

NFL's Jim Steeg Created Super Bowl Spectacular

Reprints

Jim Steeg learned an important lesson early on in his career as head of the National Football League's annual extravaganza: Bed sheets and Super Bowls don't mesh.

He was only 29 when tapped by Hall of Fame NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle to lead the league's Special Events Department as its director. This meant Steeg was in charge of the NFL's biggest showcase, the Super Bowl.

Steeg, 67, is considered the NFL official most responsible for growing the Super Bowl from a game to the biggest sports event in the United States. He was in charge of it from 1979 to 2004. After Super Bowl XV in New Orleans in January 1981, Steeg reviewed the game's presentation. He was irritated at one thing the most: the bed sheets fans used as banners and hung from the upper deck.

"I was always opposed to those kind of banners in those days but everyone in the league thought it was no big deal," Steeg told IBD. "You look at the pictures that live on forever from Super Bowl XV and it looks like a hodgepodge."

The following year, Steeg stopped the use of banners in the Super Bowl. Instead he developed a decorative package for the entire stadium.

"After a few years, it became something that everyone in all of sports did. Banners went the way of yesterday's news," Steeg said. "What I learned out of that was trust your judgment, and argue for it a little bit more."

Under Steeg's direction, the Super Bowl went from a championship game to an unofficial national weekend holiday combining sports, entertainment and innovative events in the host city. The Super Bowl also went from generating over \$5 million in revenue for the NFL when he started to more than \$250 million when he left in 2004.

Steeg was inducted into the inaugural class of the Special Events Hall of Fame in 2002. In 2008, he received the Pete Rozelle Award.

"The most important things are you need to listen, you need to read, you need to research, and you need to understand people," Steeg said.

"Jim's a tireless worker," said wife Jill Steeg, a former top Sports Illustrated writer who met Jim when interviewing him in the 1980s. "Jim wanted to make sure that if you went to the game you had a once-in-a-lifetime memory. He pushed the envelope for the game."

"It was important to lead by example," Jim Steeg

said. "I tried to be the first to work and last to leave. I was available to people if they had issues."

Amy Trask, former CEO of the Oakland Raiders, can attest to Steeg's availability.

"I can't tell you how many times I called Jim when he was as busy as could be, and he always found time to say, 'How can I help you?' He always found time to help. No matter how busy Jim was, all we saw was calm."

First And 10

Steeg was born in Boston and moved to Indiana when he was 13.

A lifetime sports enthusiast, Steeg graduated from Miami University in Ohio with a minor in accounting and a major in political science. He worked as an accountant for a year and decided that wasn't for him. He then earned an MBA from Wake Forest University. His rocket-scientist father suggested that since he loved sports he should do something in sports.

Steeg wrote to numerous sports teams. He got only one response, but one was all he needed. Miami Dolphins owner Joe Robbie hired him as the team's chief accountant.

A month later, Robbie put Steeg in charge of team travel, which he knew nothing about. In the next six months, three of his superiors either quit, were fired or retired. And suddenly, at 25 years of age,

Steeg was running the business side of things for the Dolphins.

Working with the Dolphins meant working with the team's Hall of Famer Don Shula, who is the NFL's all-time winningest coach.

"Don was the ultimate detail guy on everything," Steeg said. "I think that was really very important. He thought the smallest detail could change the outcome of a game."

Steeg took that lesson to heart and applied it to the Super Bowl. "I also wanted to look at the details that were going to make the best experience for the fans, teams and media."

He adopted another Shula philosophy: "It's 'I' when it's wrong, it's 'we' or a particular person when it's right," Steeg said.

When Rozelle was looking for someone to lead the special events department, Steeg was recommended by former Dolphins safety Dick Anderson, who had been head of the players union.

Rozelle hired the 29-year-old Steeg, who was put in charge of the Super Bowl, the Pro Bowl and the NFL Draft. Steeg worked under Rozelle until the commissioner's 1989 retirement.

"Pete had an ability to get his people to be extremely loyal to him, because of the way he treated you," Steeg said. "He also taught you to

give responsibilities to other people so they could learn and grow from what was going on."

Steeg started with three full-time staff members in his department. It grew to 24 by the time he left in 2004.

"Surround yourself with the best people, people who (are) never satisfied with the status quo and always want to get better," Steeg said.

One of those people was Don Renzulli, now executive vice president for On Location Experiences, who worked with Steeg for 10 years.

"Jim had a vision for how you can continually make the Super Bowl experience better, and he pushed everybody to make it better each year," Renzulli said. "Jim listened to everybody's ideas, said what could work, and then pushed everybody to make things happen."

On game days at the Super Bowl, there were in excess of 10,000 employees "that were directly accountable for the success of the game and to me," Steeg said. "You've got to make sure you communicate your philosophies with everybody as much as you can."

Best Fan Experience

Steeg felt the most important thing for him to keep in mind whether it was the Super Bowl or NFL Draft was to view everything through the prism of what his reaction would be as a fan.

He asked himself: "How do you make Super Bowl game day in the stadium the best possible experience you can for the fans in attendance? And that's as simple as how you prepare the look on the field, the look in the stadium, what do you do with concessions and merchandise to how you handle parking."

Steeg constantly stayed alert to borrow from other sporting event experiences he'd had — or thought that he had. He was at an L.A. Dodgers home game in the early 1980s and while in the restroom he clearly heard the team's legendary announcer Vin Scully describe the game.

"I'm thinking the Dodgers are brilliant, they put speakers in all the restrooms so you can hear Scully, and then I realize no, it was everybody bringing their transistor radios in," Steeg recalled. The seed planted, Steeg put speakers into the restrooms, tunnels, elevators and concession areas at Super Bowl sites so the fans wouldn't miss a second of what was transpiring on the field if they left their seats. Soon after that, he put TV screens in the concession areas.

While at a U.S. Open tennis match, Steeg took note of how devices were handed out to fans sitting far away from the action so they could listen to the broadcast. Steeg took that idea, found a sponsor, and provided devices so attending fans could listen

to the national Super Bowl broadcast or the ones of each team's home announcers.

When the Super Bowl XVI played in Detroit in 1982, Steeg sought Diana Ross to sing the national anthem and made that happen. Bringing the biggest stars to sing the anthem was the seed that sprouted into Super Bowl halftime shows becoming events in and of themselves.

For Super Bowl XIX played at Stanford Stadium in 1985, Steeg got Apple and Steve Jobs to sponsor seat cushions for the fans as the stadium had only uncomfortable wooden benches. Seat cushions have now become a staple at many title events.

Super Bowl Buildup

With a two-week wait before the Super Bowl game after the conference title games were played, Steeg set out to create something in the host community so people had something to do in the days leading up to kickoff. "Things like the NFL Experience came out of that," Steeg said. "One year in Phoenix we had 106 different events going on, something for everyone."

Steeg worked to also engage the host community by creating events that gave back. The Taste Of The NFL event, now in its 25th year, is a fundraiser that has donated tens of millions to food banks.

The Super Bowl Golf Tournament also gives money back to communities as do the clinics the

NFL puts on in the host cities.

"What could you do to come into the community and not just take but leave something behind?"

Steeg said. One of the biggest investments introduced under Steeg: the construction of the NFL's Youth Education Town, which is the youth center that is built every year after the Super Bowl in that community.

"Someone once said to me that the event is never over until you have learned from it," Steeg reflected. "Success can camouflage problems, and you need to be introspective enough to look for issues and improve. The self- and collective analysis after the event is critical to the future."

Steeg's Keys

NFL executive credited with transforming the Super Bowl from title game to annual extravaganza.

Overcame: Youth, inexperience and uncharted waters.

Lesson: Think like your customers.

"The best leaders incentivize, inspire and empower their teams to be creative and innovative. It's not about one person; it's about building a culture where innovation is prized — and expected."