

Rating the Packers: Week 3 at Bengals

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

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Green Bay - Some National Football League teams don't teach their tackles to cut defensive ends, even on quick outside throws.

Those teams want their tackles to drop step and then aggressively drive the ends out of the throwing lane.

If a tackle misses a passive cut block, you get what the Green Bay Packers got Sunday in their 34-30 loss to the Cincinnati Bengals at Paul Brown Stadium.

The Packers had plenty of time but ran out of downs at the Bengals 20. That's when rookie left tackle David Bakhtiari missed his cut and defensive end Michael Johnson waltzed in to tip Aaron Rodgers' fourth-and-5 pass to James Jones.

Anyone can point to a zillion factors why the Packers lost. In the end, the inability to get that final pass completed because of a technique that some teams refuse to use loomed oh, so large.

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

RECEIVERS (2 ½)

This was old-fashioned football in the sense that there really were matchups to assess. Most of the time, it was James Jones (81 snaps) against nickel back Adam "Pacman" Jones (80) on the left outside and Jordy Nelson (80) against CB Terence Newman (81) on the right outside, and almost all the time it was Randall Cobb (79) against CB Leon Hall in the slot. Hall's in his prime, but even though Jones and Newman are past their defensive coordinator Mike Zimmer asked all three former first-round draft choices to press. It was more of a "quarters" coverage that incorporates man-to-man principles. Given a quarterback like Aaron Rodgers and rules changes slanted toward offense, the Bengals' D-backs won a clear-cut decision. They took away easy releases, tackled well and held the Packers to just 9.4 yards per completion. Cobb complimented Hall but said he wasn't the best slot defender he has faced. With Hall challenging his every move, Cobb settled for 54 yards in 10 targets. Twenty-six came on the first play of the third quarter when Rodgers had 6.7 seconds to find Cobb roaming near SS George Iloka. James Jones' long reception in eight targets was 13 yards. He beat "Pacman" for a 7-yard TD on an adjusted end-zone route, but Jones blanketed him deep. Once again, Nelson was the master of the sideline, getting his feet barely in-bounds on three receptions for 70 of his 93 yards. Newman, however, made him earn everything. Jermichael Finley, whose hot start figured to continue against Iloka and the Bengals' slow-footed linebackers, went out on the sixth play with a concussion. Ryan Taylor played 34 snaps, 14 more than ever before, and gave tremendous effort as a blocker. Andrew Quarless (43) had the only drop; he still isn't the robust presence that he was in 2011.

OFFENSIVE LINE (3 ½)

All-pro three-technique DT Geno Atkins lined up for 68 plays. He has wreaked havoc in recent years, but Sunday he was invisible: no sacks, no hurries and no tackles. Of the 35 times that he lined up over RG T.J. Lang, Atkins was double-teamed just six times. Of his 29 chances over LG Josh Sitton, he was doubled 11 times. Lang set the tone, manhandling the smaller Atkins on the first play and James Starks charged for 13. Lang outmuscled Atkins, and didn't have any trouble with his quickness. It was easily Lang's best game of the season and possibly the best of his five-year career. The mauling Sitton was very good as well, also not allowing a pressure or a "bad" run. One reason the Packers averaged a whopping 6.1 yards per rush (182 yards) was the ability of Evan Dietrich-Smith to eliminate penetration one week after Washington NT Barry Cofield got the best of him. He did allow one sack on a bull rush by NT Domata Peko, but the first sack wasn't his fault because Starks made a bad decision cutting blitzing LB Taylor Mays and knocked Dietrich-Smith off his block. This was Bakhtiari's poorest game. He allowed five pressures (one sack, three knockdowns, one hurry) whereas the four other starters combined for just 2½. He also had 2½ of the five "bad" runs, including getting beat inside by Johnson on the failed fourth-and-1 that ruptured into the winning TD. Yet, Bakhtiari's speed afoot has been a key to the resurgent zone run game. The Packers are starting to run in unison down the line, and as the fastest of the five his impact is significant. DE Carlos Dunlap is a brutal matchup for any right tackle. Don Barclay has played better and needs to play better, but one sack and one "bad" run wasn't an awful day.

QUARTERBACKS (2 ½)

When you're as good as Rodgers there are no excuses, and he made none. The average starting position on the Packers' six first-half possessions was the 50. Five times in that first half the Packers entered Bengals territory, including twice inside the 5. All Rodgers manufactured was three field goals. Zimmer blitzed just 21.2%, but with a stiff four-man pressure it was just enough to create uncertainty. Rodgers threw some bad balls, including a tear screen to Cobb, a bootleg to Quarless, an out to Taylor and a swing to Jeremy Ross. The first interception was totally on James Jones for quitting on a slant. The second, on a well-covered wheel route by Hall to Cobb, was Rodgers' fault. That ball had to be thrown more outside or on a different trajectory or to someone else. Rodgers did carry out his fakes beautifully on running plays from shotgun, some of which succeeded because he checked to the ideal side at the line. At times, Rodgers was too reckless. He misjudged Dunlap's speed and took a needless knockdown dilly-dallying on a no-hope play. He was fortunate to avoid injury in a sandwich between LB Vontaze Burfict and Dunlap blocking on the back side for a run. But when the time really did come to get physical, he failed to tackle FS Reggie Nelson early on the decisive return.

RUNNING BACKS (4)

Offensive coordinator Tom Clements made a telling comment when asked why Johnathan Franklin showed more Sunday than he had all summer. Said Clements: "He probably wasn't playing behind the No.1 line in training camp." For the first time, Franklin played like the jackrabbit the Packers saw at UCLA. On his 16 touches for 126 yards, he broke eight tackles on six different carries. Nelson just shook his head afterward recalling how his dead-on-miss of Franklin 6 yards downfield turned into a 51-yard run. The rookie flashed burst to the corner, vision, one-cut squirt, toughness in blitz pickup and exceptional change of direction. Then his fumble on fourth down changed the game. Starks shouldn't be cutting pass rushers. It's not ideal and led to Johnson's sack. As often happens, he went down with an injury (knee) on his 14th carry. He is tough and talented. He also can't stay on the field.

DEFENSIVE LINE (2 ½)

It wasn't the place for wide bodies. Of the defense's 56 teams, only four included three linemen. So the Packers mixed and match combinations depending on down and distance. B.J. Raji (32 snaps), who always played RDT, had an advantageous matchup against finesse-style LG Clint Boling. Raji bull-rushed Boling back for an early pressure (one of just two by the D-line), but after that he wasn't able to dominate. Ryan Pickett (25) had all he could do to hold the fort against the power side of RT Andre Smith and RG Kevin Zeitler. Johnny Jolly (18) wasn't fooled on a WR sweep and tackled Mohamed Sanu for minus-1. Mike Daniels (22) back-doored Zeitler for a no gain and made a hustle sack.

LINEBACKERS (4 ½)

Clay Matthews was magnificent before bowing out with yet another hamstring injury. In 26 snaps he had 3½ pressure whereas Nick Perry (48), Mike Neal (34) and Andy Mulumba (six) had none. Matthews was unblocked and airborne off the back side forcing BenJarvus Green-Ellis, a Bill Belichick favorite because he never fumbled, to fumble. He terrorized prideful LT Andrew Whitworth with his talent and youth, and cleaned up Davon House's blown sack with a strip of cornered Andy Dalton on his final snap. Perry and Neal weren't good enough. Perry can't turn the corner and isn't strong enough to threaten muscular right tackles such as Smith. Neal shows occasional violence getting off blocks and more athletic flashes than Perry, but for now he's learning the linebacker business. Brad Jones triggered early all day. He attacked, trusted his instincts, slipped the hulking Whitworth once or twice and flew to the football. He ripped a fumble from TE Jermaine Gresham and hopped on Dalton's fumble. His coverage was so-so. A.J. Hawk drove ball carriers backwards or dead in their tracks four or five times. Pick or not, the Bengals got the matchup they wanted (Giovani Bernard on Hawk) and the result was a swing pass for 31.

SECONDARY (3 ½)

The best player was Sam Shields. Matched against A.J. Green most of the day, he showed his incredible speed either catching up or going stride-for-stride deep with the big man. He also stole a sideline interception from Green in man coverage. Later, Green got physical with Shields at the line, and when he didn't resist the officials had no reason to throw a flag and it was an easy 20-yard TD. Shields needs to be stronger down the field. Tramon Williams blitzed exceptionally well (sack, knockdown in four cracks) and threw his body around supporting the run. His coverage was awful, including a missed sideline tackle against Sanu (32 yards), improper leverage against Marvin Jones (22 yards) and getting out-leveraged again by Jones (11-yard TD). When Micah Hyde (15 snaps) got beat on another Sunday from a stack formation early, the Packers moved Williams to the slot and replaced him with Davon House (35) outside. House's inability to strip Sanu cost the defense 16 yards after the catch; otherwise, he impressed. Debuting as a starter, Chris Banjo (54) probably showed more consistent cover skill than Jerron McMillian (14). He is short, but his speed and focus seemed OK. M.D. Jennings chased down Dalton for a sack and ran back a fumble for a TD. He continues to wait a count long before attacking the man with the ball.

KICKERS (3 ½)

Mason Crosby hit straight balls on field goals of 41, 19 and 26 yards, a sign that he's on rhythm and in balance. Tim Masthay benefited from 16 yards of roll to average 43.3 yards (gross and net) and only 3.53 seconds of hang time on three punts. Hammering away each time, Masthay's six kickoffs had hang times of 3.90, 3.51, 2.89, 3.81, 3.08 and 4.06. His distance average was 70.8, but if he isn't more consistent, one of those line drives will be coming back 105 yards.

SPECIAL TEAMS (2 ½)

His abominable fumble on a Mike Nugent's short kickoff cost Ross his job. LB Desmond Bishop, his former teammate at California, once said that Ross was one of the two or three best and hardest-running RBs he ever faced anywhere based on his days on the Golden Bears' scout team. Ross just never showed it here. Rob Francois beat a block by LB Jayson DiManche and drilled Brandon Tate, forcing a fumble that the Bengals recovered. Hustling Datone Jones beat Boling and blocked an extra point. Jamari Lattimore led with two tackles. Poor work by Mulumba almost led to a blocked punt. Hyde is no Jarrett Bush on special teams.

OVERALL (3)

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