

# Steelers took hard road to championship

DETROIT (AP) - The Pittsburgh Steelers owned the easy road to the Super Bowl all those years they squandered home-field advantage, all those years coach Bill Cowher's teams couldn't stand up to the pressure, the moment, the challenge.

Maybe this is what was needed to bring out the best in a team that often was among the NFL's top teams, but never played like it when it counted most: the toughest road to a Super Bowl championship.

No team had won three road playoff games and then the Super Bowl, much less by beating the top three teams in its conference and the best from the opposing conference. Making the challenge even greater, the Steelers had to win their final four regular-season games just to reach the playoffs.

"It feels so much better to do something people say you can't do," linebacker Joey Porter said after the Steelers won their first Super Bowl in 26 years by beating the Seattle Seahawks 21-10 Sunday night. "There's no better feeling than that. We will always be remembered for the way we did it."

After going from 15-1 a year ago to an underachieving 11-5 during a regular season marked by injuries —

Roethlisberger was out four weeks with two knee problems — and a three-game losing streak, the Steelers fit a career's worth of highlights into a month's worth of playoffs.

By doing so, those four AFC championship game losses and one Super Bowl defeat since January 1995 finally began to fade into the past, along with the perception the Steelers and their coach couldn't win the big one.

Even Terry Bradshaw, Joe Greene, Franco Harris and Lynn Swann, stars of the Steelers' four Super Bowl champions of the 1970s, never put together anything like this championship run of a lifetime.

The Steelers rallied from 10 points down to win at Cincinnati, helped by an early injury to Bengals star quarterback Carson Palmer. They beat Super Bowl favorite Indianapolis 21-18 in a stunning upset that will be long remembered for Jerome Bettis' late-game fumble that nearly turned a certain victory into a historic defeat, and the Roethlisberger tackle that made certain it didn't.

That victory carried them to a 34-17 AFC championship game win at Denver. Then, after a bye week that drained some of their momentum after they won seven

games in seven weeks, they shook off Roethlisberger's first poor game in two months and a sluggish start to beat the Seahawks.

"It was 'Just tell us where we're going next, just send us off to another team,'" Cowher said Monday. "I think the guys thrived on that. With all due respect to Heinz Field, we just kept going off (on the road)."

Cowher and his players felt something special building weeks ago, and so could Hall of Famer Greene, who

now works in their personnel department. When Greene had lunch with Cowher on Saturday, he looked at the coach and said, "You guys got it, don't you?"

Cowher replied the team was in a zone. It's a zone they didn't leave even during some rough times against the Seahawks that included two interceptions thrown by Roethlisberger.

"We had a chance to make history, and that motivated me a little more," center Jeff Hartings said. "You can

make history by going 16-0 and winning the Super Bowl and we did the opposite. We made history by winning as a sixth seed."

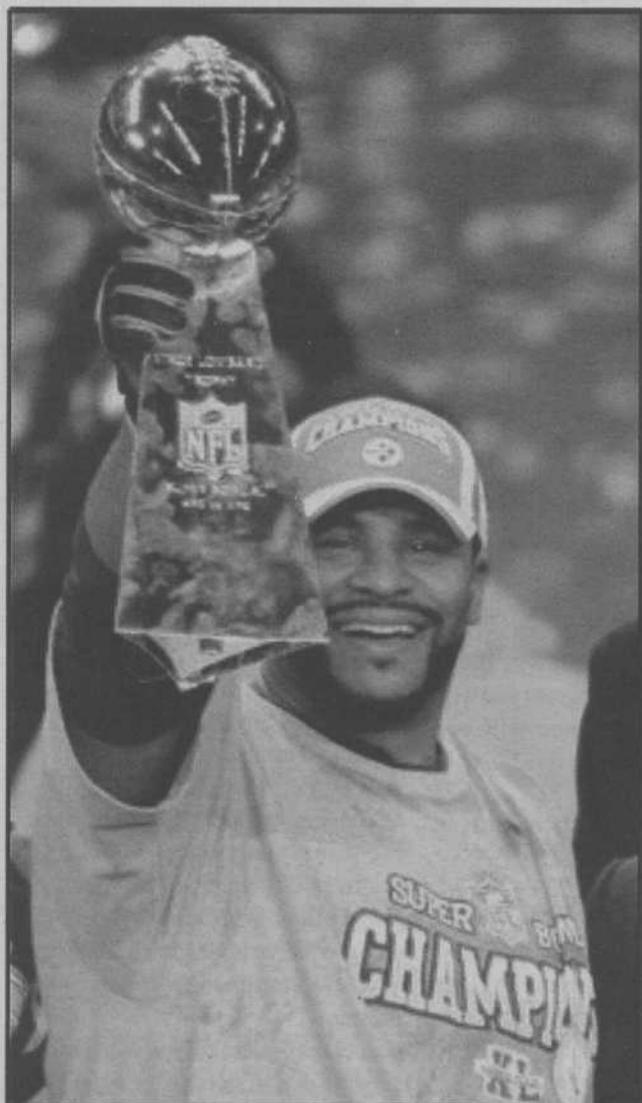
They did so after Cowher recited some American history.

To motivate his players when they were 7-5 and the playoffs were in doubt, Cowher related — and here's a never-before-used coaching ploy — Christopher Columbus' journey to America in 1492 and how many told him it was an impossible trip.

"There's a lot of people telling you that you can't do it but, you know what, that doesn't mean you don't go try," Cowher said. "Don't let your journey be defined by history, let your journey make history."

Bettis took his place in NFL history by retiring as the league's No. 5 career rusher after finally winning a Super Bowl in his 13th season, and in his hometown of Detroit. What is still to be seen is how Bettis' departure affects the

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Steelers running back Jerome Bettis lifts the Vince Lombardi trophy in what in all likelihood was his final NFL game.

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