

Packers Final Report Card

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Journal Sentinel beat writer Bob McGinn hands out final grades for the Packers:

PASSING OFFENSE (B-minus)

Ratio of runs to passes (38.9-61.1) ranked 24th in the National Football League, adding less weight to No. 8 rank in passing yards per game (229.9). Still, the last time the Packers ranked as low as No. 8 was 1994. With few effective weapons at his disposal, Brett Favre dinked and dunked to 6.57 yards per attempt, 21st among quarterbacks and his low since '93. Club had 42 passes of 20 yards or more, well down from average of 61.2 in last five seasons. Decline of Antonio Freeman forced Bill Schroeder, Donald Driver and Bubba Franks into more prominent roles they weren't equipped to handle. Favre made a conscious attempt to reduce interceptions and found out that it would work. An offensive line coached by Larry Beightol spearheaded the Packers' No. 6 ranking in percentage of sacks allowed. The club averaged 3.1 knockdowns per game, its low since '96. Return to basics concepts of coordinator Tom Rossley was undermined by 52 dropped passes, 19 more than the regular-season average during the last 10 years.

RUSHING OFFENSE (C-plus)

With Dorsey Levens carrying 77 times and Ahman Green carrying 89 times in the first eight games, the Packers were rushing for 78.3 yards per game, 3.5 yards per carry and had one touchdown. With Levens in the trainer's room and Green carrying 174 times in the final eight games, the Packers averaged 117.3 yards per game, 4.3 yards per carry and had 12 touchdowns. Only Jim Taylor twice and Levens had more than Green's total (1,175) in the club's 82-year history. Green's speed and a line that jelled as the temperature dropped contributed to 12 runs of 20 yards or more, seven more than the Packers had in their Super Bowl campaign of '96. Marco Rivera-led counter plays and fake reverses were especially effective. Green had two of the team's three lost fumbles on runs and led NFL backs in third-and-1 success (12 of 13, 92.3%). The older Favre gets, the more he will need the running game, a la John Elway. Mike Sherman and Rossley need to be as patient with the run next year as they were in the final month this year.

PASS DEFENSE (C)

Ranked 19th in passing yards allowed (215.7) and gave up 28 touchdown passes, third highest total in the league and second most in club history behind '86 unit (31). Seventeen of the scoring strikes were from the red zone, where coordination between linebackers and defensive backs wasn't good. Yielded 15 passes of 35 yards or more, three fewer than the last three years but still nine more than the Packers had in 19 games in '96. Six wide receivers posted 100-yard games, including two by Minnesota's Randy Moss. Tyrone Williams provided reliable coverage at right cornerback but three-ring circus of Mike McKenzie (eight starts), Tod McBride (six) and Antuan Edwards (two) at right cornerback wasn't pretty. In back, Darren Sharper made the plays (nine interceptions, 23 breakups) and LeRoy Butler ran the show. There wasn't enough stripping and intimidation, judging by only one lost fumble by opponents after a reception. Improved from 29th to 19th in sack percentage, thanks to Ed Donatell's heavy blitzing in the first month and never-give-up work ethic by defensive line.

RUN DEFENSE (B-plus)

Leaped from 22nd to eighth in yards allowed (101.1) and gave up a mere seven touchdowns, team's second-lowest total since 1962 and down from 16 in '99. One-gap scheme witnessed growing pains in exhibition games but once the real games started the front seven stayed disciplined and under control. The Packers encountered 1,000-yard rushers in 12 games but only two, the Jets' Curtis Martin (30-100) and Minnesota's Robert Smith (24-122), surpassed 100 yards. Smith's season low (10-26) came against Green Bay in the Week 15 rematch. The other 100-yard day was by somebody named Brad Hoover, Carolina's anonymous free agent who handed the run defenders their only humiliating moment. Hoover's 35-yard burst was the only carry for more than 23 yards by an opposing running back all season. Sharper's sure tackling aborted numerous potential breakaway runs. Biggest blot was fact that on opponents' 417 rushes, only two resulted in fumbles lost. No lineman or defensive back forced a fumble that was recovered by Green Bay, which recovered fewer fumbles (seven) than every team except San Diego and St. Louis.

SPECIAL TEAMS (B-minus)

Last year, units coached by Steve Ortmyer ranked 25th in a statistical analysis of 19 special-teams categories. Based on 10 categories this year, units coached by Frank Novak ranked 15th. Novak sold himself and his no-frills program, developed a legitimate special-teams ace in Scott McGarrahan and week after week provided reliable performance. In only one game, at Miami, when Larry Izzo ran 39 yards on a fake punt and Jeff Ogden returned a punt 81 yards, could anyone say, "We lost the game on special teams." At the same time, Ryan Longwell won three home games with field goals: Philadelphia (38 yards, 3 seconds left), San Francisco (35, 54 seconds left) and Tampa Bay (22, overtime). Allen Rossum's second-half kickoff returns of 90 and 92 yards fueled upsets over the Vikings and Colts. Green Bay lost two fumbles on special teams and recovered three by opponents. The punting by Josh Bidwell wasn't nearly good enough.

PERSONNEL MOVES (B-plus)

General manager Ron Wolf hired Mike Sherman, who looked like a solid coach in his first year. He drafted four starters (Bubba Franks, Chad Clifton, Mark Tauscher, Na'il Diggs) and three situational substitutes (Steve Warren, Kabeer Gbaja-Biamila, Charles Lee), more than making up for the colossal fifth-round blunder on Joey Jamison. And he made trades for Nate Wayne, Green and Rossum, moves that didn't seem like much at the time but saved the team later on. Dealing Aaron Brooks for a third-round pick was a wise move no matter what Brooks goes on to accomplish. "Dead money" deals for Robert Brooks, George Koonce and Raleigh McKenzie counted \$3.2 million against the cap and crippled the club's chances to make moves in-season. The defensive end shuffle of Keith McKenzie (eight sacks for Cleveland) for John Thierry (6½) turned out to be a push. For the second straight season, the Packers added more than 10 players to the 53-man roster after the first game and didn't get much from any of them.

COACHING (B)

Steady as she goes. That might have been the motto of Mike Sherman, who weathered storm after storm on the injury front and still produced a winning season in his first stint as a head coach. Sherman's mentor, Mike Holmgren, posted the same 9-7 mark in his baptismal season of 1992. Wouldn't cop the injury epidemic for an excuse, even in the dark days of 0-2, 2-4 and 5-7, and his players believed until they were performing better than any team in the NFC Central Division. Helped rid the locker room of some undesirables but wasn't able to stop Antonio Freeman from doing what he could to undermine team unity. Made a mistake by just handing Mike Wahle the job at left tackle, and his breakdowns led to several defeats. In the end, though, the line profited with Ross Verba at guard and Chad Clifton at left tackle. The hiring of Donatell and some exceptional defensive assistants bodes well for the future, and Rossley helped get Favre off that 23-interception track.

OVERALL (B-minus)

Winning seven of their last 10 games returned the Packers to the ranks of the winning teams. Unfortunately for them, this was the first time since the playoff system was expanded to include 12 teams in 1990 that not a single 9-7 team qualified. The Packers were 1-7 against the spread in the first half and 7-1 against it in the second half to finish 8-8, a notch better than the 7-9 mark against the line last year. This was a 9-7 mark with teeth, too, considering that the Packers won more games (six) against teams with winning records than any other team in the league. The Titans, Buccaneers, Jets and Lions each won five. Injuries sidelined 17 players, including nine starters, for a total of 93 games, probably the worst epidemic in Green Bay since 1979. But the team persevered and was a one victory away (by New Orleans over St. Louis on Christmas Eve) from claiming the final NFC wild-card berth.