

INTRODUCTION
THE STEELERS GET LUCKY

Oakland quarterback Darryl Lamonica was wrung out with the flu and exhausted from evading the likes of Joe Greene and Dwight White all day. He was clearly on his last legs when Coach Madden pulled him and sent in Kenny “The Snake” Stabler. The Raiders were down by three, and the Snake would just have to figure out a way to score on a stingy Steelers defense. Failure was not an option—this was the first AFC divisional play-off game for both teams, and the loser’s season was over. Stabler, Oakland’s third-string quarterback, took the snap and immediately fumbled the ball. Pittsburgh, smelling its first postseason victory in more than 40 years, capitalized on the turnover by scoring on a Roy Gerela field goal. The crazed crowd at Three Rivers Stadium roared and thrashed the air with their Terrible Towels.

Following the kickoff, though, Stabler began to move the ball. Starting from his own 20-yard line, he quickly and coolly took his team down to the Pittsburgh 30. Then, with a first down and 10 yards to go, the Snake dropped back to pass and realized that the Steelers' safeties were blitzing—there was running room along the left sideline. Stabler bootlegged left and took the ball in for the Raiders' first score of the day. A George Blanda extra point made it 7–6 in favor of Oakland, with 1:13 left in the game.

Steelers quarterback Terry Bradshaw had been having, if it were possible, a worse day than Lamonica. The Raiders safeties had been wreaking havoc on his receivers; he had completed just 10 of 24 pass attempts for 115 yards. Now he had to move the ball from his own 20 to a point where Gerela had some chance of kicking the winning field goal. Things, though desperate, started off well. Bradshaw had an arm like a shotgun, especially at close range, and he completed two passes in a row. At his own 40-yard line, with the game clock winding down, Bradshaw threw three straight incompletions into the same kind of coverage he had been facing all day. Miraculously, he wasn't intercepted.

It was now fourth down and 10 with 26 seconds left to play. The Steelers' new head coach, Chuck Noll, who had been sending in the plays from the sidelines, called for a short pass up the middle to rookie receiver Barry Pearson. Bradshaw took the snap and set up in the pocket to pass but was immediately flushed out to the right and barely missed being decked by defensive tackle Art Thoms. About to be sacked, Bradshaw spotted a flash of black and gold downfield straight ahead, almost obliterated by the sea of black-and-silver defenders. He shot a tight

spiral directly at the target and was immediately buried by the Raiders' defensive line.

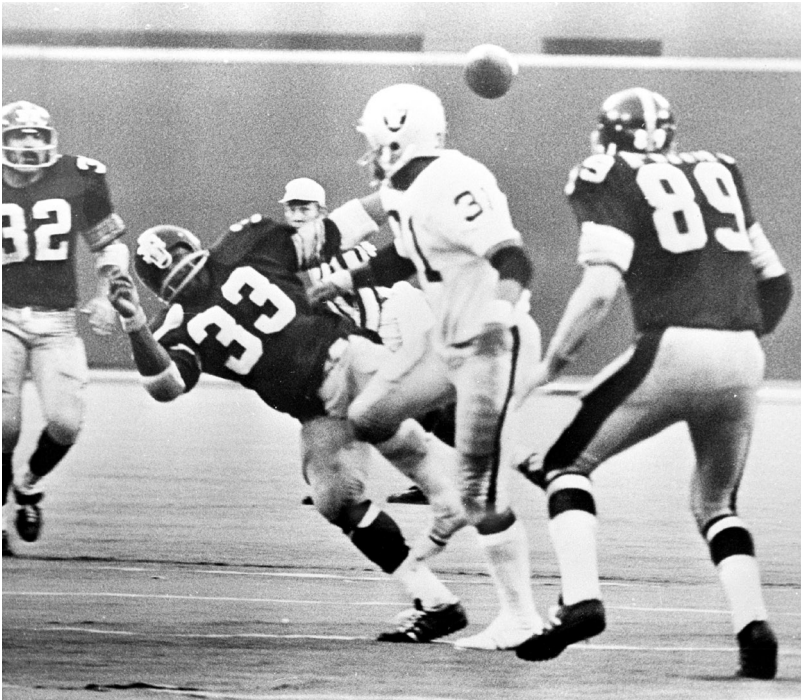
Bradshaw's desperate strike was rocketing toward his running back, John "Frenchy" Fuqua. Fuqua had just run a buttonhook pattern and was momentarily open at the Raiders' 35. Trying to avoid his coverage, he spotted the ball just after Bradshaw released it. So did Oakland's free safety, Jack Tatum, a savage tackler known affectionately throughout the league as the Assassin. Tatum dropped backed a few steps to give himself running room to build up a bit more momentum when he stuck his helmet in the Frenchman's back, and to time the hit so that it would coincide with the arrival of the ball. It did. Tatum plowed into Fuqua with a sledgehammer tackle that sent both Frenchy and the ball flying. Tatum had achieved his goal of preventing a reception by the running back. He stood over Fuqua, grinning.

But suddenly the Raiders realized they had a problem. The ball, whether it had ricocheted off Fuqua or Tatum, was flying backward to the Raiders' 42, where Franco Harris, another rookie and the Steelers' other running back, happened to be. Getting his hands under the ball just inches above the Astroturf, Harris scooped it up and, accelerating past a group of befuddled Raiders, took it in for the winning touchdown.

Not only were the Raiders confused, so were the referees. In 1972, NFL rules stated that once a thrown ball came in contact with another offensive player, it could not subsequently be caught by a third. Thus, if Fuqua had touched the ball, the play would be ruled as an incomplete pass. Tatum's grin changed to a look of disbelief as Harris blew past him. He spun around to confront his opponent on the ground.

“Tell them you touched it, Frenchy! Tell them you touched it!”

The Frenchman never did. The referees ruled in favor of Pittsburgh. And to many people, that play—which almost immediately became known as the Immaculate Reception—marked the beginning of the Steelers dynasty of the 1970s. To this day, Frenchy Fuqua isn’t talking about whether he touched the ball or not. But what almost everyone agrees on is this: It was one of the greatest plays in the history of American football.



Raiders’ safety Jack “The Assassin” Tatum levels the Steelers’ Frenchy Fuqua to put into motion what many consider to be the most memorable play in pro football history: the Immaculate Reception. Note the ball being deflected in the general direction of number 32 (in the background), rookie running back Franco Harris, who would scoop up the ball just inches from the turf and race 42 yards for the game-winning touchdown.