

# Kliebhan Didn't Last Long As Packers' Starting Quarterback

by Tom Emery  
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GREEN BAY, WISC. - In the long history of the Green Bay Packers, the notable quarterbacks tend to stay a while. Bart Starr and Brett Favre each spent sixteen years with the franchise. Aaron Rodgers was there for eighteen years.

Adolph Kliebhan didn't even make it until halftime.

Kliebhan was the starting quarterback in Green Bay's first-ever game in the National Football League, a 7-6 win over the Minneapolis Marines on Oct. 23, 1921. Sometime before the half, player-coach Curly Lambeau pulled Kliebhan out of the contest, never to return. Kliebhan never appeared in another NFL game.

Surprisingly little is known of Kliebhan today. Six decades after his death in 1963, he remains a tiny footnote in the long legacy of the Packers.

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Green Bay was not one of the charter members of the NFL, which was founded in 1920 as the American Professional Football Association. The Packers joined the next season, and there was plenty of anticipation as the opener approached.

The Packers were coming off two highly successful seasons, a 10-1 record in their inaugural campaign in 1919 and a 9-1-1 mark in 1920. Green Bay outscored their opponents, mainly semipro teams the Upper Midwest, by a combined 792-36.

Four pre-season games were scheduled in 1921, starting with a tilt on September 25 against the Chicago Boosters, who were trumpeted as the “Champions of Chicago.” The Boosters had tied Green Bay 3-3 in the 1920 season opener, but the rematch belonged to the Packers, 13-0 in front of 3,500 at Hagemeister Park, their home for the first four seasons of their existence.

A 49-0 rout of the Rockford Maroons on October 2 came next, followed by a 40-0 win over the Chicago Cornell-Hamburgs. Buried in the box scores of all three games was Adolph Kleibhan, who appeared as a substitute at quarterback, fullback, and right halfback, respectively.

Kliebhan, however, did not appear in the final preseason game, against the Beloit Fairies at Hagemeister on October 16. The oddly-named Fairies were in honor of the Athletic Association of a local engine manufacturer, Fairbanks-Morse, and had handed Green Bay its only losses in both 1919 and 1920.

This time, the Packers had the upper hand, battling to a 7-0 win. The undefeated preseason slate bode well for the 1921 regular season, and it seemed that Kliebhan would be a major contributor.

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The most prominent ethnic ancestry in Wisconsin is German, and with a name like Kliebhan, it was obvious where he came from. Both of his parents were German immigrants.

Born in Milwaukee on Aug. 14, 1897, Kliebhan was part of a large Catholic family. His father, Anton, died in 1920, just a year before Adolph made his Packers debut.

As a youth, Kliebhan went to school with Hollywood star Spencer Tracy, another Milwaukee native of the Catholic faith who earned nine Oscar nominations for Best Actor, winning twice. Kliebhan and Tracy apparently maintained a relationship for decades. Kliebhan, however, only had an eighth-grade education.

Records show that Kliebhan stood five feet, eleven inches tall with a medium build, dark brown hair, and brown eyes. A World War I veteran, he was living in his parents' home at 680 Delaware Avenue in Milwaukee in 1920, when his occupation was listed as "finisher" for a rubber company.

By the next year, Adolph had made his way to Green Bay, where he became a local sports figure, and not just in football. On Oct. 20, 1921 – just three days before the season opener – the *Green Bay Press-Gazette* ran an article on the city's entry in the semipro Wisconsin Basketball League, which included teams in Appleton, Fond du Lac, Oshkosh, Neenah, and others. Industrial teams made up most of the league, reflective of the blue-collar economy of the region.

Home games in Green Bay were at the Turner Hall, and hopes were high for the season. The *Press-Gazette* declared "there is material here for a corking good quintet," which possibly included Kliebhan, the "Packer linebacker," who "is a star basketballer."

The paper noted that "aside from league contests, it is probable that games with outside fives will be played every Sunday afternoon." The schedule began in December, after the bulk of the Packers' season had concluded.

Six days later, the *Press-Gazette* reported that the Green Bay team would be known as "Reimer's Wieners," a nod to the sponsor, Reimer Brothers, a company that sold meat. The Wieners replaced the Northern Paper Mills squad of a season before, and Kliebhan was listed once again with three teammates as "good basketball men." So not only did Adolph Kliebhan play for the Packers in 1921, he also suited up for the Wieners.

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Before all of that, however, came the season opener on October 23 with the Minneapolis Marines, who arrived in town with plenty of hype. Founded as a semipro team in 1905, the Marines were also in their first NFL season.

The *Press-Gazette* declared that "this year's Marines team is the greatest organization that has ever represented the Minneapolis club," which was the "claimants of the professional football championship of the northwest." The *Press-Gazette* also marveled at the size of the Marines' offensive line, as the combined weight of the guards was 415 pounds.

Indeed, it was a different time. But it all proved to be bluster, as Minneapolis went 1-3 in 1921 and struggled to a combined 4-11-2 mark in its first four seasons before folding in 1924. The franchise resurfaced in 1929, went 2-16-1 over two seasons and folded again, this time for good.

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Starr is known for his uniform number of 15, which has been retired by the Green Bay organization. Favre's number 4 is still found on jerseys of diehard fans, and has also been retired. Rodgers became synonymous with his uniform number, 12.

Kliebhan, however, laid claim to no number, and neither did the rest of the 1921 team. The franchise did not print numbers on jerseys until 1925. He would not have been expected to pass much, as the game was still dominated by various rushing formations.

The day before the game, the *Press-Gazette* listed the probable starters for both teams, and oddly, Kliebhan was not listed. His name was found among the reserves as a halfback. The starting quarterback was given as Buff Wagner, a product of Carroll College who only played in four career games for the Packers. Kliebhan, however, was the actual starter on Sunday.

The gates at Hagemeister Park opened at 1 p.m., but crowd control issues were not expected; the *Press-Gazette* wrote that "management has made extra arrangements to handle the big crowd without any confusion. An estimated 6,000 fans poured into the park, the largest crowd to see the Packers up to that time.

Despite the electric atmosphere, the Packers came out flat as Minneapolis jumped to a 6-0 lead. Apparently, Lambeau, the head coach who was also one of the top backfield contributors, saw something he did not like. Kliebhan, who had no pass attempts, was pulled from the game before halftime.

Exactly how much Kliebhan played is a matter of debate. Some Packer historians believe he was yanked by the second quarter – if not earlier. Lambeau stepped in himself to replace Kliebhan, though that did not help the Packer offense. He threw only two passes on the afternoon, and with six minutes remaining, Minneapolis still led 6-0.

Fortunately for the Packers, Minneapolis fumbled a punt, and Green Bay recovered at the 35-yard line. With Kliebhan out of the lineup, the Packers ground their way down the field before back Art Schmael – who would start at quarterback the next week – plowed into the end zone to tie the game.

The *Press-Gazette* reported that “cushions went flying in the air” from the crowd “while soaring hats were as thick as Green Bay flies on a July night. Staid gray-haired businessmen jumped around like school kids, and there was one continual din that could be heard for blocks away.” Lambeau kicked the extra point for a 7-6 lead, and “the crowd opened up again.”

That ended up being the final score. The writeup in Monday’s *Press-Gazette* was handled by George Whitney Calhoun, the editor of the paper whose byline simply read “By Cal.” Calhoun was a co-founder of the franchise, a board member, and its first publicity director.

Calhoun immodestly declared that the contest “was the greatest game of football ever seen on a Green Bay gridiron as the Packers celebrated their entrance into the Professional Football League.” His opinion of Kliebhan is not known; the sole references to Kliebhan in the Monday article were in the box score, not in the game narrative.

Kliebhan never played another game in professional football. The Packers, with Schmael at quarterback, lost 13-3 to Rock Island the following week. Lambeau started the final four games with marginal results, as Green Bay managed only a 3-2-1 record on the season.

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Lambeau, who inserted himself for Kliebhan in the 1921 opener, went on to coach the Packers through 1949, winning six NFL titles. In 1965, the Packers’ home stadium was named for him. By then, Kliebhan had lived, and died, in relative obscurity.

On May 23, 1922 – seven months to the day after his lone Packers appearance – he married Eleanor Blask. The union produced three sons, and lasted until Eleanor’s death in May 1960.

Kliebhan spent much of his life in West Allis, where he served as post commander of the local American Legion. For many years, he worked as a salesman. In 1940, his income was listed at \$4,000.

On Valentine’s Day 1942, Kliebhan registered for the draft for World War II service. By 1950, he was living on North 63rd Street in Wauwatosa and owned a tool business. Along the way, he kept his hand in sports, serving as a football and basketball official. One account describes him as “a prominent bowler.”

Several of his relatives were leaders in the Milwaukee area, including a niece, Sister Camille Kliebhan, who was the president of now-defunct Cardinal Stritch University from 1974-91. Sister Camille, like so many others in Wisconsin, was a Packer diehard.

A nephew, attorney James Blask, tried to land a World Football League franchise for Milwaukee in 1974. In a newspaper interview, Blask carefully noted that “our group has no interest in dislodging the Packers from County Stadium,” the franchise’s part-time home from 1933-94. Milwaukee, however, never got the WFL team.

Adolph Kliebhan spent his final days in a veterans hospital in Wood, Wis., where he died on March 13, 1963. He was buried in Holy Cross Cemetery in Milwaukee.

Papers across the region carried brief notices of his death, noting that he was one of the early members of the Green Bay Packers. Finally, Kliebhan was getting the respect he deserved.

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