

Rating the Packers vs. Cardinals - Playoffs

Passing judgment - Rodgers' few flaws are difference in face of Warner's brilliance

Posted: Jan. 11, 2010 10:27 p.m.

Green Bay — The defenses were equally horrendous.

The receiving corps, the running backs and the offensive lines all performed at about the same level. By and large, so did the special teams.

The stark difference between the Green Bay Packers and Arizona Cardinals in the NFC wild-card playoffs Sunday was the play of the two quarterbacks.

Kurt Warner looked every bit the sage veteran with 11 playoff starts under his belt, including three Super Bowls. He was so extraordinarily precise that the Cardinals only needed to reach third down five times to amass their 30 first downs.

On the other hand, Aaron Rodgers could have been tight for his playoff debut. The Packers didn't seem ready to play, which is on coach Mike McCarthy, but Rodgers had been so sharp for so long that something was on his mind. The playoffs, especially a playoff opener, do things to some people. He didn't play his game.

Rodgers might have made his worst decision all year on the first play of the game (interception). He reverted back to holding the ball. His deep-ball accuracy deserted him with the outcome at hand. And he didn't see a slot blitz on the final play (fumble) that turned into the winning touchdown for Arizona in its 51-45 overtime victory.

In a game in which Rodgers' passer rating was grossly misleading, the Packers simply couldn't overcome their disadvantage at the most important position. When one quarterback doesn't make a mistake and the other makes half a dozen or more, it should be clear why the game turned out as it did.

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

RECEIVERS (4)

The fumble by Donald Driver on the Packers' third play from scrimmage gave Arizona an easy touchdown and won't soon be forgotten. From Week 5 of 2004 to Week 11 of 2009, he hadn't lost a fumble on a reception. Driver would always fight for the extra yard and never fumble. Then he lost one Dec. 7 against Baltimore and another Sunday on a strip by LB Karlos Dansby. His downfield holding penalty wasn't good, either. His partner, Greg Jennings, couldn't have finished the season on a higher note. He tormented his pursuers, catching four for 61 yards against Bryant McFadden, two for 40 against Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie, one for 20 against nickel back Michael Adams and one for nine against dime back Ralph Brown. Plus, he would have had TDs of 73 (Brown) and 80 (Antrel Rolle) yards if the ball hadn't been thrown well over his head. The silliness of balancing the playing time for Jermichael Finley and Donald Lee went away when the stakes grew higher. Finley, with 63 snaps, gained the ultimate compliment from SS Adrian Wilson, who said, "He's very comparable to Antonio Gates. Hell of a player. He can do it all." Finley burned Wilson and everyone else whom coordinator Billy Davis tried to match up on him. Lee (34 snaps) dropped a TD pass and Spencer Havner (12) caught one.

OFFENSIVE LINE (2 ½)

DE Darnell Dockett was limited to one garbage sack, one knockdown, two hurries and two tackles. Josh Sitton lined up against Dockett probably about two-thirds of the time and did excellent work. His job in protection was made easier because the Packers frequently slid the line toward Dockett. Sitton was most impressive in the run game. He didn't allow any of that quick penetration that Dockett is known for, and he actually moved him on three or four running plays. Mark Tauscher did an admirable job against Dockett as well, especially when he worked outside on stunts. Tauscher wasn't as good against others and yielded 3 ½ "pressures." Daryn Colledge had problems coping with the bulk of Alan Branch and Gabe Watson and then was tagged with a critical holding penalty against Calais Campbell in overtime that greased the skids for defeat. Chad Clifton (ankle) went out early in the fourth quarter and was replaced by T.J. Lang. Clifton didn't have a bad pass set.

QUARTERBACKS (3)

On Rodgers' 52 dropbacks, Davis got away with rushing five on 23, six on two and seven on two. He kept blitzing because two of the five-man rushes resulted in sacks and Rodgers wasn't picking them up as alertly as normal. The times of the five sacks were 4.2, 5.0, 4.6, 8.3 and 3.3 seconds, evidence that Rodgers just wasn't very sharp. Rodgers is used to making big plays once he breaks the first line of rush. The Cardinals, however, rallied to the ball faster than most opponents and kept cutting him down before he could get out. After a terrible first quarter, Rodgers looked like a world-beater, directing seven straight scoring drives. For much of that time he matched Warner throw for throw. But in overtime, after the Packers won the coin toss, Rodgers missed the game-winning bomb that he probably completes 75% of the time and then gave the game away on a fumble to Dansby when he failed to locate little Michael Adams. They define killer mistakes.

RUNNING BACKS (4)

If the Packers hadn't gone in the tank to start there was evidence that they could have run for 150 yards or more. As it was, they totaled 90, with Ryan Grant (11-65) averaging 5.9. Grant looked like a playoff back, up on the bit and looking for a fight. His only blunder was fanning on the recovery of Driver's fumble. FBs Korey Hall and John Kuhn basically split 23 snaps but both blocked well, especially Hall. Playing with a bad elbow, Hall really struck a blow for himself in a crowded three-man field heading into 2010. His blocking was terrific.

DEFENSIVE LINE (½)

When Dom Capers decided to blitz a season-low 4.9% on passes because of Warner's release and brain, he needed rush from this unit like never before. The numbers were disappointing, to say the least. Cullen Jenkins (42 snaps) had two knockdowns. Johnny Jolly (47), B.J. Raji (23) and Ryan Pickett (22) didn't have any, not even a hurry. Raji flailed away at the line of scrimmage and really made very little headway. Given the fact that Warner's a statue, this was the day for linemen to crank it up and show what they had. The answer was next to nothing. Against the run, Jolly met his physical match in mauling RG Deuce Lutui, Pickett was so-so against C Lyle Sendlein and Raji wasn't a factor playing all over the place.

LINEBACKERS (1/2)

The week before, coach Ken Whisenhunt double-teamed Clay Matthews on 5% of passes and watched him create mayhem. This time, Whisenhunt did an about-face and doubled him 44%, usually with RB Beanie Wells or RB Tim Hightower doing the chipping. The first time Matthews saw a single block, he blew around LT Jeremy Bridges and sacked Warner on a flea-flicker. Other than that, Matthews had just one hurry and clearly wore down in the fourth quarter. The loss of Aaron Kampman was never more noticeable because Brad Jones just got engulfed by RT Levi Brown. When Jones got frustrated and flew up the field, Brown shoved him wide on two carries for 25 yards. After trying Brady Poppinga to no avail, Capers closed regulation with six snaps in his "psycho" package. Whisenhunt called a timeout, Warner surveyed the field and then picked that gimmick apart for 67 yards in 1 1/2 minutes. Almost everybody leaked big plays. Matthews was going overboard flattening down from the backside, so Steve Breaston ran a reverse around him for 28. Nickel LB Brandon Chillar and Nick Barnett were just awful in coverage. Playing in base only, A.J. Hawk really struggled down the stretch and had one of the five missed tackles.

SECONDARY (1/2)

It can't get much worse than this. There were seven missed tackles, including two apiece for Nick Collins and Atari Bigby. Some scouts have knocked Tramon Williams for not being physical, and you can see why on this tape. Even Charles Woodson shut it down and didn't even chase Larry Fitzgerald on his 33-yard TD after falling down in coverage. Woodson's strip of Fitzgerald ignited a dead team and got the comeback started. Otherwise, he gave up two TD passes, tried to undercut some routes without success and almost forgot about tackling seeking another forced fumble. Jarrett Bush gave up play after play and simply was overmatched by capable receivers playing two-man stacks. Before exiting with a hamstring injury after 2 1/2 quarters Bigby demonstrated his limitations in range and coverage ability. This might have been Collins' worst game of the year.

KICKERS (3 1/2)

Using a variety of kickoffs Mason Crosby helped make the Cardinals start on average from the 21.3. He barely missed wide right from 54 (right hash mark), hit from 20 and delivered a successful surprise onside kick. Jeremy Kapinos' only punt was a good one.

SPECIAL TEAMS (4)

Brandon Underwood made his recovery of the onside kick look routine. Poppinga had three tackles to lead the top-notch coverage. The avalanche of tacklers that descended on Jordy Nelson suggested lousy blocking. Nelson broke five tackles on a 16-yard return but fumbled two KO returns later and was benched in favor of Williams.

OVERALL (2 1/2)

From the Jan 12, 2010, editions of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel