

Actor brings 'Lombardi' to coach's home turf

By Warren Gerds

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Watching Green Bay Packers games this season with fellow actors who are Packers fans has been unique for Neil Friedman. He stars as the legendary Packers coach in "Lombardi" at Peninsula Players Theatre.

"It's been great," he said.

Friedman took a liking to the team as a kid growing up in New York. Today, folks come to see him as Lombardi and soak in a few rays from the coach's aura.

"There is great pressure," Friedman said. "People have said, 'We're really looking forward to this,' almost like, 'We dare you to be Vince Lombardi this close to Green Bay.' But so far, it's been great."

Friedman has played other real people in his extensive career, including Woody Guthrie and Johnny Cash. Lombardi is different because of close connections.

Friedman traces to the first version of the play that became "Lombardi." For a staged reading in Madison, he worked with playwright Eric Simonson and David Maraniss, who wrote "When Pride Still Mattered: A Life of Vince Lombardi."

The two creators, "from the beginning, have been so complimentary about who I am and how I fit into the role," Friedman said. "That's very gratifying."

For Broadway, Dan Lauria of TV's "The Wonder Years" got the nod. Friedman saw the production when he was playing Cash in "Ring of Fire" in Auburn, N.Y. Simonson contacted him by email.

"He was kind enough to send me a copy of the script and asked me if I could come to the city and see a preview and let him know what I thought," Friedman said. He was drawn to it.

"Dan Lauria has a real good resemblance to Lombardi also, and he's kind of a name," Friedman said. "I was just rubbing my hands together in glee going, 'Well, you know, eventually this will be in other places, and the man can't do it all.'"

The Broadway run was successful. The play has gone on to another life in professional theater. Friedman's life is different because of the Players version.

Lombardi, who they thought he was, how their parents met him and 'My grandfather rode the train with him.'"

"I got to Door County on May 25, and from the moment I arrived, a lot of local people had interesting stories to tell me about their relationship with Vince

Susan Lombardi, Vince and Marie Lombardi's daughter, has been part of Friedman's experience. That started at a pre-season function at which he performed a monologue as Lombardi.



"Where I stood to do it was two feet away from Susan, in full view of her father's Super Bowl I ring," Friedman said. "It was like, 'This is a little bit of pressure here.' But she was very kind. She's always been very kind to us.

Neil Friedman plays legendary Green Bay Packers coach Vince Lombardi in the Peninsula Players Theatre production of 'Lombardi.' / Submitted

"She called Carmen (Roman, who plays Marie) and I 'Mom' and 'Dad' on opening night. You could also hear her sobbing at the end of the show. She said she loved the Broadway production, but this one had so much more emotion to it."

The play touches on many aspects of the Lombardis and the Packers, with bits of Lombardi inspiration sprinkled in. Friedman clued into an important, unspoken message right away.

Lombardi died of colon cancer at 57.

"I'm 56," Friedman said. "The second day of rehearsal (six years ago) - portraying all the stomach pains - I called my doctor and made an appointment for a colonoscopy, like immediately upon return home. So I have Vince Lombardi to thank for that, getting off my butt to do that."

