

## McGinn's mid-season grades

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### **Passing Offense (A-)**

At this time in 2003, the Packers ranked 14th with a 211.5-yard average. Today, they're third with 274.5, ahead of their full-season record of 273.8 set in '83. The maestro, Brett Favre, ranks 14th in passer rating (90.2). Only negative is his nine interceptions, none of which occurred off three-step drops or bootlegs. Only two teams have thrown more interceptions than Green Bay's total of 11. Javon Walker has become a major threat with league-leading total of 783 yards. Also averages team-high 4.54 yards after the catch and has dropped merely one of 69 passes thrown his way. Club has just 11 drops in all, including none by running backs on 76 targeted passes. Donald Driver much improved from '03 except for five drops. Pass protection impeccable as usual. Lead NFL in sack percentage; of the five sacks, just one was charged to line. Guards Mike Wahle and Marco Rivera lead in fewest number of sacks, knockdowns and hurries allowed with 31/2. Option pass touchdowns fired by Ahman Green, Tony Fisher. Three receptions resulted in lost fumbles, two by Walker. On club-record pace in third-down conversion rate at 50.9%.

### **Rushing Offense (C+)**

Major drop-off in productivity hard to figure. Rank 13th in yards (119.9), down from third (154.3) after Week 8 in '03. Also rank pedestrian 13th in yards per rush (4.3), a full yard below their eight-game NFL-leading rank last season. Running on just 42.2% of snaps, down from 47.4% at midyear in '03 and below NFL average of 44.6%. Wheel-horse Ahman Green beset by Achilles' tendon problems since August and limited to 66.1% play time, down from 16-game mark of 71.9% in '03. Green averaged less than 4.0 in six of eight games until exploding for 10.9 average (15 for 163) in Week 7 against Dallas. He fumbled four times in first five games, losing three. Well-prepped foes defending signature counter plays in new, effective ways; "Power-O" to strong side no longer an automatic 5 yards. Most consistent run-blocker has been Mark Tauscher with team-low total of 31/2 "bad" runs. High among the linemen is Wahle with 71/2. One-legged Mike Flanagan had six in first three games before giving way to Grey Ruegamer, who struggled in first few starts. Najeh Davenport's tight hamstring has limited him to 54 snaps and 30 carries. The coaches are determined to run him a lot more in second half.

## **Passing Defense (D)**

Horribly deficient in big-play avoidance but remarkably solid on third down. Rank fourth in third-down defense (29.4%), vastly improved from 46% at this point in '03 and better than anything in last 10 years. Otherwise, there's little of merit. Have allowed 29 passes of 20 yards or more, almost double the midseason average of 20 from 1995-2003. Worst offenders in allowing 20-yard plays have been Darren Sharper with 5 1/2, Na'il Diggs, Al Harris and Ahmad Carroll with 4, Mark Roman with 3 1/2 and Nick Barnett and Michael Hawthorne, each with 3. Yielded 16 touchdown passes, 4 by Harris, as unit ranks 26th in red-zone effectiveness. Also 26th in sack percentage as Bob Slowik's ballyhooed blitz scheme went belly-up. The three sack leaders have 21 1/2, a total surpassed by 57 others in the NFL. Kabeer Gbaja-Biamila leads in total of sacks, knockdowns and hurries with 16 1/2, followed by Cletidus Hunt with 14 and Aaron Kampman with 8. Dropped interception total (3) is low but so is interception total (6). Three were by Sharper, including two spectacular ones. Opposing quarterbacks own passer rating of 94.8; the '96 championship team held foes to 39.7 rating at midseason. Despite hullabaloo over supposed crackdown on aggressive coverage, defense has just one pass-interference penalty.

## **Rushing Defense (C-)**

When Grady Jackson went out with knee injury on third play in Week 1, the run stoppage went with him. Thomas Jones (152), Tiki Barber (182) and Chris Brown (148) ran wild in four-game span; all their totals were higher than anything given up by Packers in a game since '98. The 469 yield to Giants and Titans was most allowed in two-game stretch since '80. Not having a real nose tackle and playing "KGB" too many downs exposed shortcomings at linebacker, especially Barnett's. Sharper and Roman didn't tackle or fit gaps well, either. Jackson returned in Week 7 but revival actually started in Week 6. After allowing 149.8 per game and 4.96 per carry in Weeks 1-5 the unit has allowed merely 60 and 3.53 in Weeks 6-8. Diggs the runaway leader in tackles for loss with six. Return of Jackson, significant reduction in Gbaja-Biamila's play time, steady improvement by Hunt and less zone-blitzing plugged leaks. Last three featured backs averaged 39.3 and 3.9. Probably best run-down player has been Kampman, whose grit and instincts have helped him garner 24 solo tackles. That's 13 more than KGB, the second-place lineman. Just three teams have recovered fewer opposing fumbles than Green Bay's total of two. One was an unforced handoff by Jake Delhomme in Week 1 and the other a strip by Hawthorne on a reverse in Week 2. There has been zero in the last six weeks.

### **Special Teams (C)**

Based on 10 categories, the Packers rank 16th in overall special-teams performance. They were 18th at midyear in '03. Goal for second half should be creating some turnovers. Special teams are minus-1 in turnover differential, losing a fumble by Antonio Chatman's aborted punt return vs. Titans. Just one of opponents' eight fumbles occurred on special teams, but David Martin's strip on Week 1 kickoff return was recovered by Carolina. Chatman is tied for 12th in punt-return average (8.1); kickoff-return game should be buoyed by healthier Davenport. Packers' average starting point after kickoffs of 30.6-yard line ranks fourth. Coverage has been OK, maybe a notch below. Ryan Longwell tied for 16th in field-goal percentage at 83.3% but has made last seven, including bull's-eyes of 53 and 50. Longwell's midseason hang time of 3.82 seconds is his best of last four seasons, and his average distance on directional kickoffs is a respectable 63.2. Opponents' average starting point of 28.9-yard line ranks 21st. Bryan Barker ranks 30th in gross average (39.9), is tied for 26th in net (33.7) and has 4.09 hang time. At this point last year Josh Bidwell was averaging 41.5, 34.3 and 4.15.

### **Personnel Moves (D)**

When Cullen Jenkins, Roman and Carroll rate as the most productive newcomers, it should be obvious that the incoming flow of talent has been substandard. That goes to Mike Sherman, the coach who doubles as general manager and finds time to do much of his own tape evaluations. Perhaps his best moves were re-signing Jackson late last December and Chad Clifton in early March. The jury's out on the early extension for Harris. Sherman must take responsibility for why his best cornerback, Mike McKenzie, wanted out so badly and then had to be traded. At least Sherman got a second-round pick and J.T. O'Sullivan, but McKenzie's despicable conduct at the end took its toll in the locker room. Stole fifth- and sixth-round picks from Oakland for Marques Anderson but essentially gave them right back to Kansas City for R-Kal Truluck. Traded up for Donnell Washington, B.J. Sander and Corey Williams. Sherman made the absurd decision to trade up into the third round for a one-year punter with modest skills but wouldn't give up a third in '06 for Drew Henson that Dallas gave Houston. Tim Couch blew up in Sherman's face, but that was a calculated gamble worth taking. Not spending more to insure the return of Bidwell and sound punting for five more years was a mistake.

### **Coaching (C+)**

Sherman fired defensive coordinator Ed Donatell Jan. 16 and promoted Slowik to replace him Jan. 28, hoping a more aggressive approach would put the team over the top. But Sherman quickly discovered Slowik didn't have the innovative scheme or the personnel to pressure effectively and had to back off. Donatell's four defenses averaged 16.3 takeaways at midseason; Slowik's unit has forced eight. When offensive coordinator Tom Rossley required emergency angioplasty shortly after Week 5, Sherman decisively assumed all of the play-calling in Week 6 and the bulk of it in Weeks 7-8. An executive in personnel for another team was impressed not so much about what Sherman was calling but when he was calling it. Under Rossley, the team averaged 376 yards and 19.8 points. Under Sherman, those marks are 425 and 35.7. Some players went out of their way to credit Sherman's Saturday night speech in Detroit for helping the team dig out of its 1-4 black hole.

### **Overall (C-)**

Against a schedule of two current second-place teams, two third-place teams and four fourth-place teams (composite record of 24-33, .421) the Packers couldn't do any better than 4-4. They were just 2-3 as a favorite, losing at Lambeau Field as an 8-point pick over Chicago, a 6 1/2-point pick over the Giants and a 3 1/2-point pick over Tennessee. The victories by the Bears and Titans were far and away those losing teams' finest efforts of the season. The 48 points by Tennessee were the most ever scored against the Packers at Lambeau Field. That indignity was followed unexpectedly by an upset victory in Detroit and then good victories over Dallas and Washington, a pair of desperate teams led by coaching legends. Now the Packers enter the second half trailing seven teams in the NFC, but only two (Philadelphia, Atlanta) have a better conference mark than their own 4-2. There's a rugged schedule ahead but at least the Packers play NFC North-leading Minnesota twice plus NFC contenders St. Louis, Philadelphia and Detroit. The Packers have been this way before and now are riding high. And nobody does December like Sherman's teams have, either.

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