

2004 Team Report Card

Grades by Bob McGinn

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Passing Offense (A)

When the receivers at last caught up to the quarterback and the protection, the result was a daring downfield attack that ranked No. 3 in the NFL with an average of 278.1 yards, breaking the club mark of 272.8 set in 1983. There were 60 completions of 20 yards or more, most since '97 and 11 more than the average of the last four seasons. Brett Favre, who ranked 10th in passer rating (92.4), flawlessly orchestrated four two-minute drives measuring 39, 41, 37 and 67 yards to set up game-winning field goals. At times, especially early, the Favre-to-Javon Walker combination was unstoppable. Just 40th in the NFL receiving yards last year with 716, Walker leaped to third with 1,382 and dropped merely two of 148 targeted passes. Other than Favre's 21 interceptions, which set up 52 points and doomed his team against Philadelphia, Jacksonville and in the playoffs against Minnesota, the other disappointment was yards after catch by wide receivers. Walker led with a modest 3.7 as Donald Driver, Robert Ferguson and Antonio Chatman all averaged in the 2's. There were 394 passes, or 62.3%, thrown to wideouts, a high for the West Coast era and marking a philosophical change by Mike Sherman. Largely because of crisp passing, the offense ranked No. 2 in third-down efficiency, its best finish since '96. Favre was smarter this year changing protections and, coupled with a redoubtable line, the Packers tied Indianapolis for fewest sacks allowed (14).

Rushing Offense (B)

No, it wasn't last year, when the Packers ranked No. 3 with a harvest of 159.9 per game and then ripped Philly for 210 in the playoffs. Defenses adjusted, Ahman Green was dinged repeatedly and the old standby counters strong and weak were clogged up. Still, the Packers found ways to average 119.3, 10th best in the NFL, and average a more than respectable 4.33 per carry. Under Sherman's more pass-oriented play-calling the Packers ran the ball on just 42.1% of downs, a vast difference from a shocking 50.8% a year ago and even under the league average of 45.1%. Through nine games, Green was averaging 96 yards per game. But he suffered rib cartilage damage the next week in Houston, had to sit out a game and settled for a 42.7 average over the final seven weeks. The only other capable runner, Najeh Davenport, broke two ribs Nov. 29 against St. Louis and was on the field for just 53 snaps after that. After breaking 17 runs of 20 yards or more in '03 Green managed just six this time, including a 90-yarder against Dallas but nothing else over 35. C Mike Flanagan was lost after three games and his replacement, Grey Ruegamer, was the unit's poorest run blocker. The best play was an old-fashioned toss from various formations and personnel groups. Green converted 7 of 8 on third-and-one but fumbled seven times (two more were primarily his fault but officially went to Favre), losing four.

Passing Defense (F)

The Packers could play for 86 more years and might not defend the pass as ineptly as they did under a defensive brain trust loosely coordinated by Bob Slowik. Their No. 25 finish against the pass (228.9) was their worst ranking since the merger in '70. Not only couldn't the platoon cover but often the members didn't even line up right. Blown assignments became commonplace, penalties went unchecked and quarterbacks had one gigantic field day. The opponents' passer rating of 101.5 in 17 games was light years worse than anything the Packers had allowed before (86.1 in '58). That's what happens when you permit a club-record 37 touchdown passes and intercept a club-low eight passes. Starting CBs Al Harris and Ahmad Carroll were whistled for 26 penalties (19 accepted) and allowed 15 touchdown passes; no pair of cornerbacks in Green Bay had allowed more than 8 1/2 since '95. The safeties, Darren Sharper and Mark Roman, combined to yield 7 1/2 touchdown passes and 19 plays of 20 yards or more, both astonishingly horrid numbers. In all, the Packers gave up 65 20-plus passes, 19 more than their four-year average under Ed Donatell. Slowik's blitzing scheme turned out to be nothing but hot air; he blitzed the exact same amount (29.4%) as Donatell did last year. The only brightener was an improved rush that generated 30 sacks in the last nine games compared to 14 in the first eight.

Rushing Defense (D+)

The enemy wasn't stupid. Yes, the Packers finished a lame 27th in yards allowed per rush (4.59), a crash from 10th in '03. But with a pass defense that awful, opponents had little reason to waste time running when big plays were plentiful up top. Thus, the run defense ranked a deceptively effective 14th (117.4) in rush yards allowed largely because foes rushed on just 42.4% of snaps. When Grady Jackson left with a dislocated kneecap on the third play of Week 1, run stoppage went with him. In the next five games, opponents averaged 148.8. That toned down to 110.8 in the final 11 games after Jackson's return but the big fella still wasn't a panacea. Detroit's Kevin Jones (33-156) and Jacksonville's Fred Taylor (22-165) put a huge December hurt on Green Bay, as did Chicago's Thomas Jones (23-152), the New York Giants' Tiki Barber (23-182) and Tennessee's Chris Brown (27-148) sans Jackson earlier. From 1990-'03, the only back who surpassed 145 against Green Bay was Barry Sanders. In Vince Lombardi's nine seasons, Minnesota's Dave Osborn was the only one to do it. The most allowed by a Donatell-coordinated defense was 142. Over a seven-game stretch at mid-season the opponents' featured back averaged just 35.4. Na'il Diggs at times brought much-needed nasty, but with his kidney injury in Week 12 the unit leaked yards again down the stretch.

Special Teams (B-)

The Packers ranked an improved No. 8 in a statistical analysis of 10 categories of special-teams performance. Beyond all else, they had a superb, clutch field-goal machine consisting of K Ryan Longwell, LS Rob Davis and holders Doug Pederson and Bryan Barker. Four times in a span of seven weeks – from 33 yards against Minnesota as time expired, from 46 in Houston as time expired, from 23 against Detroit with 2 seconds left and from 29 in Minnesota as time expired – Longwell won games. He made 85.7% in all, tying for seventh in the NFL, but missed from 28 in the playoffs. His mediocre directional kickoffs sunk the Packers to a tie for 20th in opponents' average starting point (29.8). Barker showed his advanced age (40) when winter set in but at least his inauspicious punting never led directly to a defeat. For a team that finished minus-14 in turnover differential the special teams' even ratio (one fumble recovered, one fumble lost) was good news indeed. Antonio Chatman lost his first fumble in two seasons but still hasn't returned a punt longer than 33. At the same time, the opponents' long punt return has been 40 during John Bonamego's two seasons at the helm. Green Bay had 20 penalties on teams, its highest total since '00. Other than Longwell's exploits, this group really didn't do anything to win or lose games.

Personnel Moves (F)

The decision by Sherman and late VP Mark Hatley to select B.J. Sander in the third round was sheer folly. Not only did they go against the recommendations and pleas of their scouts but also against the consensus of opinion across the NFL. Sander simply wasn't that good of a prospect. Sherman became the first GM to trade up for a punter in at least 20 years. The Packers could have used that third-rounder on a real player if they had just given unrestricted free agent Josh Bidwell another \$100,000 or so. Bidwell had another Bidwell year for Tampa Bay, tying for 11th in net. Sherman also wasted picks by trading up for DT Donnell Washington, a classic boom-or-bust choice, and dealing for DE R-Kal Truluck. The Truluck deal negated the heist of fifth- and sixth-round picks from Oakland just 48 hours earlier for S Marques Anderson. Mike McKenzie's personality conflict with Sherman eventually led to his Oct. 4 trade to New Orleans for a second-round pick. However, it came only after McKenzie's distracting presence contributed to an awful opening month. Panicked to gain leverage on McKenzie, Sherman took a midget cornerback (Ahmad Carroll) in the first round and another immature one (Joey Thomas) in the third. The only new contributor of merit was DT Cullen Jenkins. Taking a \$625,000 flyer on QB Tim Couch made sense. Spending \$700,000 on a safety (Mark Roman) unwanted by Cincinnati was a mistake.

Coaching (C-)

Sherman began the year by firing the perfectly capable Donatell and replacing him with Slowik, his secondary coach, assistant head coach and good friend. While Donatell continued doing solid work in Atlanta, the Packers' defense had its fewest takeaways (15) ever and its worst ranking (No. 25) since '83. Sherman did Slowik no favors by failing to get perhaps the unit's best player, McKenzie, into camp until their differences were irreconcilable. One way or another, it's a coach's job to get his best players on the field. That was a black mark along with the rash of penalties that left the Packers with 116, their second highest total since '92. Sherman did his best work when the team was 1-4 and being written off. His Saturday night speech in Detroit ignited a six-game winning streak. Days earlier, Sherman stepped into the play-calling breach when offensive coordinator Tom Rossley underwent angioplasty. One source close to the situation estimated that from mid-season on Sherman called about 60% of the plays, but whoever was doing it the Packers shattered their club record for total offense by 11 ½ yards per game (397.3). Although his team didn't reflect it in '04, Sherman is a regimented grinder who runs highly efficient practices and never met a problem that he didn't think could be solved. He isn't as facile on game days.