

Packers 2010 Team Grades

By Bob McGinn of the Journal Sentinel
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PASS OFFENSE (A)

At midseason, Aaron Rodgers was idling along ranked 16th in passer rating at 85.3 before he and the passing attack exploded. Over the remainder of the regular season, his play was so extraordinary (122.1 rating, 71.4% completion rate) that he vaulted to third at 101.2, trailing only Tom Brady (111.0) and Philip Rivers (101.8). Coupled with his postseason mark of 109.8, Rodgers' 19-game rating was 103.1. The Packers were fifth in passing yards (257.8) before averaging 260.3 in the playoffs. Green Bay wasn't a prolific deep-ball team, evidenced by the average distance of its TD passes (19.5) compared with 24.0 in '09 as well as its total of 17 completions for more than 35 yards, down from 24 in '09, 19 in '08 and 23 in '07. Certainly, Rodgers often looked to throw down the field, but the main thrust was spreading the ball around in short to intermediate zones. When cornerbacks played soft, Rodgers turned 30 called runs into one-step hitches with easy 5-to 8-yard gains. In the first four games, TE Jermichael Finley averaged 75.3 yards and played 25 more snaps (196) than any of the wide receivers. In Finley's five games, Greg Jennings averaged 36.6. Following Finley's exit with a blown knee, Jennings averaged 92.3 yards and had his greatest impact. There were 46 dropped passes, down from 50 in '09 but still too many. James Jones and Jordy Nelson each dropped 10. Jones led the team in average gain after the catch (5.16 yards). The Packers ranked 20th in percentage of sacks allowed. Rodgers was charged with 13½ sacks, down three from '09, Chad Clifton was responsible for 8 and Bryan Bulaga for 6½.

RUSH OFFENSE (C-minus)

This part of the attack was irrevocably altered when an ankle-leg injury ended Ryan Grant's season on the 27th offensive snap of the season (his 18th play). Gone was the downhill style of zone running the Packers had employed since mid-2007. Instead, the Packers opted to operate by committee, basically passing to set up the run. Many of the more successful runs came from spread formations against reduced boxes. Counting all games, the four-headed RB menagerie included Brandon Jackson (196-731-3.7), James Starks (110-416-3.8), John Kuhn (90-289-3.2) and Dimitri Nance (36-95-2.6). The Packers' third-leading rusher was Rodgers (76-412-5.4), who also ranked third among QBs during the regular season with 356 yards behind Michael Vick (676) and Josh Freeman (364). Mike McCarthy seldom abandoned the run, reflected by his 20-game run rate of 42.4% (the NFL regular-season average was 43.1%). He also kept at least one FB on the field for 42.9% of the plays, up from 42.1% in '09. Without Grant, Green Bay slipped to 24th in yards (100.4) and 25th in yards per rush (3.82). The Packers tied Cincinnati for last with merely three runs of 20 yards or more. On third- and fourth-and-1 rushing, they tied for 19th at 66.7%. The high-water mark was the 12-play, 73-yard march that closed out the 28-26 victory against Detroit. The Packers had 142 "bad" runs, their highest total since 149 in 18 games in '03. For the second straight season, Daryn Colledge allowed the most "bad" runs (25); Josh Sitton allowed the fewest (nine).

PASS DEFENSE (A)

Green Bay ranked third in pass average (net yards divided by attempts and sacks), its best finish since 2002, and ranked fifth in yards (194.2). Neither of those categories accounts for interceptions, but opponents' passer rating does. Improving from fourth (68.8) in '09, the Packers led the NFL at 67.2. Pittsburgh was a distant second at 73.1. Then, in four playoff games, Vick, Matt Ryan, Jay Cutler and Ben Roethlisberger could muster just 67.8. With 24 picks, the Packers trailed just one team, New England, which led with 25. They intercepted eight more in the playoffs, all electrifying plays made by Tramon Williams (three), Sam Shields (two), B.J. Raji, Jarrett Bush and Nick Collins. The stellar Williams had nine of the 32 picks. The linebacking corps intercepted six, its highest total since '94. The 32 interceptions directly led to a whopping 122 points. Collins dropped five interceptions, the team's highest total by an individual in more than a decade. Dom Capers grew ever bolder with the blitz as Shields developed into a second legitimate outside cover man in nickel. After rushing five or more on just 28.5% of dropbacks in the first six games, Capers blitzed 36.8% in the last seven as the Packers vaulted from 12th last year to third in sack percentage. In 20 games, Clay Matthews led in sacks (17) and "pressures" (55). Shields gave up the most passes of 20 yards or more (10), followed by Charles Woodson with 9½. Woodson allowed the most TD passes (five). Of the four 100-yard receiving games, the 132 yards by the Giants' Mario Manningham was tops. After the 49ers' Vernon Davis exploded for 126 yards in Week 12, the final eight starting TEs caught only 16 for 142 (no TDs).

RUSH DEFENSE (B)

On paper, the grade might seem high. The Packers ranked 18th in yards (114.9) and 28th in yards per carry (4.65), a sharp decline from first in yards (83.3) and second in yards per carry (3.59) in '09. But other than the first Atlanta game when Michael Turner controlled play with 23 carries for 110 yards, the run defense was seldom an issue. In the playoffs, upper-echelon RBs LeSean McCoy, Turner, Matt Forte and Rashard Mendenhall averaged a more-than-manageable 54.5 per game and 4.1 per carry. In all, the postseason yield was 83.8. The inability to contain scrambling QBs was the Packers' worst sin. In 20 games, opposing passers carried 55 times for 415 yards (7.6). Vick led with 103 yards in Week 1, followed by Detroit's Shaun Hill (53) in Week 4 and Detroit's Drew Stanton (44) in Week 13. In 2009, opposing QBs finished with more typical totals of 31 carries for 136 yards. Woodson's willingness to throw his body around charging from the slot as if he were a 23-year-old LB instead of a 34-year-old CB helped Capers stop the pass because he could use his nickel defense 75% of the time. When Capers elected to hunker down, he felt confident wheeling out wide-bodies Ryan Pickett (340 pounds), B.J. Raji (337) and Howard Green (360). Three days after the defense allowed a season-high 196 on the ground to the Vikings, Green arrived on waivers from the Jets. Adrian Peterson's 131 yards in Week 7 was the most against Capers' unit since Week 2 of 2009. A.J. Hawk (157), Desmond Bishop (151) and Woodson (124) were the leading 20-game tacklers; Woodson had the most missed tackles (20), four more than runner-up Charlie Peprah. Matthews and Woodson shared the lead in tackles for loss with seven.

SPECIAL TEAMS (D)

In the Dallas Morning News' annual statistical analysis, the Packers ranked 29th, which paired them with the 2009 Saints as having the lowest-ranked special teams of any Super Bowl champion. Green Bay had ranked 31st in '09. Three long returns led to three close losses: Chicago Devin Hester (62-yard TD) in Week 3, Atlanta's Eric Weems (40, plus Matt Wilhelm's face-mask penalty) in overtime in Week 11 and New England G Dan Connolly (71) in Week 14. In the playoffs, Weems raced 102 for a TD. Mason Crosby also had a chance to win the Washington game at the end of regulation but missed from 53 yards off the left upright. Certainly the Packers were better disciplined and organized than they had been in coach Shawn Slocum's first season as coordinator in '09. They trimmed their horrendous penalty total of 32 in 17 games to 22 in 20 games, which was their best penalty rate since '06. Slocum's yearlong battle to curb holding penalties succeeded (three this season compared with 14 in '09). The Packers found a capable punter in Tim Masthay, who had three phenomenal games. Despite not having a legitimate return man, the Packers did tie for 10th in average starting position (27.6). On the other hand, they ranked 31st in opponents' starting position (29.8). Thanks largely to two fumbles by Jordy Nelson in one game (home against Detroit), the units had their poorest turnover differential (minus-1) since '06. Tramon Williams, who didn't lose any of his five fumbles, swung the Week 16 struggle against Chicago toward the Packers with a 41-yard punt return. The best core player was enthusiastic, tough Jarrett Bush.

PERSONNEL MOVES (A)

What an off-season GM Ted Thompson and his staff had. By season's end, three members of their seven-man draft class (Bryan Bulaga, James Starks, Andrew Quarless) were starting, one was contributing (C.J. Wilson), one had started (Morgan Burnett), one might have started (Mike Neal) and one apprenticed for a year (Marshall Newhouse). Furthermore, two college free agents (Sam Shields, Frank Zombo) played key roles on defense, and G Nick McDonald stamped himself as a player to watch. The free-agent signing of Masthay 13 months ago appears to have stopped the revolving door at punter. Charlie Peprah, the only free-agent signing with regular-season experience, started the last 16 games. Thompson turned his nose up at the tepid unrestricted market. He didn't try to re-sign Aaron Kampman, who landed in Jacksonville and played well before blowing out his knee after eight games. Although the Packers will receive a high compensatory draft choice, his pass-rush value opposite Matthews would have been significant. By and large, the wholesale re-signing of eight starters since February has worked. In early October, Thompson was wise to ignore the hue and cry for RB Marshawn Lynch and not offer more than a fourth-round pick. He also was wise to move beyond P Jeremy Kapinos in March and CB Al Harris, 36, in November. Harris lasted three games as Miami's nickel back before pulling a hamstring. RB Ryan Torain, who was available when Dimitri Nance was signed Sept. 14, led the Redskins in rushing (742). Thompson's refusal even to consider one of the small return specialists that have taken the league by storm left Slocum high and dry looking for a returner. Forced to add 13 players after opening day, pro scouting chief Reggie McKenzie and his staff made two wonderful choices in Erik Walden and Howard Green.

COACHING (A)

If The Associated Press had waited until after the season to poll its voters on NFL coach of the year, it probably would have been McCarthy by acclamation. The award went to Bill Belichick. To be sure, McCarthy must take his share of the blame for losing six of the eight games that were decided by four or fewer points. His team lost four times as a favorite (at Chicago, at Washington, Miami, at Detroit) and went just 9-7 against the spread in the regular season (they were 4-0 in the playoffs). Special teams, an area that McCarthy pledged to fix, haunted the Packers in four of the defeats. After six games, the injury-riddled Packers found themselves 3-3 with Brett Favre coming to town followed by a road game against the Jets and a home date with Dallas. But McCarthy rallied the troops and shockingly won all three. Acknowledging the team's shortage of leadership, he strove to establish Woodson and Rodgers in front of the team. More importantly, he found his stride in his fifth season. He did it by formulating a calculated message of hope that he delivered incessantly in a powerful voice. His uber-confidence played exceedingly well on all fronts, most importantly in the locker room. Some backups pressed into service started believing they were all-pros. As the most penalized team from 2007-'09, McCarthy rebounded from the record-setting 18-for-152 embarrassment at Soldier Field to rank third in penalty yards (617), a totally unexpected turnaround. Coordinators Joe Philbin and Dom Capers are among the best, and McCarthy's seasoned, unified staff is rife with prized position coaches. McCarthy is better conceiving an offense and calling the plays than he is managing the game. Every coach needs something to work on.

OVERALL (A)

When the season started, the Packers had the fifth youngest roster in the NFL (25.92 years) and were a popular pick to win it all. Then Grant went down in the first half of the opener, the first of a wave of injuries that would have brought a weaker team with a lesser roster to its knees. Counting the regular season only, 12 starters missed 86 games, and 19 backups missed 94 games. Among the 31 players who missed 180 games were 15 who went on injured reserve, including nine from the opening-day 53 by Oct. 27. No NFL team this season and no Packers team since 1979 was buffeted quite like this. At 3-3, the Packers were tied for the ninth-best record in the NFC. After sweeping Minnesota and Favre, the Packers lost two straight in mid-December when Rodgers went down with a concussion. The surprising Bears clinched the NFC North title with two games remaining. Then Green Bay (10-6) emerged from the pack, subduing the Giants and Bears to claim the second wild-card playoff berth over Tampa Bay (10-6) and New York (10-6) based on the fourth tiebreaker (strength-of-victory). The Packers' six losses were by 20 points; privately, players talked about just how close they had been to an undefeated season. Their point-differential of plus-148 was second to New England's plus-205 but their 10-6 record was tied for eighth best in the league. Green Bay's schedule included six games against playoff teams and opponents with a composite record of 133-123 (.520) that included four foes each from the powerful AFC East and the NFC East. Emulating the sixth-seeded Steelers of 2005, the Packers swept three road playoff games before demonstrating their ability to get physical in a gritty Super Bowl triumph over Pittsburgh. It was Green Bay's record 13th NFL championship.