

THE PACKERS' GREATEST GAME

By Stan Grosshandler

The Packers' greatest game! Was it the famous Ice Bowl? Super Bowl I? Super Bowl II? One of the title games with the Giants or Browns?

None of the above.

The greatest game ever played by a Lombardi coached Green Bay Packer team was played December 23, 1967, at Milwaukee County Stadium. Prior to the '67 season, the NFL, in preparation for the merger with the American Football League had divided into an Eastern and Western Conference, with the East split into a Capitol Division and a Century Division and the West divided into a Central and Coastal. The Packers, Vikings, Lions, and Bears were in the Central. The Coastal, designed by someone who had flunked geography, had the West Coast Rams and 49ers and the East Coast Colts and Falcons. On December 23, the Packers were to represent the Central and the Rams the Coastal in the first playoff game.

Some background: the Packers had clinched their division by the 11th week of the then 14-week season. By the 13th week, the Rams had lost but one game and tied two, including a 24-24 tie with the Colts. The Colts led the Coastal, undefeated and twice tied. The Rams' 13th-week opponents were the Packers. The game was due-or-die for the Rams; for the Packers it was meaningless. Meaningless to everyone but Vince Lombardi. He told the press his team never had nor never would play a "meaningless" game.

Green Bay played it tough. With 54 seconds left, Donny Anderson stood at his 41 to punt, waiting the snap from center. The Packers led 24-20. Suddenly, Ram reserve linebacker, Tony Guillory, broke through and blocked Anderson's kick. Claude Crabb grabbed the ball for L.A. and was finally caught at the Green Bay five. Two plays later Bernie Casey – a constant Packer nemesis – caught a TD pass from Roman Gabriel. The Rams remained alive, 27-24.

"Coach Lombardi was very proud of us that day," recalled Bart Starr, "and I was very proud to have been a member of that team. The coach knew we'd played our hearts out with nothing to gain against a team that had everything to lose if they didn't win that game."

The next week, the Rams beat the Colts to give both teams identical 11-1-2 records but L.A. the division title. The playoff return-match between the Packers and Rams was set for Milwaukee in 20-degree weather and on national TV.

The late Henry Jordan, the Packers' all-pro defensive tackle, recalled: "It was bitter cold before the game. When the Rams came out to practice, they were complaining. We ran about saying what a great day it was and how it would be so much fun to play. They looked at us as if we were nuts."

The Packers' running game was hurting. Hornung and Taylor were gone. Elijah Pitts and Jim Grabowski had gone down with injuries in game number eight against the Colts, (another last second loss). The runners were now Donny Anderson and two retreats – Ben Wilson and Chuck Mercein. The latter had been released by both the Giants and Redskins that year. Rookie Travis Williams backed Anderson.

The rest of the Green Bay attack – Starr at quarterback throwing to receivers Carroll Dale and Boyd Dowler and tight end Marv Fleming, behind a line of Bob Skoronski, Gale Gillingham, Ken Bowman, Jerry Kramer, and Forrest Gregg – was intact. The defense showed a line of Willie Davis, Ron Kostelnik, Jordan, and Lionel Aldridge, linebackers Dave Robinson, Ray Nitschke, and Lee Roy

Caffey, and a secondary of Herb Adderley, Bob Jeter, Tom Brown, and Willie Wood.

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The Rams were led by Roman Gabriel who had Casey, Jack Snow, Bucky Pope, and Billy Truax as receivers and runners Les Josephson, Dick Bass, Tommy Mason, and Willie Ellison. The offensive line was manned by Joe Carollo, Tom Mack, Ken Iman, Joe Scibelli, and Charley Cowan. The defense had the "Fearsome Foursome" of Deacon Jones, Merlin Olsen, Roger Brown, and Lamar Lundy up front, backed by Jack Pardee, Doug Woodlief, Myron Pottios, and Maxie Baughan, with Clancy Williams, Irv Cross, Chuck Lamson, and Eddie Meador deep.

Despite the cold, the Rams started hot. Casey continued to play hell with the Packers, scoring on a first quarter, 29-yard pass from Gabriel. Gossett converted.

The Rams' momentum continued into the second period. On the first play, Lamson intercepted a Starr pass and brought it back to the Green Bay 10. Two plays gained five yards. On third down, Gabriel dropped back to pass. At this point, Jordan pulled the key play of the game, perhaps of the year, when he broke through and sacked Gabriel for a seven yard loss. On the next play, the Rams were called for illegal motion. Gossett set up for a consolation field goal. Blocked by Robinson!

Before the quarter ended, Travis Williams went 46 yards over right tackle for the tying touchdown, and Starr put Green Bay ahead with a 17-yard toss to Dale. With the score 14-7 at the half there was no need for the Rams to leave their nice warm dressing room.

In the third quarter, Mercein scored from the six. Starr completed a 48-yard toss to Dale in the fourth quarter and Williams cracked over from the two.

Meanwhile, the Packer defense smothered the Los Angeles attack. Gabriel completed only 11 of 31 passes for a mere 142 yards and an interception. He was sacked five times. It was very business-like; in those days players like Willie Davis and Ray Nitschke didn't dance over a fallen quarterback. The final: 28-7, Green Bay.

The two games that followed are better known: the 13- below zero, Championship Game win over Dallas and Super Bowl II. But this was the game that started the '67 Packers on their way to a third straight title. On paper, they were inferior to the Rams, Colts and Cowboys. The Rams had the momentum; the Packers had a couple of third- string running backs.

But, on one play, Jordan turned the game and the season around. It was arguably the Packers' greatest play in the Packers' greatest game.