

The funeral for Jerome Bettis' dad, Dec. 5, 2006

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BY: Ron Cook

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DETROIT -- When you think of Jerome Bettis' brute force, you think back to that marvelous play a year ago, on the tundra of Heinz Field, when he ran over Chicago Bears All-World linebacker Brian Urlacher, which is little like flattening Hercules.

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Yesterday, Bettis had to dig deep to find a much different kind of strength.

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He had to pull down the lid on his father's coffin.

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God help him if the day comes when he has to do anything more difficult.

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If ever there were a time Bettis needed big Casey Hampton's help, this was it. Big Snack, as Hampton is affectionately known to his Steelers' teammates, was at the Messiah Baptist Church only a few moments earlier to pay his respects to the Bettis family, which lost its patriarch, Johnnie Bettis Jr., who was just 61 when his big heart suddenly stopped beating last week. Hampton had dragged his big body out of his warm bed at the crack of dawn to catch an early flight to Detroit with seven other Steelers who, one by one, made their way slowly into the sanctuary, tired and aching, little more than 12 hours after they had beaten the Tampa Bay Buccaneers at Heinz Field. Ike Taylor. Deshea Townsend. Clark Haggans, who was hobbling because of a bad wheel. James Farrior. Joey Porter. Charlie Batch. Ben Roethlisberger, who organized the trip and arranged for the private jet.

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"We're here for Bussie because he'd be there for each one of us," Roethlisberger said with a look that made it clear no further explanation was necessary.

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The players had a private meeting with Bettis -- their former teammate, one-of-a-kind team leader and a man Roethlisberger called "a brother to all of us" -- and his mother, Gladys. It was a much different scene than the last time they all gathered in this cold city, Bettis' hometown. That was in early February, a few days before Super Bowl XL, when Bettis' parents hosted a team dinner for the Steelers at their home along the No. 2 fairway at Detroit Golf Club. It's safe to say that was the greatest week ever for Johnnie and Gladys. After the Steelers defeated the Seattle Seahawks in the big game, fulfilling a promise Roethlisberger had made to Bettis a year earlier when he begged Bettis not to retire after the team's crushing loss in the AFC championship game, they got to see their son lift the Vince Lombardi Trophy.

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This time, the tears were of sorrow.

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"Jerome's parents are our parents," Porter said. "You know they never missed a game. They were always around ...

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"Jerome's hurting. That means we're all hurting."

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The players couldn't stay for the 90-minute funeral service. No one knows better than Bettis that the NFL season marches on. The Steelers have a game against the Cleveland Browns Thursday night. Hampton, Porter and the others had to be back at the team's South Side headquarters for a mid-afternoon practice, which graciously had been pushed back by Bill Cowher at Roethlisberger's request and out of deference to Bettis, who had played such a huge role in making him a Super Bowl-winning coach.

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It's probably just as well that the players left because there might not have been room for them. The big church overflowed out the doors and across the hall to a meeting room, where the service was shown on closed-circuit television. Former Steelers Kordell Stewart and Dewayne Washington -- Bettis' teammates from an earlier time -- were there. So were his new teammates at NBC, including broadcast partners Bob Costas and Cris Collinsworth.

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But it wasn't all just athletes and celebrities. Many came because Bettis is a huge sports celebrity here, much like Mario Lemieux is in our town and Dan Marino is in South Florida. Many more came because Johnnie Bettis was a good man who raised three great kids. He worked 31 years for the city of Detroit before retiring almost two years ago as chief electrical inspector.

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"Dr. [Martin Luther] King once said, 'Service is the rent we pay for the space we occupy,'" Detroit mayor Kwame Kilpatrick said during the proceedings. "Mr. Bettis lived a life of service. He gave his life to this community."

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Bettis didn't speak during the ceremony. It took all his strength to close that casket. There was nothing left for him to stand up in front of all those people and talk about the greatest man he'll ever know.

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That was left to Jahmal Dokes, Bettis' business manager, best friend since high school and a man described in the funeral program as a "special son."

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"Someone pointed out to me how Mr. B never missed a play of Jerome's career," Dokes said. "I thought about that and realized how true it was -- literally and figuratively. He was always there to make a play for his family."

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Dokes told the story of how Bettis was the object of a recruiting war between Michigan and Notre Dame coming out of Detroit's Mackenzie High School. While Michigan's Bo Schembechler and Gary Moeller and Notre Dame's Lou Holtz were wining and dining Mrs. Bettis, Mr. Bettis was at the library, studying all he could find about the engineering programs at the two schools.

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"Jerome didn't go to Notre Dame because Holtz told him he could play running back," Dokes said. "He went to Notre Dame because that's where Mr. B told him he'd get the best education."

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Those Notre Dame days really were the start of the Bettis family's incredible ride. Any parent will tell you there's no greater pleasure or satisfaction in life than watching your child succeed. Johnnie Bettis got to watch his son win that Super Bowl, get the key to the city -- his city -- from Kilpatrick, go on the Jay Leno show and shake hands with the most powerful man in the world in the East Room of the White House.

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An incredible ride, for sure.

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It seems almost eerie now, though, that everyone -- most of all Bettis -- was concerned how Johnnie and Gladys would get along without football in their lives. Sure, it's cool to turn on the big-screen television in the den that's really a shrine to their son's career and see him as a part of NBC's Sunday night NFL telecasts. But it's not quite the same as watching him steamroll the Urlachers of the football world.

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Johnnie Bettis didn't seem too worried about it during a rare quiet moment in the hoopla of Super Bowl week.

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"I'll tell you what I'm going to do," he said. "I've got 13 years' worth of game tapes to put on DVD. I'm going to get to relive the memories for a long, long time."

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Sadly, not nearly long enough.

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