Scholars have long demonstrated an interest in the relationships between sports and ethnicity, and 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 affect 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 Pennsylvania to football and religious acculturation in Chicago, to the role of sport in constructing Scottish ethnic identity, to the intersections of race, ethnicity, and sport in Australia. Of the extant works dealing with sports and ethnicity, some of the most intriguing deal with the sporting experiences of European immigrants in the United States, where sport has played an important role in assimilating both individual immigrants and entire communities into mainstream American society. Yet despite recent research on this subject, 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? This important component of the ethnic sporting experience has yet to be systematically studied. Just as sport historians have overlooked the role of sport in the development of European American ethnic identity, so too have scholars of Italian American studies largely neglected the historical experiences of second-, third-, and fourth-generation Italian Americans. More specifically, few have attempted to...
investigate how later generations of Italian Americans express their ethnic identity at specific moments in time, preferring instead to focus on the experiences of the immigrants themselves; their descendants are too often relegated 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 chapter presents a case study of the relationship between ethnic identity and sport among second-, third-, and fourth-generation Italian Americans in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. For the descendants of Italian immigrants living in Pittsburgh, sport—and more specifically, sports spectatorship—played an important role in fostering a collective, citywide movement of ethnic pride. Between 1972 and 1977, Pittsburgh’s Italian Americans created 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, the love of their city’s NFL football team, the Pittsburgh Steelers.

An Italian Army in the Making

The catalyst for this interesting chapter in American ethnic history was Hall of Fame running back Franco Harris, a ten-thousand-plus yardage holder and arguably one of the greatest players in the history of professional football. Born 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 a propensity for the sport of football; in his first high school varsity game, the sophomore ran eighty-four 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. Despite the presence of the Italian language, food culture, and familial mores in his home, Harris grew up in a predominantly African American neighborhood, developed interpersonal relationships with people of color, and therefore considered himself black. 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 to satisfy a long-standing curiosity about his European ancestral roots. 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 six thousand Italian immigrants lived in Pittsburgh and, by 1930, the population had increased to well over eighteen
thousand. Immediately surrounding the city of Pittsburgh, Allegheny County similarly attracted a sizable number of Italian immigrants as well; over thirty-four thousand Italian-born immigrants made Allegheny County their home by 1930, or 15 percent of the Italian population in the entire Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.10 Like Pittsburgh and Allegheny County, greater southwestern Pennsylvania also attracted significant numbers of Italian-born immigrants in search of work, many of whom ultimately found jobs in the bituminous coal mining industry. In 1930 the five counties bordering Allegheny had a collective Italian immigrant population of over twenty-eight thousand.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, East Liberty became the veritable center of Italian-immigrant settlement in the region and the neighborhood with the largest Italian population in Pittsburgh.13 While home to immigrants from throughout Italy, a large proportion hailed from Spigno Saturnia—a small village located approximately midway between Rome and Naples—and first came to the neighborhood through the peer and kinship network known as chain migration. To provide a base of support and mutual protection, the Spignesi community sponsored the creation of the Spigno Saturnia Italian American Beneficial Society in 1927, one of the largest such organizations in Pittsburgh.14 Between 1900 and 1930, immigrants from Spigno Saturnia also played a major role in establishing two Italian ethnic parishes and Pittsburgh’s largest Italian business district along Larimer Avenue, a street replete with Italian-owned grocery stores, cafés, produce markets, and mutual aid societies.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, however, the Italian constitution of East Liberty rapidly declined as the economic mobility of immigrants and their descendants increased and racial tensions between Italians and African Americans worsened.15 The neighborhood had long been a trouble spot for conflict between the two ethnic groups; one of the earliest incidents was a race riot in 1934 that called for the intervention of city police.16 Italian-black tensions increased markedly in the 1950s when an urban renewal project demolished the residential Hill District—a formerly prosperous black neighborhood and an epicenter of black music and culture—thus resulting in a mass migration of uprooted African American families into other neighborhoods of the city, mainly East Liberty.17 Racial discord between Italian and black families reached a fever pitch in April 1968 when, in the aftermath of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., East Liberty African Americans targeted their frustrations on 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 out-migration increased dramatically; the East Liberty Italian business district continued to decline, and the neighborhood forever lost the Little Italy feel cultivated in previous decades.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 mid-season 1972, had rushed for one hundred yards or more in six consecutive games. 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 in the area 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.20 Wearing surplus military helmets carefully painted with Italian flags, the phrase “Franco’s Italian Army,” and each wearer’s Italian last name, the founding members of the army paraded into the Steelers’ Three Rivers Stadium and established a soon-to-be-famous cheering section immediately below the press boxes in sections twenty-nine and thirty.

Within two weeks, Franco’s 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. Because of its increasing size, the army was jokingly subdivided into the High Command (consisting of the founding members), a K9 corps (with helmet-wearing Great Dane in tow), and a chaplain corps headed by none other than a local Catholic priest. In the spirit of military symbolism, army members selected Tony Stagno as their four-star general, while Albert Vento, whose East Liberty pizzeria became a frequent Sunday morning rendezvous point, was named second in command and assigned three stars. East Liberty residents or former residents Armand Zottola, John Danzilli Jr., Pat Signore, and Dominic Stagno and additional founding members also received designated numbers of helmet stars identifying their place in the High Command hierarchy.

Almost immediately, the army attracted generous media attention from the Pittsburgh Post Gazette and Pittsburgh Press. By December 1972 it had received coverage through articles published in Sports Illustrated, through articles published in nationally respected newspapers such as the New York Times and Chicago Tribune, and in television broadcast interviews and NFL Films segments.21 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.”22

In addition to print and broadcast news coverage, the publication of books about Franco Harris and his illustrious football career greatly contributed to
Spignesi, Sinatra, and the Pittsburgh Steelers

the Italian Army’s mounting popularity. For example, three different publishing houses produced paperback juvenile biographies on Harris between 1975 and 1977, each of which included sections on the rise of Franco’s Italian Army. 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. The rising popular appeal of Franco Harris, evidenced by fan adoration and steady media coverage, further spread awareness of the running back’s flamboyant, ethnic fan group.

Performing Italian Identity

Members of Franco’s Italian Army relied on Italian symbolism when cheering for the Pittsburgh Steelers, a practice that reveals 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 simply identified the fan group as “Franco’s Italian Army,” while others provided support for their player of choice through phrases that exclaimed, “Run, Paisano, Run” and “Run You Italian Stallion.” Army members also established a booth outside the most heavily trafficked entrance to Three Rivers Stadium to encourage additional Italian Americans to “Enlist Now . . . Join Franco’s Italian Army.” Both full-sized and handheld Italian flags rounded out the army’s repertoire of visual paraphernalia.

Italian American food culture also played an integral role in the Italian Army. Before each home game, members of the High Command met at Vento’s Pizzeria in East Liberty to prepare hoagies stuffed with prosciutto, capicolla, and provolone. 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 homemade lasagna, manicotti, stuffed eggplant, and other regional dishes. Army members even smuggled Italian wine into the stadium, doing so by hollowing out loaves of Italian bread and stuffing the bottles inside. 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. 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.

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. On game days, Italian Army members revised the cornò’s traditional function, using their family medallions to place malocchio curses on opposing teams. The film Franco Harris: Good Luck on Sunday captures Tony Stagno explaining, during a December 3, 1972, game against the Cleveland Browns, the cornò’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. 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 [of Cleveland].

When Franco Harris made a shoestring catch in the final minutes of the 1972 American Football Conference championship game and ran for the game-winning touchdown, some Italian Army members suggested that the spectacular play, later dubbed the Immaculate Reception, was the result not of chance, fate, or player prowess but of an army-initiated malocchio curse. Furthermore, 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 cornò folklore to the Italian Army fan group.

Partly because of Italian American gender roles that limited women’s activities outside the home, Franco’s Italian Army was a male-dominated phenomenon. In Pittsburgh and other cities nationwide, first- and second-generation Italian American men commonly formed mutual aid societies and cultural clubs to maintain Old World relationships, customs, and language. Membership in these organizations was usually reserved exclusively for men. Italian women sometimes created auxiliary organizations so that they too could enjoy the benefits of peer group interpersonal relationships, but the mutual aid society phenomenon was more commonplace in the lives of Italian males. As a type of ethnic community organization, Franco’s Italian Army similarly developed from social relationships among Italian American men; that football spectatorship was largely a male-interest leisure activity during this period further reinforced the group’s fraternal composition. While Italian American women did not participate to the same extent as men, they played key roles in the army albeit along traditional gender lines. For example, the wives of army members assisted with pregame preparations by cooking Italian dishes and helping paint signs, and on some occasions they even attended games at Three Rivers Stadium. In fact, Franco’s Italian Army spawned a “nurses division” late in the 1972 season to accommodate those Italian American women who were also interested in publicly expressing pride in their ethnic ancestry through sports.
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. At the December 31, 1972, play-off game versus Miami, the army employed a light aircraft to drop thousands of leaflets onto the opposing team’s sidelines, calling for them to surrender to their ethnically superior foe. On yet another occasion, army members burst into a local radio station and kidnapped celebrity sports commentator Myron Cope. The hoopla surrounding this audacious radio stunt, like all 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 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 feat 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:

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.

The informal ceremony continued with generous servings of food and Italian wine for all and another round of cheek kissing, and it concluded with Sinatra posing for a series of photographs with Vento, Stagno, and of course, Franco Harris. As might be expected, the army’s induction of an icon of Italian American ethnicity generated an enormous amount of press coverage back in Pittsburgh, prompting even more of western Pennsylvania’s ethnic Italian community to seek membership in the unique group. Moreover, two weeks after Sinatra’s induction, another Italian American of national recognition approached the army. “Congratulations on the Steelers Victory,” read a telegram sent to Three Rivers Stadium. “Where do I go to join Franco’s Italian Army?” It was signed “Henry Mancini.”

Not content to merely play the role of raucous fans, the Italian Army began using its newfound popularity for philanthropic purposes. For example, army members raised money outside the stadium on game days for Pittsburgh Children’s Hospital by producing and selling tricolor armbands, small replicas...
of the Italian flag, and membership certificates. After consolidating as an official nonprofit corporation, the army began to successfully market scarves, winter hats, stadium seat cushions, plastic license plates, T-shirts, and bumper stickers with the expressed intent of raising money for charity. In January 1973, the army joined a local March of Dimes campaign, and in April of that same year it sponsored a Ride a Bike day to raise money for the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children. Along with Franco Harris, Italian Army members also made periodic visits to area hospitals to visit and console ill and disabled children. 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.

New Ethnicity

Throughout the 1970s, the streets of Pittsburgh were replete with Italian Americans sporting army propaganda that allowed them to simultaneously express support for the Steelers and pride in their immigrant histories. But what initially prompted the army’s founding members to actively merge their love of football and pride in being Americans of Italian descent? For cofounder 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. As mentioned previously, Italian out-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 was, sociologically, a sign of structural assimilation into the host society that resulted in many Little Italy neighborhoods losing their previous function as centers of Italian American community life and culture. Stagno and other local Italian Americans realized the impending demise of East Liberty’s Little Italy and initiated Franco’s Italian Army in 1972 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 previously relied on ethnic organizations such as the Spigno Saturnia society to hold their communities together, second-generation Italian Americans used the army to fulfill a similar role, thus merging Old World social relationships with a New World pastime in a way that allowed strong intragroup relationships to flourish.
For other founding members, the suppression of their Italian American heritage during childhood directly precipitated their membership in Franco’s Italian Army. Al Vento remembered not thinking about his heritage much as a child, given the pre–World War II push for the children of immigrants to become 100 percent American. Consequently, Vento supported the formation of a Pittsburgh Steelers fan group that would allow him to express his ethnicity in a way that he was unable, and unwilling, to do in his youth. Vento’s reason 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 restriction and widespread antiforeign 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 their ethnicity to be accepted by members of the host society. Many original members of Franco’s Italian Army, then, joined the fan group to express feelings of Italian American ethnic pride that had been impossible to show during their youth. For other founding members, participation in the army was a much simpler affair; it was just a unique opportunity to express ethnic identity through something equally dear to their hearts: professional football. But in either case, the 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 multiplied in size throughout the course of the 1972 season and into the seasons beyond. Because of their continuous stadium presence, active community involvement, and generous press coverage, membership entered into the thousands as western Pennsylvania’s Italian descendants established their own army contingents. The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette excitedly reported on the phenomenon: “Everybody, it seems, is joining Franco’s Italian Army judging by the [number of] banners and Italian flags.” 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. Even Lancaster, Pennsylvania, which lies 350 miles east of Pittsburgh, mustered a clan of army supporters who displayed a sign reading “Franco’s Army, Dutch Division, Lancaster, PA” at the final home game of the 1972 season. In San Diego, meanwhile, Italian American sailors at the city’s naval base enthusiastically 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.

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, were third- and fourth-generation Italian Americans who knew very little about their immigrant ancestry and did not remember Pittsburgh’s Little Italys of old but became caught up in the rebirth of ethnic pride sweeping the nation in the 1970s. In this sense, Franco’s Italian Army was one of the most unusual forms of expression to emerge as part of the so-called New Ethnicity, during 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. In some parts of the country, Italian Americans rekindled aspects of Italian American folklore—such as communal feast days and religious processions—that had in previous years been lost or forgotten, whereas in other cities people organized demonstrations of Italian Power to collectively protest media stereotypes, namely, the pervasive mafia imagery in Hollywood. 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 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. 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. Meanwhile, the city’s Slovak Americans created a fan group in honor of linebacker Jack Ham and named the hastily assembled group Dobre Sunka, an anglicized version of the Slovakian phrase for “Great Ham.” Not to be outdone by the city’s ethnic groups, Pittsburgh WASPs formed their own fan club in honor of placekicker Roy Gerela but relied on alliteration rather than ethnic identification in naming their fan group Gerela’s Gorillas. Quite unwittingly, Pittsburgh’s Italian Americans took the lead in inspiring the descendants of other immigrant groups to similarly employ professional sports and sporting events as vehicles for ethnic expression.

**Claiming Franco**

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
foundating 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. Despite these appeals, African American football fans repeatedly confronted army members at Three Rivers Stadium, calling into question the Italian community’s claims of ownership over a person who had always considered himself to be black. In December 1972, members of the 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 organization’s chairman advocated a course of action that would metaphorically 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 Franco, 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.

Despite this proposed solution, many members of the African American community remained unconvinced that Italian Americans had any right to claim an African American person and therefore deemed the sharing of Franco Harris 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 1972, he publicly stated that Franco Harris “may be a soul brother, but his legs—his legs are Italian,” a statement that scoffed 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 numerous attempts at mediation between the two groups, all of which ultimately proved unsuccessful. As the main character in the mounting imbroglio, Harris was also forced by the media to make public statements about his own ethnic and racial identity. The following statement, recorded in 1977 by Harris’s biographer, explains the running back’s long-standing feelings about 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.61

Although Harris repeatedly said that he indeed considered himself to be African American, his identification with whites—demonstrated by his continued participation in the Italian American fan group—served to alienate him from Pittsburgh’s African American community. As the controversy grew, Pittsburgh’s legendary African American newspaper, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, tended to overlook the young player’s prowess on the playing field. Between 1972 and 1977, *Courier* reporters rarely documented the talents of Franco Harris in any depth, even after he won the highly coveted Offensive Rookie of the Year award in January 1973. 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 state that the team’s defensive line, composed of four African American starters, were more deserving of the prestigious honor. 62

As a prominent voice of the black community in Pittsburgh, the *Courier*’s decision to shy away from Franco Harris reveals the unease that the rise of Franco’s Italian Army caused for the city’s black population. To African Americans in Pittsburgh, Harris—as a self-identified black man—occupied a high-profile position in their community, a position of potential leadership from which he could serve as a role model to others. By embracing the Italian Army, some believed that Harris was forsaking the city’s African American community for the Italian Americans. Others went so far as to consider Harris’s position in the controversy an affront and, in retaliation, dismissed the running back as a traitor who catered to the wants and desires of whites.63 Harris’s romantic relationship with a white woman, Dana Dokmanovich, during this period might have further damaged his overall reputation in the eyes of the city’s African Americans.64 The racial controversy surrounding Franco Harris and the Italian Army continued to grow in the years that followed. Thus, an institution that some believed had the potential to bridge the rift between Italian Americans and African Americans proved to be just another source of friction amid broader 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 that numbered in the thousands. In 1977, however,
the army’s founding members announced that the fan club had, for a number of reasons, disbanded. Although the founding members officially resigned by the end of that year, some fans tried to keep the army spirit alive, and its 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, effectively ending one of western Pennsylvania’s most unusual and most visible forms of Italian American ethnic expression.

Although it came as a surprise to the press and Steelers fans alike, 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 was an important factor in the decision to disband. Despite being instrumental in bringing national exposure to the fan group, the press created a constant demand for the Italian Army at public events and charitable endeavors, as well as their continual presence on game days at Three Rivers Stadium. After five years, the time investment required for their numerous public appearances became too much for many of the most sought-after Italian Army members to handle. Furthermore, 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 simply trying to create a fan group that would allow them to express pride in their immigrant past, Italian Army members rightly or wrongly felt that the city’s African American community was constantly misinterpreting their intentions, and they increasingly saw the media coverage as exacerbating the problem.

Conclusion

Between 1972 and 1977 Italian Americans living in western Pennsylvania invented an ethnic identity completely consistent with the environment in which they resided. As a city populated by tens of thousands of Italian descendants and historically rooted in sporting tradition, Pittsburgh in 1972 maintained the environmental conditions that allowed Italian Americans to channel their ethnic pride through professional football. Furthermore, the decision to express ethnic identity through sports at a time of citywide 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 evidenced by the reasons behind its initial formation, Franco’s Italian Army was more than a sports phenomenon, making it much different than other professional football fan groups such as the Cleveland Browns Dawg Pounders, the Green Bay Packers Cheeseheads, and the Washington Redskins Hogettes. Unlike these more recent fan groups, which are largely media creations consisting of people attempting to upstage one another for television airtime, Franco’s Italian Army was a grassroots, ethnic phenomenon in which the expression of Italian American heritage and pride—as opposed to merely attracting
media coverage—was constantly at the fore. In fact, the founding members of Franco’s Italian Army repeatedly stated that constant media attention was one of the factors leading to the army’s decline and certainly not an impetus for its initial creation. Symbolically, 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 that Franco’s Italian Army was not, at its heart, about football alone.

On another level, the way 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 antidefamation campaigns, and mobilizing in support of a nationally recognized Columbus Day, the most profound form of ethnic expression for Pittsburgh’s Italian descendants came through sports. Perhaps most importantly, however, the story of Franco’s Italian Army draws attention to the crucial intersections of sports and ethnicity and also underscores the historical and cultural significance of generations of Italian Americans beyond the first wave of immigrants—two subjects still largely neglected by scholars and students of American social history. Only by continuing to produce case studies on both ethnic sporting experience and the lives of second-, third-, and fourth-generation Italian Americans can we begin to address glaring research voids that, to date, very few scholars have ventured to fill.

NOTES


8. Kowet, Franco Harris, 16.


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” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1970), 49–56.


24. Kowet, Franco Harris, 55–70.


27. Vento, interview by the author.


29. Vento, interview by the author.


31. Ibid.


33. Vento, interview by the author.


36. Ibid.

37. Vento, interview by the author.


40. Vento, interview by the author.

41. Ibid.; Franco Harris: Good Luck on Sunday.

42. Vento, interview by the author.

43. Residential mobility as a sign of structural assimilation is discussed at length in James Crispino, The Assimilation of Ethnic Groups: The Italian Case (Staten Island, NY:

44. Vento, interview by the author.


46. Armand Zottola, interview by the author, April 28, 1999; Danzilli, interview by the author.


48. Kowet, Franco Harris, 57; Vento, interview by the author.


50. Kowet, Franco Harris, 57.


55. O’Brien, Doing It Right.


59. Ibid.


61. Kowet, Franco Harris, 77–78.


66. Ibid.; Vento, interview by the author.


68. Ibid.; Vento, interview by the author; Zottola, interview by the author.