

Rating the Packers vs. Broncos

Favre's arm, ground attack become deciding factors

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Green Bay - Last week, the Pittsburgh Steelers rolled into Denver with a 4-1 record, couldn't protect Ben Roethlisberger and wound up taking one on the chin, 31-28. On Monday night, the Green Bay Packers played those same injury-riddled Broncos in the same venue. But the Packers were able to protect Brett Favre beautifully, kept the Broncos' blitz at bay with heretofore unseen offensive balance and flew home with an immensely rewarding 19-13 victory in overtime. Now 6-1, the Packers had lost all five of their previous games in the rarefied air of Denver. However, they've never had a coach who began his tenure having as much success on the road as Mike McCarthy, who is a startling 8-3.

Here is a rating of the Packers against the Broncos, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

RECEIVERS (4½)

The four key players all made sizable contributions. Greg Jennings ran the route and made the catch of his fledgling career with the decisive 82-yard touchdown behind Dre' Bly. There were fundamental errors of positioning made by Bly on the play, but Jennings still outran him and looked so athletic hauling it in and sprinting home. Jennings also made Bly look awful on a 20-yard hitch, though he did drop two balls. The great Champ Bailey didn't respect James Jones and the rookie made him pay on a 79-yard touchdown. Jones must be playing faster than he timed a year ago. Other than an acrobatic catch in traffic for 17, Donald Driver played the dutiful role of decoy. Tight ends have been killing the Broncos and Donald Lee came through with three catches in the span of seven plays. Lee still seems overly concerned about fumbling. His cut-blocking was excellent.

OFFENSIVE LINE (4)

The Broncos sacked Roethlisberger four times and pressured him hard. In this game, the Broncos' only sack was a gift when the ball spun crazily from Favre's hand, plus they had just one knockdown and three hurries. DE Elvis Dumervil labored about equally against the two tackles and was blanked other than two hurries against Mark Tauscher. Chad Clifton was his usual impenetrable self. The intense emphasis to revive the ground game paid off against one of the league's poorest fronts. Tauscher kept cutting the end on the back side, creating cutback opportunities. Daryn Colledge might have had his best game of the season, avoiding a glaring miss in run and pass. Jason Spitz, subbing again for Scott Wells (illness), isn't as quick or athletic as Wells on the second level and was responsible for two "bad" runs. However, Spitz really worked to finish, as did the entire group did for a change. The negatives were the two holding calls on Spitz and false starts against Clifton and Tony Moll. Clifton also had 2½ "bad" runs.

QUARTERBACKS (4½)

Defensive coach Jim Bates let Favre off the hook by playing extensive single-safety shell instead of the Cover 2 looks that paralyzed the Packers in the previous six quarters. That made about as much sense as it did for Bly and Bailey to be playing inside leverage against Jennings and Jones with only one safety in the middle of the field. The touchdown passes carried 46 and 52 yards in the air and were dead on the money. Favre has been average at best for years when it comes to accuracy on the deep ball. Fans tend to excuse it when his bombs sail long or short, but clearly deep-ball accuracy is a major factor in the winning equation. Time after time, Favre is at his best coming out of his own end. Certainly no quarterback is more fearless with 95 yards in front of him. Favre also had the fumble, missed on an errant third-down bullet to an open Driver that should have been an 8-yard touchdown and went the wrong way on a drive-killing gaffe that resulted in minus-7.

RUNNING BACKS (4½)

There's no telling how long it will last but for three quarters, Ryan Grant looked pretty darn impressive. For once, linemen weren't mismatched at the point and there seldom was penetration. That enabled Grant to get to the line, and once there he crashed off defenders for 57 of his 104 yards after contact. On his first carry, the former Giant lowered his shoulder to take on onrushing safety John Lynch and knocked him from the game with a nerve problem. He ran a lot harder than DeShawn Wynn, who lasted four plays this week before getting hurt on a carry when he didn't seem eager about attacking the defense. At one point in the second quarter, the appreciative McCarthy called Grant's number 11 times in the span of 12 plays. Despite often wrapping two arms around the ball, Grant was elusive enough to break five tackles. For the first time, McCarthy removed Korey Hall on third and 1 and the result was Grant's 4-yard burst behind the booming block of John Kuhn.

DEFENSIVE LINE (3½)

Aaron Kampman had three sacks, although two were the result of Jay Cutler holding the ball too long. However, the third came on an aborted wide receiver pass back to Cutler that was ruined by an alert Al Harris. On the play, Kampman missed WR Brandon Marshall twice but showed superhuman determination to nail him 13.5 seconds after the ball was snapped. Otherwise, pressure was spotty. Despite just 29% double-teaming, Kabeer Gbaja-Biamila had a quiet 39 snaps against LT Matt Lepsis and Cullen Jenkins didn't get much done, either. Corey Williams made a rare start, played the same number of snaps as Jenkins (49) and had problems against the run, getting displaced from his gap four times. Johnny Jolly played sparingly (22 snaps) but might have played a role in Cutler's fumble at the 1 by getting off the ball quickly and bulling into pulling LG Chris Kuper. Eight times defensive linemen were cut off their feet on the back side. Ryan Pickett (25) sucked it up at the end on a bad knee and stayed home on Cutler's critical QB draw for no gain.

LINEBACKERS (3)

If rookie free agent Selvin Young rushed for 71 yards, it's possible the explosive Travis Henry (ribs) might have had 142. Blockers were getting out to the second level more than usual and the linebackers were just OK trying to sidestep or take them on. Nick Barnett ran through and missed once, showed his improvement in man-to-man coverage against backs and recovered the fumble at the goal line. Hawk smashed Cutler on a delayed blitz that was timed perfectly but other than that didn't make much happen. Brady Poppinga was victimized on a 12-yard bootleg pass to open the game and had almost no impact.

SECONDARY (2)

Cutler had 264 yards passing without Javon Walker (knee). Atari Bigby is becoming more and more of a liability in coverage with each passing game. He can't cover a TE with any kind of talent from the slot, and with four penalties there are questions about his ability to play in big games. He kicked the ball once for a delay penalty and came close to doing it a second time even after McCarthy yanked him for a spell. The other safety, Nick Collins, dropped what might have been a 59-yard interception return for a TD and doesn't always go all-out in pursuit. He isn't playing well. Neither is Al Harris, who keeps trying to sling people down instead of lowering a shoulder and getting physical. Mike Shanahan attacked Harris with Marshall and Brandon Stokley and made hay. If Harris can't get his hands inside, he's getting turned and burned too much. Charles Woodson made some hard tackles and was adequate overall.

KICKERS (4½)

Jon Ryan hammered his four punts in the Mile High City for averages of 52.3 yards (gross), 35.8 (net) and 4.75 seconds (hang time). Mason Crosby rebounded from a two-miss game by making a pair of chips shots and averaging 75.0 and 4.14 on four kickoffs.

SPECIAL TEAMS (2½)

Woodson's punt-return average is down to 7.4. Not even the sight of Todd Sauerbrun's easy-to-return 50-yard boots could make him any more dynamic. For now, at least, the Packers seem willing to accept his limitations in return for sound decisions and soft hands. Shaun Bodiford lacks the desired speed on kickoff returns, and Tramon Williams seemed better a month or two ago.

OVERALL (4)

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