

JIM CARTER
FORMER PACKER PUT PROBLEMS BEHIND HIM

by Joe Zagorski
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On a crystal-clear spring morning in the small but growing town of Eau Claire, Wisconsin, a secretary in a popular car dealership gleefully answers her ringing telephone with a sunrise slogan that sounds like it could go quite well with a wakeup cup of coffee: "Hello! It's a beautiful day at Jim Carter Ford!" Undoubtedly it is. Even on days when it is raining outside, it is still beautiful enough for Jim Carter.

As a former middle linebacker with the Packers from 1970-'78, Jim Carter has succeeded in the "real world" after pro football, due in large part to his daily credo of hard work, predicated further by more hard work. Such dedication is necessary in the commercial enterprise of selling cars, an arena in which the competition level can often equal that of his former occupation's. "Learning the automobile business took time," says Carter, at age 39 as outspoken and articulate a gentleman as an ex-line backer can be, "and learning it in 1980 through 1982 was really difficult, mainly because of the economic time."

Nevertheless, Carter decided to press onward, a choice he repeated from his unique athletic career. From his college days at the University of Minnesota (where he was a star hockey player as well as the starting fullback), to the days when he wore the Green and Gold of the Packers, Carter hung tight to his belief of perseverance. As a result, his best of efforts were to become the lifeblood of his success, today as well as yesterday.

Green Bay chose Carter in the third round of the 1970 draft, hoping to tap his bountiful resources of determination and desire. By the end of his rookie season, #50 had progressed at a most commendable pace.

"He can be as good as he wants to be," said Burt Gustafson, then the Packers' linebacker coach. "Jim always has had two things going for him – hit and hustle."

The lusty-hitting Carter played his defender role with even more zeal in his second year, as he quickly became a take-charge type of player out on the field.

"He's been playing very consistently," said Gustafson after the first few weeks of the '71 season. "He's got a lot of confidence and leadership qualities, too. He will have the team fired up. Sure, he makes mistakes – we all do – but when he makes one, he's going 100 m.p.h."

Two of the biggest drawbacks of growing up are found in the numbing isolation of making mistakes and learning things the hard way. Carter wasted little time in making the most forlorn mistake of his pro career after he replaced Green Bay's legendary middleman, Ray Nitschke, in the early part of 1971. This mistake came by word (or words) of mouth, and it traveled faster than any mistakes he could've made on the field.

"As I look back," remembered Carter, "I realize that most of the difficulty I had was self-induced. When I took over for Nitschke, I was always spouting off too much – I should have just shut up and done by job and let things fall in where they might."

Unfortunately, Carter mixed too much talk with his constant work ethic, as he tried to ignore the fact that there was still so much more to learn about the game and its people. Carter's brash statements were to become an infringement on the popularity of Nitschke, as well as a distancing tool that was used between himself and the Green Bay fans.

"I'm going to be the next middle linebacker for the Green Bay Packers," said Carter in the wake of his new starting assignment. "Ray Nitschke has been a great all-pro, but it's no secret he's nearing the end."

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Such words represented the fervor of Carter's headstrong attitude back then, and in the following year a dramatic occurrence of the emotional forces in pro football left the young linebacker in an unenviable position with the Packer faithful.

Against the Atlanta Falcons on Oct. 22 in Milwaukee County Stadium, a blindside hit from burly Jim Mitchell, a 225-pound tight end, left Carter's knee in bad shape with stretched ligaments. As Carter was being helped off the field, Nitschke ran onto it amid a chorus of cheers from the throng of Green Bay followers. Carter mistakingly thought that the fans were applauding his injury, and in the locker room after the game, he was more than willing to explain his feelings to anyone who would listen.

"So many people like Ray," said the then-ill-tempered Carter, "because he's been around so long. I don't mind if they have a favorite here. But when you get hurt and they cheer, that's awful. It's depressing and humiliating."

After this misinterpreted incident, many of the football fanatics in Wisconsin began wondering whether Carter was, in point of fact, trying to make people forget all about Nitschke. It was a question that would take some time to answer; and it would be answered -- if not by Carter, then by the fans themselves.

"As a result of the whole mixed-up situation," recalled Carter, "the fans booed me and I became awfully sensitive to that. To overcome that, I think I tried to be too cocky and act like it didn't bother me."

With Nitschke's retirement after the '72 season, the "angry young man" syndrome became a custom fit for the rebellious but still hard-working Carter in 1973. He improved his mental and strategical capabilities in the team's weekly film studies. He progressed in the critical areas of coordination, pursuit, and intensity. Most importantly, however, was the fact he took seriously for the first time his role as a team leader, especially on game day. All of this he did, while still keeping a chip from the fans on his shoulder. The result was Carter's first and only All-Pro Season.

Another award Carter received in '73 probably meant even more to him, because it came from his own teammates and coaches. Carter was named Green Bay's most valuable defensive player, a distinguished honor in spite of the team's 5-7-2 finish and the defense's 259 points allowed. Unfortunately, Green Bay's downward trend of defeat was just the beginning.

The Packers' record the next several years proved they were little more than an also-ran team, floundering along the scale of mediocrity. Consequently, with imminent failure in team achievements came more of the same in the individual categories. Carter was one of the many whose performance suffered during the mid-1970s.

"I had a couple of good years," said Carter, "but that was about it. It certainly helps to play on a winning team, but I don't believe I was ever a player on the level of some of the annual All-Pros."

One reason Carter's success level in pro football diminished was because of injuries. A pre-season leg fracture cost him some time in 1974; then came a nagging knee injury in 1975. These two were followed by the coup de grace in 1976 – a broken arm sustained against the New England Patriots in the pre-season which kept him out the remainder of the year.

Coming back from such a tough layoff is seldom easy, but Carter managed to survive the lack of action. "After not hitting for a year," said Carter during the 1977 Green Bay training camp, "that's the part you have to get back into. It just takes a little while to let go. It's hard to describe. It's a kind of cautious thing, but it's not like you're protecting yourself. It's something you have to do each year, really – get used to hitting and being hit again."

Carter led the Packers with 121 unassisted tackles in that year, as he proved he could come back to provide the defense with stability in the middle. He also proved fortunate enough to withstand and defeat a play that, for him, was the toughest in the game – the fullback draw.

"I'll be kind of just hanging there," said Carter, referring to his position on the field just after the snap of the ball, "and I'll always feel that offensive tackle bearing down on me. I'll step to my right and see the

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center set up, and I'll see the draw develop. Then from out of nowhere, I can just feel that tackle trying to blast the hell out of me. I just try to get as low as I can and fight through him. A guy like Ron Yary (former Minnesota tackle), as big as he is (6-6, 260), they run that play and he comes down growling like hell and, you know, it's a hard play."

Making the plays on the field was becoming quite a natural occurrence for Carter. Making the plays off the field was too, but in a totally different vein. Throughout his professional athletic career, Carter remained a bachelor, and a most eligible one at that. His dark eyes, thick mustache, and long brown hair mixed in well with his 6-3, 230-pound build. These attractive features were sure to give the young ladies of the Green Bay area a lot to look at whenever this "pseudo-celebrity" linebacker stepped out in public.

Added to his singular status were his enjoyment of discotheque parties and his proficiency for indulging in spirituous liquid refreshment. This combination eventually produced a nighttime lifestyle that Carter would in later years regret.

"I'm not really sure whether being a bachelor made any difference in how I spent my playing days," says Carter. "I'm sure that many of the stupid things that I did or said were attributable to drinking, and they could've been done married or single. I wasted a lot of time drinking and partying, and it could have been time much better spent in preparing for my days after football."

This spring, Carter told the Milwaukee Sentinel: "I was never into coke. I didn't know what cocaine was. The booze had the same effect. Booze is legal. We abuse it. I was an alcoholic. The last couple years I played in Green Bay there were about eight or 10 other players who were alcoholics, too.

"The professional athlete has the time and the money to do whatever he wants. I can't believe players in Green Bay have been getting into deep trouble without being drunk or stoned."

Life after football was drawing closer and closer to the nine-year veteran during the 1978 season, as he found himself splitting time with a promising young linebacker – rookie Mike Hunt. It seemed as if time had drifted back to the days when Carter was after Nitschke's job ... only now, seven years later, Hunt was eagerly after Carter's.

Emerging from the 1978 NFL campaign, Carter felt disillusioned with many facets of his pro football career – from the Nitschke situation, to the injuries, to the team's failure to win – all of these sentiments were very much in vogue when he met with ex-Packer head coach Bart Starr in the spring of 1979.

"I went and talked to Coach Starr," remembered Carter, "and he told me that I was not in the Packers' plans anymore. That was depressing and maybe a bit scary, but I accepted it as a fact of life. The next day I announced my retirement from the game.

Carter left pro football as a man who made many mistakes. These shortcomings led to too many disappointing memories, but important memories nonetheless. For within the fans' opinion of him (which never really improved that much over the years), and his more relaxed attitude and desire to play away games rather than home games, Carter learned a lot.

Possibly the most important lesson he learned was in the daily struggle to grow up and live each day to the fullest – a lesson so few of us ever learn. Located deep within the inner core of this education is the knowledge – the mark of an intelligent man stems from one who admits his mistakes, because only then can he begin to do some thing about them. Carter has this knowledge, and has lived it out in the years following his final gridiron tackle.

"I don't think I failed to achieve 'super-star status', says Carter, "because our team wasn't always in contention. When it was all said and done, the fact of the matter was that I wasn't the caliber of player that a Ray Nitschke was ... very few men are."

Thrust into the business world after his retirement from the game, Carter immediately applied himself and overcame the obstacles that often stood in his way during his years with the Packers. Before long, Carter was on a road which led to personal and professional fulfillment.

"Over the years," says the briefcase carrying Carter, "the lessons that I learned being an athlete have been invaluable in business. The adjustment from an athlete to a businessman wasn't really difficult from a work standpoint. I have always worked hard – even when I was partying too much, I would still work hard during the day. I quit drinking six years ago and that really helped me establish my direction of what I wanted to accomplish.

"Another thing which really straightened my life out was marriage – Ann and I got married in 1986, and we have an excellent life together."

An excellent crop of businesses are proof of Carter's irrepressible drive and determination. The Ford-Volkswagon-Audi dealership in Eau Claire was quickly followed by a Chevrolet-Mazda dealership in Wausau, then came another Ford dealership in St. Paul, Minnesota (Carter's hometown). Included in each location is a group of men and women who work together as a team, and succeed together as a team.

"We employ 180 people," says Carter. "We will sell about 5,150 vehicles this year and do about \$54,000,000 in total sales. I also have two leasing companies and a Budget Rent-A-Car franchise. All in all, the businesses I own are doing quite well.

So is Carter himself. For in this brute of a former football player lies a constantly hard-working human side, as well as in intelligence which transcends his past mistakes. Also emanating from his personality is a suave and gentle business nature, as evidence by his verbal sales techniques this day at his Eau Claire dealership.

As the sun starts creeping down the resplendent Wisconsin horizon, Carter spots a curious customer coming around the end of the car lot, eyeing one of his latest Ford automobiles. He immediately goes over to the would-be buyer and levels him, not with a forearm, but with a sales pitch that easily lures the fellow into taking a test drive.

Who says ex-linebackers are all action and no talk?