

CHAPTER ONE

THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE PIRATES FAMILY

The 1980–1985 Seasons



As over forty-four thousand Pirates fans headed to Three Rivers Stadium for the home opener of the 1980 season, they had every reason to feel optimistic about the Pirates and Pittsburgh sports in general. In the 1970s, their Pirates had captured six divisional titles, two National League pennants, and two World Series championships. Their Steelers, after decades of futility, had won four Super Bowls in the 1970s, while the University of Pittsburgh Panthers led by Heisman Trophy winner Tony Dorsett added to the excitement by winning a collegiate national championship in football. There was no reason for Pittsburgh sports fans to doubt that the 1980s would bring even more titles to the City of Champions.

After the “We Are Family” Pirates, led by Willie Stargell, won the 1979 World Series, the ballclub’s goals for 1980 were “Two in a Row and Two Million Fans.”¹ If the Pirates repeated as World Series champions, it would mark the first time that a Pirates team had accomplished that feat in franchise history. If two million fans came out to Three Rivers Stadium to see the Pirates win back-to-back World Series titles, it would

break the attendance record of 1,705,828, set at Forbes Field during the improbable championship season of 1960. The offseason after the 1979 World Series victory was a whirlwind of awards and honors, highlighted by World Series Most Valuable Player (MVP) Willie Stargell and Super Bowl MVP Terry Bradshaw of the Steelers appearing on the cover of the December 24, 1979, *Sports Illustrated* as corecipients of the magazine's Sportsman of the Year Award.

The Pirates had lost veteran pitcher Bruce Kison to free agency during the off season, but manager Chuck Tanner replaced Kison by moving 1978 *Sporting News* Rookie Pitcher of the Year Don Robinson into the starting rotation. Utility infielder Rennie Stennett also opted for free agency, but the Pirates already had a strong infield with Bill Madlock, Tim Foli, and Phil Garner, all acquired in brilliant trades in 1979 by General Manager (GM) Harding "Pete" Peterson. With "Pops" Stargell at first base, Dave Parker in the outfield, and a veteran bullpen led by Kent Tekulve, the 1980 Pirates were considered by many to be heavy favorites to defend their World Series title. During spring training, there was a brief walkout and threatened player strike, but the Pirates had almost their entire starting lineup returning and were a confident team when they opened the season in St. Louis. After taking three out of four games from the Cardinals, they headed to Three Rivers Stadium in Pittsburgh for their home opener against the Cubs.

Rain threatened throughout the pregame festivities, which included Sister Sledge delighting the sellout crowd with a rendition of the team's 1979 theme song. Pirates players received several awards and honors during the pregame ceremony, but the moment that drew the greatest roar from the crowd came when the team received its World Series rings. Outfielder Bill Robinson said, "This was a special day in my life. . . . Getting the ring. It meant so much to me."² Once the game started, there were four rain delays totaling more than two hours, but the fans who stayed to the end saw a dramatic victory they hoped was a harbinger of things to come in the 1980 season. Leading 4–2 in the top of the ninth, the Pirates brought in the usually reliable Tekulve, but he yielded the tying runs that sent the game into extra innings. In the bottom of the tenth, Robinson gave fans a reminder of the heroics of the 1979 World Series in which the Pirates rallied from a 3-games-to-1 deficit when he homered to give the Pirates a 5–4 victory and their fourth win in a row.

After a fast start in April, however, the Pirates dealt with a variety of injuries, slumps, and clubhouse distractions and struggled to stay above .500 in May and June. Though several players were having sub-par years, discontented Pirates fans vented their unhappiness on Parker, who had signed a five-year seven-million-dollar contract going into the 1979 season, the largest in the major leagues at that time. On July 20, 1979, the frustration grew ugly when a fan threw a battery at Parker from the upper deck of the right-field stands at Three Rivers in the eighth inning of the first game of a double-header between the Pirates and the Los Angeles Dodgers.³ The timing of the incident was unfortunate for the Pirates because they had scheduled a Willie Stargell Day celebration between games of the doubleheader. More than forty thousand fans watched the Pirates shower Stargell with gifts ranging from a mink cowboy hat to a solid gold star, while Parker, who removed himself from the first game after the battery barely missed his head, stood in anger and tears at the ceremony.⁴ Afterward, Parker told reporters that racism was behind the incident and asked the Pirates to trade him. Years later, in his autobiography, Stargell claimed that, after the battery incident, Parker “played the game out of hate and revenge instead of love.”⁵

Despite their early struggles, the Pirates bounced back in July and moved into first place. As late as August 24, they were on top of their division, two games ahead of the Expos. Unfortunately, the Pirates lost thirteen of their next fifteen games, and they never recovered. When they went on a seven-game losing streak in late September, their pursuit of a division title and National League pennant and their dream of becoming the first Pirates team to repeat as World Series champions were over.

Throughout the 1970s, the Pirates had developed a reputation for late-season surges that carried them to the top of their division and into the postseason. The problem in 1980 was that an experienced championship team became an aging, often injured team. The Pirates began the season by losing pitcher Jim Rooker to a career-ending arm injury and finished the season with Stargell on the disabled list. Every regular failed to match the production of his 1979 season, and veteran starting pitchers, including Bert Blyleven and John Candelaria, as well as bullpen ace Tekulve, finished with a losing record.

During the 1980–1981 offseason, GM Peterson’s biggest move was to acquire hard-hitting first baseman Jason Thompson from the Cali-

ifornia Angels. An optimistic Stargell had signed a two-year contract at the end of the 1980 season, but Peterson wanted insurance in case the forty-one-year-old Stargell could not come back after his season-ending injury. Peterson also traded away Blyleven, who was unhappy pitching in Tanner's five-man rotation, but the Pirates' GM felt that younger pitchers like Rick Rhoden and Eddie Solomon were ready to step up. He also believed that several players from the farm system, including catcher Tony Peña and infielders Dale Berra and Vance Law, would strengthen the Pirates' regular lineup.

The hope that 1981 would mark an easy transition proved mistaken, but it was something beyond the Pirates' performance on the field that turned the 1981 season into a disaster. Three months into the season, after acrimonious negotiations between the Major League Baseball Players Association (MLBPA) and team owners over a new contract and free agency compensation reached a stalemate, Players Association president Marvin Miller declared, "We have accomplished nothing. The strike is on."⁶ The long and bitter players' strike began on June 12, 1981, and lasted until July 31, though games did not resume until August 10. With more than one-third of the 1981 season lost to the strike, Major League Baseball commissioner Bowie Kuhn decided to divide the season into two halves, with the division winners of each half meeting in a playoff. At the time of the walkout the Pirates stood at 25–23 and were in fourth place. When the season resumed, the Pirates went into a tailspin, never recovered, and ended the second half with a record of 21–33 and a last-place finish.

After just two seasons, the Pirates had gone from favorites to repeat as World Series champions to a team expected to finish last in its division. A franchise that had hoped to attract two million fans in 1980 now hoped that one million would show up in 1982 (only 541,789 paid their way into Three Rivers in the strike-shortened 1981 season). When the Pirates opened the 1982 season, only three starters from the 1979 World Series champions were in the lineup: Omar Moreno, Parker, and Madlock. Moreno would be a free agent at the end of the season, and an overweight, unhappy Parker would follow a year later. Stargell was still on the team, but injuries reduced him to pinch-hitting in what would be his last season.

Other than the optimistic manager Tanner, no one was surprised when the Pirates were nine games under .500 at the end of May 1982,

but thanks to the hot hitting of Thompson and Madlock and excellent starting and relief pitching, the Pirates surged in July and August to six games over. They went back to the future to pick up Richie Hebner, who played on the 1971 World Series championship team, at midseason, but they also got help from youngsters Johnny Ray and Peña. Ray was named the *Sporting News* 1982 National League Rookie of the Year. For the first time since 1979, the Pirates had a winning record in September, and they finished the 1982 season at 84–78, good for fourth place in their division.

The Pirates did manage to reach their modest goal of attracting one million fans, but the final figure was only 1,024,106 for the 1982 season, which was 622,651 less than their last full-season attendance in 1980, and an average home attendance of only 12,643, second lowest in the major leagues ahead of only Minnesota. Moreover, the Pirates would have finished the 1982 season with attendance under one million if more than 38,000 fans had not come to Three Rivers for a second Willie Stargell Day. The Pirates held the ceremony honoring Stargell's retirement on Labor Day, because Pittsburgh was in the midst of a Rust Belt depression. Stargell asked the Pirates to turn the event into a fundraiser for unemployed steelworkers. Fans attending the game were asked to bring cans of food to the stadium. In thanking the crowd, Stargell told them, "During these trying times economically, there are a lot of people who would like to work and can't."⁷

While a dark economic cloud hung over the city, the Pirates had reason for optimism going into the 1983 season. After defying predictions of a losing record and possible last-place finish in 1982, the Pirates were once again regarded as contenders by sportswriters and fans. Stargell was gone, but Parker, knowing he was headed for free agency, came into camp in great shape, as did Madlock, who went on to win the National League batting title, as he had in 1975, 1976, and 1981. With a strong starting rotation headed by Rhoden, Candelaria, and newly acquired Larry McWilliams, and a durable Tekulve heading the bullpen, the Pirates looked poised to oust the St. Louis Cardinals as division champions.

Despite their talent and optimism, the Pirates played inconsistent baseball and struggled in the first half of the 1983 season. By mid-June, they were thirteen games under .500. They received a boost after the All-Star break, however, with the July call-up of rookie pitching sen-

sation José DeLeón and went on a tear that took them over .500 and within a few games of first place. On September 17, they were in a first-place tie with the Philadelphia Phillies, but with Madlock out with a torn calf muscle, the Pirates' bats cooled off, and the pitching could not carry them past the division-leading Phillies. They lost eight of their last fourteen games and finished the season in second place at 84–78, an improvement in the standings but with the same record they had in 1982.

As a parting “gift” for Parker, a fan threw another battery at him from the upper deck on September 10, 1983. With the season nearly over, Parker stayed in the game and dismissed the incident. In the clubhouse he told reporters, “I have 19, 20 more days on my contract here and no one is going to intimidate me out there.”⁸ During the offseason, Parker signed a multiyear contract with his hometown Cincinnati Reds. With Parker lost to free agency, the consensus going into the 1984 season was that, for the Pirates to remain contenders they would need to trade a veteran pitcher to strengthen the offense. To the astonishment of sportswriters, fans, and even some of the players, Peterson did just the opposite when he traded Mike Easler, the Pirates' most consistent hitter for the past few seasons, to the Red Sox for pitching ace John Tudor.

With Tudor added to an already strong starting rotation, Pirates pitchers would go on to lead the National League in 1984 with a 3.11 earned run average, but they had little support from the team's offense. Accustomed to watching sluggers like Roberto Clemente, Stargell, and Parker in the 1970s, Pirates fans now looked out at a mix of no-names and has-beens, ranging from newcomers Marvell Wynne, Joe Orsulak, and Doug Frobels to veterans Lee Mazzilli, Amos Otis, and Milt May, a rookie in the 1971 World Series, who hit just one home run and batted only .177 in 1984. The only remaining regular from the 1979 World Series champions was Madlock. As team captain he questioned, even before the season started, how the Pirates offense would score without Parker and Easler. When GM Peterson failed to trade for more offense, Candelaria, who had won the critical sixth game in the 1979 World Series, called Peterson “a bozo” and an “idiot.”⁹ To make matters worse, outstanding relief pitcher Rod Scurry revealed that he had a drug problem and headed into rehab.

Predictably, the Pirates got off to a poor start in 1984 and finished April in last place, where they stayed for the rest of the season. With dis-

gusted fans staying away from Three Rivers, attendance dropped from 1,225,916 in 1983 to 773,500, the lowest figure for a full season of play in the stadium's history. The Pirates did play better in September, but they finished the season in last place in their division with a record of 75–87. Going into the 1985 season, the Pirates were a team in turmoil, but the worst was yet to come, including the threat of a move to another city.



If ever the Pirates experienced a complete disaster in franchise history, it was the during the 1985 season. It actually began during the offseason when the Galbreath family decided to sell the franchise. John W. Galbreath, who built a fortune in real estate and horse breeding, bought into ownership in 1946 and became majority owner in 1950. But the Galbreaths had become increasingly frustrated with the team's poor play, falling attendance, and financial losses, and they decided it was time to step aside. The family, who lived in Columbus, Ohio, were also upset with fan perceptions that they were absentee landlords and unwilling to spend money to improve the ballclub. Dan Galbreath, John's son and the team president at the time, complained that, even though the family had put time, effort, and money into the franchise for twenty-nine years and had given Pittsburgh three World Series championships, fans were constantly comparing his family unfavorably with the Rooneys: "Hey, the Steelers went nearly forty years without winning a damned thing. But did Art Rooney catch hell here? Of course not. Why? Because he's Irish, and he's Catholic and he's lovable. In this city, he can do no wrong."¹⁰ They hoped to sell the franchise to local ownership, but if that failed, they would listen to offers from those interested in moving the franchise to another city.

Realizing his own future in Pittsburgh was in a precarious position after the Tudor-Easler trade, Peterson tried to improve the Pirates' poor offense by turning around and trading Tudor, a potential twenty-game winner, to the St. Louis Cardinals for outfielder George Hendrick. He also sent a package of players, including Berra, and outstanding prospect, Jay Buhner, to the Yankees for outfielder Steve Kemp and Foli, the shortstop for the 1979 World Series champions. Peterson thought that he was getting players capable of hitting twenty-five home runs and driving in one hundred runs in Kemp and Hendrick and a solid defensive player