

Rating the Packers: Week 16 vs Titans

Packers' deep roster made the difference

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

Posted: Dec 25, 2012

Green Bay - Both the Green Bay Packers and Tennessee Titans lined up Sunday at Lambeau Field without seven of their preferred starters. Marc Mariani, the Titans' top-notch kick returner, also was missing.

The Packers dipped into one of the deepest rosters in the league and didn't miss a beat. The Titans' replacements dragged the team down.

Here is a rating of the Packers in their 55-7 victory, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

RECEIVERS (4)

The Titans played a lot of Cover-3 with just one safety back. Frequently, CBs Jason McCourty and Alterraun Verner played 5 to 8 yards off the outside receivers, and Aaron Rodgers made them tackle with a series of short shots to James Jones (68 snaps) and Greg Jennings (64). Jones gained an even 50% of his yards (50 of 100) after the catch. Neither McCourty, who had an awful game, nor Verner was eager to put a shoulder into the determined Jones. Verner described Jones as a workhorse, and he was exactly right. Jones has played an amazing 93.8% of the snaps in the last 11 games. Wearing down? Not the gentlemanly Jones. He just minds his own business and keeps on truckin'. Jennings ran a crisp double move and had Verner beat for a 37-yard TD, but the ball was way overthrown. After Randall Cobb (41) suffered an ankle injury early in the third quarter, Jennings and Jermichael Finley (46) traded off in the slot. On one short catch from the slot, Jennings had an opening straight ahead but chose the path of least resistance and ran right into an outside defender for a short gain. If Cobb is going to miss time, the Packers must have Jennings be more aggressive inside. Cobb won just about every time on his release against rookie nickel back Coty Sensabaugh. He also dropped two more passes. Finley beat veteran LB Will Witherspoon down the seam for 23 and several other times was a load to bring down. He's focused, has cut back on his drops and penalties and is starting to resemble the player that he was in late 2009 and early '10. If it was Donald Driver's final regular-season home game, he went out with four snaps and one target. With Tom Crabtree (hamstring) out, D.J. Williams assumed the main blocking role and played a career-high 42 snaps.

OFFENSIVE LINE (4)

Josh Sitton fits the prototype of what a right guard should be. He's big and strong, loves to get physical and doesn't miss many blocks. On Sunday, his only glaring miscue was not getting off on time to prevent WLB Zach Brown from shutting down a stretch play to the left for no gain. Sitton's performance might have looked even better because he had a center with strength next to him in Evan Dietrich-Smith. They got after DT Jurrell Casey on double teams several times, and Sitton buckled Casey to the ground by himself more than once. Dietrich-Smith's debut as the starting center brought improvement to the run game. He got some displacement at the point of attack, stayed on his feet and showed pretty good quickness to the LB level. Probably his worst moment came on a tricky delayed blitz by Witherspoon, who got him to turn prematurely toward the guard before racing in to smack Aaron Rodgers. He had no penalties, no snapping snafus and one "bad" run. The lone sack was recorded by rookie DT Mike Martin on an upfield charge against T.J. Lang. Marshall Newhouse gave up two hurries to DE Kamerion Wimbley and had two "bad" runs. Newhouse seldom just misses in the run game. There remain instances where he steps, engages and releases too soon. Sent home sick as a dog Saturday, Don Barclay sucked it up and went the distance against DE Derrick Morgan, the Titans' No. 1 D-lineman. Yes, Barclay had breakdowns here (2½ pressures) and there (two "bad" runs). Maybe he gives a bit too much ground on his pass sets. But the rookie free agent is a fighter; he hasn't been overwhelmed in the least. Greg Van Roten played eight snaps as an extra TE, providing some muscle at the point.

QUARTERBACKS (4 ½)

Coordinator Jerry Gray broke from the copycat norm teams have displayed against the Packers for two months. He rushed five or more on 35.7% of passes, most since Week 6 when Houston's Wade Phillips blitzed a season-high 50%. That meant the Titans usually had one safety back instead of two, and that created openings on the perimeter. Rodgers stayed a step or three ahead before giving way to Graham Harrell, who took the final 15 snaps. Two exceptional first-quarter TDs by Rodgers got the rout rolling. When the Packers emptied the backfield for the only time all day, Rodgers spotted DT Sen'Derrick Marks vacating at the snap to double Finley in the slot. Knowing that it left five blockers against three defenders, Rodgers danced through the middle for a 6-yard score. On the next series, he dashed hard right on a naked bootleg and gunned a remarkable strike to Cobb in the back corner for a 20-yard TD. He did overshoot Jennings and Jones when they were open deep. Despite wind chill of 14 degrees, he handled the ball beautifully. His big, strong hands are money in this stuff. Harrell threw a 9-yard slant to Jones before he was out of his break and then didn't have enough arm to hit Driver on third and 8 along the sidelines.

RUNNING BACKS (4 ½)

This group hasn't had much work in blitz pickup lately. That wasn't the case Sunday, and John Kuhn (32) excelled. There must have been five times when Kuhn read pressure and then either stymied or rode the extra rusher away from Rodgers. On Ryan Grant's first TD, Kuhn had to alter his course after Sitton pulled in front of him. He patiently worked around and onto Brown as Grant burst into the clear. On Grant's second TD, he cut Wimbley off his feet to clear the corner. After a rough outing last week, Kuhn's only apparent mistake was his holding penalty against SS Al Afalava. The mix of zone and pattern-power runs worked well for Grant (41) and DuJuan Harris (19). In zone, Harris planted his foot several times and burst ahead, sometimes splitting tacklers. When the Packers were blocking down and pulling around, Grant let lanes materialize and then got into them with good body lean. It was a very good sign that the Packers converted a fourth and 1 and a fourth and 2 sending out a two-RB power formation and running the ball.

DEFENSIVE LINE (4 ½)

Deep backup LG Mitch Petrus was benched after 37 snaps and getting his butt handed to him by B.J. Raji (33). Not only couldn't Petrus move Raji, he couldn't prevent him from getting to an edge and penetrating. Raji batted down Jake Locker's first pass, which would have been a wide-open completion to Kenny Britt against Sam Shields. He also was responsible for Shields' interception by bumping into Locker on the release. Locker was throwing to Nate Washington, according to coach Mike Munchak. Operating against an all-reserve interior, Raji and Ryan Pickett (22) sat strong and frustrated Chris Johnson. It was a bonus, too, that Pickett and Raji got to sit out the last 1½ quarters. Mike Neal, in a season-high 39 snaps, matched Raji with two pressures and delivered an energy-sapping hit on Johnson in blindside pursuit. Without C.J. Wilson (knee) and Jerel Worthy (hamstring), Neal started in base and was very solid against the run, too, before giving way to Mike Daniels (29) in garbage time. Daniels was as responsible as anyone for stuffing FB Quinn Johnson for no gain on third and 1. The fourth quarter also marked the debut of Jordan Miller, the squatty free agent. His 15-play stint was uneventful.

LINEBACKERS (4 ½)

Since rushing 14 times against Jacksonville in Game 8, A.J. Hawk (35) has had just eight blitzes compared to Brad Jones' 42. On Sunday, Hawk made the most of his five pressures with two sacks and one knockdown. Twice he beat Chris Johnson, and on his first sack he slipped through untouched after Clay Matthews messed up the blocking with an unselfish inside charge. Munchak seemed to indicate that Chris Johnson had a big hole on his first carry if he had cut the other way behind Quinn Johnson's block on Hawk. But credit must go to Hawk for getting under the big FB's pads and making the tackle for loss. Later, Hawk beat RG Deuce Lutui and made a reckless tackle for no gain. Jones had just one pressure in his nine rushes but knocked TE Craig Stevens out of the game with a bruising frontal hit and played a screen well. The snap counts outside were 37 for Dezman Moses, 30 for Matthews, 28 for Erik Walden and 23 for Frank Zombo. Matthews was yanked eight snaps into the third quarter. He had four pressures despite 40% double-teaming. He also blew contain on one rush, finally matching up against a quarterback (Locker, 4.53-second 40) who could outrun him. Not that it mattered, but the damage was 22 yards. When Matthews jacked up Michael Roos, maintained vision to the backfield and shed the LT to engulf Chris Johnson for minus-3, just imagine how Munchak and his offensive staff felt. Here was Matthews dominating by far their best O-lineman. There was no reason to run wide at Matthews anymore. Maybe less playing time will energize Walden. He had an interception, stuffed a run at the point and flattened hard inside to make a tackle. Neither Moses nor Zombo had a pressure.

SECONDARY (4 ½)

Dom Capers dug deep, deep into his playbook by rushing five or more on 52.6% of passes (he never sent six), his high since St. Louis on Oct. 21. They came from everywhere and anywhere, unhinging a hapless O-line and turning Chris Johnson into an aimless matador. Five of the seven sacks came on blitzes, including three on fire zones. Casey Hayward (40) was sent 13 times, just nine fewer than he had in the first 14 games. He finished with one knockdown and one hurry, but three other times he ended up maybe a half-step away from recording the sack. It was by far Hayward's best pressure game. The Titans' ineptitude had a lot to do with that, but the rookie undoubtedly has learned much about slot-blitzing by studying Charles Woodson. Hayward also shut down the passing game, and Sam Shields (57) turned in another strong performance against a talented big WR (Britt). He was in Britt's hip pocket all day. The few times that Locker had time and completed passes, they went against Tramon Williams (59). The only missed tackle by a linebacker or defensive back went to Williams. M.D. Jennings (49) was late lining up on Britt's 2-yard TD and was outrun by Britt on a 37-yard bomb that he hauled in just out of bounds.

KICKERS (4)

Mason Crosby's nine-game streak with at least one missed field goal is history. After hitting from 26 yards early, he faded one in from 48 high off the right upright. It left Crosby with two makes and three misses off uprights in the last two seasons. Kicking off 10 times, he averaged 60.4 yards and 3.68 seconds of hang time. Tim Masthay punted three times, averaging 39.7 (gross), 35.7 (net) and 4.54 hang time. It was strange to see one of Masthay's Aussie-style punts fair caught at the 20. The large majority of his end-over-end attempts have stopped inside the 12.

SPECIAL TEAMS (4 ½)

Cobb has a remarkable football mind. He saved his team 37 yards of field position to open the second half by knowing the rule and stepping out of bounds at the 3 before picking up Rob Bironas' dying kickoff. When Brett Kern outkicked his coverage one too many times, Jeremy Ross made him pay with a 58-yard punt return. Back on the field for the first time since Game 9, LB Terrell Manning sold out against the wedge and ruined several kickoff returns.

OVERALL (4 ½)

From the Dec 25, 2012, editions of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel