

Rating the Packers: Week 6 at Texans

Packers finally push someone around

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

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Green Bay - These Green Bay Packers are capable of anything. After all, they were working on a 19-game winning streak just 10 months ago.

Still, the Packers hadn't turned in a great performance since the Detroit and Oakland games late last season. Six weeks into this season, the Packers needed a signature moment to restore their self-esteem and confidence.

Playing as if they were almost mad at the world, the Packers claimed Reliant Stadium for their own Sunday and shellacked the previously unbeaten Houston Texans, 42-24.

Here is a rating of the Packers against the Texans, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

RECEIVERS (4½)

Greg Jennings (groin) and D.J. Williams (hamstring) sat out, and Jermichael Finley (shoulder) was limited to 24 snaps. None of that made any difference. Jordy Nelson played like a true No. 1 WR, imposing his will on a very good cornerback, Johnathan Joseph. James Jones, whose 61 snaps were two more than Nelson's total, has been so determined to get better that now he really is. No more drops for this Jones. Randall Cobb (43) is much too special after the catch to return to his old caddy's job when Jennings returns. Coordinator Wade Phillips threw caution to the wind and went after what had been a slightly off-kilter passing game. He rushed five or more on 50% of dropbacks, the most against Green Bay since New Orleans' Gregg Williams sent 55% in the 2011 opener. Furthermore, his all-out blitz rate was 20%, including seven six-man rushes and just the second seven-man rush the Packers have seen all season. That seven-man gamble on third and 1 turned into a 48-yard TD pass to Tom Crabtree (career-high 46 snaps), who beat FS Glover Quin. After Nelson ran a beautiful up-out-in-out-in route to burn Joseph for an early 41-yard TD, he had Joseph on his heels all day. Jones broke a tackle on the sideline, ran a great double move on a deep overthrow and showed superlative hands on both his TDs. Cobb is learning the subtle art of getting open when Rodgers ventures from the pocket, and like a RB he refuses to go down without a fight. Donald Driver played 16 plays, six more than the debut performance of rookie Jarrett Boykin. Neither saw a pass. Finley aborted one drive with a foolish penalty for offensive pass interference and had one of the four drops; Cobb had two, and Nelson also had one.

OFFENSIVE LINE (4½)

Josh Sitton took on the hottest D-lineman in football and acquitted himself extremely well. DE J.J. Watt was on Sitton's right side of the line for 45 snaps compared to just 13 in the vicinity of T.J. Lang. Watt was at least partially responsible for three of the Packers' 11 "bad" runs, but he beat Lang twice and Bryan Bulaga once, not Sitton. As a rusher, Watt had two sacks, one knockdown and one hurry, but only the knockdown was against Sitton. He's getting back to his 2010 form after knee problems limited his effectiveness a year ago. Bulaga was more than up to the challenge of OLB Brooks Reed, who kept threatening the edge but never successfully turned the corner against him. In most cases, the Packers made sure to have two blockers on Watt. Bulaga worked to finish Watt a few times after Sitton broke off to the LB level. On the down side, Bulaga really had problems blocking the back side on runs in the second half. On the left side, Marshall Newhouse yielded just one hurry to OLB Connor Barwin. It came on an inside move and cost Newhouse a penalty for holding. Otherwise, Barwin kept flying off the corner, and those types of rushers are made to order for the quick-footed left tackle. Because Jeff Saturday was so Watt-conscious, it left Lang one-on-one with Antonio Smith. An excellent interior rusher, Smith was shut out. Lang and Crabtree shared the team lead in "bad" runs with 2½ apiece. It's hard to blame Lang for Watt's second sack because he was blocking it like the run that had been called. Lang pulled six times to the right and once to the left, showed athletic ability and offered promise for a continuance of that run series. Saturday was solid in protection but had 1½ "bad" runs. He doesn't have the strength or suddenness to be a consistent plus in the run game. Backup Evan Dietrich-Smith took four second-half snaps as an extra TE and had a pancake of Watt.

QUARTERBACKS (5)

Aaron Rodgers wasn't especially sharp in his ball placement early and had the overthrow of Jones. After that, he played lights out. Using the no-huddle for most of the first half, he killed a lot of time until safeties Danieal Manning and Quin committed to their coverage with about eight to 10 seconds remaining on the play clock. Then he made checks to the better of two or three runs and the Texans were off-balance, even though the crowd noise was in their favor. Rodgers was so dialed in, he probably didn't even hear the crowd. Besides, the noise machines at practice last week were set to a deafening level. Rodgers was sacked twice, and at least one was his fault. He made excellent decisions in the pocket, didn't bolt prematurely and never came close to an interception. When Phillips sent slot blitzers a few times, Rodgers calmly got the ball out. He hung in against a big hit from the unblocked Reed to find Crabtree for the TD. He threw a few lasers on the move, too. He also ran his first third-and-1 QB sneak since Game 9 last season, converting on second effort. The take-off bomb to Nelson, which became almost a routine completion in the last three years, was the first completed by Rodgers in six games.

RUNNING BACKS (4)

Without injured LB Brian Cushing, Phillips decided to go small with Quin as his replacement in the nickel defense instead of using a backup LB. The Packers attacked Quin in the run game behind Alex Green, who showed considerable talent in a successful first start. In 51 snaps, 17 more than Green had in his first 1½ seasons, he did a professional job. On the first play of the game, he waited for the pulling Lang to arrive and clear the way for a 3-yard gain. When Watt beat Newhouse across his face, Green made a sudden stop as Newhouse fell on top of Watt and then drove ahead for 5 instead of what easily could have been minus-2. The Packers used their backs and TEs to chip on Watt, and Green did his share a few times. More impressively, he stayed frontal and worked to get his hands inside when picking up blitzing LBs. He did give up one knockdown to ILB Bradie James. In comparison, James Starks (eight snaps) used poor technique leaping at a rusher with his shoulder. This was Starks' first contact since Aug. 9, so there's no reason to be overly critical. But one could question his timing, decisions and forcefulness on all five of his carries. He seemed to be running to darkness rather than daylight.

DEFENSIVE LINE (4½)

With ironman B.J. Raji (ankle) sidelined, everyone had to play more. The playing time broke this way: Jerel Worthy (55), C.J. Wilson (36), Ryan Pickett (32), Mike Neal (26) and Mike Daniels (20). When run was expected, it was Wilson, Pickett and Worthy. The first sub line featured Worthy and Neal. Most of Daniels' work came in garbage time. Worthy used a spin move to take down Chicago's Jay Cutler late (4.7 seconds) for his only sack. Thus, his sack in 2.6 seconds on a lightning-quick inside move against RG Antoine Caldwell represented his best rush to date. When Caldwell departed (concussion), rookie RG Ben Jones got blown up by Worthy on a tackle for loss when he tried to pull against him. His discipline against the Texans' cut-back scheme was exemplary until the bitter end. Pickett used his strength/bulk advantage over quick but light C Chris Myers to keep the middle clogged. On the goal line, Pickett has been the first defender off the ball two weeks in a row. He came within an arm length twice of stopping Arian Foster deep in the backfield. Not only did Wilson stay on his feet against cut blockers nipping below his waist, he generally occupied two blockers so A.J. Hawk could clean up. Wilson relies on his power rush, and he constantly pushed blockers back into Matt Schaub. Neal, with one hurry, looked rather common. The overall energy level was high.

LINEBACKERS (4½)

Befitting Duane Brown's status as probably the best LT that Clay Matthews has faced this season, the Texans double-teamed Matthews on just 23.8% of dropbacks, a season-low. Actually, Brown did pass protect pretty well; Matthews beat him for just one pressure. In all, Matthews had a team-high 3½ pressures, but it was his performance early against the run that turned the tide to Green Bay. Matthews always plays as if his hair is on fire, but in the first quarter he was even more intense than that. It's a good bet that being on the same field as Watt gave Matthews another jolt of motivation. They will be prime candidates for NFL defensive player of the year honors. Neither TE Owen Daniels nor Brown could handle him in the run game. He tossed Daniels like he weighed 149 pounds, not 249, and beat Brown with muscle and superior hand usage. However, he needs to get a grip on his offside penalties. On the other side, Erik Walden (56), Dezman Moses (15) and Nick Perry (11 before being injured) didn't have a pressure. The Packers lost D.J. Smith to a season-ending knee injury late in the second quarter and replaced him with Brad Jones. He immediately ran through to spill Foster for minus-1. Jones is leggy and not very thick. It remains to be seen if he can be as effective against the run as Smith and if Hawk can measure up to Smith in what might be an expanded coverage role in sub defenses. Blitzing a club-high nine times, Hawk came through with a sack and a knockdown. On the sack, he took a chance picking up a roughing penalty by not pulling up on a cross blitz and struck it rich when Schaub pulled the ball down. Hawk showed his reckless side crashing over the top of Foster on his knockdown. He also made a stiff hit on the goal line after beating Brown to the spot.

SECONDARY (4½)

Last week, Casey Hayward provided the team's only bright spot against the Colts' Reggie Wayne when he didn't bite on the veteran's first move and, when he cleared the route, got his head back to the ball and attacked it for an interception. The Texans tried the same route with Keshawn Martin. Once again, the rookie didn't fall for the fake and, when he could feel the WR close behind him, turned back for the ball and intercepted. It was like straight out of a how-to-play CB textbook. Hayward isn't real big or overly fast, but as advertised his instincts and ball skills are top of the line. Tramon Williams shadowed Andre Johnson. He caught six passes for 71 yards in their duel, but the long was 15 and that wasn't going to hurt the defense. Neither Williams nor Sam Shields finished plays downfield from a physical standpoint. Shields now has three of the team's five pass-interference penalties; this one was for 26 yards. It is surprising that teams don't throw more at Shields, but he also made a tremendous interception. Charles Woodson and Morgan Burnett were consistent in coverage. At least once a game, Woodson will guess on a route combination and a receiver will be left wide open for about 15-yard gain.

KICKERS (3)

Mason Crosby kicked away six times for averages of 73 (yards) and 3.62 seconds of hang time. Besides the block, Tim Masthay had four-punt averages of 42.8 (gross) and 38 (net). He would have had a fourth punt inside the 20, but a penalty brought back one of his three well-placed Aussie boots.

SPECIAL TEAMS (1)

The blot on the night was the blocked punt by LB Bryan Braman that WR DeVier Posey fell on for a TD. Crabtree, substituting at LG when Jones had to replace the injured Brandon Saine at left wing, didn't fulfill his assignment and Masthay never had a chance. The time from snap to block was an acceptable 2.03 seconds. Cobb had a 46-yard KO return and looked good all night. Rookie T Don Barclay almost got Cobb killed when he missed Braman on a KO. Rob Francois set an early tempo with two hard tackles. Williams hopped on an onside kick.

OVERALL (4½)

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