

# Packers team report card

*By Bob McGinn of the Journal Sentinel*

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## PASS OFFENSE (A-)

Aaron Rodgers sat out 57½ minutes of the first Chicago game and seven more complete games with a broken collarbone. He played 645 snaps (54.4% of 17 games) compared to 540 (45.6%) for Seneca Wallace (58), Scott Tolzien (158) and Matt Flynn (324). Still, the Packers passed for 266.8 yards per game, 13.7 more than a year ago. Rodgers' passer rating was 104.3, his backups' was 78.0 and their combined mark was 92.0. The average-per-catch of 12.4 yards ranked fifth, and there were 18 completions for more than 35 yards. Running backs had five catches for 20-plus, most since 2005. According to STATS, the Packers tied for fourth in fewest drops. There were 26, the team's fewest since '05. Drop rates were just 3.2% for WRs, 5.7% for RBs and 7.9% for TEs. After dropping 10 of 110 in '12, Randall Cobb didn't drop any of 46. All hands improved after the catch, led by Jermichael Finley's explosive 9.2 YAC average and James Jones' 5.8. Green Bay ranked 24th in sacks (45), then yielded another four in the playoffs. Don Barclay gave up 9½ followed by David Bakhtiari (6½), Evan Dietrich-Smith (six), Rodgers (5½) and Marshall Newhouse (five). The only lost fumble on a reception was by Jones at the front pylon against Washington. Jordy Nelson ranked 10th in yards with 1,314, and that included five 100-yard games.

## RUSHING OFFENSE (B-plus)

Not since Ahman Green and his stellar offensive line were pounding defenses in 2003 have the Packers had a ground game this effective. Having ranked 20th, 27th and 24th in rushing the past three years, Green Bay jumped all the way to seventh (133.5) for its best finish in a decade. Even more impressive was the per-carry average of 4.65, which ranked No. 4. James Starks' 5.54 (89 carries, 493 yards) was the best average by a Packers RB with at least 50 attempts since Eddie Lee Ivey (99-552, 5.58) in 1984. The bell cow was Eddie Lacy, the rough-housing rookie who ranked eighth with 1,178 yards. Green Bay's rushing leaders the past two seasons (Alex Green in '12, Starks in '11) each ranked 38th. Lacy surpassed 100 yards four times and fumbled just once. The Packers ran the ball 43.2% of the time, their most since '08 and above the NFL average of 41.7%. After averaging 148.6 yards per game and 5.04 per carry in the first eight games, there was slippage to 119 and 4.22 in the last nine. With Starks and John Kuhn each going 4 for 4, the Packers converted 14 of 19 on third and 1 and fourth and 1 by rushing. Dietrich-Smith led the way with 22 "bad" runs, and Andrew Quarless had 15; the Packers finished par for the course with 123. New-found strength on the ground was the foundation for improvement in first-down average from 4.79 yards (30th) last year to 5.48 (11th) this year. David Bakhtiari's missed block and Johnathan Franklin's subsequent fumble on the late fourth and 1 in Cincinnati represented low ebb.

## PASS DEFENSE (D)

Crashed from 11th to 24th in yards (247.3), finished a dismal 25th in opponents' passer rating (95.9) and gave up 30 TD passes, third most in club annals. After clamping down on A.J. Green (4-46), Torrey Smith (1-12), Josh Gordon (2-21) and Greg Jennings (1-9) from Games 3-7, the floodgates opened wide. Seven WRs in the last 10 games eclipsed 100 yards, including Dallas' Dez Bryant (11-153). Coupled with Anquan Boldin (13-208) and Pierre Garcon (8-143), there were nine receivers (no TEs) that went over 100 yards. Sam Shields allowed 10 passes of 20 or more yards, followed by Tramon Williams (8½), Davon House (6½) and A.J. Hawk (six). M.D. Jennings led in TD passes allowed with 4½. According to STATS, the Packers joined the 2011 Saints and the Bills and Lions of 2008 as the only teams in the last six seasons that didn't have an interception by a safety. The Packers had 12 picks, their fewest since '05. Green Bay returned its 11 regular-season picks for an anemic 3.3 average, easily their lowest mark since the statistic first was recorded in 1940. Fourteen players shared 45 sacks for the competitive pass rush that ranked sixth in sack percentage. Mike Daniels (31) and Mike Neal (30) led in pressures. Paced by Nick Perry's two strip-sacks, the Packers' total of five was their highest since '02. There were just seven passes batted at the line, fewest since '04. The most effective blitzer with 10 or more rushes was Jamari Lattimore (four pressures). Remarkable late picks made by Jarrett Bush against Atlanta and both Shields and Williams in Dallas will be remembered.

## RUN DEFENSE (D-minus)

The collapse of the defense against the run was as puzzling as it was costly. Through seven games, opponents were rushing for merely 83.6 yards per game and 3.70 yards per carry. Fortified by DE Johnny Jolly, the unit clogged lanes so Frank Gore (21-44), Reggie Bush (13-44), Ray Rice (14-34) and Adrian Peterson (13-60) had little room to run. It all changed after Matt Forte surged 24 times for 124 yards in Game 8. In those last 10 games, the yields soared to 158.2 and 5.2. LeSean McCoy (25-155) was the biggest ground-gainer as the Packers allowed eight 100-yard rushers, their most since '97. The Packers ranked 25th in yards at 125.0, their highest allowance under Dom Capers, and 29th in yards per rush (4.63), their worst rank since '02. Big runs were killers. There were 18 of 20 yards or more, most against Green Bay in more than two decades. Hawk was responsible for 3½ of them, followed by Neal (three) and Brad Jones (2½). The tackle per snap leaders for the three position groups were Jolly (one every 7.55) among D-linemen, Brad Jones (one every 6.15) among LBs and Micah Hyde (one every 7.71) among DBs. Hawk led in snaps (1,059), tackles (159) and tackles for loss (5½). Of the 127 missed tackles, 27 more than a year ago, Morgan Burnett (17) and Neal (13) led the way. It got so bad, the Packers were powerless to prevent the Bears and Eagles from grinding fourth quarters away, at Lambeau Field no less. According to STATS, the Packers ranked 29th by allowing opponents to convert 82.4% on third-and-1 runs (14 of 17).

## SPECIAL TEAMS (D-plus)

Green Bay fell from 12th to 19th in the Dallas Morning News' annual statistical ranking of overall special-teams performance. K Mason Crosby, the comeback kid, stood out by hitting a career-best 89.2% of his field goals. His average distance per attempt (35.5 yards) was the shortest in his seven seasons. After P Tim Masthay allowed a 109-yard return to Cordarrelle Patterson on his 34th kickoff, Crosby took the job back. They combined for a modest total of 30 touchbacks. Masthay duplicated his 21st ranking in net average at 39.0, just off the club record of 39.2 established by Jerry Norton in 1963. Only three teams had a worse turnover differential than the Packers' minus-2. The fumbles were by Jeremy Ross, on a kickoff in Cincinnati, and by Kuhn, on a blocked-punt return in Baltimore. Other forgettable plays were the encroachment penalty against Perry on a field-goal block

that led to Pittsburgh's winning TD; the fake punt on fourth and 7 against the Giants that came up half a yard short; and the 30-yard pass by Atlanta P Mat McBriar. Replacing the injured Cobb early, Hyde ranked fifth in punt returns (12.3) and 14th in kickoffs (24.1). A host of terrible early-season KO returns by Ross and Franklin left Green Bay last by 1.2 yards in opponents' average drive start (25.6). Coverage was weak. The KO return mark of 26.0 was the highest against the Packers since 1948; the punt return mark of 13.1 was the highest against them since 1989.

## PERSONNEL MOVES (C)

When GM Ted Thompson traded down in the second round, Lacy still fell right into his lap with the 61st pick. Then, after trading down twice in the third round, he made the savvy selection of Bakhtiari at No. 109. As season-long starters, they were far more effective than top pick Datone Jones. In all, Thompson's wheeling and dealing turned eight picks into 11 players, and 10 remain on the team. Meanwhile, Brian Gutekunst, the first-year director of college scouting, helped find four rookie free agents that signed first with Green Bay and stuck. Thompson also signed off on the idea that Graham Harrell and B.J. Coleman were capable backup quarterbacks. Wallace would have been much better given an entire off-season to prepare. When Buffalo cut Matt Flynn on Nov. 4, Thompson delayed eight days before signing him. Cut Sept. 23 after a shaky start, Ross had an impressive debut with Detroit (return averages of 29.3, 16.2), including a big game against his old team. Of the 15 in-season roster additions, the most helpful were Flynn and Tolzien. Eschewing unrestricted free agency, the Packers' big off-season signing was TE Matt Mulligan (cut Aug. 31). Meanwhile, the 49ers beat the Packers in Game 1 with a trade acquisition (Boldin) and again last Sunday with a UFA signing (K Phil Dawson). VP Russ Ball's last major re-signing was Burnett (four years, \$24.75 million) on July 15. No agreement could be reached on extensions for B.J. Raji and Shields.

## COACHING (C)

In the off-season, Mike McCarthy promised to find a cure for the injury curse that has wrecked his team since 2010. By the end, he was waving a white flag. Whatever it was that he tried, it didn't work. Counting playoffs, 11 starters missed a total of 58 starts, including Rodgers (seven), Clay Matthews (six), Finley (11) and Bryan Bulaga (17). Meanwhile, another 21 capable backups missed 158 games, including Casey Hayward (14) and Cobb (10). When his starting quarterback was lost for an extended time for the first time in his eight-year tenure, McCarthy was unable to lead the team to play over the absence of Rodgers and the result was an 0-4-1 November. The defense basically caved for 4½ games. Finally, the Packers wrested a tie with the bedraggled Vikings, a pair of one-point victories and another by five to salvage a winning regular season. McCarthy's 3-2-1 record in the NFC North was the poorest of his career. Both the offense (tied for 25th) and the defense (No. 24) were lacking in the red zone. McCarthy made excellent adjustments in his once all-zone run game, incorporating pulling linemen and power plays in addition to strains of the read option. On offense, he didn't call a trick play all year. On special teams, even he admitted his fake-punt call in New York was flawed. The Packers were minus-2 in turnover differential, their lowest finish since Mike Sherman's last club posted a franchise-worst minus-24 in '05.

## OVERALL (C-plus)

Playing one of the NFL's easiest schedules (115-139-2, .453), the Packers didn't beat a team that finished with a winning record and went 0-4 against teams that did. At the same time, they lost to two losing teams and tied another. It made for an 8-8-1 finish (6-10-1 against the spread) after four double-digit victory seasons. Just 13 of the 32 teams posted a winning record, and Green Bay was the only one with a negative point differential (minus-11). Failed final possessions couldn't pull out tight early-season road games against the 49ers and Bengals. When the schedule

softened, they lost Rodgers and were unable to win for a month. Detroit was 7-5 and Green Bay was 5-6-1 on Nov. 28 after McCarthy suffered the second-worst defeat of his tenure, 40-10, at Ford Field. With the Packers booed off the field at halftime the next week against lowly Atlanta, Bush preserved the comeback victory with two phenomenal late plays in coverage against TE Tony Gonzalez. Then the Packers equaled their greatest comeback ever (23 points) with a pulsating one-point triumph in Dallas. With the Lions finishing 0-4, the NFC North was settled Dec. 29 at Soldier Field. A canny blitz pickup by Kuhn, a deft scramble by Rodgers and the subsequent 48-yard TD catch by Cobb gave Green Bay a divisional three-peat. Green Bay ranked as one of the six worst division-winning teams by record in the 36-year history of the 16-game schedule. In the wild-card playoffs, the Packers had battled the 49ers to a 20-20 draw with 5 minutes remaining. Then Hyde couldn't make a fairly easy interception, Bush blew containment and this disjointed season was history.

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