

# St. Vincent's Achilles heel

Was Vince Lombardi a lousy judge of college talent?

By Dan Heilman

It's not news to any scholar of pro football history that the Green Bay Packers of the 1960s were probably the greatest dynasty in NFL history (five titles in seven years), and that their leader, Vince Lombardi, is the most revered--if not necessarily the greatest--coach in league history.

But what's often overlooked when Lombardi is canonized by football lovers is that he left the Packers in a shambles--maybe not in worse condition than when he arrived, but in rough shape just the same. His successor as head coach, the late Phil Bengtson, was forced to limp along with rookies, castoffs and veterans nearing retirement. Bengtson lasted just three ulcer-filled seasons before resigning.

This situation might have been much different if Lombardi had been appreciably more skilled at assessing, drafting and developing skilled college players. Examining how the Packers were built under Lombardi offers an interesting look at how this team succeeded in spite of his draft record, not because of it.

## All-Lombardi

Let's assemble a Packers "All-Lombardi Team" and see where all of this championship talent came from:

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KEY:

- \* Drafted by Lombardi
- # Free agent/traded for by Lombardi
- + On the team when Lombardi arrived

- QB - Bart Starr +
- RB - Jim Taylor +
- RB - Paul Hornung +
- WR - Carroll Dale #
- WR - Boyd Dowler \*
- TE - Ron Kramer +
- C - Jim Ringo +
- T - Forrest Gregg +
- T - Bob Skoronski +
- G - Fuzzy Thurston #
- G - Jerry Kramer +
- K - Don Chandler #

- LB - Ray Nitschke +
- LB - Dan Currie +
- LB - Dave Robinson \*
- DE - Lionel Aldridge \*
- DE - Willie Davis #
- DT - Ron Kostelnik \*
- DT - Henry Jordan #
- CB - Herb Adderley \*
- CB - Bob Jeter \*
- S - Willie Wood #
- S - Hank Gremminger +

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To make our total an even 30, let's look at a handful of the top Lombardi-era players who aren't on the "first team":

LB - Bill Forester +  
LB - Lee Roy Caffey #  
DB - Doug Hart #  
RB - Elijah Pitts \*  
WR - Max McGee +  
C - Ken Bowman \*  
S - Jesse Whittenton +

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It's safe to presume that these are the top 30 players to have played during the Lombardi era, more or less. What's surprising is that almost half (14) were on the team when he arrived. Eight came via trades or walk-ons during Lombardi's tenure, and only eight were drafted by him.

What's especially interesting is that virtually the entire "All-Lombardi" offense was established in Green Bay before Vince even set foot there. Naturally, Lombardi deserves tremendous credit for molding these players into winners, but considering that he came from the Giants as an offensive coordinator, it's curious that he was never able to draft offensive players good enough to unseat the ones already there. (Donny Anderson and Jim Grabowski did replace Hornung and Taylor, but only when the latter two were about to retire anyway.)

The bottom line tells the tale: Lombardi drafted 209 players while head coach of the Packers. Forty-eight (23 percent) played in at least one game for the Packers. Only 30 (14 percent) played for more than a year in Green Bay, and six of those players were drafted in 1967, his final year as coach. This means that about one player out of every nine drafted by Lombardi went on to succeed under him.

His worst draft might have come in 1962, when of Green Bay's 23 picks, only four caught on with the team; all were gone by the end of the following season. Even given the relatively scattershot draft methods of the era, those are miserable results.

The most telling fact might be this: Ten Lombardi-era Packers are in the Pro Football Hall of Fame. He drafted exactly one of them, Herb Adderley.

Does this mean that Lombardi was a poor judge of college talent? Well, a dummy wouldn't have found the likes of Adderley, Robinson, Dowler, Jeter, Bowman, Aldridge, Kostelnik, Pitts, Marv Fleming, Travis Williams and Bill Curry, few of whom were college stars. And in fairness, this listing doesn't take into account several players who were drafted by Lombardi but who made their greatest impact after he retired, e.g., Anderson, Grabowski, Bob Brown and Gale Gillingham. Another mitigating factor is that, as one of the NFL's top teams, Green Bay tended to pick near the end of any given round.

It does mean, though, that among Vince Lombardi's many talents, spotting potential in college players wasn't near the top of the list. Lombardi's greatest gift in terms of personnel might have been his ability to see something in current NFL players that he could use. He made several shrewd trades (with Cleveland for Hall-of-Famers Davis and Jordan, to name two), and he had a knack for making valuable role-players out of other teams' rejects (e.g., Chuck Mercein, Bill Anderson, Ben Wilson and Zeke Bratkowski).

### **Weakest Element**

But it must be said that the college draft was, without question, the weakest element of Lombardi's leadership in Green Bay. This is made clear not necessarily by how few great players he drafted, but by how many flops he took in the high rounds. Lombardi chose 12 players in the first round of the NFL draft between 1959 and 1967, and only Adderley, Robinson and Gillingham justified their draft status. A couple of others, like Grabowski, Donny Anderson, and Tom Moore, were solid, if unspectacular, players. As for the rest...

Does anyone remember Randy Duncan? He was the first player ever picked for the Packers by Lombardi, a quarterback from Iowa who was the top choice in the entire draft. He never played a down for Green Bay. How about Lloyd Voss and Larry Elkins? Both #1 Lombardi draft picks, both washouts. Bob Hyland, Earl Gros and Don Horn were first-round Lombardi picks who had brief, moderate success with the Packers, but not nearly to the level expected of a #1 choice.

Some other no-names taken by Lombardi in the first three rounds: Phil Nugent, Ed Blaine, Gary Barnes, Tony Liscio, Dennis Claridge, Joe O'Donnell, Alphonse Dotson, Ode Burrell, Jon Morris, Tom Cichowski, Fred Heron, Tony Jeter and Dave Dunaway. Some of these players caught on with other teams, and a couple (such as Morris) had long NFL careers. But none contributed in any remotely substantial way to the Packers. Anyone can have a couple of misfires in the draft, but to accumulate that many duds in the rounds that are supposed to contain all the blue-chippers indicates a pattern of drastic inconsistency, if not outright incompetence.

(A side note: Lombardi stayed on as general manager for a year after retiring as coach, and Green Bay's 1968 draft was so-so, producing All-Pro LB Fred Carr, T Dick Himes, G Bill Lueck and little else. Just how much input Lombardi had into those picks remains unknown.)

But here's where it gets strange. Look at this list of names, most of which should be familiar to anyone who was a football fan in the 1960s and '70s: Ernie Green, Buck Buchanan, Alex Hawkins, Daryle Lamonica, Mike Bass, Len St. Jean, Dale Hackbart, Tim Brown, Junior Coffey. Not a bad group, right? Well, all were drafted by Vince Lombardi, and all went on to much better things with other teams after doing zilch in Green Bay. Most were cut, while others (such as Lamonica and Buchanan) chose to sign with the American Football League. This tells us that Lombardi's eye for talent might have been sound, but maybe not so secure was his sense for which college players could thrive under his tutelage.

### **"My Way Or ..."**

One reason for this weakness seems to be the unilateral method Lombardi used in almost every facet of his job: i.e., "my way or the highway." Anecdotal evidence has never suggested that Lombardi put as much stock into the recommendations of his coaches and scouts as he put into his own instincts. And, Lombardi never made much of a secret of his disdain for rookies, telling us that many of his draft picks came into training camp with one strike against them.

It could even be that part of the reason Lombardi stepped down as coach was that he was canny (or cynical) enough to recognize that the paucity of young talent on the Packers roster was about to come home to roost--and that he didn't want to be around when it happened. Sure enough, the Packers struggled to a losing season in their first year without Vince on the sidelines, and it would be four more years before a new generation of players could muster a division title for Green Bay.

As is often the case with a discussion about someone of Lombardi's stature, there are no easy answers. One could mock some of his draft-day decisions, while another could point to his first and only draft with Washington (which brought in RB Larry Brown and LB Harold McLinton) and say it helped solidify the Redskins team that won the 1972 NFC championship.

As a lifelong Packer fan, it's not my intention to deflate the legend of Vince Lombardi. I've only set out to prove that, contrary to the reams of tribute written over the years, the man was indeed human.