

VERNE LEWELLEN: FORGOTTEN STAR OF THE 1920s

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The Green Bay Packers, the ultimate football power of the 1960s, were actually one of the league's first dynasties. They won three straight championships starting in 1929, following the Canton/Cleveland Bulldogs of 1922-4 as the dominant teams of the era. The Packers of the mid-to-late-'20s were the first NFL team to rely on the forward pass as more than just a desperation move, presaging the glory days to come a decade later when Arnie Herber and Cecil Isbell filled the air with footballs intended for Alabama great Don Hutson, who ruled his era like Babe Ruth did in the baseball '20s. The Pack won 68 percent of its games from 1921-32, 77 percent if 10 ties are discounted.

On that fine Packer bunch was perhaps the premier triple-threat player of the era, a man who by most accounts was the most versatile star of his time. The name Verne Lewellen means little or nothing to the modern observer, but from 1924-32 he was a truly dangerous football star who could run, throw, pass, and punt. He is one of the greatest forgotten stars of the 1920s.

HE COULD DO IT ALL

Lewellen arrived on the pro scene in 1924, a year after he keyed his Nebraska team to a stunning upset of Notre Dame. He scored a touchdown in his first game, against the Kansas City Blues, and by the time an injury effectively ended his career in 1931, he had become the only player to rank in the top 20 in rushing, passing, receiving, and punting.

In the days before the NFL was a household name, the most valuable players were those with multiple skills, as small rosters and strict substitution rules meant that a man was on the field to stay, the entire 60 minutes. Lewellen, a 6-foot-1, 182-pounder with deceptive speed, quickly established himself on both sides of the ball. Statistics from an era before the league kept its own records are incomplete, but even the partial numbers speak volumes about Lewellen. He intercepted 22 passes in his career, for a devastating Packer defense that snared a record 39 enemy aerials in the title season of 1929. He was also hands-down the finest punter of the era, averaging nearly 40 yards on 677 kicks; he had over 400 more attempts than any other player of the period.

But Lewellen also excelled in the wide-open offense that Green Bay parlayed into the second-highest scoring unit of the day, next to Benny Friedman and the exciting New York Giants. He threw for 2,080 yards in his career, despite splitting time as a passer with Curly Lambeau and Red Dunn. His 2,410 rushing yards rank in the top 10 among runners up to 1932, and his 37 rushing scores - still third in Packer history - are second in the era to superstar Ernie Nevers' 38. A rangy player with great football smarts, 'Lew' snagged 84 passes for 1,165 yards and amassed over 1,000 all-purpose yards in two different seasons, in an era noted for low scores and punt-happy field-position battles.

His 5,765 total yards place him unofficially behind Friedman (10,159), Lambeau (8,196), Dunn (7,102), Johnny "Blood" McNally (6,040), and Nevers (5,901).

A BEVY OF BRILLIANT BALLPLAYERS

Sometimes a team is so good and its stars so many that it is difficult for all of them to gain recognition. The Packers of the early days were such a group. The Green Bay Hall of Fame's first class, in 1970, included Lambeau and Blood and Lewellen. But the team had so many stars - like bruising linemen Cal Hubbard and Mike Michalske - that Lewellen seems to have been lost in the shuffle. He made the Green Bay Post-Gazette all-pro team five straight years from 1925-29, and yet a receiver on the Packers did it seven times: Lavie Dilweg, who was the first dominant end in league history and made 27 interceptions in nine seasons. The 6-3, 205-pound Dilweg caught 126 passes for 2,053 yards, the most of any receiver next to the charismatic McNally, easily outdistancing more publicized players such as Ray Flaherty, Wayne Millner, Red Badgro, Bill Hewitt, and Guy Chamberlain, statistically speaking.

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The Packers won the title in 1929, 1930, and 1931, with a plethora of stellar performers. The all-pro team was a difficult summit to achieve in those days, as there were only 11 players named each season. Various newspapers trumpeted their teams, and the Green Bay Post-Gazette was one of the consistent periodicals to do so.

PRELUDE TO GREATNESS

Lewellen shared the spotlight with the other Packers of the day from 1925-28, as the team built a powerhouse that would eventually become the league's best. In 1925 he starred in several games, scoring the winning TD against the Bears Sept. 27, and tallying the game's winning six in the last minute of a 7-0 decision over Dayton Nov. 15.

A year later he figured prominently in four wins, according to newspaper reports of the time. His 25-yard off-tackle run to the end zone brought the Packers to victory, 7-0 over Milwaukee Oct. 17. His mammoth punts kept the Cards at bay Oct. 31, while his tackle of an enemy runner at the Green Bay 1-yard-line saved a 3-0 triumph.

It was also Milwaukee who felt the sting of Lewellen's ability next, in a 21-0 win Nov. 7, in which he had two touchdowns, including a 70-yard jaunt off a fake punt. His two touches secured a 14-0 win against Louisville Nov. 14 as the Packers went on to finish 7-3-3.

The years 1927 and 1928 saw more of the same for the versatile Nebraska-ex, as he scored the team's only TD three times in '27 and keyed wins over the Yanks and Yellowjackets with long, arching punts and the patented mix of run and pass. Highlights of the '28 campaign are as follows: two TDs on Sept. 30 in a 12-12 tie against the rival Bears; two more in a 20-0 whitewashing of the Cards Oct. 14; the team's only score in a 7-0 win against the defending champ Giants Nov. 18; and a 22-yard pass to Larry Marks for a TD that gave the Pack a tie game Dec. 2 versus Providence.

THE FIRST GREEN BAY TITLE

The 1929 team went 12-0-1, as Dilweg, Lewellen and Michalske were Post-Gazette all-pros. In nine of those games, according to clippings compiled by the Elias Sports Bureau, "Lew" was the leading man.

His 30-yard touchdown pass to Dunn defeated the Dayton Triangles, 9-0, in the season opener Sept. 22. Three weeks later he scored the only touchdown as the Packers beat the Chicago Cards, 9-2, on Oct. 6. The next two games saw Lewellen at his best, as he returned an interception for a score against the Minnesota Marines, completing the play with a dazzling "S" pattern run into the end zone. His 15-yard run for a score marked the only TD of the day Oct. 27 as the Packers again edged the Cards, 7-6.

Green Bay topped Minnesota 16-6 on Nov. 2, thanks to a TD strike from Lewellen to Dilweg, and Nov. 24, the former Nebraska star had one of his best games when it counted. The Giants came into the game unbeaten and challenging the Pack for the top spot in the league. But the Post-Gazette reports that Lewellen's 60- and 70-yard punts kept Friedman and Co. at bay, while his 26-yard pass to Blood off a fake punt led to the score that broke things open in a 20-6 Packer victory.

Two games remained for Green Bay to close out its first NFL title, and "Lew" was equal to the task. Dec. 1 against Providence, he scrambled 37 yards for a first-quarter TD that sent the team on to a 25-0 rout. In the title game Dec. 8 he threw a TD and ran for another and according to the Chicago Tribune report, his booming kicks bottled up Grange and the Chicago Bears all day for a 25-0 win that brought the championship home to City Stadium in Green Bay.

SECOND CHAMPIONSHIP

In defense of their title, the Pack started off on the right foot in 1930, as Lewellen ran 10 yards for a TD and Arnie Herber, a rookie out of tiny Regis College in Denver, connected with Dilweg on a 50-yard score in a 14-0 triumph over the Cards Sept. 21. A week later, Lewellen duplicated his knack for making the team's only touchdown, as he plunged in from a yard out to knock off the Bears, 7-0.

As October began the Packers again relied on "Lew" and the passing attack. The former contributed a 15-yard scoring reception, and the latter yielded a 70-yard bomb from Dunn to the inimitable Blood in a 14-7 win over the Giants. Oct. 12 it was Dilweg to the rescue, as his 50-yard interception return for six led to a 27-12 decision over the Frankford Yellowjackets. The next two weeks it was Lewellen, squared, as his two paydirt visits keyed a pair of victories over Minnesota.

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Scoring more than 30 points was considered quite a feat in football's equivalent to the Dead Ball Era of major league baseball, and when the Packers erupted for 47 in a smashing win against Portsmouth and star wingback Chuck Bennett, it was big news. Lewellen had two scores in that blowout, while he also threw a TD pass to Dilweg.

After a rare two-game losing streak – the team ran off a stretch of 22 straight non-losses during the period – the Pack got back on track against Frankford, as Dunn fired three scoring aerals. The team closed out its second title run with a 6-6 tie with Portsmouth, enough to secure the crown again.

THREE TIMES THE CHARM

In 1931, Verne Lewellen would suffer an injury midway through the year, knocking him out of action. But before he went down, it was vintage "Lew." He ran 8 yards for a score Sept. 20 as the Pack pounded Brooklyn, and a week later came up with the only score, a 1-yard run, as the team downed the Bears, 7-0.

Oct. 4 saw the Packers handle New York, 27-7, as Lewellen ran 5 and 7 yards for touchdowns and Blood raced for a pair of six-pointers. Wuert Engelmann filled in for the felled "Lew" from then on out, scoring three times against Providence on Oct. 18, including an 85-yard kickoff return. Green Bay seemed to pull quality players out of Coach Lambeau's magic hat when needed.

The rugged Michalske provided the game's only TD as the Packers again nudged out the Bears, 6-2, rumbling 80 yards with an interception to seal the game Nov. 1. Green Bay split the last four games of the season, including a 7-0 win over Brooklyn in which the veteran Lewellen came off the bench to run 3 yards for the only touchdown.

At season's end, the Packers has managed their third straight NFL title, going down as only the second such three-time winner, after the Bulldogs, and from the statistics and game-by-game reports, it is obvious that the triple-threat Lewellen was at the fore of the team's success. Running, passing, receiving, and punting, he was one of the most versatile gridsters of his era.