

Rating the Packers: Week 5 at Falcons

Packers' secondary had shining moments in Atlanta

Rodgers also was on target in win

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel
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Green Bay - Mike McCarthy is 100% correct when he says that the Green Bay Packers haven't come close to reaching their peak.

On Sunday night, the Packers overcame a 14-point deficit against the inspired and aroused Atlanta Falcons to win at the Georgia Dome, 25-14.

By beating such a revenge-minded and sound team in their noisy stadium, the Packers served notice that they are fully capable of equaling or surpassing the franchise record for most victories in a season (13) and repeating as Super Bowl champions.

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

RECEIVERS (3 ½ footballs)

James Jones, the forgotten member of the WR corps, is back in business. Playing 28 snaps (he averaged 32.5 in 2010), Jones established a career high in receiving yards (140) and lost a 15-yard completion when Falcons coach Mike Smith called a late timeout. When the Falcons blitzed a cornerback off the slot across from Jones, he ate up the 10-yard cushion on FS Thomas DeCoud on a vertical route. Five times last season, Jones dropped what probably would have been long TD passes. This time, with two steps on DeCoud, he hung on and then easily ran away from DeCoud and SS James Sanders over the final 43 yards of a game-turning 70-yard TD. Later, the Falcons blitzed six for the only time all game and the ball went wide to Jones 5 yards downfield. Dunta Robinson is one of the more physical corners in the league, but he couldn't wrestle Jones down and the play ruptured into 21 yards. Jones also had a YAC of 17 on a sideline catch for 30 yards. Jones wasn't without blemish. He owned one of the group's five dropped passes. But now, with a big game under his belt, Jones won't face questions about his role and can go back to just being a contributing member of an elite group. What a run it was that Greg Jennings made on his 29-yard TD. He used his shiftiness to make both safeties miss coming across the field, halted at full speed, made a right turn and struck the pylon with the ball. Donald Driver (24) had a bad drop of a bullet pass inside. Jermichael Finley (51) dropped too many balls in camp and exhibition games for someone with his incredible hands. On this night, he dropped either two or three, depending on who's counting. Atlanta's linebackers might cover as well as any group in the NFL but they couldn't handle Finley. Finley's blocking is hunt and peck, hit or miss. Tom Crabtree played a season-high 29 snaps because Andrew Quarless (knee) was out and delivered some big play-side blocks against OLBs and DEs for successful runs. He's a hard man to shake. Rookie D.J. Williams also had a season-high play count (16). On one block he would be physical but on the next he appeared hesitant.

OFFENSIVE LINE (3)

Marshall Newhouse played the first 14 snaps at RT before moving to LT for the final 52 after Chad Clifton (hamstring) went down. If Clifton's hamstring is torn, it could end his career. Shifting sides is difficult, especially in a loud place like that. Once again, he responded very well, allowing no sacks, no knockdowns, one pressure and one-half "bad" run. There's just no comparison between the Newhouse of mid-August and the Newhouse of today. Surprisingly, Derek Sherrod didn't look out of place playing RT. Who knows? It might turn out to be his best position. He used his hands pretty well, set well at times and got his long arms on Ray Edwards and Lawrence Sidbury. He allowed a sack and knockdown to Sidbury, and appeared to go the wrong way on a fourth-quarter run for minus-3. His debut was adequate. Scott Wells wasn't quite as good as he has been in the first month, but he was much better than Josh Sitton and T.J. Lang. Sitton had two "bad" runs, one in which he just dived at DT Corey Peters on the back side rather than bringing his feet with him, and a costly holding penalty when he was beat up the field by Peters. He hasn't been as dominant this season. Lang drew his fifth false-start penalty in five games, fanned against Peters for a sack and was so-so in the run game.

QUARTERBACKS (4 ½)

In the playoffs, coordinator Brian VanGorder blitzed on 42% of dropbacks. This time, he blitzed just 20%, electing to sit back in zones and try breaking on the ball. Ten times Aaron Rodgers threw off play-action, generally in the area between the linebackers and a two-deep shell. Receivers love playing with Rodgers because he almost never leaves them out to dry. He throws to a spot, and if the receiver gets there the player can almost be assured there will be a yard or two of room to protect himself. Of Rodgers' 13 incompletions, six were dropped. Probably his poorest throw was the overthrown bomb to Jones off play-action/max protection that should have been a 58-yard TD. None of the four sacks or four knockdowns was Rodgers' fault. He stood tall against a really inspired defense (minus DE John Abraham), didn't let having a pair of backups at tackle faze him and won a very tough game. His performance on third down (nine of 12, 177 yards, two drops, one knockdown) was stunning. Three of those completions came after he glided away from pressure. Such plays destroy the will of a defense.

RUNNING BACKS (3)

Ryan Grant lost the fumble, his first on a rush since the 2008 finale. Because backs simply don't fumble in Green Bay, it was magnified more than normal. On the play, Grant didn't get good blocks downfield from Crabtree (on MLB Curtis Lofton) or Driver (on CB Brent Grimes). So, even after Grant broke a tackle by WLB Sean Weatherspoon, Grimes was right there to drive his shoulder into the ball. The coaches let Grant (20 snaps) cool down for the next 12 plays before returning him to the rotation with James Starks (30 snaps). Starks didn't do much on his first carry, a draw play for no gain. After that, he made mostly good reads. Starks is a contact runner who punishes tacklers. He also has speed, as when he outran Lofton to the corner for 11 yards. Once again, his shortcomings in protection were evident. He yielded 1½ pressures. McCarthy gave Alex Green his first snap in a non-garbage situation and he made a nice catch of a swing pass for 6 on third and 2.

DEFENSIVE LINE (3 ½)

After a bad game last week, the front three were back preventing another opponent from having success in the A and B gaps. LG Justin Blalock is a fine player, but backup center C Joe Hawley is mostly just a brawler, and the RG pairing of Garrett Reynolds and Brett Romberg leaves much to be desired. However, the Falcons are chippy and physical, so there was a lot of pushing and shoving in and around piles. Generally, B.J. Raji (54 snaps) and Ryan Pickett (27) took up two blockers and made it easier for the inside linebackers to attack Michael Turner. Even Jarius Wynn (32) was more square at the point this week, and C.J. Wilson (12) blew up TE Reggie Kelly to stop Turner for minus-3. On the other hand, the only pressure by the unit was a bull-rush hurry by Raji against Blalock. The D-line is coached to maintain lane integrity and power rush, but the Packers are badly in need of more pocket-collapsing power.

LINEBACKERS (4)

Desmond Bishop solidified his standing as the defense's best blitzer. The only sack came when Bishop shot inside LT Sam Baker and, rather than leap at Matt Ryan, he burst right through him for minus-11. Bishop knows how to finish. Ryan's only completion for more than 20 yards was a back-shoulder seam to Tony Gonzalez for 23. Bishop was in coverage a lot on Gonzalez, who probably can't break 4.9 anymore but remains a great possession receiver. Bishop matched up OK. Early, Bishop ran through the O-line and spilled Turner for minus-2. Later, he tried to run through again on a 17-yard reverse by Julio Jones and, as a result, gave up the sideline. A.J. Hawk was run over by Turner on the goal line and was fooled badly on a back-side screen to Jason Snelling for 17. Yet, Hawk saved a 15-yard completion to Jones by batting down a pass and did some nice work impeding underneath receivers. He always plays a more cerebral game. On the outside, Clay Matthews and Erik Walden each had three knockdowns. Walden really rocked Ryan twice. He brings a level of nastiness that would be welcomed by most defenses. Matthews drew two penalties on RT Tyson Clabo that cost Atlanta dearly. The Falcons double-teamed Matthews just 40% of the time and basically got away with it. In many situations, position coach Kevin Greene just wants Matthews and Walden to crash into tackles and be disciplined. It limits their number of chances to speed-rush off the edge.

SECONDARY (4 ½)

This unit, responsible for 16 passes of 20 yards or more in the first four games, didn't allow even one against one of the NFL's better passing attacks. Unlike the playoffs, when the Packers matched Tramon Williams on Roddy White, Dom Capers just kept Williams on the left side and Sam Shields on the right. Williams still isn't himself because of his shoulder injury, but he seemed a bit more aggressive in coverage this week. Shields was challenged twice by Jones on sideline go routes before the big rookie left with a pulled hamstring early in the fourth quarter. Each time, Shields had him smothered in his best showing of the season. Charles Woodson had an awful opening series. He left his feet twice with shots to tackle Turner in the backfield, missed and saw the big back turn them into 21 yards. The Falcons' first touchdown came when Woodson tried to undercut a crossing route looking for an interception and, along with Morgan Burnett, gave up the score to White. After that, Woodson got back to tackling and playing more disciplined football. Burnett keeps playing bubble screens well. He also showed a lot of guts on the goal line, slamming head-on into the 234-pound Snelling on a shovel pass. Now he needs to stop tipping his intentions to QBs by entering the box too early. Charlie Peprah came up with his first solid performance since replacing Nick Collins in Week 2. He's tough, he gets people lined up and he came up with a highly athletic interception against Gonzalez down the middle.

KICKERS (5)

Counting exhibition games, Mason Crosby has made 13 field-goals attempts in a row. At this point, everything is dead-solid perfect. In pregame warmups, he made one from 64 yards. In the game, he killed a 56-yard attempt that tied his club record and also hit from 32, 35 and 30. Meanwhile, six of his seven kickoffs were touchbacks and averaged 74.7 yards and 3.88 seconds of hang time. Tim Masthay's two punts averaged 42.5 (gross), 41 (net) and 4.4 seconds of hang time.

SPECIAL TEAMS (3)

Randall Cobb demonstrated just how rugged an individual he is by not fumbling and getting right back up after taking a hellacious shot from hard-hitting Mike Peterson, the crusty veteran linebacker. No question, Cobb is a daredevil. He would prefer not handing the ball to the official deep in the end zone or fair-catching punts. As admirable as that might be, he can't let courage interfere with judgment. The back-side blocking on kickoffs wasn't good. Rookie TE Ryan Taylor has to be more aggressive and not let 195-pound WR Eric Weems walk him back into Cobb.

OVERALL (4)

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