



PACKERS

Drawing up that winning drive

Rodgers, coaches worked together

JASON WILDE
For Lee Newspapers

GREEN BAY — Afterward, as the euphoria began to subside and Aaron Rodgers had answered all manner of questions about what



Rodgers

just transpired, the Green Bay Packers quarterback thought about what it all meant. “It felt like it was such a growth moment for us,” the 17-year veteran said of the Packers’ 30-28 victory over the San Francisco 49ers. “I’m really happy for the guys to feel that. And it feels like, ‘OK, now we’re on our way.



LaFleur

Now we can get into this, now we know how to win, and we can get this thing moving in the right direction.” And it was all made possible by what the Packers — not Rodgers alone, but in concert with head coach Matt LaFleur, offensive coordinator Nathaniel Hackett, quarterbacks coach/offensive passing-game coordinator Luke Getsy, wide receiver Davante Adams and, of course, kicker Mason Crosby — had done during the final 37 seconds of the game, culminating in Crosby’s 51-yard walk-off game-winning field goal.



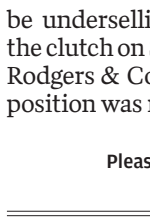
Hackett

“What Aaron and that offense was able to do in 37 seconds, it does make it easy for me,” Crosby would say later. “I just go out there and do my job.”



Getsy

While the veteran kicker who’s now made 22 straight field-goal attempts dating back to last season might be underselling what he did in the clutch on Sunday night, what Rodgers & Co. did to put him in position was no less remarkable.



Crosby

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HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL



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Case freshman coach Jon Nelson talks with running back-linebacker Misha Grayson during a practice Thursday at Case’s Gene Veit Field.

SHINING A LIGHT

Nelson has made profound impact on Case freshmen team

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MOUNT PLEASANT — Le-Ron Ball speaks from experience when he claims purpose can be instilled into the lives of directionless kids by someone who listens and who genuinely cares. Someone like Jon Nelson.

Ball was a troubled kid in Racine more than 20 years ago who resisted authority, did jail time for possession of marijuana and underachieved at pretty much everything he did. And then he encountered Nelson, a youth minister in Racine who took him into his home for four years and gradually helped salvage a life that was spinning out of control.



Nelson

The kid was inspired by Nelson to graduate from Horlick High School in 2001 and is now a youth worker and coach who recently moved with his wife of 13 years and four children to Aurora, Colo. Looking back on where he would be without the purpose Nelson put into his life, Ball says, “I’d either be in prison or I’d be dead.”

The 68-year-old Nelson is good at this kind of thing, hav-



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Members of the Case freshman football team pose recently with their “Blessed” T-shirts. The team is 5-0 so far this season after going 0-9 in 2019.

ing worked with youth since 1984 and providing ministry for Case’s athletic programs since 2005. His project for the last three years has been coaching freshmen football players at Case and inspiring them to success both on and off the field with his staff of assistants.

The candle he lit has cut through a great deal of darkness.

“Jon is a mentor to me, so I know he can be a mentor to these young men,” said Bryan Shredl, Case’s varsity head coach since 2015. “He really does a great job in mentoring those young men, being a leader and teaching them how to be a young man.

“That’s what these guys need. They need positive role models in their lives.”

The process

Members of the Case freshman football team gradually filed into Room 226 at Case under the watchful eye of Nelson after classes let out for the day. It was a Tuesday, a day set aside for monitoring their studies and reviewing film from the previous day’s freshman game.

These kids represent a mixing pot of cultures. Some live in comfortable, stable homes. But so many others in this class are not as fortunate.

The term these kids often use is they’re “staying” somewhere rather than “living” somewhere. They don’t know what a true home is.

And in so many cases, they have minimal direction and

are gradually being sucked into troubled lives.

That’s where Nelson, a 1970 Case graduate who was a three-sport athlete at the school, comes in. He hopes to provide a bridge for many of these kids to cross and set them up for a meaningful life. Just as he once did for Ball. Just as he has continued to do for countless others before and after Ball.

So on this Tuesday, he was taking charge in Room 226 as these kids walked in and sat at their desks. They were expected to be carrying backpacks with their school work and they were also expected to put away their cell phones for this session.

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BUCKS

Champions raring and ready to run it back



MORRY GASH, ASSOCIATED PRESS

Milwaukee players, coaches prepared to go for repeat

ANDREW WAGNER
For Lee Newspapers

MILWAUKEE — Not surprisingly, the Larry O’Brien Trophy was front and center on the stage Monday as the Milwaukee Bucks owners sat down for the first interview session of the team’s annual media day.

When they left, so did the trophy, which seemed odd at first but began to make sense as Milwaukee’s players took the stage as the day developed.

Intentional or not, the trophy’s absence served as a subtle reminder that the Bucks did indeed

win their first NBA championship in 50 years in July, but now it’s time to set about the business of winning another.

Giannis Antetokounmpo summed the situation up best when he said, “We know we were the 2021 NBA champs, but now we’re just the Milwaukee Bucks again.”

There is plenty of reason to believe this team is capable of duplicating last year’s success. All of the key contributors are back. So is coach Mike Budenholzer, who issued a simple message to his players as they gathered for the first time Monday morning: “Do it again.”



Antetokounmpo



Budenholzer

“The goal is always the same,” said Budenholzer, who signed a three-year contract extension last month that runs through the 2024-25 season.

“We feel good about the success we’ve had for three years. This last year ended with a championship but our players embrace the idea of getting better every day.”

Budenholzer knows it won’t be easy. While last year’s title was his first as a head coach, he served as an assistant to four championship teams in San Antonio under Gregg Popovich.

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Milwaukee forward Giannis Antetokounmpo poses for a picture during NBA media day on Monday at Milwaukee.

Case

From C1

But kids will be kids and Nelson had to gently admonish some of them to settle down and ditch their phones.

“Hey, I’m talking!” Nelson said as some kids continued to chat.

When one of the more studious kids reminded the others, “Everybody’s got work to do,” Nelson immediately followed with, “Yes! That’s what I like to hear!”

And when Nelson was called out of the room by someone, he reminded his student-athletes as he walked into corridor, “You guys stay busy.”

Given what’s going on in society with the breakdown of families and so many kids being raised in single-parent homes, it would be easy to consider Nelson’s undertaking as hopeless.

In the Racine Unified School District, black students have a four-year high school graduation rate of 63.6% compared to 84.2% for white students and 71.5% for Hispanic/Latino students. The poverty rate for black Racine residents has been reported to be about 37%, compared to 13.5% for white Racinians and 22.5% for Hispanic/Latino Racinians.

Nelson is trying to connect with many of these kids and make a difference.

He’s quick to point out that he has plenty of help from his assistants. He also said this story shouldn’t be about him and that he’s not doing this for any attention. He never has during his career in ministry.

Still, Nelson is clearly at the forefront of this undertaking.

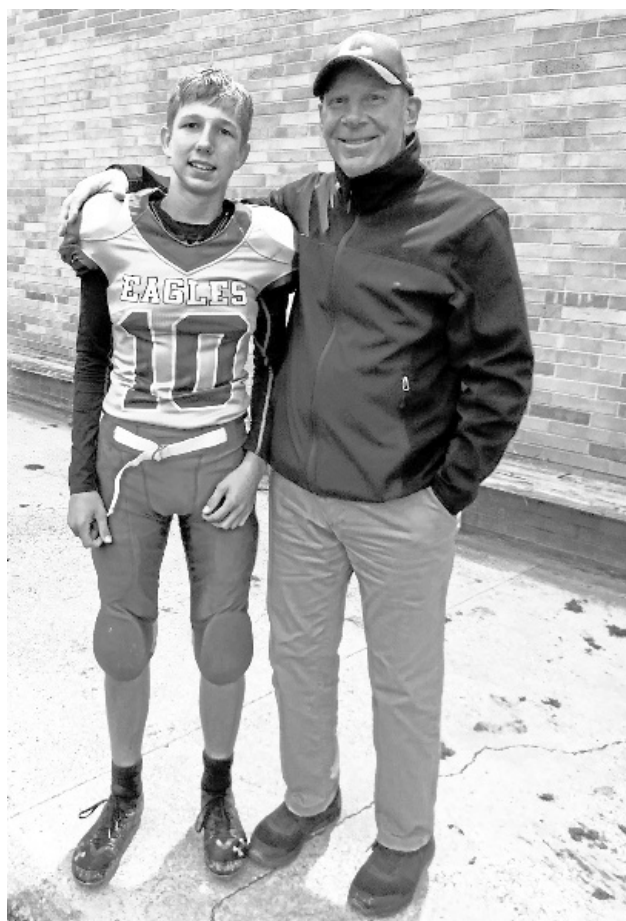
It started in 2019, when Shredl and Nelson considered the possibility of someone overseeing the task of setting up Case freshman football players both in the classroom and on the field. Nelson volunteered for this undertaking, Shredl said, and was the ideal choice given his credentials.

“We had a meeting and it was something that he was willing to do and it was kind of the next chapter in his life that he wanted to move on with,” Shredl said. “We needed a freshman coach and he’s a guy who would fit in well. He’s been around the program for years giving different leadership talks here and it was an easy transition.”

Nelson hasn’t been able to connect with all of his student-athletes, but he never stops listening to them or trying to reach them as no one has been able to reach them before.

During Monday games, most of the actual game coaching is done by defensive coordinator Al Cruz, offensive coordinator Chris Walker, wide receivers-defensive backs coach Frank Purnell and linebackers coach Ryan Nelson, Jon’s son.

And Nelson’s role?



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Case High School freshman football coach Jon Nelson, right, stands with Eagles defensive back Wyatt Crogg. Crogg, now a junior, was on Nelson’s first freshman team at Case.

“I tell people, ‘I’m the CEO,’” Nelson said. “The CEO stands for ‘Chief Encouragement Officer.’ I’m the Chief Encouragement Officer and I direct traffic. I do tell my offensive coordinator that I decide when we punt. I’m involved in coaching. I played the game.”

But more than anything Nelson directs traffic and points his kids to roads leading to achievement. And then listen, sometimes while wearing the “Blessed” T-shirts he distributed his players.

They are also responding. So much so that when Nelson asked for some volunteers in his class to be interviewed for this story, nearly everyone enthusiastically raised his hand.

So much for shy, awkward freshmen.

“He preaches to people, he motivates people, he’s a really good coach, he’s nice and he just makes sure everyone does good in class and on the field,” said Lincoln Myer, a wide receiver. “He helps out everyone. He gave us shirts and we have preach time. He really made me think of how blessed I am.”

Misha Grayson, a running back and linebacker, has come to understand the value he has by playing on Case’s freshman team. “They’re teaching us more than coaches usually teach,” he said. “They’re not just teaching us football. They’re teaching us how to do good in school and how to keep our grades.

“I’ve improved a lot in school. The first day of football practice, I thought I was just going to play football and school wasn’t going to matter. But coach Jon and the other coaches really taught me how to do well in school and do better in football.”

A m i r e Cobb, an offensive lineman, has learned that achievement comes only with hard work — and sometimes with a little embarrassment.

“This helps me because we all get to sit in a room and catch up on homework because, as you know, homework is always a downfall with the best football players,” he said. “(Nelson) is encouraging, he’s very pushy and he’s a great coach.

“About two weeks ago, we were joking around in the back of the classroom and (Nelson) asked us a question and we didn’t know the answer. I was pretty embarrassed. He has shown me the way things should be done.”

Of the three Racine public schools with football programs, Case has struggled the most over the years. Until the Eagles went 4-3 last spring, this program had not had a winning record since 1993. Since the WIAA instituted a playoff format in 1975, Case has yet to win a postseason game.

But this could be the start of a new era. When Nelson first took over the freshman program in 2019, the Eagles went 0-9. They matched the varsity’s 4-3 record last spring. And following Monday’s 14-0 victory over Tremper in Kenosha, the Case freshmen team is 5-0.

Connections are being made with student-athletes,

getting the go-ahead score, but he couldn’t exactly blame Juszczyk for bowling over Packers safety Henry Black to get into the end zone.

“Yeah, you always worry with Aaron on the other side,” Shanahan later admitted. “We were hoping to take (the clock) down, but it was a hell of an effort by ‘Juice’ to get in.”

Shanahan had reason to worry. Across the field, after a touchback put the ball at the Green Bay 25-yard line, LaFleur was suggesting to Rodgers that their altered play — “Something we actually worked on Friday at practice, kind of scribbling through their mental Rolodexes of plays that could take them the requisite 38 yards in less than 37 seconds — with no timeouts to stop the clock — to get Crosby in reasonable range for a game-winning kick.

While they were huddling, 49ers coach Kyle Shanahan was worrying. He’d wanted to bleed more clock before

with the idea of them maturing in the classroom and on the field for four years instead of being one and done. Each connection is first made when Nelson tries to make a home visit with each of his players prior to the season.

“The first year, I did a home visit with almost everyone of my kids because that was my goal,” Nelson said. “And it takes extra work to find them because with a lot of these city kids, if you ask them where they live, they’ll say, ‘I stay over on Racine Street’ or ‘I stay on Sixth Street.’ They don’t even use the word ‘live’ because they move so much.”

How many of his players are being raised without a father in their lives?

“I look as my roster and it’s probably pretty close to half,” he said. “And it’s not even those (minority) kids. I’m running into kids all the time who live in the ‘burbs’ who don’t have a dad in their lives.”

The goal is to provide a constant influx of more grounded and prepared student-athletes for Case’s varsity. That pipeline is already flowing.

“The idea is to have at least 20 seniors,” Nelson said. “That should be the goal every year. And to get to 20 seniors, you need at least 30 or 40 freshmen because you’re going to have some attrition. That’s what I’ve been working with Bryan with.

“Those 31 freshman I had last spring, I think almost all of them are playing now. I think we have 75 freshmen and sophomores at Case playing football. That is phenomenal in today’s high school football world!”

Nelson, who turns 69 in November, hopes to eventually groom a successor to carry on his work with the freshmen. He also hopes to develop a model for Horlick and Park to follow.

“This just isn’t about Case, even though I’m a Case guy,” Nelson said. “I’d like to build a character-based freshman football program that can be reproduced at other schools.”

In the meantime, the future of Case’s football program is in good hands.

“The numbers you see are a sign of how well it’s doing,” Shredl said. “I think the word’s gotten out in the community that our freshman program and Case is the place to be and we’re really looking forward to the future here with this group.”

Nelson once worked wonders with LeRon Ball. He’s doing the same 20 years later with a bunch of kids who need someone like Nelson in their lives.

“I said to LeRon not too long ago, ‘LeRon, just think about what your kids are getting now that you never got,’” Nelson said. “And he just started crying. He said, ‘Yeah, I never got this. I want the best for my kids.’”

“That’s what I want for these kids. I really do,” Nelson said. “I just want to see them get off to a great start in high school.”

Bucks

From C1

None of those teams were able to duplicate their accomplishment the following season. Only one made it as far as the conference finals while two lost in the conference semifinals and a fourth was eliminated in the first round.

This Bucks team will face the same challenges as those Spurs teams did, including the need to get new faces acclimated into the team’s system, the pressure of living up to expectations and previous accomplishments, and most notably, having to play an entire season with a massive target on its back.

The league’s bottom-feeders will take the floor looking to make a name for themselves by knocking off the champs while the teams Milwaukee beat en route to the title — especially the Brooklyn Nets — will go into games feeling like there’s a score to settle.

“The first year Golden State won (the championship), they beat us in the playoffs in the first round,” point guard Jrue Holiday said, referencing his time with the New Orleans Pelicans.

“When we came back and played them the next year, I was like, ‘Man, I need this one!’ So I’m pretty sure there are a couple of playoff teams out there that want to beat us.”

Perhaps no team wants to dethrone the Bucks more than the Nets, who might have won the title last year if Kevin Durant’s toe hadn’t been on the 3-point line with one second left in regulation in Game 7 of the Eastern Conference semifinals.

Not unlike the Bucks last summer, the Nets used the offseason to surround their core of Durant, James Harden and Kyrie Irving with additional talent while shoring up their defense. Brooklyn has been picked by many observers as the team to beat in the East.

The Atlanta Hawks, the Boston Celtics and the Miami Heat are expected to contend again, too, while the Philadelphia 76ers remain a formidable force as well.

Then, there is an entire Western Conference full of teams who’d like a piece of the Bucks, including the Phoenix Suns squad that Milwaukee beat in the Finals, and the re-tooled and re-loaded Los Angeles Lakers.

“People are going to start hunting us,” forward Bobby Portis said. “It’s going to be a championship game every night.”

From the sound of things Monday, the Bucks are eager to begin defending their championship.

“Are we satisfied? I’m

not,” Antetokounmpo said. “I’m not even close to being satisfied.”

NBA notes

Sharpshooting forward Michael Porter Jr. has agreed to a five-year maximum extension with the Denver Nuggets that could be worth up to \$207 million.

His agent, Mark Bartelstein, confirmed the deal to The Associated Press on Monday. ESPN first reported the deal.

Porter’s agreement would be worth at least \$173 million over five years and could rise to the supermax level of \$207 million over that span if he reaches certain criteria this season.

He’s assured of making at least \$29.8 million in 2022-23, a figure that would rise if he qualified for more by being voted onto an All-NBA team or winning the league’s MVP award this season.

This crowns a meteoric rise for Porter, whose college basketball career at Missouri was derailed by a back injury so severe that many questioned if he was worth the risk of being taken in the 2018 NBA draft. He slid to Denver at No. 14, the final lottery selection. Porter sat out his first season in Denver after undergoing a back procedure in July 2018.

He rebounded and has been rewarded handsomely. Porter is averaging 14.4 points per game in the NBA, eighth-best of those taken in that class.

The 23-year-old Porter is coming off a season in which he averaged 19 points and 7.3 rebounds. He also led the Nuggets with 170 3-pointers.

WNBA note

Jonquel Jones led a sweep of three major WNBA awards for Connecticut, earning MVP honors hours before the Sun opened their best-of-five playoff series against Chicago.

She averaged 19.4 points, 11.2 rebounds and 1.3 blocked shots to earn her first MVP award. Jones received all but one of the 49 first-place votes from a national media panel. Phoenix center Britney Griner garnered the other first-place ballot and finished a distant second. Breanna Stewart of Seattle was third, followed by Minnesota’s Sylvia Fowles and Washington’s Tina Charles.

Connecticut’s Curt Miller was chosen as the league’s coach of the year. It’s the second time he’s won the award, also receiving it in 2017. Miller, who became the sixth coach to win the award at least twice, had 41 of the 49 votes, with Minnesota’s Cheryl Reeve second with six votes. Bill Laimbeer of Las Vegas and Noelle Quinn of Seattle each received one vote to finish in a tie for third.



Holiday



Jones

Packers

From C1

And it could wind up being a defining moment in a season that began with a humbling, embarrassing defeat and still has miles to go on the path to Super Bowl LVI in Los Angeles.

The seeds of the game-winning drive actually were planted late in the week at practice. During Thursday’s end-of-practice 2-minute drill, Rodgers and the No. 1 offense had run a play that Rodgers wanted to alter slightly.

“I like to adjust some routes from time to time,” Rodgers explained.

What Rodgers wanted was for slot receiver Randall Cobb, to run a post route that would draw the opposing safety away from Adams, his intended target. LaFleur said the play, in its original incarnation, had been designed by Getsy as part of the offense’s third-down package for a third-and-

long situation, but after they conferred with their quarterback, they altered it and practiced it on Friday.

“We were afraid that, (as the play was designed), it could potentially bring a safety over,” LaFleur explained. “We were actually calling it to throw it over on the other side, so we changed the route and changed the concept.”

So, seconds after 49ers fullback Kyle Juszczyk had crossed the goal line and kicker Robbie Gould had booted the extra point to give San Francisco a 28-27 lead, LaFleur, Getsy and Rodgers immediately began discussing their options, scrolling through their mental Rolodexes of plays that could take them the requisite 38 yards in less than 37 seconds — with no timeouts to stop the clock — to get Crosby in reasonable range for a game-winning kick.

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“We talked about it on the sideline, how potentially that could be a really good play for us,” LaFleur said. “And the guys went out there and executed.”

Added Rodgers: “Matty suggested it right before we

went out. He said, ‘What do you think about this play?’ I said, ‘Yeah, I like that. I think that’d be pretty good.’”

“No timeouts, from the 25, you need two chunk throws. I knew that. So that’s why I wasn’t going to ‘dink-and-dunk.’ You don’t have any time for that. We had to get at least 15 on the first play.”

They got 25. Cobb, lined up in the right slot, ran his altered post route and pulled safety Jimmie Ward downfield, creating a void in the middle of the field. Meanwhile Adams, who had lined up just outside of Cobb, ran his route, which started with him angling toward the right sideline before cutting across the field to that open space. Rodgers then delivered a strike just over linebacker Fred Warner’s reach, putting the ball at midfield.

“It worked out perfect,” Rodgers said.

With the Packers having hustled to the line of scrimmage, Rodgers spiked the ball to stop the clock with 20 seconds left. After throwing incomplete for Adams on the next play, the Packers faced a third-and-10 with 16 seconds remaining.

That’s when Rodgers and Adams, who had been briefly knocked from the game after a collision with Ward earlier in the fourth quarter, connected again for 17 more yards, and Adams immediately gave himself up, saving precious seconds. Rodgers spiked the ball again with 3 seconds left, then pumped his fist, almost as if he knew the game was in hand before Crosby even came onto the field.

“My first thoughts in devising how I wanted to get us into field goal range was, ‘How can I get 17 the ball?’” said Rodgers, who finished the game having completed 22 of 33 passes for 261 yards with two touchdowns and

no interceptions for a passer rating of 113.3.

“We’ve been doing this together for a long time now,” said Adams, who caught 12 passes for 132 yards and an earlier touchdown: “Those are the types of situations that we’re made for.”

Extra points

Upon reviewing the film, LaFleur admitted Monday afternoon that Crosby’s game-winner was awfully close to being blocked by San Francisco’s Dontae Johnson, who was a split-second late after getting past Robert Tonyan’s block. “It was pretty close,” LaFleur said. “I thought Bobby did as well as he could have done on the edge. (Johnson) just got a really good jump on the snap and he made it close.” ... LaFleur said wide receiver Marquez Valdes-Scantling, who suffered a hamstring injury late in the game, would be scanned on Tuesday, leaving his status for this week’s game against Pittsburgh uncertain.