

The 1975 Green Bay Packers

by Joe Zagorski

Almost every pro football fan who can remember the 1970s can conjure up a special memory or two about the feats of teams like the Miami Dolphins, Pittsburgh Steelers, and Dallas Cowboys – just to name a few. But how many of those fans can recall the disheartening events of some of those losing teams during that decade?

The Green Bay Packers certainly experienced their share of failure throughout the 1970s. One particular season, 1975, produced quite a large amount of despair for the Packer faithful. Things didn't start out that way, however. A new coach was in town.

True, Bart Starr wasn't exactly new to Lambeau Field's surroundings. His career as a Packer Quarterback was highlighted by two Super Bowl MVP awards and a record five NFL championships through the 1960s. The news of his hiring following Dan Devine's resigning brought about renewed feelings of hope in Wisconsin. Starr was looked upon as a vindicator of a forlorn franchise, a rightful heir to the victorious tradition of a legend named Lombardi. Success in coaching after so many triumphs as a player seemed a certainty. Unfortunately, no coach in the history of the league was faced with as much pressure to win as Bart Starr was faced with in 1975.

Reclaiming glory could have been possible for Starr that season had he led as much talent as the Packers of the Lombardi era. On paper, Green Bay did have some measure of ability, but the burden of learning a new system on offense combined with a porous and vulnerable defense to curtail most standout individual accomplishments.

The season's first four games were proof of this. The Packers fell to the Lions, Broncos, Dolphins and Saints with an offense that scored a meager 55 points during that string of defeats. The defense kept pace by allowing 104 points.

Prospects of ending the losing streak appeared dim when the Pack traveled to Dallas to take on the eventual NFC Champion Cowboys in Week 5. Green Bay's offense, led by veteran quarterback John Hadl and star halfback John Brockington, surprisingly made enough big plays to chalk up Starr's first coaching victory, 19-17. Rookie halfback Willard Harrell contributed a 26-yard touchdown run for the winning score.

Despite their good showing against Dallas, Hadl and Brockington continued to fail as the season progressed. Hadl, now in what was to become his final pro season, recorded a then-Packers' record of 191 completions in '75. Unfortunately, those completions netted only 2,095 yards, good enough for a paltry six touchdowns. A total of 21 Interceptions added a finishing touch to Hadl's poor performance.

Brockington delivered an even worse showing. After stellar campaigns in 1971, '72 and '73, the bullish runner found the going tough in '74 against defenses that were keying on him (due to the ineffective passing game). By '75, Brockington had slipped to a season-total of 434 ground yards, including a dismal 3.0 per-carry average.

The Green Bay offense suffering was due in large part to a failing offensive line which allowed 42 sacks. The Packers once again dropped four straight games, which for all intents and purposes knocked them out of playoff contention in the NFC's Central Division. During this span of losses, the offense could muster a total of only 54 points against the Steelers, Vikings, Bears and Lions.

Still, Starr could see a small stream of light for the future. Second-year wide receiver Ken Payne turned in a stellar season with a team-leading 58 receptions for 766 yards, including 12 catches in the loss at Denver. Although the 6-foot-1, 185 pound standout failed to reach the end zone in '75, his catch total was tops in the NFC and second among receivers in the entire NFL behind Cleveland's Reggie Rucker.

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The excellent showing of one player, however, was not enough to offset the wide variety of Packer shortcomings. Harrell, like Brockington, recorded only a 3.0 yards-per-carry average, and second-year fullback Barty Smith gained only 243 yards.

On special teams, place-kicker Chester Marcol was lost for the year due to a leg injury. Joe Danelo replaced him and hit on only 11 of 16 field goal tries, a far cry from Marcol's usual numbers. The punting game rocketed off to a quick start in the season opener against Detroit, as Steve Broussard had three of his punts blocked, two of which were carried in for Lion touchdowns.

Second-year reserve receiver Steve Odom served as the only bright spot on the special teams. Odom was the NFL's third-best kickoff returner in '75 (behind Washington's Larry Jones and Denver's Rick Upchurch), as he accumulated 1,034 yards on 42 attempts, good enough for a 25-yard average.

Green Bay's defense, ranked 20th in the league, gave up 285 points throughout '75. The major problem with this unit was its inability to stop the run, as it allowed 2,339 opponent rushing yards.

The Packer Pass defense, however, did make some improving strides. Third-year cornerback Perry Smith led the team with six interceptions, and outside linebacker Fred Carr developed into one of the most aggressive hitters in the league. Tackle Mike McCoy turned in another solid performance in '75, and fellow lineman Dave Pureifory contributed five of his six sacks in the season's next-to-last game against the Rams.

For what it was worth, Green Bay did manage to finish the year on somewhat of an upswing, winning three of their last five contests, albeit against considerably weaker opponents.

The Packers racked up 508 total yards as they trounced the visiting Giants 40-14, in Week 10. The following week, Green Bay avenged an earlier loss to Chicago by soundly defeating the bears, 28-7. After two tough road losses to the Vikings and Rams, Starr's group completed 1975 with a 22-13 win against Atlanta.

Green Bay's transitional '75 season saw only four victories against ten losses, a record that Bart Starr probably wanted to chalk-up as "a learning experience."