

CHAPTER ONE

THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE PIRATES FAMILY

The 1980–1985 Seasons



As over forty-four thousand Pirates fans headed to Three Rivers Stadium for the home opener of the 1980 season, they had every reason to feel optimistic about the Pirates and Pittsburgh sports in general. In the 1970s, their Pirates had captured six divisional titles, two National League pennants, and two World Series championships. Their Steelers, after decades of futility, had won four Super Bowls in the 1970s, while the University of Pittsburgh Panthers led by Heisman Trophy winner Tony Dorsett added to the excitement by winning a collegiate national championship in football. There was no reason for Pittsburgh sports fans to doubt that the 1980s would bring even more titles to the City of Champions.

After the “We Are Family” Pirates, led by Willie Stargell, won the 1979 World Series, the ballclub’s goals for 1980 were “Two in a Row and Two Million Fans.”¹ If the Pirates repeated as World Series champions, it would mark the first time that a Pirates team had accomplished that feat in franchise history. If two million fans came out to Three Rivers Stadium to see the Pirates win back-to-back World Series titles, it would

break the attendance record of 1,705,828, set at Forbes Field during the improbable championship season of 1960. The offseason after the 1979 World Series victory was a whirlwind of awards and honors, highlighted by World Series Most Valuable Player (MVP) Willie Stargell and Super Bowl MVP Terry Bradshaw of the Steelers appearing on the cover of the December 24, 1979, *Sports Illustrated* as corecipients of the magazine's Sportsman of the Year Award.

The Pirates had lost veteran pitcher Bruce Kison to free agency during the off season, but manager Chuck Tanner replaced Kison by moving 1978 *Sporting News* Rookie Pitcher of the Year Don Robinson into the starting rotation. Utility infielder Rennie Stennett also opted for free agency, but the Pirates already had a strong infield with Bill Madlock, Tim Foli, and Phil Garner, all acquired in brilliant trades in 1979 by General Manager (GM) Harding "Pete" Peterson. With "Pops" Stargell at first base, Dave Parker in the outfield, and a veteran bullpen led by Kent Tekulve, the 1980 Pirates were considered by many to be heavy favorites to defend their World Series title. During spring training, there was a brief walkout and threatened player strike, but the Pirates had almost their entire starting lineup returning and were a confident team when they opened the season in St. Louis. After taking three out of four games from the Cardinals, they headed to Three Rivers Stadium in Pittsburgh for their home opener against the Cubs.

Rain threatened throughout the pregame festivities, which included Sister Sledge delighting the sellout crowd with a rendition of the team's 1979 theme song. Pirates players received several awards and honors during the pregame ceremony, but the moment that drew the greatest roar from the crowd came when the team received its World Series rings. Outfielder Bill Robinson said, "This was a special day in my life. . . . Getting the ring. It meant so much to me."² Once the game started, there were four rain delays totaling more than two hours, but the fans who stayed to the end saw a dramatic victory they hoped was a harbinger of things to come in the 1980 season. Leading 4–2 in the top of the ninth, the Pirates brought in the usually reliable Tekulve, but he yielded the tying runs that sent the game into extra innings. In the bottom of the tenth, Robinson gave fans a reminder of the heroics of the 1979 World Series in which the Pirates rallied from a 3-games-to-1 deficit when he homered to give the Pirates a 5–4 victory and their fourth win in a row.

After a fast start in April, however, the Pirates dealt with a variety of injuries, slumps, and clubhouse distractions and struggled to stay above .500 in May and June. Though several players were having sub-par years, discontented Pirates fans vented their unhappiness on Parker, who had signed a five-year seven-million-dollar contract going into the 1979 season, the largest in the major leagues at that time. On July 20, 1979, the frustration grew ugly when a fan threw a battery at Parker from the upper deck of the right-field stands at Three Rivers in the eighth inning of the first game of a double-header between the Pirates and the Los Angeles Dodgers.³ The timing of the incident was unfortunate for the Pirates because they had scheduled a Willie Stargell Day celebration between games of the doubleheader. More than forty thousand fans watched the Pirates shower Stargell with gifts ranging from a mink cowboy hat to a solid gold star, while Parker, who removed himself from the first game after the battery barely missed his head, stood in anger and tears at the ceremony.⁴ Afterward, Parker told reporters that racism was behind the incident and asked the Pirates to trade him. Years later, in his autobiography, Stargell claimed that, after the battery incident, Parker “played the game out of hate and revenge instead of love.”⁵

Despite their early struggles, the Pirates bounced back in July and moved into first place. As late as August 24, they were on top of their division, two games ahead of the Expos. Unfortunately, the Pirates lost thirteen of their next fifteen games, and they never recovered. When they went on a seven-game losing streak in late September, their pursuit of a division title and National League pennant and their dream of becoming the first Pirates team to repeat as World Series champions were over.

Throughout the 1970s, the Pirates had developed a reputation for late-season surges that carried them to the top of their division and into the postseason. The problem in 1980 was that an experienced championship team became an aging, often injured team. The Pirates began the season by losing pitcher Jim Rooker to a career-ending arm injury and finished the season with Stargell on the disabled list. Every regular failed to match the production of his 1979 season, and veteran starting pitchers, including Bert Blyleven and John Candelaria, as well as bullpen ace Tekulve, finished with a losing record.

During the 1980–1981 offseason, GM Peterson’s biggest move was to acquire hard-hitting first baseman Jason Thompson from the Cali-

ifornia Angels. An optimistic Stargell had signed a two-year contract at the end of the 1980 season, but Peterson wanted insurance in case the forty-one-year-old Stargell could not come back after his season-ending injury. Peterson also traded away Blyleven, who was unhappy pitching in Tanner's five-man rotation, but the Pirates' GM felt that younger pitchers like Rick Rhoden and Eddie Solomon were ready to step up. He also believed that several players from the farm system, including catcher Tony Peña and infielders Dale Berra and Vance Law, would strengthen the Pirates' regular lineup.

The hope that 1981 would mark an easy transition proved mistaken, but it was something beyond the Pirates' performance on the field that turned the 1981 season into a disaster. Three months into the season, after acrimonious negotiations between the Major League Baseball Players Association (MLBPA) and team owners over a new contract and free agency compensation reached a stalemate, Players Association president Marvin Miller declared, "We have accomplished nothing. The strike is on."⁶ The long and bitter players' strike began on June 12, 1981, and lasted until July 31, though games did not resume until August 10. With more than one-third of the 1981 season lost to the strike, Major League Baseball commissioner Bowie Kuhn decided to divide the season into two halves, with the division winners of each half meeting in a playoff. At the time of the walkout the Pirates stood at 25–23 and were in fourth place. When the season resumed, the Pirates went into a tailspin, never recovered, and ended the second half with a record of 21–33 and a last-place finish.

After just two seasons, the Pirates had gone from favorites to repeat as World Series champions to a team expected to finish last in its division. A franchise that had hoped to attract two million fans in 1980 now hoped that one million would show up in 1982 (only 541,789 paid their way into Three Rivers in the strike-shortened 1981 season). When the Pirates opened the 1982 season, only three starters from the 1979 World Series champions were in the lineup: Omar Moreno, Parker, and Madlock. Moreno would be a free agent at the end of the season, and an overweight, unhappy Parker would follow a year later. Stargell was still on the team, but injuries reduced him to pinch-hitting in what would be his last season.

Other than the optimistic manager Tanner, no one was surprised when the Pirates were nine games under .500 at the end of May 1982,

but thanks to the hot hitting of Thompson and Madlock and excellent starting and relief pitching, the Pirates surged in July and August to six games over. They went back to the future to pick up Richie Hebner, who played on the 1971 World Series championship team, at midseason, but they also got help from youngsters Johnny Ray and Peña. Ray was named the *Sporting News* 1982 National League Rookie of the Year. For the first time since 1979, the Pirates had a winning record in September, and they finished the 1982 season at 84–78, good for fourth place in their division.

The Pirates did manage to reach their modest goal of attracting one million fans, but the final figure was only 1,024,106 for the 1982 season, which was 622,651 less than their last full-season attendance in 1980, and an average home attendance of only 12,643, second lowest in the major leagues ahead of only Minnesota. Moreover, the Pirates would have finished the 1982 season with attendance under one million if more than 38,000 fans had not come to Three Rivers for a second Willie Stargell Day. The Pirates held the ceremony honoring Stargell's retirement on Labor Day, because Pittsburgh was in the midst of a Rust Belt depression. Stargell asked the Pirates to turn the event into a fundraiser for unemployed steelworkers. Fans attending the game were asked to bring cans of food to the stadium. In thanking the crowd, Stargell told them, "During these trying times economically, there are a lot of people who would like to work and can't."⁷

While a dark economic cloud hung over the city, the Pirates had reason for optimism going into the 1983 season. After defying predictions of a losing record and possible last-place finish in 1982, the Pirates were once again regarded as contenders by sportswriters and fans. Stargell was gone, but Parker, knowing he was headed for free agency, came into camp in great shape, as did Madlock, who went on to win the National League batting title, as he had in 1975, 1976, and 1981. With a strong starting rotation headed by Rhoden, Candelaria, and newly acquired Larry McWilliams, and a durable Tekulve heading the bullpen, the Pirates looked poised to oust the St. Louis Cardinals as division champions.

Despite their talent and optimism, the Pirates played inconsistent baseball and struggled in the first half of the 1983 season. By mid-June, they were thirteen games under .500. They received a boost after the All-Star break, however, with the July call-up of rookie pitching sen-

sation José DeLeón and went on a tear that took them over .500 and within a few games of first place. On September 17, they were in a first-place tie with the Philadelphia Phillies, but with Madlock out with a torn calf muscle, the Pirates' bats cooled off, and the pitching could not carry them past the division-leading Phillies. They lost eight of their last fourteen games and finished the season in second place at 84–78, an improvement in the standings but with the same record they had in 1982.

As a parting “gift” for Parker, a fan threw another battery at him from the upper deck on September 10, 1983. With the season nearly over, Parker stayed in the game and dismissed the incident. In the clubhouse he told reporters, “I have 19, 20 more days on my contract here and no one is going to intimidate me out there.”⁸ During the offseason, Parker signed a multiyear contract with his hometown Cincinnati Reds. With Parker lost to free agency, the consensus going into the 1984 season was that, for the Pirates to remain contenders they would need to trade a veteran pitcher to strengthen the offense. To the astonishment of sportswriters, fans, and even some of the players, Peterson did just the opposite when he traded Mike Easler, the Pirates' most consistent hitter for the past few seasons, to the Red Sox for pitching ace John Tudor.

With Tudor added to an already strong starting rotation, Pirates pitchers would go on to lead the National League in 1984 with a 3.11 earned run average, but they had little support from the team's offense. Accustomed to watching sluggers like Roberto Clemente, Stargell, and Parker in the 1970s, Pirates fans now looked out at a mix of no-names and has-beens, ranging from newcomers Marvell Wynne, Joe Orsulak, and Doug Frobels to veterans Lee Mazzilli, Amos Otis, and Milt May, a rookie in the 1971 World Series, who hit just one home run and batted only .177 in 1984. The only remaining regular from the 1979 World Series champions was Madlock. As team captain he questioned, even before the season started, how the Pirates offense would score without Parker and Easler. When GM Peterson failed to trade for more offense, Candelaria, who had won the critical sixth game in the 1979 World Series, called Peterson “a bozo” and an “idiot.”⁹ To make matters worse, outstanding relief pitcher Rod Scurry revealed that he had a drug problem and headed into rehab.

Predictably, the Pirates got off to a poor start in 1984 and finished April in last place, where they stayed for the rest of the season. With dis-

gusted fans staying away from Three Rivers, attendance dropped from 1,225,916 in 1983 to 773,500, the lowest figure for a full season of play in the stadium's history. The Pirates did play better in September, but they finished the season in last place in their division with a record of 75–87. Going into the 1985 season, the Pirates were a team in turmoil, but the worst was yet to come, including the threat of a move to another city.



If ever the Pirates experienced a complete disaster in franchise history, it was the during the 1985 season. It actually began during the offseason when the Galbreath family decided to sell the franchise. John W. Galbreath, who built a fortune in real estate and horse breeding, bought into ownership in 1946 and became majority owner in 1950. But the Galbreaths had become increasingly frustrated with the team's poor play, falling attendance, and financial losses, and they decided it was time to step aside. The family, who lived in Columbus, Ohio, were also upset with fan perceptions that they were absentee landlords and unwilling to spend money to improve the ballclub. Dan Galbreath, John's son and the team president at the time, complained that, even though the family had put time, effort, and money into the franchise for twenty-nine years and had given Pittsburgh three World Series championships, fans were constantly comparing his family unfavorably with the Rooneys: "Hey, the Steelers went nearly forty years without winning a damned thing. But did Art Rooney catch hell here? Of course not. Why? Because he's Irish, and he's Catholic and he's lovable. In this city, he can do no wrong."¹⁰ They hoped to sell the franchise to local ownership, but if that failed, they would listen to offers from those interested in moving the franchise to another city.

Realizing his own future in Pittsburgh was in a precarious position after the Tudor-Easler trade, Peterson tried to improve the Pirates' poor offense by turning around and trading Tudor, a potential twenty-game winner, to the St. Louis Cardinals for outfielder George Hendrick. He also sent a package of players, including Berra, and outstanding prospect, Jay Buhner, to the Yankees for outfielder Steve Kemp and Foli, the shortstop for the 1979 World Series champions. Peterson thought that he was getting players capable of hitting twenty-five home runs and driving in one hundred runs in Kemp and Hendrick and a solid defensive player

in Foli, but he soon found out that Kemp and Hendrick were damaged goods and that Foli no longer had the range to play shortstop. Now thirty-five years old, Hendrick was coming off an unproductive and injury-prone season with the Cardinals in which he hit only nine home runs and had sixty-nine runs batted in. He was unhappy about being traded from a contender to a struggling ballclub with an uncertain future. He expressed his dissatisfaction by refusing to talk with the press and merely going through the motions on the playing field. When he failed to run out groundballs, he quickly replaced the departed Parker as the most hated ballplayer in the hearts of Pirates fans, who dubbed Hendrick “Joggin’ George.”

While there was no questioning Kemp’s heart—he was so aggressive at bat that when he swung and missed a pitch, his body corkscrewed like a character out of a Looney Tunes cartoon. He had a bad shoulder that limited him to ninety-four games for the Yankees in 1984 with seven home runs and only forty-one runs batted in (RBIs). When he arrived at the Pirates’ spring training camp in 1985, he was sporting a lengthy scar from offseason surgery that Peterson knew nothing about. Kemp swung with the gusto of Babe Ruth, but with no power left in his shoulder he went well into the 1985 season before he hit his first home run and finished the season with only two, the same number hit by Hendrick before he was traded in late season to the California Angels.

The problem with having a bad ballclub in Pittsburgh in 1985 was that it coincided with the city’s deepening Rust Belt depression. During its Smoky City days as the country’s leading producer of steel, Pittsburgh developed a strong reputation as a working-class town. For the Pirates, that meant that ever since Barney Dreyfuss took over ownership of the franchise at the beginning of the twentieth century, the team identified with and relied upon a working-class fan base. Dreyfuss’s proudest boast was that “We are a first-division town, and I am a first-division club owner.”¹¹

During the early 1980s, 130,000 jobs were lost in Pittsburgh as the steel industry eliminated 90 percent of its workers. U.S. Steel on its own eliminated 30,000 jobs. The city also experienced a drop of 176,000 in population, including 14 percent of its young people.¹² With the steel mills closing, the unemployment rate double the national average, and the city’s population in decline, the Pirates faced a diminishing fan base.

Instead of fathers taking their sons to a Pirates game, they were taking their families to another city in search of a job.

With the team playing poor baseball, the fans who were still willing to spend money to come to Three Rivers came in a surly mood. Thompson, who had signed a multiyear contract after the 1982 season, complained, "If I had known the team would go the way it has, I wouldn't have signed. Everything has been so negative for two years. Opening day this year they booed us." When 14,029 showed up in mid-April for Buck Night, a promotion that offered fans a general admission seat for one dollar as well as a coupon for a hot dog and a drink, Pittsburgh sportswriter Bob Smizik saw the attendance as a rare positive sign. On the night of the same promotion a year prior, the Pirates had drawn only 2,752 fans. He pointed out that Peterson had called 1985 a crisis year for the Pirates, "the most important season in the history of the franchise."¹³ Peterson believed that if the Pirates could play well, reconnect with the community, and draw a million fans to Three Rivers that would be a sign to new owners to keep the team in Pittsburgh.

The Pirates started out 1985 with a record of 14–28, and the desperately hopeful Peterson did not have a chance to see the season through to the end. Growing increasingly frustrated with the poor play of the Pirates and the lack of interest by potential buyers, the Galbreath family fired Peterson and asked Joe L. Brown to return as general manager. Brown was the architect of the Pirates' 1960 and 1971 World Series championship teams. When he retired in 1976, Peterson had been the man who replaced him. Now Brown took over for Peterson.

What Brown discovered was a ballclub lacking in leadership in the clubhouse and on the field: "The retirement of Willie Stargell left us without a dominant personality. There's no one to capture the imagination." Thompson believed that when the Pirates lost Parker and Easler they lost more than their bats in the lineup: "Both guys were upbeat. They were leaders. When we lost them we lost a lot." Adding to the problem was the negative atmosphere in Pittsburgh. Brown continued, "It's tough to play where almost everything you read and hear is negative—possible sale of the club, possible move of the franchise. . . . Baseball generally is drawing well, but not here. Crowds help players. Players like to have their accomplishments recognized and applauded." Earlier in the season, the outspoken Candelaria had claimed, "There's a lot of guys who'd like to get out. . . . If you asked, I'll bet half the people here

would say they want out.” Even the optimistic Tanner admitted that he never had seen a season with so many distractions. “It’s been a very difficult year for everything, as if there was a black cloud hanging over us.”¹⁴

The Pirates management tried to attract fans to Three Rivers, but every move seemed to fail. On May 3, 1985, the Pirates brought back the legendary Bob Prince to the broadcasting booth, ten years after firing Prince and his partner Nellie King in one of the most unpopular decisions ever made by the franchise. When he was introduced to Pirates fans, Prince received a standing ovation. Incredibly, when Prince starting broadcasting the game, the weak Pirates offense came to life and scored nine runs in the first inning. When Thompson came to bat, Prince told Pirates fans, “We’ve had everything else. Jason might as well ding one.” As if on cue, Thompson hit a home run. The Pirates went on to a lopsided 16–2 victory over the Dodgers. Sadly, Prince was in failing health and died a few weeks after his broadcast.

In another attempt to revive fan interest, on June 30, with rumors swirling that the Pirates would be leaving the city, the Pirates held a Ballot by Ballpark Day to save the franchise. Fans were encouraged to “vote” their support of the team by coming to the game. An impressive crowd of 31,384 showed up, the largest crowd at Three Rivers Stadium since Opening Day, but unfortunately the Pirates failed to show up on the field and lost to the Cubs, 9–2. Fans were so disgusted with the team’s poor play that many began rooting for the Cubs and booing the Pirates. Calling Pirates fans “miserable people,” infielder Jim Morrison told a sportswriter, “This is a miserable environment to play baseball. There were 31,000 here today, and 26,000 were rooting for the Cubs and 5,000 were cheering for us. My opinion is that it’s time for the team to move.”¹⁵

That season, pitcher Bob Walk was trying to resurrect his career with the Pirates after being released from Atlanta, but he recognized that the 1985 Pirates “were a sinking ship.” Players were openly expressing their desire to get out of Pittsburgh, and attendance was poor. The pitcher remembered walking from the dugout to the bullpen before the start of games, looking up, and seeing row after row and deck after deck of empty seats. There were more fans coming to games in Buffalo, where Walk had started the 1985 season in the minor leagues, than there were coming to Three Rivers to watch a Pirates team that “was going down hill fast.”¹⁶



As if poor play and fan disgust were not bad enough, a Pittsburgh grand jury began deliberations in May in what would become known as the “Pittsburgh Drug Trials.” What emerged from grand jury testimony was a clear indication that the use of drugs, including cocaine, was common at Three Rivers Stadium. The names of current Pirates Rod Scurry and Lee Mazzilli, as well as former players Dave Parker, John Milner, Lee Lacy, and Dale Berra turned up in the testimony, as well as that of Kenneth Koch. Employed as the Pirate Parrot team mascot, Koch was accused of being a go-between for dealers and Pirates players.

On May 30 and 31, 1985, the grand jury came back with indictments for seven dealers but no customers, which meant that no ballplayers were indicted. Even Koch escaped an indictment because he cooperated with FBI agents during the investigation. Players, including current and former Pirates, would have to testify at the upcoming trials, but under immunity from prosecution. As for the indicted dealers, Aaron Skirboll described them in *The Pittsburgh Cocaine Seven* “as a ragtag group of seven local men. The Pittsburgh cocaine seven consisted of a pair of heating repairmen, an accountant, a bartender, a caterer, a land surveyor, and an out-of-work photographer. . . . nothing more than an assortment of sports groupies.”¹⁷

The first to go to trial was Curtis Strong, a part-time caterer who was from Philadelphia. The most shocking testimony during the trial came from Berra. When questioned by Strong’s defense attorney about amphetamines, or “greenies,” Berra claimed they were easily available in the Pirates clubhouse. When asked, “From whom did you get amphetamines in Pittsburgh?” he responded, “From Bill Madlock.” When asked, “Who else, if anyone, did you get them from?” he shocked those at the trial by responding, “From Willie Stargell.”¹⁸ Madlock, who was still on the Pirates team, and the retired Stargell, who had returned to the team in 1985 as a first-base coach to help with player morale, vehemently denied the accusation. Stargell would later be cleared of Berra’s accusation by baseball commissioner Peter Ueberroth, but the stain of the drug trials would convince many fans that the money they spent at the ballpark was being used to support players’ drug habits.

While Berra’s testimony was the most sensational during the trial, former Pirate and current Cincinnati Red Parker was the main attrac-

tion among the witnesses and drew a crowd. During his examination by federal attorney Alan Johnson, Parker described cocaine as a recreational drug, “sort of the in-thing to do. . . . Cocaine was becoming vastly popular in society and was constantly available because of who I was.”¹⁹ Sam Reich, the Pittsburgh attorney who represented Parker, recalled in an interview the circus atmosphere as Parker arrived at the courthouse. Reporters and photographers hounded Parker when he entered and left the building, and at one point a reporter yelled out, “What about the kids?” Parker’s response was that it was “my mistake” and has “nothing to do with kids.”²⁰ Reich also remembered that Pete Rose, the manager of the Reds, wanted Parker in the lineup even on the days he was testifying, so the unhappy Parker had to fly back and forth between Pittsburgh and Cincinnati during the trials.

When Strong’s defense attorney, Adam Renfroe, who confronted every government witness about the money he was making as a ballplayer, cross-examined Parker, he first drew attention to Parker’s “twenty-five thousand dollar Rolex watch” and his “twenty-thousand dollar diamond rings.” He then challenged Parker’s testimony that he just “having fun” by accusing him of destroying the careers of younger players like Scurry and Berra by introducing them to drugs. He then asked, “How do you carry that burden, knowing because of you the Pirates went from the world championship to being the worst in the National League?” Parker’s response was that he did not carry “that burden because I don’t take responsibility for what adults do.”²¹

On September 20, 1985, after nine hours of deliberation, the jury convicted Strong on eleven counts of selling cocaine. On November 5, Federal District Judge Gustave Diamond, after sentencing Strong to twelve years in prison, criticized the players who testified under a cloak of immunity and the gullible fans who still supported and applauded them. Days later, Robert McCue, the only other accused dealer to stand trial, was also convicted and sentenced to ten years. The remaining five worked out plea deals and received lighter prison terms.

Looking back on the trials, Reich believed that the defendants were poorly represented by Renfroe who used the trials as a platform for his own theatrics and was eventually cited for contempt of court. He said that the cases against the “Cocaine Seven” should have ended in plea bargains, and that the trials should never have taken place. But they did, and as a result, drug use among ballplayers, which was common on

teams around the major leagues, was perceived as a “Pittsburgh problem” and became an embarrassment to the city.²²

After the trials, Parker was sued by the Pirates, who still owed him millions of dollars in deferred salary, for breach of contract. The Pirates claimed, among other things, that Parker was responsible for “the poisoning of the team’s relationship with the fans and the sports press.”²³ The team and Parker eventually settled out of court. Berra and Scurry continued their struggles with cocaine addiction. In 1989 Berra was arrested for possession of cocaine and agreed to a three-year intervention program, which he completed in 1992. In late October of the same year, Scurry, who still struggled with his addiction, collapsed into a coma after a drug overdose. He died a few days later, on November 5, at the age of thirty-six.



As the 1985 season deteriorated, Brown managed to get rid of malcontents like Madlock, Candelaria, and Hendrick and those associated with the growing drug scandal, like Scurry, who was shipped to the Yankees, where he joined Berra. Brown’s moves, however, had little effect on the team’s performance. Even the Pirates’ younger players, probably demoralized by the ballclub’s misfortunes and threatened move, suffered through off years. Peña’s average dipped from .286 to .249, while former rookie sensation Ray dropped from .312 to .274. The only exception was Sid Bream, a young first baseman acquired from the Los Angeles Dodgers in midseason, who was destined to play a key role in Pirates history, but this was several years later, and for the wrong team.

Perhaps no player exemplified the Pirates collapse more than pitcher DeLeón, who just two seasons before was considered a rising star. Toward the end of the 1985 season, when DeLeón’s record sank to an abysmal 2–19, Tanner sat his young pitcher on the bench so he would not suffer the ignominy of losing twenty games, a fate not suffered by a Pirates pitcher since Murry Dickson in 1952. Tanner may have spared DeLeón, but he could not prevent the Pirates from losing 104 games, the franchise’s most losses since 1953—tied for the third most losses in Pittsburgh baseball history, better only than the 1952 Pirates, who lost 112 games, and the 1890 Alleghenies, who lost 113.

Tanner also could not prevent getting fired himself. At the end of the season, he told his coaching staff, which included Bob Skinner, Grant

Jackson, and Stargell, all veterans of World Series championship teams, that new ownership probably would want a fresh start next season and that he would not be returning as manager. It was another dark moment for fans who remembered that Tanner, who grew up in New Castle, just forty-five miles from Pittsburgh, had inspired the Pirates in the 1979 World Series by continuing to manage the team after his mother died just before Game 5. With the Pirates trailing 3–1 in games, he told his team, “My mother is a great Pirates fan. She knows we’re in trouble, so she went upstairs to get some help.”²⁴ At the end of the 1985 season, there appeared to be no help, divine or otherwise, for the Pirates. After hoping that an attendance of more than one million fans might convince new owners to keep the team in Pittsburgh, the Pirates finished the season with a home attendance of 735,900, down slightly from the previous year. After their remarkable record in the 1970s, which culminated in a dramatic victory in the 1979 World Series, the Pirates, just six seasons later, had finished the season with one of the worst records in team history and had drawn national attention as the most dysfunctional franchise in baseball.

The September 9, 1985, issue of the *Sporting News* appeared on newsstands around the country with a cover photograph of empty seats at Three Rivers Stadium. The banner across the photograph read, “Empty Hopes, Empty Seats.” Inside was a feature article by senior correspondent David Nightingale, detailing the reasons for what he perceived as the death of baseball in Pittsburgh. As far as Nightingale was concerned, the 1979 Pirates’ theme song, “We Are Family,” had become a “dirge,” and Three Rivers Stadium “a funeral parlor.”²⁵ One of the harshest indictments of Pittsburgh fans in Nightingale’s article was that the Pirates, the first franchise in MLB history to field an all-black lineup back in 1971, had “too many black players for their own good” in a city of “first-, second- and third-generation European immigrants” not known for their “color blindness.”²⁶ Garner, a member of the 1979 World Series–winning team, told Nightingale that when he played his “first game for Pittsburgh, after coming over from Oakland, the plate umpire asked how it felt to break the color barrier.”²⁷

Interim GM Brown admitted that “Pittsburgh is a difficult town for blacks.” He believed that Pittsburgh’s white ethnic population felt threatened by the passage of the Fair Employment Practices Act, which opened unions to minorities, especially once the Rust Belt depression

led to so many job losses: “So it was hard for many of them to accept a black idol on the baseball field despite the fact that Roberto Clemente, Willie Stargell and Parker were our most popular players at their respective times.” Echoing Brown’s judgment, Garner told Nightingale that “Pittsburgh is blue-collar, Middle America, and the current baseball product just doesn’t fit that market.” Selling the current product, “well, it’s like trying to sell swimsuits in Alaska.”²⁸

The first Pittsburgh team in the National League to sell its product to baseball fans took the field in 1887. During its long history, the franchise had become one of the most fabled in baseball history. The Pirates played in the first World Series in 1903 and went on to win five World Series, each in a seventh and deciding game. Over the years, Pittsburgh fans watched baseball legends like Honus Wagner, Pie Traynor, Bill Mazeroski, Clemente, and Stargell lead the Pirates to world championships. As the 1985 season came to an end, the Pittsburgh Pirates franchise should have been starting preparations for the celebration of its centennial year in the National League. Instead, it faced the likelihood that the Pirates, after ninety-nine years in Pittsburgh, would be selling their product the next season in another city. The city of Pittsburgh desperately needed a hero to save it from an approaching sports calamity, and it would find one in a Pittsburgh kid who grew up to become mayor.