

Packer team grades: McGinn's analysis

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PASSING OFFENSE (B)

Passed less than ever before in the Brett Favre era, a major reason why No. 16 rank in passing yards (202.5 per game) was team's lowest since 1993. Still, it was a highly efficient passing attack, ranking fifth in average gain per pass (6.59 yards). From about Week 5 on emphasis was placed on moving Favre in the pocket, and the bootleg total of 85 doubled total from last year (42). Moving pocket and play-action passes (149, up from 128 last year) made Favre almost impossible to hit (34 knockdowns, low in West Coast era) or sack (20, 10 1/2 of which were his fault). Offensive line responsible for five sacks, an unbelievably low total. Paucity of big plays was sore point until Favre-Javon Walker deep connection ignited down stretch. Walker had six of team's 10 receptions that were caught 30 or more yards downfield, and all 10 came in the last eight games. Walker led in receiving yards with 716, which ranked just 40th in NFL. Entire receiving corps was terrible gaining yards after the catch (Walker led with average of 4.02, but Donald Driver and Robert Ferguson were under 3). Favre's 90.4 passer rating ranked sixth in NFL even though his carelessness left offense ranked 30th in percentage of interceptions. Those interceptions led to 56 points, including the crushing overtime field goal last Sunday in Philadelphia. Favre had fewer of his passes dropped (26) than ever before. Screen game was superb.

RUSHING OFFENSE (A)

After not running nearly enough (19 times) in opening-day debacle against Minnesota, Mike Sherman and Tom Rossley committed to the run like never before. They rushed on 50.8% of plays, a quantum leap from 41.3% in their first three seasons. Mike Holmgren's seven teams ran at a 42.5% clip, Lindy Infante's four teams at 38.2%. The last Green Bay team to run this much was Terdell Middleton-led club (58.3%) in 1978. Had highest rushing rank (No. 3) since No. 2 finish in 1967. Averaged 159.9 in regular season and 144 in post-season. Amassed six 200-yard games, including an average of 233.8 in Weeks 8-11 that was more than any Vince Lombardi-coached team ever had in four-week span. Every position group blocked well, especially the line. Limited number of plays, but misdirection style challenged defenses physically and mentally. The great Ahman Green rewrote the record book with 2,105 yards in 18 games (5.2 average). Green, who had 74.8% of carries by running backs, took advantage of being able to leave the field at any time. That kept him fresh but hurt the offense on occasion. Najeh Davenport (5.2) and Tony Fisher (5.0) were competent role players. Six fumbles lost on rushes, including five by Green. The most costly was Green's in overtime against Kansas City that led to defeat on the next play.

PASSING DEFENSE (C)

Ranked 23rd in yards allowed (212.5), worst since 1992, and then yielded average of 245 in playoffs to Matt Hasselbeck and Donovan McNabb. Still, team ranked 10th in more telling category of average gain per pass (5.46), as opposing quarterbacks had 18-game rating of just 70.1. Facing six straight lousy quarterbacks to close the regular season, however, did make the task much easier. Unit was very good in the red zone (fifth) and competent on third down (14th), and 20 defenses gave up more than Packers' total of 18 touchdown passes. The critical shortcoming was allowing 54 passes of 20 yards or more, 17 more than last year and the team's highest total since 1995. Half of the starting secondary (Al Harris, the strong safeties) struggled in coverage and the injury-bashed nickel and dime backs weren't effective, either. Bhawoh Jue gave up game-winning passes of 51 yards to Kansas City's Eddie Kennison and 6 yards to Philadelphia's Todd Pinkston. Harris was responsible for 13 plays of 20 yards or more, most by a cornerback in Green Bay since Craig Newsome also gave up 13 in '96. Eight receivers had 100-yard games, including two tight ends (Tony Gonzalez, Antonio Gates) and a running back (LaDainian Tomlinson). Rang up eight sacks against the skittish McNabb a week ago, but crashed from eighth to 24th in sack percentage during regular season. Coordinator Ed Donatell rushed five or more on 29.4% of passes, way up from 19.7% in '02, and six or more on 8.8% compared with 5.5% last year. But too often blitzers were stopped dead in their tracks.

RUSHING DEFENSE (C+)

Yearlong emphasis returned respectability to this area. Ranked 10th in yards allowed (106.3), much better than last year's ranking of 21st (124.9), and opponents' average per carry dripped from the criminal (4.84) to the acceptable (4.12). The Nov. 3 acquisition on waivers of nose tackle Grady Jackson was instrumental in second-half stiffening. Without Jackson, foes averaged 117.3 yards and 4.4 yards per carry in first eight games. With Jackson, they averaged 97.6 and 3.97 in final 10 games. Decrepit Gilbert Brown played just 89 snaps in last 10 games, whereas Jackson played 384 and basically shut down the strong-side interior run all by himself. Just one running back (Tampa Bay's Thomas Jones) surpassed 100 yards in last 13 games, and only two others (Chicago's Anthony Thomas, Seattle's Shaun Alexander) did before that. The weak links were safeties Marques Anderson (team-leading total of 20 missed tackles) and Antuan Edwards (10 in 10 games) and undersized Kabeer Gbaja-Biamila. Jackson helped middle linebacker Nick Barnett, but too many of the rookie's team-high total of 134 tackles were made moving laterally instead of in the hole. Aaron Kampman, Cletidus Hunt and "KGB" forced fumbles that were lost on runs in the first five games, but there were none in the last 13. Na'il Diggs led club in tackles for loss with 11 1/2 for second straight year. Barnett had just two, the same number as Hardy Nickerson in '02.

SPECIAL TEAMS (B-)

The units of first-year assistant John Bonamego ranked 14th in a ranking of 12 special-teams categories, about the same as last year under Frank Novak. The Packers blocked a punt (Marcus Wilkins, team's first since December 1997) and blocked a field goal (Hunt, team's first since November 1997) while having none of their own blocked. Finished even in turnover differential, losing two fumbles on punts that bounced off Wilkins and Harris and then recovering two kickoff returns on strips by David Martin and James Whitley. Antonio Chatman offered little pizzazz on punt returns (8.4, 20th in NFL) but he never did fumble even one time despite fielding 74 punts in 23 games, counting exhibitions. Ryan Longwell ranked fourth in field-goal percentage at 88.5%, two years after ranking 28th at 64.5%. His short (61.2-yard average) and low (3.7-second average hang time) kickoffs largely explained why Packers ranked 23rd in opponents' starting point. Bonamego tried all kinds of gimmicks trying to compensate for Longwell's kickoff deficiencies. Ferguson probably was the most valuable player on the coverage teams. Josh Bidwell was a middle-of-the-road punter. Rob Davis long-snapped hurt almost all year and didn't have a bad one. Davenport's 16 runbacks didn't meet the NFL qualifying standard of 20, but his 31.6 average was 1.6 better than anyone who did.

PERSONNEL MOVES (B-)

In hindsight, it's incredible that Green Bay and Carolina were the only two teams that put in a waiver claim for Jackson. The Packers were awarded the big guy, who might have had as much impact as any in-season acquisition did for any team in the league. The Packers haven't had much success with emergency-list signings in recent years but Michael Hawthorne (Sept. 15), Larry Smith (Oct. 9) and Whitley (Dec. 10) also made their presence felt. Barnett was the only one of nine draft choices to contribute. Decisions to trade up for Kenny Peterson, James Lee, Hunter Hillenmeyer and Chris Johnson produced nothing the first season. The decision in February to give Gbaja-Biamila the middle restricted tender emboldened the Eagles to make a run at him in March and prompted the Packers to pay too much (\$11 million signing bonus) a year too early. Thus, they had no money left to re-sign Vonnie Holliday, an egregious mistake, or to add safety Sammy Knight or defensive tackle Dan Wilkinson. Trades involving Harris and Terry Glenn generally worked out. So did second-tier strategy in unrestricted free agency. Panic move in late July to re-sign Brown (\$400,000 signing bonus) was doomed from the start. Decision to cut Reggie Swinton after only nine days in order to recoup seventh-round draft choice in '04 was a mistake given Chatman's impotency and Swinton's two touchdown returns for Detroit.

COACHING (C+)

It was easy to snicker at Mike Sherman after the St. Louis game Oct. 19 when he "guaranteed" that Green's fumbling problem would get fixed. Green did fumble again, twice as a matter of fact Nov. 10 against the Eagles, but then didn't fumble again in 246 touches. Sherman likes to think of himself as a problem-solver, and in many ways he is. Show him a weakness and he will drive himself as well as his staff to the ends of the earth to turn it into a strength. Little gets done on the football floor at 1265 Lombardi Ave. without Sherman's hands being all over it. The offense, even the framework of the play-calling, is his. Some of the defensive philosophy is his. Bonamego doesn't install much without Sherman's approval. By and large, his teams play smart. They don't lose their cool (only six personal-foul penalties in 18 games and ranked third in penalties with 88) and they aren't plagued by turnovers. Not only didn't they lose a fumble in the final five games, they didn't even fumble once, which is just about impossible to pull off. Sherman is less effective in the area of game-day decisions and motivating players. He had a better than 50-50 chance to bury the Eagles on fourth and less than a yard with 21/2 minutes left and punted. That misguided decision has and should continue to haunt him for a long time. In conjunction with Rossley, Sherman put together a beautifully conceived package of misdirection runs "married" to bootleg passes that fit their personnel perfectly. Although Donatell heeded Sherman's call for increased blitzing, the results were mediocre.

OVERALL (B-)

At midseason, it looked like the Vikings were going to embarrass the NFC North the way the Packers did in 2002: win it by a margin of six games. Trailing the Vikings by three games in the standings and behind them in the head-to-head tiebreaker as well, the Packers went to Minnesota Nov. 2 with their season on the line and won in their least favorite venue. Thus began a turn of events in which the Packers would finish 6-3, the Vikings would finish 3-6 and the miraculous fourth-and-25 catch by Arizona's Nathan Poole enabled the Packers to repeat as division champs. Actually, it shouldn't have been so close. The Packers were all but injury-free (eight starters missed a total of 27 starts, but Joe Johnson and Edwards ate up 20 and hardly were missed) and the NFC North was awful once again. However, the Packers lost five times as a favorite, including 7-point spreads in Arizona and Detroit, that eventually would cost them home-field advantage and send them in Philadelphia last Sunday. Put those injury-racked Eagles at Lambeau Field and Green Bay rolls. Even with the divisional game in Philly, the Packers still had better personnel and an extraordinary opportunity to reach the Super Bowl. But a harrowing sequence of momentous plays and decisions led to an overtime defeat that cast a pall over the entire organization. This so-called "team of destiny" will go down as one that might have gone all the way but ultimately caved to a lesser opponent. It won't be a nice way to be remembered.