

# 2011 Team Grades

*By Bob McGinn of the Journal Sentinel  
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## **PASS OFFENSE (A+)**

Few, if any, have ever played quarterback better than Aaron Rodgers in 2011. His passer rating of 122.5 broke Peyton Manning's record (121.1). His mark was 11.9 points higher than that of Drew Brees, who was second. The Packers ranked third in yards per game (307.8), but that number would have been much higher if they hadn't entered the fourth quarter ahead in 14 of Rodgers' 15 starts. Just 19.4% of his 4,643 yards came in the fourth quarter. His only lost fumble occurred in the playoffs. After surpassing a rating of 100 in 12 straight games, he slipped below 100 three times in his last four starts. After a 78.5 downer in the playoffs, his 16-game mark was 118.8. Rodgers' corps of five WRs played almost as well as he did. The group combined for 38 TDs, 11 more than any other NFL group. Jordy Nelson led with 15, third-most in the league. He also caught 10 of the club's 20 passes for more than 35 yards. Opponents rushed five or more on just 23.7% of drop-backs, partly because Rodgers' rating against the blitz (131.4, according to STATS) far and away led the league. Ranked 22nd in sack percentage, the Packers added to their total of 41 with four more in the playoffs. That makes 147 sacks in three years. Marshall Newhouse gave up 10½ sacks. There also were 45 dropped passes, including 13 by Jermichael Finley. That's the most by a player in Green Bay since Antonio Freeman also had 13 in 1995. Probably the signature moment came in New York when the Packers drove 68 yards in 58 seconds in the final minute to beat the Giants, 38-35. Matt Flynn, whose 480 yards broke Lynn Dickey's team record, basically duplicated the feat in the finale against Detroit.

## **RUSH OFFENSE (C-)**

Mike McCarthy oversaw an offense that had a fewer percentage of running plays (39.4%) than ever before. That was down from 42.4% in '10 and the Packers' lowest mark since '05. After reaching the 100-yard mark in the first four games, the Packers reached it just four more times in the last 13. In all, they averaged just 97.4 to rank 27th, their worst finish since '05. The average per rush of 3.94 checked in 26th. No back had a 100-yard day. The high-water mark was a 4-minute drill in Minnesota led by James Starks (6 for 55) in which the Packers killed the clock in a six-point victory. When healthy, Ryan Grant started every game except one even though Starks (458) played more snaps than Grant (368). After gaining 316 yards and averaging merely 3.44 in his first 11 games, Grant came on to gain 276 and average 5.52 in his last five. Bedeviled by an ankle injury, Starks was inactive for three of the last seven games and had only 19 carries in the other four. Other than Detroit, every team had a leading rusher with more yards than Green Bay. Starks led with 578, ranking 38th, and Grant was 43rd with 559. After not losing a single fumble on a rush in 2009 and '10, the unit lost three. The killer was the bobble by John Kuhn when he ran into the back of his own blocker in the playoffs. McCarthy rushed on just seven of 17 third-and-1 plays, converting four. The percentage of "bad" runs was 24.4%, down from 26.8% a year ago.

## **PASS DEFENSE (D)**

Probably the leading indicator of pass defense is average gain per pass allowed (net yards divided by attempts and sacks). One year after ranking third, the Packers crashed to 32nd. Their yield of 4,796 yards broke by 255 yards the NFL record set by Atlanta in 1995. At the same time, the Packers led the league in interceptions with 31, eight more than anyone else and the most in Green Bay since 1955. Charles Woodson shared the NFL lead in picks with seven. The Packers returned four for TDs, all 30 yards or more. Erik Walden also brought back a fumbled reception for a fifth TD return. Because of interceptions, the Packers were able to tie for ninth in opponent's passer rating (80.9). According to STATS, the Packers blitzed more than any team other than New Orleans. Opponents had a passer rating of 66.04 against the blitz and 94.3 with no blitz, according to STATS. Desmond Bishop was the most effective blitzer with one pressure every 6.85 snaps. The top rusher, Clay Matthews, tied for 48th in sacks with six. The only strip-sack was by Matthews in the first Giants game. Detroit's Calvin Johnson exploded for 244 yards in Game 16, breaking the record against Green Bay that had stood for 52 years. In all, 11 receivers had 100-yard games, the most against the Packers since '95. The Packers had just 18 defensive penalties, fewest in the NFL. Green Bay ranked 26th in third-down defense, 20th in red-zone defense. Foes completed an astonishing 73 passes for 20 yards or more.

## **RUSH DEFENSE (D+)**

After slamming the door on Chicago's Matt Forte (9-2) in Game 3, the Packers led the NFL in rushing yards allowed per game (55). Then it all changed. In the final 14 games, opponents averaged 122.8 per game and 4.83 per carry. It got so bad that nobodies Kahlil Bell and Armando Allen, the Bears' No. 3 and No. 4 RBs, spearheaded a 199-yard outburst in Game 15. Green Bay finished 14th in yards allowed (111.8), a mark helped immensely by the fact that most teams were behind and had no choice other than to throw. Only four defenses faced fewer rushes than Green Bay's 383. The Packers' yield of 4.67 per rush ranked 26th. The run defense reached its nadir Dec. 18 when the Chiefs ran out the clock rushing. Ryan Pickett and Bishop made the Packers competitive against the tackle-to-tackle run game. More damage was done on misdirection plays, especially reverses around the right side of the defense. After forcing six rushers to lose fumbles in '10, the Packers didn't force any in '11. The Packers were a terrible defense on first down, giving up 6.82 per play to rank ahead of only New England. Bishop led with 148 tackles, 36 more than any of his teammates. There were 140 missed tackles, 33 more than in '09 when it also was a 17-game season. After allowing just three 100-yard rushers in the previous 34 games, the Packers allowed four: Willis McGahee (103), Adrian Peterson (175), LeGarrette Blount (107) and Bell (121). Eleven runs were worth more than 20 yards.

## **SPECIAL TEAMS (B+)**

In a 10-category statistical comparison of special teams the Packers tied for seventh, their best finish since 2006. Last year, they tied for 29th. The resurgence could be attributed mostly to three players: Randall Cobb, Mason Crosby and Tim Masthay. Cobb ranked second in kickoff-return average at 27.7, the highest finish for a Packer since Robert Brooks led the NFL in '93 (26.6). Moreover, Cobb tied for seventh in punt-return average at 11.3, the Packers' best finish since Desmond Howard was No. 1 in '96 (15.1). Cobb opened with a 108-yard KR against the Saints, breaking Al Carmichael's club record of 106 that had stood for 54 years. He also opened a rout of Minnesota with an 80-yard PR. In the one game Cobb didn't play (Game 16 against the Lions), his replacements almost lost the game. Cobb did lose three fumbles, leading to the club's worst turnover differential on special teams (minus-2) since '05. The lone takeaway was Erik Walden's strip of Detroit's Stefan Logan. Crosby's finest season included his first game-winner in four years (31 yards) against the Giants. Masthay's net punting average of 38.6 was the best by a Packer since Jerry Norton's 39.2 in '63. Coach Shawn Slocum's units were penalized just 10 times, the Packers' lowest total since '91. Two years ago, they had 32. The best players probably were Jarrett Bush, Brad Jones and Pat Lee. The punt-coverage team (ranked 28th) was a problem. There were 37 missed tackles, a decrease from the last two seasons.

## **PERSONNEL MOVES (C+)**

After making the decision to let DE Cullen Jenkins walk in unrestricted free agency, GM Ted Thompson failed to replace him. He also never satisfactorily addressed the outside linebacker berth opposite Clay Matthews. Thus, the Packers' pass rush never materialized and was a key culprit in the loss to the Giants. Jenkins might have been the fourth most valuable player on the Eagles' defense. Meanwhile, ILB Nick Barnett was cut July 29, four months after the Packers resigned A.J. Hawk for \$6.75 million per year. Like Jenkins, Barnett played all 16 games and probably was the Bills' fourth-best player on defense. Barnett is and probably always was a better player than Hawk. Thompson did make a wise move letting go of Daryn Colledge, who was replaced more than adequately. The re-signings of Jordy Nelson (to a bargain-basement contract), Josh Sitton, Mason Crosby and James Jones all worked out. For the second straight year, Thompson didn't sign an unrestricted free agent. In fact, just two of the 39 players (T Herb Taylor, LB K.C. Asiodu) signed in the last 12 months didn't come straight from the Packers' practice squad or right off the college campus. Trading down three times, Thompson's draft included Randall Cobb, the return-game savior. Five rookie free agents were on the final 53. The depth of Thompson's roster really paid off in the second half when injuries struck. VP Russ Ball proactively bumped the salaries of practice-squad WRs Tori Gurley and Diondre Borel on Dec. 12, helping persuade them to turn down offers and stay in Green Bay.

## **COACHING (B+)**

Mike McCarthy's secret weapon - quarterback "school" and his rigorous off-season program - was lost through the lockout. Undaunted, McCarthy found just the right touch to keep an elite team on track. The Packers joined the Denver Broncos of 1998 as the only defending Super Bowl champion to start the next season 13-0. McCarthy kept individualism in check, made sure the team stayed fresh and didn't let much slide. The Packers finished plus-24 in turnover differential, a tribute to McCarthy's single-minded pursuit of ball security and takeaways. That tied for the second-best mark in club history. The 14 giveaways were the fewest in team annals. After leading the NFL in penalties and penalty yardage from 2007-'09, the Packers improved on third-place finishes in '10 by tying for first in fewest penalties (76) and ranking second in yards (591). His fast-paced system of substitution and understated play-calling helped the Packers lead the NFL in scoring (560) for the first time since '96. He also used the no-huddle offense more than ever, giving Aaron Rodgers even wider freedom at the line. Shifting Edgar Bennett and promoting Jerry Fontenot more than made up for the departure of WR coach Jimmy Robinson to Dallas. McCarthy finished 6-4 in replay challenges. McCarthy's defense, coordinated by Dom Capers, had an awful year. Basically, nothing worked. Capers and a top-notch group of assistants got embarrassed. McCarthy's first drives resulted in 62 points (and one three-and-out) in 17 games; his first drives of the second half produced 55 points (four three-and-outs).

## **OVERALL (B+)**

The 15 victories were two more than the franchise ever had in a regular season. The Packers became one of just six teams to win at least 15 games. Their 19-game winning streak over two seasons was the second-longest in NFL history behind New England (21, 2003-'04). The Packers scored 560 points, second-most ever behind the '07 Patriots (589). They also posted a point-differential of plus-201, second to the Saints (plus-208). They won their first NFC North Division title in four years, clinching it with four games to go. And, in Game 15, they wrapped up home-field advantage for the first time since 1996. For the first time in the 45-year history of divisional play, the Packers finished unbeaten (6-0). The Packers battled through their fair share of injuries; 11 starters, counting DE Mike Neal as a starter, missed a total of 54 games. The schedule, which ranked as the fifth-easiest (117-239, .457), included six games against playoff foes. A 14-point favorite in Kansas City, they lost for the first time in 364 days. Four weeks later, the Packers were healthy, rested and home against the Giants in their playoff opener. Favored by 7½ points, they turned the ball over four times and went down hard, 37-20, for their first loss by more than six points since mid-2009. Thus, Green Bay became just the fourth No. 1-seeded team in the NFC in 22 years of playoff seeding to be KO'd in its first game. It was the fourth playoff loss at home in a decade.