Spignesi, Sinatra, and the Pittsburgh Steelers: Franco's Italian Army as an Expression of Ethnic Identity, 1972-1977

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In recent years, scholars worldwide have demonstrated a renewed interest in the relationship between sport and ethnicity.[1] The questions they seek to answer are both compelling and long overdue. What, for instance, were the contributions of specific ethnic groups to the history of sport? To what extent did sport impact ethnic culture? How did sport function to build group identity? Did the particular conditions of time and place affect the ethnic sporting experience? In an attempt to ponder these and other questions, scholars have explored subjects ranging from the African American sporting experience in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, to football and religious acculturation in Chicago, to the role of sport in constructing Scottish ethnic identity, to the intersection of race, ethnicity, and sport in Australia.[2] Of all recent works dealing with sports and ethnicity, some of the most intriguing deal with the sporting experiences of European immigrants in the United States and argue that sport played an important role in assimilating individual immigrants into mainstream American society.[3]

Despite recent research and writing on this subject, however, one integral component of the sport/ethnicity dichotomy remains largely undocumented: the sporting experiences of the descendants of European immigrants. If, as previous scholars have argued, sport indeed served as a vehicle for immigrant assimilation, what role did it play in the lives of second, third, and fourth generation European Americans? As of yet, this important component of the ethnic sporting experience has not been studied systematically.

Just as sport historians have neglected the role of sport in the development of European American ethnic identity, so too have scholars of Italian American Studies neglected an aspect of their chosen field of study seemingly integral to its complete and accurate understanding. Despite a wealth of studies dealing with the immigrant (first) generation,

very few Italian American historians have explored the historical experiences of second, third, and fourth generation Italian Americans. In fact, the absence of historical scholarship in this area has become so pronounced that some scholars have deemed these later generations wide open as viable subject matter to historians.[4] Despite such pleas, relatively few have attempted to investigate the collective historical experiences of second-, third-, and fourth-generation Italian Americans and the ways in which they expressed their ethnic identity at specific periods of time, preferring instead to produce text after text on the experiences of the immigrants themselves-the role of the second and later generations relegated, as it too often is, to a final chapter or epilogue.

In an attempt to fill the historiographical gaps prevalent in the fields of both sport history and Italian American history, this essay presents a case study in the relationship between ethnic identity and sport among second, third, and fourth generation Italian Americans. For the descendants of Italian immigrants living in Pittsburgh, sport played an important role in fostering a collective, citywide movement of ethnic pride. In fact, the most fervent form of ethnic expression among second, third, and fourth generation Italian Americans living in Pittsburgh came through sports spectatorship. Between 1972 and 1977, Pittsburgh's Italian Americans invented a new ethnic identity based on a variety of factors, including pride in their Italian immigrant past, nostalgia for the Italian neighborhoods of their youth, and, perhaps most importantly, love of their city's NFL football team, the Pittsburgh Steelers.[5]

The catalyst for this chapter in American ethnic history was Hall of Fame running back Franco Harris, a 10,000-plus-yard rusher and arguably one of the greatest players in the history of professional football.[6] Born on March 7, 1950 in Fort Dix, New Jersey, Harris was the third of nine children born to an African American serviceman and an Italian immigrant war bride. At an early age, Harris demonstrated exceptional talent for football. In his first varsity game, the sophomore ran 84 yards for a touchdown and, as a junior, scored a school record twenty touchdowns in a single season. Although also a very talented baseball player, Harris chose to carry the pigskin for a career and, upon recruitment by Joe Paterno's coaching staff, accepted a full scholarship to play at Penn State. Four years later, in 1972, the Pittsburgh Steelers drafted him in the first round.[7]

Despite the presence of the Italian language, food culture, and familial mores in his home, Harris grew up in a predominately African American neighborhood, and developed interpersonal relationships with people of color, and therefore considered himself black.[8] Although identifying with the racial identity of his father, Harris nevertheless demonstrated an active interest in his Italian side of the family. In the summer of his sophomore year in college, Harris traveled to Italy in order to satisfy a long-standing curiosity about his European ancestral roots.[9]

When he arrived in Pittsburgh in the fall of 1972, the young running back had little idea that he was entering a city deeply rooted in the history and culture of the land from which his mother emigrated. Between 1880 and 1920, Italian immigrants settled in Pittsburgh by the thousands, the vast majority searching for employment offered by one of America's most industrial cities. In 1900, nearly 6,000 Italian immigrants lived in Pitts-

burgh; by 1930, this population had increased to well over 18,000. Immediately surrounding the city of Pittsburgh, Allegheny County attracted a sizable number of Italian immigrants as well. In 1930, Italian immigrants were the largest foreign-born group in Allegheny County with a total population of 34,039.[10]

Like Pittsburgh and Allegheny County, neighboring southwestern Pennsylvania also attracted significant numbers of foreign-born Italians in search of work, many of who ultimately found jobs in the bituminous coal mining industry. In 1930, the five counties bordering Allegheny had a collective Italian immigrant population of over 28,000.[11] The combination of urban dwellers and residents of the coal patch towns surrounding Pittsburgh combined to make southwestern Pennsylvania one of the most densely settled Italian immigrant clusters in the entire United States.[12]

During this period, Pittsburgh's East Liberty neighborhood became the center of Italian immigrant settlement in the region. In 1910 and 1920, East Liberty was home to 2,860 and 2,755 Italian immigrants respectively, making it the most populated Italian neighborhood in Pittsburgh.[13] Although immigrants from throughout Italy also settled in East Liberty, a large proportion (the Spignesi) hailed from Spigno Saturnia, a village located approximately midway between Rome and Naples in south-central Italy, and first came to the neighborhood by utilizing the peer and kinship network known as chain migration. In order to provide a base of support and mutual protection, Spignesi sponsored the creation of the Spigno Saturnia Italian American Beneficial Society in 1927, one of the largest such organizations in the city.[14] Between 1900 and 1930, immigrants from Spigno Saturnia also played a major role in establishing Pittsburgh's largest Italian business district along Larimer Avenue, a street replete with Italian-owned grocery stores, cafes, produce markets, and mutual aid societies, as well as two Italian ethnic parishes.

By the 1960s and early 1970s, however, the Italian population of East Liberty started to fade rapidly due to the upward economic mobility of immigrants and their descendants and worsening racial tensions between Italians and African Americans.[15] The neighborhood had long been a trouble spot for conflict between the two ethnic groups; one of the earliest incidents took place in 1934, resulting in a race riot and ensuing intervention by city police.[16] Italian/Black tensions increased markedly in the 1950s when an urban renewal project demolished the residential Hill District, thus resulting in a mass migration of uprooted African American families into other neighborhoods of the city, mainly East Liberty.[17] Racial discord between Italians and Black families reached fever pitch in April of 1968 when, in the aftermath of the assassination of Martin Luther King, East Liberty African Americans targeted their frustrations against white homes and businesses in the area, many of them Italian-owned.[18] Although some Italian American families remained in the neighborhood after this incident, Italian migration from the area increased dramatically, the East Liberty Italian business district continued to decline, and the neighborhood forever lost the "Little Italy" nature of earlier years.[19]

In 1972, the serendipitous intersection of the lives of Franco Harris and East Liberty's Italian Americans precipitated the form of Italian ethnic expression known as Franco's Italian Army. As expected, rookie Franco Harris demonstrated incredible prowess on the gridiron and, by midseason had rushed for 100 yards or more in six consecutive games.[20] During this streak, East Liberty's Italian Americans learned of Harris's Italian heritage and

masterminded a plan that would ultimately allow thousands of Italian Americans to express their ethnic pride through sports. Led by Tony Stagno, the son of immigrants from Spigno Saturnia and owner of an East Liberty bakery, a handful of second generation Italian Americans approached the young football player with the proposition of creating a fan group in his honor. Perhaps out of pride in his Italian immigrant ancestry but more likely because of a youthful desire for the limelight, Harris cordially accepted the invitation.

At a November 12, 1972 home game between the Steelers and Kansas City Chiefs, Franco's Italian Army first made its presence known.[21] Wearing surplus helmet liners carefully painted with Italian flags and the words "Franco's Italian Army," and personalized with the Italian last names of each founder, Army members paraded into Three Rivers Stadium, the Steelers home playing field, and established a cheering section immediately below the press boxes in stadium Sections 29 and 30. Over the next five seasons, this location served as both the hub of the sports fanaticism that would carry the Steelers to two consecutive Super Bowl victories and the seat of western Pennsylvania's most interesting form of Italian American ethnic expression.

Within two weeks, the Italian Army grew to include approximately forty Pittsburghers, the majority of whom were, like the founders, second generation Italian Americans whose parents had emigrated from Italy and originally settled in East Liberty.[22] Due to its increas-

Franco's Italian Army at Three Rivers Stadium, Pittsburgh, 1972. *Courtesy Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania*

ing size, the army was jokingly subdivided into the High Command, consisting of the founding members, a K-9 corps, with helmet-wearing Great Dane in tow, and a chaplain corps headed by none other than a local Catholic priest.[23] In the sprit of military symbolism, Army members selected Tony Stagno as the army's four star general and Albert Vento, whose East Liberty pizzeria became a frequent Sunday morning rendezvous point, was named second-in-command and assigned three stars. Current or former East Liberty residents Armand Zottola, John Danzilli, Jr., Pat Signore, Dominic Stagno, and additional founding members also received helmet stars identifying their place within the High Command hierarchy.

Almost immediately, the army attracted generous media attention from the *Pittsburgh Port Gazette* and *Pittsburgh Press* and, by the 1973 season had received national coverage through articles in *Sports Illustrated, Sport,* the *New York Times,* the *Philadelphia Inquirer,* the *Chicago Tribune,* and other nationally known newspapers, as well as interviews by television and *NFL Films* reporters.[24] According to one Pittsburgh newspaper, the influx of sportswriters from cities nationwide made Franco's Italian army "as well known along the Eastern seaboard as they are in Pittsburgh."[25]

In addition to regular newspaper and television coverage, the publication of a number of books about Franco Harris and his illustrious football career greatly contributed to the Italian Army's mounting popularity. For example, three different publishing houses produced paperback juvenile biographies of Franco Harris between 1975 and 1977, each of which included descriptions of the rise of Franco's Italian Army.[26] Meanwhile, Don Kowet, the author of a 1977 adult biography of Franco Harris, devoted an entire chapter to the founding of Franco's Italian Army and the fan group's importance to Italian Americans throughout western Pennsylvania.[27] The rising popular appeal of Franco Harris, as shown by the publication and national distribution of both juvenile and adult biographies, furthered wide spread awareness of the running backs flamboyant, ethnic fan group.

Members of Franco's Italian Army relied on Italian symbolism when cheering for the Pittsburgh Steelers, revealing the intersection of ethnic pride and sports spectatorship. The quintessential symbols, as might be expected, were the red, white, and green colors of the Italian flag-colors used not only on helmets but also in signs and banners produced by army members for display at the stadium. The most frequently appearing banners identified the fan group as "Franco's Italian Army," while others exclaimed "Run, Paisano, Run" and "Run you Italian Stallion" to provide support for their player of choice.[28] Army members also established a booth outside of the most heavily trafficked stadium entrance to encourage additional Italian Americans to "Enlist Now... Join Franco's Italian Army."[29] Full sized and hand-held Italian flags rounded out the army's repertoire of visual paraphernalia.

Italian American food also played an integral role in the Italian Army. Prior to each home game, members of the High Command met at Vento's Pizzeria in East Liberty to prepare hoagies of prosciutto, capicolla, and provolone.[30] Pepperoni, salami, imported Italian cheeses, and olives were also consumed at the stadium in great quantities and, on special occasions, the wives of army members prepared dishes of homemade lasagna, manicotti, stuffed eggplant, and other regional dishes.[31] Army members even smuggled Italian wine into the stadium, doing so by hollowing out loaves of Italian bread and stuffing the bottles inside.[32] When asked by journalists to describe a typical Sunday afternoon's

events, one army member compared the atmosphere of food and fun to the Italian American family life of his youth.[33] In the 1973 season, Italian American food culture became such an integral component that members were forced to purchase two extra season tickets just to accommodate the wide variety of Italian American foodstuffs brought to each game.[34]

Members of Franco's Italian Army also imported aspects of Italian American folklore to their stadium cheering section, namely the *corno,* the Italian word for an animal horn. Thought by many Italian immigrants to ward off evil, especially the *malocchio* or evil eye, the *corno* most commonly took the form of a horn-, or red pepper-shaped medallion and could be unscrewed to reveal a small, hunchbacked figure thought to have protective, supernatural powers.[35] On game days, Italian Army members revised the *corno's* traditional function, using their family medallions to place *malocchio* curses on opposing teams. During a December 3, 1972 game against the Cleveland Browns, *NFL films* captured Tony Stagno explaining the *corno's* alleged function:

> You want to see the killer for Cleveland today? That's the big red pepper, the Italian whammy. We put it on and Cleveland can't do nothing. NFL films never seen the red pepper. And I tell you... Wait a minute, here's the kicker. This you got to see and I know you ain't never seen this in your life. Here's the man, right here inside. Little Italian hunchback. He's the killer [for Cleveland].[36]

When Franco Harris made a shoestring catch in the final minutes of the 1972 AFC championship game and ran for the game winning touchdown, some Italian Army members suggested that the spectacular play, later dubbed the "Immaculate Reception," was not the result of chance, fate, nor player prowess, but of an Army-initiated *malocchio* curse.[37] Further, in the aftermath of a 1975 victory against the Minnesota Vikings, local newspapers extensively photographed Harris proudly displaying a Viking fan's helmet adorned with two large horns because of the centrality of *corno* folklore to the Italian Army fan group.[38]

Due to Italian American gender roles that confined women to the home, Franco's Italian Army was a male-dominated phenomenon. In Pittsburgh and other cities nationwide, first and second generation Italian American women rarely joined social organizations due to their domestic and childrearing responsibilities, as well as ethnic mores that limited membership in such clubs to men only. Therefore Italian American women, unlike men, rarely had the opportunity to develop lasting community relationships with their peers. As a type of ethnic community organization, Franco's Italian Army developed from social relationships between Italian American males. By its nature, therefore, the Army did not attract large numbers of women. Further, the fact that sport spectatorship, namely football, was largely a male-interest leisure activity during this period contributed to the lack of participation by Italian American women to the same extent as Italian American men.

Although founded by Italian American males, Franco's Italian Army by no means excluded females from participating in its activities. The wives of army members, for example, assisted with pre-game preparation by cooking Italian dishes and assisting with signage production and, on some occasions, even attended games at Three Rivers Stadium.[39] In fact, Franco's Italian Army spawned a "nurses division" late in the 1972 season

in order to accommodate those Italian American women who were also interested in publicly expressing pride in their ethnic ancestry through sports.[40]

In addition to their combat garb and distinctive Italian American symbolism, members of Franco's Italian Army became well known for their boisterous stadium antics. On one occasion, army members borrowed troop transports and rumbled into the stadium with Italian flags and Army banners held aloft.[41] At the December 31, 1972 playoff game versus Miami, the Army employed a light aircraft to drop thousands of leaflets onto the opposing team's sidelines calling for surrender to an ethnically superior foe.[42] On yet another occasion, Army members burst into a local radio station and kidnapped celebrity sports commentator Myron Cope.[43] The hoopla surrounding this audacious radio stunt, like all of the army's antics, was well covered in the local papers, thus expanding regional awareness of the fan group.

The Italian Army's greatest coup, however, was the unlikely induction of Frank Sinatra in December of 1972. Aware that the Steelers were traveling to southern California to play the San Diego Chargers, Army members assigned Myron Cope the task of recruiting Sinatra into Franco's Italian Army. This task proved simple enough for the brash, gregarious Cope, whose success in piquing Sinatra's interest later earned him an honorary generalship in the army. On December 14, 1972, Tony Stagno and Al Vento arrived at the Steelers practice field in Palm Springs to officially induct Old Blue Eyes into the Italian Army. The *Pittsburgh* Press covered the event in detail:

Induction of Frank Sinatra into the Army, Palm Springs, December 1972. L-R: Franco Harris, Tony Stagno, Frank Sinatra, Albert Vento, Sr. *Courtesy Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania*

> Sinatra's induction required bussing and hugging in a practice-interrupting celebration along the sidelines with imported Italian wine, prosciutto, romano cheese, salami and pepperoni. Sinatra, of course, went along with the gag and when Stagno ritualistically kissed him on both cheeks, Sinatra—his pork pie hat replaced with a helmet with an Italian flag on it—gleefully fell into Stagno's arms. "Compadre," muttered Sinatra feelingly.[44]

The informal ceremony continued with generous servings of Italian food and wine for all, another round of cheek kissing, and concluded with Sinatra posing for a series of photographs with Vento, Stagno, and, of course, Franco Harris.

Back in Pittsburgh, the city's two newspapers covered the induction of Sinatra in great detail. Meanwhile, sports commentator Myron Cope's involvement in the ceremony resulted in generous radio and television coverage of the event. As might be expected, the news of the Italian Army successfully inducting an icon of Italian American ethnicity caused even more of western Pennsylvania's Italian Americans to desire membership in the unique fan group. Two weeks after Sinatra's induction, another Italian American of national recognition approached the Army. "Congratulations on the Steelers Victory," a telegram sent to Three Rivers Stadium exclaimed, "Where do I go to join Franco's Italian Army?" It was signed "Henry Mancini."[45]

Outside the stadium, the Italian Army used its rapidly growing popularity to aid local and national charities. To raise money for Pittsburgh Children's Hospital, Army members produced and sold tricolor armbands, small replicas of the Italian flag, and membership certificates.[46] After establishing a non-profit corporation, the Army successfully marketed scarves, winter hats, stadium seat cushions, plastic license plates, T-shirts, and bumper stickers, again with the express intent of raising money for charity.[47] In January 1973, the Army joined a local March of Dimes campaign and, in April of that year, sponsored a "Ride a Bike" day to raise money for the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children.[48] Along with Franco Harris, Italian Army members also supported and consoled ill and disabled children through periodic visits to area hospitals.[49]

In addition to raising money for important charitable endeavors, the sale of Italian Army membership certificates and paraphernalia greatly increased the number of western Pennsylvania Italian Americans claiming membership in this veritable vehicle for ethnic expression. Throughout the 1970s, the streets of Pittsburgh were replete with Italian Americans sporting Italian Army propaganda thus allowing them to simultaneously express support for the Steelers and pride in their Italian immigrant past.[50]

What, then, specifically prompted the army's founding members to actively merge their love of football and pride in being Americans of Italian descent? For founder Tony Stagno, Franco's Italian army provided an opportunity to reunite Italian Americans who formerly resided in the East Liberty Italian neighborhood but had since moved to the suburbs and other parts of the city.[51]As mentioned earlier, Italian migration from East Liberty became particularly commonplace in the late 1960s and early 1970s as Italian Americans capitalized on their economic success to invest in suburban property and simultaneously escape what they saw as troubling relations with their African American

neighbors. Characteristic of many cities of the East and Midwest during this period, this out-migration signified structural assimilation into the host society and resulted in many inner city Little Italies losing their previous status as centers of Italian American community life and culture.[52]

In 1972, Tony Stagno and other local Italian Americans recognized the impending demise of East Liberty's Little Italy and formed Franco's Italian Army to provide some continuity to the distinctive Italian neighborhoods of an earlier time. In this sense, Army membership was a direct result of a certain longing for the past at a point in history when various factors were uprooting the city's largest Italian neighborhood. At the same time, Franco's Italian Army played an important role in allowing second generation Italian Americans in Pittsburgh to continue the community relationships that had been important to the immigrant generation. Whereas Italian immigrants in Pittsburgh had relied on organizations such as the Spigno Saturnia society and other ethnic social organizations to hold the first generation community together, second generation Italian Americans created a football fan group as their ethnic club, thus merging Old World social relationships with a New World pastime and allowing strong intra-group relationships to continue.

Representatives of the Army at a charity event, Pittsburgh, 1973. L-R: Armand Zottola (rear), Albert Vento, Jr. (front), Albert Vento, Sr., Franco Harris, Dominic Stagno, Tony Stagno. *Courtesy Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania*

For other founding members, suppression of their Italian American heritage while children directly precipitated membership in Franco's Italian Army. Al Vento remembered not thinking about his Italian heritage while a child, partly because of the pre-World War II push for the children of immigrants to be 100% American. Therefore, Vento supported the formation of a Pittsburgh Steelers fan group that would allow him to express feelings of ethnicity that he was unable, and unwilling, to show in youth.[53] Vento's rationale for joining the Army reflects an important generational phenomenon characteristic of Italian Americans nationwide. Growing up in the interwar period when nativist sentiment functioned to initiate both immigration restrictions and widespread anti-foreign sentiment, second-generation Italian American children found themselves caught between the Old World ways of their parents and the American ways of their friends, schoolteachers, and classmates. Facing the pressures of Americanization, many became ashamed of their parents' Old World dress, accents, and mannerisms and suppressed the fact that they were of an ethnic origin in order to be accepted by members of the host society.[54] Many original members of Franco's Italian Army, then, joined the fan group in order to express feelings of Italian American ethnic pride that had been impossible to show during their youth.

For still other founding members, participation in Franco's Italian Army came about for simpler reasons. Indeed, a goodly number involved themselves in Franco's Italian Army simply out of pride in their immigrant ancestry, capitalizing on a unique opportunity to express ethnic identity through something equally dear to their hearts—professional football.[55] As shown by the reasons behind its initial formation, the media, though an important force in fostering widespread regional attention to the fan group, was not the principal factor in its formation. Rather, expression of Italian American ethnicity proved to be the real catalyst for the rise of Franco's Italian Army and its true reason for being.

Franco's Italian Army grew rapidly during the 1972 season and into the seasons beyond. Due to their continuous stadium presence, active community involvement, and generous press coverage, membership entered into the thousands as western Pennsylvania's people of Italian descent established their own Army contingents.[56] Italian Americans employed at a Pittsburgh recruiting battalion formed Franco's Italian Artillery and supplied howitzers as props for home games, while Italian Americans living in Butler, Pennsylvania, a small town north of Pittsburgh, proclaimed themselves the Butler Division of Franco's Italian Army.[57] Even Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 350 miles to the east, mustered a clan of army supporters. At the final game of the 1972 season, Lancaster's Italian Americans proudly carried a sign reading "Franco's Army, Dutch Division, Lancaster, PA."[58] So many had joined the army that the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette* excitedly reported, "Everybody, it seems, is joining Franco's Italian Army judging by the [number of] banners and Italian flags."[59] In San Diego, meanwhile, Italian American sailors at the city's naval base emphatically waved signs reading "Franco's Italian Navy" during a December 17, 1972 game between the Steelers and Chargers, evidence that Italian Army fever, although rooted in western Pennsylvania, became even national in scope.[60]

Some of those who claimed membership in Franco's Italian Army were, like the founding members, second generation Italian Americans who longed for the city's Italian neighborhoods of old or wished to express feelings that were difficult to show when children. By far the largest group of followers, however, included third and fourth generation Italian

Americans who neither knew very much about their immigrant ancestry nor remembered Pittsburgh's Little Italies of old, but became caught up in the re-birth of ethnic pride sweeping the nation in the 1970s. In this sense, Franco's Italian army was one of the most interesting forms of ethnic expression to emerge from the so-called "New Ethnicity," a period in American history when ethnic identity entered the forefront of American social thought and public discourse.

Nationwide, the New Ethnicity movement manifested itself in a variety of ways.[61] In some areas of the country, Italian Americans rekindled aspects of Italian American folklore such as communal feast days and religious processions that had in years previous been lost or forgotten. In other cities, Italian Americans organized themselves to collectively protest unfair media stereotypes, namely the mafia image, doing so by organizing massive demonstrations of "Italian Power." In still other parts of the United States, the descendants of Italian immigrants openly expressed pride in their ancestry by initiating a coordinated campaign to make Columbus Day a federal holiday, thus ensuring that their community would annually receive the respect and recognition that they believed it deserved.

During the New Ethnicity period, then, Italian heritage became something in which the descendents of immigrants nationwide openly cherished. In joining Franco's Italian army, third and fourth generation Italian Americans living in Pittsburgh, like Italians elsewhere in the United States, publicly demonstrated pride in their immigrant past to the society at large.[62] The particular manner in which they chose to express their identity, however, was unique to the city of Pittsburgh and rooted in the historical circumstances of time and place.

Franco's Italian Army instigated similar movements among the city's other ethnic groups. Pittsburgh's Polish Americans, for example, created Joe Greene's Polish Armed Forces, thus allowing the descendants of another prominent immigrant group to express ethnic pride through sports.[63] Meanwhile, the city's Slovak Americans created a fan group in honor of linebacker Jack Ham and named the group *Dobre Sunka,* an anglicized version of the Slovak phrase for "Great Ham."[64] Not to be outdone by the city's ethnic groups, Pittsburgh WASPS formed their own fan club in honor of place-kicker Roy Gerela, but relied on alliteration rather than ethnic identification in naming their fan group "Gerela's Gorillas."[65] Quite unwittingly, Pittsburgh's Italian Americans took the lead in inspiring the descendants of other immigrant groups to also employ professional sport as a vehicle of ethnic expression.

Whereas Americans of European descent reacted to this widespread expression of Italian American identity by emulating Franco's Italian Army, Pittsburgh's African Americans openly challenged the attempt by East Liberty's Italian Americans to claim Franco Harris. Anticipating such controversy, the Army's founding members publicly stated that their fan group was not meant to be racially offensive and that numerous African Americans had participated in and endorsed its formation.[66] Despite these appeals, African American football fans repeatedly confronted Army members at Three Rivers Stadium, calling into question the Italian community's claiming ownership of a person who had always considered himself to be black.[67]

In the weeks following, African Americans continued to openly dispute what they deemed to be Italian American ownership of Franco Harris. In December 1972, members

of one Pittsburgh Black Nationalist group, Black Brother on Black in Black, made Franco's Italian Army the first item on their weekly meeting agenda. In the heated debate that followed, the organizational chairman advocated a course of action that would essentially "split up" Franco Harris.

> We have a very serious matter before us tonight. It's a grave situation. The white folks are trying to claim one of us. Now that the Italians have claimed their share of Brother France, I say we must claim our part. We must preserve blackness... As you know, the Italians are parading around with their red, white, and green flags and wearing helmets. Now, as every good brother knows, our colors are red, black, and green. Come next week we're going to the stadium carrying our flags and our helmets... Thanks to our Italian friends, every ethnic group can wave its own flag. Now we can come out of hiding and wear our true colors... Now there are two ends of the field. We'll take the north end, of course, and give the south end to the Italians.[68]

Despite this proposed solution, many members of the African American community remained unconvinced that Italian Americans had any right to claim a person of the black race and therefore deemed the sharing of Franco Harris as completely unacceptable. As African Americans challenged what they saw as the unfair claiming of Franco Harris, Italian Americans defended their right to claim the young running back as one of their own. Some went so far as to publicly stake ownership claims to specific body parts. For example, Rocky LoCascio reflected the dominant feeling in the Italian community when, in 1973, he publicly stated that Franco Harris "may be a soul brother, but his legs-his legs are Italian," a statement that scoffed at black athletic ability and therefore further irked the city's African American community.

In an attempt to quell rising racial tensions over the Italian Army, Harris made many attempts at mediation between the two groups, all of which ultimately proved unsuccessful.[69] As the subject of the mounting imbroglio, Harris was also forced by the media to make public statements about his own ethnic and racial identity.[70] The following statement, recorded in 1977 by Harris's biographer, explains the running backs long-standing feelings on his ethnic background.

> I became more conscious of my Italian background when the Italian Army started. I hadn't thought much about being Italian before. Here in this country, unlike some of the South American and European countries, if you have any black blood in you, you're considered black. I basically grew up in a black neighborhood, so my environment was basically black. But in school, I had just as many white friends as I had black friends. It was never a thing where my whole life was totally black or totally white. I've always moved easily among both white and black people.. I do realize that I am half black and half Italian, and that's what I am. I won't disassociate myself from either, but I don't think I should let either ethnic group overwhelm me. Still, in America, if you're not white, you're black. I've always considered myself black.[71]

Although Harris repeatedly expressed that he indeed considered himself to be African American, his identification with the white race, embodied by continued participation in the Italian American fan group, served to alienate the young running back from Pittsburgh's African American community. As the controversy grew, Pittsburgh's African American

newspaper, the Courier, consistently ignored the young running back's prowess on the playing field. Between 1972 and 1977, *Courier* reporters wrote not a single article on Franco Harris, even after he won the highly coveted offensive rookie of the year award in January of 1973.[72] Following the Steelers' first Super bowl victory in 1975, a game in which Harris earned Most Valuable Player honors, the *Courier* went so far as to openly state that the team's offensive linemen, all African American, were more deserving of the prestigious honor.[73]

As a newspaper representative of African American thought in Pittsburgh, the *Courier's* decision to ignore Franco Harris reveals the unease and anger that the rise of Franco's Italian Army caused to the city's black population, To African Americans in Pittsburgh, Harris, as a black man, occupied a high-profile position in their community-a position of potential leadership from which he might serve as a role model to others. By embracing the Italian Army, they argued, Harris was forsaking the city's African American community for the Italian Americans. Overall, then, Pittsburgh's black community considered Harris's position in the controversy an affront and, in retaliation, the *Courier* dismissed the running back as a traitor who catered to the wants and desires of whites.[74] Harris's romantic relationship with a white woman during this period did little to improve the running back's overall reputation in the eyes of the city's African Americans.[75] The racial controversy surrounding Franco Harris and the Italian army continued to grow in the years following. Thus, an institution that some contemporary journalists believed had the potential to bridge a growing rift between Italian Americans and African Americans proved only to be the latest incident in the ongoing racial tensions between these two prominent Pittsburgh ethnic groups.

The ethnic revival spearheaded by Franco's Italian Army continued throughout the mid-1970s with the Army attending both home and away football games, continuing its fundraising endeavors in the off season, and maintaining a loyal following numbering in the thousands. By 1977, however, the army's founding members publicly announced that the fan club had, for a number of reasons, disbanded.[76] Although the founding members officially resigned by the end of that year, some fans tried to keep the Army's spirit alive and flags and banners continued to decorate Three Rivers Stadium throughout the late 1970s. Finally, in 1980, the Pittsburgh Steelers management traded Franco Harris to the Seattle Seahawks, thus finalizing the demise of one of western Pennsylvania's most interesting forms of Italian American ethnic expression.

Although it came as a surprise to both the media and the Steelers fan community at large, the decision to terminate the Italian Army in 1977 was carefully considered by the founding members. According to Tony Stagno and Al Vento, the media, although instrumental in bringing national exposure to the fan group, was also an important factor in the decision to disband. For one, the media created a constant demand for the Army at public events and charitable endeavors, as well as their continuous presence on game days at Three Rivers Stadium. After five years, the time required for their numerous public appearances became too much for many of the most sought-after Italian Army members to handle. Further, the media regularly alluded to the racial controversy surrounding Franco Harris, thus increasing African American anger and frustration at the existence of the Italian Army. While trying to create a fan group that would allow them to express pride in

their immigrant past, Italian Army members felt that the city's African American community was constantly misinterpreting their intentions and the media, because of its coverage, merely exacerbated the problem.[77]

Between 1972 and 1977, then, Italian Americans living in western Pennsylvania invented an ethnic identity consistent with the environment in which they resided. As a city populated by thousands of Italian immigrants and their descendants, historically rooted in sporting tradition, and on the verge of producing a world champion professional football team, Pittsburgh in 1972 maintained the environmental conditions that allowed Italian Americans to channel their ethnic pride through professional football. Further, the decision to express ethnic identity through sports at a time of city-wide football fanaticism made the open embracement of Italian American ethnicity completely acceptable by the dominant society, so much so that other ethnic groups realized that they, too, could safely rely on the Pittsburgh Steelers as a vehicle of ethnic expression.

As demonstrated by the reasons behind its initial formation, Franco's Italian Army was a much different phenomenon from other professional football fan groups such as the Cleveland Browns' Dawg Pounders, the Green Bay Packers' Cheeseheads, and the Washington Redskins' Hogettes. Unlike these mote recent fan groups, largely media creations consisting of people attempting to upstage one another for television airtime, Franco's

Unidentified member of the Army celebrating the Steelers' victory in the AFC title game over the Oakland Raiders, Pittsburgh, December 1974. *Courtesy Pittsburgh* Post-Gazette

Italian Army was a grass-roots ethnic phenomenon in which expression of Italian American heritage and pride, rather than Pittsburgh Steelers gridiron success or attracting media coverage, was constantly at the fore.[78] In fact, the founding members of Franco's Italian Army repeatedly stated that constant media coverage was one of the factors leading to the Army's decline, not an impetus for its initial creation.[79] Symbolically, the simple fact that the red, white, and green colors of the Italian flag, rather than the Steelers' sacred black and gold, adorned Army banners and paraphernalia reinforces the fact that Franco's Italian Army was not at its heart about football, but about providing an outlet for Italian American ethnic expression.

On another level, the manner in which Pittsburgh's Italian Americans actively used professional football to make a public statement of ethnic pride demonstrates how the New Ethnicity movement of the 1970s engendered forms of ethnic expression other than those previously documented. Whereas Italian Americans in other cities nationwide demonstrated their ethnicity during this period by rekindling interest in Old World religious festivals and celebrations, mounting coordinated anti-defamation campaigns, and mobilizing in support of a nationally recognized Columbus Day, the most profound form of ethnic expression for Pittsburgh's people of Italian descent came through sport. Just as settlement location greatly affected the historical development of immigrants themselves, so too did it affect the ways in which later generations expressed their ethnic identity.

Perhaps most importantly, however, the history of Franco's Italian Army and its role in Italian American ethnic expression draws attention to the paradigm of sports and ethnicity and underscores the historical significance of generations of Italian Americans other then the immigrant generation-two subjects still largely neglected by scholars and students of American social history. Only by continuing to produce case studies of the ethnic sporting experience and the lives of second, third, and fourth generation Italian Americans can we hope to rid these fields of glaring research voids that very few, as of yet, have ventured to fill.

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1. For two recent works on sport and ethnicity see Grant Jarvie, ed., *Sport, Racism, and Ethnicity* (New York: Falmer Press, 1991); George Eisen and David Wiggins, eds., *Ethnicity and Sport in North American History and Culture* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994). "Sporting Nationalisms: Identity, Ethnicity, Immigration, and Assimilation," a special issue *of Immigrants and Minorities* edited by Mike Cronin and David Mayall, contains additional scholarly insights into the intersection of sports and ethnicity. See *Immigrants and Minorities* 17 (Mar. 1998).
2. See J. Thomas Jable, "Sport in Philadelphia's African American Community, 1865-1900," in Eisen & Wiggins, *Ethnicity and Sport;* Rob Ruck, *Sandlot Seasons: Sport in Black Pittsburgh* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1987); Joseph M. Bradley, "Sport and the Contestation of Cultural and Ethnic Identities in Scottish Society," *Immigrants and Minorities* 17 (Mar. 1998): 127-50; Daryl Adair, "Conformity, Diversity and Difference in Antipodean Physical Culture: The Indelible Influence of Immigration, Ethnicity and Race During the Formative Years of Organized Sport in Australia, *c.* 1788-1918," *Immigrants and Minorities* 17 (Mar. 1998): 14-48.
3. See, for instance, Gary R. Mormino, "The Playing Fields of St. Louis: Italian Immigrants and Sports, 1925-1941." *Journal of Sport History* 9 (Summer 1982): 5-19; George Eisen, "Sport, Recreation, and Gender: Jewish Immigrant Women in Turn of the Century America, 1880-1920," *Journal of Sport History* 18 (Spring 1991): 103-20; Peter Levine, *Ellis Island to Ebbets Field: Sport and the American Jewish Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Richard Renoff, "Italian Americans and Professional Boxing in Connecticut, 1941-1951," in *Italian Americans and Their Public and Private Life,* ed. Frank J. Cavaioli et al. (New York: American Italian Historical Associa-

tion, 1993); Carmelo Bazzano, "The Italian-American Sporting Experience," in Eisen & Wiggins, *Ethnicity and Sport;* and Gerald R. Gems, "Sport and the Americanization of Ethnic Women in Chicago," in Eisen & Wiggins, *Ethnicity and Sport.* See also "One Hundred Years of 'Muscular Judaism': Sport in Jewish History and Culture," *Journal of Sport History* 26 (Summer 1999) (special issue).

4. Rudolph J. Vecoli, "The Search for an Italian American Identity: Continuity and Change," in *Italian Americans: New Perspectives in Italian Immigration and Ethnicity,* ed. Lydio F. Tomasi (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1985): 110; George E. Pozzetta, "Immigrants and Ethnics: The State of Italian-American Historiography, *Journal of American Ethnic History* 9 (Fall 1989): 84-85; Joseph Velikonja, "The Scholarship of the American Italian Historical Association: Past Achievements and Future Perspectives," in *Italian Ethnics: Their Languages, Literature and Lives,* ed. Dominic Candeloro et al. (New York: American Italian Historical Association, 1990): 118-19.

5. One of the most recent academic discussions of ethnicity posits that ethnicity is continually recreated, or reinvented, over the course of time, and results from an active effort on the part of ethnic groups in determining the ways in which they express their ethnic identity. See Kathleen Neils Conzen et al., "The Invention of Ethnicity: A Perspective from the U.S.A." *Journal of American Ethnic History* 12 (Fall 1992): 3-41. For specific works on Italian American ethnicity see Rudolph J. Vecoli, "European Americans: From Immigrant to Ethnics," *International Migration Review* 6 (Winter 1972): 403-34; Carmela Sansone-Pacelli, "Ethnic Identification in Third Generation Italian Americans," in *Italians and Irish in America,* ed. Francis X. Femminella (New York: American Italian Historical Association, 1985); Jerome Krase, "Some Sort of Americans: The Working and Reworking of Italian American Ethnicity in the United States," in *Italian Americans in a Multicultural Society,* ed. Jerome Krase and Judith N. DeSena (New York: Forum Italicum, 1994).

6. Don Kowet, *Franco Harris* (New York: Coward, McCann, & Geoghegan, 1977), 19-40. For further biographical information on Franco Harris see Stephen Hall, "The Reluctant Superstar," *Attenzione,* 2 (Nov. 1980): 51-55.

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8. Kowet, *Franco Harris,* 16.

9. Ibid., 29-30.

10. Nicholas P. Ciotola, "The Italian Immigrant Experience in Western Pennsylvania," in *Boundless Lives: Italian American of Western Pennsylvania,* ed. Mary Brignano (Pittsburgh: Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, 1999), xxi.

11. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: Population, 1930,* vol. 3, pt. 2 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1933), 703. The counties surrounding Allegheny in 1930 were Washington, Westmoreland, Beaver, Butler, and Armstrong.

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15. Catherine Cerrone, "An Aura of Toughness, Too: Italian Immigration to Pittsburgh and Vicinity," *Pennsylvania Folklife* 45 (Autumn 1995): 39-41.
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19. John Bodnar, Roger Simon, and Michael P. Weber, *Lives of Their Own: Blacks, Italians, and Poles in Pittsburgh 1900-1960* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 216. The decline of East Liberty's Italian population is also discussed at length in Colin De'Ath, "Patterns of Participation and Exclusion: A Poor Italian and Black Urban Community and Its Response to a Federal Poverty Program" (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1970), 49-56.
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30. Al Vento, Sr., interview with author, 25 Jan. 1999; *Pittsburgh Press,* 9 Mar. 1977.
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50. *Pittsburgh Post Gazette,* 25 Jan. 1973; and *Pittsburgh Press,* 30 Dec. 1974.
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63. *Pittsburgh Post Gazette,* 25 Dec. 1972.
64. *New York Times,* 4 Dec. 1972; Reid, "Black and Gold Soul with Italian Legs," 37.
65. *Pittsburgh Post Gazette,* 23 Dec. 1972.
66. *Parkersburg Sentinel,* 30 Nov. 1972.
67. *Pittsburgh Press,* 5 Dec. 1972.
68. A transcript of this debate appeared in a *Pittsburgh Post Gazette* letter to the editor several days after the meeting adjourned. See *Pittsburgh Post Gazette Daily Magazine,* 30 Dec. 1972.
69. Ibid.
70. Hall, "The Reluctant Superstar," 53-54.
71. Kowet, *Franco Harris,* 77-78.
72. During this period, a substantial number of articles appeared in the *Pittsburgh Courier* dealing with other African American players, especially third string quarterback Joe Gilliam and the Steelers offensive linemen known as the "Steel Curtain." See, for example, *Pittsburgh Courier,* 23 Dec. 1972, Sep. 28, 1974, Oct. 5, 1974, Nov. 9, 1974, Dec. 14, 1974, and Dec. 28, 1974.
73. *Pittsburgh Courier,* 25 Jan. 1975.
74. Wes Johnson, interview with author, 10 Mar. 2000; Morris Carlton, interview with author, 16 Mar. 2000. In order to honor requests for anonymity, pseudonyms have been used to identify interviewees from Pittsburgh's African American community. African American perceptions of people of biracial ancestry is discussed at length in Lise Funderburg, *Black, White, Other: Biracial Americans Talk about Race and Identity* (New York: William Morrow, 1994).
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