

Rating the Packers: Week 6 vs Rams

Going about business

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

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Green Bay - The St. Louis Rams playing at Lambeau Field in 2011 could be compared to the Phoenix Cardinals visiting Texas Stadium in the early 1990s or perhaps the Atlanta Falcons making a trip to Candlestick Park in the mid-1980s.

In other words, these Green Bay Packers have the makings of a dynasty approaching the Dallas Cowboys of 20 years ago and the San Francisco 49ers under Bill Walsh and George Seifert.

At the same time, the Rams never had a chance Sunday just as the Cardinals and Falcons didn't have a chance 20 and 25 years ago.

Here is a rating of the Packers in their 24-3 victory over the Rams, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

RECEIVERS (3 footballs)

Not that it means much, but it was strange not seeing Donald Driver on the field for the first play. Jordy Nelson started at flanker in the base formation, but Driver played the next seven snaps. Early in the second half, Driver went a stretch of 13 plays without seeing the field. Playing time must be earned in this group, and Driver didn't help himself by dropping a pass and getting knocked off a rather sloppy route by Quintin Mikell on a third-and-3 incompleting. Driver finished with 27 snaps, behind Greg Jennings (46) and James Jones (39) and ahead of Nelson (25) and Randall Cobb (10). Cobb didn't get the ball and drew a false-start penalty, but with his tenacious tendencies it's interesting to watch him block. Ten passes went to Jennings, who caught six and dropped one. Seemingly rejuvenated, Jones beat CB Justin King for a 35-yard TD on an over route and gave good effort as a blocker. Not only did Nelson beat Al Harris on a slant-and-go, he had the presence to split two tacklers downfield and then outdistance the entire Rams' defense with his long stride for a 93-yard TD. He also dropped his first ball of the season, a routine pass on third and 2. For once, Jermichael Finley played more of his snaps with his hand down or in the box (25) than he did out wide (21). He made an excellent play in the fourth quarter, bumping Mikell just enough 45 yards downfield so he couldn't intercept Aaron Rodgers' underthrown pass. Rookie D.J. Williams (20) isn't anywhere near the blocker that Tom Crabtree (24) is, but he isn't as weak as some scouts made him out to be, either. However, Williams dropped what was just the second pass thrown to him in 2011.

OFFENSIVE LINE (3)

In 20 games last season Josh Sitton was charged with nine "bad" runs. On Sunday, he has responsible for two full "bad" runs and two halves for a total of three. In the second quarter, Sitton was driven back by aging NT Fred Robbins into the lap of Ryan Grant, who did well to make it back to the line of scrimmage. Later, he got pushed by DT Justin Bannan, another stopgap starter, for a "bad" run and then couldn't get MLB James Laurinaitis blocked on a wide play for a 1-yard gain by James Starks. He just hasn't been as consistent in the run game this season. After giving up two rather shocking sacks in exhibition games, Sitton hadn't given up any in the regular season until Sunday. That's when backup DT Gary Gibson bulled him backward for a sack. Later, the overachieving Gibson probably would have had another one on a spin move, but the off-balance Sitton was saved by Scott Wells, who once again played better than anyone else. It's really hard to say why Sitton, 25, hasn't been as effective as last season. Bryan Bulaga, returning from a sprained knee, didn't get FS Quintin Mikell blocked on an early third-and-2 toss play. Other than allowing one pressure, Bulaga did an excellent job against DE Chris Long, the Rams' best defensive lineman. On the left side, Marshall Newhouse didn't allow a pressure against savvy DE James Hall and athletic rookie Robert Quinn, but he needs to sustain his blocks much better for the run. Hall kept sliding off first contact and getting in on the tackle. In time, Newhouse will learn how much he can get away with in terms of locking on. T.J. Lang was just OK. He hasn't been as consistent or aggressive in the run game as he was in the first month.

QUARTERBACKS (4 ½)

The Packers had a big advantage in the wind for all those years because of Brett Favre's cannon. Now the same applies to Rodgers. With gusts up to 32 mph, Rodgers didn't seem affected at all. He sailed a 25-yard toss over the head of Finley, but otherwise it was business as usual. Probably his best throw was a keep pass to the left when he pulled up just outside the numbers and, using his entire progression, threw a perfect pass that came down 3 yards deep in the end zone to Jones for a TD. He suffered four drops, including another bull's-eye to Jennings that clanged off his hands for an interception by SS Craig Dahl. Fearing that Rams coach Steve Spagnuolo would devise a new batch of pressures during the bye week, the Packers probably were surprised when he played almost strictly zone and blitzed just 14.7%. That's the lowest against Green Bay since Detroit (11.1%) in Week 13 a year ago. The first time Spagnuolo blitzed, Rodgers pump-faked Mikell off his feet, threw into the open window behind him to Nelson and the result was the fourth-longest reception in club history. A series later, Rodgers broke the Rams' backs on an 11-play, 67-yard TD drive by making four plays with his feet: two scrambles for first downs and two completions outside the pocket for 22 yards.

RUNNING BACKS (3)

There's nothing wrong with James Starks and Ryan Grant. They're just not Steven Jackson, which was readily apparent Sunday. Grant showed nice bounce outside on his first play, gaining 5 yards. Starks broke a tackle by SS Darian Stewart near the line and spun away for 10. Those were the highlights of a 24-carry, 75-yard (3.1) performance by the backs. The only "bad" run for the group was Starks' indecisive rush wide for 1 in the fourth quarter. Even now, Starks still seems somewhat unsure of himself. He's thinking instead of just taking the cut-back option, and the great backs really don't think in those moments. Starks played more snaps, 31-19. On first-and-10 plays, Starks' margin was narrower, 15-12. Starks continues as the third-and-long back. Mike McCarthy didn't employ a back at all on eight snaps, giving him 27 "empty" sets in Weeks 4-6 compared to six in Weeks 1-3.

DEFENSIVE LINE (1 ½)

Sam Bradford attempted to pass 48 times. The five defensive linemen didn't register a single pressure. That's hard to do. It should be impossible, especially against a shaky offensive line that was part of the NFL's poorest pass-blocking unit entering Sunday. B.J. Raji, the top threat, was shut down by LG Jacob Bell, C Jason Brown and RG Harvey Dahl. Of course, Raji must fight two blockers on most passes. Last year, he occasionally was splitting the double teams or collapsing the pocket. This year, he hasn't been. Raji played the first 39 snaps; in all, he played 64 of the 75. Through six games his play time is 87.5%. Maybe the Packers need to use Howard Green more than his average of 6.5 snaps, get Raji off the field some and hope it benefits the pass rush. Ryan Pickett (33) played better than Raji at the point of attack, too. He didn't have anything close to the two or three bad running plays in which Raji was shoved or washed. For several weeks the coaches have started giving C.J. Wilson more of Jarius Wynn's snaps. On Sunday, the count was Wynn 34, Wilson 28. As the game wore on, the attempt was made to play Wilson on base downs and Wynn on pass downs. Still, Wynn was stalemated all day long and was buckled twice on rushes. Wilson wasn't much better.

LINEBACKERS (4)

Ever since Darren Sproles' 36-yard catch on opening night, A.J. Hawk has been used less covering and more rushing. On Sunday, he made the most of his 19 pressures whereas Desmond Bishop (eight pressures) mostly toiled in coverage. It was one of Hawk's best blitz games. In the second quarter, Hawk took a calculated gamble, leaving Jackson open on the check-down and banking he could sack Bradford. He did just that. Later, he set up Charles Woodson's sack by beating Dahl. He also batted down a pass and registered a hurry against Bell. The Rams tried to exploit Bishop, but other than a 21-yard seam route to WR Danario Alexander the damage was minimal. On the coaches' tally, Bishop had 20 tackles (15 solo). When a ball carrier is jarred backward, it's almost always Bishop's doing. On the right outside, Erik Walden started and played six series (42 snaps). Returning from a broken scapula, Frank Zombo played five series (33 snaps). Walden rushed more effectively. Neither played the run all that well. On the other side, Clay Matthews played another full game despite virtually not practicing for a fourth straight week. Dom Capers blitzed more (55.1%) than he has all season, and two of his six-man pressures resulted in two of the team's three sacks. Hawk had one, and the other was by Matthews when he smashed through the middle and Bell was late lunging to pick him up. In all, Matthews was double-teamed on 39% of his rushes. He also had a pair of knockdowns and one batted pass.

SECONDARY (2 ½)

The Rams went after Tramon Williams, completing five of 10 passes at him for 59 yards. His coverage was a lot better than his tackling. He missed three, stayed clear of piles and tried to avoid physical situations. The Packers are willing to accept it because they understand he's fighting through a shoulder injury and they've got to have him on the field. Woodson's sack was his only pressure in 16 rushes, twice his previous high. Sam Shields snatched an interception in the end zone but foolishly tried to return it and suffered a concussion when drilled by WR Brandon Gibson. It was shades of late December 2002, when Darren Sharper pulled the same stunt against Buffalo, suffered a sprained knee and couldn't play in the playoff loss to Atlanta. Jarrett Bush had to play the fourth quarter outside and gave up a 32-yard bomb to Alexander. That's not his gig. But, once again, Bush played as physically as anyone in the secondary. After missing the tackle on TE Lance Kendricks 4 yards downfield on a 43-yard bootleg pass, Morgan Burnett played well with a club protecting his three-day-old broken right hand. He forced Jackson to fumble, then belted Cadillac Williams out with a thigh injury.

KICKERS (3)

Mason Crosby hit from 32 yards and averaged 70.2 yards and 3.86 seconds of hang time on five kickoffs (three were touchbacks). Tim Masthay's hang time (4.38) was solid; his five-punt averages were 44.4 (gross) and 29.2 (net).

SPECIAL TEAMS (2)

The Rams' punt-return game, among the NFL's worst, showed first life with runbacks of 39 and 17 yards. The 39-yard return by Austin Pettis was the result of a poorly placed punt by Masthay and poor coverage by the right side of Jamari Lattimore, Brad Jones and Crabtree. Other than that play, Jones performed well. On the second-half kickoff, both M.D. Jennings and Ryan Taylor were penalized for holding. For statistical purposes, the penalty on Taylor was accepted. That was unfortunate because Jennings' penalty clearly was the more obvious of the two.

OVERALL (3 ½)

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