



NUNN BETTER

Conversations with an NFL scout

by *Ivan Cole*

History can be a fragile, fleeting thing. Even in sports where statistics and records are kept by the acre, detail and context can be easily lost over time, and with it a full appreciation of what our games were as well as what they have grown to become.

Steeler Nation is fortunate in this regard. The longevity and stability that has played such an important part in the team's success for over four decades has also served to preserve a degree of institutional memory. This was my main motivation for wanting to talk to Bill Nunn, longtime Steeler scout and talent evaluator.

The fact that he is one of the longest tenured individuals in the Steelers organization not named Rooney is reason enough.

But, there's more.

Nunn joined the Steelers at a crucial time in both the development of the franchise and the transition of the NFL into the modern era. There is nothing ambiguous about the paths the team travelled before and after this critical juncture. From the beginning of the NFL in the 1930s through the 1960s the Steelers were a symbol of competitive futility and failure. Since then, they have been viewed as the very model of what a successful sports franchise can be, both on and off the field of competition.

Nunn would probably be the first to dispute that he played any significant role in this transformation. In large part that's because he'd insist that what happened during that period was more nuanced, more involved, and more complex than the presence or actions of any one individual.

It was precisely this set of issues that I wanted to explore. Something had happened during the late 1960s that set the course for the Steelers franchise for almost 50 years. What was it? What was Bill Nunn's role in it? Why has it endured? And, in a culture that tends to be both risk adverse and deficient in imagination, why didn't more of the 31 other clubs

simply copy the Steelers formula and claim it for their own? Was this just about the inclusion of African-Americans in the NFL or was something even more foundational going on?

I wasn't certain that our conversation would happen at all. My attempts to make contact with Nunn were initially dead ends. Even if I were to succeed in reaching him, why would he bother to sit for an interview? Neither I nor my publication carried any particular weight that he needed to respect.

I wasn't frustrated by any of this and even congratulated myself for having the foresight to have chosen an alternative subject, just in case. Then, remembering the line from the movie *2010*, something wonderful happened. On a Wednesday morning I received a phone call from a number with a 412 area code. Before there was time for the meaning of this to register, a woman announced that Art Rooney Jr. was calling.

Really.

Now I have met more than my share of big-time politicians, entertainers, athletes, business people, educators, and media personalities—a lot of folk who most would concede to be important or merely famous. But speaking as an ordinary citizen of Steeler Nation this was... unexpected. Rooney was more than generous with his time and in providing Nunn's information, as well as background on his own long relationship with Nunn.



Bill Nunn found Hall of Fame talent at unknown schools throughout the South.

About 10 days later I meet Nunn at his home in the Schenley Heights area of the Hill District. I was older than he expected. He quizzed me on a variety of topics, and for the most part I believe I passed.

You can draw connections and parallels between the Rooney and the Nunn families. Art Rooney Sr. (the Chief) was, among other things, a national Golden Gloves boxing champion who had qualified to represent the United States in the Olympic games. Bill Nunn's father, Bill Sr., was the first African-American to play football at Westinghouse High School and likely played for the Homestead Greys of the Negro Leagues. He also served as editor of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the premier black newspaper in the country. Art Rooney Jr. told me that the Chief was a fan of the elder Nunn's writing.

Dan Rooney would have an athletic impact in high school being named the second-best quarterback in the Catholic League at time (behind Johnny Unitas). Bill Nunn played basketball at Westinghouse and in college at West Virginia State. He turned down an opportunity to play professionally with the Harlem Globetrotters. Both men followed in their father's footsteps: Dan with the Steelers; Bill Jr. started eventually became editor of the *Courier*.

Art Jr. reported that life as editor of the *Courier* could be pretty glamorous, as it was not unusual for Nunn to be traveling around town with the likes of a Hank Aaron or Ella Fitzgerald. As for the third generation, Art II is now making his name as chairman of the Steelers, while Nunn's son (Bill III) may have the highest profile of all. An actor with over 40 films and television shows to his credit—including Radio Raheem in Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing* and parts in all three of the *Spider Man* movies. Bill III was also in Art II's wedding party.

The formal connection commenced in 1966 with Dan Rooney and Bill Nunn. But I'm getting ahead of a story better told by Nunn himself.

Ivan Cole: You played basketball in high school, and played well enough to earn a college scholarship. You attended West Virginia State, but you didn't want to go initially.

Bill Nunn: No. Coming out [of high school] the war was on and Duquesne didn't have a basketball team because of the war. Pitt didn't offer a scholarship. A tryout was arranged so I could go to Long Island University, but I stayed out a year because my father had a change of mind: "You need to go to a black school for a couple of years. You don't know anything about your own people." I said I wasn't going to a black school. He said, "Fine. Where are you going to live?"

[Laughing] I wasn't quite ready for that. He said, "Good. Go out and get a job and start paying to live here." I called

out to Westinghouse in Wilberding and I got a job there. I kept it for one day. I was in this steel mill. They would give me these shoes—I quit that job. Then my uncle got me a job with Union Switch and Signal in Swissvale. I was working 10 hours a day, five days a week because the war was on. And eight hours on Saturday. Seventy-two cents an hour...

I had received offers of scholarships from various black schools. Wendall Smith and Bill Robinson talked me into going to West Virginia State. Smith was the sports editor of the *Courier*. I don't know what you know about Wendall.

IC: Wendall Smith was leading the movement to integrate major league baseball.

BN: No. The *Courier* was pushing for integration. See, that's another misnomer. The *Courier* was pushing that. My father, they were all into that. But Wendall was the sports editor at the time. Wendall was the one that went to the training camp and traveled with them. [Brooklyn Dodgers, GM Branch] put him on the payroll so that Jackie [Robinson] could have someone to relate to.

That was Montreal, before he got to the majors. And really, he wasn't the best player in black baseball. He was the one selected because he played big-time college ball. He was a great college athlete at UCLA. He was fantastic. He had played baseball in college. Football, basketball. He played it all. He was the ideal guy for the challenge. Jackie was phenomenal. Now he had a temper, but he had to curtail all of that. And then they were dealing with the South. [The *Courier*] had all the contacts in the South. Black homes and stuff like that. The *Courier*, being a national paper, we knew the best people in those towns. At one time our biggest influence was in Florida—we had circulation in Florida of over 40,000.

IC: That's a little counterintuitive about the *Courier* being so influential. You would think the most powerful black paper in the United States would be one that was headquartered out of Chicago or New York or Washington where you had larger black populations, a larger infrastructure...

BN: You would almost think that right? But that was because of [publisher/editor Robert Lee] Vann, my father, Al Lewis, and people like that. But you got to remember, we had branch offices. We had a branch office in New York City, we had one in Chicago, a West Coast division. Detroit was one of our big editions. Washington DC. If Vann hadn't died he probably would have been ahead of them all. The main thing about the *Courier* was they had the newspaper. What would have been next? It would have been radio. They had the foresight to have seen this. There was a time when WAMO [a Pittsburgh



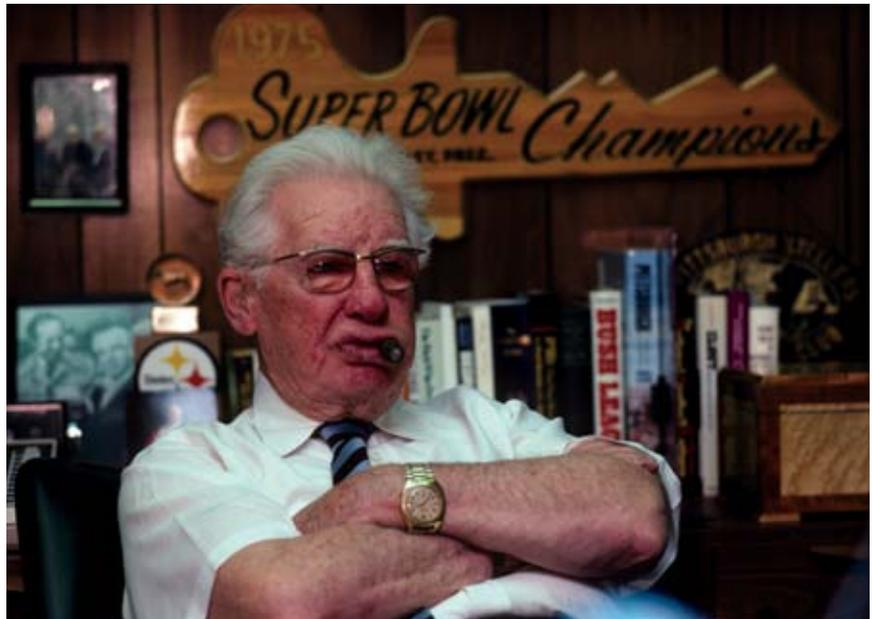
The soft-spoken Tony Dungy got his first big break courtesy of the Steelers and Chuck Noll.

radio station that served the black community] could have been bought for \$50,000. But that was a time when people didn't have the imagination. Those things happen to businesses both black and white. The originators interface and then someone else comes in and buys it.



It's about this time that I notice that Nunn is wearing a Super Bowl ring—most likely Super Bowl IX based on the design. A single diamond on a black background. It is also about this time that I realize why he has shown some reluctance in the interview. It would be impossible to understand what was accomplished in the identification and promotion of black athletes in the major sports without at least a rudimentary understanding of the role of the *Pittsburgh Courier*. African-American newspapers not only filled the necessary gaps that were created by the indifference or hostility of the white press, they served as an arm of the Civil Rights movement, advocating against the epidemic of lynchings earlier in the 20th century and for integration in general and the integration of sports in particular. The *Courier* was not just any newspaper, or any black newspaper. It was, like *The New York Times*, the paper of record for the black community nationally. At its peak it had a circulation of 250,000, with over 400 employees in 14 different cities.

I had been wrong in assuming that Wendall Smith was some sort of lone ranger when it came to the integration of baseball. More precisely he was the tip of a long, sophisticated advocacy effort that climaxed with the hiring of Jackie Robinson by the Brooklyn Dodgers. It would also be a mistake to confer a similar status to Bill Nunn. Imagine speaking of the accomplishments of Dan Rooney but there being no mention or acknowledgement of his father. As significant as the talents of Dan Rooney and Bill Nunn are, each was standing on the shoulders of giants. And there would be at least one other significant contributor to making the magic of the Steelers work.



Race was never an issue for The Chief.

IC: Nearly everything I've read about you as a scout describes you as an innovator.

BN: Because a lot of times they don't relate to what was really going on. How I started was we [with Dan Rooney] had a conversation when he was just getting started. He wanted to know why I hadn't gotten involved with the Steelers. I was covering black schools and doing a black All-American team. I was covering a black team every week. He asked if while I was out there I could pass some information on to him. I was a part time employee for the Steelers.

That started in '66 with the part time. I didn't go full time until '70. So, it was almost that Bill Nunn was the black college scout. But from the time Chuck Noll came in, Noll said, "No, we don't want you just covering black colleges."

Now again, there were so many black schools that had ballplayers at that time, because you've got to remember what was happening down in the South. So I was covering that, but I was also going to white schools like Alabama and places like that. And me being one of the few blacks in the position, they felt like I was able to make some inroads, though I had already established that. But, of course, it helped when I went to big schools such as Alabama because they were beginning to use the black players.

IC: I believe Bear Bryant once said that he wouldn't be the first SEC coach to integrate, but he wouldn't be the third either.

BN: I got there at the right time. I worked under Noll. I'm not sure if the organization hired me or if Noll hired me. I'm not sure Noll could have fired me. But one thing when you

work under someone like Chuck Noll, things like [skin color] are not a problem. I don't say that about a lot of people.

You have to pass a whole lot of tests. Guys who give you a lot of lip service, but when you get down deep, a lot of people aren't really that way. There's Dan Rooney and there's Chuck Noll. And I think it was just a carryover of fact. The Chief was still there. Dan was just taking over. I won't even talk about the Chief's background. I know the Chief's background. You know the black Steeler from years ago? From '36?

IC: [Another quiz] Yeah.

BN: Who was he?

IC: [Ray] Kemp.



Ray Kemp played for the Steelers in 1933. The following year, though, the NFL followed Major League Baseball and banned all black participation in the sport; a practice that would continue until after World War II. Nunn went on and listed several other firsts that Art Rooney facilitated: the first black trainer and assistant coach.

The conversation shifts a bit. I'm interested in his thoughts of how African Americans have been progressing in the coaching ranks. But the responses go in some interesting directions

IC: I'm looking at what the Steelers have been able to do over the past 42 years. After all Tony Dungy was originally part of

the Chuck Noll coaching tree. Tomlin was part of the Dungy tree, meaning we've come full circle.

BN: And who hired Tomlin? Dungy. The tree is really interesting. [But] Nepotism is becoming a great part of this now. With the salaries, they're trying to get their kids into it.

IC: I've wondered why it took so long for Dungy to get a head coaching position.

BN: Many things: Did not cuss, soft spoken. You might not have hired him. In other words, are you going to have enough fire to get in people's butt. Are you gonna say, "Look, goddammit!"

He made it despite that. Now you have to remember, it was here, Noll made him defensive coordinator. Youngest ever. Now with the worst staff of guys under him, including Joe Greene [smiles at his little dig at Greene]... Joe's a friend of mine. And you have one coach who is... [Makes a stabbing gesture].

IC: He's stabbing him in the back?

BN: Yeah. So they didn't fire him. But they took his job away. They had him coaching defensive backs, so he had to leave. Where did he go?

IC: Kansas City?

BN: Kansas City. Under who? Marty Schottenheimer. Okay. What happens in Kansas City? Who ends up with the defensive coordinator job here?

IC: Bill Cowher.

BN: Dungy is under Cowher. Marty didn't give him the coordinator job, so Dungy left for Minnesota to work under [Dennis] Green. You know. These things happen. And it's not always about race. I've known two guys who had the kind of temperament that Tony has. Both were in basketball. One was John McClendon at North Carolina Central. The other was in the NBA. Always calm.

IC: Lenny Wilkens?

BN: Yeah. Same kind of temperament. And people were saying, doggone he doesn't get into anyone's face.

IC: Last year I interviewed Randy Grossman. I always thought he was the best college receiver I'd ever seen. And

then I thought that it was too bad that he physically came nowhere near the criteria the NFL establishes for tight ends...

BN: He was too slow

IC: Short, slow, that's a bad combination.

BN: He was quick though. Short quickness.

IC: He said he was fortunate to land with the Steelers, and credited Noll. I'm sure you also had a hand in giving him the opportunity to show what he could do at this level. The Steelers seem to be willing to look beyond certain so-called negatives when evaluating players. For example, it has been said that James Harrison was too short, or that Hines Ward is less than an ideal prototype for a wide out.

BN: Let me break down Randy since we've already done that a little bit. First of all, Chuck Noll as a player, where would you draft him?

IC: Way down. He was a messenger guard for Paul Brown. He was undersized.

BN: Somewhere around the 15th round right?



Jack Butler (pictured) and Nunn were in charge of the Steelers' BLESTO scouting operations.

IC: Well, we don't have 15 rounds anymore, but if we did... Basically a free agent.

BN: Right. Smart. Okay, one doggone thing about Chuck Noll. He will root for the underdog because he was an underdog. So, he's going to look at the good things that someone brings to the table. Someone else might just see the bad things. What does Grossman do good? What did you say? Some of the best hands you ever saw. Now. Who was Randy Grossman coached by?

IC: [Drawing a blank] His position coach?

BN: The only black position coach on the staff.

IC: Oh. Lionel Taylor.

BN: Who was he? A slow wide receiver who had great hands. He played for Denver. He played for West Virginia State. He's from West Virginia. I always tell him that they ran him off from that campus. And then he went to New Mexico. Tough, smart, great hands. Bigger than Randy as a wide receiver.

Hey, we got rid of the tight end we drafted in the second round the same year we signed Randy. No other place would Randy have made it, no shape, no form. And Randy's a helluva guy. He's smart. He was quick. He could separate. He's not going to make any mental mistakes. And there are people who make it that way, including Noll.



The conversation morphs into something else. I had hoped to get a more detailed comparison of the three Steelers head coaches: Noll, Cowher, and Tomlin. But as Nunn points out, though he is still around and doing work for the organization, he officially retired in 1987. So while he has great things to say about Cowher and Tomlin, it becomes clear that his relationship and sense of connection with Chuck Noll is of an entirely different order.

And it is hard to avoid feeling that we are witnesses and perhaps unwitting accomplices to a cosmic injustice: Chuck Noll, the greatest head coach in the modern era of the game—based on the bottom line, winning championships, nobody has more than Noll since the merger—living in Florida with a bad back and consigned to being an afterthought to the Walshs, Belichick, and Parcells of the world. Increasingly, I feel that the memory and significance of Noll is fading from within the collective consciousness of Steeler Nation itself. He succeeded, perhaps too well, at deflecting the accolades.

BN: As a coach, Chuck was never a guy that demanded much, like commercials. He'd say, "Give it to the players." He had so many things that he liked to do beyond coaching: roses, weight program, films. He [implemented] a whole lot of things he was actually interested in. He had a whole lot of interests and was really a well rounded guy.



Nunn has more to say about coaching, not all of it kind. He speaks to the promotion of coaches and coaching to the detriment of natural athleticism.

BN: If you're always thinking, and you're a natural athlete, then something isn't right. Now if you're smart and you know what's going on, you can make it look like you're reacting on instinct. Is that instinct? Now another guy, if he has to think he cannot react with his natural skills. So now you have two different types of people.

Now who's coaching them? See, coaches are making so much money. So, now they're like, "Hey, I'm making all this money I've got to be doing something." They've got these huge playbooks. What do you need all that stuff for? They've got something for every kind of scheme.... If I were playing I would have been lost.

IC: That's why lawyers have their particular jargon...

BN: And doctors are sending you to other doctors. And they mess up. Like doctors mess up, but you can't prove that they messed up.

And as a result, who's coaching football today? Name a really great football player who is coaching in the NFL today. I say this because a couple of weeks ago this kid runs this computer program and gives me a list of all 32 head coaches in the National Football League. Only two or three have ever played football in the league.



I had been there a long time; Nunn wondered whether I had gotten what I wanted in terms of information. I assured him that I had, and that I also got a few things I hadn't asked for—always a pleasant bit of good fortune. I was still feeling somewhat uncertain, not with the answers, but with the questions.

What I believe happened during Nunn's time is that a unique group came together at just the right time to create a perfect storm. The issues, timing, and qualities brought to bear were not replicable. The results have helped catapult the Steelers from a local joke (Rooney U, Same Old Steelers)

to an international model for greatness (usually defined as sustained excellence). Along the way the Steelers helped the NFL reach the zenith of popularity; helped transform attitudes and assumptions about race, gender, and class; facilitated the creation of a community (Steeler Nation) that strengthens and affirms its cultural and geographic roots while simultaneously transcending them; and engender loyalty and gratitude so consistent among present and past employees that one is left to wonder whether the team is some version of the Stepford Wives.

The members of that group all affected this progress in different ways.

The Pittsburgh Courier

During my freshman year in college I returned to Pittsburgh on a September weekend to attend something known as the Renaissance Classic at Three Rivers Stadium. The game featured Grambling and Morgan State University.

In those days Grambling's football team was only slightly less popular than its marching band, and they would travel from Yankee Stadium to Tokyo playing in front of huge crowds. This barnstorming approach provided high-profile exposure for the players and lots of money for the schools. Just another example—like the *Courier*—of the counterculture that existed in response to institutions dead set on exclusion.

As stated earlier, the *Courier* was not just any newspaper. It was the flagship of the black press. Its support of integration in sports was not something a sports columnist cooked up one day, it was the editorial policy of the institution, leveraging its influence and resources to make that happen no matter what it took. The paper had a track record of success with Major League Baseball earlier. The Rooneys weren't creating a resource, but taping into a very sophisticated system that already existed.

And the *Courier* was unique to Pittsburgh. No other media outlets, black or white, had the infrastructure in the Jim Crow South to provide a competitor with similar advantages. The poignant irony in all this is that the success of this effort, rather than strengthening its hand, probably hastened the *Courier's* demise. Although there may have been alternative scenarios that led to survival—even an increase in acceptance and influence—as more institutions began to desegregate, black institutions like the *Courier*, and before it the Negro League baseball teams, either died or exist in sad irrelevance. Today it is known as the *New Pittsburgh Courier*.

The Rooneys

You may have heard the story of when NFL Films came up with the concept of America's Team. They first approached Art Rooney since it seemed to most aptly describe the then



Nunn and Art Rooney Jr. had a close working relationship

dominant Steelers of the 1970s. The Chief reportedly firmly declined saying that the Steelers would be satisfied with being Pittsburgh's team. Unfortunately this is why we have to put up with a Cowboy Nation that doesn't realize that the title they ceaselessly brag about is only theirs because the first choice turned it down.

In a similar vein, Chuck Noll was asked during the '70s about the slogan of the Oakland Raiders, "Pride and Poise." Noll's response was that the Steelers had those qualities, "We just don't put them on our stationary." The Steelers then, and now, function on a principle that is all too rare in American life: Their beliefs and values are reflected in their actions alone.

The Steelers were on the cutting edge of scouting (the development of the BLESTO scouting combine, for example) and inclusion long before Dan Rooney and Bill Nunn began their collaboration. However, sometimes timing is everything. The passage of federal Civil Rights legislation and serious competition from the upstart American Football League changed the landscape radically. At the same time, the Steelers were undergoing internal changes as a second generation of Rooneys commenced making their mark on the organization and the NFL.

Chuck Noll

The best laid plans can be shot to Hell by an obtuse head coach. This had happened before with the Steelers. Remember, the Steelers are the franchise that will live in infamy for cutting Johnny Unitas. The Chief often had to bear the consequences of boneheaded decisions by his coaches,



Nunn had the ear of Chuck Noll throughout the head coach's career.

of whom he was too respectful of to overrule. For his part, Noll famously informed his first team that they lacked the talent to carry the franchise where it needed to go.

Something of an unknown when he was hired in 1969, very similar to Tomlin, Noll had fewer options for building a team. There was no free agency, so he had to lean more heavily on the draft, which meant that he leaned more heavily on the scouts: Art Rooney Jr., Dick Haley, and Nunn.

The 1970s Steelers is the monument to the success of their efforts. Only two players who had been a part of the franchise prior to Noll's arrival (Andy Russell and Ray Mansfield) played any significant role in the Steelers' championship success. The draft classes were one breathtaking coup after another, climaxing in the famous class of 1974 that produced four Hall of Famers (Grossman was a free agent signee that year). John Stallworth and free agent Donnie Shell represented the type of player most often associated with Nunn from small, mostly Southern schools. However, Lynn Swann (USC) and Mike Webster (Wisconsin) were about as mainstream as you could get, while Jack Lambert was a bit out of the box in another sense. One unique feature of those '70s teams is that they were completely home grown: No one played for any organization other than Pittsburgh.

There is a certain Catch-22 here. One of the things that obscures superior leadership is the presence of great talent. For example, some have argued that one reason that Ben Roethlisberger is consistently underrated is that he is considered to be the fortunate beneficiary of a highly talented supporting cast. The same probably can be said about Tomlin. In a similar vein, Noll's teams were viewed as being

so overwhelmingly talented that presumably only a bare minimum of coaching was necessary.

What is forgotten is how much intelligence and skill is involved in recognizing quality talent and placing it in the position to be successful. One example was Noll's decision not to put Bill Nunn in a box titled "Black Scout." After all isn't that the purpose of the exercise? Is it not the intent to liberate talent from the boxes in which it is imprisoned and allow it to show where it can do the most good?

Nunn described his function as equivalent to an assistant director of personnel. This included extensive scouting all over the country. Art Jr. commented on how helpful Nunn was on cueing him in on the nuances of local etiquette in the South. Since nothing like the NFL Combine in Indianapolis existed then, he also worked closely with coaches in arranging player evaluation sessions around the country. In addition, he was responsible for running training camp, and he played an integral role on draft days in recommending who to draft and when. One thing that could not be captured just by words is how fully meaningful it seemed for Nunn that Noll saw him outside the box. And that might be all anyone really needs to know to understand the greatness of that 1970s crew.

Bill Nunn

And then there is the last piece, Bill Nunn himself. One of the things that stand out as common among the Rooneys, Noll, and Nunn is the genuine sense of personal modesty. Nunn indicated during our conversation that any number of people had encouraged him to write a memoir of some sort, but he failed to see the point of such an exercise. It was if he convinced himself that there was nothing he could say that would possibly have any long-term resonance. He makes a persuasive argument: He spoke of books that he had sitting in his house that were gathering dust and presumably serving little other purpose.

But in the final analysis I am not convinced. At the beginning of our conversation we both expressed regret that we had so many questions for our now deceased fathers that would be forever unanswered. I suggested that he might be forever known as Radio Raheem's dad. He said he was okay with that. But I don't know if that would be alright with Radio Raheem. I think Nunn would be quite surprised by how many people would be more than a little interested in what he had to say.

And, being a newspaperman, he would undoubtedly say it well. **MSP**

Ivan Cole is a Pittsburgh native who now resides in Reston, VA. A lifelong Steelers fan and a regular contributor to *Behind The Steel Curtain* from behind enemy lines in Redskins Country he can be found on Steelers gamedays frequenting any of several sports bars in Northern Virginia or Washington DC.