

Favre and I, in Chicago

By C. S. Schroeder

I've been a Packer fan all my life – but that doesn't cover the glory days. My earliest significant memory of the Pack is from 1982. In a strike shortened season, the Packers made the playoffs behind a formidable passing attack, with very good receivers and a flat-footed passer with a decent arm. I wanted to be James Lofton, but given my build and lack of great speed I decided TE Paul Coffman was probably a better choice. My interest piqued and that was my demise. The Packers would not make the playoffs in the next 10 years. With a mixture of mediocre and terrible play, they stood no chance as the Bears dominated the central. I was relegated to two big games a year, and year in and year out - as I plead to the gods for a stop - Walter Payton or Neil Anderson or *whoever* would rip the Packer defense to shreds, while the Packers' couldn't pick up a third down against the Bears ridiculously good defense to save their souls... Except for the emergence of Sterling Sharpe and one interesting season behind Don Majkowski, there wasn't much to cheer about until 1992.

It's hard to overestimate the excitement around Packer football that took shape with the arrival of Favre under Center. I had painfully watched Lynn Dickey, David Whithurst, Randy Wright, Rich Campbell and all the other pretenders to the Bart Starr throne for 10 of my formative years – and here was Brett. His playmaking was captivating. Yes, he could dissect a defense with cool passes from the pocket – but more often he played excited, with a hyper-awareness of the field. Should the play breakdown, his receivers would improvise and Favre would discard a defender to make the throw; should he break the pocket, he could throw a strike across his body, hustle for a first down, or throw a left-handed shuffle pass for that matter – any way, he'd make a play... Of course, his assets were also a detriment at times. He should have been better about taking his medicine - checking down, throwing it away, or just taking the sack. But you couldn't deny that he had the passion to make it happen, and it's that kind of abandon that you want when you're down, with the ball, with two minutes to go...

"I'm open Brett, I'm open..." I woke up mumbling, in wet sheets.

I was considerably older and more cynical in 2007, than I was during the Packers' Super Bowl runs. So when the drama began after their loss to the Giants in 07, I was more annoyed than upset. In 2007 we were arguably the second best team in the league and one lousy Favre throw away from making the Super Bowl. If Favre wanted to cement his legacy with another Super Bowl, it would have been hard for him to argue that the Packers didn't have the team for it going into 2008. But Favre retired. I didn't believe he'd just go away. It was pretty clear that riding a lawn mower in Mississippi doesn't really compare to playing in championship games; and the ambivalence of the previous off-seasons seemed sure to repeat. He wavered and waffled and had he just stated that, yeah, I'm gonna come back – then the position was his. But he didn't. Thompson had enough, set a deadline, and Favre didn't meet it. So he went with Rodgers and you can't blame him; after all, there are other players on the team. And

besides, perhaps Rodger's would be better about not throwing lollipops to the flat with a trip to the Super Bowl on the line. However you slice it, Favre quite clearly became impossible to deal with.

It's hard to accept, however, that Brett really was *simply* torn about retiring. It smells like he really wanted to play, but elsewhere – and by that I mean in Minnesota. Jokingly, he wants to follow the line of Minnesota celebrity elected officials when he's done and prefers to play indoors in his old age. Cynically, you only have to remember Favre's last Super Bowl for the reason: the Packers were going for two in a row – it's not a dynasty, but quite a statement. Instead, an aging Elway handed off, down after down, to a slashing Terrell Davis, gashing the Packers defense for big yards, play after play. While Favre's shot at back to back Super Bowl's went down with a tipped pass to Mark Chumura, Elway and company went on to the real glory – winning that game and the next year's Super Bowl as well; capping Elway's stellar career. Favre, at the end of his career, certainly has not forgotten Elway at the end of his. And what running back would you rather ride to glory than A.P.? With a little leadership and a few crisp throws, Favre could be champion again... Of course, as a Packer fan, it's also hard to accept that Favre would want to go to the Vikings with his legacy in Green Bay; and surely Favre seriously considered retirement as a means of preserving that legacy. But he knew he could still play – we all knew that – the issue was a superstar sidekick.

At what point does the story of vengeance against the Packer front office finally seem too convenient? Three years post feigned retirement? Four years? Pushing Thompson to the breaking point to try and gain outright release so he can join the Vikings "out of spite" seems the perfect way of getting what you want without bearing the responsibility for desertion. And of course, Favre's pouting over not landing Randy Moss a few years before only confirms the rouse – he thought he needed a fellow superstar to ride to glory...

All that, at least, is what I tell myself when I want to move on with my iron forged Packer loyalties; but what *is* clear is that it just should have never come to Monday Night.

I watched Favre and the Vikings play the Packers. I never thought I'd say that. I watched from a bar in Chicago – Harry Carey's no less. I realized it was the worst place in the world to watch this particular game. From Milwaukee to Superior and Platteville to Green Bay – I could have found commiseration left and right. Outside the upper Midwest, I could have at least found commiseration on my left – whether it be one of this country's many Packer fans or a good natured "sorry man" from anyone who can understand betrayal; and even in the Twin Cities I could have at least picked a fight with one of those overly friendly beneficiaries of Favre going Purple... But in Chicago, there's a natural sentiment for "to heck with all of you up there". They just assume Bart Starr and Jim Marshall and Ray Nitscheke and Jim Taylor and Randall McDaniel and Reggie White be reincarnated as 28 year olds playing for the Bears to torment all parts north. They just assume Lambeau went up in flames, the Metrodome implode. They could tolerate the occasional cheer among scattered fans from Minnesota, while they relished in Packer misery...

Somehow I managed to zone into a TV for most of the game. I watched the Packers shut down Peterson, only to set up the worst case scenario: being beaten by Favre. I watched Favre laser after Favre laser. I watched Rodgers fight for his life behind a line not fit for the Big Ten, while Favre had time for tea before deciding judiciously on the tight end for 25 yards over the middle... Finally, almost mercifully, Rodgers went down for a safety and the Vikings took a commanding 16 point lead, with the ball. I could sense the vultures swarming. A couple of ol'boys bellied up next to me. They poked and prodded. They got under my skin. I had to admit my Packer loyalties. They taunted and I squirmed, but didn't engage. I decided to make the worst of a bad situation and order another Miller Lite. I questioned why I drank the stuff. Maybe I should drink Bud and root for the Rams.

Rodgers was valiant. The kid can pass. The Packers came back to within an onside kick from the potential game tying drive, but the clock eventually ran out. If Rodgers had been on the Vikings and Favre still on the Packers, rationally you have to think the Vikings would still have won. But as it was, Favre was the hero. He was as good as I had ever seen him, and as a Packer fan, you thought Rodgers doesn't have that escapability; he doesn't have that improvisational, intangible, *je ne sais quoi*; you had that irrational feeling that Favre would have eluded that safety and hit Driver for a 99 yard touchdown; that Favre could have kicked the perfect onside kick and recovered it himself, before leading the game winning drive...

I stared - blank - until Favre was interviewed. He restated that the Packers "decided to go with" Rodgers instead of him. He played it political, respecting the Packer fans by focusing on the Vikings winning, not the Packers losing. Finally, the reporter stated that this was his last game in his 30's – turning 40 next Saturday. With that light drawl and trademark smirk, he said "Thanks for reminding me" ...

I laughed... huffed... and then sobbed...

Really, what's a Cheesehead to do? I immediately regretted I had no connections with pimps or drug dealers... I loved that guy, man - like a charismatic and sexy wife, who turns cougar and runs off with a twit (Childress) for reasons you can't fathom... Come back Brett! Whatever it takes, Come Back! You're a Packer!

"Barkeep! Another Miller Lite for crissake! Keep'em comin'!... I'm a mess..."

"You're my boy, Brett, you're my boy..." I woke up slurring... but I realized he was gone. As with any hangover, all the regrets of what I subjected myself to the previous night set in, and the cynicism was back. I wondered what I thought I had to gain by watching that game. There was no good outcome possible. And those damn Sear's commercials – hope they're paying you well! I shook it off; refused to turn on ESPN; thought a little about how the Packer's can improve their line play; reflected that Rodgers is in an impossible situation, which he is handling admirably; and went on with my day swearing I wouldn't do that again... But I knew I'd be back at it in week 8.