

PACKER REPORT



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the FAB FOUR

Packers' receivers are
unstoppable and
unselfish

INSIDE: The Packers, from 1 to 99
Irgovac adds energy to D-line
Catching up with Chris Gizzi

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By W. Keith Roerdink

Chris Gizzi runs onto Lambeau Field in the first game after Sept. 11.

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Eight years after his unforgettable moment after Sept. 11, Chris Gizzi takes his passion to today's youth.



There are enduring, defining images from Lambeau Field. Some are freeze frames in our mind. Others are slow-motion videos that play in our head and give us goosebumps years later.

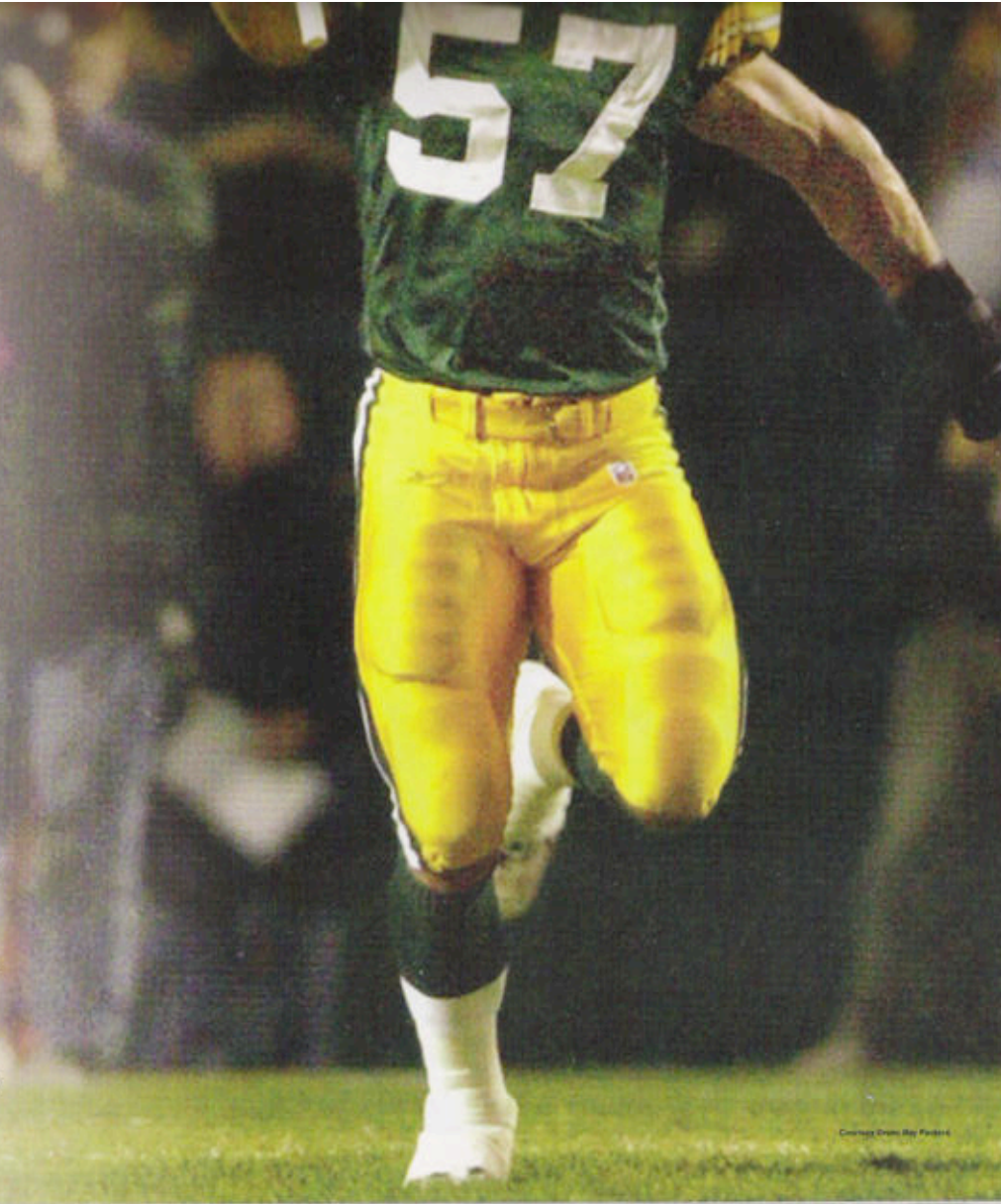
For the most part, these images have been provided by some of the greatest players to suit up in Green and Gold. There's Bart Starr's quarterback sneak in the Ice Bowl, LeRoy Butler's jump into the stands for that first Lambeau Leap, Reggie White sacking John Elway on back-to-back plays to preserve a win, Antonio Freeman's "Improbable Bobble," and any number of Brett Favre plays, from an improvised two-handed shovel pass as he's being pulled to the ground, to the iconic Sports Illustrated cover of him standing in a virtual snow globe during a playoff win over Seattle.

But sometimes, an unlikely player seizes his moment on the Frozen Tundra and grabs a hold of us. Sometimes, circumstance frames a memory and destiny decides who plays the part. It was following the most unimaginable of events, the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, that Chris Gizzi, a little-known backup linebacker from the Air Force Academy, provided an uplifting and unifying scene that is as memorable as any of the aforementioned.

I was sitting in the old auxiliary press box in Lambeau Field's north end zone on Sept. 24, 2001, for a Monday night game against the Washington Redskins. It was the team's first game since the devastation 13 days prior. The NFL had suspended games in the weekend immediately following the tragedy, and there was a somber resolve emanating through the country.

But we were defiantly moving forward — because that's what Americans do — with a very American tradition. Part celebration, part distraction, the decision to resume games after a week off seemed like the right one. As the sky darkened and the lights shone down, emotion was thick on the sidelines and in the stands as they prepared for a pregame tribute to the men and women who had lost their lives.

When Gizzi, who completed a two-year service commitment before signing with the Packers and was still involved with the academy, sprinted onto the



field carrying a giant American flag, a feeling of patriotism like I had never felt washed over and welled up inside of me. From the thundering roar that filled Lambeau Field, I wasn't alone.

Gizzi, back in Wisconsin this summer as a trainer at the fourth annual Eastbay SPARQ Football Camp in Stevens Point, breathed in deeply before recounting the events leading to that kickoff eight years ago.

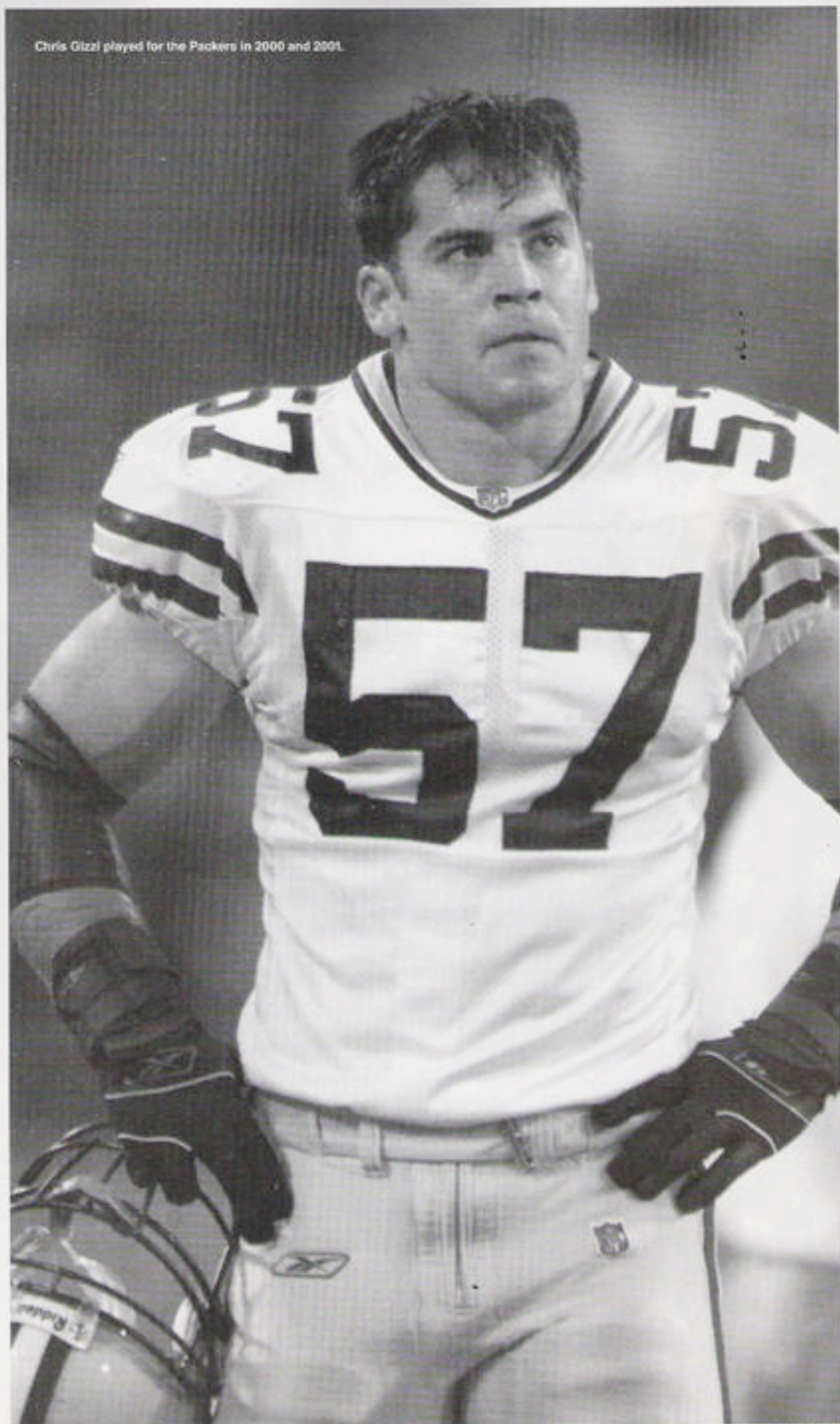
"I'll tell you what, it was exactly that for me," Gizzi said, echoing the description. "I didn't anticipate what it was going to be. I was literally just letting it fly and I didn't know what I was going to do walking out there. But I knew as soon as I hit the field — there were three times in particular when I was a Packer that the ground shook at Lambeau — and that was one of them. The ground was actually shaking as I was running and it just took me away like a tidal wave. I couldn't have stopped running if I tried."

Green Bay went on to win 37-0, but Gizzi would play just three more months with the Packers. Just three more months of professional football, as it turned out. A bad back that he had fought throughout the season got the best of him when he herniated a disc in warmups before a game against the Tennessee Titans in Nashville. A game he was slated to start in place of the injured Nate Wayne.

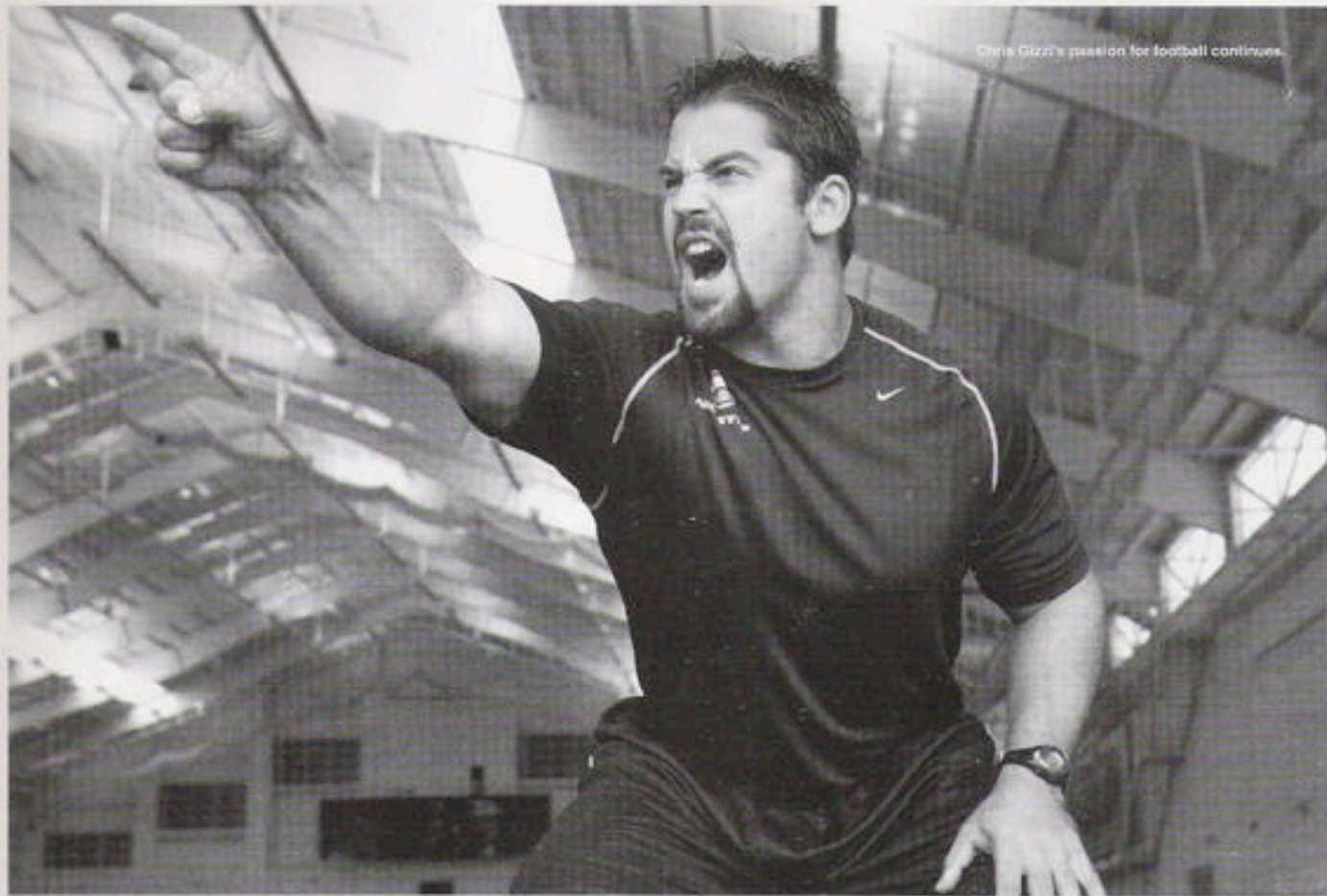
But that run onto the field with Old Glory will give him a sort of immortality that a longer career might never have. Back surgery followed by a year-and-a-half of rehab couldn't help Gizzi, who also had knee problems, catch on with another NFL club. The potential for further injury made him too risky of a signing.

"It sucked," Gizzi said. "It was awful. It was a tough way

Chris Gizzi played for the Packers in 2000 and 2001.



Chris Gizzi Images



Chris Gizzi's passion for football continues.

Courtesy Chris Gizzi

to go down with it, but that's football, right? It's a 100 percent injury rate. You don't know what you're going to get. So, you make the most of it, and I can go away saying I squeezed every drop out of it I could."

At 6-foot, 235 pounds, Gizzi was not the biggest linebacker. He wasn't the fastest. But his ticket to the professional ranks was paved with passion and intensity, along with keen listening and quick learning.

A linebacker at St. Ignatius High School in Cleveland, his teams were three-time state champions. As a wrestler, he was the state runner-up as a senior. At Air Force, Gizzi was honored with the team's "Mr. Intensity" award and became just the second player in academy history to win back-to-back Western Athletic Conference defensive player of the year awards. He came back from a torn ACL in 1995 to help his team beat Notre Dame in 1996 — back when beating the Irish was considered an accomplishment. Still, he went undrafted in 1998 and signed with Denver. But his service commitment and reserve/military status made his time with the Broncos scarce and led to his release.

Former Packers defensive coordinator Ed Donatell was familiar with Gizzi from his time as the Broncos' secondary coach and recommended him for a spot on Green Bay's roster. Though his career was brief, Gizzi defined it with a smart, instinctive, hard-nosed brand of play.

As one door closed, another one opened, and Gizzi parlayed his love of coaching and training into a successful Los Angeles training

organization called Zone Ready (www.zoneready.net), which he founded five years ago.

"We're focusing on training for athletes first and foremost, but it's really about people choosing to be successful in whatever endeavor they are in," Gizzi said. "For kids that want to be great football players, great athletes, great volleyball players, wrestlers, whatever sport they're playing, we really want this to encompass their whole life. It's really about developing yourself holistically, the whole person, and being the best scholar-athlete they can be, and hopefully they take that habit over to their life. That's the idea of being 'Zone Ready.' You are ready to be in the zone your entire life."

Along with starting Zone Ready, Gizzi's post-playing career included working with Nike and SPARQ — a cutting-edge training program that's an acronym for Speed Power Agility Reaction Quickness. The latter has Gizzi traveling all over the country helping the next generation of gridiron greats achieve peak athletic performance.

"I'm taking the passion I had for playing and I'm pouring it into these kids, pouring it out into my business, trying to reach not only amateur athletes, but we're helping government and military officials, law enforcement, fire department. You know I've got a passion for military people, men and women who have served, and with my Air Force background, I want to bring this to them because they need it," Gizzi said. "Their body depends on it because their life and limbs are on the line. That really stirs me. So, I think it all happens for a reason."

The fire that defined Gizzi from a prep player to his college career and finally the pros was on display at Goerke Field this summer day. His encouragement could be heard across the field as 170-plus high school football players spent the better part of two hours testing in the vertical jump, agility shuttle, kneeling power ball toss and 40-yard dash — the four components that produce their “SPARQ rating,” a sort of ACT score that athletes can compare online to other players around the nation.

Gizzi addressed the squad during a break, introducing the other trainers including Tom Shaw, a revered name throughout NFL Scouting Combine circles who’s trained 119 first-round draft picks and worked with Tom Brady, Peyton Manning and, recently, Michael Vick.

Former NFL linebacker Lonnie Marts, who operates his own Jacksonville, Fla.-based training center called Godspeed, was also on hand, as was Packers assistant strength and conditioning coach Mark Lovat.

But it was Gizzi that had the assembled mass mesmerized — and it wasn’t just because of the red contact lenses he was wearing, which along with the bulging muscles, mustache and goatee gave the distinct look of someone who could rip their heads off in midsentence without missing a beat. His voice is equal parts pitch-man smooth — something honed during countless speaking engagements at the academy and as an NFL player talking to potential Air Force recruits, Rotary Clubs and high schools — and restrained madman.

He has a frenetic, engaging personality, and calling him colorful would be an understatement. Gizzi drew laughs from his fellow trainers when referring to his hands and feet as “paws and hooves.” He’s shown up to a camp dressed as walking cliché “Super Coach” Earv Schwartz, complete with whistle, visor, tucked in polo shirt, knee-high socks and stories of the “glory days.”

And at a Nike camp at the University of Oregon in 2007, Gizzi pretended to be a slightly psychotic high school football player who just transferred to the area to play running back and linebacker. Waiting in line for the camp to begin, Gizzi (sans facial hair and wearing a skin-tight compression shirt) told the kids that his mom was just locked up in prison and he was living with his aunt and uncle. Needless to say, he made quite a few camp-goers pretty nervous before revealing he was, in fact, one of the trainers. Yes, Gizzi has a little bit of crazy in him. But it’s a good crazy. And it goes without saying, the kids on this day hung on his every word.

“I got two spoonfuls of something for you!” Gizzi said, scanning the crowd. “Is your mouth open? Are you ready for it? Let’s get ready to train! We’re going to have fun, right? I want to laugh, I want to smile because it’s fun getting into someone, isn’t it? It’s fun pushing the ball down the field. It’s fun putting 50 on



Chris Gizzi watches campers sprint.

Courtesy Chris Gizzi

someone. Hey, it’s fun to train. It’s got to be the same mind-set. It’s fun to push my body. It’s fun to compete with that guy next to me.

“We’re all just a bunch of warriors sharpening our iron together. And we’re going to show you some core drills. I want you to pay it forward to your teammates. Do you know what that means? It’s why football is the greatest sport in the world. The old guys teach the young guys so the young guys get better than the old guys. Maybe. But that’s why we’re going to push you today. So, have fun, fly around, do everything 100 percent. I don’t care if you’re getting a drink of water, crush the cup and punch the garbage can and get back here. I want full speed today! I want you having fun.”

He didn’t need to remind them again. And it’s clear, as Gizzi worked with the players — doing everything from sharing anecdotes from his playing days to fine-tuning their form and firing them up, that he was having as much fun as any of them.

His latest line of work has seen him train athletes from Australia to China, assist pro and college football programs and even act in Adam Sandler’s remake of “The Longest Yard.” (He’s also got a bit part in the new comedy “When In Rome,” starring Kristen Bell.) But it’s the interacting with young players in which Gizzi, whose father, Alfred, has coached for 40-plus years at the college, high school and youth level, seems to be most in his element.

“This group of kids that came out today, even if they take one or two or maybe there’s five things they take from today — that’s a very successful day for that kid,” Gizzi said. “That makes us feel good. We put our heads down at night pretty proud.”

And while the ground didn’t shake, Gizzi had once again made a lasting impression. ■

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