



NJ Profile

STEVE SABOL



By Bill Glovin
Editor

STEVE SABOL, president of NFL Films, is busy in the next room trying to hone in on the right sound effect for a feature on Johnny Unitas, the legendary Baltimore Colts quarterback who is taking a ferocious hit from a Cleveland Browns linebacker.

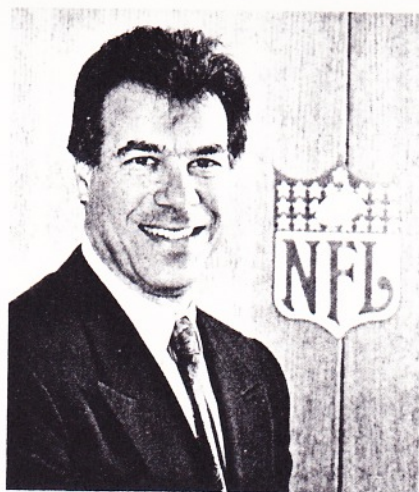
"I've always thought of myself more as a creator than a paper pusher," says Sabol. "That's one of the reasons we've been so successful. Creativity has always been the priority here."

Sabol, who hosts *This Is The NFL*, the longest syndicated show in the history of sports, and *Monday Magazine*, is a cinematic conductor working to create dramatic moments. His theatrical flair keeps creeping into his conversation as he routinely quotes colorful characters like Ernest Hemingway, Orson Wells, Gen. George C. Patton and others. And not unlike some of the characters he mentions, he'll sometimes use an obscenity or two to emphasize a point.

"Don Shula told me once that if NFL Films was a football team, you guys would have been in 15 Super Bowls and won them all," says Sabol, beaming with pride. "I couldn't think of any praise higher than that."

IN many respects, Sabol's career sounds like a modern day fairy-tale. The idea for NFL Films stemmed from his father, Ed Sabol, now 72 and chairman, who worked in the family's Philadelphia overcoat business and hated it.

As a wedding present, Ed received a 16-mm Bell and Howell movie camera,



and Steve became the leading actor in all of the home movies. "I started playing football as a 70 pounder on the Haverford (Pennsylvania) school team and every game I played he filmed," recalls Sabol. "By the time I was a high school senior, he had gotten pretty good at it."

Ed left the overcoat business at age 40 to start a film company—Blair Motion Pictures—and Steve headed for college in Colorado to play football and major in art. Ed's first film involved whale hunting, recalls Steve, and in the beginning, his father would make an occasional industrial film. In 1962,

In addition to football, NFL Films has made a NASA documentary for PBS, rock videos for Bruce Springsteen and Michael Jackson, commercials for Disney and Wendy's and more.

opportunity knocked when Ed purchased the rights to the National Football League (NFL) championship game in an open bid for a mere \$5,000. He and his son would never look back.

"I'll always remember Dad calling me up in my fourth or fifth year of college and saying, 'Judging by your grades, playing football and going to the movies must be the only things you're doing, because you can't be spending any time in class. You're uniquely qualified to help me film this game and I'd like you to come back and do it.'"

"The first thing we looked at was

some old NFL films and we agreed, from a creative standpoint, to present professional football the same way Hollywood presents fiction—with a certain dramatic flair," remembers Steve. "We moved cameras to ground level, got rid of the old fashioned polka music and the way the narration was written. Instead of using a sportscaster, we used John Facenda, a Philadelphia newscaster who had a very resonant, dramatic voice.

"The idea was to emphasize the struggle rather than the strategy. It was my objective to show football as I had experienced it as a player; with the muscles rippling, sweat spraying, snot flying, grunting. Then we took it and added a surrealistic element by putting much of it in slow motion."

New NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle was not only impressed, but realized film's potential to create a public image for a game that, relative to today, had little television exposure. With Rozelle's endorsement, Ed convinced the 12 NFL teams to contribute \$20,000 each to create NFL Films. Today, NFL Films is a wholly owned subsidiary of the NFL and it pays royalties to each team.

"My father isn't involved in the day-to-day operations anymore," says Sabol, but as Hemingway once said, 'Everyone needs their . . . detector.' Dad still contributes in that respect.

"Because NFL Films has such a distinct signature and identity, a lot of people think it's owned by me and my dad and we often hear, 'too bad you don't own stock in the company,'" says Sabol. "But in the truest sense of the cliché, it's been a labor of love—the greatest job in the world. I can't even conceive of doing anything else."

ON the wall in Steve Sabol's office may be the ultimate memento: An autographed photograph of Vince Lombardi that reads, "To Steve, a shmuck if I ever knew one."

NFL Films and its 160 employees have become accustomed to mementos and awards. A difficult-to-miss trophy case in the lobby contains a handful of the close to 40 Emmys NFL Films has won for direction, production and cinematography. All of the accolades have come despite the fact its founders never took a formal camera, writing or filmmaking course.

Sabol is proud that many employees have been at NFL Films since its inception and claims to know everyone by their first names. "I've learned as a manager that you hire the best people available and get the hell out of their way," he claims. He also boasts that the company has pioneered many of the film techniques and trends that are now commonplace.

Interestingly, Sabol once carried a stopwatch into *Gone With the Wind* and counted only 20 minutes out of 222 minutes without music, telling a reporter: "Music is an important part of our lives. We get married to music, we get buried to music, we make love to music and we go to war to music. It's a great way to convey emotion and feeling."

The music that accompanies football highlights has been composed for 24 years by Southern California graduate Sam Spence, who lives in Germany. Each year a 65-piece orchestra provides one and a half hours of original music. Later, Sabol applies it to film.

NFL Films was also the first to apply a pop song to footage and produce highlights of bloopers, which Sabol complains has become "a horrendous, tedious and over-used cliché." It was also first to provide reverse angle replays and shoot ground level slow motion, claims Sabol.

SINCE 1965, every play of every NFL game has been stored in a computerized warehouse adjoining the Mt. Laurel offices. Overall, NFL Films shoots 500 miles of film a year, second only to the U.S. Govern-

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ment. At least two to three of a 60 cameramen force are assigned to each game, with more used for important matchups and playoff games. Controversial plays are sent on to the league office.

In terms unique to NFL Films, cameramen are divided into trees, moles and weasels. A tree is the top cameraman, rooted above the action. Moles are responsible for hand-held action-oriented ground cameras and weasels are ground cameramen who shoot everything but the action. A Super Bowl may command as many as five trees, nine moles and four weasels.

"I was a weasel at 18 Super Bowls and never saw a play," Sabol contends. "The way the sun came through the port holes of the stadium, cleat marks in the mud, the way players are silhouetted coming across the field were things I looked for." Part of the



Ed (left) and son Steve, with some of the close to 40 Emmys won by NFL Films for direction, production and cinematography.

"weasel" philosophy, he adds, comes from Paul Cézanne, the great French impressionistic painter, who once said, "All art is selected detail."

Once the film is shot, it receives a police escort via motorcycle from the stadium to the airport and is rushed back to Mount Laurel for processing, which is completed by morning. Two teams of editors then come in to break down the footage and collate it into story form. By the end of Monday's working day, narration and music are mixed in and the completed product is sent on to various stations around the country.

THE fact that NFL Films uses film rather than videotapes distinguishes it from most television. It is also one of the reasons it has been able to branch out beyond football.

In 1980, it made *The Greatest Adventure: Man's Journey to the Moon*, a PBS documentary done in conjunction with NASA. In recent years, it has done rock videos for Bruce Springsteen, Michael Jackson and others, all of *Sports Illustrated's* Home Video Line, industrial and instructional films, commercials for Disney, Wendy's and more.

"Videotape gives the impression of liveness and it doesn't have film's molding, texture and tactile quality, or its sense of wonder," says Sabol. "Essentially, we are myth makers and storytellers, and that comes across better on film. Watching *Raiders of the Lost Ark* on videotape just wouldn't be the same."

The VCR boom of recent years has meant that almost 40 per cent of NFL Films revenues now come from video cassette sales, which Sabol says, "many football fans are collecting these days like baseball cards." Its video catalogue contains 1986 season features on all 28 NFL teams, all 20 Super Bowls, as well as various videos surrounding humor, history and other themes.

Meanwhile, in addition to providing the half-time highlights for ABC's *Monday Night Football*, it runs an hour and a half of new programming (*Monday Magazine* and *Monday Night Matchup*) on ESPN before the game. It also produces and provides footage for *This Is the NFL*, *Inside the NFL on HBO*, coaches shows around the country and specials.

NFL Films may be partly responsible for the new saturation level of football on television, but Sabol con-

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tends network ratings, stadium attendance and ratings for its shows reached all-time highs last year. No better evidence was the strike of recent months, when ratings were only slightly off. All things considered, he points out, it would be nearly impossible to invent a game that was more suited for television than football.

"Football is the perfect statement for the American psyche because it combines aggressiveness, beauty and a kind of military strategy. In business, it sometimes takes years to find out how something will work out, but in each and every game, there's a resolution," Sabol explains. "I think it was Patton who said, 'Everybody loves a winner,' and with football, we get our heroes and goats each and every Sunday. All those things are reasons why, as Casey Stengel put it, 'Our future is ahead of us.'"