

Rating the Packers: Week 19 vs Giants

Total malfunction at worst time

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

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Green Bay - At the moment of truth, the Green Bay Packers suffered almost a complete breakdown in their 37-20 loss to the New York Giants Sunday in an NFC divisional playoff game at Lambeau Field.

Several thousand New York fans chanted, "Let's go, Gi-ants" in the final minutes as the Packers were knocked out at Lambeau Field for the fourth time in 10 years. Give or take a point, they were a touchdown favorite each time.

The Packers' defense really hasn't been able to stop anybody all season, so the eight missed tackles in the first half alone, even the backbreaking Hail Mary touchdown, shouldn't have been that surprising.

The shocking part was the performance of the offense, from Aaron Rodgers on down.

Rodgers accounted for two of the four turnovers after having had just six in the first 15 games.

Old pros Ryan Grant and John Kuhn also lost fumbles, and a fortuitous replay decision saved Greg Jennings from another. Scott Wells, as reliable as any player on the roster, had not one but two snapping snafus. There were six dropped passes.

Not many teams after 16 games were as healthy as the Packers, either. Their only preferred starter not in uniform was Nick Collins.

But just as they did against the Giants four years and one week ago, the Packers were beaten in almost every department. The stench emanating from this defeat will linger for months and months.

Regarded as a shoo-in for the Associated Press most valuable player award that had a voting deadline of Jan. 2, Rodgers was named star of the week seven times in the Journal Sentinel's "Rating the Packers' series. The record for most star of the week designations in a season was four by Brett Favre in 2001. It originated in 2000.

Other weekly winners were Clay Matthews with three; Jordy Nelson and Wells, two; and Bryan Bulaga, Mason Crosby and Ryan Grant, one.

For the 14th time in the 21-year history of the series, the quarterbacks garnered the highest total of footballs.

The Rodgers-led position finished with 72 footballs, or an average of 4.24 per game. Following, in order, were:

Kickers, 65½ (3.85).

Receivers, 63 (3.71).

Offensive line, 60½ (3.56).

Running backs, 57 (3.35).

Special teams, 51 (3.0).

Linebackers, 50 (2.94).

Defensive line, 39½ (2.32).

Secondary, 39½ (2.32).

Overall, the Packers received 61 footballs, or 3.59 per game. Last year, they averaged 3.65 in 20 games.

Six of the nine position groups improved from last year. The biggest gains were made by the receivers (plus-.66), the quarterbacks (plus-.59) and the kickers (plus-.42). The biggest decline was by the secondary (minus-1.21), the defensive line (minus-1.13) and the linebackers (minus-.61).

Nine five-football performances were awarded. The quarterbacks earned that against New Orleans, Denver, at San Diego and Detroit. The receivers posted five against New Orleans, Denver and Detroit. The kickers had five at Atlanta and at Minnesota.

After receiving five footballs once last year against the Giants, the Packers as a team never got five this season.

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

RECEIVERS (1 football)

Charge Jermichael Finley with just one drop, but there were two others that a more severe grader might have chalked up, too. If Finley hasn't already done so, he really should get his eyes examined. On his longest play, a 19-yard gain off bootleg action, he saw the flight of the ball all the way but still seemed late with his hands and didn't catch it cleanly. He had far too many drops this season. The Giants had no intention of letting Finley beat them. A dozen or more times, they asked DE Jason Pierre-Paul to "mug" Finley before getting into his rush. One time, Finley beseeched the nearest official for a flag after being knocked down. The ref just told him to play on. All the body blows kind of took Finley (48 snaps) out of the game; his run blocking was so-so. Returning after a five-week hiatus because of a sprained knee, Greg Jennings played 40 mediocre snaps before leaving with a rib injury. Jennings had a chance to make it a 20-17 game late in the third quarter with a 17-yard TD but dropped a perfect throw just over the top of FS Antrel Rolle on a wheel route. He got a break from replay on his apparent fumble. The longest completion among Jordy Nelson (65), Donald Driver (42), James Jones (39) and Randall Cobb (18) was a paltry 21 yards. Driver made two tough catches, beating LB Jacquian Williams from the slot for 13 on third and 11 and LB Michael Boley inside for a 16-yard TD.

OFFENSIVE LINE (2 ½)

Of the two gimpy tackles, Bryan Bulaga far outshone Chad Clifton. On the Packers' first offensive play, Bulaga pushed DE Justin Tuck way wide so Ryan Grant could burst for 19. After dealing with Tuck and Osi Umenyiora in the first half, Bulaga got Pierre-Paul in the second half. In all, Bulaga allowed 1½ "bad" runs against linebackers and just one hurry (by Tuck). Clifton started, playing 26 of the 35 snaps in the first half and then only the first nine snaps of the second half. Even though the coaches said he wasn't injured, they had him on a so-called "pitch" count despite the magnitude of the game. If this was Clifton's final game, his memories won't be sweet. The Packers put him down after he failed to work back inside against Umenyiora, who knocked the ball from Rodgers' grasp just as he prepared to hit a wide-open Jennings for a 30-yard TD on a double move. He also gave up a knockdown and three hurries, including two by Pierre-Paul. Clifton fanned on a fumble recovery and then just stood there on a Giants fumble return before being decked by DT Chris Canty. His replacement, Marshall Newhouse, gave up 1½ sacks and another hurry in a 41-snap stint. He was on the ground early, did a lot of grabbing and wasn't firm or aggressive. Scott Wells helped out well against Canty and DT Linval Joseph in protection. He also gave up 2½ pressures, was charged with a "bad" run because of a premature snap and was called for holding and illegal-snap penalties. T.J. Lang and Josh Sitton both did the job.

QUARTERBACKS (2 ½)

It's hardly a coincidence that easily Rodgers' two worst performances occurred in the Packers' two defeats. He was off. Way off. The Packers had to settle for an early FG when Rodgers, on the move, threw errantly to the wide-open Jennings on what usually would have been a 29-yard TD. His timing with Jennings probably was off, too. Coordinator Perry Fewell blitzed on merely 17% of dropbacks, and although the rush picked up later (four sacks, three knockdowns) Rodgers wasn't on the ground until the 4-minute mark of the second quarter. The six dropped passes didn't help Rodgers' disposition one bit. He hurt himself with an uncharacteristically passive showing. For some reason, he made too many safe throws when his nature is to exploit tight windows. Wind and temperature weren't a factor, either. Early in the third quarter, he had a chance to duplicate his unforgettable bullet to Jennings from the No. 3 position on the left that sewed up the Super Bowl. This time, his pass was behind him. His lost fumble was his first since the wild-card playoff game in Philadelphia. Rodgers kept battling to the bitter end. He also showed a lot of guts scrambling and not always sliding among tacklers five times for first downs.

RUNNING BACKS (3)

This unit probably had more awful plays than it had all season. Grant lost a fumble as he fought for extra yards. Just as he was bringing his second arm over the ball, SS Kenny Phillips poked it free. In the first half, John Kuhn had an even more egregious lost fumble. He didn't react to Bulaga in front of him and lost the ball running up his back. Two of the four sacks went to RBs. James Starks, who didn't play until 2½ minutes into the second quarter, got too high against the blitzing Boley, let him get to his chest and then sack Rodgers in 3.2 seconds. Later, Brandon Saine (five snaps) didn't keep his feet moving against Boley and allowed a sack in 3.9 seconds. Grant and Starks, both of whom played 28 snaps, certainly were no slouches carrying the ball. Kuhn (25) carried out his fake beautifully to beat Kiwanuka on a creative new play for an 8-yard TD pass. But the mistakes were killers.

DEFENSIVE LINE (2 ½)

Eli Manning dropped back 36 times. With Howard Green inactive for the first time, the five D-linemen totaled 151 snaps: B.J Raji (53), Ryan Pickett (41), C.J. Wilson (32), Mike Neal (17) and Jarius Wynn (eight). Once again, the paucity of pass rush was overwhelming. The only pressure came when C David Baas let Raji through too early on a screen. Showing fresh legs, Raji destroyed LG Kevin Boothe on the first play of the game and did excellent work preventing blockers from getting up on the LBs. As a rusher, Raji likes to slug away rather than fight to get to the edge on a blocker. Raji's solid performance was marred by his missed tackle of Ahmad Bradshaw on his late 24-yard run. Pickett offered no rush whatsoever but probably was even better than Raji against the run. Not only did he occupy blockers, he kept finding the ball. Wilson was OK, standing square against the run. Neal was the choice over Wynn as the No. 1 nickel rusher alongside Raji. Neal does give effort. He just can't beat anybody.

LINEBACKERS (3 ½)

A.J. Hawk's performance level often is tied to the performance level of the D-line. He struggles to see inside and isn't effective shedding blockers. When teammates keep him free, as they did Sunday, Hawk is capable of being productive. He stepped up into holes, tried to play across the line and made three or four good hits, including a powerful charge on the goal line. Even better was Desmond Bishop. In eight cross blitzes, he had a knockdown that became an interception and another hurry. On his only snap with his hand down as a RE, he beat LT David Diehl outside for another knockdown. He smashed Brandon Jacobs for minus-4 on the goal line and slipped FB Bear Pascoe to stop D.J. Ware for no gain on third and 1. In coverage, he was all over Pascoe to break up three passes. His worst play came when he jumped a receiver running a crossing route to open the middle on Hakeem Nicks' 66-yard TD. Despite the vulnerable RT Kareem McKenzie, the Giants double-teamed Clay Matthews on just 37% of dropbacks and limited him to two pressures. Matthews always hustles as much as anyone on the roster. He also does a lot of guessing, wound up on the ground too much and was out of position on Bradshaw's 24-yard run. At the other outside position, Brad Jones (34), Frank Zombo (20) and Erik Walden (14) rotated. Jones beat Diehl for a sack and a knockdown. He also pulled up on Nicks' long TD assuming Charlie Peprah would make the tackle. When Peprah didn't, Jones accelerated again but couldn't catch up. Giving 100% effort 100% of the time shouldn't be too much for players to provide. But Jones certainly isn't the only one guilty of an occasional "loaf."

SECONDARY (½)

Offering renewed hope for his future, Morgan Burnett was the best player. He made a diving interception off the hash mark, saved a TD pass with a great deflection in zone coverage and made some strong tackles. Nobody else played very well. Of the unit's six missed tackles, three were by Charles Woodson. He couldn't keep up with Victor Cruz in the slot, failed along with Peprah to break up the Hail Mary, blew contain on Jacobs' 14-yard TD run and offered little on five rushes. Woodson couldn't even catch the 271-pound Jacobs as he turned the corner. Fearful of hitch passes to Nicks against a timid cornerback such as Sam Shields, Dom Capers used Jarrett Bush as the nickel back on first and second downs before going back to Shields on third downs. Shields' leverage and technique were poor on Nicks' 29-yard reception along the sideline. On the Hail Mary, Nicks was Bush's man. It was Bush's job either to redirect Nicks at the line or run stride for stride with him to the end zone, where he would vault in front as Woodson and Peprah sandwiched Nicks from behind. Instead, Bush just let Nicks run unimpeded to the corner and wasn't a factor. Neither was Tramon Williams, who should have had better sight on the ball and hustled much harder to get in position to use his 40-inch vertical jump. Williams got worked repeatedly by Cruz. He also was playing much too soft on a third-and-1 completion to Mario Manningham. Several productive hitches went to Nicks against Williams.

KICKERS (3)

Mason Crosby hit from 47 and 35 yards. His surprise onside kickoff had ideal distance but wasn't quite high enough. Still, former Packer S Derrick Martin made a terrific recovery. Crosby mis-hit one of his three kickoffs but still had three touchbacks, averaging 74 yards and 3.36 seconds of hang time. Consistently deadly with Aussie punts, Tim Masthay hit one too well and suffered a touchback. His other punt was pedestrian.

SPECIAL TEAMS (3)

Jones set up T Tony Ugoh. On the Giants' first FG, he slammed inside. On the second, he went outside of Ugoh and blocked Lawrence Tynes' 40-yard attempt. Crosby's expected onside kick escaped the first Giant, but Cruz outmaneuvered Pat Lee and Saine for the recovery. Jones and Bush were effective for the return and coverage units. Cobb showed no signs of his groin injury and had three good returns.

OVERALL (1)

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