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The Lombardi Effect in Green Bay Echoes On

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If you are tired of hearing about the frozen tundra you had better change stations now, because I am going to talk about the team from the frozen tundra of Lambeau Field, the Green Bay Packers.

The Pack is Back. Yes, the Pack is definitely, finally and unequivocally Back. I have waited a long time to say that, and so I will say it again. The Pack is Back.

From the early 1950's I was a Green Bay Packer fan. That was before Lombardi; before Hornung, Taylor and Starr. Before the phrase "frozen tundra" was known outside the upper Midwest. Like most Minnesotans who followed professional football before the Vikings, I was a fan of the lowly and pathetic Green Bay Packers, the doormat of the NFL.

Under Curley Lambeau they had been a force in the league from its beginning but by the late Forties the glory was fading. The Packers had their last winning season pre- Lombardi in 1947. Between 1947 and 1957 the Pack had five different coaches, and in 1958 Scooter McLean became coach for the second time and led Green Bay to a dismal 1-10-1 season.

In 1959 all of that changed. Vince Lombardi came to Green Bay from the New York Giants and the Pack suddenly had their first winning season as they went 7-5. The next year they were 8-4 and got to the NFL championship game. Then came two NFL championships in a row, two off years and two more championships. The Lombardi totals: six western conference titles, five NFL championships, and two Super Bowls.

Just as quickly the glory faded in the post Lombardi era. Phil Bengsten had one winning season, 8-6, in three years. Dan Devine one in five years, Bart Starr two winning seasons in nine years. Forrest Gregg did not have a winner over four years, Lindy Infante had one in four years. There were no titles for Tittletown, U.S.A.

In 1992 Mike Holmgren came to Green Bay from San Francisco and he has not had a losing season on the frozen tundra. No wonder people in Green Bay are seeing the ghost of Vince Lombardi walking the streets.

For those of us who remember the Lombardi transformation, this one is also a wonder. As I sat watching the Super Bowl last Sunday I saw number "86" catch a pass and suddenly thought of Boyd Dowler. I started looking for Max McGhee, Marv Fleming, Jim Taylor and Paul Hornung. I moved quickly back and forth in time and memory mixing decades and players, and marveled at how all this was bouncing around in my head as Farve and Company established their identity as a championship team. It really was Super Sunday.

Now a new generation of Packer fans who suffered through losing seasons can again celebrate a winning team. New legends were carved out in New Orleans on this team led by a free drinking good ole boy from Mississippi, and an intense evangelical minister from Tennessee who was sent to the frozen tundra by God.

In the Lombardi years there were also the heavy drinkers and the straight shooters. Bart Starr was the modest upright young man from Alabama, while Paul Hornung and Max McGhee were the drinkers and womanizers who kept Lombardi awake at night.

The new Super Bowl champs were like the old Packers in that they played sound fundamental football. They wore you down and beat you up with good blocking, solid tackling, and very few mistakes. As with the Packers of old they struck like lightning, Farve to Rison, Starr to McGhee, Farve to Freeman, Starr to Dowler. And they struck early. Starr with the bomb on third and one inside his own twenty in the first series of the game. Farve to Rison before the seats were warm.

For all the memories of Lombardi's Packers the legend finds its true origins in the Ice Bowl against Dallas and the dramatic drive for the final touchdown as Starr followed Kramer into the end zone, the play shown over and over again, and yet never enough for Packer fans.

Jerry Kramer chronicled it all in Instant Replay the story of that great season and the game. This is a book that not only made Kramer famous and enshrined the Ice Bowl in national memory, but it is a book that deeply influenced my own choices as a historian. On reading Instant Replay along with two other books, one on baseball and one on national character, I was led to reflect on the meaning of sport, especially football and baseball, in American life.

It led me to my first writing as a historian and then into the field of Sport History. So for me the Packers of Lombardi resonate in my life in numerous ways, and the new Super Bowl Champion Packers evoke not only memories of seasons past but of career choices of lasting impact. The synergy of the moment was most satisfying.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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