

Rating the Packers: Week 14 vs Falcons

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

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Green Bay - The situation was about as grim as grim can be at halftime Sunday when the Green Bay Packers, serenaded by boo-birds, trudged off frigid Lambeau Field trailing the lowly Atlanta Falcons, 21-10.

Then the defense began to play, the crowd got into it and, lo and behold, the Packers were back to .500 and just one-half game out of first place in the NFC North Division thanks to their 22-21 victory.

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

RECEIVERS (3 ½)

Catching heat from the coaches for failure to sustain as a run blocker and ineffectual performance in the passing game, Andrew Quarless (46 snaps) responded with his best showing of the season. He caught six of the seven balls thrown to him for a career-high 66 yards. At the sideline, he broke off his route and stretched high to make a spectacular catch for 8 yards. He released nicely on a bootleg, found an opening for 21 in the deep middle and split wide against backup FS Zeke Motta before beating him on a back-shoulder 2-yard toss for the winning TD. Since dropping six passes as a rookie in 2010, Quarless has dropped just two of 41. On Sunday, his hands looked soft and strong. Quarless admitted the Falcons almost ignored him, which was understandable given his uneven play. Although Quarless wasn't charged with a sack in Detroit, his run blocking was brutal. He was a bit better this week but did lunge and miss DE Stansly Maponga on the back side for one "bad" run and got jacked by other D-linemen at the point on two other short gains. Brandon Bostick didn't get a snap until late in the first half and finished with only 11. Just three of his snaps came with his hand down because he hasn't gained trust yet as a blocker. He continues, however, to be an athletic load with the ball under his wing. Presumably, Ryan Taylor played more (18) than Bostick because of his better blocking and reliability. Jordy Nelson (70 of 71 snaps) is a pro's pro. He's had to play somewhat out of position as the slot. He's more lethal outside, but when his limited chances arise he almost always seems to deliver.

OFFENSIVE LINE (3)

Josh Sitton didn't allow a pressure or "bad" run in another solid effort. Sitton creates consistent movement, such as on a third and 1 when he bulled DE Cliff Matthews so James Starks could charge behind him for 5. He stymied most pass rushers one-on-one. In the second half, when asked to execute a reach block, he exploded from his stance and eliminated his man. On a unit that continues to have too many problems against stunts, he's easily the best in that department. It wasn't a good day for T.J. Lang or Evan Dietrich-Smith. They were involved in two sacks, and of their combined total of six "bad" runs Dietrich-Smith had 3½ and Lang had 2½. Any line coach would love the way Lang establishes his turf, projecting a physical and even menacing disposition. But he's allowing too much penetration in the run game and just isn't sharp. Part of it probably has been being forced to switch from guard and center frequently in the last month. The entire offense deserves censure for not chasing LB Sean Weatherspoon harder on his 71-yard TD jaunt. Lang did pursue but then overran him, didn't break down and blew the tackle 20 yards from the end zone. It looked terrible, and Lang played as a D-lineman as a freshman at Eastern Michigan. Dietrich-Smith missed two days of practice but went the distance on a sprained ankle. Everyone had problems with DT Corey Peters, especially Dietrich-Smith and Lang. Don Barclay didn't have a glaring bad play in 71 snaps other than the sack that he allowed to DE Jonathan Massaquoi on an inside move. Barclay was poor with his hands and then wasn't able to recover. David Bakhtiari bounced back from his Detroit debacle with a two-hurry, one-"bad"-run performance. The Packers pulled a guard on seven runs, more than they have all season.

QUARTERBACKS (3)

Matt Flynn was both professional and workmanlike. With snowflakes flying and the temperature hovering around 10, he wasn't the least bit affected and just did his job. Flynn's a Texas quarterback. Confidence has never been an issue. He can run a huddle, inspire teammates with his toughness and lead a comeback. He made half a dozen very nice throws, completing 75% with two or three drops. He showed a tendency to lock on to a receiver, and a more experienced linebacker corps might have made him pay. He ran his way into one sack, and on five scrambles his eyes didn't seem to be downfield. He runs to run. Twelve sacks in two games are extreme. Flynn can be indecisive, partly because he has some difficulty seeing through the trees. His release is fairly slow, too.

RUNNING BACKS (3½)

Eddie Lacy paid a physical price for the 65 yards that he carved out in 20 carries against one of the NFL's worst run defenses. Lacy broke just one tackle in the first half, then suffered a sprained right ankle on the final play. After sitting out the first two series of the third quarter, Lacy played 16 of his 48 snaps in the final 1½ quarters and broke seven more tackles (rookie ILB Paul WorriLOW had three). It was a gutty effort, one his coaches at every level have just come to expect. Lacy did miss some reads and ran a little too much east-west. He also was dealing with inferior blocking. In the first quarter, Bakhtiari missed a block on Massaquoi, but Lacy saw it, made a subtle juke and skipped away for a gain of 4. When Lang got back-doored by DE Malliciah Goodman, Lacy spun away to turn a 4-yard loss into a 1-yard gain. His longest gain, 11, came when he geared down and cut back left. In the red zone, Goodman happened to be in coverage and, after a running start, perhaps hit Lacy as hard as he has been hit all year. Halted at the 1, Lacy came back on the next play to score despite a hard shot right on his left hip from FS Thomas DeCoud, who suffered a head injury and didn't return. Lacy did make an improper read and, as a result, Flynn was sacked by blitzing SS William Moore. In just seven carries, Starks (15) broke two tackles and also had a pair of 5-yard gains on runs that were poorly blocked. When Mike McCarthy didn't use a single two-back set in the first half, John Kuhn played four snaps. He finished with 19, including 12 as a traditional fullback in the second half when his blocking was effective. He made a bad mistake not trying to chase Weatherspoon.

DEFENSIVE LINE (3)

Trying to get past injuries and turn around a so-so season, Johnny Jolly (32) might have played his best game. He batted down his first pass since August, dug for and made a critical fumble recovery and posted a season-high five tackles. Jolly shed blocks by RT Jeremy Trueblood, LT Lamar Holmes and RG Peter Konz. Each time, he drew attention to himself by leaping to his feet and making sure fans knew who just made the play. Both Jolly and Ryan Pickett (24) overpowered Konz at times. Pickett trashed Konz to upend and knock Steven Jackson from the game temporarily and disengaged from Konz again to tackle Jackson for 2. The only pressure by a D-lineman was by B.J. Raji (35), who beat Konz up the field. It was his best rush in weeks. It once was a given that Raji would be on the field for every important snap. That's no longer the case. Mike Daniels (24) needs to find his second wind. Even against the Falcons' weak O-line, he didn't generate a pressure. Datone Jones (nine) wasn't in much but made two plays on awareness and hustle. Rookie Josh Boyd played a season-high 13 snaps, including his first snap of the season at NT in the 3-4. Boyd generally held firm against double teams, then spun off to engulf a play or two.

LINEBACKERS (4)

Clay Matthews (54) was double-teamed on 52.4% of his individual rushes, well above his previous high of 32% against Washington. Matthews did have a pair of knockdowns against Holmes, but the Falcons made sure he wouldn't beat them with constant chipping by backs. That often left Nick Perry (33) and Mike Neal (31 at LB, four at DL) one-on-one, and both took advantage. Late in the first half, Perry destroyed backup RT Ryan Schraeder with three straight hurries. With the game on the line in the last 2 minutes, he beat Konz for pressures on a pair of stunts with Daniels. The fact Perry did his damage from the left side when he much prefers the right undoubtedly buoyed the outlook of the defensive staff. Perry was quick to shed TE Tony Gonzalez in the run game but also was washed inside on Jackson's cutback around his side for 13. Neal's 2½ pressures also came against Schraeder, possibly the worst tackle Green Bay has seen this season. Neal's biggest play was the strip-sack in the fourth quarter. On the inside, Brad Jones (39) and A.J. Hawk (58 of 58) were mediocre. Jones overpursued and was knocked from his cutback lane on Jackson's 22-yard run. On the 36-yard TD pass to Drew Davis, Jones was stoned by diminutive RB Jacquizz Rodgers on a one-on-one blitz so Matt Ryan had time to scan the entire field. Jones left with an ankle injury after being pin-balled by Konz. The unit didn't have a missed tackle.

SECONDARY (4)

Let's face it. If Jarrett Bush doesn't break up the fourth-down pass to Gonzalez, the Falcons probably win. Given the Hall of Fame-bound tight end and the situation, it might have been the Packers' defensive play of the year. Instead of using Tramon Williams (58) inside in sub and inserting Davon House outside, the coaches benched House (one) after two weeks of non-physical play and went with Micah Hyde (36) as the nickel and Bush (17) as the dime. Bush, in limited duty, has been aggressive and effective in coverage. He's fearless, big and seasoned. What a moment it was to see Bush, a career backup, get all over Gonzalez on one of his automatic routes and knock the ball away. Then Bush sealed the victory with as strong an interception as you'll ever see. You talk about desire. Those two plays should be shown in high school, collegiate and NFL tape rooms for years to come. Williams also played well. On Neal's strip-sack, Ryan had to hold the ball when Williams was all over a slant route being run by Darius Johnson, his primary target. Sam Shields (57) wasn't as good against Roddy White. In all, Shields gave up four completions in six attempts for 53 yards. At free safety, M.D. Jennings fanned trying to tackle Davis on the TD. It was his 17th play, and after another four-play series he was pulled in favor of Sean Richardson. In 38 snaps, Richardson broke down nicely against Rodgers in a one-on-one situation but didn't show enough thrust and the little man still gained 3. Morgan Burnett (58) moved from strong safety to free safety so the 219-pound Richardson could play near the line. Burnett let Davis get inside on the TD and, in a tough assignment, lost track of Gonzalez on his 2-yard TD reception.

KICKERS (4½)

Tim Masthay picked the perfect time (56 seconds left) for his best punt of the year. His 62-yard boot (12 yards roll) into a slight wind cleared the head of PR Robert McClain before settling at the 1. Masthay's three-punt averages were 47.3 yards (gross), 44.7 (net) and 3.55 seconds (hang time). Mason Crosby aced the arctic weather, hitting from 40 into a slight wind and from 33 and 25 with a slight wind. His six kickoffs averaged 62 yards and 3.62.

SPECIAL TEAMS (3½)

Hyde had one of his better days with kickoff returns of 31 and 30 yards plus a 12-yard punt return. ILB Victor Aiyewa and Richardson sustained their blocks for Hyde and were rugged in coverage.

OVERALL (3½)

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