

5:32 to Glory: Part II

Al Lombardi sprinted. Not to a defensive player, but to the trash can. The vomit poured out of his throat, as he slapped the trash can in anger and in pain. The trainer attended to him.

“Lombardi, how are you? Everything working fine?”

Lombardi shook his head and puked some more. “Flu.”

“Need a pill?”

“I don’t think –” but he never finished his sentence, ducking back into the trash can.

The next voice that cracked the air was definitely not the trainer’s. “Lombardi! Where the hell are you! You’re my starting center and your crying in a trash can! Jesus Christ!” This was the voice of Terry Moore, the Navy head coach. His squat figure was belting out comments as quickly as his breath could push them through his lips. Lombardi simply waved his hand, vomited, wiped his mouth, and took off over to the huddle.

“You guys are worthless! You Firsties! Don’t you get it? This is your last shot to take down the Knights, and you’re giving it away! You can’t block, you can’t protect, you can’t score! Gentlemen, we have worked all year for this and you don’t *want* it enough! That’s a disgrace to our program, to our school. Harvey!” A squat boy wearing number 64 poked his head up. “Don’t you understand what a sucker block is!”

The referee casually trotted to the team huddle, as a lanky, 6’5” midshipman, in a number 12 uniform did as well. “Coach, you got 20 seconds.”

Moore didn't even acknowledge him. "Hinrich!" he barked at the lanky player in the number 12 uniform, "we're 90 yards and 11 points from where we need to be. You have 5:32 on the clock. Get it done!"

"Yes sir," Hinrich responded. He was beat. You could tell from his stance. Lombardi looked at his own figure. He was squat, at about 6'1", 235. His belly heaved with every breath, as the flu ravaging his body took its toll. His number, 68, looked backwards to him as he stared down on it. He coated his uniform with Gatorade as he tried to drink, but was having trouble keeping his arm steady.

"Alright boys, up and at 'em," and Moore pulled his quarterback aside. Lombardi ran onto the field, and was staring straight at the scoreboard. It read Army 27, Navy 16, but the statistics on the side meant more to him. Under Navy's side, it read: Rushes, 62-131; Sacked: 7. It was an embarrassment to all those linemen who had played before him. Protection and push were keys to the offensive line, and they couldn't do either.

"HUDDLE!" roared Lombardi. He gazed into the nine other men that surrounded him. Hinrich wasn't there yet. The Rhodes twins were chipper – they could never get tired; their eyes refused to sparkle, though, as they glanced at the scoreboard. Dischelli was exhausted, as he had been hit every time off the line from his receiver position. He favored his left leg.

Hinrich was all of a sudden in the huddle. "Alright, no motivational speeches from this man: Single 67 spread gold motion 9, on 4." *Pass play. He's under center. Snap it on the fourth word. Drifting right. Protect that way. Find the blitz. Dominate my man.* "Ready!" Hinrich snarled. "BREAK!" the huddle fired back.

Lombardi sprinted to the line, and grabbed the ball in his meaty right hand. Directly across from him stood empty space, but to his left and right, Army's defensive tackles, and stacked directly behind them were the line backers. He set the ball up, grabbing it by the front and tilting it backward, so the nose was in the air. He felt Hinrich's hands feel up into the crotch of his pants, as he waited to call out his cadence. Before Lombardi had time to point out the blitzing backer, Hinrich audibled; he changed the play at the line: "41 Strong slip! 41 Strong slip!" *Audible. 41. Changing the snap count to the 1st word. Strong slip. Mickey's not in motion. Going right. That's the playside. Hinrich's still drifting right. I've gotta go that way. Where are the blitzes? Who does Harvey have?* Harvey was the right guard, in charge of the lineman in front of him, and the backer behind the lineman.

"I'll chip in, Harvey." Lombardi spoke evenly to his linemate. Even when speaking normally, it was barely audible over the roaring crowd. Harvey nodded his head ever so slightly. This innocent phrase meant that Lombardi would take the man across from Harvey, while Harvey waited on a blitz.

"BLUE!" Hinrich yelled, and they were off. Flexing his wrist, Lombardi slammed the ball into Hinrich's hands, and he sprang right. He felt Hinrich drop back, and focused all attention on the man who was formerly in front of Harvey, number 97. He slammed his hands into 97's armpit and chest, lifting him off the ground with a muted grunt. Number 97 slapped at his hands, and separated for a second. Lombardi took this break to set his feet, and then dove at the guy's hips. Number 97 fell to the ground with a heavy cuss, and Lombardi popped back up, looking for someone else. Then he saw it.

“Jesus!” The linebacker had manhandled Harvey and was moving towards Hinrich. With a nifty sidestep, Hinrich moved by him, and the linebacker set back up for another shot. As Hinrich flipped the ball to his tailback, Mickey, the crowd swelled, and he couldn’t possibly have heard Lombardi’s roar as he smashed the linebacker to the ground with ferocity to rival that of a leaping tiger. “Suck on that,” he growled as he ran down the field. But by that point, he was too far behind. He couldn’t keep up with the speedy backs and receivers. He watched as Mickey raced to the end zone, and Hinrich led the way for him. *Touchdown*. As he headed off the field, a wave of nausea hit him. *Oh God*. He sprinted to the trash can again.

Before he got there, though, Moore headed him off, bucket in hand. “We’re going for two. Puke in here, and take the play to Hinrich.” Lombardi eased his helmet backward and spewed all over the bucket. “Listen up. Flex Set, 2 veer, X razor. Got it?” But Moore didn’t wait for a reply, just handed a towel to Lombardi, grabbed the bucket, slapped his rear, and pushed him toward the goal line. It was a 70 yard run, and he was out of breath as he got to the huddle. He spit up at Hinrich’s feet.

“Flex Set, 2 Veer, X Razor. God.” He puked again.

Hinrich offered a lopsided grin. “We don’t have a play called ‘God’. At least last time I checked.”

“Just call the play or I’ll spew over your precious uniform.”

“Call the huddle or I’ll call your girlfriend.”

“HUDDLE!”

Hinrich knelt. “Flex Set, 2 Veer, X Razor. On 2. Ready!”

“BREAK!” And thus they went for two. The veer was an option play. In this case, they would be going right, optioning off of Harvey’s man. It was, in this case, a potential pass, too, as the “razor” call indicated that the receivers on each side of the Flexbone formation would be running fade routes. The flexbone setup was the perfect balanced option formation as far as Lombardi was concerned. It consisted of five down lineman, two wings, two split ends, and a fullback a yard behind the quarterback. As Lombardi settled down in his squat and absorbed the ball in his palm, he took a second to look at the defense. Army sat in a “53”: five down linemen, including a man directly across from Lombardi, and three linebackers. Two corners lined up across from the split ends, breath steaming from their facemasks. The safety, Garrett Lord, was two yards deep in the endzone. His white uniform caked an earthen green, a deep brown, and a crimson tone.

Lombardi called out, “Bear!” This blocking assignment audible indicated who they would option. The man in the B gap would be “veered”; he would be forced to pick who he was going to tackle.

Hinrich settled in behind Lombardi, rocked backwards, and growled his cadence: “Yellow!” He paused, searching for a sign from Army about what they would do. Nothing showed. “Fifteen!” And they were off. Lombardi locked up with his man, as Harvey came over to double team him. He heard the crackle of pads next to him as the technique they were veering hit somebody. All of a sudden he heard a roar, but no whistle – *Hinrich must be throwing*. As he continued to keep his man tight to him, there was another roar – this time from the Navy side only. *We caught the ball. Two points. Down three*. And with the whistle, Lombardi let up, and trotted back to the sideline, looking for a trash can.

When Lombardi returned from his trash can at the beckoning of Moore, he knew things were bad with one look: Navy had the ball at their own three yard line: 97 yards from the end zone. Although a field goal would send the game to overtime, he knew by taking one look at the team that they wouldn't make it through that. As he jogged out to his position, tears welled in his eyes: there was no way in hell they could do this. No amount of Hinrich's late game magic, that everyone had spoken of from his high school days, could cure this.

Moore slapped his center's helmet. "Listen here: we're throwing. If you can't keep up with the line because of your flu, tell me now and I'll put in a sub." The Coach panted. "Don't think I won't pull you because you're a senior. Step it up. *You have a chance to go down in history as the greatest Navy comeback of all time in the most important game that matters.*" As Hinrich walked up, Moore released Lombardi and pulled his quarterback close. He whispered something to him that Lombardi perceived was taken with great shock. Then the crowd swelled, and he became enveloped in his march to the huddle.

Hinrich's call in the huddle was a surprise: it was the same play as before. It was clear, though, that Hinrich would definitely not be dumping the ball off to his tailback this time. He was gunning. It was on two, so Lombardi got to the line, and began to point out the defense. *Dime coverage. Six DBs. One linebacker.*

"Down!" Hinrich rumbled. *Linebacker is cheating back. Where is the stunt – there has to be one! They won't do anything boring on this.* "Set!" and Lombardi snapped

the ball. But he was wrong – Army did do a very boring rush. Straight ahead, find the quarterback and kill him style. Lombardi pitched in with Harvey, as they fought in the trenches with a very big DT. With a roar from the crowd, Lombardi peeled off of his man, and took off down the field; the roar meant to him that Hinrich had fired a strike to his man, and Navy was on the move. The Navy center hurried up to the line where the official had spotted the ball, which was at their own 35, and gripped it in his stance. Hinrich paced up and down the line calling out the play: “Spread Double Clock! Snap!” And Lombardi jerked the ball to him. As soon as he snapped it, he was bowled over by a blitzing linebacker. *Jesus*. The blow came with such ferocity that as he tried to raise himself up, the field danced and shook in his eyes. He vomited through his facemask, leaving a thin coating of bile on the field and on the iron cage in front of him. He immediately went to find another man to block. By then, however, Hinrich had used his athleticism to escape the Army rush, and had fired a strike to the Rhodes boy – one of them, Lombardi couldn’t tell which one – and he had gotten out of bounds, stopping the clock, and putting the ball at the Army 38. Lombardi called the huddle.

Hinrich called the play: “Gold Counter Draw”. Lombardi couldn’t believe his ears. A run? With this much time left? *What the hell is Moore thinking?* But as he fired off the line and into the Army team, he saw the genius in Moore’s plan – Army had switched to a three man front to put more DBs in the lineup, and Mickey was off like a shot: 22 yards, and a first down as the clock stopped to reset the chains. “56 North! 56 North!” yelled Hinrich. “Snap!” What began then was what Lombardi believed was his finest moment of the season: He was matched up one on one with the Army defensive tackle, and a titanic struggle ensued: Lombardi fought to get his arms inside, to chop his feet, to *defend his*

ground. The Army man slapped, the Army man spun, and the Army man got nowhere. Lombardi was pushing his man down the line, away from his quarterback, with maximum effort. And then came Lombardi's coup-de-grace: he puked. All over the Army man's jersey. The guy blanched, and Lombardi never hesitated, driving his man to the ground and falling on top of him. *Pancake. How's it taste now? Y'ain't so good as you thought you were, did you! We're gonna win.* He thought of Khrushchev, ironically: *we will bury you.* When Lombardi stood, his jersey was wet and smelly. An unpleasant rancor that made his nose wrinkle and his teammates look at him with disdain. But the ball was at the two, so no one complained. But now, the clock stood at 12 seconds – *wait, what!?* *Have we just covered 95 yards in 27 seconds? Jesus!* Hinrich called the play, but Lombardi was zoned out, and barely heard it, “Fivers bunch left spread V.” *Oh God – shotgun!* But Lombardi didn't let fear take control of him. He would do his job, because he was a disciplined soldier who didn't make mistakes. His leader had made his decision. He would execute. After snapping the ball, grappling ensued, as usual, but with a different man. Lombardi was finding it difficult to focus. His mouth was dry, he was dizzy, and he was having trouble keeping his feet. He lost control of his man – *No!* – he reached out to grab him, and held on for dear life. He almost tore the man's jersey off. He was pelted by rain – *wait, rain?* The ref had hit him with his flag. *No!* He had held his man on what would have been the game winning touchdown. He watched with despair as Hinrich exploded through the goal line, and scored. Navy rejoiced. Army cried. Lombardi vomited. By now, he was caked with his own chemicals – blood, sweat, vomit, tears. But this, this *feeling* which haunted his frame left him sicker and more drained than the flu and the battle itself. He had *cost his team victory.* He watched the ref do the motions. He

watched Moore slouch. He watched Hinrich plead. It was all a whirl to him. Army rejoiced. Navy cried. Lombardi vomited. He had blown their shot.

“LOMBARDI! DON’T THINK I’LL EVER FORGET THIS!” Moore hurled his words like the flags that had pelted Lombardi – two had struck him. Lombardi couldn’t hold himself back. The emotion flowed, and the tears streaked his dirty face. His knees hit the ground. He watched Cullick, the kicker run by him. Hinrich approached him. Lombardi wanted to die.

“Listen, you pot-bellied center,” came Hinrich’s voice. He was smiling, and was trying to help Lombardi up. “We ain’t done yet. You just watch. One snap. We tie. We go to OT. We got this, partner.”

Lombardi struggled to his feet. “Alright.” He felt good already. New life. He would snap the ball to tie. They would win later. He squatted over the ball, and prepared to fire it back to Hinrich, who knelt to hold the ball for Cullick.

“TIMEOUT, ARMY. THIS IS THEIR SECOND CHARGED TIMEOUT.” The ref blew his whistle, waved his arms, and sent the teams to their sidelines. Lombardi knelt in front of his admiral, and waited. He knew he should expect to be chewed out, but he lifted his head in admiration as Moore began to speak.

“Gentlemen,” started Moore, “this is what the entire season is about. We are here because this is what Navy does at the end of every season. We meet the Knights head to head on the field, and we win! We’ll kick this ball and make them beat us. We know we can move the ball, we know we can stop them. This is what it’s all about. Fight. Live. Win. Midshipmen on three. One, two three!”

“*Midshipmen!*” the chorus of football players growled. They hit the field at a trot, and set up. Lombardi grinned down at his streaked uniform. In the bag, baby. In the bag.

When he lined up, he adjusted his target through his legs. A field goal is not an easy thing. As a matter of fact, it is quite difficult. The center must fire with precision. The holder must catch the ball cleanly, adjust the laces, put the ball down, and the kicker must step evenly, meet the ball squarely, and kick it true. All for three points. But Lombardi was rejuvenated, Hinrich was excellent, and Cullick automatic. In the bag. Lombardi squeezed the ball with both hands, groped for the proper hold, and waited.

“Ready! Set! Snap!” And he rocketed the ball through his legs. Under the NCAA rules, no player was allowed to hit the center until his head was up, but at this point Army didn’t care, and Lombardi expected no sympathy. Another flag flew as the Army linebackers drilled Lombardi, but he fought back – he pushed the linebacker away. *And the crowd roars.* The kick should have been away by now, but instead, people were still screaming, as if something was happening. *What the - ?* And then he saw it. Hinrich had taken off, bolted for the endzone, and he wasn’t going to make it. *Talk about wasting a shot,* Lombardi grumbled. But he took off anyway. And that was when Lombardi knew Hinrich was in. Lord, the Army safety, who had terrorized the Midshipmen all day, was scared. Hinrich had him fearing Navy. And when Hinrich ran Lord over, Lombardi rejoiced, ripping off his helmet, and throwing his mouthpiece into the dusk of Philadelphia. He pointed his fingers to the sky, honoring his father, who had died not 12 hours ago. He felt his heart pound, and ache, as the tears began to flow. He had played for his father, he had won by his fathers help. The passion he had played with had taken his

game to knew heights, and he softly prayed the only prayer he knew to his father, hoping the new angel could hear him over the roar of 70,000 people. And as Lombardi sobbed, waiting for it to sink in, he felt it coming. He screamed with joy. He had won. And now, with Navy on top, 30-27, the game was over. And Navy rejoiced. Army cried. Lombardi vomited. But the sour tang of his own body could never, *never* wipe the sweet taste of victory from his mouth.