

The National Italian American Foundation Honorees

FRANCO HARRIS

NIAF Special Achievement Award in Sports

Franco Harris' professional football career began when the Pittsburgh Steelers selected the 6-foot-2-inch 230-pounder from Penn State in the first round of the 1972 National Football League Draft—the 13th player chosen. For 12 seasons, Harris proved to be one of the NFL's top big-yardage running backs, and a key to the Steeler's powerful offensive machine.

In his first NFL season, the future superstar became only the fourth rookie in NFL history to rush for 1,000 yards or more (1,055 yards). He averaged 5.6 yards per carry; rushed for 10 touchdowns and caught three touchdown passes. But what most fans remember even more than his stats was his roof-raising catch in the famous "Immaculate Reception" pass from quarterback Terry Bradshaw that gave the Steelers a 13-7 over the Oakland Raiders and Pittsburgh its first-ever playoff victory. Harris was named the league's Rookie of the Year by both The Sporting News and United Press International.

Over 13 seasons in the NFL, the last spent with the Seattle Seahawks in 1984, the prolific running back rushed 2,949 times for 12,120 yards and scored 91 touchdowns. He rushed for 1,000 yards or more eight seasons and totaled 47 100-yards-or-more games. He also caught 307 passes for 2,287 yards and nine touchdowns. At the time of his retirement, his career totals in rushing and combined net yardage of 14,622 ranked third highest in professional football history.

Harris earned All-AFC honors in 1972, 1975, 1976 and 1977; and All-Pro six times. He was named to nine Pro Bowls; and played in five AFC championships and four Super Bowls. In Super Bowl IX, when the Steelers won their first-ever league title beat the Minnesota Vikings 16-6, Harris rushed for 158 yards and was named the game's Most Valuable Player.

During his Steelers years, Pittsburgh's fans and especially its large fan base of Italian Americans, adored him. His most loyal fans dubbed themselves "Franco's Italian Army" and wore army helmets with his number on them. Even Frank Sinatra joined Franco's Italian Army.

So it was no surprised when Steelers fans flocked to Canton, Ohio, in the summer of 1990 to pay tribute to Harris when he was enshrined into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. As Harris himself once said, "A player should not be measured by statistics alone. He should be measured by something more special, such as the sharing of teammates and fans. Both the city of Pittsburgh and the Steeler team were building at the same time. It was a good feeling to be a part of it."

Born in Fort Dix, N.J., on March 7, 1950, Harris graduated from Penn State in hotel and hospitality and food. After retiring from the NFL, with Penn State teammate and NFL great Lydell Mitchell, he founded Super Bakery to produce nutrition-oriented foods for schools, hospitals and other food-service customers. Best known for marketing a nutritious Super Donut, in 2006 Harris launched RSuper Foods to distribute the Super Donut and other products across the country.