

“El Tropicoro, Esmeralda, and the Ice Bowl”

©1999 Victor Mastro

Orchard Beach was comfortable as I strolled to see some friends at around 3 o'clock that summer day in 1967. I wore this golden yellow shirt that highlighted my golden tan. My friends kidded me, "You have dark green eyes." Maybe my dark blue eyes mixed with my shirt color. I recounted a story of sorts with my acquaintances and friends. They gathered around to listen. Before you knew it, there was a small group intent on hearing my words. I took note of this very attractive young lady with long black hair. She was covered in a golden yellow swimsuit with sparkling dark emeralds for eyes. She seemed interested in my tales, but when I turned, she was gone forever.

I continued my tales of happenings of the day. I had wagered on a few exotic football bets. I wagered first on the Green Bay Packers under Vince Lombardi to win the NFL title, 5 to 1, and then the new "Super Bowl," 2 to 1. (It was not called that moniker until the following year). My other risk was that the last NFL TD would be scored by Bart Starr, QB, GB, and a good 10 to 1. All three events must happen in order for me to win, 5x2x10, 100 to 1 odds. In the heat of the summer at the beach, I joked heartily, "Wouldn't it be funny if Lombardi's Packers win in below-zero weather in the freezing cold on a quarterback sneak."

My friends chimed in, "What are you crazy? They are old and slow. The other teams, the Cowboys, the Rams, the Colts, and the Browns all have younger legs. They are too old. No team has ever won 3 NFL titles in row. What pipe dreams you have?" My retort, "I have good odds, 100 to ??? The probability is a long shot, but for \$20, what can I lose as compared to what might be?" They added on, "You are really nuts, you are crazy. You are not going to win, no way." I challenged my thoughts and their words, "why not?"

During the fall, the Belmont Athletic Association, a three tier touch football league; adult, young men, and teenagers, started around 1962 until the mid 1970's. This "concrete league" played at PS 45 field, St. Martin of Tours Park, and Grace Dodge High School. We had some high school, college and semi pro players with a draw of 100 to 300 people per game. It was a neighborhood cultural thing, this roughhouse concrete football. Each team played for block pride and status. I played offense and defense. I captained the Belmont (Fordham) Shells in our white jerseys, gold numbers and red trim, the colors of Shell Oil Company, our sponsors, in the young men's tier. I had wanted white, green, and gold, the colors of the Green Bay Packers. Many plays were replicas of Lombardi's Packers, and old time thinking football; smash mouth defense, sweep, power run, ball control, and the option pass, etc.

Football was the most important thing in my life at the time along side partying. I wanted the Shells to win the title. Our motto was, "Spirit on the road coming and on the road back." I also was in college, a rarity in Belmont. It was put on the back burner, and I was failing.

Partying in the evening or whenever was a lot of fun and excitement. One night I returned to El Tropicoro, a Latin nightclub with a neon palm tree sign by 149th Street and Southern Blvd./Bruckner Blvd. I enjoyed listening to Latin music. Upon entering this young lady was leaving. Our eyes met again, like they did in the summer. It was her. I turned to talk. She was gone into the night, again. A little later some girl told me, "There was a call, here is a note for you." Strangely I felt as I read, "Believe in yourself, we will meet again. Try a Sunday, Esmeralda." What kind of joke is this? I ridiculed myself. A few days later in school my English professor told me to stay focused and be more organized. "Write about things you know." She went on and on. Believe it or not, I wrote about football and my work became more focused and organized. I followed her words of wisdom and my marks slowly improved.

The Green Bay Packers came to Yankee Stadium in the 6th game of the season vs. the New York Giants, Oct. 22, 1967. I had bleacher seats in an all-Giant section. The NY Giants had a 21-7 lead, and these fans had ridiculed me for cheering on the Packers. Some stranger had set up betting action, Green Bay + 14 points, 10-1. This meant GB must win by at least 14 points, and for every \$1 you will get \$10. If the Giants won, you would get 10 percent of your bet back.

The Giant fans played heavily vs. the played GB action. I told the guy, "You have a lot of spirit and confidence in Green Bay." "Don't worry, the Packers will cover, you'll see," I said and played \$5, all I had, on Green Bay. If I lost, I would walk home. He encouraged me in my silly bet, "Your bet is my bet. Just cheer them on. We are going to win." The Packers came out at the half, jumping around and moving about. Vince Lombardi in his camel hair coat, 200 feet away from my seat, kept squeezing some rolled up paper. I saw the feverish intensity in his hands, he was all keyed up. My loud voice cheered out. He gazed at me for a while and sort of smiled confidently at me. I was pumped. He turned and demanded his players. I wanted to believe that he told them, "Just look at that guy, who believes you are going to win. We should have his fire. Now get out there and play football." Strange and eerie things happened. The Packers were pumped. I called plays, "Hornung off tackle, Taylor sweep left, Hornung trap, Taylor sweep right ..." They were the same plays the Packers ran, but Hornung and Taylor were not Packers in 1967. They ran the same plays from an earlier era. Meanwhile the fans became quite disgruntled at me, "Shut him up." It was getting ugly. Without fear, I kept on. The game became a Packer rout, and the stranger smiled at me. Every now and then, Vince threw a look, sort of saying, "Thank you kid for the gift." The Packers won 48-21 in one of their greatest rushing days of all time. The stranger collected a small fortune and I had \$50. This was Lombardi's last game at Yankee Stadium. I walked home to Belmont, and replayed the game over and over in my head. Later that season, I found out that there was some kind of talking during halftime and on the bench, "Let's do it like in 62." In 1962, the Packers won a brutal NFL championship vs. The NY Giants at Yankee Stadium, the last NFL title at the Stadium! The Packers showed me they were reborn and it also gave me a jolt of spirit and confidence that my team will bounce back and win the title. (A few weeks later, the Packers convinced me that "the Packers were back" by totally dominating a division leader, the Cleveland Browns, 55-7.)

Later on that evening, I went to El Tropicoro to groove on some sounds and to feel that special winning feeling. From the darkened corner came this young lady in a stunning green velvet outfit similar in color to the dress worn by Scarlett O'Hara in "Gone With the Wind," with glowing golden lights behind her. "You do believe in yourself." I said, "Yes, but the odds were quite high, you missed a few." We sat and talked a good part of the evening. It seemed we knew each other. Esmeralda was fascinated with my knowledge of football. You are quiet interesting. I told her of my exotic wages as both the Packers and Shells moved into the playoff days of December, and my finals were coming up. "Believe in yourself, Victor, and you will get strong results," she said. I do and I did. I passed all my finals with good grades.

In the "concrete league" we brawled with the Pac Rats, clad in green and gold. If the Pac Rats won, they would each get individual trophies and a team trophy. If we won, we would only get a team trophy. I was prohibited from playing in the final game, because of many penalties, and of all things, cheering from the sidelines. Our chances for a title were very slim. The final game, the title game, I coached from the sidelines. We had a 7-0 lead in the closing seconds. They scored a touchdown, 7-6. If they scored an extra point, we lose. I confidently commended my teammates, "Spirit on the road coming and spirit on the road back. They do not have the character. Their "go to" receiver does not have the character. We do." The Pac Rats huddled, broke, and came to the line of scrimmage. The QB set his pass in motion, over the middle to their "money" ball player. He had the ball in his hands, in that quick second it dropped to the floor. I saw it bounce once, twice and three times. The Belmont Shells won 7-6. We were ecstatic, jumping and cheering. I recanted "They had no character."

December started to dwindle down. I was worried about the LA Rams. They had beaten the Packers a few weeks back, and there was this strange omen, floating about. In the Chinese Zodiac, this was the Year of the Ram, 1967. They will meet again in a playoff. I hope the Packers will win. Esmeralda assured me, "Believe in yourself." I thought, people call me Vince, my grandmother's maiden name was Lombardi. I played the same position, RG, besides going to the same college, Fordham, as Vince did. Then it hit me, "Fordham's mascot is a ram. Lombardi is a Ram." A few days later I saw Bill Gallo's drawing for this playoff game (NY Daily News). It showed a ram trying to break Lombardi's chiselled face of granite. I pondered. "The Seven Blocks of Granite, Lombardi played on that great Fordham team." I knew at that point the Packers would win. They routed and physically dominated the powerful "Fearsome Foursome" defensive line, Merlin Olsen, Deacon Jones, etc. 28-7, Dec. 23, 1967. Little did I know, that following night, Christmas Eve, as December got colder, that Esmeralda was now a fan of mine. "You are psychic too. You could read the symbols and signs – your sure you're not a witch," as we talked under the neon palm tree sign of El Tropicoro in teeth-chattering cold. "What do you see for us?" In puffs of the cold night, "I see a beautiful beach with palm trees leaning into the green water and a golden sun." "You are loco, crazy," she puffed.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 22, No. 5 (2000)

Sunday, Dec. 31, 1967, it was very cold all that week in New York. That day in Green Bay the weather turned arctic, minus degrees with strong wind chills, gooseflesh blue. Lombardi had electric coils to heat Lambeau Field, but they froze and broke down. The field became frozen, ice hard as concrete and they were going to call the NFL title game off because of the cold. Early Sunday at PS 45 Field, my friend Michael wanted to see the game at my house. He asked, "Victor, who do you like?" Silly question; Michael knew I liked the Packers. He mentioned, "I like Green Bay, but Dallas is pretty tough and they want revenge." I noted, "Green Bay has more character, Lombardi is tough, and so is his team. This is Green Bay weather." We watched Green Bay take a 14-0 lead and the rout was on. But Dallas gradually came back and mysteriously took a 17-14 lead on a trick option play, one of Lombardi's favorite plays. How ironic. The Packers had the ball deep inside their own territory, five minutes left. Michael responded, "No team has ever won 3 NFL titles in a row. I rambled "They have to do it, all the signs are there ..." The Packers were helped by Chuck Mercein, NY Giants castoff, in this historic epic, their final drive. This last drive in the brutal cold, the Packers were on the goal line. The Cowboys defensive line chiselled their cleats into the ice. I was feverishly nervous, and knelt and prayed in front of the television set. Michael interjected, "Don't worry, the Packers are going to score." He had a little more confidence than I did.

Bart Starr snuck in between the right guard and center, touchdown, 21-17. I was overjoyed, jumping up and down. Michael responded, "See, I told you." They were going to score as if he had granted them this right. Years later, I read Jerry Kramer's, GB, RG, book, *Instant Replay*, of that 1967 season. He stated that Lombardi knew from training camp that he was going to win the title and sort of felt that Kramer was to throw the winning block.

I was so very happy for Vince Lombardi and his Packers. Michael brought it to my attention, "Didn't you have a bet or two." I totally forgot and was immersed in those moments frozen in time on the icy field. I connected with my wagering transactions, and was informed I have one more game, Super Bowl II, Green Bay vs. the Oakland Raiders.

I contacted Esmeralda and we went downtown to wish the New Year, 1968, on that frosty evening. The following afternoon, I surprised her with air tickets and a hotel in sunny Puerto Rico. By noon there we were under the beautiful palm trees under a golden sun with green seas. "You are amazing, Victor, wow! That was something," as we twirled our rums in beautiful Loquillo Beach.

She asked, "Who is going to win this other game?" I replied "You know the answer."

After this storybook party and romance, I returned to the cold streets of Belmont. All my friends could not get over my golden tan. I had a golden turtleneck sweater on under my black wool coat, just hanging around the candy store. They said, "You have green eyes. Where and when did you get such a beautiful golden color?" I said, "New Year's Eve, Lambeau Field, Green Bay, Wisconsin, -13 degrees with a wind chill factor plus 50 degrees below zero, gooseflesh blue, the Ice Bowl. Weather fit only for penguins, polar bears, and the Green Bay Packers."

A short time later I collected the end part of my three-way wager, \$2,000. Of this sum, a part was paid for our fun in the sun, Esmeralda and I. Whenever I see, read, or hear tales about this historic football game, I feel very, very proud, happy, and warm with a golden glow, remembering El Tropicoro, Esmeralda, and the Ice Bowl.