

Rating the Packers vs. Steelers in Super Bowl XLV

Turnovers, Rodgers made the difference

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

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Green Bay — In some ways, the 45th Super Bowl played out just the way it was expected to Sunday night at Cowboys Stadium in Arlington, Texas.

The Pittsburgh Steelers' secondary had no answers for the Green Bay Packers' passing game. Coach Mike McCarthy saw the Steelers' deficiencies on tape and built his entire offensive plan around the passing game.

To make it work, the Packers needed Aaron Rodgers to be at his physical and cerebral best. And he certainly was.

But the Steelers did enough good things on offense to have won their third Super Bowl in six years. They outgained the Packers, 387-338, and enjoyed more than a seven-minute margin in time of possession.

What the Steelers couldn't overcome was the Packers' plus-three advantage in turnover differential that led directly to 21 points.

The first was the result of a powerful bull rush by Howard Green that set Nick Collins in motion for his brilliant interception and 37-yard touchdown return.

The second was a tremendous interception by backup Jarrett Bush in which a missed assignment by Charles Woodson left tight end Heath Miller wide open deep. When Ben Roethlisberger didn't see Miller, he threw into an area that he obviously didn't expect to find Bush lurking as the so-called "free" man in the defense.

The third was a fumble by Rashard Mendenhall in which Clay Matthews and Ryan Pickett collaborated on a perfectly executed line game and Desmond Bishop made the recovery.

The closest the Packers came to a turnover was on the fifth play of the game when teammate Sam Shields backed into punt returner Tramon Williams and the ball came loose. Somehow, Williams came up with the ball.

Thus, the disciplined, ball-conscious Packers won their 13th NFL championship, 31-25, over Pittsburgh.

Rodgers was named player of the week for the third time in 20 games, tying Chad Clifton, Greg Jennings and Williams for most number of weekly wins in the Journal Sentinel's "Rating the Packers" series.

Clay Matthews won twice, and the single weekly winners were Bush, Cullen Jenkins, John Kuhn, Tim Masthay, Jordy Nelson and B.J. Raji.

For the 13th time in the 20-year history of the series, the quarterbacks garnered the highest total of footballs.

The Rodgers-led position finished with 73 footballs, or an average of 3.65 per game. Following, in order, were:

Linebackers, 71 (3.55).

Secondary, 70 ½, (3.53).

Defensive line, 69 (3.45).

Kickers, 68 ½, (3.43).

Offensive line, 66 ½ (3.33).

Running backs, 63 ½ (3.18).

Receivers, 61 (3.05).

Special teams, 56 ½ (2.83).

Overall, the Packers received 73 footballs, or 3.65 per game. Last year they averaged 2.85.

Six of the nine position groups improved from last year. The biggest gains were made by the kickers (plus-.90), the offensive line (plus-.77) and the secondary (plus-.62). The biggest decline was by the running backs, which fell .14.

Eight 5-football performances were awarded. The quarterbacks earned that against the Vikings (road), Giants, Atlanta (playoffs) and Steelers. The receivers had 5 against Atlanta (playoff), the secondary against the Bears (regular-season finale) and the kickers against the Jets.

The only 5-football team game came against the Giants.

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

RECEIVERS (3)

As magnificent as Rodgers' passes were down the middle for gains of 21 and 31 yards, Jennings' receptions were special, too. Both times Jennings ventured into the heart of Cover 2, which is a supreme test of courage for a WR. Quite a few wide receivers of Jennings' dimensions either can't or won't work inside. Jennings learned the game at the pro level from Donald Driver, the ultimate tough guy. In each case, Jennings trusted his hands despite the traffic and made difficult catches before getting whacked. For the first time in his career, Nelson played the most snaps (51) at the position. The Steelers generally matched Ike Taylor on Jennings (49), which left Bryant McFadden and William Gay outside against Nelson and James Jones (33). Nelson had success backing them off or running by them. Still, he dropped three passes, including a possible 51-yard TD. Jones dropped what might have been a 75-yard TD and Brett Swain (14), in for the injured Driver, dropped another. Jones made a great scoop of a low ball on third down right when the Packers' hopes were flagging. Week after week, TE Tom Crabtree almost always blocked his man.

OFFENSIVE LINE (4 ½)

Scott Wells fared far better against NT Casey Hampton than in the December 2009 game. Almost all of Hampton's 37 snaps came against Wells, either head-up or in an outside shade technique. One time, Wells couldn't reach Hampton and James Starks gained just 1 yard. Another time, Wells single-blocked Hampton, pancaked him and Starks charged for 14. Wells did absorb the only line-related sack when all he had to do was finish the play and push James Harrison into the turf. Chad Clifton played extremely well against Harrison, and with almost no help. Clifton kept his hands inside, seemed highly motivated and frustrated his squatty, strong, 260-pound adversary, giving up 1 ½ knockdowns. On the other side, Bryan Bulaga received more chip help and held up better than expected against LaMarr Woodley, giving up two "pressures." Neither tackle had a "bad" run. Josh Sitton also had a solid outing against talented Ziggy Hood. Daryn Colledge was fairly solid against DE Brett Keisel but overset to allow one knockdown and got turned around to allow another. Colledge's false-start penalty came when he was allowed to work from a two-point stance and flinched. Sitton always plays with his hand down.

QUARTERBACKS (5)

Coordinator Dick LeBeau rushed five or more on 58.5% of drop-backs (six or more on 7.3%). That's the second highest total by any opponent in the McCarthy era. No coordinator or front seven is better than this. McCarthy gave Rodgers wide-ranging freedom at the line to select the best run or pass to attack the defensive call. Rodgers was knocked down 11 times, including three sacks. In this era of kid-glove treatment for QBs, that's a lot. But despite the physical nature of the game, Rodgers didn't buckle and took care of the ball. Troy Polamalu was rendered impotent when Rodgers' kept looking him off. On the 21-yard TD to Jennings, Rodgers' missile was in the air just .85 seconds. FS Ryan Clark knew the route so well that he prematurely vacated his deep hash location to break on it but still missed by inches. In explaining what happened, Clark used baseball lingo: "He just threw it right by me." On the 31-yard to Jennings, Rodgers threw another dart that whistled past Taylor, who had excellent underneath coverage. That ball was in the air 1.05 seconds. These were just great, great throws, the product of a fearless passer with a big arm. The six dropped passes had a combined total of 100 yards at the drop point. Had they been caught, Rodgers' total of 304 yards might have been 450. He made his first Super Bowl almost look easy.

RUNNING BACKS (4)

In a scoreless game, Starks (32 snaps) gained 8 off the right side on third and 1. It was a superb run because the inside hole was closed. Backs with vision and confidence will bounce a short-yardage run outside, which Starks did to set up the first TD. When the Packers did run, they ran well. The only rush for negative yardage wasn't Starks' fault. He made the right read to head outside, but when Nelson failed to block LB Lawrence Timmons it was minus-3. The Packers featured inside-zone runs and not the outside zone, which would have meant TEs having to block Harrison and Woodley. Starks was beaten by Woodley for one sack. Otherwise, the blitz pickup was good to very good. Nobody else carried the ball. Brandon Jackson and John Kuhn each had 15 snaps, and Corey Hall played six.

DEFENSIVE LINE (3 ½)

C Doug Legursky, substituting for Maurkice Pouncey, wasn't the weak link of the Steelers' line. That turned out to be LG Chris Kemoatu, at least in the passing game. B.J. Raji led the pass rush with four "pressures," three at Kemoatu's expense. Although the 344-pound Kemoatu outweighs Raji, he lacked the leverage to hold his ground. Howard Green played just 18 snaps, including eight in a 4-4 jumbo front designed for run downs. Green's bull rush of Kemoatu ignited the biggest play of the game, and he was OK at the point. Ryan Pickett (29) deserves just as much credit for Mendenhall's fumble as Matthews. He stunted inside of the pulling Kemoatu and surprised Mendenhall by showing up 3 yards in the backfield. Cullen Jenkins (38) was blown out on a 9-yard run and basically played on passing downs. He had just two "pressures," both against RG Ramon Foster, but never could get Roethlisberger on the ground.

LINEBACKERS (3 ½)

The Steelers got a lot of mileage from an old-fashioned one-back power play with Kemoatu leading through the bubble on the right side. The Steelers' RBs finished 19-95 (5.0). Probably the best player was Bishop, who played fast, had three tackles for loss and a several times hustled wide to prevent speedy Mike Wallace from getting away on bubble screens. Bishop also overran an early rush and blew a fourth-quarter coverage that left Hines Ward wide open in the middle for a 15-yard catch. Matthews and Frank Zombo were inconsistent against the run. TE Matt Spaeth drove Matthews off the line on Mendenhall's longest gain (17 yards), and Matthews didn't have a "pressure." The Steelers double-teamed Matthews on 40% of his rushes, and were ecstatic that aging RT Flozell Adams and Foster kept him at bay. A.J. Hawk didn't attack Mendenhall's 8-yard TD run and had one "pressure" in his nine blitzes.

SECONDARY (3)

Besides his electrifying TD, Collins made several knifing tackles in the open field. Both Collins and Charlie Peprah got caught up inside on substantial runs that bounced outside. Peprah and Shields each missed two tackles for a unit that missed too many (six). When Roethlisberger finally got the matchup he wanted, Wallace on a deep over route against Peprah, he threw a terrible pass and Peprah escaped unscathed. Woodson made a few open-field tackles and had excellent coverage on the bomb to Wallace on which he suffered a broken collarbone. Pat Lee, his replacement, might have played his best game. He made proper adjustments, was assignment-sound and never did get beat. Shields did a poor job on a 37-yard corner route to Antwaan Randle El and a 25-yard TD to Wallace. After so many strong performances, this was a downer. Bush's interception was the best play of his career. On Ward's 8-yard TD, Bush had good coverage initially but lost him when he turned back for a split-second. Bush gave up too many completions but was effective on his seven blitzes. He showed some moves and isn't afraid to throw his body around among the wide bodies. Roethlisberger targeted Williams on seven passes, completing one for 13 yards. He was all over rookie WRs Emmanuel Sanders and Antonio Brown, and didn't give up anything to Wallace. He is just so sure of himself now.

KICKERS (3 ½)

Mason Crosby's two deep kickoffs had averages of 67.5 yards and 4.14 seconds of hang time. His four other kickoffs were OK. Tim Masthay wasn't booming the ball (40.5 gross, 36.3 net, 4.14 hang time), but the Steelers had just 5 return yards.

SPECIAL TEAMS (3)

Shields appeared to lose all awareness of where he was in relation to Williams on the first punt and avoided being a goat only when his teammate made the recovery. Later, Williams compounded his mistake after he failed to field a punt and saw it roll 20 yards. He took a swing at CB Anthony Madison as the ball rolled dead and was flagged 15 yards. Diyral Briggs cost his team 17 yards of field position by being illegally downfield. Bush and Lee did fine work as the punt-team gunners. Lee proved to be a much better choice than Shields or Starks to return kickoffs. Bush had two of the unit's six missed tackles.

OVERALL (4 ½)

PLAYER OF THE WEEK: QB Aaron Rodgers

Facing the NFL's finest statistical defense, Aaron Rodgers was asked by Mike McCarthy to shoulder the offensive burden. The coach had no plans to call many running plays. Six of his passes were dropped, but Rodgers didn't flinch, just like he didn't all season.

PLAY OF THE WEEK

Late first quarter. First down at the Pittsburgh 7. Packers lead, 7-0. The Steelers are in a double tight-end set with Mike Wallace split wide left and Hines Ward slot left. From their 3-4 base defense, the Packers have Tramon Williams playing off Wallace, Charles Woodson close to Ward, Charlie Peprah in the box and Nick Collins in the deep middle.

Frank Zombo becomes the fourth rusher after chucking TE Heath Miller, who then decoys into the deep middle shadowed by Desmond Bishop and Peprah. Ben Roethlisberger takes a five-step drop and sets up 1 yard deep in the end zone. He pump-fakes to Wallace, who beats Williams deep on a double move.

As Roethlisberger steps into the throw, he is hit in the right shoulder by Howard Green, who has bull-rushed LG Chris Kemoatu, and is knocked down. Sensing Williams is in trouble, Collins takes a few steps toward the sideline where he thinks the ball will land at about the 50.

With his eyes in the backfield, Collins sees the ball fluttering well short. He takes a 45-degree angle toward the boundary, makes the interception and takes care to stay in bounds. Collins cuts inside of RB Rashard Mendenhall at the 20, then cuts back outside and away from diving RG Ramon Foster near the 10.

Picking up blocks by Ryan Pickett on RT Flozell Adams and by Zombo on C Doug Legursky, Collins vaults from the 2 into the end zone. There he is penalized for excessive celebration after the TD.

STAT OF THE WEEK

Jordy Nelson, with nine catches for 140 yards, becomes just the second backup WR in the Super Bowl to have 100 or more receiving yards. The first was Green Bay's Max McGee in Super Bowl I (7-138). In all, 31 WRs have gained 100 yards in the Super Bowl, one TE (Cincinnati's Dan Ross) and one RB (San Francisco's Roger Craig). The Packers also had 100-yard receiving days by Antonio Freeman in Super Bowl XXXI (3-105) and Super Bowl XXXII (9-126).