

Now & Then in Ripon ... *Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society*

Small in stature, big in impact: The career of Bill Butler

With the end of the football season approaching, the Ripon Historical Society remembers William "Bill" Butler, who passed away Nov. 28, 2025.

At one time, Butler was head coach of the Green Lake High School football team and the defensive coordinator for the Ripon High School football team.

Butler was born in 1937 in Berlin and graduated from Berlin High School in 1955. At 5 foot, 10 inches and 189 pounds, Butler was thought to be too small to play college football.

Russ Skall, a well-known recruiter believed in Butler's abilities and was able to get him a football scholarship at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

A recent article in the *Berlin Journal* noted that

"Each year, Chattanooga took on the 'big boys' in the country, including the University of Tennessee, in a benefit game. The matchup would have been similar to Ripon College playing the University of Wisconsin. In Butler's senior year, he intercepted a pass at the end of the game and sparked an upset that both teams recall today. It produced a full-scale riot, which made the national news at the time."

In 1959, Butler was drafted by the Green Bay Packers in the 19th round and was the 217th overall pick. He initially was waived in training camp, but was re-signed after the team cut another rookie. Butler noted that he was paid \$6,400 by the Packers, which is approximately \$72,000 today.

This was the first year that Vince Lombardi (1913-1970) coached the

team. A safety, Butler was the second smallest player in the NFL.

David Maraniss wrote in his biography of Lombardi that when Butler showed up for training camp, Lombardi barked at him, "What the hell are you doing here? This line isn't for kids."

While with the Packers, Butler led the NFL in combined kickoff and punt return yards. Lombardi later said, "I never saw a guy with the guts and determination of Butler."

A year later, Butler went onto play for the first season of the Dallas Cowboys when they entered the National Football League in 1960. Lombardi had put Butler's name on an NFL expansion draft list thinking that the Cowboys would not select the small and un-

proved second-year player. While with the Cowboys, he ranked third in the league in punt returns yards.

In 1961, he went to play as a defensive safety as well as a kickoff and punt return specialist for the Pittsburgh Steelers. Butler suffered a shoulder separation during the 10th game of the season at Pittsburgh, but after recovering went on to play for the Minnesota Vikings from 1962-1964. In his three seasons with the Vikings, Butler led the team in kickoff and punt returns.

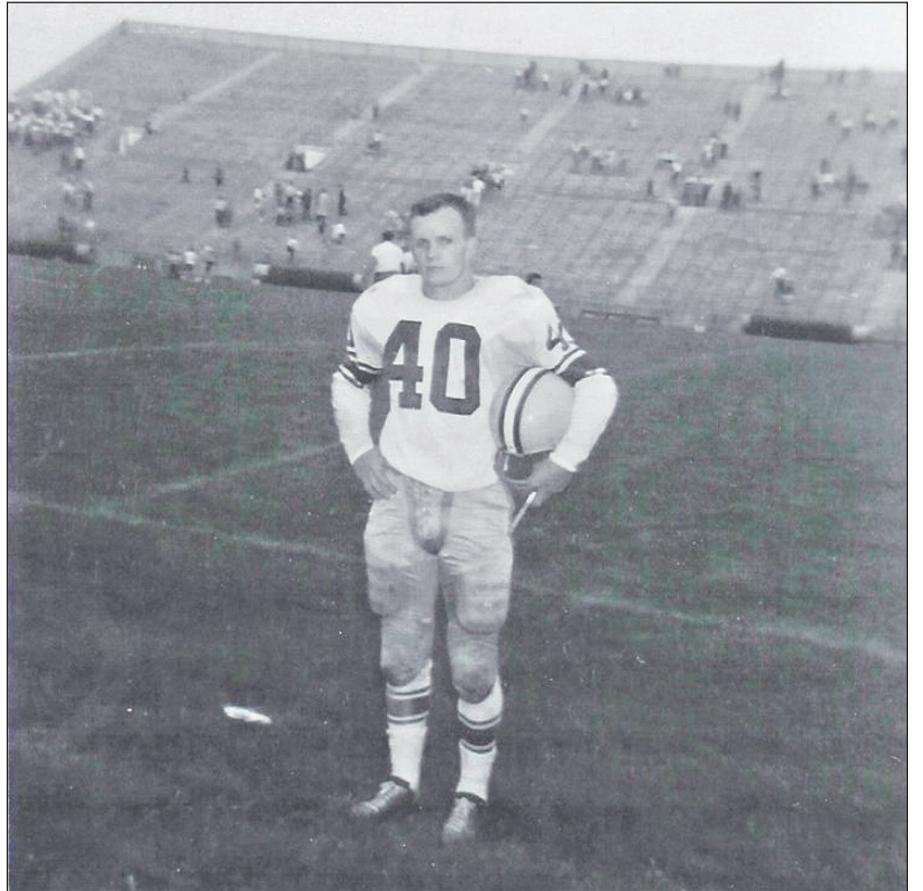
His last year of playing professional football was in 1965, when he played for the Saskatchewan Roughriders in the Canadian Football League. He was named the league's outstanding back.

For the next two years, Butler became a backfield coach with the Winnipeg Blue Bombers. This ended his nine-year professional football career in which he played every game with the exception of the last four in Pittsburgh.

An endearing story behind Butler's football career centered around his mother, Dolores Himmler Butler (1918-2008). For almost 22 years, Dolores was a stitcher for Ripon Athletic/Sand Knit, which produces all of the uniforms for the NFL. She would place notes to her son in his football uniforms. Butler's high school letter jacket is displayed in the retail area of Ripon Athletic.

Not only did Butler play football, but he also played basketball and baseball.

In college, the Chattanooga basketball team asked Butler to travel with them when its roster was depleted due to injuries. He became the game's top



BERLIN HIGH SCHOOL graduate Bill Butler stands in New City Stadium (now Lambeau Field) after a scrimmage. He played one season for the Green Bay Packers during Vince Lombardi's first year as coach. *submitted photo*

scorer. He was known to have played minor league baseball with Hall of Famer Harmon Killebrew. The year he was selected to play football for the Green Bay Packers, he also had the opportunity to sign on to play baseball with the Milwaukee (now Atlanta) Braves.

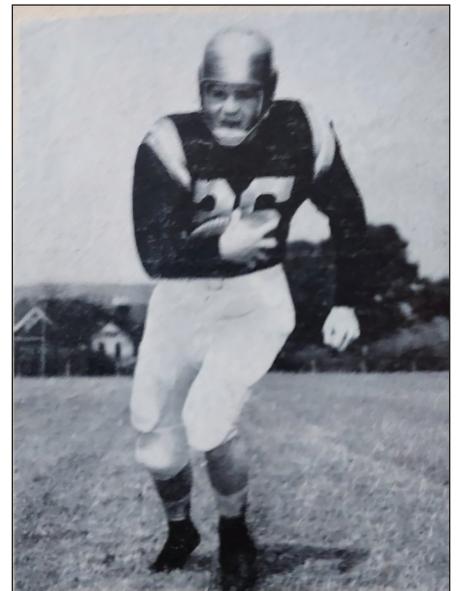
In 1967, after his professional football career was over, he returned to Wisconsin as the assistant football coach at Lakeland College (now Lakeland University) in Plymouth.

Butler then joined the Chrysler Corp., buying and selling dealerships and working as a field representative.

He and his wife, Debbi, and their four children then lived in Milwaukee, where he operated a Dodge dealership.

In 1991, at 54 years old, he purchased his mother's home, moved back to Berlin and joined a local car dealership. Butler became the head football coach for the Green Lake High School in 1998, holding the position for three years. In the early 2000s, he became the defensive coordinator for the Ripon High School football team.

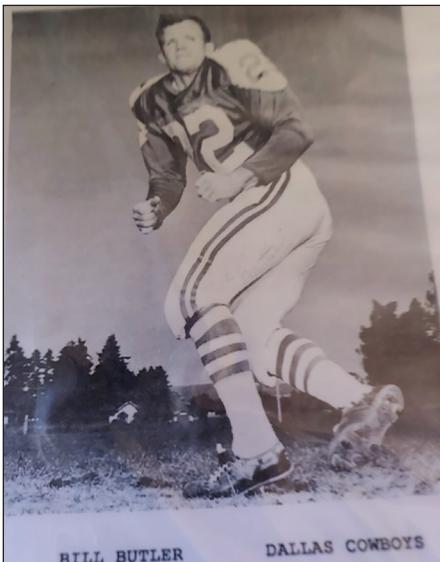
The Ripon Historical Society is the



BILL BUTLER PLAYED football for the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga prior to being drafted by the Packers. *submitted photo*

oldest continually operating historical society in Wisconsin. It is open Fridays and Saturdays 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

For more information, visit www.riponhistory.org, facebook.com/riponhistoricalsociety/ or instagram.com/riponhistoricalsociety/.



BILL BUTLER IS pictured in 1960 during his one year as a member of the Dallas Cowboys. *submitted photo*

Ripon ELECTRIC, INC

Master Electrician • State Certified Journeymen
• Industrial • Commercial
• Residential • Farm Rewire Certified
Aerial Work - up to 50' • Data & Voice Cabling
Free Estimates ~ 24 Hour Emergency Service

510 ASPEN 748-6606 RIPON