

2008 Team Grades

By Bob McGinn of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
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PASS OFFENSE (B)

The Packers slipped from second (270.9) in passing yards with Brett Favre to eighth (238.3) with Aaron Rodgers. Favre ranked sixth (95.7) in passer rating a year ago, just as Rodgers ranked sixth (93.8) this year. Playing for the Jets in 2008, Favre ranked 21st at 81.0. At times, especially in Weeks 2-6, the Packers were a dominant passing team. Greg Jennings caught 20 passes of 20 yards or more, including nine longer than 35, which were the most by a Packer since Antonio Freeman had nine in 1998. Jennings ranked sixth in yards (1,292), and his 16.2 average tied for seventh among the leading receivers. Old pro Donald Driver chipped in with his sixth 1,000-yard season (1,012), saving his best for last. Rodgers had to do much of the work himself because the Packers dropped from first to 14th in yards gained after the catch, according to STATS. The four returning wide receivers plus tight end Donald Lee all saw their yards-after-catch average decrease. The WRs also dropped 24 passes, most by the group since 2002, and Jennings was the leader with nine. The fact no running back had a reception for 20 yards or more reflected an unproductive screen game. The No. 18 rank in percentage of sacks allowed was Green Bay's worst finish since 1996. The offensive line was charged with 22 sacks, its most since '96. Neither of the tackles, Chad Clifton nor Mark Tauscher, played as well, and Rodgers wasn't as adept as Favre at getting the ball out on time. That's why he was guilty of taking 9½ sacks. Seven times, Rodgers and his receivers had the ball late in close games with a chance to win. They didn't come through once.

RUN OFFENSE (C-minus)

This was the fourth straight season in which the ground game finished a season better than it started. Through nine games, the Packers were averaging 98.1 per game and 3.76 per carry. In the last seven games, those marks improved to 131.7 and 4.56, leaving Green Bay ranked 17th in yards (112.8) and 18th in yards per carry (4.13). Mike McCarthy ran on 43.2% of the plays, up from 40.0% in '07 and just under the NFL average of 44.6%. McCarthy stayed with the zone scheme, mixing in a power play here and there and some power tosses out of three-back sets. Taking 83.4% of the team's carries by RBs, Ryan Grant ranked fifth in the NFL in attempts (312) and ninth in yards (1,203). Grant's 3.9 average tied for 21st among the top 30 rushers. Grant had five games with a sub-3.0 average but also four 100-yard games. According to STATS, Green Bay tied for 20th in negative runs with 43. Guard/center Jason Spitz was responsible for 19 "bad" runs, a team high. The Packers showed dramatic and necessary improvement in short yardage. Last year, they were 32nd in third- and fourth-and-1 conversion rate (35.7%). This year, with Grant converting 10 of 13 (76.9%), the Packers tied for 12th (71.4%). Minus a power-blocking TE, the Packers mixed and matched Donald Lee, Tory Humphrey and Jermichael Finley but probably didn't equal the power blocking of departed Bubba Franks. Although fullback Korey Hall missed five games, he and John Kuhn each averaged 17 snaps. Brandon Jackson played 315 snaps, 97 more than last year, but had 38 fewer carries.

PASS DEFENSE (B)

Through eight games, no team was playing the pass better; the opponents' passer rating was a league-low 59.9. But in the second half, with better quarterbacks and far better receivers appearing on the schedule, opponents posted a passer rating of 84.9. In the end, Green Bay ranked fourth (71.9), trailing Baltimore (60.6), Pittsburgh (63.4) and Tennessee (69.2). The Packers ranked 12th in passing yards allowed (202.8). By Week 9, the Packers had tied the club record for six interception returns for a TD, set in 1966. They held at six, but shattered the team record for most interception return yards with 685, which was well ahead of the runner-up Ravens (477) and sixth all-time. Nick Collins had TD bursts of 42, 62 and 59 en route to a 42.1 average in seven picks. Charles Woodson also intercepted seven, returning them for a 24.1 mark and two scores. Not to be outdone, Tramon Williams picked five and Aaron Rouse brought another back 99 yards. No linebacker had an interception. The secondary did it despite a pass rush that ranked just 25th in sack percentage. From 2002-'07, the Packers forced an average of seven fumbles on sacks, recovering 3.2. This year, the only sack fumble was caused by Cullen Jenkins against Dallas left tackle Flozell Adams. Aaron Kampman was a one-man gang, registering 49 of the 112 "pressures" by D-linemen. Coordinator Bob Sanders blitzed on 19.9% of passes, the Packers' lowest total since '02. His zone-blitz ratio of 2.8% was the club's lowest since '98. Last year, three TEs surpassed 100 yards; Chicago's Desmond Clark (8-81) in Week 10 had the most productive game this year.

RUN DEFENSE (D-minus)

When the run defense was awful early, the pass defense was good. Then the roles reversed down the stretch. Through nine games, the Packers allowed 154.6 rushing yards per game and 4.97 yards per carry. In the final seven games, they allowed 102.0 and 4.0. Ultimately, Green Bay ranked 26th against the run, its worst finish since 1983, and its yield of 131.9 was its highest since '88. Last year, the Packers gave up 102.9 and 3.88. The collapse was evident in all three areas of defense. Misalignments, shoddy gap discipline and missed tackles all contributed to 15 runs of 20 yards or more, up from seven in both '06 and '07 and the most in Green Bay since '04. Two weeks after being bludgeoned for 217 on the ground by Dallas, the Packers couldn't prevent Atlanta from running out the clock despite having nine defenders jammed into the box. It just wasn't a cohesive, physical defense. Collins was the team leader in missed tackles with 17. Minnesota's Adrian Peterson surpassed 100 yards rushing twice (103, 192); other 100-yard rushers were Dallas' Marion Barber (142), Tampa Bay's Earnest Graham (111), Atlanta's Michael Turner (121) and Houston's Steve Slaton (120). Meanwhile, the Packers had just 30 tackles for loss, their fewest since the statistic first was recorded in '92. According to STATS, Green Bay tied for 30th in fewest runs for negative yardage with 28. Opponents lost two fumbles in 458 carries: a strip of Peterson by Will Blackmon, and a strip of Slaton by Michael Montgomery.

SPECIAL TEAMS (D)

Mike Stock's units were down in 2006, up in '07 and back down again in '08. In a 10-category statistical comparison of special-teams performance, the Packers finished 26th. They were 17th at midseason. The punting game was a mess with Redskins discard Derrick Frost, whose 3.91-second average hang time through 12 games earned him a pink slip. His replacement, Jeremy Kapinos, was OK in brutal weather. Mason Crosby ranked just 28th in FG marksmanship (79.4%), and missed walk-off boots in Minnesota (of 52 yards) and Chicago (38). Coverage was middle-of-the-road. Blackmon (18), Jarrett Bush (17) and Desmond Bishop (15) led in tackles. Free agent Brett Goode didn't have a bad snap after being signed hurriedly to replace injured J.J. Jansen a week before the opener. Blackmon ranked ninth in punt-return average (11.1), returning two for TDs, but was merely 34th on KO returns (21.0). There were 41 missed tackles (Bush led with six), most since '05. And there were 25 penalties, most since '00. Bush had six penalties, most in more than 20 years. The unit broke even in turnover differential. Johnny Jolly blocked the first FG (against Chicago) under Stock, and Matt Flynn ran a nice fake punt for a first down in Chicago. But there were too many snafus, such as Frost fumbling a snap for a safety in Detroit, Finley's holding penalty taking a FG off the board in a three-point loss to Atlanta and Houston's Matt Turk, 38, avoiding a blocked punt and then taking off for an 18-yard gain.

PERSONNEL MOVES (C-minus)

Closing the door to Favre near the end of April, general manager Ted Thompson presided over the team's dramatic shift to Rodgers. He eventually traded the once-great QB to the Jets for what turned out to be a third-round draft choice. Vilified in the state and across the country, Thompson proved to be right. Establishing a young and effective player at the most important position was the most significant development of 2008. Thompson's only foray into unrestricted free agent brought linebacker Brandon Chillar, who was well worth \$5.4 million over two years. In other areas, Thompson wasn't nearly as successful. By trading down four times (against trading up once), he almost guaranteed the Packers would be the NFL's youngest team for a third straight year. The move down from No. 30 to No. 36 forfeited a shot at all-rookie type players in tight end Dustin Keller, safety Kenny Phillips, defensive end Phillip Merling and wide receiver Donnie Avery and prompted the selection of Jordy Nelson, the only one of nine draftees to make a sizable contribution. Refusing to pay megabucks to defensive tackle Corey Williams and trading him to Cleveland for a second-round pick was the smart play, but it backfired when Justin Harrell went in the tank and the second-rounder went for QB Brian Brohm. Thompson and negotiator Russ Ball, the replacement for non-renewed Andrew Brandt, caved together Aug. 4 in overpaying Grant. Cutting a perfectly good punter in Jon Ryan to add Frost was ludicrous. So was the release of special-teams ace Tracy White on Oct. 7. It's the Packers' job to know when players hit the wall; cutting Kabeer Gbaja-Biamila before the season would have saved them \$6.15 million. New president Mark Murphy didn't distinguish himself on his July 30 junket to Mississippi with the misconstrued \$20 million marketing offer to Favre.

COACHING (D-minus)

After being the runner-up to New England's Bill Belichick as AP coach of the year in 2007, Mike McCarthy did one of the poorest jobs in the NFL this year. The Packers endured a five-game losing streak, their longest in 18 years, because McCarthy couldn't win a close game. Seven of the defeats came with the Packers either tied or leading late in the fourth quarter. He simply couldn't find a way to win at the end of games, a brutal indictment of any coach at any level. Not only that, but the Packers led the NFL in penalty yardage (984, fourth most in club annals) one year after ranking second with 1,006. Unlike someone like Mike Holmgren, or even Mike Sherman, McCarthy never seemed too perturbed about this obvious lack of discipline in the ranks. The Packers still aren't a physical team on either side of the ball, and McCarthy's continued use of the zone-run game is the reason for that on offense. After avoiding the injury bug for two years, he failed to lift the team above injuries this year. His game management was OK. McCarthy, QB coach Tom Clements and coordinator Joe Philbin deserve plaudits for the development of Rodgers. McCarthy is widely praised by opposing coaches and scouts for his offensive multiplicity and passing game. He ran the ball more (43.2%), presided over an attack that turned the ball over just 21 times (the club's low since '95) and did well on third down (fifth) and in the red zone (sixth). But the 20th-ranked defense of Bob Sanders, the second worst in Green Bay since '92, was too predictable and blew way too many assignments for a unit coordinated for the third year by the same man.

OVERALL (D)

The Packers crashed a club-record seven games in the standings (13-3 to 6-10), surpassing the six-game fall from 2004 to 2005 that got Sherman canned. Only eight NFL teams in the 29-year history of the 16-game schedule ever had a 6-10 record or worse and a positive point differential. Amazingly enough, these Packers had the most favorable scoring margin at plus-39, slightly ahead of the 1990 San Diego Chargers, who also went 6-10 and finished at plus-34. You could say no team ever quite underachieved in the standings the way the '08 Packers did. The giveaway-takeaway table showing Green Bay at plus-7 didn't suggest losing, either; six of the other top seven teams in turnover ratio all made the playoffs. Eliminated from playoff contention in Game 14, Green Bay sunk to third in the mediocre NFC North Division. Their best victory was over Indianapolis (34-14) and their most complete performance came against Chicago (37-3), which put the Packers in a three-way tie with Minnesota and Chicago atop the division at 5-5. The Packers basically wasted the NFL lead in points scored (124) off turnovers, including a club-record seven defensive TDs. Eight starters missed a total of 43 games, including four on defense totaling 32. It was the club's worst bout with injuries since 2005 (11-66). For the third straight year, the Packers entered a season with the youngest 53-man roster in the league, this time sharing the top spot with Kansas City. A strange season ended with a 2-6 second half, the worst in Green Bay since Lindy Infante was closing out his futile four-year tenure in 1991.