

Rating the Packers vs Bears III

Packers had many positive performers in NFC victory

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel
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Green Bay — They tamed Michael Vick and the Philadelphia Eagles. They buried the Atlanta Falcons. And now they've survived a scrap with their next-door neighbor.

Champions of the National Football Conference they are, these won't-take-no-for-an-answer Green Bay Packers.

Here's a rating of the Packers in their 21-14 decision over the Chicago Bears on Sunday at Soldier Field, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

RECEIVERS (4)

This was the fourth game of the last five in which Greg Jennings has led in targeted passes. As well as Jennings is playing, it only makes sense for Aaron Rodgers to seek him out. On the first two plays, Jennings made tough catches in traffic for 48 yards. He's trusting his hands now, which hasn't always been the case, and isn't body-catching. He contorted his torso to haul in one ball that was slightly behind him, read the Bears' shifting secondary like a first-grade primer and was all north-south after the catch. Even on a go route when Charles Tillman had him blanketed, Jennings made a dramatic late surge for the ball. This was as well as he has played all season, and that's saying a lot. Since James Jones' rough game Jan. 2 against Chicago, he has played 80 snaps compared to 116 for Jordy Nelson. At this point, Jones is back to being an outside receiver. Not one of his 26 snaps came from the slot, whereas 10 of Nelson's 40 were inside. Jones remains a dangerous sideline deep threat. Rodgers' confidence in Nelson on third down has increased. The tight ends were inconsistent.

OFFENSIVE LINE (4)

Matched against Bryan Bulaga, DE Israel Idonije's only pressure came when the rookie slipped, and he wasn't a major factor in the run game. Bulaga bounced back from his four-penalty debacle against the Bears three weeks ago and was solid (one penalty, 1½ pressures, no "bad" runs). Chad Clifton sat out three series (16 snaps) in the first half with a neck stinger and was replaced by T.J. Lang. In all, Julius Peppers rushed 17 times from Clifton's side and six times over both Bulaga and Lang. The Packers double-teamed Peppers on 37% of drop-backs, excluding stunts. With the exception of two plays, Clifton kept him at bay. Lang was overmatched. Peppers beat him inside for one "bad" run and around the edge for a knockdown. He needs work in pass protection. The worst run of the day (minus-5 for James Starks) occurred when Josh Sitton blocked down and never got a glove on blitzing MLB Brian Urlacher. In protection, Sitton was beat initially two or three times by DTs Tommie Harris and Matt Toeaina. He's usually able to recover because of his balance and bulk.

QUARTERBACKS (4)

Rodgers renewed his cat-and-mouse game against Urlacher and the safeties. For some reason, coordinator Rod Marinelli seemed worried about the run and kept bringing a safety into the box late. Rodgers sold his play-fakes beautifully, froze the safeties and hit his wideouts on inside breaking routes half a dozen times when CB Tim Jennings played his customary outside leverage. Rodgers trusts his WRs to adjust routes based on their years of working together. Mistakes weren't evident Sunday. Passer rating (his was 55.4) can be so misleading. His 1-yard TD and 39 yards in all on the ground don't even factor in. Rodgers was low several times, hurried a few tosses and forced a red-zone interception when a field goal would have been the ticket.

RUNNING BACKS (3 ½)

Starks (42 snaps) dropped a physical calling card on his first carry, running right over the top of LB Lance Briggs for an extra 4 yards. When Tommie Harris penetrated in the backfield, Starks ran through him to turn minus-3 into plus-1. Two of Starks' biggest gains came when Harris was knocked far out of his gap and Starks saw the opening. He needs to do a better job selling run fakes and then blocking D-linemen after that. Starks also is lunging too much in blitz pickup, which is why he never plays on third down if it's not 1 yard to go. Brandon Jackson (12 snaps, just three in the second half) is a better check-down receiver than Starks because he's so technically sound. Even before he put the superlative move on Urlacher for a 16-yard reception, Jackson chipped Toeaina on the way out that might have saved Sitton from a sack. Jackson is decisive on his check-downs, puts the ball away fast and gets what he can. Quinn Johnson (23) missed several blocks, including two against Briggs that ruined carries by Starks. He can smash a stationary target but has problems making adjustments. John Kuhn (26) has assumed the third-and-long role from Jackson.

DEFENSIVE LINE (4 ½)

When the Packers guessed run, Howard Green was on the field for 16 snaps and Ryan Pickett for 29. That relieved the physical burden from Cullen Jenkins, who seemed rejuvenated in his 39-play stint. Jenkins had 4½ "pressures" in what was close to a dominating performance. If Jenkins has one more injury-free, productive outing in him, his next salary here or elsewhere should be enormous. B.J. Raji (61) found out early that LG Chris Williams didn't have leverage or strength. Three of Raji's 3½ "pressures" came against Williams. Even Green showed a burst to the QB when he beat Williams outside. Pickett added 1½ "pressures" against RT J'Marcus Webb. He also was active and rugged against the run except for the fourth-and-1 when the Bears decked him at the point. Raji got no better than a draw against RG Roberto Garza, the Bears' best O-lineman. Raji caught his 18-yard pick-six in his hands at point-blank range. What a play it was.

LINEBACKERS (4 ½)

Clay Matthews has been double-teamed as a rusher 40% or more in four of the last six games. The team that elected to play him straight was Chicago (31% in Week 16, 27% Sunday). Webb, the long-armed rookie, worked against Matthews most of the day and allowed just one "pressure." Matthews' best plays were a minus-3 when he trashed Webb on a run and a walk-back of C Olin Kreutz for one-half sack on a stunt inside. Late in the game, Robert Francois recognized a reverse and played through RB Matt Forte before Desmond Bishop slipped TE Desmond Clark and drilled Earl Bennett for minus-2. Francois was adequate as the fifth-string ROLB after Erik Walden (ankle) went out in the third quarter. A.J. Hawk had the most blitz chances (nine) on the defense and had only one "pressure." He is running the defense with a strong voice and an unselfish style. Bishop smothered a wheel route by the dangerous Forte, assisted in tight coverage on TE Greg Olsen and was effective on several of his eight blitzes.

SECONDARY (4)

One week after Tramon Williams made two sizzling interceptions in Atlanta, Sam Shields authored a pair of his own. The pick before the half was extraordinary in terms of positioning, timing and hand placement. He ran step-for-step with speed merchant Johnny Knox. The pick that extinguished the Bears' last gasp was exceptional in terms of knowing when to undercut a route and playing to his help. Dom Capers had rushed Shields exactly one time all season. As a changeup, he sent Shields five times from the slot and he responded with a sack in 2.7 seconds and 1½ hurries. His acceleration off the edge was stunning. Still, it isn't time to anoint Shields. Knox lost him on a 24-yard corner route, he let Forte get outside him on a 24-yard check-down and his tackling was lukewarm. Nick Collins had two really bad plays. First, he got caught too far inside and wasn't in position to cut off Knox' 32-yard reception after beating Tramon Williams. Second, he went for the interception when Bennett beat Charles Woodson on a corner route and fanned on the tackle. Woodson inexplicably quit on the play when he easily could have made the tackle, leading to a 35-yard TD. Charlie Peprah just got torched from the slot when manned up on Devin Hester, but Jay Cutler overthrew it.

KICKERS (4 ½)

Tim Masthay punted eight times, averaging 41.8 yards (gross), 34.5 (net) and 3.93 seconds (hang time). He had a ninth punt (57-yard net, 4.25 hang) wiped out by penalty. Masthay controlled Hester with three accurate "Aussie" drop punts and a pair of low, tight-sideline screamers that special-teams coaches around the league will save for their how-to cut-ups. Five of his punts ended up inside the 20 and a sixth was inches away. Mason Crosby's varied kickoffs were so-so.

SPECIAL TEAMS (3)

More and more, Jarrett Bush is playing like a legitimate cover ace. His enthusiasm seems infectious. The coverage units didn't wait taking shots at Hester and always got their man. Williams, who fumbled two punts, can thank Brett Swain for recovering one. Kickoff return, the Packers' weakest component, doesn't have a legitimate candidate. Starks isn't fielding the ball cleanly and is too slow getting started.

OVERALL (4)

PLAYER OF THE WEEK: DE Cullen Jenkins

What a difference it makes for the pass rush having Jenkins back in the lineup. He had a team-high 4 ½ "pressures," belaboring the Bears' interior and exterior with speed and strength. This was one of the finest pass-rush games all season by the defensive line.

PLAY OF THE WEEK

Third quarter, 9 minutes left, Third and goal at the Chicago 6. Packers lead, 14-0. Green Bay is in shotgun formation, with three WRs left and one WR right. As always, the Bears remain in their 4-2 defense. Chicago rushes four and the Packers block with five. The Bears double-team Greg Jennings on his corner route, but Aaron Rodgers has ample time to search beyond Jennings. Hemmed in after 4 seconds and with the rush drawing near, Rodgers decides to throw for Donald Driver in the middle of the end zone as he works against Charles Tillman. Delivering the ball from the 12, Rodgers inexplicably doesn't see Brian Urlacher, who is standing just across the line mirroring his movement. Urlacher spears the interception at the 6 and takes off. Because Rodgers is faster, he gains the angle near the Bears 40. With no blocker in front, Urlacher decides to cut back at the 36. Rodgers stops at the 39 and goes for Urlacher's legs. The 258-pound MLB manages to stay upright for five more yards before going down at the 45 after a return of 39 yards. Either Driver or John Kuhn probably would have chased Urlacher down, but it might have been deep in Packers' territory. The Bears then go three-and-out under QB Todd Collins.

STAT OF THE WEEK

The Bears finish 1 for 13 on third downs, or 7.7%. Their only conversion came with 2:38 left on a 10-yard pass to TE Greg Olsen on third and 9. In the previous 25 years, the Packers have shut out an opponent on third down five times: Atlanta, 1988 (0-11); Buffalo, 1997 (0-12); at Chicago, 2005 (0-10); Pittsburgh, 2005 (0-8); and Minnesota, 2007 (0-8). They also held a foe to a 1-13 rate in two other games: LA Raiders, 1993; and Detroit, 2002.

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