

Rating the Packers: Week 8 at Saints

Packers fall flat in many areas

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

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Green Bay - New Orleans' French Quarter was packed with vacationing Green Bay Packers fans Sunday afternoon hopeful if not confident their team would pull out a signature victory that night at the Superdome. Instead, they watched the Packers swoon in the second half before bowing to the Saints, 44-23. It was one of the Packers' three worst defeats in their 104 starts with Aaron Rodgers as starter, joining a 38-10 shellacking by the Giants in 2012 and a 51-29 beating administered by the Saints six years ago in the same building.

Here is a rating of the Packers against the Saints, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

RECEIVERS (2 ½)

Last week, Randall Cobb (63 snaps) beat nickel back Charles Godfrey so badly that the Panthers cut him two days later. This time, the Saints tried safety Marcus Ball on him and the results were comparable. Three of Cobb's catches (for 29 yards) came against Ball. He also nabbed a quick vertical toss near MLB Curtis Lofton for 27 and a 70-yard TD behind CB Keenan Lewis on a broken play. Rodgers just put the ball up, figuring a long interception on third and 10 would be as effective as a punt. He believed in Cobb, and lo and behold he made a sensational play. For some reason, just two of Cobb's seven targets came in the second half. Maybe Cobb's poorest play came on a first-and-goal run for no gain when he failed to cut off WLB David Hawthorne. Lewis, the Saints' best defensive back, effectively neutralized Jordy Nelson (63) using tight trail technique secure in the knowledge that coordinator Rob Ryan had a pair of safeties sitting over the top the entire game. The Saints switched up, using press and off coverage against Nelson, and kept him off balance. Davante Adams (65) posted a season-high seven receptions. He separated consistently with a smooth gait and sharp cuts. On the interception, it appeared as though he should have kept coming across because the middle was wide open. Jarrett Boykin (eight) was a non-factor, and Kevin Dorsey (three) got the nod over Jeff Janis because of special-teams considerations. The Saints didn't pay any attention to TE Richard Rodgers (34), and rightly so. He couldn't beat them, but he showed great hands on a very low pass and perhaps the knack for just getting open. His blocking at the point against DEs was better, too. Two weeks after catching the winning TD in Miami, Andrew Quarless (30) didn't run a great route on the end-zone slant that was tipped and intercepted. The route was contested by CB Corey White. Still, as the much bigger man, Quarless might have made the catch had he thrust his arms forward and extended well in front of White's clutches.

OFFENSIVE LINE (3)

Maybe Lane Taylor deserves the benefit of the doubt. Tossed in at RG after T.J. Lang (ankle) was lost five plays in, Taylor probably hasn't had more than a handful of reps with the first team all fall in practice. Still, it's a performance business, and based on Taylor's 63 snaps it looked like he can't play. Of the seven "bad" runs for the offense, he was involved in four. He'd step, fail to get his second foot down and give up bad penetration. Backup DT Tyrann Walker blew up Taylor on the failed fourth and 1. He made the team in 2013 because of size and competitiveness, not athleticism. His pass protection (two pressures) was more acceptable, but even there he seemed to be grabby with his hands. It was interesting to see Derek Sherrod take the final two snaps for LG Josh Sitton. The delay penalty was on Corey Linsley for not being aware that the play clock was nearing zero. Still, it was another solid performance for Linsley, who isn't going anywhere when JC Tretter is activated some time before the Bears game. Because Tretter is a better player than Sherrod or Taylor, the coaches need to prepare him as the first-in at all five positions. David Bakhtiari controlled the energy, speed and spin moves of DE Junior Galette. But then when DE Kasim Edebali got in for 20 snaps late, Bakhtiari didn't seem repped for the rookie's low take-off and was at least partly responsible for his two sacks. Bryan Bulaga's up-and-down campaign continues. He gave up three pressures to DE Cameron Jordan and another to Galette. Bulaga tends to panic against speed rushers and winds up in even more awkward situations. Sitton gave up 2½ pressures.

QUARTERBACKS (3½)

Coach Mike McCarthy and offensive coordinator Tom Clements characterized the left hamstring that Rodgers pulled as minor. It happened on his 35th snap; he played 29 more before giving way to Matt Flynn. In four snaps, Flynn was as flat as he was in a 14-play stint Oct. 2 against the Vikings. There's little doubt that his lost fumble on a bump/sack in the pocket sent McCarthy's blood pressure skyrocketing. Confronted by the conservative Rob Ryan, Rodgers ultimately lost the battle due to repeated malfunctions in the red zone. He had Cobb on a third-and-goal corner route but didn't get the ball out and took a 10-yard sack. He threw high for Cobb two plays before another field goal. He didn't score a point with a first down at the 5. As always, Rodgers was poised in the pocket, eluded a few sacks, completed passes from a variety of arm angles and ran in a 14-yard TD against Cover 2 Man, Ryan's standard coverage. He nabbed Ryan for a 12-men-in-the-huddle penalty. In the end, Ryan nabbed him.

RUNNING BACKS (4)

One of Eddie Lacy's best runs in 51 snaps (13 rushes, career-high totals of eight receptions and 123 receiving yards) came on that failed fourth and 1. Given an open alley because of Taylor's displacement, Hawthorne stoned Lacy about 2½ yards behind the line. Somehow, the big back managed to keep churning forward until he came within a foot or two. He's just physically imposing. After being run over in the first half, SS Kenny Vaccaro was on a mission trying to pop Lacy as hard as he could. Vaccaro got his licks in but Lacy kept on a' comin'. In all, Lacy broke six tackles, including two by Lofton. He made two nice catches on screens thrown at point-blank range. Even more impressive was the way Lacy lost Hawthorne to catch a sideline check-down for 10 on fourth and 6. In just his second season, Lacy already is a more comfortable catcher and far better pass blocker than James Starks (13). However, Starks is better than Lacy when it comes to picking his hole on shotgun runs. We'll label Julius Peppers a RB in his one-play cameo on offense. The slant pass hit him in a bad spot: almost right between the numbers. McCarthy should have known that catching balls in practice is a different world than those whistling spirals on game night. He didn't need that play with Peppers.

DEFENSIVE LINE (1½)

There were snatches of solid performance. Letroy Guion (46) had three tackles for loss. On third and 1, he stopped it by beating C Tim Lelito. He split a double-team from RT Zach Strief and TE Benjamin Watson for a minus-1. In the last minute, when others might have quit playing hard, Guion to his credit mashed Strief to force the Packers' only takeaway. On the other hand, he was shoved way out of his gap on an early run, and along with Mike Daniels (42) was chiefly to blame for not playing bigger and plugging it up on Mark Ingram's 18-yard carry. It was much the same for Daniels. He got off blocks three or four times to make the tackle. He chased down Ingram 28 yards downfield when the rest of the defense was flopping around. Knocked down on all fours by LG Ben Grubbs, he bounced right back up and pressured Drew Brees into an incompleteness. Other times, Daniels struggles seeing over blockers and is out of position when he has to peek one side or the other. Josh Boyd (30) didn't really make a play all day. Mike Pennel (21) got something of an education from Grubbs and RG Jahri Evans.

LINEBACKERS (1½)

The best player probably on the entire defense was Clay Matthews. Late in the first half, the Saints were in hurry-up mode and the "NASCAR" dime front was sucking wind. When his teammates barely had energy to get off the ball on the fifth straight play, Matthews slashed off the right side, beat athletic LT Terron Armstead wide and chased so hard that he sacked Brees after 4.9 seconds. Just eight of his 46 snaps came across from Armstead. As a means to protect Strief, the Saints double-teamed Matthews on 34.8% of his individual rushes, the highest he has encountered since Week 2. Julius Peppers (40 at LB, six at DT) can be a force against the run. Or, like Sunday, he can stand up, show his numbers, let tight ends wash him inside and offer next to nothing getting his hat to the ball. For all his bountiful gifts, Peppers isn't the most gung-ho guy. Mike Neal (22, 11) and Nick Perry (28) were AWOL. Replaced in the first time as the lone LB in dime by Jamari Lattimore, A.J. Hawk (57 of 68) was a comforting target for the Saints' 193-yard ground game. He was decimated by FB Erik Lorig's lead block on the 18-yard run and stumbled face-first to the carpet even before being demolished on a 28-yard burst. By playing deeper, Hawk, WILB starter Sam Barrington (45) and Lattimore (23) helped prevent Marques Colston from killing them on play-action stuff in the middle. The downside was none of them played downhill, took on and shed blocks, and tattooed people. Lattimore drifts around, playing the edges. Barrington can be physical, but with his size, speed and inexperience it might not all add up.

DEFENSIVE BACKS (½)

Morgan Burnett's value was made clear in absentia (calf). Safeties Ha Ha Clinton-Dix (64), Micah Hyde (68) and Sean Richardson (15) were awful. Other than smelling out the throwback pass to Ken Stills that the Bears perpetrated for a TD Sept. 28 against Sam Shields, Clinton-Dix was out of position on big plays and kept ducking his head on contact and missing tackles. He vacated the middle of a Cover 3 zone on the sixth play of the game enabling Stills to have between-the-hashmarks territory to outrun Davon House. It was the kind of mistake that someone in his eighth game can't afford to be making. Hyde lacks speed. What else is new? He was the Cover 2 safety to Tramon Williams' side on the 50-yard TD to Brandin Cooks and simply got run by. Williams made what probably could be considered a heads-up play by leaving his sideline responsibility and staying with Cooks when he sensed that Hyde was so out of position. Hyde is hard-nosed but did have one of the unit's eight missed tackles, too. Richardson didn't play much but Brees found him three times: TE Josh Hill was his man on the 2-yard TD, Colston was his man on a 20-yard pass and it appeared as if RB Travaris Cadet was his man on a 16-yard screen. After a string of fine games, House (67) collapsed. He wasn't getting his hands on people and challenging them. He played passively, and gave up too many completions. If he sticks his face in and doesn't rely on a lousy body block, Ingram's 28-yard run might have been 6. It seemed as though Clinton-Dix was improperly lined up on Ingram's 21-yard TD. Still, House allowed himself to get stiff-armed at the line before falling by the wayside 10 yards downfield. Williams (67) missed a pair of tackles. He also peeked in the backfield just long enough to let TE Jimmy Graham get behind him on a double move for a 22-yard TD. Although he was covering for teammates at times, Williams must be more violent at the ball and start ripping it out. The Saints certainly seemed to be running at nickel back Casey Hayward (44), who's far better in coverage than run support.

KICKERS (3)

Love that dome: Mason Crosby averaged 78 yards and 4.21 seconds of hang time on four kickoffs, all touchbacks. He showed his versatility on two onside kickoffs, but a fine play by LB Ramon Humber prevented the surprise attempt from working. His second attempt didn't have quite enough air under it. In perfect rhythm, he hit FGs from 31, 49 and 27 yards. Tim Masthay didn't get to punt.

SPECIAL TEAMS (1½)

By motioning Barrington, coordinator Shawn Slocum created a six-man side to the left before Crosby booted right where Jarrett Bush was one of the four. Bush's job was to shatter the first black jersey so Hyde could recover. Neither player got the job done and the ball slipped out of bounds. Crosby also tried the weak side at the end but the boot wasn't high enough and TE Benjamin Watson won the recovery against several slow-to-pounce Packers. Nary a kickoff was returned. Kickoffs are such a compelling part of today's NFL game, aren't they?

OVERALL (1 ½)

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