

# When Pride Still Mattered

## A Life of Vince Lombardi . .

by David Maraniss

[Fertig Notes]

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Every time a sporting act seems graceless and excessive, every time a player dances and points at himself after making a routine tackle, or a mediocre athlete and his agent hold out for millions, whenever it seems that individual ego has overtaken the concept of team, the question can be asked: What would Lombardi do about this? Why isn't there anyone like the Old Man out there anymore? Others think Lombardi represented something less romantic, a symbol of the American obsession with winning, a philosophy that if misapplied can have unfortunate consequences in sports, business and all of life. The Trinity of Vince Lombardi's early years was religion, family and sports. His father sometimes lectured Vince and the others on his triangle of success - sense of duty, respect for authority and strong mental discipline. He understood that he was not a great player, but he had fought hard, given his best and discovered that no one on the field had intimidated him, no matter how big or fast. He was confident, convinced that he could compete, puzzled why other players did not put out as much as he had. Football players often exhibit split personalities, willing to exist in an authoritarian environment, yet always looking for small ways to rebel. In 1935 leading scholars feared that universities, reflecting changes evident in modern society, were deteriorating into incoherence, with an emphasis on the particular instead of the whole, on uninterpreted fact instead of fundamental principle, encouraging a hollow worship of fame and success. The inevitable results, they said, were confusion, greed and self-centeredness. But along with enormous growth came complaints that the sport had compromised the integrity of the universities and made laughable the ideal of amateur competition. During the 1935 season, Yale's president, James Rowland Angell said, "College football has become in many instances big business." If you sit in a crooked game you must be crooked if you expect to win. Line coach Frank Leahy worried that Lombardi was always treading a thin line" between competitiveness and fanaticism. "There never was a more aggressive man who played for me than Vincent. There were times when I generally worried that he might be too aggressive." But he

rarely let his emotions interfere with his concentration for the next play. Lombardi's teammates could not see intimations of greatness in him, but they responded to his forceful character. He seemed mature beyond his years, Lombardi is one of the gladiators who considers premature talk an ill omen. He discovered what he called football's fourth dimension. The first three dimensions are material, coaching and schedule. The fourth is selfless teamwork and collective pride which accumulate until they have made positive thinking and victory habitual.' From the Jesuits he acquired a larger perspective: duty, obedience, responsibility and the exercise of free will were the basis of a philosophy that shaped the way he looked at himself and his world. From an ethics course taught by Ignatius Wiley Cox, S.J., he learned excessive freedom was not man's liberation but his ruination. While man was blessed with intellect and free will, he was ennobled only when he sublimated individual desires to join others in pursuit of common good."

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· Blaik had what Lombardi called "the great knack of knowing what offensive plan to use against what defense and then "discarding the immaterial and going with the strength." . All the detailed preparations resulted not in a mass of confusing statistics and plans, but in the opposite, paring away the extraneous, reducing and refining it until all that was left was what was needed for that game against that team. It was a lesson Lombardi never forgot. "Once in a while you are lucky enough to have the thrill and satisfaction of working with a group of men who are willing to make every sacrifice to achieve a goal, and then experience the achievement of winning it with

them," Blaik said. "In this, believe me, there is a payment that cannot be matched in any other pursuit." To say that Lombardi was a strict father at West Point would be accurate and misleading. Mostly Lombardi was missing; he was largely an absentee father and husband, when not physically, then emotionally, He found himself trapped in the snowdrifts of Green Bay on a recruiting mission and muttered, "Can you imagine living in this godforsaken place?" This was 1951, the beginning of what was later perceived through the lens of nostalgia as a decade of simplicity. History has a way of mocking attempts to render it retroactively pure. That very trinity - 1951, West Point, Red Blaik - could also be remembered for one troubling event: a massive academic honor code violation that resulted in, among other things, the devastation of Blaik's audacious football squad. The events of that episode are central to understanding the mythology of Lombardi, the contradictory demands and expectations of football, and the fallacy of the innocent past. The football players could violate the honor code out of fear, peer pressure, custom, laziness, academic inadequacy, loyalty, friendship, teamwork I couldn't turn all these people in. They were my best friends and when you play ball together you just get very close, Besides, when you see all those upperclassmen who you worship doing it you don't think it is so bad. Particularly alien to them was the honor code mentality, which required classmates to squeal on one another. What Lombardi cherished about football was its fraternity, the sense of team and loyalty, one for and all for one. He did not condone cheating but from his understanding of the controversy it mostly involved helping athletes prepare for tests. This happened every day at other colleges, Why the fuss? What was new- Or wrong - with that? Blaik did not condone their actions; nor did he criticize the decision to separate them from West Point. But he wanted to ensure that they left with dignity, "I believe in the youngsters with whom I've been dealing," Blaik said. I know their families. I know them, and I know they are men of character...My

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After his difficult early weeks at training camp, Lombardi began to earn the respect of the pros. He did it through persistence and adjustment. The will to succeed was his dominant characteristic, stronger in the end than his insistence on having things his way. If he had to adjust, he would find the means; it was a talent that he exhibited for the rest of his coaching career, though it often went unrecognized, overshadowed by his public image as the implacable leader who demanded that the world adapt to him, Jim Lee Howell was chairman of the board, but two chief operating officers ran the daily operations: Vince Lombardi the offense and Tom Landry the defense. . There two schools of thought on Howell's leadership style. The harshest perspective was that had little clue how to coach but was saved by the two finest assistants who ever worked on the same team at the same time. The more complimentary view was that he was an expert at delegating authority, Most sportswriters subscribed to the second view, portraying Howell as a progressive thinker who had adapted to the spirit of the new, which in football terms meant the era of specialized platoons. "Mostly he is the administrator and coordinator, and that apparently is the way to do the job today," Red Smith wrote of Howell. Lombardi and Landry - their coaching skills were undeniable; their personalities and styles as unlike

· as possible. From the moment he arrived in New York from the University of Texas, Landry struck his teammates as mature and rational, always thinking his way around the football field. Wellington Mara once said that "you could hear Vince laughing from five blocks away; you couldn't hear Landry from the next chair." But his mild appearance was deceiving. Landry was all science and innovation, daring to change. "He taught you not to be afraid to take chances," Herb Rich, who played alongside him that first

year in the defensive backfield. "Tom would always say, 'Anticipate! Get there ahead of him. Go on the snap of the ball,'" Landry gave Lombardi the nickname "Mr. High-Low" because when his offense did well he was sky high; but, boy, when they didn't do well, you couldn't speak to him. Landry needed a fraction of the time Lombardi took to analyze the other team. Landry was quicker; Lombardi more thorough. "Vin was a teacher," said Well Mara, "He could get on a blackboard and hammer it into the lower

mentality. Landry would not do that, He knew there were only three or four people in the room who knew exactly what he was saying." There was one essential characteristic that Lombardi and Landry shared: they were driven to win. Coaching together under Howell, they never had a losing season. Along with Fordham and Air Force, he had lost out at Penn and Washington, and his inability to land a head coaching job had thrown him into another depression, "I'm wondering whether the right head coaching job ever will open up for me," Lombardi said. "I know I can coach, but the right people never seem to know it." "You'll get your chance," Cohane responded. Lombardi hoped that Cohane was right, but he felt the faint chill of oblivion. "I'm not getting any younger," he said. Its success was dependent on a simple concept that was now the foundation of Lombardi's offensive philosophy: freedom within structure. The steep required precision, teamwork and brains. Lombardi loved it. Once, at a football seminar, he talked about it nonstop for eight hours.

- Meetings would start at nine, not five minutes after nine, Get there ahead of time, prepared. He promised to be relentless, driving constantly. *With every fiber of my body I've got to make you the best football player that I can make you, And I'll try, And I'll try. And if I don't succeed the first day. I'll try again. And I'll try again. And you've got to give everything that is in you. You've got to keep yourself in prime physical condition, because fatigue makes cowards of us all.* He would have no tolerance for the halfhearted, the defeatist, the loser, *Wherever you go, you represent the team. You will talk like, you will look like and you will act like the most dignified professional in your hometown* Relentless in the pursuit of victory, Only winners. Anyone who didn't like it was perfectly free to get the hell out right now. *There are trains, planes and buses leaving here every day, and if you don't produce for me you're gonna find yourself on one them.* Any examination of Lombardi the leader inevitably leads to the subject of pain, Paying the price, in Red Blaik's phrase, meant withstanding and conquering pain. Pain was a means to an end, not an end in itself. The art was not in the pain but in what the pain created: tireless, fearless, unbeatable men. To succumb to pain for no greater purpose was to accept defeat. That is why Lombardi drove his men toward pain. Since his days at West Point, he had based his coaching philosophy on Red Blaik's belief that perfection came with simplicity. The theory was to discard the immaterial and refine those few things that one did best. . Repetition, confidence and passion. The trinity of

Lombardi's football success.

annor, in the best shape of his life, said the players are motivated by the fear that "if you goof off, somebody else will take your job." Gary Knafelac acknowledged that fear was a motivating factor, but said it made him play better.. He "knows what he is talking about, is very precise about it, and a lot of his orders work out." Lombardi was not shy about accepting credit, telling one reporter: "You defeat defeatism with confidence, and confidence comes from the man who leads. You just have it. It is not something you get. You have to have it right here in your belly." They felt like winners even as they were losing. Losing can have vastly disparate effects on athletes, Some teams learn nothing from a loss, but fall deeper into the abyss. The plays seem predictable, the squad grows selfish. Lombardi's team reacted in the opposite way. The players learned more about themselves with each loss - not only that they hated losing, but that they were close to winning and that most of what Lombardi was teaching them actually worked and would eventually allow them to prevail. They learned something else equally important about their coach. As much as he ridiculed the notion of a good loser, he was not shortsighted in pursuit of victory. The truth was that he seemed more omery after a game in which they had played poorly and won than after a loss in which they had played hard. Marie studied the players, assessing which ones had talent, quietly soothing the feelings of those who had encountered Lombardi's wrath. *Can you get him off my back?* A player would ask her, to which she would reply, *How would you like to live with him?* If Lombardi was on your case that meant he saw something in you. There was more reason to be concerned if he didn't yell at you; that usually meant you were a goner. Wood called him "perhaps the fairest man I've ever met." Race was an issue that revealed the integrity of Lombardi's character. He was color-blind and though this was literally true - Lombardi was color-blind – there was more to it than that. It has always been easy for whites to claim color-blindness in the United States since white is the dominant color in American society, but the claim often serves as a ruse for not recognizing the particular obstacles faced by non-whites. Lombardi might have seen only one color on the football field, but he was not blind to the discrimination that his black players

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Bart Starr said, "Trust and respect should never just be handed out to somebody. You have to earn it." If he lacked the raw talents of many other quarterbacks, he thought that he could compensate by working harder and overachieving. Starr said, "You're asking me to be the leader of this team, and I'm challenged by that and I want to be the best leader I can be. 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 here where you make your apologies to me. I will be an even better leader for you if you do that." Lombardi never criticized him in front of the team again. Starr hungered for Lombardi's sense of order and keep football knowledge, and realized that it could make him excel. Red Blaik said Lombardi was "a superior individual all the way around - loyal, decent, inspiring, someone who believes in winning and never rationalizes a defeat and hates to lose though he learns from every loss." Style rather than substance allowed coaches of inferior character and talent to rise more quickly than Lombardi. "He can be a dynamo when he has to be. But like a lot of men with ability, he's a man of many moods." "Perhaps you didn't realize that you could have won this game," Lombardi said in a quiet, deliberate voice. "But I think there's no doubt in your minds now, And that's why you will win it all next year, This will never happen again. You will never lose another championship." He demanded precision - letters answered quickly, documents neatly filed, no unfinished tasks lingering at the end of the day. The office hours were nine to five, but anyone arriving at nine was considered fifteen minutes late - the same Lombardi Standard Time that his players had encountered. "He would build you up, but never to the point too high where you thought you could tell him what to do. He was still the master and you were the slaves," said Gary Knafelic. I thrive on work. I'm restless, demanding, sometimes impatient and hot-tempered. For these characteristics, a full schedule is the best antidote, Dick Schaap said, "To a man they respect him and what he has done for them." Myth or reality? Hornung seemed both. It was said that half the world wanted to be with him and the other half wanted to be him. Lombardi could rant at Hornung, blister him with criticism, fine him if necessary, and Hornung would accept it with equanimity. His willingness to absorb the heat made it easier for less talented players. For all his discipline, Lombardi was more flexible than he seemed. When presented with reports of wild goings-on involving Packers, he gave the benefit of the doubt to his players. He accepted their explanations at face value unless he had hard facts to the contrary. He believed it was better to build trust that way than to impose discipline with a pack of town snitches. Myth becomes myth not in the living but in the retelling. Football was a violent sport, Lombardi insisted, and he had known from his earliest experiences that many of the boys with a natural affinity for the game came from troubled backgrounds. He did not tolerate rebellion, he shaped the

team in his image on the field, and the positive effect he had on his players off the field was undeniable, but even with Lombardi there was a direct correlation between the amount of time he would put into character building and the talent of the character in need of building. Now we know the answer to why he did not become a head coach until he was forty-five years old. When God has reserved real greatness for somebody, God makes sure he's ready for it. Details of the past were not material to his mission. Discard the immaterial, Red Blaik had taught him at West Point, in the context of preparing for a football game, and Vince had become the master of

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to face week to week." And he would sign off with the motto he had learned from General MacArthur. "Best wishes to you both and remember, 'There is no substitute for victory.'" Hornung's first bet was on an exhibition game, and from then on he bet on college and pro games, often on the Packers. "Not once did I ever bet against us, but if I chose not to place a bet on us one Week, there was a reason why. Just too tough a game or something." There would be severe penalties for anyone caught gambling, Rozelle said that day. The severest penalty was banishment from the sport. Hornung left the meeting saying to himself, I've placed my last bet. Not that he thought betting was wrong, but it "was silly to risk a pro career for it." Why did Paul Hornung place bets on the Packers and endanger Lombardi's awesome team? The answers are as complex and varying as human nature itself: Hubris. A sense of invincibility. Reckless youth. Thrill of winning. Peer pressure, Boredom. Temptation. "Hornung bet for the thrill of it," Lombardi concluded. "The thrill lay in the fact that it was forbidden / was fond of Paul and I'm sure he was fond of me. Yet he still liked to feel that there was something he could put over on me." Football was still regarded as a part-time job in 1963, so much so that every player on the Green Bay foster found the off-season employment he needed to supplement his football income. There was something about Hornung that Lombardi and his veterans knew they would dearly miss. No. 5 had a way of loping onto the field and lifting the confidence of everyone around him. "Hornung was one hundred percent football player. He is a winner and a tremendous leader on the field," Lombardi said at the Packers stockholders meeting in Green Bay that spring. "He was one hundred percent football player even when he was injured." *Winning is not a sometime thing; it's an all the time thing*, he was fond of saying. Living with success is more difficult than living with failure: the pressure relentless for more and more. Success is like a habit-forming drug that in victory saps your elation and in defeat deepens your despair. Once you have sampled it, you are hooked." When you are successful, he thought, everyone else is jealous and every game becomes a grudge match. They really weren't up for the Bears game the way they should have been.

It was the only time a Lombardi team did not seem mentally ready for an important game. He left his seat and got the attention of his players. "I really got outcoached today," he said. "We all got outplayed, but I got outcoached. Next year, we'll be ready for them in no uncertain terms." Then he went back row by row and patted each player on the back. "What the hell was that all about?" Koeppler asked Lombardi when he returned to his seat. "They're down enough already," Lombardi said. If he was not sure of it before, Koeppler at that moment realized that "the Old Man was one shrewd psychologist." There was no third consecutive championship. "As far as the Packers are concerned, as someone once said, 'We are not slain, just wounded. Let me lay a while and bleed as little and I will rise to fight again.' So will the Packers," Lombardi declared during a speech. "The one big lesson we all have to learn, is that a team, like men, must be brought to its knees before it can rise again." Bill Quinlan was traded after the 1962 championship, when Lombardi concluded that his on-field talents were not worth his erratic off-field behavior. Jim Ringo had been a Green Bay stalwart, a perennial all-pro who had not missed a game in ten seasons, captain of the offense, smart and swift, his blocking agility essential to the success of their signature play, the Packer sweep. Lombardi knew all that and admired Ringo, but was insulted by the presence of the agent. He could not tolerate anything or anyone getting between him and his players, making the process seem mercenary, less personal. The presence of an agent made it harder from him to get up from his desk and rub the player's head and get him to relent. It interfered with his concept

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One of his friends tried to explain Lombardi by saying that he was not the best at anything -- not the most intelligent, innovative, disciplined, organized, energetic and inspiring - but far above average at everything. What set Lombardi apart was his purposefulness. "He really means to do the job, and there isn't a moment when he isn't working at it." To Steve Sabol, the young producer for NFL films, the secret of Lombardi was not so much what he said but the sound of it. "It was all the voice. The great leaders in history - Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., Roosevelt, Hitler -- all had these really unique voices. And Lombardi's voice was so unique, so strident, so resonant, it could cut through anything. He could be on the other side of a room and talking in his regular tone and everyone would hear him." To others, Lombardi's brilliance was his simplicity and dependability. Straight ahead all the way. Tell everyone what you're doing and do it better. That undeniably was an important aspect of his coaching character, yet it might also be the most misleading

explanation of all, according to Lombardi's son, Vincent. "People say the only constant in life is change. I say the constant in life is paradox. My father's life was a paradox Everything about him." A paradox is something that seems self contradictory but in reality is possibly true, and by that definition Vincent was right. It is only by looking at Lombardi as a paradox that one can fully appreciate him as a leader and coach. Was it love or hate, confidence or fear, that drove Lombardi and his players? All - at the same time, There was "nothing that stokes the fire" like hate. Hit or be hit, that was the reality of football. And yet Lombardi simultaneously believed in love and said that love made the difference. Once he began a speech to us by asking, "What is the meaning of love?" recalled Bob Skoronski. "And that is what he said. He said, 'Anybody can love something that is beautiful or smart or agile. You will never know love until you can love something that isn't beautiful isn't bright, isn't glamorous. It takes a special person to love something unattractive, someone unknown. That is the test of love. Everybody can love someone's strengths and somebody's good looks. But can you accept someone for his inabilities? And he drew a parallel that day to football. You might have a guy playing next to you who maybe isn't perfect, but you've got to love him, and maybe that love would enable you to help him. And maybe you will do something more to overcome a difficult situation in football because of that love. He didn't want us to be picking on each other, but thinking, What can I do to make it easier for my teammate? It was more than football, but crucial to, our football success." On the bulletin board of the locker room, Lombardi tacked a fan's note as a reminder of the correlation between professionalism and confidence, "I have begun to notice something just as important as your winning games," the letter stated: "Self-respect! The attitude you have instilled in your players is amazing. Too often conceit and a boisterous personality are symbols of stardom. If so, you have no 'stars' on your team, I think the quiet performance of the Packers shows confidence and respect for the other members of the team and is just an extension of the attitude you have instilled in them. You are doing more than just winning football games; you are teaching many more to compete in the game of life." It was one more way that Lombardi made the players "feel that we were something special." If there is a fine line between exuding confidence and feeling comfortable, Lombardi intuitively found it. He used fear to make sure that his players never felt too comfortable. This happened in two ways. One was indirect a fear arising from the unpredictability of his actions, "He kept the players off balance." If his use of fear had involved only fear of the uncertain, however, it might not have worked: his players would have considered him unfair and eventually that could have led to a loss of respect. And so beneath his volatile personality he constructed a foundation that was predictable and objective. He made sure that his players understood the standards by which they would be judged. This created a different fear, fear of the certain. Nothing went ungraded, every play, every player.