

Rating the Packers: Week 15 at Cowboys

Packers go from very bad to very good

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

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Green Bay - Think about this. The Green Bay Packers' only points in the first half Sunday at AT&T Stadium came on a 57-yard field goal. That's how bad they were in the first 30 minutes, trailing, 26-3.

Forty-six players and about 20 assistant coaches share in the glory that became the improbable 37-36 victory over the Dallas Cowboys.

Above all, it was a tribute to coach Mike McCarthy for altering his offensive plan at halftime, approving Dom Capers' increased use of pass-rush pressure on defense and, above all, keeping the players believing.

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

RECEIVERS (4 ½)

Of the six balls thrown to him, Jarrett Boykin caught all six for a team-high 83 yards. He ran two exquisite comebacks for gains of 10 and 13 yards, shot across the middle on a shallow crosser for 14, ran hard on a bubble screen for 10 and beat CB Brandon Carr for 27 on a beautiful back-shoulder fade. Boykin exudes quiet strength in everything he does. His improvement after the catch from Year 1 to Year 2 has been remarkable. He gets north-south in a hurry, almost always falls forward and runs like a mini-tank. After motioning across to a tight-wing position, he had the courage to slice straight-ahead inside the 5 and knock DE Jarius Wynn off his pins. Boykin (played 52 of the 73 snaps) appears to have more life in his legs than James Jones (64), who continues to battle through knee and ankle injuries. He has problems separating. Still, Jones' 39-yard reception on an 8-yard slant was the result of three broken tackles. The 13-yard TD pass to Jordy Nelson (69) on third and 3 that gave the Packers their second score was underthrown. It easily could have been intercepted by capable CB Orlando Scandrick but Nelson vaulted high and took the ball away. After a disappointing three months, Andrew Quarless (59) has shown more as a receiver in two weeks than he ever had before. Three times he walked out as a slot receiver and beat defenders for double-digit gains. He also scored a TD from out wide for the second week in a row. This time, he went inside to beat FS Jeff Heath. Quarless was at least partially responsible for one of the two sacks, but in the run game he was better with his technique and for a change didn't have a "bad" run. With Brandon Bostick limited to three snaps because of a foot injury and Jake Stoneburner inactive, the Packers were reduced to using Ryan Taylor (24) as a split receiver three times.

OFFENSIVE LINE (4)

The Packers continued to use a strong mix of man-type running plays in addition to their zone plays. Basically, they're wrapping a guard up on a linebacker, and both Josh Sitton and T.J. Lang are athletic enough to handle it. Lang wasn't able to keep his feet on an early pull and a promising run didn't materialize. However, it was his pull that helped spring Eddie Lacy on a 60-yard run off left tackle that opened the second-half charge. In all, Lang pulled seven times on runs that gained 97 yards (13.9). Sitton's six pulls were for runs totaling 43 (7.2). Jason Hatcher, who entered the weekend sharing the NFL lead for sacks by an interior player with 9, didn't even have a pressure. Lang blocked Hatcher most of the time, got away with a few holds and had a strong day. The toughest matchup was outside against DE DeMarcus Ware, who played most of the time across from David Bakhtiari. Neither Bakhtiari nor Don Barclay gave up a pressure to Ware, and even though Ware appears to be a declining player it still was an achievement. Bakhtiari had his head down more than once and missed Ware a few times, but the ball was out. He also needed to be saved once on an inside move by the double-teaming Sitton. Of the four "bad" runs charged to the unit, Barclay had 1½, Evan Dietrich-Smith and Bakhtiari each had one, Lang had one-half and Sitton didn't have any.

QUARTERBACKS (4½)

Matt Flynn was humbled since leaving Green Bay. Now he's back where he belongs and taking full advantage. In that first half he was lousy, just like almost everyone else. He bird-dogged a pick into traffic, threw high on a WR screen, was low to Taylor on a slot out and didn't get the ball out where Lacy could do something with it on a bungled third-and-1 rollout pass. At halftime, it seemed to be even money that McCarthy would turn to Scott Tolzien, and it's possible that Flynn might never have had a chance to start again. But McCarthy stayed with the collected, cocksure Flynn and was richly rewarded for his patience. That back-shoulder toss to Boykin was low and away, hard and tightly spiraled. Cowboys coordinator Monte Kiffin blitzed more than he has been, and Flynn probably had a chance to get the ball out on the first sack. In all, Kiffin sent five or more on 24.4% of passes and six or more a hefty 13.3%. On the first play of the winning TD drive, Flynn stood tall on a five-step drop from under center as the Cowboys' 6-man pressure thundered all around him. He threw a bullet to Quarless, who was crossing behind SLB Kyle Wilber, for 18. One time, Hatcher beat Lang badly off the snap but Flynn zipped a short stick route to Quarless before Hatcher could get within three steps. Flynn also made a tough throw on the hard run to his right for 10 to Boykin on the comeback. Way back when, Flynn blew past Brian Brohm because he was so much more resourceful and personable. He showed it again in Dallas.

RUNNING BACKS (4½)

Playing on a bad ankle, Lacy was on the field for 56 snaps compared to just seven for James Starks. My inclination would be to use Starks more often, but the coaches insist Lacy is too good to remove. With the hits he has taken, one wonders how long he'll hold up. He broke four tackles this time, including two on a fourth-quarter run when defenders didn't seem all that interested in having a collision. In the first quarter, the Cowboys ran a stunt on a screen pass that affected the linemen's ability to get out. MLB Justin Durant read it, beat the block of Dietrich-Smith and spilled Lacy for a 6-yard loss. The ball did come out, but he was ruled down. In one of Lacy's most impressive accomplishments, he hasn't fumbled since the first game. The only pressure charged to a back came on Lacy's shoddy cut block of Ware that led to a knockdown of Flynn. Kuhn (26) took out two Cowboys on Lacy's 60-yard run. The Packers ran nine snaps from their inverted wishbone formation, usually with Kuhn and Quarless in front of and wide of Lacy. Because the set is perfectly balanced, it forces defenses to declare the strong side when that isn't evident. It can lead to disorganized defenses and big plays for the offense. It should be remembered that four of the Cowboys' five best linebackers and four of their six best D-linemen were out by halftime.

DEFENSIVE LINE (2½)

Rookie Josh Boyd played 32 snaps, six fewer than he had played all season. Part of the reason was the shoulder injury suffered by Johnny Jolly that KO'd him after six snaps. But Boyd didn't only replace Jolly in the base defense. He played everything, even alongside Mike Daniels (40) on third down at times. His first snap couldn't have been more impressive when he powered through LT Tyron Smith and tackled DeMarco Murray for a 3-yard loss. Later, he pursued right past Ryan Pickett (34) and B.J. Raji (39) to tackle Murray all the way from the back side on a 6-yard run that otherwise might have been out the gate. He also drew a holding penalty on RT Doug Free. And he stopped Murray after a gain of 4 on the Cowboys' final running play. Boyd and Raji each had a pressure. The Packers' most effective pass rusher was Daniels, who trashed the double-team of C Travis Frederick and RG Mackenzy Bernadeau for a sack and beat Smith on a stunt for a pressure. Daniels was back showing violence coming out of his stance. Jolly got too high and was displaced on Murray's 11-yard run to start the game. Raji's lone tackle came when Murray barreled right into his chest about 4 yards downfield. Pickett scrambled off a few blocks but also had problems getting reached by Frederick. Limited to 16 snaps by the emergence of Boyd, Datone Jones was a non-factor.

LINEBACKERS (2½)

Not many players have ever throttled Clay Matthews, but Smith, his former teammate at Southern California, did just that. Of the 36 individual rushes (excluding stunts) by Matthews, the Cowboys single-blocked him 32 times. Only five of Matthews' rushes came on the other side against Free. Matthews kept trying to power-rush Smith but the third-year man was having none of that. He didn't seem to be attempting to knock down Smith's hands or slipping by on quickness. Smith, the ninth player drafted in 2011, looked every bit an all-pro player. Matthews (68) finished with 2½ pressures compared with two for Mike Neal (41 at OLB, four as a DT) and none for Nick Perry (28) or Andy Mulumba (eight). Neal posted a hustle sack in 9.7 seconds down the stretch but was neutralized for the most part by Free. Neal had another miscue on a bootleg, losing containment and breaking stride when Tony Romo pump-faked him to buy time. Perry (foot) just isn't 100%. Brad Jones (45) came back after suffering an ankle injury early and was up and down (two missed tackles), especially in coverage. At times, he was all over TE Jason Witten and others. On another pass, he missed the jam and got beat vertically by Witten for 27. A.J. Hawk played every snap again (73) and was adequate.

SECONDARY (4)

When Matthews read the oncoming wham block of TE Gavin Escobar, he flushed Romo to set in motion Sam Shields' spectacular interception with 3 minutes left. It was like a bolt from the blue, a cornerback with absolutely no safety help knifing in front of WR Miles Austin and snatching it with his gloved hands. Romo couldn't believe it. Few could. Four plays before the interception, Capers was in another nine-man front to stop the run and Shields shadowed Dez Bryant deep and broke the pass up. Shields saved two TDs with end-zone breakups and competed hard. His bad habit of peeking in the backfield returned on Bryant's slant-and-go behind him for 37, and he was out of position and then missed a feeble attempted tackle on Witten's 25-yard TD. On the other side, Tramon Williams also played all 73 snaps and was solid. Twice he made solo tackles of Murray in the open field. With 1½ minutes left, Williams made the savvy call to drop his man on the sideline to go pick hunting in the slot where Jarrett Bush was covering Cole Beasley. When Beasley cut off his route, Williams guessed where Romo's pass would be headed and made the sure-handed, game-saving interception. Nickel back Micah Hyde (47) was OK, giving up three completions in four attempts for 30. Bush (20), the dime back once again, gives such phenomenal effort that it's possible officials subconsciously cut him some slack. They're human, too. Bush did have a costly holding penalty but was persistently pesky against Witten. Morgan Burnett (73) tracked the end-zone pass to Witten all the way. He made the breakup, not the interception. He just hasn't been the physical, ball-hawking performer that the coaches hoped he would become. M.D. Jennings (33) kept his starting job, but Sean Richardson (40) played slightly more and Chris Banjo didn't play at all. Bryant overpowered Jennings in the rear of the end zone for a 5-yard TD. Richardson didn't show an abundance of range to the boundary on a bomb to Bryant that skimmed off his hands, his run support was so-so and he didn't show much thud on two rushes.

KICKERS (4½)

Mason Crosby probably would have made his 57-yarder from 63 to 65. It was crushed. On seven kickoffs (five touchbacks), he averaged 73.4 yards and 4.13 seconds of hang time. Tim Masthay's four-punt averages were 49.3 (gross), 42.5 (net) and 4.5 (hang time).

SPECIAL TEAMS (4)

Hyde had his longest punt return since Oct. 27, following his blocks wide left for 26. Davon House and Bush, who led special teams in snaps with 30, each came close to blocking one of machine-like Dan Bailey's five field goals. Bush had a terrific game overall. After the units didn't have a penalty in three games, House could have avoided his fair-catch interference foul. Newcomer Kahlil Bell broke free inside and probably should have blocked a second-quarter punt by Chris Jones. There were no missed tackles.

OVERALL (4)