

# Rating the Packers: Week 4 vs Saints

## Offense does just enough

*By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*

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**Green Bay** - It's hard to beat the New Orleans Saints when Drew Brees is in rhythm and not forcing the issue.

The job becomes even more difficult when your backup quarterback fumbles the ball away going in and seven members of an officiating crew don't see a lost fumble on a fourth-quarter kickoff return by Darren Sproles that might have eliminated the tension at the end.

Here is a rating of the Green Bay Packers in their 28-27 victory over the Saints on Sunday at Lambeau Field. Their 1 to 5 football totals are in parentheses:

### RECEIVERS (4)

It looked like a different set of wide receivers compared with the first three games. The releases were cleaner. The blocks were sustained longer, especially on bubble screens. And after the catch movement was north and south, not east and west. Handicapped by a wretched pass rush and pedestrian coverage at the LB and DB levels, Saints defensive coordinator Steve Spagnuolo didn't blitz much (26.7%) and played his safeties deep. The Packers didn't have a gain longer than 20 yards despite gaining 421 in all. It was left to the receivers to gain separation, run hard after the catch and move the chains. James Jones made four terrific plays: breaking off his route to catch a 12-yard TD pass; beating CB Jabari Greer with a lightning-fast inside release for a 14-yard TD even though Greer was lined up inside; beating Greer for 20 on a textbook back-shoulder fade; and making an impossible catch with Greer all over him to close the visitors out. Jordy Nelson, who matched Jones' 61 snaps, did most of his damage against Dunta Robinson, an improving cover corner. Nelson did have two drops, including what should have been a 14-yard TD, but he shouldered past Robinson inside and then barged through nickel back Corey White for the decisive 11-yard TD. When Greg Jennings left after 13 snaps with a recurring groin injury, Randall Cobb looked swift and decisive in 30 snaps and Donald Driver chipped in with 13. Cobb has such quick feet and change of direction, plus he's fearless as a runner. The Saints left the flats open in order to help inside and Jermichael Finley (53) played well breaking tackles by SLB Scott Shanle and others. As a blocker, he doesn't always make good decisions and is ill-equipped to lead through on a MLB such as Curtis Lofton. The Packers activated Tom Crabtree (24) and Ryan Taylor (eight) while deactivating D.J. Williams.

### OFFENSIVE LINE (4 ½)

One week after being charged with five of eight sacks against Seattle, the unit allowed no sacks, 1 ½ knockdowns and one hurry. Not only that but the running backs didn't have a single carry for fewer than 2 yards, something the Packers probably haven't done for more than a decade. Despite battling knee tendinitis, Bryan Bulaga bounced back from his nightmare against the Seahawks with a shutout. He looked extremely focused and took DE Junior Galette, the Saints' best pass rusher, right out of the game. On the other side, Marshall Newhouse took away DE Will Smith's outside rush and stayed in front of him in the run game. T.J. Lang schooled gigantic rookie DT Akiem Hicks. Lang is so physical and just doesn't make mistakes. Josh Sitton was too sound for DT Sedrick Ellis. Jeff Saturday was very good in pass protection and was OK blocking for the run. He just doesn't play with nearly the strength of Lang or Sitton.

## **QUARTERBACKS (4)**

The challenge for Aaron Rodgers was staying patient against Spagnuolo's conservative scheme. In the no-huddle, when he's basically calling the plays himself, Rodgers seemed most confident and effective. The real officials were spotting the ball in timely fashion, and Rodgers was in command at the line. Unlike the last three weeks, he had all day to throw. When that happens, few defensive backfields have a chance, and the Saints were no exception. On the first TD, Rodgers scrambled left, turned his shoulders back square and threw a dart to Jones in the end zone. It was a remarkable display of athleticism. On the second, he bounced on his toes for 5 seconds and then gunned a laser to Jennings in a tiny window. The Packers brought back the shovel pass twice and Rodgers sold it well. While Brees wasn't intercepted, Rodgers was by the outstretched Robinson when he didn't put enough arc on a sideline throw to Nelson. When Rodgers had his right eye gouged by blitzing FS Malcolm Jenkins and sat out a play, Graham Harrell was slow getting out from under Saturday, clipped the center's foot, stumbled, fell, failed getting the handoff to Benson and Jenkins recovered. On the goal line, a QB has to be extra quick getting away from the clump of surging linemen. It almost cost his team the game.

## **RUNNING BACKS (4 ½)**

Cedric Benson gets better every week. The fact that the Packers didn't have a single "bad" run in his 18 rushes is a remarkable achievement. It's also a credit to Benson's ability to read his blockers and, almost like a quarterback, make them look good. On the first play, Lofton showed up right in Benson's face at the line of scrimmage. Had it been one of the team's pedestrian backs since the Ahman Green era, it would have been no gain or a loss. Benson jumped outside, redirected toward the line and barreled ahead for a gain of 2. When DE Cameron Jordan shoved Sitton a few yards into Benson's anticipated course, he skipped around the obstacle and picked up 5. Mike McCarthy has called Benson a natural, and each week that becomes more apparent. He can stretch an outside zone play, press the hole and either fall forward or cut back. He isn't a great receiver, but when a check-down was tipped at the line his hands were good enough to make the play. Benson has workhorse qualities as well, and seemed fine after playing 59 of the 70 snaps. He was so effective that neither Alex Green nor Brandon Saine played from scrimmage, and just six of John Kuhn's 15 snaps came as a one back. Cobb took just two snaps in the backfield.

## **DEFENSIVE LINE (3)**

The Saints aren't a bad ground team, but they went nowhere against an aroused front. Ryan Pickett sat heavy against Pro Bowl RG Jahri Evans in the early going, stuffing him on a tackle for loss. But after Pickett suffered a shoulder injury, he played just 7 snaps in the last 2 ½ quarters. B.J. Raji (55 snaps) had a major size and strength advantage over C Brian de la Puente, and at times controlled him. But in various double-team situations the Saints rode Raji back too many yards. Raji has the power to split the double team. He just doesn't use it enough. C.J. Wilson (27) has been pigeonholed as a base end, and Jerel Worthy (44) is the starter in nickel and dime. But Worthy hasn't had a rush all season as impressive as Wilson's in the fourth quarter when he powered through Pro Bowl LG Ben Grubbs for a sack. Worthy is faster and more athletic than Wilson. The Packers appear to like his quickness running stunts with Clay Matthews and his range containing quarterbacks and the screen game. He just isn't reliable yet in the fundamentals of line play. Mike Daniels, the other rookie, had one hurry in his 13-play stint. Phillip Merling was inactive.

### **LINEBACKERS (3)**

Matthews has been chasing down ball carriers from behind all season just like he did to tackle Pierre Thomas for no gain on third and 1. If offenses don't start accounting for Matthews, he will keep on doing it. Playing all 78 snaps, Matthews again showed incredible energy. The Saints did more things to control him than the 49ers, Bears and Seahawks, and prevented him from dominating their shaky tackles. In turn, Dom Capers used Matthews to rush a season-high six times off the left side not to mention 15 stunts and various surges from the "psycho" package. He posted three hurries and a stunt-sack on which he accelerated right by the athletic Grubbs. Matthews absorbed some frightful body shots from the Saints. Each time, he came back from more. On the other side, Erik Walden had 55 snaps to Nick Perry's 24. After dropping off on a zone blitz, Walden made an awful mistake undercutting a screen, and Sproles was off down the sideline for 20 yards. The all-power game of Perry doesn't include many moves but does add punch to the run defense. A.J. Hawk attacked the run downhill. On the other side, D.J. Smith slipped inside of de la Puente at the second level twice and swooped in to make tackles. Brees got Smith on a 6-yard TD to Sproles and a 23-yard completion to Marques Colston on third and 17 when he didn't get sufficient depth in his zone drop. But Smith got Brees by slicing past three O-linemen to foil a promising throw-back screen, blowing up another screen for minus-4 and breaking up an option route to Sproles with a jarring smash. Smith had 14 of the Packers' 32 individual pressures and didn't register a hurry.

### **SECONDARY (1 ½)**

Tramon Williams performed like a Pro Bowler. He was matched against enormous TE Jimmy Graham on third and goal from the 2. Graham could run a slant, a slant-and-go or a fade. Williams trusted his instincts and preparation, attacked the slant and made a picture-perfect deflection on a bang-bang play. He also had a superb breakup on an inside toss to Lance Moore. His shoulder must be fine, too. Playing the short side with no WR to occupy him, Williams didn't hesitate run supporting into FB Jed Collins, the lead blocker. On the other side, Sam Shields showed why he still isn't over his terrible habit of peeking in the backfield. He didn't respect no-name WR Joseph Morgan and was burned for an 80-yard TD. He compounded his sin by going for the strip and not the tackle at the 16. When matched in the slot for a change against Colston because of motion, Shields didn't stay close enough and the result was a 27-yard completion. Because Casey Hayward was just OK as the dime back, the door could be opened for the return to the field of Davon House. Capers introduced a 4-0-7 package last week so Jerron McMillian could cover Sproles instead of Smith. When the zone rotations were leaky, Capers junked it after about 10 snaps and went back to Smith. McMillian filled hard against the run, as did Charles Woodson. In the box, this was the most physical that Woodson has been since his move to safety. However, he had a bad miss of Graham in the flat and was out of position at times in coverage. Morgan Burnett can be very physical or not physical at all, such as when Colston snatched a 20-yard TD pass over him. The only way Burnett will get that call is by holding his ground, elevating and making an athletic play. Going to the ground as he did will just get you beat.

### **KICKERS (3)**

Mason Crosby kicked off five times, averaging 69 yards and 4.13 seconds of hang time. Tim Masthay punted twice, averaging 41 (gross), 39 (net) and 4.28.

## **SPECIAL TEAMS (4 ½ )**

Kuhn's 5-yard run behind the double-team block by Brett Goode and Brad Jones on Hicks was extraordinary. It gave a possession back to the offense and turned into a TD. The extra effort by Shields on a FG block caused TE David Thomas to hold and take three points away. Daniels made Garrett Hartley's re-kick five yards shorter with an awful encroachment penalty, but Hartley then missed the go-ahead boot from 48. Raji's personal foul for punching LS Justin Drescher was grounds for ejection. Dezman Moses really hustled back to the ball, stripped Sproles and recovered the fumble that was ruled a non-fumble by referee Jeff Triplette. Moses has been a rugged force on teams. Jones, Kuhn and Bush led the impressive containment of Sproles.

## **OVERALL (4)**

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