

# Rating the Packers: Week 7 vs Vikings

## Banged-up defense makes difference

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**Green Bay** — Mike McCarthy, Aaron Rodgers and the rest of the Green Bay Packers really can win a close game.

The short-handed defense deserves most of the credit. Mainly because of those determined defenders, Brett Favre won't be able to say in retirement that he stuck it to Ted Thompson and the Packers two straight years at Lambeau Field.

Here is a rating of the Packers in their 28-24 victory over the Minnesota Vikings, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

### **RECEIVERS (4)**

The Vikings' weakness is their secondary. Safeties Tyrell Johnson and Madiou Williams took poor angles and showed little range, nickel back Chris Cook was removed after James Jones worked him over and little Asher Allen was overmatched. Jones (29 snaps) was in dire need of a big performance and delivered. He turned an 8-yard slant against Cook into a 45-yard gain with an instinctive cut into open territory. Then he made a sharp outside release and made a finger-tip catch on a go route against Cook. The four or five incomplete passes in back-shoulder situations really are inexcusable this late in the season between Rodgers and his wideouts. Donald Driver played 43 snaps and was shut out. He missed two days of practice with a thigh injury, but the Packers said he was running without any limitations Sunday night. Fluid Greg Jennings (56) simply froze Allen on his 14-yard TD. Andrew Quarless (31) has become a poor-man's Jermichael Finley in the TE rotation with Tom Crabtree (13) and Donald Lee (six). On two screens Lee showed he still has some athletic ability left.

### **OFFENSIVE LINE (4½)**

Chad Clifton put on a clinic against RE Jared Allen. He was consistent in his pass sets, used his hands extremely well and, with only occasional fan-block help from Daryn Colledge, limited Allen to half a pressure. Clifton also stretched Allen a few times in the run game. That makes four good games in a row for Clifton. On the other side, Bryan Bulaga didn't give up a sack to LE Ray Edwards, who scouts said was having a better year than Allen. Bulaga was given some chip help from RBs. He did allow 2½ knockdowns and three hurries, but the damage was negligible. He never whiffed. And Bulaga showed a degree of nastiness trying to finish run blocks. Scott Wells bounced back with a terrific outing against NT Pat Williams. Even if Williams shaded toward the side of the run, Wells was able to reach, stretch and drive block him. The toughest matchup inside fell to Josh Sitton, who had DT Kevin Williams most of the time. Sitton, who allowed just one pressure, wasn't quite as good on the run. Colledge might have had his top game of the year, not giving up a pressure or "bad" run.

## **QUARTERBACKS (3½)**

Rodgers had an ordinary performance by his standards, but it certainly was better than Favre's. Defensive coordinator Leslie Frazier sat in Cover 2 most of the game, trying to protect his vulnerable secondary and taking away the deep middle. Rodgers played to the plan, parrying the four-man rushes with screen passes and working the edges of the field against the two-deep shell. After breaking containment, he completed three passes for 39 yards. Scouts used to say he was too stiff and had just one arm slot. Now he can make throws from a variety of arm points. The red-zone screen pass that was intercepted at point-blank range by Allen was mostly Rodgers' fault, although Dimiti Nance was a little late turning around. Given the time remaining and the matchup of Jennings on CB Frank Walker, the end-zone pass that was tipped for an interception shouldn't be heavily criticized.

## **RUNNING BACKS (3½)**

Brandon Jackson (36 snaps) has been maximizing his ability for about a month. He caught a big break on his first play when his fumble bounced right back to him after a strip by LB Chad Greenway. Other than that, Jackson was reliable and effective. His shiftiness used to get Jackson in trouble because he was making one too many cuts. Now he's pressing the hole more, getting north and south and falling forward on most touches. He's also setting up his blocks in the open field and using them. As pass blockers, both Jackson and John Kuhn (25) do it so much better than the Vikings' backs. Jackson usually finds the most dangerous rusher, and the 250-pound Kuhn is just about impossible to bowl over. After showing second effort to convert one fourth and 1, Kuhn failed on another when he ran right into Quarless' back side. Up back or not, Kuhn should be able to read the inside flow of the defense and take it to a gap outside. Nance (five) played from scrimmage for the first time since Week 2.

## **DEFENSIVE LINE (3)**

Held to fewer than 100 rushing yards by the Jets and Cowboys, Minnesota pounded out 196. Losing Ryan Pickett (ankle) after seven snaps hurt. Losing Cullen Jenkins (calf) in pregame warm-ups was worse. Already minus Mike Neal, position coach Mike Trgovac was forced to use B.J. Raji on 65 of 68 snaps, free agent Jarius Wynn for 39 and rookie C.J. Wilson for 37. Raji got moved at times by LG Steve Hutchinson, a heavy drive blocker. He tired in the second half and, for the first time, offered next to nothing as a pass rusher. Wynn tends to play high and isn't much of an anchor. He did have the only sack of Favre and one of the five knockdowns. Wilson spent too much time on the deck in the early going, but at least he didn't go in the tank. In fact, he started shedding blocks and had a hand in eight tackles. Wilson is a hustler.

## **LINEBACKERS (4)**

A.J. Hawk's interception was thrown right to him, but a lot of linebackers have dropped that type of throw. He also made a sensational read and solo tackle of Toby Gerhart on a promising fourth-quarter screen. Otherwise, he was just OK. There's value in his role as an every-down player and serving as Dom Capers' signal-caller. Still, he makes a lot of tackles downfield, isn't explosive, often gets wired on blocks and didn't have a pressure in 10 rushes. You can count on Desmond Bishop for three or four violent hits each week in which he moves the pile backward or slings a ball carrier to the turf. He also is a step slow and missed three tackles. Usually Bishop short-circuits once or twice in coverage. In the third quarter, he blanketed Randy Moss in the seam, paid no heed to one of Favre's patented pump-fakes and made the biggest play of his career with a pick-six. Clay Matthews didn't get a lot done against RT Phil Loadholt but still was the No. 1 rusher and went the distance on an iffy hamstring. On the right outside, Brad Jones might have played his best game. He was assignment-sure, handled the run pretty well and had 2½ pressures, including a drag-down of Favre in which the QB suffered broken bones in his left ankle.

## **SECONDARY (3)**

In nickel, Tramon Williams matched against Moss, Charles Woodson covered Percy Harvin and Sam Shields had either Bernard Berrian or Greg Lewis. Williams' solid effort in coverage would have included a 29-yard pick-six if he hadn't dropped the ball. Woodson was able to tackle Harvin on a 37-yard over route but he still got beat. It's strange to see how many times Woodson has been ending up on the ground lately. Shields probably played to his leverage and help better than he has all season. Nick Collins got a chance to read Favre's eyes from the luxury of a single-high safety location and made a brilliant break and catch for a pick. He also had a decent chance at a second interception but dropped it, and was out of position on Harvin's 17-yard TD run and Moss' 4-yard TD reception. Charlie Peprah continues to have a bad play or three in coverage. But with Peterson rampaging 28 times from scrimmage, you'd rather have the hard-hitting Peprah than Morgan Burnett in the lineup.

## **KICKERS (3½)**

Tim Masthay turned around his sagging fortunes with a pair of productive punts. He is working to become a two-step punter. Mason Crosby averaged 64.5 yards and 3.81 seconds of hang time on two kickoffs before the decision was made to place the ball against Harvin.

## **SPECIAL TEAMS (3)**

The fake FG pass by Matt Flynn had 32-yard completion written all over it, but Quarless lost his legs and fell down. Allen pressured Flynn on the throw by beating Jason Spitz off the edge. Harvin returned a KO 48 yards when Rob Francois got knocked off his feet and Crabtree didn't do his job. Pat Lee has taken the KO return job from Jordy Nelson partially because he's more willing to sell out. SS Anthony Smith moved right in as Masthay's personal protector and special-teams fixture.

## **OVERALL (4)**

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### **Player of the week: T Chad Clifton**

Jared Allen was coming off probably his best game of the season a week ago against Dallas when he had five QB hits, two more than he had in the first five games combined. With Clifton in rare form, Allen never really got a sniff of Aaron Rodgers.

### **Play of the week**

Mid-third quarter. Second and 6 at the Minnesota 25. Packers lead, 21-17. The Vikings flank RB Toby Gerhart wide left, Randy Moss slot left, Percy Harvin slot right and Bernard Berrian wide right. The Packers are in a nickel defense with a three-deep secondary. They rush five, dropping Brad Jones off to cover the middle and sending A.J. Hawk and Charles Woodson. The Vikings respond by blocking with five as well. From shotgun formation, Brett Favre takes a few steps back. Desmond Bishop is matched up against Moss, who pivots toward the sideline. With Bishop in tight coverage, Favre pump fakes at 2.4 seconds and then runs forward because there is no pass rusher in sight. However, DE C.J. Wilson displays exemplary hustle, pops off the ground upon being cut down by C John Sullivan's block and immediately is in Favre's face. Seeing Wilson bearing down, Favre jams on the brakes, steps back and, as Wilson is tackling him around the legs, flicks a pass toward Moss 3.8 seconds after the snap. The ball goes straight to Bishop, who makes the interception. He sets sail down the sideline behind a cordon of blockers and scores a 32-yard TD. It proves to be the winning margin. It's the first pick returned for a TD by a Packers LB since Nick Barnett went 95 yards against Carolina in October 2005.

**Stat of the week**

The Packers gave up 196 yards rushing. In 23 previous games under coordinator Dom Capers, their highest rushing yield had been 156 in the playoffs at Arizona. During the 25-year period from 1985-'09, the Packers allowed more than 196 on the ground 24 times. In those games, their record was 3-20-1. The victories came against Detroit (210 yards) in October 1989, Tampa Bay (217 yards) in October 1997 and Minnesota (199) in December 2001. Their highest rushing yield in the last 25 years was 245 by the New York Giants in October 2004.

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