

# Packers

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coaster of a season already, with the team struggling early before putting together a series of wins to capture the division and earn a playoff berth for the sixth consecutive year.

Edward Fritsch of Sheboygan, a member of the Packers Fan Hall of Fame, said he and other boosters have learned to expect the sort of gritty performance the team delivered this season.

"It's great the way they've come through," Fritsch said. "They've buckled down—that's all we can hope for."

Many fans remember periods during the 1970s and '80s when Green Bay suffered through extended playoff droughts. Following the glory days of the Vince Lombardi era, the team and its supporters endured many seasons that ended in despair.

Although members of Packer Nation say they never completely turned their backs on the team in those days, some remember many Sundays when they felt disillusioned.

"I stuck with them through all of it," said Beatrice Froelich of Green Bay. "Cheer hard and cry hard."

Froelich, who once adjusted a family vacation in Disney World to avoid missing a Packers game, said the reversal of fortunes that began in the 1990s leaves her and other fans feeling upbeat and optimistic whenever the team takes the field—especially in big games.

"You can just tell—everybody is happier," she said.

In Rick Wiltzius' back-



EVAN SIEGLE/PRESS-GAZETTE MEDIA

Angel Ernst, from Lacey, Wash., hands out Get Loud Lambeau beads during a Green Bay Packers rally Saturday at the Mustard Seed Grill & Pub in Bellevue, Wash. The event was hosted by a group called Packers Everywhere and Northwest Packers Backers.

yard just outside Wausau, there is a wooden fence reserved for him to pound with his fists out of frustration whenever the Packers turn in a lackluster performance. Fortunately for the fence, Wiltzius has not been disappointed often in recent years.

The team's winning ways of late represent a validation for fans who remained loyal during the '70s and '80s, Wiltzius said.

"It's the reward for waiting that long," he said.

And the possibility a Super Bowl appearance could be just around the corner in 2015 has ramped up the excitement and anticipation for many fans to levels unseen since Green Bay defeated the Pittsburgh Steelers four years ago in Super Bowl XLV.

No matter how many winning seasons Wiltzius experiences, he said, it is always easy to get psyched up for important Packers games.

"Winning never gets old," he said.

For Jean Wilson of Menasha, the magic of the Packers is the manner in which they carry themselves on the field. They exhibit a dedication

to excellence that is admirable, she said, but they also seem to genuinely have fun playing football together.

The pure love of the game is contagious for those cheering in the stands or watching on TV, Wilson said.

"They're my team," she added. "They want to win, but they want to do it in a fun way."

Going up against the defending Super Bowl champion Seahawks today, fans realize the Packers face a daunting challenge. Win or lose, Packer Nation is prepared to stand behind the green and gold again.

Fritsch, 92, who was inducted into the Fan Hall of Fame in 2012, fondly recalls seasons when Green Bay was unbeatable and when the team brought home Super Bowl trophies. He hopes this year's team has that sort of magic and can add another trophy to the collection.

"At my age, I'd like to see it happen one more time," he said. "If it doesn't, it's still been a good year."

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