

PAUL HORNUNG:

The Fans Made Him a Star

*His was
an old story
—the college hero
who couldn't make
it in pro football;
the experts were
writing him off—until
Green Bay's paying customers
had their say*

By VICTOR SEBASTIAN



THE HOTTEST rookie prospect in professional football at the end of the 1956 season was Notre Dame's two-time All-America quarterback Paul Hornung, winner of the Heisman Trophy as the college player of the year.

The Green Bay Packers, who had first bonus draft choice that year, didn't hesitate in picking him. Like everyone else, they realized that he was a little rough around the edges, and his passing, while sufficiently long, left a good deal to be desired in accuracy.

But some "bonus" features were added inducements: Paul's demonstrated leadership qualities and his undeniable fan appeal (especially for the distaff rooters) weighed heavily in his favor.

A rugged, 6-foot, 2-inch, 215-pounder with wavy blond hair and chiseled features, Paul had to decide between a seven-year Hollywood contract and a three-year one at \$16,000 per year offered by the Packers. He chose football.

In his first season with the Packers, though, Paul seemed to be a \$48,000 dud. "I wasn't making it at quarterback," Paul says. "I tried, but at Notre

Dame I had been more of a running back than they want in the pros. Up here, you have to be able to knock a fly off your receiver's nose at 25 yards with 275-pound tackles trying to murder you."

Wellington Mara of the New York Giants, usually a cautious man, described Paul as simply "terrible" after seeing him in an exhibition game. Lisle Blackbourn, then Green Bay coach, didn't comment publicly, but his sentiments obviously paralleled Mara's at that time. He lifted Paul in favor of a 17th draft choice of 1956, Bart Starr of Alabama. When the season opened, Paul was picking up bench splinters.

EXCEPT for the "bonus" feature, that might have been the end of Paul Hornung, football player. The fans, however, still considered Paul their glamour boy. By the time the Packers' third game rolled around, their clamor was so loud that Blackbourn had to put him in the lineup. Significantly, he played him at fullback, and when he scored a touchdown the fans made it clear they considered Hornung part of Green Bay.

He alternated between fullback, halfback, and quarterback, and ended up the season as the Packers' second leading ground gainer. "It was horrible, though," Paul told me. "When I suited up each Sunday, I had no idea of where I'd be playing." Yet at the end of his second season, Paul had pretty well established himself as a durable, if unspectacular, work horse. That winter the Packers hired Vince Lombardi as head coach. As offensive coach of the Giants, Lombardi had had much to do with the development of perennial All-Star halfback Frank Gifford.

"In my offensive patterns," Lombardi explained, "the left halfback is the key operative. Gifford made it easy for me. He could do everything."

Lombardi installed Hornung as the regular left halfback and set about training him to be an all-around offensive threat like Gifford, specializing in the pass-option play.

The Packers had a surprising 7-5 winning record in '59 under Lombardi after a 1-10-1 season in 1958 under Ray McLean. Paul emerged from the fray as a full-fledged star.

The '59 season was only the beginning. Last year, his scoring appetite whetted, Paul went to town. He ended up with 15 touchdowns, 15 of 27 field goals, and 41 extra points without a miss for an all-time league record of 176 points.

And with that punch, the Packers took a long-denied divisional title.

In the play-off game against the Philadelphia Eagles, Paul had the misfortune to run into rock-like Chuck Bednarik, who earlier in the season had cut Gifford's career short with a bone-jarring tackle. Hornung had to leave the game with a pinched nerve, and the Packers lost a heartbreaker.

DURING the off-season, Paul is as popular in his native Louisville, Ky., where he lives with his mother, as he is in Green Bay. When I visited him in Louisville, few people passed us on the street without saying a big "hello" to the affable blond youth.

"Louisville is the place for me," he told me. "People ask me about Hollywood, but I don't even think about that anymore. I plan to go into the duplicating-machine business when I retire."

The young ladies make no secret of their affection for Paul, and he likes them, too, although his good looks and football heroics have gotten him into some embarrassing situations. When he signed with the Packers, for instance, he dated a starlet with an imaginative press agent.

"We went out a couple of times and she got serious," Paul recalls. "That was bad enough. But when I picked up the papers and read that I had sent her an engagement ring inside of a football—well, you tell me just how I would get a ring inside of a football!"

It amuses him to be tabbed "football's most eligible bachelor."

"I'm going to stay eligible for a while, too," he insists, and adds, "I hope," less certainly. "I like to live well, and when I hang up the cleats I'm going to have to get my business started just like anybody else. When I get settled, it will be time enough to start thinking about getting married."

That's fine with the fans, too. They wish the best for Paul, of course, but, after all, he's their boy, their "discovery"—and the girl who nabs him is likely to feel she has collected several thousand jealous in-laws.