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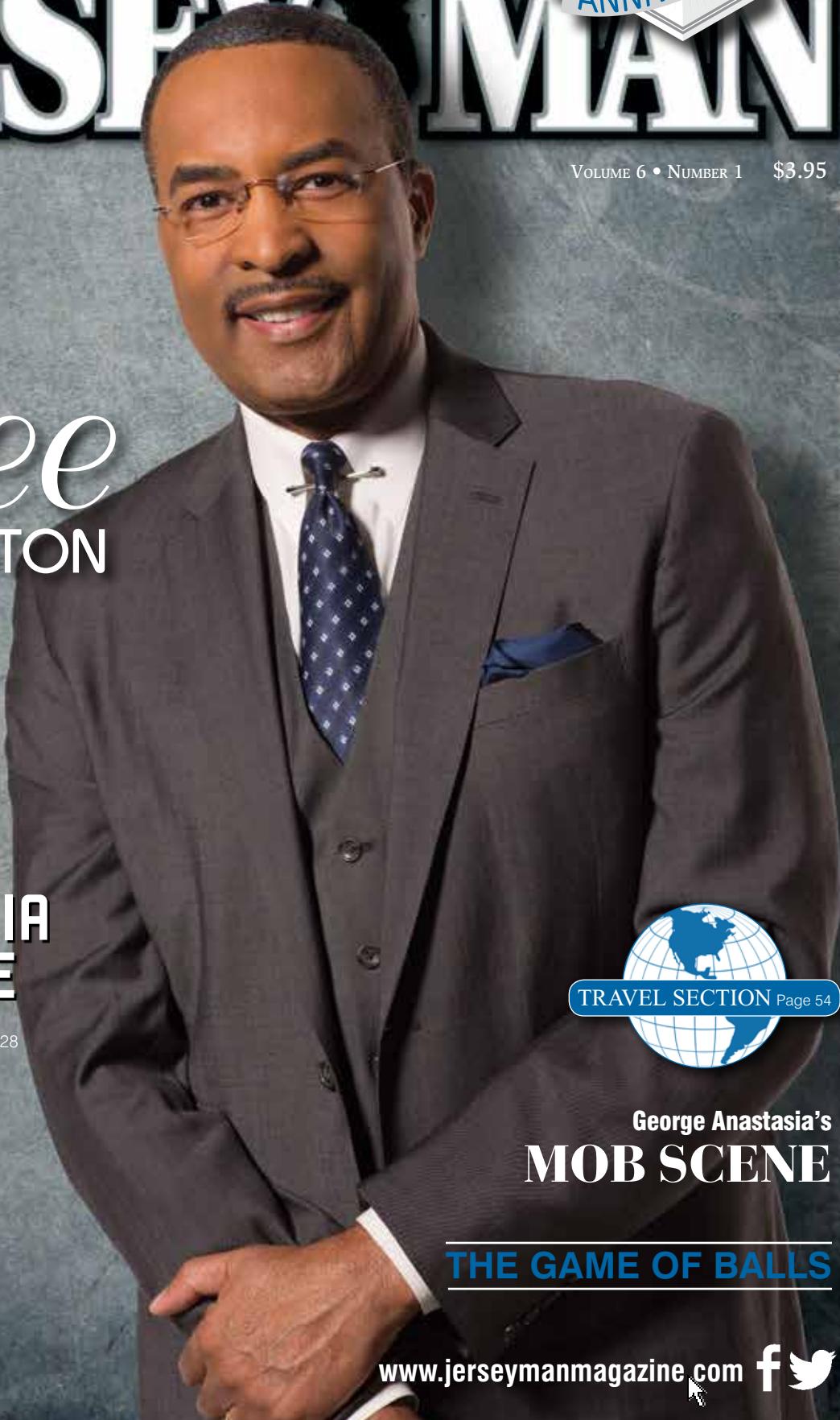


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George Anastasia's
MOB SCENE

THE GAME OF BALLS



Russ Micoli at Lambeau Field.

THE LAMBEAU LEAP



RUSS MICOLI had carried around a little dream in the back of his mind to see the Green Bay Packers play in their famed Lambeau Field since he was a kid. As the decades went on, the now-56-year-old Mullica Hill, NJ resident didn't really give that dream much thought—nor did he necessarily expect it to ever come true—but it rested comfortably in his mental “bucket list.”

Yet a serendipitous series of events in the summer of 2015—initially taking place in Italy, where Micoli and his wife, Diane, were enjoying their first-ever overseas vacation—did indeed lead Russ Micoli to Lambeau Field on October 18, 2015. There, he watched beloved Packers beat the San Diego Chargers in a thrilling game that also broke a non-playoff game attendance record for the team. The experience also led to new friendships that Micoli hopes

will last for the rest of his life.

But the story really begins in the mid-1960s, when Russ Micoli was growing up in a suburb of Buffalo, NY. Young Russ was so taken with the Vince Lombardi-era Packers that his first-grade teacher asked his mom if he had relatives in the small Wisconsin city. “No,” she said, “why?”

Well, the teacher explained: “Every time we play train, Russell makes a stop in Green Bay.”

“They say Packers’ fans are born, not made, and I’m proof of that,” Micoli jokes. “I would send away for team pictures; I had posters and pendants, and my mom would get me Packers shirts from Sears.” The Packers’ famed 1960s quarterback Bart Starr was Micoli’s boyhood hero; so much so that when his only fellow Packers fan friend defaced Micoli’s autographed photo, he had to turn over his own autographed photo of Starr to salvage the friendship.

Basically, though, Russ Micoli was a “lone wolf” Packers fan—rooting for a team that didn’t play for his hometown city (Buffalo), nor for his transplanted one (Philly) after he moved to South Jersey in the 1980s. While he can’t fully explain why his fascination with the team has lasted 50 years unabated, the affable healthcare executive knows it has a lot to do with the “Vince Lombardi mystique,” as he calls it.

“The more I learned about Lombardi and his hardscrabble, Italian-Catholic upbringing,

the more I could relate to the Packers on some deep level,” Micoli recalls. “Even as a young kid, I connected with his philosophy about hard work and integrity and teamwork—it all cemented my passion for the team.”

Fast forward to June 2015: Russ and Diane Micoli are on a nine-day escorted tour in Italy, traveling from Venice, to Florence, to Rome. Their two 20-something kids can't join them because of work and school commitments, so the Micolis are taking what is essentially a second honeymoon.

While the first group meals on the tour are an awkward mix of small-talk and story-telling, within a few days, the group of 30-some travelers from throughout the U.S. start get to know each other. The Micolis soon become friendly with three couples from the Los Angeles area. They, too, haven't been to Europe before; the husbands talk about sports and work with Russ; the wives, about their kids and jobs.

“I kept messing up his name and calling him ‘Ross;” recalls 57-year-old Bob Lopez of Laverne, CA, a retired firefighter. “But Russ was good-natured and took it in stride.”

Over the course of the trip, Lopez recalls, a casual camaraderie developed among the couples, who would sometimes meet up at night for a drink or sit by the pool and chat.

At some point, Russ mentioned being a Packers fan.



Clockwise from back left: Russ Micoli, Alex Gatica; Davey Grijalva; Bob Lopez; Tom Bachman, Tim McGrath.

immediately: “I know we all liked Russ right off the bat.”

However it happened, by the end of the European vacation, Micoli had been formally invited to join the California guys in Milwaukee, where they would then travel to Green Bay by

chartered bus for the game.

About a month after returning home, Russ got an email invite reminding him about the offer. Diane urged him to sign on: “She told me, ‘Russ, you need to do this. You’ve been crazy about the Packers your whole life. Here’s

RUSS MICOLI WAS A “LONE WOLF” PACKERS FAN—ROOTING FOR A TEAM THAT DIDN'T PLAY FOR HIS HOMETOWN CITY (BUFFALO), NOR FOR HIS TRANSPLANTED ONE (PHILLY).

The California guys, in turn, told him that for the past several years, they'd taken an annual trip to watch the San Diego Chargers play an away game. Sometimes, their wives would come along; other times, it would just be the guys if the city they were visiting didn't appeal to the ladies.

2015's destination? Green Bay, Wisconsin. As Russ recalls it, initially, Lopez and his buddies joked that if they ended up liking him by the end of the Italy trip, he'd earn an invitation to travel with them to Green Bay. Bob Lopez, however, thinks the invite was extended

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“I knew I was the outsider that they were letting into their circle, but I also felt very comfortable with these guys,” Micoli recalled. Plans were finalized, his plane ticket purchased, and on Friday, October 16, Russ Micoli boarded a plane from Philly to Milwaukee to live out his dream.

Meeting up that first night for dinner and some beers—Russ, Bob Lopez, the two other California guys who’d been on the Italy trip, and two additional Californians Russ was meeting for the first time—the male bonding immediately took hold.

“It sounds corny, but it was truly a magical weekend,” Micoli recalls—and not just because it culminated with a Packers win over San Diego (final score: 27-20): “There’s real collective life wisdom among these guys,” who got Russ thinking about “the different phases of your life, what you value, any regrets, do-overs and what to look out for.”

Lopez explains that when the California gang goes on its annual Chargers road trip, there’s an informal schedule that plays out:

dinner and drinks on the first night (a Friday), a day spent “getting the lay of the land” in whatever city they’re visiting (Saturday), the actual NFL game (Sunday) and then the trip home on Monday.

“Getting the lay of the land” basically involves bar-hopping, sight-seeing, and plenty of talking to the locals—something Russ Micoli discovered made the road trip all the more enjoyable.

“That’s what these guys do when they travel; they immerse themselves in the local color and the local people,” he recalls. “They’re enthralled by people’s stories—every waitress, every bartender, people at the next table—they really want to know the people in the place they’re visiting. And they’re right; there’s no better way to do that than to just talk to them. I kept walking into these wonderful experiences the whole weekend because of that philosophy.”

On Game Day, the six men—five dressed in Chargers garb and Russ in his Packers colors (a “cheesehead” hat and cheese scarf would be acquired before kick-off)—set off at 9 a.m. on a chartered bus for the hour’s drive to Green Bay. They arrived at the Brett Favre Steakhouse, where they had tickets for a private tailgating party.

“It was a blast,” Micoli recalls. “I got to meet three retired Packers; I got to try on one of their Super Bowl rings from 1996. I got my photo taken with them. They were great—very friendly.”

Entering the legendary Lambeau Field on a crisp and sunny autumn afternoon, Micoli took his place among the record-breaking 78,434 people in attendance.

“I knew I was going to be awestruck, like a kid walking through the gate at Disney World for the first time,” he says. “Because of the way it

Russ Micoli (R) with Bob Lopez



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Russ Micoli poses with retired Packers receiver Antonio Freeman, who let him wear his 1996 Super Bowl ring.

happened, the way I ended up there, the whole experience was intensified and amplified.”

The game itself was a thriller, with the Packers holding off the pass-happy Chargers to triumph in the fourth quarter. Micoli texted his wife, Diane, throughout the game, sending pictures of himself and his new pals, all of which show him with what he calls this “ridiculously silly grin on my face.”

Russ realized that, if he'd been a just little less open, a little less friendly, to Bob Lopez and the other guys when they met in Italy, he probably would have never seen his lifelong dream come true.

“I could have just pretty much just have said hi and left it at that, and I would have never had this tremendous life experience,” Micoli recalled. “But for whatever reason, I decided to be a little more open to meeting some new people, and it led to this incredible adventure and people who I think are now friends for life. They felt like brothers to me.”

Russ says that Bob Lopez and his fellow California travelers welcomed him into their circle without hesitation: “They were just as great as I hoped they'd be. One thing I learned during the Green Bay trip was how deeply bonded as friends they are, how emotionally open they are and how supportive they are.”

And, he learned, it's never too late to try something new. A month after returning from Green Bay, Russ Micoli and his 20-year-old son set off by car to experience something they'd talked about for a long time: a father-son road trip. The two traveled to the NFL Hall of Fame in Canton, OH, and to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland for what ended up being another “tremendous weekend adventure.”

“Bob and those guys have taught me something really important just by the way they are: you need to take advantage of opportunities when they come your way to try something new; you've got to just open yourself to the experience.” ■

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