

Grading The Green Bay Packers Defense:

Green Bay Press Gazette • January 22, 2012

Defensive Line

B.J. Raji

Named to his first Pro Bowl even though he played better in 2010, when he led Packers defensive linemen in tackles and was third on the team with 6½ sacks. Perhaps got too caught up in pass rushing early in 2011, when his snap count was at a career-high. Had three sacks and just 6½ combined quarterback knockdowns and hurries. Split time between nose tackle and end and played extensively in the nickel. Finished 10th on the team in tackles with 43 (19 solo) and second among the linemen. **Grade: B-**

Ryan Pickett

The team's best player against the run. Led the linemen in tackles with 54 (24 solo) even though a concussion kept him out against Kansas City (Dec. 18) and Chicago (Dec. 25). Absence was felt as the Chiefs and Bears ran for 139 and 199 yards, respectively. Split time with Raji at end and nose and played some in nickel, although didn't have a sack, quarterback knockdown or hurry. **Grade: C+**

C.J. Wilson

Base end who played more against the run but did see some nickel snaps. Started the season slow but by season's end had become a serviceable run stopper. Needs to make significant gains in all areas of his game.

Grade: D+

Howard Green

Run stopper who didn't have the kind of impact he did in 2010, when he joined the team in midseason. Saw limited playing time, especially early in the season, in part because of how much nickel was played and registered just 21 tackles (six solos) all season. Was inactive for the playoff game in favor of Wilson. **Grade: D**

Jarius Wynn

Undersized end started out hot with three sacks after three games, including two at Chicago (Sept. 27), but quickly disappeared. Suited to play in passing situations, finished tied for fifth on the team with 7½ combined quarterback knockdowns and hurries. **Grade: D**

Mike Neal

Never completely healthy after a training camp knee injury but at least fought through and came back after a September surgery. Still was a nonfactor, failing to record any stats in five of his eight appearances, including playoffs. Offered almost no pass rush — had one hurry — despite getting most of his snaps in nickel situations. Former second-round pick has been a major disappointment after two injury-filled seasons. **Grade: D-**

Lawrence Guy

Rookie seventh-round draft pick sustained a concussion early in camp and spent the season on injured reserve. Too raw to have made the team but could've used a year on the practice squad to refine his technique.

Grade: Incomplete

Inside Linebackers

Desmond Bishop

Was hitting his stride, especially as a blitzer, when a calf injury at Detroit (Nov. 24) knocked him out for three games. Finished second on the team with five sacks and third in knockdowns and hurries (11) despite limited rush opportunities. Led the team with 142 tackles (109 solos) and had two forced fumbles. Struggled in coverage, mostly against tight ends, allowing three touchdowns and completions on 77.6 percent of the times he was thrown at. **Grade: C+**

A.J. Hawk

Signed a five-year, \$33.75 million contract that included an \$8 million signing bonus and a \$1.8 million roster bonus the first year, then didn't come close to matching his play from 2010 despite finishing third on the team with 104 tackles (73 solos) and recording 1½ sacks. Had 6½ knockdowns and hurries. Dropped out of the game at Detroit with a calf injury and missed the following game at New York. Also struggled in coverage, allowing two touchdowns and completions at a rate of 59 percent. Base salary jumps from \$1.15 million this season to \$4.4 million in 2012. **Grade: C-**

D.J. Smith

Rookie sixth-round pick played in Bishop's spot for 3½ games and had 25 tackles and an interception in that stretch. Played bigger than his 5-foot-11, 239-pound stature. Also was one of the top special teams performers, tying for second on the team with 11 tackles. **Grade: C-**

Robert Francois

Filled in during Hawk's absence and had interceptions in both games after going through a five-game inactive stretch. **Grade: D+**

Outside Linebackers

Clay Matthews

Led the team and finished fourth in the NFL in combined quarterback knockdowns and hurries with 38½ but had only six sacks after recording 23½ in his first two regular seasons combined. Regularly faced double teams yet was the only player to consistently get any pressure on the quarterback. Played the run better than in his first two seasons. Also forced three fumbles and had three interceptions despite allowing completions 50 percent of the time. Played in all but the regular-season finale despite glute and hamstring tightness in camp, a quad injury that kept him out of practice for several weeks, a bruised knee and a sprained ankle. **Grade: B**

Erik Walden

Played perhaps his best game at Detroit on Thanksgiving with three quarterback hits, only hours before he was arrested after an incident involving his live-in girlfriend. Finished second on the team with 16½ knockdowns and hurries, but that included only three sacks. Didn't allow a touchdown but gave up completions 73.3 percent of the time. Struggled to contain against the run and saw snaps decrease late in the season before losing his starting job. **Grade: D+**

Brad Jones

One of the top cover guys on special teams (tied for second with 11 tackles) but barely played on defense until the final two games. Started in the regular-season finale — his first start in more than a year — and had a sack. Had another in the playoff game but still might not have shown enough to go into next season as the starter. **Grade: D+**

Frank Zombo

Battled injuries all season — broken scapula in the preseason, knee and hamstring in the regular season — that limited him to just six games, including playoffs. Played assignment sure if not impactful, recording just one sack from a position largely responsible for rushing. Also gave up completions all four times he was targeted.

Grade: D

Vic So'oto

Undrafted rookie showed pass-rush potential in the preseason but an early-season back injury and an inability to move up the special teams depth chart cost him playing time. Even when healthy, rarely got the chance to show what he could do but did have a sack in the season finale before being inactive for the playoff game. **Grade: D**

Jamari Lattimore

Undrafted rookie started out as a special teams contributor but then was inactive seven times in a nine-game stretch. Played extensively on defense in only one game, Oakland (Dec. 11), when he got 18 snaps but wasn't a factor. **Grade: D**

Cornerbacks

Charles Woodson

Showed signs of age, mostly by missing tackles and ending up on the ground more than in the past, but didn't give up many explosive plays. Numbers suggest he covered better in 2011 — when he allowed completions 50.7 percent of the time, four touchdowns and 451 yards compared to 52.6 percent, four touchdowns and 496 in 2010 — but the difference was negligible. Biggest impact again was on takeaways. Tied for the league lead with seven interceptions and made his eighth Pro Bowl (fourth straight). Also had two sacks, ranked fourth on the team with eight knockdowns and hurries. Cut penalties in half from the previous year with six (two pass interference, one unnecessary roughness, one roughing the quarterback, one hold, one illegal contact). Move to safety is possible, although he wouldn't be able to gamble as much as he does at corner. **Grade: B**

Tramon Williams

Didn't play anywhere near the level he did in 2010, when he was one of the best shutdown corners in the league. Allowed completions 56.5 percent of the times he was targeted, five touchdowns and a whopping 1,120 yards. Figures in 2010 were 43.5 percent, three touchdowns and 533 yards. Sustained a shoulder injury in the opener. Missed only one game but was impacted by the injury for weeks, maybe even months. Best game was at Detroit (Nov. 24), where he nearly shut out Calvin Johnson. Had four interceptions but regressed as a tackler, perhaps because of the shoulder. Had only one penalty (pass interference). **Grade: C**

Sam Shields

The primary nickel corner for the second straight season. Regressed after a solid rookie season. Coverage numbers (55.1 percent, five touchdowns, 598 yards) were worse than the previous year (50.0 percent, three touchdowns, 402) but tackling was much worse. Almost refused to play physical. Didn't commit a penalty. Saw playing time reduced. **Grade: D+**

Jarrett Bush

Still more of a special teams player, but played OK on defense. Allowed completions at a rate of 44.0 percent and gave up two touchdowns. Played extensively in the playoff game as a third cornerback ahead of Shields on early downs. Better as a blitzer (2½ knockdowns, including 1½ sacks). Perhaps the team's most complete special teams player as a blocker and cover man. Tied for the team lead with 12 special teams tackles. More importantly, had just one special teams penalty (holding). Could be attractive to some teams in free agency.

Grade: C+

Pat Lee

Four years in, hasn't shown he can play on defense but was a top special teams player, tying Bush with 12 tackles. Had one of the nine special teams penalties when he got ejected at Detroit for fighting. **Grade: D+**

Davon House

Rookie fourth-round pick missed more than two weeks of training camp with a hamstring injury and never seemed to catch up. Was active for four games but saw action in only two, on special teams. Strong in the mold of Al Harris. Has good length, speed and size but needs seasoning. **Grade: Incomplete**

Safeties

Morgan Burnett

Had two interceptions and a sack in the first three games but then struggled when he broke his right hand in practice the week of the St. Louis game (Oct. 16). Played the next five games with a club cast and his tackling suffered. Allowed completions at a rate of 55.8 percent and gave up five touchdowns. Has playmaking potential but needs to become more assignment sure. Was lost at times without a capable running mate. **Grade: D+**

Charlie Peprah

Became a fill-in starter for the second straight season. Played solid in place of Burnett in 2010 but was a major liability in place of Nick Collins for the final 15 games, including playoffs, of 2011. Allowed completions at a rate of 59.3 percent and yielded five touchdowns after giving up only one touchdown and 47.7 percent completions the previous year. Major gaffes on the final two plays of the first half in the playoff game cost the Packers a touchdown on a Hail Mary pass. Intelligence wasn't enough to mask athletic limitations. **Grade: D-**

M.D. Jennings

Undrafted rookie whose athletic ability stood out on special teams, where he was one of the top blockers and had nine tackles, but did not play on defense. Has good coverage ability and the toughness to perhaps become a fine safety one day. **Grade: D+**

Nick Collins

Three-time Pro Bowler sustained a season-ending neck injury in the second game and won't know until March at the earliest whether he'll play again. Defense never recovered from his absence. Poor safety play was one of the reasons the Packers finished last in yards and passing yards. **Grade: Incomplete**