

Rating the Packers: Week 1 at Seahawks

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

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Green Bay - Some of his teammates regard Aaron Rodgers as the finest quarterback in the National Football League. They think Jordy Nelson is special, too.

On Thursday night in Seattle, coach Mike McCarthy denied those illustrious players and the entire offense the opportunity to challenge Richard Sherman, probably one of the three or four best cornerbacks.

Of Nelson's 61 snaps, just two were on the outside right, where the loquacious Sherman was stationed the entire game. Of Rodgers' 34 passes, none targeted Sherman.

Based on STATS data, Sherman allowed two touchdowns and broke up 16 passes in 59 targeted throws last season. Foes completed 50.8% of passes when targeting him, which though good still was higher than completion rates against such cornerbacks as Buster Skrine, Brent Grimes, Jimmy Smith, Desmond Trufant and Dee Milliner. There were many others statistically better than Sherman, too.

Partially as a result, McCarthy failed to get players into any kind of rhythm by giving away about one-third of the field, and that's normally the preferred side for a right-handed quarterback. It might have introduced an element of resignation as well, which wouldn't be a good thing when playing a powerful opponent on the road.

Here's a rating of the Packers in their 36-16 loss to the Seahawks, with their 1 to 5 footballs totals in parentheses:

RECEIVERS (1)

Nelson caught nine of the 14 balls thrown to him, working almost exclusively against press coverage by Byron Maxwell. His long gain was 16 yards on a sideline stop route. The only interception came when Nelson started to dive for a slant route instead of running through it. The ball bounced off his outstretched hands to Maxwell. It was the first time Nelson was judged to be at fault on one of Rodgers' interceptions since the 11th game of his rookie season (2008) when he didn't finish another inside-breaking route in New Orleans and CB Jason David picked it off. Not one of Randall Cobb's 57 snaps came with him alone on a side. Jarrett Boykin (49) played the lonesome end opposite Sherman. Cobb was on the receiving end of the Packers' longest gain, a 44-yard interference call on MLB Bobby Wagner for bumping him deep. At other times, Cobb didn't get much separation against No. 3 cornerback Jeremy Lane. When Lane left mid-game with a groin injury, newcomer Marcus Burley hung right with Cobb, too. Sensing the Packers were ignoring Boykin, single-high FS Earl Thomas began shading toward Nelson's side. Boykin, who had at least one targeted pass in the final 13 games of 2013, saw nary a one. TE Richard Rodgers suffered a neck injury on his 17th snap and came back for only three more. He tried to be physical in-line but the Seahawks knocked him around. Andrew Quarless (46) was moving better than in August. On the three times he flanked wide right, Sherman picked him up.

OFFENSIVE LINE (3½)

C Corey Linsley performed the same way in his regular-season debut as he has been performing all summer. He's tough, strong and more than athletic enough. He didn't allow a pressure (the starters gave up just three) and wasn't at fault on any of the four "bad" runs. He can angle block, reach block, combo block, one-on-one pass block and help others in protection. He has an excellent trait: His man doesn't get to the ball. In fact, the entire unit played well until Bryan Bulaga went out with a sprained knee on the 20th snap. Josh Sitton didn't have any obvious bad plays and threw down DE O'Brien Schofield twice in the span of three seconds. The other guard, T.J. Lang, is kicking butt and taking names downfield and around piles. He's looking to inflict punishment and finish like never before. Lang gave up a late knockdown to DE Michael Bennett and didn't get SLB K.J. Wright blocked on one of his three pulls in the run game. David Bakhtiari has become more aggressive, too. He also had two major penalties. The whole group is getting after people. Other than a poor cut of DE Cliff Avril that ruined one pass, Bulaga was off to a solid start as well. Replacing Bulaga, Derek Sherrod wasn't a complete disaster but it was close. For such a good athlete before his leg-ankle woes, he is a ponderous one now. He didn't seem to be competing hard on sacks by Avril and Bennett (for a sack) off the corner in 3.2 and 3.1 seconds. They got to the edge and Sherrod was late and just kind of gave up. Later on, he missed a back-side cut and let Bennett blow past him inside. He was unable to keep his feet on a block at the linebacker level for a promising run and later on a stunt that enabled Schofield to flush Rodgers.

QUARTERBACKS (2½)

Rodgers played in only two exhibition games, possibly one reason he wasn't sharper. The overriding factor in his mediocrity, of course, was that stingy if not suffocating Seattle defense. Again, the Packers couldn't have asked for more from their protection unit. Rodgers' options were limited. Not only was the right third of the field off-limits, he didn't have a tight end like Jermichael Finley or Brandon Bostick to send down the seam. Rodgers didn't expect the din to affect the no-huddle, and it didn't. He just wasn't overly accurate, seemed a little jumpy about the rush and didn't exactly have receivers beating the press and calling for the ball. He contented himself with check-downs and turning runs into one-step passes. Once or twice, he passed up chances to run. He also fumbled on a sack, making it the third straight game (Bears and 49ers at end of '13) in which that's happened. It's the first three-game streak of that kind in his career. Other than Super Bowls and playoffs, it's national-interest games such as this in which quarterbacking reputations are cemented. He didn't play well or win.

RUNNING BACKS (3½)

An important part of the protection game is the efficiency of the backs. Eddie Lacy and, to a lesser extent, James Starks delivered some heavy-duty chips to defensive linemen as they rushed. Lacy saved the short-setting Bakhtiari from a sack when he halted Bennett dead in his tracks after the end came free inside. As much as McCarthy wants Lacy on the field, it was interesting that Starks replaced him on the fourth play of the game. It's a sign that he likes Starks but also wants to preserve Lacy. However, that will be a tall order if Lacy keeps taking so many unnecessary shots. After surviving a memorable collision with SS Kam Chancellor, Lacy spun away and, rather than go out of bounds, absorbed another stiff shot from Thomas. Then he broke another tackle by Chancellor on his 31st snap and departed with his second concussion in 12 months. Starks (25 snaps) isn't that stereotypical straight-line speed guy these days. On third and 4, he weaved behind the pulling Lang for 6. When Sherrod got whipped inside, Starks burst to the edge and broke tackles by Chancellor and Sherman for a gain of 12. DuJuan Harris, the No. 3 back, played three snaps and FB John Kuhn had eight.

DEFENSIVE LINE (½)

The Packers unveiled their version of the 4-3 base front that they call "Quad." It was used on about 15 first-half plays compared with three in the 3-4 before Dom Capers went back to the 3-4 as his base in the second half. Mike Daniels (46 snaps) might have played his poorest game as a Packer. Given his leverage, strength and intensity, the Packers expected Daniels to overcome being just a shade over 6 feet and stop the run. Daniels did resist the run last year in the 3-4, just not on a regular basis. Matched against one of the NFL's more massive guards in James Carpenter, Daniels was consistently covered up and displaced. Then, when asked to play on throwing downs, he had little to give and didn't have a pressure. NT Letroy Guion (35) was every bit as much a liability as Daniels until the fourth quarter when both began making some plays. At first, Guion was little more than a blocking dummy being ridden out of the hole. He missed two tackles as well. Datone Jones (32) was more effective than the other two but wasn't exactly a tower of power, either. Josh Boyd (23) had the unit's sole pressure. NT Mike Pennel will get his shot soon because the Packers can't live for long with those results.

LINEBACKERS (1½)

In some ways, "Quad" is like a nickel defense with Clay Matthews (65 snaps) walking out in the slot area as the No. 3 cornerback would. The Packers hope that by keeping Matthews moving around they have a better chance to find pass-rushing mismatches for him. To an extent, Matthews caught Seattle off-guard; otherwise, they wouldn't have run a tear screen for Percy Harvin into where Matthews was hovering to mash him. Matthews was OK with 1½ pressures and his extraordinary effort. The Seahawks got him on bootlegs, sweep screens and a 24-yard reception to TE Zach Miller. Julius Peppers (60) had 2½ pressures but was unable to overwhelm rookie RT Justin Britt. He also played hard. In the fourth quarter, Peppers chased off the edge and clipped the leg of Russell Wilson to abort what would have been about a 30-yard completion to Jermaine Kearse. That was pure hustle. Mike Neal's 40 snaps included 33 as a lineman. He didn't get much done. Just like in every exhibition game, Nick Perry (nine) flashed a time or two. Brad Jones played all 70 downs as the dime LB over A.J. Hawk (48) and Sam Barrington, who didn't play from scrimmage. Jones had three of the defense's 17 missed tackles, an exorbitant amount, and two penalties in man coverage against tight ends. He showed stiffness and poor technique in coverage, played too high and failed to get off blocks at the point and was slow to the perimeter. On one tackle, Harvin dragged him five yards. Jones used to be a lot better than this. Hawk had no physical recourse, either, when the D-line wasn't keeping blockers off him. A few times, he was driven almost out of the picture.

SECONDARY (1)

Despite missing three tackles, Ha Ha Clinton-Dix (40 snaps) was the best safety from a purely physical standpoint. Obviously, the misses cannot be tolerated. At the same time, he stuck his nose in there against Marshawn Lynch as willingly as any defensive back and made up his mind quickly on some breaks in run support. He stayed deep as the deepest to break up a bomb that he might have intercepted. Morgan Burnett (all 70) got tangled up with Hawk on a botched coverage and got burned on a 33-yard over route to Harvin. He just isn't playing with much quickness. Micah Hyde (51) was adequate. Sam Shields (70) made two or three terrific breakups but also paid for his bad habit of peeking in the backfield on two big plays behind him. Tramon Williams (70) broke up a pass or two and tackled OK. Casey Hayward (36) was the No. 3 corner ahead of Davon House, who was limited to special teams. The entire secondary, as well as the defense as a whole, looked just awful trying to combat Harvin's speed sweeps.

KICKERS (2)

Tim Masthay's four punts carried averages of 38.3 yards (gross), 37.5 (net) and 4.49 seconds of hang time. When the defense needed Masthay to hang a boomer after the safety, he mustered just 3.47 hang time on a ball that took a fortuitous bounce. Mason Crosby hit from 23 yards and averaged 72.3 and 3.84 in four kickoffs.

SPECIAL TEAMS (2)

When Sherman blocked House into Thomas on a punt return, the ball was fumbled and recovered by Clinton-Dix. In 18 games last season, these units didn't recover a single opponents' fumble. That play was all but canceled by the roughing-the-kicker call against Daniels on fourth and 2 that handed Seattle three points. There was a wasted timeout. On the opening kickoff, Jamari Lattimore missed LB Mike Morgan and Harris paid the price. There were four missed tackles.

OVERALL (1)

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