

Best Shots: The Greatest NFL Photography of the Century

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Pro football is a game of choreographed chaos, blurred brush strokes across a bright green canvas. It is 22 athletes springing into action in the performance of 22 distinct tasks. A center snaps the ball, a tackle blocks an end, a linebacker charges, and a guard pulls, while a quarterback pivots to hand the football to a running back, who feints and darts. And in a thunderclap, the separate parts converge. Pro football is a game of adrenaline and emotion, a battle of wills and might. It gives us heroes and goats, joy and despair, broad smiles and damp eyes. It tests players' nerves, unveils their strengths, and sometimes, exposes their shortcomings. And pro football does one other thing better than any other sport. It produces the most captivating photographic images of any game. You still can find Vince Lombardi frozen in time, eyes forward and hands clasped, as his grim-faced Green Bay Packers take the field before the 1966 NFL Championship Game. Walter Payton is caught forever in mid-flight, hurdling a sprawled defender, while scanning the defense for a chance to get more yardage. Johnny Unitas remains permanently poised in 1958, arm cocked and receiver targeted, as the New York Giants try to break through his protection. And Jack Lambert, snarling, glares out from a caged helmet, teeth missing, eyes ablaze. Photographers have prowled through pro football sidelines for nearly as long as the game has been played, each in search of a moment to be preserved for future generations. Only the names of the players and the sites of the games have changed. Photographers have captured the unadulterated joy of John Elway, finally a victor after three Super Bowl defeats...the utter exhaustion of Kellen Winslow, too tired to celebrate, after a victory in one of football's most celebrated games...and the anguished pain of Y.A. Tittle, bloody and battered in 1964, after a demoralizing loss during a wrenching 2-10-2 season. The frozen moments here have been chosen from 80 NFL seasons. In many cases, they have outlived the principals showcased in the scene. They explain again and again why America fell in love with this most American of games. Pro football is a spectacle in which majestic grace collides headlong with brutal force. It is smiles and frowns, exchanging positions over the course of 60 warlike minutes. It is teammates and opponents, stars and nonstars, performing and reacting on stage under the spotlight of sometimes-unimaginable pressure. And all of it has been captured on film, preserved, and retained for those who would like to take a long, loving look at the soul of the game.

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