

BIG BOOT

How Roy Gerela kept cool (plink!) and destroyed the San Diego jinx (thonk!)

BY EARL McRAE

Pittsburgh is warm and muggy on a Saturday morning in October. The sun pushes dimly through the smog hanging over Three Rivers Stadium, where the Steelers are holding their workout on artificial turf still damp from the rain in the night. Long the bums of the National Football League, the Steelers are entrenched in first place in their division of the American Football Conference with four wins and no losses. The shouts, curses and clatter of equipment echo eerily in the empty seats where, in 24 hours, 50,000 fans will fly banners, blow horns and scream for the blood of the San Diego Chargers. Now nothing moves up there but the odd candy wrapper or coffee cup scooped up by the wind gusting through the exits.

Thonk!

"Attaway, Roy baby," cries the thin voice of back-up quarterback Terry Hanratty. "You do that t'morrow, baby, and you gonna be just fine."

The football hurtles end over end, flashing white and brown against the backdrop of seats, outlined briefly against the sky, then tumbles back to earth on a perfect trajectory between the goal posts.

Roy Gerela of Powell River, B.C., the placement-kicking specialist of the Pittsburgh Steelers and the only Canadian player in the NFL, smiles his shy smile and trots into the end zone to retrieve the ball. His grey sweatsuit sticks sweatily to his 5-foot-10, 188-pound body as he carries the ball back to the 50-yard line and sets it up again on the tee. He stands back of the ball and to the left, takes 2½ fast strides forward and — *thonk!* — boots the ball soccer-style through the uprights with the velocity, accuracy and distance that's made him a star with the Steelers and one of the league's top three kicking specialists, surpassed in last season's scoring race by only Chester Markle of the Green Bay Packers and Bobby Howfield of the New York Jets.

Howfield beat Gerela for the AFC scoring title by two points, 121-119. Gerela had been leading until the second-last game of the season. In the final game, he had a chance to win it back with four field goal tries. He missed three. It was the first time in four years of pro ball that Roy Gerela had missed three field goals in a game. He was upset but not shocked. He'd had trouble against that particular team all season. Who were they? The San Diego Chargers.

Gerela (pronounced Jur-el-la) badly wants the NFL scoring crown and if not that, the AFC. He's just signed a new three-year contract with the Steelers, but if he has a super season he'll go in and ask to re-negotiate it. So far he's having a super season. He's kicked nine out of ten converts, eight out of nine field goals and leads the AFC with 33 points. Bobby Howfield is nowhere to be seen.



Gerela is tied for second place in the entire league. But one team could ruin a super season. Gerela knows this. The San Diego Chargers have him hexed. And the San Diego Chargers are in town.

"It's crazy," says Gerela, balancing the ball on the orange tee. "I don't know what the hell it is about the Chargers but I don't kick well against them. It's not the rush, I've had stronger line rushes in a game. I've even had less time to get the kick away. I don't know, it's just something about playing the Chargers I guess. They give me bad luck. Crazy, eh?"

Thonk!

"Now if I can get a few like that against them tomorrow I won't have any worries."

Gerela picks up the tee and heads for the dressing room. He's 26, soft-spoken and somewhat shy, with tousled brown hair on the short side, blue eyes, a hooked beak of a nose and a wide, winning smile. He's been with the Steelers since the fall of 1971,

after being placed on waivers by the Houston Oilers. In Pittsburgh, he has his own fan club, Gerela's Gorillas. Its members hang banners for him at every home game, throw parties in his honor and sell bumperstickers and T-shirts. Gerela takes it all in stride. He lives quietly in a \$190-a-month furnished bachelor apartment in a domesticated dogs 'n' kids suburb called Chatham Park. He doesn't socialize much with his teammates, preferring instead a few close friends who play for the Pittsburgh Penguins of the NHL.

At least once a week he phones his brother Ted in Vancouver to talk football. Ted, 29, was the finest placement kicker in the Canadian Football League with the B.C. Lions. Until this season that is, when he lost his touch and was replaced by Ivan MacMillan, a cast-off from the Ottawa Rough Riders and the Toronto Argonauts. Roy, who left Canada when he was 13 and has never played a game of Canadian football, is very close to his brother and follows the

Canadian game religiously. He lives in Vancouver with Ted and his wife during the off-season, and works out with some of the B.C. Lion players before the Steeler training camp opens. Sometimes he drives to Hamilton from Pittsburgh to see Ted and the Lions play the Ticats. Ted Gerela is still with the Lions, but mostly he rides the bench now.

Sure, he'd play in Canada—for \$50,000—plus

"I think he can come back again," says Roy in the corridor leading to the dressing room. "Hell, he's got another ten years of good kicking. He could have come down here four years ago, you know. He had offers from Atlanta Falcons, Dallas Cowboys and a couple of other clubs but, I don't know, maybe they didn't offer him enough. Or maybe he was happy with the Lions. He likes Vancouver." Gerela flips the ball up and down. "Ted has just as much ability as me, maybe more. He can kick farther I think." He chuckles. "Of course the Canadian ball goes farther than the American one anyway. It's bigger so you got a bigger kicking surface, eh? Also, it's smooth-surfaced while the American ball is pebble-grained. There's less wind resistance with the Canadian ball. I can kick the Canadian ball at least 10 yards farther. When I was working out with them once, Moorhead, the B.C. quarterback, he said, 'Get that little thing [American ball] outta here, I want a *real* football.'"

Gerela plops down on a stool in front of his locker, picks up a length of elastic and absently starts plinking it back and forth between his front teeth. "Don't worry," he grins. "Just something to do, that's all." His locker is between those of quarterback Terry Bradshaw and back-up quarterback Hanratty. A sign over Bradshaw's locker reads: Don't Hit Me — I'm A Candidate For The Hall Of Fame. Piled on the floor of Gerela's locker are more than a dozen black and white right-footed football shoes. His kicking shoes. They're Adidas and cost \$25 each. Gerela never uses one more than a few times. It loses its rigidity through constant kicking and that's not good. With only 1.3 seconds to get the kick away on converts and field goals, Gerela can't afford anything but the best in footwear. And eyewear. A pair of gold-rimmed glasses sit on a shelf in his locker, but he wears contact lenses during a game. Without them, he's blind as a bat.

"Ted wears contacts too," says Gerela, tossing his

sweatsuit into a laundry wagon. "Hey," he exclaims. "Maybe that's his problem. Maybe he needs stronger contact lenses. I'll have to suggest that next time I phone."

"Hey Gerela," calls equipment manager Tony Parise from across the room. "There was a call for you from Japan a while ago." Parise is Canadian too, from Niagara Falls.

"Japan!" says Gerela. "Who was it? What did they want?"

"Dunno," says Parise. "Something about wanting you to play football."

"Yeah, sure, c'mon Tony, you kidding me or not, eh?"

"I'm serious," shouts Parise. "What's wrong, doncha believe anybody? This guy called from Japan I'm telling ya." Parise shakes his head in disgust. "Tokyo I think."

Gerela waves his hand derisively at Parise. "They know I'm interested in playing in this new World Football League that's been in the news," says Gerela turning back. "You know, Mexico, England, Japan and those places. I'd go too. You better believe it. There'll be lots of money floating around."

Gerela won't say what the Steelers are paying him for his magic toe, except to say that it's 50 per cent more than he was earning last year. Would he ever consider playing in the CFL?

"Sure," he says, plinking the elastic through his teeth. "If the money's right. I'd like to play before my own people. You'd be surprised at the people here who don't even know where Canada is. Everybody down here thinks he's getting ripped off, everybody's out to rob you. What a mixed-up country this is. Everybody's head is screwed up."

"What would be a right price to play in Canada?"

"Oh I don't know. Say \$50,000 a year plus bonuses."

The day after his father's funeral, he left

Although most of Gerela's fan mail comes from the States, he does receive letters from Canada. "Here's one I got a kick out of," he says, reaching into an Adidas box stuffed with letters.

"Dear Roy. You are my favorite ball player and sports hero. You and your brother Ted I think are two great athletes. I'm enclosing a lucky piece which helped my team win our provincial PeeWee A championship last year. I hope it helps you win the Super Bowl. Could

you please get cards and papers autographed. Could you also send me a chinstrap and stickers. Thanks. Good luck and keep healthy. Your best fan, Howie H. Pinkas, Chomedy-Laval, Quebec, Canada."

Howie Pinkas has enclosed bubblegum cards of Steeler stars Franco Harris, Frenchy Fuqua, Joe Greene and L.C. Greenwood, but not one of his hero, Roy Gerela.

"Some fan," cracks Gerela.

Roy Gerela was born in the tiny farming community of Sarraill, Alta., the youngest of six boys in a family of 11 children. His father was an auto mechanic who, shortly after Roy was born, left to find work in Powell River, B.C., a mill town with a population then of around 8,000. He got a job as a laborer in the Powell River pulp and paper mill and his wife brought the family to join him when Roy was four months old.

The Gerelas lived in a small, wooden house on a dirt road called Sutherland Street. The house had three bedrooms and a kitchen, a vegetable garden out back and an outhouse beyond that. While Bill Gerela was bringing home about \$300 from the mill each month, his wife Olga earned an extra \$225 a month doing laundry at Powell River General Hospital. The Gerelas made all their own clothes from the cheapest materials, made all their own Christmas gifts for one another, and sometimes went hungry.

"We didn't have any money to go to movies or buy things," says Roy Gerela, wheeling his 1972 gold Grand Prix through downtown Pittsburgh while Helen Reddy belts out Delta Dawn over the stereo. "So we got involved in sports at school because there was always the equipment available. It was something to do, eh?" Plink, plink, plink goes the elastic band.

He excelled in soccer, the big sport in those parts, while attending James Thompson Elementary School. His father, a big, hearty man who liked drinking liquor and playing the violin, although not necessarily in that order, used to attend some of the soccer games Roy, Ted and older brother Metro played in, shouting encouragement from the sidelines. Roy was very attached to his father and, when he died, he didn't want to live anymore. He was 13 years old. The day after the funeral, Roy kissed his mother goodbye and left with an older sister and her American husband to live in Tacoma, Wash. He cried all the way there in the car.

"It was the saddest day of my life," says Gerela. "My father had just died and I was leaving my mother and going to a strange country."

With his father gone, it was felt his leaving to live with his sister would not only ease the financial burden on his mother but provide a greater guarantee of a good education for Roy. A few months after he left, his mother lost the little wooden house on Sutherland

HIS FOOT DIDN'T MEET A FOOTBALL UNTIL GRADE 11

Street because she couldn't meet the payments.

Gerela's brother-in-law, an executive with IBM, was transferred to Maryland not long after Roy moved in with the family. Roy went to Robert E. Perry Jr. High School in Rockville, Md. and started playing football for the first time. He played fullback for the Huskies and soon was the hottest fullback in the school league. When his brother-in-law was transferred to Alaska, the coach of the Huskies, Ron Laneve, offered to have Roy live with him and his wife so that his football development wouldn't be retarded, which he suspected it would be in the wilds of Alaska.

Laneve saw greatness in Roy's future. It was arranged that he would stay behind. But the transfer was switched to Hawaii instead and, although still reluctant to see him go, Laneve bade the boy farewell. In Honolulu, he played fullback for the Kalani High School Falcons, as well as baseball. Ron Laneve had always said he was the best catcher in the history of his Rockville high school. It wasn't until Grade 11 that Gerela put his foot to a football.

"The team needed a punter so I said, 'Oh hell, I'll try it, anybody can kick a ball,'" says Gerela, chewing a cheeseburger in a downtown bar called The Top Shelf. "I surprised myself. I led the league in punting with a 39-yard average. In Grade 12, I started kicking off too, and came second in punting that year. In my senior year I tried kicking converts and field goals, eh? But straight on. I couldn't get a thing. Nothing. So I quit."

A superlative catcher in high school baseball, Gerela was scouted by the Milwaukee Braves. In his senior year, he caught batting practice for the Hawaiian Islanders Triple A team. Upon graduation, he received football scholarship offers from several, mostly small, West Coast colleges and universities, finally accepting one from New Mexico State University in Las Cruces.

"Ron Laneve, my old coach, he got in touch with the coach there and recommended me. I sent down a game film to the university. We beat Kaimuki High School 21-14, eh? I scored one touchdown, made a game-saving tackle, a few key blocks and had a 45-yard punting average."

Gerela got the scholarship.

He played as a defensive back his first two years with the New Mexico State Aggies, plus handling kick-offs and punts. He didn't do converts and field goals.

"One day I got a letter from Ted, he was at Washington State University on a football scholarship then and he said, 'Hey, guess what, I'm kicking the ball soccer-style and getting great distances. You should try it'. So I tried it and he was right. I used to go out on the field after practice and boom the ball soccer-style. Everybody laughed at me. They thought I was crazy. First one I kicked went 80 yards and 10 yards off the ground."

But head coach Warren Woodson still wouldn't give Gerela his chance at kicking field goals and converts. "They had this guy, Al Gonzales, doing it for them. They wouldn't give me a chance even though I kicked better than Gonzales in practice."

Woodson retired to be replaced by Jim Wood, now head coach with the Calgary Stampeders. Wood promised Gerela a crack at field goals and converts in

his senior year if he practised in the off-season. Gerela did. But came football season and Wood gave the job to Ron James, now with the Philadelphia Eagles. Freddie Glick came to Gerela's rescue. He was the defensive coach with the Aggies and liked Gerela's stuff. Freddie Glick was also a former All-Pro defensive back for the Houston Oilers. He had contacts in the Oiler organization. He managed to get Gerela in kicking for the last five games of the season. Watching in the stands were Oiler scouts. In January, 1969, the Oilers picked Gerela fourth in the college draft.

But on Sept. 11, 1971, head coach Ed Hughes (now an assistant coach with the Dallas Cowboys), called Gerela into his office and said he was being placed on waivers.

"I knew the writing was on the wall," says Gerela, snapping the elastic band between his teeth. "Especially when Hughes brought 10 to 15 kickers into training camp. I beat them all and then he brings in this guy from the 49ers taxi squad. A left-footed kicker, straight on. Hughes didn't like soccer-style kickers for some reason. I outkicked that guy too and then Hughes says they're getting rid of me because I'm not emotional enough. What the hell's that mean, I said. He says I don't get excited. I said it's not my nature to get all excited, jump up and down, scream and yell and foam at the mouth. If I did that, I couldn't do my job. You have to keep cool. Sorry Roy, he says."

Gerela was immediately picked up by the Steelers, who had been plagued with kicking problems.

"Anyway, Hughes got canned himself. When I play Houston now I always have a great game, a great game." He smiles, the elastic band plinking.

A brightly-lit stadium on a bright afternoon

Three Rivers Stadium is packed to capacity. Bands play and banners hang everywhere. "Franco's Italian Army" and "Bradsha Boosters" and "Rocky's Flying Squirrels." Bob Bubanic, the chubby little laborer who heads Gerela's Gorillas, is leaping up and down in his ape suit, exhorting the crowd behind him in the end zone seats to chant something, anything as long as it's pro-Steelers.

The Gorillas' big sign today reads: "Hey Wersching - 2 out of 5 Won't Cut It", in reference to San Diego kicker Ray Wersching's kicking record this season. At the other end of the field, a contingent of Gorillas holds a banner asking: "What's A Wersching?" The Gorillas have a sign for every kicker in the league. They're convinced that kickers miss converts and field goals because they see the signs and get rattled.

To a mighty roar from the crowd, the Steelers take to the field, their black and gold uniforms fresh and clean-looking in the glare of the stadium lights, turned on at 1 o'clock on a bright afternoon and leaving no doubt as to why the United States has an energy crisis.

Gerela is number 10. Steelers win the coin toss and elect to receive the kick-off. Gerela is all nerves. He paces up and down in front of the Steelers bench flexing his knees, bunching his shoulders, rolling his head, hitching his pants, tugging his socks, clapping his hands, pulling his laces, flexing his knees. He looks like a guy with the hives. Sometimes he kneels on the turf and when he does he places a folded towel

beneath his knee. He wears no pads in his pants because pads hinder his leg mobility. But he only kneels for a second or two. Then he's up pacing again. Rolling his arms in windmill fashion, snapping his legs out.

At 4:38 of the first quarter the Steelers score and Gerela has no trouble with the convert. Gerela never has trouble with converts. It's field goals against San Diego that kill him.

A gorilla in lights romps on the scoreboard

Gerela prowls the sideline again, the towel in his hand. Tugging, hitching, pulling, only occasionally glancing out at the action on the field. In the first row of end zone seats, the Gorillas are up and howling.

At 9:30 of the quarter Gerela goes out again, this time to try a nine-yard field goal. He's never had trouble with nine-yard field goals. No pressure here. It's the ones from 30 yards out against San Diego that kill him. He kicks the field goal, the Gorillas roar with the crowd, but San Diego is charged with holding and the field goal is nullified. Steelers take the ball first down, goal-to-go on the one-yard line, and Bradshaw crashes over for the TD.

It's not until 14:29 of the quarter that Gerela is confronted with the Moment of Truth. A 38-yard field goal attempt. "Okay Roy, baby," whoops Terry Hanratty, "an easy three, Roy, baby." Gerela runs on to the field. The crowd roars.

Bobby Walden positions himself for the snap and starts barking the signals. "Okay Roy, now take it easy," Gerela tells himself while waiting for the ball to come back. "Nice and easy, meet the ball flush, follow through. Keep the head down. Nice and easy, real smooth."

The ball spirals back from the centre.

"Miss it! Miss it! Miss it!" screams the rampaging San Diego line as it claws and kicks its way toward Gerela. "Too far! Too far!"

Thank!

The crowd cheers, the band plays.

"Gerela Comes Through Again!" flashes the scoreboard. "Add 3!" A gorilla in lights romps across the scoreboard and then: "This Is The Eighth Consecutive Regular Season Game In Which Roy Gerela Has Kicked A Field Goal!" More cheers. More marching music.

It's Gerela's final field goal in the game, but he boots three more converts for a day's total of eight points. Steelers win 38-21.

In the dressing room afterwards, Muzak to soothe the savage beasts filters forth from unseen speakers. Gerela dresses slowly and quietly in front of his locker.

"Go, Roy, go," shouts Bradshaw, dripping water.

"Yeah, Roy," cries Hanratty, "go baby."

"Guess I'll go out and get drunk," says Gerela.

"Drunk!" explodes Bradshaw. "Hear that? He's gonna get drunk and he don't even drink. Go, Roy, baby!"

He absorbs the ribbing silently and with a smile.

"Well," I tell him before leaving, "you broke the jinx."

"Yeah," he says, running the elastic between his teeth, "it was nothing." 