

Rating the Packers vs Vikings

Few Things Follow Game Plan

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Green Bay - Coach Mike McCarthy put his team in shotgun formation with multiple spread receivers on the first series Sunday at the Metrodome, and his opening play was some cockamamie toss to Donald Driver out of the backfield that lost 2 yards.

It was almost all downhill from there for the Green Bay Packers. Trailing in just about every line of the final team statistics except for penalties (10) and penalty yardage (80), the Packers would have been routed had it not been for the brilliant touchdown returns by Nick Collins and Will Blackmon.

Here is a rating of the Packers in their 28-27 loss to the Minnesota Vikings, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

RECEIVERS (1½)

On the third-and-7 play at the end, the Packers say they were ready for the seven-man blitz they got from coordinator Leslie Frazier. If that's the case, it'd be better to have the ball in the hands of Greg Jennings rather than Donald Driver. When Driver caught the hitch at the line, the defender covering him, FS Madiou Williams, was 3 yards off. The coaches expected Driver to get the first down, not fail even to make a move and run right into Williams for a gain of 3. Other than two called runs that Aaron Rodgers turned into slants for 30 yards plus a 7-yard sideline route, Jennings was a non-factor. His fumble was the third of his career. McCarthy got excellent production from the 2008 debut of his five wideout set, but used it only half a dozen times. Tory Humphrey, regarded by McCarthy as his best blocking TE, controlled DE Jared Allen for several seconds on Ryan Grant's 1-yard TD toss to his side. Humphrey, not Donald Lee, was used as the lead blocker three times on heavy-duty power-gap plays. Lee had his second straight subpar blocking game.

OFFENSIVE LINE (½)

Chad Clifton, 32, turned in one of the poorest performances of his nine-year career. On the second of two safeties, DE Jared Allen simply knocked Clifton's hands off his chest and ran around him. Early in the third quarter, Clifton's feet almost didn't move when Allen drove by him inside to hammer Rodgers. Another sack occurred when Clifton got in the way of running back Brandon Jackson as he was heading out on a wheel route, giving Rodgers nowhere to go with the ball. And with the outcome at hand in the final 2 minutes, Clifton couldn't even find a way to execute a back-side cut-off block on DT Kevin Williams. His false-start penalty also ruined a fourth-quarter drive. Jason Spitz didn't exactly cover himself in glory, either. His one-on-one protection skills, which improved in 2007, failed him Sunday. He yielded the first safety to Kevin Williams, a sack to DE Brian Robison on a stunt, a knockdown to DT Ellis Wymys on a spin and another flush to Robison. Daryn Colledge was more than functional down after down but also drew three penalties. The top performers were Mark Tauscher and Scott Wells. Most of the good runs were to the right behind Tauscher, who also limited DE Ray Edwards to one pressure. For the first time ever, Wells didn't get blown up for a "bad" run or pressure by NT Pat Williams.

QUARTERBACKS (1½)

One of the lead items on Aaron Rodgers' off-season to-do list will be playing well in the Metrodome. Some teams have gone in there over the past few years with a spread offense like the one prepared by McCarthy and picked apart the Vikings' vulnerable pass defense. But the Packers never could get that far, partly because of poor protection and partly because of Rodgers. On the third play of the game, the Vikings blew a coverage, leaving Jordy Nelson wide open deep down the left side. But it was something that Rodgers didn't anticipate and by the time he looked left after scanning right, it was too late and his pass went awry. Late in the second quarter, a promising drive ended when Rodgers waited too long on an aborted screen and then threw downfield to Driver. By then, Colledge was illegally downfield, which really wasn't his fault. It was Rodgers' fault for not sensing that the late downfield pass can't be an option. Rodgers was lucky not to have been intercepted twice when he reacted poorly to defenders backing off the line into middle zone coverage.

RUNNING BACKS (3½)

After perhaps being overly patient with the run in the previous three games, McCarthy probably didn't give it to Grant enough. Without yardage lost in four penalties, Grant would have had an extra 25 yards and a 100-yard day. Grant was in fine form, generally locating seams and giving his all to roar through them. Defensive backs kept chopping him down like a ton of bricks, but he did make SS Darren Sharper miss on his long gain of 14. The inverted wishbone with Korey Hall and John Kuhn fronting Grant was used for only three plays but it served its purpose.

DEFENSIVE LINE (2½)

Coordinator Bob Sanders' decision to blitz more two weeks straight (on Sunday, it was 31.3% five or more, 12.5% six or more) indicates that his four-man rush is lacking. On the right side, Mike Montgomery (46 snaps), Jeremy Thompson (26) and Kenny Pettway (five) never even threatened Gus Frerotte. On the left, Aaron Kampman (71) rushed one-on-one 78.5% of the time against RT Ryan Cook and settled for two pressures. Generally speaking, Ryan Pickett (45) and Johnny Jolly (49) played base downs and Colin Cole (30) and Justin Harrell (24) played pass downs. Just about the entire eight-man rotation stayed square, adhered to gap-control principles and got to the ball.

LINEBACKERS (1)

Based on the way he's playing, A.J. Hawk better still be limited by a groin injury. Hawk's disappointing season continues as he showed poor change of direction, marginal awareness and no better than average take-on and shed. He looks stiff in coverage, has to gather himself before making cuts, missed three tackles and isn't playing with speed. Maybe the Packers will elect to hide him in the middle for Nick Barnett, who blew out his knee on the seventh play of the third quarter. Actually, Barnett was playing the run as well as he has during his disappointing season. His replacement, Desmond Bishop, got embarrassed on Chester Taylor's 47-yard TD catch and was out of position on Adrian Peterson's decisive 29-yard TD run. Still, Bishop delivered a sensational jarring hit on Peterson, forcing him to fumble on fourth and 1. Bishop is a step or two slower than Barnett but he's unafraid and a hitter. Brady Poppinga had Peterson dead-to-rights twice, missed both tackles and gave up 22 extra yards each time. That simply cannot be tolerated.

SECONDARY (4½)

It's hard to play safety much better than Nick Collins. He did miss Peterson three times, but a turf toe injury that he suffered in the first quarter was a contributing factor. Despite the injury, he blew up TE Visanthe Shiancoe in the flat and then made a phenomenal interception and 59-yard TD return. The other safety, Atari Bigby, continued to struggle in his second game back from a hamstring injury. At this point, he's slow and can't afford to be matched deep with a fleet wide receiver. Conversely, Al Harris hasn't allowed a single completion in his two-game return from a spleen injury. He spent at least 75% of his time covering Bernard Berrian, who was shut out. Charles Woodson has taught Tramon Williams to read routes and take calculated risks. The teacher and pupil each undercut routes beautifully for picks.

KICKERS (½)

Mason Crosby hit from 48 and 40, then missed from 52 in the closing seconds. Uncharacteristically, he mis-hit four of his five kickoffs, averaging 65.6 yards and 3.07 seconds of hang time. Derrick Frost is a good holder and might stick because of it. His seven punts had averages of 40.1 (gross), 35.0 (net) and 3.66 hang time, and he batted .500 on two free kicks.

SPECIAL TEAMS (4)

After a terrible start that gave the Vikings' porous units hope, Blackmon nearly saved the day with a 65-yard punt return. He also might have set a record by fielding a punt a yard deep in the end zone. Nelson didn't look good returning kickoffs.

OVERALL (2)

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