

11-3 and Forever Second

By Doug Warren

1962 . . . it should have been the Lions' year. For two seasons, the Lions had been on the heels of the Green Bay Packers, working toward the moment when they would finally lay waste to the growing Lombardi legend and claim a little glory of their own. In 1962, the NFL Championship was clearly in the sights of the Detroit Lions. The only thing that stood in their way was the Green Bay Packers, and a cold and muddy afternoon in Green Bay the Lions . . . literally . . . let it slip away.

The previous two seasons, George Wilson's club had finished as runner-up to the Packers in the NFL's tough Western Division. They did so without the services, at least in Wilson's mind, of a top-flight quarterback. Tobin Rote, the hero of the Lions' championship run of 1957, had departed in early 1960, leaving the Lions with Earl Morrall as their only experienced QB. Coach Wilson hadn't been satisfied with the progress of Morrall since acquiring him in the Bobby Layne deal in October 1958. Therefore, Wilson decided to make a trade with the Cleveland Browns for Jim Ninowski. Jim had been a backup to Milt Plum in Cleveland upon joining the Browns in 1958 as a rookie out of Michigan State. With Plum's steady progress in Paul Brown's offense, Ninowski became expendable. During 1960 and '61, neither Ninowski nor Morrall would impress Wilson enough to claim the Lions' top-job as their own. In the meantime, across Lake Erie, Plum would lead the NFL in passer-rating in consecutive-seasons, throwing for a combined 4,713 yards, 39 touchdowns, and only 15 interceptions as the Browns' signal-caller.

So with the 1962 season on the horizon, it remained Wilson's feeling that an elite quarterback was all that separated the Lions from a championship. With that in mind, George once again went to Paul Brown's Browns to engineer a trade that he hoped would push Detroit over the top. The deal culminated in the Lions returning Ninowski to the Cleveland, as well as halfback Howard Cassady and defensive end Bill Glass, in exchange for Milt Plum, halfback Tommy Watkins, and linebacker Dave Lloyd.

During the first three weeks of the 1962 season, George Wilson looked like a genius. The Lions roared out of the gate with Plum at the offensive controls, outscoring their opponents 119-51 during their 3-0 start. At the same time, the defending champion Packers also rolled their way to a 3-0 start and 100-to-7 scoring differential over their opponents.

The entire NFL was abuzz the following week in anticipation of the first 1962 clash between these two long-time foes. It was arguably the biggest game between the two teams since the 1930's. Despite the fact that the Las Vegas' wise-guys had installed the Packers as 13-and-1/2 point favorites, there was no doubt inside the Detroit camp that they had Green Bay's number. The Leo's defense had proven in the past that they were more than capable of halting the Packer's precision offense. In addition, with the talented Lion offense now clicking under Plum, Detroit's confidence was at an all-time high. The Lions felt that their time had finally arrived, and for 58-and-1/2 minutes on that gloomy autumn afternoon, October 7, 1962 it looked like they were right.

After a Packer opening drive that covered 80-yards, and ended with a Paul Hornung 15-yard field goal, it became a day dominated by defense. Late in the first period, Packer fullback Jim Taylor fumbled and Detroit linebacker Wayne Walker recovered at the Packer 42. The Lions pushed the ball into scoring territory, but a Walker 25-yard field goal try was blocked by Packer cornerback Herb Adderley. After recovering the block at their 36, a long Green Bay pass completion was called back on a holding penalty to the 30. The very next play, Packer quarterback Bart Starr was hit by Joe Schmidt as he attempted to scramble. Starr fumbled, and the ball was recovered by Alex Karras on the Green Bay 34. The Lions capitalized when halfback Danny Lewis scored from the six-yard line, behind a spectacular block by guard Harley Sewell. The score gave the Lions a 7-3 advantage. The Packers followed with a long drive to the Lion 26; however they would be stopped when a halfback option pass from Tom Moore to Boyd Dowler was picked off by Lion safetyman Yale Lary at the goal-line.

The score stood at 7-3 until another 15-yard Hornung field goal came with just six seconds left in the third period. The Golden Boy's kick cut the Lion lead to 7-6. Earlier in the third Green Bay had driven inside the Lion 25, but they were stopped when they attempted another halfback option pass, this time by Hornung. Hornung's throw was snatched by Detroit's Carl Brettschneider, keeping the Lions' slim advantage intact.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 26, No. 6 (2004)

With both defenses tightening the noose on their opponents' offenses, each team failed on long field goal attempts in the final period. When Hornung's attempt from the 47-yard line went awry, and was returned by the Lions to the Detroit 22-yard line, six minutes remained on the clock. The Lions managed to burn the clock down to 106 seconds when they faced a third down on their 49. After a time out to discuss their options, a pass play was called. . . . What followed was the most devastating end-of-game collapse in Detroit Lions' history.

The pass pattern was called "8 and 5, slant in, slant out." The pattern designated that both Lion wideouts, split-end Gail Cogdill and flanker Terry Barr, would run the same pattern on opposite sides of the formation. It's a timing route, meaning that the quarterback is supposed to throw the pass to where the receiver is going to be. The receiver and the ball are supposed to connect at that spot, giving little time for the defender to react. It's a "bread and butter" play that every NFL team has in its playbook. In fact, the Lions had used the play twice on that very same drive on third down to keep the chains moving, and the clock running. It would have very likely worked again. This time however . . . the ball got to the spot . . . but the receiver did not.

On his out-cut Barr, the intended receiver, slipped in the mud, leaving the ball to float into the hands of Packer corner Herb Adderley. Adderley grabbed the pass at the Packer 42, and raced back to the Detroit 18 before he was tackled.

The Packers cautiously moved the ball to the 14 where, on third-and-seven, Hornung kicked his third field goal of the game. There were just 27 seconds remaining on the clock. The visitors were stunned. The Packers escaped with a 9-7 victory.

After the game, many Lions wondered aloud why they had not simply run the ball in that spot. With less than two minutes to go and only one timeout, the Packers' backs would have been against the proverbial wall if the Lions had run on third down instead of attempting another pass. If Detroit would have ran the ball, it was likely that the Packers would have burned their last time out to stop the clock. That would have left the Lions, and their excellent punter Yale Lary, free to pin them deep in their own end of the field with under a minute left to play. It would have been the safest plan of action, considering how the Lion defense had bottled up the Packers for most of the second half. It was certainly the decision that many members of the Lion defense would have chosen had it been their call. However, it wasn't their call and they weren't happy about the decision to pass. After the final gun sounded, all hell broke loose in the Detroit dressing room.

While not reported at the time, Milt Plum had to be rescued in the post-game locker room by George Wilson as he was on the verge of being physically assaulted by some members of the Lion defense. Four years after the incident, in a 1967 conversation with Detroit News writer Jerry Green, Alex Karras admitted to being one of those who attacked Plum. Green wrote of the admission in a 1973 book: "Sure, I threw my helmet at Miltie. . . . I missed him by that much." Karras held his fingers two inches apart. "I could have torn his head off, that bleep, bleep. He's nothing but a milk-drinking quarterback. I wish I got him that day." Legend persists that Joe Schmidt also attacked Plum after the loss. To this day however, Joe insists that he did not.

While it has never been made clear as to who made the call to throw the pass, most believe that it was Milt who made the decision. George Wilson, to his credit, did his best to try and make everyone believe otherwise. He claimed that his quarterback was only following orders. "Don't blame Milt Plum for the interception that beat us. I take full responsibility for it," Wilson wrote in his weekly "As George Wilson Sees It" column in the Detroit News the day after the game. Wilson also did his best to bridge his team's offensive-defensive divide that formed that day. "There were a lot of things said in the locker room that we will forget," he said over the intercom on the team's charter flight back to Detroit.

While plenty of Lion tears and sweat were left behind in the visitor's locker room after their devastating loss; it was Lion blood, and the quest for blood revenge, that would hold the Lions together and fuel them until their rematch with the Packers on Thanksgiving Day. For six weeks, the Lions kept one eye on their opponents and one eye on the standings, hoping that someone could rise up and best the Packers before their rematch. It was not to be. Green Bay continued to defeat everyone in their path. Lombardi's troops stood at 10-0 when they landed in Motown late on Wednesday, November 21. In the meantime, Detroit had managed to fall two games behind the Packers; due to a loss to the eventual Eastern Division champion New York Giants in Yankee Stadium, 17-14, on October 21. Because of the Giant loss it was imperative that the Lions defend their home field on Thanksgiving. Then the Lions would then have to win out the rest of their games, while hoping the Packers could be beaten by someone else. If everything fell into place Detroit and Green Bay would tie for the Western Division crown, giving the Lions another shot at the Packers in a playoff game. It

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 26, No. 6 (2004)

was a tall order for sure, but it was all Detroit could cling to as they pushed toward ending their five-year championship drought.

To this day, the 1962 Thanksgiving Day game remains one of the most anticipated matchups in Detroit football history. As the Thanksgiving Eve dusk fell upon Detroit, a line began to form outside of the bleacher entrance to Tiger Stadium. As the flasks flowed and the makeshift fires burned into the night, Lion rooters anxiously awaited the 7,000 unreserved bleacher seats, plus another 3,000 standing-room only tickets that would go on sale for the game at 10 a.m. the following morning. The smell of turkey and dressing accompanied the scent of anticipation as game time approached. As a nationwide television audience assembled around their snowy black-and-white screens, a crowd of 57,598 Lion loyalists settled into cozy Tiger Stadium to see if their team could make amends for the terrible loss of seven weeks ago. Green Bay had been installed as 6-point favorites, and few observers outside the Lions' sphere of influence believed Detroit had a chance against them.

George Wilson and his team were more than ready. "This is it," said the coach said to the players as they prepared to exit the locker room, "You are a better all-around team than the teams that won championships here ten years ago."

From the opening kickoff, Detroit's game plan was simple and obvious . . . Attack!

Defensively, Joe Schmidt, the Lions' defensive playcaller, ordered blitzes and / or stunts on nearly every play. The object was to confuse Green Bay quarterback Bart Starr and his Packer lineman, forcing them into long-yardage situations and mistakes. Early in the first quarter, it was apparent that the plan was working; Starr was thrown for a 15-yard loss on his first pass attempt. He would find himself under assault for the rest of the afternoon as the Lions' front seven would have their way with the Green Bay offensive line.

Offensively, Detroit attacked the Packer secondary with the deep ball. Midway through the first period, after a poor Packer punt by Boyd Dowler, the Lions were set up at the Packer 39. On third down at the Packer 33, Lion split-end Gail Cogdill broke loose on a "hitch-and-go" route. Gail split the seam in the Packer zone between cornerback Jesse Whittenton and safety Willie Wood. Milt Plum's perfect throw hit Cogdill in stride for the touchdown. Wayne Walker's PAT followed, giving Detroit the early 7-0 advantage.

With 2:35 remaining in the first stanza, Packer halfback Tom Moore, playing in place of the injured Paul Hornung, coughed up the ball at midfield. Lion linebacker Carl Brettschneider smothered it at the Lion 47. The Lions drove to the Packer 27 as the quarter ended. It was time again for Plum and Cogdill to hook up. With another textbook effort Cogdill beat Herb Adderley for a 27-yard TD-strike, the point after put Detroit up 14-0.

With the crowd now worked to a fever pitch, it was the defense's turn to join the touchdown parade. On the Packers' first offensive play after Cogdill's second score, Lion tackle Roger Brown crushed Bart Starr, causing a fumble. Defensive end Sam Williams scooped up the loose pigskin and carried it to paydirt. With just under 17 minutes elapsed in the game, the Lions had a three touchdown lead. Two minutes later, Starr was sacked again by Brown, this time in the end zone. The safety gave the Lions a 23-0 lead. The score would remain that way as the first half came to a close.

The Packers left the field for the intermission in a daze. The Lion defense had allowed them only one scoring chance, which came late in the first half. Green Bay failed to capitalize as Jerry Kramer missed a 31-yard field goal. With a full half to play, and the partisan Detroit crowd in an absolute frenzy cheering for more Packer blood, the defending champions faced an uphill battle unlike anything they had seen all season.

Early in the second half, a Starr pass was intercepted by Night Train Lane at the Lion 42. Train's pick set up Detroit's next score, a 47-yard Milt Plum field goal. The score now stood at 26-0. The remainder of the game was controlled by the defenses. The two Packer touchdowns, both academic, came as a result of Lion turnovers. The first miscue occurred when Milt Plum lost the ball attempting to pass from Detroit's 28 yard line. Packer linebacker Bill Quinlan grabbed the ball out of the air and carried it near the goal line before fumbling it himself; teammate Willie Davis recovered the ball in the endzone giving the visitors their first score of the day. The next Packer TD was set up when Lion fullback Ken Webb fumbled at the Lion 14. A few plays later Packer Jim Taylor rumbled over from 4 yards out, cutting the Lion lead to 26-14, ending the day's scoring.

THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 26, No. 6 (2004)

When all was said and done, the mighty Packer offensive machine had been reduced to rubble. Bart Starr had been sacked 11 times, for 110 yards in losses, with 5 of those sacks credited to Roger Brown. In addition, Detroit had forced three fumbles, an interception, and scored 9 points of their own. Milt Plum had also answered the call offensively. The maligned signal-caller finished his day by completing 8 of 16 passes, for 137 yards and two touchdowns. His two second half interceptions had come after the game was already decided. He also added a field goal while managing the Lion offense impressively all day.

Paybacks are hell. . . . That was the message the Green Bay Packers received on Thanksgiving Day 1962. On that day the Lions finally unleashed their full force and fury on the Green Bay Packers, the team they had been chasing for nearly three years. Never before, and never again, would a Vince Lombardi coached team be so thoroughly dominated. It's ironic that the 1962 Packers remain arguably the best team of Lombardi's tenure. Green Bay's '62 squad would win more games, score more points, and give up fewer points than any other Lombardi-coached team. Nevertheless, on this day the Lions proved to themselves, and the rest of the football world, that the Green Bay Packers were human.

The Lions had succeeded in making their point. However, Detroit's hopes for a playoff rematch would never come to fruition. Green Bay wouldn't lose again that season. With the pressure of an undefeated record behind them, Vince's troops regrouped. They would finish the regular season at 13-1, ending the year with a 16-7 victory over the New York Giants for their second-straight NFL title. The Lions would have to settle for second-place once again. With another loss coming against the Chicago Bears, 3-0, in the season finale, the Lions finished the 1962 season at 11-3. It was the best regular season win total in franchise history up to that point, and would remain the standard until the 1991 Lions posted a 12-4 mark.

To this day, Joe Schmidt, Alex Karras and many of their fellow teammates remain convinced that they were the best team in pro football in 1962.

Game 1: October 7, 1962 @ Green Bay. Attendance 38,669

Green Bay	3	0	3	3	-	9
Detroit	0	7	0	0	-	7

Green Bay - FG Hornung 15

Detroit - Watkins 6-yard run (Walker kick)

Green Bay - FG Hornung 15

Green Bay - FG Hornung 21

Game 2: November 22, 1962 @ Detroit. Attendance: 57,598

Detroit	7	16	3	0	-	26
Green Bay	0	0	0	14	-	7

Detroit - Cogdill 33-yard pass from Plum (Walker kick)

Detroit - Cogdill 27-yard pass from Plum (Walker kick)

Detroit - Williams 6-yard fumble return (Walker kick)

Detroit - Safety, Brown tackled Starr in the end zone

Detroit - FG Plum 47

Green Bay - Davis recovered fumble in end zone (Kramer kick)

Green Bay - Taylor 4-yard run (Kramer kick)