

Rating the Packers: Week 12 at Falcons

Packers hang tough but lose decision against Falcons

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Green Bay — The Green Bay Packers resembled an up-and-coming young boxer who climbed into the ring and discovered that some opponents really can punch back.

A dominant force the last two weeks against dispirited Dallas and Minnesota, the Packers went on the road and took on the high-flying Atlanta Falcons, a team every bit as turnover-conscious as they are and even more disciplined. The Packers wound up landing some stiff shots of their own, but in the end it was the Falcons by split decision, 20-17.

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

RECEIVERS (4 ½)

Jordy Nelson (36 snaps) looked like a big-time player. He broke off an end-zone route in circuitous fashion and beat FS Thomas DeCoud by a step for the tying TD, double-moved CB Brent Grimes for 28 yards to set up another TD and operated almost like a checkdown on two catches. The Falcons played soft zones, and the WRs made them pay for it with 138 of their 290 yards after the catch. James Jones (42) is playing smart, consistent, physical football. He made a terrific high catch and a terrific low catch. When he wants to, he can be a mini-tank after the catch. Greg Jennings (52) made a difficult catch on a 34-year flea-flicker seem routine. All of Brett Swain's 14 snaps came in five-WR sets. He caught a 2-yard arrow route, accelerated after the catch and split Grimes and DeCoud for a career-long gain of 31. The least productive WR was Donald Driver (48), who also missed a pair of run blocks. The Packers insist Driver isn't limited by a thigh injury. When Donald Lee was declared a healthy inactive for the first time, the TE job was split between Andrew Quarless (29) and Tom Crabtree (15). Quarless was the intended receiver on a play-action pass from the 2 but didn't release cleanly from DE Kroy Biermann, hurried his route and ended up out of position and too close to Quinn Johnson.

OFFENSIVE LINE (2 ½)

The Falcons rushed three men as many times as they rushed four (16), and coordinator Brian VanGorder blitzed just 23.8%. DE John Abraham, their only rushing threat, spent the first half over Chad Clifton and most of the second half over Bryan Bulaga. He went nowhere against Clifton and had two marginal hurries against Bulaga. So the Packers pass-blocked well, but the degree of difficulty wasn't great. The problem was the run game, where Josh Sitton was the only starter not responsible for at least one-half "bad" run. Aaron Rodgers should have had a freeway into the end zone on the first sneak because the Falcons' front wasn't even lined up. But when Daryn Colledge got way too high against DT Peria Jerry, then didn't work well with Scott Wells against NT Corey Peters on the second, back-to-back sneaks failed. Colledge finished with two "bad" runs, Bulaga had 1½, Wells had one and Clifton had one-half. The embarrassing minus-6 run by Brandon Jackson would have been at least a short gain, but Wells lost his balance and let MLB Curtis Lofton steam in untouched. Colledge and Bulaga had false-start penalties on the last drive. Losing teams commit those kinds of fouls.

QUARTERBACKS (4)

In a tense, loud indoor stadium, Rodgers stayed calm, cool and collected. The two series of no-huddle was a first this season. Mike McCarthy used the five-WR set more than he has in a couple of years. Rodgers sorted a lot out at the line, stayed razor sharp and delivered the ball on time and accurately to the open man. The Falcons said they weren't prepared for his running. On his seven scrambles, five (for 35 yards) came when he wasn't flushed and two (for 15 yards) came when he really was flushed due to pressure. His fumble at the goal line was inexcusable. Late in the 90-yard TD drive, Rodgers held the ball for 6.5 seconds and Abraham sacked him at the 8. If the ball hadn't bounced back to Rodgers, the game would have been over at 17-10. He also slid prematurely on third-and-3, forcing the Packers to punt.

RUNNING BACKS (1/2)

The Packers didn't have enough blockers to account for WLB Mike Peterson on the third-and-1 at the 4. The law of the NFL jungle then states that the RB must get it on his own. Dimitri Nance brought it to Peterson so hard that he suffered a concussion. His legs didn't stop on contact. He showed second, even third effort. But he didn't make it. When Brandon Jackson wasn't successful, McCarthy junked the two-back sets (only 13 of 59 plays) for heavy shotgun (40 snaps) and the no-RB, or "empty," set (14). Thus, of the 56 snaps that were available for RBs, Jackson took 37, Nance had one and three players - Korey Hall, John Kuhn and Johnson - each had six. Jackson gained some yards from spread formations but looked overmatched in base.

DEFENSIVE LINE (2)

Howard Green (28 snaps) is starting to look like the player who has been cut 10 times. Between Green and Ryan Pickett, the Packers have absolutely no range or rush at DE. The Packers hoped that by reducing Cullen Jenkins' workload (36) it might keep him fresher for pass rushing. Jenkins split C Todd McClure and LG Justin Blalock for one sack, then set up Frank Zombo for another by making Blalock whiff. Whether it's base or sub, Jenkins hasn't been an impact player. Pickett (32) is giving it his all, but clearly his ankle isn't right. He was a sitting duck against cut blocks. Like Pickett, B.J. Raji (52) was on the ground too much. Raji made plays against the undersized, cagey McClure, but their matchup was far from one-sided. C.J. Wilson didn't produce in six nickel rushes.

LINEBACKERS (2 1/2)

Desmond Bishop was the best of the bunch. Bishop isn't always right, but at least he's willing to fire his gun. Lately, he has been right many more times than not. When he does arrive, he explodes on contact. Bishop keeps his nose down, his pads low and his eyes open. A.J. Hawk, the other ILB, was a step slow all day. The Falcons kept pulling RG Harvey Dahl on Hawk and kept tying him up. On Michael Turner's fourth-down TD from the 1, Nick Collins did his job spilling it outside. That's Hawk's play to make, but he got caught up inside and Turner waltzed in. Hawk was an ineffective blitzer (eight rushes) and appeared to labor in coverage. Hawk had the chance to go full speed ahead and kill-shot Jason Snelling on that third-and-9 checkdown. Instead, he pulled off, played it safe and let Snelling off the hook for a 10-yard gain. Clay Matthews was asked to drop nine times, which probably is too many. When Matthews did rush, he encountered just 29% double-teaming but still didn't have a pressure against RT Tyson Clabo. Zombo went nose-to-nose against LT Sam Baker and acquitted himself fairly well. Zombo beat Baker for a sack, trashed once him and was physical. Turner ran wide left a lot and did turn Zombo's flank. Of the unit's six missed tackles, Hawk had three and Zombo had two.

SECONDARY (2)

Because of the heavy reliance on base, Charles Woodson had to play more outside than he probably has all season. He was beaten so badly by Roddy White that his holding penalty might have saved a 29-yard TD. He vacated some zones. He kept looking in the backfield and gave up some easy completions because he wasn't sticking on his man. He never could get a read on Matt Ryan. Tramon Williams matched against White in nickel but stayed on the right side in base. He had two of the unit's five missed tackles. He also had pretty good coverage on the handful of completions that he gave up. Sam Shields played one of his best games. After Woodson and Charlie Peprah missed FB Ovie Mughelli in the flat, Collins showed a ton of guts in their sideline collision. However, Collins blew coverage on Tony Gonzalez' stick-and-go route for a 3-yard TD. Peprah has had better days.

KICKERS (3)

Mason Crosby reached the end zone on all four kickoffs, averaging 72.3 yards and 4.13 seconds of hang time. Tim Masthay was fortunate that his first punt (3.38 seconds) ended up with a 53-yard net. His other had ideal hang time (4.77) but was angled too sharply out of bounds.

SPECIAL TEAMS (½)

Injuries to Spencer Havner, Pat Lee and Brandon Chillar thinned the KO coverage unit. With the game at hand, the Packers allowed Eric Weems to return 40 yards before Matt Wilhelm twisted his facemask. It was utter failure in crunch time. Shields is going to break one soon, but all he had to do was beat K Michael Koenen for a 105-yard TD that was beautifully blocked. After not having a penalty in Weeks 7-10, the unit collapsed and drew five.

OVERALL (2½)

PLAYER OF THE WEEK: WR Jordy Nelson

Lined up as the innermost of three receivers to the left, Nelson broke off his route, traversed the end line and hauled in an absolute bullet with a defender all over him for the tying touchdown. He also beat Brent Grimes on a double move for 28 yards and developed a nice feel for finding open windows underneath.

PLAYS OF THE WEEK

Second quarter, 8 minutes left. Score tied, 3-3. On second and goal from the 2, the Packers line up with four WRs, one TE and no RB. Barking signals, Aaron Rodgers changes the huddle call. He moves up from the shotgun set to under center and takes a quick snap with 3 seconds on the play clock. The Falcons' defense is spread all across the field.

The Falcons are late lining up; it should be an easy touchdown. DT Peria Jerry isn't even in his stance when the ball is snapped. Across from Jerry, Daryn Colledge comes off too high and is out-leveraged by Jerry, who plays through the guard and grabs Rodgers around the knees as he surges to the 1. Chad Clifton offers little punch next to Colledge. Then LB Curtis Lofton and DT Jonathan Babineaux pop Rodgers as he topples over at the 1.

On third down, the sneak is called by Mike McCarthy. This time the Packers are in an I formation with three TEs. Arrayed against them are 11 men in the box. Again, Rodgers puts the ball under his left arm and tries to fight his way in behind Colledge. In the A gap, DT Corey Peters gets lower than C Scott Wells and Colledge, submarines and does enough to slow Rodgers' progress. RG Josh Sitton isn't helping much, either. As Rodgers leans forward, he is wrapped up by Lofton and the ball comes loose. It bounces about 3 yards into the end zone. LB Mike Peterson is the first man to the ball, just ahead of Brandon Jackson and Wells, and makes the contested recovery for a touchback.

STAT OF THE WEEK

Possession meant everything in this game. Officially, the Packers had the ball nine times, but two of them lasted just one play at the end of each half. Of their seven legitimate possessions, two were three-and-outs. On the other five, they sustained drives of 9 plays for 66 gross yards, 11-69, 7-80, 9-52 and 16-100. Of Atlanta's eight possessions, two were three-and-outs, one was a four-and-out and one was a five-and-out. They sustained three long drives of 10-65, 14-80 and 14-85. The Falcons' game-winning march was 6-20.

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