

Bart Starr: When Leadership Mattered

David Claerbaut

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There is a handful of athletes whose performance on and off transcend the sport that made them famous. Those who enjoyed the notoriety that comes with spending their entire career with a single team endear them to their fans much more so than journeymen players, the “hired guns” who sell their services to the highest bidder.

Bart Starr was one such player, according to author David Claerbaut in his new biography.

The Wisconsin-based team may be small market, but their fans are knowledgeable and loyal. The Packers have enjoyed a proud “old school” tradition, on par with the New York Yankees, Montreal Canadians and Boston Celtics. It was under such circumstances, with the fierce and demanding head coach Vince Lombardi at the helm that Bart Starr, heretofore mired in the role of reserve quarterback, became a Hall of Famer

Claerbaut recounts the tough upbringing Starr endured, with a father who, like Lombardi, constantly berated. Ben Starr constantly cajoled Bart with comparisons to his younger brother, Hilton, who died tragically as a youngster. Perhaps Bart's obsession with perfection was due in part to his attempts to live up to paternal expectations. Even when the Packers won the NFL Championship in 1961, “Resolution could never be complete for him unless it included resolution with his father.” At the end of the game, father and son enjoyed a tearful reconciliation in which Ben Starr finally admitted he had adjudged Bart too harshly.

Bart Starr is representative of its type of sports biography. Claerbaut, as he did in Durocher's Cubs: the Greatest Team That Didn't Win, his analyses of Chicago's 1969 failure to win the National League pennant, shows his penchant for research with his reportage of events, remarks and nostalgic impressions for Starr's former teammates, attesting to his leadership skills and strong faith.

He was famous for his mental and physical toughness in a machismo world.

It is sometimes sad to realize that for most athletes, the life to which they had become accustomed is gone before they turn forty. Some, like Starr, tried their hand at coaching. Many front offices hope that their excellence will rub off on the team. More often than not, however, this is not the case. Elite athletes sometimes fail to understand that what came easily to them, both physically and mentally, is more difficult for “normal” athletes. Bart Starr took over the coaching reins in 1974. By the time he was fired in 1983, the team had won only 53 of 133 games.

In an era when “role models” in sports show a propensity towards substance abuse, violent crimes and assorted indiscretions, Bart Starr is a welcome reminder of how we truly looked up to heroes of the gridiron.

RON KAPLAN (November / December 2004)

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