

THE FAVRE YEARS

The Green Bay Packers of 1992-2007



It had been a long quarter-century in Wisconsin since the Vince Lombardi glory years ended following the 1967 season. There had been just a couple scattered playoff seasons, in 1972 and 1982. There were only four winning seasons. A new management team of general manager Ron Wolf and head coach Mike Holmgren had come on board in 1992. And when they found their quarterback, a 23-year-old named Brett Favre, they were on their way.

Favre was with the Packers from 1992-2007, encompassing almost all of his Hall of Fame career. All 16 of those seasons have their own individual article published on TheSportsNotebook.com. And all 16 of those seasons have been pulled together and edited for this compilation.

You'll read about the following...

*The early days of the Favre years, when Sterling Sharpe seemed like a certain Hall of Fame receiver before a neck injury finished his career. And the big splash of signing another future Hall of Famer, defensive tackle Reggie White on the free agent market. From 1992-94, the Packers posted three straight winning seasons, went to the playoffs twice and won a game in each postseason.

*The glory years of 1995-98. Favre won three consecutive MVP awards. The Packers reached double-digit wins in all four of these seasons. And in the middle two years, 1996-97, they went to the Super Bowl, winning it all in 1996.

*The difficult two years after Holmgren departed for Seattle and White retired, as the Packers missed the playoffs and tried to find their next head coach.

*The four-year run under the leadership of Mike Sherman, as Green Bay returned to the postseason from 2001-04 and Favre authored some of the moments that are still the most-remembered in his storied career.

*The hard collapse of 2005 and the end of the Sherman era. The subsequent hiring of Mike McCarthy and the 2007 renaissance year that almost landed Favre another Super Bowl trip.

It's all here. Each game in the Packer career of Brett Favre, along with all the other great players that came through Lambeau Field. Sterling Sharpe, Reggie White, LeRoy Butler, Ahman Green, Darren Sharper, Antonio Freeman and a whole lot more. The Favre era changed the Packers forever and were tremendous fun all the way through.

1992

Favre's reputation is that of The Gunslinger, but in his first year as a starter, he was much more of a game manager. His 64% completion rate was fourth in the league and even though he threw 13 interceptions, that represented less than three percent of his throws—which made him the third-safest quarterback in the league. Conversely, there weren't a ton of big plays—Favre was middle-of-the-pack in yards-per attempt.

The offense in 1992 was really carried by the great wide receiver Sterling Sharpe. A physical mix of speed and strength, Sharpe caught balls down the field and he caught simple throws down the line of scrimmage and made his own yardage. He set a new NFL record with 108 receptions. He racked up over 1,400 yards and he was 1st-team All-NFL.

Jackie Harris at tight end was a good target and caught 55 passes. The Packer running game was mediocre and backs Vince Workman and Harry Sydney were more renowned for catching passes, nearly 50 apiece for both.

Overall the limitations on the Packer offense—particularly on the line kept them at 17th in the league in points scored. The defense had some Pro Bowl talent that included a pass-rushing outside linebacker in Tony Bennett (obviously a different person from the current Virginia

basketball coach, but oddly enough *that* Tony Bennett was playing college basketball at UW-Green Bay in the early 1990s).

Bennett finished with 13 ½ sacks, free safety Chuck Cecil made the Pro Bowl and third-year strong safety started to come into his own and would be 1st-team All-NFL four times before the 1990s were complete. The Green Bay defense was 15th in the league in points allowed.

When the season began, the Packer faithful still hoped for the career revival of Don Majikowski, the quarterback who electrified them in 1989 on a near-run to the playoffs. Favre was still the backup, but “Majik” was on a short leash.

That leash got shorter in an opening day home loss to the Minnesota Vikings. Even though the 23-20 defeat came in overtime, Green Bay was outplayed and needed Viking mistakes to keep them in the game. When the Packers were horrible on both sides of the ball the following week in a 31-3 embarrassment at Tampa Bay, Favre got significant playing time in mop-up duty.

Even so, Majikowski got the call for a Week 3 home date with a poor Cincinnati Bengals team. But he was knocked out early in the game. Number 4 came onto the field and wouldn't leave for another sixteen years.

Green Bay still trailed into the fourth quarter. At the time I was a bartender for UW-Milwaukee and recall listening to the game at some posh affair the school president was throwing. It looked like another typically long season for the local NFL team. But then Favre threw two fourth-quarter touchdown passes, the last one a 35-yarder to Kitrick Taylor down the right sideline. The Packers pulled out a 24-23 win and there was no turning back.

Favre came out the next week in the late Sunday afternoon slot against a good Pittsburgh Steelers team. He went 14/19 for 210 yards, no mistakes and a 76-yard touchdown pass to Sharpe. The 17-3 win got the Packers back to .500. Even when they lost 24-10 the next week in Atlanta after digging themselves an early hole, there were plenty of reasons to feel good going into the bye week.

But the good feeling started to dissipate in the latter part of October. The Packers were crushed on the ground in consecutive losses to Bill Belichick's improving Cleveland Browns and Mike Ditka's Chicago Bears, who were the gold standard in this division going back to 1984.

Favre and Sharpe got untracked the following week in Detroit. Favre went 22/37 for 212 yards, no mistakes and a 30-yard TD strike to Sharpe in the fourth quarter sealed the 27-13 win. But the young quarterback was exposed the next week on the road by a weak New York Giants team. He threw three interceptions, including a 69-yard Pick-6 early in the fourth quarter when the Packers only trailed 13-7. The final ended up 27-7 and Green Bay was staring at a 3-6 record.

There were no expectations the following Sunday when Green Bay played the first of what used to be the three games a year they played at old Milwaukee County Stadium. I was going out to

the game with a couple friends and as a Redskins fan, was just hoping the Pack could help out the 'Skins by knocking off the Philadelphia Eagles today.

I didn't know we were going to see another threshold moment in the journey of this quarterback and franchise. Favre used both of his top receivers, with Sharpe catching seven passes for 116 yards and Harris getting eight balls that went for 98 yards. Even when Green Bay coughed up a second half lead and trailed 24-21 in the fourth quarter, Favre rallied them.

The Packers tied the game with a late field goal. With overtime looming, the Eagles turned it over and Green Bay turned the gift into a stunning field goal that won it 27-24. The 4-6 record was nothing special, but this team felt different and the players knew it. They talked openly in the locker room about getting on a late run to the playoffs. And they nearly did it.

A revenge trip to collapsing Chicago saw Favre break an early 3-3 tie with a 49-yard touchdown pass to Sharpe. This time, the Packer defense dominated against the run, while Edgar Bennett emerged and ran for 107 yards. The 17-3 road win hastened the Bear demise.

Green Bay was playing divisional games in Milwaukee the next two weeks against the Buccaneers and Lions (Prior to 2002, Tampa was an NFC Central team along with the four current teams of the NFC North).

The Pack looked ready to let down against the woeful Bucks, failing to run the ball and trailing 14-12 in the fourth quarter. Favre threw a nine-yard TD pass to Harris that pulled it out. Favre opened the Detroit game by hitting Sharpe on a 65-yard scoring play and that set the tone for an early 28-0 lead. Green Bay's 38-10 rout nudged their record above .500, to 7-6.

They paid a visit to the Houston Oilers on Sunday Night. Houston (today's Tennessee Titans) were a playoff perennial that was going back to the postseason in 1992 and had a Hall of Fame quarterback in Warren Moon. It was expected the Green Bay surge would finally crest here and they could start focusing on 1993.

Instead, the Packer defense forced four turnovers. Favre tossed a short TD pass to Sharpe and an improbable 16-14 upset put Green Bay squarely in the playoff race. There were part of a three-team joust with the Eagles and Redskins for two wild-card spots. And they still harbored hope of a final week showdown in Minnesota for the NFC Central crown if they could get some help.

In the meantime, the Packers had their own business to take care of. The home finale in Lambeau started with a bad Los Angeles Rams team being spotted a 10-0 hole. Then corner Terrell Buckley delivered a Pick-6. Favre threw two touchdown passes to Sharpe, who ended up with eight catches for 110 yards. Green Bay ripped off four touchdowns in the second quarter and cruised home 28-10.

But in the same time slot, the Vikings won a defensive battle in Pittsburgh to clinch the division. The Eagles knocked off the Redskins and secured one wild-card spot. It was down to Washington and Green Bay for the final berth and the 'Skins had the inside path.

The Packers got the needed help the following Saturday. Washington lost a home game to the mediocre Los Angeles Raiders. The Redskins were basically begging the Packers to grab the last playoff spot—if only the Packers could win on the road against the Vikings.

When Green Bay drove for an early touchdown, you wondered if Minnesota was going to hold something back, already knowing they were the 3-seed and scheduled to play the following weekend. But the Vikes hunkered down and the Packer problems up front were again exposed. They were outrushed 165-29, Favre threw three interceptions and the game got away. The 27-7 loss ended the playoff dream.

But real optimism was finally brewing in Green Bay. Lambeau Field has been the home to Hall of Fame quarterbacks for a long time now. That started back in 1992.

1993

In what was then a new era of NFL free agency, the Packer front office didn't hesitate to pull the trigger on a big move. The biggest prize on the market was defensive tackle Reggie White. The devout Christian minister was persuaded that Green Bay was a good place for him to continue with his off-the-field religious activities.



As for on the field, White was already convinced that Favre was the kind of quarterback that could get him where he had never been—to a Super Bowl. Even though White's current team in Philadelphia was a perennial contender and had an electrifying quarterback in Randall Cunningham, White was convinced that Favre gave him the best chance at a ring.

Favre and White were future Hall of Famers. Sharpe seemed on his way there as well, having not yet suffered the neck injury that would prematurely end his career and his Canton hopes. In 1993, Sharpe was still on top of his game—a then-record 112 catches for the season and 1st-team All-NFL honors.

Edgar Bennett and Darrell Thompson shared duties in what was a pedestrian running attack. Bennett was also a pretty good pass-catcher and tight end Jackie Harris rounded out the targets. The offensive line failed to produce any Pro Bowl talent. On the surface, this offense should have been above-average at best. But with Favre, Sharpe and Holmgren working the Xs and Os, they ended up sixth in the NFL in points scored.

The defense was similarly top-heavy in talent, with White producing another Pro Bowl campaign and getting 13 sacks. Bryce Paup was a rising star outside linebacker, adding eleven sacks and giving offensive coordinators someone other than White to worry about blocking. LeRoy Butler was the best strong safety in football, a tough hitter and intercepting six balls. There was a big drop off after these three, but they were enough to rank the Pack ninth in the league in points allowed.

With hopes high, Green Bay opened at home and blew out a bad Los Angeles Rams team. Favre went 19/29 for 264 yards, with Sharpe catching seven balls for 120 yards. The Packers outrushed the Rams 138-53 and cruised 36-6. All was finally well with the world at Lambeau Field.

Not so fast. The Philadelphia Eagles were a perennial contender and came to town next. Green Bay took a 17-7 lead into the fourth quarter, but couldn't run the ball and lost 20-17. After a bye week, the Packers went to Minnesota. Green Bay played some really good red-zone defense, not allowing a touchdown. But the Vikes did get five field goals and handed the Pack a 15-13 loss. After these two disappointments, no one could be surprised when they went to defending Super Bowl champion Dallas and got their clock cleaned 36-14.

After all the hype of summer, was this just the same old Packers? They were 1-3 and now a Sunday night visit from John Elway and the Denver Broncos was looming as an early must-win.

Green Bay came out with the appropriate urgency. Harris had a big game catching the football and the Packers were ahead 30-7 after three quarters. But this was a sloppily played game. Both teams ended up with 10-plus penalties. Favre threw three interceptions. And this was Elway, the master of the comeback and a team that would eventually get to the playoffs. Denver closed the gap to 30-27 and got the ball back.

Enter Reggie White. The Minister of Defense hadn't made this move to let things get away before they even started. He sacked Elway three times on the final drive and preserved the win. All of Green Bay could exhale as they entered another bye week (1993 was the one year the NFL experimented with a double-bye).

The schedule loosened up a bit on the far end of the bye. Green Bay went to lowly Tampa and blasted the Buccaneers 37-14. Favre threw four touchdowns while Thompson ran for 105 yards. The following week, the rival Chicago Bears came north. In a physical game, the Packers played it close to the vest and led 10-3 in the fourth quarter when Thompson's 17-yard touchdown run sealed the win.

Monday Night Football wasn't something Green Bay had seen a lot of in their two-decades long fling with irrelevance. They went to Kansas City, where Joe Montana was the first of his two seasons with the Chiefs. The Packers did not play well. They turned the ball over six times. Two drives that got inside the KC five-yard line had to end with field goals. It's somewhat surprising they only lost by a respectable 23-16. But they were back to .500 at the regular season's halfway point.

Another road trip awaited, this one to New Orleans. The Saints were another team lurking on the playoff fringe and this game would be extremely significant before all was said and done. The Packer offensive line struggled on the road, allowing six sacks and only clearing room for 69 rushing yards. But the Packer defense countered with five sacks of their own, two by White. They got five turnovers. Favre, for all his youth and already developing reputation as a gunslinger, made fewer mistakes and that was the difference in a 19-17 win.

A stretch of three straight divisional games awaited. Detroit visited old Milwaukee County Stadium, where the Packers played three home games a year prior to 1995. In a back and forth game, Green Bay first led 10-0, then trailed 17-16 in the fourth quarter. Favre was the difference, going 24/33 for 259 yards and leading another ten-point burst to close the game and the 26-17 win.

Tampa Bay was up next. In a bad weather game right after Thanksgiving, the Packers trailed 10-6 in the fourth quarter until Favre flipped a two-yard TD pass to Sharpe for the win.

A road trip to Chicago saw the Packers dig an early 17-7 hole and Favre went to the air often. He threw 54 passes, completing 36 and producing over 400 yards. They were still in the game at 23-17, but in the fourth quarter Favre's third interception of the afternoon went back to the house and sealed a 30-17 defeat.

With the playoff race still tightly packed, Green Bay went to play San Diego, a team on the AFC playoff fringe. The Packers played clean football, picked off three passes, stopped the run and won 20-13. They were sitting on an 8-5 record going into the season's final three games, squarely in position to make the playoffs and in the midst of a three-time fight with the Vikings and Lions for the division crown.

Minnesota was coming to County Stadium. Favre played well, going 20/33 for 256 yards. Sharpe caught six balls for 106 yards. But the Packer weaknesses caught up with them. There was no running game. The more balanced Vikes ran for over 150 yards. Even though Green Bay only turned it over twice, Minnesota never did. A 21-17 loss put the Packers back on the brink.

The win over New Orleans earlier in the year loomed enormous. The Packers were 8-6 and the Saints were 7-7. That November 14 trip to the Bayou explained the flip in the standings and also gave Green Bay the tiebreaker edge. If the Packers could get another win, they would be home free.

But the schedule wasn't easy. The playoff-bound Los Angeles Raiders were up next. A road trip to Detroit was the finale. And a different generation of Packer fans didn't have the same confidence they might have today when facing challenging times.

One thing Green Bay and their fans did know was cold weather and the day after Christmas in Wisconsin was absolutely frigid. The Packers and Raiders were both playing cautiously. It was working for Green Bay. They led 7-0 at half. That lead nudged to 14-0 after three quarters. Then came the play that changed the Packers forever.

It was a big play on its face. Butler scooped up a fumble on the Raider 25 and raced into the end zone. The play all but sealed the win and a playoff berth. But in his excitement, Butler went racing through the end zone and leapt into the stands. It was the first instance of what today is known as "The Lambeau Leap" and is done after every Packer touchdown at home.

Going into the final week, Green Bay, Detroit and Minnesota were all going to the playoffs. The Vikings were going to finish second and be the 5-seed. The Packers and Lions were going to play each other in the 3-6 game in the NFC bracket. But where would be determined by what happened in the finale at the Silverdome.

Knowing the bigger picture took some of the steam out of this game and Detroit's great running back Barry Sanders sat out. Although that made what happened all the more disappointing.

Backup Lion running back Eric Lynch went for 115 yards. Favre threw four interceptions. A 20-16 lead after three quarters turned into a 30-20 loss. It didn't mean elimination, but it did deny the Packers their first NFC Central title in over twenty years and denied the city of Green Bay its first home playoff game since '82.

Six days later, everyone was back at the Silverdome for a noon kickoff that would begin wild-card weekend. Sanders was back in uniform. And oh, did Barry and Brett ever put on a show. Sanders went off for 169 yards rushing. Favre went 15/26 for 204 yards. With the future Hall of Famers meeting the moment, the game was a classic.

Detroit seemed to have the upper hand, with a 17-14 lead, seeming to have rattled Favre with a Pick-6 and on the verge of going in again. Packer safety George Teague made the second-most remembered play of this game, intercepting a pass in the end zone and going 101 yards the other way. Detroit still bounced right back and took a 24-21 lead, which set us up for the most remembered play of the game.

Green Bay had moved to the 40-yard line, getting close to field goal range and tying the game. Favre rolled to his left. Making a play that few quarterbacks could make, he stopped pivoted, and threw a beautiful pass all the way across the field. Sharpe was wide open, with the Lion secondary likely assuming that no one would try such a move when they were only ten yards from field goal range. Sharpe waltzed into the end zone untouched. Ballgame, Pack wins 28-24.

A divisional round date in Dallas awaited the following Sunday. The early afternoon kickoff got away from Green Bay in the second quarter. They led 3-0, but Dallas ripped off 17 points before half, then took a 24-3 lead in the third quarter. The game followed the same dynamic as the regular season meeting here in early October—Favre and Sharpe were doing their thing, but there was no running game and Dallas just had too many weapons. The final was deceptively respectable at 27-17.

It was still a breakthrough year for Green Bay. They were finally in the playoffs.

1994

The 1994 Green Bay Packers did an almost exact repeat of '93—another 9-7 playoff season that had the fan base happy the Pack was back, but also wondering when they would get to that proverbial next level.

In his third year as a starter, Favre continued to progress. While he was developing a reputation as “The Gunslinger”, his final numbers still were that of a conservative, game-managing quarterback in the West Coast system of Holmgren.

His 62% completion rate was sixth among NFL quarterbacks. While his 14 interceptions and being picked off on 2.4% percent of his throws would be high today, it was seventh in the league in 1994. What the Packer offense didn't do well was get the ball down the field, with Favre's 6.7 yards-per-attempt putting him 15th in what was then a 28-team league.

Any shortcomings in the passing game were no fault of Sharpe, who had a Pro Bowl season with 94 catches at nearly 12 yards a pop. Robert Brooks would eventually become a deep threat, but in '94 he was still more of a possession receiver, at eleven yards a catch. Bennett was a reliable target out of the backfield and his 623 rush yards led the team. Reggie Cobb provided a change of pace in the running game with 579 yards.

What the Packers did not have was a potent offensive line. In spite of that, the brilliance of Favre and Sharpe, combined with the strategic shrewdness of Holmgren, led to the offense scoring the fourth-most points in the NFL.

White had a Pro Bowl year and recorded eight sacks. The Packers also added some veteran help, bringing in Steve McMichael from Chicago to hold down the middle. Sean Jones came over from Houston to play on the end opposite White and added 10 ½ sacks. Bryce Paup was developing into a good pass-rushing linebacker on the outside and he rang up 7 ½ sacks.

The back seven of the defense was a little more problematic. There was no notable talent at linebacker and while corner Terrell Buckley intercepted five passes, he would never be known for his hitting or his run support. But the quality of the pass rush led to the defense ranking fifth in the league in points allowed.

The NFC Central was very balanced. The Packers, along with the Vikings and Lions had all made the playoffs in '93 and the Bears were right in the mix. On the flip side, none of those four were seen as a real threat to the hegemony of the Cowboys and 49ers in the NFC as a whole. This was a division that was up for grabs.

Minnesota added future Hall of Fame quarterback Warren Moon in the offseason and they came to Lambeau Field to start the season. The Packers picked Moon off three times, two of them from safety George Teague and got a tough 16-10 win. But a week later, a good Miami Dolphins team came to old Milwaukee County Stadium, where Green Bay played three home games a year. The Pack had no running game, fell behind 24-0 and though Favre threw for 362 yards, they were empty yards from behind in what ended up a 24-14 loss.

A road trip to Philadelphia, another team that would be on the playoff fringe, saw the running game again shut down. Favre went 24/45 for 280 yards, but the result was still a 13-7 loss. Their back to the wall early, the Packers came home to host lowly Tampa Bay. Favre was locked in, going 30/39 for 306 yards, no mistakes and spreading the ball around in an easy 30-3 win.

The New England Patriots were a rising contender under Bill Parcells and Green Bay went to Foxboro on the first Sunday of October. In a good game, a missed extra point by the Pack was the difference in a 17-16 loss. Green Bay still looked hungover the next week at home against a lousy LA Rams team and trailed 17-3 at the half. They awoke in time, with an 85-yard punt return by Brooks keying the rally and a 24-17 win.

Green Bay took their bye week at 3-3 and then went to Minnesota for a big Thursday night. Early in the game, the Viking defense returned a fumble for a touchdown. In a tough, physical game, similar to the Week 1 battle at Lambeau that proved to be the difference. The Packers fell in overtime, 13-10.

Another prime-time date on the road against a divisional rival was up next. Monday Night in Chicago was Halloween, it was pouring rain and it had another twist—this week's games were the first time the NFL experimented using throwback jerseys. The Packers and Bears were dressed like it was the 1920s and the conditions added to the game's old-timey feel. Favre ran 36 yards for a touchdown, Bennett muscled his way for over 100 yards and Green Bay produced an easy 36-6 victory.



The divisional run continued the next week in Milwaukee against Detroit. Favre threw for 237 yards and three touchdowns, as the Packers led 38-14. The Lions made a noble bid at a comeback in the fourth quarter, but the final was still 38-30. A 17-10 home win over a bad New York Jets team pushed Green Bay's record to 6-4. They were in good position moving into the homestretch.

But a difficult three-week road trip awaited. Buffalo didn't make the playoffs this season, but the Bills were still the four-time defending AFC champs and very much alive when Green Bay visited Rich Stadium on November 20. The Packer defense couldn't get off the field. Buffalo had 38 minutes of possession time, took a 24-0 lead before a late rally made the final cosmetically respectable at 29-20.

A short week was on deck with a Thanksgiving date in Dallas and the two-time defending Super Bowl champions who had knocked them out of last year's playoffs. Green Bay would catch a break though. Troy Aikman was hurt and injuries would force Jason Garrett into the lineup.

The future head coach of this franchise, Garrett was already known for his mastery of the system. But he wasn't supposed to light up the Packer defense for over 300 yards passing. Favre played well, going 27/40, 257 yards and four touchdowns. Sharpe caught nine balls for 122 yards. But being outrushed 138-29, the Favre/Sharpe duo couldn't keep up in a fast-paced 42-31 loss.

It was more of the same the next week in Detroit. In 1993, the Packers and Lions played here in the season finale to settle the division title and then the following week in the wild-card game. In

the latter, both Favre and Detroit running back Barry Sanders put on an exceptional show. They did again here for the late-afternoon national audience.

Favre went 29/46 for 366 yards. Barry ripped off 188 yards rushing in just 20 carries. But despite leading 14-3 early and 31-24 late, the Packers lost 34-31. They were 6-7. The season was teetering on the brink. But Green Bay, Detroit, Chicago and Minnesota were all still tightly bunched up in the NFC Central.

The Bears came to Lambeau Field and the Packers played like a hungry and desperate team. They crushed Chicago in rush yardage, 257-27, with Bennett going over 100 yards. Favre was 19/31 for 250 yards and three touchdowns. The final score was 40-3. That's called making a statement.

Statement or no, Green Bay needed to keep winning. They were hosting Atlanta. The Falcons were 6-8, one of several teams on the playoff fringe. If the Packers could win, they would seize control of their playoff destiny. If they lost, they were in serious trouble.

The game was also the final one to be played in Milwaukee, as the franchise was ending its decades-long relationship with the city so they could play all eight home games in Lambeau Field. It was a perfectly logical decision, although living near Milwaukee, this writer recalls the emotion that surrounded this game for a lot of old-timers. In my early twenties, I was fortunate enough to be in the stands for this piece of local history.

Green Bay seemed in control of the game and led 14-3. Bennett was doing good work out of the backfield, catching eight balls for over 100 yards. But the Packers didn't drive the stake in when they had the chance, the Falcons rallied and late in the game the Pack was down 17-14.

It was time for Brett to step up. He led a drive inside the Atlanta 10-yard line in the closing moments. The Packers were out of timeouts. Favre rolled to his right. The pass wasn't there. Most quarterbacks would do the safe and logical thing of throwing it away and playing for overtime.

But good, bad or indifferent, Brett Lorenzo Favre never did the safe and logical thing. He tucked the ball away and put it all on the line with a race for the right pylon. He got there, carrying a couple Atlanta tacklers on his back to finish the job. Ballgame, Packers win 21-17.

There was still the matter of getting one more win and Green Bay took care of business with a Christmas Eve day win in Tampa. The Pack dominated on the ground, Bennett again going over the 100-mark and Favre again playing efficiently at 24/36 for 291 yards. They were up 28-6 at halftime and cruised into the postseason with a 34-19 win.

All four contenders of the NFC Central ended up qualifying and would occupy the 3-6 seed lines in the NFC bracket. When Detroit lost on Christmas night, it moved Green Bay up to the 4-spot and guaranteed them a home game. Minnesota secured the division and the 3-seed on Monday Night against a San Francisco team that was locked into the 1-seed and resting key people. Chicago would be in the #6 spot.

So it was a Packers-Lions playoff rematch on New Year's Eve. Last year's wild-card game had been memorable for its wild shifts and changes in direction. This one would be remembered for the Green Bay defense.

In one of the great defensive efforts put on by any team in the playoffs, the Pack held Barry Sanders to (-1) yard rushing. Yes, negative yards. And no, weather was not a problem. It was unseasonably warm at 40 degrees in Lambeau that day and the sun was out.

Favre threw for 262 yards, two touchdowns and made no mistakes. Green Bay had another game where they didn't put an opponent away and they had to make a key stop late. But it was all enough for a 16-12 win.

The playoff rerun continued, with a second straight divisional round trip to Dallas. And for the second straight year, the Packers were overmatched. Favre was erratic, at 21/46 for 236 yards. Aikman was sharp, 23/32 for 337 yards and he threw a 94-yard touchdown pass in the first quarter that sent the tone for this early Sunday afternoon in Big D. The final was 35-9.

The loss was tough to swallow for Green Bay. Not because they really expected to win—Dallas and San Francisco were five steps ahead of everyone else in the NFL. But there had been hope the Packers would be competitive and show they weren't far from getting to the league elite themselves. The loss showed they still had work to do.

But the three consecutive 9-7 seasons that had been completed, with two postseason trips and two playoff victories, had given Green Bay a foundation to build from.

1995

The team and the fan base were hungry to get off the fringe of contention. The 1995 Green Bay Packers were a breakthrough team that jumped one level higher.

It will be no surprise to learn that Green Bay's move from being above-average to pretty good was keyed by Favre's rise from being pretty good to outstanding. The quarterback dazzled in 1995. His 38 touchdown passes led the NFL. His completion percentage of 63 percent was sixth and the 7.7 yards-per-attempt were second among quarterbacks. The 13 interceptions might seem high by today's standards, but with an interception rate of just 2.3%, Favre still was in the top 10 for avoiding mistakes. He won the first of his historic three consecutive MVP awards.

Brooks emerged as the favored target and he racked up nearly 1,500 yards receiving and at almost 15 yards a pop, could stretch the field. Tight end Mark Chmura worked underneath, caught 54 balls and made the Pro Bowl. Mark Ingram was a solid veteran receiver that created a viable option and Dorsey Levens caught 48 passes out of the backfield.

The running game had been a sticking point in Green Bay. And while the '95 Packers would never outmuscle anyone, they did get more balance to the offense. Edgar Bennett cleared the 1,000-yard mark and was another good pass-catcher in Holmgren's West Coast offense. Up

front, even though the Packers didn't have Pro Bowl players, the drafting of Notre Dame's Aaron Taylor gave them a little more muscle.

All told, the Packers ranked sixth in the NFL in points scored. And the defense was even better, ranking fourth in points allowed. Reggie White was 1st-team All-NFL in 1995 and had 12 sacks. Sean Jones, added nine sacks and kept some pressure off of Reggie. Leroy Butler was one of the game's top strong safeties and even though '95 wasn't a Pro Bowl year, he was in the midst of a six-year run where he was consistently one of the league's best at his position.

So in short, the Packers weren't deep—at least when measured against the standards of NFC behemoths Dallas and San Francisco, who had combined to win the last three Super Bowls. But Green Bay had some star power in a balanced NFC Central.

The season didn't exactly start off with a bang. A bad Rams team came to Lambeau Field on Week 1, picked off Favre three times and walked out with a 17-14 win. Green Bay's coming Monday Night visit to Chicago now had some early urgency to it.

Favre came out firing with three early touchdown passes, including a 99-yard strike to Brooks. The Packers jumped out to a 21-0 lead. The Bears came roaring back, closed the lead to 27-21 and drove down the Green Bay 3-yard line in the fourth quarter. The drive stalled, Chicago took the field goal and the Packers made the 27-24 score stand up.

A home game with the New York Giants was up next. The Giants were on their way to a rough year and the Packer defense had their way, not allowing a touchdown. Favre threw early touchdown passes to Brooks and Ingram, Bennett churned out 87 yards on the ground and the Pack won 14-6.

Green Bay headed for Jacksonville, where the Jaguars (along with the Carolina Panthers) were in their first year of existence. This Sunday Night game marked the Jags' first prime-time appearance. Favre was the star of the show. He went 20/30 for 202 yards and spread the ball around. Leading 17-7 in the fourth quarter, a 29-yard TD pass to Anthony Morgan sewed up what ended as a 24-14 win.

The Packers went into their bye week at 3-1, but the schedule was about to get tougher. They went to Dallas, the place where their last two seasons had ended in the divisional round with decisive losses. This game didn't go much better. They dug themselves a 24-3 hole and while Favre rallied the Pack to within 31-24 and Brooks caught 10 balls for 124 yards, Dallas controlled the line of scrimmage, drove for a clinching field goal and won 34-24.

Green Bay now faced a key NFC Central stretch. Their games against the Lions and Vikings would be jammed into the next four weeks, followed by the rematch with the Bears. The unique schedule sequence began with Detroit and Minnesota each coming into Lambeau Field.

Packers-Lions games were about Favre and Barry Sanders. Both were on their game. Sanders rushed for 124 yards, but Lion QB Scott Mitchell did not play well. Favre did, going 23/34 for 342 yards and no mistakes. The Packers won 30-21. Favre stayed locked in against the Vikings. In a

game that was tied 14-14 at the half, he threw four touchdowns against zero interceptions and Green Bay pulled away to a 38-21 win.

Having swept their home games, the Packers could get control of the division by simply stealing one on the road. They couldn't do it. In Detroit, Favre threw for 304 yards, including a 77-yard TD pass to Brooks. But Favre also threw three interceptions, Sanders went for 167 yards and Green Bay lost 24-16.

In Minnesota, Favre was picked off twice and then knocked out of the game with an ankle injury. The Packers also trailed this one 24-16 before backup Ty Detmer led a game-tying drive. But the Vikings got a late field goal and won 27-24.

Green Bay was now sitting on 5-4. Favre's status was very much in doubt. Chicago was coming in at 6-3. It was a must-win.

If there's one thing everyone in the NFL would come to learn about Brett Favre it's that he doesn't miss games. Not one like this. He came out and played on his bad ankle. How did he do? How about 25/33 for 336 yards, five touchdowns and no picks. Trailing 28-21 in the third quarter, he hit Brooks on a 44-yard strike to tie and then found Bennett on a 16-yard scoring pass to get the lead.

On an afternoon when the Packers couldn't run, stop the run or contain Chicago quarterback Erik Kramer, their own injured quarterback lifted them to a 35-28 win. The win was a seminal moment for the entire season and is a key inflection point of this entire era of Packer success.

Green Bay paid a visit to Cleveland. The Browns, a playoff team a year earlier and coached by Bill Belichick, were unraveling after the stunning midseason announcement that they were moving to Baltimore. By this point, the Browns were spiritless. Favre went 23/28 for 210 yards, three TDs, zero mistakes and led a 31-20 win. It was more of the same the next week at home against Tampa—16/24, 267 yards, three TDs against no mistakes in a 35-13 win.

Cincinnati wasn't very good, but they came to Lambeau on the first weekend of December and gave the Pack a good game, one that was tied 10-10 at the half. But the Green Bay defense was shutting down the run. Favre ended up 31/43 for 339 yards and threw for another three TDs, as the Packers pulled away 24-10.

They were 9-4 and had momentum. A division title was very much in their grasp and there were even rumblings about the Super Bowl. But a Sunday Night visit to Tampa threw a monkey wrench into those plans. Buccaneer quarterback Trent Dilfer was able to at least match Favre on this night and Bennett couldn't get anything going on the ground. The Packers lost 13-10.

Green Bay still led the NFC Central by a game, with Detroit and Minnesota giving chase at 8-6. Chicago had faded to 7-7, tied with Tampa. But the loss to the Bucs dropped the Packers behind the Lions in terms of divisional record. Detroit held the tiebreaker. Furthermore, any hope of catching San Francisco for the 2-seed and first-round playoff bye went out the window with the loss.

Momentum needed to be re-established in a late Saturday afternoon visit to mediocre New Orleans. The game was tied 7-7 in the second quarter. In short order, Favre threw a 17-yard touchdown pass to Brooks, a 40-yard strike to Brooks and a 28-yard scoring pass to Antonio Freeman. It was 28-7 by half and ended as a comfortable 34-23 win.

The division race took clarity the rest of the weekend. The red-hot Lions won their sixth straight and were 9-6. Minnesota lost on Monday Night in San Francisco. The NFC Central was a simple proposition. The Packers would take the crown with a win in the early TV window on Christmas Eve Sunday. If they lost, the Lions could claim it when they kicked off in Tampa in the late afternoon.

And Green Bay's opponent would not be an easy one. The Pittsburgh Steelers were one of the hottest teams in football and would eventually reach the Super Bowl. What the Packers did have going for them was homefield advantage and the fact the Steelers were already locked into the AFC's #2 seed.

Favre did his thing. He went 23/32 for 301 yards and nary an interception to be found. Brooks was electric, catching eleven of those passes for 137 yards. Green Bay led 24-13 in the fourth quarter and seemed in control.

But Pittsburgh had their own offense gaining momentum. They marched in for one touchdown. In a big defensive stop, the Packers prevented the two-point conversion and maintained a five-point lead at 24-19. That stop loomed even larger when the Steelers got the ball back, marched inside the 10-yard line and faced a fourth down.

Yancey Thigpen had played a good game at wide receiver for the Steelers, catching six balls for 80 yards. When he got wide open in the end zone, hearts across Lambeau sank. The pass from Neil O'Donnell was right on target...and Thigpen inexplicably dropped it. The old stadium erupted. The Packers had survived 24-19. They were NFC Central champs for the first time in 23 years.

Had Thigpen caught the ball, the Packers would have been going to Philadelphia the following week, given Detroit's subsequent win at Tampa. Instead, Green Bay was hosting a playoff game and playing a much more manageable Atlanta Falcons team that had snuck into the postseason in the final week.

The Packers spotted the Falcons a touchdown and then took. Favre played conservatively and mistake-free, at 24/35 for 199 yards. The big play of the game came when Green Bay led 14-10 and Freeman returned a punt 76 yards to the house. Bennett ran for 108 yards, the defense played well and the final was a comfortable 37-20.

Green Bay fans were now used to winning on wild-card weekend, this making three years in a row on advancing out of the first round. It was the divisional round that was the stumbling block. They didn't have to go to Dallas this year, but a trip to San Francisco—merely the defending Super Bowl champs with future Hall of Famer Steve Young at quarterback—didn't seem a whole lot easier.

As it turned out, the Packers matched up much better with the 49ers, something they would repeatedly prove over the next few years. Green Bay got a defensive touchdown to get the ball rolling. Favre threw a pair of touchdown passes. A stunned nation watched on this late Saturday afternoon as the 9 ½ point underdog Packers took a 21-0 lead.

Young put the ball up 65 times in an effort to bring the 49ers back, but it really never got tight. At 21-10 in the second half, the Packers went on two long drives that ended in field goals. The final score was 27-17.

Now it was time for a third straight trip to Dallas, this time for the NFC Championship Game. The Packers were again a nine-point underdog in the betting markets. When they trailed 14-3 in the second quarter, it seemed like more of the same in Big D.

Then Favre hit Brooks on a 77-yard touchdown pass and followed it up with another scoring drive. Green Bay led 17-14 and after three quarters they still held a 27-24 lead. Favre was playing well and would end up 21/39 for 307 yards.

But his counterpart Troy Aikman was razor-sharp, going 21/33 for 255 yards and no mistakes, while Favre threw two picks. The Packers committed eleven penalties. Most important, Dallas controlled the line of scrimmage. The Green Bay pass rush never got to Aikman, while the Cowboy front got home to Favre four times. And the rushing yardage differential was 169-48 in favor of Dallas behind the great Emmitt Smith. Dallas scored twice in the fourth quarter and won 38-27.

It was a disappointing ending, but no one could contain the optimism in Green Bay. They hadn't reached the Super Bowl yet, but they had knocked off at least one of the league's elite teams and placed themselves squarely in the conversation.

1996

Favre had a trying offseason prior to the highly anticipated 1996 campaign, going through treatment for addiction to Vicodin painkillers. But it didn't affect his play on the field. His 39 touchdown passes led the NFL in 1996. He was intercepted just 2.4% of the time, fourth in the league. His completion percentage and yards-per-attempt were both in the top ten. And he won the second of his three straight MVP awards.

The Green Bay skill position cast was exceptionally balanced. Nobody hit the 1,000-yard mark in either rushing or receiving, but there was plenty of depth as the ball got spread around. Bennett and Levens led the running game and were each threats to catch the ball out of the backfield. Antonio Freeman and Don Beebe each stretched the field at wide receiver. Keith Jackson made the Pro Bowl at tight end. Chumra and fullback William Henderson were each steady targets underneath.

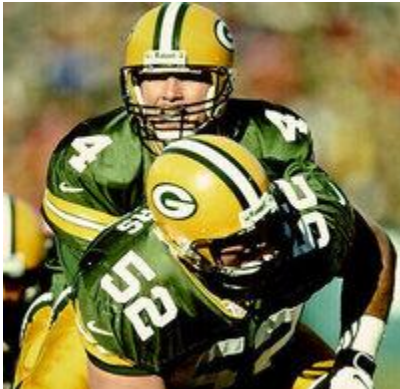
A draft focus on the offensive line was also starting to bear fruit. The Packers had reliable and young offensive linemen at most spots and 32-year-old Frank Winter, the old man of the crew, made the Pro Bowl at center. It all added up to an offense that led the league in points scored.

White was 35-years-old and not the force he'd been in his prime, but the future Hall of Famer could still play. He recorded 8 ½ sacks and punched another Pro Bowl ticket. He was joined up front by Sean Jones and defensive tackles Santana Dotson and big Gilbert Brown in a line that consistently got pressure on the quarterback.

The front four was consistently the defensive strength of this team during their 1990s heyday, but there was one signature talent in the secondary. Butler made 1st-team All-NFL in 1996. The Packers added a veteran free safety in Eugene Robinson who intercepted six passes.

Green Bay's defense also ranked #1 in the league. Suffice it to say, the most prolific offense combined with the stingiest defense makes a team pretty tough to beat. And the '96 Packers came blazing out of the chute.

A road trip to Tampa Bay to play first-year head coach Tony Dungy started the season. Dungy would turn the Bucs around quickly, but not this year. Favre went 20/27 for 247 yards and four touchdowns, three of them to Jackson. Green Bay won 34-3.



Philadelphia had reached the playoffs in 1995 and would do so again this season. They came to Lambeau Field for a Monday Night home opener. The Packers pounded the Eagles on the ground, winning rush yardage 171-59. They led 30-7 by halftime and won 39-13.

The routs continued against an average San Diego Chargers team at home in Week 3. This time the rush differential was 132-33, the halftime score was 21-3 and the final 42-10. Green Bay was riding high. So was division rival Minnesota, also 3-0. And the Packers and Vikings would meet in the Twin Cities in Week 4.

Minneapolis' old Metrodome was usually a house of horrors for Favre (ironic, given that he ended his career there) and this 1996 trip was no different. A tough Viking defensive front got to him seven times. The Minnesota offensive line facilitated 38 minutes of possession time. Green Bay lost 30-21.

A couple of easy road wins over mediocre teams followed. Favre threw four touchdowns against zero interceptions in a 31-10 win at Seattle. A trip to Chicago saw Favre throw four more scoring passes, Freeman rack up 146 yards receiving and the defense limit the Bears to 53 yards on the ground. The final was 37-6.

It was time for another Monday Night home game and this was a biggie. The San Francisco 49ers were, along with the Dallas Cowboys, the two great powers of the NFC in the early 1990s.

Green Bay's playoff upset at San Francisco in the divisional round the previous year was a seminal moment for the franchise in the Favre era. Now they had to show it wasn't a fluke.

The Packers didn't play well early on, digging a 17-6 hole by halftime. They got back in the game when Favre hit Beebe on a 59-yard touchdown strike and converted the two-point play. They still trailed 20-17 late in the game before a field goal from Chris Jacke forced overtime. In OT, Jacke nailed a 53-yard field goal, Lambeau went berserk and Green Bay had a 23-20 win. They went into their mid-October bye week at 6-1.

Tampa Bay came north on the far side of the bye. Green Bay was a 17 ½ point favorite, but the Dungy Effect was starting to take hold. The Buccaneer defense limited Favre to 19/31 for 178 yards. Bennett was able to grind out 93 yards on the ground though, and the Pack survived, 13-7.

Detroit was the next divisional foe to come to Lambeau. Favre and Lion running back Barry Sanders had some great battles over the years and this was one of them. Sanders ripped off 152 yards rushing and even though this was not a good Lion team, they were within 14-10 at the half. Favre got rolling in the second half, threw a 65-yard touchdown pass to Beebe and led a 28-18 win.

At 8-1, Green Bay was riding high and the money point of the schedule was here. The Packers were going to Kansas City, where the Chiefs were a consistent contender during the Marty Schottenheimer Era. And then it was on to Dallas for a Monday Night date at the venue where they had been eliminated from the playoffs three straight years.

The trip to KC was a disaster. The potent Chief running game pounded out 182 yards. The Packers trailed 27-6 before a couple Favre TD passes made it cosmetically close at 27-20. But the game the fans of Green Bay really wanted was next.

This trip didn't go a whole lot better. The Packer offense was again shut down, not scoring until midway through the fourth quarter. The defense made red zone stops—a lot of them, as Dallas' steady offensive drives resulted in seven field goals. The final was 21-6 and it didn't feel even that close.

Green Bay was 8-3 and still had a two-game lead over Minnesota, who had faded to 6-5. The Packers were still atop the NFC overall, with the tiebreaker on the 49ers, also at 8-3. The up-and-coming Carolina Panthers, along with the Cowboys, were 7-4.

The standings weren't the problem. The problem was that Green Bay had just looked utterly helpless in its two biggest games of the year. A full-scale fire alarm was going throughout the state of Wisconsin as the Packers prepared to go to St. Louis and play the mediocre Rams on Sunday Night Football.

For one half, the nightmare continued and Green Bay trailed 9-3. They couldn't run the ball. Favre couldn't get the ball down the field. But defensive back Doug Evans stepped up with a big Pick-6 in the third quarter that turned the tide. The Packers steadily pulled away to win 24-9.

A 28-17 home win over the Bears wasn't particularly inspiring, although Freeman had a huge day with 156 yards receiving on ten catches. Desmond Howard also showcased the punt return skills that were about to make him famous with a 75-yard return to the house. The Packers were 10-3 and set to host the 11-1 Denver Broncos.

The game was hyped as a Super Bowl preview, with each team holding pole position for the #1 seed in their respective conferences. As it turned out, that was forecast was one year ahead of schedule when the Broncos flamed out in the playoffs. And this early afternoon kick had the steam taken out of it when John Elway didn't play.

Freeman again went off, catching nine passes for 175 yards and three touchdowns. The Packers led 13-3 at the half and then took off, winning 41-6. The victory clinched the NFC Central and at least the #3 seed in the playoffs.

Now they needed to wrap up a first-round bye and a visit to Detroit was next. Desmond took a punt 92 yards to the house. Favre went 16/25 for 240 yards and spread the ball around. The Packer defense held Sanders to 78 yards and an easy 31-3 locked up at least the 2-seed.

One more hurdle to secure homefield all the way through and it was a revenge date with the Vikings. The game was tied 10-10 at the half, but Green Bay completely took over the second half. They won the rush yardage battle 233-49, with 109 yards from Bennett. Favre went 15/23 for 202 yards, three touchdowns and no mistakes. All three scoring passes came in the second half. The Packers blew out the playoff-bound Vikes 38-10 and wrapped up the 1-seed in the NFC bracket.

San Francisco had gone 12-4, but was edged out by Carolina in the NFC West. So the 49ers went the wild-card route and then brought them to Lambeau on a wet and muddy day that began Divisional Round Weekend.

It was Desmond time. He took a punt at his own 29-yard line and went the distance for the game's first points. The Packers took a 21-0 lead. In the conditions and with the league's best defense behind him, Favre played it close to the vest—a high-percentage 11/15, but only for 79 yards. San Francisco made it interesting at 21-14. But Favre steered clear of mistakes, while 49er counterpart Elvis Grbac threw three picks. Bennett keyed a 139-68 rush yardage edge. Green Bay scored two more TDs and pulled back away, 35-14.

The Packers were hungry for Dallas to come north, but the Green Bay faithful didn't get their wish. The Panthers had grabbed the 2-seed and beat the Cowboys on Sunday. Playing Carolina, a franchise in their second year of existence, didn't exactly have the same marquee value as going through Dallas would. But when you haven't been to a Super Bowl in nearly three decades, there's only so much room for getting fussy about your path.

The NFC Championship Game kicked off shortly after noon local time the following week. Carolina went up 7-0. Favre answered with a 29-yard touchdown pass to Levens. Even though the Panthers briefly took a 10-7 lead, the Packer offense had found something with Levens. He

ran for 88 yards and caught five balls for 117 yards. Bennett rushed for 99 yards and Green Bay outrushed Carolina 201-45.

If the Panthers couldn't control the line of scrimmage, they weren't going to win. Favre threw a short TD pass to Freeman. Green Bay was up 14-10 at the half and they took over the second half, pulling away to a 30-13 win.

To a modern generation of New England Patriots fans, the Super Bowl seems like a birthright. That wasn't the case in 1996. The Patriots were making just their second appearance on the biggest stage in American sports and they had never won a title. Green Bay was a hefty 14-point favorite.

A snowstorm blanketed most of Wisconsin on Super Bowl Sunday. I was living in Milwaukee and the streets were silent during the hours of game time.

Favre came out of the chute with a 54-yard deep post to Andre Rison for a touchdown. The ensuing highlight of the quarterback running downfield with his helmet off, filled with exuberance, would become a staple of his highlight montages in years to come.

But the Patriots, with Drew Bledsoe at quarterback and Curtis Martin in the backfield, had a response. They were ahead 14-10 by the second quarter. Favre went back to the long ball and hit Freeman on an 81-yard touchdown pass. The quarterback later ran in from two yards for another touchdown. Green Bay was up 27-14 at the half.

New England cut the margin to 27-21 in the third quarter. Just when the game was ready to get interesting, Desmond Howard took matters into his own hands. He brought the kickoff all the way back. The two-point conversion made the score 35-21. With the defense intercepting Bledsoe four times and White sealing his legacy with three sacks, that score stood up.

Favre went 14/27 for 246 yards, the two long touchdowns and no mistakes. He should have been named the game's MVP, although Howard getting the honor for his special teams work wasn't a bad choice.

The Vince Lombardi Trophy was finally going back home. The Green Bay Packers were back on top.

1997

The 1997 Green Bay Packers had all the pieces in place for a repeat. They did indeed make it back to the Super Bowl, but an upset cost them their chance at a dynasty.

Favre made it three MVPs in a row in 1997, sharing the honor with Detroit Lions' running back Barry Sanders.

Favre's 35 touchdown passes were the most in the NFL. He completed 59 percent of his passes, a figure that ranked seventh in the league. His 7.5 yards-per-attempt were fourth. The

one weakness was that he made more mistakes this year than in either of his two previous MVP campaigns. Favre's 16 interceptions equated out to being picked 3.1% of that time, and that was near the bottom of the league.

Freeman and Brooks were big-play targets on the outside. Freeman caught 81 passes at better than fifteen yards a pop. Brooks had been the Packers' top receiver in 1995 before injuries kept him out of much of the '96 title run. He came back strong in '97 with 60 catches for over 1,000 yards.

Favre had other places to go with the football. Chmura was a Pro Bowl tight end. Henderson caught 41 balls out of the fullback position. The offensive line didn't have Pro Bowl talent, but collectively, they were one of the best pass-protection units in the league.

No one was more versatile than Levens. The running back's 53 catches were third-most on the team. And he rolled up over 1,400 yards on the ground to give Green Bay excellent offensive balance. The Packer offense finished second in the NFL in points scored.

The defense was almost as good, ranking fifth in points allowed. The usual suspects led the way. Reggie White was 36-years-old, but the defensive lineman had another Pro Bowl year on his way to the Hall of Fame. White recorded 11 sacks and led a good defensive front that included Dotson and Gabe Wilkins, who each got 5 ½ sacks. Butler was the NFL's best strong safety in the secondary.

Green Bay opened the season with a Monday Night home game against the Chicago Bears. The Bears were in a steady decline since making the playoffs in 1994. Favre went 15/22 for 226 yards and a couple touchdowns, spreading the ball around to all his targets. Chicago quarterback Erik Kramer was erratic. The Packers took home a 38-24 win.

A late Sunday afternoon road trip to Philadelphia was up next. The Eagles had been a consistent playoff team going back to the late 1980s. Green Bay missed good opportunities when they drove to the Philly 10-yard line or closer three different times and settled for field goals. The result was a late touchdown beat the Packers 10-9. It was disappointing in the moment and in light of the fact that this Eagles team wasn't very good, looks even more so from the eyes of history.

Green Bay was still an eleven-point favorite when they came home to play Dan Marino and the playoff-bound Miami Dolphins. Favre outplayed Marino, going 24/37 for 253 yards, two touchdowns and no mistakes. Levens' 121 rushing yards keyed a big edge in the ground game. More red-zone inefficiencies kept the game unnecessarily close, but this time the Packers won, 23-18.

Minnesota was Green Bay's most consistent challenger in the NFC Central and the Vikings were coming to Lambeau Field for Week 4. Favre came out firing with four touchdown passes in the first half alone. Freeman caught seven balls for 122 yards, while Brooks' five catches went for 92 yards. Green Bay led 28-7 and then held off a Minnesota rally to win 38-32.

Another divisional game was up next with a road trip to Detroit. The red-zone bugaboo returned and two good Packer drives early in the game produced only two field goals. Then Favre threw a Pick-6. Sanders got rolling and racked up 139 yards. Green Bay lost 26-15.

The month of September was in the books and the Packers were 3-2. Certainly not bad, but they didn't look like the same team they had scaled the heights a year earlier. And they had a tough game on deck.

Tony Dungy had turned around the previously woeful Tampa Bay Buccaneers and this year's Bucs team would contend in the division and make the playoffs. Green Bay had to play better, especially when they were in position to score. On this early afternoon game in Lambeau, the Packers did just that.

Two first-half drives went for touchdowns. Wilkins made highlight reel play for a defensive tackle, intercepting a pass and going 77 yards for a touchdown. Green Bay outrushed Tampa Bay 217-64 and even though Favre couldn't get the ball downfield against Dungy's defense, he stayed away from mistakes. All that was enough to produce a 21-16 win.

The string of four straight NFC Central games concluded in Chicago. The Packers spotted the Bears a 10-0 lead before Favre threw three short touchdown passes to get the game moving back in Green Bay's direction. The 24-23 escape wasn't inspiring, but it was a win. The Pack headed into their bye week at 5-2.

Green Bay returned with a Monday Night date in New England, a rematch of the previous year's Super Bowl. Favre was brilliant, going 23/34 for 239 yards, three touchdowns and no interceptions. Levens ran for 100 yards. The defense picked off Patriot quarterback Drew Bledsoe three times. The result was a comfortable 28-10 win.

Another prime-time appearance came the next Sunday Night when Detroit visited Lambeau Field. The Packer defense was the story. They got four sacks. More important, Green Bay intercepted Lion quarterback Scott Mitchell four times. Twice by Butler and another a 50-yard Pick-6 from Darren Sharper that broke a 7-7 tie in the second quarter and paved the way for a 20-10 win.

Green Bay did not play well the following week at home against St. Louis as a (-15) favorite against the lowly Rams. Favre was erratic, only completing 18/37 passes. But he made enough big plays, getting 306 passing yards with Freeman catching seven balls for 160 yards. The Pack won 17-7.

They were a big favorite again the following week in Indianapolis. This Colts' team was awful and in the midst of a season that would position them to draft Peyton Manning the following spring. Green Bay was a (-13) favorite. Favre went 18/25 for 363 yards. Levens rushed for 103 yards. No problem, right?

Not so fast. The defense played its worst game of the year. A rising star named Marshall Faulk ran for 116 yards. And quarterback Paul Justin had his fifteen minutes of fame. Justin threw for 340 yards and beat Favre and the Packers 41-38.

The Dallas Cowboys had not only been the dynasty of the early 1990s and contender every year of this decade, they had also been the biggest thorn in Green Bay's side. The Cowboys knocked the Packers from the playoffs in 1993, 1994 and 1995. It stuck in the craw of Green Bay fans that Dallas lost in the playoffs before they could come north in 1996.

Hence, even though this Cowboy team was a bad one that would end their run, all of Lambeau Field was alive for the visit on the Sunday prior to Thanksgiving. Levens rolled up 190 yards rushing. Favre threw four touchdown passes. Green Bay won 45-17 and got some measure of satisfaction.

The Packers were 9-3 and atop what was proving to be the deepest division in pro football. The NFC Central would produce four playoff teams, including the Lions, Vikings and Buccaneers. Minnesota and Tampa Bay were both 8-4 and in hot pursuit of first place. They were Green Bay's next two opponents—both on the road. The season's biggest moment was at hand.

The Packers went to Minnesota on Monday Night. In previous years, the good Viking front four often forced Favre into mistakes in the loud indoor environment of the Metrodome. Not tonight. Favre was mistake-free. Levens ran for 108 yards. And it was the Green Bay defense that got pressure on the quarterback. They rang up six sacks, including 2 ½ from White. The Packers won big, 27-11.

That momentum rolled with them down to Tampa. The Packers completely shut down the Bucs. Favre went 25/33 for 280 yards and a couple TDs. Another easy win resulted, this one 17-6. Green Bay's dominant showing clinched the NFC Central with two weeks to go and sent a message that they were rounding into form for the playoffs.

There was still the matter of trying to catch San Francisco for the 1-seed in the NFC playoffs. The 49ers were 12-2 and held the tiebreaker edge, so the Packers needed a lot of help. They did their part when they went to Carolina. The Panthers were on their way to a 7-9 year so this rematch of the NFC Championship Game had lost some juice. Favre threw a 58-yard TD pass to Freeman, a 20-yard scoring strike to Brooks while Levens and backup running back Aaron Hayden helped roll up over 200 rushing yards. Green Bay won 31-10.

San Francisco beat Denver on Monday Night and sewed up the top playoff seed. Green Bay had the 2-seed and first-round bye in hand. They played the season finale on early Saturday afternoon at Buffalo. The Bills, like the Cowboys, were having a rough year after having been outstanding for the entire 1990s. Favre threw a couple early TDs, put the Packers up 21-0 and then took the second half off. Green Bay wrapped up their 13-3 regular season with a 31-21 win.

After a week off, Green Bay hosted Tampa Bay. Favre threw an early touchdown pass to Chmura, but the red-zone problems of the early season made their way back. Two good Packer drives bogged down and a game that could have been put to bed early was still in play at 13-0.

The Tampa defense was playing well, especially defensive tackle Warren Sapp who got to Favre three times. The Bucs cut the lead to 13-7 as the game went to the fourth quarter. Finally Levens, who rushed for 112 yards, scored a touchdown and sealed the 21-7 win.

Green Bay might have been the road team for the NFC Championship Game in San Francisco, but the Packers were clearly the more respected team. Oddsmakers installed them as a (-1.5) favorite. It turns out that understated the case quite a bit.



On a rainy afternoon by the Bay, the Packers simply dominated. They outrushed the 49ers 106-33. Favre went 16/27 for 222 yards. Freeman, undeterred by the muddy conditions, made his four catches count for 107 yards.

Even though San Francisco quarterback Steve Young battled nobly, going 23/38 for 250 yards, they were empty yards. The 49ers didn't get in the end zone until a kickoff return with four minutes to play. Green Bay won 23-10 and it felt a lot more convincing than that.

The Pack was riding high as they went to San Diego for the Super Bowl. They were a (-11) favorite over the Broncos and much of the media, both national and local, had already moved into coronation mode.

But Denver, after the first ring for their legendary quarterback John Elway, was in the mood for confrontation rather than coronation. Even though Favre threw a 22-yard TD pass to Freeman to start the scoring, the Broncos countered with 17 unanswered points.

Green Bay rallied back and by the third quarter the game was tied 17-17. But Packer defensive tackle Gilbert Brown, a key part of their rush defense, had to leave the game with an injury. Bronco running back Terrell Davis was a great player and a future Hall of Famer in any case. Now there was a soft target to run at. And did Denver ever pound that advantage.

Davis carried 30 times for 157 yards. He ran for two touchdowns, the last one breaking a 24-24 tie with just under two minutes to go. Green Bay drove to midfield and had a legitimate shot to tie the game, but a fourth down throw from Favre fell incomplete.

It was an incredibly disappointing end to a two-year end that was incredibly successful. Green Bay would go on to many more good seasons with Favre at quarterback, with multiple postseason trips and several more playoff wins. But they never made it back to the Super Bowl with #4 at the helm.

1998

The 1998 Green Bay Packers were the last edition in Mike Holmgren's successful seven-year run in Lambeau Field. The '98 team slipped a bit, but they were still a solid team and a fitting swan song for the head coach.

Favre was coming off three straight MVP seasons. The Gunslinger didn't make it four in a row, but he was still awfully good. The 63 percent completion rate was the best in the league and the 7.6 yards-per-attempt ranked seventh. What separated this season from the previous three was that Favre's mistakes ticked upward. The 31-23 TD/INT ratio wasn't bad the way it would be today. But that was still interceptions on 4.2 percent of his throws and that still ranked near the bottom of the league.

Freeman continued to be Favre's favorite target and the big-play receiver made 1st-team All-NFL in 1998, going over 1,400 yards and averaging 17 yards a pop. Chmura had a Pro Bowl year at tight end. Where the Packer offense had problems was in the supporting cast for the stars. No other receivers and none of the running backs had notable seasons—the latter undoubtedly held back by the lack of any Pro Bowl players on the offensive line.

Even so, with Favre going deep to Freeman and underneath to Chmura, the Packer offense ranked sixth in the NFL in points scored.

Reggie White was 37-years-old and this would be his final year with the Packers. It was a vintage season, 16 sacks and 1st-team All-NFL honors for the Hall of Fame defensive end. A rookie, Vonnie Holliday, was on the other end and he delivered eight sacks, preventing offensive lines from keying too much on Reggie.

Butler was another 1st-team All-NFL player in 1998. All told, the Packer defense was much like the team itself—not as good as during the Super Bowl years, but still decent and ranked 11th in the NFL for points allowed.

Green Bay opened the season at home against Detroit. This Lion team would prove to be a disappointment, but the game was wild. The Packers led 24-12 when they allowed a kickoff return for a touchdown. Green Bay kick returner Roell Preston promptly ran one right back the other way. Then Favre hit Freeman on an 84-yard touchdown strike. The Pack won 38-19.

Tampa Bay was starting a run of consistent contenders under Tony Dungy. The Bucs were in town next. Even though Green Bay gave up another special teams touchdown, Favre more than made it up for it. He went 22/37 for 237 yards, spreading the ball to eight different receivers and making no mistakes. The Packers won 23-15.

A road trip to lowly Cincinnati saw a less than inspired performance, but Favre went 23/35 for 274 yards, Green Bay won the turnover battle 3-0 and took home a 13-6 win. A week later they went to Carolina. The Panthers would have a woeful season, but they gave the Packers all they could handle.

The game was tied 20-20 at the half, with Favre making big plays both ways—he had thrown two touchdowns and a Pick-6 by intermission. For the game, he ended up with five TDs and three interceptions—enough to stay on the right side of the balance sheet in a 37-30 win.

Green Bay was rolling at 4-0. Minnesota was also 4-0. The Packers and Vikings were set to meet on Monday Night Football in the first week of October at Lambeau Field. It was a great time for the Packers to assert their control over this division.

Instead, a changing of the guard was announced. The Green Bay pass defense was shredded by Minnesota receiver Randy Moss. Favre threw three more interceptions and this time there was nothing positive to counterbalance the mistakes. Before a stunned crowd and stunned national audience, the Packers fell behind 37-10. Backup quarterback Doug Pederson (who went on to become a Super Bowl-winning coach in Philadelphia nearly twenty years later) got some rare playing time and threw a couple garbage-time touchdown passes. The final was 37-24, but it wasn't even that close.

Green Bay had to live with that beatdown through their bye week. They returned to play on a Thursday night at Detroit. Favre threw a 67-yard touchdown pass to Freeman to start the scoring and the Pack took a 10-0 lead. Favre would throw for 300 yards on this night. But he had another three-interception game. Sanders rushed for 155 yards. The lead dissipated and the Packers lost 27-20.

A home date with a bad Baltimore team was needed. The Favre-to-Freeman combo got clicking, nine times for 103 yards. Preston brought a punt 71 yards to the house and Green Bay won 28-10 to get back on track.

San Francisco came to town for a marquee late Sunday afternoon game on November 1. The Packers had knocked the 49ers out of the playoffs three years running and mixed in regular season wins along the way. Green Bay owned this rivalry and that didn't change today. Favre went over the top, 80 yards to Freeman for one touchdown and 30 yards to Robert Brooks for another. In a 22-22 tie game in the fourth quarter, Favre hit Freeman for a 62-yard strike and the Packers won 36-22.

A Monday Night visit to Pittsburgh was up. The Steelers were another consistent contender under Bill Cowher. Although this '98 team would fade badly, that didn't happen until after Thanksgiving. On this night, the Packers were blasted off the line of scrimmage, losing rush yardage 142-39. Another Monday Night saw Green Bay dig a huge hole, 27-3, before racing for some late points to make a loss look respectable, this one 27-20.

The beatdown on the ground clearly got under someone's skin, because the Packers came at the next week against the Giants with something to prove. In a late afternoon kick at the Meadowlands, the Pack muscled up for a 169-65 rush yard edge, keyed by a 100-yard game from Darick Holmes. The result was an easy 37-3 win.

Green Bay was 7-3, but Minnesota was riding high at 9-1. The coming trip to the old Metrodome was do-or-die if the Packers had any hopes of a fourth straight division title. Favre threw an early Pick-6 and dug his team a 10- hole. But he also went 31/39 for 303 yards and got Green Bay back in the game. But the Pack also lost a couple fumbles and they lost the game 28-14. It was plain the Packers would have to go the wild-card route.

A late afternoon home game with lowly Philadelphia produced another muscular display from the ground game. Holmes ran for 163 yards. Bill Schroeder also stepped up at receiver, catching five balls for 128 yards. The Packers won 24-16.

With four weeks to go, Green Bay was essentially in a race with San Francisco for the 4-seed. The alignment of the NFL prior to 2002 had only three divisions. That meant the 4-seed would go to the top wild-card. The Packers were 8-4. The 49ers were 9-3, but of course Green Bay had the tiebreaker .

But the Pack's bid to host a wild-card game took a blow on a Monday Night in Tampa. The offensive line collapsed and Favre was sacked eight times. The defense gave up a couple long touchdown passes to Trent Dilfer. Green Bay lost 24-22 and was now two back of San Francisco. The Packers were all but locked into the 5-seed with three weeks to go.

A home date with an awful Chicago Bears team was far from dominant. But Dorsey Levens carried 15 times for 105 yards, the latest good sign for what appeared to be an emerging running game. Freeman caught eight balls for 103 yards and the Packers won 26-20. In the final home game of the year against Tennessee, Favre hit Freeman on touchdown passes from 57, 68 and 32. Green Bay won 30-22.

The season finale was at Chicago, with two Bears games in three weeks. In a game played without a lot of passion either way, Green Bay defensive back Keith McKenzie's 28-yard Pick-6 was the difference in a 16-13 win. The Packers were going into the playoffs at 11-5. The 49ers took care of business later that afternoon, burying a bad Rams team to get to 12-4. The wild-card date was set.

Packers-49ers IV was in the late Sunday afternoon time slot, the conclusion to Wild-Card Weekend. It proved worthy of the marquee television spot. Green Bay's running game continued its late season resurgence with Levens going over 100 yards. Garrison Hearst did the same for San Francisco. Favre went 20/35 for 292 yards. Trailing 23-20 with two minutes to play, Favre found Freeman on a 15-yard touchdown pass.

Green Bay was up four and closing in on another win over San Francisco. And the Packers appeared to seal it when the great Niner wide receiver Jerry Rice fumbled and Green Bay recovered. But officials ruled that Rice was down. It was an obviously blown call, one that replay would take about one second to overturn today. But there was no recourse to instant replay in 1998. The 49ers were Packer territory and still had a shot.

By rights, the Pack should still have closed the game out. There were eight seconds left and the ball was on the 25-yard line. But Young rifled a perfect strike to Terrell Owens for a touchdown. The season was over in a bitter 30-27 loss.

So was the Holmgren era. The head coach had made no secret of his ambition to one day be both general manager and coach and that opportunity did not exist at Green Bay, where the great Ron Wolf was firmly ensconced as GM. There was no doubt that someone would give Holmgren the total control he craved and that team would be the Seattle Seahawks.

It was a time of change. After four years in the league's elite, the Packers would take a brief step back in the first couple years after Holmgren.

1999

The new man in charge was Ray Rhodes, who had previously taken the Philadelphia Eagles to a couple of playoff appearances. But the '99 season didn't work out. The Packers missed the playoffs for the first time since 1992 and Rhodes was one-and-done in Lambeau.

Favre's first year without his original coaching mentor was a struggle. He played with injuries, including a broken thumb and the numbers were mediocre. A 57 percent completion rate was 20th among NFL quarterbacks. The 6.9 yards-per-attempt was in the middle of the league. And the TD-INT ratio was underwater at 22/23.

Antonio Freeman continued to be one of Favre's favorite targets, as he'd been throughout the decade. Freeman caught 74 balls and cleared the 1,000-yard threshold. The normal second target was tight end Mark Chmura. But Chmura was lost for the season after two games and wide receiver Bill Schroeder stepped into the void. Schroeder caught 74 passes of his own and also went over 1,000 yards.

Dorsey Levens had a 1,000-yard season rushing, although he averaged less than four yards a carry. Levens, a versatile player, also caught 71 passes. All told, the Packers offense ranked 10th in the NFL in points scored.

Defense was Rhodes' specialty, but the Green Bay D struggled to 20th in the league in points allowed. The great Reggie White had retired, leaving a big void in both leadership and production. LeRoy Butler was still at strong safety, but was starting to decline. Rookie corner Mike McKenzie picked off seven passes. But no one stood out.

In fact, a lack of standouts neatly summarizes the Green Bay problem. Not a single player made the Pro Bowl. Even in the best years of the Holmgren run, the Packers were always top-heavy reliant on their stars. Without that, the lack of depth was on display.

Green Bay opened the season at home against a mediocre Oakland Raiders team. The Packers were outrushed 153-91. Favre was intercepted three times and the Packers trailed 24-14. Favre also went 28/47 for 333 yards. Freeman caught seven balls for 111 yards. Favre threw two late TD passes, the last one with eleven seconds left and Green Bay pulled out a 28-24 win.

A road trip to Detroit had a different vibe than in recent years, with Barry Sanders having just retired. Levens was the best back on the field and carried 29 times for 153 yards. But Favre didn't have a good day and the defense allowed a couple long touchdown passes early in the game. A 23-15 loss dropped the Pack to 1-1.

The Minnesota Vikings, the defending divisional champ came to Lambeau Field for a late Sunday afternoon kickoff. Favre went 24/39 for 304 yards. It looked like it might not be enough

when the Vikings took a 20-16 lead late in the game. But Favre led one last furious drive and then hit Corey Bradford on a 23-yard touchdown pass with twelve seconds left and a thrilling win.

Green Bay was going into the bye week at 2-1, but they were a matter of seconds from being 0-3. This was a team that had clearly had some problems to fix. Tampa Bay came to Lambeau Field for a Sunday Night battle after the week off.

Green Bay was beaten in the trenches—outrushed 173-93 and they allowed five sacks. Favre stepped back and opened up to his wide receivers. Freeman and Schroeder each caught seven passes and each went over 150 yards on the night. Favre went 22/40 for 390 yards. More late-game magic was in store for the Lambeau crowd. A 21-yard Favre-to-Freeman TD strike pulled out a 26-23 win.

The Packers went on to Denver. It was the first time the teams had played since the Super Bowl following the 1997 season. The Broncos won that one and then repeated as champs in 1998. John Elway retired after '98 and this year's Denver team wasn't very good. But you wouldn't have known that from this game. Green Bay was pounded on the ground, losing rush yardage 151-21. Favre threw three interceptions. A game that was tied 10-10 in the third quarter turned into a 31-10 blowout loss.

Another road game out west came at mediocre San Diego and this one went much better for the Pack. The Chargers had two former Chicago Bears quarterbacks, Erik Kramer and Jim Harbaugh. Green Bay had gotten familiar with both and today they picked *each* QB off three times. The six interceptions keyed an easy 31-3 win.

It was time for the Monday Night game everyone had circled from the start of the season. The Seattle Seahawks and Mike Holmgren were coming to town. It was the teacher facing his old student.

And the teacher decidedly won this one. Even though Favre threw a 74-yard touchdown pass to Bradford, this one got away from Green Bay. Favre ended 14/35 for 180 yards and was intercepted four times. Seattle coasted to a 27-7 win and Holmgren went on to win a division title in his first season.

The Packers had to get well and a visit from a subpar Bears team should have been the perfect antidote. Favre played pretty well, going 27/40 for 267 yards. Green Bay won the turnover battle 4-1. But they settled for field goals on a couple of good drives and were outrushed 160-85. Chicago pulled a 14-13 upset. The Packers were 4-4 and in trouble.

The trouble got worse in Dallas, a team that joined Green Bay on the playoff fringe. The Pack was again pummeled on the ground, this time to the tune of 149-50. Favre was forced to throw fifty times. It wasn't a formula for success and ended with a 27-13 loss.

A home game with Detroit, another team on the very edge of the playoff picture, was now must-win. Green Bay trailed 17-12 at the half. This time, Favre stepped up with a 26/40 for 309

yards performance. Levens ran for 99 yards, the Packers took over the second half and won 26-17.

Green Bay and San Francisco had a great rivalry through the 1990s and had met four straight years in the playoffs. The 49ers were having an even tougher go of it in 1999 than the Packers were, so this Monday Night game at the end of November was missing some juice. Either way, Green Bay needed the win and Favre delivered it. He was sharp 24/35 for 260 yards and no mistakes. The defense played its best game of the year in a 20-3 win.

Green Bay was 6-5 and the good news was that mediocrity was the story of the NFL in 1999. The Packers still had a shot at the NFC Central, with the Buccaneers, Vikings and Lions all 7-4. There were three wild-card spots available. The Cowboys were 6-5, with the New York Giants, Arizona Cardinals and Carolina Panthers all giving chase at 5-6. It was just about playing well in December in this packed race.

The Packers went to Chicago and took a measure of revenge. After spotting the Bears a 10-0 lead, they reeled off three quick touchdowns, including a fumble return by Keith McKenzie. The running game was put in the hands of De'Mon Parker, who went 113 yards on 19 carries. The result was an easy 35-19 win.

In the meantime, Carolina had lost to the eventual Super Bowl champion St. Louis Rams. That proved more important when the Panthers came to Lambeau and halted Packer momentum. In a back-and-forth game, neither team could run the ball. Favre and counterpart Steve Beuerlein each threw for over 300 yards. But this time, Green Bay didn't have the ball last. A Carolina touchdown run on the final play of the game handed the Packers a 33-31 loss.

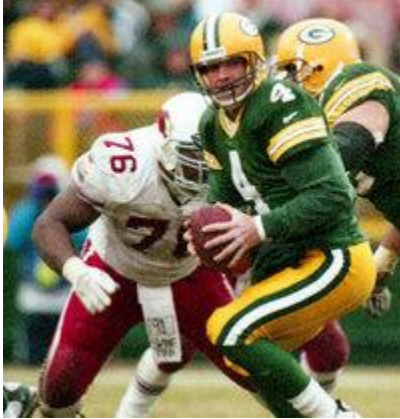
Tampa Bay had seized control of the NFC Central and was 9-4. Detroit was 8-5. Green Bay and Minnesota were both fighting for their lives at 7-6. And they were set to meet on Monday Night in the old Metrodome.

In a good game, the difference was that Favre threw a couple picks while Minnesota stayed mistake-free and got some big plays in the passing game to Randy Moss. Green Bay lost a tough 24-20 decision.

The Packers were still in a four-way tie for the last playoff spot. The Cowboys, Giants and Panthers were also 7-7. But Green Bay was the one who had to visit surging Tampa Bay for a late afternoon start on the day after Christmas. Even though the Packers led 10-9 at the half, they only rushed for 12 yards and fell apart in the second half of a 29-10 loss.

There was still hope. In this year where no one seemed to want to play their way in, the Cowboys, Giants and Panthers *all* lost. So had the Lions, who were now 8-7 and holding on to the 5-seed. Green Bay didn't control their destiny, but their path was pretty reasonable given how many missed opportunities there had been.

Green Bay played Arizona, who had been fading hard down the stretch. The game at Lambeau Field would kick off in the early window. If the Packers won, they simply needed to root for the Giants to win at Dallas in the late afternoon. If that parlay happened, Green Bay was in.



The Packers took care of their business easily. Favre went 21/34 for 311 yards. Levens piled up 146 yards on the ground and made his Fantasy owners happy with four touchdowns. Green Bay won 49-24.

But there was no help coming later in the day. Dallas was in complete control from the outset and their 26-18 win was not as close as it sounds. The Cowboys took the final playoff spot. In a year where not one, but two 8-8 teams made the playoffs, the tiebreakers fell against the 8-8 Packers.

Green Bay wasted no time in cutting ties with Rhodes and bringing in Mike Sherman as the new head coach.

2000

For most of the year, the 2000 Green Bay Packers continued to be mediocre. But a late surge nearly got them back to the playoffs and set the stage for another run of success.

Favre had endured the toughest year of his career in 1999 and the numbers in 2000 didn't get a whole lot better. Favre's 58 percent completion rate was 20th in the league. His yards-per-attempt, normally a source of strength was only 6.6 and in the bottom third of starting quarterbacks. Favre trimmed back on the mistakes with a 20-16 TD/INT ratio, but being intercepted on 2.8 percent of his passes still put him in the middle of the league.

It wasn't what Green Bay needed from their future Hall of Fame quarterback. Both of Favre's top receivers, Freeman and Bill Schroeder slipped under the 1,000-mark. Although with Schroeder I suppose we're really splitting hairs—his 65 catches produced 999 yards. Freeman caught 62 balls for 912 yards.

The revelation for the Green Bay offense was Ahman Green. A young running back who came over from Seattle in free agency, Green burst onto the NFL scene with nearly 1,200 yards rushing and averaging 4.5 yards a pop. He was a versatile receiver whose 73 catches led the team. On a roster with a young offensive line---there were rookies at both tackle spots and at tight end—and a struggling quarterback, Green ensured the Packer attack still ranked 11th in the league in points scored.

Green Bay's defense continued to look for an identity in their second year without Reggie White on the defensive line. Darren Sharper stepped up with a big year at free safety, intercepting nine passes and making 1st-team All-NFL. The Packer defense wasn't great, ranking 14th in points allowed. But they were above average in a 30-team league and better than they'd been in 1999.

The season opened at home with a late afternoon game against the New York Jets, a team that would stay on the fringe of the AFC playoff picture all season before narrowly missing out. The Packers picked up where they had left off in '99.

Favre struggled to a terrible 14/34 for 152 yards showing. The running game was non-existent. Green Bay was penalized ten times. A late touchdown made the 20-16 loss respectable, but this wasn't really competitive.

Nor was a visit to mediocre Buffalo the following week. Even though Favre went 25/35 for 269 yards and made no mistakes, those were mostly empty numbers, compiled after the Packers dug themselves a 17-0 hole. They lost 27-18.

A Week 3 home game with a good Philadelphia Eagles team now had to be played with real urgency. Favre struggled and was intercepted three times. But the Birds were sloppy and committed twelve penalties. No one could get in the end zone. Green Bay kicker Ryan Longwell booted two field goals, the last with three seconds in the clock and the Packers escaped 6-3.

The Packers paid a visit to Arizona and put together a complete game. Green set the tone with a 19-yard touchdown run and Green Bay would win rushing yardage 176-28. Favre hit Schroeder on a 55-yard touchdown pass to get a 14-0 lead. The Pack coasted home to a 29-3 win. They were .500 and a crisis had been temporarily averted.

At least until Chicago came to Lambeau the following week. The Bears weren't any good, but you wouldn't have known that in this game for the late Sunday afternoon TV audience. Chicago had Green Bay in a 24-3 hole by halftime. Favre dug in and tried to bring the Packers back, throwing three touchdown passes. Schroeder caught two of those TDs, part of eight catches for 108 yards. With two minutes left, Green Bay pulled to within 27-24, but that was where it ended.

A visit to Detroit, a team on the playoff fringe followed a similar script. Favre threw three interceptions and helped dig his team a 24-3 hole. Favre also went 27/43 for 293 yards and pulled the Packers to within 31-24 by midway through the fourth quarter. But again, the comeback bid ended up short.

At 2-4, Green Bay needed to beat a bad San Francisco team at home the following week. Favre always played well against the 49ers and this late afternoon game was no exception. He went 20/27 for 266 yards and made no mistakes. Freeman caught six balls for 116 yards. It got more than a little hairy, tied 28-28 late in the game. But Favre led one more drive and Longwell won another game with a late field goal.

Green Bay took their bye week and then headed to Miami, an eventual playoff team. The Packers came out firing. Dorsey Levens, the top running back prior to Green's arrival, scored a couple TDs. Green ran for 94 yards on the afternoon. Green Bay led 17-0 in the second quarter. But Favre couldn't stretch the field and the offense eventually bogged down. The Packer defense was shaky for the second straight week and the promising start turned into a 28-20 loss.

Minnesota was having a big year and was the class of the old NFC Central. But the Packers-Vikings rivalry of the Favre era was usually defined by homefield advantage. So it would be on the first Monday Night of November. Sharper picked off two passes and Green Bay had a 5-0 turnover advantage. Favre was erratic and the game went to overtime at 20-20. But the Gunslinger also made some big plays, the last of which was a 43-yard touchdown strike to Freeman that won it 26-20.

Tampa Bay was in the mix with Minnesota for the division title. The aggressive Buccaneer defense gave Favre fits, especially when Green Bay traveled south for a late window game. Favre hung in and completed 14/25 for 117 yards, nudging the Packers out to a 15-14 lead. But Tampa eventually knocked the Iron Man out of the game, kicked a couple fourth quarter field goals and handed Green Bay a 20-15 loss.

A difficult schedule stretch continued with Indianapolis, the fourth straight opponent that would win ten games and make the playoffs in 2000. At 4-6, Green Bay desperately needed to win. Favre stepped it up and went 23/36 for 201 yards. Schroeder caught eight passes for 155 yards. In front of the home crowd, Green Bay raced out to a 19-0 lead. A young Peyton Manning, just starting to come into his own, led a furious comeback, but the Packers hung on and won 26-24.



They were still alive for the playoffs, but a Monday Night visit to a mediocre Carolina team was a disaster. The Packers fell behind 14-0. Favre was forced to throw 51 times trying to bring his team back and three of those balls were intercepted. Green Bay lost 31-14.

At 5-7, the Packers looked dead in the water. In the post-Holmgren era they were now 13-15. There wasn't a ton of reason for optimism. That's when Green Bay began turning things around.

They went to Chicago on Sunday Night and Favre was sharp. He went 19/31 for 225 yards and no mistakes. Schroeder had another good game, six catches for 119 yards and the result was an easy 28-6 win.

Any hope of a miracle run to the playoffs absolutely necessitated winning a home game against Detroit, who came to Lambeau Field at 8-5. Green carried 27 times for 118 yards, including a 39-yard touchdown run with two minutes to play that sealed the 26-13 win.

There was one wild-card berth realistically in play. The St. Louis Rams, the defending Super Bowl champs led the way for that spot with a 9-5 record. Detroit was 8-6 and Green Bay sitting on 7-7. But the Packers held the tiebreakers on both teams (division record with the Lions, conference record with the Rams). It was a faint hope, but it was still hope.

First, Green Bay had to go to Minnesota, who was on their way to the 2-seed in the NFC bracket. In the old Metrodome, where Favre often struggled, he rewrote the script, going 26/38

for 290 yards, three TDs and no mistakes. Freeman caught six balls for 97 yards. And Green had a huge afternoon, going for 161 yards. The Packers pulled out a 33-28 win.

Detroit held serve and Green Bay watched nervously on Monday Night when St. Louis went to Tampa Bay. A Rams win would knock out the Packers. But Tony Dungy and the Bucs did the Pack a solid, winning a wild game 38-35.

So there was one week left. In the early afternoon window on Christmas Eve, Green Bay would now host Tampa, who still had hope of winning the division. At the same time, Detroit was at home against Chicago. St. Louis was visiting playoff-bound New Orleans. The Packers needed all three elements of the parlay to fall into place.

On a cold day in Lambeau, the game was about defense. Green Bay led 14-3 in the fourth quarter, but they were turning the ball over while Tampa Bay was not. The Bucs pulled even 14-14. They had a chance to win late when Favre torpedoed a Packer drive with an interception and then Tampa got a shot at a 40-yard field goal in the final seconds. But the kick missed. Green Bay won the overtime coin toss and marched down for a field goal that won it.

Meanwhile in Detroit, the Lions were...well, they were being the Lions, losing a heartbreaker to Chicago on a late field goal. Alas, the Rams went into New Orleans, got the win and took home the final playoff berth.

Two straight years out of the playoffs with a Hall of Fame quarterback is never going to meet any definition of acceptable. But the strong December stretch drive infused some real optimism back into Green Bay. They carried that over and for the next four seasons, Favre and the Packers were again a playoff regular.

2001

Both Favre and the Packers came into the season with something to prove. They needed to show they could be successful without Holmgren. In 2001, they did just that and started another string of playoff trips.

Favre stepped up with a solid year, completing 62 percent of his passes for 7.7 yards-per-attempt. Both were in the NFL's top 10. The interceptions, his typical bugaboo, stabilized at 2.9 percent of all throws and were in the middle of the league. The TD/INT ratio was 32-15 and he made the Pro Bowl.

The biggest bright spot of the last couple years had been the emergence of Ahman Green as one of the NFL's most versatile running backs. In 2001, Green ran for nearly 1,400 yards and his yards-per-carry was a solid 4.6. He also led the team with 62 catches.

Favre's targets on the outside continued to be the reliable Freeman and Schroeder. Both caught over 50 passes and both could stretch the field. Freeman averaged nearly 16 yards per catch and Schroeder averaged 17.3. Corey Bradford added to the big-play capability, with his 31 catches going for 17 yards a pop.

A well-balanced passing attack included an up-and-coming tight end. Bubba Franks caught 36 balls in a Pro Bowl season. Even though the offensive line was young, there were some up-and-comers in guard Marco Rivera and tackle Chad Clifton. It was all enough for Green Bay to rank 5th in the NFL in points scored.

The defense relied on pressure from the edge. Defensive end Kabeer Gbaja-Biamila (KGB) led the way with 13 ½ sacks. Vonnie Holliday worked the other end for seven more sacks. All that pressure helped free safety Darren Sharper intercept six passes. Even though the Packers didn't have any Pro Bowl players on the defensive side of the ball, they were still as good as the offense—fifth in the league in points allowed.

Green Bay opened the season with a home game against Detroit. The Lions were on their way to a hideous season and it began today at Lambeau. Green bolted for a 31-yard touchdown run early on and raced 83 yards to the house later in the game. Favre went 22/28 for 260 yards, two TDs and no mistakes. The Packers got an easy 28-6 win.

Two days later, the tragedy of 9/11 hit, with the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centers. The NFL postponed its schedule by a week. When they resumed, Green Bay would host the first Monday Night Game after play resumed. Lambeau Field was in a patriotic fervor along with the rest of the nation as the Packers met the Washington Redskins.

Favre went 20/31 for 261 yards and threw three touchdowns. Green rushed for 116 yards. The defense got five sacks. Even allowing the Redskins were a mediocre team that wouldn't find their footing until October, the 37-0 dismantling was an impressive display.

Green Bay's first road game was at Carolina. The Panthers were on their way to an even worse season than the Lions, but the Packers slept through the first half and trailed 7-6. Favre woke his team up with second-half touchdown passes to Schroeder, Franks and Bradford. The quarterback threw for 308 yards in the 28-7 win.

Riding high at 3-0, Green Bay went to Tampa Bay. The Bucs were a consistent playoff contender and were only a year away from winning the Super Bowl. And Tony Dungy's defense usually gave Favre fits. Today was no different. Tampa intercepted Favre three times, including one on the goal line that turned a potential Packer touchdown into a Pick-6 the other way. That was the difference as the Pack lost 14-10.

Favre bounced back in a big way the following week at home. The defending Super Bowl champion Baltimore Ravens were in town. They were renowned for their defense and on this afternoon, they outrushed Green Bay 158-60. Enter Favre. He went 27/34 for 337 yards, three TDs and no mistakes. Freeman caught nine balls for 138 yards and the Packers had an impressive 31-23 win.

A visit to Minnesota didn't go quite as well. While the Vikings were a consistent playoff contender and had been in the NFC Championship Game as recently as last year, 2001 was not a good year in the Twin Cities. But homefield was often decisive in this rivalry and it would be so today. The Vikings pounded the Packers on the ground, to the tune of a 200-74 rush yard

advantage. Favre didn't make mistakes, but he couldn't get the ball down the field. The result was a 35-13 loss.

Green Bay went into their bye week at 4-2. On the far side was a key home game with Tampa Bay.

For the better part of three quarters, the Buccaneer defense continued to own Favre and the Packers trailed 17-7. Then Green took off on a 63-yard touchdown run to get Green Bay back in the game. Trailing 20-14 with three minutes left, the Pack was poised to get the ball back. Allen Rossum took the punt at his own 45 and went to the house for the winning touchdown.

The Chicago Bears, dormant through the latter part of the 1990s, were awakening in 2001 and having a big season. Green Bay went to Soldier Field and the defense came up big. They held the Bears to 47 rushing yards. Meanwhile, Green ran for 93 yards. Schroeder caught four balls for 100 yards and the Packers got a big 20-12 win.

At 6-2, Super Bowl talk was back in the air at Lambeau. Which made a visit from a mediocre Atlanta Falcons team all the more disappointing. Favre threw three interceptions, the defense allowed some big plays in the passing game and the Packers suffered a 23-20 upset loss.

Green Bay had no time to lick their wounds, because there was a fast turnaround—a Thanksgiving Day date with Detroit. Favre delivered an 18/26 for 252 yards and no mistakes performance. Green produced 102 yards on the ground. The Packers were comfortably ahead 29-13 late in the game. Then things got hairy. Detroit scored and converted the two-point play. The Lions got the ball back and scored again.

There were ten seconds left, the lead was down to 29-27 and Detroit was lining up for a two-point play to force overtime. A collapse like this against one of the league's worst teams—coming on top of the Atlanta loss—would give back so much of the progress this Packer team had made. They made the stop, preserved the win and extended their record to 7-3.

Another appearance on the national stage against a shaky team, this one a Monday Night date in Jacksonville, also tested the stress levels of Packer fans. Late in the third quarter, Green Bay was down 21-7. Favre got rolling. He threw two TD passes and finished the night 24/42 for 362 yards and no interceptions. And with a minute and a half left, he ran six yards for the decisive score in a 28-21 win.

It was time for the rematch with Chicago. The Bears were 9-2 and led the NFC Central by a game. The Packers had the chance to pull even and control the tiebreaker in this December 9 game at Lambeau Field.

A defensive battle ensued, and a 7-7 tie went late into the third quarter. Green was the difference in this game. His 125 rushing yards gave the Packers a ground game and they pulled away to a 17-7 win.

So we had four weeks to go and Green Bay and Chicago were each 9-3. Tampa Bay would make the playoffs, but they weren't in the mix for a division title. The Packers and Bears were each in position to get the 2-seed in the NFC bracket, behind the St. Louis Rams who were running away with the top spot.

Adding the intrigue was the San Francisco 49ers also sitting on 9-3, but trailing the Rams. Hence, the Packers were in a race not only with the Bears for the division, but the 49ers for the 4-seed.

And just like the previous win against Chicago, this one was followed by a letdown. Green Bay went to mediocre Tennessee. They were crushed in the trenches, losing rush yardage 167-31. Favre was kept to short passes and the Packers lost 26-20. The Bears and 49ers both won. Green Bay had gone from the 2-seed to the 5-seed in the blink of an eye.

Cleveland came to Lambeau for a late afternoon game on the day before Christmas Eve. The Browns were mediocre, but Favre was again restricted to shorter throws. His final numbers were 18/28 for 139 yards. What Favre did do was stay patient and efficient. There were no mistakes. It created the space for Green's 150 rush yards to lead the way to an easy 30-7 win.

But no help came. Chicago and San Francisco both won. Two weeks to go.

Green Bay hosted Minnesota. The problems in the running game resurfaced, losing 129-56 in rush yardage. With ten minutes to play, the Packers trailed 13-10. But Favre was again staying patient. He went 18/29 for 169 yards, and steered clear of mistakes. Green Bay picked up three turnovers. The biggest was a Pick-6 in the fourth quarter and the Pack won 24-13.

Chicago handled their business against Detroit. But Green Bay got surprising help. San Francisco went to Dallas and lost to a bad Cowboys team. The Packers were at least positioned to get a home playoff game.

The Pack, Bears and 49ers were all playing in the early afternoon window in the season finale. Green Bay visited the New York Giants. After a run to the Super Bowl in 2000, the Giants were a sub-.500 team this year. Green Bay won 34-25.

Favre went 15/30 for 215 yards and played efficiently, but the stat everyone remembers for this game is that he was sacked once. That sack, late in the game, gave Giants defensive end Michael Strahan the single-season sack record. Favre, a friend of Strahan's, was accused of giving himself up voluntarily so Strahan could get the record. The play has served as a black mark on the legacy of both players in the eyes of a lot of fans.

At any rate, Green Bay's win assured they would host San Francisco in the wild-card round, a matchup that was locked in when Chicago held serve and won the NFC Central.

The Packers and 49ers were familiar foes. They had met in the playoffs in 1995, 1996, 1997 and 1998. They had played memorable regular season games. Both teams were coming into

this 2001 game at 12-4. That's a record that will often get you a 1-seed in the playoffs. Somebody who had a Super Bowl-caliber season would be making an early playoff exit.

Favre and Freeman put Green Bay on the board with a short touchdown pass in the first quarter. But the extra point was missed. As the defenses settled in, that was the difference by halftime with the Packers trailing 7-6.

The Packers got control in the third quarter. A short field goal gave them the lead. Favre hit Franks with a 19-yard touchdown pass. For some bizarre reason, Sherman decided now was the time to get back the missed extra point. He went for two and that missed. The score stayed 15-7, still within one possession. Sherman's decision looked even worse when the 49ers scored, converted the two-point play and tied up the game 15-15.

In a tense battle on this early Sunday afternoon, on a cloudy afternoon in Green Bay, the Packers got the lead back with a field goal with seven minutes to play. And with just under two minutes to play, they put it away when Green ran nine yards for a touchdown. Favre went 22/29 for 269 yards to lead a big 25-15 win.

Green Bay was on their way to St. Louis for a shot at the Rams, who had been the class of the NFL all season long. They were the "Greatest Show On Turf", led by Kurt Warner and Marshall Faulk. The Packers needed to play a perfect game to win on the road...and this would be anything but that.

In front of the late Sunday afternoon audience, Favre threw an early Pick-6. Green Bay trailed 24-10 at the half. Favre dug in and tried to rally his team. Instead, the hole kept getting deeper. He threw two more Pick-6s. He threw six interceptions for the game. The result was a 45-17 loss.

Losing in this manner is never particularly fun, but no one in Green Bay had too many regrets. They hadn't expected to win this game and Favre's performance was seen—accurately—as the Gunslinger simply digging too deep in a game where most quarterbacks might have pulled in the reins.

The bigger takeaway was that the Pack Was Back. This was the first of four straight playoff seasons.

2002

The 2002 Green Bay Packers were aiming to build on that with a return to the Super Bowl. And for almost the entirety of the season, the '02 Packers were poised to do just that. Then two disastrous games undid it all.

Favre had another Pro Bowl season, although his statistical performance was largely pedestrian. The 62 percent completion rate was good and ranked 11th in the league. But Favre only generated 6.6 yards-per-attempt and that ranked 21st among NFL quarterbacks. The

TD/INT ratio of 29/16 was fine by the standards of the time, although being intercepted on 2.9 percent of all throws still put you in the middle of the league.

In short, he was decent, but it was far from vintage Brett Favre. So how did the Packer offense rank sixth in the NFL in points scored? Green rushed for over 1,200 yards. Marco Rivera emerged as a Pro Bowler at guard, one of the rare top-caliber offensive linemen Green Bay had during the Favre era.

Donald Driver stepped up at wide receiver with a Pro Bowl season, catching 70 balls for over 1,000 yards. Franks was another Pro Bowler at tight end, with 54 catches. All in all, there was a running game, a deep threat, an underneath receiving target and pedestrian numbers or not, this was still Brett Favre pulling the trigger. That's how the Packers ranked sixth in the NFL in points scored.

Green Bay's defense had playmakers up front. KGB recorded twelve sacks from his defensive end spot. Holliday added six more from the other end and Cletidus Hunt got home 5 ½ times working the interior. They were supported in the secondary by a Pro Bowl season from Sharper and the emergence of rookie strong safety Marques Anderson, who picked off four passes. All told, the Packer defense ranked 12th in the league in points allowed.

We should also note that 2002 saw the divisional alignment change to its current form. Tampa Bay left to join the newly created NFC South. Now it was the four great rivals--Packers, Bears, Vikings and Lions left in what we know as the NFC North.

The season opened at home against Atlanta. It was an ironic opener in one sense—the Packers' bid for the division title and #2 seed the previous year had been seriously damaged by a home loss to what was a mediocre Falcons team. This season opener would seem even more ironic by season's end.

For now though, it was just one wild football game. Green rushed for 155 yards and caught six passes. Favre went 25/36 for 284 yards. Michael Vick fired right back for Atlanta and the teams traded blows all the way to overtime. Green Bay landed the last one and won 37-34.

A road trip to New Orleans didn't go as well. The Pack didn't run the ball, they lost three fumbles, dug themselves a 21-3 lead and fell 35-20. Favre got back on track at lowly Detroit. The Gunslinger went 31/47 for 357 yards and three touchdowns. Green Bay took a 34-17 lead, watched the Lions make it tight with a couple touchdowns and then tacked on another field goal for a 37-31 win.

A mediocre opponent in Carolina visited Lambeau. Green Bay's offense continued their up-and-down performance. But Hunt's two sacks led a defensive effort that kept the Packers within 14-10 in the fourth quarter. Favre finished 18/32 for 200 yards and his 22-yard TD strike to Driver with just over four minutes left pulled out the 17-14 win.

Chicago had outlasted Green Bay for the division title a year ago, so the Packers' October visit to Soldier Field was put on Monday Night Football. But this year's Bears team would fall hard

and never contend. Favre went 85 yards to Driver for a first-quarter touchdown. Two more TD passes before the first half was done. Holding a 24-14 lead, KGB sealed the deal—he got his hands up, intercepted a pass and took it 72 yards to the house. Green Bay won 34-21.

The New England Patriots had emerged onto the scene a year earlier when a heretofore unknown quarterback named Tom Brady led them to a shocking Super Bowl run. Green Bay went to Foxboro and made a big statement. Favre played a mistake-free game, while the defense picked off three Brady passes. Green ran for 136 yards and the result was a surprisingly easy 28-10 win.



A mediocre Washington Redskins team came to Lambeau. The 30-9 win was largely uneventful, keyed by the defense getting four turnovers and KGB's two sacks leading an overall team effort that produced six sacks.

Except...well, there was one little event. Favre was knocked out of the game. The Iron Man had not missed a start in his entire career, going back to 1992. This one was serious enough that it threatened to end the streak.

Divine Providence smiled on Favre. There was a bye week before a coming Monday Night visit to Miami. It was touch-and-go and Favre's health was a major national media story for the next couple weeks. But in the end, he got on the field.

And he played pretty well against a decent Dolphins team. Favre went 16/25 for 187 yards. It was enough for the defense to win the game. KGB got three sacks. Sharper had an 89-yard Pick-6. The score was 24-0 in the fourth quarter and ended 24-10.

Now rounded fully back into gear, Favre came home and unloaded on the Lions. He went 26/39 for 251 yards and no mistakes. Driver caught 11 balls for 130 yards. Aided by a Pick-6 from Anderson, the Packers dropped 30 points in the first half and won 40-14.

Minnesota was going through a tough year, but no one who followed Brett Favre would ever rest easy when he went to the Metrodome. This game proved hair-raising. The Packers were pounded in the line of scrimmage, losing rush yardage 218-71 and digging an early 14-0 hole. A sloppy game both ways resulted in 25 combined penalties and six combined turnovers.

But Green Bay kept coming. They pulled even 21-21. In the fourth quarter, Favre and Driver made another big play—an 84-yard touchdown pass. The Packers added a field goal for breathing room and escaped 31-21.

Green Bay was running away with the NFC North. They were in a tough fight with the Philadelphia Eagles and Tampa Bay Buccaneers for seeding position in the playoffs. That made a late afternoon battle in Tampa on the Sunday before Thanksgiving all the more important.

It was a memorable day for this writer personally. One of my best friends had gotten married the previous day and we are at the gift-opening ceremony on Sunday. As the guys all went to the basement to watch the game, there were jokes about how our buddy had to be dying listening to the shouts from the basement while he pretended to be thrilled about the new linens given as a wedding gift.

Anyway, it was a tough, physical game. Green Bay took a 7-3 lead by the half. But the Bucs' aggressive defense, led by Hall of Fame tackle Warren Sapp, was making life miserable for Favre. They forced him into four interceptions. One of them stopped a Green Bay drive in the red zone. On another, Sapp leveled Packer tackle Chad Clifton with a block on the return. Clifton was knocked out, tempers got heated and Green Bay coach Mike Sherman was even screaming at Sapp on the field.

The frustration of the 21-7 loss undoubtedly added to Green Bay's fury. The Bucs were now 9-2 and led the way for the 1-seed. The Packers and Eagles were both 8-3. Worse for Green Bay is that they trailed Philadelphia by three games in NFC record. Hence, the Pack would lose a tiebreaker to Tampa based on head-to-head and a tiebreaker to Philly based on conference record. Not much room for error, if any.

Green Bay hosted Chicago. Favre was erratic and the Packer trailed 14-6 at the half. Green and backup running back Tony Fisher were running well though and combined for 169 yards. The Pack took over in the second half and won 30-20.

They also got a break—Tampa lost at New Orleans. The race at the top of the NFC was now a three-way tie at 9-3.

Green Bay hosted Minnesota on Sunday Night Football and again had a shaky first half. But it could have been worse. A couple defensive stops inside their own 10-yard line kept the Packers within 13-0. Then Fisher, emerging late in the season as a running threat, got going. He ran for 96 yards and ran for two TDs in the second half. The last one came with 1:06 left and pulled out a 26-22 win.

A big road trip to San Francisco was next. The 49ers were on their way to the NFC West title, although pretty clearly headed for the 4-seed in the bracket. Favre always played well against San Francisco and this key December battle was no different—25/33 for 201 yards and no mistakes. The Pack won 20-14.

Tampa and Philly were both holding serve, so all three teams were 11-3 and Green Bay would still be stuck as the 3-seed if nothing changed. Finally, in the season's penultimate week, something did.

Playing in 25mph winds at home against mediocre Buffalo, Green rushed for 116 yards. Holliday had his entire season in one game, getting five sacks. The Packers won 10-0. The following night, Tampa Bay lost to Pittsburgh. There was one week to go. Philadelphia was still 12-3 and had the inside track to the 1-seed, but Green Bay's 12-3 mark was now good for the 2-seed and a first-round bye.

The three teams were not only all battling with each other, but they were also quite clearly the three best teams in all of football. Somebody that had a Super Bowl-caliber season was going to get stuck playing in the wild-card round.

The final week of the season was ideally spaced from a television perspective—the Eagles were playing the Giants in the early window. The Packers would visit the Jets in the marquee late afternoon slot. Tampa Bay was playing in Chicago on Sunday night.

Great news came early in the day. The Giants upset the Eagles. It was all there for Green Bay. Beat the Jets and get homefield advantage. And as of 2002, the Packers had never lost a playoff game in Lambeau Field.

But the Jets had plenty to play for. They were in a three-way race of their own, with the Dolphins and Patriots for the AFC East title. By kickoff, New York knew they would take the division with a win. The Jets played like something was at stake. The Packers did not.

Green Bay only trailed 14-10 at the half. But Favre had a poor game, going 16/33 for 172 yards. His counterpart, Chad Pennington—ironically, a man Favre would displace as Jets quarterback six years later—heated up in the second half. The Packers were crushed 42-17. Tampa Bay won that night. The Packers, Eagles and Bucs were all 12-4. That left Green Bay on the wrong side of all tiebreakers and in the wild-card round.

Atlanta was the opponent. The Saturday night kickoff was the first time a game in the wild-card round was played in prime-time. And it would be the first time a road team won at Lambeau Field in the playoffs.

Nor would it be particularly close. Green Bay had a punt blocked. They turned it over five times. They trailed 24-0 at halftime and were booed off the field, an extremely rare display of anger by the normally uber-nice people of Wisconsin. There was no motivation in the second half and the final was 27-7.

The disasters against the Jets and the Falcons put a very bad taste in everyone's mouth. But that shouldn't obscure just how good this Packer team was for almost the entire 2002 season. Losing in the first round of the playoffs looks ugly. But that shouldn't obscure how unbalanced the NFL was in '02, with the best three teams being in the NFC.

Had the Packers been able to lick their wounds with a bye after the Jets disaster, they might have rebounded in the postseason. Instead, all the circumstances of 2002, tiebreakers and all, distorted the final legacy of this team. Let's at least remember them as the team that tied for the best record in all of football.

2003

To just look at the results of the 2003 Green Bay Packers might not tip you off that it was a special season and a wild ride. But if you lived through the adventures of those '03 Packers you know that it was perhaps the year that best summed up the Brett Favre era.

It wasn't a breakout playoff year like 1993. It wasn't a move into the NFL's upper crust in 1995. It wasn't the ultimate Super Bowl title run of 1996 or the near-repeat of 1997. But the 2003 Green Bay Packers captured everything that football fans loved about Brett Favre...and everything that could drive them a little crazy about his on-field play sometimes.

Favre's statistical line tells a little bit of that story. He was often brilliant, with a 65 percent completion rate that ranked second in the NFL and his 7.1 yards-per-attempt that was 10th. That, along with 32 touchdown passes got the future Hall of Famer another Pro Bowl trip. But then there were the 21 interceptions—getting picked off at a 4.5 percent clip ranked Favre 30th among NFL quarterbacks.

Green had become one of the game's most versatile running backs and he rolled up nearly 1,900 yards on the ground. Even more impressive was that Green averaged better than five yards a pop in the process. He caught 50 passes and was another Pro Bowl player.

The receiving corps wasn't particularly strong, but Driver did catch 52 passes for over 600 yards. Javon Walker and Robert Ferguson were also contributors and could help Favre stretch the field. Franks only caught 30 passes, but his blocking skills helped him punch a Pro Bowl ticket.

Franks wasn't the only one who could block. The offensive line produced a pair of Pro Bowlers in center Mike Flanagan and Rivera. The Packer offense ranked fourth in the NFL in points scored.

The defense was keyed by the pass-rushing skills of KGB, who recorded ten sacks from the edge. Two beneficiaries of KGB's pressure were secondary ballhawks Mike McKenzie at corner and free safety Darren Sharper who combined to intercept nine balls. The Green Bay defense didn't have any Pro Bowl players in 2003, but they ranked a respectable 11th in the league for points allowed.

Green Bay hosted Minnesota to open the season. Homefield advantage usually defined this rivalry in the Favre years, but on this day the Gunslinger was awful. He threw four interceptions. The Packers were in a 27-3 hole by the third quarter before rallying to make the final score cosmetically close at 30-25.

Another division rival in Detroit came to Lambeau. The Packers had to win this one and they did. Green bolted 65 yards for a touchdown in the game's opening minute, the start of a day he rolled up 160 yards rushing. Al Harris had a Pick-6 in the fourth quarter that put the finishing touches on a 31-6 rout.

Green Bay visited lowly Arizona for what should have been an easy win. And Favre played reasonably well, going 23/33 for 245 yards. But the Packers couldn't get the running game going. Cardinal quarterback Jeff Blake was able to stretch the field. Green Bay was dumped 20-13.

A Monday Night visit to Chicago now had urgency attached. Of these first four opponents, only the Vikings were a contender. The Packers simply couldn't start 1-3.

They didn't. Green again set the tone with a long touchdown run early on, starting a 176-yard night. Green Bay was up 24-6 by halftime. When Chicago cut the lead to 24-16, Favre tossed a couple fourth quarter touchdown passes to widen the lead back out and the game ended at 38-23.

The Packers weren't impressing anyone, but at 2-2 they were alive and hosting playoff-bound Seattle. Favre was efficient against his old mentor, Mike Holmgren, going 19/25 for 185 yards and no mistakes. Green rushed for 118 yards. Green Bay delivered their best performance of the still-young season in a 35-13 blowout win.

Kansas City was on their way to a 13-3 season thanks to an explosive passing game overseen by head coach Dick Vermeil. The Chiefs came to Lambeau. Favre was ready for the challenge and went 25/36 for 272 yards. Green went off for 139 yards. The Pack was coasting with a 31-14 lead after three quarters. Then KC came roaring back, tied the game 34-34 in the final two minutes. In overtime, the Packers lost the shootout, 40-34.

Another opponent against a good, playoff-bound offense came with a trip to St. Louis to face the Rams. Favre again played well, going 23/32 for 268 yards. But this time the running game disappeared. Green Bay was in an early 14-3 hole, had to chase the rest of the game and lost 34-24.

Green Bay went into the bye week at 3-4. On the far side of the bye was another big prime-time road game with a divisional rival, this one on the first Sunday Night in November up in Minneapolis.

Favre played this one a little closer to the vest, steering clear of mistakes and going 18/28 for 194 yards. Green stepped up with a big game, with 137 yards. Green Bay took over the fourth quarter. Tied 20-20, they ripped off ten straight points. The Vikes got a TD back, but the 30-27 final held. A huge road victory had kept the Packers in the mix in the NFC North.

Philadelphia was on their way to the top seed in the NFC bracket and they came to Lambeau Field for a Monday Night date. Green put on a show for the national audience, going off for 192 yards on the ground. He caught one TD pass and ran for another. In a tough defensive game, the Pack handed a 14-10 lead to their D late in the game. But the Eagles drove it down for the winning TD. Green Bay slipped back under .500 with the 17-14 loss.

A year earlier, Tampa Bay had won the Super Bowl, keyed in part by a big November win over Green Bay. This year the Bucs were struggling. The Packers returned to the scene of the crime for a late Sunday afternoon game.

Favre often struggled with the aggressive Tampa defense and today was no exception. He was often erratic, but this time the Green Bay quarterback steered clear of big mistakes. The

Packers picked up three turnovers. Green ran for 109 yards and got some help on the ground for Najeh Davenport. Defense, the running game and no mistakes keyed a nice 20-13 win.

Green Bay hosted mediocre San Francisco and Favre got things rolling quickly with a 66-yard touchdown strike to Walker and a 16-yard scoring pass to Ferguson. It was 14-0 in a hurry. Green then took over, ran for 154 yards and helped the Packers manage the rest of the game to a 20-10 win. They were back on the plus side of .500 at 6-5.

Not for long. A Thanksgiving Day visit to Detroit was a disaster. The Lions were a bad team, but Favre threw three interceptions and the Pack turned it over five times. A 14-13 lead after three quarters turned into a 22-14 loss.

If nothing else, Green Bay had ten days to get ready for games with mediocre Chicago and a lousy San Diego Chargers team. It was a chance for the Packers to get their bearings back and stay in the hunt for an NFC North division that had no great team.

The home date with the Bears didn't start well—Favre threw a Pick-6 and the Packers were staring at a 14-0 hole. But it ended well. Favre went 22/33 for 210 yards and got Green Bay out to a 19-14 lead. When Chicago was driving in the fourth quarter threatening to get the lead back, McKenzie picked off a pass on his own 10-yard line and went all the way to the house. That all but sealed a game that ended 34-21.

The visit to San Diego proved to be a battle. The Chargers might not be good, but with Marty Schottenheimer rebuilding behind LaDarian Tomlinson in the backfield, the Bolts weren't far from being a contender. They took a 21-17 lead into the fourth quarter. Favre answered the bell, hitting Ferguson on a 40-yard TD strike, tossing an 11-yard scoring pass to Green and then going back to Ferguson from 16 yards out. The fourth quarter flurry, keyed by Driver's eight catches for 112 yards, led a 38-21 win.

Green Bay was 8-6 and tied for first in the NFC North with Minnesota. The problem was, the Vikings held the tiebreaker based on conference record. Dallas led the wild-card race at 9-5 and had control of the tiebreakers. The Packers were tied with the Seahawks at 8-6 for the final berth. Green Bay held this tiebreaker based on head-to-head, but there was one problem—any Dallas loss could create a three-way tie and the Packers would end up the odd team out.

So it was must-win on Monday Night in Oakland. And now is when the legend of the 2003 Green Bay Packers really kicks into high gear.

The day before the game the Favre family received awful news. Favre's father Irv had died of a heart attack. He was only 58-years-old. There was talk that Favre would not play the following night. In the end, his family persuaded him it was what Irv would have wanted. He took the field, but with a heavy heart.

A sympathetic nation rallied to a quarterback they already loved for his down-home demeanor. And on Monday Night, Favre electrified the audience. He threw for 399 yards. There were four touchdown passes. There were no mistakes. A 41-7 win over what was a bad Raider team

normally wouldn't raise an eyebrow. This one, with virtually everything Favre threw up, seeming to land in the hands of his receivers, had a magical quality to it.

With most great quarterbacks, their defining moment is often a legendary drive (see John Elway in 1986 at Cleveland), a big Super Bowl win (Joe Montana, Tom Brady and a host of others), an epic playoff comeback (Peyton Manning in 2006 against New England). Ask people about Brett Favre's greatest moment and the most common answer you get is the night he threw four touchdown passes a day after his father died. Brett Favre, more than other star athletes, was Everyman and perhaps this sums it up.

Everyman was still no guarantee for the playoffs. The previous Saturday, Minnesota had blown out Kansas City, depriving the Packers of help in a game where it seemed possible. Seattle and Dallas had both won. Everything was up in the air going into the final week.

Green Bay was slated to play in the late Sunday afternoon window at home against Denver. The Broncos were playoff-bound, but had nothing to play for.

The problem is that neither did Dallas. The Cowboys dropped their finale in the early afternoon. Combine that with Seattle's win in San Francisco on Saturday, and Green Bay was frozen out of the wild-card. The only hope was to catch Minnesota. The Vikings were out in Arizona for a finale that would play parallel to the Packers-Broncos game.

Green Bay took care of their business. Green had the best day of the best season in his career. He poured it on for 218 yards, including a 98-yard touchdown jaunt that all but sealed the game early in the fourth quarter. It ended 31-3.

Everyone at Lambeau was watching the score in Arizona. It didn't look good. The Vikings led 17-6. Phil Simms, calling the game for CBS, noted that Green Bay had gone 10-6 and that such was usually a playoff season. The obituaries were being written.

Then the Cardinals got a touchdown. And got the ball back. Watching the Packer game became a surreal experience. Players from the sidelines were looking up at the fans, who were tuned into what was going on in the desert. Arizona got to the Minnesota 28-yard line, but there was only time for one more play.

What happened next remains stunning by any measure. Josh McCown stepped back for Arizona and found Nathan Poole for a touchdown. The crowd at Lambeau erupted as though they were there, even though their own game was still going on right before them. Arizona had pulled the upset. Green Bay was going to the playoffs. The thought that maybe Irv had guided McCown's pass was a part of the storyline.

Green Bay was now hosting a first-round playoff game. Seattle came in for the second time this season. This one wasn't as easy as the first. Both teams had two good first drives bog down with field goals. Favre found Franks for a 23-yard TD pass to make it 13-6 at the half.

The offenses picked up the pace in the second half. Favre went 26/38 for 319 yards. Counterpart Matt Hasselbeck was 25/45 for 305 yards. The back and forth battle went to overtime tied 27-all, neither quarterback having thrown a pick.

Maybe that's why Hasselbeck was confident enough to tell the official "We're gonna score" as Seattle won the coin toss under overtime rules that were then strict sudden death. Hasselbeck was almost right.



Seattle drove near midfield. Hasselbeck looked to his left. His pass was intercepted by Al Harris, who raced the other way for a Pick-6. In yet another stunning turn of events, the Packers had another victory.

Green Bay went to Philadelphia the following Sunday, a late afternoon kick that would conclude the divisional round weekend. The Packers played like the magic was still there. Favre went to Ferguson for touchdowns from 40 and 17 yards. Green Bay led 14-0.

Philadelphia rallied with two TDs of their own to tie it, but Green was owning the Eagles on the ground. His 25 carries produced 156 yards. A field goal early in the fourth quarter put the Packers up 17-14. They had the ball late in the game, facing 4th-and-inches near the Philadelphia 40. A first down would seal the game. Head coach Mike Sherman opted to punt.

It was an understandable decision, given the Eagles only needed a field goal and the Packer defense was playing well. But when the punt went into the end zone, Green Bay had only gained about twenty yards in exchange for giving up a chance to clinch the game. Even so, when the defense forced Philly into an impossible 4th-and-26, it didn't appear to matter.

The stunning turns of events were now going to turn around and bite the Packers. Philadelphia converted the first down and quite easily, as the Green Bay secondary led Freddie Mitchell waltz over the middle of the field wide open. The Eagles tied the game with a field goal.

Green Bay still got the coin toss in overtime. That's when Favre threw what can only be described as the worst and most misguided pass of his career. In his own territory and under pressure, Favre scrambled and then basically hurled the ball blindly back across the field. To no one's surprise, the blind backside desperation throw was intercepted. Philadelphia kicked a field goal and the season was over.

Live by the sword and die by the sword was Brett Favre's mantra throughout his entire magnificent career. Never were both sides of that more obvious than in the highs and lows of 2003, with a heavy dose of heartwarming human interest on top of it all.

2004

The 2004 Green Bay Packers were similar to their immediate predecessors—they started slow, dug themselves a hole and rallied to come out of it. Like '03, there were big wins down the stretch and a frustrating playoff loss. But unlike the previous year, this one ended on a particularly dour note and foreshadowed the end of another movement in the Brett Favre era.

Favre delivered another strong year in 2004. His 64 completion rate was ninth among NFL quarterbacks. His 7.6 yards-per-attempt would normally have put him near the top of the league, but with big plays in general up a bit due to stricter regulation of defensive secondary play, it only ranked 11th this year. Still pretty good. The TD-INT ratio of 30/17 was vintage Favre. Plenty of big plays, both good and bad.

There were Pro Bowl players at the skill positions. Green continued to be reliable. Even though his production slipped after a spectacular '03, Green still rushed for 1,163 yards, averaged 4.5 yards-per-attempt and his 40 catches made him a vital part of the passing game.

Walker punched a Pro Bowl ticket at wide receiver with a big year, catching 89 balls for nearly 1,400 yards. Driver's 84 catches averaged 14.4 a pop. Franks continued to be a good blocker and a reliable option for Favre. Henderson was 1st-team All-NFL at the under-the-radar fullback spot and caught 34 passes.

Rivera was the best of the offensive line, again making the Pro Bowl at guard. All in all, this added up to the fifth-most productive offense in the NFL for points scored. The problems came on defense.

Green Bay still had a terrific pass rusher in KGB who recorded 13 ½ sacks. Aaron Kampman was a developing force on the other side of the defensive line. Sharper had been a reliable player for several years now. But no one made the Pro Bowl and the Packers finished 23rd in the league for points allowed.

Lambeau Field was the sight of the season's opening Monday Night game and Green Bay was hosting Carolina. The Panthers had made the Super Bowl in 2003. But they were headed for mediocrity this season and Green Bay got them started in that direction. Green carried 33 times for 119 yards, keying a 152-38 edge in rush yardage and 38 minutes of possession time. The Packers delivered an efficient 24-14 win.

Chicago had been dormant for the past couple years and this season wouldn't be a whole lot better. But the Bears had a new coach in Lovie Smith and success wasn't far around the corner. Lovie delivered the first big win of his tenure thanks to some Green Bay mistakes. Trailing 7-3 late in the second quarter, the Packers were on the verge of a go-ahead touchdown when a fumble went 95 yard the other way. With Favre having a mediocre day, Green Bay lost 21-10.

A visit to powerful Indianapolis and Peyton Manning was next. In the late Sunday afternoon TV window, Favre and Manning put on a show. Favre went 30/44 for 360 yards, four touchdowns and no mistakes. Walker had a huge game, with eleven catches that produced 200 yards. But Manning was even better—393 yards, five TDs and no mistakes. Green Bay lost 45-31.

That loss wasn't particularly alarming, but coming home and losing to the New York Giants was. The Packers were outrushed 245-81. Then they hosted Tennessee on Monday Night and were outrushed 224-35. Even though Favre threw for 338 yards that night, most of them to Walker and Driver, the quarterback also threw three interceptions. It wasn't enough to overcome the rush yardage disparity and the Packers lost 48-27.

Green Bay was not only sitting at 1-4, but they had lost three home games (Bears, Giants, Titans) that were on their way to a combined 16-48 record for the season. The Packers were in serious trouble by any measure you wanted to use.

So even though the next three opponents—the Lions, Cowboys and Redskins were all headed for poor seasons, no one in Packerland could count on any victories. But this is where Green Bay started to turn the corner.

The Packers held a 17-10 third quarter lead in Detroit when Sharper came up with a Pick-6. Favre went 25/38 for 257 yards and two touchdowns, playing error-free football. Driver caught nine passes for 110 yards. Green and backup running back Najeh Davenport combined for 143 yards and the Pack pulled away to a 38-10 win.

Dallas' visit went refreshingly easy for the fans of Lambeau. Green ripped off a 90-yard touchdown run. Favre was razor-sharp, going 23/29 for 258 yards and two TDs, Walker catching eight of those passes for 129 yards. The final was 41-20.

Green Bay went to Washington and jumped out to a 17-0 lead. Favre was 20/32 for 289 yards, although he did throw three interceptions. But the early lead was plenty for a defensive line that got four sacks and the Packers won 28-14. They were back to .500 going into their bye week.

Minnesota, the key rival in the NFC North, was waiting on the far side of the bye. It was a late Sunday afternoon kickoff at Lambeau for a national audience. And the game was everything that Fox Sports could have hoped for.

Favre was 20/29 for 236 yards and four touchdowns. Green rolled up 145 yards on the ground. Green Bay was in command, up 31-17 in the fourth quarter. But their defensive woes, combined with an explosive Viking attack, made this one tight. Minnesota tied the game 31-31. Favre calmly led one more drive back down the field. On the game's final play, Ryan Longwell kicked a 33-yard field goal for the win.

Green Bay went down to Houston the following Sunday Night. Facing a subpar team, the Packers couldn't run the ball and were sloppy, committing ten penalties. They were staring at a 13-3 deficit in the fourth quarter. The four-game winning streak looked over.

But Favre found Driver on a 24-yard touchdown pass. The Gunslinger finished this night at 33/50 for 383 yards. He led a drive for a tying field goal. One more drive set up Longwell for another last-play field goal attempt. For the second straight week, the kicker delivered, this time from 46 yards and a 16-13 win.

The St. Louis Rams were in the midst of a .500 season when they came to Lambeau for another Monday Night game. This was no contest. The Packer running game simply destroyed the Rams. Green was out, but Davenport went off for 178 yards on 19 carries. Favre was 18/27 for 215 yards, three TDs and zero picks. The result was an easy 45-17 win.

Riding high with six wins in a row, Green Bay was due for a letdown. And a road trip to Super Bowl-bound Philadelphia was a logical place for it to happen. The defensive melted down and allowed five touchdown passes in the first half. The 47-17 rout never resembled a competitive game.

Still sitting on 7-5 and in a division with no standout team, the Packers were in good shape. The focus of the NFC North was on a Christmas Eve afternoon battle up in Minnesota in the season's penultimate game. The next two weeks were about positioning for that showdown.

Green Bay looked ready to revert to early season form when Detroit came to Lambeau for a late afternoon kick and took a 13-3 lead into the fourth quarter. In a virtual replay of the Houston game, Favre stepped up with a 23-yard touchdown pass to Driver. Then the Pack got a tying field goal. Then Favre set up Longwell for a field goal. This time they left two seconds on the clock, but the 23-yarder got another 16-13 win.

Another late afternoon TV window game at home was up with Jacksonville. The Jags would not make the playoffs, but they were on the fringe of contention and finished 9-7. Jacksonville played like they needed this game. Green Bay did not, turning it over five times, three on Favre interceptions. They lost 28-25.

Even so, after the awful start to the season, no one in Green Bay was complaining about being 8-6 and tied for first with Minnesota. Even better, the Packers held the tiebreakers on the Vikings. Meaning Green Bay could clinch the division with a win on Christmas Eve and still be alive if they lost. Finally, none of the other wild-card contenders were better than 6-8. The Pack was in prime position to get a fourth straight playoff trip.

The old Metrodome in the Twin Cities was home to some of Favre's most troubled moments as a Packer. It looked like this year might be one of them. In a 24-24 tie game and just over eight minutes left, Favre threw a Pick-6 deep in his own end.

But Favre's struggles in Minnesota also mean that his successes there stand out. Like going 30/43 for 365 yards on the afternoon with three touchdown passes. Like rallying the Packers to tie the game. And like setting up Longwell for *another* last-play field goal. For the second time this season, Green Bay had beaten Minnesota by a 34-31 score. Aided in no small part by Driver's eleven catches for 162 yards, the Packers were NFC North champs.

There was no shot at a first-round bye, so the season finale in Chicago the day after New Year's was meaningless. Favre played the first half and was sharp, going 9/13 for 196 yards and a couple TDs. Sharper added another Pick-6 to his season totals. Favre came out with the score 21-7 and the Packers coasted to a 31-14 win.

Green Bay was up to the 3-seed, but that proved to be a mixed blessing. The way the rest of the playoff picture fell, Minnesota ended up in the 6-spot. The Packers would have to try and complete a three-game sweep in a rivalry that was closely contested.

On a late Sunday afternoon in Lambeau that ended wild-card weekend, all of the Packer weaknesses went on display. The defense was lit up by Dante Culpepper and dug Green Bay an early 17-0 hole. Favre was at his mistake-prone worst, throwing four interceptions. Favre was also at his never-give-up best and did cut the lead to 24-17 by the fourth quarter. But Green Bay never forced a turnover and Minnesota added a lockup touchdown. The season ended with the 31-17 loss.

Green Bay had now lost two home playoff games in the last three years—both in the wild-card round—after never losing a postseason game at Lambeau prior to 2002. Perhaps it wasn't fair, but there was now a bad aftertaste to a season that had seen so many thrills and rallies.

2005

The Brett Favre years in Green Bay had seen tremendous success. Since his arrival in 1992, the Packers had made the playoffs ten times, won six division crowns, went to the Super Bowl twice and won it all in 1996. Even the three years they were out of the money for the postseason, the Pack still finished .500 or better. The 2005 Green Bay Packers season brought that all to a crashing halt. The Packers collapsed and began a rebuild, with Favre's future now in doubt.

It was following the 2004 division title run that Favre began the public discussion of retirement which eventually turned into a national soap opera and caused Green Bay to use a first-round draft pick on a quarterback from Cal named Aaron Rodgers.

What happened on the field only furthered that speculation. While his 61 percent completion rate was still good, it was no longer in the league's elite, ranking 13th among starting quarterbacks. Favre's yards-per-attempt, usually a strength, slipped to 6.4 and was 25th. And his 29 interceptions were off the charts awful. Being intercepted on nearly five percent of his throws put Favre 34th—dead last among quarterbacks with enough throws to qualify.

To make matters worse, Ahman Green was limited by injuries to five games. Samkon Gado ended up as the leading rusher. Tony Fisher tried to replace Green's production as a pass-catcher out of the backfield and caught 48 passes. But the combo wasn't nearly as good as a healthy Green.

There were new faces at other spots. Antonio Chatman replaced Javon Walker at one wide receiver spot. Chatman's 49 catches for 549 yards were a big dip from the Pro Bowler Walker. Donald Lee replaced a Pro Bowl tight end in Bubba Franks. Lee caught 33 balls, but for less than 300 yards.

To make matters worse, the team's best offensive lineman, Marco Rivera, had left via free agency. So even though Donald Driver had a good year at receiver, catching 86 passes for over 1,200 yards, the Packer offense was unusually bad. They only ranked 22nd in the league in points scored.

And the Green Bay defense, bereft of elite talent for several years now, wasn't going to make up the gap. They had some good pass rushers in Kabeer Gbajala-Biamilia (KGB) and Aaron Kampman, who combined for 14 ½ sacks off the edges. But that was nowhere near enough and the Packer defense was 19th in the NFL in points allowed.

Week 1 provided a clue as to what lie ahead. Green Bay was in Detroit. The Lions weren't any good, but the Packers only rushed for 46 yards and allowed four sacks. Favre threw a couple picks and the result was a 17-3 loss.

A home game with another bad team in Cleveland provided a chance to get back on track. Favre got dialed in with some big plays, going 32/44 for 342 yards and three touchdowns. Driver caught six balls for 105 yards. But Favre also threw a couple picks, the defense didn't force any turnovers and a touchdown with four seconds left handed the Packers a 26-24 loss.

Losing to two bad teams wasn't good preparation for facing a genuinely good one in playoff-bound Tampa Bay. Green Bay was pounded up front, losing rush yardage 161-75 and Favre threw three more interceptions. It was another close game, but also another loss, this one 17-16.

Carolina was another playoff-bound team out of the NFC South and that's where Green Bay was headed for a Monday Night visit. In a must-win game, the Pack dug themselves a 26-7 hole. Favre dug deep and went 28/47 for 347 yards and four touchdowns. He rallied the Packers to within 32-29 at the three-minute mark. But that's where the comeback bid ended. Green Bay was 0-4.

New Orleans was on their way to an atrocious season, one that put them into position to draft USC's Heisman Trophy-winning running back Reggie Bush. The Saints came to Lambeau. The Pack spotted the visitors a field goal and then took over. Favre went 19/27 for 215 yards. The defense brought back two interceptions for touchdowns. The result was a cathartic 52-3 rout that at least got Green Bay in the win column going into the bye.

For the historical record, something else happened on that October 9 day in Lambeau Field. Aaron Rodgers threw and completed his first NFL pass.

Optimists could point out that Green Bay had started 1-4 in 2004 and rallied to win the NFC North. Any such comeback this year would have to begin at Minnesota on the far side of the bye. Favre played a good game, going 28/36 for 315 yards. Driver caught eight of those passes for 114 of those yards. The Packers led 17-10 in the fourth quarter. But they couldn't run the ball, the Vikings rallied and Green Bay lost 23-20.

A road trip to Cincinnati, the eventual AFC North champs, saw the defense play much better, but Favre threw five interceptions. That ended in a 21-14 loss. Pittsburgh, bound for the playoffs and eventually a Super Bowl title run from the 6-seed, came to Lambeau for a late Sunday afternoon game. Green Bay, trailing 6-3 in the second quarter, was driving. They fumbled and it went back the other way for a touchdown. With another poor running game performance, the Packers lost 20-10.

The record was down to 1-7 and everyone knew this was a lost season by the halfway point. Green Bay still went to mediocre Atlanta and played with some pride. Gado ran for one touchdown and caught another. Driver snagged ten catches for 114 yards. The Packers pulled out a 33-28 win.

Time for a rematch with Minnesota, who would stay on the fringe of playoff contention all year. On the Monday Night stage, Favre hit Driver on a couple long TD passes from 51 and 53 yards. But Favre also threw a Pick-6. The Packers were outrushed 160-21. And they were beaten on a last-play field goal, 20-17.

Green Bay went on to Philadelphia. The Eagles, like the Packers, were having a down year after four consecutive seasons of success. Green Bay took a 14-10 lead at halftime, but an erratic Favre threw a couple interceptions and Philly eventually won 19-14.

The calendar turned to December. Green Bay still had both games ahead with archrival Chicago. The Bears were setting the pace in the NFC North and the Packers could at least hope to play spoiler. Not on this day in Soldier Field. Even though the defense played well and Gado ground out 75 yards, Favre went to the air 58 times. He completed 31 and got 277 yards, but it was inefficient yardage. He also threw two interceptions, one a late fourth quarter Pick-6 that sealed Green Bay's 19-7 loss.

A Sunday Night home date with Detroit provided the opportunity to get a win. It was hairy as two bad teams played a competitive game. But Gado's 171 yards rushing were the difference in the 16-13 overtime triumph.

Any good feels were short-lived. The worst performance of a putrid year was coming up on Monday Night in Baltimore. Facing a bad Ravens team, Favre threw two interceptions and lost two fumbles. He was pulled and Rodgers got his first taste of extended playing time. The rookie went 8/15 for 65 yards and an interception. Nothing to cheer about for Green Bay fans in the 48-3 humiliation.

At 3-11, Green Bay's final two home games were against Chicago and Seattle. These were the teams headed for the top two seed positions in the NFC playoffs. One was the Packers' historic rival, the other was led by Favre's first coach, Mike Holmgren. Surely this could be a motivating moment for the Pack.

If it was, it didn't show on the field on Christmas Day afternoon against the Bears. Green Bay fell behind 24-7. Favre put it up 51 times and threw four interceptions, including a Pick-6 in his own end zone. The 24-17 final was only cosmetically competitive.

Seattle had the top seed wrapped up and eventually made the Super Bowl. Against an opponent that was mailing it in, Green Bay finally got another win. Driver caught six passes for 118 yards and the Pack beat the Seahawk second string 23-17.

A long year was over. So was the tenure of Mike Sherman, who had coached the team since 2000 and been the general manager since 2001. He was fired from both roles. Ted Thompson came in as GM and he hired Mike McCarthy as the new coach. The final tumultuous chapter of Brett Favre's time in Green Bay was at hand.

2006

There was a cloud of uncertainty surrounding the Packers. How much longer Favre would play was a constant source of speculation, often fueled by the quarterback himself. When Rodgers, now entering his second season, would get an opportunity added to the brewing controversy.

The first three quarters of the 2006 season didn't do much to dispel any of that. But a strong finish nearly pushed the Packers into the playoffs and got momentum back in their direction.

Now 37-years-old, Favre's numbers had been poor in 2005 and weren't much better this year. He ranked near the bottom among starting quarterbacks in completion percentage (56%) and yards-per-attempt (6.3). He only threw 18 touchdown passes against 18 interceptions. But his interception rate, which had ballooned to nearly 5 percent in '05 dropped to 2.9 percent this year and put him in the middle of the league.

Green was back as the mainstay of the backfield. He cleared the 1,000-yard threshold in rushing, averaged a respectable four a pop and caught 46 balls out of the backfield. The receiving corps was led by Driver, who had a Pro Bowl season with 92 catches for nearly 1,300 yards. And Favre got a new target in rookie Greg Jennings, whose 45 catches produced 14 yards a catch.

The offensive line wasn't a strength, but it rarely was in the Favre era (or in the subsequent Rodgers era for that matter). At least this year there was some hope, as McCarthy broke in two rookies at guard, Daryn Colledge and Jason Spitz.

A third rookie broke into the starting lineup on the defensive side of the ball, linebacker A.J. Hawk. The Packers also made a big veteran addition, signing defensive back Charles Woodson in free agency. The future Hall of Famer had eight interceptions in 2006.

But the front line was the key to Green Bay's defense. Kampman came into his own as a Pro Bowl defensive end, with 15 ½ sacks. KGB added six sacks on the other end. Cullen Jenkins and Corey Williams combined for 13 sacks coming up the middle.

Given all this, it's surprising that the Packer defense only ranked 25th in the NFL in points allowed. The offense, even with its relative weakness compared to the rest of the Favre era, was still marginally better, at 22nd in points scored.

The season opened at home against Chicago in a late afternoon kickoff. The Bears had won the NFC North in 2005 and would be Super Bowl-bound this season. Individually, Green Bay's key players got some numbers against a good Chicago defense. Green rushed for 110 yards. Driver caught seven balls for 96 yards. But with Favre only 15/29 for 170 yards and two interceptions, there were no numbers on the scoreboard. The Pack was whitewashed 26-0. It was the first time in the Favre era they had been shut out.

Favre heated up the following week when New Orleans came to town. He went 31/55 for 340 yards and three touchdowns. An early 22-yard scoring throw to Jennings got the Packers out to a 13-0 lead. But the Saints, in their first year with Drew Brees, were headed for the 2-seed in the NFC playoffs and they had more. Green Bay lost 34-27.

A road trip to lowly Detroit saw the first win of the McCarthy era. Favre went up to Jennings for a 75-yard touchdown strike. For the rest of the game, Favre spread the ball around, went 25/36 for 340 yards, three TDs and no mistakes. Green Bay won 31-24.

The Packers went on the road to eventual NFC East champ Philadelphia for a Monday Night appearance. It was ugly. Favre was erratic, the defense allowed big plays in the passing game and the result was a decisive 31-24 loss.

Looking for a running game, McCarthy gave Noah Herron some carries the following week against the St. Louis Rams in Lambeau. Herron rewarded the coach with 106 yards. Jennings made some big plays, 105 yards on five catches. But the Packers lost a couple fumbles and lost the football game 23-20.

They were headed into the bye week at 1-4, the third straight year that had started with four losses in five games. Last year completely got away, but 2004 had seen Favre rally the Packers to a division title. There weren't a lot of signs of hope this year, although from a historical perspective, we know that Green Bay's schedule had been frontloaded with the top three seeds in the NFC bracket. Philadelphia and New Orleans were having turnaround seasons that were not yet fully apparent in the moment.

The Pack went to Miami and fell behind a subpar Dolphins team coached by Nick Saban, 10-6 in the first half. Green got rolling and rushed for 118 yards. Driver caught ten balls for 93 yards and keyed the passing game. Woodson came up with a third-quarter Pick-6 and Green Bay went on to win 34-24.

A second straight win followed at home against the shaky Arizona Cardinals. Green's 106 yards keyed a massive 203-86 edge in rush yardage. And Vernand Morency had his fifteen minutes of fame, catching eleven passes for 101 yards in what would be the only 100-yard game of his career. The Packers cruised to a 31-14 win.

At 3-4 and games against losing teams in Buffalo and Minnesota coming up, Green Bay was in position to make something of this season. But they had to handle the road in both games.

In Buffalo they did not. Favre threw an early Pick-6 and the Packers lost the turnover battle 4-0. Even though Green ran for 122 yards and it was tied 10-10 in the fourth quarter, it was the Bills who pulled away to a 24-10 win.

Facing a must-win game in the old Metrodome, Favre stepped up with a vintage big-play performance. He went 24/42 and those twenty-four completions produced 347 yards. Driver caught six balls for 191 yards, including an 82-yard touchdown strike. The defense came up with four sacks and the Packers kept themselves alive with a 23-17 victory.

But Tom Brady and the New England Patriots were up next. Even with the game in Lambeau, this got really ugly. Favre only went 5/15 for 73 yards, before being pulled in what ended up as a 35-0 rout. Rodgers got some playing time, but could only manage 4/12 for 32 yards. The gap between the Packers and the league's best teams was still obviously quite substantial.

And there was no time to lick wounds, with two more playoff teams up next. Green Bay went to Seattle. In a sloppy game, both the Packers and Seahawks turned it over four times. But Green Bay added in ten penalties and were crushed in rushing, 235-51. They took a 34-24 defeat.

Even worse was a home game against the Jets. In a 31-0 hole at halftime, Green Bay was booed off the field. This might be par for the course in a lot of places, but the generally kind and gentle Midwestern folks that come to Lambeau Field are known for their loyalty. But even they had snapped. This game ended 38-10. The Packers were 4-8 and this was becoming something pretty close to 2005 all over again.

But the schedule softened up and Green Bay dug deep. They went to mediocre San Francisco. Favre typically played well against the 49ers, even against their best teams through the 1990s. In this spot, facing Alex Smith, the rookie San Francisco chose over Rodgers, Favre went 22/34 for 293 yards and no mistakes. Green Bay stopped the bleeding with a 30-19 win.

Favre was shaky against Detroit, throwing three interceptions. But Morency added a couple touchdown runs, Green ran for 79 yards, the defense got big stops and the Packers ground out a 17-9 home win.



The NFC wild-card race was shrouded in mediocrity, so Green Bay's 6-8 record actually had them very much in the mix for the final playoff spot. They trailed the Giants and Falcons by a game, with the Rams and Panthers also sitting on 6-8.

Minnesota came to Lambeau for a Thursday Night date a few days prior to Christmas. This could have turned into a big lump of coal for Packer fans, with Favre spotty, throwing a Pick-6 and no running game to be found. But the defense delivered the Christmas gift. That Pick-6 was the only points the Packers allowed and they squeaked out a 9-7 win.

Meanwhile, both the Giants and Falcons lost on Sunday, while the Rams and Panthers won. It was a crackup of five teams at 7-8 and one playoff spot available.

New York held the tiebreaker, but Green Bay was second in line. Given that the Packers were only three weeks removed from being booted off their homefield, this was pretty good. They were slated to play on Sunday Night in Chicago to end the regular season. New York was scheduled in prime-time for Saturday night in Washington.

When the Giants beat the Redskins 34-28, the playoff bid was over. There was no chance to play spoiler with the Bears, as Chicago had the top seed for the playoffs wrapped up. But with everyone wondering if this prime-time date in Soldier Field was going to be Favre's swan song, it was still must-see television.

I recall being in Orlando that New Year's Eve, watching the game at a bar in Disney World, in advance of going out to watch Wisconsin play in the following day's Capital One Bowl. Favre went 21/42 for 285 yards. Russell Martin had another fifteen minutes of fame moment, gaining 118 yards and then never being heard from again. Nick Collins picked off two passes and brought one back to the house. Patrick Dendy added a Pick-6 of his own. Playing the Chicago backups, Green Bay cruised to a 26-7 win.

Everyone was watching Favre in the postgame interview to see if he would give any hints as to his future. Surrounded by his offensive line, the quarterback had tears in his eyes and was reserved. It seemed to be something close to a goodbye.

But it wasn't. In fact, the late surge of 2006 had set the stage for the final act of the Gunslinger's great career.

2007

Favre had decided to return for another year after another offseason of indecision regarding retirement. But there were no great expectations in Lambeau Field for the '07 season. Instead, this turned into a magical year for Favre in what proved to be his final campaign as a Packer.

Favre had a big year, completing 67 percent of his passes for 7.8 yards-per-attempt. Both ranked in the top four of the league. His mistakes were kept manageable—a 2.8 percent interception rate put him in the middle of the league. He finished second in the MVP voting, trailing only Tom Brady who merely rewrote the record book for the 16-0 New England Patriots.

There was change afoot in the backfield. After several years of relying on Ahman Green for both rushing and receiving, the Packers went with Ryan Grant. The rookie produced 956 yards and averaged 5.1 per carry. Vernand Morency was used to replace Green's pass-catching skill. Morency caught 30 balls out of the backfield.

Driver continued to be a Pro Bowl receiver and Favre's favorite target, catching 82 passes for over 1,000 yards. Jennings was the man who was stretching the field—his 53 catches averaged better than 17 yards a pop. James Jones was a good third receiver and Lee a reliable tight end.

The offensive line was anchored by left tackle Chad Clifton, a mainstay who got Pro Bowl recognition in 2007. Overall, the Pack ranked fourth in the NFL in points scored.

Green Bay's defense was led up front by Kampman at defensive end. Kampman picked up twelve sacks and made the Pro Bowl. Corey Williams provided a good inside rush, getting home seven times from the tackle spot.

The secondary was led by Woodson, who intercepted four passes. Al Harris, the 33-year-old veteran delivered a Pro Bowl season at one corner and strong safety Atari Bigby picked off five passes of his own. The Packers ranked sixth in the league in points allowed.

Green Bay opened the season at home against Philadelphia. The Eagles were the defending NFC East champs, but headed for an 8-8 campaign this year. The Packer defense forced Philly quarterback Donovan McNabb into an erratic game and then kicker Mason Crosby broke a 13-13 tie with a field goal that won it with two seconds left.

A visit to New York to face the Giants was next and here is where Favre really moved into what would be 2007 form. He went 29/38 for 286 yards, spreading the ball around to all his targets. Leading 14-13 after the fourth quarter, he tossed a couple TD passes to put the game away and the Packers won 35-13. Green Bay had a road blowout of a playoff-bound team they had not seen the last of.

San Diego was another playoff-bound team with Philip Rivers at quarterback and LaDanaian Tomlinson in the backfield. Favre and Rivers hooked up in a shootout at Lambeau, each throwing for over 300 yards. Trailing 21-17 and nearing the two-minute warning, Favre hit Jennings with a 57-yard TD strike. It was the decisive blow in a crazy last two minutes that saw the Packers score an add-on touchdown and the Chargers get a field goal in the closing seconds. The game ended 31-24 and the Pack was 3-0.

It was on to Minnesota. The Vikings were mediocre in 2007, with a good defense, good offensive line and Adrian Peterson at running back not able to make up for problems at quarterback. That would create more than the usual amount of tension between Favre and the Packers in due time. Not today though. Favre went 32/45 for 344 yards, no mistakes and spread the ball around. It was enough to overcome the lack of a running game and win 23-16.

Another division rival was up next in Chicago. The Bears had won the NFC North the past two years and went to the Super Bowl in 2006. This year saw them slip back to mediocrity, but their tough defense made life unpleasant for Favre on the Sunday Night stage in Lambeau. Even though Favre went 29/40 for 322 yards, he threw a couple picks and the Packers lost three fumbles. It led to a 20-10 third-quarter lead disappearing and turning into a 27-20 loss.

Favre again struggled in a home game with the playoff-bound Washington Redskins. The Packers didn't run the ball well. But the defense stepped up by forcing three turnovers, including Charles Woodson's scoop-and-score on a 57-yard fumble return. It was enough to pull out a 17-14 win at home.

Green Bay went into their bye week at 5-1. Packer Nation was happy to be back in contention, but there was still some skepticism about whether this was really an elite team. After all, the early schedule had been heavy on home games and most of the victories had been close.

The first game on the far side of the bye was a Monday Night road trip to Denver. Even though this was a mediocre Broncos team, the Mile High City was on fire. The World Series had come to town the previous Saturday with the Colorado Rockies hosting the Boston Red Sox. There was talk that a Monday with Game 5 of the Series and then MNF against Brett Favre would be the biggest sports day in the history of Denver.

None of it worked out for Denver. The Rockies were swept four straight and the Series ended Sunday night. Then on the football field, Favre went 21/27 for 331 yards, two TDs and no mistakes. Jay Cutler was good enough for Denver to get it to overtime at 13-13.

On the first play from scrimmage in OT, Favre rifled an 82-yard touchdown strike to Jennings for the ballgame. Green Bay was 6-1 and though they didn't know it at the time, had gotten a sneak peek at the torment they would inflict on Cutler when the quarterback eventually landed in Chicago.

The Packers went on to Kansas City where the Chiefs were having an awful season. Playing to the level of their competition, Green Bay trailed 22-16 with three minutes left. Favre and Jennings again made a big play, this one a 60-yard TD pass. They added a field goal with 1:40 to go to make it 26-22. Woodson sealed the deal with a Pick-6. The 33-22 win looks comfortable on paper, but it was another narrow escape.

Over the next three weeks, Green Bay started making it easy on themselves and giving the fan base room to breathe. They blew out Minnesota at home 34-0, with Favre going 35/48 for 363 yards and three touchdowns. Against mediocre Carolina, Favre was 22/30 for 318 for three more TDs, two of them to Lee. The final was 31-17. And on Thanksgiving in Detroit, Favre ripped off a 31/41 for 381 yards showing that added three more TDs to his total. Driver caught ten balls for 147 yards in the 37-26 Turkey Day feast.

Green Bay and Dallas were running away with the top spots in the NFC. They would go head-to-head on the final Thursday Night of November. Inside track to homefield was on the line.

If anyone wanted to be skeptical of the Packers as a Super Bowl team, this game at old Texas Stadium gave the doubters plenty of ammo. Favre was terrible, going 5/14, throwing two interceptions and getting knocked out. Green Bay was in a 27-10 hole by the second quarter. The Packers were flagged for 142 yards worth of penalty yardage.

There was one bright spot. Aaron Rodgers, now in his third year sitting on the bench, came in for Favre and went 18/26 for 201 yards. Rodgers closed the deficit to 27-24 before Tony Romo's Cowboys pulled back away to a 37-27 win. It was a disappointing loss, but Green Bay fans were saying at the time that maybe this Rodgers kid would turn out okay after Favre was gone.

Green Bay was still sitting at 10-2. They were blowing away the NFC North and also had a comfortable two-game lead on Seattle for the 2-seed and first-round bye in the playoffs. And the Pack was only a game back of Dallas for the top spot if they could play well in December and get some help.

The running game was on display against woeful Oakland, with Grant ripping off 156 yards in an easy 38-7 home win. A visit to another lousy team, the St. Louis Rams produced another blowout win. This one was tight into the third quarter, at 20-14 when Favre threw a 44-yard TD pass to Jennings. Nick Barnett led the defensive effort with a pair of sacks and the final was 33-14.

Even better was the news that Dallas had lost. The Cowboys still held the tiebreaker, but with both teams at 12-2, anything was possible going into the final two weeks.

Green Bay went on to visit Chicago on a brutally cold day where temps were (-18) with the windchill. Favre was off his game, going 17/32 for 153 yards and two interceptions. The Packers trailed 21-7 when the Bears added touchdowns on a blocked punt and a Pick-6. Grant's 100-yard day in the cold was small consolation in the 35-7 loss. Dallas won and clinched the #1 seed. The Packers had gotten an ominous foreshadowing of what might happen if they played in the bitter cold.

The final game of the year at home against Detroit would be a playoff tuneup and it went well. Favre went 9/11 for 99 yards, a couple TDs and took the second half off. Brandon Jackson replaced Grant in the backfield and rushed for 113 yards. The Packers closed out their surprise 13-3 season with an easy 34-13 win.



After a week off, Seattle came in for a late Saturday afternoon game that would begin the divisional round. With no one knowing what Favre's future plans were, and any game next week expected to be in Dallas, the assumption was that this could very well be Favre's final game at Lambeau Field.

It was fitting that his first coach, Mike Holmgren, was the one in town leading the Seahawks. And that it ended up a snow game, fitting Favre's freewheeling, fun-loving personality.

That doesn't mean the game started well. Seattle scored two touchdowns in the first five minutes. But the Packers took over the remaining 55 minutes. Favre went to Jennings for a couple touchdown passes. Grant ran for two more TDs and that 14-0 deficit morphed into a 28-17 lead by halftime. As the snow continued to pile up, Favre played it smart and close to the vest, going 18/23 for 173 yards and no interceptions. Grant became the focal point and had a huge 201-yard day rushing. Green Bay cruised to a 42-20 win. .

The following day, in the late afternoon, the nation watched the Giants-Cowboys. New York had been dysfunctional for much of the season before playing well enough to get in the playoffs and

then beating a pedestrian division champion in Tampa Bay. No one was expecting them to knock off Dallas. But that's what happened. There would be one more home game in Lambeau Field.

Fox Sports, which had the Super Bowl rights, was surely salivating over the possibility of Brett Favre playing his final game in the Super Bowl against the undefeated New England Patriots. Oddsmakers slotted the Packers a solid (-7 ½ favorite) for the NFC Championship Game.

By game day, the weather was the overriding factor. The cold and the wind combined to create a windchill temp of (-23). To make matters worse, this was the second game of Championship Sunday, meaning kickoff wasn't until 5:30 local time. It would only get colder as the day went on. I have family and friends who were in attendance and have heard stories about beer freezing in the can before one could sip it.

On the field, the story was how the Giants were completely controlling the line of scrimmage. They won rushing yardage 134-28. Even though Favre wasn't sacked, he was never allowed to get comfortable in the pocket. He was also kept on the sidelines, with the Giants controlling the ball nearly 40 minutes.

Even so, the Green Bay defense made big red zone stops and early New York control of the game only resulted in a 6-0 lead. It was wiped out on one play, Favre to Driver for 90 yards down the right sideline. Favre still went a respectable 19/35 for 236 yards. But with the game tied 20-20 and the Giants lined up for a last-play field goal, this dream season looked over.

Then the field goal missed. Lambeau erupted. Green Bay won the overtime coin toss. At a time when OT was still strict sudden-death, all it took was one simple drive to field goal range.

But the Giant defense quickly put the Packers in third and long. On third down, Favre threw an out pattern. Normally a reasonable enough play with single coverage on the outside, this time the quarterback—under steady, irritating pressure and his aging legs probably stiffening up in the cold, didn't get enough air under it. The ball was intercepted.

The Giants got another field goal attempt. This time they made it. The season was over. So was Brett Favre's tenure as a Green Bay Packer. He announced his retirement at a tearful press conference soon after.

Of course, one more chapter in Favre's career was still brewing, one that would briefly place him at fierce odds with management and eventually extending to a fan base that loved him. By April, Favre wanted to return and said his retirement decision had come under pressure from the front office to make a fast decision.

The recriminations that went back and forth could fill a book unto themselves. But Favre was traded to the Jets where he played in 2008. And then, in an act that stunned Packer fans, he signed on with the hated Vikings in 2009 and had one more fantastic season, leading Minnesota to the NFC Championship Game.

In reality, Favre and the Packers were both ready to move on from each other following the 2007 season. Football people knew that this '07 Green Bay team had been special, but that special is often a euphemism for “mirage” and that some retooling was still necessary. It was the right time to transition to Rodgers.

But it was also apparent that Brett Favre had more good football left in him and his retirement shouldn't have been forced upon him to meet the needs of the Green Bay Packers. Future years would see all-time greats like Peyton Manning and Tom Brady part ways amicably with their teams when facing similar situations.

Whomever you blame for the fallout—and I'm unequivocally on Favre's side—this story has a happy ending. Favre has since been inducted into the Packer's Ring of Honor, been welcomed back at Lambeau and the affection both sides have for each other has been restored. The events of 2008-09 were just a rough family quarrel. And those 2007 Green Bay Packers can take their rightful place in history as a special team in Brett Favre's last ride at Lambeau.