

Rating the Packers: Week 15 at Patriots

Packers' loss not a total shock

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Green Bay — The Packers slaughtered the spread of 14 points Sunday night at Gillette Stadium, carrying the fight to the Patriots from their opening onside kick all the way to the final play before their startling upset bid was extinguished.

Coach Mike McCarthy had his team primed for New England, the Super Bowl favorite after a string of dominating victories. Even without Aaron Rodgers for the first time, the Packers dominated the statistics behind Matt Flynn.

Here is a rating of the Packers in the 31-27 defeat, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

RECEIVERS (1)

The most significant play of the second half occurred early when CB Kyle Arrington returned an interception 36 yards for a TD. The Patriots rushed six for one of only three times all night, leaving man coverage against Green Bay's five WRs. On the left, Jordy Nelson drove from the slot to the short flat just as James Jones was slanting behind him against Arrington. Jones appeared to be surprised when S Patrick Chung appeared in his path as he raced up to cover Nelson. Jones then aborted his route, which was the worst thing he could have done. Jones either must get on top of Arrington or collide with Chung so Nelson at least would be wide open for the throw. Jones can look so good so often. Then he makes a lackadaisical play like this that just kills his team. On the runback, three WRs - Jones, Nelson and Brett Swain - all had clear shots to tackle Arrington but blew it. It was just brutal. After the receivers had just two drops in the last four games, there were three here: Donald Driver, Andrew Quarless and Nelson. The best play was the stop-and-go route by Jones against Devin McCourty for a 66-yard TD. Mired in the least productive stretch of his career, Driver needs 127 yards in the final two games to break James Lofton's team record of 9,656.

OFFENSIVE LINE (3)

With the Patriots missing four of their top six D-linemen, the Packers hammered away for 143 yards rushing. Vince Wilfork had an excellent game but not a lot of his plays came at the expense of Scott Wells. Probably the secret to Wells' success is his ability to get on bigger men so quickly. If he didn't, they'd push him around more often. His hustle and effort were superb. The other solid performer was Josh Sitton, who gave ground at times to Wilfork but never got overrun. Bill Belichick fooled the unit at the start with some well-disguised pressures, one of which cost Chad Clifton a sack against UFL refugee Eric Moore. Clifton played soft early but then did some nice things in the run game. Bryan Bulaga blew an assignment on the final drive, letting free agent LB Dane Fletcher pour through on Flynn for a costly sack. He also had a team-high 2 1/2 "bad" runs, partially because the people he was blocking kept getting their hands inside his chest instead of the other way around. That's a big reason he keeps falling off run blocks. Daryn Colledge played on a sprained knee and at least was adequate.

QUARTERBACKS (4)

The Patriots' defense has major weaknesses against run and pass, so from that standpoint New England was an ideal opponent for Flynn's first start. But playing against Belichick never makes for an easy debut. Up and down early against Belichick's unscouted looks, Flynn appeared very much in command of himself and the team by mid-second quarter. He made a mistake here and there, but his composure, accuracy, arm strength, pocket movement and decision-making was more that of a low-level starter than a backup. He played some pitch-and-catch where the Patriots weren't, kept on an even emotional keel and had a passer rating of 100.2. Belichick ended up rushing five or more on 38.6% of passes and sacked Flynn five times, but just one-half of one was his fault.

RUNNING BACKS (4 ½)

John Kuhn (23 snaps) and Brandon Jackson (49) have seldom, if ever, been better. Kuhn converted third downs of 3, 10, 1, 5 and 7 yards even though he appeared hemmed in and out of luck on several. Apparently tired of getting cut down by knifing tacklers, Kuhn went airborne four times. He vaulted over S James Sanders, McCourty and Chung to convert third downs, then helped make OLB Rob Ninkovich fan as he leaped into the end zone on a 6-yard TD. He just wouldn't be denied. Jackson really did look like an RB. He played hard, made pretty good reads and finished runs. He was more decisive with his cuts but also exhibited the patience that rewarded him with some cutback lanes. Jackson did drop a pass, just his second of the season in 45 targeted throws. McCarthy elected to keep active Korey Hall over James Starks. Hall helps more on special teams but saw just one snap from scrimmage. Nance (13) danced too much in his disappointing day. Quinn Johnson (18) is becoming more confident in his hands.

DEFENSIVE LINE (4)

This is the week that players and coaches will cast votes for the Pro Bowl. Because sacks are the easiest way to measure a DT, B.J. Raji's two sacks on national TV might have put him over the top for a trip to Hawaii. Raji beat Pro Bowl LG Logan Mankins in 3.9 seconds with a power move, then overran tough little RB Danny Woodhead for another in 2.5. He seemed faster off the ball and is using his hands even better. The beefy base front of Raji (39 snaps), Ryan Pickett (27) and Howard Green (15) was hard to move. Jarius Wynn (11) was used on some passing downs, often in three-man rushes when his job was to occupy two blockers so someone else could be singled. Wynn's good work in practice hasn't carried over into games. Belichick is renowned for using just one basic running play on the goal-line. Thanks to C.J. Wilson's penetration, BenJarvus Green-Ellis lost a yard on that play.

LINEBACKERS (4)

Desmond Bishop joined Raji as the other outstanding player on defense. Bishop took himself completely out of the play with a bad decision on Green-Ellis' 33-yard TD run. However, he made a series of instinctive reads and explosive hits and didn't miss a tackle. Dom Capers hadn't shown many ILB cross-blitzes in 2010, but when he called one in the second quarter Bishop blew up Tom Brady for a 2.8-second sack. Rather than use the pedestrian Erik Walden at RE all the time, Capers debuted a "dollar" defense for about a dozen snaps in which Bishop rushed from RE in a 4-1-6. He wasn't productive. Clay Matthews couldn't beat RT Sebastian Vollmer at all, although he was double-teamed on 47% of his rushes. It's easy for opponents to double Matthews with right guards because they can just leave Pickett alone with the center and fan back.

SECONDARY (3)

Generally, the Packers covered Wes Welker and Woodhead from the slot with Charles Woodson and dime back Jarrett Bush. Woodson showed early he wasn't having any of Welker's staples (in-and-out routes, bubble screens) with two arresting plays. The only play either made in the passing game was a 35-yarder to the wide-open Welker, who was supposed to be covered by Woodson. In the end zone, Woodson wasn't able to plaster TE Aaron Hernandez long enough and the result was a 2-yard TD pass when Brady had 4 seconds. Brady's other TD, a 10-yarder to Hernandez, came when Sam Shields appeared to peek in the backfield and then badly missed the tackle. Tramon Williams played Green-Ellis' long run and a 16-yard reverse poorly, but his coverage was top-caliber as usual. Woodson had a chance for a huge play when he undercut a corner route to TE Rob Gronkowski but dropped the interception. Nick Collins exited with rib damage and was replaced by Atari Bigby. Collins wasn't effective, giving up a 25-yard pass to Gronkowski and being too passive on Green-Ellis' jaunt.

KICKERS (3 ½)

A few years ago, Mason Crosby was a liability on onside kicks. Today, he's exceptional, which was evident on his well-placed boot to open the game. He hit FGs from 31 and 19 yards, and kept a lid on dangerous KO returner Brandon Tate with three types of kickoffs. Tim Masthay's four-punt averages were 41.3 yards (gross), 38.5 (net) and 3.89 seconds (hang time).

SPECIAL TEAMS (3)

Since Shawn Slocum arrived with McCarthy in 2006 the Packers have only tried three or four surprise onside kicks. Their bold move worked when Crosby's boot was perfect, Kuhn kept the ball alive and Collins made the recovery tight to the Green Bay sideline. New England was vulnerable with six rather than seven men at the line, but to their credit the Patriots didn't drop back prematurely. Allowing a guard to return a kickoff 71 yards bordered on criminal. That was a collective failure. Shields isn't a natural KO returner and struggles fielding the ball cleanly. He will need patience and hard work to succeed.

OVERALL (4)

PLAYER OF THE WEEK: RB JOHN KUHN

After a few of Kuhn's airborne assaults, some Patriots didn't want any part of him. You can't blame them. At 6 feet and 250 pounds, Kuhn is a heavy, heavy load. This was Kuhn's finest moment in his four-year career in Green Bay.

PLAY OF THE WEEK

Late second quarter. Greg Jennings has just scored, giving the Packers a 17-7 lead. Mason Crosby tees up the ball on the right hash mark, four of his teammates to the left (Atari Bigby is one of the two safeties) and six to his right (Charlie Peprah is the safety there). Crosby executes a “hook shot,” an unpredictable kick that is designed to go low and hard deep into Patriots’ territory. The ball is airborne for 1.34 seconds and is fielded on the second bounce at the 25 by RG Dan Connolly, who is in the middle of the Patriots’ 6-3-2 formation. Connolly wraps both arms around the ball and ventures forward, just hopeful of securing the ball during the expected head-on collision. As Connolly approaches the 35, the Packers’ coverage disintegrates before his eyes. Quinn Johnson runs into Diyral Briggs, who is preparing to make the tackle. Near them, John Kuhn also loses his leverage. Connolly cuts outside Johnson, Briggs and Kuhn at the 40, positions the ball like a loaf of bread under his left armpit and sets sail into the clear. Both Peprah and Crosby have taken bad angles and have to chase the lumbering 313-pounder who once ran 40 yards in 5.06 seconds when he weighed 296. Peprah draws abreast at the GB 37 but goes for the strip instead of the sure tackle. As he does, S Sergio Brown blocks him. Connolly sidesteps Crosby at the 15, trips a bit when grabbed low by Bigby and then is dragged down by Kuhn and Rob Francois at the 6 after a 71-yard kickoff return, the longest ever by an NFL offensive lineman. Three plays later, the Patriots score and their deficit is just 17-14 at halftime.

STAT OF THE WEEK

The Packers run 80 plays and have a time of possession of 40 minutes, 48 seconds in their loss to New England. Since the football renaissance in Green Bay began in 1992, the Packers had run 80 or more plays in eight other games (two overtime) and had possession time of 40:00 or more in four other games (one overtime). They were 6-2 in games with 80 or more plays and 3-1 in games with the ball 40 or more minutes. Their 80-plus play defeats were at Chicago in 2005 (84 plays, 19-7) and at Chicago in 1993 (83 plays, 30-17). Their 40:00-plus defeat was against Minnesota in 1992 (40:19, 23-20). Since 1992, the most plays the Packers have run is 89 against San Francisco (1996). Their highest time of possession is 41:39 against San Francisco (2009).

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