

Bob Skoronski Protected Bart Starr, Gave Super Bowl I A Dash Of Nutmeg



Two players with Connecticut ties - Bob Skoronski and Chuck Mercein - were part of Vince Lombardi's Super Bowl Packers.

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(Associated Press File Photo)



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Bob Skoronski, who grew up in Connecticut, helped Vince Lombardi's Packers win the first two Super Bowls

The cameras of both CBS and NBC were rolling at the Los Angeles Coliseum, and [NFL](#) Films was there to record the history.

Vince Lombardi, in short sleeves and a tie — this was LA, not Green Bay — gathered the [Packers](#) around him.

"I want you to be proud of your profession," he barked, in the Brooklyn staccato that is still mimicked. "It's a great profession. You be proud of this game and you can do a great deal for football today, a great deal for all the players and the league and everything else. Now, go out and play this ballgame like I know you can play it."

It was Jan. 15, 1967, and for many, the foundation of pro football was somehow in peril. The first of the championship games to be known as the [Super Bowl](#) was about to be played, and when the huddle broke, Bob Skoronski, who was born in Ansonia, raised in Derby and became a football prospect at Fairfield Prep, wearing No. 76 in green, headed out for the coin toss. Skoronski, Green Bay's offensive captain, became the first of many Connecticut players to make a mark in the Super Bowl, which will be played for the 50th time Sunday.

To many at the time, it was a meaningless exhibition between the champions of the upstart [AFL](#), who were given no chance against the established NFL. But Lombardi, the face and voice of the NFL, was nervous, fearing that a freak happenstance could shatter the status quo.

Lombardi was a legend with West Point connections, so he knew a lot of people in a lot of high places.

Skoronski, in an interview with a public TV station in Illinois, once said the team "received a lot of letters [from political leaders], telling us how important it was for this old, established league to set the pace against the AFL."

The pressure fell to Lombardi, who pushed his team hard all week. Green Bay beat Kansas City, 35-10.

Lombardi and 11 players from the Packers of the 1960s are in the Hall of Fame. Skoronski, who played from 1956-68, a durable tackle who protected quarterback Bart Starr's blind side, is not one of them, something Starr, among others, has called to be corrected.

"He was the offensive captain and that was saying a lot on that team," said Chuck Mercein, the running back from Yale who joined the Packers in time for Super Bowl II. "Bob had the respect of all of those guys on that team. He was very, very solid, very consistent, an excellent blocker. He treated me particularly warmly when I got there."

Skoronski had been there for all of it, the Packers' loss to the Eagles in the 1960 Championship Game, the victories over the [Giants](#) in the 1961 and 1962 title games. The Packers won again in 1965, outlasting Cleveland in the "Mud Bowl," and again in 1966, beating the [Cowboys](#) in a thriller at the [Cotton Bowl](#).

Now, this was all new. The AFL had formed in 1960 to challenge the NFL, as other leagues had in the 1940s and '50s that were later absorbed into the league. The AFL was outbidding the NFL for star college players, upsetting the league's salary structure, and forced a working agreement that included a common draft and a championship game, in which the champions of the two leagues would meet. Lombardi had referred to the AFL, which was changing the game with its open, pass-oriented offense, as a "Mickey Mouse league."

"He felt the weight of the NFL on his shoulders, that he couldn't let them down," Mercein said. "He was very big on that. He never wanted to embarrass himself, or the team, or in this case, the league."

Max McGee got more playing time when Boyd Dowler was injured and McGee ended up making two TD catches. The Packers executed almost flawlessly, and turned up the blitz in the second half to win by 25.

Skoronski, 81, was a successful businessman in Wisconsin and Connecticut after retiring from football in 1969. He has enjoyed hunting and fishing, as far north as Canada, as far south as Florida where he now lives, and he does charity work with former Packers teammates, with whom he has always kept in touch. He declined an interview for this story.

Mercein, 72, retired four years ago after a long career on Wall Street, and now plays golf all he can, stays remarkably fit and enjoys 13 grandchildren.

After Super Bowl I, there was one last ride. Mercein, who had been with the Giants, joined Green Bay late in the 1967 season and played a leading role in the 68-yard drive that won the game for the Packers on a frigid New Year's Eve. He remembered Bart Starr calling a play in the huddle, and asking Skoronski if he could block his man, defensive end George Andrie, to make it work.

" 'Ski said, 'I got it, run the play,' " Mercein said. "And he made a great block, or the play doesn't happen, an 8-yard gain down to the 3-yard line."

The Packers won as time was running out, then played the [Raiders](#) in the second Super Bowl, on Jan. 14, 1968, in Miami's [Orange Bowl](#). The Raiders were known for vicious hitting, and the deep passing of quarterback Daryle Lamonia, but the Packers methodically crushed them, 33-14.

"It was anticlimactic," Mercein said. "The Super Bowl became the biggest sporting event in the world, but we didn't sell out. It was a conciliation to the AFL, so we could stop the merger and stop having this battle that was spiraling out of control."

"So the perception was it was almost like an exhibition game. All the emphasis was on winning the NFL championship, winning the third in a row. We knew we were expected to win, we knew we had to win because it meant a lot to the NFL. It was all business."

Talk of Lombardi's retirement was in the air, and this was to be his last game as Packers coach. Before the game, he told Mercein that Ben Wilson would get the start in the backfield.

"It was disastrously disappointing for me," Mercein said. "I had had two great games in the division playoffs and the NFL championship, but I took it like a man, I didn't complain."

"There was a moroseness about [Lombardi] before the game. It was not a joyful exit, it was a painful one, and it turned out to be the wrong one for him, because he came right back [to coach Washington in 1969]."

Lombardi wore a black blazer. At halftime, in what Mercein remembers as a "funereal" atmosphere, guard Jerry Kramer said, 'Let's play the last 30 minutes for the old man.'

"He'd always said it was harder to stay on top than to get there," Skoronski told The Courant in a 1993 interview. "The last championship, I think, meant the most to him."

Lombardi would hoist the trophy that is now named for him. And as Super Bowl 50 approaches, the winners of the first two, and their iconic coach, who died of cancer at age 57 in 1970, still remain vivid, relevant symbols of the NFL.

"It's amazing, isn't it?" Mercein said, "He was the difference. He could get the most out of his players, he could make every player better. And that's what great managers do."