

## **THE BEST END WE EVER FORGOT**

**By Bob Carroll**

Lavie Dilweg, by nearly all contemporary accounts and measurements, was the best end in pro football almost from his first game until his last. He had an unusually long career, played on the best team of his time, and followed his playing days with a life of public service that took him all the way to Washington. What more could anyone ask?

How about being remembered? Today, the name Dilweg would stump all but the most dedicated pro football trivia buffs. Ask the average fan to identify "Dilweg" and he might think it's some kind of pickle.

Well, you say, that happens sometimes. The men he played against and beat, the writers who modified his name with reverent adjectives, the fans who cheered him to the skies have, for the most part, passed on. The man himself is gone. That's the way it happens.

Yet, it didn't happen to Ed Healey or Mike Michalske or George Trafton or Joe Guyon – men arguably no better at their positions than Dilweg at his. Their glory, legends, and skill seem to grow greater in proportion to the distance from their last games. Their names may not ring a bell with the casual fan, but to anyone who knows pro football was played before Garbo talked, their names set off tingles like the Greeks used to get when Homer mentioned Olympus.

But Dilweg? Is it some kind of toupee?

Well, if he was so good, why ain't he famous? The reasons for this phenomenon are to be found in the way football has changed since Lavie played it so well and in his own – for lack of a better word – style.

LaVern R. Dilweg was born January 11, 1903, at Milwaukee, WI. He played football at Washington High School in Milwaukee and then matriculated to Marquette University, the local school. There he was twice named to the Walter Eckersall All-America Team, but he missed out on the better known national honor teams. Marquette wasn't exactly a household name outside the midwest despite a 28-4-1 record in his four years as a letterman.

Nevertheless, he was well-enough known to get invited to the first East-West Shrine Game after the 1925 season. There, he opposed a more famous All-American end – California's Brick Muller – and both were rated the stars of the game.

Ring Lardner wrote: "Between Mr. Muller of the West and Mr. Dilweg of Marquette, enough end was played ... to last until Christmas. All the end that Muller didn't play was played by Dilweg."

In 1926, Dilweg joined the Milwaukee Badgers of the National Football League. The Badgers had the advantage of being close to home but little else. Lavie immediately earned praise for his steady play on both offense and defense. That was the football equivalent to a rose among thorns because once you got past Lavie, the Badgers were second-ratesville.

When the Badgers folded after that season, he signed with the Green Bay Packers, and it was in Green Bay that he had his greatest years. From 1927 through 1931, he was named to the first team of every important All-NFL squad, including the first Official Team, chosen in 1931. In his entire nine years as a pro, only in 1934 – his final season – did he fail to be named to at least the second squad of at least one important All-NFL team.

Yet by his own admission – Dilweg never had a really "big" game. He never scored a "Frank Merriwell" touchdown, never caught a basketfull of passes in a single contest, never was named MVP in a Super Bowl.

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When pressed, Lavie would allow he remembered two games that were outstanding. In 1928, when the Packers almost won the title, he was all over the field in a key game against the New York Yankees. Finally he teamed up with Verne Lewellen and Eddie Kotal with a lateral pass after a forward pass that blew the game wide open.

His other memorable game was the one all Packers and Packer fans from that era remember as the big one – one of the most important games in Green Bay's long history. In 1929, the race was between the Pack and the New York Giants led by Benny Friedman. Both teams were undefeated when they met at the Polo Grounds in late November, the only game between the two contenders on the '29 schedule.

Eleven Packers took the field and all played brilliantly. Only one sub was used by the Packers; in the last minute guard Jim Bowdoin went to the sideline with an injury. Lavie's pass rushing kept Friedman in check all day, as Green Bay won 20-6 and went on to take their first NFL title.

Although he was generally acknowledged as the best defensive end of his day, his reputation was earned with steady, rather than spectacular, play. He just knocked down any runner who came near him or cleaned out the interference so someone else could. Then he went back to his position and waited quietly for the next play. He figured dancing was for the ballroom.

Football has changed in many ways since Dilweg's day. Certainly, the position of end is a very different commodity. Today, a "great" defensive end is a monster who turns quarterbacks into noodle soup by gathering more sacks than an A & P bagger. After each sacking, it's de rigeur for these guys to hop around and wave their arms like a lottery winner suddenly attacked by red ants.

We seldom hear of the steady guys who tie up two or three blockers so some free spirit can roar in and then imitate Fred and Ginger, or who close down the running game like a bad musical. These steady ones have to be identified by the trainer to get in at the gate. The coaches know them, of course, and the runners have their pictures pasted in their lockers under "Beware."

Boob Darling, who said flatly that Dilweg was the best end he ever saw, admitted he couldn't remember a single spectacular play Lavie ever made. But, the former Packer center explained, he was always there to give help when needed – and he always made it look easy.

On offense, Dilweg was a strong blocker at a time when that was what they hired ends to do. If you're old enough to remember hearing an offensive end praised for his blocking, you may have also voted for Dewey. They don't even have offensive ends anymore; they have "wide-outs," speedsters who total their pass receptions on an abacus. In Dilweg's day, most teams threw passes about as often as Capone paid his taxes.

However, Green Bay was a typical in the NFL. They weren't like today when most teams pass as much as a wimp with a four-card flush, but the Green Bay crew knew it was legal to throw the ball. The Pack earned a reputation as "pass-happy" by throwing as many in a season as a couple of modern teams do in a game.

Dilweg, an excellent and reliable receiver, did his part. In 1929, he caught 25 passes, an unusually high total then. Perhaps more surprising to our modern ideas of what an end should do, he intercepted seven opponents' passes in that season and 27 during his career.

Curly Lambeau was building a powerhouse in Packerland – probably the best team the NFL had seen up till then. He had Dilweg, Verne Lewellen, Red Dunn, Eddie Kotal, Boob Darling, Jim Bowdoin, and Jugger Earpe. Then he added huge Cal Hubbard, staunch Mike Michalske, and irrepressible Johnny Blood.

With the 6-3, 199-pound Dilweg and the rest of the lineup, the Packers won NFL Championships in 1929, 1930 and 1931. You don't hear much about it now because there wasn't any championship game at the end of the season to focus attention on the title winner. Thrice, the Pack just slogged through the schedule beating everyone they had to, held a little celebration, and went home. Had Lavie played in a

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few championship games, it might have helped us remember him. Give him today's Super Bowl hype and they'd chisel his face on Mt. Rushmore.

At the time, the Pack naturally dominated the all-pro teams, and only Lavie was a near-unanimous pick all three seasons. But all-pro teams didn't get many headlines outside of Green Bay.

He did it on blocking and tackling. Once the speedy Blood went into the lineup, Lavie's pass reception totals dropped off like a cheap elevator. There were only so many passes to go around, and Blood was paid to catch them.

In 1931 Lavie averaged only one reception for every two games; both he and Blood made all-pro.

Talk about the "Odd Couple!" Lavie was so straight he made Elliot Ness look like a radical. Johnny treated life as his personal circus.

One time after the Packers clinched another championship the victory party was held on the train back to Wisconsin. Blood was having his usual high time and reeled off some antics that enraged the towering Dilweg. Johnny was all for fun and frolic, but he understood the kinds of things that put people into traction. So when Dilweg came after him, he ran like a Swiss watch. Lavie chased him from the club car through all the other cars and finally had him cornered on the rear platform.

The next few moments perfectly illustrate the two different personalities. The devil-may-care Blood hoisted himself on top of the moving, swaying train. Dilweg sensibly gave up pursuit and returned to the party. Blood walked the top of the train to the engine and dropped into the cab, scaring the hell out of the engineer and fireman. His party was wherever he happened to be at the time. He and the trainman celebrated the rest of the trip home in the engine's cab.

There's something to be said for being colorful; the "Magnificent Screwball" Johnny Blood is a charter member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame, good for a delightful chapter in most pro football histories, and a name that still rings familiar fifty years after his last touchdown.

The straight arrow Dilweg is the kind of guy you look up in indexes. He played very well; his team won; that's it.

Eventually Johnny Blood's peculiar behavior patterns caused Coach Lambeau to give him less playing time. Lavie's reception totals rose again.

Whoever said "Timing is all" (either Jack Benny or Masters and Johnson) must have been thinking of Lavie Dilweg. Five years into the 1930s, he ranked as probably the best end in NFL history and certainly the best the Packers ever had. After his retirement following the 1934 season, Dilweg entered law practice in Green Bay. The next fall, Don Hutson arrived. Remembering who played end for the Pack before Hutson is like recalling who made tissues before Kleenex.

Hutson redefined the duties of an end. You look up "end" in a dictionary, you see a picture of Hutson. Look up Dilweg, it says "archaic."

Dilweg and his wife Eleanor – a member of the 1924 Olympic swimming team – had four children, three sons and a daughter. The same year he joined the Packers – 1927 – he received his law degree from Marquette. His success with the local team certainly didn't hurt business when he hung his shingle out in Green Bay. He practiced football in the morning and law in the afternoon.

"Everybody was very understanding, he explained later. "If I needed a continuance because of a road trip, I'd generally get it. Most of the men in my day did nothing in the afternoons, but I was able to use law as a living, with football as a helper.

His law practice prospered, and eventually he moved into politics. At one point he ran against former teammate Verne Lewellen for county attorney. Lewellen won.

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In 1941, he was elected to the U.S. Congress as a representative from Wisconsin. He served one term, remaining in Washington afterward to build a lucrative law practice as a legal consultant on congressional legislation. He was assistant to the attorney general in 1951 and 1952. In 1963, President Kennedy appointed him to the U.S. foreign claims commission, a post he held until his death in 1968.

Ironically, only 36 hours earlier Lombardi's Packers had equalled Lambeau's Packers' feat of winning three straight NFL titles.

You could make a case that the stuff he did after football was a little more important in the whole scheme of things than playing end for the Green Bay Packers. You could also argue that as a player he was about as colorful as a hospital sheet. You might even mention that nobody at his position gets paid anymore to do many of the things he did so well. And none of that changes the fact that at a particular time and place in the long history of football, nobody played end better than Dilweg.

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## LaVERN R. DILWEG

Born January 11, 1903 at Milwaukee, WI  
Died January 2, 1968 at St. Petersburg, FL  
Hgt: 6-3 Wgt: 199 College: Marquette

### PASS RECEIVING

Year	Team	Lg	Gm	PC	YDS	Avg	TD	INT	Pt
1926	Milwaukee	N	9x	12	221	18.4	0	2	0
1927	Green Bay	N	10y	16	244	15.3	1	2	12
1928	Green Bay	N	12	18	203	11.3	0	5	0
1929	Green Bay	N	13	25	429	17.2	3	7	18
1930	Green Bay	N	12	16	291	18.2	2	6	18
1931	Green Bay	N	14	7	201	28.7	4	5	25
1932	Green Bay	N	14	7	120	17.1	0	0	1
1933	Green Bay	N	11	14	229	16.4	0	0	0
1934	Green Bay	N	12	11	105	8.8	2	0	12
9 years			107	126	2043	16.2	12	27	86

x - pass receiving incomplete for 6 games

y - pass receiving incomplete for 1 game

### Honors

#### College:

Walter Eckersall All-American 1924-25

East-West Shrine Game 1925

#### All-Pro Selections:

1926: Annual Green Bay Press-Gazette Poll (chosen by writers, officials, and coaches around NFL), 2nd team; Wilfrid Smith (for Chicago Tribune), 1st team

1927: Press-Gazette, Smith, LeRoy Andrews (NFL coach), Jack Reardon (game official), Ralph Scott (NFL coach); all 1st team

1928: Press-Gazette, Smith, Team Managers, all 1st team

1929: Press-Gazette, Smith, Andrews, Rud Rennie, all 1st team

1930: Press-Gazette, Players' Poll, Chicago Daily Times, Milwaukee Sentinel, Red Grange (two teams, Collyer's Eye Magazine and Chicago Herald-Examiner), Ernie Nevers, all 1st team

1931: Official Team, United Press, Reardon, Grange, New York Post, all 1st team

1932: Official Team, United Press, both 2nd team

1933: United Press, 2nd team

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Bibliography: Pro Football Hall of Fame file (Canton, Ohio); The Coffin Corner (various issues); David S. Neft (statistics).