

Rating the Packers: Week 16 vs Steelers

Mistakes doom Packers against Steelers

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

Posted: Dec. 24, 2013

Green Bay - Matt Flynn's fumble. Nick Perry's encroachment penalty. The failure of Evan Dietrich-Smith to snap the ball that led to the fatal false-start penalty. Flynn's decision-making on the final play.

Those four egregious errors occurred in the last 3 minutes late Sunday afternoon, dooming the Green Bay Packers to their bitter 38-31 defeat at the hands of the Pittsburgh Steelers at Lambeau Field.

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

RECEIVERS (4)

Twelve passes were thrown to James Jones (74 of 79 snaps) and Jarrett Boykin (71), and five to Jordy Nelson. Coordinator Dick LeBeau did some things to minimize Nelson's role, but not enough for that large of a discrepancy. Nelson hasn't been the Packers' most targeted receiver since Game 10. Operating against nickel back William Gay, a competitive overachiever, Nelson didn't catch a ball until the end of the first half. There were just four snaps all game in which he was alone to a side. During Randall Cobb's absence, Nelson has had far more snaps from the slot than anyone else. He's good in the slot, but he's Pro Bowl good outside. As talented and trustworthy as Nelson is, it's surprising Mike McCarthy hasn't found more ways to get him the ball. He shouldn't be a decoy. Toughing it out on bad knee, Jones caught seven of his nine receptions from an outside location. Flynn had no business throwing that curl to him. Ike Taylor was squatting on the route. He got away with it because Jones wanted the ball more and made a miraculous grab. Jones' double moves weren't effective but he broke a few tackles and sold out inside. Boykin also showed courage, extending on a slant with LILB Vince Williams lurking and then breaking three tackles. He had a routine drop but also took a back-shoulder TD catch away from Cortez Allen. Andrew Quarless (60) had one of his better blocking games, especially working against LOLB Jason Worilds at the point of attack late in the first half. You can't blame Quarless for Flynn's interception. He was just getting into his run block and had no idea Flynn was going to rise up and fire.

OFFENSIVE LINE (2)

Perhaps inspired by how well Dallas ran its zone scheme last week, this unit was in fine form for a rushing attack that averaged 5 yards per carry. Players got off the ball in almost perfect unison, then moved together on stretch plays to prevent penetration while cutting off the back side. It was highly impressive, an illustration of how the zone scheme is supposed to look. All five starters did the job. There were just three "bad" runs, and only one was charged to the line. About the only terrible block was by Marshall Newhouse on his first of two snaps as a sixth blocker. Worilds beat Newhouse inside, and he was penalized for holding. Why even play him? The penalty on Newhouse was one of six against the unit although two holds on David Bakhtiari were nullified. The most costly came with 20 seconds left at the 1 when Dietrich-Smith didn't snap the ball on time and T.J. Lang was the first player to jump. That was just a killer mistake. Four of the six fouls were holds and Josh Sitton grabbed the face mask of Worilds on a delay blitz. LeBeau pressured on just 17.4% of passes. Of the three sacks, one came on a simple twist off the right side and another occurred on a power-rushing jail break in which Dietrich-Smith, Sitton and Bakhtiari all got walked back. With LaMarr Woodley on injured reserve and backup Jarvis Jones inactive due to illness, Bakhtiari had his easiest matchup of the season against deep reserves Chris Carter and Stevenson Sylvester. With the zone scheme working so well, McCarthy pulled the guards on just seven runs.

QUARTERBACKS (2)

Flynn's TD pass to Boykin came against a six-man pressure. With unblocked FS Ryan Clark sprinting straight at him, Flynn calmly threw a back-shoulder dart. He drilled a slant to Boykin with Barclay pushed back into his lap. When DE Cameron Heyward, the Steelers' best and most powerful lineman, drove Sitton back into Flynn, he still hung in and delivered a 31-yard strike to Nelson. Flynn doesn't mind taking a licking to make a play. His temperament and composure strike the right chord. On a harsh weather day for quarterbacks, Flynn managed the best he could and made no excuses later. On the interception, Flynn checked from run to pass from an inverted wishbone formation that can be problematic for a one-step toss. He's not Aaron Rodgers. Just stick with the sideline call. On the last snap, he could have just spiked the ball from under center and the Packers still would have had about 8 seconds for third- and fourth-down plays. It's hard to say how the random coverage by Troy Polamalu affected Flynn's choice of Boykin over Nelson on their companion in-breaking routes. Two plays before, he made a great choice going to Quarless on a crosser instead of following through with an ugly-looking screen. On the finale, Nelson seemed to be the better call. The fumble is on Flynn. He also threw half a dozen passes that were off-line or almost picked.

RUNNING BACKS (4½)

Even Eddie Lacy has limits on what type of injuries he can handle. Already playing on a bad right ankle, he limped off late in the third quarter on his 37th snap and didn't return. Before that, Lacy demonstrated the power, the leg drive and the vision opponents have come to respect if not fear. In all, he broke five tackles. On his 14-yard TD, he saw Polamalu and Carter pursuing a little too fast from the back side. So he geared down, cut back left, turned on the speed and spun-leaped over Taylor into the end zone. His teammates seem to adore the guy. He's spirited, unselfish and makes them look good. Plus, his pass protection was solid, too. James Starks played 26 snaps, 11 more than he has in any game since Sept. 22. The Pittsburgh coaches thought Starks ran the ball effectively in the 45th Super Bowl, which was his last game against them. Starks was effective again, pressing the hole better than he has some weeks and really bringing it to the defense. John Kuhn (25) rushed three times for 12 yards, dropped a screen and didn't block as well as usual.

DEFENSIVE LINE (2)

Based on unofficial totals compiled in the press box, none of the seven players had either a solo or assisted tackle. It was expected that B.J. Raji (33) or Ryan Pickett (32) might have done damage against Cody Wallace, the Steelers' No.3 center who is playing with his fifth team. Both players occupied blocks and weren't ever blown out, but they didn't get off blocks, either. Wallace and Raji had been getting under each other's skin when Wallace hit Raji in the face and the officials saw Raji retaliate for a 15-yard penalty. You just can't do it. Later, Raji was on the back side of a running play when he exploded with his hands and left Wallace in a heap. It was a seldom-seen flash of dominance that was often seen in 2010. As usual, Mike Daniels (30) was the best rusher. Daniels' worst play occurred on Le'Veon Bell's 4-yard run that set up his winning TD on the next play. Playing RE in the 4-4 goal-line defense (C.J. Wilson would have been the better choice), Daniels was knocked so far from his gap by LT Kelvin Beachum that pulling RG David DeCastro could wheel through the gaping hole. Failure there might have been the difference between 3 and 7 points. Datone Jones played a season-low four snaps, effectively replaced by Josh Boyd (24) in many sub situations. Boyd was just OK. Wilson played six snaps.

LINEBACKERS (3½)

The Packers got just 21 snaps from Clay Matthews (thumb) and 19 from Brad Jones (ankle) before they exited with recurring injuries. Matthews posted the only sack, beating Beachum off the edge in 2.6 seconds. Mike Neal (48) had just one pressure against RT Marcus Gilbert. He also gave up a 6-yard bootleg toss on a fourth-and-1 and lost his gap integrity twisting inside on Ben Roethlisberger's 13-yard TD. Neal, however, did set an extremely strong edge against TEs Heath Miller and Matt Spaeth and bounced off a cut block by Gilbert to tackle Miller a yard short on a third-and-6. Nick Perry (22) needs an off-season to rehab his bad foot. Playing more than he has in a month, Andy Mulumba (25) didn't do anything as a rusher but was stout against the run. The interception by A.J. Hawk (58) was one of the finest plays of his long career. He read Roethlisberger's eyes, leaped high and tipped the ball to himself. His gap accountability has been inconsistent in recent weeks, and he made it too easy for Wallace to eliminate him on Bell's 22-yard draw play. Hawk had Bell by the legs when Jamari Lattimore (34) stripped him to set up a TD. Jones seems more at ease than Lattimore with Hawk's role directing traffic and barking orders. Lattimore vacated the middle on Roethlisberger's TD jaunt. Concerned with Roethlisberger's mastery of extending plays, Dom Capers pressured a season-low 14.3% on passes. Astonishingly, there wasn't a single inside-linebacker blitz.

SECONDARY (2)

After CB coach Joe Whitt said Friday that Micah Hyde had everything necessary to play safety at some point, the Iowa rookie was at his physical best. Playing 49 snaps as the nickel back, Hyde was heavily involved at the line in run support. Without hesitation, he took on a pulling guard with the proper shoulder and forced a run inside. He beat WR Emmanuel Sanders off the back side and helped tackle Bell for no gain on a third-and-2. On a similar play, Hyde got rid of WR Markus Wheaton and made a tackle for loss on a third-and-1. He also applied tight coverage. Morgan Burnett (58) and M.D. Jennings (22) each missed two tackles and Sam Shields (53) missed one. Burnett committed too early, dropped his head and was hurdled by Bell on a 25-yard run. That cost the defense an extra 15 yards. Jennings gave up an additional 17 yards by missing Bell and Antonio Brown. Sean Richardson (36) provides far more size in the box than Jennings, and was more than adequate as a run stopper. He's also somewhat stiff in coverage, and was too deep on Spaeth's far-too-easy 11-yard TD catch. Tramon Williams (57) had a long day trying to keep up with the cat-quick Brown. He looked the wrong way on Brown's 36-yard reception behind him, gave up a back-shoulder pass for 18 and avoided a slant-and-go TD pass of 15 yards when Roethlisberger made an awful throw.

KICKERS (2½)

Mason Crosby connected from 22 yards, had one blocked from 23 that was wiped out by penalty and averaged 61 yards and 3.77 seconds of hang time on six kickoffs. Tim Masthay's five-punt day opened with a one-hop snap from Brett Goode, which was one of his worst ever. His averages were 41.6 (gross), 33.4 (net) and 3.82 (hang time).

SPECIAL TEAMS (1)

It was a banner game for Hyde and the kickoff-return unit. Hyde's runbacks of 70, 39 and 33 yards all exceeded the club's long of 31 in the first 14 games. The blocking was better sustained than usual, and Hyde hit the gaps hard. On the other hand, Sanders returned a kickoff for 46 when Mulumba and Jennings couldn't get off blocks and Crosby had to save the day. Masthay was called on to tackle Brown on his 41-yard punt return when Jake Stoneburner and Kahlil Bell overran him and Mulumba missed. On fourth and 3, Perry inexplicably jumped offsidelines on a field-goal block, and his gaffe quickly turned into the winning TD. P Mat McBriar completed a long pass for 30 yards on the side of the field where Davon House and Kuhn were located. Stoneburner muffed a pooch kickoff but recovered himself. Heyward blocked the field goal in a gap occupied by Derek Sherrod and Newhouse. Stoneburner and Victor Aiyewa drew major penalties.

OVERALL (2½)

From the Dec. 24, 2013, editions of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel