

Rating the Packers: Week 1 vs Saints

Offense Puts On Dazzling Display

*By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel
Posted: Sept 10, 2011*

Green Bay - The Green Bay Packers basically have picked up where they left off seven months ago, defeating another excellent opponent in a playoff-type environment.

Now, with games against tail-enders Carolina and Denver sandwiched around a trip to Chicago, the Packers could be heading to Atlanta on Oct. 9 with their first 4-0 start since 2007. That's when they last won the NFC North Division and finished 13-3.

Here's a rating of the Packers in their 42-34 victory over the New Orleans Saints on Thursday night at Lambeau Field. In parentheses is each position group's 1 to 5 football total.

RECEIVERS (5 footballs)

There are five wide receivers and three or four tight ends that deserve to play. Still, the coaches made it plain as day that Greg Jennings and Jermichael Finley are a cut above and are going to play no matter what. The snap counts at both positions were revealing, to say the least. Jennings had 52, followed by Donald Driver (44), Jordy Nelson (27), James Jones (19) and Randall Cobb (seven). Finley had 51, followed by Andrew Quarless (15), Tom Crabtree (14) and D.J. Williams (nine). Ryan Taylor was inactive. Of Finley's 51 snaps, 13 were in-line and nine were either in the backfield or on the wing. That means 29 of his snaps, or 57%, were in the slot or isolated wide. Just as was the case early last season, Finley is going to take a bunch of snaps from the wide receivers behind Jennings. At times, defensive coordinator Gregg Williams tried to cover Finley with Roman Harper, an old-fashioned box safety. His two biggest gains (20, 18) came from in-line and in man coverage by Harper. Every time I looked up Finley seemed to be open. Aaron Rodgers probably could have thrown the ball to Finley 15 times rather than four and had the same amount of passing yards, if not more. Where Finley needs to shape up is in pass protection. From his backfield location, he was responsible for a sack and a knockdown by LB Jonathan Casillas in the span of three plays. Ten of Quarless' snaps were in-line. If TE coach Ben McAdoo wants someone blocked, he waves in Crabtree. On a 10-yard run by Ryan Grant, Crabtree got his hands on LB Will Herring and drove him into the turf. Jennings was a step ahead of nickel back Patrick Robinson all night. That back-shoulder throw at the pylon is becoming money in the bank. Driver just loves to play the game. It shows. Nelson has become a tough matchup for cornerbacks because of his size, burgeoning confidence and deceptive speed. As if the Packers needed another weapon, they have one in Cobb. Wrong route or not, the catch, the run, the fake and the vault into the end zone for a 32-yard TD all happened so suddenly, it was just over.

OFFENSIVE LINE (4½ footballs)

Aside from two false-start penalties, the debut of T.J. Lang went well. After all those games with Daryn Colledge, it was so different seeing someone at LG jarring people with his punch and knocking them down. He's bigger, he's meaner and he's stronger than Colledge. Six times Lang had 350-pound Shaun Rogers in one-on-one pass pro. Rogers isn't close to what he once was; otherwise, he would have played more than 15 snaps. Still, Lang had the strength to belly up against Rogers. Lang's base isn't always sound. He needs considerable refinement. But there's a good body and brain to develop. Scott Wells reach-blocked Rogers onto his back in the end zone on John Kuhn's 1-yard TD. He made an even better reach-and-snatch block against DT Sedrick Ellis on James Starks' 17-yard TD. Executing reach blocks is all about quickness. Clearly, the best center on the field was Wells, not six-time Pro Bowler Olin Kreutz. Working mostly against rookie top pick Cameron Jordan, RT Bryan Bulaga pitched a shutout. Ditto for RG Josh Sitton, who was sharp kicking out and nullifying the 3-technique DT. And LT Chad Clifton came through, yielding just one pressure against DE Turk McBride.

QUARTERBACKS (5 footballs)

Given months to prepare for Rodgers, Williams tried everything to confuse him. As was the case against Pittsburgh's Dick LeBeau in the Super Bowl, Rodgers never even came close to a turnover. Look at Williams' rush counts on the 40 drop-backs: eight snaps with three, 10 with four, nine with five, seven with six and six with seven. That comes out to 55% blitz and 32.5% heavy blitz (six or more). The Packers didn't see anything like that all last season. On 61.5% of his drop-backs, Rodgers was in the shotgun. It's like a shooting gallery. He reads, he looks off and then he delivers tight, accurate, hard spirals. Three or four of his eight incompletions were somewhat wild. On both scrambles, Rodgers slid in a hurry. That's smart. An extra yard or two isn't going to affect this offense.

RUNNING BACKS (3½ footballs)

Grant started and played eight of the first 10 snaps when a RB was on the field. From that point, Starks had 43 snaps to Grant's eight. The final 45-16 tally for Starks was reflective of their relative performances all summer. Grant is in great shape and seemed a little quicker than he did a month ago, but his run vision still isn't all the way back. Starks' bruising burst was evident when he ran through safeties Malcolm Jenkins and Harper on his TD run. Equally as impressive were the hard cuts that he made on two runs to escape when defenders suddenly appeared in his face. On the other hand, his lack of reliability in blitz pickup will wear thin if it continues. On the sack by Harper, Starks has to abort his fake and pick him up.

DEFENSIVE LINE (3 footballs)

Even when the Saints used their regular personnel on offense, the Packers felt confident remaining in nickel. The reason was Ryan Pickett and B.J. Raji. Playing 37 snaps, Pickett had a terrific effort holding his ground against Pro Bowl guard Jahri Evans. Although he hates playing the right side, Pickett moved there for three snaps so Raji could shift to left. Even Pickett's brutish pass rush was more effective than normal. He made an enormous play, recognizing and then foiling a screen to Darren Sproles that could have been out the gate. And on the clincher from the 1, Pickett got lower than RT Zach Strief and set in motion the airborne attack of Mark Ingram. Raji played 70 of 76 snaps, or 92%. He was on the field for the first 38. Not only does Raji have amazing stamina, he also displayed remarkable power working against Carl Nicks, another massive, top-caliber guard. Nevertheless, Raji didn't register a pressure all day. With Mike Neal out (knee), the coaches went with Jarius Wynn (32) over C.J. Wilson (six). The Packers played just one snap of 3-4, and Howard Green's only three snaps came in the 4-4 "hippo" front. Wynn is seeing the game much better. He ruined a screen for minus-4, and his sack came when he delayed his rush and tackled Drew Brees as he ran to him. He stuffed TE David Thomas to halt a third-and-1 run. Near the end, Wynn jumped right back on his feet after being pancaked by Nicks and Kreutz and then tackled Sproles for no gain.

LINEBACKERS (1½ footballs)

Clay Matthews played through Thomas on the final play and made the first hard contact on Ingram. Strief, like Lang a veteran who was debuting in a starting role, escaped without giving up a sack. On the field for 51 of Brees' drop-backs, Matthews was single-blocked 23 times, double-teamed 13 times, ran stunts six times and dropped into coverage nine times. When Erik Walden had all kinds of problems in coverage, Matthews helped trying to handle TE Jimmy Graham. Matthews beat Strief for four pressures, including two knockdowns. Walden played with strength against the run but didn't make much headway against LT Jermon Bushrod. Dom Capers used A.J. Hawk 20 times to pressure, and in one of the best pass-rushing games of his career, Hawk had four pressures. His timing was excellent, he took good angles and he played hard. Hawk's coverage was a different story. He was exploited twice by Sproles for big gains, once by RB Pierre Thomas. Hawk missed two open-field tackles and sidekick Desmond Bishop fell off Thomas on a 15-yard check-down. Bishop did well shedding and sliding around Kreutz in the run game.

SECONDARY (1½ footballs)

The tackling, the coverage and the coordination didn't come close to meeting the standards of this elite unit. Now and then players made breaks on the ball, but Brees was able to pass for 419 yards (8.6 per attempt) in part because of poor performance. No one played well. Tramon Williams had outside leverage on Robert Meachem's 31-yard TD on third and 1, presumably because he expected safety help. But the pass by Brees was a bit behind Meachem and Williams must find a way to get that ball out. In keeping with his inconsistent camp, Sam Shields ran step-for-step with speedy Devery Henderson to smother one take-off route, then seemed to peek back at Brees from press coverage and couldn't catch up on Henderson's 29-yard TD. Nick Collins helped win the game by forcing a fumble by Marques Colston that Williams recovered. He also was out of position at times, missed two tackles and had no impact on four blitzes. Charles Woodson broke up a third-down pass to Colston inside the 5, failed to break up a 21-yard seam route to Colston, didn't get anywhere on eight blitzes and slugged David Thomas twice in the stomach during a scrum. That will be costly. Morgan Burnett covered reliably behind Woodson when he pressured and tackled better than anyone in the secondary.

KICKERS (1 football)

Masthay's 52-yard punt that was returned by Sproles for a 72-yard TD had fine hang time (4.58 seconds) but was poorly placed. He flubbed two of his three other punts and hit a great drop punt that should have been downed by Jarrett Bush at the 1. Mason Crosby tried to kick deep on six of his seven kickoffs. His averages on the six were 69.7 yards and 3.96 seconds of hang time.

SPECIAL TEAMS (2½ footballs)

Cobb's debut couldn't have been more spectacular. On his 108-yard TD, he showed quick cutting ability at the 9, guts and burst at the 14, strength and balance at the 22 and more acceleration at the 35. The run was worthy of tying the NFL record. Cobb also had a 32-yard punt return brought back on Kuhn's illegal-block penalty in which he made the first man miss and almost was gone for 75 yards. It was Brad Jones' tackle to make on the TD by Sproles, but he didn't assert himself, slipped and it was over after Masthay gave up the sideline. Former Packer FB Korey Hall made the key block, eliminating Kuhn. Shields was late coming over as the "safety" on the kickoff team but at least he did push Sproles out after 57 yards. It took a knifing tackle by D.J. Smith or else Sproles might have gone 69 instead of 20 with a 2.83-second punt by Masthay. Smith continued to impress overall. The onside-kick recovery by Driver was an aggressive, heady move.

OVERALL (4 footballs)

STARS OF THE WEEK: 3 stars - Aaron Rodgers. 2 stars - Scott Wells. 1 star - Ryan Pickett.

From the Sept 10, 2011, editions of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel