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# Vancouver's Berger off to Super Bowl

By Mike Beamish, Canwest News Service January 22, 2009

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**Pittsburgh Steelers kicker Jeff Reed (3) celebrates his field goal with teammate Mitch Berger (17) against the Baltimore Ravens during the third quarter in the NFL's AFC Championship football game in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, January 18, 2009.**

**Photograph by: Reuters, Reuters**

VANCOUVER — The Super Mitch Berger — two 18-ounce patties of hand-ground prime beef, sauteed mushrooms, Canadian back bacon, cheddar cheese and a special sauce dubbed Mitch's Mayo — will make its exclusive appearance on Super Bowl Sunday, Feb. 1, at Players Chop House in Vancouver.

After being the butt of cheap jokes for years, Pittsburgh Steelers punter Mitch Berger has finally agreed to allow his name to be used as a menu item. But Super Bowl celebrants at the restaurant, co-owned by Berger and business partner Rob Ward, had better enjoy their Super Mitch Bergers (yes, that's the way they're spelling burger) while they can. This is a special deal, a one-day-only thing.

“With the last name Berger, Mitch has been made fun of for years,” says Ward. “We’ve discussed having a Mitch burger before, but he’s always shrugged it off. Now we’re doing it for the first time, with his blessing, because of the Super Bowl.”

After 14 NFL seasons, the punter-restaurateur from North Delta, B.C., is finally getting his kick at football’s penultimate prize.

Berger, 36, is with his ninth NFL team and has been close to making the Super Bowl before. He was with the Minnesota Vikings in 2001 and in 1999, the year the Vikes suffered a crushing overtime loss to the Atlanta Falcons in the NFC championship game. In 2006, with New Orleans, Berger was injured and on the sidelines when the Saints went marching down to the Chicago Bears in the NFC title game.

“It’s huge for Mitch,” says Berger’s older brother, Mike. “But it’s pretty huge for my dad, too. It will be the first Super Bowl he’s ever gone to, with Mitch playing for my dad’s favourite team.”

Don Berger, Mitch’s dad, was born in Homestead, Pa., a Pittsburgh suburb and grew up in the borough of Whitaker, also in the Pittsburgh metro area. He’s bled Steeler black and gold since birth, even though the Pittsburgh teams of his youth were some of pro football’s champion losers. In their first 35 years under owner Art Rooney, the Steelers never earned so much as a divisional title. Don Berger’s memory bank stretches to a time before the Super Bowl eras of Terry Bradshaw (1975-76 and 1979-80) and Ben Roethlisberger (2006), back to Jim Finks. The Steelers quarterback from 1949-55, Finks later coached the Calgary Stampeders for eight seasons before moving on to management in the NFL.

“They were average, nothing special back then,” Don remembers. “But being a Pittsburgh native, the Steelers have always been my team. . . . I’ve got Terrible Towels, Steeler mugs, flags and a picture of Super Bowl legends — Mike Webster, Joe Greene, Jack Ham, Terry Bradshaw.”

Don Berger was 17 when he left Pittsburgh after enlisting in the U.S. air force. Later, he was posted to a radar base in Sioux Lookout, a small, largely aboriginal community in northwestern Ontario where he met his future wife, Evelyn. She was from Winnipeg and met Don on her first day on the job as a waitress.

They were married five months later. She was 19. He was 20.

“I was trying to get away from Winnipeg for the summer and I ended up with a husband,” Evelyn says.

“We’re closing in on 50 years (together).”

Don later taught physical education at residential schools with the Department of Indian Affairs, from Swan River, Man., to Kamloops, B.C., where Mitch was born in June 1972. The family eventually settled in North Delta, when Don transferred to Employment and Immigration Canada.

Although Don Berger has been a B.C. Lions season ticket holder since the team played at Empire Stadium, Mitch, who holds dual citizenship, maintained his focus stateside. As a youngster, he drew his inspiration from Sunday afternoon and Monday night heroes such as Bradshaw and legendary Bears running back Walter Payton.

“We were raised as American athletic kids living in Canada,” Mitch says. “I never played hockey or lacrosse like Canadian kids. I don’t know those sports or even what the rules are.”

Mitch was taken in the sixth round of the 1994 NFL college draft by the Philadelphia Eagles.

After being cut by the Eagles and the Bears, Berger eventually caught on with the Vikings, twice made All-Pro and he has had some prolonged hang time in the NFL ever since.

The Arizona Cardinals, Pittsburgh’s opponent in Super Bowl XLIII, represented Berger’s eighth team last season. The Steelers are his ninth. And the fact he is still with them is serendipitous. Berger won the job in pre-season after the Steelers’ regular punter, Daniel Sepulveda, tore the ACL in his right knee and was put on injured reserve for the rest of the season.

During the Steelers' bye week in mid-October, however, Berger began experiencing problems himself after his hamstrings cramped up on a flight back home. When he tried to play through the injury without success, the Steelers wanted to place him on injured reserve, making him ineligible for the rest of the season. Nixing that idea, Berger convinced the Steelers to release him, then he returned to his off-season home in Scottsdale, Ariz., to rehab his hammies. The gamble paid off when the Steelers re-hired Berger after his replacement, Paul Ernster, struggled in his stead.

Now, Berger's dad, mom, brother Mike, sisters Melissa, Lynette, Debbie and their husbands all will be in Tampa to see him play in the game that is full of attention-grabbing arithmetic. A record 97.5 million American TV viewers watched at least part of last year's Super Bowl. In Canada, 10 million saw at least a segment of the game.

"He's played ball for a long time, he's had some injuries and he's never given up," says Don Berger. "The timing is right. Unbelievable, actually. To see my son play for my team, the Steelers, in a Super Bowl . . . It's really a dream come true."

Vancouver Sun

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**Pittsburgh Steelers kicker Jeff Reed (3) celebrates his field goal with teammate Mitch Berger (17) against the Baltimore Ravens during the third quarter in the NFL's AFC Championship football game in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, January 18, 2009.**

**Photograph by: Reuters, Reuters**

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