

Ratings the Packers vs. Steelers

Left to kick themselves

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Green Bay — Just when the Green Bay Packers were primed to strike a blow for themselves as a legitimate playoff contender, a bad kicker and inept pass defense intervened Sunday at Heinz Field.

The Pittsburgh Steelers still haven't lost six games in a row since 1969, one year before the Packers' last victory in Pittsburgh. It took a perfect throw by Ben Roethlisberger to beat the Packers, and a perfect throw it was as time expired.

According to the league, it was the first time in history that a game ended in a 37-36 score.

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

RECEIVERS (2 ½)

Donald Driver dropped way too many passes (seven out of 113) last season and he's doing it again this year. Three drops Sunday extended his career-high total to 10. Great players don't do that two years in a row. James Jones ran an exquisite post-corner route that sent rookie CB Joe Burnett sprawling for the go-ahead TD. He also has shown improvement this season after the catch. The move that he made to break a tackle by CB William Gay and extend a 3-yard pass to 12 was one of the best he has ever made. But Jones also dropped a pair of third-down passes. Jordy Nelson didn't make any mistakes, made two or three fine catches and should be in line for more playing time. The Packers really went after Gay, completing eight of 14 for 97 yards. After a so-so first half, Jermichael Finley was dominant in the second. This was the first game in which the coaches determined that Finley (44 snaps) has to play a lot more than Donald Lee (27). It was 22-10, Finley, in the second half. Having been lax in ball security last week, Finley showed his maturity by being extra cautious and, when in doubt, just go down. The long pass down the middle that looked like a drop by Lee actually wasn't. It ticked off ILB James Farrior's helmet. Some of Greg Jennings' biggest plays have come when he's the inside of three receivers split to one side.

OFFENSIVE LINE (4)

Chad Clifton brought back memories of his salad days by pitching a shutout against OLB James Harrison. Harrison, one of the strongest and meanest men in the NFL, had just one knockdown (a stunt against Daryn Colledge) and one assisted tackle. When the Packers did run, Clifton was on task and moved people. On the other side, Mark Tauscher had to resort to every trick in the trade just to stay afloat against the formidable LaMarr Woodley. Tauscher was responsible for three "pressures," but against a player of Woodley's caliber that wasn't bad. He's just so competitive. He hates to get beat. Any run-game scheme in which Scott Wells is asked to single-block NT Casey Hampton isn't a good one. Wells was solid in pass pro but couldn't get the still-talented and massive Hampton blocked for the run. Josh Sitton and Colledge had it relatively easy in protection compared to the tackles. Sitton was involved in two "bad" runs and drew the only penalty (false start), but pass blocked very well.

QUARTERBACKS (4 ½)

Venerable defensive coordinator Dick LeBeau threw the book at Aaron Rodgers. He rushed five or more on 54.9% of passes, the most against Green Bay since St. Louis' Jim Haslett blitzed 72.7% in Week 14 of 2007. The entire offense, including Rodgers, was poor early against cross blitzes and the QB got whacked hard twice by ILB Lawrence Timmons. After that, Rodgers was terrific. He showed his wonderful touch on the long TD to Jennings. He kept his eyes downfield even with people in his face, which isn't easy to do. He ran for a 14-yard TD when he spotted an opening and trusted his judgment and legs even though there wasn't any pressure. He is starting to pump-fake like another QB that once played in Green Bay. Without those seven dropped passes his numbers might have been as astronomical as Roethlisberger's (although the Steelers dropped four themselves).

RUNNING BACKS (4)

Brandon Jackson is worth watching. It's hard to remember another RB gesturing and calling out blitzers pre-snap. Jackson is so into this blitz pickup thing, he's operating like another Wells. Not only is Jackson always in the right place, he is downright nasty taking people on. Ask Timmons, who's on the soft side, anyway. Jackson's probably still blocking him. He even took Woodley on down the middle. Both Jackson and FB Quinn Johnson dropped passes. With John Kuhn inactive, Johnson had nine snaps compared to Korey Hall's seven. Hall sure made the most of them, delivering two or three powerful blocks. For the first time, Jackson had more snaps (24 to 23) than did Ryan Grant. Quiet day for Grant. Still, his 24-yard TD was his seventh rush of 20 yards or more in the last 10 games, a far cry from early '09 and all of '08.

DEFENSIVE LINE (2 ½)

Dom Capers tried to keep Cullen Jenkins (60 snaps) as fresh as possible, but with Ryan Pickett limited to five plays with a bad hamstring he was forced to play B.J. Raji at NT and couldn't offer Jenkins more rest. On the final drive, Capers played Jenkins six straight snaps and 11 of the first 14 before he became exhausted. The next play with Jenkins on the sidelines was the decisive strike to Mike Wallace. Jenkins' monster day (7 1/2 "pressures," including four against rookie LG Ramon Foster) would have been so much better if he had tried to sack Roethlisberger low to high instead of high. As it was, Jenkins missed about four sacks, although he did set up sacks for Brad Jones and Brady Poppinga with up-field bursts against Foster. Thirteen of Raji's 52 snaps came at NT, and his form and discipline were better this week. Still, Raji was on the ground more than Pickett or Johnny Jolly (56) ever are. He also gave away any element of surprise on a zone blitz by standing up prematurely, then got schooled by Heath Miller in coverage.

LINEBACKERS (1 ½)

Miller is a complete TE but not a speed TE, ala Finley. That's what made A.J. Hawk's woeful performance in coverage all the worse. One time, Hawk let Miller cross his face inside from the right slot and then didn't come close to running him down on a 27-yard completion. He just got exposed. Clay Matthews made life miserable for LT Max Starks, whipping him around the corner for 4 ½ of his 5 ½ "pressures." He isn't getting engulfed these days as he was a month or two ago. He's dipping so low that the big boys often are missing with their hands. And Matthews is just a fabulous finisher. It won't be long before extensive chipping ensues. Matthews also made a textbook play on a power run at him, taking down Miller and a pulling guard so Hawk could make the tackle for loss. When Matthews does get blocked, it isn't for long. Nick Barnett played most of the game on a sore knee and wasn't himself. Foes are testing Brad Jones with all sorts of misdirection plays and he's holding up. Brandon Chillar returned to his nickel post opposite Barnett and played poorly in coverage.

SECONDARY (½)

Nick Collins and Atari Bigby were fine. Other than being too soft on the TD screen to Mewelde Moore and showing marginal range on a 29-yard corner route to Hines Ward, Bigby delivered some jarring hits against run and pass. For some reason, Jarrett Bush didn't seem to get the scouting report on Mike Wallace that he was a straight-line vertical blazer. He let Wallace run right past him in man coverage on the game-opening play without laying a glove on him and the result was a 60-yard TD. Then he lost track of Ward on a 54-yard bomb over his head and a 25-yard pass to Wallace that fell incomplete due to Bigby's lusty hit. If Bush keeps playing he will have a giant target on his back. Charles Woodson was extremely physical supporting the run. Matched against Ward most of the game, he did too much grabbing and holding, drew three penalties and wasn't a factor downfield. Tramon Williams had a good shot to end it with an interception. He wasn't on top of his game. Newcomer Josh Bell, playing outside in the dime, gave up the sideline to Wallace and defeat resulted.

KICKERS (1 ½)

Mason Crosby's miss from the 34 (wide right, right hashmark) was the result of improper placement of his plant foot and follow-through. After 17 years of superb kicking by Chris Jacke and Ryan Longwell, the Packers no doubt are vigorously debating if Crosby has what it takes. His kickoffs – two for distance, three low drivers and one pooch – were beautifully executed. Jerry Kapinos' five punts had averages of 42.2 yards (gross), 34.4 (net) and 4.07 seconds (hang time). Kapinos also debuted as holder and barely avoided catastrophe after an early bobble.

SPECIAL TEAMS (3 ½)

Energetic Derrick Martin offers life to the coverage units. His five tackles helped contain diminutive but dangerous Stefan Logan. Martin's holding penalty was the 14th by this group. Nelson was confident catching and aggressive running on returns. Bush helped ruin the Steelers' shocking onside kick by moving up 5 yards and taking down two players. Bell's positioning was poor on the punt that he failed to down near the pylon.

OVERALL (3)

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