

Packers individual report card: Defense

By Bob McGinn of the Journal Sentinel

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DEFENSIVE LINE (8)

Josh Boyd: Wasn't ready early, playing just 14 snaps in the first 11 games. In regular part of the rotation after that, logging 116 snaps total as both a five-technique and three-technique (had two snaps as one-technique). Disruptive and unpolished. Must improve his pad level and hand usage. Played harder late than he did in August, when the NFL tempo was brand new. Even at 305, he shows some quickness and some pass rush for a fifth-round pick. One-gapped at Mississippi State but started coming around as a two-gapper after midseason. Has a bright future. **Grade: D+.**

Mike Daniels: Significantly improved in second season. Was team's best interior pass rusher by far with team-leading 31 pressures. Effort was remarkable week after week. Disregard his height (6-0½). He played with superb strength, leverage and violence. Started to demand double-teams after his fast start. Fifth on the D-line in tackles per snap (one every 13.2) but second on team in tackles for loss (five). At least adequate as a base end. Also chipped in with 155 snaps on special teams, adding some muscle on kickoff returns. **Grade: B+.**

Johnny Jolly: Career is in jeopardy because of the bulging disc that he suffered in the C-5 section of his cervical spine Dec. 15. Not only that but he turns 31 in February and his contract expires in March. Jolly averaged just 22.1 snaps in 13 games. He led the D-line in tackles per snap (one every 7.55) and was third in pressures per snap (one every 71.8). Batted down a flock of passes in August but had just one during the season, a far cry from his club-record 11 in '09. Short-area, instinctive power player with minimal quickness, pass rush and range. Some teammates swear by his motivational zeal. **Grade: C-.**

Datone Jones: By season's end Boyd was the better player than Jones, the first-round pick. He needs to get a whole lot tougher and stronger. After reporting at 295, he was playing at 285 in December. Bothered by an ankle injury suffered on the first play of the exhibition season but said it was fine after about a month. Despite prototypical height (6-4), Jones almost never played a down in the 3-4. He averaged 14.9 snaps, never playing more than 23 in a game. His reps were way down in the final three games (16). Jones flashed some rush here and there, finishing second to Daniels in pressures per snap (one every 25.1), and contributed in long pursuit. He ranked sixth in tackles per snap (one every 13.9) and didn't have any for loss. **Grade: D.**

Ryan Pickett: His range has diminished but not his effort. He's always there at the point of attack, occupying double-teams to keep the LBs free and almost never being dislodged from his gap. One scout insisted he didn't disengage from blocks as well as in the past. Pickett ranked second on the unit in tackles per snap (one every 9.89), easily the worst rate of his eight-year career in Green Bay. He'll be 35 next season but stays in shape year-round now and intends to play another season. It could be for near the \$955,000 minimum. **Grade: C.**

B.J. Raji: The extension averaging \$8 million per year that was on the table for some time is off the table now. The Packers still want Raji back, but given his dreadful production it's possible now that he'll return at a much lower rate. What worries some scouts is they say Raji's motor ran so hot and cold even in a contract year. They wonder what will happen after he gets paid. Raji insists he was only following orders to two-gap and protect the ILBs. In 2013, he functioned almost like a sumo wrestler. Raji ranked last on the D-line in tackles per snap (one every 16.4) and was fourth in pressures per snap (one every 87.3). In 2010, his best year, he registered a pressure every 32.4 snaps. Still, at 27, some teams might be extremely interested in him on the unrestricted market because 338-pounders with his athleticism are few and far between. **Grade: C-.**

C.J. Wilson: Played just 123 snaps, down from 355 last year, 397 in '11 and 288 in '10. Third on the unit in tackles per snap (one every 10.25) after finishing first last year. Never approached his excellent rookie season as a pass rusher. He's a bigger man now at 307 pounds, with high confidence in his ability to play the run in a 3-4. He'll be offered a job somewhere, and it still might be in Green Bay. **Grade: D+.**

Jerel Worthy: Made a rapid comeback from Jan. 15 reconstructive knee surgery but proved he wasn't ready in a nine-play debut Nov. 24 against Minnesota. Couldn't hold the point of attack, which was his main problem as a rookie, too. Played just five more snaps after that. Undersized for the base defense but might contribute as an interior pass rusher another year removed from the injury. **Grade: Incomplete.**

LINEBACKERS (11)

Victor Aiyewa: Earnest, intense inside linebacker ran around on special teams in the last six games. Made six tackles. Plays faster than he timed (4.94). Worth another look. **Grade: Incomplete.**

Sam Barrington: Rookie seventh-round draft choice beat out Terrell Manning, a fifth-round pick in '12, for the No. 5 berth inside. Suffered a hamstring injury in Game 8, ending what had been his physical start on special teams. Although Barrington didn't play a snap from scrimmage, he played extensively in exhibition games. He demonstrated a fiery tempo, considerable snap on his tackles and solid rush ability. He isn't particularly big or fast, but his instincts, toughness and smarts (Wonderlic of 23) warrant him a long, long look in 2014. He'll press for major playing time if he continues to develop. **Grade: Incomplete.**

Rob Francois: Mature, resourceful inside backup faces uncertain future after a ruptured Achilles on his 12th snap from scrimmage in Game 4 ended his season. His loss really hurt the special teams. He'll be 29 in May so it's probably unlikely the Packers will offer him a contract. **Grade: Incomplete.**

A.J. Hawk: The good middle linebackers that run defenses combine talent with intangibles. Hawk has all the heart and hustle any coach would want but his shortcomings in speed and athleticism limit the defense. He played more snaps (1,059) than ever before and registered three turnover plays after being shut out the past two years. He led the team in tackles (159) and tackles for loss (5½), finishing second to Brad Jones in tackles per snap among LBs. He also led LBs by allowing six passes of 20 yards or more (his career-high was 7½ as a rookie), led the team by allowing 3½ runs of 20 yards or more and gave up a career-high total of 3½ TD passes. He blitzed 100 times (the Packers would rather blitz Hawk than have him in man coverage), more than twice the total of anyone else, and had his poorest success rate (one every 10 snaps) since '09. He also tied for third in missed tackles with 12. After taking a pay cut in March, he's due a \$500,000 roster bonus March 13. He's better slipping blocks than taking them on. He's also playing much lighter these days. Coaches and teammates swear by his communication and technical skills. **Grade: C.**

Brad Jones: After a pedestrian, injury-filled season, the Packers probably don't like the fact his base salary is to jump from \$1 million to \$2.5 million. Jones missed 3½ games early with a hamstring and another 1½ games late with an ankle injury. He was responsible for five 20-plus passes and 2½ 20-plus runs. He improved his pressure rate from last season. When healthy, Jones is faster than Hawk. He's also leggy, stiff-hipped and not overly instinctive. **Grade: C-.**

Jamari Lattimore: He played better than ever during Jones' absence in October but wasn't nearly as good in December. A DE in college and OLB in 2011 as a rookie in Green Bay, Lattimore's instincts seemed off a year ago as he made the shift inside. He read his keys and blocking combinations more readily this season, triggered fast and made some big hits in the backfield. His pass-rush numbers were top-notch as well, but his primary value always has been on special teams. **Grade: C-.**

Clay Matthews: Failed to play all 16 games for the third time in four seasons, missing one-half game with a hamstring and the equivalent of seven full games with a twice-fractured right thumb. Played just 50.2% of the snaps. One of the NFL's premier players and its highest-paid LB. Settled for 21 pressures, less than half of what he had in each of his first four seasons. Ranked just fourth among five OLBs in tackles per snap (one every 11.2). On the small side for head-butting tackles down after down in the base defense. **Grade: B.**

Andy Mulumba: Free-agent rookie from the Congo who grew up in Montreal and played DE at Eastern Michigan. Physical specimen. Made a relatively smooth transition to a stand-up position. Wasn't ready to play as much as he had to (348 snaps) but will be the better for it next year. Talented, but still needs significant development. **Grade: D+.**

Mike Neal: Might have played his last snap in Green Bay. Lasted just five plays of the wild-card game before bowing out with a knee injury. Didn't practice much the second half of the season but never missed a game in his contract year. Lost more than 25 pounds (to 273) in order to shift from DE to OLB. Second on the team in pressures with 30, five more than he had in his first three injury-filled seasons. Straight-line power rusher with burst and explosive twitch. Constantly fooled because his eye control and experience were lacking. Last among OLBs in tackles per snap but also could be the hardest one for TEs to block at the point of attack. Second on the club in missed tackles with 13. **Grade: B-.**

Nate Palmer: Played 195 snaps as a free-agent rookie, including 60 opposite Neal in the first Bears game. Generally did his job. Didn't give up a play of 20 yards or more, didn't miss a tackle and wasn't penalized. Not as physically imposing as Mulumba, and when it came down to the two of them it was Palmer tabbed to be inactive in six of the last seven games. **Grade: D.**

Nick Perry: Played harder than he did as a rookie, when he seemed confused and not totally committed to the conversion from DE to OLB. Unfortunately for Perry, his playing time increased only from 32.8% to 38.2% because of more injuries. Was just starting to come on as an edge-power rusher when he suffered a broken foot in Game 5. After not forcing a fumble as a rookie, he tied Matthews for the team lead with three. Sat out 5½ of the next six games but was never the same upon his return in Games 12-17. Fourth on the club in pressures with 18½ after having just five in '12. Had the second-most penalties on defense (three). Led OLBs in tackles per snap. Still a liability in space. **Grade: C.**

DEFENSIVE BACKS (12)

Chris Banjo: Made more impact on special teams (273 snaps) than at safety (192). Second in special-teams tackles with 10. Last among the five safeties in tackles per snap. Missed five tackles from scrimmage, too. Undersized at 5-10 but a big hitter with the speed (4.46) that warrants another look. **Grade: D+.**

Morgan Burnett: STATS came up with a category called "Ballhawks," which ranks all defensive players on their total of sacks, interceptions, passes defended and forced fumbles. Burnett tied for 158th place with five despite playing 82.6% of the snaps. When the Packers signed Burnett on July 15 to an extension averaging \$6.19 million they viewed the four-year veteran as the next Nick Collins or Darren Sharper. Based on his play this year, they got someone like Marques Anderson. Burnett's effort and commitment are beyond reproach. He's the best communicator in the back end. He's a more than adequate athlete, has ideal size, runs in the low 4.5s and has roamed wide in the past. Burnett also scored 14 on the Wonderlic, and there remains too much hesitancy in his game. As he pressed to get near the ball, his tackling deteriorated to the point that he led the team with 17 missed tackles. He did lead the safeties in tackles per snap but had just one tackle for loss. He has a \$1.5 million roster bonus due March 15. **Grade: D+.**

Jarrett Bush: Bush's season will be most remembered for the playoff game when he blew containment of Colin Kaepernick on the 49ers' winning drive. It's too bad because in many ways it might have been his finest season after Dom Capers turned to Bush as the dime back in the last five games. In the victory against Atlanta, Bush was the hero with two late plays against TE Tony Gonzalez. In 126 snaps from scrimmage, he wasn't responsible for a 20-plus play and missed just one tackle. As always, Bush was the performance and emotional leader of the special teams. **Grade: B-.**

Casey Hayward: The hamstring injury that he suffered shortly before camp limited him to less than a week of work in August. After pulling it again, he came back for Games 7-9, played 87 uneventful snaps before pulling it a third time and going on IR. His ball and coverage skills were missed.

Grade: Incomplete.

Davon House: Consummate size-speed prospect treaded water in Year 3. At times, he was all over receivers. At other times, he suffered lapses in coverage and hung back in contact situations. It got House benched for Games 13-16 before the injury to Sam Shields last Sunday thrust him onto the field for 61 plays, many in zero-man coverage. He fared well. House gave up 6½ 20-plus passes and three TD passes in 47.2% playing time. Also dropped four interceptions. Despite some inconsistencies, he was among the team's top two or three players on special teams, which he led in snaps with 338. **Grade: C.**

Micah Hyde: A fifth-round pick, the rookie from Iowa proved to be the best tackler in the secondary, pressured well from the slot and tried to play the defense as called. In coverage, he gave up 5½ 20-plus passes and one TD. He played inside and outside, accumulating 39.4% playing time. When Hyde was beat, it usually was the result of being a step slow. Joe Whitt, his position coach, expressed confidence that Hyde could make a seamless switch to safety. Meanwhile, the sure-handed Hyde came out of left field to finish as one of the NFL's most successful dual returners. He covered kicks effectively, too. **Grade: B.**

M.D. Jennings: According to STATS, Jennings tied for 227th place in their "Ballhawks." Despite 75% playing time, he broke up merely two passes and, like every other safety, had no interceptions. He has been just kind of out there for two years. Too often, Jennings broke down in the red zone. He gave up a team-high 4½ TD passes. He lacks height, weight and overall presence. At best, he's a third safety. It's entirely possible the Packers won't make him a qualifying offer as a restricted free agent. **Grade: D-.**

James Nixon: Free-agent cornerback with phenomenal speed. Played one snap from scrimmage before knee cartilage damage sent him to IR at midyear. **Grade: Incomplete.**

Sean Richardson: The Packers cut Jerron McMillian and began playing Richardson, who had missed a full year with a herniated cervical disc that required C5-C6 fusion. He played more snaps than Jennings (114-87) in Games 13-15 before the coaches went back to Jennings (78-36) in Games 16-17. Richardson lurked around the box, used his 219 pounds to provide a physical presence and had just one major glitch in coverage. He was tough, fit gaps and did his job. Whether his stiffness will find him being exploited in coverage will be seen next summer. **Grade: D.**

Jumal Rolle: He spent 11 weeks on the practice squad before being promoted to the 53-man roster for the last two games. He's a 6-foot CB from Division II Catawba College with 4.51 speed and exceptional ball skills. He had stints with Buffalo and New Orleans earlier in the year. He'll have a real shot in 2014. **Grade: Incomplete.**

Sam Shields: Talented man-cover corner. Matched up all over the field with Detroit's Calvin Johnson on Thanksgiving and held up well. Great hands. His classic interception late in Dallas turned that game around. On the timid side at times in run support. Had too many missed tackles (12) after missing just three last year. Hasn't been able to break his bad habit of playing with his eyes in the backfield and losing leverage on routes. Played 79.1% of the snaps, allowing 10 20-plus passes and 3½ TD passes. The Packers have been trying to re-sign Shields for months but the sides appear to be apart on total package and guarantees. **Grade: B.**

Tramon Williams: Turned his season around in the last eight games, notching all four of his interceptions and tackling better than he has since 2010. If the Packers planned to seek a reduction from his \$6.9 million base salary in the final year of his contract, they certainly won't now. Played 98.9% of the snaps in another ironman-type season. Replaced Hayward in the slot near midseason and posted 3½ pressures in 34 blitzes. Responsible for 8½ 20-plus passes and four TD passes. Penalized eight times, five more than anyone else on defense. Missed just six tackles, equaling his career-low from 2008. Registered eight turnover plays, twice as many as any other player on defense, but also had a team-leading five dropped interceptions. **Grade: B+.**

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