

Grading the Packers: The Defense

About the grades

The grades were done by Rob Demovsky of the Green Bay Press-Gazette. They are based on season-long interviews with NFL coaches and scouts, and observations of games and practices.

DEFENSIVE LINE

Aaron Kampman, DE

Backed up his career-best season in 2006 (when he posted 15½ sacks and made the Pro Bowl) with another Pro Bowl season. The workhorse rarely came off the field and again led the team with 12 sacks in 15 regular-season games. Also registered 34 quarterback pressures, 11 more than any other Packers defender. Led the team's defensive linemen with 91 tackles, which was fourth on the team. Also forced one fumble, recovered one fumble and knocked down two passes. Did all of that despite facing far more attention from blockers than he did in '06. Had only three sacks in his final seven regular-season games. Committed two penalties (both offsides).

Grade: A-minus.

Cullen Jenkins, DE

Strong finish to last season got him a four-year, \$16 million contract extension but never really got going until late in the season. Played early downs at defensive end and often moved inside in the nickel package. Posted just one sack in the regular season (in Week 6 against Washington) but did finish third on the team with 22 quarterback pressures. Came alive in the playoffs. Had 1½ sacks and five tackles in the divisional game against Seattle and posted five more tackles, a quarterback hit and a pass breakup in the NFC championship game against the Giants. Battled a variety of injuries, including ankle and knee problems, most of the season but played in all 16 games. Led defensive linemen with four penalties (one personal foul, one unnecessary roughness and two offsides).

Grade: C-minus.

Ryan Pickett, DT

Best run stopper for the second straight season. Missed the final 2½ games of the regular season with a groin injury, and the Packers gave up 356 yards rushing in those games. Second among the team's defensive linemen in tackles with 63, which ranked seventh overall, despite often coming out of the game in obvious passing situations.

Grade: B-minus.

Corey Williams, DT

Started fast with six sacks in the first 10 games while splitting time with Johnny Jolly. Production dropped after he was forced into more snaps following Jolly's season-ending shoulder injury. Posted just one sack the rest of the regular season, including none in the final five games. Committed one penalty for roughing the passer. Scheduled to be an unrestricted free agent, the Packers have shown little interest in re-signing him. Could end up with a sizable contract in free agency.

Grade: C-plus.

Kabeer Gbaja-Biamila, DE

Performed well in his reduced role as a designated pass rusher in the nickel and dime packages. Finished second on the team with 9½ sacks in the regular season and was second in quarterback hurries with 23 despite missing the Dallas game with an ankle injury. Committed one penalty (offsides). Had 1½ sacks in the playoffs. Should return in '08 despite a salary that will jump from \$5 million to \$6.15 million.

Grade: C.

Justin Harrell, DT

Rookie first-round draft pick (No. 16 overall) didn't get on the field until Week 5, then lasted only two games before an ankle injury sidelined him for five weeks. Returned for the final five games plus the two playoff contests. His lost senior season at Tennessee, when he played in only three games because of a torn biceps, made the transition to the NFL difficult. Relied mostly on his impressive strength as a rookie but needs to refine his technique. Finished with 24 tackles, no sacks and two quarterback pressures.

Grade: D.

Johnny Jolly, DT

One of the most improved players in 2007 until a shoulder injury ended his season after 10 games. His development probably makes Williams expendable. Recorded 31 tackles, one sack and one quarterback pressure in 10 games. Also knocked down five passes. Committed two penalties (one hold, one roughing the passer). Should return as a starter alongside Pickett next season provided his shoulder injury heals by training camp.

Grade: C-plus.

Colin Cole, DT

Decent run stopper who made 13 tackles in a backup role for seven games before a broken forearm ended his season.

Grade: D.

Jason Hunter, DE

Rarely played on defense but excelled on special teams. Posted a team-high 25 special-teams tackles during the regular season and forced the fumble on the punt coverage team that Will Blackmon recovered for a TD against Oakland.

Grade: D-plus.

Michael Montgomery, DE

Slowed by a preseason knee injury that kept him out of the first seven games, had a limited role as a pass rusher and on special teams. Finished with 22 tackles but no sacks and just one quarterback pressure.

Grade: D.

Daniel Muir, DT

The only rookie free agent to make the 2007 roster after a strong training camp, played in just three games. A developmental project who could see increased playing time in 2008.

Grade: Incomplete.

Conrad Bolston, DT

Claimed off waivers from Minnesota on Dec. 12, played only in the regular-season finale. Will have to fight for a roster spot in camp.

Grade: Incomplete.

LINEBACKERS**Nick Barnett**

Received a contract extension that included more than \$11 million in first-year money and had the best season of his five-year career. Some scouts believe he was the team's defensive MVP. Snubbed by Pro Bowl voters despite leading the team in tackles with 165 and posting 3½ sacks in limited blitzing opportunities. Led the linebackers with four penalties (two face masks, one illegal contact and one unnecessary roughness).

Grade: A-minus.

A.J. Hawk

Played steady and sound fundamentally, but lacked big-play production. Only interception came at Kansas City on Nov. 4, finished second behind Barnett in tackles with 129 and had one sack in his second pro season. Committed three penalties (two illegal contacts, one face mask). Former No. 5 overall pick needs to make more big plays.

Grade: C-plus.

Brady Poppinga

Once again struggled in pass coverage against tight ends but played well against the run. Came off the field in the nickel defense, meaning he played only about half the snaps but finished fifth in tackles with 70. Committed two penalties (one personal foul, one holding). Had perhaps his best game in the playoff loss to the Giants.

Grade: C-minus.

Desmond Bishop

Rookie sixth-round pick rarely played on defense but was a core special teams player. Played in 10 of 16 regular-season games, missing four games with a shoulder injury. Tied for third with 12 special teams tackles.

Grade: D.

Tracy White

Finished second on the team with 16 special teams tackles despite missing three games with an ankle injury. Forced a fumble on punt coverage in the playoff game against the Giants, but the Packers failed to recover it.

Grade: D-plus.

DEFENSIVE BACKS

Al Harris, CB

Despite making the first Pro Bowl of his 10-year career, didn't have as strong a showing as in 2006. Again drew the opponent's top receiver nearly every game. Struggled against the two best receivers he faced — Dallas' Terrell Owens and the Giants' Plaxico Burress in the NFC championship game. Committed a team-high 12 penalties, three more than his team-leading total from last year. His infractions were: illegal contact (four), pass interference (two), face mask (two), holding (two), illegal use of hands (one) and delay of game (one). Tied for the team high with five TDs allowed and had two interceptions. Was targeted 78 times and allowed 46 completions for 713 yards.

Grade: B.

Charles Woodson, CB

Had four interceptions and ranked second among defensive backs with 64 tackles despite playing the second half of the season with knee and toe injuries. Missed two games, including the Nov. 29 loss at Dallas. Didn't allow a TD pass, though he rarely covered the opponent's best receiver. Was targeted 68 times and gave up 33 catches for 456 yards. Matched Harris for the team lead in penalties with 12 (five illegal contact, four holds, three pass interferences). Some scouts felt he was the MVP of the defense.

Grade: B-plus.

Atari Bigby, S

First-year starter had a knack for making big hits and big plays. Led the team with five interceptions and 13 pass breakups, but allowed five TDs. Was targeted 65 times and allowed 37 completions for 564 yards. Committed eight penalties (four pass interferences, two face masks, one unnecessary roughness and one delay of game).

Grade: C.

Nick Collins, S

Third-year starter again failed to match his level of play as a rookie. Missed three games in the middle of the season with a knee injury but got his job back despite solid play from rookie Aaron Rouse in his absence. Gave up four TDs. Was targeted 46 times but gave up only 15 completions and committed only one penalty (for unnecessary roughness).

Grade: C-minus.

Jarrett Bush, CB

Began the season as the nickel (or third) cornerback and started in place of Woodson at Dallas, where he had a horrific performance. Gave up two TDs and was flagged for pass interference on consecutive snaps against the Cowboys before getting benched. Never returned to the nickel package after sustaining a calf injury on Dec. 9 against Oakland. Had three defensive penalties (all for pass interference) and a team-high three penalties on special teams. Gave up five TDs, was targeted 64 times and gave up 29 completions for 319 yards. Also botched a potential fumble recovery late in the NFC championship game.

Grade: D-minus.

Tramon Williams, CB

Played in all 16 games plus both playoff contests but didn't become a regular contributor on defense until the Thanksgiving game at Detroit. Replaced Bush as the nickel cornerback and held up well. Allowed only one TD, was targeted 23 times and gave up 10 completes for 161 yards and was flagged just once for pass interference and twice on special teams. Returned a punt 94 yards for a TD against Carolina on Nov. 18 and averaged 22.8 yards on a team-high 30 kickoff returns and had a 49-yard kickoff return in the NFC championship game.

Grade: C-minus.

Frank Walker, CB

The only unrestricted free agent signed last offseason, rarely played on defense but contributed on special teams. Gave up one TD, was targeted 21 times and gave up 13 completions for 146 yards. Committed two defensive penalties (a personal foul and a holding). Was inactive for the NFC championship game and after signing only a one-year contract, probably won't return.

Grade: D-minus.

Will Blackmon, CB

Showed flashes of brilliance on special teams (two TDs - a fumble recovery and a 57-yard punt return — against Oakland on Dec. 9) and was solid in limited playing time in the nickel and dime defense. Didn't allow a TD, was targeted seven times and gave up just one completion for 7 yards but was limited to just nine games because of a recurring foot injury. Did not commit a penalty. If healthy, could be the nickel back and a potential starter.

Grade: D-plus.

Aaron Rouse, S

Rookie third-round pick started three games in place of the injured Collins and had a pair of interceptions, but hardly played — other than on special teams — after Collins returned. Didn't give up a TD, was targeted 12 times and gave up six completions for 77 yards. Didn't commit a penalty. Athletic, physical defender could push for a starting job in '08.

Grade: D-plus.

Charlie Peprah, S

Played in all 16 games, primarily on special teams and tied for sixth on the team with 11 special teams tackles.

Grade: D.

Tyrone Culver, S

Spent the season on injured reserve with a shoulder injury.

Grade: Incomplete.