

# **In Lombardi's Way**

Genre: Drama

Logline: They needed a coach. He needed a team

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Mani Wilcowski is a former Viet Nam veteran with a Vietnamese wife by the name of Luon and three young children. Owner of a very successful construction firm in Chicago, he often uses dubious means of obtaining construction contract-- including but not limited to bribing city official under the 'persuasion act'—his own definition for helping buyers see things his way. Although dubious in his means of obtaining such contracts, his work ethic and quality of construction is unsurpassed. He knows he will build the best building money can buy and demands perfection from his employees. There is no cutting of corners on any Wilcowski construction sites.

A former high school football star, he also coaches his son's little league football team and jockeys between executive board meetings and his little league football practices.

One day when Luon is driving to one of their games, she gets lost in one of the more violent areas of Chicago with her three kids. When she pulls over in her new Cadillac to ask directions from one of the street gang members, he kills her and the three kids when his car-jacking bust goes array.

Devastated, Mani goes into seclusion and runs his business from home. Months later in February, George Williams--a long lost Black friend Mani had lived with during his last year in high school--comes to pay a visit to Mani's palatial home in Chicago. George is a Pastor in Milwaukee and used the Seminary as a means of avoiding the Vietnam draft as a "conscientious objector". Mani, on the other hand, went on to fight the war in Vietnam—a point of contention between the two that was never resolved. Escorted into the den by Gerti, Mani's old German housemaid, George finds himself unwelcome after all those absent years. He offers his condolences, which are met with mixed reviews especially when Mani brings up the friendship they had until the war. George nods in agreement, but tells Mani he's changed. He went into seminary to avoid the war, but came out believing the Bible. 'Good for you,' Mani tells him sarcastically. As George gets ready to depart, he turns back and tells Mani that Bethlehem Academy—the high school in Milwaukee they had both attended together --is in need of a football coach. The former coach, had died over a year ago and they have been without a team ever since. 'Knowing how much you love football, I thought it might be something of interest to you.' he tells Mani, then leaves.

A few weeks later, Mani is walking along the park areas near Lake Michigan when he sees some young boys playing touch football in the snow. He stops and stares. The next day he calls George's at his church in Milwaukee. The church secretary tells George there is as Mani Wilcowski on line one. George, in the middle of a meeting with is staff, takes the call and hears Mani tell him he has decided to take the coaching position. After Mani hangs up, George turns to his staff and tell them the good news.

The next day, Mani tells his construction company he is taking some time off and that they have more than enough competent people to run the office in his absence. Chester, Mani's green-behind-the-ears assistant tells Mani, that like a good soldier, if he needs any help with anything, he will be of service. Smiling, because that is what Chester has been paid to do, tells him 'Good...I'll remember that Chester.'

Like the mass exodus of British soldiers in all kind of sailing vessels off the coast of Dunkirk in WWII, George's church has brought to Chicago every imaginable vehicle to take Mani's belongings back to Milwaukee. Gerti is in a constant state of tension trying to tell them all to be careful with the furniture-- and miraculously nothing breaks as George's congregation packs every thing up and hauls it away in a caravan of old and used vehicles. Once in Milwaukee, they move it all into his home in the same miraculous fashion while a nervous Gerti looks on. Finished, they have a big pot blessing out and there is more food than they know what to do with as little old ladies and others keep bringing more pies and other dishes while kids and other adults all come to tell him thanks for taking the job.

Later than night, when everyone has left, he and Gerti enter the kitchen and find pies and cakes and hot dishes and other foods stacked high on the kitchen table and counters. It is reminiscent of the scene in the movie *To Kill a Mocking Bird* when Gregory Peck simply stands and stares at the generosity of the community. Like Gregory Peck, Mani is overwhelmed.

It has been two years since Bethlehem Academy has had a football team—and now, they are not even on the schedule for the up and coming season with the Christian School Conference that is made up of various parochial schools in the surrounding area. If they are to be included in next fall's schedule, they must first get permission from the conference board that meets annually for a week to discuss various issues.

George, who knows nothing about football, accompanies Mani to the board meeting where they are met with stiff resistance by the head of the board, Mr. Davis, who is reluctant about letting them back into the league. Davis tells Mani that the board will reconvene and let him know the next day about their decision. Meanwhile, Mani decides to "influence" the board with the same means of persuasion he had done to influence the city of Chicago's building commissioner. He phones Chester back in Chicago and tells him he has some work for him to do...

As they wait for the board's verdict, Mani pays a visit to Bethlehem Academy and his old principal Mrs. Weaver. Sitting in the cafeteria in tiny little seats, he is given a free lunch and stares at the pea green stew reminiscent of the kind he had years ago. Mrs. Weaver tells him how glad she is he came back to accept the job. When done with lunch, she gives him the key to the field house and he goes to pay a visit. Inside, he sees the same quote on the blackboard that had been there for years—authored by his former coach: *What I gave I had, what I saved, I've lost forever.*

The next day he and George come to hear the board's decision, and Mani is optimistic. When Mr. Davis points out that he and the board have been bribed and that they will no longer consider Bethlehem's position, George is furious and reads Mani the riot act on the way out. Dumbfounded, Mani has no recall.

Later that night Mani revisits the old field house again. George, who felt bad about reaming him out earlier that day, finally finds him alone in the coach's office. Mani recalls the day his father took him to see the Ice Bowl in Green Bay on December 31<sup>st</sup> 1967 when the Green Bay Packer played the Dallas Cowboys for the NFL championship game.

His father, an unsuccessful salesman, had mustered up the last of his saving to take his "boy" to the big game. 'Aint this something Mani', he kept saying that bitter cold afternoon. And when the Green Bay Packers won on the last play of the game with a quarterback sneak by Bart Starr behind Jerry Kramer and Ken Bowman, all his father could do was to hug him and hold him, repeating to Mani over and over the words: 'Remember this moment son, this is what it's like to win in life.'

Lombardi was his father's hero as he was Mani's -- demanding more from his players than they wanted to give in order to become something they had never been. But more importantly, it was Lombardi, more than any other public figure who stood in stark contrast to the prevailing winds that had swept our nation in the turbulent 60s while we fought a defensive war we were never suppose to win in Vietnam. Lombardi stood for victory in the midst of defeat, adherence to authority in the midst of rebellion, self sacrifice in the midst of hedonism, and clarity of purpose in the midst of political confusion. He represented what was good about America and what America always stood for and was one of the only lights in the midst of one of America's darkest hours.

Holding Mani in his arms that afternoon after they won the Ice Bowl was his father's way of trying to impart something of lasting value into his son's life that he himself could not, having failed in all his attempts at business. And those words would be the last thing Mani would remember about him...He died the next day. Since George and Mani were next-door neighbors, George's mother took him into their home where he lived during his senior year of high school since Mani had no other family.

The next day, Mani approaches the board members on his own. He is given permission to speak--and now humbled, he pleads with the board to allow him coach a team from Bethlehem. Mr. Davis is reluctant, but Father Obrien intervenes and allows him to speak. After explaining his own need to play football after his father died, he tells them about the what he saw written on the chalkboard: 'What I gave I had want I saved I lost forever.' Mr. Davis is not moved and tells Mani the board has already reached their decision. As Mani turns to walk away, Mrs. Johnson tells the board they need to take another vote. Father Obrien agrees--and they do and the verdict is read: Bethlehem will have a team in a 5-4 decision. Mr. Davis, however, will have is last word and tells Mani that he will need to field a team of at least 30 players by \_\_\_\_\_--and by his recollection, Bethlehem barely has that many in the upper class. Mani asks if he will allow other students to play that are going to their night school. 'I didn't know you a night school.' one of the board member states. 'We

do now,' Mani replies...Mr. Davis objects along with a few of the others, but Father O'Brien and Mrs. Johnson override him and tell Mani if he can field a team by that date they will allow them back into the league for next fall's football season. Mani smiles.

With a little over a month to find a total of thirty players, they try every avenue to find their team: some have dropped out since the former coach died and others are simply nowhere to be found

A few days before the deadline, one of the players on the team from Bethlehem is harassed by a local gang in town that is led by Tony—a former football player himself who had dropped out of high school at the urging of his drug-dealing older brother. Tony was a star athlete and his whereabouts are not hard to find. When Mani tracks him down in the stairwell to his mother's apartment, Tony pulls a gun on Mani who is sitting on the steps waiting for him to arrive. Mani asks Tony where he can find Tony—the former football star who keeps harassing his football players. It is a cat and mouse conversation and both sides know who the real Tony is. Tony, continues to play the game, however, and tells Mani he doesn't know where to find him. Then Mani tells him someday he will find Tony like he used to find Viet Cong on search and destroy missions during the war in Vietnam. Clearly shaken, Tony starts waving his gun at Mani, who then calmly hands him his business card. 'If you find Tony before I do,' he tells Tony, 'ask him if he wants another chance to play football and make something of himself...maybe something a little better than a drug dealer that could cost him some jail time....My phone number is on the card.' Mani then turns and walks away.

Two days later, Tony's brother is killed in a convenient store robbery and Tony makes the call to Mani and tells him he wants to play football. Mani tells him to organize a meeting with the rest of his gang that night. When George and Mani pull up in Mani's Cadillac, a few of the gang members think he is mafia and that he is going to let them in on some kind of deal. But their hopes are dismissed when they find out he is the real deal—a real coach who is asking them to play football and will demand more than they are willing to give in order to become something they have never been: champions. 'I coach champions,' he tells them, 'not losers who have to use guns and knives to intimidate people and rob from people because they are not strong enough in and of themselves. If you want to be a champion, then I'll see you tomorrow morning in the Bethlehem's field house at 8 am.'

Like the movie *Glory*, with Denzel Washington and Matthew Broderick, who need the Black regiment to enlist in order to have a company of soldiers to fight the Rebels, George and Mani don't know if they will have a team or not. As they approach the field house in the rain the next morning, they open the door and to their surprise they see the whole gang—soaked to the bone from the rain. 'We come to play football, coach,' Tony says.

With enough players to satisfy the school board, the football practices begin. Slowly, the gang members work out their differences with the Bethlehem school students. One player by the name of Malcolm still has a problem with knives and he frequently pulls out his

stiletto and shows it to the rest of the team. 'Malcolm!' Mani yells at him on more than one occasion until the frightened, Malcolm puts it away.

Over time, they start to meld into a team of one mind. George, who knows nothing about football, is given the task of putting together a playbook--and he does, the only problem is that his young daughters helped him name the plays after cartoon characters: daffy duck, tweetie bird, big bird, Scooby Do, and Yankee Doodle.

'Why that just Dandy!' Mani yells out sarcastically as the playbooks are passed out before the team.

'Well then you name them!' George touts back, 'and pick up the towels and fix the hot water heater and the running water to the sink and wash the towels and get footballs and fix the bus schedules and—'

'OK!' states Mani...'OK, so we got our selves the Yankee Doodle...that's just Dandy.'

Even though they are melding as a team, they are still awful and Mani has them practicing day and night under the car lights. They need quarterback and find one when a local kid happens to come upon on of their nightly practice. When Mani gives him the football, he throws it far beyond the field and hits his car. George smiles and tells Mani "I think we found our QB"

Night school is interesting at best with Mani I and George both trying to teach the same subject: English-- and arguing which form of a particular word is correct. When the UPS man- a young man in his twenties--delivers a package and uses the same word in a sentence the next day they ask him how to define it. When they hear that his answer is correct and different than theirs, they jump allover it and ask him if he has ever taught before. 'Well I used to train my pet Gerbils when I was a kid,' he tells them...the next scene shows him teaching the class using gerbil metaphors.

When the principal Mrs. Weaver gets wind that Mani has bought new uniform for the team she wonders why they are green and gold with the letter "G" on the helmet that looks almost identical to Green Bay Packer logo, especially when their colors are red and white "What does that "G" stand for?' she asks Mani. 'God's army,' he replies. Then Mrs. Weaver asks him if he would consider a donation to the school boiler fund and the used desk fund and all the other funds. Mani then gets on the phone and calls Chester to start making arrangements for all those things.

As their first game against Holy Cross approaches they are in desperate need of a Ray Nitschke—a middle line backer. 'Who is Ray Nitschke?' one of the players ask 'You don't know who Ray Nitschke is?' Mani asks them in disbelief. He then orders Chester to get the whole team posters and names of the 1967 Green Bay Packers, then has them memorize their names and positions as part of every practice.

Their first game against Holy Cross is a disaster, and they are beaten by 40 points. Mani is furious that they gave up and tells the team so. In the locker room after the game as the players are getting dressed, we hear George and Mani argue as their loud voices carry through the paper thin walls of the coaches office into the locker room where every player sits listening intently to their argument.

George tells Mani he needs to go and apologize for being so hard on the kids—they played Holy Cross--the defending state champions.

'So when a champion steps out on the field and starts winning we are suppose to give up?' Mani replies. 'These guys need don't need an apology, they need a swift kick in the butt—they gave up out there. If Lombardi taught us anything it's that the will to win isn't everything, it's the only thing! We fought a defensive war we were never supposed to win in Vietnam and it cost us 57,000 American lives. Don't talk to me about winning. You were never told to stand down as you watched your buddies die under gunfire, you were never ordered not to shoot until fired upon, you were never told not to bomb above the 58 parallel because we might piss off the Chinese. My God man, Lombardi was right. The will to win isn't the only thing--its everything. And when you take away a man's will to win, it destroys him--and that's exactly what happen in Vietnam. Our own government destroyed the will of the American soldier--and these kids out there are no different. They have the same invisible glass ceiling over their head as we did in Vietnam. They don't win in life because they are not suppose to win in life because they don't think they can win in life...because no one has showed them how to win in life. Well I got news for you George! The will to win is in them. It's in all of us--and it's our job to pull it out.'

Suddenly every thing is different from that point on in the story. The kids have heard first hand the heart and soul of their coach and know he cares more about them then most of them care about themselves. The practices are different with the leaders on the team taking up the slack and prompting others to follow suit and be the best they can be. And like a great metamorphosis, the team begins to aspire then gel into champions.

As the season progresses members of the team begins to shine include the littlest player on the team, Twan, the Asian field goal kicker who missed all three field goals against Holy Cross, but finally drills a game winning field goal in the closing seconds of one of their final games.

On the anniversary of his family's death, Gerti reminds Mani about how his team is made up of the same kind of kids that killed his family. 'Ironic,' he says. 'No, replies Gerti...'It's God's grace in action.'

Now in contention for championship game against Holy Cross, George gets a hold of the Green Bay Packer's alumni association and asks a special favor unbeknownst to Mani.

When the final game with Holy Cross is played, both teams are fighting hard for the title as the game mirrors that of the 1967 Ice Bowl. With seconds remaining on the clock,

Bethlehem Academy is on the move but is suddenly stopped on the one-yard line. Mani calls for a quarter back sneak just like Bart Starr behind Jerry Kramer and Ken Bowman that won the Ice Bowl. But on the following snap, Bethlehem fumbles the ball and Holy Cross recovers. As the Holy Cross is celebrating victory, the Bethlehem team slowly gets on board the bus for home. Teary eyed, Mani gets up in front of his players and tells them how proud he is of them, that they played like champions and loves them like a family.

Finished speaking, a police officer knocks on the bus door and asks to see Mani Wilcowski, then hauls him away to the squad car as the team looks on in disbelief.

Inside the squad car, Mani thinks all of his underhanded dealing with the Chicago city hall members has finally caught up with him as he starts to blurt out that 'those Bozos down in city hall don't know quality construction when they see it.'

When the officer sitting in the passenger seat turns around and asks him what he is talking about, Mani tells him he wants to speak with his attorney

When they get to the station, Mani is livid and demands a phone. The two officers and the rest of the station all point to the conference room. With both guns blazing Mani flings open the doors and is met by a sea of people: the players, the parents, the board, members, and members of the 1967 Green Bay Packers.

Dumbfounded, he sees Bart Starr come forward and tells him how proud they are of what he did, and how proud Lombardi would have been of them as well. Mani then yells out to his team to see if they know these guys. They all nod yes having seen their photos in all their practices

When they present Mani with a cake, no one has a knife to cut it. Suddenly Malcolm pulls a stiletto from his pocket; 'Hey...Hey I got a knife!'

'Malcolm!' Mani yells....The lights fade.