

Rating the Packers: Week 4 vs Broncos

Packers' aerial fleet devastating

*By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel
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Green Bay - The full might of the Green Bay Packers' offensive juggernaut came into focus Sunday at Lambeau Field, and it was a sight to behold.

Green Bay marched for touchdowns on six of its first nine possessions. Not one of the six drives included fewer than five plays or 46 yards.

The Packers' 49-23 victory over the Denver Broncos served as Exhibit A for the way passing attacks have taken hold of the National Football League like never before in the first month of this season.

Here is a rating of the Packers against the Broncos, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

RECEIVERS (5 footballs)

For the second time in four games the Packers didn't drop a pass. Neither of the two standouts, Greg Jennings nor Jordy Nelson, has dropped a ball yet. It would have made for sensational viewing if CB Champ Bailey (hamstring) had been able to cover Jennings. The Broncos' Brandon Lloyd and Jennings rank as two of the premier route-runners in the NFL. Jennings (57 snaps) ran right by double coverage on the Packers' third play, adjusted his body beautifully looking back into the sun and hauled in a 43-yard bomb. He's probably blocking better than he ever has, too. Less than 24 hours after signing a new contract, Nelson (43) physically dominated Bailey's fill-in, Cassius Vaughn, on two hitches for 25 yards. In the past few years, whenever the Packers max-protected and threw deep off play-action, the intended receiver was Jennings. Now McCarthy has designed some of those routes for Nelson, and he responded by blowing past aging SS Brian Dawkins for a 50-yard TD. James Jones (39) made a tough catch of an ankle-high turn-in for 18 on third and 13. Later, Jones didn't run a real good post route against CB Andre Goodman but when he turned back in the end zone the dart from Aaron Rodgers was coming waist-high right into his fingertips. That was an excellent catch, too. Randall Cobb (18) looked young and fresh, quick and fast. Limited by a knee injury to 28 snaps, Donald Driver ran one of his classic goal-line turnarounds for an 8-yard TD. Jermichael Finley (55 snaps, including 34 in the slot or wide) was the only tight end to see a targeted pass. Finley missed LB Von Miller inside, causing James Starks to be stopped for no gain on a second and 1. Tom Crabtree (15) didn't get the job done at the point of attack on an opening-drive fourth and 1, enabling Dawkins to roar up and upend Starks for minus-1. Week after week, Andrew Quarless (20) is getting his hands inside and showing that he really cares about his blocking.

OFFENSIVE LINE (4½)

McCarthy used Starks to help Marshall Newhouse in protection more than he normally does for a tackle. It made sense because Miller looks even quicker off the ball than Clay Matthews. Newhouse gave up two sacks to Miller off the edge and 3½ other pressures, so statistically it was a long afternoon. Yet, Newhouse wasn't mismatched athletically in the least, even against the second pick in the 2011 draft. He showed the agility to hang with Miller's spin move and pushed him wide by himself probably 10 times. He just isn't savvy enough yet to play the angles, use his feet and recover to eliminate even half a body. Unlike Allen Barbre, the starting RT in early 2009, the game isn't too big for the bright-eyed Newhouse. Scott Wells, T.J. Lang, Chad Clifton and Josh Sitton didn't allow a single pressure, and Sitton yielded the only "bad" run. Squatty but dynamic DE Elvis Dumervil isn't 100% because of a bum shoulder, but Clifton played him tough. Dumervil walked Clifton back a few times but never really lost control. DE Robert Ayers, a first-round pick in '09, kicked inside in nickel but couldn't get a sniff against Sitton.

QUARTERBACKS (5)

Coach John Fox and D-coordinator Dennis Allen blitzed on just 16% of dropbacks, the least seen by the Packers since Detroit blitzed 11% on Dec. 12 in their last defeat. Their only hope was that the rush from the front four would save a weak secondary. But McCarthy and Rodgers have become masters at exploiting matchups, especially at the safety level. As cagey and tough as Dawkins is, he was no match when Rodgers began zinging passes in his area. When Nelson made Dawkins look bad deep, Rodgers' bomb carried 56 yards and was in the air merely 2.4 seconds. As always, Rodgers exercised prudence and just threw the ball away under pressure. However, he took his share of vertical shots. The TD pass to Jones mirrored the scoring shot in the tightest window imaginable that he fired to Finley on a similar post route in Chicago. Using empty formation a season-high 10 times, Rodgers pump-faked the middle open and then ran hard for the first of his two TDs. His interception was a bad throw, as was Matt Flynn's.

RUNNING BACKS (4)

With Ryan Grant (kidney) sitting out, Starks played a career-high 51 snaps and was impressive. After Starks' poor performance against the Bears, RB coach Jerry Fontenot said he had no reason to be hard on Starks because he is so critical of himself. Maybe he missed a read, but when you run with that type of violence, no one should really care. Twice Starks landed on a tackler and spun away for extra yardage when everyone assumed he was down. Smiling after many of his carries, Starks seems to enjoy the give-and-take of contact that identifies physical running backs. He's no Brandon Jackson in pass protection, but week by week he is becoming more dependable. Just before the half, he leaked out after giving chipping help to Newhouse, turned and made himself available to Rodgers and then gained 16 on a check-down. The screen game just isn't in sync right now. Rather than use rookie Alex Green, McCarthy gave four third-and-long snaps to John Kuhn (20) as relief for Starks. Green debuted with six snaps in garbage time.

DEFENSIVE LINE (1)

The playing time showed 43 for B.J. Raji, 35 for Jarius Wynn, 31 for Ryan Pickett, 19 for C.J. Wilson and 16 for Howard Green. The only pressure was by Raji in which LG Zane Beadles was penalized for illegal hands to the face. Even with a stationary target in Kyle Orton, nobody could get anything going against an O-line that was demolished by Oakland on opening night. The group also did too much catching and was displaced on several running plays. Raji was on the ground too much and wasn't as firm stacking blockers. For the first time this season, Wynn showed some of his former inadequacies at the point. He kept turning his shoulders rather than staying square in an attempt to anchor against double teams, which created gaps that Willis McGahee ran through. Then Wynn got knocked out of his rush lane on third and 3 and Orton waddled ahead for a gain of 8. Pickett was his usual steady self against the double teams but, as usual, could only stand at the line and thrash around when pass showed. Green, reduced to six snaps total in the first three games, was called upon in the base when Wynn began to buckle against power. Wilson showed range and awareness flattening with discipline from the back side to make some tackles. If Wynn has hit a plateau, it's probably time for their playing time to be reversed.

LINEBACKERS (1½)

More than any foe so far, Denver was determined not to let Clay Matthews win. RT Orlando Franklin, a rookie with brute strength but mental shortcomings, often was able to just sit there and protect a side because he got so much help from RG Chris Kuper, a TE or a RB. After dropping into coverage twice against the Bears, Matthews dropped 11 times here. His 23 rushes included 12 singles, nine doubles and two stunts. He registered the club's only two knockdowns; his only hurry led to Desmond Bishop's sack on a cross blitz. Bishop usually provides the degree of power, nastiness and instincts that A.J. Hawk usually doesn't. Bishop didn't make any of his 10 tackles across the line. Most of his hits were stop-the-bleeding variety at about 5 yards when McGahee was cutting back and about to slip away. Hawk did some of the dirty work on the conversion run by Knowshon Moreno, but Bishop's aggressive tackle from a difficult angle denied the 2 points. Still, it was a long day in coverage for Bishop. He got worked by TE Daniel Fells down the middle on a pass that would have been a 26-yard TD if Bishop hadn't made a desperate lunge from behind to force the ball out. Later, Bishop reacted to Orton's pump-fake in zone coverage and gave up a 7-yard TD to Fells. Hawk got caught up in trash on a 14-yard run by McGahee and overran him on a 10-yard gain. He made an excellent play tipping a pass that Charlie Peprah intercepted. Erik Walden found nothing in his repertoire to beat high-caliber LT Ryan Clady.

SECONDARY (1)

Tramon Williams didn't resemble the player who played cornerback as well as anyone in the NFL last season. The Broncos, usually Lloyd, caught six passes for 63 yards against Williams, and on all six he was in off coverage. Clearly, Williams is better playing press, but with a tender shoulder the coaches didn't think he could hold up jamming receivers at the line. He isn't tackling well, either. The hope is that before long he can return to his previous style. On the other side, Charles Woodson showed unbelievable anticipation on Eric Decker's out cut from motion on third and 4. Changing the coverage at the last moment with Sam Shields, Woodson sensed there would be pressure from a five-man zone blitz, mirrored Decker's route, snagged the pass in his hands and ran it in for a 30-yard TD. Otherwise, Woodson struggled. One of the three plays he lined up at safety in the base defense was the first play of the game. Fells ran right by him, but Orton's 25-yard pass was overthrown. Lloyd beat Woodson deep in the third quarter, but Orton overthrew him in the end zone. The 28-yard run by McGahee was Woodson's tackle to make at the line but, as often happens, he slipped to the ground and fanned. Shields was caught peeking in the backfield on what should have been an easy 40-yard TD pass to Lloyd. Orton underthrew it, Shields closed nicely and made a fine interception. It wasn't Shields' fault that Decker came free on a pick for a 5-yard TD, but his feeble shoulder block of a tackle was. At safety, Morgan Burnett showed absolutely no awareness on a 44-yard flea-flicker to Lloyd or ability to adjust on Decker's 33-yard TD. He showed a nice read and close on a bubble screen but minimal upper-body strength failing to get through McGahee's stiff arm until getting him out of bounds 13 yards later. Peprah had the pick and an end-zone pass breakup but got burned with Burnett on a 50-yard bomb to Lloyd against a two-deep shell that was wiped out by penalty.

KICKERS (4½)

Mason Crosby's surprise onside kick was phenomenal. The Broncos had just five men up in a league seeing more six- and even seven-man fronts. His seven kickoffs averaged 69.9 yards and 3.87 seconds of hang time. Tim Masthay's only punt (49) rolled 14 yards.

SPECIAL TEAMS (3½)

The surprise onside, the Packers' first since vs. New England last December, was executed to perfection. Pat Lee and Tom Crabtree were chosen to make the key blocks, which they did, and Nelson soared over for the midair recovery. Small, slow but resourceful Quan Cosby averaged 28.8 on four kickoff returns. Vaughn took advantage of shoddy tackling to return another for 31. A gambler by nature, Cobb returned a very high kickoff 9 yards deep and brought it back to the 21. A total of 21 players performed on the four core units.

OVERALL (4)