

PLAYING FOR THE PACK IN THE 30'S
An Interview with Clarke Hinkle

by C. Robert Barnett

"When we went on the road, people came out to see us play. They wanted to see how a little town in the north woods could have such a powerful football team. They thought we were lumberjacks or something. In fact we did have a band of five or six guys who would dress up like lumberjacks and sit in the corner of the stadium and play music," said Clarke Hinkle, the great Packer fullback, of his playing days in the 1930's. "We were the Notre Dame of pro football. We used their shift, and we were the small town team that won." And win they did. The Packers were the team of the decade, with four N.F.L. titles, a division championship, and three second-place finishes. Not bad for the smallest town in the league.

Just how the small north woods community of Green Bay was able to field a team which dominated the N.F.L.'s big city teams is as amazing to today's fans as it was to those of the 1930's. Of course, recruiting players and maintaining a powerhouse roster were handled much differently then. There was no college draft until 1936 and during the '30's players were seldom traded. Without the aid of computers or large scouting staffs, coaches had to ferret out and sign talented players almost single-handedly. Lucrative financial deals were seldom offered as inducements to sign, but this worked to the advantage of Green Bay. Curly Lambeau, the Packers' founder and first coach, discovered he could compete successfully by convincing athletes to play with the N.F.L.'s best team in the greatest little town in the world.

At least that was how Lambeau recruited Clarke Hinkle, who played for the Packers from 1932 to 1941, and Hinkle's experience seems typical. In 1930, Hinkle was an All-American at Bucknell College and as such was recruited by several pro teams. "There was no college draft then so I just waited to see who would be interested in me," said Hinkle. "One of the Maras who owned the Giants invited me to stay over in New York, after my last college game, to see the Giants play the Packers the next day." This proved to be a mistake; the Packers beat the Giants 14-10 on a 21-yard fourth quarter pass from Joe Dunn to Harry Bruder. Hinkle, however, was impressed by the Packers, not the Giants. "That game really convinced me to go to Green Bay. They had a huge team and they looked awesome. They had a guy playing tackle named Cal Hubbard who stood 6-foot-4 or 6-foot-5 and weighed about 265 pounds. As I watched the game, I thought to myself, by God I believe I would rather be on his side than play against him," Hinkle recalled.

After leading the East to a 6-0 victory and being named outstanding player of the annual East-West Shrine game, Hinkle was approached by Lambeau. "Curly came to my hotel room to talk to me about playing for the Packers," he recalled. "I didn't hesitate, I remembered that game in New York and Lambeau offered me \$120 a game. The Giants' offer was only about \$85 a game but I believe I would have played for almost nothing."

"I don't know if I would have liked New York, I was never a big city boy," said Hinkle, who was born and raised in Toronto, Ohio, a town of about 7,500 people. "I thought Green Bay would be like a college town with a lot of college spirit, and it was." It was "college spirit" which sustained the Packers. Obviously the players didn't get rich on \$120 a game, even in the depression.

Endorsements weren't profitable either. As Hinkle said, "There weren't many commercials, but when there were some they never came to Green Bay." What moved the players then as it does today was the fame and glory of being a pro.

Although the Packers may not have made big bucks, they were well paid in adulation -- more so than the players on the big city teams. "The players in the big cities like Chicago just went their own way into the city after practice. They never had any contact with each other or the fans. Nobody knew who they were," said Hinkle. "It wasn't like that in Green Bay. We hung around together after practice, and when we walked down the street we were always recognized and pointed out," Hinkle added.

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"They took their football seriously in Green Bay. If we won a game we were in all the bars that night and never bought our own drinks. We had a ball. Coach Lambeau would say, 'the lid's off; just don't get thrown in jail.' But if we lost a ball game we never left the hotel. People were mad. If we had to leave the hotel we would go down the alleys," Hinkle said.

The popularity of the Packers wasn't limited to the beer drinkers in the bars, for everyone seemed to want to associate with the players. Hinkle remembers that "we were invited to the finest charity balls in full-dress tails. If you didn't have a Packer at an affair it just wasn't a success. And the girls. We had our choice of the girls to date in Green Bay. A lot of them were of French-Belgian descent and they were beautiful."

Despite the love affair that the people of Green Bay had with the Packers, there was a disadvantage associated with playing in Green Bay. It was cold. Hinkle said, "It was so cold that we played all of our early games at home and finished the season on the road. Sometimes we would be away from Green Bay for three whole weeks. But that wasn't a real problem. Green Bay was like a great big family and the players were favorite sons. We were kings. Those were great days, and I wouldn't have had it any other way."

Weather conditions must not have caused too many difficulties for Clarke Hinkle, however. He was named to the All-Pro team during four of the ten years he played for the Packers -- no minor feat considering there was a fullback for the Bears named Bronco Nagurski. Even today the mention of Nagurski causes Hinkle to break into a tight smile. "When we played the Bears with Nagurski we put on all of the extra pads we could find, because when we took the field we knew both teams were there to commit mayhem. A couple of years ago a sportswriter asked me what was my greatest day in pro football and I told him, 'the day I heard Nagurski retired'."

Hinkle retired from the Packers following the 1941 season, in which he was named to the All-Pro team. "I was inducted into the services," he said, "but I had had ten good years and wanted to go out on top. I hate to see great players try to hang on for another year." He added, "After the war Lambeau tried to get me to come back as a kicking specialist. But I didn't do it. I told him, 'I know how you operate, before long you'll have me running the ball and playing linebacker and I am too old for that stuff.'"

Now retired, but still an avid golfer, he looks trim and fit enough to step back forty years into the Packer backfield. Hinkle, who was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1968, lives in Steubenville, Ohio in the heart of the upper Ohio River Valley. It is an area of small towns which are noted for steel mills and for taking football seriously.

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Note: Hinkle died in 1988.