

Rating the Packers: Week 9 at Chargers

Packers' road trip bumpy

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel
Posted: Nov. 8, 2011

Green Bay - The Green Bay Packers' 45-38 victory over the San Diego Chargers Sunday at Qualcomm Stadium wasn't as significant as it might seem. After all, the Chargers were without seven starters, including their fine running back (Ryan Mathews), their top-notch No. 2 wide receiver (Malcom Floyd), their best offensive lineman (guard Kris Dielman), their best defensive lineman (Luis Castillo) and their best pass rusher (Shaun Phillips). Still, the .500 Chargers were 3-0 at home this season and 35-8 at home with Philip Rivers starting at quarterback. Here is a rating of the Packers against the Chargers, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

RECEIVERS (4 footballs)

The Chargers matched their excellent veteran cornerback, Quentin Jammer, on Greg Jennings. They went nose-to-nose, mostly in the bump zone, and it probably ended as a draw. Jennings' longest play was a 21-yard catch in which he had to stop, start, stop and go again to gain separation. Then Jennings made one of his greatest catches by stretching out for a rifle shot from Aaron Rodgers. On Jennings' 4-yard TD on a back-shoulder fade, Jammer was right in his hip pocket and had both hands actually on the ball. Somehow, Jennings pinned it against his helmet and maintained possession as they fell in a heap. However, Jammer denied Jennings twice on third down, including a pass that was just a bit high or it might have been an 89-yard TD. As usual, Jennings led with 50 snaps, followed by James Jones (31), Jordy Nelson (29), Donald Driver (26) and Randall Cobb (season-low six). Jones made the most of his only ball, running a gorgeous stutter-and-go to beat rookie CB Marcus Gilchrist for a 21-yard TD. On the 64-yard play-action heave from Rodgers, Nelson was able to get his head around and locate the ball once he got behind Gilchrist. Many receivers aren't able to do that. Nelson plays with a discipline that Rodgers must admire. He can count on him to be in the right place and catch the ball. The entire unit caught the ball very well on a wet day. With FieldTurf everywhere, it was neat seeing dirty uniforms. Jermichael Finley (45 snaps, including 14 in-line) made two outstanding grabs.

OFFENSIVE LINE (3)

Probably the best performer was Bryan Bulaga. Matched against a surprisingly athletic and speedy vet in Travis LaBoy, Bulaga owned him for run and pass. Sometimes Bulaga does a little too much catching and not enough punching. In some ways, his style is reminiscent of Mark Tauscher's. Bulaga continues to grow as a solid starter. Minus Castillo since the opener, the Chargers' leftovers circled the wagons and played with tremendous energy. Scott Wells was more effective the longer that he worked against NT Antonio Garay. Wells was beaten by Garay on a bull rush for a sack that was split evenly between him and Rodgers for not taking the quick, easy throw to Nelson. The Bears gave up on DT Tommie Harris, but he has beat Josh Sitton for a pair of sacks in 2½ months. He got Sitton on a spin move Sunday after taking him in the Aug. 26 exhibition game when he played for Indianapolis. The only "bad" run charged to a lineman went to Sitton after Harris shoved him deep into the backfield on the first play of the second half. Despite the bye respite, Sitton just doesn't look right physically. T.J. Lang had another false-start penalty, giving him six at midseason. He allowed a bull-rush sack to Garay that was credited to LB Antwan Barnes and had another 1½ pressures. On the left side, Marshall Newhouse was better than he was in Minnesota but still played a little soft against the speedy Barnes. He yielded three pressures. His saving grace on the edge is his quick feet.

QUARTERBACKS (5)

Unpredictable Chargers defensive coordinator Greg Manusky played his safeties back almost the entire game. At the same time, he had CBs Dante Hughes, Jammer and Gilchrist playing press-man coverage underneath. Assessing the situation, Rodgers decided to run seven times (for 53 yards) seeing defenders having turned their backs in man coverage. That hurt San Diego, but not as much as his great throws on the run. His bomb to Nelson covered 53 yards in the air. On another occasion, he moved hard right and spun a beautiful pass to Nelson for 11. Off a pump fake, his TD toss to Jones was perfect. After the Chargers went right down the field to take a 7-0 lead, Rodgers just saddled everyone up, converted two third downs and made Manusky pay (4-yard TD pass) for allowing SS Steve Gregory to cover Finley one-on-one wide on the goal line. Rodgers just makes so many wise decisions. With pass rushes buzzing nearby the entire first half, he put a vise-like grip on the ball and wouldn't give in with a fumble. Once again, he never even came close to an interception. He'll just take a sack, knowing the Packers are more than capable of coming back from second and 15 or third and 7. It appeared as if Rodgers might have thrown the late third-down incompleteness to Jennings a tad too hard because it wasn't his typical tight spiral.

RUNNING BACKS (3 ½)

After talking during the week about staying with the RB rotation, the coaches gave Ryan Grant fewer snaps (11) than he's had all season. Grant started for a seventh time, and was in for seven of the nine plays on an opening TD march. Then he didn't see the field again until the final minute of the third quarter. Grant was OK. He just isn't as big, fast or powerful as James Starks (39), who has been playing extremely hard since his debacle in Chicago six weeks ago. Starks had two questionable runs on which he probably should have stayed front-side. His best run was his first, a 20-yarder that would have been no gain if he hadn't broken an attempted tackle by Hughes. He finished by dragging Gilchrist the final 6 yards. On his next carry, he made LB Takeo Spikes miss. John Kuhn subbed for Starks on six third downs and had 18 other snaps at FB. In the previous four seasons, Kuhn had to alternate. Now, the more that he plays, the better his blocking is becoming. He was aggressive and tough Sunday.

DEFENSIVE LINE (1 ½)

The Packers still call Ryan Pickett a DE and B.J. Raji a NT but the opposite is true. In their 24 snaps of base 3-4, the NT breakdown was 19 for Pickett and five for Raji. Just about every time, it would be Pickett (36 snaps) at NT, Raji (66) at weak-side DE and Howard Green (21) at strong-side DE. Unlike last season, Green just isn't finding the football these days. Even without Dielman, the Chargers kept running old-fashioned Power-O's featuring double-team blocking, and backup RB Mike Tolbert averaged 4.4 in 19 carries. Tolbert can't run; thus, his long was 9 yards. If the talented and much faster Mathews (groin) had played, the Packers' rushing yield of 85 might have been much higher. Raji cranked it up with the outcome in doubt and beat LG Tyrone Green for a pair of bull-rush pressures. Perhaps the best tackle made by the poor-tackling defense came in the fourth quarter when Jarius Wynn (29) shed mauling RG Louis Velasquez and flattened Tolbert after a gain of 2. Only recently has C.J. Wilson (21) replaced Wynn as the No. 1 backup DE in base. Neither Wilson nor Wynn had a pressure; that's why the return of Mike Neal remains vital. Wilson had an excuse for looking so bad on Tolbert's 8-yard TD run. The call just happened to have him backing off the line on a fire-zone blitz.

LINEBACKERS (3)

When the Packers beat the Bears in Week 16 a year ago and Erik Walden had three sacks (one was cheap), he got a ton of pub even though he played the run poorly that day. This probably was his finest game for the Packers. He had a career-high 4½ pressures, almost all at the expense of massive, talented LT Marcus McNeill. He also batted down a pass, drew a holding penalty by TE Randy McMichael after smashing him in the face on a run and beat McNeill inside in the fourth quarter for only his second tackle for loss in Green Bay. If truth be told, Walden isn't thrilled about job-sharing with Frank Zombo. In this game, he played like a full-fledged starter. On the other hand, Zombo missed a couple of tackles and showed limited range before leaving with an aggravated hamstring in the third quarter. On the other side, Clay Matthews had three knockdowns among his 4½ pressures. The Chargers double-teamed Matthews on 49% of passes. That doesn't count the 11 other occasions when Matthews stunted inside to occupy blockers for others or steamed through the middle from his rover position behind the line. He also fell into coverage on 14 other dropbacks. When the Chargers drew within a TD, Matthews uncorked two phenomenal spin moves that beat Vasquez and RT Jeromey Clary. Dom Capers dropped Matthews more than usual because he gave Desmond Bishop a season-high 17 rushes. Bishop beat Clary on a dip-and-rip for a sack to go with a pair of pressures. Capers' problem is how to hide A.J. Hawk in coverage. If you notice, when opponents empty the backfield, Bishop is always the ILB who must run by Hawk and go cover wide. Hawk couldn't even cover Tolbert, who maybe can run 4.75. He was beat badly on Tolbert's two options routes for 40 yards. Even his zone drops remain inconsistent. In space, Hawk's herky-jerky gait and stiffness become readily apparent. Against the run, Hawk isn't a step up-and-stuff player. One time, he was there to stop Tolbert on third and 1 but couldn't finish. Later, Hawk made a great read and hit Tolbert 2 yards deep, but his tackle lacked teeth and Tolbert surged forward for 1. Of the nine tackles missed by LBs, Hawk led with three. Bishop shouldn't have to cover TE Antonio Gates. He's the unit's top run stuffer. But Hawk's liabilities forced Capers' hand, and so frequently Bishop was eaten up by Gates. The best part of Hawk's game right now probably is rushing..

SECONDARY (1 ½)

Most of the game, Charlie Peprah raised his arm and came down into the box. His two interceptions occurred when he was playing deep off the hash mark. Bishop tipped Rivers' forced ball to Gates and it went right to Peprah, who brought it back for a TD. Later, Rivers threw a terrible long pass and Peprah caught it again. The other big play happened when Tramon Williams read a route combination, broke perfectly, plucked the ball in his hands and ran the interception back for another TD. Beyond those three plays, this looked like a dysfunctional mess. As poorly as the cornerbacks were covering, Capers tried something almost completely new and rushed Williams and Sam Shields three times each. Left in man coverage, Williams has to defend the 38-yard play-action pass to Vincent Jackson. Williams and Morgan Burnett probably were both at fault on Jackson's 29-yard TD against "quarters" coverage. There were three missed tackles; no one really wanted a piece of the hard-charging Tolbert. Charles Woodson couldn't handle Gates, either. He was penalized three times, including two on third and long and one on fourth and short. Nobody's playing well back here.

KICKERS (4)

With lousy protection, Tim Masthay did well just to get airborne a pair of fourth-quarter punts. The fact that they averaged 54 yards (gross), 42.5 (net) and 4.15 seconds of hang time was superb. Mason Crosby hit a FG from 47 and averaged 71 yards and 3.37 on eight kickoffs (five touchbacks).

SPECIAL TEAMS (1 ½)

The Packers weren't employing their "hands" team on Nick Novak's onside kick that the Chargers recovered. Ryan Taylor blew it by going for the ball instead of just blocking and letting it dribble through to Nelson. As it was, Nelson's vision was obscured after the ball bounced right between the rookie's legs. Later, the Packers sent out their "hands" team, but the Chargers kicked deep. That's when Woodson made an inexplicable rookie mistake, returning from a yard deep with no blocking instead of taking the touchback. Other than a protection issue, Brad Jones had a fine game.

OVERALL (3 ½)

From the Nov. 8, 2011, editions of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel