

A LEAP IN LAMBEAU'S HISTORY

Hoeffel coached Packers when they joined league in 1921, records reveal

By Cliff Christl of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel staff
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What has long been accepted as gospel in Green Bay is myth.

Bizarre and blasphemous as it might sound, Curly Lambeau was not the first coach of the Green Bay Packers.

Lambeau wasn't the coach in 1919, the year the Packers were founded as a semipro team, nor was he the coach in 1921, their first year in what has become the National Football League.

William Ryan was the coach in 1919 and Joe Hoeffel in 1921.

The proof was uncovered by inspecting a number of official publications produced by the team in its early years and every pertinent story written about the Packers in the Green Bay *Press-Gazette* from Aug. 11, 1919, the date of the first team meeting, through Dec. 31, 1930.

Files were also examined at the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio; the Packer Hall of Fame, the Brown County Library and Packer City Antiques in Green Bay.

Given the fact that Hoeffel served as coach in 1921, inaccuracies exist in Lambeau's official NFL coaching record and in the tributes extended to him at the Pro Football and Packer halls of fame.

Lambeau is credited with 33 years of service as a head coach in the NFL – 29 with the Packers, two with the Chicago Cardinals and two with the Washington Redskins – tying him with Don Shula for the second-longest tenure in NFL history. George Halas holds the record with 40 years.

Lambeau also ranks fourth in career victories. He has been credited with an overall record of 226-132-22, which gave him 33 more victories than Chuck Noll, who is in fifth place. Included in Lambeau's record was a 3-2-1 mark compiled in 1921.

Lee Rummel, executive director of public relations for the Packers and the team's unofficial historian, and Joe Horrigan, vice president / communications-exhibits and lead historian at the Pro Football Hall of Fame, offered no quarrel with the evidence that has been gathered.

"I think you have documentation of something that differs from what has been presented," Rummel said.

When asked if he was convinced that Hoeffel, rather than Lambeau, coached the Packers during their first season in the NFL, Horrigan said:

"Yeah, more and more as you point this stuff out. I don't think there was ever any intent to cover that up. It just was a sliding over of the facts, so to speak. I don't have any problem with Hoeffel being acknowledged as the coach.

"To Green Bay fans, who know who Lambeau was and know the history of the franchise, this is going to come as a stark revelation. (But) I don't think you are going to get any fight, given sufficient evidence, and I think you've done that."

Nobody associated with the Packers in 1921 is alive. Hoeffel died in 1964 and Lambeau in 1965. J. Emmett Clair, manager of the team and an officer with the Acme Packing Co., which sponsored it, died in April 2000 at age 102. Norm Barry was believed to be the last survivor of the team's 25 players when he died in 1988 at age 90.

But some of the most convincing evidence was found on the masthead of five separate issues of "The Dope Sheet," subtitled "Official Program and Publication, Acme-Packers Football Team." Editions published on Oct. 9, 16, 23 and 30, and Nov. 6, 1921, all listed Hoeffel as the team's coach and Lambeau

as its captain.

The *Press-Gazette* first announced that Hoeffel would be joining the Packers On Aug. 11. The story noted that he would “assist Captain Lambeau in coaching the team.” Almost a month later, but still 15 days before the Packers’ first game, a *Press-Gazette* headline read: “Joe Hoeffel Will Coach Packer Team.”

“Joe Hoeffel, former Wisconsin football star, who will cooperate with Captain Lambeau in building up a winning football machine for the Green Bay Packers, was on hand for Friday night’s practice and helped put the candidates through a stiff drill,” the story began. “Arrangements have been completed to have Hoeffel out with the team in a coaching capacity for the remainder of the season.”

Clearly, the wording of the two stories created some uncertainty about Hoeffel’s exact duties. The first story, in particular, left the impression that he either would answer to Lambeau or serve as his equal.

But subsequent *Press-Gazette* articles provided more clarity as to how authority was divided between the two men. And the stories left no doubt that Hoeffel handled the coaching duties, while Lambeau was team captain.

On numerous occasions, after the second announcement on Sept. 10 through the end of the season, the *Press-Gazette* identified Hoeffel as the coach in headlines and in stories. The paper carried daily reports about the Packers, all presumably written by George Whitney Calhoun, who with Lambeau co-founded the team. Calhoun was sports editor of the *Press-Gazette* at the time.

The stories credited Hoeffel with scheduling practice, overseeing practice, implementing new plays, conducting blackboard sessions and making substitutions during games. On rare occasions when a quote appeared in a story, Hoeffel was the one quoted. The Nov. 16 Dope Sheet also carried a brief item stating that he was the one negotiating to acquire a new quarterback.

The only title the *Press-Gazette* attached to Lambeau’s name throughout the season was “captain.”

It should be noted that at the time, the title of captain carried more clout than it does today. In that role, Lambeau served as the indisputable team leader on game day.

On more than one occasion in 1921, the *Press-Gazette* referred to the Packers as “Captain Lambeau’s squad,” although that was a common association made in those days.

“Often, you’d hear, ‘Thorpe’s Canton Bulldogs.’ He was the captain. He was the man in charge,” Horrigan said. “You’d hear it with ‘Grange’s Chicago Bears.’ That was clearly for promotional value. He wasn’t the coach by any stretch of the imagination. Benny Friedman’s Brooklyn Dodgers. Again, he wasn’t the coach, but it was referred to as his team.”

The rules dictated that the captain run the team during games by limiting a coach’s involvement.

The official rule book used in 1921 by what was then the American Professional Football Association read: “There shall be no coaching ...by any other person not participating in the game.” Another section under the same category read: “No person shall be allowed to walk up and down on either side of the field.”

Both rules remained in effect through 1939. In 1940, the latter of the two rules was amended to allow coaches to move along the sideline. Not until 1944 were coaches permitted to communicate with their players.

But coaches, not captains, are credited with a team’s record in “Total Football: The Official Encyclopedia of the National Football League.”

How could it be that Lambeau was recognized for all this time as the team’s first coach when, in fact, he wasn’t?

First, the NFL kept few records at the beginning. It wasn’t until 1932 that the NFL even compiled statistics.

There also is ample evidence to show that Lambeau’s perceived role evolved into something bigger than it actually was over time.

What presumably was the first story detailing the history of the Packers appeared in the *Press-Gazette* on Oct. 7, 1922. It stated that Ryan, the coach at Green Bay West High School, doubled as the Packers' coach in 1919, and that Lambeau and Jack Dalton, Ryan's replacement at West, "shared the leadership honors on the field" in 1920. The *Press-Gazette* reported that Hoeffel had been asked to coach that year but had turned the Packers down.

The Packers printed their first program in 1925 for an exhibition game against Iron Mountain, Mich. The program described Lambeau simply as "captain of the Packers since 1919." Programs found for eight other home games played from 1926-28 mentioned Lambeau's early involvement, but, again, said nothing about him being the first coach.

The first time it was suggested that he had been the man in charge from the start was in a program for the Sept. 15, 1929, game against Portsmouth (Ohio). It read: "Lambeau is starting his 11th year as pilot of the Packer team,"

The Packers printed what amounted to their first press guide in 1930. It consisted of three pages, stapled together with no cover. In a brief item about Lambeau, it failed to credit him with being the team's original coach.

The first such reference appeared in 1933. It read: "Lambeau was coach of the Packers when that team joined Joe Carr's wheel in 1921 and has been the only coach the team has had."

In 1935, the first year the Packers published a covered press guide, it noted that Lambeau "has been directing the Packers" since they entered the NFL. But another item read: "Curly helped organize the Packers, and he served first as their captain, and later as coach."

Eleven years later, Calhoun wrote a three-part series about the history of the team for its official program. In it, he stated that Lambeau was "the only coach the team has ever had." However, Calhoun was guilty of altering at least one other piece of history in the series.

He wrote that the Packers forfeited their franchise after the 1921 season for lack of funds. The minutes from the NFL meeting after that season document that the Packers were temporarily expelled from the league for using college athletes under assumed names in one of their games.

In 1946, Calhoun was publicity director of the Packers, as well as telegraph editor at the *Press-Gazette*.

"What I think is that Calhoun perhaps was inclined to romanticize (Lambeau's) association with the team a little bit," said Rempel, a former colleague of Calhoun's at the *Press-Gazette*. "Later, they became enemies. But at the time, he and Curly were very tight."

By all accounts, Lambeau was not one to allow accuracy to interfere with a good story.

"Cripes, he'd lie to your face and you knew he was lying and he'd still lie to you and make you like it because he was so good at it," Rempel said.

Of the several books written about the Packers' history, only a collection by Larry Names, published between 1987 and 1995, mentioned Hoeffel. Names wrote that Hoeffel was the coach in 1921 but provided no supporting evidence.

Another of Names' contentions was that the Packers actually were organized in 1918 when Lambeau was playing at Notre Dame. The Packers' early press guides traced the team's roots to that season, as well.

But there isn't evidence to prove that.

The 1919 team was the first to use the nickname Packers. It was a newly organized team with a new sponsor, and a new coach and captain. In addition, there were 15 new players. Only 10 of the players on the 1918 Green Bay Whales performed with the original Packers. Moreover, Green Bay had fielded other city teams going back to the late 1890s.

For the record, nothing that was uncovered here should diminish Lambeau's legacy. He was the Packers'

guiding force from an early stage and the one largely responsible for the team's survival. He still won more games than any NFL coach other than Shula, Halas and Tom Landry; and he won six NFL championships, a number matched only by Halas.

"He was the guy who was the glue who kept this thing together for a long time," Rempel said. "He and maybe a couple other guys, but he was certainly a central figure. And he deserves credit for it."

But his biography and accounts of the franchise's early history require some revision.

Hoeffel was star player in high school, college

By Cliff Christl of the Journal Sentinel staff

Although Joseph Merrill Hoeffel has long been forgotten by almost everyone but his surviving family, he was once one of the biggest names in Wisconsin football. Hoeffel was captain at the University of Wisconsin in 1912, the last year that the school had an unbeaten football team. An end, he also was selected second-team All-American that year by Walter Camp. Those honors were deemed worthy enough for Green Bay to hold a public banquet for him on Nov. 27, 1912.

A native of Green Bay, Hoeffel was born in 1890 and starred in football at Green Bay East, the same high school that Curly Lambeau later attended. After graduating from Wisconsin, Hoeffel spent three years as an assistant coach at the University of Nebraska.

In 1916, he coached the East High team, and Lambeau was his star player. After coaching the Green Bay Packers in 1921, Hoeffel went to work for his family's business and remained in Green Bay until his death on April 15, 1964.

One of his two sons is still living. Joseph Hoeffel Jr., 84, is a retired physician living in Bryn Mawr, Pa. Hoeffel Jr.'s son, Joseph Merrill Hoeffel III, is a member of Pennsylvania's delegation in the U.S. House of Representatives.

A great-granddaughter of the former Packers coach lives in Milwaukee, but she requested that her name not be printed in the story.

Joseph Hoeffel Jr. was 4 years old in 1921. He had no recollection of watching his father coach, he said. He remembered attending his first Packers game in the late 1920s. He went with his dad to old City Stadium in Green Bay to watch the Frankford Yellowjackets play.

Hoeffel said his father told him that he served the Packers in a coaching capacity, but he figured he was the end coach.

"It's just a great surprise to me," Hoeffel said. "Maybe I just assumed because he was the end coach at Nebraska and that was his position. That's just what I've always thought. I can't say which is right, but the newspaper reports at the time are certainly more accurate than what I remember 75 years ago."

Hoeffel said it would be welcome news if the Packers and the NFL decided to recognize his father's role in future publications. "I think that would be very nice," he said. "The whole family has talked about it. My brother has been long gone, and he would have been interested also."

Revising record books could be messy job

Officials unsure of how to respond to evidence of Hoeffel's coaching

By Cliff Christl
of the Journal Sentinel staff

Even if the National Football League and the Green Bay Packers officially acknowledge that Curly

Lambeau wasn't the team's first coach, they might be reluctant to revise their record books.

To do so would erase what has been accepted as a historical fact for decades.

"I guess you could, but it would take some explaining that would be rather convoluted," said Lee Rempel, the team's executive director of public relations. "I don't know if we will or not.

"I remember when (Lambeau) stepped down, Art Daley (of the *Green Bay Press-Gazette*) wrote the story" alluding to the fact or supposition, if you will, that he had been the coach for 31 years from 1919 to 1949. That's the way everybody has always looked at it. But, obviously, this puts a different light on it, no doubt about it."

Joe Horrigan, vice president / communications-exhibits for the Pro Football Hall of Fame, said someone at the league office would ultimately have to rule on the matter, but that a recommendation to do so would probably have to come from him.

"There is no process," he said. "I guess it really starts with us being the historical repository if, in fact, we have factual information. And this now is factual information.

"Is it our right or within our power to change anything? We can change it in our files only. We don't publish for the National Football League. Would we bring it to their attention? Sure. Is there an ear there? Absolutely."

In 1993, the NFL accepted a recommendation from the Hall of Fame to reduce George Halas' victory total by one. At the time, Don Shula was closing in on Halas' record for career victories.

But to expunge Lambeau's first-year record would create numerous complications, not the least of which would be that it would create inaccuracies in the inscription above his bust at Canton.

Horrigan said he probably would leave it up to the Packers to decide if they wanted to make a change in their 2002 media guide. Up to now, Joe Hoeffel's name has never appeared in the guide.

Rempel said that was something that probably should be corrected.

"I think we probably should do that just to be consistent with the history, the history we have now just discovered," he said.

One possible compromise, Rempel said, would be to list Lambeau and Hoeffel as co-coaches. That way Lambeau's record wouldn't be affected and his biography would be altered only slightly.

Bob Carroll, one of the editors of the NFL's official encyclopedia, said there was sufficient evidence to change the record and that if it involved some other team and some other coach, it probably would be done. But he predicted that because of Lambeau's stature, nothing would change.

"It's not Hoeffel Field," Carroll said.