

Green Bay Packers

2005 Team Report Card

Grades by Bob McGinn

PASSING OFFENSE

Brett Favre had the poorest season of his career with a passer rating of 70.9 that ranked him 31st in the NFL. The Packers were able to finish seventh in passing yards (235.4) mainly because they threw the ball more times (626) than every team except Arizona. This wasn't supposed to be a dink-ball offense, which judged by 10.3 yards per completion it eventually became. But the Week 1 loss of Javon Walker eliminated the only true deep threat and Favre probably missed more open intermediate and long receivers than ever before. The Packers completed 40 passes of 20 yards or more, well off their average of 56.1 in the previous 10 seasons. Donald Driver, the only playmaker, had 17 of the 20-plus passes and six of the nine for more than 35 yards. Favre had six chances to win close games on the final possession but delivered just once. The team ranked third in percentage of sacks allowed, but that was due more to Favre's near-refusal to take a sack than any great protection. In fact, the pass blocking by the guards was lousy. Favre's interception total of 29 (by subjective count, 22 ½ were his fault) was an incredible 12 more than anyone else in the league and tied Lynn Dickey's club record. Dropped passes (25) were not the problem. Tight end Donald Lee led receivers in average yards after catch at 4.46.

Grade D+

RUSHING OFFENSE

After ranking 10th in 2004 (119.3-yard average) and third in '03 (club-record 159.9), the ground game plummeted to 30th (84.5). That was the team's worst ranking since the '77 squad finished 27th in a 28-team league. Despite the departure of guards Mike Wahle and Marco Rivera, the brain trust tried to run the same scheme only to discover after two months or so that replacements Adrian Klemm, Will Whitticker, Scott Wells and Grey Ruegamer couldn't measure up. Only when Samkon Gado came out of nowhere did the run game perk up. In the first six weeks before Ahman Green and Najeh Davenport were injured, the rushing averages were 72.3 per game and 3.06 per carry. In 10 games with Gado, Tony Fisher and Noah Herron toting the leather, the averages were 91.8 and 3.59. Not only were the guards inferior but fullback William Henderson, tight end Bubba Franks, center Mike Flanagan and left tackle Chad Clifton fell off as drive blockers. Given almost no alternative, Mike Sherman rushed on only 37.9% of plays, the team's second-lowest run ratio since 1990. Average per carry of 3.4 ranked ahead of only Arizona (3.16). Sherman claimed all summer that the ground game would come around. It never did.

Grade F

PASSING DEFENSE

Yes, the Packers did finish No. 1 in fewest passing yards allowed (167.5). It was a tribute to Jim Bates' simplistic yet fairly effective man-within-a-zone coverage scheme. The result was a dramatic reduction in big plays when compared to Bob Slowik's dysfunctional defense a year earlier. This group allowed just nine gains of more than 35 yards, down from 22 in '04 and the lowest total since '96 (six). Blown assignments were minimal, although late miscues by Joey Thomas, Nick Collins and Mark Roman spelled defeat against Cleveland and Jason Horton's egregious error lost the second Minnesota game. By all other indicators, this was a middle-of-the-road group against the pass. Despite facing backup quarterbacks in 5 ½ games and almost none of the best ones, the Packers allowed a passer rating of 86.2 that tied for 25th in the league. Green Bay's foes attempted just 430 passes, second-fewest in the NFL behind New Orleans (418). Based on the Troy Aikman Efficiency Ratings that rank defenses in seven categories instead of just one, the Packers were the most overrated unit in the NFL and ranked 21st overall. The Packers dropped a possible eight interceptions, two fewer than they intercepted

Grade C-

RUSHING DEFENSE

Initially, teams found this a tough nut to crack. Bates played seven in the box in his 4-3 "over" defense, kept his tackles square and taught form tackling. The only 100-yard rusher in the first nine weeks was Tampa Bay's Carnell Williams. The dam burst in Week 10 when Minnesota's Mewelde Moore became the first of four more 100-yard rushers (Philadelphia's Brian Westbrook, Baltimore's Jamal Lewis, Chicago's Tom Jones) down the stretch. There was no need for teams to pass. This was a steady stream of yardage, never a downpour. The most rushing yards surrendered by Green Bay was 182, but conversely only one foe (Cleveland) was held to fewer than 90. In the end, the Packers ranked 23rd (125.6), their poorest ranking since '83. Several scouts for opposing teams said their game plan was to run as often as possible right at undersized end Kabeer Gbaja-Biamila. Of the five lost fumbles by opponents on rushes, just one was forced by the ineffectual corps of linebackers. Seven of the 10 runs for 20 yards or more occurred in the last seven games. Playing in a defense designed for the middle linebacker to excel, Nick Barnett had 89 more tackles than anyone else

Grade D

SPECIAL TEAMS

Based on 10 categories of special-teams performance, the Packers ranked 31st for their poorest showing in more than 15 years. At midseason, B.J. Sander was doing OK. When he went on injured reserve Dec. 22, his future was in doubt. His second-half collapse left the Packers with the worst net-punting average (33.5) in the league. Sander also messed up a handful of holds for Ryan Longwell that led to a No. 27 ranking in field-goal accuracy (74.1%). At least Longwell's kickoffs were placed well directionally because they certainly weren't long or high. Another No. 32 finish came on kickoff returns (18.9), where the losses of Terrence Murphy and Davenport forced coach John Bonamego to toss just about anyone into the breach. With punt returner Antonio Chatman extending his streak without a fumbled punt to three seasons, the turnover differential on special teams wasn't a disaster at minus-3. But even ultra-dependable long snapper Rob Davis had a bad extra-point hike in a 17-16 loss to Tampa Bay. Defensive tackle Cullen Jenkins blocked two PATs and one field goal. Defensive end Mike Montgomery tipped a punt. The one area in which the Packers did a good job was covering both punts and kickoffs

Grade D-

PERSONNEL MOVES

It was bad enough that new GM Ted Thompson didn't think enough of Wahle and Rivera to re-sign either one of them. What might have been worse was saddling Sherman with stiffies like Matt O'Dwyer and Klemm in a feeble attempt to replace them. On defense, Thompson's off-season signees were linebacker Raynoch Thompson and safeties Arturo Freeman, Earl Little and Todd Franz. All were worthless. There always are good players in free agency, but Thompson sure didn't find them. In the draft, Thompson staked his tenure on Aaron Rodgers, who didn't look very good in limited exposure. Injuries to Murphy and Brady Poppinga took the shine off a draft with some decent-looking players later on. Thompson got caught in the crossfire of Darren Sharper's cool relationship with Sherman, so it's hard to blame him for losing another veteran who made the Pro Bowl. Clearly, his best move was unearthing Gado and getting both Lee and Rod Gardner for next to nothing. The next time the Packers raise ticket prices, remember how loose management was handing Sherman his \$6.4 million golden parachute. As expected, Franks had the worst season of his career when the team didn't get him signed until 28 days into camp

Grade D-

COACHING

Injuries didn't doom Sherman. Turnovers did. The epitome of bad football is a league-high 45 giveaways, 21 takeaways (third-lowest total in club history) and a turnover-differential of minus-24, the Packers' worst ever and tied with New Orleans for last this year. Throw in 119 penalties, most in Green Bay since '87, and everything's on target for a horrendous season. The Packers practiced with discipline but didn't play with it. Sherman, coordinator Tom Rossley and quarterbacks coach Darrell Bevell tried the kid-gloves approach with Favre and ultimately lost their jobs because of it. If Sherman didn't believe in Rossley as a play-caller, he should have hired someone else because doing it himself only exposed his own limitations. When Sherman didn't have all-world personnel, his bootleg-pass, gap-style run game attack was rendered null and void. There were some bright spots, such as tight ends coach Joe Philbin fully integrating Lee into the offense and running backs coach Edgar Bennett jumping all over Gado until the fumbles stopped. The two defensive line coaches, Bob Sanders and Robert Nunn, were exceptional. Through it all, Sherman's self-confidence never wavered before Thompson pulled the plug.

Grade D

OVERALL

It isn't easy to have Brett Favre as your quarterback on every down, tremendous home-field support, amazing facilities, a ton of money and still go 4-12. The '05 Packers found a way to do it for many reasons, including sloppy play, the steady erosion of talent due primarily to Sherman's failed four-year run as GM and injuries that knocked out 11 starters for a total of 66 games. Despite being tied for the third-worst record in the NFL, the Packers still ranked 20th in scoring differential at minus-46. Eight of their losses were by margins of 2, 1, 3, 3, 7, 3, 5 and 7 points. The Packers opened the season ranked No. 16 in Sports Illustrated's power poll and favored to win the NFC North Division that was weak for a fourth straight year. They outgained 12 of their 16 foes but found themselves eliminated from playoff contention just three days after Thanksgiving. Green Bay's streak of 13 straight non-losing seasons, easily the longest in the NFL, never had a chance with ineptness running amok. The Packers haven't tasted 4-12 since 1991. The semi-outrage then can't even begin to compare to the full-fledged outrage now.

Grade D-

