

2008 player grades: Defense

By Bob McGinn of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
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DEFENSIVE LINE (12)

Colin Cole: Playing his most snaps (451) since 2005, Cole had the best pass-rushing season of his five-year career. He had 11½ pressures compared to just one in 130 snaps last year. By increasing his weight 10 pounds to 328, Cole also was more consistent holding his ground at the point of attack. Cole (6 feet 1½ inches) does get overwhelmed at times, but he has tremendous strength and exemplary gap discipline. His hand usage enabled him to take a side as a rusher, and sometimes he'd just keep going to the QB. **Grade: C**

Justin Harrell: His second season turned into a nightmare when he fell far out of shape in February and then ruptured a lumbar disc in March as he lifted weights trying to make up for lost ground. Another back operation Aug. 25 was followed by seven weeks on the physically-unable-to-perform list, six games in the rotation and then three weeks on the inactive list when his back and hip flared up again. In 301 snaps (105 this year), Harrell has not a single pressure. He can be hard to move and he can locate the ball (44 tackles), but his pass rush has been worthless. Anything the team can get from this first-round pick gone bad will be gravy. **Grade: F**

Jason Hunter: A year ago, he had 30 tackles in 18 games on special teams, most by a Packer since 1984. This season, in 12 games, he had three. It was a stunning drop-off for Hunter, who perhaps forgot what got him to the NFL as a free agent from Appalachian State. Maybe putting on 10 pounds (to 270) to play defense affected his speed in coverage. His snaps from scrimmage have increased from 34 to 86 to 89, and he did show a little bit as an inside nickel rusher in the last two games. **Grade: D-**

Cullen Jenkins: The pass rush never recovered from Jenkins' season-ending pectoral injury suffered in the fourth quarter of Week 4 when he reached out to sack Tampa Bay QB Brian Griese. Jenkins had been off to the best start of his career with 19 pressures and 18 tackles. "If you're running a Viking or Bear scheme, Cullen Jenkins is your three-technique (DT) and he's your star," an NFC North scout said in late December. He had surgery Oct. 2. At 28, he should have several strong seasons in him. **Grade: A-**

Johnny Jolly: Second on the unit in playing time with 67.8%, Jolly had a pedestrian season. He was a major disappointment as a pass rusher, ranking sixth on the group in pressures per snap (one every 71.1). His spin move fooled no one and his bull rushes kept coming up short. Although he has good size (6-3, 320), Jolly isn't a stout point-of-attack player. His gap control lacked discipline, with long runs sometimes the result. Jolly does make tackles a gap or two away, and in pursuit. He likes the game and plays hard, but there are some reservations about his commitment to conditioning. Plus, he still has to deal with felony drug possession charges that could affect his availability. **Grade: C**

Aaron Kampman: Playing 95% of the downs, Kampman broke the unit record of 94.1% set by Vonnie Holliday in 1999 (the Journal Sentinel began recording snaps in '98). A remarkably conditioned athlete, he never seems to wear down. Really, Kampman couldn't afford to because his pass rush was all the team had without Jenkins. He averaged one pressure every 20.1 snaps, down slightly from the last two seasons. He also led the D-line in tackles for the fifth straight season, averaging one every 11.5 snaps. That also was off his pace of the last three seasons. Kampman also didn't force a single fumble in his 996 snaps, a critical flaw that needs fixing. **Grade: A**

Alfred Malone: Harrell's demise and the utter failure of every other inside pass rusher prompted Malone's promotion from the practice squad Dec. 1. He played 49 snaps in the final month, mostly as a DT on passing downs, but didn't have a pressure. A former Texan, Malone might be worth another look. **Grade: D**

Michael Montgomery: Montgomery had his best season by far and should be re-signed before becoming an unrestricted free agent in March. In a career-high 523 snaps, he ranked second on the unit in tackles per snap (one every 7.4). He's all about effort. He makes more than his share of plays flattening down from the back side or hustling back into cutback lanes. He's no better than average setting the edge. As a rusher, his athletic limitations surface. He does have long arms and a developing hump move. **Grade: C-**

Kenny Pettway: A former Jaguar, he was signed off the street Oct. 1 to take Jenkins' spot. He did play 35 snaps from scrimmage but never made a play. However, he was outstanding running down in special-teams coverage because he's big, fast and knows what he's doing. His season ended Nov. 30 with a blown knee that required reconstructive surgery. **Grade: D+**

Ryan Pickett: Pickett is a one-trick pony. He can hunker down at LT and, many more times than not, won't be moved by a double-team. That's vital for any defense to have. If pass shows, he can be single-blocked and still won't generate any pressure. If it's a run away from him, he has limited range and declining speed. Each year, he probably makes fewer plays on the ball. Still, Pickett led the D-line with one tackle every 7.2 snaps. At 29, Pickett has a year left on his contract with a cap salary of \$3.5 million. He played close to 350 pounds this season, which is OK for what he does. Teammates enjoy being around him. He's an overlooked team leader. **Grade: C+**

Jeremy Thompson: He got a shot at RE on base downs for Jenkins and at RE in nickel after Kabeer Gbaja-Biamila was cut after Week 7. But a rash of injuries limited him to just 174 when the coaches undoubtedly wanted to see a whole lot more. As it was, Thompson ranked third on the unit in pressures per snap (one every 38.7) but was eighth in tackles per snap (one every 13.4). He has speed to turn the corner, respectable strength and decent leverage against the run. He's also highly intelligent. His next step is to gain some confidence and just turn it all loose. **Grade: D-**

Anthony Toribio: Spent five weeks on the practice squad and the last two weeks on the 53-man roster but didn't play. He didn't show all that much at Division II Carson-Newman in a four-year career. **Grade: Incomplete**

LINEBACKERS (7)

Nick Barnett: Wasn't the downhill, attacking Pro Bowl-caliber performer that he had been in 2007, which easily was his best season. Still, he was the team's best linebacker, basically running the defense and providing an element of raw emotion and nastiness that was desperately needed. Then he blew out his knee at the Metrodome and underwent reconstructive surgery Nov. 20. Barnett, with five missed tackles, was on pace to miss only 10, which would have been his low since '03. He also allowed just one-half play of 20 yards or more after having averaged 6.5 in his first five seasons. **Grade: B-**

Desmond Bishop: There was no middle ground with Bishop in his second season. One minute he was making a tremendous play (he led the team in forced fumbles with three), the next he was getting killed. He replaced Barnett at MLB in Minnesota, giving up two long plays but drilling Adrian Peterson on fourth and 1 and making him fumble. As the starting WLB against Houston, Bishop meted out some punishing shots and forced two fumbles, but then he was destroyed three times in coverage. He also had an exceptional exhibition game against Tennessee. Bishop has good, not great speed. But he's a hitter, seems to have a nose for it and probably will have a chance to start in '09. **Grade: D+**

Brandon Chillar: The Packers got exactly what they expected from Chillar. The former Ram was their best cover LB, breaking up nine passes compared to six for the others combined. He was the major reason why no opposing TE had a 100-yard game. He changes directions well, has good speed and tackles efficiently. He also was the team's best blitzzer, registering one pressure for every 3.3 rushes. Chillar isn't nearly as good against the run. He tends to run around blocks, not take them on. **Grade: C**

Spencer Havner: Promoted from the practice squad Dec. 4. Played on special teams and in the goal-line defense over the final four games. The Packers have had him around for parts of three years. Maybe it's time to try with somebody else. **Grade: Incomplete**

A.J. Hawk: This was Hawk's poorest season. He led the team with 121 tackles but just one was for loss and he didn't have an interception, forced fumble or recovered fumble. Moreover, he managed just one pressure every 10.7 blitzes, by far the worst ratio among the LBs. As one NFC personnel director put it, "He played like a 4.6 guy in college and I see kind of a 4.8 guy now. He does not have a real burst to the ball. He does not look the same to me." Not only didn't Hawk play fast, he was inconsistent getting off blocks and never blew anybody up. Hawk played a steady game, and in general his gap discipline was fundamentally sound. He was responsible for three plays of 20 yards or more after averaging 4½ in his first two seasons. Hawk missed most of August with what a source close to him said was a pectoral injury, then fought through what the club called a groin injury without missing time. He was no better or worse in his seven starts at MLB than he had been at WLB. **Grade: C**

Danny Lansanah: The Packers promoted Lansanah from the practice squad Oct. 7 after they learned that Miami had plans to sign him to its 53-man roster. At the same time, they cut LB Tracy White. The Packers thought so little of Lansanah that they played him in just five games. He had impressed as a hard hitter and pass-rushing threat before being cut Aug. 30. **Grade: Incomplete**

Brady Poppinga: Lost playing time to Chillar against teams with receiving tight ends. In his third season as the SLB, he didn't produce a turnover and gave up 3½ plays of 20 or more, all coming in the final nine games. Poppinga is marginal in space and doesn't take good angles. For his size, his speed is OK. At times, his instincts really appear off. In desperation, Poppinga was given 46 snaps as a pass-rushing RE, but more than one scout said that was a lost cause. Poppinga will attack a lead blocker with as much fury as just about any LB in the NFL. He's an extremely intense, team-oriented individual. **Grade: C-**

SECONDARY (11)

Atari Bigby: Never seemed to be the same player after suffering an ankle injury in the third exhibition game. Underwent surgery Dec. 26 to remove loose bodies. It's hard to assess where Bigby's at. Last year, it appeared as if he would be benched in late November because of terrible coverage, excessive penalties and too many missed tackles. Then he intercepted four passes in the last six games and delivered a series of intimidation-style hits. Bigby reported over his playing weight in July and didn't have a great camp even before the ankle injury. With Bigby set to become a restricted free agent in March, the Packers will give him one of the three top tenders and wait to see if he's worthy of a long-term contract. **Grade: D+**

Will Blackmon: Blackmon is a wonderfully gifted athlete but that doesn't translate into his coverage ability. He lacks feel in man coverage, struggles at the ball and isn't quick recognizing route combinations. Little-used as the dime back, he also played some nickel and wound up defending just one pass. Blackmon didn't fare well on kickoff returns (21.0) but ranked ninth on punt returns with an 11.1 average, best in Green Bay since Desmond Howard (15.1) in 1996. The longer the season went on, the more chances that Blackmon took. He ended up fumbling four times, all on punt returns and all recovered by Green Bay. He also led in special-teams tackles with 18. **Grade: C-**

Jarrett Bush: Since being yanked as nickel back in Week 14 last season, Bush has played only a few snaps from scrimmage. His instincts in coverage appear minimal. In fact, he looked as comfortable cross-training as a safety in August as he ever did at cornerback. With 17 tackles, Bush was a high-energy player on special teams. However, he missed a team-high six tackles on special teams and also was penalized six times, the most by a special-teams player in Green Bay in more than 20 years. **Grade: D**

Nick Collins: Blossomed into a Pro Bowl player with by far his finest year. Made four great interceptions in the first nine games. After Collins broke in front of TE Jerramy Stevens for a pick, Tampa Bay coach Jon Gruden exonerated Brian Griese basically by indicating no safety ever had played the route quite like that before. Collins harnessed his remarkable speed and athleticism, trusted his instincts and, perhaps above all else, caught the ball. He did drop a team-high three interceptions but caught seven, returning the interceptions for a club-record 295 yards and three TDs (the last NFL safety to bring three back for scores was Kansas City's Lloyd Burruss in 1986). However, Collins was unable to keep it up. He gambled too much down the stretch trying to manufacture big plays and took himself out of plays with bad angles. After missing five tackles in the first half, Collins missed 12 in the second half for a team-high total of 17. He did play hurt for long stretches of the season. Collins allowed a career-low total of 2½ plays of 20 yards or more.

Grade: A-

Al Harris: There was question whether Harris would ever play again after he suffered a lacerated spleen in Week 3. But he returned in Week 8 and played some of his best football until a poor finish. After turning down some hits in 2007, he was more aggressive and missed a career-low four tackles. Harris gave up six plays of 20 yards or more, but four came in the final three games. Inexplicably, three were on blown assignments. At 34, he still has three years left on his contract, but the Packers will have to make the crucial call on how much he has left. **Grade: B**

Pat Lee: A second-round draft choice, Lee came to Green Bay having spent five years at Auburn but still seemed somewhat out of his element. He'll have to prove quickly that the game isn't too big for him. His impact from scrimmage (26 snaps, one tackle) was minimal. Ditto for his impact on special teams (69 snaps, two tackles). He missed the final five games with what appeared to be a minor knee injury. **Grade: D-**

Charlie Peprah: Early in camp it appeared as if Peprah's third season would be by far his best. But a hamstring injury Aug. 5 sidelined him for the rest of the month and then he wasn't much of a factor in the regular season. Peprah can cover, is bright and instinctive. But he's also small and doesn't run real fast. He'll have a chance to remain as a special-teams leader and No. 4 safety. **Grade: D**

Joe Porter: His 4.31-second speed in the 40-yard dash probably makes him the fastest player on the roster. But there's a reason why he was only the nickel back at Rutgers in his final two seasons. The game does seem too big for him. **Grade: Incomplete**

Aaron Rouse: Bigby's tribulations gave Rouse the chance to start six games and play extensively in a half-dozen others. The verdict isn't in but the thumbs are inching toward a downward direction. Rouse looks the part. Yet, he isn't an explosive hitter or dynamic tough guy. He's high-cut and leggy, leaving less than desired short-area agility and instinctive reactions. He has terrific hands and is a natural ball hawk, but he struggles in man coverage and directing traffic doesn't come naturally for him. He allowed 2½ TD passes and four plays of 20 yards or more. **Grade: D**

Tramon Williams: Williams doesn't have a long memory, which is good. But the fact he has to forget so much isn't. He gave up a team-high 10½ plays of 20 yards or more and four TD passes, exorbitant numbers for a nickel back who also started seven games. He blew too many assignments, sometimes guessing trying to make big plays. Nevertheless, there is much to like about Williams. He's tough, smart, confident and unselfish. He plays much faster than his timed speed. And his ball skills are outstanding, evidenced by his five interceptions. **Grade: C**

Charles Woodson: Allowed seven plays of 20 yards or more, down from eight each of the last two seasons, and one TD pass. Broke up a team-high 20 passes and intercepted seven, returning them for a career-high 169 yards and two TDs. Six of his interceptions were the result of spectacular individual effort. It was the best season by a Green Bay CB in many years. Woodson fractured a toe in the opener and wasn't able to practice fully until Nov. 5. Taking pain-killing shots to play on Sunday for about a month, he still threw his body around as if he were 22, not 32, and challenged just about every route. **Grade: A**