

# 2010 Player Grades: Defense

*By Bob McGinn of the Journal Sentinel  
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## DEFENSIVE LINE (9)

**Howard Green:** The Jets' decision to release Green Oct. 26 turned out to be a "stroke of luck" for the Packers, according to GM Ted Thompson. "Big Green" played a season-high 34 snaps five days later in the shutout of his former team. As the season wore on, he became a fixture at RE in the base defense and at LT in the 4-4 defense. The 360-pound wide-body stayed square, generally held his ground and ate up blocks. He also served as a willing mentor for young players. Cut 10 times in his career, Green earned a ring and deserves to be brought back. He ranked second on the D-line in tackles per snap (one every 9.5) and surprisingly showed some pass rush. The biggest play of his career was the Super Bowl knockdown of Ben Roethlisberger that resulted in Nick Collins' pick-six. **Grade: C+.**

**Justin Harrell:** Entered the season as the No. 4 DE and then, after playing two snaps in the opener, blew out his knee blocking for a FG. Unless the Packers are out of their minds, Harrell's career as a first-round draft choice in Green Bay will end with 14 games, 37 tackles and no sacks. **Grade: Incomplete.**

**Cullen Jenkins:** A recurring calf injury limited Jenkins to 15 games and 44.9% playing time. Still, he led the D-line in "pressures" per snap (one every 16.1) for the fourth time in five years. With Mike Neal waiting in the wings, it would appear as if the Packers are going to let him walk as an unrestricted free agent. Jenkins should get an enormous payday. Very few inside players rush the passer as well as Jenkins, who can play DE or three-technique DT in a 4-3, RE in a 3-4 and DT on passing downs. Scouts from the NFC North and around the league have always had an extremely high opinion of Jenkins. He's 30 and has a fairly long history of injury, but interior pass rushers are hard to find. **Grade: B.**

**Johnny Jolly:** Has been eligible for reinstatement since the Super Bowl. He was suspended in July for violating the NFL substance abuse policy. The Packers retain Jolly's rights for another year because his \$2.521 million contract for 2010 was tolled during his suspension. First, Jolly would have to prove to Commissioner Roger Goodell that his life is back on track and he won't embarrass the NFL. He'll be 28 in a week, has lived a hard life, hasn't played football in 13 months and, in event of a lockout, might not be in a structured NFL environment for months. His LE position has been filled capably by Ryan Pickett. Jolly easily could play RE, but the Packers have Green, Neal and C.J. Wilson on that side. Jolly is a hard charger who hates it on the bench. If Jolly is reinstated, the Packers must determine if he could handle a reduced role and what his presence might mean in the locker room. Green Bay could always trade him. His best season was 2009. **Grade: Incomplete.**

**Mike Neal:** He played 78 snaps in two games. Against Detroit, he stripped RB Jahvid Best, one of six fumbles lost by opposing rushers in 20 games. Against Washington, he played well before suffering a torn rotator cuff and labrum that required surgery Oct. 26. Neal finished with one sack, three hurries and one tackle for loss. In exhibition games, he had twice as many pressures as anyone on the roster. It looks like Neal can stack the point, bull rush and get to an edge. His potential is bright. **Grade: C+.**

**Ryan Pickett:** Made the shift from NT to LE without griping and became more comfortable and effective as the season went along. For the fourth time in his five seasons he led the D-line in tackles per snap. His mark of one tackle every 6.97 snaps was a career high. Over a stretch of five games near midseason, he missed three games in their entirety and played just nine snaps in the other two. Nicknamed "Grease," Pickett is almost impossible to move. He isn't as athletic as he was as the Rams' first-round draft choice in 2001 but does have a knack for reading blocking combinations and finding the ball. Unselfish team leader. Signed a fat contract in March but did whatever he could to justify the front office's faith in him. **Grade: B.**

**B.J. Raji:** Played 85% of the snaps (1,070 of 1,259), most by a Packers' D-tackle from 1998-2010. The previous leader in that 13-year period was Santana Dotson (82.9%) in '98. Raji didn't make the Pro Bowl but he certainly could have. He led the D-line in tackles for loss (4½) and batted balls (three), tied Jenkins in sacks (7½) and finished just behind Jenkins in knockdowns (six) and hurries (19½). At this point, Raji isn't great at the point of attack. He can be moved. But he also has excellent feet, and he uses them to slip around blocks. A non-pass rusher as a rookie, he became a good one in Year 2. **Grade: A-.**

**C.J. Wilson:** The injuries suffered by Neal, Harrell, Pickett and Jenkins opened the door for Wilson, a seventh-round draft choice who kept improving. By the Super Bowl he was up to 300 pounds, without diminished quickness and speed. He's not as talented as Neal, but with increased confidence anything's possible. Despite playing just 22.9% of the snaps, he ranked third on the D-line in pressures with 12. Wilson had the ability to finish rushes when he got close to the QB. He showed a nose for the ball, finishing third on the unit in tackles per snap (one every 10.67). He's bright-eyed and active. **Grade: C+.**

**Jarius Wynn:** Crushed when he was beaten out by Wilson and cut in early September, Wynn was summoned a week later to replace Harrell and then made the most of his second chance. He had nine pressures in 163 snaps, a ratio of one every 18.1 snaps that ranked second on the D-line to Jenkins. Wynn is the lightest D-lineman at 287. He's more equipped to rush the passer inside than he is taking on blockers. He's definitely worth another look. **Grade: D+.**

## LINEBACKERS (12)

**Nick Barnett:** Barnett's season ended in Week 4 with a wrist injury that was repaired by surgery Oct. 13. Dom Capers featured Barnett on cross blitzes and pressures off the edge. With 64 rushes, Barnett was on pace for 256 in the regular season. A.J. Hawk had 118 after 16 games. Barnett ranked second in pressures per snap (one every 12.0) at ILB behind blitz leader Desmond Bishop. When he's right, Barnett is reckless on the blitz and a physical-for-his-size presence against the run. He runs better than the other ILBs, but he's just OK in coverage. He has two years left on his contract; in 2011, he has a \$5.5 million base salary and a \$400,000 roster bonus. He cannot play OLB in a 3-4. **Grade: C+.**

**Desmond Bishop:** Barnett's misfortune gave Bishop a chance to back his annual contention that he really was an authentic starter. In 16 games, he proved his point. Bishop possesses the body snap and Jack Nicholson gleam in his eye that the menacing LBs of old had. His instincts are good, not great. He ranked as the team's best blitzer with a pressures-per-snap rate of one every 5.5 snaps. Despite almost not playing in the first four games, he finished second in tackles with 151, six behind Hawk. Bishop is a step slow to the sideline, and he allowed more plays of 20 yards or more (five) and TD passes (1½) than any LB. He missed the most tackles among LBs with 14, five more than anyone else. The Packers paid him Jan. 1 and they fully intend to keep starting him. He cannot play OLB in a 3-4. **Grade: B.**

**Diyral Briggs:** Claimed off waivers from Denver Oct. 26, Briggs played just a handful of snaps from scrimmage but ranked sixth in special-teams tackles with 12. Hard to say if he'll be back in camp. **Grade: D.**

**Brandon Chillar:** Billed as the team's best cover LB, Chillar had a disappointing season that ended with a rotator-cuff injury after eight games. He had surgery Dec. 15 and will try to be back whenever camp opens. He's down for a \$2 million base salary plus a \$300,000 roster bonus in '11. At 28, he'll be pushed to make the team. **Grade: C-.**

**Robert Francois:** Physical free agent who can play inside or outside. Better against run than pass. Worth another look. **Grade: D.**

**A.J. Hawk:** The injury to Barnett gave Hawk, who was either splitting time or not playing at all in nickel, the chance to play 100% of the downs. He did that for the final 16 weeks, contributing as much as he has in five seasons. As the junior partner to the talkative Barnett for four+ seasons, Hawk's personality was submerged to an extent. With Barnett out, the calls came through Hawk. According to teammates, he communicated promptly and succinctly. He still isn't a heavy hitter, rates as a mediocre blitzer (one "pressure" every 19.6 snaps, worst on the defense), often gets stuck on blocks and is a step slow to the sideline. He's steady in coverage, having not given up a TD pass since Week 5 of 2008. Now Hawk's future is uncertain. The Packers won't pay him the \$10 million base salary due him in 2011, but if he's on the roster by the first day of the league year (March 4, if labor accord is reached) that amount is guaranteed. He cannot play OLB in a 3-4. **Grade: B-.**

**Brad Jones:** Won the starting job opposite Clay Matthews mostly by default and basically held it until blowing out his shoulder in Week 7. He does display natural leverage on the run at him and uses his hands well. He put on 10+ pounds and played at slightly more than 240. So far, his pass rush has been ho-hum. **Grade: D+.**

**Clay Matthews:** Played on a sore shin until mid-December but still ranked fourth in regular-season sacks with 13½, trailing Dallas' DeMarcus Ware (15½), Kansas City's Tamba Hali (14½) and Miami's Cameron Wake (14). In 19 games, he led the Packers in sacks (17) and pressures (55), and was third in tackles for loss (6½). He had six take-away plays, one fewer than last season. Opponents double-teamed Matthews on 35.2% of drop-backs (140 of 398). On other occasions, he stunted 118 times and dropped into coverage 135 times. Because foes must account for him on each play, he makes life easier for teammates. He's better playing the run away from him than at him, but run-stopping at the point certainly doesn't rank as a weakness. Not many players can match Matthews' level of effort. **Grade: A.**

**Brady Poppinga:** Just when it looked like he was going to start for the injured Jones, Poppinga blew out his knee in Week 6. He suffered roughly the same injury to the same knee as a rookie late in 2005. Because of his two-year mission to Uruguay in 1999-2000, Poppinga was over-aged when he was drafted and will be 32 in September. Given his age and injury history, the Packers might not bring him back. **Grade: D+.**

**Erik Walden:** With Jones, Poppinga and Frank Zombo hurt, Walden started six games down the stretch before sitting out the Super Bowl (ankle). He counted 3½ sacks among his 9½ pressures, fared fine in coverage, missed just one tackle and didn't have a penalty. Walden probably runs 40 yards in the low 4.7s. Thanks in part to superb coaching by Kevin Greene, his number of missed assignments was remarkably low. His work against the run was uneven but at least he never shied away from contact. He'll be back. **Grade: C.**

**Matt Wilhelm:** Another injury fill-in from the bleak days of late October. He's one of the first full-fledged veterans that Thompson ever plucked off the street. His contract is expiring, he won a ring and he probably won't be back. **Grade: D.**

**Frank Zombo:** Fourth on the team in sacks (five) and sixth in pressures (14) as a rookie free agent who played DE in a 4-3 at Central Michigan. Developed his pass-rush repertoire as the season went on, began using his hands better and became more than just a bull rusher. Physical if not always consistent at the point. Smart and tough. Struggles in space because he doesn't change direction well. **Grade: C.**

## **SECONDARY (14)**

**Josh Bell:** This is the strangest name on the 15-man injured-reserve list. He went on Aug. 10 with a knee injury that didn't appear to be serious. He's a hardworking cornerback but won't be back. **Grade: Incomplete.**

**Atari Bigby:** He's 29, coming off a lost season and with a contract set to expire. Played just six games after coming off the physically unable to perform list Nov. 6. With three safeties ahead of him, Bigby is expected to leave for a better chance to play. **Grade: Incomplete.**

**Morgan Burnett:** Burnett's rookie season ended in Week 4 when he suffered a torn ACL. Installed as the starting SS on April 30, he never seemed overwhelmed and was just starting to become more aggressive in coverage. Thompson traded up into the third round for Burnett because of size, speed and ball skills, plus the draft was almost out of safeties. Burnett was shy if not timid about entering piles and throwing his body around. He must become more physical. **Grade: D+.**

**Jarrett Bush:** He was paid \$1.5 million per year in 2009 to lead the special teams. He surely did that in 2010, leading in tackles with 19, forcing one fumble, drawing several holding penalties and downing a host of punts. He also had the most penalties on special teams with three, although that was a decrease from six in 2008 and four in '09. And he led the units in missed tackles with six. Nobody shows more exuberance about playing special teams than Bush, and it rubs off on teammates. Although Bush made the play of his life with a terrific interception in the Super Bowl, he should be used in coverage only in case of dire emergency. **Grade: C.**

**Nick Collins:** Collins has been among the top two or three safeties in the NFC for the past three seasons. Playing deep most of the season, he intercepted five passes and dropped five more. He is blowing fewer coverages than he did early in his career. His speed remains outstanding, and he can outrun some of his bad angles. He allowed six plays of 20 yards or more, almost exactly his average from 2005-'09, and 3½ TD passes. Collins missed 13 tackles, right in line with his career average of 12.8. He had four penalties after having only five in his first five seasons. When Capers did rush Collins (37 times), he seldom just settled for a stalemate. **Grade: B.**

**Josh Gordy:** Free-agent rookie CB with Jacksonville in 2010 who ended up on the Packers' practice squad before being promoted for the last nine games. Never played from scrimmage. Played on the same defense at Central Michigan with Zombo. Looks like he can run (4.42), turn and cover. He has borderline height (5-10½) but is worth trying to develop. **Grade: Incomplete.**

**Pat Lee:** Probably cemented his chances for an invitation to return with a clutch, steady showing in the second half of the Super Bowl. A variety of injuries over Lee's first three years seem to have robbed him of some speed and quickness, and he wasn't a burner even coming out of Auburn. But he's a diligent worker and figures to receive one more shot. **Grade: D+.**

**Derrick Martin:** Has five seasons under his belt but still is just 25 years old. Another high-energy special-teamer without a definitive position. Probably a better safety than cornerback, the position he played in Baltimore from 2006-'08. One year remains on his contract. **Grade: D.**

**Charlie Peprah:** Came off the bench to replace Burnett in Week 5 and started the rest of the way. High character individual wrung every ounce out of his ability. Lacks size, speed and athleticism. He got it done in the classroom and by being a tough guy. Functioned better near the line than deep. Finished second on team in missed tackles with 16, but it wasn't for lack of trying or technique. He just wasn't fast enough to get there sometimes. Was exposed deep in the second half of the Washington defeat. In all, he allowed 7½ plays of 20 or more yards but only one TD pass. The Packers need to re-sign Peprah, then give him a chance to compete with Burnett. **Grade: C+.**

**Sam Shields:** Counting Al Harris, he began training camp ranked about No. 8 on the list at CB. By midseason, some scouts said he was covering better than anyone other than Tramon Williams. The emergence of Shields got Bush off the field and emboldened Capers to play more press-man coverage. Shields allowed more plays of 20 yards or more (10) than anyone else and also gave up the second-most TD passes (four). He made a bunch of mistakes, and not even his blinding speed would allow him to outrun some of them. But he never seemed to get down on himself, kept on listening to CB coach Joe Whitt and then made two brilliant interceptions in the playoff game at Soldier Field. He had merely one penalty. The Packers view him as a starting-caliber player. **Grade: B-.**

**Anthony Smith:** Acquired from the Jaguars Oct. 18 for a conditional seventh-round draft choice when the Packers were desperate for a safety. He played briefly in four games and went on injured reserve, so Green Bay doesn't owe the pick to Jacksonville. **Grade: Incomplete.**

**Brandon Underwood:** One of the more disappointing players on the roster. Possesses the size, speed and talent to make it as a cornerback, but after two seasons still doesn't seem to understand what it takes to be a pro. **Grade: D-.**

**Tramon Williams:** Played the position as well as anyone in the NFL. Of his nine interceptions, six were the result of great anticipation, hands and leaping ability. Also recovered two fumbles and forced another for a total of 12 take-away plays, five more than anyone else. As the year went on, and Williams' confidence grew, it became harder and harder for quarterbacks to complete a pass on him in man coverage. In all, he allowed six plays of 20 yards or more, down from 10½ in 2008 and eight in '09 as a part-time player. The only TD pass that he allowed was an 85-yard jump ball by the Giants' Mario Manningham. He became an adequate tackler, missing only seven. **Grade: A.**

**Charles Woodson:** Nobody in the organization could possibly have wanted a Super Bowl ring more than Woodson. Each day, he brought a serious demeanor to the workplace that in effect warned his more carefree teammates that they had better take care of business. From the slot, where he lined up 75% of the time, there was no one better. Playing as recklessly as a raw rookie in an August scrimmage, Woodson threw his 34-year-old body around against the run and on the blitz. He also took fewer chances in deference to what Whitt asked him to do. Partially as a result, his interception total was a mere two. From outside, where he lined up 25% of the time, he was ordinary. Woodson's speed has diminished, he wound up on the ground too much and some of the ploys that used to work no longer did. He led the team in forced fumbles (five), tied for first in tackles for loss (seven) and was the third more effective blitzer (one pressure every 9.7 snaps). In all, he had 11 pressures, 4½ more than last year. On the downside, Woodson led the team in penalties (12), missed tackles (20) and TD passes allowed (five), and was second to Shields in plays of 20 yards or more allowed (9½). In his 13th season, he accepted the responsibility of leadership and became the club's undisputed voice. **Grade: B+.**