



Reprieve From The Fire On Sunday

By Marty Parkes

Editor's Note: Autumn, Wisconsin's best season, means a lot of things to different people. To me, autumn especially means two things—football and golf.

Many autumn weekend days first find me at Blackhawk Country Club early in the morning and in either Camp Randall or Lambeau Field in the afternoon. My season football tickets to the Badger and the Packer (Green Bay games only) are prized possessions.

Is it any wonder then that I was so emotional when I read the following article in the September issue of GOLF JOURNAL? I know many other WGCSA members, especially those my age who remember the great Packer teams coached by Lombardi, enjoyed it, too.

My concern was for those fans who may have missed this excellent piece. After a call for help to Lois Latham and the resulting work by her, Marty Parkes' fine story about the special role golf played for Vince Lombardi is reprinted here with permission from the USGA and the editors of GOLF JOURNAL. Our sincere thanks to them.

More than 100 amateur golfers converged upon Oneida Golf & Riding Club, in Green Bay, Wisconsin, in late July of 1961 to compete in the Wisconsin State Golf Association's annual championship. One of the highlights of the festivities that year was the banquet for competitors on the evening of Monday, July 24th. The guest speaker was Green Bay's most famous citizen, Vince Lombardi, general manager and head coach of the football Packers.

Lombardi's mind, although never far from the football field, contained thoughts that July evening about his other favorite game, golf. Lombardi told the assembled audience in his raspy voice: "Those who like games get more out of golf than any other." He proceeded to draw analogies between the two sports he loved best. "Golf is more than a game. I liken it to football because it makes many of the same demands football does. For example, it takes courage—it takes a lot of guts to play golf. And it takes a lot of



Golf played a special role for Vince Lombardi, Green Bay's coach of many moods.

stamina. It also takes coordinated efficiency—and you must be dedicated to win."

The short, stocky coach concluded with an overview of the merits of golf: "It teaches you to master yourself before you can master others. Most important, it teaches you to have a sense of humor—to be serious, but not to a point where you take yourself seriously. This is a great game, gentlemen, a great game. If you have sons and if you want them to grow up to be men, have them play the game of golf."

These remarks, obviously, revealed Lombardi's heartfelt love of the game. The love affair had commenced more than a decade earlier, during Lombardi's tenure as an assistant at West Point under its famous football coach, Colonel Earl (Red) Blaik.

Lombardi had dabbled in golf before his arrival at the Point in 1949, but did not pursue the game seriously. However, he started to play regularly at the U.S. Military Academy. West Point featured its own rocky, hilly golf course. The course, designed by Robert Trent Jones, had only 12 holes when it

opened in 1950. German POWs undertook much of the original construction work during the Second World War. It required moving mountains of ledge, soil and trees to complete the layout; Jones recalls that he saw a chain saw used for the first time in his life during the building of the course.

Lombardi's duties as an assistant coach were demanding. Colonel Blaik was a harsh taskmaster who worked himself and his staff long hours throughout the year. Doug Kenna, who also served as an assistant coach on the West Point staff, recalls Vince Lombardi the golfer during those years. "Vince was enormously warm and fun to play with. He loved to play golf—and he loved to be with guys on a golf course. Golf was his prime relaxation when he was coaching."

Lombardi encountered his share of difficulties while learning the game. Kenna says, "From a golf standpoint, he was certifiably the worst golfer I ever knew back then. He was very much dedicated to breaking 100, but seldom did. We played a good bit together at the West Point course, which was a near-impossible course to play back then. The harder Vince fought the course, the worse he got. Golf was a frustrating game for him in those years."

To highlight these frustrations, Lombardi's playing partners laughed uproariously at his failure on the same par-3 hole every round at West Point; he repeatedly shanked the ball into the woods. His friends went so far as to erect a sign on a tree in the woods that read: "Lombardi's garden."

Kenna remembers an occasional round with Lombardi away from West Point and the watchful gaze of Colonel Blaik. "One day Vince and I sneaked off to play golf at a little club down the Hudson where he had a friend. We gave Blaik some lame excuse. We were certain we wouldn't be recognized. When we finished the ninth hole and passed by the clubhouse, somebody said that Blaik would like to buy us a beer when we finished. We knew right then we were in for it when we got back to West Point. Vince and I fin-

ished the round. But when we got back to Blaik's office, he chewed us out up one side and down the other for not sticking around with the rest of the staff to watch game films."

Lombardi and Kenna often traveled together on recruiting trips. One time a blizzard stranded them in Green Bay for three days. Chafing at their confinement, Lombardi gloomily peered out their hotel room into the unending snow. He ironically remarked to Kenna, "Can you imagine anybody living in a place like this? This is just the end of the world."

The New York Giants eventually lured Lombardi away from West Point in 1954 to become their offensive coordinator. Wellington Mara, owner of the Giants, had been one of Lombardi's classmates at Fordham University. "I didn't play golf with Vince until he came to coach for us," Mara says. "He never tried to keep things in, even on the golf course. You knew when he was happy and you knew when he was unhappy."

Lombardi worked hard at both his coaching duties and golf game during his years with the Giants. He took golf lessons and played frequently on

weekends at municipal courses near his home in New Jersey. His game steadily improved. Then, in 1959, Lombardi achieved his lifelong dream: He became a head coach and general manager of an NFL franchise, namely the Green Bay Packers. Evidently the Green Bay community looked better to Lombardi in 1959 than it had years earlier, on that recruiting trip with Kenna.

When he moved to Green Bay, Lombardi joined Oneida Golf & Riding Club. Stanley F. Pelchar designed the course, which opened in 1928. Lombardi soon grew fond of Oneida's contoured topography and challenging layout. He established close friendships with three other players at the club: Dr. Gene Brusky, a physician; Ray Antil, a businessman; and Jack Koeppler, an insurance agent. (Lombardi met Brusky and Koeppler, in fact, at the first tee at Oneida.)

Brusky recalls one of the first rounds he played with the coach at Oneida. Lombardi missed a short putt on the first hole. Same thing on the second. Same thing on the third. Lombardi proceeded to heave his putter across a creek to the fourth tee and remained sullen for the next two holes.

But, upon reflection, he broke his silence on the sixth hole. "Boys, I want to apologize for acting like a fool," Lombardi said.

Their friendship flourished over time. They played at least once a week and always on a Saturday before a home game. "Right away I noticed his great love of the game of golf," Brusky says. "And he was a fierce competitor on the golf course as well as the gridiron."

Lombardi even appointed Brusky Green Bay's team doctor. "When he introduced me to the team he told them I was tough and could hit a golf ball farther than any man he had ever seen. All the players looked at him with blank expressions on their faces. They all wondered what hitting a golf ball had to do with being a medical doctor."

Ray Antil remembers: "The greatest round he ever recorded at Oneida was a 78 on St. Patrick's Day, which is about as early in the spring as you can play in this part of the country. He was so happy that he insisted on taking a group of us out to dinner that night to celebrate."

Lombardi's enthusiasm for fine golf didn't stop with his own endeavors.

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"One time I had a hole-in-one on the eighth hole at Oneida," Antil says. "Vince couldn't get over it. It was the first one he had ever seen. For weeks after, Vince told everyone he met about it."

Jack Koeppler, a 3-handicap at Oneida, won the Green Bay City championships in 1962 and 1968. "Vince didn't care about monetary considerations of the game—he just had a driving desire to win," Koeppler says. "When we played as partners and I hit a bad shot, he would dig down and play harder. Some partners would get flustered in such situations. Vince, conversely, thrived."

Lombardi's demeanor on the golf course varied with the seasons. "In the summer he played better. During the football season, he had trouble concentrating and his game suffered," Koeppler says. "He always insisted on playing, rain or shine. I remember he dragged me out one time in the middle of a rainstorm that was like a monsoon. I told him that just because his football team played in this kind of weather didn't mean we had to play golf in it, too."

Brusky says, "Vince kept pretty much to himself in many ways. He only used his temper and emotions when he needed to, when it was appropriate. He never sought fame or fortune, and actually hated notoriety. He just wanted to win, and reluctantly accepted all the publicity that went along with it."

"Compassionate is the only way I can describe Vince," Koeppler says. "We had a lot of poor Indian caddies at the club from the nearby Oneida Indian Reservation. He was a soft touch for all of them and gave out large tips. He was just a warm, down-to-earth guy."

Lombardi's hard work on his golf game paid off; he now carried a 9 handicap at Oneida. He wasn't a long hitter but generally kept the ball on line. He was particularly adept with his 6-, 7-, and 8-irons.

Lombardi's highlight at Oneida was a charity event on July 21, 1965. The other players that day were Don Hutson, a Hall-of-Fame end for the Packers before the Lombardi era; Bill Furnari, the golf pro at Oneida; and Jack Nicklaus. Art Daley, covering the event for the *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, wrote: "Lombardi, Hutson, and Furnari weren't expected to match Nicklaus, but they had their moments

—especially Lombardi, who paired up with Jack against Hutson and Furnari in a best-ball event."

Lombardi and Nicklaus were victorious by a score of 7 and 6; Lombardi won two of the holes, one by sinking a 25 foot birdie putt on the treacherous 4th green. He recorded a pair of 41s for 82, which tied him with Hutson and placed him one stroke better than Furnari's 83; Nicklaus shot an even-par 36-36-72.

Nicklaus vividly recalls playing golf with Vince Lombardi. "That match led to a very pleasant relationship with Coach Lombardi," he says. "I have nothing but fond memories of him. In fact, I remember that his letter was among the first ones I received when my father passed away."

Two of Lombardi's players who are now enshrined in the Pro Football Hall of Fame, in Canton, Ohio—middle linebacker Ray Nitschke and quarterback Bart Starr—walked in the gallery for Lombardi's match with Nicklaus. "I remember how hard he worked on his golf game for two or three months before the Nicklaus match," Nitschke says. "And it paid off. He played very well. You could learn a lot about Lombardi, like you can most people, by watching him on a golf course. He was very competitive and wouldn't accept defeat, yet he had great integrity."

Starr concurs: "The stronger and bigger the competition, the better Lombardi always performed. The Nicklaus match was no different. He was just a great competitor. I remember that he always refused to accept strokes from anyone on a golf course, even if it meant he'd lose. He was just too proud. I think it says something about him."

Throughout his tenure in Green Bay, Lombardi's fame increased and the pressure on him intensified. More than ever, he needed golf and the relaxation it provided. Unfortunately, though, his duties as general manager and coach gradually diminished his leisure time.

This circumstance was never more apparent than in the months preceding the Packers' third straight world championship in Super Bowl II. The pressure of "three-peating" took its toll on Lombardi. "It's not even fun to golf anymore," he cried. "I come in after a round and the natural thing to do is sit around, talk, and have a drink and a sandwich." Instead, Lombardi was forced to scurry back to his office

immediately to make phone calls, answer telegrams, and transact business.

Lombardi decided to retire from coaching after winning Super Bowl II and concentrate full-time on his duties as general manager. At precisely 8:07 p.m. on Thursday, February 1, 1968, before a crowded press conference at Oneida, he announced he would be stepping down as the Packers coach.

For a few months, Lombardi enjoyed his retirement and the free time it provided. Football training camp started in mid-July, though, and soon his decision to leave coaching turned into a frustrating, boring nightmare. Lombardi would schedule a tee time at Oneida, then abruptly cancel it and pace his office. He felt guilty spending so much time at the course while everyone else in the Packer organization was working.

A solution soon presented itself. Washington Redskins owner Edward Bennett Williams made Lombardi a lucrative offer to join his team as part-owner, executive vice-president, and head coach, which he accepted. Lombardi was asked why he desired to return to the rigors of coaching. "I miss the fire on Sunday," he explained.

Lombardi transformed the Redskins from losers into winners in his first season. But in the summer of 1970, doctors diagnosed him with cancer of the colon. He hounded his physicians until they were forced to tell him his condition was terminal. "The last time I saw him," Wellington Mara says, "my wife and I visited his home in Washington. I remember that we watched the British Open together on the television in his living room."

Lombardi lost about a pound a day during his fatal illness. He passed away on September 3, 1970, at the age of 57. His funeral was held in St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City, and he was buried close to his former home near Red Bank, New Jersey.

Golf provided Vince Lombardi immeasurable enjoyment, camaraderie and time away from "the fire on Sunday." His old golf partner, Jack Koeppler, reflects back and looks ahead: "That was a long time ago now, and I'm starting to get up there in years myself. The good news about my getting older, I suppose, is that before too long, I'll have the chance to play a lot of golf with Vince again."

"If Christmas didn't exist, man would have to invent it. There has to be at least one day a year to remind us we're here for something else besides our general cussedness." — Eric Sevareid