

PROLOGUE



From the sidelines, through the maze of bodies, he could see it developing—the initial misdirection, Harris taking a step to his left, turning completely around and now heading right; Mullins setting back in a pass-blocking stance, then releasing to lead interference; Harris accepting the ball from Bradshaw and sliding into the vacated outside hole, beginning to rumble as his blockers cleared the way. By the time the exhausted Vikings, defenders dragged him down, he'd gained 15 yards, the Steelers had another first down, and the final result was no longer remotely in doubt.

As the lights cast an ethereal glow through the frigid gloom of the New Orleans twilight, and the scoreboard clock worked its way toward :00 in the heavy Louisiana air, Super Bowl IX neared its conclusion, and the Pittsburgh Steelers stood on the verge of becoming world champions. The season's work was nearly complete.

It was in these moments, with the end of the quest imminent, when Chuck Noll often would feel the emptiest.

All the shared effort and focus that Noll had mustered throughout the long season was bound up in that moment and then, after the inevitable diminution of time, it was all over. He was left then with nothing but the formalities—the handshakes and mere words that could never do justice to the things he felt. For a time, he held the melancholy and hollowness at bay, in the negative space where the sense of purpose had thrived for months. It all remained on the inside, where he kept his deepest feelings—unshared, unremarked upon, often unexamined.

On the outside, where his football players were whooping and hollering, there was only a sublime, sincere expression of joy in that moment of complete triumph. Noll often seemed impervious to these common sentiments, but in this case he too was swept up in the tide, grinning as his players hoisted him on their shoulders.

Yet even in this instant of complete victory, the head coach of the Pittsburgh Steelers enjoyed but did not exult. Five years earlier in the same stadium, Hank Stram had triumphantly waved the rolled-up sheets of his game plan while being carried off the field by his Chiefs; two years earlier, following Super Bowl VII in Los Angeles, Don Shula had rejoiced on the shoulders of his Miami Dolphins, raising a pair of fists skyward at the completion of a perfect season.

But on January 12, 1975, there would be no such indelible image. Noll, ever the pragmatist, simply used his arms to steady himself on the shoulders of Franco Harris and the helmetless, beaming Joe Greene as they carried him across the field on his brief victory ride. He appeared delighted but composed, keenly aware that the trip he was taking was a fleeting one.

He was back on his feet by the time they reached the tunnel, heading to the bowels of the decrepit Tulane Stadium. Inside the visitors' dressing room, with its long wooden benches and low-slung ceilings, there was a cacophony of noise and sweat and deadline journalism, with a mob of cameramen, reporters, league executives, team employees, and interlopers standing amid the oversized men reveling in the greatest moment of their sporting lives.

In sports, all championships carry an air of redemption. But this one went beyond that. More than forty years after they'd entered the league, the Steelers had finally won their first NFL title. There was a deep, primal release from decades of frustration for the city of Pittsburgh and the

team. Players were crying tears of joy, coaches were hugging, others in the room were shouting exhortations.

In the midst of all that revelry, Chuck Noll, the head coach of the Steelers, did none of those things. He smiled, exchanged congratulations, and shook hands.

Grasping Terry Bradshaw's hand, he said, "Congratulations, we did it."

"Congratulations, Andy," he told the veteran linebacker Andy Russell, shaking his hand. "This is why we do the hard work."

Then he shook Frenchy Fuqua's hand, and said, "Congratulations, we did it."

NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle entered, and then everyone in the room focused on the owner and team patriarch, the white-haired Art Rooney, "The Chief," he of the thick glasses, jaunty Ascot, and out-sized cigars. It was only after Rozelle presented the Lombardi Trophy to Rooney, and after Franco Harris was awarded the game's most valuable player award, that Noll was cornered in the locker room by NBC broadcaster Charlie Jones and asked on national television about his thoughts on the occasion of finally attaining the greatest goal in professional football. How, asked Jones, were Noll and his players going to celebrate this achievement?

"I think we're going to enjoy it for just a short time, and then get on to next year."

It took Jones another instant to realize that Noll's brief answer was complete.

"And then be ready for next season . . . already?," Jones prompted.

"That's right, it comes around fast."

Even then—perhaps most especially then—Chuck Noll was cognizant that success was not a fixed point but an ongoing state of mind, a series of habits and commitments. He'd made a life out of setting them and honoring them. He wouldn't stop now.

More than two hours later, after he'd extended dozens more congratulations to players and staff, and faced the gauntlet of television, radio and print interviews, he made his way back to his suite at the Fontainebleau Hotel.

His wife Marianne, wearing her lucky Steelers' bracelet, had been sitting on the sofa, still reveling in the thrill—thinking about how much it meant to Chuck, the assistants and the players, and how this game would

change all of their lives—when she heard the key in the door. She stood up, beaming broadly and held her arms out as he walked in the room.

And as he approached her, he extended his right hand, shook hers firmly and said, “Congratulations. We did it.”

Years later, Noll’s detractors would cite this scene—a coach celebrating the culmination of his greatest victory by offering a perfunctory, congratulatory handshake to his own wife—as proof of his bloodless personality and his inability to relate to the people nearest to him.

And, just as forcefully, Marianne Noll would maintain that the proffered handshake from her soul mate was just one more inside joke—“We both were laughing at the time,” she said—as well as further proof, perhaps, that you had to know Chuck.

Then again, perhaps no one else did.



Vince Lombardi’s name is on the Super Bowl trophy that is presented to the National Football League champion each year, and he remains the standard by which all football coaches are judged.

Chuck Noll won twice as many Super Bowls as Lombardi and presided over arguably the greatest dynasty in football history. But he never found the place in the public imagination that Lombardi and others did. No one was making Broadway plays about the life of Chuck Noll. He didn’t wear a trademark fedora, and his statue was not outside any stadiums. He didn’t open a chain of steakhouses upon retiring or wind up as the centerpiece of a recurring *Saturday Night Live* sketch. In the pantheon of great coaches whose names might be invoked by writers or announcers, he was infrequently mentioned.

Part of it was that Noll didn’t strive to be known, didn’t give much of himself away. The writer Roy Blount Jr., who spent the entire 1973 season with the Steelers and produced numerous intimate portraits in his classic *About Three Bricks Shy of a Load*, concluded at the end of six months spent in close quarters with Noll that the man was “opaque.” Others wondered how the leader of such a diverse group of men could be so ostensibly bland himself. “No burning zeal is evident,” wrote Dave Brady of the *Washington Post*. “There is hardly an identifying mannerism.”

This was not solely the impression of outsiders.

“I worked there thirteen years, and I know nothing about him,” said the defensive end L. C. Greenwood. “The only time I went into his office was when he cut me.”

But the measure of his impact on his team and pro football was simple and ineluctable: In the nearly four decades of the team’s existence before Noll was hired, the Pittsburgh Steelers were the least successful franchise in professional football, never winning so much as a division title; in the nearly five decades since his arrival in Pittsburgh, they became the most successful franchise in the sport, winning six Super Bowls, eight American Football Conference championships, twenty-one division titles, and twenty-nine playoff berths.

Noll surely didn’t do it alone, but he was the catalyst, the man who drew a line under everything that had gone before and set the tone—over his twenty-three seasons as head coach of the Steelers and beyond—for everything that would follow.

“Losing,” he said on his first day on the job, “has nothing to do with geography.” Yet in Noll’s era, the people of Pittsburgh came to believe that winning *did*. The success the Steelers enjoyed became a vital part of the city’s history and sense of itself. Undoubtedly, the combination of his reserved nature and the dissonant circumstances of the Steelers’ rise—the team became dominant at the very point at which the steel economy in western Pennsylvania began to crumble—added a measure of poignancy. One could not tell the story of the Pittsburgh renaissance that came after without discussing what Noll’s teams meant to the people of the region. The man Pittsburghers could never fully know helped them see themselves better. They weren’t victims. They were resilient. They were, in a real sense, a reflection of the football team.

That Steelers dynasty of the ’70s—with its thick, rollicking mix of black players and white, street smart and country strong, devout and profane—was molded into a cohesive unit by the will of one man. Along the way, every one of the team’s players, in one way or another, subjugated themselves for the greater good of the team.

Jack Ham, the Steelers’ Hall of Fame linebacker, was once asked how such a diverse, seemingly disconsonant group of people could set aside their considerable differences and find common cause.

“Chuck Noll,” he said. “We all became clones of Chuck Noll.”



Noll was “square” in every respect of the word. Physically, he possessed a resolute, formidable blockiness, a solid foundation that seemed to extend from his feet all the way up to his neck. Socially, he was a straight arrow, a regular communicant who never experimented with drugs, rarely drank anything stronger than beer or wine, kept his hair trimmed short, wore his clothes conservatively, and remained—by every account—scrupulously faithful to his wife during their fifty-seven years of marriage. In sensibilities, he was square: He preferred nonfiction over fiction, facts over interpretation, knowledge over philosophy. Finally, he was square in a behavioral sense—strict, honest, with a clearly defined sense of right and wrong, and a demeanor that remained calm in the face of adversity. “We never saw him crack,” Joe Greene once said. “He was a solid block.”

On the sidelines, Noll cut a stolid, mostly nondescript figure. Burly without being stout, he had brownish-blond hair and a handsome, chiseled face that softened over the years. His countenance betrayed little information beyond seriousness of purpose.

At a time when many football coaches were sartorially daring, wearing suits and ties, snap-brim hats and tailored vests, Noll preferred a fashion statement that seemed to make no statement at all: black windbreakers, collared sports polos, off-the-rack slacks. It was tempting to look at the understated personality, the underwhelming clothes, and determine that Noll *himself* was colorless and humorless. And he was secure enough with himself to not be troubled by people reaching such a conclusion.

His press conferences were notoriously uninformative, not because he wasn't articulate or had little to say but because he viewed all information about his team as potentially damaging, a subtle edge for opponents. “Chuck Noll was at the top of his game yesterday,” wrote a beat writer in 1974. “He held an informal meeting with a handful of sports writers and his answers to four of the first six questions were ‘I don't know.’” The week of one of the Super Bowls, a sheet was distributed in the media room titled “Highlights of Chuck Noll Press Conference.” The rest of the page was left blank.

Yet he possessed confidence in his abilities and a calm assurance that he knew what he needed to know. This sense of certainty often alienated writers, who were intimidated by it, and players who were intimidated by Noll himself.

For Noll, the game was not a metaphor or a mystery or a test of manhood. It was a matter of simple execution, of blocking and tackling and an adherence to the fundamentals of the game. There were few of the loud exhortations of other coaches, no fiery inspirational speeches before taking the field. “I am not a motivator,” he said. “I do not holler or pound on the table. We [he and his assistants] are just choosers and teachers. We try to choose self-motivators and then teach them.” These techniques were instilled, refined, and emphasized tirelessly to his team. Roy Blount Jr. joked about it, “I can just see the movie ads for *The Chuck Noll Story* now: ‘He came out of Cleveland, well schooled in techniques!’”

The view then became common that Noll was merely a facilitator, a basic coach who lucked into one of the greatest assemblages of talent in pro football history. The players from that team are still recalled in romantic detail—Joe Greene and Franco Harris, Terry Bradshaw and the Steel Curtain, Lynn Swann and John Stallworth all became part of pro football lore. Noll, in turn, was not forgotten, exactly. But neither was he celebrated. As his friend and University of Dayton teammate Pat Maloney once put it, “Well, I guess Chuck is famous, but not *real* famous. You know what I mean? And just to his area. You know what I mean? Right around Pittsburgh. And Dayton.”



So it was by equal parts design and circumstance that one of the most successful coaches in football history was so little known.

Part of the challenge was the degree to which Noll seemed removed from the monomaniacal rhetoric of football coaching. At a time when one of his contemporaries, George Allen, was famous for statements such as, “I demand of my men that they give 110 percent,” Noll was pointedly rational. Football was a love but not his lodestar. He had adopted from Paul Brown, his own coach in the pros, the belief that football was something for a man to play before he found “his life’s work.” He repeated that mantra to his players hundreds of times during his tenure in Pittsburgh.

He also had a wealth of interests outside the game. No Super Bowl-winning coach had as many dimensions; at various times during his twenty-three years coaching the Steelers, it became known that Noll had earned a pilot’s license to fly small aircraft, could skipper a forty-two-foot yacht, was a connoisseur of wines who’d experimented with homemade vintages, was an audiophile and a gourmet chef, and an aficionado of clas-

sical music who once enjoyed a stint as a guest conductor of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. Yet he could be maddeningly obtuse when questioned about any of these outside interests. When the writer Peter King first interviewed Noll, in 1984, he asked about the coach's well-known regard for wines. Noll stared back at him and said, "I have no idea what you're talking about."

There were, in the end, no easy paths to get to precisely who Chuck Noll was, though he himself suggested the most obvious approach during his retirement press conference in 1991, after completing his final season coaching the Steelers. "Obviously, you'd like everything to be smooth, but termination is not easy," he said. "It's not usually smooth. I heard somebody tell me poet Ralph Waldo Emerson probably put it best when he said, 'Your actions speak so loudly, I can't hear what you're saying,' and I'd like to keep it that way."

And through his retirement, he succeeded in doing just that. He disappeared like Johnny Carson, courting no attention following his celebrated career, rarely appearing in public. Through the 1990s and 2000s, he'd occasionally show up at a dedication or a Steelers' game or a card signing, but even then he remained a cordial, largely distant figure.

Because of this, Noll remains an elusive enigma. Though his players' lives were profoundly shaped by their time with him, and while their gratitude ran deep, they couldn't escape the fact that they didn't really *know* their coach nor fully understand how he'd gotten that way. Hall of Famer John Stallworth spoke often of Noll being a father figure, but he also conceded that in the four decades of their association, they never had a conversation that lasted longer than five minutes.

"The bottom line on Chaz," said running back Frenchy Fuqua, evoking the nickname that many players used, "Chuck Noll, if he's in the room, no one, I think, from the Steelers really got to know him, nor truly understand anything but his teaching."

"I was very uncomfortable talking with him," said trainer Ralph Berlin, who worked side by side with Noll for more than two decades. "If you said what a beautiful day it is, you better be ready to defend *why* it is a beautiful day, or if you want to say you went to dinner at some restaurant, and had this for dinner, and how great it was, you better be able to tell him why. So, from that standpoint, I don't know that I ever really was entirely comfortable with him."

The distance created a mystique, and Noll's sometimes imperious manner—combined with his success and the complete authority he held over football operations for nearly the entirety of his tenure—created the image of someone who was infallible and omniscient. To many of those who played for him, the myth became the fact.

“I heard this story once,” said Ron Johnson, cornerback on Noll's last two Super Bowl teams. “I heard that his wife had prepared some kind of meal for him, and Chuck looked at it, and it wasn't how he wanted, and he cooked his own dinner—he cooked the same thing all over again! He cooked his own dinner his own way, and I said to myself, you know—*I can see Chuck doing that.*”



Back home, however, there was no mystery, no myth, no mystique. The intensely private man in the relentlessly public job took refuge in his family. He didn't merely have a loyal wife; he also had a best friend. And the timeless, abiding relationship between Chuck and Marianne Noll offered the best clues to who he truly was.

The dutiful, self-serious scholar, handsome but too shy to date regularly in high school, and bashful into his college days, found a life partner with whom he had a deep, unspoken connection. The man who'd fought hardship, poverty, and formidable health obstacles earlier in his life found sanctuary in the arms of a woman who saw him for exactly who he was.

With her manner of sweet steel, she protected him through the decades, cherished the strength and shelter he gave her, and stood by him when he grew ill. And he repaid her with his devotion, his companionship, and one last solemn promise, made on a tearful afternoon in 2005.

Even those closest to Chuck Noll maintained that Marianne was the only one who truly knew him. So, in the end, his life—and perhaps his life's work—made the most sense as a love story.