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## NEWS

### Ivery battled through injuries, adversity

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It's 9 a.m. in Georgia, the temperature is already climbing past 65 degrees, and Eddie Lee Ivery has his hands full with the wall of sound that is the Thomson High School girls track team.

He is a legend at the Brickyard, the historic field at THS, but this is the Burke County Track Meet in Waynesboro, Ga., the year's crowning event. Even with one eye on his squad, Ivery is eager to talk Packers football.

Ivery is an assistant coach at his alma mater. For the Packers, he was a highly touted No. 1 pick in 1979, bounced back from a pair of severe knee injuries, led the club in rushing three times and was a component on some of the most prolific offenses in team history.

He looks at his NFL career with pride and regret. The record book says he put in eight years with Green Bay but, after being selected 15th overall, Ivery wrecked his left knee in the opener at Chicago after just three carries. He only completed one 16-game season and only appeared in more than 12 contests twice in his career. Four of his NFL seasons add up to a total of 19 games, many missed because of injuries, many wounds self-inflicted.

"In my rookie season, I didn't know how to take it. I thought my career was over," Ivery said. "I had torn my ACL and I felt like I had let the Packers down because they trusted me by making me their No. 1 choice. I thought of my legs as my weapons. I didn't know anything about knee surgery because I had never been injured."

Ivery said he never worked harder than preparing for his second season, which turned out to be the best of his career. He started all 16 games, rushed for a team high 831 yards, finished second on the club with 50 receptions and scored four touchdowns.

The improbable struck the following season. Ivery suffered torn left knee ligaments in Soldier Field in the first game and was sidelined again for the rest of the year. The realized potential of '80 is sandwiched between a pair of seasons where he had a combined 96 yards on 24 carries and two knee surgeries. Another year on the shelf and long stretch of rehabilitation was ahead.

"Same field, same team, same time of year, I thought there was absolutely no way this could have happened," said Ivery. "I read in the newspaper that no running back had come back from something like this. I began to listen to that. I told my wife I needed to find another career to pursue. I began to make bad decisions with drugs and alcohol. I realized I wasn't going to let anyone tell me I couldn't play, that I still had the passion and I wasn't done yet."

For the first time since his arrival in Green Bay, in '82 the opener wasn't at Chicago, and he showed his scarred left knee was sturdy by pounding out 109 yards on 17 carries against the Rams. The season was shortened to nine games because of the strike, but he led the team with 453 yards and ranked third in the NFL with 10 touchdowns. For the only time in his career, the Packers had a winning record at 5-3-1 and went to the playoffs.

With QB Lynn Dickey, wide receivers James Lofton and John Jefferson and tight end Paul Coffman, Green Bay had one of the NFL's best offenses, but Ivery couldn't keep the success going. He only played in eight games the following year while battling his addictions. Through the club, Ivery enrolled in a long-term treatment center.

"The Packers gave me the opportunity to get my life back in order," he said. "It's a great organization, and they helped me at that time. I never thought I'd play for a team like the Packers, and they were there for me. It was awesome to play with people like Dickey, James Lofton, Ezra Johnson and Mike McCoy. I'm from a small town in Georgia, and the opportunity to play there was a blessing."

After a stellar career at Georgia Tech - he was an All-American in '78 and picked up 11 first-place votes for the Heisman Trophy - Ivery was given the indication that he'd be selected by the hometown Falcons at 17th overall. He believes his 356-yard rushing performance as a senior vs. Air Force on a frosty field in November particularly impressed the Packers.

"That game was played in the snow and it was 17 degrees," Ivery said. "I think that's when the Packers put me at the top of their list. I didn't have a clue about Green Bay. Zeke Bratkowski was the running backs coach at the time, and when he called me, I was in awe to go where players like Bart Starr and Carroll Dale had played."

In '84, Ivery returned and was a solid contributor for the next two seasons. He had 562 yards on only 99 carries, added 19 catches and scored seven TDs that year, and in '85 he led the team with 636 yards, including a pair of 100-yard performances. It was the last of a stretch of three straight seasons in which the Packers finished 8-8.

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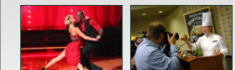
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in 00, a banged-up Ivery became primarily a receiver out of the backfield and hauled in 31 passes in 12 games, then retired from the NFL.

After leaving Green Bay, Ivery's addictions returned with a vengeance, and sent his life spiraling out of control. He achieved sobriety in spurts and had relapses. He lost money and left his personal life in shambles until ultimately making it through. He's been clean and sober since '98 and has repaired the relationships he had fractured.

"My life went downhill after my career," he said. "One thing football taught me is when you get knocked down, keep fighting. When you are dealing with drugs and alcohol, no one else can get your life back in order. I was a Christian man and I felt like I turned my back on it. I ended up finally turning it around."

Ivery returned to Georgia Tech as an assistant strength and conditioning coach in 2000, and two years later completed his degree in industrial management. Working in his college's athletic program was rewarding, but he felt the call back to his roots. He serves as the assistant coach in football and track at Thomson High School. Bus driving duties are even part of his job description.

"At Georgia Tech, I got my life turned around," said Ivery, now 54. "I wanted to coach and they gave me an opportunity. My time there was instrumental in helping me repair my life, but I felt like I needed to be at the high school level. I felt like I had to come back home."

"Here in Thomson there isn't a lot of opportunity. It's still like it was when I was a kid. I know what it's like to be born and raised here. There are a lot of kids here like I was, kids with single parents, growing up in a small community. I tell them don't give up, that they can be successful. I tell them when life knocks you down, keep getting up."

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