

# PACKERS OF THE PAST

## Harry Sydney #42

BY MIKE WARREN  
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

GREEN BAY – For most of his professional life, Harry Sydney has been a mentor.

Whether it's been as a teammate, an assistant coach, a father or through his nonprofit, Sydney has been helping young men become successful both on and off the football field for more than 30 years.

Sydney's mentoring career started in earnest in 1992, when he came to Green Bay as a free agent running back, joining new Packers Head Coach Mike Holmgren.

The two had been together for five seasons with the 49ers in San Francisco, where they won back-to-back Super Bowls in 1988 and 1989.

"He brought me over here in '92 to help teach these guys how to win," Sydney told Packerland, during our July 2023 conversation.

As a veteran during the '92 campaign, Sydney helped mentor rookie running backs Edgar Bennett and Dexter McNabb, as well as three-year starter Darrell Thompson and free agent Marcus Wilson.

He also contributed on the field, catching 49 passes for 384 yards and rushing for 163 yards on 51 carries.

After not playing in 1993, Holmgren kept Sydney in the fold in 1994 as a general assistant "to work with many areas of the football team."

"People always said Harry was like a coach while he was still playing," Holmgren said in making the appointment. "I think he'll make an excellent teacher."

Sydney was promoted to running backs coach in 1995, assisting Bennett to his only 1,000-yard season as a pro, and the first by a Packers running back since Terrell Middleton turned the trick in 1978.

Under Sydney's guidance, Bennett also closed out the season with a team-record 1,715 yards from



Sydney

scrimmage, surpassing Jim Taylor's previous record of 1,580 amassed in 1962.

In 1996, Sydney tutored the offensive backfield trio of Bennett, Dorsey Levens and venerable blocker William Henderson, which amassed 2,817 rushing and receiving yards and 18 touchdowns, as the Packers raced to a 13-3 regular-season record and through the playoffs capturing the Lombardi Trophy by winning Super Bowl XXXI.

Building on the success of the 1996 season, Harry Sydney further developed Dorsey Levens, presiding over his emergence as one of the most productive running backs in team history.

Under Sydney's tutelage, Levens made the most of becoming the team's featured back in the absence of the injured Bennett, who was lost early in the season to a torn Achilles' tendon.

Levens became the team's sixth 1,000-yard rusher (1,435) and the first running back in nearly two decades voted to the Pro Bowl.

Levens also shattered the Packers' single-game rushing record, grinding out 190 yards against Dallas (Nov. 23) to break Jim Taylor's 36-year-old record.

The following season, Levens — and thus, any form of a running game — all but disappeared from the Green Bay offense amid contractual difficulties and a major injury.

Still, the Packers managed an 11-5 record, which qualified them for the playoffs as the NFC's fifth seed.

In the NFL Wild Card round, they were beaten 30-27 by the San Francisco 49ers, when a stumbling Steve Young recovered from a near sack and threw a 25-yard touchdown pass to Terrell Owens with three seconds left.

The loss brought an end to the Mike Holmgren era in Green Bay.

But Harry Sydney — along with Sherm Lewis and Johnny Holland — survived the coaching change.

Sydney returned the following season as the team's running backs coach under new Packers Head Coach Ray Rhodes.

When Rhodes was let go after a disappointing 8-8 season in 1999, Sydney was not retained by new Packers Head Coach Mike Sherman.

His NFL career was over. "It's like different levels of life. I was a single man then I became a dad, then you're teaching. So, that's the same thing. Chasing to get a Super Bowl. Won it. Won back to back with San Francisco, then came to Green Bay to teach guys how to win. It's a process. You can't have one without the other," he said.

In 2003, Sydney began "coaching" on a different level. He founded My Brother's Keeper, Inc., a nonprofit 501(c)(3) male-mentoring organization dedicated to assisting boys and men dealing with various hardships in their lives.

"What the whole premise of My Brother's Keeper is to help our boys and men get out of their own way," Sydney told us. "When we opened it after I was coaching with the Packers, we looked around and realized there was an epidemic going around. Boys and men were getting lost. We were throwing them in jail instead of figuring out, 'Hey, what's going on?' Now we talk about mental awareness. We were doing it 20 years ago. That's what My Brother's Keeper is about. It's about helping our boys and men. And the ages, it

used to be 11-65. Now it's 9-82."

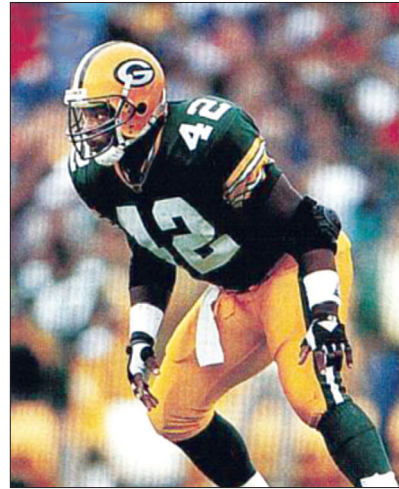
Participants range from troubled boys identified by schools, courts and parents, to men struggling with relationships, job dissatisfaction, financial difficulty and defining and achieving realistic goals.

"I've got clients that come from as far as Sturgeon Bay, as far as Milwaukee, all around this area," Sydney stated. "I do most of the mentoring — me and another guy part-time."

Sydney is among many former Packers players and/or coaches who came to Green Bay and stayed here after their careers were over.

"I tell people Green Bay's the American Dream once you're old enough to realize what the American Dream is. It's a peaceful place to live," he said. "You got sports, you can go to Milwaukee, you can go wherever you want, but it's a good place because of the Green Bay Packers. Because of the Green Bay Packers, it's never going to be a crime area because nobody's going to spend money to come here if they're not safe, so Green Bay makes it safe."

Sydney broke into professional football as a member of the Denver Gold of the USFL in 1983-84. In 1985, he joined the league's Memphis Showboats, where he was a teammate of future Packers player Reggie White. Sydney ranks 11th all-time in rushing yards for the USFL. After spending the 1986



Sydney

TOPPS photo

season in the CFL, Sydney joined the San Francisco 49ers in 1987.

He spent five seasons with the Niners, before joining his offensive coordinator in Green Bay in 1992.

Sydney is the only NFL player who has caught touchdown passes from both Joe Montana and Brett Favre.

After spending the 1986

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Harry Sydney participates in the 2023 Green Bay Packers Hall of Fame golf fundraiser in Green Bay. Kris Leonhardt photo