

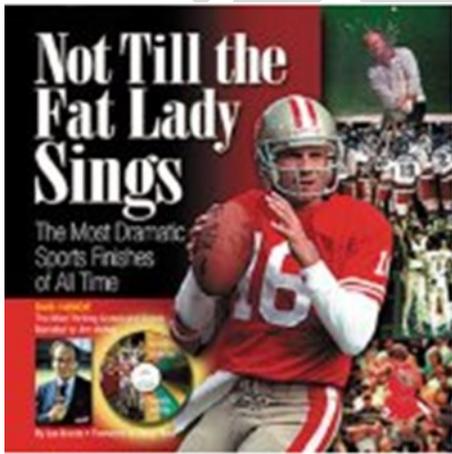
NFC Championship Game

December 31, 1967

Green Bay Packers vs. Dallas Cowboys

To say this Sunday in late December dawned clear and cold would have been a gross understatement. The 1967 NFL championship was on the line and the Green Bay Packers and Dallas Cowboys had winning – not weather – on their minds.

But Mother Nature was already at work. The mercury plunged to a record-setting 13 degrees below zero and a wind chill of 48-below made the air feel more like Alaska than Green Bay, Wisconsin. It's no wonder that this New Year's Eve game would go down in history as the "Ice Bowl."



Until close to game time, Packers coach Vince Lombardi would have sworn up and down that tough guys don't worry about the weather. In fact, Lombardi had done all he could to make sure that they wouldn't have to; the previous season he had an \$80,000 heating system installed the length of the field to ensure that the surface would be in optimum playing condition in any weather. Possibly the heating coils did their job too well. Unfortunately, the warm air created condensation between the field and the tarp. When the tarp was lifted, the arctic air hit the field, turning it into an ice rink.

"It was like being at the North Pole," said Cowboys coach Tom Landry of the intense cold. The commissioner checked with team physicians before deciding the game should even go on, and officials were forced to shout plays dead after referee Norm Schacter's whistle froze to his lip. But if excitement alone could warm the stadium, the 50,861 fans would have been taking off their shirts.

As the game began, the Packers had the advantage of home (albeit frozen) turf, but the Cowboys were riding high after a 52-14 win over the Cleveland Browns the week before. They had high hopes of winning their first NFL title, and ending the Packers' bid to be the first team in league history to win three consecutive championships.

At first, history appeared to be repeating itself. Just as they had done a year before in the 1966 championship game, Green Bay jumped to an early 14-0 lead. By the 2nd quarter, however, the Cowboys were adjusting to the bitter cold and coming up with some big plays of their own.

Two Packer fumbles were all it took for the momentum to change. The temperature was colder than ever, but by halftime the game was suddenly heating up and the score was a close 14-10.

The locker room focus was on thawing out, with a few heated words by the coaches designed to spur the players on to victory. "We thought we were still in charge," said Packers fullback Chuck Mercein, "but we knew we still had football to play and that it was time to hunker down."

The Cowboys, it seemed, were of the same opinion – and they came out psyched to win. The Packers were set to receive at the start of the 2nd half, but the Cowboys squelched their momentum by stuffing a Donny Anderson run, sacking Starr and blocking a pass intended for receiver Boyd Dowler. After a scoreless 3rd quarter, Dallas turned up the heat once again with a touchdown eight seconds into the 4th quarter. The Cowboys were riding high with a 17-14 lead.

It wasn't just the air that had cooled off in Green Bay. The home team went 37:15 without scoring before they finally gained a little momentum of their own.

There was 5:04 remaining on the clock when the Packers got the ball on their own 32-yard line. "We were ready on that last drive," said Starr. "We were totally focused on what we needed to do in order to go down and win. As I looked into the eyes of my teammates, I knew that all I had to do was call the play."

And play calling was what the former University of Alabama quarterback was known for. Teammate Jerry Kramer said, "Bart was rarely the best quarterback in the league on a statistical basis. But for three hours each Sunday, he was almost always the best quarterback in the game." And this frigid Sunday in December was no different.

With just 68 yards between the Packers and an unprecedented third championship, Bart Starr began the most famous drive of his career.

Green Bay moved the chains 38 yards as the crowd watched three minutes tick off the clock. A 19-yard pass to Mercein finally stopped the clock and earned the Packers a first down.

With 11 yards to go, Starr called what he now considers to be the best call of his life – a "give" or "sucker" play. When guard Gale Gillingham faked to his right, Dallas tackle Bob Lilly followed, opening a hole for Mercein who dove to the 3-yard line. Less than a minute remained on the clock.

Starr then handed off to Donny Anderson who plunged another two yards for a Green Bay first down at the one-yard line. On second down, Anderson was stopped at the line of scrimmage on the same play.

The Packers called a time out with 20 seconds on the clock. By now the wind chill had dipped to an unbelievable 50-below. The frozen tundra that was Lambeau Field made play next to impossible, but hoping the third time would be a charm, Starr once again handed off to Anderson. The running back slipped on the icy turf, stopping a mere one foot short of the goal line, and Green Bay took their final time out.

With 16 seconds frozen on the scoreboard the sell-out crowd stomped their numb toes and screamed for the home team, but the Pack was still on the short end of the 17-14 score.

There are several schools of thought on what the Packers should have done. A field goal would tie the game, sending the teams into overtime. A pass was another option; if it didn't work, Green Bay could still run, pass or kick on 4th down. But Starr had other ideas. He wanted to go for the victory.

Handing off was a risk on the icy field, so Starr made his case in the sideline conference – go for a quarterback sneak. Lombardi agreed, saying, “Then let's run it and get the hell out of here.”

Starr returned to the huddle, calling for a 31 wedge. That was the signal for Jerry Kramer and Kenny Bowman to double team defensemen Jethro Pugh, opening a small hole for Starr who was ready. He lunged into the end zone – and the record books.

The extra point was good and the Packers took the lead with 13 seconds remaining. Two incomplete passes by the Cowboys ran out the clock to give Green Bay the come-from-behind 21-17 win. And their third consecutive championship.

Years later Cowboys coach Tom Landry would remember that day. “I can't believe that call, the sneak,” he said. “It wasn't a good call. But now it's a great call.”