

Neil Leifer Scores Again With *Guts and Glory*

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Anybody familiar with sports photography or the history of the NFL will love Neil Leifer's new book, *Guts and Glory: The Golden Age of American Football* (Taschen Publishers).

The book covers the period from 1958 -- when Leifer started his prolific career on his 16th birthday by photographing the "Greatest Game Ever Played" (the overtime classic between the Giants and Colts) -- to 1978, when he stopped covering sports full-time to branch out to other photographic pursuits.

Leifer noted that the book covers a period of major transition in the history of the NFL. "It's when football went from being a sport with empty seats in all the stadiums to having long waiting lists for season tickets that take years to clear," he said.

Leifer worked for *Sports Illustrated* for most of that time period, so many of his images are in bold, brilliant color in a world where all newspapers were in black and white. So, here they are, just as they were back in the day: superstars like Jim Brown, Joe Namath, Bart Starr, Dick Butkus, Sam Huff and, yes, even O.J. Simpson; legendary coaches like Vince Lombardi, Tom Landry, Don Shula, John Madden and Paul Brown; and even average players who often made for extraordinary subjects.

"*Guts and Glory* will show you more picture in color from that particular time than you will probably see anywhere else," Leifer said.

The beauty of this book goes way beyond who is featured in the photographs. Leifer was always an innovator, taking photographs from unique vantage points to give fans a completely different perspective on the game. There are several photos, for example, taken from the gondola at the Houston Astrodome that show the Oilers and Jets doing battle in 1968, the Jets Super Bowl season.

"I wanted to photograph the game the way it looked on the chalkboard that a coach would use in a game," Leifer said.

In another photograph, Leifer puts us inside the Baltimore Colts huddle. Stars like John Mackey, Tom Matte, Jimmy Orr and Earl Morrall stare down at us as we look up at them from the viewpoint of a blade of grass.

Some photos highlight how much the game has changed. Hall of Fame quarterback Bobby Layne is shown toward the end of his career in a Steelers uniform, playing without a face mask. We also see plenty of shots from classic venues like the old Yankee Stadium, Franklin Field in Philadelphia and Memorial Stadium in Baltimore, and games that were played on a dirt infield because the stadiums were used for both baseball and football.

Leifer also captures the way our society was during that time in our history. One photograph features a member of the Cowboys cheering squad proudly carrying the flag of the Confederacy, something that we would never see in 2011. We also notice how differently fans

dressed when they went to sporting events in the days before NFL Properties made team-licensed clothing easy for fans to purchase. Another photo that looks odd to 21st-century eyes is the all-white bench of the last NFL team to integrate: the Washington Redskins. Sandwiching the bench photo are images of competing protests: one of uniformed members of the American Nazi party demanding that owner George Preston Marshall keep the team all white and another featuring African-Americans wearing suits, holding signs asking the Redskins: "We carry the rifle, why can't we carry the ball?"

Another strength of the book is Leifer's ability to capture the essence of various football personalities in portraits. One example is the sight of George Blanda, the oldest man to play in the NFL, photographed on the sideline during his final NFL game in January of 1976. The image captures every line on the 48-year-old's face. A series of close-ups speak volumes about stars like Gale Sayers, Ray Nitschke, Jim Brown, Terry Bradshaw and "Mean" Joe Greene.

Bad weather often provides classic moments in football; it also gives Leifer a chance to capture them. We see Bart Starr and the Packers taking on the Colts in the dense fog of Memorial Stadium in Baltimore, Jim Taylor slogging through the mud against the Browns in the 1965 NFL Championship Game and a dejected Joe Namath slowly getting up from the snow-covered Shea Stadium turf.

"There is not a photographer in the world that wouldn't prefer a beautiful sunny day with the sun over your shoulder, because you want to be comfortable when you work," Leifer admitted. "However, without question, the most memorable pictures, when you finish, are in bad weather. Look at the picture of Joe Namath on the sidelines in the mud. Look at the picture of Jimmy Taylor running against Cleveland in the mud. Look at the two pictures of Sam Huff, in a driving freezing, raining snowstorm. They are the best pictures you'll ever get. If you look at a game today, even if you get a driving rain, the uniforms look exactly the same in the fourth quarter as they did in the first quarter. But the mud and the dirt looked great. It was so much more interesting."

Leifer already released a book featuring his baseball photographs while upcoming volumes from Taschen will feature boxing and horse racing. He is also working on his memoirs, which will be published by *Sports Illustrated*.

After 1978, Leifer moved beyond sports to take photographs of other subjects. Today he is making highly acclaimed documentary films about subjects as diverse as former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor and three blind photographers, both of which were aired on HBO. His latest is called *The ConVenTion*, about a large gathering of ventriloquists, which has just finished shooting.

But this book captures the essence of Leifer's unparalleled eye for sports photography. It encapsulates pro football's golden era and some of its unique personalities, and is a must pickup for any fan of NFL history or sports photography.

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