

Rating the Packers: Week 7 at Vikings

Packers use their survival skills

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel
Posted: Oct. 25, 2011

Green Bay - Just about every motivating force was on the side of the Minnesota Vikings Sunday at the Metrodome.

Revenge for a 31-3 shellacking by the Green Bay Packers in the rivals' last meeting. Redemption for a 39-10 loss in Chicago a week earlier. Desperation in the face of a 1-5 start. Rejuvenation in the person of rookie quarterback Christian Ponder. Pride as a 9½-point underdog at home.

The Vikings might have played their best game of the season. They started well, leading by a touchdown three different times and taking a 17-13 cushion into the second half.

But Green Bay weathered the Vikings' best shot in front of a raucous crowd and improved to 7-0 with a 33-27 victory.

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

RECEIVERS (4 footballs)

Degree of difficulty was a factor. Even when intact, the Minnesota secondary is shaky. Without LC Antoine Winfield (neck) and nickel back Chris Cook (felony arrest), coordinator Fred Pagac had almost no choice other than align his overmatched backups in cushiony zones and try to make the Packers go the length of the field. Basically unchallenged, the Packers' receivers had ample space to run free all day long. Greg Jennings (41 snaps) suffered a bruised hand on his first reception but came back to catch seven of his nine targeted passes. Jennings was given a gift 79-yard TD when SS Husain Abdullah blew a coverage. James Jones (25) gained 31 of his 63 yards after the catch in another strong performance. When Jones is in rhythm, as he is now with just one drop in the last four games, he looks sensational catching every ball away from his body. Jordy Nelson (34) also played more than Donald Driver (27), who executed a nice crack-back block on Abdullah but saw just one pass. The only drop was by Randall Cobb. At that point, midway in the second quarter, he had played 10 snaps. After that, position coach Edgar Bennett used him just four more times. When the Packers ran out the clock in sensational fashion, Andrew Quarless played alongside Jermichael Finley instead of Tom Crabtree. Quarless (23) continued his impressive work as a heavy-duty blocker. His best play came when he motioned down from outside, punched DE Jared Allen to the ground, hustled into his route and made a 21-yard catch. It was surprising to see Crabtree (13) miss his block against SLB Erin Henderson on the first play of the game. Finley's 50-snap day included two targeted passes.

OFFENSIVE LINE (3 ½)

This was T.J. Lang's best game in about a month. In pass protection, he allowed just one-half pressure, and he was the only O-lineman who wasn't responsible for a "bad" run. He showed good power in-line and did well coming off combo blocks to the second level. Lang is an adequate athlete. He does tend to play a little high. He's also using his hands better. Lang showed remarkable poise by not retaliating when DE Brian Robison kicked him in the groin. Playing on a bad ankle and knee, Josh Sitton really had problems trying to change direction and hit on the move. Still, he sucked it up and was OK against DT Kevin Williams, who did beat him for two "bad" runs. Bryan Bulaga probably earned a draw against Robison, a very good end. Scott Wells pitched a shutout in protection but gave up two "bad" runs. Even though Allen had a phenomenal game, Marshall Newhouse has to play a lot better than he did. His whole body got turned toward the sidelines on an early sack by Allen. On three "bad" runs, he was trashed by Allen, he let LB Chad Greenway blow by him inside and he tripped and fell on a short pull. Three or four times Newhouse missed cut-offs on the back side either by overextending or being late off the ball. There was some talk on the sidelines about shifting Bulaga to left tackle, but the decision quickly was made to stay with Newhouse. If Chad Clifton doesn't return and Newhouse doesn't improve, Bulaga or Derek Sherrod have to be viable options.

QUARTERBACKS (4 ½)

It probably took just a play or two for Aaron Rodgers to recognize the Vikings' vanilla game plan and know that the underneath stuff would be readily available. So he took what Pagac gave him, passed for 335 yards and didn't come close to a turnover. Allen hit Rodgers squarely in the back on both of his sacks but was unable to force a fumble. Years of weight training have enabled Rodgers to develop extremely strong wrists, fingers and hands. His best throw probably was a tight corner route to Jennings for 26. Two of the four sacks were Rodgers' responsibility for holding the ball too long. In the first six games, he was at fault on just one of 12. It could also be said that by taking a sack he didn't risk an interception. Of his six incompletions, two were third-down misfires to Jennings in the fourth quarter, one was thrown away, one was spiked, one was dropped and one was too low for Starks.

RUNNING BACKS (4)

Once again, Ryan Grant was the starter. He played the first five snaps of the opening drive, then seven of the first nine to start the second half. However, he finished with just 18 snaps to 35 for James Starks. With the outcome in doubt, Mike McCarthy went with Starks on all six carries in the four-minute and he responded in brilliant fashion with 55 yards. In some ways, Starks ran like a young Grant. He'll sell out on every play and take the extra punishment just to make the extra yard. Running backs tend to lose their desire to do that after a few NFL seasons. On a 20-yard run at the end, Starks made Abdullah miss 10 yards downfield. On a 13-yard burst that closed out Minnesota, he broke tackles by CB Asher Allen and Greenway. The Vikings lost their gap discipline late in the fourth quarter and Starks made them pay by making the right reads. On Starks' first carry of the second half, Allen immediately showed up in his face after getting by Newhouse. But Starks made a quick cut and turned a 4-yard loss into a 4-yard gain. In that final push, Starks was helped by John Kuhn's booming blocks on FS Tyrell Johnson. Other than one "bad" run, Kuhn blocked very well. He ran a smart route through the line for a 2-yard TD.

DEFENSIVE LINE (1 ½)

The Packers are getting a ton of snaps from B.J. Raji (60 of 66 here, or 91%), which remains vital for the defense. They're just not getting much production. Raji's only pressure was somewhat of a garbage sack when he chased Christian Ponder out of bounds for no gain. Against the run, he didn't get much done against LG Steve Hutchinson, an old pro with leverage, power and pride. Once again, Ryan Pickett was the more formidable of the two players at the point of attack. Down after down, he's able to take on 625 pounds of double-team blocks without turning his shoulders or giving much ground. Do you think the Vikings' defense would have been ripped apart in the final 2½ minutes if Pickett had been wearing a purple jersey? There is no way. Wide bodies like Pickett are extremely hard to find. Of course, Pickett offers minimal range or pass rush. As midseason nears, Raji isn't having anywhere near the impact that he had a year ago. Part of that is the fact he has had fewer one-on-one rush opportunities this season. Another factor might be that Raji isn't maxing out in the areas of chase and pursuit. Playing defensive line requires extraordinary energy, and perhaps Raji is wearing down a bit after being on the field so much week after week. Because of Adrian Peterson, the Packers played 20 snaps of 3-4 and four of 4-4. Not one of Jarius Wynn's 13 snaps came in those two alignments. He's playing alongside Raji on passing downs and again didn't have a pressure. Howard Green had a season-high 24 snaps but never found the football.

LINEBACKERS (3 ½)

Clay Matthews might have played his best game of the season. Despite 52% double-teaming on pass plays, he had one sack, one knockdown, one batted ball and two flushes. After being fooled early on a bootleg, Matthews smelled out a reverse and pressured Ponder on rollouts. In the second half, the Vikings ran the same counter play, once to the left and once to the right. On the first, Erik Walden hesitated just enough so RG Anthony Herrera could pull across and get a slight piece of him. Thus, Walden wasn't quite able to wrap up Peterson, who turned it into a 25-yard gain. On the next series, the Vikings pulled Hutchinson to block Matthews, but Peterson ended up losing 5 yards. The difference was Matthews' ability to read the play instantly and burst across to engulf the running back before the guard could get there. In the fourth quarter, Matthews split a double-team, bounced up after being splattered by RT Phil Loadholt and located Ponder to administer a knockdown that referee Peter Morelli foolishly called roughing the passer. So the Packers sent in Brad Jones to give Matthews a one-play breather. It probably wasn't a surprise that one play sans Matthews turned into a 24-yard TD pass. Walden's 4½ pressures marked his best rush game of the season. Jones was used to spy Ponder about five times in Dom Capers' "blanket" package. On the inside, Desmond Bishop just keeps drilling people, chasing and finding the ball. A.J. Hawk never makes a big hit, is slow to diagnose and a step slow to the sideline. He couldn't even outrun Ponder on a scramble. On Peterson's 1-yard TD right at Hawk, he had a chance to keep his eyes up, wrap up and hit the great back with everything he's worth. Instead, he tried a rather feeble forearm lift that had no effect.

SECONDARY (1)

Most of Peterson's 175 yards was the result of this unit's awful tackling. Charles Woodson missed three, Charlie Peprah missed two and Morgan Burnett missed one. Almost all of them came when Peterson was breaking out of the scrum. This is a secondary that has turned down way too many tackles this season, is out of position too much and doesn't take consistent angles. The toughest and perhaps most effective player was Jarrett Bush, who subbed outside for nickel back Sam Shields (concussion). Woodson's two interceptions were things of beauty. He guessed right undercutting receivers and then made spectacular catches. On the other hand, Woodson used the wrong arm trying to defend Michael Jenkins on his 24-yard TD and got beat by TE Visanthe Shiancoe on a 22-yard out. Tramon Williams guessed, too, on the first play of the game, and gave up a 72-yard bomb to Jenkins on a stop-and-go route. Not only has the unwieldy club protecting Burnett's broken arm affected his tackling, it also seems to have reduced his playing speed considerably. Peprah spent almost the entire game in the box and wasn't good.

KICKERS (5)

After hitting from 63 yards in warmup, Mason Crosby's club-record boot from 58 almost was routine. He also was dead-center perfect from 39, 45 and 24 yards. His seven kickoffs averaged 72.9 yards and 4.01 seconds of hang time. He had four touchbacks. The Vikings' average starting position was the 21.7. Tim Masthay had a fine day, averaging 59.3 yards (gross), 55.5 (net) and 4.27 hang time in three punts. Granted, his 64-yard kick rolled 23 yards, but he did well just to get it off because of a blocking failure.

SPECIAL TEAMS (3)

Cobb made a poor error in judgment, signaling too late for a fair catch and then fumbling away a towering punt. He bounced back with a 42-yard punt return and a 31-yard KO return. In for Shields as a safety on the KO team, Nelson made a form tackle of Percy Harvin. Jones didn't block down on a late punt, and DE Everson Griffen was inches away from a block. Pat Lee had an excellent game.

OVERALL (4)

From the Oct. 25, 2011, editions of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel