

Fitzgerald's play reminder of all that is great in sports

By Barry Rozner | Daily Herald Columnist
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A day later, I couldn't stop thinking of it.

It was difficult to find amid so many memorable Super Bowl XLIII moments, and it was buried within what might become the most famous Super Bowl play ever.

Yes, James Harrison will be remembered for an eternity because of a remarkable decision, an astounding catch and run, and his refusal to go down during his 100-yard interception return.

It's that will to win in a man and in a team that is unusual in this day and age, when money and fame have made the desire to win so difficult to find in pro sports.

It's what makes the Steelers if not unique at least rare in sports today.

They are a true team with remarkable leaders who put teammates and victory above personal gain and statistics.

It's why I thought as far back as mid-November that the Steelers would win it all, that with players like Ben Roethlisberger and Troy Polamalu not just playing but, more important, leading, that they wouldn't let the Steelers lose.

These are traits quite difficult to find today, and players of character and hunger who are rare indeed.

Keep in mind that a few years ago I called Larry Fitzgerald the best player in the history of college football, and the real winner of the Heisman Trophy, much to the dismay of Jason White and his legion of Sooners fans.

I've often thought that the only complete football player with whom I could compare Fitzgerald was Walter Payton, and I've been hesitant to do so out of reverence for Payton, without a doubt my favorite player ever.

And so during that James Harrison run to glory, I was struck by something else.

Larry Fitzgerald was 6 yards deep in the end zone and going the other way when Harrison grabbed the ball. Fitzgerald was, if not the farthest player, certainly among the farthest from the football, with his momentum headed toward the end line.

As the play went the other way and developed along the sideline, there was no sign of Fitzgerald as Harrison bowled over one Cardinal after another, using his convoy to negotiate the long march as time ran down in the half.

In the back of my mind, I wondered when Fitzgerald would show up. Sure enough, by midfield he burst into the picture.

Trailing along the sideline, Fitzgerald could not find the open space to get to Harrison. There were players from both teams in the way, and Fitzgerald struggled to get near the ball carrier.

Every time he got close, he lost ground. He ran into a couple of Steelers and a few Cardinals, pushing and shoving to get through the scrum.

At the 30-yard line he even ran into teammate Antrel Rolle, who was closely watching the play from the sideline. Too close, in fact. Fitzgerald smashed into Rolle and nearly flattened him, frustrated that the bottleneck grew worse.

Fitzgerald again lost time and ground, looking like a horse caught in traffic in a large stakes field, checked up time and again, unable to find running room until the very end of the race.

Finally, at the 5-yard line, with the end zone in sight and no time on the clock, Fitzgerald's 106-yard journey was nearly at its conclusion. He was free to get a shot at Harrison, coming down hard on the ball with one hand while dragging down the 250-pound Harrison from behind.

Fitzgerald came within a split second of stopping Harrison before he could reach pay dirt, but when Fitzgerald hauled him down, Harrison actually landed on Fitzgerald, which allowed the Steelers' defender to slide into the end zone.

It was a question of inches.

Had it been a half-foot sooner, a half-second before, had he not run into his own player on the sideline who wasn't even in the game, had he not had to fight through so much traffic, Fitzgerald might have literally saved the game for Arizona.

Yet, at that moment I had this vivid memory of Payton in the late '70s, chasing down a defender, running the length of the field to make a tackle near the end zone after a fumble or an interception, trying to prevent a touchdown right at the goal line.

And it certainly wasn't a Super Bowl Payton was trying to win that day.

It was heart, and nothing else.

I knew a long time ago about Fitzgerald's hands - the best in football - and his leaping ability, strength, intelligence and toughness.

He even surprised the Steelers with his speed Sunday night.

Now, he'll always be seen at the end of the longest play in Super Bowl history, coming within an instant of changing the game - and altering history.

I don't know how many will remember that he ran 106 yards from a dead stop to make that play.

I will. It reminds me of what's great in sports. It allows me to remember Walter Payton. It makes me think of his heart, his desperation, his need - his absolute and uncontrolled need - to win.

And it makes me wonder if the Bears as an organization today really get any of that.

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