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CAREERS

3 generations of Vince Lombardi go to law school; 1 becomes a famous football coach

BY RANDY MANILOFF

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The three Vinces in 1969. Vince Lombardi, then the Washington Redskins' coach, with his 3-yr-old grandson Vincent Thomas II, left, during a visit with son Vincent H. Lombardi, 27, in the background. The young Lombardi's other son John, 1½, bites his brother's toy spaceman. (Photo by Robert Walsh/The Associated Press)

In 1938, Vince Lombardi was a first-year student at the Fordham University School of Law in Manhattan, New York City. He had enrolled at his father's suggestion. But the experience didn't suit him, and he dropped out after a semester. Lombardi took a job teaching high school in New Jersey. His duties were wide-ranging: physics, chemistry, Latin and coaching the school's football team.

Two decades later, Green Bay Packers fans would be thankful that Lombardi hadn't been enamored with the Rule Against Perpetuities. In nine seasons as its head coach, the team won a staggering two Super Bowls and five NFL Championships.

Lombardi's career as a lawyer wasn't to be. But, like his own father, he encouraged his son, Vince Lombardi Jr., to take that path. "That generation had great respect for lawyers," Lombardi Jr., 83, tells me. "He had a lot of respect for lawyers. He thought that was a calling and a good way to go."

Lombardi Jr. studied at William Mitchell College of Law (now Mitchell Hamline School of Law) in Saint Paul, Minnesota. He recalls the enormous pride his father felt at graduation. "My son, the lawyer," Lombardi said, with a wide grin, to all around him.

No doubt it would have been the same years later at Vince Lombardi II's graduation from the University of Washington School of Law. This time: "My grandson, the lawyer."

Lombardi II has surely been hearing his name a lot lately. He is a long-time U.S. attorney in Seattle. The city recently became home to the Vince Lombardi Trophy, the prize awarded to the Seahawks after its win last month in Super Bowl LX.

In a phone interview with Lombardi's son and grandson, they discussed their careers and connections to the Hall of Fame coach. The two are certain of one thing: If Lombardi had been a lawyer, his days would not have been spent parsing the tax code. "He would have commanded the courtroom," Lombardi Jr. tells me.

More fatherly advice

Lombardi Jr.'s early career included a stint in the trust department of a bank in downtown Minneapolis and a seat in the Minnesota legislature, which he held while maintaining a private law office. His practice was diverse: "whatever came in the door," he says, chuckling.

In 1975 he combined his law degree and knowledge of the gridiron, becoming one of the first employees of the Seattle Seahawks. He spent a year helping the NFL's then-nascent franchise get organized, including serving as in-house counsel. He stayed with the team during its first two seasons on the field, adding director of ticket sales and marketing to his responsibilities.

From there, Lombardi Jr. went to work for the NFL's Management Council, which he describes as the league's "labor relations department." He served as assistant executive director. That made him second in charge, but he tells me that he ran the operation. The department's chief "was very good as a labor negotiator," he says, "but he didn't know anything about football."

Lombardi Jr. also led two United States Football League teams as president and general manager while the USFL existed as a professional league from 1983 through 1985.

Lombardi II was just 4 years old in 1970 when his grandfather died of colon cancer at age 57. His memories of him are few, but one stands out. Lombardi was head coach of the Washington Redskins during the 1969 season. He can recall being seated with his grandfather on a golf cart at the team's training camp. The youngster was allowed to steer. "When you're 3-and-a-half or 4, that's the coolest thing in the world."

Lombardi II attended Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. Upon graduation he was frustrated by the molasses-like hiring process of the Foreign Service and had only unsatisfying job offers in hand. Lombardi Jr., like his father before him, offered his son advice: "I think you should go to law school. I think it would be a good fit for you," he recounts his dad telling him.

He headed to the University of Washington. During his second year, the Foreign Service informed him that he was getting closer to a position. But it was too late, Lombardi II recalls thinking: "I'm not going to quit law school now to go stamp visas in some obscure country they were going to ship me as a new Foreign Service Officer."

Having achieved significant success in moot court, including at the national level, Lombardi II easily knew his direction. He spent more than a decade as a commercial litigator in Seattle. But he grew "bored and dissatisfied" in private practice.

He applied to the U.S. Attorney's Office in October 2001, immediately after the Sept. 11 attacks. "It's kind of a cliché story, but it's the truth," he says. "I thought it was a way to serve my country and hopefully do something more interesting."

Lombardi II has been an assistant U.S. attorney in Washington, serving in Seattle's Western District for 22 years. He's tried countless cases. But not many of late. These days, being in a management role—in the Criminal Enterprises Unit—the courtroom is a more foreign service.

Work commitments kept Lombardi II from attending last month's parade celebrating the Seahawks championship. That his name is associated with football's greatest prize doesn't faze him, he tells me. There have been a lot of Super Bowls, he says. It's just "background" at this point.

While the trophy may no longer cause a reaction for Lombardi, II, he shares an amusing anecdote about his son, also named Vincent, where that wasn't the case.

He was around 3 or 4 years old and the Super Bowl was on television. Too young to care about the game or understand his famous great-grandfather's connection to the sport, the youngster was on the floor playing with trucks. The game's announcer made a comment about the Vince Lombardi Trophy soon to be awarded. At that moment "his head just snapped up," his father says, recounting his son's immediate reaction to hearing his name come from the television.

Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing

In addition to his success on the sidelines, coach Lombardi is well-known for his countless aphorisms about success, effort and the game itself. None is more famous than "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing."

Lombardi wasn't the first to speak the phrase—credit for that goes to Henry "Red" Sanders, head football coach of UCLA and Vanderbilt University. But the former Packers coach certainly owns it.

In *What It Takes To Be #1*, Lombardi Jr.'s early 2000s book about his father's leadership style, he says that Lombardi regretted the line. What he meant was the will to win.

"I meant the effort ... I meant having a goal ... I sure as hell didn't mean for people to crush human values and morality," Lombardi Jr. writes, quoting his father's attempt at clarification to a sportswriter.

But it was too late, Lombardi Jr. goes on to say: "I think that part of the problem was that highly quotable quotes tend to get carved in stone. Part of their appeal is that they're immune to rewrites."

Sharing the name of the famous coach can sometimes bring unexpected responses, as Lombardi II discovered while preparing to seek a temporary restraining order in an employment matter.

He anticipated the state court judge would ask whether he informed opposing counsel about the forthcoming TRO. So he dialed the lawyer's office. "This is Vince Lombardi calling for lawyer so-and-so," he announced. The response: "Lawyer so-and-so is a very busy man and doesn't have time for practical jokes."

"I thought to myself for a minute," Lombardi II says, "I could legitimately go and tell the judge, I tried to call the other side, and they couldn't be bothered to take my call."

Vince Lombardi's law school drive ended in a three and out. But his coaching set the stage for his son and grandson to score successful legal careers. That's Vince Lombardi's trophy.

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