

2006 Green Bay Packers: Team grades

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PASSING OFFENSE (C)

The Packers threw a league-high 630 times, 34 more than runner-up Detroit. With Brett Favre healthy for 15 ½ games and throwing all the time, it wasn't much of an accomplishment to rank eighth in yards (237.2). However, in the more telling category of pass average, the Packers ranked 17th, their worst finish since 1994. Offering veteran stability and exceptional leadership, Favre did trim his league-leading interception total from 29 to 18. Still, with one or fewer TD passes in 10 of the last 13 games, Favre sagged to 25th in passer rating with the third-worst mark of his career (72.7). His yards-per-attempt rate of 6.34 was his second-worst ever. Not only did Favre lack accuracy deep, but his receivers offered little vertical stretch. Donald Driver earned his Pro Bowl berth with a great year, but after Greg Jennings damaged his ankle in Week 6 there was little to go with him. Red-zone production was brutal with a No. 31 ranking (previous worst since '98 was No. 18). Bubba Franks didn't catch a TD pass as tight ends dropped horrendous 12.8% of targeted passes. That wasn't much better than drop rate of running backs (9.5%), who had merely three receptions for 20 yards or more after averaging seven in the last three seasons. Wide receivers dropped just 4.1%. According to STATS, Green Bay led the NFL in drops with 43. Two-minute, screen game and shotgun snapping need work. Fortified by extensive seven-man protections, the Packers ranked third in percentage of sacks allowed.

RUSHING OFFENSE (C-minus)

Mike McCarthy came in talking like a coach hell-bent on running the ball. In the end, the Packers ran on merely 39.7% of the downs, only slightly better than last year and well off McCarthy's five-year ratio of 43.2% in five seasons calling the plays in New Orleans and 49.5% in San Francisco last year. Slipped from 11th (118.9) at mid-season to 23rd (103.9) at the finish. Ahman Green was healthy enough to play 14 games and record his sixth 1,000-yard season, ranking 19th with 1,059 yards. Of the 22 running backs with 1,000 yards, he ranked just 19th in yards per carry (3.98). His first-half average of 4.68 yards was followed by second-half mark of 3.41. Green converted merely eight of 13 third-and-one's to rank 33rd but didn't fumble once between Weeks 4-15. The Packers intentionally ran left more than right, taking advantage of Chad Clifton's strength at the point and Mark Tauscher's proficiency as a cut blocker. Outgoing coordinator Jeff Jagodzinski installed new zone-blocking scheme and results were hit-and-miss. According to STATS, Green Bay tied for sixth with Atlanta in fewest negative runs (34). However, in terms of "bad" runs, which also counts carries for 1 and no yards, the Packers' mark of 29.9% was their fourth worst in the last six years. There were seven rushes for 20 yards or more, including four by newcomer Vernand Morency (91 carries) and three by Green (266). Green Bay ranked 31st in first-down efficiency with 4.04 yards, ahead of only Oakland.

PASSING DEFENSE (B-minus)

Ranked last at mid-season (244.5) and 30th after 12 games (235.3), the Packers did an about-face down the stretch to finish 17th (206.8) after allowing just 121.5 in the last four weeks. The No. 17 rank would appear to be a collapse from No. 1 (167.5) but the ranking was skewed in 2005 based on an exceedingly low number of pass attempts. More telling was the No. 14 rank in pass average both seasons. Opponents' passer rating of 75.4 ranked eighth, far better than tied for 25th in '05 and 32nd in '04. Not only that but the Packers ranked third in interceptions (23) after picking off a whopping 15 in the last six games. Team had merely 18 in last two years. Fourteen of the 23 were the result of sensational plays, including many of Charles Woodson's eight picks. Coordinator Bob Sanders did little blitzing (24.9%) because four-man rush spearheaded by Aaron Kampman, Cullen Jenkins, Kabeer Gbaja-Biamila and Corey Williams was so effective (46 sacks, fourth in NFL). From Week 3 on, Al Harris largely was responsible for limiting No. 1 receivers to an average game of two catches for 33 yards. On the other hand, linebackers allowed 20 ½ plays of 20 yards or more, most in the period from 1994-'06. Plus, safeties Marquand Manuel and Nick Collins gave up 9 ½ TD passes, most by a pair of safeties from 1994-'06. Manuel's 5 ½ were most by any safety in that span. An excessive number of blown assignments plus faulty technique in Sanders' match-coverage scheme led to 53 passes of 20 yards or more, up from 36 in '05.

RUSH DEFENSE (C-plus)

Joined the '94 squad as Green Bay's only defenses since the 16-game schedule was adopted in '78 not to allow an individual 100-yard rusher in the first 10 games. That streak came to a screeching halt in Week 10 when Nick Barnett suffered a broken hand, sat out Week 11 as Seattle's Shaun Alexander became just the fifth back ever to surpass 200 yards against Green Bay (40-201), and then played in a cast for the last month. After allowing three more 100-yard rushers later (Cedric Houston, Frank Gore and Cedric Benson), the Packers finished 13th in yards (114.1) and 17th in yards per carry (4.14). New starters A.J. Hawk and Brady Poppinga were major upgrades against the run, Ryan Pickett probably was the equal of Grady Jackson and never-say-die Aaron Kampman set the club record for tackles by a D-lineman with 113. Nevertheless, the promotion of Jenkins ahead of "KGB" at right end two plays into the 13th game was the key. Before the move, the Packers allowed 123.9 yards and 4.22 yards per carry. After the move, they allowed 84.5 and 3.80. The unit missed 100 tackles (Marquand Manuel led with 15), the fewest since the statistic first was recorded in '99. Improved tackling helped keep the number of runs for 20 yards or more yards to seven, fewest since '99. Sanders played the same 4-3 "over" scheme as predecessor Jim Bates but had 50% fewer tackles for loss (32 compared to 48). According to STATS, Green Bay ranked only 24th in opponents' negative runs.

SPECIAL TEAMS (D)

McCarthy's decision not to retain John Bonamego and hire Mike Stock in this area paid no obvious dividends. In a statistical breakdown of 10 special-teams categories, the Packers ranked 31st in 2005 and 31st in 2006. The Saints were 14th under Bonamego. Special-teams inadequacies seldom were an issue because they weren't catastrophic. The unit didn't force any turnovers but other than Noah Herron's fumbled kickoff return in Week 1 there weren't any giveaways. In the department of trick plays, the Packers won one of three. Green Bay didn't block any kicks and had two field goals blocked, but those were the fault of Dave Rayner. The other first-year specialist, Jon Ryan, surprised as a competent holder and punted better than B.J. Sander, but his net (35.7) was tied for 26th. Rayner made 74.3% of field goals to rank 26th, same as Ryan Longwell did in '05, and his deeper, higher kickoffs helped the Packers tie for 11th in opponents' average drive start. The return units tied for 29th in the NFL. The daring Woodson led the NFL in fair-catch ratio (two of 43) and had his only fumble wiped out by penalty (the Packers' opponents muffed five punt returns). Morency gave it his all to finish in a tie for 30th on kickoffs (21.6), but the Packers are long overdue for a return ace along the lines of Devin Hester, Pacman Jones and B.J. Sams. Only 11 teams had worse overall coverage. LB Tracy White was the No. 1 core player followed by LB Ben Taylor and CB Jarrett Bush. Kickoff coverage was better early than late.

PERSONNEL MOVES (B-plus)

GM Ted Thompson followed a dismal first season with a very good second season. The draft is his baby, and after turning seven selections into 12 via five trades on April 29 he got more than his money's worth in Year One. Four rookies started, and all four could make the all-rookie team. A fifth started 10 games and five others at least made the club. The only miss was WR Cory Rodgers in the fourth round. Although Thompson ultimately decided to deal Javon Walker for too little compensation (second-round pick), it was Mike Sherman and Brett Favre who poisoned the environment for his return. In all, the draft choices made 65 starts. In unrestricted free agency, Thompson got good value from Woodson and Pickett in the first year. His signing of Manuel rather than free-agent safeties Chris Hope, Marlon McCree, Lawyer Milloy and Corey Chavous was a blunder. Dealing Samkon Gado for Vernand Morency was a plus, as was the scrap-heap discoveries of Carlyle Holiday, Ruvell Martin, Jason Hunter, White, Rayner and Ryan. Signing troubled WR Koren Robinson Sept. 11 was a year too late and somewhat naïve. Thompson let seven unrestricted veterans go (Mike Flanagan, Tony Fisher, Longwell and Jackson, among them) and cut nine veterans from March to July, but in hindsight it's hard to find fault with any of the decisions. He re-signed Scott Wells Nov. 6 but hasn't made a hard move yet on Jenkins. In a rather top-heavy scouting department, the last member to leave for a better job was Scot McCloughan in April 2000.

COACHING (B-minus)

Inheriting a situation that appeared bleak 12 months ago, McCarthy refused to tolerate excuses from himself or others and brought the Packers back to respectability. His team, the youngest in the league, looked dead in the water after a 1-4 start. But the Packers regained their equilibrium near mid-season, faltered in November and caught fire for a classic Green Bay finish in cold weather before supportive crowds. The best thing that McCarthy did was get the turnover situation under control. The Packers finished even in turnover differential, vast improvement over a hideous minus-24 in '05. Furthermore, the team tied for 10th in fewest penalties (90) and was eighth in fewest penalty yards (689), improvements from 19th and 16th a year ago. Supremely confident in his offensive approach, McCarthy was good for Favre and made sharp adjustments in protection to hide a youthful O-line. However, his team ranked 22nd in points, equaling the team's worst finish since '91 and no better than what Sherman and Tom Rossley did in '05. McCarthy must have been appalled in the first two months by the performance of the defense coordinated by Bob Sanders and the secondary coached by Kurt Schottenheimer. Still, McCarthy made no rash decisions, an indication that he can keep his volcanic temper under wraps. Getting Jenkins on the field full-time for "KGB" was much better late than never.

OVERALL (B-minus)

Picked for oblivion in most quarters, the Packers became a force in December before eventually losing the second wild-card playoff berth to the New York Giants on the strength-of-victory tiebreaker. They leaped from fourth to second place in the NFC North, finishing with a four-game winning streak. Their 8-8 record represented a four-game improvement from a year ago, a leap exceeded only by New Orleans, Baltimore, the New York Jets and San Diego. It was the best jump from one season to the next in Green Bay since Mike Holmgren turned the 4-12 mess that he inherited from Lindy Infante into a 9-7 contender in 1992. McCarthy's club went 5-3 on the road, a record that Holmgren's seven teams in Green Bay matched but never surpassed. It took two late wins over tail-enders Minnesota and Detroit to salvage face and a 3-5 record at Lambeau Field. The Packers opened the season with 14 rookies and three first-year players only to end it with 16 rookies and four first-year men. In Week 16, 29 of the 53 players, or 54.7%, spent no time on the Packers' active or reserve lists just a year ago. And it was a team that went 7-8-1 against the spread, winning all five road games as an underdog of between 3 and 7 points. Lady Luck smiled on the Packers, with a total of seven starters missing merely 13 games due to injury. But in a bottom-line business, the Packers failed to make the playoffs despite another horrendous season (24-40 interconference record) in the NFC.

- Bob McGinn

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