

# Rating the Packers: Week 16 at Buccaneers

*By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*

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**Green Bay** - For what the Tampa Bay Buccaneers have, and it isn't much, they gave the Green Bay Packers all of it Sunday at Raymond James Stadium. Eddie Lacy took some shots. Aaron Rodgers took some shots. Randall Cobb took some shots.

The physical tenor of the Packers' 20-3 victory actually served as good preparation for the NFC North championship game Sunday against Detroit and the playoffs. Obviously, the caliber of opponent will increase substantially from here on, but defenses other than in Seattle can't hit much harder than Tampa Bay's.

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

## **RECEIVERS (4 ½)**

Jordy Nelson (66 of 74 snaps) was the best player on the field. When the Packers had nothing going early, he delivered time and again with difficult catches in key situations. By doing so Nelson uplifted his teammates and deflated the Bucs, who saw Nelson secure first downs on third down with 2, 13, 8, 9 and 6 yards to go. Aaron Rodgers' calf injury prevented him from running. That was a relief for the Bucs but there was Nelson to break their hearts. In remarks to teammates Saturday night, Nelson acknowledged deep disappointment over his two dropped TDs in Buffalo and vowed not to let it happen again. Randall Cobb (58 at WR) is just so economical in his movements. He made sharp cuts from the slot to escape capable nickel back Leonard Johnson and then sharp cuts getting north-south with the ball in his hand. He was reckless fighting for the extra yard and reckless when he cracked back on SLB Danny Lananah and sustained his block for two or three counts. Both WRs ran slants against Johnson from the slot from the 1. Nelson beat Johnson for a TD whereas Cobb had the pass deflected. Davante Adams (46) had to watch Jarrett Boykin (19) in the No. 3 role for an eight-play series after he dropped an easy sideline scramble route 21 yards downfield. Later in the first half, Adams had both hands on a 15-yard pass inside the 10 before FS Dashon Goldson whacked him from behind and the ball came out. Boykin was open between the zone corner and safety for a 25-yard gain but Rodgers overthrew him. It was his only target. If Richard Rodgers (35) had been able to cut off RE Michael Johnson on the back side it probably would have been a 15-yard TD instead of a 4-yard gain.

## **OFFENSIVE LINE (4)**

Elite DT Gerald McCoy (knee) sat out but the Bucs have a hardworking, hard-charging, disciplined front. Tampa Bay was well up among the NFL leaders with 23 sacks in the last seven games. The left side of the line gave up a stunt-sack to Johnson, NT Akeem Spence walked back Josh Sitton for a knockdown and LE Jacquies Smith beat Bryan Bulaga inside for a hurry. Otherwise, that was about all you could fault the unit for in protection. Perhaps the best player was T.J. Lang, who wasn't responsible for a "bad" run or pressure. His ankle has improved. You can see that in his quickness to the LB level. The Bucs ran a slew of stunts, and on one Corey Linsley was penalized for holding DT Clinton McDonald when he barreled across Linsley's face. The Packers had a season-high 13 "bad" runs, and seven went to the line. Having missed practice all week because of a concussion, Bulaga wasn't sharp in the run game and missed backside cuts against Spence and SS Bradley McDougald that led to "bad" runs. He matched intensity to neutralize fiery edge rushers Larry English and Smith. David Bakhtiari had problems staying in front of Johnson but not to the extent of September 2013 when Johnson played for Cincinnati. Sitton had two "bad" runs whereas Bakhtiari had 1 ½. The only lineman to pull on a running play was Sitton (two for 7 yards).

## **QUARTERBACKS (4)**

Rodgers didn't appear to have the same energy level. That was understandable. He had been battling a flu bug late in the week. He did less at the line than normal against coordinator Leslie Frazier, who disguised coverages well and blitzed a mere 12.2% on passes. Rodgers also suffered a strained calf on the second series, an injury that can be very painful. So he adjusted, playing a conservative check-down and short-slot-pass-to-Cobb kind of game. He was patient, in control and, by and large, on point. The Bucs were playing for keeps, hitting anything that moved. It was an uncomfortable afternoon for Rodgers given his health and an aroused opponent. His first-quarter fumble on the sack by Johnson was the 10th of the season, one less than his career high of 11 in 2009 (counting playoffs). It also marked the first time in Rodgers' career that he has fumbled in four straight games. It's a major problem, and he needs to get it corrected fast.

## **RUNNING BACKS (3 ½)**

James Starks was charged with 2 ½ "bad" runs because of a series of faulty decisions. He should have stayed play-side rather than cut back on an early run, then went wide on a draw for minus-1 when he might have gained 2 or 3 hammering straight ahead. He didn't break a single tackle. His average is down to 3.8 compared to a career-best 5.5 a year ago. Maybe he was frustrated with just seven carries. Meanwhile, Lacy (34) broke four tackles, including a shot from the side by Lansanah on the 44-yard TD. Lansanah had a free run but went for the strip instead thinking with his weight (255) Lacy still would go down. Lacy didn't go down, gathered speed and outran SS Bradley McDougald, a second-year man with 4.62-second speed. Lacy took a load of punishment. He might have been more willing to juke and avoid blows earlier in the season. Now that it's crunch-playoff time, he looks even more willing to do whatever it takes. Cobb played about half of a 56-yard FG drive midway through the second half at RB when the Packers were clinging to a 7-point lead and needed a spark. FB John Kuhn's 25 snaps were a season high. He made key blocks on two long runs but also fell off blocks that contributed to two "bad" runs.

## **DEFENSIVE LINE (4)**

The Bucs' longest rush was 4 yards. When the Bucs wouldn't control the clock with their ground game, they had no chance of springing an upset. Not only didn't Mike Daniels (32 of 49 snaps), Letroy Guion (23) or Josh Boyd (15) budge, they almost were never on the ground. Matched against decorated veteran LG Logan Mankins, Daniels played one of his finest games. Mankins is tall (6-4), and at 32 doesn't bend anywhere near the way he once did. Daniels (6-0 ½) used his low center of gravity to win the leverage battle. He beat Mankins up the field for a half sack, and repeatedly either shed or slipped around his attempted blocks. Daniels beat LT Demar Dotson on the goal line and had Doug Martin trapped for a safety but missed the tackle. Guion and Boyd are giving high effort. Guion will give ground against double-teams but seldom buckles and frequently springs back into the tackle. The Bucs had nowhere to turn. Even their 13 snaps with a sixth offensive lineman on the field didn't help their inept ground game. Datone Jones (22) didn't play any of the 11 snaps in the 3-4 base, and Mike Pennel's lone snap came in the 4-4 short-yardage package. Jones found patsies in RGs Patrick Omameh and Josh Allen and registered 2 ½ pressures. Come playoff time, he needs to do it against good players.

## **LINEBACKERS (4 ½)**

Maybe Clay Matthews was burned about not being named one of the two defensive captains behind Morgan Burnett and Julius Peppers. He had 2 ½ sacks, overmatching backup Garrett Gilkey for one and Dotson for another. He also had knockdowns against backup Kevin Pamphile and Dotson, who is just two weeks into the move from RT to LT and remains out of sorts. He beat the pulling Omameh to stop Charles Sims for minus-1, halted TE Luke Stoker dead in his tracks on a crossing route and batted a pass at the line. Matthews played 26 snaps at OLB, 13 at ILB and six walking up late as a wide rush end. On the other side, two of Peppers' four pressures were sacks, including one on a big bull rush against the hapless Allen. Unlike Nick Perry (15), Mike Neal (17 at DL, 17 at OLB) is a quick-twitch athlete. He has fast get-off, doesn't round off his cuts on stunts and constantly was disruptive. Perry was a non-factor but Jayrone Elliott, in eight snaps, knocked down McCown on a twist inside. Sam Barrington (32) played alongside Matthews in the 4-2 and Hawk (12) in the 3-4. There's an intimidation quotient in Barrington. WR Vincent Jackson pulled off his dig route when he sensed that Barrington was coming to pound him. At the same time, Barrington needs to tighten his game. He made the decision to leave Martin, his man, and turn an early five-man pressure into six with a late run-in. This time, it worked. Barrington laid out McCown so his pass to Martin fell incomplete. Had it been complete, Martin might still be running. Playing 18 snaps as the LB in the 4-1, Brad Jones ran over Sims for one knockdown and ran in unblocked on a delay for another.

## **SECONDARY (4 ½)**

Dom Capers blitzed 51.5% on passes, his highest rate since Game 6, and watched as both his rush and coverage excelled. Rookie Mike Evans and Jackson, both 6-4 ½, failed to beat press coverage cleanly, and with no time to scan McCown was doomed. Tramon Williams (49) was in perfect position to draw the offensive pass-interference call on Evans and tackled crisply. Sam Shields (44) gave up a 22-yard sideline completion to Jackson going for the ball and was adequate overall. The only missed tackle by the back seven went to Hyde (37), who served as nickel back while Casey Hayward (18) was the dime. This might have been Morgan Burnett's career game. The Bucs rushed just 14 times but Burnett made the tackle on almost every one. Instead of his customary wait-and-see approach, he trusted his reads and pulled the trigger. Martin, a shake-and-bake kind of runner, bounced outside from his own 2 creating a two-way go against Burnett with only green grass ahead. He feinted, and feinted again. Burnett stared him down, didn't lunge and made a form tackle for no gain. It truly was a "wow" play. Given 16 blitzes in the last seven games, Burnett also has made strides as a rusher. RT Oniel Cousins might be terrible but he is massive. Using his hands well, Burnett zipped by Cousins inside for a sack. Ha Ha Clinton-Dix (49) broke up one bomb to Jackson but then failed on another and the gain was 40. From a two-shell secondary, the rookie arrived in plenty of time and should have intercepted. Instead, he was so passive at the ball that Jackson actually caught it on the way down, not in high-point style.

## **KICKERS (3 ½)**

Mason Crosby hooked an attempt from 48 wide left before coming back with hits from that same left hash from 42 and 25. His five kickoffs averaged 73.2 yards and 3.72 seconds of hang time. Four were touchbacks. Tim Masthay's two-punt averages were 34.5 (gross and net) and 4.42.

### **SPECIAL TEAMS (3)**

From Games 5-13, these units drew just three penalties. This was the second game in a row with two fouls. Sam Shields, who really struggled in seven snaps on the perimeter replacing injured Davon House, had an illegal block in the game and Chris Banjo was assessed for holding. Lang was back on the FG-extra point protection team, replacing Linsley at LG. Protection was solid. Cobb fumbled fielding a punt but managed to recover.

### **OVERALL (4)**

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