

The Last Hometown Team

“If you see any cops, yell as loud as you can and run like hell.”

Kyle was giving some last minute instructions to us in case we were spotted. The illusion that the six of us were in control of the situation humored me for a brief moment. If any 5-0's as we would say, were to find out what we were up to, they would just have to wait by this pipe. The reason for 5-0's being slang for policemen still eludes me. It's probably from some rap song but I have no idea where from. Could it have been the gibberish we listened to as we drove around aimlessly just before? Who knows? Hip Hop all sounds the same to me but I've somehow convinced my crew that I liked it. People do funny things to try to fit in. That is exactly how I wound up in my current situation.

The pipe was the only way in and the only way out, as far as we knew. That fact didn't seem to bother Joey as he shimmied up the wall and over the edge. The pipe he so effortlessly climbed was about 25 feet high but from where I was standing, it looked like it stretched into the heavens. The steam from Joe's breath formed a cloud at the top only adding to my vision. The thought of getting arrested sent a chill down my spine. It was already chilly enough. I hate December.

“Come on you, puss!” Joey yelled from up top.

“Coming!” I reluctantly yell back.

Every part of my body is telling me this is not a good idea but a little voice in the back of my head reminds me that this is going to make one hell of a story some day. I mount the pipe and begin to climb. The pipe hugged the side of the wall making it very difficult to get my arms around it. Slowly I began my ascent, trying hard not to think of the knobs and such from the

utility boxes below that I could impale myself on should I fall. I smile a little as another thought occurs to me. I can't believe I'm breaking into Lambeau Field.

Lambeau Field and the Packers represent everything that is Green Bay. The team's name itself even suggests our heritage as a blue collar town: Meat Packing. In fact, the team used to be called the Acme Packers before Curly Lambeau and some local businessman bought out the franchise on behalf of Green Bay for \$250 in 1922 (Packers.com). Although the city has diversified its economy quite a bit since those days, we still have a strong presence in the industrial sector as well as in dairy processing. We don't get to wear those embarrassing cheeseheads for nothing, you know. We are also recognized as one of the largest producers of pulp and paper in the world today. I am glad this fact is less well known otherwise we might be wearing giant toilet paper rolls on our heads as well. The blood and sweat that built this city also built historic Lambeau Field which was put up in 1957. The stadium has gone through many cosmetic changes over the years but the original bowl-shape remains intact making Lambeau Field one of the most recognized stadiums in the world. It has to be. It's been in the NFL for 48 consecutive years, over ten years longer than any other stadium. Not bad for a city of only 100,000 people.

"We should have brought flashlights."

I was about to thank my buddy, Adam, for pointing out that painfully obvious fact when I stumbled across another cardboard box. I thought ducking through the barbwire fence and jumping into the concourse area would be the tough part, but I thought wrong. It's ironic that we would still be running into stuff even if we were in the concourse legitimately. Trying to get a brat or go to the bathroom during a game is a nightmare with all the fans clamoring around. Instead

of running into drunken fans, we were running into boxes of who knows what. Man, I wish I had a light.

“I see some light up ahead” someone yelled in the dark.

I think it was Micah. I couldn't see him but I could tell from the clop clop of his Doc Martens in the distance. He wore them everywhere. They were so much cooler than my Airwalks. But at least they were quieter for our stealth mission. I followed the sound and then noticed the light myself. I began to feel a huge rush as I approached the entrance to the field. I wonder if this is how the players felt as they charged out into the stadium. I couldn't imagine them being more pumped up than the six of us were that night. Well, maybe the playoffs are a little different.

Game day at Lambeau field is an experience very few people forget. Tail-gaiting at Lambeau is almost as important as the game itself. The camaraderie among the fans is unprecedented anywhere else in the country. If you are wearing green and gold on gameday Sunday, you just made about 70,000 new friends. Strangers that would normally pass by on the street without a second look are now giving high-fives and laughing hysterically together. The food and beer are bountiful. If you're not completely stuffed with a buzz on going to the game, it's your own fault. The excitement escalates as noon approaches and fans start heading towards their seats. There is order in all the chaos. It's amazing to see how well people get along when they have a common goal: to beat whoever we are playing that week.

“Hey, this is where Mark Chmura caught that touchdown pass in the third quarter.”

My friend Vang, which was short for Brian VangenLangenburg, was pointing at a footprint near the goal post in the back of the endzone. Judging by the million other footprints in

the area, I thought the odds that he was right were pretty slim. It was still fun to think about though.

I grabbed the football out of Vang's hand.

"Are we going to play or what?" I yelled.

The scene in front of me was hysterical. On my left was a pathetic rendition of the Lambeau leap where many Packer players have jumped into the stands after scoring a touchdown. It was hard to see in the dark but there was no mistaking Ding, which is short for Eric Dingledein, clamoring on the rail while Micah and Kyle tried to pull him in the stands. Their efforts were futile. On my right was some kind of contest between Joey and Adam to see who could climb the highest on the up-rights of the goalpost.

"Good idea, Wollin."

Adam, the fearless leader of our circle of friends at the time, jumped down from the post. I had only recently joined their group so I haven't earned a funny nickname based on my last name yet or the acknowledgement of my first name for that matter. You only earned those kinds of titles if you scored some beer for the weekend or threw a house party when your parents were gone. It would be several months before I got recognized as Wollhoulihan.

In any case, they all liked my idea to play some football. The full moon gave us plenty of light to play. I wonder if the pros ever look up at the burning stadium lights and remember a time when they too used to play under the moonlight, back when things were simpler and respect on the playground was all that mattered.

The magic about Lambeau field is that it is home to some of the greatest players and games in NFL history. The infamous Ice Bowl where Bart Starr performed his glorious quarterback sneak is lived over and over again by every fan that has sat in the stands in sub-zero

temperatures in December. People in Green Bay don't ask each other, "Where were you when we landed on the moon" but instead, "Where were you when Antonio Freeman made his immaculate catch to beat Minnesota in the fall of 2000?" Even now, fans are treated by the living legend, Brett Favre, who carries on the Green Bay tradition in everything he does. So many players in professional sports today are so wrapped up in their contracts and endorsement deals; they hardly have time to play the game anymore. Any fan that has seen Brett smile and shake off an interception knows that Brett plays because he loves the game. Anyone that would want to prove that fact would need only to look at his attendance. He has had 192 consecutive starts as a quarterback, a record still in the works (Brettfavre.com).

"Alright guys, I think it's time for the Annexation of Puerto Rico."

Everyone laughed. Normally, my random placement of obscure movie quotes goes over the heads of my friends but apparently enough of them have seen the movie *Little Giants*. I suggested another play. Run as fast as you can around the field and try to get open. It's the same play we have been running since we could catch a football. The opposition would never expect it. We stepped up to the line. Kyle on my left, Vang on my right. I hiked the ball to myself. "One Mississippi! Two Mississippi!" Micah was really bringing the pressure on defense. In another 3 Mississippi's, I would get sacked. I had to act fast. A lame duck went soaring through the air and to my target. I guess my brilliant strategy paid off. Millions of fans have seen countless hall-of-famers do their magic on that historic ground but the best play I have ever seen on the frozen tundra was Kyle's catch and dive into the endzone after juking both Joey and Adam in a stunning display of athleticism. Lombardi would have been proud.

The legend of Vince Lombardi lives on in the heart of every Packer fan that ever watched a game. Lombardi coached on principles, hard-work, and fundamentals; something every blue-

collar worker can rally on. Lombardi once said, "I firmly believe that any man's finest hour-his greatest fulfillment to all he holds dear-is that moment when he has worked his heart out in a worthy cause and lies exhausted on the field of battle-victorious." This quote and many others are used in hundreds of leadership and management books. I guess with 6 division titles, 5 NFL championships, 2 Super Bowls, and a lifetime record of 98-30-4, you know what you are talking about (VinceLombardi.com). A bronze 14 foot statue of the heroic coach was commemorated along with the new stadium additions to honor his presence in Green Bay.

"Can I bum a square?"

Micah handed me a cigarette. I was a textbook case of "smoking to fit in with the cool kids." I really did want one though. My heart was pounding and I wanted something to calm my nerves. I held back a cough as I looked around.

The scene of all of us smoking on the big "G" logo on the 50 yard line would have been quite a sight. We were all very quiet, but looking at everyone's faces, I could see the shit-eating grins on each one of my buddy's faces. I didn't need a mirror to know to that I had one myself. In our minds, we thought we were easily the coolest kids on the planet. For the time being, the element of danger was gone. We were invincible.

Later that night, as we calmly strolled across the vacant parking lot to my 86' rusted out Mercury Sable, I realized how lucky I was to have turned sixteen before the rest of my group. I knew for awhile they were using me for my car but now I felt like I truly belonged to the group and I know they felt the same too. I know I would have never taken the risk of getting caught if they were not there to coax me. The city of Green Bay and its wonderful people and the Packers football team have influenced me so much and for that, I will always be thankful.