

Packers 2009 Team Grades

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Posted: Jan. 16, 2010

PASS OFFENSE (B-plus)

An improved Aaron Rodgers, a breakout season for Jermichael Finley and one of the NFL's finest quartets of wide receivers led to a No. 7 ranking with 261.3 yards per game and then a 404-yard outburst in the playoffs. Rodgers ranked fourth in passer rating at 103.2, and counting the playoff game his rating was 104.6. His third-down rating of 133.5 was the league's best in a decade. The shortcoming was protection; with 37 sacks in the first eight games, the Packers were headed for the franchise record. The insertion of Mark Tauscher at RT stabilized the O-line and sliced the sack total in the second half to 14. Of the 51 sacks, Rodgers was responsible for a team-leading 16½ because he consistently held the ball too long. Greg Jennings ranked 15th in receiving yards (1,113) and Donald Driver, who had 11 of the exorbitant total of 50 drops, ranked 19th (1,061). Jennings, Driver, Jordy Nelson and James Jones all improved their yards-after-catch average, with Jones going from 2.90 to 6.0 yards. Finley averaged 5.67 after the catch and 12.3 in all, which trailed only Antonio Gates (14.6), Brent Celek (12.8) and Vernon Davis (12.4) among leading TEs. Largely because of Finley's emergence, tight ends were targeted on 24.9% of passes compared to 14.1% in 2008. In all, the Packers averaged 12.6 per catch, which tied for fifth in the NFL and represented their best mark since '87. The 29th-place ranking in sack percentage was the team's worst since '90. The 50-yard bomb to Jennings that beat Chicago on opening night was the first of 24 passes for more than 35 yards.

RUSH OFFENSE (C-plus)

Mike McCarthy achieved balance on offense with a ground game that ranked 14th at 117.8 yards per game. That was the team's best rushing production since 2004, Ahman Green's last good season. With Ryan Grant averaging 4.50 in 17 games and 4.44 in the regular season, Green Bay ranked 13th in yards per carry (4.30). Grant was seventh in the NFL with 1,253 yards and scored 11 of the 20 TDs, the Packers' high since they had 23 in '64. Superbly coached by Edgar Bennett, the RBs fumbled just once on a rush (Brandon Jackson in Week 5) and once on a pass (Grant in Week 2). The "bad" run total of 108 was the team's lowest in a decade; Daryn Colledge was charged with 18½ of them. McCarthy ran the ball on 42% of the downs, not far off the NFL average of 43.7%. He remained true to the zone scheme, using the outside and inside zone plays over and over but also expanding the run-game package out of shotgun and incorporating more inverted-wishbone formations. One of the three fullbacks was on the field 42.1% of the time, and on average the Packers had 1.3 tight ends on the field. Rodgers scrambled for 316 yards, second most in the NFL behind Jacksonville's David Garrard (323). The Packers struggled against many of their better opponents, averaging 102.1 against the 10 foes with the best records and 144 against the six foes with the worst records. The third-down job passed from DeShawn Wynn (66 snaps) to Brandon Jackson (270) in Week 5 after Wynn injured his knee. Then Green was brought back Oct. 21 to carry 41 times for 160 yards in 84 snaps.

PASS DEFENSE (B)

Until late December this segment of the defense was the toast of the state for having shut down just about every quarterback with the exception of Brett Favre. Then Pittsburgh's Ben Roethlisberger (503 yards) in Week 14 - and Arizona's Kurt Warner (379) in the playoffs - exposed flaw after flaw in the carefully constructed 3-4 scheme of coordinator Dom Capers. When Big Ben and Warner combined for a passer rating of 143.5, the Packers had a pair of defeats and an off-season ahead to figure out what in the heck happened. Otherwise, the numbers were very good: fifth against the pass (201.1 yards) and fourth in opponents' passer rating (68.8). The 30 interceptions, including 26 by DBs, led the league and were the most in Green Bay since 1981. Defensive player of the year Charles Woodson picked off nine and forced 15 turnovers, including five pass plays in which he forced a fumble that was recovered by the Packers. There were major problems with the red-zone defense, which ranked 28th for the worst finish since '04. Opponents passed for 29 TDs, then Warner chalked up five more in the playoffs. Thanks mainly to Clay Matthews and his club-high 45½ "pressures," the sack total went from 13 at midseason to 37 at the end. Other than Cullen Jenkins (39 "pressures"), the D-line offered little push. Still, Johnny Jolly did set the club record with 11 batted balls. With Woodson matching and dominating receivers of all types (Chad Ochocinco, Jason Witten, Calvin Johnson), the Packers allowed just three 100-yard games to WRs and two to TEs. Capers blitzed on 27% of passes, a marked increase from Bob Sanders' 19.9% in '08.

RUSH DEFENSE (A)

Capers' first order of business was doing something about a defense that ranked 26th against the run (131.6). Mission accomplished. For the first time ever the Packers led the NFL in run defense, setting a franchise record of 83.3 in the process. They also improved drastically (4.60 to 3.59) in yards allowed per carry. With help from top-shelf assistants Mike Trgovac (DL) and Kevin Greene (OLB), Capers limited 12 of 17 foes to less than 100 yards. The 100-yard rushers were Cedric Benson (29-141) in Week 2 and Steven Jackson (27-117) in Week 3. Adrian Peterson settled for 152 yards in 50 attempts (3.04) in Week 4 and Week 7. The heaviest foursome of D-linemen in the NFL (327.5-pound average) was hard to budge, the OLBs generally set the edge and the ILBs gradually warmed to the 3-4 scheme. Frustrated opponents, often trailing on the scoreboard, ran just 371 times against Green Bay, the third-fewest total faced by any defense. Down the stretch, the power ground games of Dallas (14-61) and Baltimore (21-66) didn't go anywhere. The Packers had 64 tackles for loss, a vast improvement from merely 30 the year before and their highest total in more than 20 years. Playing virtually every snap after the first month as he returned from a blown knee, Nick Barnett led the team in tackles (126), tackles for loss (10) and missed tackles (13). The unit recovered fumbles by three of the NFL's top six rushers: Jackson, Peterson and Baltimore's Ray Rice. After a no-try outing in Week 16, the Cardinals gained more yards (156) than any opponent had all season by running outside and away from the behemoths inside.

SPECIAL TEAMS (D-minus)

After finishing 26th last year in a 10-category ranking of special-teams performance, McCarthy asked for and received retirement papers from Mike Stock. McCarthy then promoted Shawn Slocum, but ultimately the results were even worse: Green Bay ranked 32nd in those same 10 categories. The units did finish with average to good performances in the last five games, but until then it was a royal mess. There were 32 penalties, an unprecedented number, and 14 were holds. Green Bay never had more than 10 holding calls in the previous 22 seasons. Cincinnati's Quan Cosby helped swing the tide in Week 2 with a pair of long punt returns. Later, Minnesota's Percy Harvin and Tampa Bay's Clifton Smith did the same thing returning kickoffs. If not for the speedy chases of Tramon Williams, several lengthy returns would have been TDs. The Packers ranked 31st in opponents' average starting point (28.9) after kickoffs. The return game was ordinary after Will Blackmon blew out his knee in Week 5, although Jordy Nelson did rank 11th on kickoff returns (25.4). For the second season in a row the turnover differential was even. The kicker-punter duo of Mason Crosby and Jeremy Kapinos was among the worst in the NFL. Crosby tied for 25th in FG percentage (75%) and Kapinos tied for 32nd in net punt (34.1). Three times Slocum had his units well-prepared either to spring surprise plays or prevent them from succeeding. Desmond Bishop (23 tackles) and Derrick Martin (21), the top two tacklers, were cited by Slocum as the leading core players. Long snapper Brett Goode had a second straight flawless season.

PERSONNEL MOVES (B)

GM Ted Thompson was bullish on the roster coming off a 6-10 season and elected to remain status quo despite calls for free-agency action. He stayed with Grant as the featured back. He was convinced that he had enough D-linemen and linebackers for the 3-4. In both instances, Thompson was right. His monumental decision (for him) to trade up into the first round for Matthews not only made his draft but also the defense. From the draft, which might turn out to be his finest, Thompson got two starters, the No. 6 O-lineman, the No. 4 D-lineman, the late-season dime back and a part-time FB. The youngest team in the NFL for the fourth straight year improved substantially in the second half. His only foray into unrestricted free agency (C-G Duke Preston) was a washout. Thompson refused to increase a low-ball offer to P Hunter Smith in April, so the former Colt went to Washington, where his net of 36.8 tied for 22nd and his directional numbers were far better than Kapinos'. By not signing a veteran tackle until Mark Tauscher was ready, Thompson got to watch his backup LTs get overrun by DE Jared Allen in the Vikings' sweep. In the only player-for-player trade, Martin provided value in exchange for Tony Moll. Bringing back Tauscher might have been a no-brainer, but the move did wonders for what had been a hapless O-line. Moving CB Patrick Lee to injured reserve Sept. 5 with a fairly minor knee injury was highly questionable; he looked ready to go by October. Six of the 10 in-season additions to the 53-man roster came off the practice squad, and not one made any impact. After giving \$21 million to Brandon Chillar in a strange move, the Packers ended the year \$10.1 million beneath the salary cap.

COACHING (B)

McCarthy had an impressive season as an offensive tactician and play-caller. The Packers set the franchise record for points (461) because there was balance and the passing game was cutting-edge good. The route combinations are clean, the routes are precise and the tempo is fast. McCarthy's decision to give Rodgers even more leeway at the line resulted in dozens of run-to-pass plays that never made 7-yard gains look easier. The Packers' turnover differential of plus-24, their best since 1965, was nine turnovers better than anyone else and a remarkable achievement. After a jackrabbit-style burst through August, McCarthy didn't have the team ready for September. He suffered the ignominious distinction of being swept by Favre and Brad Childress, which in the end cost him the NFC North title. And he suffered a hideous defeat to winless Tampa Bay 10 days after his encounter with part-time maintenance man Mike Wood led to the aide's dismissal and made the coach look petty. Yet, one week after Tampa Bay, McCarthy got the team off the deck in the turnaround victory over Dallas that ignited the run to the playoffs. Over the last three years, the Packers have had more penalty yards than any other team. McCarthy doesn't get overly agitated about it, but when crucial late calls aren't made against a playoff opponent he might reconsider what effect his approach is having on officials. After choosing to batter the hibernating Cardinals in the regular-season finale, his players might have gone in fatheaded only to fall behind, 17-0. Rallying mightily though they did, the Packers never did take the lead and the result was McCarthy's second crushing playoff defeat as the favored team in the last three years.

OVERALL (B)

Not many outsiders recognized that the Packers would be vastly improved from a 6-10 finish in 2008. The players and coaches, however, knew the team would be. So the five-game jump to 11-5, though impressive, wasn't the achievement that the five-game leap was from 8-8 to 13-3 in 2007. The schedule, including the four-game matchup against the lowly NFC West, was advantageous, to say the least. The Packers' strength of schedule (113-143) tied for second-softest in the NFL. When Finley returned from injury in Week 10 and the new 3-4 defensive scheme became more second nature, the Packers turned into one of the NFL's hottest and most dangerous teams. For the 22nd time in the last 26 years, the Packers posted a better or the same record in the second half as they did in the first. Injuries (seven starters missed 39 games) were manageable. Morale was high. Expectations soared. Having lost the NFC North crown early with the sweep at the hands of Minnesota, the wild-card playoff berth became a foregone conclusion by mid-December. The Packers ended the regular season having outscored their opponents by 164 points, second in the NFL to New Orleans (169). But with thousands of Packers fans in attendance one week after the Cardinals had been routed in the same desert venue, the Packers were eliminated in overtime. Thus, a team with the No. 2 defense, the No. 6 offense and by far the best giveaway-takeaway ratio couldn't get past a team with the No. 14 offense, the No. 20 defense and a turnover differential of minus-7. The season crashed to a halt with Rodgers holding the ball one final time.