

Starr Still Shining Bright

by Joe Zagorski

Bart Starr's name has long been synonymous with consistency and excellence in the world of professional football. His accomplishments in the sport have been equaled by very few men, a remarkable fact when considering that his playing career ended 20 years ago. The most luminous of Starr's achievements include induction into the Pro Football Hall of Fame and the Green Bay Packer Hall of Fame, as well as being named the Most Valuable Player in Super Bowls I and II.

Last September the championship quarterback was bestowed with another honor, the 3rd Annual Ernie Davis Award. Davis was a Heisman Trophy-winning running back from Syracuse University who, in 1963, died of Leukemia before getting his chance to play in the NFL. Hall of Famer Gale Sayers and Super Bowl XV MVP Jim Plunkett won the award in 1988 and '89, respectively.

While displaying the type of community involvement that the Ernie Davis Award symbolizes, Starr's efforts and contributions to numerous charitable causes have been going strong for well over 30 years. The tragedy of son Brett's death in 1988 due to cocaine abuse has added even more resolve to this unselfish man when pointing out the dangers of drugs to youngsters.

Starr is currently working in Alabama with son Bart Jr. in their father-and-son real estate firm. He took time out of his schedule to travel up to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to publicize the award in conjunction with Harrah's Casinos of Atlantic City, New Jersey. Starr also paid a visit to former teammate Herb Adderley (who is himself a member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame). The following interview with Starr was conducted in the hopes of discovering his thoughts and opinions about his football career, the Green Bay Packers, and his life after football.

Q. After your playing days with the Packers, you've seen yourself as well as many of your teammates grow to a productive life after football. Was Vince Lombardi the reason why so many of those Packers succeeded in so many of their careers after football?

A. "He was certainly the central figure in all of that. When he came to the Packers, we had the nucleus of a good football team. Without demeaning anyone who had preceded him, what we lacked was strong leadership, and he provided that the day he walked through the door. That was the big difference. He was truly our catalytic effect, and off we went together."

Q. Was there anyone certain game while you were playing that stands out in your mind as your most memorable?

A. "I've always been reluctant to pick just one game, but if forced to I would pick the 1967 Ice Bowl title game against Dallas for several reasons. One, the uniqueness of the weather. It was 13 degrees below zero at kickoff on that day, and I believe it got even colder later on. My bones still shake and I still get a chill to this day whenever I talk about the weather on that day. Two, what the game itself meant. It was an opportunity to win three consecutive championships which we were successful in doing by winning. And equally important was that we, in that particular game, showed what had really been synonymous with the Green Bay Packers for a lengthy period of time in the 1960s, that is that we performed beautifully as a team. That game was won as a team that day.

"I'm reluctant to mention just one game, because if I had to pick a most memorable moment or something like that, my pick would be the series of championships (five in seven years), because that magnifies the very thing I was just telling you about – the great team that I played on."

Q. How does the Ernie Davis Award stand in importance among all the other awards that you've won in your career?

A. "It will rank very highly because of what this award represents. It's for what a person has given back to his community, for his commitment to the things that we've been alluding to. I think that when a reward is given for those reasons...it's special. Athletic achievement is one thing, and community involvement and participation is yet another, and I think the latter far outweighs the former."

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Q. You've been active with various activities outside of football during the past few decades. What has been the most important charity function that you've lent your time to and have had the most fun participating in?

A. "My wife Cherry and I have had the pleasure of chairing a number of worthwhile projects and being associated with the major charitable programs in the country, such as the United Way, the Cancer Crusade, the Multiple Sclerosis Society and the March of Dimes. We've put time in on all of those things and they've been very rewarding to us.

"But if I had to pick just one it would be working for and promoting and coordinating with a boys' home in Wisconsin called the Rawhide Boys Ranch. We helped found it years ago (1966), and it's been extremely rewarding for us. They've done a great job working with disadvantaged youth, and working in a capacity with them has been THE most rewarding experience that I have had. (Through the ranch) I've seen a lot of young men grow up to become leaders of society, primarily because they were given a chance, they were given good leadership, and they were given discipline and love which were obviously lacking in their family environment. As a result they've went on to become successes in the fields that they've chosen."

Q. Former Philadelphia Eagles coach Dick Vermeil once said that the only thing that holds a person back from success is an opportunity. Do you believe that a chance in life is the forerunner of success?

A. "Many times I do. I think there are certainly some other factors, but in principal you'd have to start there."

Q. What would you say to any professional athlete today who is involved in some sort of a drug problem or situation?

A. "I'll give you a couple of answers. The most simplistic is to get off the drugs and get them out of your system. The other is the caution of what they're doing to themselves because they're literally killing themselves or could kill themselves if they stay on drugs. And then they need to seek help, and seek it immediately."

Q. You lost your son to drugs (Brett in 1988), and I'm sure that's been quite a catalyst for you and your wife during the past few years in your efforts to help people realize the dangers of using drugs.

A. "It has been. We were speaking out and were very much involved in the war on drugs prior to his death. But because of our ability to identify the consequences of using drugs as a result of our son's involvement and since his death, we've had an even greater need – a heightened need I guess you could say – to want to do more. And we have. I've spoken hundreds of times across the country since his death. Because it's a fight that we all have to be willing to become involved in if we truly are going to keep the pressure on this problem. We've made some great strides during the past couple of years – we really have. But making strides and winning are on each end of a line, and I think we have to be willing to do more to truly win."

Q. Do you think the Green Bay Packers can get back to the Super Bowl in the near future?

A. "Yes I do. I think they have an outstanding coach, and they have excellent talent. I think they can make it. They can be very good in a short period of time."

Q. What advice on quarterbacking would you give current Packer Don Majkowski during this stage of his playing career?

A. "I haven't been around Don for any length of time. In fact it's only been socially (as in a golf outing) when I've seen him. So I haven't looked at him to offer him any technical advice, but I think that generally speaking I would tell him to look at himself, analyze his own strengths & weaknesses and embellish the strengths. He is a very talented player, and he has some strengths that are not there in some people; (such as) his ability to move, to salvage a play, and to hang tough until the last second to get the job done. He's done a great deal of those things.

I think what he has to do is to work hard individually to improve his own talent, but keeping in mind that the team wins. (A quarterback) has to follow the philosophy of the offense and the team, because when

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you stray from that it can cause problems. The biggest comment I can make to anyone (on a team) is to make the most of your own talents, and always place the team's success and philosophy ahead of your own individual desires and egos. When you do that everyone wins and benefits. The reverse is not necessarily true. As long as all of us are focused on a TEAM philosophy, TEAM goals and TEAM objectives, the rest takes care of itself."

Q. Sounds like a good philosophy for life, not just football.

A. "It is."

Q. During your coaching tenure with the Packers, were there any players that stood out to you and helped to make your job an enjoyable one?

A. "Yes there were...there were a number of good players. There were several who were not necessarily that talented but they gave us everything they had. I think of a quarterback by the name of David Whitehurst who filled in for Lynn Dickey when Lynn was injured a lot early in his stay with us. I know of several offensive and defensive linemen who contributed significantly to us. They were very talented, very committed. Guys like Greg Koch and Ezra Johnson and Larry McCarren – just wonderful people to be around. We had some outstanding talent in James Lofton and people like that. So it was an enjoyable experience for us to work with people like that."

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