

2011 Player Grades: Defense

*By Bob McGinn of the Journal Sentinel
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DEFENSIVE LINE (7)

Howard Green: A year ago, Green played 209 snaps and had 22 tackles and four pressures, including a game-changing knockdown of Ben Roethlisberger in the Super Bowl. This year, he played 230 snaps and had almost exactly the same number of tackles (21) but far fewer pressures (one-half). Recently turned 33, Green's contract is expiring. Although his pass rush wasn't nearly as good, he remained stubborn at the point of attack. He's a better NT than DE. Massive men like Green, especially ones that are such excellent influences on young players, aren't always easy to find. **Grade: D.**

Lawrence Guy: He suffered a concussion on the fifth day of training camp, wasn't allowed to practice again and spent the season on injured reserve. Drafted in the seventh round, he has the height the Packers are seeking at DE. He also has run 40 yards in under 5 seconds. If Guy matures and gets stronger, he'll have a chance. **Grade: Incomplete.**

Mike Neal: Viewed as the logical successor to Cullen Jenkins, Neal hurt his knee Aug. 16 and didn't get back on the field until Game 10. Playing 158 snaps in eight games, he made merely six tackles for the worst tackle-per-snap rate on the unit. As an interior rusher, he just kind of thrashed around. Neal gave good effort but never really made a play. In two seasons, he has played 237 snaps in 10 of a possible 37 games. Ten days ago, D-line coach Mike Trgovac said some in the organization have been talking about giving Neal a shot at OLB next season. Although Neal maintained his weight of 295, he's a committed body builder who probably could drop weight to do it. The Packers would have to determine if he has the athleticism to stand up. **Grade: F.**

Ryan Pickett: When Mike McCarthy kept saying this was Pickett's finest season, he was doing a disservice to his career. True, Pickett was in tip-top shape this year. However, Pickett had more tackles per snap in each of his first five seasons than he did in '11. Remember, this is a former first-round draft choice who once was a legitimate pass rusher. In '06, he totaled seven pressures in 645 snaps, 5½ more than he had in 495 this season. Few are better than Pickett withstanding double-teams inside. He just won't budge. Pickett finished third on the team in tackles for loss with 4½, his best for the Packers. **Grade: B-.**

B.J. Raji: Raji is much better playing 3-technique than NT. Raji and Pickett shifted back and forth between the two positions, but Raji should have had even more snaps outside. At the point, Raji gets washed down more than most gigantic D-tackles. He tends to play too high, and that's when he gets pushed around. Many scouts say Raji doesn't play hard all the time. On some rushes, he's able to get to the edge of his blocker with his explosiveness and strength. Other times, he just stalls out. Raji's number of tackles, tackles for loss and pressures per snap were down appreciably from last year. Highly durable, Raji played 79.8% of the downs. He just didn't play back to his breakthrough form of 2010. **Grade: B-.**

C.J. Wilson: Wilson began the season behind Jarius Wynn but their roles were reversed near midseason. For someone pushing 300 pounds, Wilson isn't a bad athlete. He got a little better at the point of attack but showed modest, if any, improvement as a pass rusher. Playing 34.2% of the downs, Wilson ranked second on the unit in tackles per snap but averaged just one pressure every 113.4 snaps. He's a hardworking, high-character player who isn't as productive as he should be. **Grade: D+.**

Jarius Wynn: He's probably best-suited to play either LE or 3-technique DT in a 4-3 scheme. Wynn needed to bulk up to play DE in the Packers' 3-4, but he remains very ordinary against the run. As a rusher, Wynn had one pressure every 46.7 snaps, the best rate on the D-line but a far cry from Cullen Jenkins' rate of one every 16.1 snaps last season. A willing worker, Wynn needs to get stronger in the upper body and become more physical with his hands. **Grade: D+.**

LINEBACKERS (10)

Desmond Bishop: Bishop, a full-season starter for the first time, had his best year. On paper, Bishop probably shouldn't make as many plays as he does. He isn't big, fast or particularly athletic. He just knows how to find the football. Despite missing three games, Bishop easily led the team in tackles (148) and tied for the team lead in tackles for loss (6½). He also was the most effective blitzing, generating one pressure every 6.85 rushes. Bishop is an old-fashioned head-hunter with a zest for contact. Largely because of A.J. Hawk's liabilities in coverage, Bishop was pressed into extensive coverage responsibilities for which he is ill-suited. Struggling to cover on the perimeter and up the seam, he allowed nine passes of 20 yards or more and 2½ TD passes. He missed 10 tackles, down from 14 a year ago. **Grade: B+.**

Rob Francois: When Hawk went down, Francois played 2½ games at SILB and had two of the linebackers' total of six interceptions. In Detroit, he dropped into a zone, leaped high and picked off Matthew Stafford. Against Oakland, he blanketed TE Kevin Boss in man coverage and made the pick. Later, he forced Raiders FB Marcel Reece to fumble, and Erik Walden ran the recovery back for a TD. At other times, Francois was a step slow in coverage and didn't get off blocks. What he lacks in talent he makes up for with utmost professionalism. **Grade: D+.**

A.J. Hawk: The first of the opponents' 73 passes for 20 yards or more was given up by Hawk on an option route against the Saints' Darren Sproles for 36 yards. Months later, Dom Capers referred to that awful play trying to explain how difficult it was trying to find adequate matchups against some teams. Capers did what he could to hide Hawk in coverage. Still, he gave up five 20+ passes. Against the run, Hawk was a late reactor who never delivered a smashing hit and often took bad angles or was a step slow in pursuit. He missed 15 tackles, six more than in any of his five previous seasons, and had just 1½ for loss. Thirteen players had at least one turnover play but Hawk didn't have any. He did improve in one area, ranking fourth among the blitzers with one pressure every 9.23 snaps. **Grade: D.**

Brad Jones: The undersized Jones performed well as a special-teams player until late December. That's when the coaches became disenchanted with Walden and gave Jones 39 snaps against Detroit and then the start and 34 snaps in the playoffs. Jones didn't disappoint, beating RT Gosder Cherilus for one of two sacks against the Lions and then LT David Diehl for the only sack against the Giants. Jones is undersized, somewhat stiff and not all that fast. He did improve his pass rush, and his leverage at the point always has been pretty good. **Grade: D+.**

Jamari Lattimore: The Packers kept this rookie free agent from Middle Tennessee State because of his special-teams flair and potential as a pass rusher. He beat out draft pick Ricky Elmore because he was faster and more physical. Other than an eight-play stint in Game 15, Lattimore had to be content playing special teams. By the end of the season he was weighing in the high 230s; the Packers hope he can get to 245 by August. He will warrant a long, long look in August. **Grade: D.**

Clay Matthews: Matthews led the team in pressures for the third straight year. He had 53½ compared with 55 in 2010 and 45½ in '09. On individual rushes, he was double-teamed on 44% of passes in his first eight games and 30% in his final eight. He didn't dominate any RT. On 606 total drop-backs, he was singled on 230, doubled on 140, ran stunts on 99 and dropped into coverage on 137. Matthews improved most in coverage, intercepting three passes, allowing one 20+ pass and no TDs. He tied for the team lead in tackles for loss (6½) and missed merely seven tackles. Matthews gives phenomenal effort and has tremendous instincts. At times, he gets overmatched physically and winds up on the ground too often. **Grade: A-.**

D.J. Smith: A sixth-round draft choice from Appalachian State, Smith hadn't played from scrimmage before Bishop's calf injury put him on the field for 3½ games. He was good against the Lions, OK against the Giants, excellent against the Raiders and not very good against the Chiefs. He showed a nose for the ball, hit hard and wasn't bad in coverage. He might be short (5-10½) but he isn't small. He has a chance to be a starter. **Grade: C.**

Vic So'oto: So'oto is a big, powerful man. He ripped a fumble away from Kansas City's Jamaal Charles in August and he almost did it against Detroit's Tony Scheffler. He goes 100 mph. He has a formidable bull-rush. He gets after people. A collegiate DE-DT, So'oto has a lot to learn about playing OLB. In order to move up, he must become more fluid and comfortable in space. **Grade: D.**

Erik Walden: He started the first 15 games opposite Matthews before splitting time in the final two. Walden is a very active player. He moves well laterally and makes a lot of plays in back-side pursuit. At the same time, his instincts appear off. He was fooled routinely on reverses and was hooked too often at the point. Walden can run and gives great effort. He finished with 26½ pressures, second behind Matthews, and missed only six tackles. He will become an unrestricted free agent in March. The Packers could do worse than bringing him back on a one-year deal. **Grade: C-.**

Frank Zombo: A series of injuries restricted Zombo to six games and three pressures a year after he started in the Super Bowl and had 14 pressures in 14 games. Other than durability, Zombo's main problem is his inability to play in space. It's a mystery why that would be because he was an outstanding WR in high school and, in February 2010, ran 4.75 and had a 35-inch vertical jump. He'll get one more shot. **Grade: D.**

SECONDARY (10)

Morgan Burnett: Started every game despite suffering a broken hand Oct. 13. When paired with Nick Collins, he was the strong safety and able to play near the line of scrimmage, which looks to be his strong suit. Given Charlie Peprah's deficiencies in space, Burnett then had to play deep and ended up vacating the middle too much. He was able to recover sometimes because of his speed and proper angles, but the CBs found that they couldn't depend on him. Although Burnett did miss 11 tackles, he was somewhat more physical than a year ago. At this point, Burnett isn't a smart player. As more of an introvert, he needs to play alongside a top-shelf communicator. **Grade: C.**

Jarrett Bush: Nobody practices harder and is more committed to the team than Bush. Every day seems like Super Bowl Sunday for Bush. Once again, he probably was the finest player on special teams. He also was the most physical of the D-backs. He will throw his body around against linemen in the pass rush. He's a fine slot blitzer and an exceptional tackler. Although Bush continually has improved in coverage, he probably always will have weaknesses at the break point and at the ball. For not playing much, he gave up way too many big plays (eight for 20 yards or more, 2½ TD passes). Don't be surprised if another team signs him in March to be its nickel back and special-teams ace. **Grade: C+.**

Nick Collins: When he suffered a season-ending herniated disc tackling Carolina's Jonathan Stewart in Week 2, the defense suffered a grievous loss. Over the years, Collins had grown into an excellent communicator perfectly capable of getting everyone lined up. He underwent a cervical fusion Sept. 29. In March, he will meet with doctors to decide if he should play again. Collins is 28. The Packers aren't optimistic. **Grade: Incomplete.**

Davon House: Missed 2½ of the four exhibition games with hamstring and ankle injuries, became the forgotten man and got into just two games. House showed enough early to draw a bead on the No. 4 CB job but the injuries ruined that. He has ideal size and ease of movement. His forte at this point is bump-and-run coverage. Still, the coaches weren't confident enough in his development to put him on the field. He has the tools. There's just no way of telling if he will ever be physical enough or put it all together. **Grade: Incomplete.**

M.D. Jennings: Some were surprised when this rookie free agent from Arkansas State made the team. That didn't include a scout for another NFC team, who said, "I liked the way he moved. I was hoping they'd cut him, but I knew they wouldn't." Though undersized, Jennings is a tough kid with good ball skills and feel in coverage. His speed is above average, too. Despite being the No. 3 safety for the last 15 games, he never had to play from scrimmage. **Grade: Incomplete.**

Pat Lee: Played a few snaps in the opener but that was about it. He and Bush each had 12 tackles to lead special teams. Limited by speed and quickness, he can cover from the slot but probably not outside. **Grade: D.**

Charlie Peprah: As the replacement for Collins, Peprah made more than his fair share of big plays. He had five interceptions without dropping any and tied for third on the club in turnover plays with six. He missed 12 tackles, four fewer than a year ago, and went a second season without a penalty. On the other hand, Capers had to seek ways to minimize Peprah's exposure against WRs. He was responsible for eight passes of 20 yards or more and 4½ TD passes. Peprah is a good athlete, will hit and knows how to play. He's just small and a step slow. **Grade: C-.**

Sam Shields: Shields regressed in his second season as the nickel back. Time after time he'd lose contact with the receiver because he'd peek into the backfield looking for the interception. If anything, his ability to leverage receivers and use proper technique slipped. Shields was able to outrun some of his mistakes because of that blinding speed. Still, he gave up nine passes of 20 yards or more and 4½ TD passes. Shields also didn't seem the least bit embarrassed about turning down tackles and keeping an arm's length away from piles. Remember, he was a wide receiver at Miami through the 2008 season. Shields is 24. Either he'll become more of a pro or his career will fizzle out. **Grade: C-.**

Tramon Williams: One year after allowing merely six plays of 20 yards or more, Williams gave up 16½. It's the most by a Packers CB since Doug Evans yielded 17½ in '95. He went from perhaps playing as well as any CB in the NFL, a performance that earned him a four-year extension averaging \$8.22 million, to being the weak link of the secondary, at least according to one opposing O-coordinator. Williams took too many chances, bit on double-moves and became an easy mark. He also missed 17 tackles, 10 more than a year ago. He did play with a bum shoulder most of the season. Williams intercepted four passes and dropped four others. **Grade: C+.**

Charles Woodson: Woodson tied for the NFL lead in interceptions with seven and led the team in turnover plays with nine. "Obviously, people don't want to throw at him," an O-coordinator for a Packers foe late in the season said. After he intercepted five in the first seven games, quarterbacks did seem to shy away from Woodson. After giving up 6½ passes of 20 yards or more by midseason, he didn't allow any after that. Woodson did yield a team-high five TD passes. Woodson marches to his own beat, playing hunches that sometimes result in big plays but more often appear to backfire. He wasn't as good getting off blocks from the slot against the run, and his declining athleticism led to a team-high total of 18 missed tackles. He also wasn't nearly as successful as a blitzing and drew seven of the nine penalties called against the secondary. In the next few months, the Packers probably will approach him about a move to safety. **Grade: B.**