

Rating the Packers vs. Vikings

Truly special in the end

Posted: Sept. 9, 2008

Green Bay - One low-hanging punt by Chris Kluwe. One 76-yard punt return for a touchdown by Will Blackmon. That basically was the difference between the Green Bay Packers and Minnesota Vikings on Monday night at Lambeau Field in a taut opener won by the Packers, 24-19. Special teams also were the underpinning of the Packers' 16-13 victory over the Philadelphia Eagles on opening day a year ago. The Vikings' premier special-teams player, linebacker Heath Farwell, went on injured reserve Aug. 11 with a knee injury. They feared the special-teams matchups against the Packers, and in the end their worst fears were realized. Here is a rating of the Packers against the Vikings, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

RECEIVERS (4)

Greg Jennings and Donald Driver are everything a new QB could want. By and large, they run decisive routes, almost always are where they're supposed to be and catch just about everything. The offense was plum-awful in the first quarter. On the first snap of the second quarter, Jennings found himself one-on-one against backup CB Charles Gordon because rookie FS Tyrell Johnson bit on a play fake. Jennings kept running and running until the bomb from Aaron Rodgers carried 64 yards into his vise-like grip at the 6 for a gain of 56. It was just another example of Jennings' stunning ability to outmaneuver defenders far downfield. Driver ran a neat slant-and-go route against CB Antoine Winfield for an apparent 68-yard TD but it was called back. Otherwise, Winfield covered Driver effectively. FB Korey Hall operated as the No. 3 goal-line TE for Jermichael Finley, who was inactive. Tory Humphrey surprisingly moved bigger people blocking in-line but then blocked poorly on the final series.

OFFENSIVE LINE (4)

Chad Clifton decisioned DE Jared Allen. Other than his first-quarter holding penalty against Allen, Clifton blanked Allen in the 13 dropbacks in which they were pitted one-on-one. The Packers gave Clifton chip help from a running back on four dropbacks, including the three seven-step drops. In all, Clifton was alone against Allen on 62% of dropbacks. The nightmares that NT Pat Williams used to cause Green Bay were minimal, largely due to Jason Spitz. Early on, Spitz was a little slow getting his snapping hand on Williams but later adjusted. Williams ruined just one run. Daryn Colledge had a terrible miss against DT Fred Evans on the goal line. He blocked better at the second level than in-line. Tony Moll can't be faulted on his illegally downfield penalty that wiped out the long TD to Driver. Only Rodgers and Driver knew the run was being changed to a pass. Moll isn't a real good knee bender and sometimes loses the leverage battle, but he punched hard and went after people. Mark Tauscher had his hands full with DE Ray Edwards, who beat him for the only knockdown and the only flush. Tauscher did get good movement in the run game but also had bad misses against LB Chad Greenway (when he fired underneath him) and Edwards on runs totaling minus-5.

QUARTERBACKS (4½)

This was a lights-out debut for Rodgers. Unlike his first few years, he kept his emotions in check. Not only did he play his position beautifully, he led the team. He seemed to process information very well. He didn't come close to an interception. He threw tight spirals accurately, completing his final 10. His arm strength seemed well above the league average. And he made excellent decisions on when to run and how to handle himself in the open. When he saw openings, he took them, not once bolting the pocket prematurely. If this keeps up, foes will have to "spy" Rodgers. He was fortunate to recover his own fumbled exchange, missed a wide-open Donald Lee in the end-zone corner and held the ball on a sack that was nullified by penalty.

RUNNING BACKS (4)

Obviously, the Packers must have Ryan Grant. The difference between Grant (24 snaps) and Brandon Jackson (30) is dramatic. Nursing a bad hamstring, Grant still had enough for runs of 19 and 57 yards through the middle. By making LB Ben Leber miss each time, Grant gained an additional 58 yards. Grant might not have exceptional vision but he gets in and out of holes fast. The decision to waive Vernand Morency left Jackson as the third-down back for the first time in his career. He didn't seem sure of himself and fumbled once. Even though Leber was tugging on his jersey, Hall ran a goal-line route from TE and made a tumbling catch for a 1-yard TD.

DEFENSIVE LINE (3)

Defensive linemen tend to play high in early season games. That's what happened to Ryan Pickett (35 snaps) and Johnny Jolly (52) in the first quarter, but after that they were much stouter. Pickett, who hadn't taken a snap in August, tired somewhat down the stretch. Colin Cole (28) was up and down at the point but did register two pressures, one more than he had in 130 snaps last season. Aaron Kampman, an iron man with 72 plays, didn't dominate RT Ryan Cook but still wound up with the only sack (on a stunt) and three other pressures. Playing against second- and third-string left tackles, Cullen Jenkins (64) had 3½ pressures and unselfishly helped others as the grab man on stunts. His pass rush was better than it had been all summer. And, all things considered, he was OK against the run. Kabeer Gbaja-Biamila felt none the worse for wear after going 30 snaps on a sore knee. He didn't jump early on his sack-fumble that was disallowed but might have been lined up offside. The Vikings did run effectively at him. Michael Montgomery (12 snaps at DE, eight at DT) got the utility call over Jason Hunter (merely 1, at DT).

LINEBACKERS (3½)

A.J. Hawk looked a little sluggish but having him back from a monthlong chest injury was big. He was adequate against the run but gave up some plays in coverage, including a 23-sideline route to TE Garrett Mills in which he lost leverage and depth. Hawk had one knockdown in eight blitzes. Nick Barnett was his typical active, aggressive, nasty self. Barnett got caught napping on a 14-yard screen-turned-inside route to Chester Taylor. The ability of Brady Poppinga to clear out interference and Barnett to scrape off into two gaps on cross-strong blitzes blunted the Vikings' counter-gap scheme. Poppinga dropped an interception.

SECONDARY (3)

Atari Bigby spent most of the game as the eighth man in the box and handled the dirty work like a linebacker. A few plays after showing poor footwork on a 17-yard pass to Mills, Bigby retaliated by catching the wayward pass by Tarvaris Jackson for a game-clinching interception. Nick Collins made a smashing hit on TE Visanthe Shiancoe to turn a 24-yard catch against Poppinga into an incompletion. Al Harris matched with Bernard Berrian and was attacked deep by coach Brad Childress. Surprisingly, Harris stayed with Berrian, although Berrian missed much of camp with turf toe. Harris drew a 26-yard interference penalty and might have had another long one. After getting run over by Adrian Peterson, Harris saved a TD with a shoulder-high tackle. Charles Woodson was far too wide on a slot blitz, giving Peterson the hole that he shot through for 34 yards, and then was beaten by Berrian on a 24-yard post that almost ruptured into a 64-yard TD.

KICKERS (2)

Mason Crosby hit from 42, then kicked a 33-yarder so low that it was blocked by Cedric Griffin. That was a shocker. He crushed five kickoffs for averages of 73.6 yards and 4.12 seconds hang time. Hitting three of five punts tight to the sideline, Derrick Frost debuted with averages of 45.2 (gross), 42.6 (net) and 4.07 (hang time).

SPECIAL TEAMS (5)

The secret of Blackmon's success is more his instant acceleration than change of direction. On his TD, he shot up the field so fast that the Vikings' tackling angles went haywire. Hunter and Humphrey each had at least two pancake blocks as Green Bay imposed its physical superiority. The only negative was Bigby's inability to field an onside kick that went out of bounds.

OVERALL (4)

From the Sept 10, 2008, editions of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel