

# Cheeseheads, Tailgating, and the Lambeau Leap: The Green Bay Packers and Wisconsin Folklife

I have been a fan of the Green Bay Packers all my life. When I was growing up in Milwaukee during the late '50s and early '60s, my brothers and I could hardly wait for Sunday afternoon telecasts of Packers games to end so that we could rush outside to imitate the heroics of Paul Hornung and Jim Taylor, Bart Starr and Ray Nitschke.

Throughout high school, I joined millions of other Wisconsin residents in cheering the team on to several NFL championships during the "Glory Years" under legendary head coach Vince Lombardi. As a college freshman, I picked the lock of my proctor's door to watch "The Pack" trounce the Kansas City Chiefs in Super Bowl I. The following year, I viewed the Packers' Super Bowl II victory over the Oakland Raiders on an ancient black-and-white television that made 250-pound linemen look as tall and thin as the Celtics' front court.

Little did I know then that almost 30 years would pass before the Packers would return to the Super Bowl, that a generation of Packer fans would have to suffer through humiliating losses to the likes of the Chicago Bears and the hated Dallas Cowboys before reaching the pinnacle again, that my own son would be a senior in college before the Green and Gold would reclaim the Lombardi Trophy. Yet, throughout this long drought, during which I moved to

Philadelphia, Detroit, and Washington, D.C., before returning to Wisconsin in 1985, I remained a committed Packers fan — and so did literally millions of others. Why such loyalty? Why such dedication and commitment? The answers to these questions lie, I think, in the success of the Green Bay Packers in appealing to Wisconsin's appreciation for tradition, community, and celebration.

When it comes to professional athletics in Wisconsin, the Green Bay Packers embody tradition. For more than 75 years, half the history of the state itself, the Packers have been a vital part of Wisconsin life. While other professional sports franchises found their way to Milwaukee, neither the Braves, their successors the Brewers, nor the Bucks — despite world championships in their respective sports — have ever commanded the same fan support. Dedication and commitment among fans take time to grow and develop, identification with a team and pride in association require stability as much as success. Each new game, each new season in the Packers'

## Robert T. Teske

long and celebrated history has enhanced the aura of tradition surrounding the team, supported the creation of popular heroes which still capture the imagination of football enthusiasts everywhere, and continued to generate a rich body of "Packerlore."

As important as tradition in winning a place for the Packers in the hearts of Wisconsin fans is the team's understanding of, and appreciation for, its community. As the only franchise in the United States which is publicly owned, the Packers enjoy a unique affiliation with the smallest market in professional sports. During a recent public offering, thousands of Packer fans snapped up stock in the organization — despite the fact that the \$200 shares will never appreciate in value. People simply wanted to be able to say they owned a part of the team. Following the Packers' 1997 conference championship victory over the Carolina Panthers, thousands of fans paid \$10 each for pieces of "frozen tundra" stripped from Lambeau Field. The fact that all the proceeds from the sale of the turf were donated by the Packers to local charities further enhanced the organization's ties to the community.

Other symbols of the Packers' connection to their hometown are somewhat less quantifiable, but no less important. Take, for example, the now-famous "Lambeau leap." By hurling himself headlong into the stands after scoring a touchdown, each jubilant Packer shares his moment of triumph with the community which cheers him on every week. The fact that this form of end-zone celebration has never drawn a penalty flag seems to suggest that even officials recognize it as a sign of solidarity with football's most dedicated fans.





*"St. Vince" and "Title Towel Man" are among the characters tailgating at Lambeau Field in Green Bay. Photo by Andy Kraushaar*

The community which cheers the Green Bay Packers actually extends throughout Wisconsin and well beyond. The Packers organization reserves tickets for Milwaukee season-ticket holders at designated games each year in Green Bay, thus maintaining intense fan loyalty (and encouraging some of the largest traffic jams imaginable on Sunday mornings along I-43 from Milwaukee to Green Bay). At games in Tampa Bay, many "snowbirds" who have permanently fled Wisconsin's long, hard winters gather with loyal fans who follow the team from Wisconsin to generate a crowd of some 30,000 "Packer backers." Cities like San Francisco and San Diego,

despite having their own professional teams, typically have one or more bars designated as gathering places for area Packer fans. Only the Fighting Irish of Notre Dame also seem to draw the support of fans so widely distributed around the country.

In addition to building a formidable tradition and cultivating the support of a broad-based community, the Green Bay Packers have long been the occasion for, and center of, Wisconsin celebrations. During the last few years, Packer celebrations have expanded to fill virtually every available time slot from the opening of preseason in July till the last second ticks off the clock during the Super Bowl in late January. Schools and businesses reg-

ularly hold "Green and Gold Days" before big games, and merchants offer Packer specials, like a free sack of bagels for every Packer sack. The Archive of Folk Culture at the Library of Congress has received cassette tape recordings documenting over 45 Packer songs and song parodies in a wide variety of styles ranging from polkas to pop (see page 16).

None of these spin-offs, however, can quite compare with the central Packer celebration, the one which engulfs Lambeau Field during every Packer home game. In much the same way that Cheese Days in Monroe give local dairy families a cause to celebrate and Syttende Mai in Stoughton encourages





*It is a tradition for Packers players to borrow bikes from local kids to ride from the locker room to the practice field each day of preseason training camp.*

Photo courtesy Green Bay Area Visitors and Convention Bureau

members of the Norwegian ethnic community to get together, so, too, do Packer games give those attending — and even those watching the game at home — an opportunity to enjoy themselves.

Packer fans typically arrive hours before game time to take part in a form of revelry widely known as tailgating. At the minimum, the pregame celebration usually involves cooking bratwurst on charcoal grills set up in the Lambeau Field parking lot, and washing down the sauerkraut-covered sausages with large quantities of another venerable Wisconsin product, beer. Of late, outlandish costumes have come to complement the ubiquitous “cheeseheads,” inflatable Packer helmets, Packer jerseys, Packer jackets, and green and gold face paint worn by most fans to tailgate parties and Packer games. Among the costumed characters regularly sighted in and around Lambeau these days are the

antlered “Packalope” and the blessed “St. Vince.” Occasionally, the University of Wisconsin Marching Band will add its postgame concert, known as the Fifth Quarter, to the conclusion of a Packer game, thus combining two long-standing state athletic traditions. After the game, more tailgating or a trip to the local tavern to review the highlights may well be in order.

With their victory over the New England Patriots in Super Bowl XXXI, the Green Bay Packers demonstrated that — as bumper stickers had proclaimed hopefully, but prematurely, for years — “The Pack Is Back.” With their second consecutive appearance in football’s grand finale in Super Bowl XXXII, the team has shown that it ranks among the NFL’s best. Whether such good fortune continues for Green Bay or not, the Packers will remain near and dear to the hearts of all Wisconsin residents because of the team’s abiding appreciation for tradition, community, and celebration.

## Suggested Reading

Cameron, Steve. *Brett Favre: Huck Finn Grows Up*.

Indianapolis: Masters Press, 1996.

Favre, Brett. *Favre: For the Record*. New York: Doubleday, 1997.

*Green Bay Packers Yearbook*. Green Bay, 1997.

Kramer, Jerry. *Instant Replay*. New York: World Publishing, 1968.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Distant Replay*. New York: G.P. Putnam, 1985.

Lombardi, Vince. *Run to Daylight*. New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1963.

Schaap, Dick. *Green Bay Replay: The Packers’ Return to Glory*. New York: Avon Books, 1997.

---

*Robert T. Teske is a folklorist and has served for the last ten years as the executive director of the Cedarburg Cultural Center. He is the curator of the traveling exhibition Wisconsin Folk Art: A Sesquicentennial Celebration, which is touring the state during 1998 in conjunction with the Wisconsin Folklife Festival.*

## “Scatter My Ashes”

By John Harmon Shardik

Just let me hear that Lambeau cheer  
To set my spirit free  
Scatter my ashes in Lambeau Field  
That’s where I want to be.

In the fall I count the days ‘til Sunday rolls around,  
Cuz that’s the day the Packers play — the only game in town.  
I haven’t missed a game in years; some say I’ve paid my dues,  
But in my soul I’m green and gold. I’ll be there win or lose.

And when I die, don’t nobody cry  
And no pine box for me.  
Just scatter my ashes in Lambeau Field,  
And I can rest peacefully.

Through the years I’ve shed some tears, I ain’t ashamed to say.  
Through thick and thin, I’ve always been behind them all the way.  
And Lambeau Field is home-sweet-home to die-hard fans like me.  
There’s no place like home, they say, no place I’d rather be. . . .

*Courtesy Hillfield Publishing*