

Rating the Packers: Week 11 vs Buccaneers

Defense not on par yet

*By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel
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Green Bay - We're 10 games into the season, and the Green Bay Packers don't appear to have improved on defense.

In the first five games, they allowed 375.6 yards per game and 111 points and took the ball away 13 times. In the last five games, they've allowed 408 yards per game and 101 points and have taken the ball away nine times.

In their 35-26 decision over the Tampa Bay Buccaneers on Sunday at Lambeau Field, the Packers seemed as vulnerable as they have been all season. More and more, it would seem that their defensive deficiencies will catch up to them.

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

RECEIVERS (4 footballs)

CB E.J. Biggers ran 40 yards in 4.34 seconds twice at his Western Michigan pro day in March 2009. The year before, Jordy Nelson ran 4.54 on a similar surface. On Sunday, Nelson outmaneuvered the Bucs' nickel back on receptions worth 34, 26 and 40 yards, and he showed better acceleration and second gear. Nelson isn't being asked to work much inside. Along the sidelines, he has become a beast. There isn't any wasted motion with Nelson. He releases with strength, gets into his release fast, plants, catches and drives forward with purpose. When Biggers overplayed him on a third-and-5 inside breaking route that Nelson ran just last week, he changed direction and sped down the sideline for 34 yards. For the first time, Nelson led the corps with 43 snaps compared with Greg Jennings' 41, Donald Driver's 30, Randall Cobb's 20 and James Jones' 19. Jennings drew the toughest matchup in talented Aqib Talib and caught two of his six targets for 6 yards. Talib made two spectacular breakups or Jennings would have been off to the races. For the second week in a row, Jennings was saved from a fumble because he was down by contact. The 72 yards for Driver was his highest total in 12 games, and 41 came after the catch. His legs looked fresh when he made FS Corey Lynch whiff in space. After Jones dropped a back-shoulder fade of 15 yards, he disappeared for a quarter when Cobb took his turns. Jermichael Finley had three targets, giving him 20 in the last five games compared with 32 in the first five. Given the range deficiencies of Lynch and SS Sean Jones, the Packers could have built a game plan around Finley. He played 52 snaps, including 25 either in-line, on the wing or in the backfield. Finley had a 30-yard catch over Lynch, a bad drop behind Jones and a pass-interference penalty when he pushed CB Ronde Barber. On their longest run (20 yards), the Packers felt confident letting Andrew Quarless (21) block the DE (Michael Bennett). He handled it well, just as he does almost all of his blocking assignments. Tom Crabtree (17) sold his 5-yard TD route perfectly against SLB Quincy Black.

OFFENSIVE LINE (3 ½)

Rookie DE Adrian Clayborn gave Marshall Newhouse fits with his outstanding mix of effort, speed and power. In the first half, Clayborn beat him for one sack, one knockdown and 2½ hurries. Newhouse was just hanging on against an active, aggressive foe. In the second half, Newhouse settled in and didn't allow a pressure. He was more consistent with his pass sets, didn't get turned to the sideline as much and played well. Newhouse isn't at the stage where he's worried about finishing blocks. The guard next to him, T.J. Lang, plays with some nastiness every week. On one play, Lang grabbed NT Brian Price by the ankle just to slow his pursuit from the back side. Of late, Lang probably is out-playing Josh Sitton, who had two holding calls (one was nullified), a false start and a minus-3 "bad" run. You just don't see the power and punch from Sitton that you did a year ago. Albert Haynesworth was on the field for 37 of 64 snaps, including 19 against Sitton and 18 against Lang. Both guards hunkered down and handled his power rushes. Scott Wells had the tough task of trying to execute reach blocks on Haynesworth, who's got him by at least 50 pounds. They battled to a draw. Price beat Wells for a sack in 2.4 seconds when Wells probably should have backed off a bit for a better angle. When Bryan Bulaga missed with his hands, LEs Da'Quan Bowers and Bennett got into him on bull rushes for 2½ pressures.

QUARTERBACKS (4)

Aaron Rodgers' standards have become so impossibly high that 67.6% marksmanship, 299 yards and a passer rating of 112.3 are considered disappointing by some. That includes Rodgers, at least judging from his postgame remarks. We've just become accustomed to him rarely throwing an errant ball. He had three to five that could be considered off target, and the interception that he threw to CB Elbert Mack was a stunner. It seemed his trajectory was off a bit. Perhaps his footwork wasn't as good. It's hard to be superlative every time, especially on a raw 32-degree afternoon. On the other hand, when coach Raheem Morris all-out blitzed more (20%) than any opponent since New Orleans, Rodgers showed poise and made big plays. He is seeing the rush so well. More times than not, Rodgers will make undisciplined rushers pay with productive scrambles. Morris threw Rodgers off to an extent by bumping up with his corners and forcing him into some unfamiliar windows. Three times Rodgers got the Bucs to jump off-sides with a hard count.

RUNNING BACKS (4)

One time when Wells couldn't reach Haynesworth, Starks just ran from the big man, made a decisive cut and gained 20 yards. In his 17-touch, 91-yard day, Starks almost never was brought down by the first man. On the first of his five checkdowns/swing passes, he made four defenders miss. The Bucs' underpowered LBs couldn't get him down. It remains to be seen how long Starks will be able to run with such reckless ferocity. Starks played 35 snaps before leaving with a knee/ankle injury at the 3-minute mark. Ryan Grant (15) was adequate again. When WLB Adam Hayward showed up unblocked in the hole on a fullback belly, John Kuhn (25) knocked him over for a 2-yard TD. B.J. Raji showed soft hands securing the handoff and plunging in for a 1-yard TD.

DEFENSIVE LINE (3)

Ryan Pickett probably moved better than he had all season. Maybe it was the caliber of opposition. Brawny RG Davin Joseph is rated one of the three or four best guards in the NFC. Pickett played 36 hard-to-move snaps. He split a double-team by Joseph and undersized C Jeff Faine for a 3-yard loss against LeGarrette Blount. Pickett also caught Joseph by surprise with a nifty spin that he seldom shows. Mike Neal's 16-play debut was uneventful. His main role was at LT in the nickel, replacing Jarius Wynn. He played opposite Raji on passing downs and didn't make a difference. Half of Wynn's 14 snaps came in garbage time. Raji bull-rushed LG Jeremy Zuttah and batted down a pass. That was his best moment in 46 snaps. In their six-man rotation, the Packers started Howard Green (16) at the other DE in the 3-4 and used C.J. Wilson (18) as both a backup DE in base and as a backup DT in nickel.

LINEBACKERS (2)

Dom Capers continued his monthlong pattern of heavy blitzing, sending five or more on 58% of drop-backs and six or more on 10%. The only sack was made by Erik Walden when he wasn't blocked. The only two knockdowns were made by Clay Matthews. The Bucs were determined to play their game. On Matthews' 22 individual rushes, they double-teamed him on just three, a 14% rate that was by far the lowest he has encountered this season. Veteran RT Jeremy Trueblood stands 6 feet 8 inches and has a long wingspan, but the weakness of his game has been against edge speed. Nevertheless, Matthews never just whipped him. Former Packer Kregg Lumpkin was awful in pass protection, giving up a sack to Charles Woodson and 4½ pressures. Matthews beat him for one knockdown, and his other one came late. Capers even gave Matthews a few snaps on the right outside for one of the few times in 2011. What's the best part of Walden's game? Probably his effort, which might be a match for Matthews'. On the inside, Desmond Bishop had 2½ pressures in 13 rushes and A.J. Hawk had two in 12. Both were embarrassed on Blount's 54-yard TD. Bishop, who left his feet prematurely, said he had never been run over quite like that in his entire career. When Hawk saw Bishop miss, he decided to hustle over and then hit Blount with a forearm (it had no effect) instead of wrapping up. Once again, Capers used Bishop in coverage roles for which he isn't athletically suited. Hawk has the ability to cover but isn't effective in space. The unit missed five tackles, including two by Walden.

SECONDARY (2)

Josh Freeman tried to exploit the matchups of WRs Mike Williams and Arrelious Benn on Tramon Williams and TE Kellen Winslow on Charlie Peprah. After a sluggish first quarter, the Bucs pretty much had their way. Tramon Williams gave up seven completions in 10 attempts for 73 yards. His yearlong struggles on sideline fades and comeback routes continued. The Bucs must have read the scouting book about making Williams and Sam Shields tackle by the number of WR screens that they tried. Williams had three of the six tackles missed by the secondary, Morgan Burnett had two and Shields had one. The one thing that Williams keeps doing well is taking the ball away. Just before halftime, Williams made a phenomenal interception, chasing Mike Williams clear across the field, weaving through traffic and then accelerating with the ball in the air. His second pick skimmed off Winslow's fingers. Other than his pathetic attempted tackle of Blount, Shields was fine until the fourth quarter. Then he got beat by Williams on a slant for a 9-yard TD and by Benn on a 37-yard go route. Once again, Shields peeked in the backfield, lost contact with Benn and couldn't recover. The problems with leverage continued when Peprah, knowing he had safety help inside, enabled Winslow to beat him outside. That also was for 37 yards. There doesn't seem to be a commitment to communication and improvement between the veterans and young players in this position group necessary to surmount problems.

KICKERS (3)

Tim Masthay did a fabulous job pulling the ball down and avoiding a blocked punt. Onrushing LB Jacob Cutrera did knock the ball from his grasp, but Masthay picked it up, ran for the first down and then fumbled out of bounds. His three punts averaged 54.3 yards (gross), 42.3 (net) and 3.99 seconds (hang time). Kicking from the left hash, Mason Crosby hit the right upright from 29 yards for his first miss of the season. His six kickoffs averaged 66 yards, 3.48 of hang time and an opponents' starting position of the 24.3.

SPECIAL TEAMS (3)

Quarless, who blew the block on Cutrera, was saved by Masthay's reactions. D.J. Smith was inches from giving the Bucs possession on a surprise onside kick. Kuhn recovered a late onside kick. Cobb slipped on one kickoff return (21 yards) and muffed another that became a touchback. Later, he ran almost a carbon copy of his 80-yard punt return against the Vikings. Cobb started laterally to the right, cut up the field and went for 55. Ryan Taylor and Jones were penalized for illegal blocks. Taylor had two of the seven missed tackles.

OVERALL (3 ½)

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