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A legend at St. Norbert

St. Norbert College

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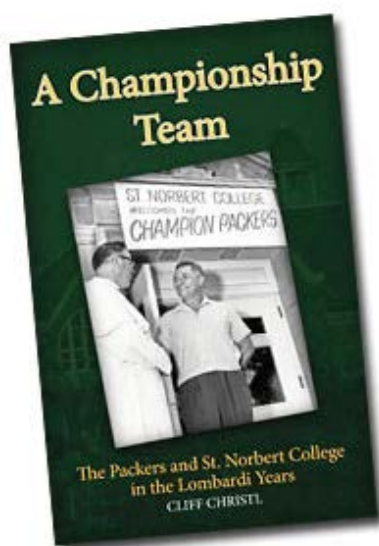
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A legend at St. Norbert

Bart Starr and Forrest Gregg are among many players whom Cliff Christl interviewed for his new book, "A Championship Team: The Packers and St. Norbert College in the Lombardi Years" (2009). This first offering from the St. Norbert Press takes a look back, through the eyes of those who were there, at the Packers' training camps held on campus during the reign of the coaching legend.

If these two excerpts whet your appetite, "A

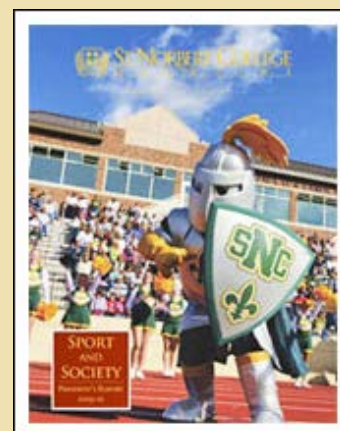
Championship Team" is available at bookstores and other outlets, including the Packer Pro Shop and the St. Norbert College bookstore, and at www.snc.edu/go/shop.

BART STARR

A lowly 17th-round draft pick in 1956, Starr showed enough promise to make the Packers' roster, but he foundered over the next three seasons. In 1959, Vince Lombardi's first as coach, Starr started the final five games and led the Packers to victory in four of them. He won the job outright in the sixth game of the 1960 season and led the Packers into the NFL championship game that year and then to five titles over the next seven years, including the first two Super Bowls. Starr was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1977. He also served as the Packers' head coach from 1975 to 1983.

I thought it was an ideal situation that the Packers and St. Norbert worked out during the training camp period. We could be housed there, hold our meetings there. We spent the evenings there. I thought it was a perfect fit because of the convenience, the closeness, the friendliness of everyone associated with the college. It was just a very enjoyable experience. The setting at St. Norbert and in De Pere was very practical. We couldn't have been in a better environment. You could walk around a little bit, meet people, say hello to them.

I enjoyed meeting people. My father had stressed when we moved around – my father was a career military man – that you could be



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Bart Starr and Forrest Gregg

friendly to people regardless of age. That you could be sociable, kind, generous. So when you had an opportunity to be [around the young fans on campus], you'd try to help them anyway you could: Answer questions, be cordial about signing autographs. It was fun.

We learned a great deal [in Lombardi's first year]. He simplified the terminology, which had been a lot of gobbledygook stuff. He reduced the terminology that was necessary to call plays and those types of things. You could see from the very first meeting that this man was extremely well-organized and well-prepared. [Meetings] were always relatively short. I think he felt if he could keep it as simple as possible, it would be much more appealing for the players. Plus, I think he felt he could maintain discipline by being narrowly focused and speaking in that fashion.

In those days, he didn't have an offensive coordinator, so [Lombardi] basically coached the offense. He was always uniquely well prepared. He taught well. Anytime we had a meeting, I could hardly wait to go to the next [one] because I knew he'd be conducting it. He was just an outstanding teacher and coach.

Mostly, [I roomed] with Henry Jordan. Henry Jordan had a great sense of humor. It was super fun rooming with a guy like that. He was a great guy. Most of the time when we went back [to the room], we just went to bed. But it was a good roommate-teammate package. We had some very good discussions. [And] we were a little more subdued than [Paul Hornung and Max McGee]. [But Lombardi] loved those guys because even though they didn't like curfew, they never embarrassed themselves or the team. So Coach Lombardi turned his head and fined the heck out of them. The next morning at practice, no one was sharper, no one was more committed or prepared than those two guys. Many of us always figured that when we had our team party at the end of the year, their fines paid for our party.

In the afternoon, when we wanted to get a beer before the meetings, we'd go over to a nice pub in East De Pere. Just over the bridge and to the right. They treated us very well and very privately. It was just a way for us to get away for a few minutes. During training camp, we went over there frequently.

(The pub he was referring to was Century Bowling Lanes and Bar, located at 132 S. Broadway St.)

FORREST GREGG

In his book "Run to Daylight," Lombardi called Gregg "the finest player I ever coached." An offensive tackle, Gregg joined the Packers in 1956 as a second-round draft pick, went into service for a year, then returned in 1958 and played through 1970. He played in 187 consecutive games for the Packers, the second longest streak in club history to Brett Favre. Gregg was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1977. He also served as the Packers' head coach from 1984 to 1987.

I went [to St. Norbert] from 1958 until 1970, then came back there when I was coaching at Green Bay. St. Norbert had good facilities. The cafeteria was great. It had everything you needed: meeting rooms, everything for a training camp.

I had heard about [Lombardi] during the off-season [of 1959]. I didn't have any idea as to who he was or what he was like. I lived in Dallas during the off-season and [Southern Methodist University] had some kind of function. I ran into a friend of mine and he said, "So you all got a new coach in Green Bay." I said, "Yeah, a guy named Vince Lombardi."

recall the Vince Lombardi years on campus in the new book, "A Championship Team."



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He said, "Do you know anything about him?" I said, "Absolutely not. I don't know a thing about him. Do you?" He said, "Yeah, he's a real bastard."

It was a guy named Don "Tiny" Goss. Tiny was at SMU when I was there. He was drafted by the Cleveland Browns and played one year. I think he was in Cleveland in 1956 and '57, then he [went to] the Giants, I think in '58. I don't know for how long, but it was long enough to figure out what Vince was.

When it came time to go to training camp John Symanek, a defensive back who lived in Arlington, and I rode up to Green Bay together. The second night, we got as far as Milwaukee and we decided we'd stop, have dinner and go into camp the next day. In the meantime, I said, "John, why don't we call Dave Hanner and see what's going on, just in case we're missing something?" So we call Dave up and said, "How is it going?" He says, "Whew-eee!" I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "I've already been to the hospital twice from heat exhaustion. This training camp is like nothing you could ever dream of," as far as the past is concerned. John and I put our heads together and we said, "We won't have any chance of making this team. We better get up to Green Bay." We checked out of the hotel, jumped in the car and got to [St. Norbert] about midnight or a little after.

There was a camp boy there checking people into the rooms. I told the guy, "We kind of got in late. John and I are going to sleep in, and we'll come and meet Coach Lombardi at lunch." The guy kind of smiled and said, "OK." At 6:45, some guy was beating on our door. "Get out here." We said, "We're sleeping in." "Coach Lombardi wants to see you guys at the cafeteria as soon as you get there." We jumped up, put on our clothes and took off over to the cafeteria.

I'll never forget meeting him. The boy took us over and told Coach Lombardi who we were. My first impression was that he was kind of short, not a real big guy, but blocky. Had a real nice smile. I shook hands with him and he had a real firm handshake. I thought, "Well, this seems like a pretty good guy." He says, "Glad you guys came in a little early. We've got a lot of work to do. I'll see you at practice." That was the introduction to him.

At the first practice, we did about 45, 50 grass drills. Up-downs, we called them. It seemed like 100. I don't know how many it was, but my tongue was hanging out. We got through the grass drills, then we started on agility drills and then we broke down further from there and the offensive line went over to its corner of the practice field. We were going over some plays, doing some technique drills. Bill Austin was our line coach. All of a sudden, I hear this screaming. It was like a rabid dog. I look over and Max McGee was walking back to the huddle. Lombardi was behind him, "Mister! We don't walk anywhere here! We run wherever we go! When you run out for a pass pattern, you run back to the huddle! You don't walk back to the huddle!" The more [Lombardi] talked the faster Max got.

[When Lombardi introduced the sweep], he drew this play up on the board. He said, "This is the play we've got to learn to execute. This play has everything to do with our total offense. We pass from the same formation. We run off tackle from the same formation. We run short traps, long traps, a dive from that formation. Everything has the same look from this beginning." He went through everything: how the guards pulled and led the play and what they would be looking for; the tight end's block; the split receiver's block; tackles, running backs, everybody. He said, "We will make this play work." And we did.

That wasn't the first meeting. The rookies were still the main source of attention. But I think it was the first full offensive meeting after everybody reported. It was football. It wasn't anything I hadn't seen before. [But] he was definite about it and I figured I better learn what I was supposed to do and figure out how to get it done. That was kind of how everybody looked at it.

The first two years I played pro ball, which was '56 and '58, I never thought I was in good enough condition to play my best the whole game. After a couple weeks in [Lombardi's first] training camp, I knew I was going to be ready to play. I just hoped I'd get an opportunity. I could just tell by the mood of the players that we were going to get better as a football team. I didn't know how good we were going to be. I had no way of knowing that we were going to be the team of the Sixties. But it was obvious that things were going to be different. You know Henry Jordan made that joke about how [Lombardi] treated us all the same, like dogs? Well, he did. He said several times and it really hit home with me, "I'll paint you all with the same brush. The rules are for everybody, not just one guy. There's no one guy greater than this football team." I liked that type of philosophy and I related to it.

I remember we played the Bears in Milwaukee that first season in preseason. They ran a screen pass on us and that big fullback, [Rick] Casares, scored on us and beat us. We were looking at film two days later at St. Norbert. [Lombardi] stopped the film and said, "I want to show you a ballplayer." I had no idea what he was talking about. We ran a trap play and my assignment was to release inside the defensive end, go across and hit the middle linebacker. It wasn't Bill George, I can tell you that right now. It was some rookie middle linebacker and I caught him looking. I knocked him on the ground and then jumped on top of him. [Lombardi] ran that play three, four times and my heart was beating so fast, I thought I was going to pass out. That was the first time he ever said anything really [nice] about me. What he did was – he expected that from me every game. He set the standard.

(George played middle linebacker for the Bears from 1952 to 1965 and was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1974.)

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