



# SHOWDOWN on the FROZEN TUNDRA

One of the Craziest, Strangest Games in NFL History

by Mark Zimmerman © 2019

The winter weather was brutal on the frozen tundra of Lambeau Field that day after Christmas back in the 1960s. The Green Bay Packers fought through the weather, injuries and adversity, and won that postseason contest on the last play of the game. No one will ever forget the famous Ice Bowl in which Green Bay quarterback Bart Starr dug in his cleats just enough to sneak the ball over the goal line and defeat the Dallas Cowboys.

But we're not talking about the Ice Bowl. We're talking about the divisional playoff game two years earlier between the Packers and the Baltimore Colts. The game nobody remembers. The game that wasn't scheduled. The one that shouldn't have been played. The first overtime game in Green Bay's history, a victory based on a field goal that many people, especially the fans in Baltimore, swear did not pass through the goalposts. And for all practical purposes, Starr, the Hall of Famer who won five NFL titles, did not play. Neither did the Colts' star quarterback Johnny Unitas. Or his backup.

The game played on Sunday, December 26, 1965 in Green Bay was one of the strangest, weirdest contests ever staged in National Football League history. It also was the longest game in NFL history up to that point. And three obscure Packers, thrust into the spotlight, were instrumental in that victory.

The Western Divisional playoff was necessitated when Green Bay and Baltimore ended the 1965 season with identical 10-3-1 records (the Pack beat the Colts twice that season but there were no tiebreaker rules then). This was back in the day when the NFL consisted of two conferences of seven teams each. There were no overtime games except in the postseason.

Over in the Eastern Conference, the Cleveland Browns, behind the running of Hall of Famer Jim Brown, easily captured their title with an 11-3 record.

In the mixed-up West, the Packers and Colts sparred for the lead. The Packers won their first six games that season (including one against the Colts) before losing badly to arch-enemy Chicago, which won nine of their last ten games. The next week, the Packers lost again, this time to Detroit, while the Colts beat the Bears. In week eleven, Green Bay lost to the Rams, and the Colts tied the Lions. A week after that, Green Bay closed the gap with a 24-19 win over the Vikings, while the Colts fell to Chicago, losing the game and their star quarterback, Unitas, to a torn ligament in his right knee. The Packers won in Baltimore, 42-27, on December 12th, with golden boy Paul Hornung scoring five touchdowns. And then the Colts lost their capable backup quarterback, Gary Cuozzo, to a separated-shoulder injury.

On the final weekend of the regular season, the Colts used newly acquired third-string quarterback Ed Brown to beat the Rams on a game-winning field goal by kicker Lou Michaels. All the Packers had to do to win the division was beat the hapless 49ers, but Green Bay faltered at San Francisco, with the 49ers tying the game with only a minute left to play. A divisional playoff was forced and slated for the day after Christmas, in Green Bay at the newly christened Lambeau Field. The founder of the Packers, Curly Lambeau, had died earlier that year, so the New City Stadium had been renamed in his honor.

Unfortunately, the forecast for heavy snow never materialized. The start of the game was delayed 30 minutes due to television requirements. The conditions that day were severe but not nearly as bad as the Ice Bowl would be, two years later. The temperature at 2:00 pm, at the start of the game, was 23 degrees but the raw winds drove the chill factor down to 12 degrees (the wind-chill factor at the Ice Bowl was 48 below zero). The turf was soggy but fairly firm after the protective tarpaulin and tons of hay were removed. Green Bay fans, sitting on metal bleachers with their every frosty breath visible, were not strangers to this type of bone-chilling weather. Even so, many of the 50,484 fans in attendance retreated to their cars in the parking lot at halftime to warm up a little. Many wore ear-flap hats and battery-heated socks and gloves, left over from deer hunting or ice fishing season. Despite the cold and the wind, the *Milwaukee Sentinel* described the weather as "ideal considering the time of the year."

The cold and the wind made passing very treacherous. At the NFL Championship three years earlier, at Yankee Stadium, winds gusted to 30 to 40 mph. Green Bay star fullback Jimmy Taylor carried the ball 31 times for 85 yards and a touchdown. The ground was concrete and the contact between players and the turf was brutal. Taylor played much of the game banged up, and with blood in his mouth from cuts. The Packers prevailed in that slugfest, 16-7. They'd practiced under worse conditions; their head coach was the legendary disciplinarian Vince Lombardi.

The Colts, led by head coach Don Shula, were a nine-point underdog. Shula decided to use Tom Matte, normally their tailback, as their starting quarterback (Unitas was in a full-leg cast; Cuozzo's arm was in a sling; and Brown was ineligible for postseason play). Matte had played quarterback in college at Ohio State under Woody Hayes. But he hadn't throw many passes, since Hayes strongly emphasized the running game. Matte had thrown two passes in his pro career. He went into the game wearing a plastic wristband listing the Colts' offensive plays.

The Packers won the toss and received the opening kick-off. Then everything went south. On the first play from scrimmage, Starr dropped back and tossed a 10-yard pass to tight end Bill Anderson, who fumbled after a hit by Lenny Lyles. The ball was scooped up by Colts linebacker Don Shinnick, who trudged 25 yards into the end zone for six points. Along the way, Starr tried to take out one of Shinnick's escorts, Jim Welch, and sustained what turned out to be painful bruised ribs. Starr was taped up and tried to continue, but he couldn't raise his hand above shoulder-level (however, he did continue to serve as the holder on field-goal attempts). In 31 seconds of play the Colts had evened the odds.

"What happened," said Anderson later, "was that the ball hit me in the shoulder, instead of the stomach. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a defender coming in to hit me, and I was trying to get the ball down into my stomach in time. I didn't quite make it. If there was a tunnel handy, I'd have crawled into it and run out of the stadium and kept on running."

Anderson, a University of Tennessee product, had played six years for the Redskins, retired to become an assistant coach at Tennessee, then a year later signed back up with the Skins. He was picked up by the Packers in August 1965 to back up the starting tight end. Although used sparingly in 1965, Anderson did catch the winning touchdown pass in a 24-19 victory over the Vikings that season.

With Starr sidelined, Lombardi sent in his second-stringer, reliable Zeke Bratkowski, balding at 34, a ten-year veteran backup quarterback who had played for the Bears and the Rams. He had joined the Packers midway through the 1963 season. Bratkowski had already won two games for Green Bay that season in relief of Starr, including the first win against the Colts (back when Unitas was healthy).

Bratkowski had been a stand-out All-America quarterback for the Georgia Bulldogs, played for the Bears, served two years in the US Air Force, rejoined the Bears, and then went to the Rams. A competent passer, Zeke never did manage to break into the starter's role. His nickname in Green Bay was Uncle Zekie.

The first half was a defensive struggle between the Pack and the Colts, and two quarters of futility for both offenses. Taylor was one of the finest and toughest running backs in NFL history but this was not one of his best games. He dropped three passes and he failed to gain the end zone from a yard out, twice, once fumbling but luckily regaining the ball. On one series, the Packers had three tries to move the ball three yards into the end zone but failed. The Colts mounted a 67-yard drive that ended with a short field goal by Lou Michaels. The lights were turned on at halftime with the score 10-0, Colts. The hometown fans were stunned at the turn of events.

In the second half, perhaps inspired by Lombardi's locker-room speech, the Packers began to move the ball. Bratkowski connected on a 33-yard pass to split end Carroll Dale, who fell at the two-yard line. Dale had been grabbed by Jerry Logan while the ball was in the air but still managed to catch the ball. Two plays later, Hornung followed guard Jerry Kramer into the end zone, narrowing the score to 10-7.

The Colts stopped another Green Bay drive with an interception at the 18-yard line, and early in the fourth quarter they stopped yet another drive with an interception at the eight.

Despite the two interceptions, this was Zeke's biggest game ever. He completed 22 of 39 passes for 248 yards. Anderson, the goat on the first play, caught eight passes that day, more than anyone else. Often, he managed to slip into the middle of the field vacated by blitzing middle linebacker Dennis Gaubatz to give Bratkowski a chance for a completion.

With 6:50 left in the game, Bratkowski dropped back to pass and was hit by defensive tackle Billy Ray Smith for a loss. The yellow flag was thrown. The referee declared that Smith had hit Bratkowski in the helmet with his open left hand, much to Smith's protestations. This gave the Pack first down at the Colt 43. Eight plays later, the green-and-gold were at the 15. On fourth down with 2:00 left in regulation, Lombardi sent in Don Chandler to try a field goal to tie the game.

Up until the 1965 season, the kicking duties had been handled by Hornung, a wonderfully versatile player, backed by lineman Jerry Kramer, when needed. That all changed when Lombardi opted for Chandler, a kicking specialist and a stand-out at the University of Florida. He played for the Giants, and ironically, played in the NFL's first and only overtime game up to that point, a loss against the Colts in 1958. During the 1965 season, Chandler kicked a 90-yard punt, still the fourth longest in NFL history. Dour, lanky, and balding, Chandler was a native Iowan who hailed from Oklahoma, where he owned a ranch and construction company.

This was the moment every kicker lived for, practiced for, and dreaded. Starr held the ball. The 22-yard kick was into a 15-mph wind. Chandler booted the chip shot, then threw up his hands and turned away. The ball sailed high and to the right and field judge Jim Tunney threw up his hands and called it good. Baltimore players looked on in disbelief—they insisted the kick was wide right. But the back judge and referee agreed with Tunney's call. The ball had sailed high, over the vertical field-goal posts, so the call was subjective. There was no instant replay or review by officials in New York. The score was now tied, 10-10.

Late in the game, the Packers had the ball again when Taylor caught a pass at midfield and appeared to fumble. According to the sportswriter James Tackach, "while the officials separated the players, the clock continued to run. The fourth quarter ended with Shula trying to get his Colts one more play." The game would go into sudden-death overtime. This would be the second overtime game in NFL history (sudden-death, because the first team to score would win the game). Needless to say, nobody left their seats.

The Packers won the coin toss and elected to receive; the Colts would have the wind at their backs. Neither team could get anywhere on their next two possessions, but then the Colts found themselves at the Packer 47 with Michaels lined up to kick the winning score, seven minutes into overtime. Michaels had kicked a 50-yarder that season, so he had the leg. But Buzz Nutter's snap was off and by the time the holder aligned the ball, Michaels kicked it "pitifully short."

Green Bay took over at their own 20 and ground it out. Anderson's last catch of the day, an 18-yarder, moved the ball to midfield. Several plays later, Dale snagged a Bratkowski pass and tumbled out-of-bounds at the Colt 26. The ball was advanced to the 18 by 13:39 into overtime when Chandler trotted onto the field for a 25-yard field-goal attempt to win the game. Eleven Colts crowded the line in an effort to block the kick. Bill Curry centered the ball to Starr the holder, and Chandler propelled the pigskin through the uprights. This time, there was no doubt. The anxious crowd erupted into a wall of noise. Lombardi let out a whoop, and the Packer players danced on the sidelines.

"The usually sophisticated Green Bay football fans pulled out all the stops that reached near-hysteria as their team ran off Lambeau field," wrote the *Milwaukee Sentinel* reporter.

Just like that, Chandler, Bratkowski, and Anderson injected themselves into the Packer fans' hall of fame (Chandler and Bratkowski would be officially voted into the Packer Hall of Fame in later years).

Fans poured out of the stands and into the legendary taverns and beer joints surrounding the stadium. Beer and warm pretzels awaited them. Workmen began covering the field with tons of hay and tarps, in preparation for the next weekend's championship game with the Browns.

It had been a long haul in Titledown that year. According to press coverage, the Packers "were addicted this season to doing things the hard way."

"This game was typical of the season," said Lombardi afterward. "We did just what we had to do." Chandler said he was relaxed and confident when he made the winning kick, but his hands were visibly shaking while resting afterward in the locker room. All-Pro tackle Forrest Gregg said it had been one of the toughest games he'd ever played. Anderson, one of the heroes of the game, said he had been hit in the head during that first play from scrimmage and couldn't really remember much of anything. "It was all a little hazy the rest of the way," he later noted.

For the record, the Colts won the ground game, 143 to 112 yards, but the Packers had 23 first downs to nine, 250 passing yards to 32, and 362 total yards to 175. The Colts never crossed midfield during the second half. And the advantage of the only numbers that really counted, as shown on the mechanical Pabst Blue Ribbon scoreboard, belonged to the green and gold.

*On that same day, in sunny, warm San Diego, the Buffalo Bills beat the San Diego Chargers, 23-0, to win their second consecutive American Football League title.*

Coach Shula praised his field-goal Matte (Colts owner Carroll Rosenbloom said he ran for 57 yards), and downplayed the played-the weather controversy, but Colts owner Carroll Rosenbloom said, "We didn't deserve to lose. There was no justice out there today."

Michaels, the Colt kicker, said Chandler's 4th-quarter field goal to tie the game had been at least three feet wide-right. Other Colts claimed as much. Michaels publicly challenged Chandler to state that his kick was good. Chandler responded, "It wasn't a real good kick, and I couldn't tell."

The Packers would go on to beat the Browns the next weekend for the NFL Championship, the first of three consecutive titles and the last before winning the first two Super Bowls.

The Colts, led by quarterback Matte, demolished the Dallas Cowboys, 35-3, in the Playoff Bowl. Matte was named the game MVP. His plastic wristband made the NFL Hall of Fame, even if he didn't.

During the subsequent off-season, the NFL Rules Committee passed two new changes for the 1966 season. Two officials now would be required to stand at the goal line to observe field-goal attempts. And the goalpost uprights were extended from ten feet above the crossbar to 20 feet above, to make it easier to judge kicks.

After his NFL career ended a year later, Anderson spent three decades teamed with John Ward as part of Tennessee football's beloved radio-broadcast team. Anderson had played for the Tennessee Volunteers from 1955-57 and was a co-captain in 1957. He died in 2017 at age 80.

Chandler helped the Packers win Super Bowls I and II (he kicked four field goals against the Raiders in the latter game). In his 12-season NFL career, Chandler played in 154 regular season games, kicked 660 punts for a total of 28,678 yards, 248 extra points on 258 attempts, and 94 field goals on 161 attempts. He died at his home in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 2011 at age 76.

Zeke coached for the Packers and several other NFL teams until the mid-1990s. He is the father of former Jacksonville Jaguars offensive coordinator Bob Bratkowski. Zeke is now 88 years old and resides in Florida.

*Note: The author can testify that the facts of this game are true. He should know, because he was there. But he remembers the weather being much colder than it actually was.*