

Rating the Packers: Week 7 vs Panthers

Both offense, defense pick apart Panthers

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

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Green Bay - It was almost a given the Green Bay Packers would be able to pass the ball at will Sunday. The Carolina Panthers' secondary is just that porous and slow.

The unknown entering the meeting of NFC divisional leaders at Lambeau Field was if the Packers' defense could slow down the read-option attack directed by multitalented Cam Newton.

Had it been necessary, Aaron Rodgers might have thrown for 500 yards. It wasn't, because the Packers got so far ahead they stopped trying to score in the fourth quarter.

Meanwhile, the defensive players stayed in their gaps, stymied the read option and teed off on Newton with telling effect.

Here is a rating of the Packers in the 38-17 victory, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

RECEIVERS (4½)

Any time Rodgers scrambles, the entire secondary should flock to Randall Cobb (46 snaps). Defensive coordinator Sean McDermott tried four zone blitzes, and on one DE Charles Johnson dropped back to where Cobb was running a short curl. As Rodgers moved to his right watching Cobb, he pivoted away from Johnson to an open area 11 yards deep. When Rodgers zipped a throw back inside for Cobb, he made a great catch away from the frame of his body. Instantly turning up field, Cobb juke LB Luke Kuechly and raced for a gain of 47. Later, he caught a 2-yard pass, cut behind a block by Davante Adams, used remarkable change of direction to elude CB Melvin White, nickel back Charles Godfrey and DE Mario Addison and went down the sideline for 33. All six of Cobb's catches came from the slot, and 86 of his 121 yards came after the catch. Now Cobb had a pigeon covering him in the slow-footed Godfrey. Still, his ability to separate that wasn't there in August and September but certainly is there now. This is what the Packers need to see before offering him a lucrative new contract. Over-the-hill CB Antoine Cason was too small and slow to jam Jordy Nelson (49), leaving ancient SS Roman Harper no chance on his 59-yard TD in the dead zone of Cover 2. Nelson sustained three crack-back blocks against the rugged Harper on runs totaling 16 yards. For the first time Richard Rodgers (32) played more than Andrew Quarless (27). Mike McCarthy prefers Rodgers as his on-the-line blocker. Rodgers showed some leverage and strength blocking at the point and leading from the backfield against both Thomas Davis and Kuechly. However, the rookie was too inconsistent. He was charged with 1½ of the team's five "bad" runs, also missed blocks on a pair of 2-yard runs and was partially at fault for one of the two sacks. Brandon Bostick (eight) juggled one short pass and dropped another. He also flashed some of the leg drive and nastiness as a run blocker that the Packers haven't received from their TEs.

OFFENSIVE LINE (4½)

Last week, Johnson kept bull-rushing Cincinnati's Andre Smith, one of the NFL's biggest and better RTs, into QB Andy Dalton. It didn't happen Sunday because Bryan Bulaga played one of his best games. Bulaga sat down effectively against the power stuff, didn't yield a "bad" run and allowed one-half of a pressure. Just like T.J. Lang in Miami, Bulaga found himself in position to recover Eddie Lacy's fumble because he was hustling instead of just watching. David Bakhtiari faced DE Mario Addison, probably the Panthers' No. 1 rusher, and didn't give up a pressure or "bad" run. Addison appeared on the verge of slipping by several times, but Bakhtiari regained his balance, managed to stab at least one hand into Addison's chest and won the down. Bakhtiari didn't have the speed to cut off Kuechly and Davis on runs the other way but did what he had to do and prevented them from wrecking plays. Judging by the way he's snapping the ball on time when defenders cross into the neutral zone on hard cadence, Corey Linsley is playing like a seasoned pro. However, the seldom-off-his-feet Linsley finally got body-slammed, with former Green Bay strongman Colin Cole tossing him on the back side of a run. Guards Josh Sitton and Lang also pitched shutouts in pass pro and combined for 1½ "bad" runs.

QUARTERBACKS (4½)

Degree of difficulty is a key element in these grades. Five footballs can't be possible against that terrible secondary. Rodgers seized McDermott's defense by the throat in the first series. After slipping and absorbing a 10-yard sack, Rodgers whittled it down to third and 2 by coaxing the Panthers into successive off-sides penalties (on the first, Quarless should have been penalized because he moved a split-second before DE Wes Horton). The Packers still would have had to punt, but Rodgers pump-faked his way past CB James Dockery on a third-and-2 scramble for 3. When McDermott rolled zone coverage toward Nelson on the next play, Rodgers whistled a 25-yard strike that left the poor Harper in an untenable position. McDermott played primarily zone coverage, kept his safeties deep and blitzed on 33% of passes. Rodgers waited out the Panthers' veteran secondary until Harper inevitably broke back deep and then kept moving the chains with runs, check-downs and completions that seldom were contested. It was another quarterbacking clinic.

RUNNING BACKS (4)

Lacy had 30 snaps to only 11 for James Starks before Starks limped off with an ankle injury midway through the third quarter. McCarthy went back to more inside than outside zone, and the only runs with pulling linemen were two for 9 yards behind Sitton. It helped Lacy, who pressed the line, didn't have a glaring incorrect read and broke nine tackles, including two by the hard-hitting and athletic Davis. He still hasn't had more than 17 rushes in a game, a plus for the cold-weather games ahead when his smash-mouth style might be invaluable. Lacy is utilizing a patiently aggressive approach in pass pro that's effective. For perhaps the first time all season, a blitz (Kuechly) ran him over. After a spin move, Lacy didn't have the ball high and tight and had it stripped. On two occasions, he didn't pick up his feet and was clipped to the ground with room to run. Starks had the speed to outrun Kuechly to the corner and smelled the goal-line running through FS Thomas DeCoud. Starks' decision to take an inside-zone wide wasn't ideal, but when Horton blew containment it paid off in the 13-yard TD. The first of John Kuhn's seven snaps didn't come until 9½ minutes remained.

DEFENSIVE LINE (4½)

LE Josh Boyd (35), NT Letroy Guion (23) and RE Mike Daniels (31) started in the 3-4, but Dom Capers had cause to employ it on just 10 snaps because the Panthers fell far behind early and then went with three-wide sets. Rookies Mike Pennel (23) and Luther Robinson (21) rotated in the 4-2. Operating against an offensive line that was down three starters by the third quarter (two rookie free agents played 89 snaps), the unit had a big rush day with seven pressures. Boyd, Guion and Daniels each had two. Boyd just wants in on the action. He's a power rusher with quick twitch, and he goes all out all of the time. On a pair of third and 1s, Capers sent out his 4-4 front with Boyd, Guion, Pennel and Daniels dug in from left to right. Guion beat LG Fernando Velasco to stop Jonathan Stewart for no gain on a zone read. The Packers were in a 3-4 on fourth and 1 when a push by Guion and Daniels stopped Newton dead in his tracks on a sneak. Pennel is getting better. He stuffed backup LG Andrew Norwell to make a tackle for loss before spinning off rookie backup Brian Folkerts to ride down Chris Ogbonnaya after a gain of 1.

LINEBACKERS (4)

Neither surprise starter Sam Barrington (29) nor rotating Jamari Lattimore (26) distinguished himself. They split time in place of Brad Jones, who apparently fell out of favor last week. Barrington assisted over the top on the two third-and-1 stops. His lack of size is the concern. He met Stewart coming downhill and the big back kept right on going for 4 more yards. In time, the Packers hope Barrington can beat blockers to the spot with his nose for the ball and toughness. Playing with a neck roll to protect a week-old stinger, Lattimore made a few mistakes but also played with his customary aggression. Once again, A.J. Hawk played every snap (69) and was just OK. His command of the defense is without equal. He never quits battling. On the other hand, he allowed the 20-yard screen to TE Greg Olsen giving himself up in the open field just as he did frequently in the box. Hawk is knocked about and screwed into the ground on a regular basis, but grits his teeth and always comes back for more. Blitzing 39.6% on passes, Capers rushed Hawk 11 times. He never got home, but at least on those plays his deficiencies in coverage couldn't be exploited. Clay Matthews (52) was the best of the alternating four OLBs with 4½ pressures and a tackle for minus-3 on Stewart's first carry. Matthews responded to recent criticism of his production with a fiery, physical performance. His numbers would have been even more impressive but the Panthers often held him. Julius Peppers (47) isn't as active as Matthews but on half a dozen snaps each week he is hard to handle. He displayed remarkable get-off and then dipped under athletic RT Nate Chandler for a shared sack. Nick Perry (23) seems to have taken to a reduced role that involves less pressure. He and Peppers each had 1½ pressures while Mike Neal (31) had one-half. For the first time, the starting front in the 4-1 included Matthews and Perry outside and Peppers and Neal inside.

SECONDARY (4½)

Minus Sam Shields (knee), the unit still dominated a Panthers WR corps that has to be the slowest in the NFL. On his interception, Casey Hayward (42) was supposed to be in the flat covering Jerricho Cotchery. Instead, he lingered inside anticipating a pass to Olsen. Taking the bait, Newton threw it and Hayward snatched the ball beautifully outside the frame of his body. He made two low, knifing tackles. Davon House (50) started on the outside and was good again. On a deep ball to towering Kelvin Benjamin, House used textbook technique, not looking back for the ball until he was right next to the receiver. Ha Ha Clinton-Dix (69) made his first start but that might have been more because Micah Hyde (45) was needed as the nickel back. Clinton-Dix ducked his head and missed a tackle, but also made several jarring hits. The rookie isn't bashful about firing his gun in contact situations. Morgan Burnett (52) missed a couple of tackles but remained steady in coverage and near the line. Sean Richardson (18) tackled Stewart for no gain on third and 1, smashed him hard after a gain of 1 and swooped in from the deep middle to upend a toss for minus-1. After that impressive showing, it'll be interesting to see if the coaches use him in non-garbage time. Tramon Williams (57) didn't reinjure his ankle after playing without practicing. He stayed at home and smothered a flea-flicker to Cotchery and broke on some short passes. The ankle didn't help him elevate trying to defend a 32-yard fade and 13-yard TD pass to Benjamin. Jarrett Bush was picked on at the end.

KICKERS (4)

Mason Crosby hit from 34 yards and averaged 71.4 yards and 3.84 seconds of hang time on seven kickoffs (five were touchbacks). Tim Masthay's five-punt averages were 55.2 (gross), 44.0 (net) and 4.10 (hang time). In swirling winds, both veterans performed well.

SPECIAL TEAMS (4)

Hayward sustained his block beautifully at the point of attack on Cobb's 24-yard punt return. Cobb and Hyde alternated on punts; Hyde made a mistake not fair-catching one at the 6 that was downed at the 2. Rookie LB Jayrone Elliott wasn't used from scrimmage despite the score but played 22 physical snaps here. When Bostick and Jones allowed penetration on each side of the line, Masthay did well just to get a third-quarter punt airborne. Bostick knocked Philly Brown from the game with a concussion on a lusty hit. The coverage was fast and furious.

OVERALL (4 ½)

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