



Dan Rooney

Dan Rooney was in his usual welcoming mode when the Opus team came to visit him in what turned out to be his last ever interview. The Steelers president and chairman, a man who turned a moribund franchise into one of the most successful and historic dynasties in football history, the friend of sport, celebrity and American presidents, the first Ireland ambassador to visit all 32 Irish counties, insisted still on being called just "Dan" as he sipped an ice-cold cola in his office, still the same man from the North Side neighborhood of the Steel City.

How crucial has the team's presence in the city been over the years? Is this something you're always conscious of and something you cherish?

There's no question about it. It means an awful lot to the whole fabric of the city. There's so much history in terms of how we got to where we are. The NFL came to my father when they changed the blue laws and asked if he'd like to take a team in the NFL. My father thought Pittsburgh deserved a team because of the steel and the toughness of the whole community. So it went from there.

A lot of your father's beliefs have rubbed off on you, haven't they?

My father was really a people person. He always talked to me about, "Don't ever think you're too big or too good for people. Everybody is important, regardless of race, religion or anything else." His faith meant everything to him. And he practiced, and he expected us to practice our faith.

What are your earliest memories?

My birth coincided with the Steelers starting their first game in 1932. I was five years old when I went with my mother to see my first game, and 14 when I went to the Steelers training camp. I spent my time with the players, doing things for them. I'll tell you one great story from those times. I was 14, like I said, and you had to be 16 to drive. The coach at the time was Jock Sutherland. He was a tough guy. He made us account for every sock. The equipment manager was a guy called Frank [Scott]. One time they forgot to bring the blackboard that they carried around on the field to write the plays on and show the defense. Frank was scared to death when he realized



there was no blackboard because he knew he was going to get chewed up for it. He turned to me and said, "We've got to get a blackboard. Can you get one?" I said, "Yeah, I can get one." He said, "But can you drive?" I told him I could but that I was only 14. He threw me the keys and said, "Take my car." So I drove down to the department store, ran down to the basement and picked up a blackboard, some chalk and some erasers and headed back to the practice field. Frank was very happy and told me to keep the change.

The special era of the Steelers was, of course, the 1970's. It began with the "Immaculate Reception." What are your memories of that historic moment?

You mean *the play*! It was the greatest play, not only in the history of the Steelers, but in the history of the NFL. I was in the press box when it happened. They put me on to the 'phones, which they shouldn't have, of course. I could hear the officials and I heard them say to the referee, "Call what you saw." He took it from there. Everybody in Pittsburgh, everybody in America could see what happened. The stadium only held 60,000 but it felt like 160,000 in there had seen it. I like to think there was some divine intervention happening that day for us and during that play. I remember being in the locker room after the game. Now I'm not much of a touchy-feely type of guy but I had to give Franco a big hug. It was the greatest play I'd ever seen by far.

And is it true your father missed it?

Yes, it is. He was in the elevator. At that point he had resigned himself to the fact that the game had gone from us. He really couldn't believe it when he found out what happened. To this day the people of Pittsburgh talk about it. It had a huge effect on everyone, not just with the team but with the city. It was, and very much still is, a very special touchdown to the people.

Does any play come close to the "Immaculate Reception?"

There was one, just a few years back, with Antonio Brown. They threw a pass to him and he wasn't going to make it to the goal line. The band's on the field as he's running for the touchdown when he stepped on the line, so it didn't count. I told him later if he'd cut inside he would have made it