

# Vince Lombardi on the Hidden Power of Mastering the Fundamentals

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It was July of 1961 and the 38 members of the Green Bay Packers football team were gathered together for the first day of training camp. The previous season had ended with a heartbreaking defeat when the Packers squandered a lead late in the 4th quarter and lost the NFL Championship to the Philadelphia Eagles.

The Green Bay players had been thinking about this brutal loss for the entire off-season and now, finally, training camp had arrived and it was time to get to work. The players were eager to advance their game to the next level and start working on the details that would help them win a championship.

Their coach, Vince Lombardi, had a different idea.

**“This is a football.”**

In his best-selling book, [When Pride Still Mattered: A Life Of Vince Lombardi](#), author David Maraniss explains what happened when Lombardi walked into training camp in the summer of 1961.

*He took nothing for granted. He began a tradition of starting from scratch, assuming that the players were blank slates who carried over no knowledge from the year before... He began with the most elemental statement of all. "Gentlemen," he said, holding a pigskin in his right hand, "this is a football."*

Lombardi was coaching a group of three dozen professional athletes who, just months prior, had come within minutes of winning the biggest prize their sport could offer. And yet, he started from the very beginning.

<sup>288</sup> Lombardi's methodical coverage of the fundamentals continued throughout training  
<sup>289</sup> camp. Each player reviewed how to block and tackle. They opened up the playbook and  
<sup>290</sup> started from page one. At some point, Max McGee, the Packers' Pro Bowl wide receiver,  
<sup>291</sup> joked, "Uh, Coach, could you slow down a little. You're going too fast for us." [1]  
Lombardi reportedly cracked a smile, but continued his obsession with the basics all the  
same. His team would become the best in the league at the tasks everyone else took for  
granted.

Six months later, the Green Bay Packers beat the New York Giants 37-0 to win the NFL Championship.





Vince Lombardi is carried off the field by his players after defeating the New York Giants 37-0 to win the 1961 NFL Championship. (Image Source: Green Bay Press-Gazette Archive)

## Fundamentals First

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The 1961 season was the beginning of Vince Lombardi's reign as one of the greatest football coaches of all-time. He would never lose in the playoffs again. In total, Lombardi won five NFL Championships in a span of seven years, including three in a row. He never coached a team with a losing record.

This pattern of focusing on the basics has been a hallmark of many successful coaches. (For example, basketball legends John Wooden and Phil Jackson were known for having a similar obsession with the fundamentals. Wooden even went so far as to teach his players how to put on their socks and tie their shoes.)

However, it is not just football and basketball where this strategy is useful. Throughout our lives, a focus on the fundamentals is what determines our results.

It is so easy to overestimate the importance of one critical event or one "big break" while simultaneously forgetting about the hidden power that small choices, daily habits, and repeated actions can have on our lives. [Without the fundamentals, the details are useless.](#) With the fundamentals, [tiny gains can add up to something very significant.](#)

## Simple Ideas, Deeply Understood

Nearly every area of life can be boiled down to some core task, some essential component, that must be mastered if you truly want to be good at it.

**Fitness:** There are plenty of details you can focus on in the gym. Mobility work is great. Analyzing your technique can be important. Optimizing your programming is a good idea if you have the time and energy. However, these training details will never substitute for the one fundamental question that all athletes must answer: Are you stepping under the bar and [getting your reps in](#)?

**Love:** Displays of affection are wonderful. It's nice to buy your loved ones flowers or to spread joy with presents. Working hard for your family is admirable (and often very necessary). It's wonderful to upgrade to a larger house or to pay for your children's school or to otherwise advance to higher standard of living. I'd like to do these things myself. But make no mistake, you can never buy your way around the most essential unit of love: showing up. To be present, this is love.

**web Design:** Building a website is like painting on a canvas that never gets full. There is always space to add a new feature. There is never a moment when something couldn't be optimized or split-tested. But these details can distract us from the only essential thing that websites do: communicate with someone. You don't need fancy design or the latest software or faster web hosting to communicate with someone. The most basic unit of any website is the written word. [You can do a lot with the right words.](#)

Mastery in nearly any endeavor is the result of deeply understanding simple ideas. For most of us, the answer to becoming better leaders, better parents, better lovers, better friends, and better people is consistently practicing the fundamentals, not brilliantly understanding the details.

“This is a football.”

### Sources

1. [When Pride Still Mattered: A Life Of Vince Lombardi By David Maraniss](#). Page 274.

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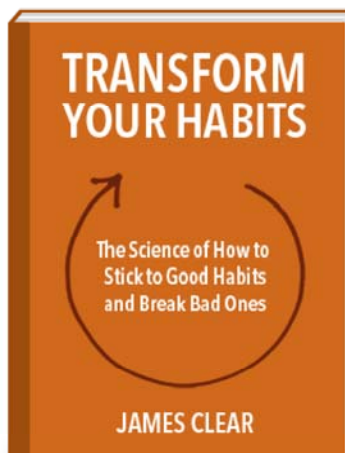
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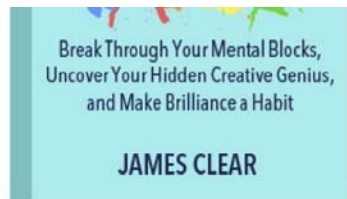
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