

Rating the Packers: Week 13 vs Vikings

Burnett's play put initial hole in Vikings' ship

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

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Green Bay - By halftime, the Green Bay Packers were missing eight preferred starters whereas the Minnesota Vikings were down two.

Two plays into the third quarter, Adrian Peterson had 178 yards in just 15 carries, making him better than even money to break his own National Football League record for single-game rushing yards of 296.

But then Morgan Burnett intercepted Christian Ponder in the end zone. It was the start of a gritty comeback by the Packers that carried them to a critical 23-14 victory Sunday at Lambeau Field.

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

RECEIVERS (4)

Through four games, Greg Jennings had played almost 80% of his 129 snaps from the slot or innermost receiver in three-wide sides. He never looked comfortable and had a long reception of 13 yards. Upon his return Sunday from an abdominal injury, it was clear that Mike McCarthy planned to keep Randall Cobb inside and alternate Jordy Nelson and Jennings at one of two outside berths opposite James Jones. Before Nelson exited with a hamstring injury on the 17th offensive play (his 10th), Jennings had seven snaps and Jones had 16. Jones went on to play all but one of the 82 snaps, Cobb had 57 and Jennings had to play more (54) than the coaches would have liked. Jennings brings a silky-smooth, route-running precision that the unit has lacked. Jones' vertical jump was an ordinary 34 inches at the combine in 2007. His 32-yard TD catch right over the top of CB A.J. Jefferson was remarkable. The snap breakdown at TE was Jermichael Finley (49), Tom Crabtree (33), D.J. Williams (14) and Ryan Taylor (six). All but Williams might have played as well as they have all year. Of Finley's six receptions, three came on third down and were for first downs. From an in-line location on 22 plays, he put nifty moves on athletic OLBs Chad Greenway and Erin Henderson to come free. As a split receiver, he ran a strong slant to beat FS Harrison Smith in man coverage. Finley's only negative were the two "bad" runs in which he got beat inside by DE Jared Allen. Crabtree made the key one-on-one block at the point against Allen, Greenway and Henderson on three runs totaling 23 yards. He also made a strong lead block against Allen on a 9-yard carry and ran hard on a 15-yard bootleg reception. Taylor sealed the edge on DE Brian Robison for James Starks' 22-yard TD and jarred Henderson on an 8-yard carry. There were no dropped passes.

OFFENSIVE LINE (3)

Don Barclay hadn't played from scrimmage all year when Lang suffered an ankle injury midway through the second quarter on his 31st snap. Barclay went the final 50 snaps and held up pretty well. Opposed by Robison, an excellent athlete with good speed and quickness, Barclay wasn't the least bit overwhelmed. He worked hard to maintain the width of the pocket, kept his hands moving and never once got knocked completely off-balance. He gave up two pressures to Robison and was lucky on a nasty spin move that he had Aaron Rodgers to save him by getting the ball out rapidly to Jennings on an 18-yard skinny post. Barclay was partially responsible for two "bad" runs, including one in which he missed MLB Jasper Brinkley on the back side. But there was a lot to like. He kept after people in the run game, and his hand usage was good in pass pro. Discounting stunts, Barclay was one-on-one on 13 of 20 pass plays. In his abbreviated stint, Lang allowed 1½ pressures. Another player happy to have Rodgers as a teammate was Marshall Newhouse, whose six pressures included just one sack. After a poor first half, he blocked Allen better in the second half. Newhouse was by himself on 76.3% of his pass plays against Allen. Neither Newhouse nor Josh Sitton had a "bad" run, and Sitton yielded just one pressure. Matched against DT Kevin Williams, Sitton was solid. Evan Dietrich-Smith made his third start and had two more penalties, giving him a total of five. When Lang is healthy, EDS's penchant for penalties will be a factor whether the coaches play Lang at LG or RT. The Packers angle-blocked more in the run game, taking some of the physical strain off Jeff Saturday. He was blown up by DT Christian Ballard for minus-2 on a shovel pass and had two "bad" runs against undersized NT Fred Evans, including a failed third and 1. That old-fashioned style of wedge blocking for John Kuhn on the third and 1 looked just awful.

QUARTERBACKS (4 ½)

D-coordinator Alan Williams stuck to his two-shell for the entire game, following the tactics others have employed with success against the Packers in the past month. This time, Rodgers and McCarthy were primed with a sensible game plan. For the first time since Game 2 there were no empty sets. For a change, quite a few passes (eight) were thrown off simple three- and five-step dropbacks from under center. Rodgers kept his poise despite 15 pressures, eluded two dead-to-right sacks and made about 10 big plays running and passing on the move. On one bootleg, he turned around only to see SS Jamarca Sanford coming full blast at him. His arm strength was apparent on the off-balance bullet that he fired to Crabtree. His 32-yard TD pass to Jones was placed in the only spot it could be. He escaped to the right and put the game away by patiently picking out Cobb racing between defenders for 33 yards. Remembering that DE Everson Griffen jumped three times in the second meeting last year, Rodgers drew Griffen off once and his teammates three other times with exceptional "3-19, 3-19" hard counts. On a two-man route, his 57-yard bomb to Jennings off double-pass action came up 5 yards short and was intercepted by Smith. Rodgers stayed a step or three ahead of a good, intense defense all day.

RUNNING BACKS (4 ½)

Last week, position coach Alex Van Pelt said the group played better against the Giants than it had all year. This performance might have exceeded that. Alex Green got the start and held a 19-8 edge in snaps over Starks in the first half, but Starks got the 18-9 nod on Green in the second half because he was so impressive. Starks did make Brinkley miss on a toss that gained him 6 extra yards. He also showed tremendous burst turning the corner and outrunning CB Antoine Winfield and Sanford to the pylon. If Starks made a bad read, it wasn't glaring. Green didn't do any dancing, either. He's a 222-pounder with the speed to take the corner and the power to bleed runs. He went north-south on a check-down, gaining every inch available, and also picked up an additional six by eluding Brinkley. Kuhn was in for 42 snaps, including 24 as a third-down back and 18 as a FB. He has had much better games blocking and running.

DEFENSIVE LINE (2)

The best way to control Peterson in a 3-4 defense is have three big men stay home and stay square across the front. In this regard, the Packers sorely missed C.J. Wilson (knee), their top grunt against the run other than Ryan Pickett. Jerel Worthy got the start, but at 288 pounds he was rolled out a few times and was limited to just 16 snaps. Fellow rookie Mike Daniels was next, but at 6-0½ he struggled seeing over enormous tackles Phil Loadholt and Matt Kalil. Daniels had 14 plays. Mike Neal opened as the sub rusher next to B.J. Raji, but in the end he had 30 snaps because the coaches considered him the better matchup. Pickett (35) generally occupied two blockers but never really made a play. Raji (44) was active early but didn't have a pressure. Neal had two of the unit's three pressures.

LINEBACKERS (2)

Erik Walden, who played all 55 snaps, struggled for the second straight game. The defense can ill afford him to falter down the stretch two years in a row. On the perimeter against Christian Ponder three or four times, Walden seemed surprised by his athletic ability and kept getting faked out or outflanked. Other than an early bull rush for a knockdown, he could do nothing against the improved Loadholt. On the other side, Dezman Moses had several containment miscues and mustered just one pressure. Still, the staff played him 49 snaps compared to six for Frank Zombo. The best pass rusher was Brad Jones, who counted three pressures among his 12 blitzes. One time, he hopped over trash (the fallen Worthy) and smacked Peterson after a gain of 2. But Jones also had a series of bad plays. He let FB Jerome Felton go on a 13-yard check-down and was partially responsible with Jerron McMillian on Kyle Rudolph's 7-yard TD catch. Against the run, he missed a diving tackle on Peterson's 48-yard jaunt and was blown back so far by Felton on Peterson's 23-yard carry that he knocked off Hawk, who was in position to make the tackle. Earlier, Felton put Hawk on his back on a 9-yard gain by Peterson. Desmond Bishop was never missed more.

SECONDARY (2 ½)

Morgan Burnett's two interceptions certainly turned the tide. His two missed tackles enabled Peterson to gain an extra 122 yards. Burnett and Tramon Williams were double covering Michael Jenkins in the end zone, and you could say Burnett would have been beat for an 8-yard TD if Ponder could throw it up like Rodgers. As it was, Burnett timed his leap and made a sure interception of the underthrown ball. Later, he took a great angle in man coverage on Rudolph, showed terrific burst and undercut the route for possibly the finest play of his career. As for the misses, Burnett dived and came up empty both times. A lack of chase in his game also was evident on occasion. He also gave up a 21-yard reception to Rudolph in one-on-one coverage. M.D. Jennings (39) was run over by Rudolph in the flat and then tried to take Peterson high on the 82-yard TD and had an embarrassing miss. McMillian, the bigger and stronger alternative to Jennings, played 35 snaps. He had two of the 11 missed tackles by the defense, including one as the last man on the 48-yard jaunt when he also tried to tackle Peterson high and became overextended. Smith and Sanford tackled far better than their Green Bay counterparts. Tramon Williams (55), who chased down Peterson on the 48-yarder, was more physical and didn't allow a completion. Casey Hayward (54) also pitched a shutout, and Davon House (25), targeted seven times, gave up two for 25 yards during garbage time. Minus Percy Harvin (ankle), the Vikings' five WRs were taken completely out of the game by the three CBs. Their first reception came with 2:47 remaining.

KICKERS (3)

It was an eventful afternoon for Mason Crosby. On his opening kick, a 30-yard FG, he sunk in too close to the ball and then was extremely fortunate to have it bank off the top of the left upright and through. Then he closed the first half in disappointing fashion with a lousy hit from 53 that went way wide right. He began the second half by trying to hit the kickoff too hard and it sailed out of bounds. But a few minutes later, with his career in Green Bay possibly at stake, Crosby hit a tremendous ball that sailed through from 47 before closing with another from 31. His six kickoffs had averages of 71 yards and 3.91 seconds of hang time. Tim Masthay punted four times, averaging 41.5 (gross), 41.3 (net) and 4.34 (hang time).

SPECIAL TEAMS (2 ½)

The diving House said he actually touched a punt by Chris Kluwe that went 36 yards. Jarrett Bush drew two penalties, giving him five in 2012. Cobb had a chance for a big KO return, but Daniels tried to block the wrong man. Cobb had a 30-yard KO return and a punt return for minus-7. Jamari Lattimore (19), Rob Francois (22) and Williams (19) had strong performances.

OVERALL (3 ½)

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