

Grading The Green Bay Packers Defense: Johnny Jolly holds the line

By Rob Demovsky - Green Bay Press Gazette • January 16, 2010

Defensive line

Johnny Jolly, DE: Seemingly destined for a backup role after B.J. Raji was drafted in the first round. Not only retained the starting job but had his best season. Started every game, played extensively in both the base and nickel packages and led all defensive linemen in tackles (75), the first time he's done that in his four-year career. Batted down 11 passes, the most among defensive linemen since the team began recording that stat in 1980. Had the first interception of his career when he blew up a screen in the opener against Chicago. Finished with nine quarterback hits, a forced fumble and two fumble recoveries. Also blocked a field goal in Week 2 at St. Louis. After an ill-advised personal foul penalty in the second Minnesota game, played with more discipline the rest of the season.

Grade: B

Ryan Pickett, NT: Made a seamless transition to nose in the 3-4 and was a major reason the team led the league in rushing defense (allowing 83.3 yards per game). Recorded only 47 tackles (34 fewer than last season), but ate up blockers so the linebackers could pile up tackles. Missed the final three regular-season games because of a hamstring injury and might not have been 100 percent for the playoff game, when the Cardinals were able to run the ball. Scheduled to be an unrestricted free agent, there's mutual interest in him returning next season.

Grade: B-minus

Cullen Jenkins, DE: Bounced back from the torn pectoral muscle that ended his 2008 season after just four games. Finished second on the team with 4½ sacks, a total that could have reached double digits but he had trouble finishing rushes. Finished third on the team with 25 quarterback hits. Played in every defensive package — base, nickel, dime and was the lone lineman in the five-linebacker "Psycho" package.

Grade: B-minus

B.J. Raji, NT/DE: Didn't have the immediate impact that was expected after being picked No. 9 overall. Contract dispute cost him valuable time in training camp and an ankle injury in the preseason finale rendered him ineffective in the early going. Once healthy, displayed the kind of power that should make him a force against the run. Showed flashes of speed that could make him effective as a rusher. Played more at end than at nose but long term is probably a nose. Totaled 36 tackles and a sack.

Grade: C-minus

Jarius Wynn, DE: Rookie sixth-round pick displayed some raw pass-rush ability in the preseason and got some action in 11 games in the nickel package. Has the potential to develop into a solid starter.

Grade: D-plus

Michael Montgomery, DE: Was no better as a 3-4 end than he was in the old 4-3 scheme. Played only sparingly on defense in eight games, in part due to ankle and hand injuries, and contributed on some special teams. Might have a hard time making the roster next season.

Grade: D

Anthony Toribio, NT: A practice-squad call-up late in the season for the 2nd straight year, this time because of Pickett's hamstring injury. Future likely depends on whether Pickett is re-signed.

Grade: I

Justin Harrell, DE: Re-injured his back — the same injury that limited him to just six games of spot duty in 2008 — and spent the entire season on injured reserve. The former first-round pick's career is on life support going into his fourth season. If he can't get healthy this offseason, he'll be done in Green Bay, and perhaps in the NFL.

Grade: I

Inside Linebackers

Nick Barnett: Started slowly after coming back from ACL surgery late in 2008 but by the end of the season was one of the best defensive players. Led the team with 122 tackles. Became an effective blitzing and tied for third on the team with a career-high four sacks. Became more proficient and comfortable making the defensive calls as the season progressed. Did have some trouble in coverage, giving up completions 62.2 percent of the time teams threw at him. Was responsible for one touchdown.

Grade: B-minus

A.J. Hawk: Up and down season in which he saw his playing time drop to fewer than 10 snaps in some games and increase to nearly every snap in others. With the team at full strength, was limited to just the base defense. Played decent against the run and ranked second on the team with 87 tackles but once again struggled mightily in coverage, giving up completions a team-high 71.4 percent of the time he was targeted but didn't give up a touchdown. With salary and bonuses totaling \$4.6 million next season, it's not a given that the former fifth pick in the draft will return.

Grade: D

Brandon Chillar: The team's most versatile linebacker who can cover, rush and play the run. Missed four games because of a broken hand but was given a contract extension at midseason. Was used mostly in the nickel package and the "Big Okie," in which he replaced a safety. Gave up completions 40 percent of the time he was targeted and allowed two touchdowns. Also played some base and could replace Hawk in that role next season.

Grade: C-plus

Desmond Bishop: Finally found some playing time on defense in the "Psycho" package late in the season but for the third straight year was primarily a special teams player. Led the special teams unit with 22 tackles and had a forced fumble.

Grade: C-minus

Outside Linebackers

Clay Matthews: A stud in the making. Overcame a training camp hamstring injury that limited him the first month of the season. Became a full-time starter after four games. Led the team with 10 sacks, the most ever by a Packers rookie, and also had a team-high 35 quarterback hits. Led the team with three fumble recoveries, including one for a touchdown, when he ripped the ball away from Minnesota's Adrian Peterson. Wasn't targeted much in coverage, where he allowed completions on 45.5 percent (5 of 11) of passes thrown his way. Made the Pro Bowl as a first alternate.

Grade: B-plus

Aaron Kampman: Showed the same pass-rush ability in his first season as a converted defensive end, finishing second on the team with 28 quarterback hits despite playing in only nine games before he blew out his left knee. Didn't handle the coverage aspect of playing the position that well, although he gave up only three completions (and one touchdown) on nine passes thrown his way. Probably remains a better fit as a 4-3 end but his injury complicates his future as an unrestricted free agent.

Grade: C-plus

Brad Jones: Rookie seventh-round pick showed flashes of playmaking ability after stepping into the starting role in place of Kampman. Had four sacks, 10 quarterback hits and 31 tackles in 14 games (including seven starts). Needs to play with more power and add strength to be more effective. Not a clear-cut starter even if Kampman doesn't return.

Grade: C-minus

Brady Poppinga: Opened the season as a starter but lost his job to Matthews and played only sparingly on defense. Had a bigger role on special teams, where he recorded 10 tackles.

Grade: C-plus

Cyril Obiozor: Undrafted rookie who flashed some pass rush ability in camp. Was promoted from the practice squad on Dec. 7 and played in every game the rest of the way, mostly on special teams. Has the natural talent to perhaps blossom into a pass rusher.

Grade: Incomplete

Jeremy Thompson: Injury-filled season limited him to just five games and left his career in doubt after a neck injury in practice on Dec. 4. Groin injury in camp prevented him from competing for a starting job after a strong offseason. Played in just five games, primarily on special teams.

Grade: I

Cornerbacks

Charles Woodson: Put together the finest season of his 12-year career and was the NFL defensive player of the year for the first time in his career and a Pro Bowl pick for the sixth time. Used in a variety of roles, including corner, nickel, dime and as a blitzer. Tied for the NFL lead with a career-high nine interceptions, three of which he returned for touchdowns. Also led the team with four forced fumbles (in the regular season) and popped out another one in the playoff game. Was targeted a team-high 84 times and gave up completions 47.6 percent of the time for six touchdowns. Committed eight penalties, most on the defense but four fewer than last season.

Grade: A

Al Harris: Was having another solid season as a shutdown corner until he blew out his left knee in the 10th game. Gave up completions 46 percent of the time he was targeted and allowed two touchdowns. Had two interceptions and six penalties. At age 35, it's not certain whether the former Pro Bowler will be able to return to the same form.

Grade: C-plus

Tramon Williams: Held up OK in place of Harris and led the team with a career-high 22 pass breakups. Also had four interceptions and a sack. Was the team's best punt returner (10.4-yard average) but was taken off that duty when he became a starter. Gave up a team-high 46 completions (56.1 percent of the time he was targeted) and allowed five touchdowns. Had six penalties, including a team-high four for pass interference.

Grade: C

Jarrett Bush: Injuries forced Bush to become the nickel cornerback the last month and a half of the season, and he was exposed. Gave up four touchdowns and completions 59.1 percent of the time he was targeted. Still played decent on special teams but not as good as he has in the past. Matching the three-year, \$4.5 million contract the Titans offered him as a restricted free agent still seems like a bad move.

Grade: D

Josh Bell: Saw limited action in the dime package after signing as a free agent on Nov. 24. Gave up only one completion but it was the game-winning touchdown on the final play at Pittsburgh.

Grade: I

Brandon Underwood: Rookie sixth-round pick played in 10 games, mostly on special teams, but did get a few dime snaps.

Grade: D

Trevor Ford: Rookie free agent was promoted from the practice squad on Nov. 25 and played in three games, mostly on special teams.

Grade: I

Will Blackmon: Return specialist blew out his left knee in the fourth game of the season. Averaged 23.3 yards on kickoffs and 3.7 yards on punts.

Grade: I

Pat Lee: Former second-round pick landed on injured reserve for the second time in as many NFL seasons. Never came back from a preseason knee injury.

Grade: I

Safeties

Nick Collins: Backed up his first Pro Bowl season with another one. Took command of the play calling in the secondary and after a slow start, made big plays in the second half of the season. Recorded six interceptions, including a stretch of four straight games with a pick. Was strong in coverage, allowing completions 41.1 percent of the time. A restricted free agent who should be the top priority for a long-term deal.

Grade: A-minus

Atari Bigby: Injuries again prevented him from returning to his 2007 form. Missed three games after sustaining a knee injury in the opener, and the defense suffered in his absence. Had four interceptions, 12 pass breakups and gave up completions only 38.4 percent of the time.

Grade: C

Derrick Martin: Acquired in a Sept. 5 trade from Baltimore for lineman Tony Moll. Made one start at Minnesota on Oct. 5 but botched two coverages. Finished second behind Bishop in special teams tackles (21).

Grade: D-plus

Matt Giordano: Fifth-year veteran was signed as a free agent Sept. 23 but played only sparingly, mostly on special teams.

Grade: I