

2007 Green Bay Packers: Player grades

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Defense

DEFENSIVE LINE (12)

Conrad Bolston: One of the two or three smartest D-linemen in the 2007 draft based on his score of 28 on the Wonderlic intelligence test. More of a movement-type DT than a run stuffer. Late-season waiver pickup from Vikings. Struggled finding the ball in a 29-play stint against Detroit in finale. **Grade: Inc.**

Colin Cole: Played in seven of 11 games before suffering a fractured arm that ended his season. Sixth on the unit in tackles per snap (one every 10). Not much of a pass rusher. The picture of Cole after four seasons is he's someone who makes more plays than his ability should allow but gets blown out too much for someone of his modest ability. Cole will be 28 in June and will have to distinguish himself quickly in '08 to earn a job.

Grade: D-plus.

Justin Harrell: Languished as the No. 5 DT for nine of the first 11 games and wasn't even in uniform. When injuries hit, he averaged 25.9 snaps in the last seven weeks. At first, Harrell spent too much time on the ground and didn't recognize blocking combinations. In the last month, he stayed on his feet more, gave ground grudgingly and began finding the ball. In fact, he led the unit in tackles per snap (one every 6.32). Conversely, he was a washout as a pass rusher, failing to register a single "pressure" in 196 snaps. He needs to toughen up, recognize that it's a violent game played by nasty people and begin earning his keep. **Grade: D-plus.**

Jason Hunter: If he wasn't the top player on special teams he was undeniably the No. 1 tackler. He had 30, most by a Packer since 1984. From scrimmage, Hunter doesn't appear capable of harnessing his 4.6 speed and understanding team defensive concepts. He played 86 snaps, 52 more than in '06, but had just one "pressure." **Grade: C-minus.**

Kabeer Gbaja-Biamila: With his cap salary rising from \$6.6 million to \$7.7 million, the Packers might seek the reduction in '08 that they haven't previously sought. For 10 ½ games, "KGB" flourished in his old role as designated pass rusher. He flew off the edge, helped win two or three games with fourth-quarter pressure and had four sacks against Minnesota LT Bryant McKinnie in two games. But then he damaged an ankle in Week 11, sat out Week 12 and wasn't the same again. Still, he led the club in "pressures" per snap with one every 13.2, much better than one every 20.8 in '06 and surpassing his career best of one every 13.8 in '01. In all, he played 41.8% of the downs, his lowest rate since '01. **Grade: B.**

Cullen Jenkins: Finished second on the unit in snaps (914) despite battling various injuries from mid-September on. Looked like a star in the making throughout August but rarely played back to that form. Crashed from third in the unit in tackles per snap (one every 8.4) last year to ninth (one every 15.5) this year and settled for one "pressure" every 30 snaps, way down from team-best one every 15.5 in '06. However, he led the unit in batted balls (eight) and tied for the team lead in tackles for loss with 4 ½. His inability to rush effectively inside was key factor why the defense almost never dominated.

Grade: C-plus.

Johnny Jolly: Basically was job-sharing with Corey Williams (26.7 snaps per game) when he suffered a season-ending shoulder injury in Week 10. Rushed even better than Jenkins in camp and started five of the first six games, but ended up a disappointing sixth in "pressures" per snap (one every 66.8). Second in batted balls with five. A stout, instinctive, high-energy player against the run. If Williams leaves and Jolly's Dec. 12 rotator-cuff repair goes well, he would enter camp as the starter. **Grade: C-plus.**

Aaron Kampman: Carolina's Jordan Gross was about the only RT who got the best of Kampman. Ranks with A.J. Hawk as the hardest worker in the weight room. Sees the game on a different level than most of his teammates. Rates superior in preparation, commitment, leadership and professionalism. Amassed 31 knockdowns, breaking the mark of 29 by Reggie White during the West Coast era that seemed unapproachable. Second in "pressures" per snap (one every 17.2) and fifth in tackles per snap (one every 9.9). Played 84% of the downs despite being forced to sit out the finale. **Grade: A.**

Mike Montgomery: Sat out the first seven games with a knee injury and was never quite the same. Wasn't as active against the run and didn't produce as a rusher. Had a down year. He'll be pushed for the No. 4 DE job in '08. **Grade: D.**

Daniel Muir: Played merely five snaps in first 14 games but played extensively in Weeks 15-16 and showed considerable promise. The rookie free agent from Kent State probably should have played more. He did outplay Harrell all summer. Muir is much more than just a slug as a rusher, and is extremely strong. On the short side at 6-2, but with his eager-to-please attitude he might be able to overcome his weaknesses. **Grade: D-plus.**

Ryan Pickett: Sat out two games with a groin injury but still played 48.9% of the snaps as the team's elite run stopper. Very, very hard to move. Plus, he finds the ball. Second on unit in tackles per snap (one every 7.9). Stationary pass rusher who almost never gets off the line of scrimmage. If his conditioning were better, he might do more pocket-collapsing and pursuing. **Grade: B.**

Corey Williams: Third on the unit in snaps with a career-high 777, 208 more than a year ago. Had to play too much after Jolly's injury and both his pass-rushing and play-making suffered. A fairly complete player. Maybe a slightly better rusher than stuffer. Fourth on the unit in "pressures" per snap (one every 37) but just seventh in tackles per snap (one every 12.3). Handled his likely departure via unrestricted free agency with class. Now looking at a huge payday. **Grade: B-minus.**

LINEBACKERS (6)

Nick Barnett: Emerged as Pro Bowl-caliber player for the first time. Seemed so crushed by not being selected that his play might have been slightly affected down the stretch. Doesn't even weigh 230 pounds but was the most physical player on defense week after week. Earlier in his career, he was a lateral, semi-finesse player. Today, he is a downhill, attacking player. Had three turnover plays. Was responsible for seven of the 13 ½ "big" plays (20 yards or more) charged to LBs, including 4 ½ on screen passes. He also missed 14 tackles. **Grade: A-minus.**

Desmond Bishop: Sixth-round pick who played almost strictly on special teams as a rookie. A no-nonsense individual who takes care of business. Apprenticed as Barnett's backup but has the intellect to play the strong side. He isn't as fast as Brady Poppinga but might have better instincts. **Grade: D.**

A.J. Hawk: Played almost every snap for the second straight season but didn't make many waves. So far, he has been a durable, highly consistent player at a performance equivalent to an average starter. He had three turnover plays, 3 ½ tackles for loss, nine missed tackles and seven "pressures," all comparable to '06. Despite outweighing Barnett by about 20 pounds, Hawk was the one getting pushed around at times in the run game. And he almost never delivered a crushing hit. His improvement came in the subtle art of coverage, where he trimmed his "big" play yield from 7 ½ to 1 ½ He's just steady. **Grade: B-minus.**

Abdul Hodge: Will attempt to resume his career after undergoing surgery on both knees Sept. 18 to alleviate patellar tendinitis. Tried to gut it out early in camp but couldn't. Hodge had a speed problem coming out of Iowa as a third-round pick and can ill afford to lose a step. Merits one more look. **Grade: Inc.**

Brady Poppinga: Some scouts think Poppinga should be a fourth linebacker and special-teams player whereas others say he's acceptable as a starter. Poppinga is jacked-up each Sunday. He's 245. He's a heavy hitter. He plays with raw emotion. And he doesn't miss many tackles (nine in each of the past two seasons). Big plays aren't his thing. He runs better than average in a straight line but doesn't change direction well and isn't a fluid athlete in space. His weakness would be coverage, but he worked to improve in that area and wasn't beaten as badly this year. **Grade: C.**

Tracy White: White led the special teams in turnover plays with three, including a TD recovery against Philadelphia, a recovery against the Giants that helped turn the game into a rout and a great strip of the Giants' R.W. McQuarters last Sunday. The problem for the Packers is he's small and extremely limited from scrimmage. The Packers can ill afford to replace him with a better talent unless that player is equally effective on special teams. **Grade: D-plus.**

DEFENSIVE BACKS (11)

Atari Bigby: By late November, it looked as if Bigby would have to be replaced as a starter. He kept getting exposed in coverage, was heavily penalized and missed too many tackles. Today, he seems entrenched for '08 after making four of his five interceptions in the last six games and also delivering a series of intimidation-style hits. In all, he had nine turnover plays, most by a Green Bay safety since Darren Sharper also had nine in '01. Bigby clearly is best in the box because he's a determined, explosive tackler. He can't cover the top tight ends man-to-man and will bite on play-action and give up completions over his head. The defense will have to be tailored to his strengths. Bigby gave up 7 ½ "big" plays and a team-high 5 TD passes. He missed a team-high 15 tackles. And he had eight penalties, twice as many as any Green Bay safety in the previous 16 seasons. **Grade: C-plus.**

Will Blackmon: One injury after another has derailed Blackmon's progress. He has played so sparingly from scrimmage that it's almost impossible to tell if his obvious physical traits will translate into effective coverage. He can run and jump and cut, but too many times in camp his man seemed to make the catch. His strong suit has been returning kicks. **Grade: D-plus.**

Jarrett Bush: He had 13 weeks to prove himself as the nickel back and couldn't do it. Bush is tall and runs well enough, but the more that he played the worse he got. He wasn't good at the ball, appeared hesitant and lacked confidence. He made no turnover plays, tackled poorly (12 misses) and gave up four TD passes. **Grade: D-minus.**

Nick Collins: After three seasons he has played one memorable game (at Chicago, '06). Started 15 games in his third year and didn't have a single turnover play. Part of his problem is marginal hands; he led the team in dropped interceptions with three, giving him eight in his career. Granted, he is more talented than most safeties. But he's also moody and the Packers never quite know what they're going to get. He knows his playbook, but doesn't always see the big picture and ends up making poor decisions. He gave up 5 ½ "big" plays and three TD passes, and had just 1 ½ tackles for loss. Collins is tackling much better than he did as a rookie. **Grade: C-minus.**

Tyrone Culver: Culver blew out his shoulder in the exhibition finale and went on injured reserve. If the shoulder holds after reconstructive surgery, he'll compete as a No. 4 safety because of his smarts. **Grade: Inc.**

Al Harris: If Harris, 33, can't get his hands on a receiver in bump-and-run coverage, he's dead in the water. His inability to play man-off and zone coverage restricts a defense. He still can re-direct some receivers all day long and dominate them. Increasingly, however, his lack of speed and unwillingness to tackle hurt him and the defense. He allowed 13 "big" plays, up from 5 ½ in '06 and 8 ½ in '05. Plus, he yielded four TD passes and drew 12 penalties, two more than his career-high total from '04. His meltdowns against the Cowboys' Terrell Owens and the Giants' Plaxico Burress were debilitating in enormous games. Plus, he almost never makes a big play. He has four years left on his contract. The Packers can only hope he has one more competent season in him. **Grade: C-plus.**

Charlie Peprah: Was the No. 7 safety for the first three weeks of camp before making his move. He's a typical safety drafted in the middle rounds: smart, not very fast, takes good angles, average hitter. **Grade: D-plus.**

Aaron Rouse: Of the team's 19 interceptions, seven required extraordinary skill. Two were by Rouse, including a great break on a short route to Carolina TE Jeff King and a great break on a dig route to Detroit's Calvin Johnson. He's big, semi-physical and obviously capable of the big play. He needs to break down better as an open-field tackler. No reason why he shouldn't compete to start in '08. **Grade: C-minus.**

Frank Walker: Played sparingly as a dime back late in the year and might leave as an unrestricted free agent. At 26, he's a fiery competitor who pushes the envelope in coverage. His problem is he tends to grab and hold a lot and doesn't always make sound decisions. **Grade: D.**

Tramon Williams: Didn't do anything from scrimmage until Week 11, but by the playoffs he had won the job as nickel back. Unlike Bush, Williams fears nobody. He has excellent speed, natural feel for coverage on deep balls and is a hard, face-up tackler. Based on limited playing time, his total of 5 ½ "big" plays allowed was excessive. He was learning by trial and error, but with his speed and down-to-earth attitude there is something worth developing. As the top returner, he averaged 23.4 on 36 kickoffs and 13.4 on nine punts. **Grade: C-minus.**

Charles Woodson: Allowed eight "big" plays, same as a year ago, and one TD pass, down from 3 ½ in '06. Second on the team in turnover plays with five, led the secondary in tackles for loss with 2 ½ and had 70 tackles, 26 more than Harris. Plays cornerback by feel rather than technique, and guesses a lot more right than he does wrong. Has played hurt for two years, sells out his body week after week making jarring tackles, and helps some younger players. Woodson, 31, should have at least one more good year. **Grade: A-minus.**