

# The NFL in the 1970s

**PRO**

**FOOTBALL's**

**MOST**

**IMPORTANT**

**DECADE**

**Joe Zagorski**

*Foreword by* **ROCKY BLEIER**

"The 1970s was the decade of *The Godfather*, Watergate and disco. It was also the decade of *Monday Night Football*, America's Team and the Steel Curtain. Author Joe Zagorski's lively, well-researched book explains how rival leagues, the NFL and AFL, came together and the modern era of pro football was born."

—McCann Award-winning sportswriter **RAY DIDINGER**

"Finally, a book about the decade of football that defined the game for the Boomer Generation, a decade when the NFL supplanted Major League Baseball as our national past-time and became a cultural obsession. This is when the Me Decade collided with the ultimate team sport. And in this book, Mr. Zagorski has provided the perfect balance, weaving complex historical narrative into a series of wonderful stories and personality portraits that will forever live in the fabric of American sports."

—**SAL PAOLANTONIO**, ESPN national correspondent

"It was a self-indulgent era, preoccupied with personal appearance and artistic self-expression. Pro football was a reflection of the times." —NFL Films documentary *The Super Seventies*.

The 1970 merger between the American Football League and the National Football League laid the foundation for a stronger brand of gridiron competition, providing a new level of excitement for fans. This book examines each year of the NFL's pivotal decade in detail, covering the great names, great rivalries and great games, as well as the key changes in both strategy and rules. Along the way, the author explains how pro football developed into a near-religious American tradition.

Former sportswriter **JOE ZAGORSKI** is a member of the Pro Football Researchers Association and volunteers his free time to the Tennessee Chapter of the NFL Alumni Association. He lives in Oak Ridge, Tennessee.



**McFarland**



Front cover: Pittsburgh Steelers running back Rocky Bleier carries the ball against the Dallas Cowboys in Super Bowl X at the Miami Orange Bowl on January 18, 1976 (Associated Press/Vernon Biever)

# ZAGORSKI The MFL in the 1970s



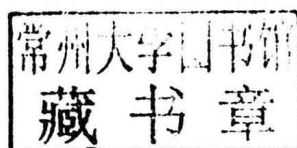


# The NFL in the 1970s

## *Pro Football's Most Important Decade*

JOE ZAGORSKI

*Foreword by Rocky Bleier*



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Front cover: Pittsburgh Steelers running back Rocky Bleier  
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## The NFL in the 1970s



For my parents and for Frankie,  
who were with me through it all





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Many people have helped me with this book project, and I will undoubtedly leave some out in these acknowledgments; any oversights are unintentional. All of the following in one way or another were important to the completion of *The NFL in the 1970s*.

There are several people at NFL Films, both past and present, who must be recognized, starting with the late Ed Sabol. He founded NFL Films right around the time I was born, and with his son, the late Steve Sabol, gave me one of my earliest reasons for falling in love with pro football. Decades later, I still thank these two men who made my autumn Sundays so much fun and still do through their company. NFL Films historian Chris Willis was always willing to provide me with the information I needed to make it easier to get the key details this book required. He also gave me advice on publications, as he himself has written a few books on various people and teams in pro football history. Todd Schmidt, like the rest of the NFL Films family, carries the torch in the finest of traditions established by the Sabols.

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## Foreword by Rocky Bleier

Who knew the impact the 1970s would have in the evolution of the National Football League? Certainly not the players. We were just kids trying to fulfill a dream of playing professional football and getting a decent paycheck, along with bragging rights back home. In hindsight it was a decade of change, innovation and sometimes desperation, but it was also a decade of opportunities, miracles, and creating lifetime memories.

The Pittsburgh Steelers gave an undersized, banged-up Vietnam veteran an opportunity, and I am living proof miracles can happen. You make the most of it, and ultimately I became a member of four Super Bowl championship teams, in one of the greatest decades in NFL history.

Joe Zagorski's book on the 1970s in the NFL captures the memories that made the decade special, not just for me, but for millions of pro football fans across America. His book describes each year with sharp details, vivid descriptions of crucial plays, and fun personal anecdotes which make the book enjoyable to read.

The 1970s changed the NFL in many different ways. There were two player strikes. "No freedom, no football," was the chant, and the decade was also the beginning of free agency. Competition from the World Football League only furthered the continuity of the brand in the NFL. *Monday Night Football* became the league's center stage. What once was a regional showcase now was becoming a national pastime, and the networks became the league's financial partners. Eventually pro football needed to be more exciting, so the league altered the rules to help the offenses score more points—a direct result of the defensive dominance in the NFL. We like to think the Steelers played a big part in those changes.

Other changes involved strategy, like the use of the Shotgun offense, or desperation, like the 3–4 defense or the 53 Defense in Miami. This all had a direct result on the pressure to win, forcing many coaches to spend countless hours watching game film, searching for one or two critical plays to gain an advantage over their upcoming opponent.

Naturally, my fondest memories about the decade involve the relationships I made over the years with teammates and opponents alike. Guys like Terry Bradshaw, Franco Harris, Joe Greene, and so many others who are all featured in this book. And what about those special plays are memorable too? Plays like Franco Harris' "Immaculate Reception," Oakland's "Sea of Hands" game, and the "Hail Mary Pass."

How do I know all of this? Because I was there, I lived through those times, and now so can you! If you love pro football and NFL history, then this book needs to be in your collection. I hope you enjoy reliving the NFL in the 1970s.

*Rocky Bleier was a Pittsburgh Steelers halfback in 1968 and 1971–1980. He played in the first four Steelers Super Bowl victories and caught the touchdown pass from Terry Bradshaw that gave Pittsburgh a lead it never relinquished in Super Bowl XIII. Bleier retired after the 1980 season with 3,865 rushing yards, 136 receptions for 1,294 yards, and 25 touchdowns. At the time of his retirement, he was the Steelers' fourth all-time leading rusher.*





## Preface

The decade known by many pro football historians and fans as the “Super Seventies” truly lived up to its name. The game experienced tremendous growth during those ten years. A merger in 1970 between the American Football League and the National Football League brought the ten AFL teams into a combined NFL. Franchise expansion also occurred in 1976, when two new cities (Tampa Bay and Seattle) joined the league. Major television contracts were signed with the three national networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC), and *Monday Night Football* became a viewing staple. Overall attendance at regular season and postseason games increased in many of the league’s cities each year, and the Super Bowl became an undeclared national holiday. The 1970s thus added annual building blocks of excitement and dramatic history to the game. The spectacle the NFL became during the following decades had one of its biggest growth spurts as a result of events that occurred in that ten-year span.

The NFL took some major formative, innovative, and appealing new steps in the 1970s. I tried to include as many of these as possible in each chapter, with the hope that fans would observe the growth of the sport annually from 1970 to 1979. There were many different aspects of the pro game that made this decade special, from the teams’ colorful uniforms, to the new stadiums opening seemingly every year, to the growing and competitive action every Sunday afternoon and Monday night. After all my research, however, I was still left with one major question: Can anyone—including me—undeniably claim that the 1970s was greater than all other decades in pro football history? The debate is sure to come up. This book is my attempt to provide evidence to support my belief that the 1970s should be regarded as pro football’s greatest decade. At least some answers to prove my point are in the following. Trying to determine and gauge the criteria to answer the greatest decade question turned out to be a mix of objective and subjective factors.

All I had to go on were my memories, game film, newspaper and magazine articles, and anecdotes from the players and coaches themselves. I compiled them and came up with an underlying belief: the 1970s saw so many special events and firsts in league history, so many superstar players (who are still regarded by many fans as household names), and so many other noteworthy occurrences that changed the game, that all other decades simply pale in comparison. All these combined to ignite the public’s interest in the NFL like never before. I felt I needed write a chronological, week-by-week account (for the most part) of the games and the divisional races. I wanted to make this book a way to re-live the decade, and it appeared based on my research that taking the reader from the start of each year to the end of each year, and devoting one chapter to each, was the best and most natural way to do it. Every year in the decade saw several important events and examples which added to pro football’s greatness. I tried my best to mention and examine as many as possible, where the growth of football’s excitement and popularity can be traced. This book may not persuade disbelievers to admit this is the most exciting of decades, but I hope it does. Baseball had

always been known as the “national pastime.” During the 1970s, pro football’s popularity definitely closed the gap on baseball’s lead. Former Oakland Raiders and Pro Football Hall of Fame defensive lineman Howie Long stated in his Hall of Fame induction speech in 2000 that pro football’s nickname was fast becoming the “national passion.” It could be successfully argued that such a passion for the game for both the players and the fans alike began in the 1970s.

The decade ushered in new heroes and new personalities. With the growth of the league’s popularity in both the print media and on television, players such as O.J. Simpson, Roger Staubach, Fran Tarkenton, Joe Namath, and Terry Bradshaw became famous, and were regarded by thousands of fans as larger than life. The suit-and-tie wizards on Madison Avenue wisely selected pro football players to endorse a wide variety of products, and the commercials that were produced during the 1970s are still highly regarded by advertising executives as some of the most creative and memorable of all time. Be it Buffalo Bills running back O.J. Simpson sprinting through airports promoting the Hertz Rent-A-Car company, or New York Jets quarterback Joe Namath eating popcorn from his Hamilton Beach popcorn popper, or Pittsburgh Steelers defensive tackle Joe Greene showing his not-so-mean side by trading his jersey to a young fan for a Coca-Cola, NFL players were more than willing to promote the benefits to consumers of buying all kinds of merchandise. In so doing, they added to their fame on the football field, became highly popular pitchmen through the many new avenues of endorsement advertising, and sometimes earned cameo roles in television shows and movies. Many advertisers were more than happy to pay top dollar to promote their products during Sunday afternoons and Monday nights, knowing full well most of the nation was watching the games and would be tempted to buy what they were selling. The millions of dollars the league made thanks to the television contracts also turned on a financial spigot, and money for the owners started pouring in. Player salaries in contrast increased slowly over the course of the 1970s, but they did increase.

Also responsible for the NFL’s notoriety during the 1970s was the growth of a company called NFL Films. Led by founder Ed Sabol and his son Steve, NFL Films documented each game with 16mm highlights, stirring music, and even more stirring narration from baritone John Facenda, a famous Philadelphia television news anchor from the 1960s and 1970s. Kids who grew up in the 1970s (I was one of them) readily recall staying up late on school nights to watch *This Week in Pro Football* or *NFL Game of the Week*, the backbone of NFL Films’ television schedule. Today, NFL Films is the main vehicle by which the game has become as popular as it is.

New and increasingly modern stadiums also dotted the NFL landscape. The multi-purpose stadium serviced both football and baseball teams in 17 cities. Many people derided those shared stadiums as all too common, with no outstanding features. But despite their detractors, these new stadiums mirrored the growth of the pro game. All were large, some cavernous. Most had escalators and luxury boxes, which were virtually unheard of in most stadiums of the 1950s and 1960s. Domed stadiums were also growing in number. There were fans even then who absolutely despised dome stadiums, but I felt it was good for a few teams to have them, if for no other reason than to provide a sense of contrast in locations and settings. For fans of the 1970s, the sight of the Houston Oilers playing their home games in any stadium other than the Astrodome would be ridiculous.

As you read this book, you will notice a multitude of very exciting and memorable games (in both the regular season and the postseason) in NFL history were played each year during the 1970s. Competition was key, as underdog and unexpected teams fought hard to win, with thrilling moments the common result. From 1970 to 1979, there was at least one major upset in the NFL playoffs each year. Playoff money may have been the cause for the harder hits that were delivered more frequently in the postseason than in the regular season. The vast majority of the players from the 1970s naturally did not make the kind of money pro football players make today. For