

SUPER BOWL XTRA



STEELERS • SEAHAWKS

# Hoisting Lombardi Trophy a fitting finish for Bettis

DETROIT

It isn't hard to say what Steelers running back Jerome Bettis will remember most about the greatest night of the greatest week of his life.

It won't be the incredible tribute his teammates paid him before Super Bowl XL when they sent him out alone when the Ford Field public-address announcer introduced the 2005 AFC champion Steelers to the world. For 2, 4, 6, 8 long seconds after running out of the tunnel, Bettis stood alone at the 20, soaking in the thunderous applause of the ridiculously pro-Steelers crowd. The team's motivation all season was to get him home to Detroit for the big game. It was only after he had his moment in the spotlight that the rest of the players swarmed around him and got ready to play the Seattle Seahawks.

It won't be the final carry of Bettis' storied career. It was so typical Bettis, a blast for 4 tough yards off right guard late in the game as the Steelers were running out the final minutes of a victory. It's how he played his entire career, a Hall of Fame career, 4 tough yards at a time.

It won't be the precious hug Bettis shared on the sideline with his best friend on the team — Hines Ward — as quarterback Ben Roethlisberger took one final knee from the greatest formation in football — the victory formation. The Steelers' 21-10 win was official. Ward wasn't just the MVP, thanks to his 43-yard touchdown catch that put the Seahawks out of their misery. His goal of sending Bettis out as a champion was complete.

It won't even be the magical confetti shower that all players dream of and one that Bettis had waited 13 long years to experience.

No, it was when they handed Bettis the Vince Lombardi Trophy. That's the one moment he'll always remember, being able to hold up that jewel for his teammates, for Detroit and for Pittsburgh.

"We just brought a champi-



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onship home," Bettis would say later. "One for the thumb."

It didn't seem like it was going to happen for Bettis a year ago after the Steelers lost to the New England Patriots in the AFC championship game. Ward bawled like a baby the next day because he thought he and his teammates had failed Bettis.

Heck, it didn't seem like it was going to happen two months ago after the Steelers lost to the Cincinnati Bengals at Heinz Field to fall to 7-5. They needed to win their final four games just to make the playoffs. They had to beat the top three seeds in the AFC playoffs, all on the road, just to get to Super Bowl XL and give Bettis that chance to run into the spotlight.

"I wanted the cameras to shine on him alone," said Steelers linebacker Joey Porter, who came up with the tribute and convinced coach Bill Cowher to approve it. "If we all go out there together, you'd have to look for him. That wouldn't be right. Not in his hometown. Not after what he's meant to this team."

The story wouldn't have been complete, of course, if the Steelers hadn't beaten the Seahawks. "We weren't going to let [Bettis] leave without [the championship]," said Porter, who was infuriated last week when Seattle tight end Jerramy Stevens suggested the Seahawks were going to spoil the ending to the Bettis story.

Bettis contributed. He led Roethlisberger into the end zone on a 1-yard touchdown run that gave the Steelers a 7-3 lead. And he would have been a

huge part of what should have been a game-clinching score. The Steelers were leading, 14-3, and driving, thanks to Bettis runs of 6, 12 and 4 yards. But Roethlisberger threw a horrible interception from the Seattle 7 to give the Seahawks a chance.

Fortunately for the Steelers and for Bettis, it didn't matter in the end. The trick play touchdown pass from Antwaan Randle El to Ward clinched the victory and championship.

All that was left was for Bettis to hoist that trophy and announce his retirement by saying, "For The Bus, I think, the last stop is going to be here in Detroit ..."

"It's been an incredible ride. I decided to come back to win a championship. Mission accomplished."

The announcement came as no surprise to Bettis' teammates. Even though he danced around the retirement question all week during his hectic homecoming that included him getting the key to the city, he had clued them in. They knew this was it.

"Television is waiting for him," Porter said. "He's great with words and I think he has a face for TV."

Said safety Troy Polamalu, "After what he's meant to this team as a role model and a big brother, we're going to miss him."

No one will miss him more than Ward.

"What a way for him to go out," he said. "That's how I want to go out, by winning the Super Bowl in my hometown."

At that moment, you could tell that thought meant every bit as much to Ward as his MVP award. He was expected to party with Bettis long into the morning at a local club at a party hosted by Magic Johnson.

"Jerome went out as a champion," Ward said. "That's what it's all about."

There were no tears from him on this night.

Only a smile that could light up all of Detroit.

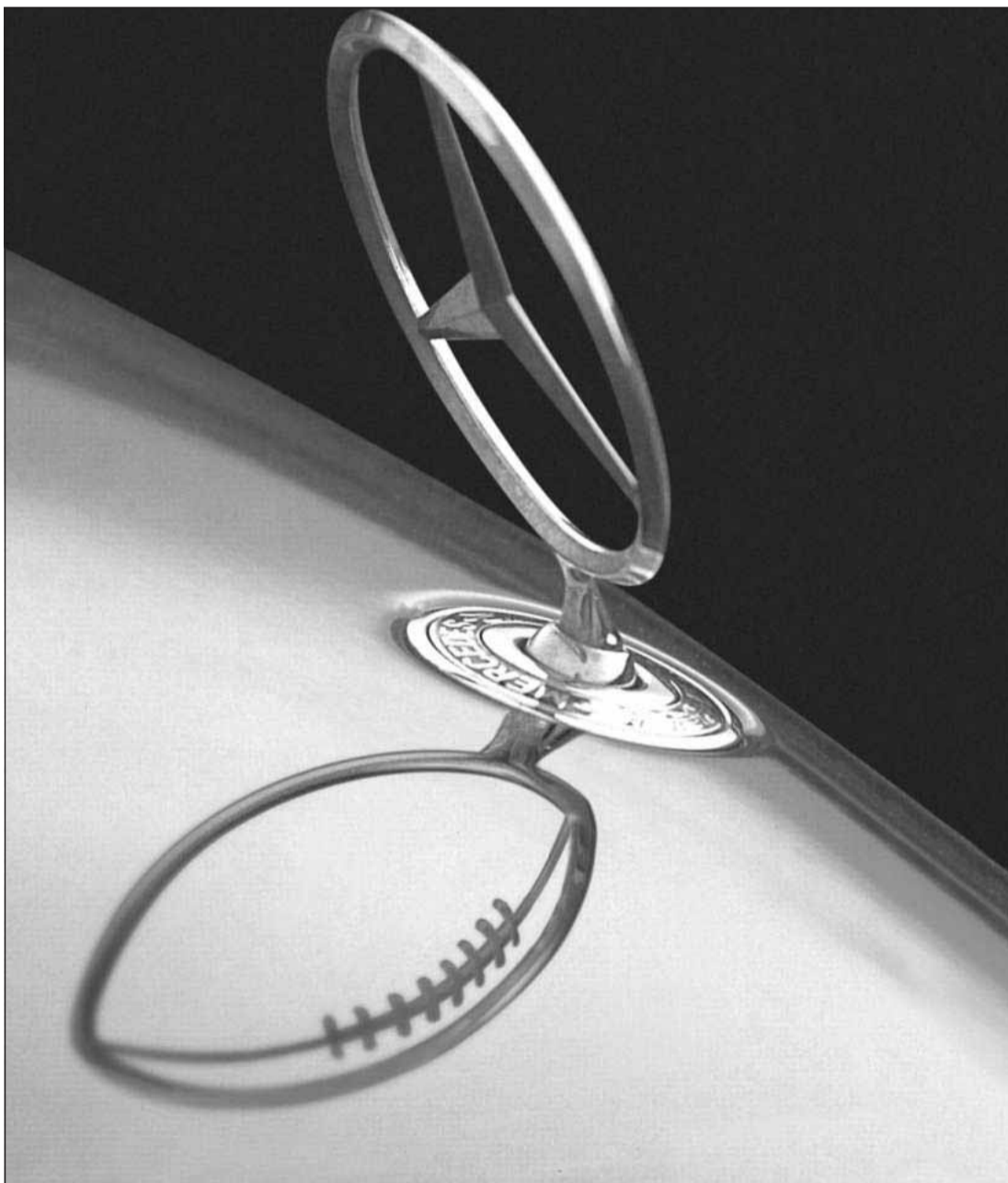
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Lake Fong/Post-Gazette

As he has done so often in his career, Bettis goes head on with Seattle defenders Marquand Manuel, front, and Marcus Trufant.

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