

Rating the Packers: Week 12 at Lions

Talent on roster runs deep

*By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel
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Green Bay - If the strength of a football team is the bottom quarter of its roster, the Green Bay Packers might be impossible to beat.

By the start of the second half, rookie D.J. Smith, Evan Dietrich-Smith and Rob Francois were in the lineup at weak inside linebacker, right guard and strong inside linebacker, respectively.

When the regular season started, the Journal Sentinel ranked the Packers 1 to 53 on the basis of their importance and value to the team. Smith came in at No. 39, Dietrich-Smith was No. 45 and Francois went off at No. 47.

Even though Smith and Dietrich-Smith had never played meaningful minutes, both held up just fine on Thanksgiving in the Packers' 27-15 victory over the Detroit Lions at Ford Field. Francois, who had to start a game in 2010, came through with a spectacular interception.

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

RECEIVERS (3 ½ footballs)

Jermichael Finley was adamant in saying that FS Louis Delmas is the Lions' best defensive back. When Delmas went out after six plays with a knee injury, coach Jim Schwartz had to insert former Bear Chris Harris, who can't run at all. After LC Chris Houston (knee) departed on the Packers' 14th play and dime back Brandon McDonald (knee) in the middle of the third quarter, nickel back Aaron Berry became the LC, SS Amari Spievey became the nickel back and WR Rashied Davis became the dime back. SS John Wendling took some snaps for Spievey. The point of recounting is to suggest that the Packers' degree of difficulty was minimal. Greg Jennings (47 snaps) made it look so easy on two big plays (50 yards) with Berry trying to cover him. He also had two penalties and came up a half yard short on a third-and-3 completion. For the third game in a row, Jennings fumbled after a catch but was ruled down by contact. Finley and James Jones had false-start penalties. Another third-and-short failed in the first half when Finley dropped a ball inside with a step on Spievey. It was Finley who started the second-half charge by vaulting over Spievey, a cornerback at Iowa, on a 26-yard fade. After Jennings, the snap counts were closer than ever: Donald Driver (27), Jordy Nelson (25), Randall Cobb (23) and Jones (23). Driver stumbled on a short route in the end zone. Nelson dropped a hitch, and Andrew Quarless (21) dropped a 1-yard TD. Jones just kind of lurks out near the sideline. He has been targeted just 34 times, well down from 61 after 11 games a year ago. Yet, he leads the club in average per catch at 18.8. His very good day would have been a great one if he had held on to that 30-yard fade in the second quarter.

OFFENSIVE LINE (4 ½)

The high grade is because of the degree of difficulty. The Lions had seven good D-linemen in uniform, and with crowd noise the potential was there for a disaster. Coordinator Gunther Cunningham relied on his four-man rushes, blitzing his typical low amount (17%) and pressing with his cornerbacks as he saw fit. This unit more than held its own, allowing one sack, two knockdowns and 4½ hurries. Probably the best performer was Marshall Newhouse. He and T.J. Lang had problems on simple tackle-end stunts late in the second quarter. In fact, the only pressure that Newhouse gave up to hard-charging Kyle Vanden Bosch was on a stunt. Vanden Bosch repeatedly threatened off the edge, but Newhouse punched better with his arms this week and kept him at bay. On the longest run (12 yards), he influenced Vanden Bosch to come up field, then left Lang to finish him off as he shot to the second level and cut off OLB DeAndre Levy. It was impressive. Scott Wells was clean in protection and had just one "bad" run when DT Sammie Hill blew through his gap on the goal line. Wells is just so quick off the ball and into blocks. Although Josh Sitton (sprained knee) lasted just 20 snaps, he fared OK against Ndamukong Suh. Dietrich-Smith faced Suh on 18 plays, including a few one-on-one's, and was beaten badly twice. After Suh was thrown out for stomping on his biceps, Dietrich-Smith didn't embarrass himself one bit against rookie Nick Fairley, the 13th pick in the draft. Sure, EDS had some bad plays, but not as many as LGs Jason Spitz and Lang did in the same building a year ago. It was a poor outing for Bryan Bulaga. He was late off the ball for a sack against Cliff Avril, allowed 3½ other pressures and had two major penalties. Given the rare chance to pull, Bulaga moved well outside on a toss sweep and pancaked OLB Justin Durant.

QUARTERBACKS (4 ½)

Not too many years ago, the Packers would never have dared go into a dome and run spread offense out of shotgun right off the bat. It's a mark of how efficient all the players are, but especially Aaron Rodgers. First play, the Lions' defense and their fans are like caged animals. Rodgers sidles up in shotgun, calmly surveys the Lions and throws a rhythmic sideline stop route to Nelson against Berry for 15. The in-your-face stuff ended there until the second half, but the message that the Packers would run their stuff had been sent. It's hard to find fault with Rodgers for being shut out until 4:51 remained in the first half. He just wasn't getting much support, and the Lions' rush was fresh and fairly productive. What Rodgers didn't do - turn the ball over - was critical. Unlike Matthew Stafford, who basically reads half the field, Rodgers' progression includes the whole field. He didn't make as many "wow" plays as usual, just a whole host of solid plays. And, in this red-letter game, that was more than enough to improve his career record to 42-21.

RUNNING BACKS (3 ½)

Iffy all week with a sore leg, James Starks pushed through the pain and uncertainty, started and played well. After 20 snaps (early third quarter), Mike McCarthy put him down and finished with Ryan Grant (18), rookie Brandon Saine (10) and John Kuhn (23). On his first carry, Starks made Delmas miss and gained an extra 6 yards. On his second carry, he shucked off the penetrating Durant and at least made it back to the line. Grant generally gets what's blocked. He went down like a ton of bricks on one screen but then, on a swing pass, eluded two defenders and picked up 8. Saine just didn't run as physically at Ohio State as he has in the NFL. When the speedy Avril had the angle, Saine beat him to the corner on a swing pass with his excellent burst and then punished CB Eric Wright instead of going out of bounds. Called for holding against the blitzing Levy, Kuhn made a great goal-line cut block of Avril and broke two tackles on a pass in the flat. B.J. Raji led Kuhn's 1-yard TD by crunching MLB Stephen Tulloch in the hole.

DEFENSIVE LINE (3)

The Packers were fortunate that RB Kevin Smith (ankle) was done three plays into the second quarter. The Lions finished with 136 yards (6.5), and the way Smith started it might have been a 200-yard day. Once again, Ryan Pickett (27 snaps) was the most effective player. The Packers rushed three to the right and dropped Pickett as a contain man to the left. That's when he tipped Stafford's pass to Clay Matthews for a game-changing interception. Pickett obviously took to heart the urging from coaches to pursue harder after some players loafed on LeGarrette Blount's 54-yard TD jaunt four days earlier. Two or three times, Pickett gave incredible effort in chase. Raji still wasn't productive, but with his playing time reduced to 62% he was able to put together two or three explosive rushes. Mike Neal's snap count increased from 16 to 27 in his second game back. He even played one of the team's four snaps in the 3-4. Right now, he's getting stalled at the line on pass and getting knocked around occasionally against run. The six-man rotation also included C.J. Wilson (22), Jarius Wynn (18) and Howard Green (two).

LINEBACKERS (4 ½)

Judging strictly by on-field performance, Erik Walden really is improving. He had 3½ pressures, marking his fourth good rushing game in the last five. Clever LT Jeff Backus struggled both with Walden's outside speed rushes and more refined hand usage. One time, Walden paused, sized up Backus and then burst by him using mainly technique. Against the run, Walden set a hard edge, disengaged from blocks quickly and kept finding the ball carrier. On the other side, Clay Matthews had three of his five pressures against RT Gosder Cherilus. The Lions surely designed their throwback screen to take advantage of Matthews' aggressiveness, but Matthews' awareness is so acute that he read it and made a magnificent deflection. However, Matthews kept getting tossed to the ground by TE Brandon Pettigrew at the point of attack. Desmond Bishop (calf) was a step slow before exiting after 21 snaps. On his first snap, D.J. Smith blew up Pettigrew on a lead and crushed Kevin Smith in the hole for no gain. It was the type of play that Bishop frequently makes and A.J. Hawk almost never makes. Hawk tried to undercut a screen and missed. If you do that, you've got to make the tackle. Smith also was in good position on the aborted throwback and was adequate in coverage. He seems a little short for heavy-duty blitzing. Francois gave up three completions for 30 yards, but that has been par for the course at the position this year. On his pick, he took full advantage of being free underneath, elevated in the throwing lane and made an awesome catch in his hands.

SECONDARY (4 ½)

Despite two dropped interceptions, Tramon Williams was the key to the game plan. Capers needed someone who was athletic and wasn't in awe to front Calvin Johnson and play to the over-the-top safety help that was in effect maybe 50% of the time. On Williams' watch, Johnson caught one pass for 5 yards. He did it by keeping his distance, refusing to engage in wrestling matches that CBs in press almost always lose. Although Williams was slow to force on an 11-yard reverse, he didn't miss a tackle. The DB misses were by Charlie Peprah (three), Charles Woodson (two) and Jarrett Bush (two). The stick route to Pettigrew is a staple for Stafford. When Woodson saw it, he basically dropped coverage, played the odds and made a startling interception. The only completion for 20 yards or more came against Bush in man coverage on Johnson's option route (23). Sam Shields kept using an unusual bail technique in zones, apparently part of Capers' instructions not to get beat deep. Morgan Burnett was just so-so..

KICKERS (4 ½)

Little Stefan Logan, who hurt the Packers in 2010, had a chance at five punts and five kickoffs but wasn't a factor. Tim Masthay proved that he can directionally punt to either side, pinning Logan to the sidelines. He tilted the field toward Green Bay, averaging 43.4 yards (gross), 39.8 (net) and a season-best 4.45 seconds of hang time. Four of his five punts were inside the 20. Mason Crosby kicked away five times, averaging 71.2 and 3.96. He hit FGs from 35 and 32 yards..

SPECIAL TEAMS (3 ½)

D.J. Smith delivered one of the biggest hits of the season on a second-quarter kickoff return by Logan. Quarless beat Levy and RB Maurice Morris up the middle and had P Ben Graham dead to rights for a block. Somehow, Quarless missed when the left-footed Graham got it off to the side. Battling it out with Berry and Davis covering a punt, Pat Lee lost his cool, threw a punch and was kicked out. Bush excelled in coverage.

OVERALL (4 ½)

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