

Rating the Packers: Week 17 at Vikings

Room for improvement

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

Posted: Jan 1, 2013

Green Bay - In 1993, Brett Favre might have played the poorest game of his budding three-year career in the regular-season finale against the Detroit Lions at the Silverdome. He threw four interceptions and the Green Bay Packers, in position to win the NFC Central Division, lost to the Lions, 30-20. It remains Detroit's last division championship. Six days later, the two teams met back at the Silverdome in an NFC wild-card playoff game. This time, Favre played almost mistake-free and beat the Lions, 28-24, with a 40-yard touchdown pass to Sterling Sharpe in the final minute.

Nineteen years later, the Packers are coming off a dreadful defensive performance in a 37-34 loss to the Minnesota Vikings Sunday at the Metrodome. Now the defense, just as Favre once did, gets a crack at redemption against the same opponent on a Saturday in the wild-card round.

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

RECEIVERS (4)

This was Greg Jennings' first 100-yard game since the last time the teams met in Minneapolis on Oct. 23, 2011. Through the assortment of injuries, it was becoming somewhat difficult to remember just how special Jennings can be. No matter where he ends up in 2013, this tape will help him. When Antoine Winfield (broken hand) departed after 18 snaps because of extreme pain, little Marcus Sherels had to cover Jennings. All eight of his catches (for 120 yards) came from the slot (five right, three left). One time, D-coordinator Alan Williams blitzed the cornerback across from Jennings and Aaron Rodgers delivered him the ball 9 yards downfield. LB Chad Greenway, a fine athlete himself, tried to corral Jennings right after the catch. Jennings then made three or four crisp moves in staccato fashion, left three defenders in the lurch and glided away for a 45-yard gain. The Packers were down, 13-0, and headed nowhere when Jennings slipped away from two tacklers to convert a third-and-8 in the left flat. He had two hands on what should have been a 41-yard TD and also dropped a 3-yard TD pass before catching one from the same distance two plays later. James Jones played 64 snaps, one more than Jennings. His 14th TD came on an 8-yard hitch when he ran through a stiff frontal shot from hard-hitting SS Mistral Raymond at the 3½-yard line and powered in. He smells the goal line. Jones' false-start penalty was just the third of his six-year career. Minus Randall Cobb (ankle), Jordy Nelson returned from a hamstring injury to play 40 snaps. It was an extreme rarity to see a defender (CB A.J. Jefferson) catch Nelson from behind on a take-off route. Jarrett Boykin, who made a tough fourth-down catch, played seven snaps, and newcomer Jeremy Ross played one in place of Donald Driver, who was a healthy inactive. Jermichael Finley (50) was responsible for two of the team's four "bad" runs but was terrific in the passing game. Finley said he glanced at the scoreboard as he turned the corner and alertly veered out of bounds when he saw :01 left in the half. He leapt high to make a 20-yard sideline catch, continued making nice gains in the short flats and threw a crushing block on CB Chris Cook to spring Jones for 30 yards. The offense sprang to life early in the second quarter when Mike McCarthy used three plays of inverted wishbone featuring Tom Crabtree as the key blocker.

OFFENSIVE LINE (3)

Evan Dietrich-Smith passed his first dome start as a center with flying colors. For the first time in ages the O-line wasn't involved with a "bad" run. Dietrich-Smith easily was the most impressive blocker and didn't have a pressure, either. When the Vikings put a man over his nose, he got his hands up fast and hard. His footwork seems on point, he has strong hands and a jarring punch, and can muscle people. He's moving easily down the line on reach blocks, too, and didn't allow any penetration. T.J. Lang played well other than a stunt-sack by Jared Allen in which Marshall Newhouse did a poor job slowing Allen on a DE-DT twist and Lang was too wide to pick him up effectively. Sitton went chest-to-chest against big Kevin Williams and held up well. Most of the time, athletic Everson Griffen rushed over Lang in nickel. Griffen beat Sitton with a second move for a sack after he was able to sit down against a heavy bull rush. One of Don Barclay's two false-start penalties probably should have been called on Sitton because he jumped first. Barclay was much more effective blocking for the run. In pass pro, Barclay gave up one sack to DE Brian Robison. When Griffen moved out against Barclay well into the second half, he registered 1½ sacks and two more pressures. Griffen appeared to be knocking Barclay's hands down a few times.

QUARTERBACKS (4)

Rodgers put up excellent numbers after a sluggish start as his teammates acclimated themselves to the deafening level of noise. He took a delay-of-game penalty that wiped out a sizable completion to Finley and was fortunate to avoid a pick-6 by Jefferson when an errant sideline pass seemed to slip from his hand. Rodgers ignited the fire for his and the offense's prolific second half by leading just the third point-producing drive in 16 end-of-first-half chances. Out of timeouts, he had the presence of mind to bounce up from a sack, line everyone up in a rush and get the ball away to Finley for 14 yards so Mason Crosby was within field-goal range. He made 10 or 12 terrific throws, including looking off the safety and then hitting Nelson in stride for 73. This was only the second time in Rodgers' career as a starter that he didn't have a rushing attempt. His lost fumble in the third quarter, which loomed large in the outcome, wouldn't have happened if Rodgers hadn't been caught in-between decisions and just taken off. Although the times of the five sacks were 4.2, 3.7, 3.4, 3.6 and 2.7 seconds, Rodgers was charged with just one-half.

RUNNING BACKS (4)

McCarthy started Ryan Grant, using him on four of the first six nonproductive plays. After that, DuJuan Harris had 36 snaps compared to Grant's one. Harris fits the classic scouting line: "He's a rolling ball of butcher knives." He's just flying through holes, beating tacklers to the spot and pin-balling into safeties. FS Harrison Smith kept pounding the short man, but he kept bringing it. Harris is slipping too much. It cost him one "bad" run, and on another he ran into the back of Sitton. That's uncommon for Harris, who usually makes sharp, smart cuts and moves forward almost instantly. His blitz pickup against Greenway was surprisingly good. Strangely, Alex Green wasn't used.

DEFENSIVE LINE (4)

Once or twice early, Adrian Peterson took advantage of B.J. Raji's up-field charges by running underneath them. After that, Raji probably was the most dominant player on the field other than "AP." He was just too quick and too powerful for LG Charlie Johnson and RG Brandon Fusco. Raji, playing the majority of his 60 snaps at three-technique, had a hand in four tackles for loss. One time, he showed excellent low-block shield against LT Matt Kalil's backside cut and then flattened inside to tackle Peterson. Raji also had 1½ of the three pressures by the D-line. In a blood and guts game, Ryan Pickett played 54 snaps, his high since he had 60 in the 2007 playoff loss to the Giants. Pickett beat Fusco for a rare pressure and held stout at the point. It made no sense for the coaches to start Mike Neal and play him on the first five snaps in base over C.J. Wilson. True, Wilson hadn't played in a month (knee), but if the medical staff said he was healthy then he should have started because he is much better setting a wall against Peterson. In the end, the snap counts were Wilson (32), Neal (24), Jerel Worthy (nine) and Mike Daniels (five). Wilson made two excellent plays against the run whereas Neal was just OK.

LINEBACKERS (1)

Of the 14 missed tackles on defense, four fell on this unit. Not only that but the outside linebackers - Clay Matthews (64), Erik Walden (58), Dezman Moses (15) and Frank Zombo (one) - generally set a poor edge against tight ends. Kyle Rudolph abused Matthews on the late 26-yard run by Peterson in the one place that the 4-4 defense was most vulnerable. Rudolph, one of the NFL's most complete TEs, won a few other times against Matthews, too. The Vikings double-teamed Matthews on 41% of dropbacks. He beat Kalil off the edge for a chase-down sack and had two other pressures. Moses got the start on the left side but after he got washed inside by RT Phil Loadholt on a 12-yard rush the staff went to Walden. A.J. Hawk (56) and Brad Jones (all 69) weren't sure with their steps, combined to miss three tackles and were disappointing. On the sixth of Peterson's 34 carries, Jones came across unblocked and should have made a routine tackle for a 2-yard gain. Instead, he came in high and "AP" knocked his hands off en route to 22. Jones and Hawk both were at least partly responsible for short TD passes out of the backfield to Jarius Wright and Peterson. On Peterson's 7-yard TD run, Hawk seemed to back up, slipped and then was covered up right in the hole by lead-blocking Rhett Ellison.

SECONDARY (½)

There were eight missed tackles, including three by Tramon Williams (66) and two by Morgan Burnett (69). Williams had a brutal game. Against the run, he didn't really want in on the rough stuff and gave Peterson the outside once or twice. Against the pass, he got embarrassed by FB Jerome Felton on a sideline stop route, gave up a 21-yard dig to Jerome Simpson off a play-action fake that shouldn't affect a CB and picked a terrible time to drill Simpson in the face with an official positioned almost right next to him. On the other side, Sam Shields (64) and Casey Hayward (28) weren't much better. Shields was looking in the backfield so intently that he didn't even know what type of route Wright ran to blow by him for 65 yards. You simply can't get beat long like that in three-deep zone. With no receiver in front of him, Hayward drifted too far inside on Christian Ponder's play-action fake and then had no chance to gain depth and return to the sideline on the 25-yard strike to Michael Jenkins. That was a backbreaker. A better tackling corner than Hayward might have upended Toby Gerhart on a third-and-11 screen that ruptured into 21. Wright also left Hayward in the dust on a corner route from the slot, but Ponder's pass for a 19-yard TD was offline. Burnett almost always tries to be physical in the box, where he spent almost the entire game. One of his misses was from point-blank range in the backfield that Peterson turned into a gain of 19. M.D. Jennings (56) is willing but lacks the size to take on Peterson. After Shields peeked toward Ponder and managed to lose Jenkins in the end zone, Jennings did a nice job picking him up but then fanned on the interception and gave up a 3-yard TD. Jerron McMillian (26) was exploited by Rudolph in man coverage.

KICKERS (4)

For weeks, Crosby's kicks have been hooking or fading. Taking advantage of ideal conditions, he hit two straight balls that were good from 51 and 40 yards. His six kickoffs averaged 68.8 yards and 3.99 seconds of hang time. Tim Masthay (three punts) averaged just 42.7 (gross), 30.7 (net) and 3.83 hang time.

SPECIAL TEAMS (3)

Jeremy Ross was sensational replacing Cobb. He broke five tackles on a 32-yard punt return, made one cut to daylight on a 44-yard kickoff return and made three more people miss on a 9-yard punt return. On the other hand, the coverage against Sherels was soft. There were three missed tackles, not much hustle and almost no hard contact.

OVERALL (3 ½)

From the Jan 1, 2013, editions of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel