

Grades: Packers' Report Card for 2001

From the Journal Sentinel

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

Offense

WIDE RECEIVERS (6)

Corey Bradford: After four seasons he basically is what he is: a sideline-and-up speedster with a lot of guts who will never be a refined product. Might have salvaged his career in Green Bay with an excellent final month. Offers little after the catch and had worst drop ratio of the three top wide receivers (six in 70 throws). All six of his drops came over the middle. **Grade: C-**

Donald Driver: His leaping third-and-8 catch against the 49ers when the game was slipping away might have been the club's most memorable of the season. A competent No. 4 receiver and terrific special teams player. Just not very big. **Grade: C**

Robert Ferguson: Clearly, the most talented receiver on the depth chart. Clearly, a player the Packers want to see starting next season. But, as a rookie, he was so immature and slow to grasp the offense that he was in street clothes 17 times in 18 weeks. Really had no idea what being a professional athlete was all about. Texas A&M is Mike Sherman's old employer, and in many ways this pick was his. He vouched for the kid's work ethic. Now it's time for Ferguson to prove him right. **Grade: Incomplete.**

Antonio Freeman: Surprised some people by getting with the program and staying with it after tumultuous events of 2000. Had a respectable season because of his toughness and competitive fire. A body catcher who will go anywhere for a ball. Realistically, though, his legs are gone. And with his 30th birthday approaching in May they won't ever return, meaning he won't get any better at separating from defenders. Averaged 4.7 yards after the catch, an improvement from 3.9 in '00 but well off his NFL-high mark of 7.3 in 1998, his last dominant season. Probably best to cut the cord now. **Grade: C+**

Charles Lee: Inactive for 11 games and caught merely 3 passes, seven fewer than he did as a rookie. At this time a year ago was getting the big buildup from the staff to become a starter in 2001. A teaser with talent, stature and speed. Doesn't always have the best attitude and frustrates the coaches. Worthy of one more shot. **Grade: D-**

Bill Schroeder: Made some exceptional big catches against some exceptional cornerbacks in the first two months and overtook Freeman as the main man. Then went into the tank down the stretch, dropped six passes in the last eight games and reverted to being an unsatisfactory No. 2. More of a straight-line speed player who did damage on shallow crosses but doesn't naturally string moves together and isn't very maneuverable on third down. Tends to be timid in traffic and often a disinterested blocker. At some point, the Packers need better. **Grade: C**

TIGHT ENDS (3)

Tyrone Davis: Sherman coached this player in 1997-'98 and seems to have an affinity for the guy. He's a free agent March 1 and will be 30 in June. His one redeeming quality used to be speed. But fluctuating between 270 and 280 pounds, which he did this year, Davis can't run like he once did and his run blocking in the final five games was disappointing. Plus, he has always dropped the wide-open pass. **Grade: D**

Bubba Franks: The Pro Bowl starter strictly by default. Nine of 10 touchdown passes measured six yards or less and were more a testament to coordinator Tom Rossley's schemes than any dramatic improvement by Franks. Compared to most tight ends, he has a great body and is at least a threat in the passing game. Finally made two outstanding downfield catches in the final month that illustrated he has a chance to do some of the things that elite tight ends have done over the years. A willing blocker who will stick his nose in against defensive ends, but doesn't sustain consistently and missed too often on back-side cutoffs. Marginal speed evident by average of merely 3.03 yards after the catch, down from 4.27 in '00. **Grade: C**

David Martin: A project who, all things considered, had a successful rookie season. Answered toughness question affirmatively as a blocker and on special teams. Blocking remains an enormous drawback, but in time has a chance to become adequate. As a receiver, however, he is more gifted than Davis and much faster than Franks. Hit the rookie "wall" in December but still a fascinating prospect for the future. **Grade: D**

OFFENSIVE LINE (10)

Chad Clifton: A 335-pound man with the kind of athletic ability that many tackles would kill to have. Looks the part, massive and light on his feet. Despite missing three games and all but six plays of a fourth, he allowed more sacks, knockdowns and hurries (21) than anyone else. Has played tougher than he did at Tennessee but still needs to play stronger and look to finish more often. Should only get better. **Grade: B**

Earl Dotson: Grand old warrior didn't help himself one bit by having a poor game against the Rams in the finale. Solid to the core. Back problems have abated but tendinitis in both knees won't ever just go away. Packers would like him back, and it's probably 50-50 if another team would offer starter's opportunity and cash. **Grade: C-**

Bill Ferrario: Inactive for all 18 games but played extensively in exhibition games. Has a long, long way to go if Mike Wahle leaves and the Packers intend to start him. Slightly below average athlete with the grit and resourcefulness to make a name for himself at some point. **Grade: Incomplete**

Mike Flanagan: Quick, agile, smart and determined. Waited five years to become a starter and proved to be a competent player. NFC Central scouts ranked him fifth among centers in the division. They liked his athleticism but had some reservations about his horsepower against bull rushers and as an in-line run blocker. Sometimes, offensive linemen gain strength as they age, which is what the Packers hope happens here. **Grade: B-minus**

Kevin Jordan: Rookie free-agent tackle blew out a knee ligament in April minicamp and spent the year on injured reserve. **Grade: Incomplete**

Marco Rivera: Certainly the least athletic of the five starters but most lines have two or three overachieving tough guys just like him. Suffered a broken right hand in Week 12; didn't miss a game but split time the rest of the way. Conscientious technician who cuts down on his number of poor pass sets every year. Asked to pull and throw the key trap block against the weak-side end on a stutter-counter play that was a staple of the run game all year. **Grade: B-minus**

Barry Stokes: After banging around the league for five years and never playing, he made the most of his chance when Clifton went down. More than held his own against Chicago's Phillip Daniels and Tampa Bay's Simeon Rice. Easy-going jokester who is a valuable third tackle. If Wahle departs, he would get a long look to replace him even though guard isn't his best position. **Grade: C**

Mark Tauscher: Not as tall, heavy or gifted as Clifton but after two seasons has been the better performer. Looks like the "Pillsbury Doughboy," as Ron Wolf put it on draft day. But possesses tremendous toughness, remarkable balance and almost never gets moved completely out of a play. Many scouts who might see him only six to eight times a year in person or on tape still don't appreciate his level of play. Gave up 1 ½ sacks, 5 ½ knockdowns and 9 ½ pressures, allowed the fewest "bad" runs (9) of anyone on the line and also had the unit's fewest penalties (2) for the second straight year. Demonstrated he can play guard but it's a waste to use him there. **Grade: A-minus**

Mike Wahle: Had some shaky moments (at Tampa Bay) here and there but lined up for every snap and blossomed into a real player. The scouts' choice as the No. 1 guard in the NFC Central. After allowing 19 ½ sacks, knockdowns and hurries as a 13-game starter in 1999, he bottomed out with 15 ½ in a mere six starts last year before being benched. This year, his 18-start total was 10, lowest on the line and evidence of his vast improvement in protection. Highly athletic and won't turn 25 until March. Still needs to be sharper as in-line run blocker, but toughness is not an issue. **Grade: C+**

Frank Winters: Didn't play a down from scrimmage at center and turned 38 last week. There doesn't seem much point in bringing him back. **Grade: Incomplete**

QUARTERBACKS (2)

Brett Favre: Still the pick of many football people as the one player they'd rather have over all the others. Ability to make something out of nothing and impose his will on a football game remains second to none. All-time tough guy and leader. Earns \$10 million a year but would play the game for nickels and dimes. His boyish enthusiasm has never waned. Can make every throw and turned in virtuoso performances against Baltimore and Jacksonville. Always has and probably always will put the ball up for grabs more than he should, and six-interception finale (five were primarily his fault) in biggest game of season was inexcusable. Tied for second with Daunte Culpepper behind Kerry Collins (23) in fumbles with 16. If he slipped physically, it was evident only in his career-low rushing total of 56 yards. **Grade: A-**

Doug Pederson: Capable holder. Never did more than hand off or kneel down at the end of games but had a decent training camp. At 34, the Packers must look to improve. **Grade: Incomplete**

RUNNING BACKS (5)

Herbert Goodman: Fourth-string halfback who would do well to play in NFL Europe League this spring. Has some talent but still has too much Graceland in him. **Grade: Incomplete.**

Ahman Green: Third in the NFL in total yards from scrimmage with 1,981, behind only Priest Holmes (2,169) and Marshall Faulk (2,147). Well deserving of starter status in the Pro Bowl. Exciting blend of raw power and raw speed. Tough guy who is as comfortable on turf as tundra. Had 17 runs and receptions for 20 yards or more and converted nine of 11 on third and 1. Gutsy, aware pass blocker. Will never be a natural receiver but sliced his total of dropped passes from 10 to five. Fumbled six times, same as last year, and lost five. Not as creative or as elusive as some premier ball carriers. **Grade: A-**

William Henderson: Probably will have to go out on the free-agent market and probably will return to Green Bay, just as he did in April 1999. Endearred himself to coaches by shouldering more of a leadership burden this year and unselfishly giving his all on most of the special teams. A good blocker but not a devastating one on a consistent basis. Turns 31 next month but is a workout wonder who has worn well with age. **Grade: C+**

Dorsey Levens: One of the oldest running backs in the NFL. Will be 32 in May. Averaged 2.7 carries and 10.1 yards rushing in 17 games as Ahman Green's caddy. Average of 25.9 yards on 14 regular-season kickoff returns was team's third highest since 1972. Took massive pay cut in March but might not want to do it again. Long history of injury shouldn't fool anyone into thinking that he could still be an every-down player. **Grade: C-**

Rondell Mealey: Would have made Levens expendable by now but can't stay on the field. Blew out a knee in 2000 and suffered a broken leg this year. A functional receiver with good run vision and lower body strength. **Grade: D.**

Defense

DEFENSIVE LINE (12)

Gilbert Brown: Not only saved his career but no doubt increased his expected life span by dropping 65 pounds and holding at or near 335 all season long. Made a difference at the point of attack against a good center (Jeremy Newberry) in the 49ers' playoff game and showed some of his old long pursuit earlier before a nasty case of turf toes limited him to merely 23 snaps total in Weeks 12-16. Played 323 of 1,191 snaps in all, about half of what Russell Maryland (641) played a year ago. Still, you'd rather have Brown's anchor than Maryland's craftiness. A minimum-wage earner this year who, despite his injury and weight-gain history, might attract modest free-agent money elsewhere. Then the Packers have a decision to make. **Grade: C+**

Santana Dotson: Played more snaps (719) than any lineman other than Vonnie Holliday but ranked sixth on the unit in solo tackles (18), tied for fourth in sacks (3 1/2) and third in knockdowns (8). A descending player with a hefty contract who has too much pride to take

another massive cut and isn't suited to be seventh or eighth man in a rotation. Average to below against double-teams and only on rare occasion was he athletic enough to slip a block and make a play. **Grade: C-**

Jim Flanigan: Tremendous tempo player with a warrior's mentality. Third in snaps with 678, second in knockdowns (12 1/2), tied for second in solo tackles (25) and third in sacks (4 1/2). Three of his sacks came on stunts, and he set up several other sacks on stunts as well. Lacks the bulk to play nose tackle and was buckled at the point frequently when he was asked to replace Brown. **Grade: C**

Kabeer Gbaja-Biamila: Only the Giants' Michael Strahan (22 1/2), the Ravens' Peter Boulware (15) and the Rams' Leonard Little (14 1/2) had more sacks than "KGB," who had 13 1/2. Nine came in the first four games in his sensational start, but offenses and tackles adjusted and he became merely mortal. In all, he was double-teamed (excluding 49 stunts) on 38.1% of passes, but the double-team rate of 29.7% in the first six games increased to 42.1% in the last 12. As expected, lost some weight and wore down as the season went along and got bounced around too much. Played 39.3% of snaps. Despite amazing natural strength, lacks the body type for every-down duty. Off-the-chart intensity and desire, but still needs more than a little fine-tuning. **Grade: B**

Vonnie Holliday: The team's finest defensive lineman for the third straight season and had his best year. Had six tackles for loss, more than twice as many as any other lineman, and 56 solos, 31 more than anyone else. His 31 1/2 sacks, knockdowns and hurries ranked second on unit to Gbaja-Biamila (34). Quick off the ball for his size, slips blocks well and conditioned to play 79.5% of the snaps. Maybe not a blood-and-guts performer but determined enough and starting to become more of a leader. Not far away from Pro Bowl consideration. **Grade: B+**

Cletidus Hunt: The odds-on favorite to replace Dotson as the starter. Better at end than tackle but effective at both. Played 487 snaps after four-game drug suspension but didn't have a sack. Often a step away. Offered more penetration than anyone on the line except Holliday. If you grade the flashes, you will see a big-time player. Other times, he takes himself out of plays, gets wired to blocks and runs out of gas. Has a chance to sign a big-money deal if he emerges in 2002. **Grade: C**

Billy Lyon: Third on the unit in snaps (586) in 1999 but only eighth in 2000 (217) and 2001 (292). Big-effort type who always seems to make more plays than he should, even against the better tackles. Can play three of the four positions. **Grade: C**

Jamal Reynolds: Enormous disappointment. Non-factor early in training camp, injured a knee and sat out a month, inactive for first 10 games and largely invisible as third-down rusher in last eight games. His two sacks came against two backup tackles (Jacksonville's Todd Fordham, Cleveland's Roman Oben). Had just one knockdown and one hurry in 147 snaps. Some scouts didn't know if he could be an every-down player but most figured he'd rush the passer. Next year, the Packers need him to replace John Thierry as the starter. At this point, not fast enough to win outside, not strong enough even to challenge inside and not very intense. Finished at 251 pounds, 16 under his combine weight in February. **Grade: D-**

John Thierry: Served a purpose for two years but his time has run out. Handles himself with uncompromising toughness and would run through a wall to play. But his body is wearing out and he didn't play as well as he did in 2000. The Packers are likely to suck up his \$1 million cap hit and move on. **Grade: C**

Jared Tomich: Late-season pickup who had 10 sacks for New Orleans from 1997-'00. Undersized hustler worth bringing back to camp. **Grade: Incomplete**

Rod Walker: Looked like the real deal in Week 13 against Tennessee, his former team. A thick shock absorber with more movement than the typical nose tackle. Still young enough (25) to get better. **Grade: D+**

Steve Warren: Sat out the entire season after having had thigh surgery in December 2000. Before going down as a rookie he averaged 17 snaps a game. Short, squatty and quick. A different style nose tackle than Brown or Walker and might not fit if he has lost any quickness. **Grade: Incomplete.**

LINEBACKERS (7)

Na'il Diggs: Mature, smart (no penalties in two years), athletic and versatile. Was more physical than in his rookie year but still hasn't made an interception or recovered a fumble. Had 9 ½ combined sacks, knockdowns and pressures in 2001 compared to 2 ½ in '00, and tied for the team lead in tackles for loss with 6. However, he also missed a team-high 17 tackles, a whopping 16 more than a year ago, and gave up 5 ½ plays of 20 yards or more, 4 ½ more than in '00. Suffered major elbow damage in Week 9 but played through it, which hindered his tackling. Still could develop into a much better player. **Grade: C**

Chris Gizzi: Blew out his back during pre-game warmups at Tennessee, underwent surgery and quite possibly will not return. Special teams hustler and instinctive backup on the weak side. The Packers must be committed to replacing Gizzi with a bigger, more athletic player. **Grade: D+**

Bernardo Harris: His loss of speed became glaring at times as the season dragged on. Signed a big extension in March and began to put on the 10 extra pounds that hurt his performance. Some scouts for other teams admire Harris more than the Packers, who exposed him on the expansion list hoping Houston would assume his hefty cap hit. Could he become the player he was before 2001? Possibly, but he needs to have a world-class off-season and regain the quickness and speed against run and pass that he used to have. However, he did play 10 1/2 games with a broken right thumb, which must be factored into any evaluation. **Grade: C+**

Rob Holmberg: Started three games on the weak side and played extensively in another. Will turn 31 in May but still runs remarkably well. Not much of a presence at the point of attack but worth a training-camp invitation. **Grade: D+**

Torrance Marshall: Looked like a bust in July and August. Showed no feel against run or pass and took the easy way out consistently against inside runs. Played a little better in various roles once the season started. The Packers rolled the dice in the draft on his rare combination of size

and speed. Don't be surprised if they try to create competition between him and Harris at middle linebacker if the veteran returns. **Grade: D**

Nate Wayne: Aggressive little fireball who was making numerous big plays when a cracked bone in his back set him back for a month. High-energy player with the stereotypical temperament of a linebacker. Made a conscious effort to tackle more crisply and did so, slashing his misses from 24 to 10. Had 5 1/2 sacks and 9 1/2 total pressures, both well above last year, and intercepted three passes. Tends to guess too much, leaving himself out of position in coverage more than a player of his speed should be. **Grade: B-**

K.D. Williams: Putting him on the expansion list spoke volumes about what the coaches think of him. Had seven more tackles (19) than anyone else on special teams and earns minimum wage, but the Packers are committed to finding better. All-world trash talker who always seems to be in everybody's business. **Grade: D**

DEFENSIVE BACKS (12)

Matt Bowen: Line-of-scrimmage style safety who arrived from St. Louis Nov. 30. On occasion, his good speed showed up on special teams. Ability to cover in training camp will determine his future. **Grade: D**

LeRoy Butler: Will be 34 this summer but wants to play two more years and no doubt will accept another pay cut to do it. Suffered season-ending broken shoulder blade in Week 9 but didn't need surgery. His future could well hinge on what the medical staff thinks about the shoulder. One of the smartest defensive players in the league who made all the calls and ran the show as another coach on the field. Can't run or make plays on the blitz or on the ball like he used to, and having good range at safety comes in handy when a runner or receiver needs to be chased down. But his pluses outweigh his minuses. Willing, accurate tackler who makes 10 other players feel more confident and play better. **Grade: B**

Antuan Edwards: We'd know by now if he's a player or not if he hadn't blown out a knee in Week 3 because he would have replaced Butler and started for the first time. Didn't have a stellar training camp. Struggles to cover faster wide receivers and isn't an intimidating presence at safety. The coaches speak highly of his ability to make adjustments, but he has never been tested. **Grade: Incomplete.**

Scott Frost: Signed for the final five games but wasn't active. Ex-Nebraska quarterback who was a bust at safety for the Jets. Size, speed and versatility worth bringing back to camp. **Grade: Incomplete.**

Billy Jenkins: Strictly a strong safety who plays the run much better than the pass. Had a strong game against the 49ers in his first start and didn't get overly exposed by the Rams, either. A three-year starter for St. Louis and Denver who is worth keeping around if the coaches can live with his marginal speed. **Grade: D+**

Bhawoh Jue: Saved the entire team by taking over for Butler in Week 10 and doing a halfway decent job at safety, a position that he hadn't played since high school. Blown coverages and missed tackles ultimately caught up to him and he had to be benched, but given the circumstances he did OK. His future clearly is at cornerback, where he started for one year at Penn State and showed good coverage ability early in training camp. **Grade: D+**

Tod McBride: Played better as the nickel back this year than he did last year. Allowed just two plays of 20 yards or more, down from six in '00, and didn't have a defensive penalty after having had four a year ago. A physical if not always accurate tackler who sometimes becomes too emotional and loses his composure. Ideal size for the position, but speed and change of direction is right on the borderline. **Grade: C-**

Mike McKenzie: Really came into his own after an off year. Late in the season, the consensus of scouts was that he ranked as the fifth-best cornerback in the NFC behind Philadelphia's Troy Vincent, Washington's Champ Bailey, San Francisco's Ahmed Plummer and St. Louis' Aeneas Williams. Allowed five plays of 20 yards or more (none longer than 29 yards), low among the starters in the secondary. Opponents went deep against him 15 times because some question his deep speed, but he didn't allow a single long completion. Shared the team lead in passes defended with 24. Extremely physical with receivers. Loves to play and compete. **Grade: A-**

Allen Rossum: Sat out 10 ½ games with hamstring and knee injuries, paralyzing the return game. One of the NFL's best return specialists. His value doubles because of his ability to play nickel or dime back in a pinch. His awareness and quickness outweighs his diminutive size. A restricted free agent who the Packers will work to re-sign. **Grade: C**

Darren Sharper: Didn't play quite as well overall as he did last year, but he had set the bar for himself incredibly high. Missed Butler's steadying hand and wasn't as free to make attacking plays. Makes his share of mistakes. Responsible for 8 ½ plays of 20 yards or more (six in '00) and missed 11 tackles (nine in '00). Regardless, he represents an enormous physical presence up the middle for a defense that doesn't have another one. Has the tools to cover some wide receivers from the slot, hang in the air with Randy Moss and deliver punishing tackles just when the running back appears to be in the clear. **Grade: A-**

Keith Thibodeaux: Former Viking arrived in mid-November and served as the dime back for five or six weeks. Allowed only 1 ½ plays of 20 yards or more and didn't miss a tackle. Decent cover cornerback with decent speed who should return in July. **Grade: D**

Tyrone Williams: Didn't play back to the level that he established in '00. Allowed 12 plays of 20 yards or more, seven more than last year and the most in his five seasons as a starter, and had 13 missed tackles, second high on the club. Fancies himself as a pure cover corner and, with his speed and ability to mirror, allows the coaches to all-out blitz when necessary. Doesn't adjust particularly well at the ball and isn't an overly instinctive player, either. Usually not much of a hitter or tackler, but there were times early this season when he did throw his body around. Something of an enigma. **Grade: C+**

Special Teams

Josh Bidwell: Night and day difference from the struggling punter that he was last year. In 2000, tied for 29th in gross average (38.5) and ranked 19th in net (34.6). This year, tied for 13th in gross (42.5) and tied for eighth in net (36.5, second best in club annals since the NFL began keeping the statistic in 1976). Craig Hentrich's best net for the Packers from 1994-'97 was 36.3.

Grade: B

Rob Davis: Has never really had a horrible snap during five seasons in Green Bay. On the expansion list but the Texans don't figure to want a cheaper snapper, not one making the veteran's minimum. **Grade: C**

Ryan Longwell: Signed a record-setting contract in February and then had a terrible season after four dynamite ones. Made just 20 of 31 field-goal attempts, a mark of 64.5% that ranked last in the NFC and 28th in the NFL. He finished ahead of Jacksonville's Mike Hollis, Seattle's Rian Lindell, Cincinnati's Neil Rackers and former Buffalo Bill Jake Ariens. Kickoffs were even shorter (and not as high) as they had been. Did bounce back to go 3 for 3 in the playoffs. Hard-working, tenacious and bright. Needs to come to grips with the K-balls and make necessary adjustments. **Grade: D-**

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