

Rating the Packers vs. Falcons

There's no defending effort

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Green Bay - Aaron Rodgers answered the bell with a sprained right shoulder. Many of his teammates, especially those on defense, didn't show up.

That basically was the story Sunday at Lambeau Field as the Green Bay Packers, a team that won 13 games in the regular season a year ago, lost by the margin of a field goal to the Atlanta Falcons, a team that won only four.

Was it really an upset? Only time will tell. But if the Packers don't find some answers fast on defense, their season will spiral out of control.

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

RECEIVERS (4)

After two three-and-out possessions, Mike McCarthy turned to a two-tight set with Tory Humphrey and Donald Lee that was the key to the 398-yard explosion in the final three quarters. Humphrey, who had one reception since first joining the team in August 2005, caught four for 67 yards, including 28 after the catch. Humphrey beat a blown coverage down the right seam for 37 and came free for what would have been a 20-yard TD down the left seam but Rodgers didn't see him and took a sack. Humphrey was penalized for holding DE Chauncey Davis on a stretch play and wrecked another rush by inexplicably failing to block CB Brent Grimes. But he also showed strength and grit by putting DE Jamaal Anderson on his back at the finish of another run. Only four balls were thrown Donald Driver's way but he made the most of them, including a 44-yard TD with Grimes and FS Erik Coleman all over him. Greg Jennings caught four of eight, marring his day with an early third-and-6 drop.

OFFENSIVE LINE (3)

The C-RG combination of Scott Wells and Jason Spitz was much more effective in its second game back than its first. The Packers generally kept their distance from hulking NT Grady Jackson, who insisted with a wink afterward that he was not a pound above 360. Other than a holding penalty on a screen that was declined and a high shotgun snap, Wells didn't have a bad play. Spitz was very solid in protection as well and did a better job reading and reacting on the outside zone plays. After a week of brow-beating from the staff, Chad Clifton was trying to finish blocks. However, he was at least partially responsible for the two sacks, surrendered knockdowns to DE John Abraham and LB Michael Boley, and cost Ryan Grant a big gainer on the first snap by failing to sustain against Abraham. When Clifton exited with a pulled hamstring 15 plays into the second half, Daryn Colledge moved to LT and Allen Barbre played LG. Colledge yielded two of the four knockdowns. Barbre had a holding penalty but got impressive movement against DT Jonathan Babineaux on the shovel pass for a TD.

QUARTERBACKS (4)

Brett Favre began to endear himself to teammates in his seventh start by playing through a partially separated left shoulder against Philadelphia. Rodgers might have accomplished essentially the same thing with his gutsy, pain-filled showing. At this point, Rodgers is the absolute least of this team's problems. Bad wing and all, he threw a perfect ball to Driver that carried 54 yards. When coordinator Brian VanGorder rushed three 10 times, four 29 times and five or more only once, Rodgers went to his tight ends underneath Cover 2 zones eight times for 92 yards. He took deeper drops than in any previous game and threw accurately. He threw three balls away, including one after the errant snap, and stayed away from trouble. However, for the second time in two weeks, he made a bad mistake in the last 5 minutes of a tight game and suffered a costly interception.

RUNNING BACKS (3½)

This was the best Grant has looked since the Seattle game nine months ago. He played a season-high 40 snaps without apparent hamstring difficulty. He opened it up and turned the corner several times, outrunning MLB Curtis Lofton twice. Rather than going out of bounds, he dished out forearm licks to tacklers. He ran through a tough hit by SS Lawyer Milloy and WLB Keith Brooking to convert a third-and-1 play by a few inches. But Grant still must tighten his overall game. On the first sack, Rodgers had nowhere to go after Grant got knocked off his check-down route. Brandon Jackson (19 snaps) made a nice up-field cut for 9 on a third-and-3 play but showed almost no open-field pizzazz when matched one-on-one in the flat.

DEFENSIVE LINE (½)

This group hasn't played this badly in a long time. Rookie Matt Ryan dropped back 28 times and wasn't sacked or even knocked down when in the pocket. Aaron Kampman ran into chips by the running back but even when he was one-on-one against RT Tyson Clabo nothing happened. By failing to close down his gap, Kampman also gave Michael Turner a 22-yard run. The other end, first-time starter Michael Montgomery, offered little as a rusher and took himself out of plays by lacking discipline. When Montgomery left with an ankle injury after 36 snaps, rookie Jeremy Thompson played 20 and got knocked around. Against the run, Thompson is too light at 258 pounds and Kabeer Gbaja-Biamila (14) is too enfeebled to hold his ground. "KGB" beat the snap two or three times but couldn't finish. Ryan Pickett (41) held the point better than Colin Cole (30) and Johnny Jolly (52), who is starting games fast but fizzling later on.

LINEBACKERS (1)

The Falcons kept pounding and pounding between the tackles and this unit was powerless to stop them. This should have been Brady Poppinga's kind of game but he got roughed up just like Nick Barnett and A.J. Hawk. Barnett missed two tackles, had a hard time getting away from C Todd McClure and looked just like another linebacker. He had a chance to blast Jerious Norwood short of the first-down marker on third and 3 but the scatback ran right through him for an extra 2 yards. Playing with a sore groin, Hawk couldn't even run with TE Justin Peelle on a fourth-and-1 TD pass. Coordinator Bob Sanders blitzed just five times. Hawk rushed on each of those and didn't show any shake-and-bake or power.

SECONDARY (1½)

Starting for injured Atari Bigby and Aaron Rouse, Charlie Peprah was hardly a force. He looked a step or two slow, didn't make any big hits and blew the coverage against TE Ben Hartsock on the red-zone bootleg pass on which Tramon Williams made a stunning reaction to intercept. Williams makes his share of mistakes each week and needs to tackle lower, but for now he's better than Will Blackmon and Pat Lee. Blackmon was beat at the line and at the top of the route by Roddy White for a 22-yard TD in man-to-man coverage, then relaxed when Ryan scrambled and gave up a 31-yard gain to Michael Jenkins. Lee probably has more natural coverage ability than Blackmon but has all kinds of development ahead before he can be labeled a player. Charles Woodson was beat badly by White's double move for a 37-yard bomb to open the game, and kept getting pushed down around the line. But even with a broken toe the guy always tries to be physical. Nick Collins continues to play with so much more confidence than in the past.

KICKERS (1½)

Mason Crosby hit from 50 and missed from 53. He also mis-hit one of his four kickoffs, finishing with averages of 72.5 (yards) and 3.57 seconds (hang time). His onside kickoff with 1:56 left was just awful. Derrick Frost had one poor punt and two effective ones, finishing with 41.0 (gross), 40.0 (net) and 3.71 (hang time).

SPECIAL TEAMS (1½)

Norwood's 54-yard kickoff return, the result of a failure to attack the wedge, nipped the Packers' comeback in the bud. The Packers claimed Grimes took a dive to draw the holding penalty on Jermichael Finley that negated Crosby's 43-yard FG. Blackmon got back on the beam, breaking four tackles on four kickoff returns and averaging 27.5.

OVERALL (2)

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