

Rating the Packers: Week 13 vs 49ers

Running backs, Rodgers shine

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Green Bay — Lambeau Field. An opponent from the West Coast. December.

A Sunday afternoon date like that is a gift from the National Football League schedule-maker. It's about the same as the Green Bay Packers playing on a hot, humid October Sunday afternoon in Tampa.

So the Packers took care of their business, dispatching the San Francisco 49ers, 34-16. Here is rating of the Packers, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

RECEIVERS (4 ½)

Until this year, Greg Jennings generally could be found wide left as the split end. Since Jermichael Finley's departure, the Packers have rolled Jennings like never before. Against the 49ers, he played 51 snaps, but only 20 came as the lone WR to the left. He also spent plenty of time in both slots and wide right. Now it's almost impossible for cornerbacks and coordinators to draw a bead on him. Jennings has sure, strong hands and a catching radius that belies his modest 5 feet 11 inches. He's also blocking pretty well for his size. As a group, the WRs haven't dropped a pass since Week 9. The customary hesitancy in James Jones' play seems to have vanished. He's playing fast, and with better luck could have had a 100-yard game. Mired in a six-game drought without a reception of 20 yards or more, Donald Driver's 61-yard TD (38 after the catch) will go down as one of the most memorable plays of his career. Andrew Quarless (45 snaps) ran a substandard route on one of the two balls thrown his way and failed to make the catch. Tom Crabtree (21) is the heavy-duty blocker. Donald Lee (14) really finished one block against OLB Ahmad Brooks but was penalized for holding him on another.

OFFENSIVE LINE (3 ½)

Yes, this unit can drive block in short yardage. Batting 100% after a lousy Sunday in Atlanta, the highlight was the final play of the third quarter. On third and 1, John Kuhn bashed for 3 when Scott Wells and Josh Sitton steamrolled NT Aubrayo Franklin 4 yards back and out of the game with a groin injury. Sitton is mauling people on a weekly basis. Although Franklin is a strong player, the Packers' decision to single him often with Wells paid off in getting the guards faster to the LB level. Wells' excellent peripheral vision and knowing just when to snap the ball helped Rodgers draw the 49ers offside five times with his hard count. Chad Clifton came off surprisingly hard for the run, too. On the other hand, the unit was too soft in pass protection. Daryn Colledge kept getting walked back by powerful DE Justin Smith (one-half sack) and didn't help Clifton much by not forcing the switch on stunts. Colledge looks stiff in space and offers little downfield. Clifton was soft in protection, too, giving up sacks to Brooks and OLB Travis LaBoy. Bryan Bulaga gave up one-half sack to muscular DE Isaac Sopoaga but had just one bad miss for the run.

QUARTERBACKS (4 ½)

Rodgers frustrated coordinator Greg Manusky, who blitzed him 32.5% on passes but couldn't stem the easy-to-watch but hard-to-achieve pitch-and-catch rhythm of the passing game. Manusky tried his best to deceive Rodgers, but most of the time Rodgers would wait him out at the line until it was time to commit and then get the offense into a better play or adjustment. His tricky cadence took the edge off the rush. When the 49ers dropped a linebacker deep in Cover-2, Rodgers took the checkdown. When Brooks beat Clifton inside on a four-man rush, Rodgers sensed it and circled that side for 12. When FS Dashon Goldson took a chance by doubling Jennings knowing Manusky was blitzing, Rodgers got the ball out fast and accurately to Driver for the TD. Let's not forget, either, that it was windy and cold. At times, Rodgers made it look like seven-on-seven on a windless, hot August night. One of the four sacks was on Rodgers, as were two penalties. He will hold the ball, but it's seldom a problem these days.

RUNNING BACKS (4 ½)

Brandon Jackson started and led with 28 snaps, but rookie James Starks entered on the third snap and played 24. Kuhn split the difference with 26, including six at FB. Starks didn't fumble. He also gained 63% of his 73 yards, or 46, after contact. He broke a pair of tackles by all-pro ILB Patrick Willis, gaining an extra 12 on one. He made some clean cuts, showed a no-nonsense mentality and kept on a tight north-south course. There was nothing not to like. Jackson showed impeccable timing, a nice burst and second effort dragging CB Nate Clements for 8 yards on a 37-yard screen. Mike McCarthy went back to Kuhn as his third-and-1 back and watched him convert four in a row.

DEFENSIVE LINE (4)

Cullen Jenkins (36 snaps) was extremely active, finishing with two sacks and three hurries. He shot a gap on the goal line to chase down Troy Smith for a sack, then caught a break when Smith ran into LG Mike Iupati on a promising scramble and sacked him again. But then, late in garbage time, Jenkins was late lining up and damaged his problematic left calf when he pushed off from a two-point stance. Rookie C.J. Wilson (11), who played LT alongside Jenkins on third-and-long, can move for his size but hasn't produced. Dom Capers slanted his linemen more than he has since Week 8 and helped mess up the 49ers' tight blocking combinations. Ryan Pickett (24) was attentive to detail, stuck to his angles and didn't meander too far. B.J. Raji (43) had to deal with the 49ers' massive three-man interior and didn't budge very often. When C David Baas caved in against Raji's physical presence, Raji steamed in to sack Smith in 3.1 seconds. Four of Howard Green's 10 snaps came in a 4-4 "hippo" front used on likely run downs. On the 49ers' longest rush (17 yards), Green wasn't able to prevent Desmond Bishop from being cut off by Baas and so there was nobody left outside to prevent Anthony Dixon from sweeping the right side.

LINEBACKERS (3 ½)

The 49ers double-teamed Clay Matthews more on his individual rushes (52.6%) than any team so far. Partly as a result, Matthews had just one knockdown (set up by Jenkins' flush) and one hurry. On the third play, Matthews spun inside looking to pressure Smith, was pinned by RT Anthony Davis and could only watch as Smith broke containment and completed a 39-yard bomb to Michael Crabtree against Charlie Peprah. Matthews is on the ground a lot, but some of that is due to the fact that he tries so hard, hates being blocked and is willing to suffer the physical consequences that exist for placing himself in vulnerable positions. When he is off his feet, he isn't off them for long. In some calls, Frank Zombo is lining up almost a yard off the line. Once again, it helped him set a hard edge against LT Barry Sims. More impressively, he came through with a sack (bull rush against TE Vernon Davis in 3.4) and two hurries against Sims, a 12-year veteran who isn't easily beaten. Zombo is starting to show a little more creativity, but not at the expense of containment. The ILB play was adequate.

SECONDARY (3 ½)

The intention was to cover Davis with Charles Woodson as often as possible, but it didn't really work out that way. On a third and 6, Woodson didn't employ winning technique in the slot and got overwhelmed physically as Davis ran an out cut for 20. On a late third and 7, Woodson inexplicably let Davis go uncovered toward the sideline for a 15-yard reception. Smith tested Tramon Williams deep three or four times but got nowhere. Josh Morgan was shut out and Crabtree wasn't a factor, either. Williams did drop his fourth potential interception. Hard to say if it's more skill or good fortune, but in the last two games Sam Shields has been highly reliable. Peprah missed three tackles, including one along the sideline when Davis manhandled him for 25. Nick Collins took a bad angle, overran Davis and let him waltz the final 42 yards of a 66-yard TD. Collins came back with a diving interception. When Capers played more dime than he has since Week 1, Jarrett Bush got the call over Brandon Underwood.

KICKERS (1)

Mason Crosby's first career miss from inside the 30 (29 yards) caromed off the left upright due in part to pressure by DT Ray McDonald, who powered between T.J. Lang and Sitton. Crosby also hit from 43 and 24. He hit three kickoffs long (57.0 yards, 3.96 hang time), popped up two, squibbed one and drove another. Tim Masthay struggled with the raw conditions, posting three-punt averages of 43.3 yards (gross), 33.0 (net) and 3.17 hang time. The hang time for 49er Andy Lee was bad (3.55), too.

SPECIAL TEAMS (3)

Shields and Williams were respectable on returns, although Shields fumbled catching a kickoff before picking it right up. Diyral Briggs' three tackles led solid coverage units. There were two penalties, including the first holding call of the season (Bush).

OVERALL (4)

PLAYER OF THE WEEK: WR Greg Jennings

This was the fifth time in the last six games that Jennings either has had the most targeted passes or tied for the most. WR coach Jimmy Robinson is using him all over the formation like never before, and Aaron Rodgers is focusing on him. Jennings has never been better.

PLAY OF THE WEEK

Second quarter, 7 minutes left. Third and 1 at the GB 43. San Francisco leads, 6-0. The Packers mill around near the line but don't huddle. Greg Jennings flanks far left, Donald Driver and James Jones flank right and Brandon Jackson aligns with Aaron Rodgers, who is behind center. Across from Jennings, CB Shawntae Spencer is in bump coverage. SS Reggie Smith is the only deep safety. Because there is no huddle, Rodgers will verbalize the play at the line. Using a hard count, Rodgers entices LOLB Ahmad Brooks and ROLB Travis LaBoy to jump off-sides, and WILB Patrick Willis might be off-sides, too. When Scott Wells sees the 49ers in the neutral zone, he snaps the ball as penalty flags fly. Rodgers takes a five-step drop, knowing his receivers are instructed on "free" plays to run as fast and as far as they can. It's a four-man route. After looking right to attract Smith's attention, Rodgers releases the ball in 2.5 seconds for Jennings, who has a step on Spencer. Jennings has given himself room along the sideline. As the perfectly thrown ball arrives, Jennings catches it at waist height at the 18. Spencer rakes at the ball with his right arm, fails to dislodge it and falls off near the 12. Smith, who isn't running full-out coming over, finally reaches Jennings at the 5 and they tumble into the end zone together. The Packers decline the off-sides penalty on Brooks. The 57-yard TD puts the Packers ahead for good, 7-6.

STAT OF THE WEEK

James Starks carries 18 times for 73 yards in his debut. Here are the results of selected RBs for the Packers in the last 30 years in the first game that they carried the ball: Eddie Lee Ivery (3-24), 1979; Gerry Ellis (1-5), '80; Gary Ellerson (6-50), '85; Paul Ott Carruth (1-4), '86; Kenneth Davis (8-36), '86; Brent Fullwood (3-8), '87; Keith Woodside (2- -1), '88; Michael Haddix (4-21), '89; Vince Workman (1-3), '89; Darrell Thompson (1-0), '90; Edgar Bennett (6-22), '92; John Stephens (17-75), '93; Dorsey Levens (3-10), '94; Reggie Cobb (9-35), '94; Raymont Harris (24-76), '98; Darick Holmes (27-111), '98; Ahman Green (12-41), '00; Najeh Davenport (2-8), '02; Samkon Gado (1-8), '05; Noah Herron (8-27), '05; Vernand Morency (3-3), '06; Brandon Jackson (15-40), '07; Ryan Grant (3-10), '07.

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