

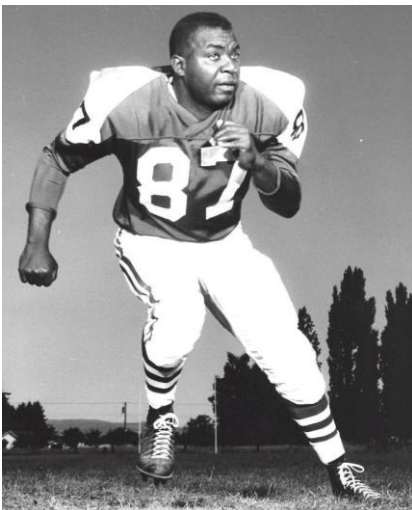


Nate Borden

This article was written by Budd Bailey

Most of us have learned about the major milestones that came with the civil rights milestones that took place in the 1950s and 1960s. That's important, of course, but it's also good to hear the personal stories that are told by those who were there. Sometimes they are tales of kindness, while others cause despair.

Nate Borden, who at times was the only African American on the Green Bay Packers, had a few stories along those lines. He also probably could have given a speech on what a couple of legends were like when they started their coaching careers.



Nathaniel Borden was born in Detroit, Michigan, on September 22, 1931. He spent most of his childhood in Jersey City, New Jersey. Nate attended William L. Dickinson High School; as of 2020 he was the last of eight players from that school to go on to the National Football League. However, former New York Giant Rich Glover did coach the football team there early in the 2010s.

Borden established a reputation for size and speed as a high school player. He was All-State as a tackle as a junior in 1949 and as a fullback as a senior in 1950 and also saw some time on the defensive line at tackle. Nate also was on the track team, taking part in the discus, shot put and two-mile run, and did a little boxing as well. That all caught the eye of college recruiters, and Borden landed a scholarship from Indiana University.



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Nate lettered as a freshman at tackle in 1951 and played 127 minutes on the varsity, but was an end for the Hoosiers in 1952 and 1953. He was back at tackle in 1954, where he earned second team All-Big Ten honors from the Associated Press.

Borden was a good player in a difficult situation for Indiana. The Hoosiers went 2-7 in 1951, 2-7 in 1952, 2-7 in 1953, and 3-6 in 1954. Nate at least had a nice win as a senior, beating Michigan on Oct. 30 when the Wolverines were ranked 11th in the country. Nate's most famous teammate might have been Bob Skoronski, who won some titles with the Packers in the 1960s – unless you count Olympic decathlete Milt Campbell.

It must have been tough for Borden to get much attention from pro scouts. However, someone noticed that he was a rare bright spot on the Hoosier roster. Green Bay took Borden with its pick in the 25th round, the 292nd player taken. He was the only player taken in that round to play in even a single game of professional football, which provides an idea of the odds he faced. Tom Bettis and Hank Bullough were the biggest names on Green Bay's draft list that year.

The Packers had signed their first African American for their roster in November 1950, Bob Mann. Green Bay actually had a player, Walt Jean, in the 1920s who had a black father, but his Packer teammates didn't know about it. Mann had been with a couple of NFL teams before joining Green Bay. He had sued the league claiming racial discrimination when he was an unsigned free agent in 1950, but the lawsuit was dropped after Mann agreed to be a Packer. He stayed through part of the 1954 season, when he was cut because of a knee injury.

In 1950, there were fewer than 20 African Americans in the city of Green Bay. That meant that many people there had not even met a black person. Mann said he didn't have any racial problems there, although he did bump into some issues on Packers' road trips.

That brings us to Borden, who beat the odds to be on the Packers' roster in 1955. He was one of three African Americans on the team at that point; the others were Veryl Switzer and Jack Spinks. Nate's biggest problem might have been housing. He couldn't find a place to live within the city limits. According to one source, he did find a hotel just out of town in which some of Borden's teammates used during the season. However, those players told the hotel owner that if Borden was given a room, the rest would take their business elsewhere. Nate eventually found a "shack" that was later described by 1959 teammate Em Tunnell as a place "you wouldn't keep your dog in."

Luckily, racial attitudes on the Packers varied during Borden's time there. At first glance, Bart Starr might be an unlikely person to offer a helping hand to Borden. Starr, a rookie in 1956, was born and raised in Alabama, and played for the Crimson Tide. In his first



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season, Starr and his wife invited Borden over to his house for dinner, and Nate and his family were frequent visitors of the Starrs in the next few years.

Borden saw mostly spot duty for the Packers as a rookie at defensive end. He started five games along the way in 1955, and recovered an impressive three fumbles. That helped the 6-foot, 235-pound defender become a regular in 1956. He was said to have struggled at times, partly because he was playing right defensive end on the 4-3 defense that was becoming popular in that era. Nate stayed a starter through the end of 1958. In terms of win-loss records, Borden probably felt like he was back in college during those years at Green Bay. The Packers were consistent losers: 6-6 in 1955, 4-8 in 1956, 3-9 in 1957, and a truly dismal 1-10-1 in 1958. The day before the Packers' final game in 1958, Len Ford – the only other African American on the roster and a future Hall of Famer – was dropped from the roster because of injuries (broken fingers).

Green Bay had unhappy fans, shareholders and players at that point, and there was some doubt if the team in the smallest city in the NFL could survive much longer. The Packers truly needed a change in culture. Luckily for them, a man who could do exactly that was available. Vince Lombardi was an assistant coach for the New York Giants, and thought he was ready for a promotion. He had applied for other head coaching positions in college and pro football, and was turned down. The Packers knew Lombardi was highly regarded, and offered him complete control of the football operation as general manager and head coach. He took the job.

One of Lombardi's first moves was to pick the best players for the roster without any prejudice. He traded for Tunnell, a future Hall of Fame safety from the Giants. It was part of his plan to change the Packers' image from almost all-white to fully integrated. "Vinnie changed all that," Tunnell said later. "He gave the people who were renting the room (to Borden) hell and then moved him to a decent place." Lombardi also pledged to move any player who used a racial, religious, and/or ethnic slur off the team.

Lombardi also brought in new players from everywhere, and the reconstruction program worked. Green Bay finished with a 7-5 record in 1959, its first winning season since 1947. Almost ironically, Borden was left on the outside looking in at the starting lineup, as Bill Quinlan took over at defensive end. Nate also was bothered by a knee injury that fall. It was hard to know what was ahead for Borden's football career at that point.

Borden might have caught a small break with his timing. The Dallas Cowboys were scheduled to enter the NFL in the fall of 1960, and they needed players. Dallas took three players from each team; the Cowboys' picks from the Packers were Borden, safety Bill Butler, and running back Don McIlhenny. Nate was starting over again, but at least he had a contract for 1960. Meanwhile, the Packers picked up some depth at defensive end



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to replace Borden when they acquired Willie Davis from the Browns. Davis eventually was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Waiting in Dallas was another first-year coach who had left the Giants as assistant coach. Tom Landry and Lombardi were considered two of the best assistants in the league when they were together under Jim Lee Howell. Their careers would be intertwined throughout the 1960s. Borden, therefore, had the chance to play for both of them when they were starting their head coaching careers, which must have been an interesting experience.

Expansion teams often find wins hard to find, and the first-year Cowboys were no exception. They lost their first 10 games, tied the Giants, and lost to the Lions to finish 0-11-1. Eddie LeBaron threw 25 interceptions as the starting quarterback, and no running back rushed for 400 yards for the season. Borden, at least, started all 12 games and had two fumble recoveries.

Life was a little better for the Cowboys in 1961. They improved to 4-9-1, beating Pittsburgh on Opening Day for the first win in franchise history. Dallas' first draft choice was a defensive lineman named Bob Lilly, who became an all-time great.

That was it for Nate in Dallas, as the Cowboys cut him just before the start of the 1962 season and gave his starting spot to George Andrie. Luckily for Borden, teams were always looking for players what with the American Football League around. Borden soon signed with the Buffalo Bills to provide some depth of the defensive line. Alas, he suffered a knee injury and only played three games for the Bills. Borden signed with the Bills for another year in 1963, but was quickly cut in training camp. He signed with the Toronto Argonauts of the Canadian Football League in July of 1963, but he only lasted two weeks before his release.

That action didn't mean he was done with football. Borden already had done some scouting for the Cowboys in the offseason, and he moved into it after his playing days were over. Nate worked for the Packers and Bengals teams as well as United Scouting and the World Football League in that role. After that, Borden moved into government work. First, he had a job in Jersey City as an assistant to the mayor. Then Nate moved to Las Vegas, where he worked with Mayor Russ Dorn and served as the Officer of Urban Development.

Benson died on September 30, 1992.



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