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LEADERS & SUCCESS

Football's Vince Lombardi

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Vince Lombardi's football practices were so intense that games were like days off, his son, Vince Lombardi Jr., once said.

The legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers trained his players to treat drills as real-game situations, pushing them to exert 100% effort in 1 1/2-hour practices that were high on intensity, repetition and simplicity.

He believed in simple things done with "consistent excellence rather than complicated things done poorly," Michael O'Brien wrote in "Vince: A Personal Biography of Vince Lombardi."

That consistency and an uncanny ability to motivate helped make Lombardi (1913-70) one of the greatest coaches in National Football League history. In nine seasons in Green Bay, from '59 to '67, he won 73 per cent of his games, five NFL championships and two Super Bowls. To him, defeat was unthinkable.

"There's only one place in my game, and that's first place," he said halfway through his career at Green Bay. "I have finished second twice in my time at Green Bay, and I don't ever want to finish second again.

"There is a second-place bowl game, but it is a game for losers played by losers. It is and always has been an American zeal to be first in anything we do, and to win, and to win and to win."

To that end, he had players practice basic plays over and over and over again until they executed them flawlessly. One such play was the sweep, which called for a running back to follow pulling guards around the corner.

The Packers practiced the sweep up to 30 times a day and ran it in games with an unstoppable precision that throttled defenses. It became the cornerstone of their success under Lombardi.

Made Game Time A Cinch

"It was automatic," left guard Fred "Fuzzy" Thurston said. "We experienced it so much during the week . . . we could run it in our sleep."

The Packers drilled under the most severe conditions: in snow, sleet, ice and rain. The players became so tough that in 13-below-zero weather in the '67 NFL championship game they endured and defeated their archrival, the Dallas Cowboys, 21-17. It became one of the most famous games in NFL history.

After the game, Dallas coach Tom Landry credited the win to the strength of character developed by Lombardi's rigorous training.

"The discipline and conditioning programs (the Packers) went through, the punishment and suffering - they all tend to develop character," Landry said. "Once you

get character, you develop hope in all situations. That is the greatness that comes out of it."

Lombardi defined coaching as teaching, which he equated with repetition. He taught players to understand techniques, plays and strategy, pounding lessons into them in a mechanical way and repeating the same instructions year after year.

"You gotta seal off the linebacker! You gotta seal off the linebacker! You gotta seal off the linebacker!" he'd holler.

He ran films back repeatedly so that players would understand the coaches' line of thinking.

"They call it coaching, but it is teaching," Lombardi said. "You do not just tell them it is so, but you show them the reasons why it is so, and you repeat and repeat and repeat until they are convinced, until they know."

He inspired players by getting them to see themselves as champions. Lombardi once told defensive end Willie Davis, "Today, when this game is over, the people leaving this stadium will have seen the finest defensive end in pro football."

When the Packers played in Cleveland, where Jim Brown was becoming one of the greatest running backs ever, Lombardi reminded Packers fullback Jim Taylor: "What an opportunity this is for you to be spoken about in the same breath as Jim Brown."

Players responded by giving an "extra dimension of performance," Davis said. "There was something in that moment that would capture you, and you would say, 'I'd like for (spectators) to leave this stadium saying Willie Davis was tough today.'"

Lombardi always used a commanding tone in his pep talks to the team and in confronting players nose-to-nose before and during games. His message: Perform vigorously.

"The dictionary is the only place that success comes before hard work," Lombardi would tell players. "Hard work is the price we must pay for success. You can accomplish anything if you're willing to pay the price."

Lombardi, who had been a starting guard at Fordham University, insisted that players constantly stoke their own level of motivation, getting them to develop a mental toughness and no-lose attitude.

"He taught me that you must have a flaming desire to win," quarterback Bart Starr said. "It's got to dominate all your waking hours. It can't ever wane."

Always Getting It Right

Lombardi adopted one of his favorite slogans - "You don't do things right once in a while; you do them right all the time" - from his father, Harry Lombardi, who believed the virtues of hard work were obvious and not open to argument.

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When Harry required Vince to lug huge sides of beef and pork and chop them up in the family's Brooklyn butcher shop, tasks Vince detested, it had to be done to perfection.

"There was only right and wrong, and he believed that you only did the right thing all the time," Vince said. "He was a perfectionist if there ever was one."

Harry, a powerfully built man with a volatile temper, accepted no back talk. He was stern and verbally abusive toward his son, sometimes flying into a rage but then forgetting about it 15 minutes later.

But he drummed important advice into Vince: "Before you can do what you want to do, before you can exist as an individual, the first thing you have to accept is duty, the second thing is respect for authority, and the third . . . is to develop a strong mental discipline."

Vince deployed a similar temperament and ideals on the football field, where he demanded respect and players had no option but to give it to him. To those who gave proper respect, he reciprocated.

His football mentor

was Army coach Col. Earl "Red" Blaik, whom Lombardi assisted from '49 to '53. The stern Blaik, who ordered his players to work hard and "pay the price" in competition, had a great ability to teach the game.

To him, football was a "thinking job" that required a diligent analysis of films and a constant adaptation to changes, O'Brien, Lombardi's biographer, wrote. Lombardi credited Blaik with "fashioning my entire approach to the game."

Besides Blaik, Lombardi liked to quote Gen. Douglas MacArthur, who commanded U.S. forces in

the Pacific in World War II, that there is "no substitute for victory." He played records of MacArthur's military speeches to inspire his players.

Davis says Lombardi's lessons have helped him as much in the executive suite as on the football field.

In addition to discipline, commitment, effort and consistency, "Something (Lombardi's players) took from the athletic arena is a refusal to fail, and that it's all about pride," said Davis, now majority owner and chief executive of All-Pro Broadcasting Inc. of San Bernardino, Calif., which owns four radio stations.