

# Rating the Packers: Week 17 at Bears

## Late heroics save game

*By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*

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**Green Bay** - The Green Bay Packers were anything but great Sunday at Soldier Field, just like no team was in the NFC North Division this season.

But with a gift touchdown in the first half and an improbable touchdown in the final minute, the Packers won the division for the fourth time in coach Mike McCarthy's eight seasons (and third in a row) with a 33-28 victory over the Chicago Bears.

Here is a rating of the Packers against the Bears, with their one to five football totals in parentheses:

### **RECEIVERS (4)**

Averaging only 5.3 targeted passes in the last four games, Jordy Nelson had 15 Sunday. It exceeded his record of 14 against Detroit in Game 16 of 2011. With Randall Cobb back in tow (he played 36 of 77 snaps), Nelson worked more outside than he had in three months. From the slot, Nelson accelerated quickly into his routes and was too much for nickel back Isaiah Frey to handle. His decisiveness, size and stamina make Nelson an eminently reliable target, one Aaron Rodgers used to his fullest advantage. When the Packers trailed, 28-20, Nelson began the charge breaking tackles by CB Tim Jennings, DE Julius Peppers, SS Major Wright and WLB Lance Briggs to turn a run-turned-hitch into 34 yards. On the final drive, when the Packers faced their second fourth and 1, Rodgers motioned Cobb from the left to right slot so Nelson would be one-on-one wide against CB Zack Bowman with their best play. Nelson worked up 8 yards, dropped his hips, came back and made a tremendous catch of a shin-high pass. Nelson could have gone harder after a pair of inside-breaking routes, including a ball in the end zone that probably would have been snared if he had extended with two arms instead of one. Nelson (76) and James Jones (75) were typical iron men. All six of Jones' receptions came on hitches or short stop routes, including four for 32 yards with Bowman playing off. Jones didn't make any fancy moves but did gain 32 of his 41 yards after the catch. Jones had the unit's only obvious drop. Jarrett Boykin (38) saw his playing time reduced to accommodate Cobb. Boykin came all the way back from the 2-yard line to the 15 as the only aware player on the field for the gift TD. He made an excellent crack-back block on a 14-yard run but missed Jennings on a promising screen pass. Andrew Quarless, playing 34 of 62 snaps with his hand down, blocked adequately and made a remarkable 22-yard catch of a pass inside that FS Chris Conte should have intercepted. Ryan Taylor (13) took all the No.2 snaps at tight end when Jake Stoneburner didn't even play on special teams.

## **OFFENSIVE LINE (4)**

McCarthy called more power-type running plays than he has all season, hoping to cut the penetrating Bears' defense in half and adding bulk at the point against a smallish front. Josh Sitton pulled seven times (for gains of 15 yards), Evan Dietrich-Smith was 4-16 and T.J. Lang was 6-62. The pulling guards generally adjusted well on the second level when they had room to fold around center. Many times, however, there was no movement at the point, especially against DT Jeremiah Ratliff. Lang came off hard and moved DT Corey Wootton on John Kuhn's critical fourth-and-1 conversion. There were 11 "bad" runs; of the seven charged to the O-line, David Bakhtiari had one and the other four linemen had 1½. Three times Rodgers was able to step up through the middle because Sitton, Dietrich-Smith and Lang kept the middle clean. Peppers came to play for a second time this season against Green Bay, and Bakhtiari had another trial by fire. Peppers beat him for a strip-sack, but Rodgers was given some of the blame because it took 4.4 seconds. Peppers and Shea McClellin knocked Bakhtiari off the ball several times, including a bull rush in which Peppers almost tipped the rookie onto his back. Ala Mark Tauscher, Bakhtiari somehow recovered and Rodgers completed the pass. As usual, Lang was the keeper of every pile. Any defender lingering too long on a Green Bay ball carrier automatically earns a swat or shove from the "Eastern Michigan Enforcer."

## **QUARTERBACKS (4)**

This was Rodgers' 95th start, counting playoffs. By rough estimate, he might have performed better in half of them. Yet, his 48-yard TD pass on fourth and 8 to Cobb might have been his greatest single play, given the circumstances, the in-your-face rush by Peppers and the pressure upon completing that long pass through the frigid night. There was no way Rodgers could be sharp after a two-month layoff, and he wasn't. Six to eight of his 40 passes (I count two-point conversions) either were low, high or behind receivers. The only reason Conte felt comfortable leaving Quarless was the fact Rodgers was bird-dogging Boykin in the end-zone corner. It was only the third pick he has thrown from inside the opponents' 10 in his career. His other pick was a little high, fast and behind Nelson. Still, Nelson can make that catch. On the other hand, Rodgers made not only the game-winner to Cobb but also a 32-yarder to Nelson on the move. In almost eight full games, his backups completed just one of their 30 passes for 20 yards or more after moving off the designed spot. Rodgers' ad-lib ability also was reflected on his 5-yard scramble on the final drive in which he eluded the onrushing Briggs; the way in which he handled the premature shotgun snap from Dietrich-Smith; how he maneuvered Taylor into a proper set as the play clock ran down on Kuhn's fourth and 1; his alertness telling Boykin to scoop and score; and, finally, how he evaded Peppers, making him pay the ultimate price for blown containment. Three times Rodgers felt compelled to call a timeout, seemingly because he wasn't on the same page with McCarthy's play call.

## **RUNNING BACKS (4½)**

Bears coordinator Mel Tucker more than doubled his five-or-more pressure numbers (16% to 35%) and six-or-more pressure numbers (4% to 12.5%) from the first meeting. It was incumbent upon Kuhn, at least in his 22 snaps, to sort out the unexpected blitzing. Constantly, he showed up in the proper spots to stop rushers dead in their tracks. The highlight, of course, was his hip-jarring cut block that slowed Peppers just enough on the decisive play. Kuhn also made a shrewd read on fourth and 1, allowing McClellin to clear on Quarless' block in front of him before lowering his pads and churning through Wright for the first down. It's a mystery why James Starks wasn't on the field for the last 1½ quarters. Other than letting the ball eat him up for a drop on a check-down, Starks was fresh-legged and terrific in 19 snaps. He broke three tackles in 12 touches whereas game but gimpy Eddie Lacy (43) didn't break any in 23 touches. Starks has never been particularly skilled or dependable in the passing game, but Lacy isn't at this point, either. Starks is a bucking bronco, a long-striding speed back who is making better cuts all the time. Lacy used his blockers well, moving easily off his feet-parallel jump cuts despite the bad ankle. He actually touched helmets with DT Landon Cohen in the right-side A gap before deciding to swing back wide left and scoring standing up. That's what scouts call God-given instinct.

## **DEFENSIVE LINE (3)**

B.J. Raji (32) was more active. He was getting off the ball, attacking blocks better and hustling in pursuit. He was moved out too easily by LT Jermon Bushrod on Matt Forte's 5-yard TD. This didn't qualify as one of the many superb performances Raji has had against Chicago, but it was a step in the right direction. Ryan Pickett (25) gave as good as he got against RG Kyle Long, the strapping rookie. It was another sub game against the Bears; just four of the 50 snaps came in the 3-4 base front. Thus, Josh Boyd (nine) didn't play much and C.J. Wilson was inactive in favor of Jerel Worthy, whose two snaps came on third-and-double digits. Boyd blew up a trap with penetration, leading to a 5-yard loss for Forte at the Green Bay 40 and a punt. Energetic Mike Daniels (26) could muster just one pressure. Datone Jones had five snaps.

## **LINEBACKERS (2)**

Minus Clay Matthews, Mike Neal and Andy Mulumba started and Nick Perry filled in. When RT Jordan Mills damaged his foot on the first play and left for keeps two plays later, it was the first time a Bears O-lineman missed a snap all season. Former Jaguar Eben Britton, a respectable athlete but soft in the run game, yielded just one pressure to Neal, who played 43 of his 46 snaps against him. The Packers need more rush from Neal. In the run game, Neal was too physical for two tight ends and Britton. He kept getting a half-body free and made six tackles. Mulumba beat TE Martellus Bennett for a power-leverage sack in 3.7 seconds, had a pressure against Bushrod and set a strong edge early. Later, the Bears exposed his inexperience in the run game. Perry trashed Bushrod immediately but couldn't push off his damaged foot and Jay Cutler ended up not even being threatened. Late in the third quarter, Perry embarrassed himself by short-circuiting on a coverage and then looking horrendous in space on Forte's easy 33-yard check-down. That was his 12th and final snap because the coaches benched him after that. It was a long day for Jamari Lattimore (39), who replaced injured Brad Jones. He was out of position on Forte's 20-yard run and waited instead of attacking Forte on his 4-yard TD catch. Lattimore showed his speed laterally stopping Forte after a 3-yard run, but overall he seemed much more tentative than usual. A.J. Hawk (46) kept getting jacked or engulfed by C Roberto Garza and the two solid guards and basically was a non-factor.

## **SECONDARY (4)**

Expecting the back-shoulder toss, Tramon Williams (50) stopped his feet when Brandon Marshall ran the fade and the result was a 5-yard TD. Other than that, Williams was outstanding. He forced Alshon Jeffery to fumble from behind. He read a tear screen, reacted before the blockers and tackled Jeffery for a gain of 1. He made solo tackles of Forte twice in the open field. He has been much more physical the second half of the season. On the other side, Sam Shields (50) was fine other than the 37-yard bomb off a double move in which he didn't bring his superior speed to bear against Brandon Marshall. Williams, nickel back Micah Hyde (47) and dime back Jarrett Bush (11) each defended a third-down pass and the Bears had to punt. Playing the final four snaps in a 3-0-8 alignment, Davon House let Jeffery get behind him on the third last play but Morgan Burnett (50) saved the day with an end-zone deflection. Otherwise, Burnett didn't exhibit the athleticism and grit of a top-flight safety. On the 67-yard bomb to Jeffery, Shields was in respectable position but Burnett wasn't. There was plenty of time for Burnett to reach the boundary. But he wasn't in a smooth backpedal and, when he did turn to go, he was stiff out of his break and showed absolutely no burst. After playing Sean Richardson more than M.D. Jennings in the last three games, the coaches favored Jennings this time, 32-18. Richardson was stiff-armed by Forte and enabled him to turn the corner.

## **KICKERS (3½)**

Mason Crosby connected from 33 and 27 yards. Kicking away three times, he averaged 63.7 yards and 3.87 seconds of hang time. His two shorter kicks were well-placed in the right corner. Tim Masthay punted twice, averaging 40 (gross), 15.5 (net) and 4.13 hang time.

## **SPECIAL TEAMS (1½)**

Devin Hester had two big returns. He zipped 39 yards on the opening kickoff when Jennings, House and Bush all lost containment and Crosby was forced to shove him out of bounds. LB Victor Aiyewa retaliated with a punch after the return, tacking on another 15 yards. It was the Packers' only penalty. On Hester's 49-yard punt return, House got pushed inside as the first man down before Mulumba, Nate Palmer and Brett Goode let him get outside. Lattimore missed the tackle at the cost of an extra 15 yards. On KO returns, the Packers aren't getting much from Datone Jones in the middle of the wedge. Hyde fumbled a punt on the catch but Bush recovered. Bush forced Hester to fumble on a KO return but Hester got it back.

## **OVERALL (4)**

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