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## INVESTOR'S BUSINESS DAILY®

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### Vince Lombardi Injected Washington Redskins With A Winning Fever

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When Vince Lombardi became the Washington Redskins' head coach in 1969, he inherited a team accustomed to mediocrity.

The Redskins had gone 13 seasons without a winning record.

Lombardi seized the chance to improve the squad's mentality.

He wanted a team hungry to win, not one content with losing.

He employed the philosophy that he'd used in Green Bay, where he changed the Packers from perennial losers to instant winners on the way to five National Football League titles during his coaching reign from 1959 to 1967.

In the mix was teamwork.

"He brought everyone together as a team and said you couldn't win it individually, but as a team you could succeed at almost anything," Brig Owens, a Redskins safety at the time, told IBD. "He taught us that everyone had a responsibility, you couldn't afford to make mistakes, and that if everyone did their job properly, that would be the creation of success on a particular play."

That strategy helped make the Redskins winners. They finished 7-5-2 in 1969, losing to teams with a combined 40-13-3 record.

#### Lombardi's Keys

Lombardi landed in Washington in 1969, took over a team that had gone over a decade without a winning record, went 7-5-2 and died the next year. AP View Enlarged Image

- Won five NFL titles with the Packers, then made the Redskins winners.
- Overcame: The odds of turning around losing teams in Green

Bay and Washington.

- Lesson: Remain confident and focused, and you can realize your goals.
- "Vince Lombardi gave us a taste for winning. Most of us had never been on winning teams, but because he exuded a winning attitude and a winning feeling, he gave us the feeling that it could be done," said Bobby Mitchell, a Redskins scout after completing his Hall of Fame playing career.

The rejuvenated squad seemed primed to become a constant contender under Lombardi.

But he died from cancer before the 1970 season at age 57.

In 10 NFL seasons, he won 74% of his games, the second best record in league history. His bust is in the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio.

## The Basics

Knowing what worked in Green Bay, Lombardi played to other aspects of his coaching strengths in Washington. They included his emphasis on simplifying the game.

With a belief in doing simple things with consistent excellence rather than complicated things poorly, he made Redskin players practice plays until they executed the plays flawlessly.

The strategy was integral to making his celebrated power sweep so dominant in Green Bay.

Legendary Redskins quarterback Sonny Jurgensen said that Lombardi drew up plays that appeared uncomplicated.

"He'd say, 'They can't stop this play,' and you're thinking, 'This is a great football play; they can't stop it,'" Jurgensen said. "He would leave the room, and an assistant coach would explain the same play, and you'd say, 'That play can't work.' It was because he had great teaching skills."

Lombardi was such a stickler for simplicity that he devoted time to teaching the Redskins basic fundamentals, something that the prior coach, Otto Graham, had shunned.

Case in point: Lombardi convinced his offensive linemen that firing off the ball faster and being more aggressive in blocking gave them an edge. "It's all about blocking and tackling, gentlemen," he would say. "If you execute your job assignment, we'll win."

Guard Vince Promuto was one of the many Redskins who found the game easier under Lombardi.

"All you had to do was hit a defender right in the middle of the chest and push him backward while you stayed parallel to the line," Promuto said. "That way, the runner could pick a hole and didn't have to focus on a hole that was designated for the play. You didn't have to take crazy positions where if the guy was inside you, you had to block him to the outside, which was impossible to do."

Lombardi's Washington practices were concise but intense, 90 minutes at the most and packed with repetition. "You don't do things right once in a while; you do them right all the time," he was known to say.

"He'd say, 'We're going to practice for an hour and 30 minutes, now give me 100%. I want to practice as close to perfect as we can,'" recalled Pat Fischer, a Redskins cornerback in those days.

When Lombardi saw an opportunity, he went for it. Knowing that the Redskins had folded in winnable games before he arrived, he prepared them physically and mentally to prevail in those situations.

He did it by elevating players beyond their psychological breaking points to where they continued performing at peak level. For example, his up-and-down exercise — which called for running in place, hitting the ground, bouncing up and moving forward, backward and sideways — led players to extreme exhaustion.

But they developed the intestinal fortitude to block it out.

According to Promuto, someone may have been fatigued after 25 repetitions when the season began but could do 80

by season's end.

The training prepared the player for the stamina-testing fourth quarter of a football game.

"He would earn respect by pushing you right to the breaking point where you said, 'If I get a club, I'll kill the old man,'" said Bobby Mitchell, a Redskins star flanker in the 1960s before becoming a scout under Lombardi. "But he knew just when to pull you over and hug you and say, 'I'm starting you in the game; I expect you to do this.' He'd release you from your anger, and he knew when to give you back your manhood so you'd play your heart out for him."

### **Sweat Start**

Redskin players got their first true taste of Lombardi at training camp in 1969. They learned about his demands for discipline and professionalism.

Once-carefree Redskins experienced Lombardi Time, which required them to arrive at least 10 minutes early to a meeting.

Many of them also trimmed down their long hair, knowing that Lombardi wouldn't tolerate it.

By the end of the first week of camp, once-apatetic players were practicing with broken bones, knowing that Lombardi might cut them if they didn't.

Redskin players also experienced Lombardi's bombastic approach where he'd call them "dirty, rotten, lazy dogs." In reality, his rants had little to do with demeaning anyone. The guys saw that he was playing with their psyches as a way of shaping them into a winning squad. "Vince Lombardi was the greatest, and it probably took us six weeks to figure it out," said Carl Kammerer, a defensive end. "He got in your face, and everybody would hear him say, 'Mister.' His voice would ring everywhere.

"But you realized that all he was trying to do was get you to play at a level above where you were satisfied at playing. He knew there was more in you, and, by golly, he was going to get it out. He had that kind of spirit, fire and desire."

The coach acquired a team with an explosive offense led by Jurgensen, one of NFL history's most prolific passers. But Lombardi wanted more from Jurgensen and took a step that the quarterback's other coaches in D.C., Bill McPeak and Graham, had been reluctant to do.

He made Jurgensen a leader.

### **Vince And Sonny**

Lombardi put Jurgensen in charge of conditioning drills and viewed him as a coach on the field, thus earning the quarterback more respect from his teammates.

Jurgensen, feeling relaxed and in control, responded by posting league highs in completions (274), attempts (442) and passing yards (3,102), and made the Pro Bowl.

As he had in Green Bay, Lombardi spotted talent in unheralded players. Rookie running back Larry Brown, an eighth-round draft pick, was small and slow and a long shot to make the roster. But he ran fearlessly and showed great explosion off the ball, prompting the coach to start him over Ray McDonald, the Redskins' 1967 first-round pick.

Brown ran for 888 yards, just missed Rookie of the Year honors and gave the Redskins, once mostly a passing team, a more balanced offense. He's still one of the franchise's all-time leading rushers.


Knowing that his Redskins could move the ball, Lombardi wanted it in the offensive unit's hands as much as possible. So he had to bolster a soft defense.

He encouraged one of the game's most feared middle linebackers ever, Sam Huff, to come out of retirement. Huff served as a player-coach and the defensive captain that season, providing on-field smarts and leadership that the Redskins had been lacking. He started in all 14 games and intercepted three passes, returning one 18 yards for a touchdown.

"We were in awe of him," Jurgensen said of Lombardi. "He had won, and he knew what it took to win. It didn't take me any time to understand why Green Bay was so successful. He was by far the best coach I ever played for — the best coach anyone ever played for."

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