



THE  
*Heroes*  
OF GREEN BAY

# STARR ON THE RISE

*It took some time for football sages, including Vince Lombardi, to see what a leader the Packers had in the polite young man from Alabama*

BY ANDREW LAWRENCE

**T**HE YEAR WAS 1960, AND THE QUARTERBACK WAS FED UP. IT WASN'T that Bart Starr couldn't handle a stern talking-to; he grew up in a military family, after all. It was just that he'd never known as unrelenting a drill sergeant as Vince Lombardi. It had been a year since the former Giants offensive coach had scored his first NFL head-coach gig, in

Green Bay, and still he rode Starr as if the fifth-year veteran were a naive rookie. Starr aspired to perfection, in games *and* in practices. But when he missed the mark, Lombardi pummeled him harder than any on-rushing defender would. Starr would suffer those verbal blows in front of the entire team before Lombardi apologized in private.

Now, he was still smarting from throwing two interceptions in the Packers' season-opening loss to the archrival Bears—"A real punch in the side," Starr recalled in *When Pride Still Mattered* by David Maraniss. "Here's the man who had brought me along and given me the opportunity, and I failed when I got the chance." When he threw a third in practice that week, it prompted yet another public tongue-lashing from Lombardi. But this time Starr responded. After practice he cornered

the coach in his office and delivered a most cathartic counteroffensive. He raged at Lombardi for blaming him for the practice pick, which, he argued, had been the result of a tipped ball. He ripped the coach for yelling at his players in public and made a case for special dispensation.

"You're asking me to be the leader of this team," Starr said. "But I can't be if you're chewing my butt out in front of the team you want me to lead. I can take any ass-chewing you want to deliver. And if you feel I have it coming, have at it. But please do it in the privacy of your office. . . . I will be an even better leader for you if you do that."

The verbal blitz staggered Lombardi. "I hear you" was all he said. The coach never publicly criticized Starr again. "From then on we had a relationship that was just unbeliev-

Four decades after retiring Starr still holds strong in the NFL postseason record book.

*Photograph by FOCUS ON SPORT/GETTY IMAGES*



able,” Starr said. “It just took off and went to another plane.”

Together they would reach rarefied air. Starr and Lombardi led the Packers to five NFL titles in nine years—including victories in the first two Super Bowls—while compiling what remains the second-highest win percentage (.740) by an NFL quarterback-coach tandem that has been together nine years or more. Early on it was obvious to anyone how much Lombardi would figure in the Packers’ success. But Starr, who would wind up as a four-time Pro Bowler, a two-time Super Bowl MVP and the 1966 league MVP, hardly appeared destined for greatness. And when he eventually did blossom, most saw him as little more than a manager.

For Lombardi, though, Starr became more than a mere extension of the coach out on the field. He was the maestro who took to his playbook as if it were a Mozart composition and got his teammates to perform it with philharmonic precision. “He’s the one with the brains

team’s punter just to get on the field (his 41.4-yard average was second best in the nation), but the following summer of ’54 he severely sprained his back while practicing his punting and saw little action his junior year. The next season Starr mostly watched from the bench again as new coach J.B. Whitworth experimented with youth, starting just two seniors. (The Crimson Tide went 0–10.) Starr’s high school reputation in Montgomery earned him an invite to the Blue-Gray college all-star game there, but he barely played and afterward cried in frustration. Moving on to the NFL seemed about as likely as walking on the moon.

It took a recommendation from, of all people, ’Bama’s basketball coach to launch Starr. Johnny Dees touted the quarterback prospect to Jack Vainisi, the personnel director of the Green Bay Packers. Vainisi came away impressed by the numbers Starr had put up in relief (for his Tide career, Starr completed 54.4% of his passes for 1,903 yards and 10 TDs) as well as his size (6’ 1”, 200 pounds) and

*Starr was “too SELF-EFFACING to be the real bold, tough QUARTERBACK,” Lombardi said at first.*

out there,” Lombardi said of Starr in 1962 to *Football Illustrated*. “We rise and fall with him.”

RAISED IN MONTGOMERY, ALA., STARR weathered more downs than ups early in his career. He made the sophomore team at Sidney Lanier High, quit two weeks later, then returned to the team after his father, Ben, an Army officer, threatened to put him to work in the garden if he didn’t commit to the sport. Once Starr was back on the field, his coaches passed him over for players they deemed more talented. It was only after the starting quarterback broke his leg during Bart’s junior year that the coaches turned to him, and Bart responded by leading Lanier to its first undefeated season.

The next year he garnered all-state and All-America honors as well as scholarship offers from across the country. Starr followed his heart. His high school sweetheart, Cherry Louise Morton, had designs on attending Auburn in the fall of 1952, and Starr wanted to play at a school close by—so he committed to archrival Alabama. (The couple married two years later.)

Starr caught on quickly in the classroom—an education major, he graduated Phi Beta Kappa—but on the gridiron he couldn’t catch a break. As a sophomore in ’53 he became the



Starr’s focus was evident whether he was practicing holds in the snow before the 1965 title game or dissecting a defense to make a big play.



smarts. Come the ’56 draft, the Packers picked Starr 199th overall. Starr spent the summer throwing footballs through a swinging tire in his in-laws’ backyard in preparation for the season. He was over the moon.

STARR WAS QUICKLY BROUGHT BACK TO EARTH WHEN he reached Green Bay. The Packers hadn’t had a winning season since 1947, and there was little Starr could do to improve matters in his first two years under coach Lisle Blackbourn. Starr watched from the sideline for most of his rookie year, in ’56; starter Tobin Rote had a Pro Bowl

season, but the Packers went 4–8. In ’57 Rote was traded to Detroit, and Starr split snaps with future AFL star Babe Parilli; they combined for just three wins.

Things were even worse in ’58: Starr made eight starts and managed no better than a tie; Parilli made three and won one as the Packers finished a franchise-low 1-10-1. And yet, even that one victory now seems a miracle considering the atmosphere created by new coach Scooter McLean. He had few rules for his players—they set their own dress codes and curfews and regularly skipped team meetings.

Starr felt adrift and uncomfortable around the coach and saw no logic to his play selection and personnel use. “If you made an error, you went out, and if the other guy made an error, you came back in,” Starr recalled.

When McLean was replaced by Lombardi ahead of the ’59 season, it seemed as if Starr would get a fresh start. But it turned out to be more of the same. Lombardi wasn’t quite sure of what he had in Starr—“He was probably just



The Alabama native made himself at home in Wisconsin, where he raised two sons with his high school sweetheart and wife, Cherry.

a little too polite and maybe just a little too self-effacing to be the real bold tough quarterback [you] must be in the National Football League,” the coach said—so he traded for Lamar McHan (who had won 15 games in 53 starts with the Chicago Cardinals) with the idea of rotating him with second-year vet

Joe Francis and relegating Starr to holding duties on kicks.

It proved a winning combination at first: The Packers roared to a 3–0 start. But when McHan became injured, Green Bay went on a five-game losing streak. When Francis couldn’t stop the bleeding, Lombardi traded him away and reluctantly turned to Starr. The 25-year-old responded with the same poise he did his junior year at Lanier, guiding the Packers on a season-ending four-game winning streak that put them above .500 for the first time in 12 years.

As he reviewed game film, Lombardi discovered that he had a passer who boasted fluid mechanics, a capable arm

and, most important, was an intelligent play-caller. Still, it was the confrontation with Starr in his office that was the real revelation. While all the time Lombardi had doubted he had a quarterback with the moxie to lead his team, it turned out there was one right there under his nose.

Under Lombardi’s tutelage, Starr not only became one of the NFL’s supreme field generals, but he also emerged as one of the game’s greatest clutch performers. Even now, 40 years after his retirement, no quarterback has a better playoff record (9–1) or a higher postseason passer rating (104.8). What’s more, he was coolest when the weather was coldest, especially in the 1967 NFL title

game against Dallas dubbed the Ice Bowl. Down 17–14 with 4:50 left and the ball at his own 32 against the Cowboys’ famed Doomsday Defense and a –13° temperature with 15-mph winds, Starr marched the Packers to the Dallas three-yard line. Hoping to take advantage of a mismatch on the right side of the line, Starr called consecutive running plays, which were stopped at the two-foot line. The hole was there, Starr told Lombardi during a Packers’ timeout with 16 seconds left, but the icy surface was causing tailback Donny Anderson to spin his wheels and keeping him from shooting through the gap on time.

Starr told Lombardi he wanted to run 31 wedge—an inside running play in which the guard and center double-team the defensive tackle—but as a quarterback keeper. “Run it,” Lombardi said, “and let’s get the hell out of here!” On third-and-goal Starr did just that, falling over the goal line as time expired for a 21–17 victory and the fifth NFL title of the Lombardi-Starr era. When the coach was asked what play Starr called, he boomed, “Damned if I know!”

Such was the faith Lombardi had in Starr. The coach could have passed over him as so many had before. He could have sent him packing as he had so many other Green Bay players. But if Starr’s office outburst taught the coach one thing, it’s that when the stakes were greatest, his quarterback would not back down. He’d come back fighting. □

*Starr retired after the 1971 season and later coached the Packers, from 1974 to ’83, during which time they had a record of 53-77-3. Today he runs Healthcare Realty Management, Starr Enterprises and, along with his wife, Cherry, the Rawhide Boys Ranch, a center for troubled youth.*