

## **RAY MANSFIELD – A SENSE OF HISTORY**

By Jim Campbell

Ray Mansfield, ironman, risk-taker, raconteur, outdoorsman, "historian," adventurer, and all-around good guy, left us much, much too early while hiking the Grand Canyon in the fall of 1998.

As tragic as his death was, the former Steelers' center didn't miss much in life -- nor on the field. He played in 182 consecutive game. But now we will miss him. No more voice of reason. No more "Old Ranger" tales. No more cameos on NFL Films' shows. No more friendly tips on immortality to young players.

A remnant of the bad, old days of Pittsburgh's SOS (Same old Steelers), Mansfield, and long-suffering team mate Andy Russell, rejoiced in the team's newly-found success under Chuck Noll in the 1970s.

The Black & Gold's first brush with winning, after forty years of futility, came with a Central Division championship, clinched in San Diego on the last day of the 1972 season. Seizing the moment, if not the day, at the final gun Mansfield turned to young Jim Clack, and said, "Hey, kid, you wanna be immortal? Come with me." Clack, a second-year center/guard out of Wake Forest, heeded the advice. He and Mansfield each took a leg and hoisted a jubilant Noll onto their shoulders for a ride out of San Diego Jack Murphy Stadium. Photographers recorded the historical event. And until the Steelers started winning Super Bowls with regularity, the resulting photo was often used to illustrate Steelers success. Beaming Mansfield and joyful Clack are as evident in it as their Pro Football Hall of Fame coach.

Scarcely a week later "history" struck again. Mansfield was up to the moment again.

He and a gameday sideline worker were glumly standing by as the clock ticked down on the December 23, 1972 Steelers-Raiders divisional playoff game. After leading most of the day on Roy Gerela's two field goals, the Steelers were suddenly Snake-bitten when Ken Stabler broke contain and scored. Oakland 7-Pittsburgh 6.

Fourth down. Terry Bradshaw rushed. He unloads. John "Frenchy" Fuqua down field. Jack Tatum unloads. Ball ricochets. Franco Harris reaches, plucks, and rambles into the end zone. Mansfield and others didn't know they had just been eye-witnesses to "the Immaculate Reception." Mansfield, however, knew he had just seen something special.

His sideline companion exclaimed, "I (bleeping) saw it, but don't (bleeping) believe it!"

Mansfield said, "Me neither," paused, and then said, "Hey, we better get down to the end zone and get in the pictures."

Somewhere in Mt. Laurel, NJ, in the vaults of NFL Films is footage of a trundling Mansfield making his way down the sideline toward a milling end zone, but looking back every so often to see where the cameras are.

It was history. It was Mansfield. It was great!