Remembering Ray Nitschke

By Ed Gruver

He was idolized by Hall of Famer Dick Butkus, which speaks volumes about the kind of middle linebacker Ray Nitschke was.

And he was idolized by thousands of Green Bay Packers fans, which speaks volumes about something infinitely more important than football, and that's what kind of man Ray Nitschke was.

Millions of American men and boys who grew up in the sixties followed the Packers because of men like Nitschke, Bart Starr, Paul Hornung, and Willie Davis. Green Bay, like Notre Dame football and Brooklyn Dodgers baseball, inspired a national fan base that crossed all economic and sociological lines. There was something special about this championship team from a tiny Wisconsin town. It was indefinable and magical. It was a feeling, a state of mind, and a generation of Americans warmed their competitive fires by the accomplishments of Vince Lombardi's Packers.

Ray Nitschke knew what this feeling was all about. In an interview less than one year before his sudden and untimely passing on Sunday, March 8 from a heart attack, Nitschke spelled out what separated the Lombardi Packers from every other team of its era, what made them the team of the decade.

"It was the character of the Packers, man," he said over the phone in a raspy voice that sounded like crunching gravel. "We played for sixty minutes. We let it all hang out. There was no tomorrow for us. We got the adrenaline flowing, and we just let it go, man."

No one on the Lombardi Packers played with more adrenaline, more emotion than Number 66. Fran Tarkenton, who quarterbacked the Vikings and Giants during the sixties, said once that while Nitschke may not have been the defensive captain of those great Green Bay teams, he was their undisputed field general. Added Tarkenton, "I think other players were afraid not to play well with Nitschke around."

Fear was part of the Nitschke legend. He wielded it like a padded forearm, inspiring teammates and intimidating opponents. In truth, Nitschke, like so many of his Packer teammates, was a walking contradiction. They were angelic assassins. Backup quarterback Zeke Bratkowski said once that Starr, southern gentleman away from the game, became in the heat of battle a warrior perfectly willing to cut the opponent's heart out and show it to them. It was a statement that applied to all the men of Lombardi, none more so than Nitschke.

Off the field, he was mild mannered and a solid family man, given to wearing thick glasses and dark business suits. He could have been mistaken for a banker or lawyer, and when he appeared on the TV show *What's My Line* just hours after being named Most Valuable Player of the 1962 NFL championship game, his quiet and dignified manner stumped the celebrity panel.

There was no mistaking Nitschke on Sunday afternoons, however. He replaced his false front teeth with a gummy mouthpiece that lent a cruel downward curl to his wide mouth. He covered his balding head with a battle-scarred gold and green Packers' helmet, and wrapped his huge forearms in yards of padding and tape. The transition from businessman to block bully became complete when Nitschke stood poised over the center before each snap, his hawkish features forming a frightening visage as he peered his full-cage facemask like a man peering through the bars of a padded cell.

Kansas City Chiefs' Hall of Fame quarterback Len Dawson recalled walking to the line of scrimmage for the opening play in Super Bowl I and coming face-to-face with Nitschke for the first time. To Dawson's surprise, Nitschke seemed to be foaming at the mouth. Said Dawson "I thought to myself, 'This is the meanest-looking man I have ever seen.'"

Wielding his padded forearms like a scythe, Nitschke punished opposing linemen and cut a wide swath through blocking schemes. “Nitschke takes you on with that forearm,” Minnesota Vikings' all-pro center center Mick Tingelhoff said at the time. “He tries to punish you, and he does.”

Some opponents believed Nitsohke hit harder than his contemporary, Butkus. Preston Pearson, a running back for the Colts, Steelers, and Cowboys recalled once a blow by the balding enforcer that left him reeling. It occurred in a 1971 game, when a Pittsburgh lineman had missed his block, allowing Nitschke to flow unimpeded to Pearson on a Steeler sweep. Out of the corner of his eye, Pearson saw Nitschke flashing towards him a second before impact. Like Dawson, Pearson said Nitschke had a wild look in his eyes, and was foaming at the mouth. “It was the kind of hit,” Pearson said, “that can break a man’s back.”

The image of Nitschke as a foaming, wild-eyed madman made for good publicity in the sixties, but it also caused CBS sportscaster Tom Brookshier some anxious moments in an interview following the epic 1967 Ice Bowl. Brookshier jokingly introduced Nitschke to a national viewing audience as “Green Bay’s madman” but he froze with fear when Nitschke fixed him with an angry stare. “I'm not a madman,” he snapped. “I lust love to play football.”

Nitschke not only intimidated offensive players and sportscasters, but defensive peers as well. His Hall of Fame career lasted from 1958-72, spanning the golden age of middle linebackers that included Bill George and then Dick Butkus in Chicago; Joe Schmidt and Mike Lucci in Detroit; Sam Huff with the New York Giants; Tommy Nobis in Atlanta; Nick Buoniconti in Boston and then Miami; and Willie Lanier in Kansas City.

Nobis said Nitschke fit the part of a ferocious defender as if he had been culled from central casting. He added that Nitschke not only looked like a football player, he *sounded* like one as well.

During games and on the practice field, Nitschke kept up an incessant chatter. His raspy voice reverberated throughout the field as he shouted defensive instructions. On occasion, his constant talk irritated Lombardi.

“Hey, Nitschke,” the Green Bay boss would say.

“Yes, coach.”

“Shaddup.”

There was no stifling Nitschke on Sunday afternoons, and his actions always spoke louder than words. He was the linchpin in Green Bay's 4-3 lineup, and defensive coordinator Phil Bengston shielded him from offensive linemen by pinching his tackles inside to foul blocking schemes. When he wasn’t unimpeded by linemen, he broke through their blocks with a f1ailing forearm. At 6-3, 235 pounds Nitschke was fast for his size, and he used his lateral quickness and mobility to cover the field from sideline to sideline. Though he excelled as a run-stopper, he was also an excellent pass defender, with 25 career interceptions.

Nitschke’s nose for the ball and his knack for deciphering plays made him the focal point of every offense in the league. “Whenever we played the Packers,” Dallas Cowboys all-pro tackle Ralph Neely said, “our first concern was, ‘How do we block Nitschke?’”

Few teams were successful, and running backs during the sixties were left echoing the Motown tunes of Martha and the Vandellas. Like the song said, there was “Nowhere to run to, nowhere to hide.”

The late George Allen, who built the Rams’ famous “Fearsome Foursome” defenses of the sixties, said once when Nitschke got wound up he was capable of taking a defense apart by himself. “He was almost impossible to contain,” Allen said.

One of the leading defensive tacticians of his era, Allen was so impressed by Nitschke he paid him the ultimate compliment by naming a defense after him, “47 Nitschke.” The scheme copied the way Ray played a certain position.

What impressed Allen most about Nitschke was his ability to step up and make a big play in a big game. He was a money player, Allen said, on a team that a1ways had the stakes piled high on the table.

In the frigid, minus-20-degree wind chill of the 1962 NFL title game, he recovered two fumbles to key a 16-7 Green Bay win over the New York Giants. His performance that day on the hallowed but frozen ground of Yankee Stadium inspired a young University of Illinois middle linebacker named Dick Butkus. Watching the game on TV, Butkus was thrilled when Nitschke was named game MVP. “If he had asked me,” Butkus said later, “1 would have gladly served as the chauffer for the sports car they gave him.”

In the 1965 NFL championship game, he keyed on Cleveland's great fullback, Jim Brown, and held him to 50 yards rushing on a snow-swept field in a 23-l2 Packers’ victory. He also made the defensive play of the game when he sloshed 30 yards through the icy mud in one-on-one coverage with Brown and made a lunging deflection of a sure TD pass three yards deep in the end zone.

In January of l968, Nitschke’s lateral pursuit overwhelmed the Oakland Raiders’ power running game in a 33-l4 Green Bay triumph in Super Bowl II. A review of the play-by-play reveals Nitschke made six unassisted tackles in the sun-splashed Miami Orange Bowl, and set the tone for the afternoon when he flipped fullback Hewritt Dixon heels-over-helmet on the game's first play from scrimmage.

"I think the Lombardi teams enjoyed and wanted to get into the big games,” he said. “We had a great record in our post-season games. We lost the first (championship) and never lost another.”

“I think it was the preparation and every thing Lombardi represented, you know, about hard work and that every game was important. So when you get to the real important games, you were ready to go. Every game was a championship game, and that made it easier when we got to the big games because we weren't awed by it, we weren't nervous about it. We were more relaxed than the opponents, and in those particular years, we always played to our experience. That's how we handled it. That’s what you work all season for, to get into the playoff games, and you don’t want to blow it.”

Nitschke's no-nonsense approach was perfectly suited for the sixties, an era when games were played before howling mobs in grass cathedrals, and he covered himself with equal parts mud and glory.

“Lambeau was always special, and so was Milwaukee,” he said. “Packer fans have always been very loyal, very supportive. Since I’ve been around, Packer fans have always been unreal.”

Nitschke's rough but clean play earned the respect of fans not only in Green Bay but across the country. Though he was a Hall of Famer, he never allowed his star status to interfere with his relationship with fans. Long after his playing days were over, character remained a guiding principle with him.

“It was another day to go to work, and try to play and play well,” he said of his career. “One of the great things I've loved about football is that you don’t cancel the qames. It shows a little about yourself and the character of yourself.

“Everybody can play in fifty degree weather, but can you play in a hundred degree weather? Can you play in a wind chill of fifty below? It's a test. It's a test of your character and your team's character, and you have to make adjustments. It’s like life, you know. Things don't always go your way. And you have to make the right adjustments.”

Nitschke made the adjustments. Having lost his father when he was three and his mother when he was thirteen, the one-time rowdy settled down and became a dedicated parent to his own children, Amy, John, and Richard.

To millions of Packer fans, Ray Nitschke remains forever a part of Green Bay's family. He never refused an autograph, and never accepted money for one either. When he attended card shows that called for several Hall of Famers to sign as many as 500 items, Nitschke was usually at about number 150 when his colleagues were done. The reason? Ray took time to talk with everyone who came to see him. His daughter Amy said recently her father considered it an honor, a privilege when someone asked for his autograph.

During the course of the phone interview, the doorbell rang in Nitschke's home outside Green Bay. Telling his caller to “Hold on a minute,” Nitschke answered the door. Five minutes later he returned.

“There's a blizzard here,” he said, “and the guy drives out to get my autograph on a helmet and a football.”

He issued a raspy laugh, but one tinged with unmistakable appreciation.

“Packer fans are nuts, man.”

Nuts? Maybe. But nuts about Nitschke.