

# The Lombardi Sweep

## The Signature Play of the Green Bay Dynasty, It Symbolized An Era

By Ed Gruver

*"Starr hands off to Hornung, sweep to the left side, he's got some blocks... He's at the five, cuts into the end zone for the touchdown! Forrest Gregg cleared the way with a beautiful block, the two guards, Jerry Kramer and Fuzzy Thurston, did a great job of pulling, and there you saw the Green Bay Packers Power Sweep..."*

For nearly a decade, the Green Bay Packers' Power Sweep was the dominant play in pro football. It was the signature play of Vince Lombardi's offensive scheme, and anyone who watched the NFL on CBS in the 1960s heard sportscaster Ray Scott make calls, like the one above from the 1965 championship against Cleveland, numerous times.

The Lombardi Sweep was as much a part of the NFL landscape in the 1960s as a Jimmy Brown pitchout or a John Unitas sideline pass to Raymond Berry, and the Packers rode their number one running play to five NFL titles and victories in the first two Super Bowls.

Like most Lombardi plays, the sweep relied on a minimum of deception but a maximum of effort.

The pulling guards formed a convoy around end, with the lead guard taking out the cornerback and the offside guard picking up the middle linebacker or outside linebacker. The center executed a cutoff block on the defensive tackle, and the onside offensive tackle popped the defensive end and then sealed off the middle linebacker. The blocking back lead the ballcarrier into the hole with a down block on the defensive end, and the tight end drove the outside linebacker in the direction he wanted to go. If the linebacker made an inside move, the tight end rode him in that direction and the runner hit outside. If the linebacker went outside, the tight end moved with him and the runner cut inside.

Because of the option blocking of the tight end and the runner's ability to cut inside or outside, the sweep was really two plays in one. Three, if you add the extra dimension of the halfback option pass off the sweep action.

What it was most however, was a four-yards-and-a-cloud-of-dust play perfectly suited to Green Bay's ball-control offense.

"There is nothing spectacular about it," Lombardi once said of his sweep. "It's just a yard gainer. But on that sideline, when the sweep starts to develop, you can hear those linebackers and defensive backs yelling, 'Sweep!' 'Sweep!' and almost see their eyes pop as those guards turn upfield after them... It's my number one play because it requires all eleven men to play as one to make it succeed, and that's what 'team' means."

Halfback Paul Hornung, like his running mate fullback Jim Taylor, was a big but mobile back perfectly suited to run the Lombardi Sweep. Though neither was particularly fast, both Hornung and Taylor were quick, intelligent backs who excelled at running under control, that is, reading the blocks of the pulling guards in front of them and then hitting the right hole.

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"It made everybody work as a team," Hornung said of the sweep. "It gave everybody enough responsibility that you took it upon yourself to do the best you could. And it became the best play in football."

The Packer Sweep was unspectacular, yet so successful, that even rival coaches acknowledged a grudging admiration for it.

"That sweep worked because everybody on the team did his job," the late Don McCafferty once said. Having been an assistant coach with the Detroit Lions and later head coach of the Baltimore Colts, McCafferty had plenty of opportunities to view the Packer Sweep up close.

"The Packers had great players," McCafferty added. "The guards were superb, the running backs, the quarterback. It was merely execution, and the defenses were the ones to get executed. Mysterious? Not a chance. Just too damn good."

In the Packer playbook, the sweep was known as "49" when run to the right; "28" when run to the left. To opponents however, it didn't much matter to which side the play went. When quarterback Bart Starr bent low in the Green Bay huddle and called out, "Fire, Brown Right, 49 Sweep, zone blocking, on two", the Packers broke from the huddle exuding confidence.

"The fact that they had the people to run (the sweep), but then, the fact that they ran it so often," said Merlin Olsen, a Hall of Fame defensive tackle who as an anchor of the L.A. Rams' "Fearsome Foursome" unit, played across the line from the Packers throughout the 1960s. "They ran the same play time after time after time. They had tremendous confidence in the play. They'd make a call for a sweep to the right or a sweep to the left, and Bam! They had it. And they knew it."

Green Bay guards Jerry Kramer and Fuzzy Thurston loved the sweep because, among other things, it featured line play and brought offensive guards out of the obscurity they toiled in.

"With his system, he even made me proud to be an offensive lineman," Kramer, a best-selling author, wrote in his book *Farewell To Football*. "Generally speaking, there's nothing more anonymous than playing guard. After they announce the lineups, you never hear your name over the loudspeaker... But in Lombardi's offensive system, with the guards pulling and leading the attack, Fuzzy Thurston and I emerged from obscurity... Everytime there'd be a photograph in the papers of Hornung scoring a touchdown -- which was pretty often -- there'd be me or Fuzzy or both of us in the picture, leading the way."

While the success of the sweep relied on each member of the offense, the pulling action of the guards was most essential. The guard who had the most difficult assignment was the off guard, the guard who had to pull farthest away from the play yet still get to the outside in time to lead the convoy.

"I know it's a difficult maneuver," Lombardi said. "But (the off guard) has to get there. I don't give a damn whether he enjoys getting there or not."

Just as difficult was the cutoff block made by the center -- in Green Bay's case Jim Ringo and then Ken Bowman. Depending on the defensive alignment and blocking assignments, the center's responsibility was to cut off either the outside defensive tackle or middle linebacker in a 4-3 defense, or the tackle pulling over him in an odd-front scheme.

The center's block was crucial, since the pulling of the guards left the defensive tackle opposite them uncovered for a split second. Unless the center can get into his block and cut off the defensive tackle quickly, the defender will penetrate the backfield and smear the ballcarrier for a loss.

Lombardi first saw the sweep in action as a lineman on the Fordham Rams famous "Seven Blocks of Granite" unit of the 1930s. It was the era of single-wing football, and Lombardi became impressed with the sweep as it was run by Jock Sutherland's powerful University of Pittsburgh teams.

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When Lombardi graduated and began attending coaching clinics as head man of St. Cecilia High School in Englewood, N.J., he continued to be impressed with the techniques of the single-wing, with its guard-pulling techniques and the cut-back features of the backs.

Lombardi deepened his knowledge and refined his coaching skills as an assistant to the legendary Earl "Red" Blaik at West Point in the 1940s, then made the jump from the college ranks to the NFL when he joined Jim Lee Howell's New York Giants staff as an assistant in 1954. By this time, incorporating the elements of the single-wing sweep to the T-formation style of the NFL was an idea that had been incubating in Lombardi's fertile coaching mind. When he got to New York, he was ready to introduce his sweep principles to an interested, if somewhat skeptical, veteran group of Giants.

The Giants were last in the NFL in rushing in 1953, but Lombardi saw something special in young backs Frank Gifford, Alex Webster, and Mel Triplett. Lombardi pulled the guards and added a twist when he utilized greyhound Roosevelt Brown as a pulling tackle on end runs. To counter the 7-4 "Eagle" defense in vogue at the time, Lombardi gave his linemen larger splits, isolating the middle guard and making him vulnerable to the double-team blocks that had marked Sutherland's single-wing teams. To top off his revolutionary concepts, Lombardi instituted option blocking, giving his linemen the freedom to ride their defensive counterpart one way, while the backs ran to daylight behind them.

Within two years, the Giants were trouncing George Halas' Chicago Bears, 47-7, in the NFL title game, and giving the Baltimore Colts the fight of their lives in the '58 overtime classic.

When Green Bay hired him in 1959, Lombardi needed just two years to get the Packers into the championship game, and three years to win the first of his record five league championships. The dynasty had begun, and at the heart of it was the Lombardi Sweep.

"Every team eventually arrives at a lead play," Lombardi said. "It becomes the team's bread-and-butter play, the top- priority play. It is the play that the team knows it must make go, and the one the opponents know they must stop. Continued success with the play makes for a number one play, because from that success stems your confidence, and behind that is the basic truth that it expresses the coach as a coach and the players as a team."

The power sweep was Lombardi -- fundamentally sound, few frills, and men working together as a team. It was the first play Lombardi put in when he took over in Green Bay, telling his team, "Gentlemen, if we can make this play work, we can run the football."

The Packers made it work with constant drilling, beginning and ending every practice session with the power sweep.

"You think there's anything special about this sweep?" Lombardi once asked a writer. "Well, there isn't. It's as basic a play as there can be in football. We simply do it over and over and over."

"There can never be enough emphasis on repetition. I want my players to be able to run this sweep in their sleep. If we call the sweep twenty times, I'll expect it to work twenty times...not eighteen, not nineteen. We do it often enough in practice so that no excuse can exist for screwing it up."

The success of the Packers in the 1960s initiated defensive adjustments to stop the sweep. Tom Landry, Lombardi's former coaching colleague on the Giants, devised his Dallas "Flex" defense in part as a response to the sweep, and throughout the decade the two coaching legends engaged in a fascinating point- counterpoint of strategies and tactics.

Though Lombardi outfitted his team with numerous blocking schemes to handle defensive adjustments to the sweep, he recognized that some maneuvers could limit the effectiveness of his number one play. He also knew however, that in making adjustments to stop the sweep, defenses invariably weakened themselves in another area.

The Cowboys were a perfect example. While Landry flexed, or offset, his defensive linemen and ordered them to hold their positions in order to take away the cutback features of the sweep, Lombardi countered

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by running power plays directly at the offset defenders, attacking the "bubble" that existed between the offensive and defensive linemen.

Lombardi made other adjustments as well. Hornung's option pass off (see Diagram 1) the sweep in the wind-swept 1962 championship game in New York set up a Packers' touchdown in a 16-7 win over the Giants. In the 1965 title game against the defending champion Browns, the Packers shifted the blocking on their sweep, pulling just the offside guard, Kramer, and tackle Gregg in a move that confused the Cleveland defense (see Diagram 2). The result was a third-quarter touchdown run by Hornung through the snow and mud that clinched a 23-12 win.

Two years later, on an arctic New Year's Eve afternoon, the Packers ran an influence play designed to catch Cowboy all-pro tackle Bob Lilly chasing the sweep (see Diagram 3). Green Bay quarterback Bart Starr waited the entire game to call the play -- "65 Give " -- then used it at the most perfect time, sending Chuck Mercein skating to the Dallas three-yard line to set up Starr's famous touchdown sneak for a 21-17 win in the Ice Bowl.

Thirty years later, there remains a certain magic about the Lombardi years in Green Bay, and it is there to be seen in the grainy images of championship games won on icy fields in late December. Most of all, it is there in the images of one play, run over and over again, and in the voice of Ray Scott calling the most famous play in pro football history:

*Starr hands off to Hornung, sweep to the left side, he's got some blocks... He cuts into the end zone for a touchdown!... And there you saw the Green Bay Packers Power Sweep.*