

FIVE THE HARD WAY

Last Sunday the Pittsburgh Steelers became the third franchise in the NFL with five Lombardi Trophies and the first ever sixth seed to win the Super Bowl. Being the sixth seed meant there would be no home playoff games for the Steelers, so they became the first team to win 10 road games, including the Super Bowl, in a single season. And while the final game might not have been “pretty,” it looked gorgeous to die-hard Steelers fans across the nation who would agree that it was a victory that was a long time coming. Regardless of the manner in which it was won, Super Bowl XL provided a stamp of validity to some who, having been regarded as *good*, can now justifiably be deemed *great*.

Ben Roethlisberger has accomplished much and has set remarkable records in his young career, but the sum of all his accomplishments without this one victory would have added up to same emptiness and longing that have haunted the great Dan Marino since his Dolphins lost to the 49ers in Super Bowl XIX. Big Ben didn't play anywhere near his best football in the Super Bowl, but that doesn't change the fact that he'll go down in history as the youngest quarterback ever to pilot his team to a Super Bowl victory.

When considering Ben's performance in *the* Big Game, however, it's important to remember that even the strongest of veterans are affected by nerves on the nation's largest sporting stage. Wide receiver Hines Ward was named MVP of the Super Bowl, but even he admitted that his performance early in the game – he dropped a pass in the end zone – was hampered by his shaky nerves. To their credit, however, both Ben and Hines were able to overcome those jitters to complete one of the game's most crucial drives.

It was the second quarter. Seattle led 3-0 and appeared to be solidly in control of the game, having just intercepted an under-thrown Ben Roethlisberger pass. The Pittsburgh defense forced a three-and-out that gave the offense good field position, and with 8:15 left in the first half the Steelers went to work from their own 41 yard line. Willie Parker ran twice, but the ball moved just four yards. Big Ben looked to pass for the first down on 3rd and 6, but the Seattle pressure got to him. Quick on his feet, he scrambled and scooped a shovel pass to Hines Ward who advanced the ball 12 yards for a first down. Another Parker run gained just a yard, but Ben backed it up with a 20 yard strike to Cedric Wilson.

The Steelers were now at the Seattle 22 yard line and seemed sure to score at least a field goal, but an incomplete pass, an offensive pass interference penalty and a sack for a loss of eight yards left them with a daunting 3rd down and 28 yards to go. The talented Seattle defense dropped into coverage to prevent the long play and was still able to apply enough pressure to flush Ben from the pocket. He scrambled to the left, beat one lineman and appeared to have room to run, but he recognized that if he ran he'd come up short of the first down. Ever mindful of the line of scrimmage, he side-stepped toward the sideline as he surveyed the field for a receiver. When he picked out Hines Ward he calmly stopped, turned his body back to the right, set his feet and launched the ball toward the end zone. Ward saw that the pass was under-thrown and successfully out-jumped the Seattle secondary for a completion at the 3 yard line.

Ben scored the touchdown three plays later on a designed quarterback run that Seahawks fans will always claim should have been overturned by the referee after he reviewed the replay, but the call stood then and will stand forever. And those of us who saw the game will always remember how two *great* players made two *great* plays on crucial third downs in order to give the Steelers a 7-3 half-time advantage that their over-all offensive performance had not merited.

The first half ended with a bang when Seattle kicker Josh Brown missed a 54 yard field goal, but a much bigger bang was heard when “Fast” Willie Parker took Pittsburgh's second play from scrimmage 75 yards for a touchdown. The run was set up by superb blocking and ended with millions of people across the country turning to each other and saying, “Wow! He really *is* fast!” Parker's dash replaced Marcus Allen's 74 yard scamper in Super Bowl XVIII as the longest run from scrimmage in Super Bowl history.

More importantly, the touchdown gave the Steelers a 14-3 lead in the third quarter, and every coach in the NFL knows that the Steelers are nearly impossible to beat when they have more than a touchdown lead in the second half. After Josh Brown missed another field goal it seemed the Steelers would run away with the trophy, but Big Ben's nerves crept up on him again. On 3rd and 6 from the Seattle 7 yard line, Ben had Cedric Wilson open in the right side of the end zone but once again under-threw the pass. Kelly Herndon added his name to the list of record-setters with a 76 yard interception return to the Pittsburgh 20 yard line, and three plays later Matt Hasselbeck threw his only touchdown pass of the game to tight end Jerame Stevens. Suddenly the game was close again, and the Seahawks had momentum.

Both defenses tightened their games, forced three-and-outs, and the third quarter went into the books. But the final quarter found the Seahawks in the middle of a drive when everything started to click. League MVP Shaun Alexander found his blockers more effective and began picking up big chunks of yardage. He ran for five times for 5, 5, 6, 5 and 7 yards, and coach Mike Holmgren began to salivate. I still almost hear his thoughts out loud, "Shaun's running so well that they've got to honor him. It's setting up our short passing game beautifully. We're on their 19 yard line. There's the pass to Stevens to the 1 yard line! *We're going to regain the lead in the fourth quarter of the Super Bowl!*"

Wait. Hold your breath. There's a yellow flag down. Holding on the offense. It was a marginal call, but at that stage of a game with this magnitude *every* call is marginal to *someone*. The facts are these: The Seahawks still had the ball and a first down at Pittsburgh's 29 yard line. There were still over 12 minutes left in the game, and the Seahawks were only four points down. Therefore, they have only themselves to blame – and not the officials – for what ensued. Hasselbeck was sacked for a 5 yard loss and two plays later he threw the game's most ill-advised pass, one that league officials very generously describe as being "intended for Darrell Jackson." Pittsburgh's Ike Taylor secured the interception and returned it to the 29 yard line. After a questionable penalty on Hasselbeck for a tackle that was so poorly executed it was interpreted as an illegal block by the officials, the Steelers had the ball at their own 44 yard line.

They needed just three plays, including Ben's five yard scramble on 3rd and 2, to cross the 50 yard line, and on 1st and 10 from the Seattle 43 the Steelers went for the win. It was just one play, but five players touched the ball and Hines Ward ended up prancing into the end zone on the cover of Sports Illustrated. It's the play that sealed victory for the Steelers, and it was executed to perfection.

Jeff Hartings snapped the ball to Ben Roethlisberger. Ben pitched it to Willie Parker. Willie handed it to Antwaan Randle El who was running a reverse, and Antwaan – on the run – launched a perfect pass that spiraled on a glorious arc toward the end zone. Ward was running at full speed, but the pass was so well thrown that he didn't have to alter his pace at all. Randle El threw such a gorgeous pass that it was probably tempting to name him the most valuable player, but in Super Bowl XL there was one player who was always in the right place at the right time and made the big plays when they need to be made, and that player was Hines Ward. He caught Randle El's pass with nonchalance reminiscent of a Thanksgiving Day pick-up game and in the end zone he erupted with the joy of the child who stood next to him on stage when he received his richly deserved MVP award.

Parker and Randle El may never be widely regarded as *greats*, but their place in Pittsburgh Steelers lore is secure. Roethlisberger and Ward, however, are newly crowned *greats* in Pittsburgh, joining Jerome "The Bus" Bettis, whose last game was fittingly his first Super Bowl victory.

With so much excitement and drama surrounding the offense, however, let's not forget about the defensive stand-outs who executed Bill Cowher's trademark game plan to perfection and held the league's most prolific offense to its lowest output of the season.

Taylor, Haggans, Townsend, Farrior, Foote, Hampton, Polamalu, Keisel, Porter, Smith, Carter, Harrison, McFadden, von Oelhoffen, Colclough, Hoke, Hope, Iwuoma and Kriewaldt.

From a 7-5 record on December 10th, those are the names of the men that anchored Pittsburgh's remarkable season-ending streak of eight victories – six of them on the road. They held those eight opponents to an average of just 11.875 points per game, so it is only fitting that they get the last word.