

Rating the Packers: Week 14 vs Falcons

Running game helped Packers win tough test

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

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Green Bay - Atlanta Falcons coach Mike Smith labeled the Monday night contest at Lambeau Field as a "very physical football game" in his postmortem Tuesday.

It was largely because the Falcons, a team with weak offensive and defensive lines and almost no running game, stood up to the Green Bay Packers in weather (snow flurries, 33 degrees) that was foreign to them.

Another home blowout might have hurt more than helped the Packers. Call it a precursor to the playoffs, when visiting teams won't be any more intimidated playing at Lambeau Field than the Falcons were.

Here is a rating of the Packers in their 43-37 victory, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses.

RECEIVERS (4)

Desmond Trufant is one of the best cornerbacks the Packers have faced. Jordy Nelson (66 of 68 snaps) and Davante Adams (49) struggled to free themselves when flanked to Trufant's side. The Packers did business against Robert McClain, who was subbing for Robert Alford (wrist), and backup Kemal Ishmael after SS William Moore exited on his 13th snap (foot injury). The Packers' 24-point lead had been trimmed to 10 when they got their desired matchup. Max protecting with eight blockers, Nelson had time to run right at Ishmael and get on top of him for the 60-yard TD that clinched victory. Otherwise, Nelson did his damage on adjusted routes and as a blocker. McClain and SS Dezmen Southard had Nelson doubled in the end zone late in the first half when Aaron Rodgers bolted the pocket and Nelson instantly reacted to find a window for the 10-yard TD. Four or five times Nelson locked up his man on substantial running plays. Acknowledging that Josh Wilson was overmatched by Randall Cobb (61) in the slot, defensive coordinator Mike Nolan gave Wilson help whenever possible. As a result, Cobb had just four targets, but he caught them all for 58 yards. Cobb showed his toughness extending to catch a high pass on third and 3 in the lair of the linebackers and made a great 4-yard catch despite great coverage by Trufant on third and 2. Adams had a long afternoon. Three times the coaches permitted Richard Rodgers (34) to block the DE on the play side, and each time the rushes were successful. Rodgers gets under the skin of some defenders trying to get in the last shove, but for a rookie feeling his way that's a good thing. Andrew Quarless (41), the No. 1 tight end, ran a strong route for 30 behind ILB Paul Worrilow and gained 18 of his 52 yards after the catch. He also drew his first penalty (false start) since Game 4.

OFFENSIVE LINE (4 ½)

This unit played well for the fifth week in a row. Nolan blitzed merely 12.5%, figuring his 31st-ranked pass rush couldn't get there, anyway, so why not play coverage? Once again, Josh Sitton was the leader with no pressures and no "bad" runs. His injured toe must be improving because he was back getting significant movement in the run game. Sitton is almost impossible to beat in one-and-one pass protection; DT Jonathan Babineaux, the Falcons' best interior defender, didn't make any headway. On James Starks' 41-yard burst at the end, Sitton moved left on one of his pulls and flattened Ishmael. Corey Linsley started the game by reach-blocking Babineaux on Eddie Lacy's 22-yard run and then doing the same thing on the next snap with momentary combo help from Sitton as Lacy gained 12. Later, Linsley failed to reach NT Paul Soliai on 1 ½ "bad" runs and gave up a flush to DT Corey Peters on a bull rush. The rookie generally gets on people and doesn't get off. Bryan Bulaga played better than David Bakhtiari, who was grabbed and jerked to the ground by hard-charging DE Kroy Biermann for a sack. In all, Bakhtiari was responsible for 3 ½ pressures and one-half "bad" run. He is playing a stronger game in his second season. He just needs to focus even harder and eliminate those two or three uneven plays per game. Playing on a bad ankle, T.J. Lang struggled at times setting his anchor against Soliai. Overall, Lang turned in a rugged, competitive performance.

QUARTERBACKS (4 ½)

Smith said he counted 13 snaps in which Rodgers extended the design of the play. Most were successful. With Nolan content to play his safeties deep, Rodgers used that rapid, almost sidearm flick of his to complete nine check-downs to four receivers for a handy 78 yards (8.7 average). Surveying Nolan's odd and even fronts, he checked to what he considered the better run and helped guide the offense to a 179-yard day. Rodgers' 28-yard contribution included two clutch first downs. He pump-faked 3 yards beyond the line but Southward still fell for it on a 9-yard scramble. Rodgers fumbled for the eighth time when he allowed himself to get too out of control and was stripped by FS Dwight Lowery. He paid the price for holding the ball too loosely yet somehow managed to make the recovery. Given excellent time, Rodgers conducted a shooting gallery at times. He also made a few more shaky throws than usual. On one, he led Nelson into harm's way on a dig heading towards Worrilow, something he almost never does. Once again, he didn't throw an interception. Matt Ryan threw one, a terrible mistake, and it made a huge difference in the outcome.

RUNNING BACKS (4 ½)

The one-two punch of Eddie Lacy (46) and James Starks (22) combined for 207 yards from scrimmage. Lacy broke five tackles in his 18 touches, including three on a 13-yard check-down. For a player that's got to be pushing 250 pounds, Lacy's jump cuts and spins are remarkable. There's usually a dip here, a dip there. Before leaving with a bruised hip at the 6-minute mark, Lacy also had dropped a pass, made a bad read and failed to beat man coverage by Worrilow in the end zone on one of his rare routes as a split receiver. Starks made the Falcons pay for what Smith called "mis-fitted" gap control on a 41-yard, game-clinching burst off left tackle. Worrilow had the angle but was left grabbing air because of how fast Starks hit it. He broke five tackles in 12 touches. On his 3-yard TD, Starks probably would have scored even more easily had he stayed inside. Instead, he danced wide and, at the 5, made Ishmael miss so everything in the end was hunky-dory. Starks inspired confidence with his ball security on five late carries in a row against a grabby, desperate defense. You never know what Mike McCarthy will do next. He came out in a two-back set of all things, with John Kuhn (15) in front of the RB all seven plays of the opening TD drive.

DEFENSIVE LINE (1)

The Falcons don't expect a whole lot from their injury-riddled O-line. Against a unit starting two rookies and a second-year free agent at LT, RT and C, the Packers' D-line was a major disappointment. After two straight strong rushing games, Mike Daniels settled for one hurry and it came against former Badger Gabe Carimi, who replaced injured RG Jon Asamoah late. Daniels hardly played in the first half (seven of his 35 snaps). During the Falcons' comeback, he blew containment on Ryan's 8-yard run. Letroy Guion (29) was no better than Daniels against run or pass. He got off to a poor start against Asamoah, was hammered on the goal line, jumped offside and dropped an interception on a pass that he batted into the air. Josh Boyd (23) didn't make anything happen, either. Datone Jones (30) didn't generate a pressure and was up-and-down at the point. Mike Pennel played just three snaps.

LINEBACKERS (1 ½)

Julius Peppers (58) was almost invisible. It was shocking because every one of his snaps came on the left side across from RT Ryan Schraeder, a free agent from Valdosta State. His only pressure came early when he split Schraeder and Asamoah. Otherwise, he came off the ball lethargically, showed his numbers and sometimes just stood there. It was strange to see. Nick Perry (23) was quiet, too. He didn't get a sniff against LT Jake Matthews. Mike Neal (26 at LB, 20 at DT) beat Matthews for two pressures and, as always, gave superb effort. Clay Matthews led the way with four pressures, and two came against his cousin Jake Matthews. The breakdown of his 67 snaps was 36 inside, 27 outside, two as the fifth end and two as a middle rusher. On Matthews' 12 individual rushes from ROLB, the Falcons doubled him just once. Dom Capers blitzed just 24.4%, his low since Game 3. Seven times Matthews ran stunts inside from end, which seems excessive because basically all he's doing is occupying blockers for someone else. At ILB, he played the run better away than frontally. Sam Barrington (44) joined Matthews in nickel and A.J. Hawk (eight) in base, and Brad Jones (23) was the dime. Barrington's alignments are far from precise. He does play downhill, and is a heavier hitter than Hawk or Jones. His vulnerability in coverage was apparent on a 14-yard pass to Jacquizz Rodgers when he was slow reacting and didn't get through a pick. Jones wasn't a dependable presence in the middle. Hawk didn't see the field until 4 minutes remained in the half.

SECONDARY (½)

The best players were Morgan Burnett (66) and Davon House (22). Burnett made Ryan pay for his awful throw by remaining disciplined in coverage, catching the sideline interception in his hands (for the game's only takeaway) and breaking two tackles on a 32-yard return. Burnett spent much of the game in the box as the Packers focused on stopping the run. He's a determined, accurate tackler in-line. House replaced ineffective Sam Shields (45) early in the fourth quarter. He was the only cornerback who got up and challenged Julio Jones on his career day. House broke up two long fades to the dominating big man with tight coverage. He also made a strong face-up tackle to halt the conversion run. Coming off a concussion, Shields had a forgettable showing. On Jones' 22-yard TD, he didn't get a jam and was weak at the ball. He did show great speed chasing down Jones on his 79-yard slant-and-go behind Tramon Williams (67) and hustling to throw a block for Burnett. Williams looked equally as bad in trail technique on a 29-yard dig by aging Roddy White, who's playing on a bum ankle, and dropped a sideline interception after nice coverage. Micah Hyde (42) and Casey Hayward (39) played poorly, too. Hyde let little Eric Weems, a special-teamer, beat him inside on a fourth-and-5 TD pass. Hayward was too deep in the end zone and gave up a too-easy 2-yard TD pass to Harry Douglas. The Packers played some man and they played some zone. The cohesion between the three levels of defense was as bad as it has been all season. Ha Ha Clinton-Dix (67) needs to stop making rookie mistakes.

KICKERS (3 ½)

Mason Crosby hit from 38, 33 and 53 yards off a slippery track on a windless night. He tried several styles of kickoffs against Devin Hester. His nine-boot averages were 65.1 yards and 3.50 seconds of hang time. Tim Masthay was fortunate to get off his only punt (31 yards, 3.18) after a heavy rush. With Masthay punting so infrequently, the delicate rhythm of the punt team has become a concern.

SPECIAL TEAMS (½)

When Clay Matthews grabbed G Justin Blalock, Brad Jones charged through outside to block Matt Bryant' 53-yard FG attempt. It was the Packers' first block in the regular season since September 2009. Jarrett Boykin and Nelson recovered fourth-quarter onside kicks. An opposing assistant warned that DT Ra'Shede Hageman was a terror blocking kicks. When Lane Taylor and Boyd weren't technique-sound, Hageman stamped through them to block an extra point. There were substitution issues and a wasted timeout. Weems took advantage of Kuhn's tardy block to almost block the punt. House jumped offsides on a FG block. Hester's long return was 38 yards in six returns (26.3); the Packers will take that any day. DuJuan Harris and Hyde were adequate in the return game.

OVERALL (3 ½)

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