

## BUILDING A CHAMPION: 1996 GREEN BAY PACKERS

By Ken Crippen

*The author would like to thank Ron Wolf and Mike Holmgren for taking time to speak with him about their championship team. The author would also like to thank Ken Herock for taking the time to speak with him about the Atlanta Falcons' perspective on the Brett Favre trade.*

Having one of the most storied histories in the National Football League (NFL), the Green Bay Packers have earned the moniker Titledown, USA. With twelve championships to their credit and the distinction of being the only NFL team to win three straight championships<sup>[1]</sup> (accomplished twice: 1929 through 1931, and 1965 through 1967), the Packers are considered one of the league's most successful franchises. However, there were downtimes throughout their existence. After legendary coach Vince Lombardi gave up the reins to defensive coordinator Phil Bengtson before the 1968 season, the team had only two winning seasons over the span of 24 years. It was not until Ron Wolf was hired in 1991 before the franchise returned to its winning ways, taking the 1996 championship with one of the league's historically best defenses.

The Green Bay Packers were officially formed on August 11, 1919 in the editorial room of the *Green Bay Press-Gazette*. Organized by Earl 'Curly' Lambeau, an employee of the Indian Packing Company, and *Press-Gazette* sports editor George Calhoun, the Green Bay Packers started a long rollercoaster ride that spanned almost the entire history of the NFL.

The Packers saw immediate success their first season as they amassed an astonishing 10-1 record and beat their opponents by an average of 50 points per game. They followed that with a 9-1-1 season the following year and Lambeau decided to join the American Professional Football Association (APFA), which is now called the National Football League. Backed by John and Emmitt Clair of the Indian packing Company, Lambeau purchased a franchise in the league, but success was not so easy. Going 3-2-1 for the year, the Packers finished in a tie for sixth place in the league with the Evansville Crimson Giants, who also joined the APFA that year. To make matters worse, the Packers lost their APFA franchise. At a league meeting in Canton, OH, Packers owner John Clair admitted to fielding college players during the 1921 season, which was strictly forbidden. Clair asked for, and was granted, permission to withdraw his franchise from the league. A few months later, Lambeau went to a league meeting and applied for a franchise. It was granted and the Green Bay Packers<sup>[2]</sup> were back in the league, which was renamed the National Football League.

Green Bay struggled financially during the 1922 season. Local businessmen banded together to form the Green Bay Football Corporation, and paid off Lambeau's outstanding debts. The Packers were changed to a public non-profit corporation, with shares in the team selling for \$5. By the time the season started, 1000 shares were sold.

As the Green Bay Packers entered the late 1920s, the team was in better financial shape and in better shape on the field. Between 1929 and 1931, the Packers won three straight championships

behind players like halfback Johnny ‘Blood’ McNally, end LaVern Dilweg and tailback Verne Lewellen. The teams contained five eventual members of the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Along with McNally and Lambeau, tackle Robert ‘Cal’ Hubbard, guard Mike Michalske and back Arnie Herber found their way to Canton.

In 1934, the Packers faced another financial crisis when a fan fell from the stands and successfully sued the team. The team was reorganized and generated enough capital to continue.

Behind the throwing of tailback Cecil Isbell and the receiving skills of all-time great Don Hutson, the Packers won championships in 1936, 1939 and 1944. But Green Bay would face additional monetary issues as the 1940s came to an end. From 1946 through 1948, the Packers failed to sign two of their three first-round draft picks as the newly-formed All-America Football Conference (AAFC) won the bidding war for the draftees.

After the AAFC folded with the conclusion of the 1949 season, Curly Lambeau found himself in trouble with the board of directors after he purchased the Rockwood Lodge, located just north of Green Bay, to be used as a training facility for the team. Lambeau had spent over \$25,000 for the lodge; money the franchise could ill afford.

Lambeau resigned in 1950 and accepted the head coaching job of the Chicago Cardinals. After almost two seasons, Lambeau left the Cardinals and finished his coaching career with a two-year stint with the Washington Redskins.

Gene ‘Tuffy’ Ronzani had the distinction of taking over for Lambeau as head coach and general manager, but his tenure was short-lived. After three years, Ronzani resigned and was temporarily replaced by Hugh Devore and Ray ‘Scooter’ McLean to finish the 1953 season. Marquette’s Lisle Blackburn coached for four years and ‘Scooter’ McLean spent the 1958 season in charge. Between the two coaches, the team went 18-41-1. The Packers needed to regain their former glory and that came in the form of Vince Lombardi.

Vincent Thomas Lombardi started his playing career at Fordham University as a member of the famous Seven Blocks of Granite.<sup>[3]</sup> After graduation, Lombardi started coaching at St. Cecilia High School in Englewood, NJ. In 1947, he returned to his alma mater as an assistant coach under Andy Palau. Following the 1948 season, Lombardi left to join the coaching staff at West Point, where the legendary Red Blaik was running the show. In 1954, Lombardi became an assistant coach on the New York Giants, winning an NFL Championship in 1956. In January of 1959, Vince Lombardi became the next head coach of the Green Bay Packers, where he won five NFL Championships and two Super Bowl victories in his nine years as head coach.

After Lombardi resigned in 1968, defensive coordinator Phil Bengtson assumed the head coaching duties. Over the next two-plus decades, the team struggled to find its way. With only two ten-win seasons (10-4 in 1972 and 10-6 in 1989), the championships of the past were a distant memory.

Enter Ron Wolf.

He started his professional career as a talent scout for the Oakland Raiders in 1963. “I was hired by Al Davis on a trial basis over the telephone,” recalled Wolf. “One of the great things at that

time was that there were eight teams in the American Football League. There were only 33 players so there were only 264 players. What they did was every night they would study a different team and I would sit in there and by that you could see who the really good players were and why. That's through osmosis I guess. A picture is worth a thousand words."

Wolf left the Raiders after the 1974 season to take the job as general manager of the expansion Tampa Bay Buccaneers. The team lost their first 26 games before winning the final two of the 1976 season. The only team with a worse record was the 1942-1945 Chicago Cardinals, who lost 29 straight games. After his third year with the team, his contract was not renewed and Ron Wolf was out of a job. Wolf recalled his time in Tampa Bay, "The biggest problem I had was a tri-part type of agreement. There were three people: Hugh Culverhouse, John McKay and myself. Hugh Culverhouse and John McKay were contemporaries. They both served in World War II. They were the same age. They golfed together. They dined together. The vote was usually two-to-one. I could still do pretty much what I wanted to do when I wanted to do it as long as McKay was on board with it. I learned an awful lot, let's put it that way, which I put into play in Green Bay years later." The year after Wolf's departure, the Buccaneers won their division with a 10-6 record and advanced to the Conference Championship Game, but lost 9-0 to the Los Angeles Rams.

After leaving the Buccaneers, Wolf interviewed in Detroit. "Monte Clark wanted me up there and I went up for an interview. I was coming from Tampa to Detroit and I will never forget the ride up to Pontiac. I never saw over the snow banks the whole way up there and that had a big influence on what I was going to do." Wolf did not take the job in Detroit, but instead returned to the Raiders.

Commenting on his time working under Al Davis, Wolf recalled, "I think that I was blessed with that because he was energetic. So smart. In those days, if you were in a pro football operation, you *ran* the operation entirely from a business sense and from a coaching sense. He had that capability. We are talking about George Halas', Paul Brown's, people of that ilk who could do that and Al was in that vein. The same vein. Brilliant man. He took the time to train me, for which I am very, very fortunate to have been under his tutelage."

He stayed with the Raiders until 1990, when he accepted a job to work under Dick Steinberg at the New York Jets. "That was just fabulous for me, because for the first time I learned a different system and how you work within an organization that is tied to one thing and one thing only: that is bettering a team from a scouting standpoint," recalled Wolf. "It is a marvelous system. A system that was established by Bucko Kilroy and tweaked by Gil Brandt. Steinberg was Kilroy's number one pupil. It was a fabulous system for me because it showed me that, I hate to use this phrase, to skin a cat. There is another way of doing things. I say that year-and-a-half was both mind-boggling and eye-opening for me with all I learned from Dick Steinberg."

In November of 1991, Ron Wolf was hired to be the general manager of the Green Bay Packers. According to Wolf, "I had worked with Mike Reinfeldt when we were with the Raiders and he left to go to the University of Southern California and he took a job with Green Bay as chief financial officer. They contacted me...asked permission to talk to me. Mike initiated the phone call. I talked with Bob Harlan. I came out to Green Bay and I took the job. There wasn't any way that I wasn't going to take the job because this time, due to my age, no one my age had ever been

hired except for George Young. So I thought if I ever had a shot again, I am going to take it regardless of where it is and this was the shot.”

That was not the first time Wolf had interviewed in Green Bay. “I had interviewed when Forrest Gregg was the coach there. They were just a mess. There was no organization. I hate to speak, but it wasn’t organized and it wasn’t about football.” When Wolf returned, he compared the state of the franchise then to 1991; “When I interviewed, the best player on the team was a tackle named Ken Ruettgers. When I came back five years later, the best player was Sterling Sharpe, but the second best player was Ken Ruettgers. So, they didn’t really do much to help that team.”

Not only did they do little to improve the team, the overall mentality of the organization was that of a loser. With only four winning seasons – and one of those was a strike year – over a twenty-year span, the Packers were in shambles. An overhaul was needed. Head coach Lindy Infante was let go after the season. Philosophical differences were the key to his departure. According to Wolf, “I believe that you win with players. You do not win with systems. He didn’t want to swap out players. I believed that you had to do that. That was probably the big difference between us and that was a huge difference as far as I was concerned... He was a good football man, but he and I would not have been able to work together.”

Wolf needed to find a head coach and turned his sights towards San Francisco 49ers offensive coordinator Mike Holmgren. The highly sought-after coach had his choice of destinations, but picked Green Bay for his first head coaching job. Wolf recalled, “Fortunately, we were able to get him and once we got him, I think that it signaled that we were here.”

Holmgren and Wolf then turned their attention towards the quarterback position. According to Wolf, “I believe that the one thing you need to succeed in professional football, what you need most is a quarterback. If you don’t have a quarterback, you can’t win.” In 1991, the Packers had three quarterbacks on the roster: Don Majkowski, Mike Tomczak and Blair Kiel. None had the talent or leadership necessary to deliver a championship to Green Bay. Wolf remembered the 1991 NFL draft with the New York Jets and the quarterback they almost selected: a guy out of Southern Mississippi named Brett Favre. “He was the highest rated player on our board,” recalled Wolf. “Dick Steinberg had made a deal with the Cardinals to move up in front of Atlanta. The Jets would have taken Favre, but when the second round came around, the Cardinals said that the player they wanted was there and that they were not going to make the deal.” The Cardinals selected Mike D. Jones, a defensive end out of North Carolina State. The Falcons proceeded to take Brett Favre with the 33rd pick in the draft, followed by the Jets taking Louisville quarterback Browning Nagle.

Now that Wolf was in Green Bay, he still had his eyes on Favre. The first game the Packers played after Wolf was hired was against the Atlanta Falcons. According to Wolf, “One of my good friends was Ken Herock [vice-president of player personnel with the Falcons]. He told me when I was walking into the stadium that if I wanted to see Brett Favre throw, that I would have to look at him now, because when the team came out, they wouldn’t let him throw. Right away, I knew that I could get this quarterback.”

Wolf then went to the Packers’ executive committee to plead his case for Favre. According to Wolf, once Bob Harlan approved of the deal, it was done, but Harlan suggested that Wolf speak

to the executive committee for the sake of protocol. “I started talking and explained to the people in the room what I thought this person would mean to our franchise, comparing him to some of the former greats to play for the Packers. In the end though, he was a much better player than even I thought he would be.”

Wolf recalled, “I think the biggest thing was that he came on the field with his team, it tilted in his team’s favor. Everything about him from a quarterback standpoint, he was mechanically sound. He got himself into some bad positions with his feet, but mechanically, when he threw the ball, he was perfect. Plus, he had a cannon of an arm. He could get out of trouble. Fierce competitor. I think the big thing was a proven winner. He played on a mediocre college team and he upset some really good football teams and the reason why they did was because of Brett Favre.”

There was a problem, however. When Favre went for his physical examination before joining the Packers, the doctor detected avascular necrosis in his hip, a degenerative bone condition where cells within bones die due to a lack of blood supply. The doctor was going to fail Favre, but the Packers had another doctor on staff. According to Wolf, “At that particular time, our doctors were by committee. We had a doctor in Milwaukee and a doctor in Green Bay. After that, we just ended up with the doctor in Green Bay. That is a true story. He did fail the physical. The orthopedist in Green Bay had not examined him, but then he examined him and said that he could play a minimum of about four to five years. That is all I needed to hear.”

Wolf had his quarterback.

Heading into the 1992 season, Brett Favre was the backup quarterback to Don Majkowski. However, it was not long before he saw action. In the second game of the season, the Packers were in Tampa Bay to play the Buccaneers. With a 17-0 Tampa Bay lead, Packers coach Mike Holmgren benched Majkowski in favor of Favre. His first pass was deflected back to Favre, where he was tackled for a seven-yard loss. The Packers lost the game 31-3. The following week, Majkowski regained his starting role against the Cincinnati Bengals, but a torn ligament forced him out of the game. Favre had another shot to redeem his poor play from the previous week, but fumbled four times. It was not the start that the Packers wanted for their future franchise quarterback. However, late in the game, Favre started to show flashes of why Wolf wanted him in Green Bay. With 13 seconds left in the contest, Favre capped a 92-yard drive with a 35-yard pass to Kitrick Taylor to give the Packers a 24-23 victory. Overall, he went 22 of 39 for 289 yards and two touchdowns in the win. With Majkowski out for at least four weeks with his injury, it was Favre’s team. He never relinquished his starting role.

The Packers lost four of their next six games, but followed that with a six-game winning streak to guarantee themselves a winning season; only the second in twenty years. They finished the season with a 27-7 loss to the Minnesota Vikings and a 9-7 record. The Packers were improving, but there was a lot of work to do to build the team into a champion.

After the 1992 season, the Packers focused their efforts on defense, targeting a big-name free agent in Reggie White. According to Wolf, “We realized that we needed a great player on our defense. Here he was: Reggie White. The two best free agent players in the game were Reggie White and Deion Sanders. There was no way that Deion Sanders was going to come to Green

Bay. I didn't think that there was anyone who thought that Reggie White would come to Green Bay, either. We put a massive recruiting job on Reggie White. Ray Rhodes did a fabulous job with that. Mike Reinfeldt did a great job engineering the financial thing with his agent and we were able to pull it off. I think that we were able to pull it off because we were just us. He came to Green Bay and got picked up in an SUV, not a limousine. He was taken to a Red Lobster to have catfish. He saw us as we are. I believe that sold him. Also, the fact that he was paid all that money helped too. I think the money had more to do with it than anything."

The Packers continued to improve. In 1993, they again had a 9-7 record and placed second in their division, but made the playoffs for the first time since 1982. They traveled to Detroit and beat the Lions 28-24, but lost 27-17 to the Cowboys in Dallas the following week. The 1994 season was a mirror of 1993, as the Packers went 9-7 and placed second in the division, beat the Lions in the wildcard playoffs and lost to the Dallas Cowboys in the divisional round of the playoffs. In 1995, the Packers went 11-5 to claim their first divisional title since 1982. With wins over Atlanta and San Francisco in the playoffs, Green Bay traveled to Dallas for the NFL Championship game. As was the case with the previous two contests with the Cowboys in the playoffs, Dallas won the game and the Packers' season was over. According to Ron Wolf, "It was one of those things. You see this from time to time in football. It didn't matter who the quarterback was. They had Aikman. They lost Aikman and they put Garrett in. They could have put three players and eight helmets out there and we would have still found a way to lose. When we played in Dallas, we were just not a good artificial turf team. I think that got into our heads. They had our number. I always had this thing that if we were to lose, we would switch hotels. We lost eight consecutive times down there. We were running out of hotels."

The Packers were close, but trouble presented itself heading into the 1996 season. Their two-time Pro Bowl quarterback and 1995 Associated Press Most Valuable Player (MVP) Brett Favre was addicted to pain killers.

On November 15, 1992, Brett Favre had his shoulder separated when he was sacked by future teammate Reggie White. After the game, he took his first Vicodin. Over the next few seasons, Favre increased his dosage to where he was taking over ten pills a day. He hit rock bottom when he suffered a seizure in February 1996 when he was in the hospital to have bone chips removed from his ankle. The NFL stepped in and demanded that he attend a rehabilitation program or be fined four-weeks pay. On May 14, 1996, Brett Favre addressed the media to acknowledge his addiction and checked into the Menninger Clinic to start his treatment. On June 28, he completed the program and returned to the Packers.

Green Bay was favored to win the Super Bowl, but questions remained as to whether Brett Favre would be able to come back from his rehabilitation and regain his MVP form from the previous year. Those questions were put to rest when the Packers opened their season by soundly beating the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. Tampa head coach Tony Dungy's first game saw his team turn the ball over six times en route to a 34-3 drubbing at the hands of their division rival. Favre completed 20 of 27 passes for 247 yards and four touchdowns. It was the fifth time in eight starts that Favre had thrown for at least three touchdowns in a game. Buccaneer quarterback Trent Dilfer struggled, completing 13 of 30 passes for 123 yards and four interceptions. The Tampa Bay offense was only able to generate 176 total yards, compared to the 406 amassed by the

Packers. It was not the debut that Tony Dungy wanted, but it was exactly what the Packers needed heading into their game with the Philadelphia Eagles.

Green Bay was looking to exact a little revenge against Philadelphia. Former Packer defensive coordinator Ray Rhodes was now the head man with the Eagles. He stole assistant coach Jon Gruden and made him the offensive coordinator. With former Packer coaches controlling both the offense and defense, the Packers knew what to expect. According to Packer tight end Keith Jackson, "You look at them and go, 'Hey, that's our play! Hey, that's our play, too! There are so many similarities.'" However, having the same plays and executing those plays are two different things. The Eagles started their first drive with a pass to receiver Chris T. Jones, but lost possession to Packer cornerback Doug Evans. This was the first of four takeaways on the first half, giving Green Bay an average starting position of their 41-yard line. Even though Favre overthrew his first five passes, he finished the game going 17 for 31 for 261 yards and three touchdowns. This game him seven touchdowns for the season with no interceptions. After the 39-13 loss, Rhodes commented, "We were physically dominated on both sides of the ball tonight...It hurts to get beat like that."

The Packers were 2-0 for the season and both side of the ball were on fire. The offense outscored their opponents 73-16. The defense had ten takeaways, two rushing touchdowns allowed and no passing touchdowns allowed. It was still early in the season and people wondered of they could keep the momentum going. Packer safety LeRoy Butler commented, "People are wondering how we're going to react to close games and we don't want to know." Enter the San Diego Chargers.

Favre had his first multiple interception day in ten games against the Chargers, but they were still able to generate offense. Leading 28-3 after three quarters of play, the Packers thought they were well on their way to victory. The Chargers felt differently. Stan Humphries completed six straight passes, including a touchdown pass to bring the score to 28-10. According to Butler, "The momentum was swinging a little bit toward the Chargers." The Packers drove, but running back Edgar Bennett fumbled and lost possession – his first since November 22, 1992. According to Charger head coach Bobby Ross, "If we can get points on the board at this point, its 28-17 and there was still better than seven minutes to go." San Diego drove to the Packer twelve-yard line, but a pass to Terrell Fletcher was intercepted by LeRoy Butler, who returned it 90 yards for a touchdown. Ninety seconds later, Desmond Howard returned a punt 65 yards for another score to end the game at 42-10.

The Packers were 3-0 for the first time since 1982. Another impressive offensive game was also highlighted by a strong defensive performance. Green Bay held San Diego to 141 total yards with only one passing touchdown allowed.

The Minnesota Vikings were projected to be no better than fourth in their division in 1996. Heading into their game against the Packers, they were undefeated and looking for their fifth straight home win over Green Bay.

The Vikings led 17-7 early in the third quarter and Green Bay looked to come back. Favre threw a five-yard pass to Don Beebe, who broke through the Minnesota defense and streaked for an 80-yard touchdown. The defense stepped up. Green Bay linebacker George Koonce intercepted a Warren Moon pass and ran it back 75-yards for a touchdown. In under a quarter of play, the

Packers tacked on 14 points to take a 21-17 lead into the final period. However, a 37-yard run by Robert Smith allowed Minnesota to regain the lead and seal the victory. Two Minnesota field goals late in the game gave the Vikings a 30-21 win to remain unbeaten.

The Packers did not play well. Favre was sacked seven times with two forced fumbles. Green Bay wide receiver Robert Brooks summed it up; “You just can’t be careless with the ball. It doesn’t matter how potent your offense is. It doesn’t matter how tough your defense is if you don’t take care of the ball.”

Even with only eight first downs and 217 total yards, the Packers were still optimistic. According to defensive end Sean Jones, “We’re still the best team in the league. I don’t care what anybody says. I am not worried about it. We’ll see how it all shakes out in the end.”

The Packers continued their road trip with a game in Seattle to take on the Seahawks. Seattle was coming off their first win of the season; beating the winless Tampa Bay Buccaneers 17-13. Green Bay needed to take advantage and prove that Sean Jones was correct in that the Packers were the best team in the league.

Both the offense and defense were in rhythm. Favre went 20 of 34 for 209 yards with four touchdowns and no interceptions. But it was the defense that carried the game. They had five takeaways, including four interceptions of Seattle quarterback Rick Mirer. This brought their total to 22 takeaways for the season with a +13 takeaway/giveaway ratio. Four of the defenses five takeaways directly led to scores, totaling 24 points. Green Bay defensive tackle Santana Dotson, who recovered a fumble in the game, summed it up; “This was a game for the defense. This is what you need to do when you play on the road.”

Two scores in the final 35 seconds of the first half gave the Packers all the momentum they needed to easily beat their division rival Chicago Bears. Tight end Keith Jackson caught a two-yard pass from Favre with just over half-a-minute remaining in the second quarter. On the next drive, Packer cornerback Doug Evans intercepted a pass, leaving only 20 seconds on the clock. Favre threw a ‘Hail Mary’ pass to Antonio Freeman, who brought it down for the score and a 20-3 halftime lead. Freeman finished the day with seven receptions for 146 yards and two touchdowns. In a desperation move, the Bears resorted to trickery to try and get back in the game. Punter Todd Sauerbrun faked a kick and passed to Bobby Engram. Green Bay backup middle linebacker and former Bear Ron Cox commented, “I think the worst thing is when you got to run trick plays just to try to stay in the game. Right there, that makes you know that something’s wrong.” The Packers took the easy 37-6 victory to go 5-1 on the season, while the Bears fell to 2-4.

Robert Brooks, wide receiver for the Packers, suffered a season-ending knee injury on the first play from scrimmage against the San Francisco 49ers. He was replaced by Don Beebe, who subsequently caught eleven passes for 220 yards and a touchdown. But the Packers needed record performances from their players to keep up with the 49ers. Green Bay was down 17-6 at halftime. In the third quarter, Favre connected with Don Beebe on a 59-yard score. The pass to Edgar Bennett was good for the two-point conversion and the Packers were back in it 17-14. A 35-yard field goal by Chris Jacke tied the score in the fourth quarter.



With 2:13 left on the clock, 49er cornerback Marquez Pope intercepted Favre on the Green Bay 24-yard line. This led to a 28-yard field goal by Jeff Wilkins to give San Francisco a 20-17 lead. Green Bay started the final drive with 1:42 left in regulation. Favre methodically drove to the San Francisco 13-yard line, but three straight incomplete passes forced the Jacke field goal to tie the game to send it into overtime. The Packers won on a 53-yard field goal by Jacke, which was the longest field goal in overtime history. Jacke also tied a Packer record with five field goals in the game. Brett Favre threw a club record 61 passes in the 23-20 overtime victory.

A much needed win for the Packers as they headed into their bye week.

The injury bug struck again during the game against the Tampa Bay Buccaneers following the bye. Antonio Freeman was running a slant route near the goal line on their second offensive series. Free safety Melvin Johnson hit Freeman, breaking his forearm. Combine that with the Robert Brooks injury earlier in the year, and the receiving corps was decimated. Don Beebe, Desmond Howard and Derrick Mayes were left to fill the void. Freeman's loss hurt the Packers as they put up their worst offensive performance of the season to date. According to Brett Favre, "It was kind of a ho-hum day on offense. That's kind of frustrating to me because I expect us to go out and score 30 points." Favre was held without a touchdown pass for the first time since November 5, 1995. With all of the negatives in the game, the Packers still won 13-7 for their eleventh straight home victory.

Green Bay could ill-afford to have any receivers get hurt while they are waiting for Antonio Freeman to return. During their next game against Detroit, Don Beebe took two massive hits in the first half. Holmgren recalled, "I was concerned. The way our luck's been going with our wide receivers." Fortunately, Terry Mickens, who had been sidelined all season due to an ankle sprain, was able to suit up and play...and he played well. Mickens finished the game with seven catches for 52 yards and two touchdowns. According to Mickens, "I didn't care if I started or just got out there on special teams. I just wanted to play again." While Green Bay's offense clicked, their defense was not up to par. Detroit running back Barry Sanders rushed for 152 yards on 20 carries. That was the first time Sanders ran over 100 yards in eight games, and he had 105 yards by halftime against the Packers. According to Holmgren, "I expect better things from our defense. Of course, Barry Sanders can make any defense look average." However, they did hold him to 47 yards in the second half of the game.

Green Bay took a 14-10 halftime lead and score twice in the third quarter to jump out to a 28-10 lead heading into the fourth quarter. Detroit scored late in the final period, but ran out of time and the Packers took a 28-18 win to improve to 8-1 on the season. Detroit fell to 4-5.

Green Bay started a three-game road trip with a game in Kansas City against the 6-3 Chiefs, and the defense continued to struggle. On the first play from scrimmage, Kansas City connected on a 69-yard pass on their way to racking up 383 total yards, of which 182 were rushing yards. Kansas City backup running back Greg Hill ran for 94 of those yards on 14 carries, scoring three touchdowns. According to Hill, "I never felt like I had anything to prove. All I needed was an opportunity."

It wasn't until the third quarter before the Packers found the endzone. Favre connected with Don Beebe on a 25-yard pass and a late touchdown by Favre to Derrick Mayes brought Green Bay to

a 27-20 deficit. The ensuing onside kick was recovered by Kansas City, however, and they ran out the clock. According to Holmgren, “We were too sloppy to beat a team as good as Kansas City. We didn’t deserve to win this one.” That loss ended Green Bay’s five-game winning streak.

At 8-2 for the season, Green Bay still was leading the NFC, but by a slim margin. San Francisco, Philadelphia and Washington were all 7-3, with Dallas and Carolina at 6-4.

Dallas had beaten the Packers the four previous times they met in the regular season and had their number, especially in Dallas. Green Bay needed to get things back on track heading into their Monday night showdown in the Lone Star state.

With Robert Brooks, Antonio Freeman and now tight end Mark Chmura on the sidelines recovering from injuries, Dallas was able to apply pressure to Favre. According to Dallas head coach Barry Switzer, “We chased Favre all over the field. We never gave him a chance to get in synch.” Green Bay’s offense never got past the Dallas 45-yard line in the first half, converting only four first downs.

Dallas’ offense could not find the endzone, either. They scored five field goals on their first five possessions. However, it was their seventh and last field goal that created controversy. With 20 seconds left in the game and an 18-6 lead, the Cowboys lined up to kick for another three points. The Packers were upset at Dallas’ attempt to add points when they clearly had the game won. Why did Dallas kick? A seventh field goal by Chris Boniol would tie an NFL record for most field goals in a single game. Switzer defended his decision, “If our kicking coach hadn’t told me he could set an NFL record, we wouldn’t have done it.” He continued, “I wouldn’t deny your son, my son, anyone’s son a chance to make an NFL record.” The kick gave the Cowboys a 21-6 victory and a 7-4 record for the season and a second place tie with the Philadelphia Eagles in the division. The Packers fell to 8-3, only two games ahead of their closest division rival in Minnesota.

The Packer offense was struggling and needed help. Enter Andre Rison. Ron Wolf recalled, “Jacksonville had put Andre Rison on waivers. I remember sitting there and talking with Mike Holmgren and Sherm Lewis about it before the game that we will claim Rison because we were losing receivers left and right. We claim him and he came in and made a big difference.”

Down 9-3 at halftime against the St. Louis Rams, the Green Bay defense and special teams decided to arrive. Within the first minute of the third quarter, cornerback Doug Evans intercepted a Tony Banks pass and returned it 32 Yards for a touchdown. This was the first interception in three games for the Packers. According to defensive end Reggie White, “At halftime, we said, let’s stop talking and go and do it. Doug came out and made the big play that turned the game around.” Evans added, “The interception got everybody fired up. The big deal was putting the team on the board putting the team ahead.” Green Bay led 10-9. Two more touchdown passes by Brett Favre gave the Packers a 24-9 victory and a 9-3 record to tie them with San Francisco for the lead in the conference. With his two touchdown passes in the game, Brett Favre became only the second player to have three seasons with 30 or more touchdowns. Dan Marino had four.

A much needed win for the Packers. The offense and defense finally clicked in the second half. Wide receiver Antonio Freeman had recovered enough from his broken forearm to return to the

field for Green Bay's game against the Chicago Bears. The Packers only needed one win in their last three games to clinch their division.

Chicago scored first on a 15-yard pass from Dave Kreig to Bobby Engram. Green Bay countered late in the second quarter with 19-yard pass from Favre to tight end Keith Jackson to tie the game. According to head coach Mike Holgren, "Getting that touchdown late in the half was very big for us. It made it 0-0 again, basically. It jump started us for the second half."

Desmond Howard returned a punt for 75 yards to put the Packers up 14-7 in the third quarter. Two Green Bay touchdowns later and the Packers were leading 28-10 with 5:39 remaining in the game. A late touchdown by the Bears put the final score at 28-17 for the Packer win to clinch the division title. Antonio Freeman caught ten passes for 156 yards in his return.

With the division wrapped up, the Packers set their sight on home-field advantage throughout the playoffs. But they needed to go through two tough opponents within their last three games. The first was the Denver Broncos, who were on a nine-game winning streak. They had the NFL's leading rusher in Terrell Davis and future Hall of Fame quarterback John Elway. The Packers caught a break, however. Denver had clinched a playoff berth the previous week when they beat the Seattle Seahawks 34-7 and John Elway had injured his hamstring and sat out of the game against Green Bay. In for Elway: Bill Musgrave, a quarterback who had thrown a total of twelve passes heading into the 1996 season.

The Packers still needed to prove that their offensive and defensive problems were fixed. That was accomplished in the 41-6 rout of the Broncos. Receiver Antonio Freeman had a career high 175 yards on nine receptions and tight end Mark Chmura returned from his torn left arch to catch four passes for 70 yards. Favre commented on Freeman's return; "I think that we all can see that it's definitely enhanced our offense again having him back. Even with a bum arm, with a cast, he's done a great job." Freeman added, "I look back at breaking my arm as a blessing in disguise. It gave me a chance to sit back and criticize myself a little without having to worry about my confidence falling. I really have to concentrate, because it's an obstacle having the cast."

The defense also stepped up by holding Terrell Davis to 54 yards on 14 carries and held the Bronco offense to zero first downs in the third quarter. Denver head coach Mike Shanahan commented, "We were ineffective in all areas, not just the running game. The passing game – anytime you get 175 yards, and that is by far our worst production of the year, you're disappointed."

There was very little offense in the first half of the game with the Detroit Lions. The highlight was a 92-yard punt return for a touchdown by Desmond Howard – his third of the year. The 51-yard punt was caught by Howard at the Green Bay eight-yard line. He ran toward the Packer sideline, cut back, beat punter Mark Royals and sprinted into the endzone. Detroit head coach Wayne Fontes commented, "That hurt us. When he broke the first one for six, that gave them field position. That hurts you." With four sacks and only 78 yards from running back Barry Sanders, the Lions lost their eighth of nine games. The 31-3 victory put the Packers in good shape at 12-3 for the season. A win in their final game against Minnesota and Green Bay would host games throughout the playoffs.

The score was tied 10-10 at halftime with the Vikings. Two touchdowns from Favre in the third quarter and another in the fourth allowed 28 unanswered points for the Packers on their way to a 38-10 victory.

Brett Favre was sacked seven times in his previous meeting with the Vikings. To counteract that, the Packers focused on their running game. Dorsey Levens ran for 73 yards and a touchdown on eleven carries, and Edgar Bennett added 109 yards and a touchdown on 18 carries to help the team generate 233 yards on the ground. This was in contrast to the 212 yards passing, the first time in 46 games that the Packers ran for more yards than they passed. Favre commented, "I'd love to throw it 40 or 50 times, I say that all the time, but when you can run the ball that well, it really helps." Head coach Mike Holmgren added, "I think as the elements get worse, some things become very difficult to do... We're going to need to be able to run the ball in the playoffs."

It was a record-setting season for Green Bay. The Packers were the first team since the 1972 Miami Dolphins to lead the league in scoring (456 points) and in defensive points allowed (210 points). Brett Favre beat his touchdown record of 38 by throwing 39 touchdowns. They had the NFL's top ranked defense, the first time Green Bay accomplished that since 1967. They were the first team to allow less than 20 touchdowns since the 16-game schedule had been installed in 1978. The 13-3 record gave the Packers the most regular season wins since 1962. Desmond Howard set an NFL single season record for return yards with 878. Tight end Keith Jackson summed it up; "I have been on a lot of great teams. I have never been on a team that collectively played this great."

But the Packers still had work to do. They had clinched home-field advantage throughout the playoffs for the first time in 30 years. Defensive end Reggie White was quick to put things in perspective; "We're not through yet. We get three more under our belt, we can celebrate for the rest of our lives."

The first playoff game was against San Francisco. The 49ers beat the Philadelphia Eagles 14-0 in the first week of the playoffs, but quarterback Steve Young broke two ribs in the win. That hurt the 49ers as Young was only able to play a few series in the first quarter against the Packers before being replaced by Elvis Grbac. According to Young, "I took a myriad of (painkiller) shots, but I had no real zip on the ball. After a couple of series, I knew we would have to move the ball down the field and I couldn't do it."

Green Bay's offense also struggled, only generating nine yards of total offense in the first quarter. However, they did not need offense as they had Desmond Howard. He returned a punt for a 71-yard touchdown for the first points of the game. After a fair catch on the second punt, he returned one 46 yards on his third punt to set up a 4-yard pass to Andre Rison for a 14-point Packer lead. San Francisco head coach George Seifert commented, "We were concerned with Desmond Howard, but through we could contain him. But he's a heck of a player and popped big plays for them all season. That's one of the reasons they're in the position they're in."

But Howard would be most remembered for what happened after halftime. With a 17-10 lead, the Packers received the ball to start the third quarter. But Howard was still in the locker room. Howard explained, "I was changing my uniform at halftime, and I didn't know that time was running out. When I was coming through the tunnel, I saw that the ball was kicked off. That

made my heart skip a beat.” Antonio Freeman saw that there were only ten men on the field and quickly sprinted next to return man Don Beebe. Head coach Mike Holmgren expanded, “Andre went out there to make a play. Desmond wasn’t even on the field...I was very angry.” The kick sailed toward Beebe and then rolled past him. Rison sprinted toward the ball, but 49er Steve Israel got there first giving possession to San Francisco at the Green Bay four-yard line. That set up a score to decrease the Packer lead to 21-14. But the anemic offense of the 49ers was unable to generate additional scores, while Green Bay tacked on two touchdowns for the 35-14 win and a trip to the Conference Championship against the Carolina Panthers.

The Panther were in only their second year as an expansion franchise. No other team had won a division title in only its second year.

Carolina put the first points on the board when linebacker Sam Mills intercepted Favre and returned it to the Green Bay two-yard line. That set up a Kerry Collins pass to Howard Griffith for the score and a 7-0 lead. Green Bay countered when running back Dorsey Levens dove into the endzone to catch the tying touchdown. After a John Kasey field goal, Green Bay racked up two scores within the final 48 seconds of the second quarter to take a 17-10 lead into halftime. In the third quarter, Green Bay pulled away. After an exchange of field goals, Levens caught a screen pass and ran it 66 yards to set up a four-yard scoring run for Edgar Bennett. Green Bay tacked on a field goal in the fourth quarter to take the 30-13 win.

The Packers were the champions of the National Football Conference and were on their way to their first Super Bowl appearance since the Lombardi days. General manager Ron Wolf recalled, “To be able to stand there and to acknowledge that you are the champions of the National Football Conference in Lambeau Field was unbelievable. That is the greatest experience I have had professionally.”

Their opponent was the New England Patriots. That was the first Super Bowl appearance for the Patriots since their 46-10 loss to the Chicago Bears in 1985. They started 0-2 to begin the 1996 season, but finished 11-5 to capture the AFC East division and a first-round bye in the playoffs. In a twist of irony, the Patriots beat the Jacksonville Jaguars, who like the Carolina Panthers, were also in their second year of existence.

Typically known for starting slow, the Packers bucked the trend and got on the board quickly. Desmond Howard returned the kickoff 32 yards to set up Green Bay’s first offensive series. On the second play, Brett Favre audibled out of the called play and tossed a 54-yard scoring strike to receiver Andre Rison. After the game, Favre recalled, “There were some coverages we had seen on film. We didn’t think it would happen that early in the game, but they showed it.” Favre elaborated, “The safeties came up tight to cover our tight ends so I knew we would have a safety middle. Andre put him on the post and he’ll win most of those battles.”

Cornerback Doug Evans intercepted Drew Bledsoe on the Patriots’ first series, setting up a Chris Jacke 37-yard field goal and a 10-0 lead. However, that did not deter New England, as they came back with two straight touchdowns to take a 14-10 lead at the end of the first quarter.

Running Back Curtis Martin commented, “Green Bay is too good of a team for you to ever think that you have them down...We made the mistake of letting them get the momentum back.” In

the second quarter, Favre connected with Antonio Freeman on an 81-yard pass. Two scores later, the Packers entered halftime with a 27-10 lead.

Late in the third quarter, Curtis Martin's 18-yard run cut the Packer lead to 27-21, but Desmond Howard broke the back of the Patriots with a 99-yard kickoff return for a touchdown. New England defensive end Willie McGinest recalled, "We had them on their heels. We had the momentum, and Howard just came out and ran the ball back, and it just stuck a knife in the middle of our whole team."

With no scoring in the fourth quarter, the Packers won the game 35-21 to capture their first championship since 1967 and their twelfth title overall. General manager Ron Wolf summed it up; "None of this would happen without the great work of everyone in the operation. Single minded. Single purpose. The football side of it I am talking about. We were able to bring the Packers back. I am very proud of that. I am proud of all the people that helped make it happen. Mike Holmgren did such a marvelous job hiring people. He had about five or six people on his staff that became head coaches in the National Football League. It was like a Greyhound bus terminal there in the beginning. People coming and going. Once number four [Brett Favre] got in there, it all changed. It changed for the better."

Heading into the 1997 season, the Packers were a little too confident. According to Wolf, "Sometimes you think that you are a little better than you really are. We made a couple of dumb personnel moves. We were good enough to get back into that game, but we played the second half without most of our defensive line. That is an area where I should have been stronger. You win and sometimes you think that you can overcome. You can't overcome the leadership. We were lacking a little bit of leadership in '97." Green Bay lost the Super Bowl 31-24 to the Denver Broncos, giving John Elway his first and only Super Bowl victory.

After the 1998 season, head coach Mike Holmgren resigned from the Green Bay Packers to take a job as head coach/executive vice-president/general manager of the Seattle Seahawks. Holmgren wanted to do more than coaching. He wanted to manage a team. According to Wolf, "Who could blame him? He is so bright. A lot of his contemporaries were getting those types of positions and he was certainly as well qualified, if not more, than they were so it was easy to see that he would want to branch out." Wolf added, "I talked to Bob Harlan long and hard about it that if you would rather have Mike than me, you could offer him the general manager and keep him. They did not want that type of relationship. They did not want a coach/general manager type of thing. They had been through that a lot. It didn't work."

The Packers needed a new head coach and Wolf wanted a man with previous head coaching experience. "I put blinders on during the interview process. That is something you should never do. I determined that in order to replace Mike Holmgren, I needed a veteran guy. I had a person by the name of Andy Reid on the staff of Green Bay that wanted the job. Because I put those blinders on, I overlooked him and what a mistake," recalled Wolf.

Ray Rhodes was hired to succeed Holmgren. Rhodes had been the defensive coordinator under Holmgren from 1992-1993, but had three years of head coaching experience with the Philadelphia Eagles. According to Wolf, "He was a veteran coach. He had done a really good job in Philadelphia. He had been replaced, but having an opportunity to watch him work with the

Packers for three years, he was all football. I sold myself that he would be the guy. We started out pretty well, but I could see there at the end that it just wasn't working the way that it needed to work. It is a terrible situation when you realize that you made a mistake. Suddenly, you are affecting lot of people's lives, but the object is to get it right. You have an obligation to the community and to the organization." Rhodes only lasted one year in Green Bay, going 8-8 and missing the playoffs. He was replaced by Mike Sherman.

Sherman coached the team for six years, amassing a 57-39 record and three divisional championships, but the Packers were never able to advance past the divisional round of the playoffs.

Ron Wolf retired from the Green Bay Packers in June of 2001. "The light went out. It is like blowing a candle out," recalled Wolf. "Suddenly, I couldn't do it any more. I couldn't work the way I was accustomed to working. I couldn't put forth the effort I had before. I was kidding myself. I didn't think that it would be fair to the Packers for me to continue." Mike Sherman Assumed the role of general manager when Wolf retired.

How do the 1996 Green Bay Packers stack up historically? They led the league in scoring that year with 496 points, but it was their defense that stood out. They led the league in points allowed with 210 and had allowed only 19 touchdowns the entire year. That was better than the 1985 Chicago Bears, who most consider to be one of the best defenses of all time. According to Wolf, "I think that we would be up there for that single year. If we had won two, that would be a little different, but we didn't. We have nobody but ourselves to blame for that. Bad performance."

The Green Bay Packers have won more titles than any other team in NFL history – twelve. Ron Wolf reflected on Green Bay and its long football tradition; "Suddenly, you walk into that building and you are struck by it. All of the championships. All of the names. You walk out into Lambeau Field and you see all of the names there. You think 'Holy Smokes, look at this. This is incredible.' The real people that made the game so tremendous. To me, Green Bay is the Citadel of pro football. That's where it started, right there. Curly Lambeau, Johnny Blood, Arnie Herber. And then you carry it on with the six championship teams that Lambeau had. The really great players like Cal Hubbard. Cecil Isbell, who for some reason is not in the Hall of Fame, which is unbelievable. You have got all of these people, and then you take the Lombardi era and you look at those names up there. You hear those names and you automatically know who they are and what they were. They were Green Bay Packers. Hornung, Starr, Taylor. You can go on Willie Davis, Ray Nitschke. My goodness. Suddenly, that hits you. When you walk in the halls at that time, they had the banners hanging for the championships. Wow. What I used to do, when I started interviewing coaches, I would get them at the airport and take them down to City Stadium, which is still there and still used for high school football. I would show them where it all started. Right there at City Stadium in downtown Green Bay. And then you come to present-day Lambeau Field, which they've redone. It's still a magical place."

They Packers were champions because they installed a winning attitude throughout the entire organization. They were also willing to take risks. They picked up Brett Favre, who saw little playing time in Atlanta. He was known to be a gunslinger and tough to manage, but Holmgren was able to get the best out of him. They were willing to spend the money to get prized free

agent Reggie White. They picked up Desmond Howard, who had little success while with the Washington Redskins and Jacksonville Jaguars, and turned him to a legitimate kick and punt return specialist. Finally, they picked Andre Rison, a receiver with an attitude who was on his fifth team in eight seasons and his second of the year. Rison filled a void with the injuries to the Packer receiving corps. Wolf and Holmgren were willing to do what was necessary to build a championship team, and their efforts yielded a Lombardi Trophy.

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[1] The Cleveland Browns won four-straight championships in the All-America Football Conference from 1946 through 1949. They continued their success by winning the NFL championship in 1950 to give them five straight league championships.

[2] Lambeau originally wanted to call his team the Blues in order to differentiate his new team from the Packers, but the name never took hold.

[3] The 1936 version of the Seven Blocks of Granite are considered the most famous. The line consisted of Leo Paquin, Johnny Druze, Alex Wojciechowicz, Ed Franco, Al Babartsky, Natty Pierce and Vince Lombardi.