

Rating the Packers vs. Browns

Packers pound weak foe

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Green Bay — When the Green Bay Packers left the Metrodome two weeks ago, their schedule offered up a two-week respite of pushovers followed by a return engagement with the Minnesota Vikings at Lambeau Field.

Thankfully, the preliminaries are over. Time for some attractive football.

Here is a rating of the Packers in their 31-3 road victory Sunday over Cleveland, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

RECEIVERS (4)

It has become rather apparent that Donald Driver has regained the title of No. 1 receiver that he lost to Greg Jennings last season. The targeted-pass total (Driver 39, Jennings 38) is even, but the production (Driver 479 yards, Jennings 356) isn't. Week in and week out, Driver is playing with extraordinary flair. He almost looks like a matador with the ball in his hand. Seldom does the first tackler bring him down. His 71-yard TD is 30 yards if he doesn't make S Brodney Pool miss in the open field, 48 if he doesn't stiff-arm pursuing CB Eric Wright. The run by Driver and the 45-yard TD run by Spencer Havner were inspiring in that two players, one the most productive receiver in club history and the other the lowliest of free agents, refused to be denied. Jennings is a class act but he's going to mar his reputation if he keeps moaning about every non-call. He has yet to achieve the level of play whereby he should be given the benefit of the doubt on routine breakups. After Jermichael Finley departed with a knee injury on his third snap, it left Donald Lee and Havner. Lee played every snap (66) after having played 61% (Finley was at 59.6%) through five games. Judged by his erratic performance (two penalties, one drop), Lee will need some relief. Based on their token coverage, foes haven't appeared to take Havner seriously as a receiver. They will now. He can move.

OFFENSIVE LINE (4 ½)

Generally speaking, both inside and outside zone runs work better against the 3-4 than the 4-3. Everyone else has been running on the Browns but the Packers' total of 202 is the most against Cleveland since Minnesota had 225 in the opener. Regardless of scheme, nothing would have mattered if NT Shaun Rogers hadn't been controlled. The fulcrum of the effort was Scott Wells, who played one of the finest games of his career. He stayed in front of Rogers, then pushed him a gap or two with the subtle help of a shove to Rogers' side by one of the guards. Rogers' weakness is his inability to protect his legs, and both Josh Sitton and Daryn Colledge cut him down a lot. There were seven runs worth 50 yards in which Wells got movement on Rogers and then the running back cut behind him. Sitton and Wells were unscathed in protection. T.J. Lang's first start was more than adequate. He focused well (no penalties), he showed base, balance and sustain in the run game and he was OK (three "pressures") in protection. Allen Barbre short-circuited a few times in the second half but overall his was another winning performance. Colledge wasn't bad but did allow 2 ½ "pressures" and 3 "bad" runs, including the failed fourth-and-1 QB sneak when he played too high against DL Robaire Smith.

QUARTERBACKS (4 ½)

Aaron Rodgers is making extraordinary plays look easy. Take the TD to Driver. Not only did Rodgers read the first-and-10 safety pressure of coordinator Rob Ryan, who blitzed on 45.8% of passes, he delivered a crisp pass to Driver that hit him right in stride. By doing so, it enabled Driver to gather himself so he could go either way against Pool. Rodgers appeared to be trying to get a gap or two outside on the sneak but when Smith beat Colledge and grabbed his leg he couldn't get there. In shotgun a season-low 12 times, Rodgers looked sound under center and never took a drop deeper than 5 steps. His ability to skip away in the pocket from onrushing OLB Jason Trusnik and almost nonchalantly slide down after a 19-yard scramble put an exclamation point on the talent level of the two teams.

RUNNING BACKS (4 ½)

Ryan Grant gained just 18 yards after contact in 12 first-half carries but then had 73 YAC in 15 second-half carries. Getting better with each and every carry, the bruising big back sucked the life right out of the Browns' soft run defense. Having practiced against the 3-4 all spring and summer, Grant (47 snaps) seemed to benefit from familiar reads. He recognized where Rogers wasn't and surged through holes, falling forward just about every time. Not only did Grant make Pool miss for the final 25 yards of a season-long 37-yard burst, he also avoided Trusnik in the backfield when Havner missed a fourth-quarter block. He hasn't fumbled since Week 2, either. Brandon Jackson (18) bounced away from bad plays twice for gains totaling 11 yards. Now that rookie Quinn Johnson has 32 snaps under his belt, it will be interesting to see if the Packers will utilize his brawn against Minnesota.

DEFENSIVE LINE (3 ½)

Johnny Jolly has been a tower of power at the point all season. He recognizes blocking schemes, is ready to play each week and is hard to move. He also was an effective rusher in September but hasn't had a "pressure" since Week 3. Part of the problem is Jolly is playing so much. He was on the field for 47 of the first 48 snaps. After unwanted submarining in short yardage at Minnesota, B.J. Raji proved he learned his lesson by blowing up LG Eric Steinbach on the goal-line. Raji played with more strength but with his tender ankle the coaches limited his snap count to 14. Cullen Jenkins (43) had a team-high 4 ½ "pressures" and really pursued hard downfield, but also was displaced badly on two weak-side counters by Jamal Lewis totaling 27 yards. Ryan Pickett (32) battled to a draw against C Alex Mack, an impressive rookie.

LINEBACKERS (4)

The best of the four ILBs (Desmond Bishop played nickel at the end) was A.J. Hawk. Twice he took on FB Lawrence Vickers and stuffed the ball carrier behind him. Protected when Dom Capers used 11 snaps of the "46" defense, Hawk moved purposely and aggressively to the ball. Later, he wasn't able to get there over the top of the counters. Nick Barnett has had better games. He didn't do the job either time against Vickers on the counters and couldn't intercept a hot fastball at point-blank range from overmatched Derek Anderson. Clay Matthews didn't get a lot done against LT Joe Thomas but one bull rush showcased just how physical he can be.

SECONDARY (4 ½)

Using more bump-and-run than he has all season, Capers figured the Browns' motley collection of WRs couldn't escape Charles Woodson, Al Harris and Tramon Williams. He had that right. Rookie Mohamed Massaquoi kept trying to push off against Harris, who did draw two penalties but nevertheless won a unanimous decision. Anderson did have openings to complete two of the four long takeoff routes run by Massaquoi against Harris but lacked the accuracy to do it. Woodson knocked Brian Robiskie, the other rookie WR, off a route and showed fabulous hand-eye coordination by spearing an interception after seeing the ball for no more than an instant. Woodson also forced a fumble from Joshua Cribbs and forced Anderson into a long, late second-quarter incompletion that Browns coach Eric Mangini said Monday would have been a TD if RB Jerome Harrison hadn't whiffed on Woodson. The safety play was solid.

KICKERS (2)

Mason Crosby's six kickoffs included two touchbacks and two out of bounds. He averaged 70.5 yards but a season-low 3.69 seconds of hang time, presumably because he was trying to change up his tactics to control Cribbs. His 55-yard miss (wide left) had the distance. Jeremy Kapinos averaged 43.5 yards (gross), 29 (net) and 4.28 (hang time).

SPECIAL TEAMS (2)

At least the Packers held their own against an elite opponent. The Browns' tremendous punt coverage gave Tramon Williams little room to maneuver, and he didn't help himself with excessive jitter-bugging. Williams also was a tad shaky fielding punts and making decisions. Jackson was so ordinary on kickoff returns that he might be replaced. Jarrett Bush and Nick Collins didn't have proper spacing on a 41-yard KO return but tough-guy Crosby saved them by going right through Cribbs' formidable stiff-arm to make the tackle. The 12-men penalty that turned a punt into a Browns' first down was the result of a substitution snafu caused by injury.

OVERALL (4)

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