

# Rating the Packers: Week 2 at Panthers

## Packers show their poise in comeback

*By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel  
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**Green Bay** - Defending Super Bowl champions possess a certain magisterial presence that must be coped with by their opponents in the following season.

The Green Bay Packers showed some of that Sunday in Charlotte, N.C., coming back from a 13-0, second-quarter deficit to post a 30-23 victory over the Carolina Panthers.

Not only is it difficult to repeat in the National Football League, it's difficult to get off to a good start the year after. Of the last 20 Super Bowl champions before Green Bay, nine began the next season with a 2-0 record, nine started 1-1 and two slumped to 0-2.

On Sunday in Chicago, the Packers can join the seven other titlists since 1990 that started 3-0.

Here is a rating of the Packers in the Carolina game. In parentheses is each position group's 1 to 5 football total.

### **RECEIVERS (4 footballs)**

Last week, James Jones' playing time was the talk. This week, it might be Donald Driver's. One week after ranking a close second to Greg Jennings in snaps (52-44), Driver had just 28 to rank third behind Jennings (45) and Jordy Nelson (32). Not only that, but Driver was the target of just one pass. The only other time that happened in his 10-year career as a starter was Week 7 a year ago in Minnesota after he missed two days of practice with a thigh injury. But that's just the way it's going to go. Jones (17) and Randall Cobb (10) are worthy of playing time, too, and 19 of Jermichael Finley's 39 snaps came from the slot or split receiver. Chris Gamble, an average-to-above cornerback since 2004, matched against Jennings and played him tough. Jennings should have caught a back-shoulder fade against Gamble at the Carolina 22 on fourth and 4. Jennings ran one of his masterful deep routes off play-action in the third quarter, tying nickel safety Jordan Pugh in knots for a 49-yard TD. Jennings also made great blocks on FS Sherrod Martin so James Starks could break loose on a 40-yard run and on CB Captain Munnerlyn so Nelson could stride away for his magnificent 84-yard TD. Four of Finley's five receptions were among his 15 snaps when positioned in-line. Given his upright running style and limited lower-body shield, he's always going to be a candidate for leg, knee and ankle injuries. Given his height advantage, Finley gets a drop for not finishing that 6-yard fade. Cobb showed instant production. On his first play, he turned a 2-yard in route into 12 by making SS Charles Godfrey miss. Five tight ends were active for the first time in Packers annals, but only Andrew Quarless (17) and Tom Crabtree (15) played from scrimmage behind Finley. Beaten by DE Charles Johnson off the edge, Crabtree was responsible for the only sack.

## **OFFENSIVE LINE (4½ footballs)**

Rookie DTs Sione Fua (one tackle, no pressures) and Terrell McClain (no tackles, no pressures) were invisible because Scott Wells, T.J. Lang and Josh Sitton played so well and, in truth, they're not very good. Fua appeared to be a full gap over at times, but Wells was able to execute reach blocks against the rookie so the guards could get off to the LB level and Starks could have clear vision of cutback lanes. Not only is Lang bigger and stronger than Daryn Colledge, he's also more athletic on the move. On a 9-yard zone run to the left, Lang knew exactly when to leave Wells alone with the DT and get on MLB Dan Connor. Lang is more explosive than Colledge and has done good work on screens, too. Fua did beat Lang for one "bad" run. Sitton's only shortcoming was his holding penalty when he finished DE Greg Hardy too vigorously. O-linemen often get penalized for pancake blocks even if their hands are inside. It's ridiculous for officials to nit-pick these dominating-type blocks. Hardy was neutralized, but Johnson, a fully dimensional, relentless rusher, had two pressures against Chad Clifton and one against Bryan Bulaga. Playing next to Colledge, a finesse player, Clifton's finesse game didn't used to be as noticeable as it is now. Clifton showed no power in his base or upper body when Johnson killed him inside to blow up Starks on a third and 1. Bulaga had some problems anchoring and took two holding penalties, but he does have an ability to recoil and stay on his feet. Probably Bulaga's worst play came on a screen when he didn't throw his body at a downfield defenders and so a screen to Ryan Grant that should have been a touchdown fizzled at the 6.

## **QUARTERBACKS (4 footballs)**

When Aaron Rodgers is afforded excellent protection, as was the case here, the expectation level goes through the roof. Rodgers has reached the point where 308 passing yards and a rating of 119.9 seem almost ho-hum. Of his 11 incompletions, three were dropped, a few others were just off the mark and a few more were poor throws. Besides getting solid work from Gamble against Jennings, D-coordinator Sean McDermott blitzed judiciously (25% five or more rushers, 14% six or more) and mixed coverages well. As often is the case, Rodgers never came close to a turnover. He makes progressing from his first, second and third receivers look almost simple. When the Packers were down by 13 and facing third and 7 at their own 23, Rodgers made one of those plays that can turn a game and a team around. For the only time all day, McDermott rushed just two, backing McClain off over center to spy Rodgers. Seeing none of his five receivers open amid eight defenders, Rodgers ran toward the line but away from McClain. By the time that he released the ball, 4.9 seconds after the snap, Finley had that additional time to break off his route and free himself from Pugh. Rodgers' pass carried 31 yards downfield and was on the money, resulting in a 39-yard gain. Nine plays later the Packers were in the end zone for the first time.

## **RUNNING BACKS (4 footballs)**

Starks has entrenched himself as the shotgun-spread formation back. Because of it, he more than doubled the snap count of Ryan Grant (36-17) for the second week in a row. Starks didn't have any obvious poor plays in protection, and he seems to have a better feel when to leak out as a last-ditch receiver. For such a young player, Starks is exhibiting more patience. He is developing cutback eyes as he presses the line. As one of the two or three tallest backs in the league, Starks is able to see over things that the now-prototypical shorter backs cannot. He showed burst cutting to daylight when his blockers washed down the back side. On screens, he is letting things come to him. There's nothing wrong with Grant. He's running hard and generally getting what's blocked. Now he needs to start making the safety miss. John Kuhn's 1-yard TD run was special. Lately, he has been scoring standing up because defenses pay such short shrift to fullbacks. This time, SLB Thomas Davis and Connor keyed Kuhn and crashed into him at the half-yard line. Kuhn, however, was so strong that he stayed alive and reached the ball over the line. Kuhn (23) had a rough blocking game though. He didn't handle Davis on the first play of the game, then ran right by Connor who drilled Starks for 1 yard on the second play of the third quarter. Despite having just one FB on the roster, the Packers used the inverted wishbone formation four times. Crabtree lined up next to Kuhn.

## **DEFENSIVE LINE (3 footballs)**

It would have been very interesting to see if the Panthers would have been able to run effectively if dominating RT Jeff Otah (concussion) had played. His replacement, rookie free agent Byron Bell, was just trying to survive. As it was, B.J. Raji (69 snaps, 90% playing time) and Ryan Pickett (34) were key factors why RBs DeAngelo Williams and Jonathan Stewart combined for 18 yards in 11 carries (1.6). Dom Capers uses five or six variations of the 3-4 front. Often Raji is the weak-side end and Pickett the nose tackle, but Raji also played eight snaps on the nose. C Ryan Kalil is Pro Bowl-caliber and LG Travelle Wharton is solid, but Pickett has been really hard to move and Raji just won't stay blocked. The referee announced that LT Jordan Gross held on the goal-line, but Gross didn't hold. The offending player seemed to be TE Jeremy Shockey, who was trying to double-team Pickett with Bell and used his hands trying to fight Pickett. On the next play, Pickett shoved his way into the backfield against RG Geoff Hangartner and Stewart eventually was wrestled down by Clay Matthews for minus-2. Capers urged the linemen to maintain lane integrity against Cam Newton. Raji had three pressures, including an up-field sack against Wharton, and Jarius Wynn (career-high 59 snaps) had one. Wynn was OK against the run.

## **LINEBACKERS (2½ footballs)**

O-coordinator Rob Chudzinski had no intentions of letting Matthews control the game against Bell. The Panthers double-teamed him on 48% of his individual rushes and limited him to three pressures. Give Bell some credit. He stayed down when Matthews tried spin moves against him. On the other side, neither Erik Walden nor Brad Jones, who played about a quarter, contributed much to the rush against Gross, a superb tackle. The Panthers were able to exploit Walden in some difficult coverage assignments in the base defense before Capers helped him by playing more nickel. Desmond Bishop let Stewart reach the sideline on a 19-yard screen but used his instincts to keep finding the football.

## **SECONDARY (2 footballs)**

Morgan Burnett made a nice catch of an overthrown pass for an interception, stripped the ball from the outstretched arm of show-boating Steve Smith for a takeaway and reacted extremely well to sack Newton on a red-zone bootleg. On another play, Burnett took on the pulling Wharton and got Newton down after a short gain. Burnett has played more aggressively. Burnett's worst play was the 34-yard bomb to TE Greg Olsen over his head when he opened his hips at the line. Nick Collins was OK before suffering a season-ending neck injury tackling a hurdling Stewart on the sixth play of the fourth quarter. With Tramon Williams (shoulder) sitting out, Capers decided to match Charles Woodson against Smith. At times, Smith ate him alive, catching five passes for 135 yards. Woodson seemed to do a lot of guessing. Nevertheless, Woodson came through with three takeaways. He undercut a corner route to Smith knowing Collins was behind him, showed great hands and moxie picking off a wayward pass inside and then hustled across the field for the fumble recovery even though he had been beat by Smith for 25 on the play. Pressed into duty as nickel back, Jarrett Bush had a solid game. The same can't be said for Sam Shields, who missed three tackles, lost a sideline jump ball to Brandon LaFell and just didn't seem with it. He is not off to a good start.

## **KICKERS (3 footballs)**

Mason Crosby hit three field goals (37, 19, 34 yards) and averaged 68.9 yards and 3.5 seconds of hang time on seven kickoffs. The Panthers' average starting point after his boots was the 19.1. Punter Tim Masthay, in a slump, had three-punt averages of 38.7 yards (gross), 35 (net) and 3.88 (hang time). He's having technical issues.

## **SPECIAL TEAMS (1½ footballs)**

Cobb didn't show much vision, running into the back of Ryan Taylor on a KO return. Then, when two tacklers sandwiched him, he didn't wrap both arms around the ball and lost the fumble. For the second week in a row Driver recovered an onside kick. For years, he has come through in the prime recovery position on the "hands" team. LB Jamari Lattimore, Taylor and Jones led top-notch KO coverage.

## **OVERALL: 3 footballs**

## **STARS OF THE WEEK**

**3 stars** - Scott Wells

**2 stars** - James Starks

**1 star** - T.J. Lang