Landry and Lombardi, Legendary Coaches

By Patrick Gallivan

It was the coldest New Year's Eve in Green Bay, Wisconsin history as the Packers and Cowboys lined up for the critical play of the game. The wind chill felt like 40 below zero on that last day of 1967. Frozen steam rose from the helmets of the gridiron gladiators. Only thirteen seconds remained and the Packers were down by three points. No timeouts remained. If the Packers risked a run, the game would likely end. By now, you know the outcome. Bart Starr slipped behind Jerry Kramer into the end zone and the Packers escaped with a 21-17 victory.

The Packers upended the Cowboys for the second straight season. Ironically, the Cowboys had the ball deep in Packers' territory at the end of the earlier contest. A pass interference penalty gave the Cowboys a first down on the two-yard line. They had ninety seconds to score and win the game. On first down Dan Reeves ran the ball to the one-yard line. As the Cowboys prepared to snap the ball on second down, left tackle Jim Boeke was offsides. The play continued with an incomplete pass. The penalty moved the ball back to the six-yard line. Dan Reeves had been poked in the eye on the penalty play. He stayed in the game. On second-and-six, Meredith threw him the ball. With his vision blurred, Reeves dropped the pass. On third down, Meredith threw short to tight end Pettis Norman, who caught the ball but was immediately tackled at the two. Now, the Cowboys had one chance left. Dave Robinson blitzed Meredith forcing an early throw that Packer Tom Brown intercepted in the end zone. Final score: Packers 34, Cowboys 27.

A couple plays may have changed the fate of these two teams and NFL history. Vince Lombardi's packers went on to win the first two Super Bowls. Tom Landry led the Cowboys, who were given the nickname, "Next Year's Champions," due to their inability to win the "big one." History shows that the coaches of those teams, Vince Lombardi and Tom Landry, were two of the most successful coaches in NFL history. But they might have been two of the most opposite coaches that we have seen walking the sidelines of the National Football League.

Everyone who watched professional football in the mid-sixties has memories of Lombardi strutting up and down the sideline. He would greet players coming off the field with a quick and direct, criticism of their performance. "Grab, grab, grab," he would yell. "Nobody is tackling out there." Lombardi led using a militaristic style. In contrast, Landry was widely known as a gentleman. He even looked the part standing there in a suit and tie topped off with his trademark Fedora hat. Landry stood expressionless, often with his arms crossed in front of his chest. He rarely showed emotion. Cowboys' fullback Walt Garrison was asked if he ever saw Landry smile. "No," said Garrison, "but I was only there for nine years."

Ironically, both men got their start in professional football with the New York Giants under head coach Jim Lee Howell. Landry started as a player-coach on the defensive side of the ball. In 1956, after two years of double duty, he became what is today called defensive coordinator.

The same year, Lombardi came to the Giants as the main offensive assistant. He had come from the United States Military Academy where he was an assistant on the staff of Earl "Colonel Red" Blaik. Lombardi said that his father and Coach Blaik were the men he admired most, and who most influenced him. They instilled in Vince a great desire for perfection. Vince not only placed tremendous inner pressure on himself to be exemplary, but he passed this standard on to his players. He expected perfection. He was a driven taskmaster who would practice plays over and over in order to achieve that goal.

Vince Lombardi was born the first of five children in Brooklyn, New York. His father was a butcher and meat wholesaler. His mother was one of thirteen children, most of whom lived in the neighborhood. Family was important to the Lombardi family. Vince studied for two years for the Catholic priesthood before changing his mind. After high school, he accepted a football scholarship to Fordham University.

Although Lombardi didn't have a stellar professional football-playing career, he earned some fame as one of the "Seven Blocks of Granite" at Fordham. This is where he first learned the importance of strong interior line play. At Green Bay, Lombardi's lines, whose members were quick and agile, could take over the game. His most famous play, the "Packer power sweep," relied on the ability of his guards to pull out and lead interference for the backs.

In contrast, Landry was an all-conference player on the University of Texas football team, which consistently went to bowl games. The star of his team was future hall of famer, Bobby Layne, who quarterbacked the team. Landry never anticipated a professional career in coaching football. He planned to play a couple years and return to Texas to enter the business world. But after a successful college career, professional football called. He began with the Yankees of the All American Conference but, after the AAFC collapsed, ended up with the Giants of the NFL. He quickly saw that other players had superior athletic skills, so he dedicated himself into being a smart player. That insight for the game made him an ideal candidate to coach for the Giants. After building a reputation as a brilliant assistant coach with the Giants, the Cowboys offered him their top job.

Landry was 36 years old when he took over the expansion Cowboys. His first season with the Cowboys was a long and painful one; they finished 0-11-1. The tie came against the Giants on the last day of the season. He witnessed only 13 victories in his first four seasons as head coach of the Cowboys. He considered leaving the game. It wasn't until his sixth season that his team won more games than they lost.

In contrast, Lombardi took over a Packer team that hadn't had a winning season in twelve years and had only won one game the year before, but had some budding stars on the roster. Paul Hornung, the Heisman Trophy winner was splitting time between quarterback and running back. Bart Starr, Jim Taylor, Jerry Kramer, Ron Kramer, Ray Nitschke, and Bob Skoronski were already there. In only his second season, the Packers won the Western Conference with an 8-4 record. They lost to the Eagles in the Championship game 17-13. Lombardi vowed that they would never lose another championship game. They didn't. The Packers won the title the next two years, finished second in the West in 1963 and 1964, and then won three straight championships from 1965 through 1967.

Landry led the Cowboys to a record twenty consecutive winning seasons. His career victories (270) trails only Don Shula and George Halas. After finishing second to the Packers in 1966 and 1967, they lost to the Colts in Super Bowl V when Jim O'Brien kicked a 32-yard field goal. But, on January 16, 1972, the Cowboys finally ended up on top with a 24-3 victory over the Miami Dolphins in Super Bowl VI. The Cowboys returned to the big game in 1978 with a victory over the Denver Broncos, 27-10.

The contrast between the two men wasn't limited to their personalities. It carried over to the strategies they employed on the field as well. Lombardi's offense was simple. He preferred to run few plays, but to execute them to perfection each and every time they were run. His big play became the Lombardi sweep, where his running backs (Jim Taylor and Paul Hornung, in the glory years) ran behind the pulling guards. They executed it to perfection.

Vince's eight years in the classroom and his seventeen years coaching football players had molded him into a masterful teacher. People listened when he talked. His time at West Point reinforced his belief that players needed condensed, uncomplicated information. He kept his message simple and he repeated it over and over. He used this method to ensure every player understood the plan and convinced his players that the plays would work.

Landry built his offense so that it would confuse the defenders. He viewed offense from a defensive perspective. "Since the effectiveness of the 4-3 depends on the defensive team recognizing a formation, knowing what plays can be run from that formation, and then recognizing keys that tell them the likely play or plays to expect, the obvious way to stymie the defense was to cut down on recognition time," Landry said in his autobiography. "The less time a defensive player has to recognize a formation and spot keys before the snap of the ball, the harder it is for him to anticipate the play in time to stop it." [i]

That is how he came up with his multiple offense. Instead of Lombardi's method of running a dozen basic plays off a few formations, Landry wanted to run forty or fifty plays from eight or ten formations. He wanted to make it difficult for the opposition to know what play they planned on running. He even had the offensive lineman stand up in unison, just prior to the snap of the ball, before returning to their stances. This movement was used to block the defenders view of the backfield and further hamper their recognition skills.

Motivating his players was Lombardi's strength. "He was a great salesman, a great motivator, a great general," Sam Huff said. "And yet, he also was a human being, a man who loved life, who loved his family, who loved to laugh with that big toothly grin. He really was like a father to a lot of players, and you did everything for him, not yourself. No one was selfish around Vince Lombardi. Nobody complained about not getting enough playing time or having to go down on kickoffs or punts." [ii]

If motivation was Lombardi's strength, it had to be Landry's weakness. "He really wasn't a good motivator," said Cowboys defensive end Larry Cole. "He wasn't into the speeches and the rah-rah part of the game. That was his weakness. He was such an organizational person. He was an industrial engineer. So he really didn't like the human, emotional side of dealing with different people's personalities. He had to do it, but, if he had his druthers, it would just be the technical stuff." [iii]

Landry's strengths came from his ability to look at complicated things and reduce them to simple terms. He brought his training in industrial engineering to football. He looked at the sport as a science, breaking down each process so that players could understand what needed to happen. On defense, Landry broke down for each of his players the "keys" to look for and how to anticipate offensive plays they were likely to run.

If you had to use one word to describe Landry, you might use consistency. "He didn't get excited," said former Pittsburgh coach Chuck Noll, who beat Landry in two Super Bowls. "He always had everything under control. He was very analytical, a guy who was a great technician, and his teams reflected that." [iv]

Lee Roy Jordan, a linebacker who played for Landry from 1973 to 1976, appreciated Landry's quiet leadership. "Coach Landry was so stable, so consistent," Jordan said. "He never got excited. He never got down. He didn't show great emotions when things were going right and he didn't show great dejection when things were going wrong. I think that made him a great leader." [v]

The contrast between the two was apparent when watching the two teams play. "The foundation of our Cowboys' system is recognition," Landry said in his autobiography. [vi] "The quarterback reads the defensive alignment and coverage. Based on what he sees the defense doing, he knows which receiver should be open."

The thinking man's system versus the Packers basic system. Lombardi's Packers didn't try to fool you. You knew what they were going to do; your mission was to stop them. They didn't try to confuse you; their strategy was to play closer to perfection than you could.

It is said that a football team takes on the temperament of the coach. These teams and the systems they employed were a direct result of the leaders that coached them. Lombardi was a teacher and a motivator. Landry was an engineer. Their personality, background and training helped mold the way they coached the game.

Lombardi was definitely a "people person." A major element of Lombardi's life involved what he called the "five o'clock club," when he would collect friends, associates and various hangers-on, have a few drinks, and unwind. Lombardi could speak on a variety of topics. He claimed that these social hours helped him maintain his sanity. [vii]

Landry was probably more comfortable alone. "Over the years some observers, including a number of Cowboys, criticized me for not having a closer personal relationship with my players," Landry said in his autobiography. [viii] "Some of that can probably be attributed to personality shortcomings—my shyness, my demanding perfectionism, my emotionally undemonstrative nature, and that tendency toward tunnel vision that sometimes made me insensitive or oblivious to other people."

Landry kept his distance from his players because he didn't want closeness to cloud his decision making process. It may be the same reason he remained composed, and unemotional, on the sidelines. He needed to make decisions. Over his career, he decided most, if not all, of the offensive plays his team ran. In sharp contrast, Lombardi took Bart Starr's recommendation on the play call as his team sat on the one-yard line with seconds left in the 1966 title game.

"The stoic vision of Landry on the sidelines was synonymous with the Cowboys," former Eagles quarterback Ron Jaworski said. "They were a very methodical, business-like team. They were the first team to use computers and take a cerebral approach to breaking down a game. When you saw him on the sidelines, you couldn't tell if the Cowboys were up 40-0 or down 40-0. He was always in control of himself, his football team and his emotions. And clearly, his teams were always ready to play." [ix]

Wellington Mara, whose family has owned the Giants since their inception, compared their personalities. "Lombardi was on the surface a much warmer person than Landry," he said. "He went from warm to red hot. You could hear Vince laughing or shouting for five blocks. You couldn't hear Landry from the next chair.

Lombardi was more of a teacher. It was as though Landry lectured to the top 40 percent of the class and Lombardi taught the lower 10 percent." [x]

In the end, both men had tremendous success. Lombardi won five NFL titles, including the first two Super Bowl victories in his nine seasons at Green Bay. Landry led the Cowboys to twenty straight winning seasons, five conference championships and two Super Bowl victories. Both men were winners, but they won in very different ways. Psychologists will analyze forever which personality style is better suited for a NFL head coach. Do you want the supreme motivator who gets the maximum performance out of his troops or the quiet engineer who will clean up processes to ensure victory?

Both paths can be effective, as history has proven.

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[i] Tom Landry with Gregg Lewis. *Tom Landry: An Autobiography*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990. Page 138-9
[ii] Sam Huff with Leonard Shapiro. *Tough Stuff: The Man in the Middle*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988. Pages 227
[iii] Charean Williams and Tim Price. *Knight Ridder Newspapers*. "Remembering Tom Landry: reactions from friends, players and on-field foes." February 14, 2000.
[iv] Jaime Aron. *Associated Press*. " Friends Remember Landry." February 12, 2000.
[v] Ibid.
[vi] Landry. Page 236
[vii] Mike Shropshire. *The Ice Bowl: The Green Bay Packers and Dallas Cowboys Season of 1967*. New York: Donald I. Fire Books, 1997. Page 147.
[viii] Landry. Page 274
[ix] Ron Jaworski. ESPN.com "Landry's innovations changed NFL." October 15. (http://espn.go.com/nfl/landry/jaworski.html)
[x] Bob St. John. *The Man Inside . . . Landry*. Word Book Publishers, 1979. Page 77.