

Grading The Green Bay Packers Defense:

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Defensive Line

Ryan Pickett -- B

Moved to defensive end from nose tackle and increased his tackles (53) from last season (47) in about the same amount of playing time.

Missed two full games and most of two others because of an ankle injury. Had a sack and a fumble recovery and was in on the hit that caused Rashard Mendenhall to fumble in the Super Bowl.

Played most of the base snaps and some on nickel. Signed a new contract through 2013 last offseason and hasn't shown any signs of decline.

B.J. Raji -- B+

Moved to nose tackle after playing defensive end as a rookie, blossomed into one of the top playmakers on defense and was voted as a Pro Bowl alternate. Warhorse who rarely came off the field, led all Packers' defensive linemen with 66 tackles and was third on the team with 6½ sacks after posting 36 tackles and one sack last season in a disappointing rookie campaign. Also had 13 quarterback hits and 12 pressures in the regular season. Made one of the biggest defensive plays of the postseason, showing rare athleticism for a player his size by returning an interception 18 yards for a touchdown in the NFC title game. On the cusp of becoming one of the league's elite 3-4 nose tackles.

Cullen Jenkins -- B-

Best pass-rushing defensive lineman on the team when healthy but missed five games because of a calf injury and half of another because of a broken hand.

Still managed a career-best seven sacks and was second on the team with 21 quarterback hits (only four fewer than last season, when he played in all 16 games).

Returned for the playoffs after missing the final four regular-season games and had ½ sack against the Bears. Played almost exclusively in nickel situations. Free agent and at age 30 might not be re-signed, especially if the suspended Johnny Jolly returns.

Howard Green -- C+

A 340-pound waiver-wire pickup on Oct. 27, helped shore up the run defense. Essentially became a starter at end in the base in place of Jenkins and combined with Pickett and Raji to form an all-340-plus-pound front three, something defensive coordinator Dom Capers liked. Played in nine regular-season games and recorded 17 tackles, ½ sack and a forced fumble. Didn't play in the wild-card playoff game because the game plan was mostly nickel but played in the final three postseason games and should be part of the team next season.

C.J. Wilson -- D+

Rookie began the season as the sixth defensive lineman but began to play from scrimmage late in the year after Jenkins became limited.

Played in nickel situations and offered some pass rush with a sack and five quarterback hits. Saw action in all four postseason games. Needs to get stronger but showed enough promise to stick around for a while.

Jarius Wynn -- D

Re-signed in Week 2 after getting cut at the end of training camp but couldn't move ahead of Wilson despite having a year of experience on the rookie. Saw his most action against the Vikings on Oct. 24 after Jenkins was injured in pregame.

Down to just three healthy linemen, he played a season-high 36 snaps that day and had three tackles and the game's only sack. Was inactive for the NFC title game and dressed but didn't play in the Super Bowl.

Justin Harrell -- I

Injury-riddled career continued with a torn anterior cruciate ligament in his left knee while blocking on a field goal in the second quarter of the season opener after spending all of 2009 on IR because of a back injury. In four years, has played in just 13 regular-season games and probably won't be back next season.

Mike Neal -- I

Second-round pick appeared poised to contribute as a rookie until a shoulder injury ended his season after playing in just two games. Showed his strength and power in those two games with five tackles, a sack, a forced fumble and a quarterback hit.

Outside Linebackers

Clay Matthews -- A

Runner up for NFL defensive player of the year, had a team-high 13½ sacks and 40 quarterback hits (up from 10 and 35, respectively, last season as a rookie) despite missing one full game and part of another (hamstring), both of which the Packers lost. Was also hampered during the season by a shin injury. Added 3½ sacks in the postseason and helped cause the Mendenhall fumble in the Super Bowl. Became more versatile, rushing from both the left and right sides, although he played primarily left outside linebacker after playing on the right side as a rookie.

Frank Zombo -- C+

Undrafted rookie became a starter after Brad Jones went down with a shoulder injury early in the season. Started eight games but missed final three regular-season games and first three playoff games because of a knee injury. Returned after six-week absence to start in the Super Bowl and had five tackles, including two for a loss and a sack. Had four regular-season sacks and was fifth on the team in tackles (67).

Erik Walden -- C+

Street free agent signed on Oct. 27 but didn't become a key member of the defense until Zombo went down. Responded with a career game in the must-win regular-season finale against the Bears with three sacks and 16 tackles. Used as a spy against Michael Vick in the wild-card game against the Eagles. Inactive for Super Bowl because of an ankle injury sustained in the NFC championship game. Better pass rusher and more athletic than Zombo but not as good in coverage or against the run.

Robert Francois -- D

Bounced between practice squad and the roster but started one game, Week 16 against the Giants, because of injuries to Zombo and Walden, and had three quarterback hits. Also played 28 snaps in the NFC title game after Walden's ankle injury and had three tackles. Best known for controversial special-teams penalty in the loss to Miami, when he was flagged for being illegally lined up over the center. Also was a backup at inside linebacker.

Diyral Briggs -- D

Claimed off waivers on Oct. 26 and played mostly on special teams. Never assimilated into the defense.

Brad Jones -- I

Won the starting job on the right side coming out of camp despite sustaining a shoulder injury halfway through camp. Started the first two games wearing a brace on his shoulder but injured his knee in Week 2, missed one game, then returned to play in four more before reinjuring his shoulder. Had no sacks and six quarterback hits in his limited action. Still might be odds-on favorite to be the starter next season unless a newcomer is brought in.

Brady Poppinga -- I

Reserve forced into a starting role against Miami in place of Matthews and lasted 27 snaps before a torn ACL ended his season and possibly his career with the Packers. Had one sack that came in relief of Matthews the previous week against Washington.

Inside Linebackers**Desmond Bishop -- B**

Perennial backup/special teams standout replaced Nick Barnett as a starter in Week 5, finished second on the team in tackles (121) and added three sacks and an interception returned for a touchdown in the Oct. 24 game against the Vikings. In coverage, gave up completions on 48.7 percent of the 39 times he was thrown at but didn't allow a touchdown and broke up eight passes. Shed questions about whether he was assignment-sure, earned a four-year, \$18-million contract extension and solidified himself as a long-term starter.

A.J. Hawk -- B-

After not playing a snap of defense in the season opener, became the quarterback of the defense after Barnett went down. Excelled in communicating the defense as the signal caller and had the best playmaking season of his career. Three interceptions tied for the most among all NFL inside backers in the regular season and led the team in tackles with 134. Gave up completions 63.8 percent of the 47 times he was targeted and allowed one touchdown but had 10 pass breakups. Reliable as always and hasn't missed a game in his pro career. Will have to redo his contract in order to be back because the Packers aren't going to pay him the \$10 million he's due for next season.

Matt Wilhelm -- D

Veteran signed off the street on Oct. 26 but played exclusively on special teams. Committed a facemask penalty on a kickoff return at Atlanta on Nov. 28 that helped set up the game-winning field goal but otherwise was solid in coverage.

Nick Barnett -- I

Broken wrist in Week 4 ended his season even though he finished that game against the Lions and had hoped to keep playing the rest of the year. Had 27 tackles (including 12 in the game in which he was injured) in the four games he played and had an interception in the Week 3 game at Chicago wiped out by a roughing-the-passer penalty. Under contract for two more years but it might be between him and Hawk to return.

Brandon Chillar -- I

Tried playing outside linebacker in training camp but that experiment lasted only a week. Began the season a regular in the nickel package but battled shoulder problems that eventually ended his season after appearing in parts of eight games. Had a sack and an interception while allowing completions on 64.7 percent of the times he was thrown at, including one touchdown.

Cornerbacks**Charles Woodson -- A-**

Wasn't as good in coverage (52.6 percent completions allowed, four touchdowns and two interceptions) as last season (47.6 percent, six touchdowns and nine interceptions), when he was the NFL defensive MVP, but was as good or better as a blitzer (two sacks for the second straight season). Third on the team in tackles with 105, up from 81 last season. Versatility allowed Capers the freedom to use him in a variety of ways and took on an increased leadership role. Committed a team-high 12 penalties, four more than last season, but had none in the playoffs. Defense wasn't the same in the second half of the Super Bowl after he went out with a broken collarbone.

Tramon Williams -- A-

Blossomed into an elite-level cover man in his first full season as a starter and earned a four-year, \$33-million contract extension. Led the team in interceptions in both the regular season (six) and postseason (three), including the one that clinched the wild-card win over the Eagles and one he returned 70 yards for a touchdown in the divisional round at Atlanta. Allowed completions on only 43.5 percent of his targets (down from 56.1 percent last season) and just three touchdowns with 20 pass breakups. Had only two penalties in the regular season plus two in the playoffs. Nothing special on punt returns (8.0-yard average).

Sam Shields -- B-

Undrafted rookie speedster became one of the most pleasant surprises of the season, playing all but two games as the nickel corner. Got better as the season went along and had two interceptions in the NFC championship game, including one in the final minute that clinched the Super Bowl berth. Allowed completions on exactly half of the 54 times he was targeted but allowed just three touchdowns and didn't commit a penalty in the regular season and just one in the postseason. Had a decent kickoff return or two (long was 49 yards) but wasn't a consistent threat (21.5-yard average).

Jarrett Bush -- C+

Filled in for Shields as the nickel cornerback in Week 4 against Detroit but otherwise played only sparingly on defense until the Super Bowl, when injuries forced him back into action. He had an interception and gave up a touchdown against the Steelers. Improved his special-teams play and was a postseason captain. Was second on the team in special-teams tackles (12) and had just three special-teams penalties.

Pat Lee -- D

Saddled with injuries again but when healthy couldn't crack the sub packages and played mostly on special teams until injuries forced him into action on defense in the Super Bowl.

Brandon Underwood -- D-

Opened training camp as the favorite to win the nickel corner job but quickly plummeted down the depth chart. Shoulder injury kept him out early in the season but played in 12 games plus the first three in the postseason, all on special teams, but was inactive in the Super Bowl. Made a major blunder in the wild-card game at Philadelphia when he touched a live ball on a punt.

Josh Gordy -- I

Promoted from practice squad on Dec. 1 and appeared in two games on special teams.

Josh Bell -- I

Ended last season as the dime corner but sustained a foot injury the first week of training camp and was placed on injured reserve.

Safeties**Nick Collins -- B+**

Selected to Pro Bowl for third straight season and finished second on team with four interceptions. Added one more in postseason, the 37-yarder he returned for a touchdown in the Super Bowl. Also had 75 tackles and allowed completions on 42.2 percent of the times he was thrown at and gave up two touchdowns. Committed just three regular-season penalties plus one in the playoffs.

Charlie Peprah -- C+

Re-signed in the offseason after getting waived/injured in 2009, took over the starting strong safety role in Week 4 and never gave it up thanks to solid, assignment-sure play. Had 64 tackles and two interceptions in the regular season while allowing just one touchdown and completions on 47.7 percent of the times he was targeted.

Atari Bigby -- I

Injury-filled season was derailed from start by an ankle injury during the training camp run test and needed surgery. Began season on PUP but appeared in just four games because he sustained a groin injury after being activated off PUP. Free agent who might not be re-signed.

Morgan Burnett -- I

Rookie was a starter from day one until he blew out his knee in Week 4. Had 15 tackles and an interception but allowed completions on 55.6 percent of the times he was targeted, had one pass interference penalty and gave up one touchdown. Still viewed as starting prospect.

Derrick Martin -- I

Played in first five games, mostly on special teams, before a knee injury ended his season.

Anthony Smith

Originally cut in 2009, was re-acquired in a trade from Jacksonville on Oct. 19 for a seventh-round pick but lasted only four games before an ankle injury ended his year.