

2007 Green Bay Packers: Team grades

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PASSING OFFENSE (A)

Whether it was small ball or long ball, the Packers rolled through the air. Ranked second in passing yards per game (270.9), highest finish since 1983 and third-best mark in club history. Maestro Brett Favre set a personal best by surpassing 100 in passer rating 10 times during the regular season before adding an 11th in the post-season. His completion mark of 66.5% was another best. And his passer rating of 96.0 in all games was the third-highest of his career, behind only 1995 (100.7) and 1996 (97.2). The wide receivers caught 48 passes of 20 yards or more, most since '97, and 23 of them were for more than 35. Greg Jennings had 14 TD catches in 16 games and averaged 17.4 yards, third best in the NFL behind Pittsburgh's Santonio Holmes (18.1) and Tampa Bay's Joey Galloway (17.8). He had 14 20-plus catches compared to 17 for Donald Driver and 11 for rookie James Jones. According to STATS LLC, the Packers led the league in yards after the catch. Jennings had a blistering YAC mark of 6.48 yards, and Driver chipped in a career-best 5.33. In lieu of a ground game, the Packers ran 12.2% of their plays without a running back, sometimes with five wide receivers. Third in sack percentage, a tribute to Favre's quick release and pocket mastery as well as an offensive line that was charged with merely 12 of the 20 sacks. The O-line also was charged with just 22 penalties, its low since '01. Driver's career-low drop rate (1.49%) helped team reduce its average drops per game from 2.69 in 2006 to 1.78 in '07. Jennings and Jones did drop eight apiece. The Packers faced 27.7% blitzing on passing downs, most since '02, and Favre threw 52.9% of his 17 interceptions against blitzes. The screen game was lousy all year.

RUSHING OFFENSE (C)

At midseason, the Packers ranked last in yards (72.1) and 30th in yards per rush (3.30). Thanks to Ryan Grant, they finished 21st (99.8) and 12th (4.12). Through six games, the revolving running back corps of DeShawn Wynn, Brandon Jackson and Vernand Morency was averaging 65.67 and 3.26. That all changed when Grant replaced an injured Wynn five plays into the Week 7 game in Denver. Over the last 12 games, the Packers averaged 122.17 and 4.64. Grant rushed for 929 yards in the final nine regular-season games, second in the NFL behind San Diego's LaDainian Tomlinson (947). In all, Grant carried 228 times for 1,186 yards (5.2) and 11 TDs. He had 16 gains of 20 yards or more, 15 rushing. By comparison, Ahman Green had four in '06 and only one in '05. Green's high was 21 in '03. At midyear, the Packers had rushed merely 35.3% of the time. By the end, their rush rate was up to 39.4%, well below the NFL average of 43.5% and 25th in the league. Grant's calling card was finding the cutback lane on outside zone plays. His breakaway burst piled up yardage and served to hide some of the down-to-down deficiencies. There were 96 ½ "bad" runs charged to the offensive line, 18 more than last season and the most in any season this decade. According to STATS LLC, the Packers were last in the NFL in conversion rate on third- and fourth-and-1 (35.7%). It reflected an inability to get the tough yard in crunch time and underscored one of the major failings of the zone scheme. Korey Hall and former Steeler John Kuhn split time at fullback and were OK. Blocking by wide receivers was adequate, at best.

PASS DEFENSE (B)

A rarity in this era, cornerbacks Charles Woodson and Al Harris played bump-and-run in the Packers' match-coverage scheme. Woodson had a much better season, but Harris made the Pro Bowl. The Packers ranked 12th in passing yards allowed (210.4), sixth in opponents' passer rating (75.6). Directed by assistant Lionel Washington, Green Bay's third-down defense ranked third in conversion rate (33%), its best finish since '96.

Philadelphia's Donovan McNabb and Dallas' Tony Romo were the only quarterbacks ranked in the top 10 of passer rating encountered by Green Bay. Ranked seventh in interception percentage with 19, picking off two in a game five times but never more than two. Those 19 picks set up 55 points. Aaron Kampman had a whopping 58 ½ "pressures," the team's highest total in a decade, and his 31 knockdowns surpassed the great Reggie White's 29 in 1993. Enjoying a resurgence stemming in part from his part-time status, Kabeer Gbaja-Biamila led the D-line in "pressures" per snap with one every 13.2. The pass rush sagged to 13th, with 32 sacks coming in the first 11 games and only eight in the last seven games. Sluggishness in the four-man rush plus nagging injuries to "KGB" and Cullen Jenkins led coordinator Bob Sanders to blitz on 31.3% of passes in the last six games compared to just 17.7% in the first 12. It was a penalty-ridden secondary, with 23 of the 37 flags coverage-related. Harris had 12 penalties, Woodson nine and Atari Bigby eight. Allowed 100-yard games to tight ends Antonio Gates, Chris Cooley and Tony Gonzalez in first eight weeks, then nothing more by a TE than 67 yards to Jason Witten in the last 10. Six 100-yard games by WRs were the most since 2004.

RUN DEFENSE (B)

Early on, Sanders was able to stop the run with seven defenders. The yield was 92.9 yards per game in the first nine games. Later, the coordinator had to play more eight in the box and yet still ended up allowed 108.1 in the last nine games. In all, the Packers ranked 14th in rushing yards allowed (102.9) and 11th in yards allowed per carry (3.88), their best finish since 2000. Allowed just seven runs of 20 yards or more for the second straight season, the team's lowest total since '99. Forced and recovered three fumbles on running plays, all occurring in Weeks 6-7. Improved team speed limited QBs to an infinitesimal 58 yards on the ground. Rip-snorting LB Nick Barnett and Jenkins led in tackles for loss with 4 ½ followed by Corey Williams, Johnny Jolly and Bigby with four. Barnett led in tackles with 183 in 18 games, with A.J. Hawk next at 144. Bigby, who was third with 137, also led the club in missed tackles with 15. Barnett missed 14 and Jarrett Bush missed 12. Five players missed nine: Brady Poppinga, Nick Collins, Hawk, Woodson and Harris. When Sanders needed a run stop, he often used an effective cross-strong blitz with Poppinga leading and Barnett mopping up. The decline in the run defense really started in Week 14 when St. Louis' Steven Jackson gained 143 behind a decrepit O-line. The next week, Chicago's Adrian Peterson controlled the game with 102 yards in the gale-force winds of Soldier Field. Then, in the NFC Championship Game, New York's Brandon Jacobs and Ahmad Bradshaw combined for 130. The only other 100-yard game was by Minnesota's Adrian Peterson (112) in Week 4.

SPECIAL TEAMS (B)

After finishing dead last (32nd) in overall special-teams performance the past two seasons, the Packers jumped to sixth in '07 based on a breakdown of 10 categories. Ranked ahead, in order, were San Francisco, San Diego, Chicago, Buffalo and Cleveland. Basically, coach Mike Stock's units won the opener when Eagles coach Andy Reid neglected to bring a competent punt returner to Lambeau Field. As a result, the Packers recovered two fumbles on punts and turned them into 10 points for a 16-13 victory. Over 18 games, the units finished plus-3 in turnover differential. Second-year DE Jason Hunter, one of many players who grew up on the job, led in tackles with 30, most by a Packer since LB John Dorsey was credited with 35 in 1984. Hunter had just eight as a rookie. LB Tracy White was second with 18, followed by Hall with 15 and two players, LB Desmond Bishop and S Charlie Peprah, with 14. Jon Ryan posted the club's best net punting average (37.6) since Donny Anderson in 1969. Opponents returned Ryan's punts a total of 113 yards, second fewest behind New England and the best by Green Bay since '67. Rookie Mason Crosby led the NFL in scoring with 141 points, becoming the first Packer to do it since K Chester Marcol in '74. Everything went awry in Chicago when Poppinga and Kuhn were responsible for a pair of blocked punts and Ryan got off a 9-yard boot after a wide snap by Rob Davis, who had his poorest game in 10 ½ seasons. Tramon Williams (94) and Will Blackmon (57) returned punts for TDs, the first time the Packers had more than one in a season since Desmond Howard returned three in '96.

PERSONNEL MOVES (A-)

GM Ted Thompson might have made the NFL trade of the year on Sept. 1 when he sent a sixth-round draft choice to the Giants for Grant. The Giants planned to cut Grant, but the expenditure was well worth it because there was no guarantee Green Bay would have been awarded Grant through the claiming process. All Grant did was save a running attack that had been spinning its wheels for weeks. In the draft, Thompson traded down twice, turning nine selections into 11. Of the 11, one started (Hall), one kicked (Crosby), five were situation substitutes, another remained on the 53-man roster, one finished the year on injured reserve and two were cut. The Packers had a chance to move from No. 16 to No. 14 and select CB Darrelle Revis, an all-rookie cornerback for the Jets, but elected to stay put and take Justin Harrell, who was stuck on the inactive list before injuries struck. The decision to keep Crosby over incumbent Dave Rayner was prescient. So was letting Green and TE David Martin walk in free agency. Both were major disappointments with new teams. Unrestricted free agency brought only Frank Walker, but Thompson used "street" free agency for Tramon Williams, undrafted free agency for DT Daniel Muir and waivers for Kuhn. Thompson hoped to trade for Randy Moss but lost out to New England. Yet, with fan sentiment emotionally split on the issue of Moss, it's possible such a trade wouldn't have turned out as well for the Packers as it did for the Patriots. Either re-signing or sweetening the contracts of Jenkins, Harris, Barnett, Driver, Lee and Mark Tauscher made sense, for the most part. The decision by retiring President Bob Harlan to dump John Jones in May before he could begin doing irreparable damage to the organization was critical. WR Robert Ferguson was the only player cut by Green Bay in '07 who did much for another team.

COACHING (A-)

Mike McCarthy finished second to New England's Bill Belichick for the Associated Press Coach of the Year Award. Since starting 4-8, McCarthy has gone 18-4 for a two-year record of 22-12. Vince Lombardi also was 22-12 after 34 games, Mike Sherman was 21-13 and Mike Holmgren was 19-15. McCarthy took some heat from the traditionalists for his decision to give the players off each Wednesday during training camp. Some players kept harkening back to that decision for why the team stayed fresh and generally side-stepped injuries to key players. The son of a Pittsburgh firefighter and barkeep, McCarthy uses plain talk to hammer home his message of accountability and consistency. By and large, he created an environment in which players respected the game and each other. Selfishness and self-promoting weren't problems. McCarthy spent most of his time with the offensive coaches working on the game plan and preparing his play sheet. He did a tremendous job finding ways to score points early without a ground game, forcing Favre to play a thinking-man's game without excusing his lapses, and posting a 6-2 record on the road. His second team tied for seventh in fewest giveaways (24), the Packers' best finish since '96. On the other hand, the Packers ranked 29th in penalties (113), their worst finish in more than two decades, and ranked 31st in penalty yardage (1,006). The youngest team in the NFL for the second straight year completed the season with 10 rookies and three first-year players on the 53-man roster. Largely because of McCarthy, the team didn't play young. But, with the Super Bowl one home-field victory away, he was out-coached by the Giants' Tom Coughlin.

OVERALL (A-)

Picked to finish 6-10 by Sports Illustrated, the Packers were 13-3. That equaled the club record for victories and tied for the ninth-best winning percentage (.813) in the team's 87-year history. Their 10-1 start was surpassed only once before (1929) in club annals. After a first half in which the Packers didn't dominate a single opponent, their second half included routs of Minnesota, Oakland and Detroit. A runner-up in the NFC North by five games to Chicago in 2006, the Packers turned around and won by five over the Vikings. The division championship was clinched with three games remaining. Ever mindful of their good fortune, the Packers had eight starters miss a total of just 18 games one year after having had six starters miss 12 games. In its startling season, Green Bay played only four teams that made the playoffs and just four teams that finished with winning records. In all, its opponents were 120-136 (.469); the '08 opposition was 136-120 (.531) this year. The Packers were 12-3-1 against the spread. Thousands of their fans packed venues such as Kansas City, Denver, Dallas and St. Louis. With home-field advantage seemingly at stake, the Packers stumbled in Dallas. Three weeks later, they collapsed in abominable weather conditions in Chicago and the Bears completed a sweep. The smashing comeback from a 14-0 deficit against Seattle in the divisional round coupled with the Giants' upset in Dallas spawned an outbreak of Super Bowl fever in Packerland. But then, as a 7 ½ point favorite, the Packers were thoroughly outplayed in the NFC Championship Game. Thus did end the most satisfying of seasons with a third crushing home playoff loss in six years.