

# 2011 Player Grades: Offense

*By Bob McGinn of the Journal Sentinel*

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## WIDE RECEIVERS (6)

**Randall Cobb:** The rookie drafted in the second round emerged as the Packers' best return man since Desmond Howard 15 years ago. Cobb bubbles over with confidence. He hates taking a knee on kickoffs or making a fair catch on punts. He's almost too tough for his size. Cobb displayed a second gear in the open field. He averaged 18.1 snaps from scrimmage behind Donald Driver, playing more and more as the season went on. He led the receivers in average gain after the catch at 7.1 yards. Dropped two of 34 targeted throws. At this point, he looks like an effective slot. Does he have enough to become a starter? That's to be determined. **Grade: B.**

**Donald Driver:** It's possible that he caught the Packers off-guard Monday by declaring that he wants to keep playing. Now they have a decision to make, and it must be handled with sensitivity. Driver deserves royal treatment, but he's also 37 and due to make \$5 million in 2012. He played OK. He's durable. He's willing to take a lick. He still has value as a third-down slot receiver. Still, some defensive coordinators elected to cover him with just a LB or safety, no doubt because he was the lesser threat in their eyes. His average gain after the catch of 3.38 ranked last at the position. **Grade: C+.**

**Greg Jennings:** Coming back from a sprained knee, Jennings was inches from catching three long TDs that probably would have won the Giants game. He's the master of the double move. Smooth route runner makes exact cuts and is all about team. Caught the ball well (five drops) but averaged a career-low 4.04 after the catch. He ranks as one of the very best stylists in the league. **Grade: A.**

**James Jones:** Mildly concerned about Jones' ability to grasp a new system, the Vikings in early August signed former Falcon Michael Jenkins instead. Jones returned with a three-year, \$9.6 million deal and had a typical season, averaging 30.8 snaps and scoring seven TDs. He doesn't run great on the watch but is able to beat press-man coverage down the sideline. Led the unit in drop percentage (six in 57, 10.53%) but also finished second in average yards after the catch (7.0). **Grade: C+.**

**Jordy Nelson:** Late in the year, some teams came to regard Nelson as the team's No. 1 threat. Enjoyed his finest season, tying Jennings for the club-lead in receptions with 71 and surpassing him in yards (1,302). Trimmed his drop total in half (10 to five). Improves each year after the catch; averaged a career-best 5.83 this year. Led club in catches for 20 yards or more with 19, which also was his total in his first three seasons. Unlikely or not, Nelson deserves to rank as one of the NFL's premier deep threats. Unassuming, purposeful and so consistent. **Grade: A.**

**Shaky Smithson:** Hurt a shoulder late in training camp. Surprisingly, the Packers decided to keep him around all year. Doesn't begin to compare to fellow rookies Tori Gurley and Diondre Borel, both of whom will be returning off the practice squad. Better returner than receiver. **Grade: Incomplete.**

## TIGHT ENDS (5)

**Tom Crabtree:** Quick-minded and tough. Always on top of his playbook and tries to finish every block. Played 327 snaps, about the same as last year, and didn't make much impact. On the small side for heavy-duty blocking. So-so receiver. **Grade: D+.**

**Jermichael Finley:** Mike McCarthy asked Finley before the season to try to play every game in his return from knee surgery. Mission accomplished. The results, however, were uneven, to say the least. After dropping seven of 117 throws in his first three seasons, Finley dropped 13 of 103 this year. He dropped way too many in training camp as well. He probably was pressing, perhaps due to his expiring contract. Finley did tie Jennings for second place behind Nelson in 20+ receptions with 13. His mere presence created open areas for teammates. He makes plays in-line, from the slot and out wide. Although Finley played more than twice as many snaps as Crabtree, he had just one "bad" run compared with Crabtree's 4½. Strictly a position blocker, Finley usually stays in front of his man. Finley played more snaps as a TE than WR. Barring an unexpected turn at the negotiating table, the Packers will be using the franchise tag for TEs on Finley. Next year, it will be on Finley to dispel the notion that he's a coach-killer. **Grade: B-**

**Andrew Quarless:** Blew out his knee playing special teams in Game 12 but the medical staff delayed surgery until Jan. 9. Surpassed Crabtree as the club's most powerful blocker at TE. Showed up in August determined to become a better blocker and did something about it. Vows to return in 2012 but might run out of time. Possesses good, not great, hands and pretty good speed. **Grade: C-**

**Ryan Taylor:** Probably had less impact than anticipated on special teams. Didn't make a big play but still finished fifth in tackles (10). The No. 5 TE most of the season, he played the first of his 30 snaps from scrimmage in Game 13. High-energy player will do whatever is asked trying to improve. **Grade: D.**

**D.J. Williams:** Williams (6-2, 245, 4.61) has almost the exact same size and speed as New England's Aaron Hernandez (6-2½, 243, 4.60). Williams was the 141st pick in 2011 and Hernandez was the 113th pick in '10. Hernandez is the kind of player the Packers envisioned when they drafted Williams. He blocked a little better than expected. Next season, he will be asked to emerge as a receiver. **Grade: D.**

## **OFFENSIVE LINE (10)**

**Bryan Bulaga:** His improvement was significant from his rookie season. Bulaga allowed 1½ sacks, 2½ knockdowns and 14 hurries for 18 pressures compared with 33½ pressures in '10. Also, he cut his penalty total from 10 to four and his "bad" runs from 14½ to a team-low six. In fact, Bulaga showed enough athleticism and reliability at RT to suggest he'll be the Packers' LT in '12 and for years to come. He will need strength development. That would help him keep pass rushers away from his body and eliminate some of the catching that he must resort to. His run blocking was solid, too. **Grade: B.**

**Chad Clifton:** Hamstring and back injuries limited Clifton to seven games. With his 36th birthday approaching in June, there's little reason to think the Packers would want him back. His \$5.7 million salary for '12 isn't the main issue, either. It just seems like it's time for both sides to move on. Early in the season, Clifton still showed he could contain top rushers without much help. At this point, he's strictly a finesse player. **Grade: C-**

**Evan Dietrich-Smith:** Having not played any meaningful snaps in his first two seasons, Dietrich-Smith more than proved he belonged on the roster. He played 2½ games at RG, half a game at C and another game at LG. He came off the bench to hold his own against Detroit's Ndamukong Suh and struggled mightily against the Giants before settling in during his final two appearances. He is thick, plays with enough balance and bend and has a level head on his shoulders. **Grade: C-**

**Ray Dominguez:** If he has a future it will be at guard, not RT. He has size, temperament and thinks well on his feet. Now Dominguez has 6½ months to trim down, gain bulk strength and prepare for the second training camp that will determine if he has a future. **Grade: Incomplete.**

**T.J. Lang:** He made a life-altering change in his lifestyle during the off-season, leaving the bar scene behind and focusing on football. After being handed the LG job Aug. 22 over Derek Sherrod, Lang never looked back. Starting every game, he was a clear-cut improvement over departed Daryn Colledge. Lang might be a little stiff and tends to be something of a waist-bender. But he's powerful enough to move people at the line and quick enough to block at the LB level, and he developed into a consistent pass protector. He had more penalties (seven) than anyone on offense. He also allowed 16½ pressures and 11½ bad runs. His ability to play the equivalent of two games at RT without incident really enhanced his value. **Grade: B-.**

**Marshall Newhouse:** He played 692 snaps at LT, 145 at RT and 15 at RG for 76.7% playing time after not playing a down as a rookie. The numbers weren't pretty. The 10½ sacks allowed by Newhouse were part of his total of 41½ pressures, twice as many as anyone else and more than any Packers O-lineman has had in the last 13 years. He also gave up the second-most bad runs with 14½. Still, Newhouse has what every team seeks at tackle: good feet. He's extremely smart but doesn't come across as having all the answers. He needs weight-room work and a little more toughness. It's hard to keep switching sides, but Newhouse did it this year. He'll be fighting for a job at LT or RT. **Grade: C.**

**Derek Sherrod:** A first-round draft choice, Sherrod was miscast early in camp at LG and then had all kinds of problems at LT, his natural position. He was just starting to play on a rotating basis with Newhouse when he suffered a broken tibia and fibula in Game 14. Sherrod finished with 73 snaps at RT, 39 more at LT. Beat for a sack, two knockdowns, four hurries and 3½ bad runs. Also drew two penalties. Because it was a clean fracture, there is optimism he will be ready to play in '12. He needs a ton of technique work along with greater urgency in his approach. He's still a long way away. **Grade: F.**

**Josh Sitton:** He's by far the most robust player on the line. He's big and brawny, mean and enjoys mauling people. At the same time, he's quick enough to get off the double-team and occupy LBs. Even though he played just 15 games compared with 20 last year, his bad run count went from nine to a team-high 17. However, his pressure total did drop from 17 to 10½. There's no question that a knee injury affected his performance most of the season. **Grade: B-.**

**Herb Taylor:** He was signed off the street Dec. 20 to replace Sherrod but never played. Capable of playing four positions. Has a contract for '12. Worth another look. **Grade: Incomplete.**

**Scott Wells:** He wants to be paid like a top-five center. He just made the Pro Bowl for the first time, then tied for fourth in the all-pro voting. The Packers have concerns about his age (31). Whatever their position, the Packers need to get Wells re-signed by mid-March. Wells can be stubborn and a little bit surly. Those also are reasons why he made it as a seventh-round pick. A masterful pass blocker, Wells allowed just one-half sack, giving him 14 in eight years. He allowed the fewest pressures (8½) on the line and was second to Bulaga in bad runs (eight). His non-stop hustle helps create ideal tempo for the offense. It's almost like having another O-line coach on the field. The number of times that bigger opponents toss him around has dwindled almost to zero. **Grade: A-.**

## **QUARTERBACKS (3)**

**Matt Flynn:** Probably will leave as an unrestricted free agent early in the signing period. Three weeks ago, he made himself millions in his record-bashing performance against Detroit. He didn't stand out in August or in a few mop-up stints, but in his first start at Lambeau Field he broke Lynn Dickey's club passing record with 480 yards. In four exhibition campaigns, his passer rating was 86.0, he completed 60% and he was sacked 16 times. Flynn is aware, throws accurately and has enough arm strength. He moves well, commands a huddle and always has been a gamer. **Grade: B.**

**Graham Harrell:** Harrell played 18 series in 5½ quarters of the exhibition season, generating two TDs and three FGs and posting a passer rating of 75.7. In August, Mike McCarthy said Harrell had the potential to be a solid No. 2. The Packers have elevated him from the practice squad to the roster two straight years. **Grade: Incomplete.**

**Aaron Rodgers:** His record passer rating of 122.5 (118.8 counting playoffs) just about says it all. It was almost uncanny what Rodgers saw and how he delivered the ball so quickly and decisively. Even against jailbreaks, he almost always seemed to get the ball out and into someone's hands. He made breathtaking plays with his arm and clutch plays with his feet. He rushed for 257 yards, fourth among QBs behind Cam Newton (706), Tim Tebow (660) and Michael Vick (589). He threw just seven interceptions and lost only one fumble. He put in incredible amounts of study time. He led the team. He diminished fears about his pair of concussions last year. And he made everyone around him better. **Grade: A+.**

## **RUNNING BACKS (5)**

**Ryan Grant:** The Packers never seemed comfortable with the four-year, \$18 million contract they gave Grant during the Brett Favre summer of 2008. Now that the deal is expiring, will they walk away from Grant? Given the uncertain state of the RB corps, the guess is Grant will return with a one-year contract. It took Grant until December to kick it into gear. Before that, it seemed as if his legs might be gone. In several key areas, Grant outperformed James Starks. He had just one-half bad run to Starks' 4½, allowed 1½ pressures to Starks' seven and dropped one pass to Starks' three. Still, the Packers didn't trust Grant on third down, preferring Starks and even John Kuhn. Grant runs tough and makes good reads. He showed against Oakland that he still has a burst, too. **Grade: C.**

**Alex Green:** Green underwent reconstructive knee surgery Nov. 9 and should be good to go by August. He was injured blocking for a KO return in Game 7. He played just seven snaps from scrimmage. Green is another big back with impressive overall ability. Despite a dismal 1.4 average in exhibition games, he did run aggressively between the tackles and caught the ball very well in camp. **Grade: Incomplete.**

**John Kuhn:** He completed his fifth season by losing a fumble and suffering a sprained knee in the playoff game. Kuhn's blocking is average - at best. He was responsible for six bad runs and seven pressures, including two sacks. His value as a blocker comes more in knowing what to do than having the horsepower to get after people. He is a good ball carrier for the FB position but his receiving is limited by catching radius and speed. **Grade: C-.**

**Brandon Saine:** A rookie free agent, Saine was promoted from the practice squad after Green went down. In 75 snaps, he proved to be a smart, well-prepared player with a legitimate future. He has good speed, catches the ball well and runs more recklessly than he did at Ohio State. He proved to be a no-nonsense kind of back, making one cut and digging out what he could. **Grade: D+.**

**James Starks:** Unlike last season, when Starks carried 23, 25 and 22 times in the first three playoff games, he was never the guy in the offense this year. It's like whenever he got to 13 rushes, and he did five times, the coaches decided that was enough. Perhaps as a result, Starks never quite found himself in his second year. Starks made too many mistakes on reads, in pass protection and as a receiver. No one could doubt his physical toughness. He attacks tacklers and blitzing LBs with rare ferocity. But now there are reservations about his ability to play hurt, play off the bench and play on third downs. **Grade: C.**