

Rating the Packers: Week 17 vs Lions

Packers able to flip the script

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

Posted: Jan. 2, 2012

Green Bay - Judged by the first 10 plays, Mike McCarthy's decision to sit Aaron Rodgers, Clay Matthews and Charles Woodson for non-health reasons appeared to have rubbed off on his players. In other words, why should they bother if the coach didn't?

They bungled the opening kickoff so badly that the Lions almost got a gift touchdown. The first possession ended with a lost strip sack, their first since the NFC wild-card playoff game in Philadelphia a year ago. That set up a Lions touchdown, which was followed by another botched return that turned into a safety.

Just two minutes had elapsed and the Packers already found themselves in arrears, 9-0. The crowd at Lambeau Field had no clue what team it was watching.

Three and a half hours later, the Packers and their fans could bask in a regular-season finale done well. Short-handed as they were, the Packers took their rival's best shot and emerged victorious in memorable fashion, 45-41.

Here is a rating of Green Bay against Detroit, with its 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

RECEIVERS (5 footballs)

Jordy Nelson closed his sensational regular season with a career-best 162 yards. He caught four passes for 79 yards against nickel back Alphonso Smith, one for 58 against LC Chris Houston, two for 19 against RC Eric Wright and one for 6 against dime back Brandon McDonald. Nelson seems to make all his routes look the same before making crisp cuts and exploding out of his breaks. He's just so purposeful in everything that he does. He must have excellent vision because it never takes him long to locate the ball. It's one reason he is so excellent on take-off routes and back-shoulder fades. Smaller cornerbacks seem to just fall off him. When Houston raked his hand across the ball on the 58-yard TD, Nelson never wavered with his vise-like grip. Ever physical, he eliminated both Smith and FS Chris Harris on Ryan Grant's 80-yard jaunt. Minus Greg Jennings (knee) and Randall Cobb (groin), Nelson played 67 of the 73 snaps, James Jones had 60 and Donald Driver played 52. At TE, the snap counts were 52 for Jermichael Finley, 26 for Tom Crabtree and 20 for D.J. Williams. Jones forgot all about a 25-yard drop early in the third quarter when the game was on the line. He started the decisive 80-yard drive by making a similar kind of catch (16 yards) that he had dropped. Then, when without benefit of a double move, Jones ran right by Houston on the 40-yard take-off that set up Finley's 4-yard TD. Playing on a bad knee, Finley came up big on third down and showed tremendous hustle chasing down Smith on his 30-yard interception return. When D-coordinator Gunther Cunningham "zero" blitzed for the only time all day, Driver made him pay by destroying the lead-footed Harris one-on-one for a 35-yard TD.

OFFENSIVE LINE (4)

McCarthy's decision to start Clifton in two weeks is based on what might become, not what was Sunday. In 25 snaps, Clifton gave up 3½ pressures and one "bad" run to DE Kyle Vanden Bosch. After switching sides when Clifton took a seat, Marshall Newhouse played the last 48 snaps at LT and gave up 1½ presses and two "bad" runs to Vanden Bosch. Now Clifton will have two full weeks to solidify his game. Clifton didn't play strong and he didn't look particularly nimble. Newhouse didn't help his cause with a pair of penalties. T.J. Lang handled the tough in-game transition from LG to RT, neutralizing DE Cliff Avril over the last 2½ quarters. Newhouse kept Avril at bay in the early going. On the inside, Josh Sitton played one of his better games of the season. Other than the 1½ pressures late in the second quarter, Sitton contained Ndamukong Suh. He's big enough and strong enough to muscle Suh. When Suh tried bull-rushing, Sitton would give some ground but never enough to collapse the pocket. If Sitton hadn't missed MLB Stephen Tulloch on a screen, Brandon Saine would have gone a long way. The Lions probably should have put Suh over Evan Dietrich-Smith, who played the last 48 snaps at LG. He overpowered EDS for a sack in 2.6 seconds but seldom played over him again on passing downs. EDS did get some good movement in the run game. A holding penalty downfield saved Scott Wells from being charged with a rare sack. Otherwise, he was outstanding again. Wells almost never gets shoved back anymore, on run or pass.

QUARTERBACKS (5)

Matt Flynn didn't stand out in August or in a few mop-up stints. There was little to foreshadow his record-bashing outburst. Playing the first half in no-huddle was a great idea. He just has an excellent feel for it. McCarthy's order of substitution was limited by having just three WRs, but he also seemed to scale back some of his motions and shifting in the second half. That probably helped Flynn, too. Flynn was in total control. He ran an organized huddle. He was in command of the checks and protections. When the ball needed to come out, he got it out. On a blustery day, he demonstrated more than enough arm strength. His hard count was effective. He did have four to six shaky throws. Smith's interception on the slant to Nelson was his fault, and he got lucky when McDonald dropped his forced pass with 1:50 left. Flynn hung tough in the pocket despite three sacks and seven knockdowns. He never took the easy out by bolting prematurely and running. He threw two on-target deep balls for TDs. His statistics were helped when Grant and Driver combined for 109 after-catch yards on two passes. Flynn has kept improving each and every season.

RUNNING BACKS (3½)

Other than one game, Ryan Grant has been present and accounted for one year after suffering a serious ankle injury. On the other hand, James Starks has been able to carry just 13 times in the last six games. McCarthy saw to it that Grant would be ready in two weeks, giving him five snaps in the second half after a 28-snap first half. Grant missed a read or two in the first half. He also drew an unsportsmanlike conduct penalty, perhaps because he used the ball as a prop on his "Snow Angel" in the end zone. On the screen pass, he brush-blocked blitzing LB DeAndre Levy, turned quickly around, outran SS Amari Spivey and Avril to the break point and was off. He also ran his feet finishing a few runs. John Kuhn (31) and Saine (24) were adequate in the second half.

DEFENSIVE LINE (1 ½)

After a lousy showing against Chicago, the unit regained a measure of self-respect by limiting backup RBs Kevin Smith and Maurice to 48 yards in 13 carries (3.7). B.J. Raji (52 out of 80 snaps) did a better job using up two blockers, keeping them off the LBs. The biggest difference, however, was the return of Ryan Pickett (36) from a two-week concussion. He used to get knocked off the ball in the second halves of games when his stamina broke down. Now that he's in better shape, there is little evidence of him being buckled. The lone pressures came on bull rushes by Pickett and C.J. Wilson (34) against C Dominic Raiola. Because Dom Capers didn't play a single snap of 3-4, Howard Green probably didn't need a shower after seeing just one snap in goal-line. Jarius Wynn (17) and Mike Neal (13) generally were subbed in passing situations. Wynn gave up his second TD pass of the season when he drifted on a zone drop. Capers dropped D-linemen half a dozen times, maybe figuring that their rush is so negligible he might as well try to get something out of them in coverage.

LINEBACKERS (½)

Matthew Stafford could have established squatter's rights in the pocket. On the inside, Desmond Bishop and A.J. Hawk each rushed 14 times. Bishop also put his hand down from DE four times in nickel. Each had one pressure. On the outside, McCarthy and Capers are grasping at straws. Without Matthews, Brad Jones (35) and Vic So'oto (46) traded off on the left side, with Frank Zombo (39) and Erik Walden (41) splitting time on the right. Rookie Jamari Lattimore didn't get a snap. The collective rush of the OLBs was a sack apiece for So'oto and Jones against RT Gosder Cherilus and a hurry by Jones on a nifty spin move on Cherilus. That was it even though Stafford was in passing mode 61 times. On Thanksgiving, Walden gave LT Jeff Backus fits. This time, the closest he came was a ridiculous piling-on penalty when So'oto got his sack. The best bet to start in two weeks would be Jones. He showed some of his natural leverage at the point and also got off a couple of blocks. It can't be said that Jones is good in coverage, but he changes directions better than So'oto and probably is more fluid than Zombo, too. So'oto relies on brute force, which he displayed ripping the ball away from TE Tony Scheffler on a near-fumble. On one stunt, he ran right over the top of RG Stephen Peterman. But then So'oto's deficiencies in space were exposed by Scheffler on the two-point conversion. D.J. Smith's only action came when Bishop played DE. The best play came when Bishop left the rush, hustled back and stripped Kevin Smith on a check-down.

SECONDARY (1)

Calvin Johnson (244 yards) had the greatest day ever against Green Bay partially because Tramon Williams was asked to cover him man-to-man more than on Thanksgiving, when he limited him to one catch for 5 yards with extensive safety help. Johnson beat Williams at least partially on seven receptions for 155 yards. Williams might not be all that fast on the watch, but his game speed is exceptional and he trusts it implicitly. Against Johnson, he found a faster foe. Not only did Johnson make Williams look bad on a 27-yard fade, he ran away from him a few times on deep crossing routes. Morgan Burnett didn't do Williams any favors by being out of position on some of Johnson's dig routes. Burnett did fill quickly on a few runs and broke up a third-down pass. On his 15-yard return of Smith's fumble, it was surprising that Burnett didn't show more acceleration. That had TD written all over it. There were communication and positioning lapses galore, evidenced by an astounding 12 passes of 20 yards or more. Sam Shields continues to play too passively, and his coverage was so-so. Jarrett Bush played with all-world intensity as the slot fill-in for Woodson. When Nate Burleson faltered on a slant, Bush trusted his eyes, broke hard and picked it off. He also had a chance for a 99-yard TD return but dropped an out cut to Scheffler.

KICKERS (4)

Battling stiff winds that generally blew toward the Green Bay sidelines, Tim Masthay averaged 44 yards (gross), 42 (net) and 4.13 seconds of hang time. His 78-yard free kick was thrown out because official Walt Coleman said the ball wasn't made ready for play. Mason Crosby had five touchbacks on eight kickoffs, averaging 70.4 and 4.09. He hit from 22 yards, then booted a good ball from the 47 straight at the right upright only to watch it blow wide left.

SPECIAL TEAMS (2½)

How rare was it for the Packers to force a turnover on special teams? When Walden stripped Stefan Logan on a KO return and Crosby recovered, it was the Packers' first takeaway since Game 9 last season. Brett Goode's snapping in high winds and punt coverage led by M.D. Jennings and Lattimore were other pluses. The negatives included rampant sloppiness in a return game sorely missing Cobb. Pat Lee's misadventures trying to return the first two kickoffs almost cost the Packers nine points instead of only two. It didn't help Lee's chances to receive another contract. Saine replaced Lee, then bobbled a return. Nelson should have fielded a punt that rolled inside the 5.

OVERALL (4)

From the Jan. 2, 2012, editions of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel