THE MAN IN THE HAT

More than 30 years after his final season, Tom Landry's
shadow still stretches across all levels of football.

BY DAVID LEE
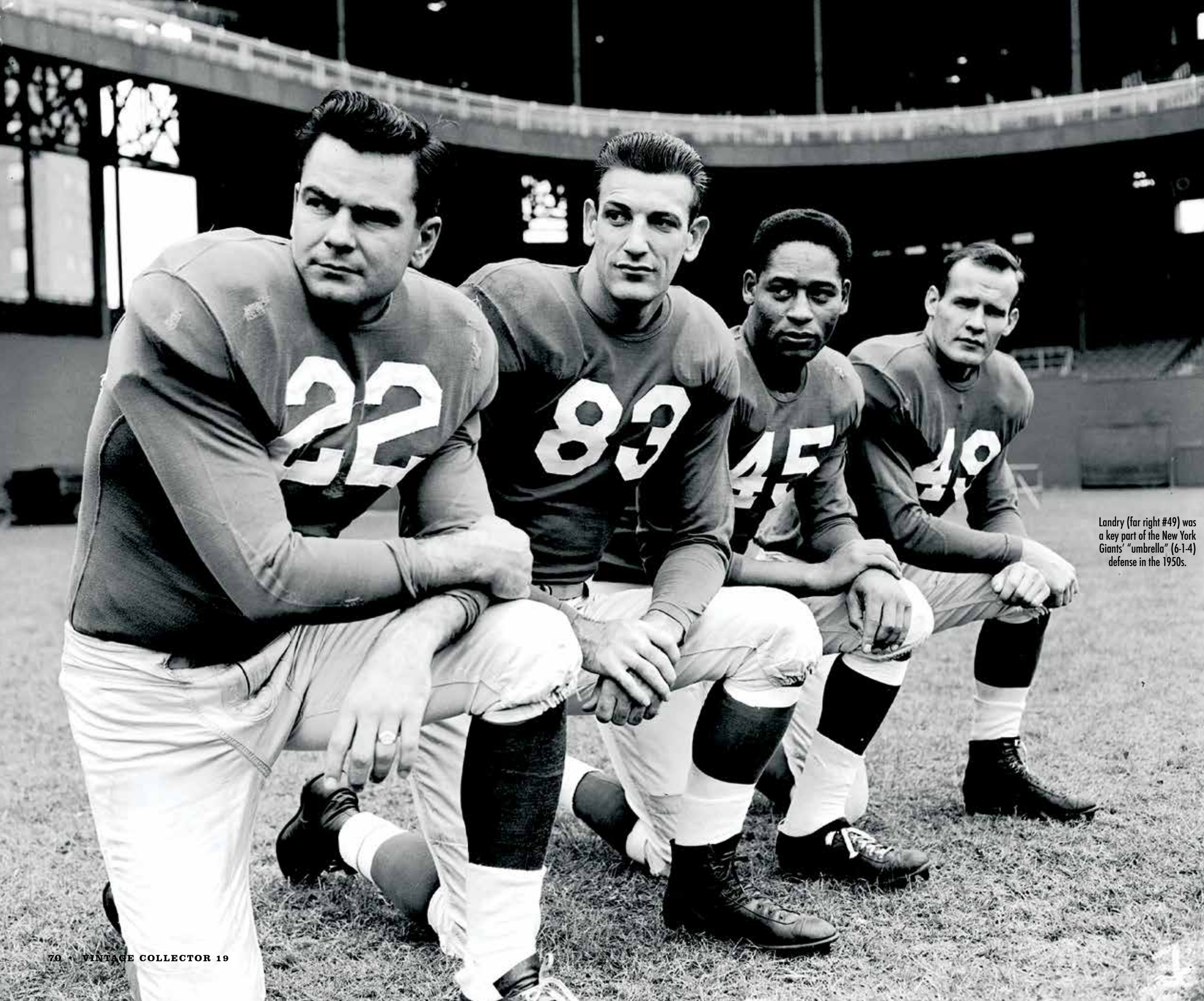
Landry (far right #49) was a key part of the New York Giants' "umbrella" (6-1-4) defense in the 1950s.

You can't travel the 30-mile stretch of Interstate 30 connecting Dallas and Fort Worth without being reminded of Tom Landry. The piece of highway is named after the legendary Dallas Cowboys head coach. His unmistakable fedora and stoic stare are etched into stone sections bracketing the highway like an homage to a once-great king.

You could say that Tom Landry Highway is the backbone of North Texas. From it you can see Cotton Bowl Stadium, the original home of the Cowboys, and the team's current home, AT&T Stadium in Arlington. It's fitting, because in many ways, Landry helped build Dallas. As the original head coach in 1960, he transformed a winless, laughable team into an American sports juggernaut. The city's national reputation suffered after the 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy, and the Cowboys were instrumental is rebuilding Dallas' brand. The franchise evolved into a perennial power during the '60s and '70s when football became America's most watched sport, exploding in popularity on TV.

"I think the whole Cowboys image came from him," Roger Staubach once said of Landry. "I think Tom will always make the Dallas Cowboys more than a football team."

Landry's unshakable, corporate executive approach to the game—crossed arms, no-nonsense expression, suit and tie—is an icon of pro football's golden age. Even his silhouette is instantly recognizable. When the Cowboys earned the reputation of "America's Team," Landry didn't like it. He thought it placed a huge target on their back. He was even against adding cheerleaders—too much glitz.

FATHER OF THE 4-3 FLEX DEFENSE

With the Giants, Landry developed the defensive concept of putting four linemen at the line of scrimmage while using three linebackers. The innovation was the use of the middle linebacker moving off the line. This was Hall of Famer Sam Huff's position, and Landry largely drew up the concept to maximize Huff's abilities. Huff was quoted in a Washington Post article saying, "Landry built the 4-3 defense around me. It revolutionized defense and opened the door for all the variations of zones and man-to-man coverage, which are used in conjunction with it today." The 4-3 formation is still one of the most popular and versatile defenses at all levels of football.

When Landry took the Dallas job, he refined this idea to counter Green Bay's powerful running ability, which was now coached by Lombardi. The two began a chess match that would last nearly a decade. Landry moved two of the four down linemen slightly off the line based on what the defense thought the offense would do. The tweak was referred to as the "Flex Defense." Defenders were responsible for covering a gap, creating a type of zone defense against the run. Like cogs in a watch, every defender had a job. Cowboys legend Charlie Waters said that Landry's defense was all about math and angles and engineering. It turned into the famed Doomsday Defense—one of the best units in NFL history.

Ed "Too Tall" Jones (72) was part of the Dallas Doomsday Defense, as constructed by Landry.

To Landry, who held degrees in business administration and mechanical engineering, a football team was a machine—one that could be mapped like a blueprint, dismantled, recalibrated and reassembled. Preparation was his way of motivating the team. "He expected perfect execution on every play," former Cowboys running back and assistant coach Dan Reeves once said. Landry even revolutionized the NFL draft process by using a computer to help rank draft prospects. At the time, it seemed like an out-of-touch method, but it's a common practice today.

His philosophies may have appeared impersonal, even cold, but they worked. The impact he made on the NFL is immeasurable. As a multitalented player for the New York Giants, Landry played halfback, defensive back, and was one of the NFL's leading punters. He became the defensive coordinator at age 30, coaching alongside offensive coordinator Vince Lombardi in the late 1950s. During his four years, the Giants went 33-14-1 and won one NFL title.

The coach, and his ever-present fedora, are part of the Cowboys' Ring of Honor.

SPECIALIZED WEAPONS

Each player had his place in the machine, so Landry loved drafting specific types of players to fit his system. His first-ever draft pick was defensive lineman Bob Lilly, who earned the nickname, "Mr. Cowboy." His defensive linemen were typically taller and leaner, such as Ed "Too Tall" Jones and Jethro Pugh. He built large offensive lines, drafted track speedster Bob Hayes, and is credited with being an early innovator of offensive shifts.

Landry's offenses often used 10 or more formations per game, which was nearly unheard of at the time. Not only did he throw multiple formations at defenses, he also loved shifting formations and putting skill players in motion before the snap. The offensive line would start in a two-point stance, pop up, then get in a three-point stance. The backfield and receivers would shift position, causing the defense to have to adjust two or three times just before the snap. The Dallas offense also popularized the shotgun formation that's now a staple in the game.

TWO DECADES OF DOMINANCE

Landry's Cowboys couldn't have had a worse start, going winless in their inaugural season and compiling five straight losing seasons. But things turned around quickly in 1966. Dallas made it all the way to back-to-back NFL Championship Games, losing to the Packers both times and failing to represent the NFL in the first two Super Bowls. Both losses

essentially came by 1 yard, with Dallas unable to score from the 1-yard line in 1966, and failing to stuff Bart Starr on a quarterback sneak in the famous Ice Bowl in 1967.

The team continued to fall short for the next few years, consistently putting together great seasons, but losing in the postseason. Landry's team earned a reputation of the lovable losers, but finally won their first title in 1971, defeating the Dolphins in Super Bowl VI. He led the Cowboys to 20 straight winning seasons spanning 1966-1985, a major professional sports team record that still stands. The Cowboys appeared in the NFL or NFC Championship Game 12 times during that span. In the 1970s, they won two titles and went to five Super Bowls.

Dallas's fight for dominance with Pittsburgh through the 1970s is one of the greatest rivalries in sports history. Dallas went to four Super Bowls in the decade, winning two, while the Steelers went 4-0 in the title game. None were closer fought or more entertaining than Super Bowl XII when the two finally faced off to determine the team of the decade in arguably the greatest Super Bowl of all time. The Cowboys fell short, but still compiled 99 wins in the '70s. Even the first four seasons in the 1980s, Landry's team went 42-15, and reached the NFC Championship Game three years in a row.

Landry's 250 regular-season career wins rank third among retired coaches behind only Don Shula and George Halas. His coaching protégées include Mike Ditka, Dan Reeves, John Mackovic, Gene Stallings and Raymond Berry.

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SIX LANDRY CARDS TO GRAB

Tom Landry has a handful of cards from his playing and coaching days. His Rookie Card appears in 1951 Bowman (#20), which was his third season in the pros. It pictures Landry dramatically throwing a pass, and tops out at around $500. It has more than 600 PSA graded examples with just 13 PSA 9s and two PSA 10s.

Landry was included in the two 1952 Bowman sets. The Bowman Small #142 reaches $400, and the Large version sells for up to $600, making it Landry's most valuable card. Like most cards from the Bowman Large set, it's harder to find in great condition due to its unconventional size being harder to store and protect. The 1955 Bowman #152 is the last card from his days with the Giants. It shows Landry with his signature stare, foreshadowing his Hall of Fame coaching career. This card identifies him as a halfback and tops out at $200.

Two cards depicting Landry as the Dallas coach appear in the 1964 and 1965 Philadelphia sets. They can be found for no more than $20 and highlight a significant offensive play from a specific game the previous season. For example, the 1964 card #56 shows a pass play from a game against the Giants on Dec. 1. The backs of the cards explain the plays and the players who ran it, which are identified by their jersey numbers on the front.
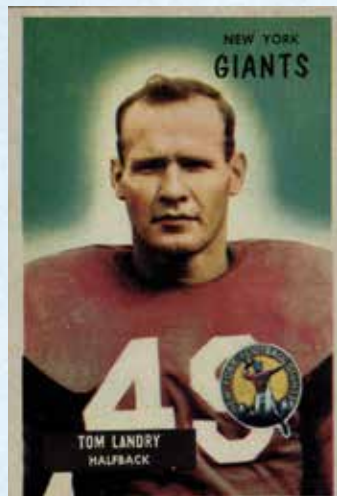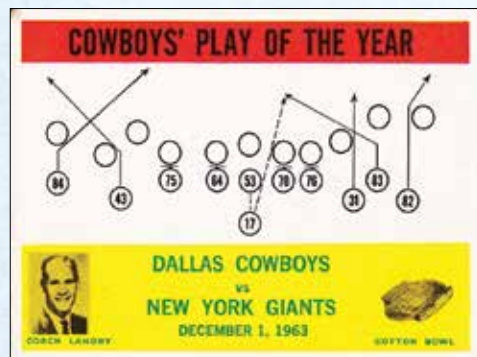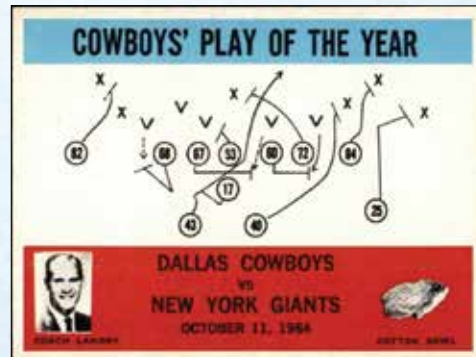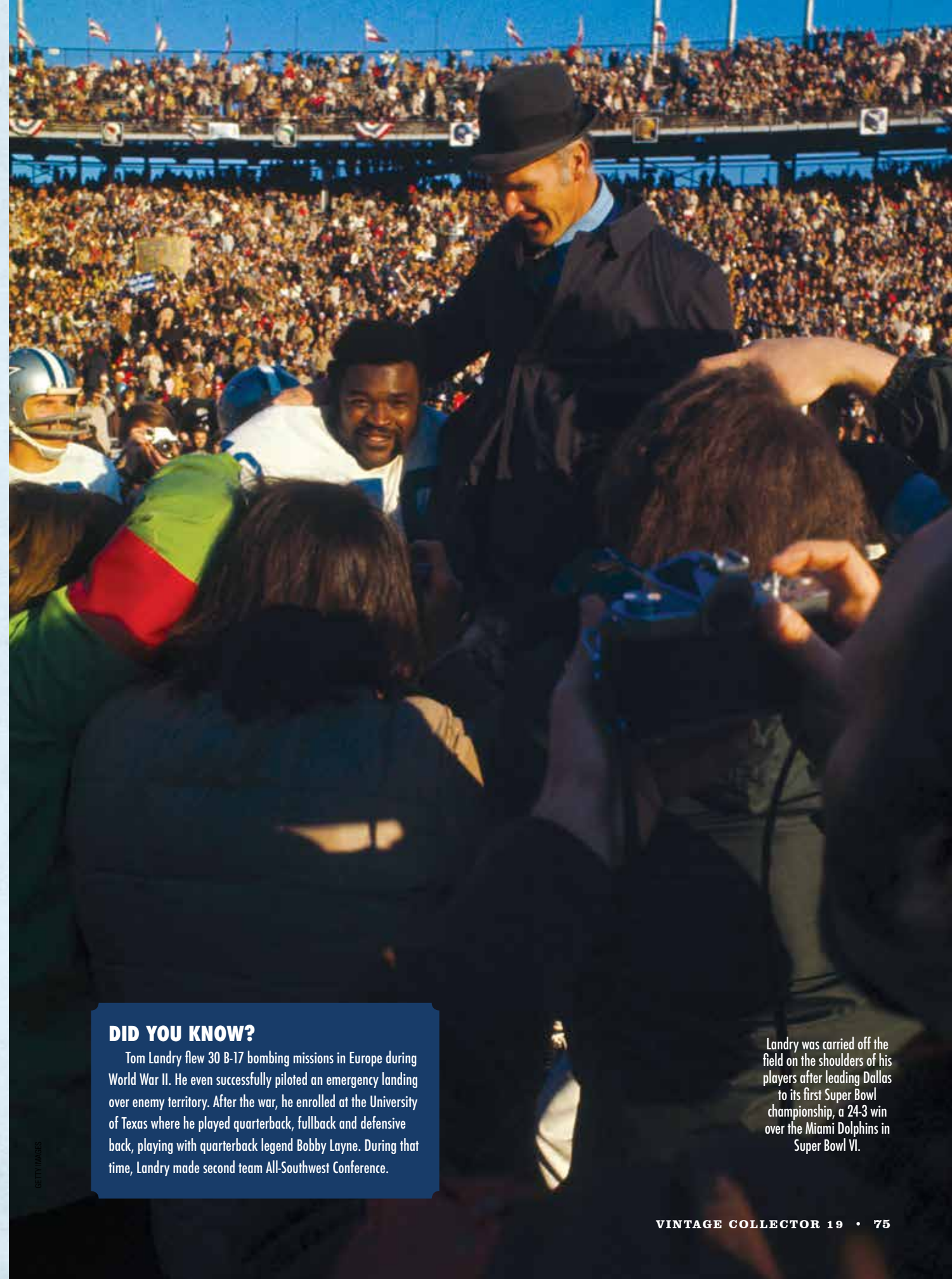
1951 Bowman RC
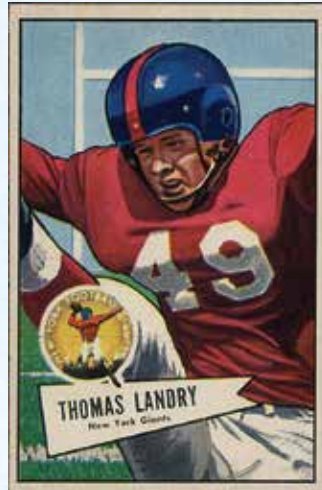
1952 Bowman Small
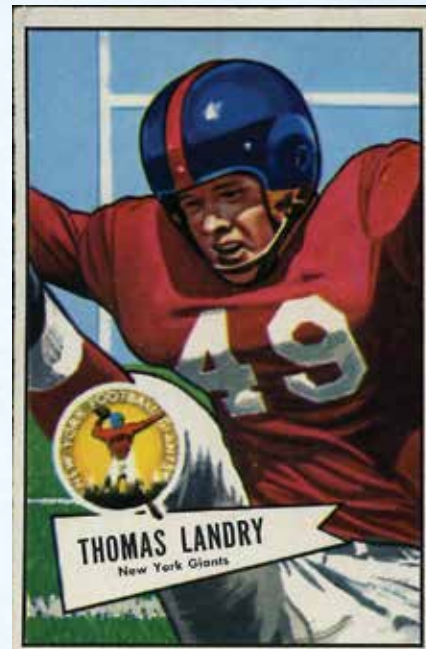
1952 Bowman Large

1955 Bowman

1964 Philadelphia Gum

1965 Philadelphia Gum

DID YOU KNOW?

Tom Landry flew 30 B-17 bombing missions in Europe during World War II. He even successfully piloted an emergency landing over enemy territory. After the war, he enrolled at the University of Texas where he played quarterback, fullback and defensive back, playing with quarterback legend Bobby Layne. During that time, Landry made second team All-Southwest Conference.

Landry was carried off the field on the shoulders of his players after leading Dallas to its first Super Bowl championship, a 24-3 win over the Miami Dolphins in Super Bowl VI.