

# Rating the Packers vs. Falcons:

Catching the Falcons napping in their nest

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Green Bay - It was inevitable. The Green Bay Packers would play an exceptional game and one of their heavily favored opponents wouldn't take them seriously.

Judging from the tempo of the two teams in the first quarter, the Packers clearly were more ready to play. Then, when the Atlanta Falcons got back in it, the Packers put them away by dominating the fourth quarter.

Here is a rating of the Packers in their 33-25 victory, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

## **Receivers (4):**

Week after week, Donald Driver is putting on a how-to manual for players on losing teams. Driver makes his living running shallow crosses and slants in areas where some wideouts fear to tread. He caught 10 of the 15 balls thrown to him for 114 yards and seven first downs. That third-and-8 reception for 17 yards, when he refused to go down and gained an extra 8, should be remembered. Little Antonio Chatman isn't afraid to go inside, either. The Packers are getting more mileage out of Chatman as a starter than anyone thought possible. He knows his limitations, too. He catches the ball, gains what's there and gets down to avoid fumbling. Once again, coach Mike Sherman concocted a spread offense by mixing and matching tight ends Bubba Franks and Donald Lee with Driver and Chatman. It isn't pretty but the big guys did catch six for 65 yards. Andrae Thurman's fumble recovery was an enormous play.

## **Offensive Line (4½):**

Debuting at left guard, Scott Wells was better than Adrian Klemm had been. That could change starting against Minnesota because its front four is built more for power than speed. The small, gap-shooting Falcons were made to order for Wells, who is quicker than Klemm. He got a piece of MLB Keith Brooking on the first TD in a way that Klemm probably wouldn't have been able to do. At times, Wells showed surprising pop and leverage straight ahead. At other times, he didn't locate well on pulls and didn't finish. By unofficial count, DT Rod Coleman played 34 snaps against Will Whitticker and 18 against Wells. The fact that Coleman didn't have a single tackle showed that both guards, as well as the entire line, played well. Actually, Whitticker had more trouble with DE Patrick Kerney on stunts. This should be another confidence-booster for Whitticker. Mike Flanagan gutted it out for 11 of 13 series and had a terrific game. Chad Clifton had a strong day, particularly in the run game. Kevin Barry had a few road-grading moments but his third-and-1 missed block against SLB Michael Boley marred his day.

**Quarterbacks (4½):**

Brett Favre seemed more at peace with his supporting cast. He isn't just playing quarterback these days. He is serving as father figure, mentor, instructor, traffic cop, cheerleader and just about everything else under the definition of leader. The game's basically on his shoulders, but that's the way he likes it. Because of noise, Favre was in the shotgun only twice. But he did take 17 three-step drops and was getting the ball out with a lightning-quick release. Ed Donatell rushed five or more on 35% of drop-backs and had Favre dead to rights four times, but only one was a sack because Favre is so aware and hard to knock down. He threw a couple of bad balls but the lone interception was more the result of being unlucky than impetuous. With Michael Vick beset by his own physical and mental miscues and almost casual in his approach, Favre was by far the No. 1 quarterback on the field.

**Running Backs (3½):**

Samkon Gado's 103-yard, three-TD day in his first start was an adventure from start to finish. On the 9-yard TD, another back probably would have been tackled by Brooking but Gado was able to accelerate past him in the hole. On the shovel pass for a 1-yard TD, LBs Ike Reese and Boley had him stood up at the 2 but he wouldn't go down. Gado is both compact and powerful, and he's always going forward. He left his blockers a few times, which wasn't advisable. He also fumbled twice, which was inexcusable, but it wasn't an issue because Vonta Leach hopped on one and Thurman pounced on the other. In the passing game, he was better than expected. Gado played 58 snaps compared with 12 for ReShard Lee, who entered on passing downs. Leach's ailing shoulder was better this week and so was his blocking.

**Defensive Line (4½):**

Without injured Corey Williams, Cullen Jenkins (42 snaps), Colin Cole (32) and Kenny Peterson (25) played more than they have all year. Together with Grady Jackson (30), the DTs stayed in their rush lanes and were stout enough against a cut-blocking O-line. Jackson wasn't as dominant because of a bad knee. Cole is more than just a shock absorber. He also has a nose for the ball and the type of explosive strength to find it. Jenkins was buckled on three occasions at the point but sprung back each time with his big heart and made the tackle. He also stood at the line and batted two passes. Aaron Kampman (62) and Kabeer Gbaja-Biamila (56) kept Vick from having a field day outside. Kampman was washed down inside a few times but also had a bull-rush sack against TE Dwayne Blakley, one knockdown and two hurries. "KGB" ran a long way to strip Warrick Dunn on a screen pass but failed to post even one pressure against LT Kevin Shaffer.

**Linebackers (4½):**

Nick Barnett struggled dragging down T.J. Duckett and wasn't great on some stretch plays. In terms of big plays, however, his stock was never higher. His hustling paid off for two fumble recoveries, a sack against RG Kynan Forney, an outstanding player, a blown-up screen and a fumble forced from the bumbling Vick. Barnett, Paris Lenon and Brady Poppinga all pestered Vick as Jim Bates rushed five or more a season-high 47.5% of drop-backs and six or more a season-high 15%. Lenon started on the strong side but Na'il Diggs played just as much in his first game back. Diggs helped keep Dunn under wraps in the passing game. Poppinga had seven snaps in a 3-2 defense, spotted in and out on base downs and spied Vick on occasion. If Robert Thomas intends to keep running through, he better get there more than he did Sunday.

**Secondary (4):**

Once Bates determined a few weeks ago that Al Harris was the only capable blitzing in the group, he moved him to the slot. Harris attacked Vick with one sack, two knockdowns and one hurry. The other cornerback, Ahmad Carroll, forced the fumble by Roddy White that Barnett recovered but instead of joining the convoy of blockers taunted the Falcons' sideline in an outrageous display. There was no need for Carroll to grab White on a bomb but he did it anyway and was penalized 43 yards for interference. Later, he stayed blocked forever by White on Dunn's touchdown on a screen pass and didn't jam or compete on White's 19-yard TD over him. It took Mark Roman 26 games to participate in a turnover play but he finally managed to recover a fumble on the "KGB" strip. He also played Dunn poorly on the TD screen pass. Down after down the coverage was effective.

**Kickers (4):**

Ryan Longwell made field goals of 46, 23, 53 and 51 yards. Asked to kick off directionally, Longwell's eight boots averaged 67 yards and 3.94 seconds (hang time). That's exceptional. B.J. Sander bungled the snap on a 46-yard attempt that never got airborne. His three punts had averages of 42 yards (gross), 30.7 (net) and 3.79 seconds (hang time).

**Special Teams (4):**

The Poppinga-led cover teams made sure aging Allen Rossum didn't break loose. Atlanta's average starting point after kickoffs was merely the 22.5. New S Jeremy Thornburg is playing well, too. Jason Horton and Marviel Underwood missed Rossum on his 29-yard punt return. Nick Collins handled an onside kick.