my property assessed for a clear path to the south sky. For a charge of \$50, a geek came to my property, with the \$50 fee being applied to the \$200 cost of installation should I purchase the \$700 dish (and now they practically give the things away). I live on a wooded lot; my road is a path cut in the woods. There were trees blocking a path to the south, problem being they were my neighbor's trees. He's not exactly a friendly neighbor; I've had one conversation with him during my 17 years next door, none for the past 16 years. Finally, using a device that resembled a monocle, the geek determined that he could mount the dish on the very edge of my garage roof. Mrs. Swiss, having been out for the day, came up the driveway, and the geek announced, "Good news!! We can do it." "Oh...great," she replied, and continued on inside. The dish was installed, though Sunday Ticket wasn't available for another week, on November 27 versus the Oakland Raiders. I celebrated by springing for the phone hookup with Tony to hear the Steelers beat Miami in OT, tuned in my dish the next week, and haven't missed a play since.

There are many complaints about Sunday Ticket, but not from me. I kept it simple, and have been grandfathered in. My only purchase from DirecTV is NFL Sunday Ticket, meaning that I use my dish for 17 Sundays a year, and I'm a cable subscriber otherwise. The price has continued to climb, now exceeding \$200 yearly. As recently as two years ago, my Canadian friends were only paying \$100/season. I've always maintained that if the charge was tripled, I'd still be first in line to pay it. My only complaint with Sunday Ticket is their blacking out games that are televised locally. As I sometimes tape to watch later, any confusion on whether the Steelers telecast will be televised locally or on satellite could prove fatal. I've been spared thus far.

The 1994 season produced a memory for the ages;

January 7, 1995: Steelers-29 Browns-9

Closest I've ever come to having a religious experience. This was my first Steelers game in 6 years; my first playoff game in 16 years. A fan in the concourse, pre-game, is extending both fingers skyward, screaming "Fuck the Browns." In tape, on his yellow raincoat, is the same refrain, "Fuck the Browns." Brentson Buckner gets in a fight during introductions. I had forgotten what a TRS crowd could be like, everyone with a Terrible Towel, chanting, "Here We Go Steelers; Here We Go" Vinnie T., on cue, throws a pick to Tim McKyer right before half. Who knew that the following week, McKyer would wear the goat horns for eternity. O'D passes to Yancey, TD!! Yancey pulls the Terrible Towel from his jersey, is waving it in the end zone right below me. Crowd goes wild. I stare to the heavens. Nirvana!!

From the heavens to the fires of hell over the course of a week!! For the AFCCG vs. San Diego, I accomplished my usual Sunday goal, which was to get Mrs. Swiss the fuck out the house. She was off to a birthday party with our daughter. Oh, she has this really annoying habit of getting the fuck out the house on Sunday, only to return around the 2 minute warning, typically with a trunk full of groceries that she wants me to unload, or a pressing conversation in which she wishes me to engage. "You're only half-listening to me," she says. "Wrong. I'm about zero listening." I'll take the kids at home. In fact, I have a tried and true method for watching football whilst home with little kids. It goes like this.

- a. Give 'em candy
- b. Ignore 'em
- c. Yell at 'em

Repeat steps "a" through "c" and the game's about over.

Anyway, I was home alone with my then 2 year old son for the AFCCG, and he had awakened from his nap. After the stiff Tim McKyer allowed Tony Martin to get inside his sorry ass for the go-ahead TD, the Steelers drove the field to the Charger 9, whereupon following a 1-yard loss on 1st down; O'D's final 3 passes of the '94 season were all behind his intended receiver. Had he hit John L in stride on 3rd down, he would have scored, rather than tackled by Junior Seau, who by the way, I hope is still lying on the field in Phoenix, face down, crying his

little eyes out, heartbroken that his 18-1 Patriots failed to win the Super Bowl. For a split second, I thought the 4th down toss to Foster was complete. When reality struck, I cried out loudly, "FUCK...FUCK...FUCK...FUCK." My little boy stared at me, bug-eyed. He and I go to a Steelers game yearly. Other than that, he doesn't really watch with me. I'm not a lot of fun to watch with, between my sudden outbursts and my constant whining and moaning.

After the bitter pill of 1994, we approached 1995 full of optimism. After Rod Woodson tore an ACL trying to respond to a Barry Sanders cut, I watched as Norm Johnson kicked a short FG at the final gun to beat Detroit in the opener. I ran about my family room screaming, "Steelers win, Steelers win, Steelers win," I did a somersault (I'm given to somersaults for Steelers victories); my foot coming over caught my little boy square in the nose. He was felled instantly, right in the presence of his mother. It was, umm, a sobering experience. He's resilient though. The following week, after a Steelers touchdown, as I celebrated with both feet on the ground, he said, "Daddy, Daddy, kick me in the nose again." I made it down to the Divisional Playoff versus Buffalo, cheered the news that Bruce Smith would be out with the flu. This game commenced a decade long practice of attending games with my nephew. Tony, a season-ticket holder since 1970, had long preferred to watch at home, some seasons selling his full allotment of tickets to a single buyer. He preferred the comfort of his living room, the replays, etc. Then, he got screwed on his seat assignment at Heinz, and he pledged never to attend a game there. He backed off this at the urging of his daughter in '05, attended several games last year, and seems to be back in the full game-day swing. Anyway, it became the practice, for several years, that if I could make it to Pittsburgh for the game, I had a ticket, as long as I took my nephew. Now, he's grown, married, and his sister is a legit Steelers fan in her own right. Not only can I no longer use Tony's season tickets; if Tony wants to go, he has to scalp a ticket himself, as his kids have already laid claim to his seats!

Back to the '95 Divisional Playoff. My nephew and I weren't tailgaters as much as we enjoyed (well, I enjoyed, and he would tag along) walking about the lot, observing other tailgaters. One crazed fan, his entire body painted black and gold, stripped to his waist in the 19-degree weather, and used himself as a human bowling ball, hurling himself into pins that were set up in the lot. He lifted himself up, scraped and bloodied, a noble effort. Inside, the Steelers 26-7 lead had shrunk to 26-21, and the crowd had been silenced when a concessionaire, one who's been around for years, stood in front of an Upper South End Zone section, removed his shirt, poured a beer over his own head, and re-energized the masses. Two scores later, the Steelers had a 40-21 victory, and a ticket to the AFCCG, which everyone expected to take place in Kansas City. However, the Indy Colts had different plans, and assisted by Chiefs kicker Lin Elliott, who missed 3 FGs, beat KC 10-7, and had their own ticket punched to Pittsburgh.

It was the toughest winter in years in New England. Roof rakes were selling like hotcakes at local hardware stores. There were multiple storms weekly, and the populace had become so desensitized that we'd say, "Oh good, only 12 inches expected this time." I was due to fly to North Carolina for work on the Monday following the AFCCG, but the day before, I received clearance from headquarters to accept Tony's offer of his ticket, and was still able to book a very cheap flight out of Boston, with the 24-hour cancellation period extending past the time of the flight itself. Herein begins a regret that I've not yet purged from my memory. Falling asleep on the couch in my NH home on the eve of the AFCCG, my plans were to fly to Pittsburgh at 7am, fly back that night, and then leave again for NC on Monday. Mrs. Swiss went off to bed around 1am; my plan was to leave for Boston around 5am. At around 3am, I awoke on the couch to find water leaking through the light fixture on my kitchen ceiling. I took, regrettably, the "responsible" route. Once again, I would miss an AFCCG due to weather. I called Tony. He would take his kid instead. I cancelled my flight. I stayed home to tend to my leaky ceiling. I did manage to get Mrs. Swiss and both kids the fuck out the house that day, watching the game in solitude. When the Hail Mary from Harbaugh fell incomplete, tears came to my eyes; I flung open the backdoor and shouted into the frigid New England afternoon, "Super Bowl, Super Bowl, Super Bowl!!!" It was good for Tony though, to witness this event with his son. He described the TRS stands shaking, an indescribable scene. Doddamn....I wish I'd been there.

I must admit that my reaction to the SB loss 2 weeks hence was muted. I did not go ballistic when O'D threw his 2nd pick to Larry Brown, instead saying to myself, "Not again." The most difficult portion of the football season for me is when the season goes on without the presence of the Pittsburgh Steelers. I want to see my team play as far into the post-season as possible. In 1995, they did just that, but came up short in their bid for One for the Thumb. The entire season was over. They'd win it in '96.

Neil O'D, the bum, signed with the Jets. I don't think it was just the money; I think he couldn't bring himself to go back to Pittsburgh, the object of such scorn and vitriol. Chris (Mad Dog) Russo, from New York's WFAN, called it right, however. "O'Donnell can drive a Cadillac, but he can't drive a Chevy." He was right. The Steelers were tailor-made for a QB of O'Donnell's talents and abilities. After three more unproductive seasons as a starter with the Jets and Bengals, he went off to Tennessee to caddy for Steve McNair for the balance of his career.

After one-half with Jim Miller, the QB reins rested with Mikey Tomczak for the whole of 1996. After the opening loss at Jax, and the second consecutive year where we lost a major force on our D to injury, this time Greg Lloyd with a torn patella tendon, never to be the same, the Steelers reeled off 5 consecutive wins. The final game of this skein was a home game versus the lowly Bengals on a day that I was scheduled to fly to North Carolina, through Pittsburgh. I couldn't arrange my schedule to lay over for the entire game, but I would be in the

Pittsburgh Airport until halftime, by which time the game should be well in hand. Upon my arrival in Pittsburgh, I checked with a gate agent to see if I could fly to Ashville more toward evening. He told me that I could but that it would cost me about \$500. Not being independently wealthy, I declined his offer. Halftime came, and the game was not well in hand. In fact, the Steelers and lowly Bengals were locked in a 3-3 tie. My plane was boarding. I couldn't leave!! As I approached the jet way, boarding pass in hand, I pivoted and approached the gate agent, this one of the middle-aged female persuasion, and explained my dire circumstances...a native Pittsburgher, exiled to the hinterlands of New England, wanting but to watch my beloved Steelers prior to flying off to North Carolina. "Where are you watching," she said, "we'll take care of you." And on this day, her type of "taking care of" exceeded all others! A half hour later, as I watched the second half, she entered the bar with a new boarding pass for a later flight. I watched the Steelers sack Jeff Blake 10 times, watched Kordell take a screen pass in for a TD, and watched Woodson score on a fumble recovery, as the Steelers beat the Bengals, 20-3. I'll be forever indebted.

After a loss to Houston, October 27 was a beautiful autumn day in New England. Mrs. Swiss prevailed upon me to make good on a running promise, that being to tape the game, and watch later. I'll write separately on the prerequisites, and dangers of such a practice, but on this day, we were off to Boston, to walk the Freedom Trail, take in other sights. Before heading home for the day, we entered a pizza establishment in Boston's North End to order a hoagie (not called hoagies in New England though; they're "grinders"). The TV was on, tuned to NFL Football. I ran from the joint, screaming so as to drown out whatever sound might pierce my ears. It was a close call, but I managed to safely escape knowledge of the Steelers fate, and that evening watched Norm kick another short FG at the final gun to beat the winless Falcons, 20-17.

My friend Freado came to town on Saturday night, December 7th, Pearl Harbor Day appropriately enough. Freado hails from Monessen, lives in Westerville, Ohio (Bungals territory) and for awhile did some consultation with my place of employ. Freado is Freado's last name, but even his brother calls him Freado. Freado was a bad luck charm during his visits. During one visit, we had car problems that took weeks to resolve. During another, my kid got stung by a dozen bees. This time, Freado wasn't in our house more than an hour when the lights went out during a storm of such severity that we had no power until Tuesday. It was Steelers-San Diego the next day, and what were we going to do? Well, I had a double phone jack, a couple of old rotary phones, and me and my buddy Freado sat side by side for 3 hours, listening to the Steelers best the Chargers, 16-3, while Mrs. Swiss paced and stewed, wondering when I'd start digging us out of the impassable driveway. Relax, Honey, time enough for that.

A piece of **good** luck Freado had would make any Steelers fan jealous. Freado's dad, Pete, worked for the Valley Independent, a Mon Valley weekly. Freado had an interest in photography, spent half his life in a darkroom when I first met him.

Freado asked Pete's boss if he could have a press credential for a Steelers game, which would get him onto the sideline where he could take some pics. Boss told him that he couldn't give him a pass for one game, but he could give him a pass for the whole season provided Freado took pictures which the Independent could use. For the '74,'75 and '76 campaigns, Freado was a fixture on the Steelers sideline, snapping away. Some of his Freado's pics, of Lambert, Swannie, LC, Franco, adorn my office wall.

I did manage to attend the Wild Card Playoff against Indy (more on that under "Family Gatherings" in another section), and then purchased tickets via a ticket broker for the upcoming Divisional Playoff game in Foxboro against the Patriots. Tony flew to New England for this one, and the following Fog Bowl was perhaps my darkest day as a sports fan. Several rows from the top of the old Foxboro Stadium, the fog prevented us from seeing much anyway, but just as it was clearing, the Pats management, in their infinite wisdom, elected to go forth with a pre-game ceremony where Revolutionary re-enactors fired muskets into the air, filling the place with smoke once more. The game started badly, with Rod Woodson being scorched by Terry Glenn on the Pats' first offensive play, and ended worse. There was absolutely nothing to cheer about on this day when the Steelers lost, 28-3, the crowd stood throughout, and my venom toward the New England Patriots, particularly their fans, reached a point of no turning back. It wasn't enough for these all-time losers to win the game, but some insisted on getting in our faces as well, screaming about the Super Bowl. "Maybe you'll do better than 46-10 this time," I shot back, referring to the Pats massacre at the hands of the Chi Bears in their only previous Super Bowl appearance. A very pretty New England young lady on her way out of our row though, was sympathetic toward Tony. She seemed to be on the verge of hugging him. "Highlight of my day," said Tony.

The 1997 campaign was perhaps the most "fun" non SB season of all. The up and down play of Kordell Stewart in his initial season at the helm, three picks first half, three TDs second half, the comeback from 21 down against Baltimore, the trio of overtime victories. There were some moments as a fan as well. Two of my three most memorable "heckling" games were during this season, a full description offered in the following chapter. And then there was one of my finest days as a Steelers fan, the Feast of the Immaculate Interception at Foxboro Stadium.

December 13, 1997: My then 13-year-old Nephew flew up for this game, and I drove my new Nissan Quest van, otherwise filled with four Patriots knuckleheads, all my employees, down to the scene of the prior year's debacle. I still have the damn thing, 11 years and a quarter million miles later, inherited it from Mrs. Swiss in '03 when we bought a new vehicle. She always gets the new one. And I'm driving the past 5 years, feeling like a soccer mom. I had to pull the van over repeatedly as one of said knuckleheads insisted on flying a Patriots fan out of the window. I eventually confiscated the offending rag. The Pats fans in the parking lot were their usual pleasant selves, "Hey, Jerome Bettis takes it up the ass," said

one to me as I passed by, wearing my #36 jersey. I merely smiled, gave him a thumbs-up sign and proceeded (remember Ben, prior to the '05 Cinci Playoff game, "a wink and a smile, gets 'em every time"). Inside, they were their smug selves for the greater part of the New England early evening. Staked to a 14-0 lead early, the Pats led throughout, and one more first down, leading 21-13 and the game would be clinched. If they elected to play it safe and run on this crucial 3rd down, the Steelers would need to drive 80 yards in the final two minutes to be in position to tie. Bledsoe dropped back, he threw, and all of a sudden Kevin Henry had the ball, heading toward the Pats goal line. Following an amazing catch by Yancey on 4th down, a toss to Bruener for the TD, and a sliding grab by Yancey for the deuce, we were headed to overtime. After a 1st down sack of Kordell, little Courtney Hawkins took a 3rd & 16 screen for damn near 50 yards. After another toss to Bruener, Norm kicked the game winner, and amidst a Black & Gold celebration, 60,000 New England zombies filed silently out of Foxboro. Actually, some were not so silent. "You guys are assholes," said one dissatisfied patron to me and my nephew "fuck you guys," as he flipped us the bird. We giggled like school girls, hung around, whooped it up with our Steelers brethren. Back at the van, my other passengers moped and wallowed. The van was locked; they awaited our return. I opened the vehicle, and immediately hit the tape player with "Here We Go" by the Fan Club. One of my crew couldn't take it, snapped, and attempted to forcibly remove the tape. We physically restrained him from doing so. It was a joyous ride back to New Hampshire...for some of us.

That win gave the Steelers a first-round bye, and the right to host the Pats in the playoffs, rather than the other way around. I was in the TRS house, with my nephew for that one, another heckling highlight, as the Steelers squeaked by the injury-ravaged Patriots, 7-6, on the strength of Mike Vrabel's strip of Bledsoe late in the game. I talked with Boston Globe sportswriter Bob Ryan in the Pittsburgh Airport on that Saturday night; his sharing with me that Bledsoe just didn't have the awareness, the presence, to take his team to the Promised Land. As Tony was driving me to the airport that night, he asked if I'd be back the following week for the AFCCG. I told him that I didn't know, two weekends in a row might be a bit much, particularly as I had committed to being a better husband and father as a New Year's resolution. "Fuck that," said Tony, "do that next year."

The following week, I was back, first having held my son's fifth birthday party at Chuckie Cheese, so raucous that it was seemingly a warm-up for the following day at TRS. That night, Mrs. Swiss called, "Dave, there's an animal in the house." After telling Mrs. Swiss that I was helpless to help, being 650 miles away, Tony, my nephew and I went for a little ride. We drove past the William Penn Hotel where the Broncos were holed up. "Fuck you, you assholes," Tony screamed up at the windows after stepping out to the sidewalk. We drove over to the North Side where crowds had gathered awaiting the opening of the lots the following day. One sign proclaimed, "Elway Takes it up the Ass." I guess that "Up the Ass" claims were popular that year. Chan Fuckin' Gailey is seared in my memory. Steelers are up, 14-10, 2nd & 1 on the Broncos 35, 4 minutes to half.

JB is running well; Kordell is not throwing well, having narrowly averted being picked at least twice previously after throwing into double coverage. Please, run the ball, exhaust the clock, go into the locker room with at least a 7 point lead. We get the ball back to start the 3Q. No, Chan has Kordell throw deep, he's picked. A couple pass interferences, an offensive holding call later, the Broncos go into halftime up, 24-14. Steelers close the gap, and then somehow, some way, Jason Gildon fails to defend a pass to Shannon Sharpe with the game on the line. We exit TRS, damn if I want to stay and see the Broncos be awarded the Lamar Hunt Trophy on our field. I had better get used to that scene for the seasons to follow.

The '98 season was a nice one for awhile. We lost a heartbreaker at Cinci to the Traitor Neil O'D, had a very good win at KC, and a tough loss at Tennessee. On vacation at the Outer Banks of North Carolina prior to Thanksgiving, I was desperately searching for way to watch Steelers-Jagoffs. It was late on that Sunday morning when I learned of Slammin' Sammie's, a sports bar in Kitty Hawk. My brother-in-law, John, and I were on our way. It wasn't a Steelers bar, there were about a half dozen games on, but the Steelers fans comprised at least 2/3 of the patrons. "Seems like we're right across the street from Three Rivers Stadium," John remarked. We drank way too much, and the Steelers won, only to follow it up with the infamous Coin Toss/Field Goal Bill game in Detroit on Thanksgiving Day. I had watched most of this game, and then taped the rest as we went for a ride on the beach prior to our Turkey Day dinner. I almost got sick afterward. Tony, on the other hand, reacted initially to the coin toss in his Pittsburgh abode by hitting our mother with an errant pillow toss. Maybe it wasn't so errant? Payback for not allowing him to go to Pitt Stadium with Uncle Louie in the '50s? Comeuppance for making him go to school on October 13, 1960, Game 7 of the World Series? Following the OT loss, Tony went into his garage, sat in his car, rolled up the windows, and rather than offing himself with exhaust fumes, screamed "Mother Fucker" loudly and repeatedly. He then went upstairs and enjoyed his Thanksgiving raviolis. I was in Pittsburgh the following week, Pats fans in tow, for the Steelers-Pats game, the second of 5 consecutive losses with which the Steelers closed the '98 campaign. This one's in the all-time heckling piece as well, but not from a positive perspective. The next week, Kordell was crying on the sideline in Tampa.

The final season of the decade was dreadful, and may have nearly cost Bill Cowher his job. The Cowher/Tom Donahoe row did result in Donahoe's ouster. My Pittsburgh trip this year was for a Penn State/Steelers doubleheader. On Saturday, Tony and I sat in Beaver Stadium as a Tom Brady led Michigan team overcame a 10-point 4Q deficit to beat the Nittany Lions. Then, then....the following day, Tony and I, along with Mrs. Tony and my then 79-year old mother sat in the Auxiliary Press Box while the Steelers faced the expansion CleveBrownies. Tony said I couldn't be my usual noisy, obnoxious self as he had scored these tickets through his work, and there were reporters actually working there. But, there were temptations, like all the free beer one could drink.

For a number of years, I had almost no liquid intake at Steelers games; more on this later. On this day though, I took full advantage of the hospitality. The Steelers held a 15-7 4Q lead when Kordell threw a revolting pick on a screen pass, but still led by 15-13, and faced a 3rd down that would ice the game if converted. They came up short, punted away to the Brownies and Tim Couch methodically led his squad down the field, and the Brownies won in on a FG at the final gun. As the Steelers left the field, I screamed with ample volume, "I hate you MOTHER-FUCKERS." Tony never scored those tickets again. So ended the '90s.

HECKLING

Besides the noise tremors brought on by the full enclosure of Three Rivers Stadium, the other benefit sacrificed in the transition to Heinz was the ability to heckle our opponents as they arrived on Game Day.

Don't get me wrong. I like Heinz. I like the view of the Pittsburgh Skyline. But....if a view of the skyline is so damn important....go stand the fuck outside!!

On to the heckling. At TRS, the players' busses came into the North Side in full view, and came to a stop on the street underneath Gate A. The players disembarked not onto the sidewalk, but onto the street, and any assembled masses were kept on the opposite sidewalk, all of about 6 feet away from The Enemy Du Jour. Of course, this was a heckler's paradise. Three games stand out from my personal Heckler's Remembrances:

1. Nov. 9, 1997: Steelers v. Baltimore Ravens, a Sunday Nighter. My then 13 year old nephew and I are on the sidewalk. Who gets off the Ravens bus, but Vinnie T. Being a Penn State fan, I'm conversant with Vinnie's blaming his slow professional start on his being haunted by the '87 Fiesta Bowl where Vinnie threw 5 picks into the hands of the Nittany Lions (and where said Nits kicked Michael Irvin's ass ALL night long). Simple mantra I employed that night, "Hey Vinnie, Fiesta Bowl, Vinnie...hey Vinnie, Fiesta Bowl, Fiesta Bowl, Fiesta Bowl!" Let the record show that on every one of the Ravens first three possessions, Vinnie T. threw interceptions. He was then pulled from the game. Steelers won, 37-0. I'll take credit for that one, thank you.

2. January 3, 1998: Steelers vs. New England Patriots, Divisional Playoff: My nephew and I are at our posts. Myra Kraft is standing nearby, waiting for her boy, Jonathan. She enters the stadium. First bus pulls up. A handful of players disembark. Drew Bledsoe had just been in the news for a crowd surfing episode at a Boston nightclub where a young woman was injured. "Where's that faggot, Bledsoe," I call out. "This isn't the Paradise Lounge. These are the Pittsburgh Steelers, Bledsoe...gonna kick your ass today. Where's that faggot, Bledsoe." The laughter behind me escalates, louder & louder. It occurs to me....my people

love my heckling. It's intoxicating. I continue. "Where's that faggot, Bledsoe." All of the players are now within the stadium. I cross the street. I approach a security guy that's clearly in charge. I ask him when the next bus is coming in. "I don't know," he says. I look at him quizzically, "You don't KNOW?" I respond. A few minutes later, the same security guy crosses the street, approaches me. "Hey," he says, "you're the one that was bustin' their balls, right?" I say, "Yeah, it was me." He says, "Next bus'll be here in 20 minutes; you keep ON bustin' their balls." THANK YOU, my Steeler brother....and so I did. Steelers win, 7-6.

3. December 6, 1998: Steelers vs. New England Patriots. Heckling admittedly backfired on me this day. I travel to Pittsburgh with my two brothers-in-law, both Pats fans, two of my employees, both Pats fans, one of whose wife only permitted him to make the trip 'cause he was going with me. She figured I'd be safe and reasonable. My nephew was along, as well as Freado and his son. After burning a Drew Bledsoe jersey in the parking lot, we proceed to our heckling spot. Please note that this was in the midst of the Kordell/gay/Schenley Oval rumors. Please note additionally, that Terry Glenn had been referred to as "she" by former coach Bill Parcells, the Tuna talking of Glenn wearing high heels. Off the Pats bus comes Chad Eaton, Ted Johnston, Willie McGinest and big 'ol Zeafross Moss. "Where's Terry Glenn and his high heels," I shouted, "Hey, Kordell's going to run all over you wimp-asses today." Chad Eaton scowled. Ted Johnson laughed. Zeafross Moss in a departure from the dead silence always garnered by my heckling (no one had EVER said anything back), turns to me says loudly, "Kordell sucks dick." True story! I was speechless. I couldn't respond. Later on, I thought about my "shoulda said." I shoulda said...."So's ya mamma." I pictured it; Moss chases me, beats on me, and suffers a groin pull in the process. I contribute to a Steelers victory. But alas!! I was speechless. I said nothing. The game? Terry Glenn catches an 87 yard TD from Bledsoe. Chad Eaton plays like a man possessed. Ted Johnson? He tears a bicep muscle, tackling Jerome Bettis; he was never the same again. Kordell? He has beer poured on him leaving the field. A portion of the stands in the North end zone collapses. Steelers lose, 23-9, the second of 5 straight losses to close the '98 campaign.

Heckling days seems to be over at most stadiums. Busses pull safely within the stadium compound, no direct access. Now, one must be satisfied with heckling the opposition fandom.....in person....and...in cyber-space.

FAMILY GATHERINGS

The last Wild Card Playoff I attended was on December 29, 1996....but what a journey in getting there.

Living in New Hampshire, the family travel plans to Pittsburgh are regularly fluid, and sometimes never come off. We had committed to making this trip sometime

after Christmas of '96, and when I informed my mom of this just after Thanksgiving, she began formulating her holiday plans, mistakenly however, without consulting the Playoff Schedule of the Pittsburgh Steelers.

She could not have known the depths of the quagmire that she was to enter, as said schedule was not released until the evening of December 22nd, long since Mom having scheduled our family Christmas Dinner for Sunday, December 29th, 1:00pm, given that I wasn't arriving with my gang until the 27th.

When she announced this, Tony was immediately on the phone, saying, "Mom, you've gotta change the Christmas event, it's the same time as the Steelers playoff game." Mom scolded him, 'Now Anthony; what's more important, our family Christmas Dinner, or a Steelers game?' "Don't go there, Mom," Tony replied.

Mom was resolute though. She was not going to have her Christmas Dinner take a back seat to Steelers football. Ever the intermediary, the peace-keeping force, I recruited my then 12 year old nephew to call his grandma, ask her to change the time. I managed to draw the simultaneous ire of both his grandmother, as well as his mother, in doing so. Hey...never hurts to ask, right?

I had decided that this was workable. I would merely position myself in full view of the TV, stuff my face like a fuckin' glutton for 20-minutes, and then stagger to the couch for the remaining 3 quarters. As an aside, gluttony is a time-honored tradition in my family. As a lad, I regularly popped buttons off of my freshly laundered and pressed white shirt at holidays, after having ingested a few dozen raviolis and a dozen or so bottles of pop. Careful sitting across the table from young Swiss, lest you have an eye put out. Mrs. Swiss refers to the Thanksgiving table as "The Trough," and that's a fairly accurate assessment. I come from a long line of hogs. Dad, working on the Pennsylvania Railroad after graduating from Rankin High in '34, packed 16 sandwiches in his lunch daily. My aunt, his sister, verified this, as she was the lunch-packer. His explanation, "Worked like a jackass, had to eat like one, too." My favorite meal...raviolis. I've never ordered raviolis in a restaurant, however. Why? Haven't found an eatery yet that'll serve up 44 ravs on a plate.

Anyway, Tony upped the ante a couple days prior to game time, merely saying, "Mom, if you don't change the time, I won't be there." Mom relented; dinner time was now 6pm. The Big Winner??? ME!!! I was in line to be in the house at TRS with my nephew, watching Steelers beat the Colts. A week later, Tony flew up to New England, and we sat in shared brotherly misery as the Steelers took it up the ass in the Fog Bowl, 28-3. But...the Wild Card round, we were all winners.

Anyway....the lesson is automatic. If you have ANY say, any input, into the scheduling of a family event between the months of September and early February first, consult your schedule...and NOT just your Steelers schedule.

Most importantly, check the NFL Playoff schedule, and do NOT book anything during a potential playoff encounter.

On January 11, 1998, the 90th birthday party of 2nd, 3rd or 4th cousin (who gives a shit how many removed) was scheduled in conflict with the AFC Championship Game, in which the Steelers were participating. Regrets started pouring in from people that had affirmatively RSVPd. Mom thought that was terrible. "Hey Ma....what the hell...why'd they schedule it during the AFCCG.," I exclaimed. "Who knew?" she said. "Doesn't matter," I said. ALWAYS, ALWAYS, ALWAYS assume that the Pittsburgh Steelers will be the participants in the biggest of games. Dunno if Mary Rivetti's still around...probably not. She'd have just celebrated her hundredth, and I think I would have known about that. Her daughter, Babe, is still going. Don't know Babe's real name, or maybe her real name is Babe...dunno. I have trouble keeping up with the whereabouts of the old Dago relatives, whereabouts meaning on this earth or beyond. Mom never told Nunna when out of town relatives passed, as Nunna would flip out. "How's Mary in Bridgeport?," Nunna would ask about one of the Connecticut relatives. "Oh, she's fine, Ma," Mom would say. Meanwhile, Mary'd been 6 feet under in Bridgeport for the past dozen years.

More recently, and a bit of a digression from "Family Gatherings, involves the Jets Playoff Game in '04. Mrs. Tony's sister and her husband are given tickets to a performance at the Benedum Center by their daughter, who's a Steelers fan, for Pete's Sake (who's Pete?), but it conflicts with the Divisional Playoff Game. What? The girl doesn't own a calendar. They tell us that the start of the performance was held as Steelers-Jets went into OT, they describe how people at the Benedum Center were chanting, "Here We Go Steelers, Here We Go"....waving terrible towels. All that's great...but....what the fuck were they doing at the Benedum Center watching some doddamn play!!! Steelers were in the playoffs!! Again....no calendar???

TAPING

I've long professed my willingness to place my family first, ahead of my Pittsburgh Steelers fandom in the queue of my life. Of course, my family is having none of this, so I must fairly regularly put my attention where my mouth is. Given the choice, when I must be absent from the live broadcast of a Pittsburgh Steelers game, rather than check in on the score, listen on radio, follow on-line, etc., I always opt to tape, take the appropriate precautions and then watch later, "as if" live.

There are a couple of pitfalls to this practice, and I've sadly encountered both. There is the "power interruption" pitfall. I encountered this traveling back from the Outer Banks on the Sunday following Thanksgiving of 1999. I had a vanful of disgruntled passengers that wanted to stop overnight after traffic ground to halt

for an extended period on the Garden State Parkway earlier in the day. However, I was driving, I was taping, and the anticipation of a Steelers game at the end of my journey energized me. Finally, after an ordeal of more than 16 hours, we pulled into our New Hampshire driveway. From the vehicle, I detected a flashing of the clock on the kitchen stove. Egad!! There had been a power interruption. There would be no joy for me. I was reduced to "finding out the score," as is always suggested by Mrs. Swiss, as in, "Can't you just find out the score later." Steelers lost. I've learned my lesson with power interruptions. Now, if I'm taping while away on Prince Edward Island in the Canadian Maritimes, where I have a cottage, and returning home on game day, common practice is to call Neighbor Chuck. He's able to enter my house, adjust my taping equipment if necessary. If his phone rings close to 1pm on Sunday, and it's me, he'll say without delay, "Don't worry, Dave. There haven't been any power failures."

One must also be careful with human error. I was away for the weekend in PEI in October, 2001, when the Steelers played their first game ever at Heinz Field. I dutifully set the VCR (none of this TIVO, DVR stuff for me) and drove home on Tuesday, knowing that a Steelers game awaited. There had been no power interruption, I rewound the tape, hit play, and the yield was static. I had set the timer for 1am, rather than pm, and had 4 hours of nothingness on my VHS tape. There was also no water. I had to enlist Neighbor Chuck's help to prime the pump on my well, not knowing how to do shit around the house myself. I really can't do much of anything, really. I have a very short list of skills, limited to being able to write a decent letter and tell other people what to do.

Lastly, one must be careful of "bean spillage." One must take great care to avoid knowing the score beforehand. This has always been fairly easy in my PEI cottage. If it's not hockey, no one's watching in PEI, no one's reporting on it either. In fact, at the close of the '01 regular season, I kept myself in the dark for over a week, and returned home on New Year's Eve to watch a Steelers double-header. Believe me; it gets no better, except that after seeing the Steelers beat Detroit, I then saw them blow a game against Cinci, Bill Cowher's lone loss after holding a lead of 11 points or more. On the return from PEI, I do experience some anxiety once we re-enter the USA, particularly fearful of random bean spillage at rest areas. Standing in line for a slice of pizza at Sbarro's for instance, what if the two guys in front of me are discussing the afternoon's events. Pizzer-eater #1 (the New England accent, in addition to dropping r's where they are intended, adds r's where they have no business), says "Hey Bah-knee, those bah-stahds from Pittsbuugh won again. Oh, I'll have a large pizzer with aughta-chokes." (Remember the Our Gang line, "It might've choked Arta, but it's not gonna choke me"). Pizzer-eater #2 responds, "There quata-back is wicked smaht, Mahty." Therefore, I've taken a double precaution:

- a. I stuff my ears with earplugs, cotton, or some other deafening apparatus (though it's a little tough to eat pizza in that way, we must make sacrifices).
- b. I never, ever, ever wear any Steelers gear while taping, thereby avoiding making myself a target for extraneous commentary from well-meaning (or hostile) strangers.

After arriving home, I take additional precautions:

- a. I avoid answering the phone. I violated this rule last season while taping the Browns game at Heinz, answering my cell phone for an unrecognizable number. It was one of my staff who immediately spilled the beans. I had driven all the way home from New York, avoiding any bean spillage at rest areas, only to have this happen. ARGGH!
- b. I generally avoid contact with family members that know the score. It makes me extremely nervous to be around those that know. This is why my family generally barricades themselves upstairs until game's end should they know what happened.
- c. One must also be careful of visitors to one's home after taping. I suggest that one not permit any. After driving home from PEI this past December 30th, and having successfully taped the Steelers/Ravens game, a male friend of my 18-year old daughter's entered the home as I was watching second quarter action, and said "tough game, huh?." I let loose with a blood-curdling scream. The young fella's not been back.

If one takes all the necessary precautions, there are advantages to taping and watching later.

- a. It doesn't take as long, as one can fast forward through insufferable commercials.
- b. One can conduct their own replays
- c. One can take a break, go outside for a breath of air, walk one's property, when it becomes just too much to take.

It's a bit odd though. If the Steelers are lining up for a potentially game-winning kick, my thought to myself, ever cognizant that this event has already occurred, is not "I hope he makes it," but rather, "I hope he made it." Strangely, knowing that the event is not live, serves as an anti-anxiety salve, much needed at times.

ROOTING FOR INJURIES

One might think that given my history of knee injuries, I would have more compassion, not be so cavalier about rooting for injuries to opponents of the Pittsburgh Steelers. Actually, I take the opposite tact; my injury history affords me license to root for injury with a clear conscience. It's insufficient to suggest that one simply root for injury. It's a more complex situation than that, hence the following analysis:

The Competitive Advantage Injury: The lone cardinal rule of rooting for injuries is to always, always, always, always, without exception, root for injuries to give the Pittsburgh Steelers a competitive advantage. There's nothing personal; in fact, it's the ultimate sign of respect. For example, I like Tom Brady, I have the ultimate respect for Tom Brady...and every single week, I root for Tom Brady to break his fuckin' leg. Not only is it okay to root for injuries to give our Steelers a competitive advantage; I postulate that it's required. You are less of a fan if you don't do it.

And, please spare us the bullshit of not wanting to give the other team and their fans any excuses, any legitimacy to their whining. They can whine all they want, who cares, let 'em cry. In fact, I rather enjoy it. The ONLY thing that matters are Steelers victories.

Classic rooting for injuries:

The Carson Palmer injury in the '05 WC Playoff....I was on the ceiling, howling with delight. I KNEW when he went down, no way were the Steelers losing that game. In his case, I'd like to see it happen to him again.....wimp-ass leaves the stadium before halftime, with his team still in the lead. When I read that account in SI; I had to re-read it, then re-read it again. Way to be a leader, Carson... watch the game from the La-Z-Boy.

The Rodney Harrison injury in '05.....Cedric Wilson earned his year's pay with that one, his best moment ever as a Pittsburgh Steeler. His TD catch in the AFCCG vs. Denver, and his TD against Cinci in the playoffs were close, but for my money, his ending Rodney Harrison's season stands out.

The expatriate injury:

It was March or so, of '98. I was watching ESPN report the signing of Yancey Thigpen by the Tennessee Titans. I was filling my living room with invective & vitriol. My then 8-year old daughter, says, "Daddy, what's wrong?" I say, "That idiot just left the Steelers to sign with the Stupid Tennessee Titans." She says, "Daddy, do you hope he breaks his leg?" Of course, I denied it, had to lie to my kid, said, "No Honey, and if I ever say that, I don't really mean it." But I do mean it....wholeheartedly!!!

I remember Chad Brown being injured....loved it!! Rod Woodson, Carnell Lake.....wished broken legs on them constantly. Neil O' Donnell.....cast several spells on his sorry ass....'course his sorry ass was mostly on the bench after leaving Pittsburgh, so it didn't much matter.

Leave Pittsburgh for more dough, better sushi.....I don't give a shit. Fuck you...and I hope you break your fuckin' leg (you may have sensed that I have a preference for broken legs as the injury of choice).

The expatriate waiver:

Those Steelers that helped us win a Super Bowl, and then left for more dough.....Kimo, Randle El, Chris Hope, Peezy (even though we cut him, it was based on more dough), Clark Haggens. I don't wish a broken leg on those guys. I do wish that they toil in obscurity for the balance of their careers though....ala Thigpen, ala O'Donnell, et al.

The waiver to the expatriate waiver:

When injury to our ex-Steelers who helped us win One for the Thumb gives us a competitive advantage, then I'm all for it. Honestly, I'm starting to get sick with all the fuss over Peezy. Understand, I'm not big on favorite players...and Peezy was my favorite. But, all this bullshit about people continuing to root for Peezy, cheering for him at Heinz last year...bull-shit on that!!

Tell you what I'll do though. If Peezy again comes to Pittsburgh, and is announced in the starting lineup...if I'm there, I'll cheer for him....I will!! He buckles up first play, I'm rooting for him to break his fuckin' leg.....not contradictory at all.

My lone hesitation with that though is that I do want Peezy to break Tom Brady's fuckin' leg during his twice yearly tilts with the Pats. He can't break Brady's fuckin' leg if his own leg's in two.

The asshole injury:

Probably everyone roots for injuries to assholes. Nobody felt bad when Terrell Owens broke his leg. Not much more to be said on that topic.

Limits to rooting for injuries:

Some maniacal fans that I've encountered, particularly on the internet, feel differently about this, but I never root for a life-threatening, or a disabling injury. I bordered on saying that I don't root for career-ending injuries.....I really don't....but neither do I care if they happen. If Rodney Harrison had never played again, I wouldn't much care....matter of fact, when he does play, I have to expend energy rooting for him to be re-injured. It would be more efficient, economize on my energy supply if he just remained on the shelf.

Anyway, to demonstrate my compassion, please consider....I hate Tedy Bruschi, abhor him....can't stand the guy. He does make plays, at least he used to me, which made me hate him more. I loved when he got put on his ass during the Addai TD run to win the '06 AFCCG. I can't even accuse Brushchi of being an illegal from Arizona, of wading across the Rio Grande. I know he's a Dago like me.

Oh...my compassion...almost forgot. When Bruschi came back from his stroke midway through the '05 season, I specifically rooted for a non-stroke related injury. Some were rooting for his "heart to explode." Not me....I was rooting for

the standard broken leg on his first play back. It would've been great....Tedy walks onto the field to a thunderous standing ovation from the Foxboro nitwits (sports most pronounced assholes...the Pats fan, many of whom I know and am supposed to love), seconds later, he's on the field, his leg busted in two. I even argued that a broken leg would spare him from the potentially life-threatening injury.

So....there ya have it folks, free yourself, don't feel guilty about rooting for injuries. As a Steelers fan....it's more than okay, it's your right, it's your obligation....it's your duty!!

13 MINUTES AIN'T ENUFF

There was a time, when following the lead of my brother Tony; I restricted my liquid intake at Steelers games. Once my ass was in a seat pre-game, it ordinarily did not rise until the conclusion of the afternoon's festivities. I would regularly smuggle in an 8-ounce bottle of water to TRS, that to wash down the 6 Advil that I would ingest throughout the game. Why the Advil? Well, it's like this. I do my part as a fan by making as much noise as possible when the Steelers are on defense. From the time the opposition break their huddle, until they snap the ball, I'm screaming. Not screaming any words, mind you, just pure noise, sort of like...."AHHHHHHHHHHHHH" as loudly and continuously as possible. I turned my nephew onto this practice as well. Doing this for this time period, every play, often produces a headache. Some sacrifices we must make.

However, during this decade I've begun to imbibe pre-game. I think it was the presence of an IC distributor's truck at the '01 AFCCG, giving away his product. "Wanna beer," he asked me. "Sure," I said. "Wanna beer?" he said to my then 17-year-old nephew. "No," I said, "he doesn't want one, but I'll take his." I drank a few more, and then staggered to the Stadium. My practice now is to drink as much as I can pre-game, even if it's not free, and then buy a beer prior to kickoff for \$6, then another hopefully at halftime. Actually, in retirement, whenever that is, I might purchase an RV and a Heinz Field parking pass, sell all day pee passes for inside my RV for \$10. At the Jets playoff game in '04. I had to stand in line for the Porto-potty forever, and found myself jealous of the RVers and their ease in peeing. I might not have sprung for ten bucks, but I would have paid \$2 to take a single whiz

Many Steelers fans that I've talked to have noticed the abundance of yellow seats at Heinz at the onset of the third quarter. Some have attributed this to a lack of interest among the Steelers populace, to overwhelming segments of tickets having fallen into the hands of the HFFCB (High-Falutin' Fat Cats Bourgeois). To me, based upon my direct experience at Heinz, the answer is simple....13 minutes Ain't Enuff.

13 minutes Ain't Enuff to both pee and get a beer for the second half. Thirteen

minutes might work fine for the fan at home in his recliner; 13 minutes might work for the networks trying to squeeze the game into a 3-hour segment and still air a full complement of commercials.....but 13 minutes Ain't Enuff for a fan at the stadium.

The fan at Heinz who, quite reasonably, wants to not miss a play after shelling out his dough for a ticket, faces the dilemma of either peeing or getting a beer....can't do both. And...you get a beer without having peed first, given your pre-game and first half consumption.....good luck to you!!

This leads to a number of other unseemly practices. I abhor the practice of fans leaving the stands while the game is in progress, returning to their seat. NOTHING drives me crazier than having my view blocked by slovenly fat fucks walking up the stairs, right in front of me, during a big 3rd down, stuffing their fat faces with nachos and cheese whiz. As an aside, Heinz sells a ton of this bullshit. I've hardly a discriminating palate, but that cheese whiz they throw on those chips...no way I touch that shit.

By the way, please indulge me as I detail the difference between "a fat fuck" and one who has earned the designation of "The Fat Fuck," followed by their name. We have, for instance, The Fat Fuck Peter King, The Fat Fuck Tony Siragusa, and The Fat Fuck Mark Madden. Not only are these individuals fat fucks, but they're full of shit as well. Counter this, for instance with Bill Parcells, or Wade Phillips, both fat fucks, but both, in my estimation, not full of shit. Thin full of shit people sometimes earn the designation of "The Smug Little Fuck" followed by their name, the best example being The Smug Little Fuck Rich Eisen.

Back to the story. My personal practice is to leave my seat at the two minute warning, hang near the tunnel to the concourse until the first half expires, sometimes needing to evade the ushers who are doddamn lucky to get that job, and should be watching like the rest of us, leaving their fellow Pittsburghers alone. Instead sometimes, they're pricks and tell us to move along, making good Steelers fans face the challenge needing to walk to and fro whilst watching the game at the same time. Anyway, when time expires in the half, I make a mad dash for the rest room, followed by the beer stand.

Beer stands also present a problem. Ain't but a few that sell anything decent, like Yuengling. Most of 'em sell some Iron City bullshit. And please; do NOT tell me that IC's good beer. We always contended that it was brewed with Mon River water, even during the Mon's worst days. That doesn't stop me from drinking it when it's given to me though.

And let's talk gender differences here. Nothing in life has further convinced me that this is indeed a man's world than the ease at which men can pee compared to our female sisters (I know that's redundant terminology). During playoffs at TRS, the sinks were put into use as additional pee receptacles. I'm going to

assume that this was not the case in the Ladies' Room, unless any of you were agile enough to hoist yourselves up, or were exceptionally long-legged.

I've long thought about things I might invent, had I any mechanical or engineering skills. First on the list, for a long time, would be an ass-wiping machine. I've actually thought this out in a fair amount of detail, but it's really NHNT (Neither Here Nor There) for this discussion. It would be good though, if there was a mechanism whereby one could pee without leaving their seat. In addition to the cupholder (and does anyone else HATE the Heinz Field cup holder being down on the freakin' floor?), how about a little gizmo that you could strap on at your seat (again, probably easier for the male species), and have it flow directly to the Allegheny. Can you imagine; Terrible Towels offset by a gold river in the background?

Closest I saw to the ability, en masse, of a crowd to pee at their seats, was a high school playoff game in Minersville, Pa, a good example of Coal Miner Ingenuity. Minersville Stadium had open bleachers, thereby allowing patrons (again, those of the male persuasion only), to turn completely around in their seats, and with legs dangling, and while looking into the eye of Aunt Esther, and Cousin Agnes in the row behind them, relieve themselves onto the ground below. As the Guinness boys would say, "Brilliant!"

How about running more commercials during halftime, extend it to 20 minutes...cut out the bullshit of a commercial after a score, then again after the following kickoff. This could also help the fan at home as well, who if inexcusably ill-prepared, has to run out for more beer at halftime. A 20-minute halftime wouldn't kill us. It could even bring back a high school band, or more Punt, Pass & Kick bullshit.

At any rate, 13 Minutes Ain't Enuff.

Y2K DECADE: ONE FOR THE THUMB....AT LAST

The current decade began with Kent Graham at QB and 3 consecutive Steelers losses in the final season at TRS. The Steelers then reeled off 5 consecutive victories with Kordell Stewart first replacing the statue Graham due to injury, but then holding onto the job. The Steelers D, in a streak a bit reminiscent to the '76 squad, gave up 13, 3, 0, 0 & 6 points during this streak, defeating the eventual SB champion Ravens in Baltimore, prior to dropping a late 9-7 decision at Tennessee. I attended my last game at TRS the following week against the Iggles, a game where the Steelers led 4Q by a score of 20-10, prior to being robbed on an on-side kick, and eventually losing, 23-20, in OT. It was their 3rd loss of 5 to date in which they received an apology letter from the NFL due to incorrect officiating. On the season's final day, Christmas Eve, the Steelers needed the MinnieVikes, with 'ol friend Bubby Brister at QB, to win at Indy in order to make the playoffs. The Vikes, with nothing to play for, tanked, and the Steelers season, a respectable 9-7, had concluded.

The 2001 campaign began with a loss in Jax, then came September 11th. The resulting suspension of that week's games, followed by a by week, resulted in their being 3 weeks between the Steelers first game and the second, after which the Steelers reeled off 5 straight victories before losing at home to the Ravens as Chris Brown missed about two dozen field goals, including a 35-yarder with seconds remaining that would have tied the game. The Steelers then reeled off 7 more consecutive wins, including a Sunday Nighter in Baltimore, and ended the season with a 13-3 mark. I made my first Heinz Field appearance for the Divisional Playoffs against Baltimore, the night before watching the Instant Replay Patriots miraculously defeat the Raiders. The Steelers dispatched the Ravens without much trouble, 27-10, the only TD surrendered via...punt return...and notably, Jerome Bettis, attempting to come back from an injury suffered 7 weeks previous, did not play after medical staff erred with his pain injection. I returned to Pittsburgh for the AFCCG the following week, with the Steelers favored by 11, and all reasonable minds expecting a coronation. I talked with a Pats fan on the flight, an affable fellow with many friends in Pittsburgh, Steelers fans. Their practice involved the winning friends being able to pee on the hats of the losing friends. What a tradition!! The Steelers, of course, gave up another punt return for a TD when Bill Belichick thoroughly schooled Cowher by alerting the officials pre-game that Troy Edwards consistently ran OOB while covering punts. Cowher was guilty of either a) not knowing this, or b) knowing this, and failing to do a damn thing about it. In any event, a booming Josh Miller punt in 1Q resulted in a do-over. Josh, pissing and moaning about the spotting of the ball on the re-kick, punted weakly. Troy Brown broke the tackle of John Fiala and took it to the house. Another special teams TD, combined with a Pats defense that lined up an end over TD Jerame Tuman, kicking his ass all day, resulted in an upset victory for the Pats, as well as the longest flight of my life....a return to NH with a plane full of Pats fans.

The 2002 season started with poor play from the QB position, a sieve-like secondary, and two consecutive losses. It also started with my visiting my sister-in-law, Alison (Mrs. Swiss's sister) for the season opener, Steelers at Patriots. Now, Alison has long been nicknamed "Alfred," to the extent that my kids refer to her as "Auntie Alfred," and by the way, they do this New England "auunt" pronunciation rather than the phonetically correct "ant." To my surprise, it was me and three chicks watching on that opening night, only one of whom I wasn't related to by marriage, and she was the only one who knew anything about football. She was also the only one who knew how to keep her fuckin' mouth shut, the result being that I stormed out of the place, yelling to one sister-in-law, "Alfred, your Christmas party sucks. Don't expect me to be there this year," and to the other, "Sandy, your Halloween Party sucks, be damned if I'm going."

The season's 3rd game was also the start of a personal annual tradition, with one year off, of bringing my son to a Steelers game. I took then 9-year old Anthony to Steelers-Browns. We had sort of a little problem at the game...meaning that I

sort of...lost him. It was his fault though! We went to the Men's Room at halftime, the little tyke standing in front of me. I told him to stick around while I peed, the willful little shit didn't listen, and when I exited the Men's Room, he was nowhere to be found. The concourse being jammed at halftime, I was looking for the proverbial needle in the proverbial haystack, only in this instance, the haystack was about 6 feet high, and I was looking for a 3 foot needle. I looked everywhere, couldn't find him. I went back to my seats, back to the concourse. Finally, the young guy seated next to me was in the concourse, telling me that my son was in his seat waiting for me. Anthony has good sense like that. Were it his sister, she'd probably still be wandering around the Great Hall somewhere. Of course, were it his sister, she would've listened to me in the first place; I would've found her standing outside of the Ladies' Room, as instructed. Same genetics, same environment, two very different personalities. She's honest to a fault; he lies with impunity. Anyway, the little shit was in tears when I returned, but we agreed that neither of us would tell his mother about this little incident.

Losing one's children is a time-honored tradition in our family. Though Mom denies it, she tried to ditch young Tony in a Tijuana marketplace in the early '50s, having traveled cross-country by train, with her two oldest boys, and Nunna, to visit our cousins, the Orlandos, who had moved to LA to start a new life. A Mexican señorita, though, thwarted Mom's attempt to dump the tyke and returned the crying bambino to her. Said señorita was likely worried that she would be obliged to feed the porky gringo had she not found his madre. Trust me, Tony would've closed down the burrito stand. Nunna, going through Mexican customs on that trip, was schooled to lose her Dago accent. Nevertheless, when asked where she was from, replied "Pizza-borg."

Back to the Steelers and CleveBrownies. Late in the game, Tommy Maddox replaced Kordell Stewart, effectively ending the Kordell Era in Pittsburgh. Tommy Gun led the Steelers to the tying TD, then to the winning FG in OT, and all remarked how refreshing it was to see a real QB under center for the Steelers, one who had the ball in the air prior to the receiver making their break. On the way out, a nice young couple was next to us. The guy, who could have easily hailed from Swissvale, or Wilkinsburg, or thereabouts, rubbed Anthony's head, said, "How'd ya like the game, Buddy?" After they had passed by, Anthony said to me, "Daddy, their shirts say F-word Cleveland." We agreed that neither of us would tell his mother about this little exchange either.

After leading the Steelers to 4 consecutive victories and a tie versus Atlanta, where his 473 yards passing remains a Steeler record, Maddox suffered temporary paralysis in a loss to Tennessee, and Kordell was back at QB. After two victories, where Kordell played atypically solid and error-free, Maddox came back at QB and single-handedly gave away the game to the expansion Texans. The Steelers were the 3rd seed for the playoffs, but only one-half game behind top-seeded Oakland. I oft wonder what might have been had Kordell remained in the lineup.

It happened again for the Wild Card Playoff versus Cleveland. I had a game ticket awaiting me, and a tentative flight out of Boston on Sunday morning. However, we stuck around in PEI one day too long, not leaving for home on Friday, and a massive storm then prevented us from heading out until Sunday. Once again, I was not in the House for a classic. I had the VCR set though, and at game time on Sunday, I was on the Maine Turnpike, listening to a station that pledged all-day Christmas carols. I figured that that was safe. We got home; Mrs. Swiss went on-line to check her emails. Seated not more than two feet from me, she saw the top AOL headline, which indicated that the Steelers had staged a miraculous comeback to beat the Browns. She quickly signed off, hurried upstairs and barricaded herself inside the bedroom. Anthony & I watched Fu score the winning TD a few hours later.

A week later was the Tennessee playoff loss. Maddox misses an open Terrence Mathis on the sideline at the TN 29 following the 2-minute warning. Joe effin' Nedney draws a penalty on a self-admitted acting job, and makes the re-kick to beat the Steelers. I publicly wish a broken leg on Nedney. It happened a week later in the AFCCG vs. Oakland. Serves the fucker right!

There is nothing to say about 2003. I didn't make a trip to Heinz, Maddox was terrible, and thank God that Joey Porter was called for a personal foul in OT during the finale against Baltimore. That loss, capping a 6-10 season, put the Steelers in position to draft Ben Roethlisberger, QB, from Miami of Ohio.

The 2004 season started innocently enough. TMaddox brought the Steelers back late against Oakland after the Steelers had blown a comfortable lead and Jeff Reed kicked the game winner in the waning seconds. As I had done 9 years earlier on Opening Day, I ran about screaming "Steelers Win" and doing somersaults. This time, I took my act outside, so as not to cause injury to anyone. The following week, Maddox was injured in a loss to Baltimore and the rookie QB took his place, much to the chagrin of one Alan Faneca. It was four months before the Steelers would lose again, an outstanding season for Ben, for the resurgent Jerome Bettis, and for the Pittsburgh Steelers as they posted a franchise-best 15-1 mark. When my then 84 year old mother was hospitalized earlier in the season, I flew to Pittsburgh for the weekend, and just so happened to attend Steelers-Bengals with my nephew. Me, Anthony and Stupid Charlie were on hand for the Halloween game against the undefeated Patriots, then holders of a 22-game winning streak. Stupid Charlie took justified abuse in the Heinz Field lots, Anthony trick-or-treated there successfully, and the Steelers beat and beat up the New Englanders. This team likely peaked the following week against the undefeated Iggles. My nephew was in New England to visit his girlfriend. He and I hooted and hollered, filled my house with noise. She married into the family anyway. I was challenged to watch a late-season game against Baltimore, one that the Steelers needed to clinch home field throughout. I was going to be in PEI, and I had no satellite TV as yet. I convinced Mrs. Swiss a

couple years later that we needed satellite....for the tenants. Anyway, I paid the cost for a PEI friend to subscribe to Sunday Ticket for the balance of the season (they run those deals in Canada). It cost me \$50, and was well worth it. Returning home from PEI, I took two separate calls from Buffalo Bills fans. Of course, they weren't rabid enough to have subscribed themselves to Sunday Ticket, but they wanted to come over and watch the Bills, who needed to beat the Steelers in the regular season finale to make the playoffs. I told them both that ordinarily I would never allow any opposition into my house on game day, but since it was a meaningless game for the Steelers, I guess it would be okay, this time, as long as they didn't make too much noise. I, however, made plenty of noise, as even Tommy Maddox, and yet another pick six couldn't stop the Steelers from winning their 15th game.

It was onto the playoffs, and this time, I was sure glad I was in the House as the Steelers dodged two bullets in the form of missed New York Jet field goals by Doug Brien to win the Divisional Round in overtime. My nephew and I were delirious, hugging perfect strangers. A neighboring fan earlier couldn't restrain himself, attacked a Jet fan who was doing nothing more than cheering for his team, but honestly, I could understand his misguided actions. I was tempted to go after him myself. Only my maturity and patience prevented me from doing so.

For the AFCCG, my niece had laid claims to her dad's tickets. There was no way, having made this emotional investment in this team, that I would not be in the House. I bought early via E-Bay. In fact, I contacted sellers of the Divisional Playoff Tickets, inquired about their committing their AFCCG tickets early. I got taken, I think, but my ass was in the House. I paid \$375, and oh, my nephew's dad paid \$375 as well for his ticket, which was in section 505, in the double letters. Their cousin (the Benedum Center chick) paid \$150, on the street, a couple hours prior to game time, for a better seat. Of course, who was to know how frigid it would be for this 6:30 start. I'm still thawing from this game. Fortunately, I was able to reschedule for an earlier flight out of New Hampshire, enroute to Pittsburgh. The original flight on which I was booked never took off. We entered the stadium at 4:30. I was instantly freezing and never, ever warmed up. I lost my glove at halftime and panicked, found it though. This game is oft-remembered for Field Goal Bill kicking a FG on 4th and goal from the 2, early in 4Q when the Steelers had battled back from 21 down, and a TD would have cut the margin to 7. I remember it for once again needing to fly back to NH with a plane full of Patriot fans. I also remember it for exiting the plane only to run into a reporter and cameraman from the local ABC affiliate. As I was wearing my Steelers jacket, the reporter said, "There's an upset Steelers fan." It took every bit of restraint; again I cite my maturity and patience, to refrain from saying, "Kiss my Ass." I was picturing the headline, "Children's Home Director Tells Local Scribe to Kiss His Ass."

One for the Thumb, finally!! Some of my clearest memories involve a couple of early season-losses. Mrs. Swiss was away in PEI during the Steelers-Patriots

contest in September. Her sister, Alfred, invited me over again to watch the game with her, and her brother. My first response was a negative, telling her that I couldn't watch the game with "you people." I then relented, given pressure from my kids who wanted to visit their cousins. Mrs. Swiss's brother and sister are rather gentle football fans, and were unable to relate when I cheered wildly Cedric Wilson's best play ever as a Pittsburgh Steeler, his taking out of Rodney Harrison. I couldn't sit still during this game. Matt Light did break his fuckin' leg. I was on the fuckin' ceiling. My brother-in-law reminded me that this was a friendly gathering. "Fuck that, Clay," I said. When the Steelers lost at the final gun, I ran out the door, told the kids I'd be in the car. My sister-in-law called me the next day asked me if I was okay. "Alfred," I said, again citing my maturity and patience, "it took every ounce of restraint I could muster to refrain from physically attacking one of you yesterday." Later, when the news came down that Rodney Harrison had been placed on IR, I called and sang a few verses of "Goodbye Rodney." She was immediately on the phone to Mrs. Swiss, telling her that I needed psychiatric help. I'm not going to argue with that.

These people are pains in the asses to watch games with though. They break the Cardinal Rule of football-watching, particularly Steelers football watching, which is, "Thou Shalt Not Talk about Other Shit during the Game." I go over this past playoff season to watch Pats-Jags with them, and they're talking about insulation or some such shit. I might've learned something, but I had to move my chair. Then at halftime of a tie game, they go outside to look at some tree that had fallen; they're not even back for the beginning of the 2nd half. This is why I generally watch alone. I could have Neighbor Chuck over. He's a solid fan, but talks too damn much during the game. WoburnJoe, a Pats fan, but a Steelers fan at heart, is good to watch with. We talk, but only only only about the matter at hand.

Fast forward to the Jax debacle a couple of weeks later. I've never been as pissed with Bill Cowher as I was during and after this game. Anyone could see, from the first series, that Maddox had no business quarterbacking this team. I have a guest to my house, a Steelers fan, first time this guy has been there. The family, out for the day, has once again returned home, as the game goes into overtime. It looks like a Steelers victory is a sure thing once Q returns the kickoff to the Jagoffs'25. Then...Maddox fumbles the ball away. You Asshole!! Then, the Steelers regain possession and Maddox throws another patented pick six for the loss. As usual I was taping. This time, I immediately grab a hammer, eject the tape, and over the fam's protests, in the presence of my guest, I beat the shit out of that tape. At least I wouldn't be tempted to watch it again, hoping for a different outcome, as I'm wont to do sometimes. Then, the next day, Cowher says he had "thought about" lifting Maddox. Earth to Bill. WHAT were you waiting for? Then, Maddox bitches about people throwing shit in his yard. Good!! I swear to God. Had Maddox been standing atop the Smithfield Street Bridge post-game, I'd have pushed him off. I have to admit, hammering the tape was not an original. I had witnessed Stupid Charlie doing it in the '80s following

a Pats' playoff loss. He actually went one better, opening his sliders, and hurling the tape to the street below from his 2nd floor balcony.

Anthony and I attended, for the second consecutive year, a Steelers game on Halloween Night. He was starting to believe that Halloween Night Football was a Steelers tradition. Tony broke his Heinz Field Boycott for this game, sitting with his daughter. The Steelers won a close one, 20-19. Every 10 minutes or so, a female voice behind me screamed, "Break his fuckin' leg!" Anthony was laughing his young ass off. I told my then 85-year-old mother about this the next day. "That's terrible," she said, "What did the people around you do?" "Mom, you kidding me?" I said, "She was the hero of the section." I flew back into Pittsburgh for one more game, the late-season contest against Cincinnati. I bought a single ticket off of Ebay, 45 yard line, for \$115. Tony picked it up for me from a woman that turned out to be a former classmate of his at Taylor Allderdice. I flew into Pittsburgh on Sunday morning, Tony picked me up, I visited with my mom for an hour, went to the game, saw the Steelers lose, Tony picked me back up in town, drove me back to the airport, and I flew back into Boston. Evaluating our playoff chances that night, I knew the Steelers would not only need to win out, but would need two losses apiece from San Diego and Kansas City, a tough road to hoe indeed.

The following Sunday, the Steelers beat Chicago in a game for the ages at Heinz. I can confirm that there's at least one Steelers fan living on the Canadian Maritime pastoral paradise of Prince Edward Island. I met Shawn (screen name PlaxicoisWacked) through Stillers.com. He got up off his couch in early December, battling sciatica that would later require surgery, and on a Friday morning, drove with 2 non-Steelers fan islander comrades, 12 hours through a blizzard to Boston's Logan Airport. There they slept on the floor, and flew into Pittsburgh on Saturday morning. Introduced to a scalper, Harris, by Tony, they purchased tickets, and asked Harris to throw in a ride to the Igloo to take in the Pens game. Enroute, Harris was pulled over, determined by the Pittsburgh Police to not have a valid Driver's License, whereupon the officer told Shawn that he would have to drive Harris's caddy, but would need to produce a license. The PEI license that Shawn produced was viewed suspiciously as well as humorously by the officer, but off they went. Shawn and his buddies wound up at a Pittsburgh after-hours club, and after a few hours sleep at the Doubletree, it was off to Heinz Field the next day. Shawn, outgoing by nature, was determined to talk to everyone that he saw in Black & Gold, and he made a fair dent in that population, reportedly achieving rock star status in his section. After the game, the trio slept on the floor at Pittsburgh International, flew back into Boston on Monday, and drove the 12 hours back to their PEI homeland. That's wanting it! By the Way, Shawn holds an Annual Draft Party at his Summerside, PEI abode. He invited Mrs. Swiss over during one of her solo jaunts to the Isle, but she respectfully declined.

At the same time, Kansas City was losing at Dallas, and Miami pulled off an upset in San Diego. The following Saturday, the New York Giants, minus both offensive tackles as well as several linebackers, beat the Chiefs, but as the Steelers were winning at Minnesota the following day, San Diego beat the 13-0 Indianapolis Colts. We flew to the Florida Keys for the Christmas holidays, needing to have San Diego lose one more, both games in which they would be favored. When we planned this Florida holiday, along with Mrs. Swiss's siblings and their families, I had made it abundantly clear that I would be spending both Christmas Eve and New Year's Day in a sports bar, watching the Pittsburgh Steelers. It's always best to arrange these things beforehand, and to sometimes commit it to writing. From the list of Steelers bars nationwide in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, I found the Shanna Key, an Irish pub in Key West. There, on Christmas Eve, I watched the Steelers crush the CleveBrownies, 41-0, while the KC Chiefs were beating the favored Chargers, all whilst downing pints of Smithwick's. The Steelers were in control of their own destiny. However, an upset of the Bengals by Buffalo meant that the first round opponent would be the Patriots rather than the Bengals, should the Pats beat the Dolphins, in Foxboro. After an early morning trip to Fisherman's Hospital on New Year's morning with Anthony to treat an ear problem, I was off to the Shanna Key again, this time dropping off my daughter and nieces for an afternoon of shopping in Key West. The Steelers, after some difficulty, beat Detroit behind JB's 3 TDs in his final Heinz Field appearance, and the Pats did everything in their power to lose to the Dolphins. The matchup was set; Steelers-Bengals for the first time ever in the playoffs. Post-game, I'm walking up Duval Street in Key West, again wearing #36. As the bars in Key West open to the street, the guitar player on stage at one establishment, and I, spy each other simultaneously. He's wearing a Pittsburgh Steelers #36 as well. "Hey, Jerome Bettis," he calls out. I enter said establishment with my young female followers, and climb onstage to belt out the Steelers Fight Song ("Here We Go"), much to the embarrassment of my charges.

All along, I had said that the season would be satisfactory if the Steelers made the playoffs and defeated the Bengals. I had also said, however, that if they did so, I'd convince myself that they could beat the mighty Colts as well. Once the Bengals were vanquished, I needed to plan for the following weekend. There was one problem. Mrs. Swiss, finishing her graduate work, was graduating from a small, very lesbian college, in Vermont on that very Sunday, and needed to be on campus for the weekend. We both lied to each other. "I don't care if you miss my graduation," she said. "I would never miss your graduation," said I. On Saturday night, I sat wooping it up in a hotel room outside of Montpelier, Vermont, watching the New England Patriots lose to the Denver Broncos, as my kids looked on, and Mrs. Swiss and three very hot lezbos downed beers. The next day, driving home from Vermont in a blizzard, as the Steelers played the Colts, I ran out of a Dunkin' Donuts when I heard a sports broadcast on the radio, and arrived home with a playoff tape to watch. "Leighton said she was rooting for the Steelers, Daddy," said my daughter. "Don't say another word," I screamed. "But Daddy, I didn't say who won." They all knew, Mrs. Swiss, both kids. They

barricaded themselves upstairs while I watched the tape, though Anthony would periodically appear, imploring me to stay calm. Sheer joy, utter despair. Sack his ass, Peezy! Jerome Bettis, how could you! Vanderjagt missed it! Exultation at the end!!

The following week, my in-laws came over for the AFCCG. My brother-in-law had a stack of vacation pics from Florida. I had to kick his ass out of the living room, send him into the dining room with his sisters. At game's end, 10 years from when I had done this previously, I was flinging open my backdoor, and screaming "Super Bowl!!!" into the New England winter's night.

Having never watched a Super Bowl in Pittsburgh, I flew into town on Super Bowl Sunday morning to watch with Tony, Mrs. Tony, my mom, and nephew. Shawn flew in from PEI, watched at Sports Rock in the Strip District with a gathering of Stillers.commers. Of course, they were in line by 11am and into the club by 11:30 am, awaiting a 6:18pm kickoff. They were certainly well enough imbibed. I took frequent walks around Tony's neighborhood pre-game, observing fellow Pittsburghers pull into relatives' driveways, carrying in platters of Dago and Hunkie delights, ricotta pie, pigs in a blanket, etc. Much to my sister-in-law's chagrin, during the game, I couldn't curb my practice of peeing outside during most commercial breaks (she doesn't live in a wooded lot like I do; it's rather open, very visible). Mom told us no swearing; we sort of didn't listen to her. At game's end, I was doing somersaults in the living room, kicking no one in the nose. Tony and I drove the streets of Pittsburgh until the wee hours, shaking the hands of revelers, hanging from the windows. The next morning, we picked up Shawn and his GF from their downtown hotel. Pittsburgh International was as joyous an airport as one would ever see. One For the Thumb!!

I thoroughly enjoyed the off-season in New England, discovering a positively-based mental illness with which I was afflicted. I suffered for months with PEIS (Post-Euphoric Immersion Syndrome), delighted in it, actually. I called Patriot friends after hours on their office voice mails I blasted the Steelers fight song, I laughed like a hyena. I screamed into the phone, "Five is more than three. Fuck You. Go Steelers. Hahaha. Five is more than three." I would spy vehicles on the highway with "Patriots: 3x Super Bowl Champs" bumper stickers. I would cut in front of them; shove my Steelers wheel cover in their faces. When I overnighted my request for public sale tickets to the Steelers offices, the postmaster looked at my envelope, peered over his glasses, said, "Got lucky," referring to the SB officiating (a bogus issue). I got up real close to him, separated only by the counter, looked directly into his eyes, said "Got **Five**." So many of my Steelers brethren were saying that they "couldn't wait" for the season to start. Not me. I was having too good a time.

I had to be in the House for the '06 opener. I was shut out of tickets for that game via the public sale route, but was able to purchase a single off of Craig's list for \$125; forty-five yard line, but Row KK. Never again will I sit in double letter rows.

Pre-game, my then 25-year-old niece got our asses thrown out of HiTops on the North Side, as she:

- a. Didn't have her license when carded, and...
- b. Said that she was with her Dad (me) after I had already told the manager that I was her uncle.

He looked at us askance, told us to get the hell out, and we went over to Firewater's. After going to Swannie's gubernatorial tailgate in the lot, I tailgated with a few Stillers.commers, and then went inside to see the highlight of the '06 season, a fine game by the Charlie Batch led Steelers.

I returned to Heinz with Anthony for an October 15th encounter with the Chiefs. Flying into Pittsburgh on Friday night, so many lit football fields were visible. I told Anthony that 25 years ago that was his dad playing on one of those fields, and then I corrected myself to say it was 35 years ago. He looked at me, said "cool" and put his headphones back on. On Sunday though, I was in the concourse to grab a pre-kickoff beer, when I spotted a familiar face. "Bill Priatko," I called out. It was my old high school coach, who I'd not seen since I graduated 34 years ago. Bill Priatko, of North Braddock Scott High, and Pitt, had played linebacker for the Steelers in 1957. He also played a few years for the Browns. He was with his daughter, who had been a little girl when he coached Swissvale High School. I re-introduced myself, he hugged me, said it was the highlight of his month, and that he would be visiting with his old friend Dick LeBeau post-game. We exchanged several very nice e-mails, him telling me that the Steelers poor season had thrown him off kilter, unable to focus.

Several plays ruined the Steelers' '06 season, two of them coming in September, against Cincinnati at Heinz. Steelers are leading Cinci, 7-0, FWP is running at will, and on first and goal from the 5, Steelers pass and Ben is picked. A 14-0 lead could have ended it for the cowardly Bengals. Later in that game with a 3-point lead, Cowher sends Ricardo Colclough back to field a Bengals punt, despite there being a very small problem with that. Said problem is that Colclough can't catch. Of course, Coke fumbles; Cinci recovers in the red zone, scores a TD, and wins the game. Cowher would later say that he puts Santonio Holmes in close to the goal line, as he "likes his hands." Earth to Bill once more. About 7 minutes left in a 3-point game, with your return man inside his own 20. Is that not close enough to your own goal line to place an absolute priority on catching the ball? Lastly, there was Ben's fumbled snap against Atlanta. Steelers were leading 17-7 at the time, and had not been stopped on offense. It was late in the first half. Steelers may well have added to their lead. Instead Atlanta scores a TD, recovers an onside kick, and scores another TD to take the lead. Late in that game, after Michael Vick runs for a big first down with 2 minutes to play, Cowher is yukking it up with Dog's Best Friend on the sideline. Therein lays the story of the '06 season, Bill Cowher's final run, and an abject disappointment.

This past year, '07, started with sufficient promise. I attended the home opener against Buffalo, and was thoroughly distracted by the person sitting next to me during an FWP TD run, and actually throughout the game. Anthony and I were in town to see the Steelers shut out the Seahawks on a hot as hell Sunday afternoon. A few weeks later, my entire fam flew into the Burgh for the wedding of my nephew. Such a legit Steeler fan, he inexplicably scheduled his wedding on an October SUNDAY. Even worse, he scheduled the big day PRIOR to the release of the NFL schedule. Tony and I sweated out the schedule release, hoping, ideally, for a Monday Nighter, as the wedding was a mid-afternoon affair. We were rewarded with the next best thing, the Sunday Nighter versus Denver. I was in church on that October afternoon, Terrible Towel extending from the back pocket of my suit. There was a TV set up at the reception, afterwards most of us adjourning to the bar of the Airport Holiday Inn. Thankfully, I had not a beer bottle in hand when Jason Elam's winning kick for the Broncos sailed through the uprights, as it would have likely been through the TV screen rather than my Terrible Towel, which glanced harmlessly away. Thereafter, we were encouraged to leave the bar by the hired help, repairing to our room, and later making disparaging calls to the barmaid that had headed up the eviction team. A few weeks later, holding an extra ticket he had scalped, Tony asked me if I'd "like" to attend the Monday Nighter versus Baltimore, then corrected himself to say, "I know you'd like to, but can you?" I could, and I did, and for the first time in years, sat next to Tony at a Steelers game, played in monsoon-like conditions, standard fare for the '07 season at Heinz. Tony was at the Miami game as well. Later in the season, Stupid Charlie, who had invited me to the Steelers-Patriot game at Foxboro, was unable to attend as somehow he found himself hosting Hanukkah that day. I bought his extra ticket (\$125, going up to \$169 this year) and invited Tony to come up, just as he had for the Fog Bowl 11 years ago. The Steelers, of course, lost to the 18-1, Super Bowl runner-up Pats, but if I said it once that day, I said it a million times, "Got Five. Five is more than three." I'll be back there next year, saying it again, this time adding "18-1" to my repertoire.

The '07 Steelers campaign ended on a Saturday Night at Heinz Field, and me alone in my downstairs playroom. A tattered couch, a big-screen TV and my bitchin' and moanin' filled the room. Down 18 points, a furious rally, then 3rd & 6. ARRGGH! The Winter of my Discontent carries on.

CLOSING

As I approached, and am now, quite generously, in the throes of mid-life, I first needed to come to terms with the seeming reality that my Steelers would not win One for the Thumb in my lifetime. I assured myself repeatedly that the Black & Gold had provided me more than anyone has the right to expect as a fan. The day that the Steelers did win their Fifth, and I was drunk with joy in the streets of Pittsburgh, my life was complete as a sports fan. But my life did not end there, and now I want more, always more.

As I come increasingly to grips with my mortality, I can't help but think of my final send-off, and how the Pittsburgh Steelers will be incorporated. Of course, if Mrs. Swiss survives me, she may well exercise a spousal veto over any Black & Gold on my big day, thus I'm conveying my wishes to you, my Steelers brothers and sisters.

I have no desire, as did our Steelers comrade, James Henry Smith, who passed away in 2006, to be dressed in Steelers pajamas, beer and cigarette in hand, facing a continual loop of Steelers highlights. The celebration of my life can be more conventional. I would like for my funeral service to be joyous, filled with Steelers music. Minimally, the ceremony should open with the polka version of The Steelers Fight Song by Jimmy Pol, and then close with Here We Go by the Fan Club, an updated edition, por favor. Left up to Mrs. Swiss, the musical selection would be "How Great Thou Art," or its more fitting alternative, "If Thou Were Only Half as Great As Thou Think Thou Art."

As I'm laid out, a conventional suit would be appropriate, but please, a Steelers tie, with Terrible Towel in my casket. And, oh yes, only black & gold floral arrangements are permitted.

Should my demise occur prior to any more Super Bowl victories by either the Steelers or Patriots, there should be a banner on either side of the hearse transporting me to my final resting place. One should read, "5 > 3," with the other simply stating, "Got 5."

And, a special request, the clergy that conducts the service and burial, please, he must be a Yinzer!