

Rating the Packers: Week 11 at Lions

Packers prepared for success against the Lions

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

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Green Bay - Both teams played with their safeties deep and four-man rushes, daring each other to run the ball. Incredibly, the Lions never blitzed once all day.

As it usually does in the NFL, the outcome hinged on the team that was better prepared to execute at the end. On both offense and defense, the Packers owned the last 4 minutes, just like they've owned the Lions for years.

Here is a rating of the Packers in their 24-20 victory over the Lions Sunday at Ford Field, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

RECEIVERS (3 ½)

Defensive coordinator Gunther Cunningham adhered to the blueprint for slowing the Packers with a two-safety shell. On early downs, backup safeties Don Carey and Ricardo Silva often were 18 yards deep. Therefore, it became more of a horizontal than vertical passing attack, and for the most part the unit got what was available. Ten of Randall Cobb's 12 targeted passes were as a WR. He caught nine, none for more than 11 yards until the game was on the line. On an audible, Cobb ran a corner route against nickel back Jacob Lacey with Silva in the middle of the field. "If we wanted to be in a coverage on that route, that's the one that we needed to be in," Lions coach Jim Schwartz said Monday. "But we didn't make a play, and they did." It was like Dan Marino just putting it up for the Marks Brothers (Mark Duper, Mark Clayton) in the 1980s with the Miami Dolphins. It was third and 1, and Aaron Rodgers was trying to make sure he didn't overthrow Cobb. He gave him a chance at the ball, and Cobb adjusted better than two defenders and made a fabulous catch. The only dropped pass was by Jordy Nelson; James Jones still doesn't have a drop because Lacey broke up a first-quarter pass to him in the slot. Last December, when the Packers went 68 yards to beat the Giants, 38-35, the drive started when Jermichael Finley beat LB Jacquian Williams in the right flat for 24 yards. This time, Finley gained 40 of the necessary 82 yards on a 1-yard pass in the right flat. He broke three tackles, including one by MLB Stephen Tulloch. Nelson blocked extremely well. So did Cobb, but Jones must improve in this area. Tom Crabtree single-blocked DEs Cliff Avril and Lawrence Jackson on rushes of 7 and 15 yards.

OFFENSIVE LINE (2)

The Lions were 1960s-style static on defense. They lined up their linemen in the same places almost the entire game, didn't blitz once and ran a few stunts. The Packers countered with a customized run-game scheme to account for the Lions' extra-wide DEs. For a team that seldom pulls even a guard, it was refreshing watching LT Marshall Newhouse and RT T.J. Lang on the move. There was more angle blocking this week, too. But scheme can never trump personnel, and on this day the Lions' front four won. On Ndamukong Suh's 27 rushes, just six were against one blocker: four against RG Josh Sitton, two against LG Evan Dietrich-Smith. He faced a double-team by C Jeff Saturday and Sitton nine times, and he ran seven stunts. That left Dietrich-Smith alone against Nick Fairley, and for the most part he was overmatched. Fairley beat Dietrich-Smith for a sack, a knockdown and a hurry. He also shot around Sitton for a sack in 2.9 seconds. Dietrich-Smith allowed two "bad" runs and was penalized twice. Given the opponent, the venue and the fact it was his first start of 2012, Dietrich-Smith deserves a pass. But for this week, at least, it's unclear if he can get the job done against good people. Much the same could be said for Lang, who was just trying to survive. He overset early and got beat inside. Avril registered three pressures against Lang, including a sack in 2.9 around the corner. Changing not only positions but also sides is an enormous adjustment. This isn't going to be easy, but Lang will be helped when the game slows in the weeks ahead. Sitton also allowed three pressures and had one "bad" run. Sitton is an absolute bull of a man, but there were two or three times in which Suh manhandled him. Suh can be a beast. Newhouse pitched a shutout against Kyle Vanden Bosch but had some poor plays against Willie Young, an undersized backup. Like everyone else, Saturday had some problems trying to get Fairley blocked in the run game. He was good in protection.

QUARTERBACKS (4)

It's one thing to win a game without Clay Matthews. It'd probably be another thing to win a game without Aaron Rodgers. Schwartz and Cunningham were betting that Rodgers couldn't play the patient game for 60 minutes. With a limited secondary, it was their only shot. The ferocious nature of the four-man rush complicated Rodgers' day. Mike McCarthy was a model of patience as well, running almost as much as he threw. The Packers scored a TD on their third possession mainly because Rodgers completed third-down passes of 15 and 12 yards just before getting driven into the turf by rushers. Then he spotted the LBs moving toward a screen pass and came off it to Finley for a 20-yard TD even though the rush was in his face again. The Packers didn't do much of anything (seven first downs) in their next six possessions. Rodgers didn't help the cause by underthrowing Cobb and suffering an interception by Lacey. He also fumbled on a sack, his second in three games. Fortunately for Rodgers, Saturday was hustling and made the recovery. But then, with the Lions and the fans thinking they had Rodgers' number, he took his team the distance for the W. The 40-yard pass to Finley required a subtle adjustment at the line. The TD pass came when Rodgers, apparently anticipating a move into the box by FS Don Carey, made a hand signal to the receivers that changed Cobb's assignment to the decisive corner route. When Carey did come down, the Lions' one-high man coverage was ideal for the adjustment. For as good as Rodgers is physically, his mental acuity might be an even greater asset.

RUNNING BACKS (3)

Having played just 38 snaps in his first three games, James Starks was anointed feature back. He had 44 snaps, compared to six for Alex Green (all on third downs) and 16 for John Kuhn (all at FB). Randall Cobb lined up in the backfield five times, and McCarthy used more empty sets (nine) than he has since Game 5. In many ways, this was the same Starks from the 2010 playoffs, when he had 81 carries in four games. Given the punishment that he absorbed and doled out, there's no way you would have wanted to be him Monday morning. Starks averaged merely 3.0 in his 25 carries, but 44 of his 74 yards came after contact. The blocking was hit-or-miss. Often times, he was required to be his own blocker. When WLB DeAndre Levy tried to take on Starks high, he carried him for 5 extra yards. Three times Tulloch hit Starks squarely, and three times Tulloch couldn't finish him alone. When Sitton and Saturday missed blocks on third and 1, Starks made a great read, bounced wide and outran pursuit for the first down. There were two or three runs, however, in which Starks bounced wide left when he probably should have kept on an inside course. On one of Cobb's two rushes, Avril beat Lang inside. Cobb fended off Avril, turned up field and gained 4 instead of losing 2.

DEFENSIVE LINE (4 ½)

Ryan Pickett (38 snaps) is at the absolute top of his game. B.J. Raji (50) wasn't far behind. Both rushed the passer far better than in any game this season. On Casey Hayward's interception, Pickett walked back RG Stephen Peterman into Matthew Stafford's lap. Pickett also set up Morgan Burnett's goal-line sack by beating Peterman inside. Davon House's jump-on sack was the result of another power surge by Pickett against Peterman and Raji's up-field flush against LG Rob Sims. Raji had three pressures in all, including a hurry against C Dominic Raiola that contributed to Stafford overthrowing Calvin Johnson on what should have been a 44-yard TD behind Tramon Williams. Raji was trapped by Peterman on Mikel Leshoure's 10-yard run to set up the Lions' first TD. Dom Capers didn't play a single snap of 3-4 base defense. It's why C.J. Wilson played just 13 snaps. Among Jerel Worthy (18), Mike Neal (13) and Mike Daniels (eight), Daniels easily was most impressive. He allowed Erik Walden to sack Stafford by beating the hapless Peterman. Daniels also executed a textbook fumble recovery.

LINEBACKERS (4)

Dezman Moses, whose 55 snaps were a season-high, left a lasting impression with a series of excellent rushes against LT Jeff Backus. They were matched 17 times before the old pro exited with a hamstring injury. For a free-agent rookie, Moses showed a variety of moves. He showed a spin inside, a dip-and-rip off the edge and very good hand usage. Backus seemed to be caught off balance. When rookie Riley Reiff, Moses' former teammate at Iowa, took over, Moses outplayed him, too. Moses prevented Burnett from being burned by Johnson on another 44-yard bomb by beating TE Brandon Pettigrew and plastering Stafford as he threw. Moses does need work on zone drops and setting the edge. Walden (68) didn't get a lot done against RT Gosder Cherilus and was penalized twice. He stayed at home on a reverse but also blew a coverage that left TE Will Heller alone for 17 yards. Even Frank Zombo (20) beat Reiff for a pressure and played through him for a tackle. Vic So'oto was benched after two snaps when he blew contain enabling Stafford time to find Johnson deep for 53. Both Brad Jones and A.J. Hawk made several good plays. Jones made two tackles in the backfield by beating Sims to the spot. He also had two major penalties. Hawk made a sensational read, beat Sims and smothered a screen for minus-2. He also covered well on short routes to Pettigrew and RB Jaique Bell. When the Lions' ground game gained picked up in the second half, Hawk's inside presence was lacking.

SECONDARY (4 ½)

Hayward (all 72 snaps) said hello to Stafford on the second play, showing up in an unexpected place a la Charles Woodson to break up a short pass to Pettigrew. When his man blocked, Hayward read Stafford's eyes and made his fifth interception. When his man, Mike Thomas, motioned behind the backfield for a reverse, Hayward hustled behind the line, charged up and made a rugged form tackle. At the end, Hayward buzzed the flat to break up a sideline pass. Davon House (72) was all over Titus Young, physically dominating him. Some officiating crews would have flagged his aggressive coverage. Williams (72) flitted around Johnson, generally keeping him in check. His run support, however, leaves much to be desired. Burnett (72) turned an interception into a TD for Johnson and was burned by Ryan Broyles for 27. His tackling was solid. M.D. Jennings (52) left in the fourth quarter because he needed an IV and was replaced by rookie Sean Richardson (15). Jennings' 72-yard interception return for a touchdown was the play of the game. After losing out to Johnson on the bomb, McMillian covered well down the stretch.

KICKERS (1)

There's not much to say about Mason Crosby. After missing two of three FGs, he must regain his exact contact point on the ball and start stroking it down the middle. Tim Masthay punted four times, averaging 44 yards (gross), 44 (net) and 4.35 seconds (hang time).

SPECIAL TEAMS (1 ½)

Cobb showed poor judgment going back to return a KO from the end zone after the ball had bounced off him. Even worse, he put the ball on the ground twice (one was ruled down by contact). It's unacceptable. The Lions really took it to the Packers' return units. The downing of a high punt by Jarrett Bush at the 2 was superb. Jamari Lattimore was the other standout. Richardson should be expected to recover the fumbled punt by Stefan Logan. A poor block by Johnny White almost cost Masthay a blocked punt.

OVERALL (4)

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