

'39 PACKERS

ONE OF GREEN BAY'S GREATEST TEAMS

by Stanley Grosshandler
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You are right about the 1939 Packers. They were really one of the great ball clubs," replied Clarke Hinkle when asked what was the greatest Green Bay club he had ever played on.

The Packers started playing pro ball in 1919; and while they produced 11 World Champions, the most outstanding have been Curly Lambeau's teams of 1929 and 1939 and the Vince Lombardi club of 1962.

"I joined the Packers in 1932," recalled Hinkle, a Hall of Fame fullback, "and we had a fine club that year. There were fellows like Dilweg, Earpe, Blood, Hubbard, Michalske, Lewellen, and Herber. We ended with a 10-3-1 record, yet they awarded the title to the Bears on a ridiculous record of 7 wins, 1 loss, and 6 ties.

"Our '39 bunch was very versatile. We had four good punters in Arnie Herber, Cecil Isbell, Frank Balaz, and myself; four placement kickers with Tiny Engebretsen, Don Hutson, Ernie Smith, and yours truly; and two of the greatest passers in football history - Cecil Isbell and Arnie Herber.

"While there were 33 players on the roster, we relied on 16 men who played a lot of the 60 minutes of each game.

"These 16 fellows stayed healthy through a tough 11-game schedule. What contributed to our success? We had an intense desire to get the job done, pride and loyalty to the team and supreme confidence that we could win".

The line of the 1939 Green Bay Packers was anchored by center Charles Brock, with guards Buckets Goldenberg and Russ Letlow, tackles Bill Lee and Baby Ray, and Don Hutson and Milt Gantenbein at the ends.

In *The First Fifty Years of NFL Football*, Goldenberg, Letlow, and Lee were selected as the best at their positions for the 1930's, Brock and Ray as tops for the 1940's, and the incomparable Don Hutson was chosen as the all-time split end.

To this Hinkle adds: "Milt Gantenbein was the best blocking end who ever lived."

The subs were such talented players as Tiny Engebretsen and Pete Tinsley guards, tackle Ernie Smith, and end Harry Jacunski.

The type of deceptive receiver Don Hutson was is related by Col. Dwight Sloan, a famous passer who played defense against Don.

"I remember the first time I played against him. He came out for a pass and I had no trouble keeping up with him. This isn't too hard I thought to myself and then I couldn't find him. Suddenly I looked behind me and he was far up the field tailing in the pass. He had shifted into high gear and left me standing there."

Buckets Goldenberg recalled Vince Lombardi's reply to a question as to whether he could use Don. "Hell, if I had him no one could stop my passing attack," claimed Lombardi.

At his peak Hutson held over a dozen league records and his 99 touchdowns on passes stood for years as the mark for the modern receivers to shoot for. What might have he done with the benefit of today's rules and sophisticated attacks?

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Using the single wing and Notre Dame box which lent itself more to power up the middle and off tackle than deception, the Packers won 9 of 11 games losing only to Cleveland and Chicago by a total of six points.

The tailbacks were Herber and Isbell. Both were good runners and Arnie led the league in passing three times and Isbell, twice. Like Hinkle and Hutson, Herber is also in the Hall of Fame. The block-busting Hinkle played fullback, and wingbacks were Joe Laws and Andy Uram. Uram set a record for the longest run from scrimmage that fall. At blocking back was Larry Craig.

"When we got Craig," Goldenberg recalled, "we switched Don Hutson to defensive back and Larry played his end. People do not realize that Don was an excellent defensive back. I also think this switch prolonged Don's career. Clarke Hinkle was a great favorite of the fans. He was a handsome man and a thrilling runner. Today I am sure he would star as either a fullback or middle linebacker."

All-time Bear guard Dr. Danny Fortmann concurred with Buckets. "Hinkle was one of the three greatest players I ever faced in all my years in the league. His style of running made him very difficult to bring down and when you did get him you knew it."

The reserve backs were hardhitting Ed Jankowski, vet Hank Bruder, and Larry Buhler. Don Hutson caught 34 passes and scored 38 points to lead the league. Clarke Hinkle, who led the league the previous year, scored 36 points, and kicker Engebretsen hit for 30.

After taking the Western Division title, the Packers were able to avenge the Giants who had beaten them in the 1938 title contest. Herber hit for the first TD, Isbell passed for a second, and Engebretsen and Smith chipped in with field goals. The final score -- a 27-0 rout of the New Yorkers.

Although the Packers took another championship during the war year of 1944, this was the last great Packer club until a new era dawned 22 years later.