Swann Song?
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by Dr. G. Terry Madonna and Dr. Michael Young

Lynn Swann is widely known as a former Pittsburgh Steeler superstar, an impressive motivational speaker, and a popular network sports commentator. It's a persona he clearly revels in. But now a gubernatorial aspirant, Swann may be poised to become even better known as the "former next governor" of Pennsylvania. It's an unflattering sobriquet he is unlikely to relish nearly as much.

How Swann has gone from cause celebre to looming lost cause is the question du jour in Pennsylvania politics. His descent has been swift. Only months ago, anointed as the nominee of the Republican Party, Swann, seemed ready to play David to Rendell's Goliath, and return Pennsylvania's state house to the GOP; now it seems possible he could be remembered instead as the guy that helped steered state Republicans into a political iceberg.

What is certain is that Swann's campaign for governor--rocked with some bad press, beset by critics within its own party, and criticized for a series of miscues and missteps--is now having its defining moment. How well the Swann campaign deals with the assortment of dilemmas and challenges it faces will determine whether Swann can make the race with Democratic Governor Ed Rendell competitive again?

Earlier in the year Swann was, indeed, competitive--he and Rendell were virtually deadlocked in the race. But in the past several months Rendell has opened up a substantial double-digit lead that threatens to end early a race once considered an epic contest of national interest.

Swann's wounds have multiple sources. Certainly he seems to have been the victim of his early success--almost fatally lulled to sleep by the torrent of state and national interest in his campaign, an interest driven by the compelling personal story of Swann's phenomenal rise from humble beginnings to super stardom. Outside events also played a role in Swann's rapid rise. A key influence was the stunning victory of the Pittsburgh Steelers in the Super Bowl together with the publicity accorded Swann in the wake of the victory. Important, too, was the growing belief in Republican circles that Ed Rendell was ripe for the plucking.

These cumulative factors converging early in the campaign created an air of inevitably for Swann that led Republican leaders to orchestrate the departure of his primary opponents, including the formidable Bill Scranton and the issue-oriented State Senator Jeff Piccola. This probably saved campaign cash and avoided a nasty intra-party battle for the GOP. But in the process it also denied Swann, a political neophyte, the opportunity to hone his campaign skills, develop a battle tested campaign, and develop a set of issues and policy recommendations that could withstand serious scrutiny.

Other problems have also dogged Swann's candidacy. Both the candidate and the campaign have exhibited shortcomings. Swann has been upbraided by his own party leaders for failure to master state issues, for reluctance to reach out to party leaders and party elders, and for anemic campaign fundraising. He trails Rendell by some 10 million dollars, and did not raise enough cash to buy television time for the spring primary season.
Added to these problems is Swann's seemingly bad fit with the zeitgeist of the times: the cranky and vexatious mood of the Pennsylvania electorate. Each election cycle presents candidates with an electoral environment in which issues must be framed, strategies set, and coalitions assembled.

This year the electoral environment has crystallized around the infamous legislative pay hike of last year, the defeat of 17 state legislative incumbents in the May 16 primary, and the emergence of a widely supported reform agenda in the state. As a result, the electorate's mind-set is strongly change-oriented, anti-incumbent, and reform-minded. Unfortunately for Swann, he remains unconvincing as a change agent. To date his efforts to portray himself as an outsider, who would change the much-despised culture in the state capitol, seems strained and forced; his arguments regarding reform resonate as unfinished or not well thought out.

Nor has the record of his party in the legislature provided much solace. So far Swann has focused his criticism on the ambitious spending programs and income tax hike of the Rendell administration. But Swann's own party's legislative leaders have increased every one of Rendell's budget proposals and supported many of the very programs Swann would eviscerate or eliminate; worse still, GOP legislators led the effort in the much detested pay hike of last year.

As if all that were not enough, Swann must also contend with a very uncivil civil war now raging within the Republican Party. The May 16 primary and the defeat of legislative incumbents brutally revealed the sharp divisions between reformers and establishment types now unleashed within the Republican Party. Swann needs his party united. He must draw the reformers into his campaign, without losing the support of the state's Republican establishment. A political Houdini might be challenged by this task. Yet, Swann must fuse the disparate Republicans elements together if he hopes to defeat Rendell.

And so what to make of the problems and dilemmas Swann now faces? Can Swann do now what he once did regularly for the Steelers: make the clutch plays necessary to win it all? Maybe!

Other gubernatorial candidates have certainly come from behind to win. At least one, Dick Thornburgh in the 1978 made up as much as 25 points on his Democratic rival. More recently Swann's current opponent Ed Rendell showed it can be done, coming from a double-digit deficit to beat Bob Casey in the Democratic gubernatorial primary in 2002.

But the game clock is ticking ominously for Lynn Swann. It's already later than he may think--and it's certainly later than he and his advisors would like it to be. The calendar tells us it is still late spring, but electoral chronology is calculated differently. Much as winning football teams build their later success in hard pre-season work, winning political campaigns typically lay the groundwork for victory in spring and summer months--long before the traditional Labor Day public campaign swings into high gear.

Swann's early fumbles have cost him dearly: in campaign funds, in party backing, and in voter support. But most of all they have cost him time, and that may be the hardest of all to make up.

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