

ALLA CORRENTE

Vince Lombardi

On February 3, 2013 the San Francisco '49ers will play in Super Bowl XLVII in New Orleans. The winning team (hopefully, the '49ers) will be awarded the Vince Lombardi Trophy, named for the successful Italian-American coach of the Green Bay Packers during the 1960s, and the winning coach in Super Bowls I and II. This month's Alla Corrente will look at the life of Vince Lombardi, coach extraordinaire.



Vincent Thomas “Vince” Lombardi (June 11, 1913 – September 3, 1970) is best known as the head coach of the Green Bay Packers during the 1960s, where he led the team to three straight league championships, and five league championships in seven years (equivalent in those days to winning the Super Bowl), including winning the first two Super Bowls following the 1966 and 1967 NFL seasons. The National Football League’s Super Bowl trophy is named in his honor. He was enshrined in the NFL’s Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1971.

He played football at St. Francis Preparatory School, and later Fordham University. He began coaching as an assistant and later as a head coach at St. Cecilia High School. He would later become an assistant coach at Fordham University, the U.S. Military Academy, and the New York Giants before becoming the head coach of the Green Bay Packers from 1959 to 1967 and the Washington Redskins in 1969. He never had a losing season as

a head coach in the NFL, compiling an impressive regular season winning percentage of 73.8% (96-34-6), a preseason winning percentage of 78.6% (44-12), and 90% (9-1) in the postseason for an overall record of 149 wins, 47 losses, and 6 ties in the NFL.

He was born in Brooklyn, NY to Enrico “Harry” Lombardi and Matilda “Mattie” Izzo on June 11, 1913. Harry’s mother and father, Vincenzo and Michelina, immigrated from Salerno, Italy. Mattie’s father and mother, Anthony and Loretta, immigrated from an area several miles east of Salerno. Harry had three siblings and Matilda had twelve siblings. Vince was the oldest of five children, Madeleine, Harold, Claire, and Joe. The entire Lombardi and Izzo clan settled in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn.

Matilda’s father, Anthony, opened up a barber shop in Sheepshead Bay prior to the turn of the 20th century. At about the time of Vince Lombardi’s birth, Harry, and his brother, Eddie, opened a butcher shop in the Meatpacking District. Throughout the Great Depression, Harry’s shop did well and his family prospered. Vince grew up in an ethnically diverse, middle-class neighborhood.

Church attendance was mandatory for the Lombardis on Sundays. Mass would be followed by an equally compulsory few hours of dinner with friends, extended family members, and local clergy. Vince was an altar boy at St. Mark’s Catholic Church. Outside of their local neighborhood, the Lombardi children were subject to the rampant racism that existed at the time against Italian immigrants, and Vince learned to defend himself along with his siblings when they were subjected to such racism. As a child, he helped his father at his meat cutting business, but grew to hate it. At the age of 12 he started playing in an uncoached, Sheepshead Bay, organized football league.

Lombardi graduated from the eighth grade at PS 206, aged 15, in 1928. He then entered the Cathedral College of the Immaculate Conception, a six-year secondary program with the goal of becoming a Catholic priest. At Cathedral, he played on the school’s baseball and basketball teams, but his performance was hindered by his poor athleticism and eyesight. Against school rules, he continued to play football off-campus throughout his studies at Cathedral. After completing four years at Cathedral he decided not to pursue the priesthood, and he enrolled at St. Francis Preparatory high school for the fall of 1932. His playing on Prep’s football team earned him a spot on the virtual All-City football team.

Continued next page...

ALLA CORRENTE, *Continued* Vince Lombardi

In 1933, following graduation from St. Francis Prep, Lombardi accepted a football scholarship to Fordham University in the Bronx to play for the Fordham Rams and Coach Jim Crowley, one of the Four Horsemen of Notre Dame in the 1920s. During his freshman year, Lombardi proved to be an aggressive and spirited player on the football field. Prior to the start of his sophomore year, he was made a starter at tackle even though he was undersized for the position (5'8" and about 180 lb.)

In his senior year (1936), he became the right guard in the Seven Blocks of Granite, a nickname given to the Fordham University football team's offensive front line by a Fordham University publicist. In a game against the Pittsburgh Panthers, he suffered a severe gash inside his mouth and had several teeth knocked out. He missed most of the remainder of that game, until he was called in on defense for a successful goal line stand that preserved a 0-0 tie. Fordham went 5-0-2 before losing in the final game of the season, 7-6, to NYU. The loss destroyed all hopes of Fordham playing in the Rose Bowl and the loss taught Lombardi a lesson he would never forget—to never underestimate your opponent.

On June 16, 1937, he graduated from Fordham University. The economic times of the Great Depression offered him little opportunities for a career. For the next two years he showed no discernible career path or ambition. He tried his hand at semi-professional football and as a debt collector, but those efforts proved to be failures very quickly. With his father's strong support he enrolled in Fordham Law School in September, 1938. Although he did not fail any classes, he believed his grades were so poor that he dropped out after one semester. Later in life, he would explain to others that he was close to graduating but his desire to start, and support, a family forced him to leave law school and get a job.



By 1939, Lombardi wanted to marry his girlfriend, Marie Planitz, but, at his father's insistence, he needed a steady job to support himself and a family. In 1939, he accepted an assistant coaching job at St. Cecilia (which closed in 1986)—a Roman Catholic high school in Englewood, New Jersey. He was offered the position by the school's new head coach, Lombardi's former Fordham teammate, quarterback Andy Palau. Palau had just taken over the head coaching position from another Fordham teammate, Nat Pierce (left guard), who had accepted an assistant coaching job back at Fordham. In addition to coaching at the high school, Lombardi, age 26, also taught Latin, chemistry, and physics there for an annual salary of under one thousand dollars. Andy Palau left for Fordham in 1942 and Lombardi became the head coach at St. Cecilia. He stayed a total of eight years, five as head coach. In 1943, St. Cecilia's was recognized as the top football team in the nation, in large part based on their victory over Brooklyn Prep, a Jesuit-run school considered one of the best teams on the American eastern seaboard. Brooklyn Prep that season was led by senior Joe Paterno, who, like Lombardi, would rise to legend-status in football. Also, while at St. Cecilia, Lombardi became the President of the Bergen County Coach's Association.

In 1947, Lombardi became the coach of freshman teams in football and basketball at Fordham University. The following year he served as an assistant coach for Fordham's varsity football team, but he was arguably the *de facto* head coach.

Following the 1948 football season, he accepted an assistant coaching job at the U. S. Military Academy at West Point, a position that would greatly influence his future coaching style. He served as offensive line coach under legendary head coach Earl "Colonel Red" Blaik. "As integral as religion was to [his] sense of self, it was not until he reached West Point and combined his spiritual discipline with Blaik's military discipline that his coaching persona began to take its mature form." (*When Pride Still Mattered: A Life Of Vince Lombardi* by David Maraniss, 1999, p. 101) Blaik's emphasis

Continued next page...

ALLA CORRENTE, *Continued* **Vince Lombardi**

on execution would become a trademark of Lombardi's coaching style and strategy. He coached at West Point for five seasons, with varying results. The 1949, 1950, and 1953 seasons were successful. But the 1951 and 1952 seasons were not successful due to the aftermath of a cadet cribbing scandal (a violation of the Cadet Honor Code) which was revealed in the spring of 1951. As a result, 43 of 45 members of the varsity football team were discharged by administrative order. "Decades later, looking back on his rise, Lombardi came to regard ... Blaik's decision not to resign ... as a pivotal moment in his [own] career"—it taught him perseverance. (Maraniss, 1999, p. 136).

In 1954, Lombardi, age 41, began his NFL career with the New York Giants. He accepted a job that would later become known as the offensive coordinator position under new head coach Jim Lee Howell. The Giants had finished the previous season, under 23-year coach Steve Owen, with a 3–9 record. By the third season, Lombardi, along with the defensive coordinator, former All-Pro cornerback-turned-coach Tom Landry, turned the squad into a championship team, defeating the Chicago Bears in 1956 for the league title. At points in his tenure as an assistant coach at West Point, and as an assistant coach with the Giants, Lombardi worried that he was unable to land a head coaching job due to prejudice against his Italian heritage, especially with respect to Southern colleges and universities. Howell wrote numerous recommendations for Lombardi to aid him in obtaining a head coaching position. Lombardi applied for head coaching positions at Wake Forest, Notre Dame and other universities and, in some cases, never even received a reply. While he was with the Giants, he introduced the strategy of "rule blocking" to the NFL. In rule blocking, the offensive lineman would block an area, not necessarily a particular defensive player as was the norm up to that time. The running back was then expected to run toward any hole that was created. Lombardi referred to this as "running to daylight".

In the 1958 NFL season, the Green Packers, with five future hall of famers playing on the team, finished with a record of 1-10-1, the worst season in Packer history. The players, of course, were dispirited; the Packer shareholders were disheartened; and the whole Green Bay community was enraged. The angst in Green Bay extended to the NFL as a whole, as the financial viability and the very existence of the Green Bay Packer franchise were in jeopardy. On February 2, 1959, Vince Lombardi accepted the position of head coach and general manager of the Green Bay Packers, and that move saw the rebirth of one of the most successful franchises in NFL history.

Lombardi created punishing training regimens and expected absolute dedication and effort from his players. The 1959 Packers were an immediate improvement, finishing at 7-5, and rookie head coach Lombardi was named "Coach of the Year."

In his second year, Green Bay won the NFL Western Conference for the first time since 1944. This victory, along with his well-known religious convictions led the Green Bay community to anoint him with the nickname "The Pope." He led the Packers to the 1960 NFL Championship Game against the Philadelphia Eagles. Prior to the championship game, Lombardi met with Wellington Mara and advised him that he would not take the Giants' head coaching job, which was initially offered after the end of the 1959 season. In the final play of the game, in a drive that would have won it, the Packers were stopped a few yards from the goal line. Lombardi had suffered his first and his only, ever, championship game loss. He would coach the Packers to win their next nine post-season games, a record streak not matched or broken until Bill Belichick, coach of the New England Patriots, won 10 in a row from 2002 to 2006. The Packers would defeat the Giants for the NFL title in 1961 (37–0 in Green Bay) and 1962 (16–7 at Yankee Stadium), marking the first two of their five titles in Lombardi's nine years. After the 1962 championship win, President John F. Kennedy called Lombardi and asked him if he would, "come back to Army and coach again"; Kennedy received Lombardi's tacit denial of the request. His only other post-season loss occurred to the St. Louis Cardinals in the Playoff Bowl (3rd place game) after the 1964 season (officially classified as an exhibition game).

Including postseason but excluding exhibition games, Lombardi went on to compile a 105–35–6 (.740 winning percent) record as head coach, and he never suffered a losing season. He led the Packers to three consecutive NFL championships—in 1965, 1966, and 1967—a feat accomplished only once before in the history of the league (by Curly Lambeau, co-founder of the Packers, who coached the team to their first three straight NFL Championships in 1929, 1930, and

Continued next page...

ALLA CORRENTE, *Continued*

Vince Lombardi

1931). At the conclusion of the 1966 and 1967 seasons, Lombardi's Packers would go on to win the first two Super Bowls. He coached the Green Bay Packers to championships in five of seven seasons.

One memorable game during his tenure as Packer's coach was a game when the Packers hosted the Dallas Cowboys in Green Bay on December 31, 1967 in the NFL Championship Game of 1967. This became known as the "Ice Bowl" because of the -13°F game time temperature. With 16 seconds left in the game and down by 3 points, the Packers called their final time-out. It was 3rd and goal on the Dallas 2 foot line. In the huddle, with the game on the line, quarterback Bart Starr asked guard Jerry Kramer whether he could get enough traction on the icy turf for a wedge play and Kramer responded with an unequivocal "yes." Then Starr came over to Lombardi on the sidelines to discuss the last play and told him he wanted to run a 31 wedge, but with him keeping the ball. Lombardi told Starr to 'Run it! And let's get the hell out of here!' Lombardi was asked by Pat Pepler what play Starr would call, to which Lombardi replied, "Damned if I know." Starr returned to the huddle and called a Brown right 31 Wedge, but with him keeping the ball. Kramer blocked Jethro Pugh low and Ken Bowman hit Pugh high as Starr followed them into the end zone for the Packer lead and eventual victory.



Lombardi stepped down as head coach of the Packers following the 1967 NFL season, staying on as the team's general manager for 1968. He handed off the head coaching position to Phil Bengtson, a longtime assistant, but the Packers finished at 6-7-1 and out of the four-team NFL playoffs. He returned to coaching in 1969 with the Washington Redskins, where he broke a string of 14 losing seasons. The 'Skins would finish with a record of 7-5-2, significant for a number of reasons. Lombardi discovered that rookie running back Larry Brown was deaf in one ear, something that had escaped his parents, schoolteachers, and previous coaches. Lombardi observed Brown's habit of tilting his head in one direction when listening to signals being called, and walked behind him during drills and said "Larry". When Brown did not answer, the coach asked him to take a hearing exam. Brown was fitted with a hearing aid, and with this correction he would enjoy a successful NFL career.

Lombardi got quarterback Sonny Jurgensen, one of the league's premier forward passers, into the best condition he could. He coaxed former All-Pro linebacker Sam Huff out of retirement. He even changed the team's uniform design to reflect that of the Packers, with gold and white trim along the jersey biceps, and later a gold helmet with an "R" inside a circle, similar to the famous Green Bay "G" monogram.

Illness and Death

As early as 1967, Lombardi had been suffering from digestive tract problems, but he had refused his doctor's request for him to undergo a proctoscopic exam. On June 24, 1970, he was admitted to Georgetown University Hospital for tests that ultimately discovered a fast-growing malignant cancer in his colon. On July 27, he was readmitted to Georgetown and exploratory surgery found that the cancer was terminal. Lombardi, with Marie at his side, received family, friends, clergy, players, and former players at his hospital bedside. He received a phone call from President Nixon telling him that all of America was behind him, to which he reportedly replied that he would never give up his fight against his illness. Vince Lombardi died at 7:12am, on September 3, 1970. He was 57 years old.

On September 7, the funeral was held at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City. Approximately 1,500 people lined Fifth Avenue and between 39th and 50th Street, Fifth Avenue was closed to traffic. Terence Cardinal Cooke delivered the eulogy. In attendance were team owners, Commissioner Pete Rozelle, past and present members of the Packers, Redskins, and Giants, former students from Saint Cecilia's, colleagues and players from West Point, and classmates from Fordham. Lombardi is buried next to his wife Marie and his parents Harry and Matilda, in Mount Olivet Cemetery in Middletown Township, New Jersey.

Adapted by James J. Boitano, Ph.D. from Wikipedia, from www.vincelombardi.com website, and from <http://www.biography.com/people/vince-lombardi-9385362?page=1>.