

Rating the Packers: Week 1 vs 49ers

Packers' spirit gets broken by 49ers' Anquan Boldin

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

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Green Bay - The Green Bay Packers had no shortage of belief, bravado or motivation Sunday heading into their opening game against the San Francisco 49ers

Coach Mike McCarthy convinced his players that they were as good if not better than the defending NFC champions, and that they would prove it at Candlestick Park.

The Packers gave it the old college try, playing with high emotion and enthusiasm and scoring four touchdowns. In the end, they just couldn't handle Anquan Boldin, who joined Detroit's Calvin Johnson and Indianapolis' Reggie Wayne as wide receivers who have posted more than 200 receiving yards against Green Bay in the last 21 games, counting playoffs.

Here is a rating of the Packers in their 34-28 defeat, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

RECEIVERS (4½)

Last season the 49ers' secondary tried to intimidate the Packers, and at times it appeared to work. The 49ers hit hard and tackled extremely well. On Monday, 49ers coach Jim Harbaugh lodged one major complaint against his team, and that was tackling. True, the 49ers aren't as physical without FS Dashon Goldson and nickel back Chris Culliver. With Goldson leading the charge, the Packers were cut down immediately just about every time they caught a ball. This game was different. Jermichael Finley (59 snaps) kept catching look passes in the flats, turning up field and gaining 55 of his 56 yards after the catch. He made dime back Perrish Cox miss badly on a 12-yard TD. Finley looks faster this season. He's carrying his pads lower and keeping tacklers away from his long legs. Jordy Nelson and Randall Cobb were limited to two snaps each in the exhibition season because of injuries. Nelson played all 62 snaps, allaying any physical concerns, and was the Packers' best player. Twice Aaron Rodgers got outside the pocket and threw darts behind Nelson, who made beautiful adjustments for gains of 31 and 37 yards. He made FS Eric Reid, a promising rookie tackler, miss in the flat and a 2-yard gain ruptured into 22. Then he ran a 6-yard stop route, made CB Carlos Rogers miss and picked up 15. Nelson showed outstanding hands and shiftiness in the open field. He also went inside on a slant for 9 knowing a heavy lick would be coming from Reid. It was important for Nelson's peace of mind to take a shot like that. Cobb lined up either in the slot or No. 3 to a side on 49 of his 50 wide-receiver snaps. Often covered by Rogers, Cobb played with a competitive fire, took three heavy shots and bounced right back up. At times Cobb reminds me of a young Greg Jennings because of how he bounces around and is so elusive. James Jones also played all 62 snaps but was shut out. Cobb made a mistake in the final minute by failing to get out of bounds on a 38-yard gain. It might have cost his team two deep shots into the end zone. The lone interception skipped off Finley's hands to Reid. Finley's blocking, for both run and pass, was subpar. The No. 2 tight end, Andrew Quarless, had a quiet eight snaps.

OFFENSIVE LINE (3)

LT David Bakhtiari's debut wasn't great but it was solid. The Packers kept sliding the line toward him and Josh Sitton, who was playing his first game at left guard. That made sense because DE Justin Smith and OLB Aldon Smith played most of the game on that side. Bakhtiari needs more strength, but at least he makes every effort to finish. He will get bounced or tossed but won't back down and battles to the whistle. That's his clear-cut advantage over Marshall Newhouse. Bakhtiari gave up 1½ sacks to Aldon Smith, including one on a cut block that needed to be executed better. He also allowed 3½ pressures, including a pair to strongman Justin Smith and 1½ more to Aldon Smith. He wasn't perfect on the back side by any means in the run game, but none of the four "bad" runs was his fault. On the other side, Don Barclay went one-on-one much of the time against OLB Ahmad Brooks, another athletic power player. Barclay was a little shaky in the fourth quarter, but his total of three pressures and no "bad" runs was impressive. Sitton had one of the poorest games of his career with three penalties, 1½ pressures and 1½ "bad" runs. He's got to know you can't put your hands in a D-lineman's face and expect to get away with it. He's learning how to play the left side. That was evident on a pull when he missed ILB Patrick Willis, who piled up the play. RG T.J. Lang has had better days, too, finishing with three pressures and one "bad" run. A full-fledged starter for the first time, Evan Dietrich-Smith was fine.

QUARTERBACKS (4)

Rodgers' football totals were 2 and 3 against the 49ers in 2012. Once again, there was no run game to speak of. Defensive coordinator Vic Fangio placed his safeties in a two-deep shell snap after snap and used his match coverage concept underneath. On Rodgers' 40 passes, Fangio rushed four 32 times. The 49ers are about as static a defense as the Packers will see all year. Operating straight-up against a unit with that much talent didn't work early, so Mike McCarthy ordered up the controlled no-huddle. Maybe the Packers huddled on 25% of the downs. Despite not having his time clock fixed with this revamped offensive line, Rodgers excelled getting the ball out of his hand. When pressure came off the edge, he ran away from it and threw the ball away twice. Not only hadn't Rodgers played much with Nelson and Cobb in August, he played just 45 snaps himself. There were missed assignments around him, and Eddie Lacy kind of backed into a promising check-down to the right that led to an overthrow on third and 7. Playing about 75% from shotgun, Rodgers found open receivers and 385 yards of total offense. His naked bootleg for 6 yards on third and 1 wasn't called by McCarthy. With Reid sprinting toward the end zone on a long interception return (it was called back), Rodgers gave chase and knocked him down.

RUNNING BACKS (1)

Lacy admitted he was nervous, and it showed. This is a complex system compared to Alabama's, and in his first game and on the road he struggled with the detailed part of the job. Some of his early runs were horribly blocked. But even when there was some running room, he wasn't crashing into the holes fast and maximizing what was there. His methodical style of play might well be the result of thinking too much. Unless Johnathan Franklin does more with a regular-season chance than he did in August, Lacy won't benefit from having a change-of-pace back. McCarthy benched him after a second-quarter fumble, giving James Starks seven snaps. The second half was all Lacy, who finished with 41 compared to 15 for John Kuhn. McCarthy didn't use a traditional fullback in front of Lacy until the third quarter. Lacy did make two tacklers miss on a screen pass for 31.

DEFENSIVE LINE (4)

The unit's football totals were 1 and 1 in the 49ers games a year ago. This was about respect and self-esteem. The 49ers started the same vaunted offensive line as last year, and the Packers were right back at them with the same players up front. It was strangely conventional football, with the Packers in their 3-4 on 51 of 77 snaps (66.2%). The snap counts were Ryan Pickett (51), B.J. Raji (51), surprise starter Johnny Jolly (35), Mike Daniels (19), C.J. Wilson (18), Datone Jones (18) and Mike Neal (13). It was brawn against brawn, possibly the NFL's heaviest D-line standing up against possibly the NFL's best O-line. It surely was no place for the feint of heart. Raji flowed fast and was fairly consistent at the point. Pickett, 33, still can stack and shed. Jolly plays higher than Pickett but he's hard to move and his hustle downfield was remarkable. Indomitable Frank Gore, who is one tough hombre, hammered away 21 times and settled for 44 yards. He'd disappear under all that humanity, and only in the second half did he begin to surface for respectable gains. Saving Raji strictly for the rigors of base, the Packers started Jones and Neal in sub. Everyone had been drilled to power rush and then stop if necessary if it meant preventing Colin Kaepernick from bursting past. Discounting Jolly's garbage sack, the only pressure was by Raji. Chalk that up to the game plan and the exceptional opponent.

LINEBACKERS (3)

Clay Matthews (70 snaps), Nick Perry (53) and Neal (33) angled inside from outside, often defeated blocks or at least gained stalemates, and forced Gore and Kendall Hunter into the behemoths over center. Matthews always plays with a flame, but he revved extra hot here. Matthews was a ringleader in blunting the read-option. He sliced through traffic to nail Hunter and Kaepernick for a pair of minus-7 runs. The last time a Packer had made a tackle for loss of 7 or more yards was October 2010 (DE Howard Green, minus-8, against the Jets). The 49ers double-teamed Matthews on just 14.8% of his rushes. Down after down, Pro Bowl LT Joe Staley blocked Matthews as well as it can be done. However, Matthews was more interested in containment; he did beat Staley for two pressures and all-pro LG Mike Iupati for a sack. Perry's big body came in handy against a physical team. Neal also had three pressures. On the inside, Brad Jones (75) and A.J. Hawk (59) were much better near the line than in space.

SECONDARY (½)

The Packers blitzed 32.5% on passes. Their plan was to play a heavy box against the run, maintain discipline against the read option and cover as best they could. Minus two of their top five DBs (Morgan Burnett, Casey Hayward), the coverage was a disaster. Jerron McMillian missed four tackles, showed surprising lack of burst in coverage and was weak at the ball. M.D. Jennings was remarkably indecisive, as when he failed to fill the alley on Hunter's 23-yard run and didn't obliterate Vernon Davis after his 37-yard catch beyond Micah Hyde. Hard-hitting Chris Banjo was on the field for four snaps; look for a lot more of him this week. Unable to play press coverage except in goal-line, Sam Shields drifted about and had a brutal game. Hyde lost his way against bunch formations, showing why he fell to the fifth round. With the outcome at hand, Tramon Williams and Jennings couldn't prevent Boldin from a 15-yard completion on fourth and 2. Jarrett Bush had to play 20 snaps as the dime back. I can't imagine another 200-pound cornerback intruding on Iupati's space and getting absolutely destroyed. Man, that must have hurt.

KICKERS (4)

Tim Masthay debuted on kickoffs. Beating out one of the best in Mason Crosby, he mishit one, hit two well and crushed his last two. His five-boot averages were 73.8 yards and 3.57 seconds of hang time. He made a strong tackle of Cox to end abruptly his 30-yard return, and then was run over by Anthony Dixon on his 30-yard runback. On the same field as all-pro punter Andy Lee, Masthay outperformed him. His six-punt averages were 46.2 (gross), 44.8 (net) and 4.31 (hang time).

SPECIAL TEAMS (2)

LS Brett Goode had one of his best games ever. At 28, he appears to have improved his velocity a bit, and his accuracy and lace placement remain extraordinary. Jeremy Ross made one bad decision, fielding a kickoff in the left corner, hesitating and then trying to carry out a return to the right. His decision to bring back a kickoff with 6 minutes left was sound; the blocking that allowed C.J. Spillman to tackle him at the 9 was the culprit. Daniels and McMillian drew major penalties. Davon House was impressive covering punts.

OVERALL (3)

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