

Rating the Packers vs. Panthers

Williams' return launches rout

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Green Bay - Carolina coach John Fox, regarded by some of his peers as an exceptional coach on game days, dropped the ball in the first quarter Sunday, dooming what little chance his team had to challenge the Green Bay Packers. First of all, the Panthers had 10 men on the field. Then, when the Packers deployed return man Tramon Williams deep, Fox should have just called time out and either kicked the field goal, tried a conventional punt or gone for it on fourth and 7. Instead, Fox's kicker, John Kasay, went ahead with the pooch punt that Williams returned 94 yards through 10 non-tacklers for a back-breaking touchdown. That was about all she wrote.

Here's a rating of the Packers in their 31-17 victory over the Panthers, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

RECEIVERS (4)

Carolina had one of the best trios of cornerbacks the Packers have seen this season but it didn't much matter. Using at least three WRs on 66% of the snaps, the Packers basically had people open all day. Donald Lee caught all five of the balls thrown to him, beating promising rookie MLB Jon Beason on a seam route for a 26-yard TD. For a player whose mental capabilities were questioned at Mississippi State and in Miami, Lee has fixed all of that. He understands coverages, knows how to uncover, catches everything, doesn't go down easily and usually works hard as a blocker. Donald Driver (49 snaps) destroyed SLB Thomas Davis in the slot, then did the same deep against CB Chris Gamble. A quick feint by Greg Jennings (48) left Gamble just standing there in man-to-man coverage on a 4-yard TD. Jennings glides in traffic, is hard to tackle and showed discipline with his hands and routes. As big and as strong as James Jones (44) is, he should be a much better blocker. Ruvell Martin (16) used his big body to beat nickel back Richard Marshall on a quick slant. He deserves more playing time, but where should it come from?

OFFENSIVE LINE (4)

Playing on a bum ankle, old pro Mark Tauscher escaped with just two pressures against DE Julius Peppers. One came on Peppers' sack, but the cause was more on the other side where a miscommunication between Daryn Colledge and Scott Wells enabled DE Mike Rucker to flush Brett Favre. On pass plays, Tauscher had help against Peppers on just four of 19 drop-backs. Tauscher did draw his third penalty in as many games, giving him an uncharacteristically high total of five. Meanwhile, Chad Clifton mastered the veteran Rucker and didn't have a glaring miscue in the run game, although he almost never finished, either. Battling hard to keep his job with Junius Coston back from an ankle injury, RG Jason Spitz was quick to the second level and physical on double teams. Wells was unable to make several reach blocks against NT Maake Kemoeatu, but few centers could.

QUARTERBACKS (4½)

Coordinator Mike Trgovac, who blitzed Atlanta heavily last week, blitzed just once on Favre's 31 drop-backs. Instead, Trgovac played coverage, hoping Favre would make some of the impulsive mistakes that he did in 1999 when "Trgo" was the Packers' defensive line coach. However, Favre really played under control and, for one of the few times in his career, never gave the opponent a shot for even one interception. He played the game on an even keel, staying away from the emotional highs and lows that sometimes get him in trouble. The long TD strike to Lee was thrown in the perfect location. He continued to get the ball out quickly, the hallmark of his season. And he manufactured a throw or two, completing passes when little was there.

RUNNING BACKS (4)

Each week, the difference in how Ryan Grant runs zone plays compared to how everyone else has run them in Green Bay this season jumps out. Grant (38 snaps) is so much more determined than the others. He's reckless. He inflicts punishment. He falls forward. Furthermore, Grant is showing the ability to make cuts in full stride without having to gear down. His vision enabled him to make two tight cuts on a 23-yard run. Later, he located daylight on the back side for 16 when some of the team's more mundane runners would have plunged into the congested front side for 1 or 2. Brandon Jackson and Vernand Morency combined for merely 10 snaps. Former Steelers FB John Kuhn (13 snaps), whose 15 more pounds give him a slight edge on Korey Hall (16) as a lead blocker, is playing more and more.

DEFENSIVE LINE (3)

Aaron Kampman played against Jordan Gross, the first truly competitive RT he has faced since early September, and was limited to one pressure. Athletic and physical, Gross blocked Kampman one-on-one almost all day whereas Kabeer Gbaja-Biamila was doubled on 60.6% of passes. Kampman's first offside penalty since Week 10 in '06 cost Al Harris an interception. Despite dealing with heavy chipping by RBs, "KGB" kept flying off the edge for three pressures against LT Travelle Wharton. Forced to play DT on early downs with the early departure of Johnny Jolly (shoulder), Cullen Jenkins got worn down at the point of attack. RG Jeremy Bridges, one of the better drive blockers on the schedule, slugged it out for a draw with Ryan Pickett. In the waning moments of the first half, Corey Williams earned even more money for himself come March with a sack against C Justin Hartwig, a sack against Bridges and a near-sack against Hartwig.

LINEBACKERS (3½)

A.J. Hawk has played better in the last three games than he did earlier. In coverage, he had blanket coverage several times on TE Jeff King, a pet target of Vinny Testaverde's. Hawk was pursuing laterally once when a blocker confronted him. In the past, he might have gone underneath the block and taken himself out of the play. This time, he broke across the blocker's face and into the path of the ball carrier, where he helped on the tackle. He worked to be accountable on runs instead of just getting blocked. Nick Barnett might be facing a league fine for slamming Testaverde out of bounds. The Panthers ran three screens on the first series after seeing Barnett struggle previously, and he reacted better.

SECONDARY (2½)

Testaverde completed just three of 10 passes for 14 yards to receivers covered by Charles Woodson, who instinctively undercut a crossing route to Keary Colbert for his fourth interception. Unlike some others in the secondary, Woodson is all business all the time. With Steve Smith sidelined with a shin injury, Harris tried to intimidate towering Drew Carter. However, Carter took the ball away from Harris on a 26-yard fade, then took advantage of shoddy zone coverage and tackling by Harris for a 49-yard gain. Carter was open immediately on an end-zone fade when Harris had his eyes trained on Testaverde but was denied the TD when Harris saved himself with a superb punchout. If Harris keeps ducking his head tackling, he's going to get hurt. Aaron Rouse's instantaneous read on a "stick" route by King led to his fine interception. Later, Rouse didn't attack another interception opportunity and failed to give maximum effort in chase situations. Atari Bigby drifted out of position in "quarters" coverage on Carter's 43-yard bomb and then showed little catch-up speed. Bigby had two of the five tackles missed by defensive backs.

KICKERS (2)

Mason Crosby has missed five of his last 15 FG attempts. His blocked try from 49 yards was low, he missed to the right from 49 and he hit from 47. He averaged 65.7 yards and 3.77 seconds of hang time on six kickoffs. Jon Ryan, punting from Carolina territory on three of his four punts, averaged 35.5 (gross), 30.5 (net) and 4.22 (hang time).

SPECIAL TEAMS (4½)

Fielding Kasay's pooch on the third bounce, Williams accelerated around several linemen and was gone. He got a great block from Jolly, one of three by him on big returns in '07. Part of the problem on the blocked FG by Peppers was the fact that Spitz, in at RT, got overrun. Robinson impressively changed directions twice on a 67-yard kickoff return but was run down from behind. His legs aren't quite there yet. Later, forward progress saved Robinson from a lost fumble. Charlie Peprah had big blocks on both long returns. Kick coverage was superb. Vernand Morency and Jarrett Bush had major penalties. Driver is a master recovering onside kicks.

OVERALL (4)

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