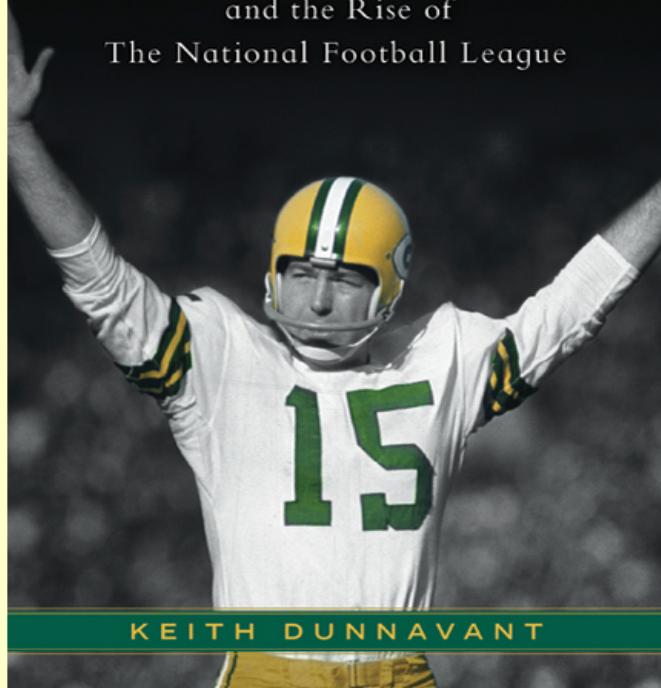


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# AMERICA'S QUARTERBACK

BART STARR  
and the Rise of  
The National Football League



KEITH DUNNAVANT

THOMAS DUNNE BOOKS.  
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# ONE

## BUBBA'S GHOST

Suddenly, someone screamed.

The sound of pain rang out from the house next door like an alarm, shattering the peace of an ordinary Sunday afternoon in 1947.

Then a kind of darkness descended upon Bart Starr's world.

Long before this turning point, his story began with a very different sort of scream, a life-affirming wail, in the bleak year of 1934, when the context for most everything was the widespread economic hardship of the Great Depression. Despite the hope embodied by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his New Deal, unemployment still hovered near 24 percent and vast numbers of Americans struggled just to provide food, clothing, and shelter for their families. Beyond the widespread despair, the world kept turning. Going to the movies remained a unifying thread of American culture, as audiences flocked to see Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert in the comedy *It Happened One Night*, director Frank Capra's first big hit. Donald Duck made his first appearance in a Walt Disney cartoon, a pivotal early step in the building of an entertainment colossus. Newspapers contained numerous stories about notorious bank robber John Dillinger, whose bloody rampage ended in a hail of bullets outside a Chicago theater, betrayed by the infamous lady in red. More than half a century after Thomas Edison perfected the electric lightbulb, the Tennessee Valley Authority began supplying power to previously unwired parts of

the rural South. The sports pages focused on colorful and lethal boxer Max Baer, who utilized his devastating right to knock out Primo Carnera to become Heavyweight Champion of the World. In the year when radio penetration of American homes reached 50 percent and millions routinely sought comfort in FDR's fireside chats, the World Series broadcasts contained commercial advertisements for the first time, with Ford Motor Company paying the staggering sum of \$100,000 to be the sole sponsor as the St. Louis Cardinals bested the Detroit Tigers in seven games. Few Americans cared so much about the still-struggling National Football League. In the far north outpost of Green Bay, Wisconsin, a group of local businessmen raised \$15,000 to prevent the NFL's Packers from folding.

Another milestone in the history of the Green Bay Packers failed to make the papers. On January 9, 1934, Ben and Lulu Starr of Montgomery, Alabama, welcomed Bryan Bartlett Starr into the world. Happy and proud, they named their first born after the father (Bryan was Ben's middle name) and the doctor who delivered him (Haywood Bartlett).

Ben, the great-grandson of a full-blooded Cherokee Indian, had been born in the small southeastern Alabama town of Dadeville. When both of his parents died shortly after World War I, he was raised by his grandfather in Anniston, about one hundred miles north of Dadeville. Forced to drop out of high school to help support the family, Ben worked as a mechanic and welder. He was a large man with dark hair, a square jaw, and a commanding aura.

On a fateful night in 1932, he met Lulu Inez Tucker, a pretty, petite brunette, at the home of a mutual friend. Lulu, the daughter of railroad engineer, grew up in the capital city of Montgomery. The connection was immediate, and they were married less than four months later. Romance moved fast in those days.

The newlyweds set up housekeeping in Montgomery, where Ben landed a job as a blacksmith. Two years after Bart's arrival, Lulu gave birth to a second son, Hilton. They often called him Bubba.

Better jobs took the Starrs to Columbia, Tennessee, and back to Montgomery, before the march to World War II prompted the father's Army National Guard unit to be mobilized. Two years at Fort Blanding, near Gainesville, Florida, were followed by an extended assignment at North-

ern California's Fort Ord, where the family stayed behind when Ben was shipped off to the Pacific.

The frequent moves proved to be a kind of education for young Bart. "I will always be grateful for the things I learned from having to adapt to different circumstances and environments," he said.

Free to roam the area adjacent to the military housing neighborhood of Ord Village, Bart and Hilton sometimes sat for hours, watching the waves crash into the picturesque Pacific shoreline, often wondering about their father, who existed for four years only in the form of letters. Like many young boys of the time, they closely followed the progress of the war through reading newspapers and watching newsreels. The epic struggle against Hitler and the Japanese was a constant fact of life—manifested by rationed staples and movie stars hawking war bonds—but at times, it could seem distant, especially as they rode the school bus through the fertile agricultural fields and along the towering cliffs each morning and afternoon. Bart often was distracted by the natural beauty of the landscape just outside the window.

The Starr household was managed like an extension of the military, even after Ben was shipped overseas. Lulu was a wonderful cook and a very loving mother, but was also a strict disciplinarian who made sure Bart and Hilton attended church, creating a wholesome environment in keeping with their Methodist faith. The boys were taught to understand their responsibilities to live an orderly and obedient life consistent with the military way—and the consequences for exceeding her boundaries.

Like all boys, they tested the limits.

After learning that the army conducted training exercises in a forest near their home, Bart and Hilton began scavenging the area for discarded equipment. Fearing for their safety, Lulu forbade further maneuvers but they kept sneaking off, looking for canteens and other prized loot. Somehow, she found out and administered a paddling neither boy would ever forget.

"If I catch you in there again, you'll really get one," she warned.

Bart knew she meant business.

"We couldn't figure out how she knew we were back in there," he recalled.

She could *smell* their disobedience.

The boys didn't realize that the area was covered with numerous eucalyptus plants, producing a pungent odor that betrayed their activities.

The lure of the forest was difficult to resist, but the boys knew their mother meant business.

"We got the message and stopped going in there," Bart said.

During a Saturday outing to the movies—as they settled in to watch *Cowboy Serenade*, starring matinee idol Gene Autry—Bart and Bubba stumbled upon a different sort of treasure.

Bart's ten-year-old heart raced as he pointed toward the movie screen.

"Look! There he is!"

Hilton stared at the flickering black-and-white film with a skeptical eye. Could it be?

The newsreel of General Douglas MacArthur's dramatic return to the Philippines in October 1944 moved fast, so the Starr boys sat through the feature presentation three times just to get two more looks at the stern-looking, unidentified man in the background. Each time, they carefully studied the soldier's face, comparing it to their prized memories. Desperate, like millions of American children, for any sort of connection with a father who had been away fighting in World War II for nearly three years, the brothers eventually walked out of the darkened theater convinced that the anonymous GI was their very own daddy.

"We were so pumped up," Bart said. "We came out of that place two feet off the ground."

The bond between the boys was unshakable, but their personalities contrasted sharply. Hilton, who wore glasses from an early age, was aggressive, tough, and known to have a mean streak. Bart was introverted and timid, and tended to keep his feelings to himself. The sibling rivalry that developed between them was probably inevitable, but it was eventually enabled and exacerbated by their very demanding father.

Lulu and the boys were back living in Montgomery when the war ended, and after Master Sergeant Starr decided to make a career of the military—switching over to the newly independent U.S. Air Force—he planted the family flag firmly in Alabama's Capital City. Understanding that he would have to spend other tours overseas, Ben wanted his boys to have a stable home environment, so he and Lulu bought a small, white frame house on a middle-class street for \$3,500, a figure roughly equiva-

lent to the median American income at the start of the great postwar boom, when the deprivations of the Great Depression were being swept away by a new wave of optimism and consumerism. Southerners had not yet learned that they could not live without the wonder of air-conditioning, so during the stifling summer nights, the brothers—spoiled by the mild summers in Northern California—often struggled to sleep in their sweat-drenched sheets. When Ben finally broke down and bought an attic fan to pump a little air through the house, the boys suddenly felt rich. Like many children during the age of dramatic radio and Saturday matinees, when the power of imagination filled the air, they learned to make their own fun. The tight contours of the adjacent garage provided a kind of entertainment for Bart and Hilton, who frequently wagered pennies over their father's ability to back out without scraping his Chevy.

The war hardened Ben, accentuating his gruff, overbearing demeanor. Like Bull Meecham, the antagonist in Pat Conroy's novel *The Great Santini*, he was a domineering figure who drew precious little distinction between his troops and his family, demanding that his boys live within his exacting rules and meet his high standards, just like the men in his squadron. Forbidden from expressing their own views, they never considered challenging his authority.

"My dad was the toughest man I've ever known in my life," Bart said. "He intimidated me. He was my Master Sergeant."

Despite such feelings, Bart loved his father and relished every opportunity to spend time with him, especially when Ben worked part-time during several summers as a ticket-taker for Montgomery's minor league baseball team. He arranged for Bart to be a ball boy, which heightened the boy's interest in professional baseball.

"My dad was a fabulous role model," Starr said. "I wanted to be just like him."

A shared love of sports strengthened the connection between Bart and Hilton, who spent much of their free time competing with other neighborhood boys in sandlot baseball and football games. On the diamond, Bart imagined he was Joltin' Joe DiMaggio, the Yankee Clipper, master of the 56-game hitting streak, longest in baseball history, who existed to Bart primarily through radio broadcasts and newspaper pictures carefully studied. He once saved nickels and dimes for months just so he could

ride the bus to visit his aunt Myrtle in Detroit, where the payoff pitch was a chance to see DiMaggio and the Yankees play the Tigers from a distant bleacher seat. It didn't matter that his hero, past his prime, failed to reach base.

His favorite football player was University of Alabama halfback Harry Gilmer, the passer in the Crimson Tide's version of the Notre Dame Box offense. Grantland Rice, the famed sportswriter most responsible for the breathless mythology of Notre Dame's Four Horsemen, once called Gilmer "the greatest college passer I've ever seen." Decades before Florida's Tim Tebow introduced the jump pass to twenty-first-century audiences, Gilmer gained national acclaim for his ability to leap into the air and fire a bullet into the distance. In photos of the day, he appeared to be taking flight. Like many other youngsters of the day—including future Florida State head coach Bobby Bowden, who grew up near the legendary passer in Birmingham—Bart spent many hours trying to emulate Gilmer's airborne fling, especially after seeing him up close during one of the Crimson Tide's annual games at Montgomery's Cramton Bowl.

"I was fascinated by Harry Gilmer and wanted to learn to throw the ball just like him," Starr said.

Starr eventually moved beyond the jump pass, convinced, like so many others, that he could never equal the master, but in working hard to incorporate some elements of Gilmer's fundamentals into his own style, the cerebral young man took the first tentative steps down the path of learning the passing game as a mechanical process.

The Starr boys' tackle football games—often contested on the lawn in front of Hurt Military Academy, without pads or headgear—could be intense, all-afternoon grudge matches where scrapes, bruises, and bloody appendages became badges of courage. Their mother tried to understand when her boys walked through the front door at dusk looking like war casualties, battered but wearing a warrior's glow.

Sports exposed the differences between Bart and Hilton. Their friendly rivalry took on a new dimension when the older brother began to believe he was competing for his father's approval.

Because he had not enjoyed the luxury of playing team sports as a child, Ben lived vicariously through his sons' exploits, which eventually graduated from sandlots to a youth team sponsored by the local Veterans of Foreign Wars post. Convinced that the tougher, faster, more competi-

tive Hilton—who reminded Ben of himself—was the real athlete in the family, he showered him with attention and took every opportunity to criticize Bart while encouraging him to strive to be more like his little brother. Bart, the ever-dutiful son, endeavored to take his father's suggestions to heart.

But he could not help feeling jealous and resentful as his father routinely favored Bubba.

Unable to express his feelings, Bart suppressed the complicated mesh of psychological drama rattling around in his head, even as he loved and admired his brother.

The first window-rattling boom caught everyone by surprise.

It happened more than two thousand miles west of Montgomery on October 14, 1947, when Col. Chuck Yeager, piloting a Bell X-1 aircraft despite broken ribs, hurdled through the stratosphere high above the California desert on a top-secret mission and became the first man to surpass the sound barrier, producing what would come to be known as a sonic boom.

Like the birth of the atomic age two years earlier, the first Mach 1 flight symbolized man's unmistakable progress in the triumphant glow of American technological and industrial might, revealing that the sound barrier was just a number wrapped in a blanket of air, proving that nature could be tamed and harnessed.

But in many other areas of American life, danger still lurked in the invisible air.

Despite a steady procession of medical advances, many diseases—eventually to be conquered in the blur of twentieth-century achievement—continued to wreak havoc, including the mysterious scourge of polio, which crippled an average of 20,000 Americans every year, roiling the culture with hysteria and helplessness as epidemics swept across dozens of cities and towns.

Just months before Yeager's historic flight, Dr. Jonas Salk became the new head of the Virus Research Lab at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine. He soon began work on the polio vaccine that would one day make him famous. When, after years of trial and error, the inoculation was introduced to the public in 1955, eliminating polio almost overnight, Salk was hailed as a savior by a generation of once-fearful parents.

Like polio vaccines, tetanus shots would one day be commonplace, but in an era before the public health system worked closely with educators to require childhood vaccinations, the disease, which enters the body through an open wound and attacks the central nervous system, proved to be an elusive, and deadly, enemy.

In 1947, anything seemed possible and yet so many real-life barriers remained unshattered.

It was an age of transcendent achievement. And unspeakable tragedy.

When the Starr family returned from church on a warm Sunday afternoon in 1947, Bart and Hilton wound up next door, playing with the neighbor kids. They always seemed to be outside. Sometimes it was baseball; sometimes they rode bikes until their legs ached, sometimes they pursued fireflies in the gathering dusk. But they always seemed to be outside and on the move.

This time it was tag. Their barefoot, breathless, adrenaline-pumping chase was not just one of the simplest forms of athletic competition ever devised by man—it was a celebration of youthful exuberance. It was all about being young and full of life.

But in the blink of an eye, it became an object lesson about the fragility of life.

Racing around the house, Hilton pricked his foot on an old dog bone protruding out of the dirt.

His mother heard his scream and came running.

Lulu cleaned the wound the best she could, secure in the belief that her son would not require the still relatively new tetanus shot. She wanted to spare him the pain.

But his foot became infected, and he died of tetanus poisoning three days later.

Gloom enveloped the family like a fog.

“We were all heartbroken,” Bart said. “It was so tragic. It nearly ripped our family apart.”

The heaviest load landed on Lulu, who blamed herself.

“My mother was just devastated by guilt,” Bart said.

The woman who would later marry Bart saw how the event reverberated throughout the rest of her mother-in-law’s life.

"She carried a terrible burden," Cherry Starr said. "It affected their marriage. [Ben] held her responsible, and he shouldn't have because it was an accident . . . I don't think she ever got over it."

For Bart, the enormous pain of losing a brother was complicated by a different sort of burden.

"I felt guilty about resenting the attention that Bubba had received from Dad," he said.

Without anyone to confide in, he internalized the pain, spending many lonely hours in his room.

When Ben returned from a tour of duty in occupied Japan, he seemed distant. His relationship with Bart deteriorated as he mourned in his own way, acting at times like he had lost the wrong son. In addition to dealing with Hilton's death, Bart was forced to confront his little brother's ghost on a daily basis. The Master Sergeant pushed Bart even harder to excel as an athlete, to adopt his departed brother's toughness, aggressiveness, and fire. Bart bristled whenever his father punctuated many harsh rebukes with the phrase, "Your brother would have . . ."

The line cut like a knife through Bart's tender heart.

Every time.

The implication was clear: Bart would never be as good as Hilton.

Some children, confronted with such paternal badgering, surrender to the swirling doubts, accepting the father's verdict in a haze of pity, turning it into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Others rebel, thumbing their nose at the authority figure, changing the subject, and rendering it moot.

But instead of feeling sorry for himself or resisting the pressure, instead of disrespecting his father or channeling his efforts elsewhere, Bart resolved to prove his old man wrong.

"I was determined to show him that I could be a good athlete," Bart said.

The connectivity between this youthful resolve, framed by tragedy, and all those years of Green Bay glory yet to come is impossible to overstate.

Even as it erected an emotional wall between the two men—demonstrating the fine line between cruelty and love—the Master Sergeant's psychological warfare motivated his son to fight, setting the tone for the rest of his life. In the years ahead, Bart would learn to appreciate

the way his father toughened him; taught him the value of a strong work ethic; instilled in him a fierce tenacity; imbued him with a glowing ambition; and showed him how to harness such intangibles to reach beyond his physical limitations.

The wounds of youth would heal but the lessons produced by the pain would last a lifetime.

“That’s one of the reasons I’ll always love him,” Bart, full of introspection, said from the distance of the twenty-first century. “I didn’t really understand what he was doing at the time . . . but without the way he challenged me, I would have been a different person. He challenged me when I needed to be.”

Ben Starr may have been incapable of adequately showing love to his oldest son, but he knew how to prepare him for Vince Lombardi.

The training continued when Bart returned home from football practice one afternoon during his sophomore year of high school, confronting another turning point.

After playing wingback in the Notre Dame Box at Montgomery’s Baldwin Junior High School, Starr graduated to Sidney Lanier High, where the Poets ran the T formation, and was immediately moved to quarterback. He was overjoyed at the new position, which would allow him to showcase the passing skills he had honed on the sandlot, but he quickly became disenchanted when he was relegated to the junior varsity, considered too green for the powerful Lanier varsity. When he told his father that he planned to quit the team, Ben resisted the impulse to challenge his son.

“All right, it’s your decision,” he said calmly. “I’m glad you’ll be home in the afternoons. I want you to weed the garden and cut the cornstalks. I want the garden cleaned up for fall.”

Ben understood how much Bart hated working in the garden. Quickly reconsidering his decision, the boy showed up early for practice the next day and never again considered quitting.

The Master Sergeant knew how to get in his son’s head.

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