

Rating the Packers vs Falcons

Packers overcome Falcons' strength

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel
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Green Bay — The best pile-driver in the business, the league's heaviest third-down back and a thumping, Pro Bowl fullback. A nasty, veteran offensive line. And a mini-tank at wide receiver.

A hard-hitting, swarming defense.

Even the kick returner runs extremely hard for his size.

The underappreciated element of Green Bay's 48-21 rout of Atlanta on Saturday night was how the Packers stood up to a very physical team on just five days rest so talents such as Aaron Rodgers and Tramon Williams could decide the outcome.

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

RECEIVERS (5)

Having dropped 11 passes in the last four games, the WRs owed Aaron Rodgers and the offense. Consider the debt paid in full. Besides no drops, the unit caught 26 passes for a stunning 331 yards, including 116 after the catch. Granted, nickel back Christopher Owens had an awful game replacing Brian Williams (knee), but starters Dunta Robinson and Brent Grimes were no match, either. All four WRs were equally impressive. By no means did James Jones (30 snaps) run a great stop-and-go route against Grimes, but Rodgers trusted him and he went straight up for a tremendous 20-yard TD. Even when Jones was running down the right sideline, he still carried the ball in his left arm. Jordy Nelson (43) was excellent after the catch and is developing more and more feel for route combinations. Donald Driver (41) had his way with Owens from the slot, got up the field on hitches and really looked fluid. Greg Jennings (58) caught the ball nicely in his finger tips and didn't hesitate working the middle. He had the ball away from his body when SLB Stephen Nicholas stripped him from behind. It was Jennings' first lost fumble in five seasons.

OFFENSIVE LINE (4)

In the first meeting, the Falcons put DE John Abraham across from Bryan Bulaga about half the game. This time, Abraham rushed just twice against Bulaga, and both were stunts. On the other side, Abraham had 10 single-block rushes against Chad Clifton, five double-team rushes and nine stunts. Abraham beat Clifton inside in 4.3 seconds for one of the two sacks. DE Kroy Biermann had the other in 3.6 seconds against Bulaga. Clifton also created some movement in the run game. He has gone five games without a penalty. Josh Sitton had another exceptional game with no pressures and one-half "bad" run. Week after week he competes, mashes and mauls. Daryn Colledge had some rough plays (2½ "bad" runs, 1½ pressures) but at least he has stabilized to the point where he almost never just whiffs. Scott Wells executed some very difficult reach blocks and handled the noise beautifully, but it wasn't one of his top games.

QUARTERBACKS (4)

Rodgers is lifting his game to another level when it matters most. If this scene didn't shake him, not much will. Look at the start. It's third and 13 from the 8 after the Falcons swallow the Packers' first two plays. It's impossible to hear. Expressionless, Rodgers huddles them up and then whips a quick strike to Jennings for 30. And so it went. The Falcons blitzed heavily (42%) but could hardly believe it when the slithery Rodgers spun away from four dead-to-rights sacks. When the Falcons did trap Rodgers, he didn't try anything stupid and just went down. On the move, his last resort is running. His eyes are down the field, and his velocity, accuracy and decision-making on the move are superlative. Four times he turned called runs into short completions against soft corners. There's absolutely no wasted motion in his delivery. Every pass looks the same coming off his hand, so defenders are caught not knowing if the target is 10 or 40 yards away. He seemed three steps ahead all night.

RUNNING BACKS (3 ½)

The shift from Brandon Jackson to James Starks is official. Starks had 43 snaps and Jackson, who had only two in the second half, finished with 16. Starks had a poor blitz pickup against Owens on a slot blitz early, but he improved as the game went on. The 218-pound Starks packs a wallop. He has good body snap and uncoils entering contact. Most of the time, he makes one cut and hits it. Starks absorbed some wicked hits, especially one from SS William Moore. But he can take a shot. Starks hasn't fumbled in 81 touches, but he must be ever-vigilant about being high and tight with the ball. John Kuhn (eight snaps RB, 13 FB) has just three drops in four seasons. He's a dependable flat receiver and short-yardage torpedo. Quinn Johnson (23) kept trading whacks and words with WLB Mike Peterson, an aging warrior with a ton of pop and pride. Johnson was guilty on two "bad" runs, but his in-your-face style definitely has a place against a bunch of brawlers like Atlanta.

DEFENSIVE LINE (4)

Opposing coaches and scouts say this unit is coached brilliantly by Mike Trgovac. Don't be misled by the body types. The footwork, the pad level, the assignment awareness and the unselfishness required to eat up blockers is a tribute to Trgovac. When the game was close, the Packers used Ryan Pickett (14 snaps), B.J. Raji (36) and Howard Green (12) in the 3-4 and then added C.J. Wilson (20) in a 4-4 four times. Pickett and Green didn't even play in the second half, which was all nickel. Pickett dealt with the tough side (RT Tyson Clabo, RG Harvey Dahl) but kind of waded in and stood firm. Green stayed square. Raji established his physical superiority on undersized C Todd McClure early with some jarring punches. Wilson beat LG Justin Blalock for a sack in 3.2 seconds and came off for four tackles. Cullen Jenkins (29) wasn't quite as stout as the others when the Falcons did run. He did back-door Dahl for a minus-2 and ran some excellent DT-DE twists with Clay Matthews.

LINEBACKERS (4 ½)

Coordinator Mike Mularkey doubled Matthews on 45% of dropbacks, up from 29.4% on Nov. 28. When Charles Woodson missed Matt Ryan on a slot blitz, Matthews beat Clabo with a spin for a sack in 2.9. Woodson's sack came a series later when Clabo was late picking him up because he was eyeing Matthews on a stunt inside. Matthews' second sack came on a stunt with Jenkins when he slashed inside and was just too fast for Dahl to pick up. On some runs, offenses can't account for the back-side OLB. But if the D-line can stymie the ball carrier just a little, Matthews flattens down the line with such speed that he will make the tackle. After the unit missed six tackles in the first game, all three misses this time came on Michael Turner's 12-yard TD. Desmond Bishop had some rough plays in coverage, giving up a 19-yard post to Brian Finneran and drawing a holding penalty on another. Both Bishop and A.J. Hawk have shortcomings in coverage, but they're hustling and work well together. Prolific TE Tony Gonzalez caught just one pass, a 7-yarder against tight coverage by Bishop. Bishop also forced a fumble by Michael Jenkins. Erik Walden never beat LT Sam Baker around the corner but his speed in pursuit helps. Hawk had seven of Dom Capers' 18 individual rushes but didn't do any damage.

SECONDARY (4 ½)

Tramon Williams made two game-altering interceptions but don't overlook the performance of Charles Woodson. He baited Ryan perfectly on the first play of the game and probably would have had a pick-six if Roddy White hadn't grabbed him. White should have been flagged. Woodson kept wrecking running plays by slicing in from the slot or tossing aside WRs. He was filling like a LB. The Falcons went after Sam Shields, throwing 11 balls at him (eight to Jenkins) and completing five for 48. Shields gave up a 22-yard fade to Jenkins and drew his first penalty of the season but overall was solid. Williams was beat by Jenkins on his first pick, but Ryan didn't have the arm to finish and the leaping Williams made him pay. The steady safeties didn't miss a tackle.

KICKERS (3)

Mason Crosby missed from 50 off the left upright, then connected from 43 and 32. Three of his eight kickoffs appeared to be kicked long, and his averages were 70 (yards) and 4.09 seconds (hang time).

SPECIAL TEAMS (½)

Eric Weems' 102-yard KO return could have been ruinous. It looked like the play was there to be made by Diyral Briggs, but he fell down at the 21. Collins, one of the safeties, seemed to be too wide and then took a poor angle. With his speed, he easily could have caught Weems, who isn't a burner. Crosby lost leverage and balance, and then Weems was gone. Starks fumbled a KO out of bounds and doesn't look like the answer. It takes him too long to gather himself

OVERALL (4 ½)

PLAYER OF THE WEEK: T QB Aaron Rodgers

Falcons defensive coordinator Brian VanGorder rushed five or more on 42% of dropbacks, more than any Packers' opponent other than the Giants (45%) on Dec. 26. Rodgers beat the blitz, beat three-man rushes, soft zones and everything else in a tremendous performance to quell playoff fever in Atlanta.

PLAY OF THE WEEK

Second quarter, 10 seconds left. Second and 19 at the GB 35. Packers lead, 21-14. The Falcons are trying to shorten the 53-yard distance for a field-goal attempt by Matt Bryant. The Packers rush three and the Falcons send three out, blocking with seven. Matt Ryan sprints out to the left and looks for Roddy White, who is lined up just outside the left hashmark across from Tramon Williams. White rounds off an out route near the 28. Williams starts out lined up with outside leverage on White but said he knew that the sideline route was coming. So he allows White to assume the outside leverage, trying to bait Ryan into the throw. "It was 'Cover 2 Man,'" SS Charlie Peprah said. "We had help over the top so he could be aggressive." Ryan throws from the left hash mark on the run from the 40. Williams breaks in front of White, snatches it cleanly a yard or two from the sideline and sprints up the boundary. TE Tony Gonzalez has the sideline blocked at the GB 45. Ryan arrives on time but overruns the play, getting too close to Gonzalez. Williams bursts inside both players at the GB 47 and is gone. He reaches the end zone 11.9 seconds after the ball was snapped. The Packers lead, 28-14.

STAT OF THE WEEK

Counting playoffs, this is the first game that the Packers don't punt in 21 years. Only four times in their history had the Packers finished without a punt: November 1960 at Baltimore (lost, 38-24); September 1967 against Chicago (won, 13-10); December 1982 against Buffalo (won, 33-21); and December 1989 at Chicago (won, 40-28). The last time the Packers had just one punt was December 2007 at St. Louis. In the playoffs, they had just one punt against St. Louis in January 1983, Atlanta in January 2003 and Arizona in January 2010.

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