

Rating the Packers: Week 16 vs. Lions

Taking away small measure of success

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Green Bay - The Green Bay Packers didn't dominate the woeful Detroit Lions on Sunday at Lambeau Field but their 31-21 victory still was a whole lot better than the alternative.

So the Packers were able to salvage a measure of sunshine from the darkness of the last six weeks and finished with a 6-10 record, good for third place in the NFC North Division and 13th place in the 16-team National Football Conference.

Last year, their 13-3 record won the division. Then they went on to finish second in the NFC playoffs.

The Packers were led against the Lions by Aaron Rodgers just as they were this season by the quarterbacks. For the 11th time in the 15-year history of the Journal Sentinel's "Rating the Packers" feature, quarterbacks garnered the highest total of footballs.

Of course, the departed Brett Favre was responsible for the dominance at quarterback until this season.

Nonetheless, the quarterbacks and every other position fared worse in the composite weekly ratings than they did in 2007. In the overall category, the Packers averaged 2.78 footballs, almost one full football below a year ago (3.67).

The Rodgers-led quarterbacks were first with 53½ footballs, or an average of 3.34.

Following, in order, were: receivers, 51½ footballs (3.22 average); running backs, 47½ (2.97); defensive backs, 45½ (2.84); special teams, 44½ (2.78); offensive line, 42½ (2.66); defensive line, 40 (2.5); kickers, 38 (2.38); and linebackers, 35 (2.19).

The biggest drop-off occurred at linebacker, where the average plummeted an average of 1.17 footballs from last season. Kickers were down 1.01, followed by defensive line (0.67), special teams (0.50), offensive line (0.34), quarterbacks (0.33), receivers (0.20), defensive backs (0.16) and running backs (0.09).

Defensive end Aaron Kampman was player of the week three times. Two players, safety Nick Collins and Rodgers, were named twice.

Just two 5-football performances were awarded: the special teams in Week 1 against Minnesota and the defensive backs in Week 7 against Indianapolis.

As a team, the Packers' drew 4½ footballs against the Colts and 4 in September victories over Minnesota and Detroit. They were handed their lowest total (1) in a 51-29 loss at New Orleans.

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

RECEIVERS (2)

For a player of Greg Jennings' caliber, it was a poor way to end a season. Certainly, he didn't look ready to play, based on the fact that he dropped three passes in the first quarter. Later, he made a beautiful adjustment on an underthrown 47-yard pass and gathered it in, showing great body control. But then there were other occasions in which he ran lazy, rounded-off routes, didn't make sharp fakes at the break point and didn't have his hands in proper position. In contrast, Donald Driver caught all six of the balls thrown to him and basically owned CB Leigh Bodden. Rather quietly, Driver has done an excellent job this year running sideline take-off routes. So the coaches put Driver, not Jennings, on the field for the critical play-action bomb that turned into a 71-yard TD and clinched the victory. Driver also blocked well. Jermichael Finley looked like a million bucks separating twice from SS Daniel Bullocks in man-to-man coverage for big plays. But then he ran past CB Dexter Wynn, another member of the Lions' inept secondary, and dropped what might have been a 39-yard TD.

OFFENSIVE LINE (3)

Remember to keep in mind just how hapless the Lions' defense is. Having said that, Daryn Colledge's first start at RT wasn't bad. He seemed comfortable outside. He moved well in the open field. And he recovered two fumbles, the first by being heads-up and finishing the play and the second by taking the ball away under a pile of three Lions who got there first. RG Josh Sitton got some movement for the run, including two pulls on power-type runs. But he also was charged with at least partial responsibility for three "bad" runs and struggled in protection, giving up two knockdowns, two hurries and one-half sack. He will need a lot of work handling stunts and DTs with quickness in order to claim a job in 2009. Probably the best player was Jason Spitz, who once again demonstrated his invaluable versatility by moving from LG to C to replace injured Scott Wells (ankle) late in the first quarter. Spitz usually plays with competitive fire.

QUARTERBACKS (4½)

Coordinating what was his final game for Detroit, Joe Barry went down challenging Rodgers to make plays against a much higher than normal percentage of man-to-man coverage. He probably was banking on Rodgers not being able to make pinpoint throws with the wind chill index at 10 degrees. Rodgers recognized what was happening, handled the elements and never came close to making a terrible throw. Of his 10 incompletions, six were dropped, two were broken up, one was thrown away and one probably should have been caught. The Lions blitzed 25%, sacking him four times (2½ were his fault for various mistakes) and knocking him down three times. But Rodgers was on the money, even with rushers in his face twice.

RUNNING BACKS (3½)

Ryan Grant (42 snaps) broke six tackles, more than he has in several weeks, and went above 100 yards for the fourth time. He saw a cutback lane two or three times and ripped through for sizable gains. On the debit side, Grant continued to demonstrate why the Packers don't rely on him as a receiver. He fights the ball, frequently not catching it cleanly. And when FS Calvin Pearson roared up to upend him low and cause the fumble, it's possible Grant didn't even see him. Sometimes it seems as if he has blinders on. A quick, instinctive cut, the kind some gifted backs are born with, would have left the submarining Pearson eating dirt. If DeShawn Wynn (19 snaps) turns out to be only a tease, he did leave a hook for '09. He has more shake-and-bake than Grant and his speed is darn good for 230 pounds. But Wynn's fumble was just as bad as Grant's except Colledge recovered. John Kuhn also closed well, beating MLB Paris Lenon for a 5-yard TD pass.

DEFENSIVE LINE (2½)

Kampman, who played 72 of 73 snaps, did some good things against RT Gosder Cherilus in the run game but was unable to solve the big rookie with an assortment of bull rushes and up-field charges. Although he had Kampman alone on 73% of passes, Cherilus yielded just one pressure. Michael Montgomery (45) didn't get to Dan Orlovsky at all but several times used a reasonable facsimile of Reggie White's famed "hump" move to knock LT Jeff Backus off balance. With Montgomery's length, it might be his best move. It was another ho-hum day for Jeremy Thompson, who was limited to 18 snaps and had just a pressure. A more effective rusher was Jason Hunter (18), who worked at DT in nickel and at least kept C Dominic Raiola honest. His partner inside, Alfred Malone (18), wasn't bad bull-rushing. Johnny Jolly (46) probably should have done even more damage against slow-footed LG Manny Ramirez.

LINEBACKERS (4)

If Brady Poppinga played a better game in 2008, it wasn't often. He stayed home on the back side and made a few plays, then shot through a gap and tackled Kevin Smith for minus-1. On his only blitz, he beat FB Moran Norris and drilled Orlovsky simultaneously with Brandon Chillar, and in 13 rushes at RE in nickel he caused a few problems for Backus. Chillar played well, too. He gave as good as he got taking on the lead blocks of Norris, and was very effective in man-to-man coverage against TE Casey FitzSimmons. As Smith's sweep left for a 9-yard TD unfolded, the play was there for A.J. Hawk to make. But Hawk took his time flowing into the running lane, and when he did the pulling Raiola was able to eliminate him with a cut block. It just can't happen.

SECONDARY (3½)

Tramon Williams finished on a high note, giving up three completions in six targeted passes for 26 yards despite being matched on Calvin Johnson almost as much as Al Harris. Charles Woodson made a tough interception to set up a TD and covered well. On the other hand, Harris probably played his worst game of the year. He couldn't prevent John Standeford from beating him across the field for 35 yards. A play later, he blew the coverage and let Standeford run free behind him for 36 more yards. That's a horrendous miscue. He didn't find the ball fast enough on Johnson's fade for a 9-yard TD, lost his poise and shoved Cherilus for a 15-yard penalty, and had two coverage fouls that were declined. Collins intercepted one pass, dropped another and missed four tackles, including a shot at Johnson on his 14-yard TD in which he was supposed to have LB help. He gets out of control too much. Charlie Peprah played more than a half for injured Aaron Rouse and failed to distinguish himself.

KICKERS (4)

Mason Crosby came up just short on a 69-yard FG from a rare free kick, hit from 36 and averaged 65.2 yards and 3.78 seconds (hang time) on four deep kickoffs. One way or another, Jeremy Kapinos put two more punts inside the 20 and averaged 37.7 (gross), 37.7 (net) and 3.27 hang time on his three attempts.

SPECIAL TEAMS (4)

Jordy Nelson fielded the bouncing opening kickoff, broke a pair of tackles and weaved his way to a 45-yard return. On returns, Will Blackmon operated on the edge but avoided the killer mistake. Blackmon and Peprah led effective kickoff coverage.

OVERALL (3½)

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