

Rating the Packers: Wild Card vs Vikings

Keeping an injured foe down

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

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Green Bay - It will go down as one of the least memorable games in the Green Bay Packers' 77-year playoff history.

Once quarterback Christian Ponder was declared out with an elbow injury and scatter-armed Joe Webb was declared in, the Minnesota Vikings had almost no chance to mount an effective passing game and therefore almost no chance for an upset Saturday night at Lambeau Field.

Adrian Peterson can only do so much, and when Mike McCarthy and Dom Capers prevailed upon the defense to play with more discipline, the die was cast.

Here is a rating of the Packers in their 24-10 wild-card victory over the Vikings, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

RECEIVERS (3 ½)

It's remarkable how McCarthy finds ways to keep just about everyone on the 46-man active roster in the game. It was a total surprise to see Jeremy Ross, who wasn't Packers' property until Oct. 17, on the field for the fourth and fifth snaps of the game in two-WR sets. Even before Jermichael Finley left with a hamstring injury midway through the third quarter, McCarthy had used three others plus G Greg Van Roten as an extra blocker. The TE snap counts were Finley (39), D.J. Williams (17), Tom Crabtree (16), Ryan Taylor (12) and Van Roten (four). Each player has a role, reps a few plays each week in practice and is made to feel part of the plan. Finley ran a lazy route on third down from the Viking 14. With a good head or body fake, it's a TD rather than a deflection by FS Harrison Smith. Earlier, the end-zone pass was in Finley's hands but still would have been a most difficult catch because of LB Chad Greenway's blanket coverage. Jordy Nelson, who is battling knee and ankle problems, didn't see the field until the fourth series and finished with just 19 snaps. James Jones (66 of 68 plays) manned one outside berth, kept getting open and blocked well, too. Jones isn't going to outrun many cornerbacks but his routes all look the same so it's hard for defenders to draw a bead on him. The biggest play (32 yards) was made by Greg Jennings (49). He stopped on a dime against CB Chris Cook on fourth and 5, created separation by knocking Cook's hands off and beat him on a hinge route to the sideline. When Cook slipped off the tackle, Jennings ran down to the 2. Randall Cobb played inside on all 33 of his WR snaps but was targeted just twice. It's the price individuals in this group must pay for the embarrassment of riches at the position.

OFFENSIVE LINE (3)

Don Barclay passed another test, shutting out DEs Brian Robison and Everson Griffen after a rough outing six days earlier. There was some chip help, but Marshall Newhouse was the recipient of almost as much aid from T.J. Lang. Barclay might be a low-key person, but he apparently has a competitive spirit and acute concentration. Other than one-half of a "bad" run on the back side against DT Kevin Williams, Barclay performed like a veteran in his playoff debut. Josh Sitton didn't have any obvious poor plays and kept Williams at bay. Newhouse has played against Jared Allen enough times to know he must stay within himself, be patient and not get beat by his repertoire of moves. There were times when Newhouse blocked Allen beautifully. However, Newhouse also allowed the unit's only sack, only two knockdowns and only hurry. Allen registered all but the sack, which went to DT Christian Ballard when he moved outside and beat Newhouse up the field. In both run and pass, Newhouse often plays the first two seconds well but then doesn't finish. Despite giving up 1½ "bad" runs, Newhouse was better than Evan Dietrich-Smith (three) and Lang (2½). DT Fred Evans, a career backup, had a field day and could hardly be blocked. He beat Lang inside three times, including two runs for minus-8 and minus-5. On the goal line, McCarthy probably was to blame for running John Kuhn on a failed third-down dive from the 1. Asking Lang to cut off Evans when he's wedged tightly in a gap might be too much. Dietrich-Smith was beat backdoor by Evans when he moved too quickly toward the play side. The Packers' inability to finish out the game in professional fashion was a poor reflection on this unit.

QUARTERBACKS (4)

In order, D-coordinator Alan Williams' blitz counts in the three games against Green Bay were 10.9% on Dec. 2, 26.7% Dec. 30 and 14.7% Saturday night. He relied on his four-man rush, usually keeping both safeties deep. Aaron Rodgers' answer for Williams was a steady dose of running plays and a slew of check-downs plus three screen passes. Other than an exceptional two-minute touchdown drive to close the first half, Rodgers was fairly content to let the Vikings' secondary come up and tackle. He made some fine throws, such as the sidearm shot to Kuhn on a screen that required an adjustment, the incomplete pass to Finley in the end zone and the 23-yard dart to Nelson off a bootleg to the right. Two of the three sacks (4.5, 4.8 seconds) were Rodgers' responsibility. However, the Packers overcame a second-and-14 hole after one of them en route to their final TD. It would be far more difficult to overcome a turnover, and Rodgers hasn't thrown an interception since the third quarter of the first Minnesota game.

RUNNING BACKS (4 ½)

DuJuan Harris (29 snaps) ran a lot better than his numbers (17-47-2.8) might suggest. He helped the O-line more than the O-line helped him. One time, Newhouse overshot the penetrating Greenway, who was in the backfield quickly right where Harris was headed. Instead of taking a loss, Harris bent his track a bit inside so Greenway couldn't reach him and made a 4-yard gain. On an inside-zone toss from the Minnesota 9, Harris instantaneously saw trouble ahead on the play side but spotted Newhouse washing down Allen as he began a stunt inside. Harris veered wide left outside Newhouse, smashed into hard-hitting SS Jamarca Sanford at the 3 and just wouldn't go down. When MLB Jasper Brinkley whacked him hard from the side, Harris advanced another step or two. More than once, he gained another yard despite having a defensive lineman on his back. After failing to catch a poorly thrown check-down on the first third down, Harris seemed at ease in the passing game. He has shake and bake, and a cannonball mentality. Kuhn (33) made fine adjustments on both TDs. When Robison smelled screen, Kuhn moved to a more open area. When Williams charged hard into Lang's trap block, Kuhn made an athletic jump cut around them and scored. Ryan Grant (14) tried to close the game but went nowhere. Cobb had five snaps, the most he has had in the backfield since Game 10.

DEFENSIVE LINE (4)

B.J. Raji (40 snaps) had an awful first series. He was moved off the ball and missed two tackles. After that, he was almost impossible to move, didn't miss any tackles and set up one of Clay Matthews' two sacks with a strong power rush against RG Brandon Fusco. Ryan Pickett (33) also took up a lot of space. Together with Raji and C.J. Wilson (34), the Packers formed a rock-ribbed wall that Peterson tried to crack. With no direct lanes open to the safety level, the great stallion became too quick to bounce outside. Pickett was cut down and also shoved down several times by John Sullivan, an excellent center. Wilson maintained good separation with his strong arms and disengaged from blockers to make six tackles. Whereas Raji just can't finish his rushes, Mike Neal (27) came up with 3½ pressures because of his impressive closing burst. Mike Daniels (19) held his own against a solid O-line.

LINEBACKERS (4 ½)

Matthews led the team with 4½ pressures, all against top LT Matt Kalil. Uppermost in Matthews' mind was lane integrity and containment on rushes. Even though Matthews clearly was just holding his edge on some rushes, he ran over Kalil on an early charge, beat him up the field for two sacks (one was a fumble by Webb) and came off the rookie for another knockdown. Kalil covered up Matthews on an 8-yard run, and TE Kyle Rudolph was productive blocking him. But Matthews, helped by having to play just 45 of the 62 snaps, carried the day. Erik Walden played one more snap (46), accumulating 3½ pressures and a tackle for loss in an inspired performance. Beaten for 11 yards early on a bootleg by Webb, Walden redoubled his focus on spacing and outside responsibility and proved to be a thorn in Peterson's side. With Frank Zombo inactive, Dezman Moses picked up the remainder of the workload (30 snaps). As a rusher, Moses had enough to beat Kalil off the edge for a hurry and Fusco for a flush. He tackled Peterson twice for gains of 1, shedding RT Phil Loadholt and then Rudolph. Not only is Moses a tough guy, he played like a smart guy Saturday night. On the inside, Brad Jones and A.J. Hawk were OK.

SECONDARY (4)

Having missed eight tackles six days earlier, this unit toughened up and missed just two. Sam Shields and Tramon Williams were much improved. Shields is an enigma. In this game, he came up hard and tackled Peterson all by himself for a gain of 2. Other games, he seems to back off. He stopped Jarius Wright short on a third-and-8 reception, too. When Webb finally got around to risking a downfield throw, Shields began the process of planting doubt in his mind by breaking hard on a 15-yard curl to Michael Jenkins and knocking the ball down. He also had great position on two long bombs and intercepted one using what can be excellent ball skills. Williams and Charles Woodson appeared to be 25 yards too far underneath and the culprits on Jenkins' 50-yard TD. Battling late-week illness, Williams was more conscious this time keeping Peterson from reaching the sideline. In his return, Woodson replaced M.D. Jennings at free safety in base and nickel and Jerron McMillian at the line in dime. Woodson beat Wright for a big tackle for loss early and missed just one tackle. He didn't stick Peterson like he might have early in the season but for having missed nine games he was plenty physical enough. Woodson wasn't able to intercept Webb but took some characteristic chances trying to do so. After taking a bad angle early, Jennings showed his toughness with a hard solo tackle of Peterson and a jarring smash of Devin Aromashodu on the sideline. When Casey Hayward blitzes from the slot, he should be less worried about deception and more about getting there.

KICKERS (3)

Mason Crosby made his one FG attempt (20) and kicked off effectively. Of his four boots for distance, he averaged 72 yards and 3.67 seconds of hang time. Tim Masthay was busy, punting eight times for averages of 37.8 (gross), 34.6 (net) and 4.09 hang time. He didn't hit the ball nearly as well as Minnesota's Chris Kluwe (49.6, 46.2) but had five fair catches and three inside the 20.

SPECIAL TEAMS (3 ½)

Giving the final uniform at LB to Terrell Manning instead of Zombo paid off here. Manning is a hard-hitting, headhunting rookie with good speed and athleticism. Besides two tackles, he crashed into returner Marcus Sherels just before he was going to recover his own muffed punt. Moses then came up with the recovery for the Packers' second take-away on a punt in eight games. Jarrett Bush also provided excellent coverage. Things started out poorly when Kuhn was pinned inside on Sherels' 37-yard KO return. The return game was divided between Cobb (punts) and Ross (kickoffs). Cobb tried to run laterally toward the wide side of the field on two designed returns and didn't get much.

OVERALL (4)

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