A Sporting Event
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A year or so ago, the fondest hope of many in Pennsylvania--if biggest nightmare of a few --was that the Eagles and Steelers would be meeting in the Super Bowl. Well it’s finally happening –except the grand contest won’t be played for the Lombardi Trophy, but instead for the highest office in Pennsylvania. And the final pairing in the big one won’t be Pittsburgh vs. Philadelphia but Team Swann vs. Team Rendell. Pennsylvania’s gubernatorial super bowl is about to begin.

It was former Lt. Governor and now former gubernatorial candidate Bill Scranton who made it all possible. Scranton’s withdrawal from the Republican nomination race for governor has set the table for a historic Pennsylvania governor’s race--historic because Lynn Swann is now likely to become the first African American to win a gubernatorial nomination for governor in the state; historic because the race now features two candidates with national visibility and stature; and historic because never have two candidates been so identified as clearly with the state’s two major cities in opposite ends of the state-- and not so incidentally with the two major football sports franchises in Pennsylvania.

Scranton’s sudden withdrawal says much about the race and provides important clues to understanding the contest between Swann and Rendell to follow. Originally most analysts dismissed the Swann candidacy as a fool’s errand. How could an ex-football player--regardless of his celebrity--with no political experience and little knowledge of state government possibly win the nomination of a major party for governor--much less the nomination in the button-down, top-down Republican party. And how could a candidate who refused to debate, much to the chagrin of his opponents as well as the media, have any hope of persevering?

But Swann has persevered--and quite comfortably as it turns out.

He had already locked up the crucial GOP State Committee endorsement vote before Scranton’s capitulation. In the critical court of public opinion, Swann, the former sports broadcaster and political neophyte, was leading Scranton, a Pennsylvania name brand if there ever was one. He was also increasing the lead in the early polls, and was within spitting distance of the state’s reigning political superstar Ed Rendell. Not bad for a rookie.

Clearly there are some important lessons to be gleaned here. For the better part of a year, the Scranton campaign let Swann run unchallenged. Swann toured the state, relating to growing audiences his resonating personal narrative--up from humble roots to USC on a football scholarship, then to the Steelers for a stellar pro career, playing for an all world team beloved by millions. It’s not quite Horatio Alger, but it is a compelling story.

Meanwhile, the Scranton campaign, focused on Rendell and beset with its own internal problems, violated an iron axiom of electoral politics: never underestimate an opponent. As a consequence, Scranton never dealt with the challenge of campaigning against star power and a genuine celebrity.
Ironically Scranton failed in his quest for governor at precisely the moment he was most prepared to become governor. A former Lt Governor and scion of a famous Pennsylvania family, he had blossomed into a formidable campaigner. In every sense, he was a much better candidate than during his initial foray into politics as Lt. Governor more than 20 years ago. But ultimately the Republican Party establishment congealed behind Swann, leaving Scranton with the unenviable prospect of running against the Republican organization. It was an ordeal he wisely refused.

A second lesson from the Swann emergence calls attention to the growing intervention of national events into local politics. No Pennsylvania candidate for governor in modern times announced his candidacy and had it become a national story, and certainly no candidate ever had the media exposure of a Super Bowl to fuel a candidacy. Who would have predicted last year that the Steelers would win their conference, win the Super Bowl, and that Swann would be the beneficiary of a tidal wave of national publicity in the wake of Steeler mania? We still are some distance from a true "nationalization" of state politics. But with both congressional and statewide politicians increasingly raising campaign cash out of state, and amid growing national interest in state candidates, Pennsylvania will probably see more national influences in state politics in the future.

And what should we make of the race to come? Who would have imagined that an all pro Hall of Fame Pittsburgh wide receiver and ABC sports announcer would run for governor against a Philadelphia Eagles commentator who just happens to be the governor of Pennsylvania? Swann himself has suggested that the race is about a sports announcer who wants to be governor and a governor who wants to be a sports announcer. Well not quite. But the metaphors are sprouting faster than potholes after a Pennsylvania winter.

It’s East vs. West. The Eagles vs. Steelers. Best from the West vs. Beast of the East--you see the point here. We’re talking a clash of titans, and it's going to be a wild ride.

And make no mistake; Ed Rendell is a tough and seasoned politician and not arguably a great campaigner, who will exploit Swann’s lack of knowledge and experience. Nor is Rendell’s money edge to be discounted. Currently, he is leading Swann’s fundraising by about 12 to 1. Moreover, state Republicans may yet regret not testing Swann in a primary. Other than Dick Thornburgh who had a substantial public record as a US prosecutor, no novice candidate in modern history has won major office without at least one prior race under the belt. Swann has made a career by breaking records, but this particular one may be his greatest challenge.

Meanwhile Rendell himself is not without a care or two. His polling strength is not impressive for an incumbent running for re-election. Some of his campaign promises remain unfulfilled. And he is running in a year that looks ominous for incumbents.

But all of this gets to play out over the next nine months. Meanwhile, pull up a seat and get comfortable. The big event is underway.

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