

Special teams carry day

Robinson sets early tone for the squad

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Green Bay - If this was as close as the Green Bay Packers get to a flat performance in 2007, they will have had a truly remarkable season.

The Packers played the run so poorly Sunday in the first half of their 33-14 victory over the St. Louis Rams that you almost had to question whether they were really ready to play. In fact, they never really did stop Steven Jackson.

Still, the Packers won going away because the Rams were neither healthy enough nor well-drilled enough to sustain a herculean effort for four quarters. Plus, the Packers' blatant superiority on special teams carried the day.

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

RECEIVERS (3)

It was surprising that the WR corps failed to exploit the Rams' subpar cover people. Donald Driver made nickel back Jonathan Wade miss on a "lookie" and gained an extra 25 yards. Greg Jennings showed how smart he is with sideline awareness at the end of the half. James Jones, Koren Robinson and Donald Lee each made a few plays. But Jones dropped a pass at the 1 and missed Wade on a bubble screen to Jennings that went for minus-3. Backup TE Ryan Krause failed to get off the line and into his route on the failed third-and-1, drew a false-start penalty and struggled as a back-side blocker. Bubba Franks is very much needed.

OFFENSIVE LINE (3)

Coordinator Jim Haslett rushed five or more on 72.7% of passes and six or more on 27.3%. Using Journal Sentinel statistics since the 1998 season, the 72.3% surpasses the previous high of 63.6% by San Francisco coordinator Jim Mora in Week 7 of 2000. The 27.3% ranks second to the 31% by Philadelphia coordinator Jim Johnson in the 2003 divisional playoffs. Against Haslett's wild blitzing, the potential for getting Brett Favre beat up was fairly high. As it turned out, there were no sacks and just three knockdowns, with 1 ½ charged to Junius Coston, one-half to Scott Wells and one to Favre. Wells forcefully declared who was to block whom; there were almost none of the free runners that often result in turnovers. Mark Tauscher probably had the most solid effort, but Chad Clifton was effective, too. Sure, it was hard sometimes for the line to run block with so many defenders jumping around and rushing from all angles, but that's no excuse. Seven of the nine "bad" runs were charged to the middle three, with Coston getting 3, Jason Spitz 2 ½ and Wells 1 ½.

QUARTERBACKS (2 ½)

Besides dealing with Haslett's kamikaze tactics, Favre had another major hurdle: all the hype from family, friends, fans, teammates and opposing players over breaking Dan Marino's career passing record. How could Favre get in the proper state of mind to play well when everyone was asking him for autographs, interviews and hugs? Although his elbow is fine, he fired two floaters for interceptions that were too high and off line. He also underthrew Driver deep, overthrew Ruvell Martin deep and made some poor reads. He did recognize the wide-open Jennings for the 44-yard TD, but his 4-yard TD to Lee almost as easily could have been intercepted.

RUNNING BACKS (2 ½)

Ryan Grant ran a little high at times, which was surprising given his consistently good body lean over the last two months. He also was charged with his first official fumble, although it was his fault on two lost handoffs from Favre that were charged to the QB. It's hard to blame Grant too much on the fumble because the DE on the play side, Brandon Chillar, put his helmet on the ball just as Grant turned up the field on a screen. The Packers have become a below-average screen team and Grant looks like part of the problem. Vernand Morency did something for a change after catching two check-downs. He played all of his 10 snaps before Brandon Jackson finished up with his eight. After Korey Hall went down with a hip strain after six plays, John Kuhn (27) spent a good part of his day having to turn back and block penetrating defensive linemen.

DEFENSIVE LINE (1 ½)

Jackson is the epitome of a franchise back. However, his offensive line is an aging, stopgap operation. For at least half the game, this unit was doing too much catching and too little stuffing and disengaging. Even Ryan Pickett, who played 31 snaps before leaving with a groin injury, had trouble with two golden oldies, RG Todd Steussie and C Andy McCollum. Corey Williams (57) played hurt and was OK. Justin Harrell (33) wasn't terrible at the point but still is spending too much time on the ground, stalls out as a rusher and appears to tire. Perhaps the best player was Cullen Jenkins (50), who beat LT Alex Barron once inside and once outside to set up one of Nick Barnett's two sacks. Jenkins, who was fooled badly on a naked pitch, also held his ground when injuries forced him to play DT in the fourth quarter. Kabeer Gbaja-Biamila (38) appears almost to be playing in slow-motion compared to his pre-leg injury form. Aaron Kampman (63) didn't dominate RT Brandon Gorin.

LINEBACKERS (4)

Barnett's size deficiency was exposed a time or two when Jackson pounded straight up the gut, but for the most part he provided impact in everything that he did. Barnett often dominated TE Joe Klopfenstein and FB Brian Leonard when they had the temerity to lead-block him. He blew past McCollum and into the backfield for a tackle for loss when the center waited a split-second too long before getting out on him. He showed absolutely rare range chasing down Jackson at the sideline on the naked pitch. He showed remarkable athleticism hurdling Jackson's cut block on a middle blitz. He closed fast in coverage three or four times, including his great break against Isaac Bruce on a crossing route that was tipped to Atari Bigby for an interception. Brady Poppinga did miss three tackles and isn't always in the right spots, but there's a place for his ruggedness. A.J. Hawk showed some pop as a straight-head blitzer and was adequate in other areas.

DEFENSIVE BACKS (4)

Al Harris probably played his best game in a month, covering Torry Holt most of the day and limiting him to three receptions. The Rams designed the slant-and-go for Holt to beat Harris, which he did on the 4-yard TD, but other than that Harris was in his back pocket. It was a typical Charles Woodson day. There were more completions than normal (six of eight for 74 yards) as he floated around making his inimitable reads and calculated gambles, but Woodson also stuck his nose into the rough stuff like a safety and gave tremendous effort trying to chase down Jackson on the 46-yard TD. On Bruce's 37-yard double move against Woodson, Bigby has to get over there from a two-deep shell and either destroy the receiver or break it up. Bigby blitzed effectively and showed very good hands and reactions on two interceptions. Despite what problems there were up front, both Bigby and Nick Collins must exercise more discipline and get Jackson down on his long run. Aaron Rouse played a portion of the second half for Collins (back pain) and made some hits. Competing for the nickel back job with Jarrett Bush (calf) out, Tramon Williams didn't help himself in coverage.

KICKERS (4 ½)

Mason Crosby was perfect on four field goals (41.3 average distance) and averaged an impressive 71.3 yards and 4.13 seconds (hang time) on eight kickoffs.

SPECIAL TEAMS (5)

Robinson set the tone on an opening 43-yard KO return, breaking a tackle and outrunning half the Rams. Then Rouse set the tone on the opening KO, blowing up the wedge and making the tackle. The best play in coverage, and it's saying a lot giving the extraordinary swarming and hustling that was going on, had to be Charlie Peprah's reckless tackle and strip of Derek Stanley, the luckless, overmatched rookie returner. Despite injuries to Bush, Hall and Tracy White, there was little drop-off in coach Mike Stock's rotation system. Robinson broke five tackles on an 88-yard KO return shortened to 66 by Tramon Williams' unnecessary holding penalty. Even when Robinson botched a squib kick at the 11, he still squirted out to the 32. Punt returner Will Blackmon flashed exciting change of direction. The coordination between snapper Rob Davis and holder Jon Ryan has been flawless for months.

OVERALL (4)

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