

Rating the Packers: Week 13 vs Patriots

Packers get well-earned victory

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

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Green Bay - Favored by three points on home turf, the Green Bay Packers held serve Sunday against the New England Patriots, winning by five, 26-21.

Neither team turned the ball over. There were merely eight penalties. The replay challenges and reviews that often ruin the continuity of the viewing experience were kept to the bare minimum. The time of the game was 3 hours on the nose.

Eminently prepared by coach Mike McCarthy, the Packers exploded for gains of 49 yards by Eddie Lacy in the first three plays en route to an opening field goal.

Though the Packers never trailed, they needed an end-zone pass breakup by Ha Ha Clinton-Dix, a sack shared by Mike Neal and Mike Daniels and a remarkable third-and-4 completion from Aaron Rodgers to Randall Cobb in the final 3½ minutes to subdue the tough-minded Patriots.

Regardless of the outcome, it would rank as one of the finest games played at Lambeau Field in several years.

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

RECEIVERS (4)

A determining factor was the Packers' ability to press the advantage that Davante Adams (58 of 73 snaps), their No. 3 wide receiver, had over Logan Ryan in the first half and Alfonzo Dennard in the second half in their rotating role as the Patriots' No. 3 cornerbacks. If the Patriots had won, Adams' drop of what would have been a clinching 10-yard TD pass would have been remembered for a long time. It was the first terrible drop of the rookie's season, but at least he was trying to snatch the ball with his hands rather than attempt a body catch. Adams attacked Ryan three times on double moves. He beat Ryan for 45 yards on a crisp out-and-up route, then got run down from behind. Adams has good, not great speed, but he is tough and already has a good understanding of the pro game. When Rodgers scrambled left, Adams instantly broke off his route and escaped Ryan for 33. Twice he went inside on slants for 12 and 17 yards, not flinching before taking a whack in the ribs from ILB Dont'a Hightower and running through Dennard for 10 after-catch yards. He could get just one foot down on what would have been a 17-yard TD. If a receiver can catch a ball, he can get both feet down. The great Darrelle Revis started on Cobb (61 at WR) but in the end probably was matched against Jordy Nelson (71) just as much. Cobb dropped two passes in the second half before weaving his way through traffic to make the game-clinching catch. After rushing three men nine times and four 17 times, Bill Belichick blitzed for the first time with 23 seconds left in the half. Covered by Revis, Nelson gained separation at the top of an in-breaking route, caught the strike in stride 11 yards downfield and outran the defense for a 45-yard TD. Andrew Quarless (54) is stringing good games together now. He's pushing off like the big boys, exerting himself and not wrecking running plays with missed blocks. When the Packers finally got SS Patrick Chung in man coverage, Richard Rodgers (29) burned him for a 32-yard TD. No Lambeau Field leap for the cool Cal rookie. He just flipped the ball to the official and ran off.

OFFENSIVE LINE (4 ½)

The pass protection was superb. Hightower did beat Corey Linsley and T.J. Lang for a sack with a delayed A gap blitz on a poorly communicated protection. The Packers haven't had one that bad in weeks. Other than that the unit allowed just two knockdowns and one hurry, all against David Bakhtiari. Clearly, the Patriots are a different defense with RE Chandler Jones. A big-time rusher, he should return from a hip injury in a week or two. Fearful of blitzing, Belichick ended up rushing two men once, three 14 times, four 25 times and five four times. The last time the Packers saw more three-man rushes was 16 at Kansas City in 2011. The best chance for pressure was LE Rob Ninkovich. However, he was shut down by Bryan Bulaga and didn't have success on his tight, slashing twists. Bulaga used his hands and arms well, shuffled his feet and stayed on balance. Bakhtiari played well, too, but just had a few more slipups than the others. At times, mountainous NT Vince Wilfork pushed Linsley back but never once was he able to trash the rookie and disrupt a play in the backfield. The Packers pulled linemen on eight of their 24 runs, a much higher rate than normal. Those eight carries gained just 16 yards. Josh Sitton and Lang carried the fight to the Patriots as well. A week ago, this Patriots' front pulverized Detroit's offensive line. Granted, the Lions were missing three starters, but what a difference a week made for New England's rush.

QUARTERBACKS (4 ½)

It took a while to settle in for Rodgers. He needed to see what Belichick was up to, and in cold weather it's common that passers start out overthrowing. He didn't fare well in the red zone. He actually forced a pass in the end zone early that could have been intercepted by a pair of Patriots. But it wasn't picked, and he got through another game without a turnover (he recovered his own strip-sack). The TD pass to Richard Rodgers in which Aaron somehow pulled a ball back that was headed for Nelson wasn't unlike Tiger Woods being able to stop his downswing because of some distraction. He had spotted the rookie TE, then flicked it 40 yards with deadly accuracy. His scrambling sideline dart to James Starks for 28 on a flat-and-up route was incredible, too. The ball to Cobb at the end took the guts of a burglar to throw. With the line protecting so well, Rodgers sits and sits in the pocket. The trust factor between passer and blockers continues to expand. Once again, Rodgers took some unnecessary shots, including one from LB Jamie Collins after 7.5 seconds that could have ended his season.

RUNNING BACKS (4 ½)

Cobb's action at RB this season included three snaps in Game 2 and two in Game 7. He played eight here, two less than he had all of 2013 and his highest total since the divisional playoff loss to the 49ers in January 2013. Blanked by Revis in the first three series, Cobb caught four passes for 55 yards from the backfield in one second-quarter series. Not only did Cobb terrorize LBs and DBs, he showed courage in traffic and pressed the hole on his two rushes. Eddie Lacy (52) broke just one tackle because the Patriots play so hard and tackle well. Time after time, however, he got his shoulders square and bled what he could out of carries. Collins ran Lacy over on an A gap blitz that 5 seconds later became a sack. On the first play, Lacy looked perfectly comfortable hauling in a rail route for 12. It was evidence how far he's come as a receiver. The 28-yard wheel route by Starks (10) probably was the longest and probably best reception of his five-year career.

DEFENSIVE LINE (4)

Easily the leading player was RE Mike Daniels. Playing time showed his value. He was in for 50 of 56 snaps, a season-high 89.3%. This defense would be sunk without him. The longer the game lasted, the less LG Dan Connolly and C Bryan Stork could do with Daniels. Connolly was beaten for 2 ½ pressures, Stork for one. Clay Matthews' tackle for loss was the result of Daniels destroying Stork, a rookie whose strength and overall game don't measure up to Linsley's. Daniels' off-sides penalty on the goal line, however, was inexcusable. He also was pinned inside on LeGarrette Blount's second 13-yard run. The Packers played 24 snaps in the 3-4. LE Josh Boyd (30) was adequate. NT Letroy Guion (40) was, too. The Packers don't have any household names but the effort has been high. Datone Jones (16) entered on passing downs and rushed OK. The trust factor isn't there yet with rookie NT Mike Pennel (three)

LINEBACKERS (4)

When McCarthy decided A.J. Hawk shouldn't play every down, Sam Barrington started inside alongside Matthews in nickel, played a career-high 47 snaps and seized the day. He made a huge hit on Shane Vereen from the side before coming back on the next play to smash the 250-pound Blount for no gain on third and 2. Matthews can make physical plays like that. Hawk never really could. He also made a strong tackle on the goal line, beat Connolly for a knockdown of Brady, knocked WR Julian Edelman from the game for a while (ankle) and deflected a pass in a zone drop. Hawk did play 26 snaps in the base defense, but what happens the next time the Packers play virtually all sub? He just can't stay off the ground. He's so light that about his only chance against the interior run is diving at legs trying to create a pile. Matthews played 29 snaps outside and 27 inside. He had two pressures, 1 ½ more than Julius Peppers (53), and kept looking for people to hit. Productive or not, his physical dimension should never be taken for granted. Peppers tipped two passes but also missed an easy tackle on Brandon Bolden's 6-yard TD. Playing a season-low 18 snaps, Mike Neal was fresh for his great rush off the edge against LT Nate Solder that earned him a shared sack with Daniels on the Patriots' last snap. Battling a bad shoulder, Nick Perry played 10 uneventful snaps.

SECONDARY (4)

Unofficially, here were the top five primary defenders on TE Rob Gronkowski's 31 routes: Morgan Burnett (nine), Clinton-Dix (seven), Micah Hyde (four), Matthews (four) and Davon House (three). Clinton-Dix got the call late because Gronkowski was set wide out of the box. "Grnk" had the ball in the end zone on what might have been the winning TD but Clinton-Dix kept grabbing until the ball came out. The simplest catch for the all-pro TE was for 19 after Burnett appeared to peek in the backfield and was beaten off the line on a lob. Burnett (56), Clinton-Dix (56) and Sam Shields (10) each missed two tackles. When Shields ducked his head, he suffered a concussion bouncing off Bolden. The best player in the secondary was Tramon Williams (56), who was targeted about 10 times and didn't give up much. He helped set the tone on the second series, closing fast on Edelman's shallow crossing route and bringing him down a yard short of the first-down marker. When the Patriots made Williams tackle with their short game to his side, he responded by not missing any. House (44) replaced Shields and was so-so. Brandon LaFell scored on a 15-yard TD with a stutter-step move that made House look bad. He's usually much more competitive at the ball. Micah Hyde (30) started over Casey Hayward (nine) as the nickel back.

KICKERS (3 ½)

Mason Crosby hit from 32, 35, 33 and 28 yards on a rough day for kickers. His miss wide left was more the result of improper aim than a mishit. Strangely, Crosby did mishit three of the six kickoffs that he attempted for distance. It probably was the result of trying to hit the ball too hard on a cold day when it wasn't going far, anyway. His six-boot averages were 63 yards and merely 2.94 seconds of hang time. One of the mishits skittered out of bounds. Tim Masthay's lone punt (38 yards) hung just 3.29 seconds.

SPECIAL TEAMS (3 ½)

Earning a draw was fine because the Patriots are one of those teams that keeps two or three players more for their contributions in the kicking game than from scrimmage. The FG protection team was excellent against a veteran coach (Scott O'Brien) who is known for blocking kicks. Jayrone Elliott was the top player in coverage with three tackles. Danny Amendola, a dangerous veteran returner, didn't get far. DuJuan Harris came close to breaking a kickoff return.

OVERALL (4 ½)

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