

## **GREEN BAY'S DEFENSIVE GENIUS**

Phil Bengtson was architect of Green Bay's defense in glory years

By Ed Gruver

When Phil Bengtson passed away at his San Diego home Sunday, Dec. 18, following a lengthy illness, it marked the passing of one of the great defensive coaches in pro football history.

Like baseball's Lou Gehrig, Bengtson was a talented, quiet man who worked in the shadow of a dominant personality. Bengtson was defensive coordinator under Vince Lombardi in the Green Bay glory years of the 1960s, and while Lombardi became a legend, Bengtson was content to remain in the background.

In an era when gimmick nicknames popularized defensive teams in Dallas, Los Angeles and Minnesota, Bengtson preferred to let the Packers' on-field performance speak for itself.

Bengtson's defense helped key the Packers to "Team of the Decade" status in the 1960s, as Green Bay won five NFL titles, including the first two Super Bowls, and became the first and only modern era team to date to "threepeat" as NFL champions.

The Packers were at their best defensively in championship competition. Green Bay did not allow a single point in the 1961- 62 NFL title games, when the Packers defeated the high-powered New York Giants, 37-0 and 16-7. In the 1965 NFL title game at Green Bay, the Packers' defense and a muddy field helped hold Jim Brown to 50 yards rushing, as the Packers beat the defending NFL champion Cleveland Browns, 23-12. In all, Green Bay played in 10 playoff or championship games during the 1960s, and Bengtson's defense gave up 17 points or less in all but one of them.

Under Bengtson, the Packers led the NFL in ten different defensive categories in the 1960s. They peaked in 1962, leading the NFL in 12 different categories. In a statistical comparison with the defensive leaders of other eras -- 1948 Eagles, 1956 Giants, 1975, Steelers, 1985 Bears, and 1990 Giants -- the 1962 Packers graded out higher in more categories than any other team.

In a 1991 interview, Bengtson recalled the 1960s Packers with a quiet sense of pride.

"We emphasized the basics," he said. "It's not the plays you use, it's the players you have."

Yet while the Packers are remembered as a team that used a basic 4-3 scheme with man coverage, Bengtson put in wrinkles that confused opposing offenses. He utilized stacking principles by pinching his tackles inside, keeping enemy blockers off middle linebacker Ray Nitschke, which allowed the Hall of Famer to flow to the ball. He also used another Hall of Famer, Willie Wood, in a free safety zone, giving him the freedom to roam the deep middle of the field.

Those who played under Bengtson remembered him as a classy gentleman and a great human being. While Lombardi spent NFL Sundays prowling the sidelines, Bengtson would stand quietly at his side, chain-smoking cigarettes and following the action on the field from beneath the brim of his fedora.

Little escaped Bengtson's attention, in pregame preparation or on game day itself. He mastered the details of teaching the technicalities of defensive football -- pass rush routes, coverage drops and angles, etc.

Ray Nitschke, the linchpin of the Green Bay defense in the 1960s, recalled Bengtson as a master technician.

"He was a real perfectionist," Nitschke said, "a student of the game. He was always prepared, and he got us prepared. We were never outcoached."

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The Packers' opponents can attest to that. "Those guys were rough and skilled," said Hall of Fame fullback Jim Brown, who never had a 100-yard rushing day against the Packers.

"They didn't make many mistakes," said Len Dawson, who quarterbacked the Kansas City Chiefs in Super Bowl I, won by Green Bay, 35-10. "They played exceedingly well as a team."

That they did is a testimony, to the talent of the Packers, and the coaching of Phil Bengtson.