

**Four-time Steeler Super Bowl champion Rocky Bleier
to be honored by St. Barnabas**

by John Fries

When Rocky Bleier was growing up in Appleton, Wisconsin, he just wanted to play football. In his wildest dreams, he probably couldn't even begin to imagine the journey that lay ahead. But here he is, decades later—a youthful 65-year-old whose life has been the stuff of which movies are made (one movie, indeed, has been made about his life). In April, Bleier—longtime Pittsburgh resident, Vietnam veteran, Purple Heart and Bronze Star medal recipient, star Steeler running back, four-time Super Bowl champion, successful business owner, in-demand motivational speaker and seven-year volunteer with the St. Barnabas PRESENTS FOR PATIENTS® program—will add another descriptor to his ever-growing resume: recipient of St. Barnabas Charities' 2011 Hance Award.

When the award is presented during St. Barnabas' Founder's Day celebration on April 28, Bleier's name will be added to the list of notable Americans who have earned the award, which is named after the man who founded St. Barnabas more than 100 years ago. The award is presented each year to a national figure who has had a significant impact on the lives of Americans.

His track record of achievements notwithstanding, the humble Bleier was surprised to learn that he had been selected for the award.

"It's an honor," said Bleier. "Bill (William V. Day, president of St. Barnabas Health System) called and asked me to be this year's awardee. St. Barnabas provides excellent care for the elderly and has great, worthwhile programs including the annual PRESENTS FOR PATIENTS® holiday program that reaches more than 300 facilities in five states. I've met many patients through the program over the years, and that's always enjoyable. Plus, the Founder's Day event benefits the St. Barnabas Free Care Fund, which provides more than \$4.7 million in free care each year. So I gratefully agreed to accept the award."

By doing so, Bleier joins a stellar list of exemplary individuals that includes former President Gerald Ford, former First Lady Barbara Bush, actor Charlton Heston, Comedian Steve Allen and Michael Reagan, radio talk show host and son of President Ronald Reagan.

Bleier said that the patients he meets at St. Barnabas, understandably, generally want to talk football—and he is always happy to oblige. If you've followed the sport for any length of time, you know that there are significant differences between how it was played during Bleier's tenure and how it is played today. "Genetics has led to bigger players today who are in better condition than ever," Bleier noted. "Also, coaching has become better," he added. Back in his day, he says, training camp was just that. "You arrived at camp and prepared for football season. Today, though, sports are a year-long commitment. Players need to be more focused, and they need to be in shape before they go to camp."

Not surprisingly, youth sports today are also much different from Bleier's playing days on the Wisconsin football fields (and even when he played for Notre Dame, including as a member of the 1966 national championship team). "The image of professional sports has changed," he said. "Back then, you had one game you could watch on TV on Saturday, and one on Sunday. Now, with 24-hour TV channels dedicated to sports, games are on all the time and young athletes view the NFL, MLB and NBA as the epitome."

All of which, according to Bleier, has led to a modern approach to playing and coaching. "Today, coaches have much better information available to them about training, conditioning, nutrition and injury prevention," he said. "Years ago, if you were hit on the head, your coach might tell you to just shake it off. Today, coaches know about injuries like concussions, and how to prevent them. And, pads and protective equipment are much better today than ever before."

Bleier is also a believer in tenacity and good, old-fashioned hard work. Although he became a Steeler in 1968, he was drafted shortly after that and went off to serve in Vietnam. Seriously wounded during his tour of duty, he was told at the time by doctors in a Tokyo hospital that he would never play football again. For two years, he trained relentlessly, packing on nearly 100 pounds of muscle and eventually, against the odds, making the roster—first on injured reserved; then on the taxi squad. He would soon help bring the Steelers to the Super Bowl four times—each of which they won—before retiring after the 1980 season.

In the years since, Bleier has remained athletically active. It's no exaggeration to say that, today, he could be the poster person for adult health and fitness. In person, he exudes vitality, something he attributes to his personal nutrition and training regimen. He hits the gym most mornings at around 7:30 before going to the RBVetco office in Carnegie, where he runs a construction firm.

"I work out five days a week," he said "Mostly weightlifting, which is important for bone structure. I also do some cardio on the elliptical machine, stationery bike or treadmill." He also emphasizes the need for a healthy diet, especially as one gets older. "As a baby boomer, you develop a strong awareness of good health, so I watch what I eat. And it helps a great deal that my wife is also very conscious of eating well."

When asked to share his daily meal plan with readers, he said, "I have a shake for breakfast, which contains vitamins, greens and fiber. For lunch, it's soup and half a sandwich. When I get home from work, I'll have some string cheese and crackers. Then, at about 8:00, we have dinner."

Active as a motivational speaker for many years, Bleier is glad to share words of wisdom regarding wellness. He stressed the need for people, especially older adults, to stay focused on their health. "People want to be healthy, but they lose hope," he said. "They have excuses. We need to change their perception. You CAN change your lifestyle. We can have a good quality of life as we age."

SIDEBAR:

St. Barnabas Founder's Day

April 28, 2011

On Thursday, April 28, former Steeler Rocky Bleier joins a distinguished list of individuals honored with the Hance Award. The award has been given each year since 1980, during the Founder's Day celebration event, to a national figure who has had a significant impact on the lives of Americans.

This year's Founder's Day 2011 celebration will begin at 10:30 a.m. at St. Barnabas Nursing Home with a Welcoming Tailgate Ceremony. William V. Day, president of St. Barnabas, will greet Bleier and present him with a key to the campus. Patients, their families and St. Barnabas staff members will also greet Bleier and give him the homemade gifts they created on Patient Activity Day. Immediately afterward, a V.I.P luncheon with Bleier, St. Barnabas board members and trustees and special guests will be held at The Washington Place at St. Barnabas in the Mt. Vernon Restaurant.

That evening, Bleier will be the honored guest and speaker during a fundraising gala held at the Omni William Penn Hotel. This year's dinner theme is The Black n' Gold Charity "Ball" in honor of Bleier's accomplishments as a Pittsburgh Steeler. A silent auction will begin the evening's festivities at 5:30 p.m. and guests will enjoy performances by The Harold Betters Show and Etta Cox as well as a special appearance by Andy Russell, former Steeler and past Hance Award recipient.

John Fries

2637 Brighton Road

Pittsburgh, PA 15212

Phone: 412-760-2299

E-mail: johnfries@comcast.net

Web: www.johnfries.com