

Sewickley Valley YMCA Senior Men's club hosts Steelers great Andy Russell

The speaker at the Sewickley Valley YMCA Senior Men's Club meeting on Feb. 24 was Andy Russell, who was an important part of the Pittsburgh Steelers team that won Super Bowl IX in 1975 and Super Bowl X in 1976.

Russell began his presentation talking about his early days as a high school football player. He said that during his freshman year in high school, the family moved from New York to St. Louis. The move came about after Russell's father, a senior executive at Monsanto, was transferred. Russell attended Ladue High School in the St. Louis area, and in his sophomore year was a starting end. His junior and senior years, he played full back and linebacker, earning all-state honors.

Russell said that, upon graduation from Ladue, he received scholarship offers from 28 universities. Russell said his father thought he should attend the University of Missouri in his home state, as he had great respect for its football coach, Dan Devine. So, Russell accepted Missouri's offer. He enrolled there and signed with the ROTC program. Russell said he was surprised when Devine also wanted him to play both on offense as a running back and defense as a defensive back. Russell lettered there from 1960 to 1962. The combined records of those Tigers teams was 26-3-3.

Russell played in three bowl games, including the 1961 Orange Bowl, in which he intercepted two passes in a win against Navy. He also led the Tigers in rushing that season and returned an interception 47 yards for a touchdown in a 10-0 victory against the Oklahoma Sooners. Russell was inducted into the Missouri Sports Hall of Fame for years 1957 to 1976.

In 1963, Russell was drafted by the Steelers and played under Buddy Parker, who he said hated rookies. Russell said Parker traded many of his rookie players for more experienced players. During his rookie season, Russell had to leave the team because of commitments to the Army and missed playing in the NFL championship game against the Chicago Bears. He was deployed to Germany for two years, during which time he reached the rank of second lieutenant. While in Germany, he played military football, which kept him in good shape.

Russell talked about when he came back to the team two years later in 1966. Chuck Noll was the coach then and one of the first things Noll told the team was that they weren't winning because they were bad and they weren't likely to be around for very long. Three years later, Russell made his first of eight Pro Bowl appearances. He would go on to play in seven consecutive Pro Bowls, from 1970 to 1976. He has also since been named to the NFL 1970 All-Pro Team, and the Steelers named him to their All-Time Team in 2007 while celebrating their 75th season. Collectively, he, Jack Lambert and Jack Ham, who anchored the "Steel Curtain," were chosen to play in 25 Pro Bowls. Russell

was a team captain for 10 years. In addition to his athletic ability as a linebacker, Russell was also known for his ability to read the opposing quarterback's plays and stop them in their tracks.

Russell said times were different when he played. If you got hurt and went to the sidelines, you were checked out and sent back to the playing field. He talked about a game with Green Bay when he tackled one of Green Bay's huge running backs. All he remembered then was seeing a flash of light, so he got up and went back to the huddle. It was then that Green Bay quarterback Bart Starr told him, "I think you are in the wrong huddle!"

Russell set a playoff record that still stands today on Dec. 25, 1975, when he returned a fumble 93 yards for a touchdown at Three Rivers Stadium in a victory over the Baltimore Colts. Some have claimed that it is also the longest play in terms of time elapsed. Russell talked about that runback and said he had a slight injury then and was running out of gas. He said he figured he would be tackled, but that his teammates kept blocking Baltimore's players on his way to the touchdown, so he couldn't stop.

Russell also said that, "I never missed a game my entire football career: high school, college, Army or pro." He also acknowledged that, "There was some luck to avoid all those injuries. I played hurt a lot with broken fingers and thumbs and things like that. But you played. In those days, the badge of honor was to play hurt. That is not so anymore."

Russell completed his college education with a Bachelor of Science in economics and a master's degree in business. He also said at one point in his career he was making more money from his business than he was playing football, but he decided to continue playing. He said that, back then, NFL players didn't make as much money as they do now. Today, Russell is a successful businessman and partner in Laurel Mountain Partners, a Pittsburgh-based municipal finance and investment banking company.

Russell also talked about how much he enjoyed, as a player, traveling with the USO and helping to raise funds for many worthy causes. Russell is still a very active fundraiser, and has his own foundation, the Andy Russell Charitable Foundation. For more, visit andy russell.org.

Russell spoke for about an hour to a crowd of 96 people without any notes and received a long round of applause. It was apparent that the Senior Men's Club truly enjoyed that he came to their meeting and shared his experiences with them about one of the most wonderful times in Pittsburgh sports history.

Senior Men's Club meetings are open to anyone interested in attending. They take place Fridays at the Sewickley Valley YMCA at 9:30 a.m. For more, visit www.sewickleyymca.org/programs/senior-mens-club



Steelers great Andy Russell addresses attendees at the Sewickley Valley YMCA Senior Men's Club meeting Feb. 24.