

Rating the Packers: Week 17 vs Lions

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

Posted: Dec 30, 2014

Green Bay - From the press box, it certainly didn't look as if Aaron Rodgers would come back in the second half from his aggravated calf injury. On Monday, offensive coordinator Tom Clements said the same thing. Not only did Rodgers return with 7½ minutes left in the third quarter, energizing teammates and fans, he led the Green Bay Packers on three substantial drives in five possessions against a top-notch defense Sunday at Lambeau Field in what was the NFC North Division championship game.

Here is a rating of the Packers in their 30-20 victory over the Detroit Lions, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

RECEIVERS (4½)

No one was harder on himself than Randall Cobb (58 snaps at WR, two at RB) after the 19-7 defeat at Ford Field in Week 3. Operating against the Lions' fifth and sixth nickel backs, Danny Gorrer and Mohammed Seisay, he had three catches for a measly 29 yards in 42 ho-hum snaps. This time, Cobb caught four of five balls for 80, setting up two TDs with gains of 34 and 29 and scoring another himself from 13. Why the Lions would cut Gorrer Nov. 3 is anyone's guess. Well-traveled or not, Gorrer stuck with Cobb in the slot. Former Colt Cassius Vaughn was the nickel back Sunday and had no chance, trailing badly on two catches by Cobb for 47 yards before being pulled for Don Carey. "I had to make up for last time," Cobb said Sunday. This time, he was a dominant force. He even went inside and cracked back on a defender. Davante Adams, who had 40 targeted balls in the previous eight games, literally was on the outside (60 snaps) looking in. He didn't see a ball. Jordy Nelson (62) gained 43 of his 86 yards (50%) after the catch. He made FS Glover Quin miss twice and SS James Ihedigbo once. He's shifty with the ball in his hands. Richard Rodgers (31) had his best game as a receiver. He fought his way across the face of LB Tahir Whitehead for a 6-yard catch on third and 4, made a instantaneous hot-read adjustment against one of defensive coordinator Teryl Austin's rare blitzes for 7 on third and 1 and bent in a post route for 18 against Ihedigbo. Despite his size, he's still not a reliable run blocker. Going one-on-one at the point of attack with DE Ziggy Ansah on a fourth and goal at the 1 isn't an enviable assignment, but if Rodgers even gets half of his man it's a TD. He also couldn't cut off DE Jason Jones on another red-zone run.

OFFENSIVE LINE (4)

Probably the best player was T.J. Lang, who was across from Ndamukong Suh on almost all of Suh's 50 snaps. He locked up Suh one-on-one on the opening play and Eddie Lacy shot by for 22. He did the same thing three plays later on James Starks' 21-yard burst. Remember how Suh used to throw Marshall Newhouse and Jeff Saturday around? None of that happened this time. Lang is one of five tough guys on that line now. Lang was involved in three of the 10 "bad" runs. Suh pushed him back sometimes. But Lang gave as good as he got, and that was a win for Green Bay. The Packers folded or pulled linemen on 12 of their 36 carries by RBs. The net was just 26 yards but at least it gave Suh and his linemates something else to consider. David Bakhtiari gave up just one hurry to Ansah, a fabulous second-year talent. He stopped the bull rushes that were such a problem last year. Bakhtiari struggled staying in front of Ansah in the run game but there was only one carry in which the RB was smashed because of his malfeasance. Corey Linsley's job by and large was to keep his body on WLB DeAndre Levy so he couldn't undermine the offense. Levy is that good. Everyone played a role in neutralizing Levy. Linsley keeps making solid contact, is seldom on the ground and isn't easily deterred. Bryan Bulaga gave up a bad sack to Jones but otherwise played well. Continuing to play on a bad toe, it makes sense that Josh Sitton was more effective early than late.

QUARTERBACKS (5)

Mike McCarthy kept three QBs active for the first time in fear that Rodgers' week-old calf injury might resurface. It didn't look good when he went down in a heap with a pull in the same calf. Returning in mid-third quarter, Rodgers limped around, solved Austin's uncomplicated scheme and burnished his history dating back to his California youth as someone who will play hurt. In some ways, Rodgers doesn't need his legs to throw short-to-intermediate. He leaves his base and jumps into some passes, anyway. Relegated to a pistol location directly in front of Lacy, he took advantage of superior protection (he was down once in 23 dropbacks) to complete 77.3%. He kept finding open receivers and zinging those tight, accurate spirals right when it's most advantageous for them to get the ball. The Lions knew the hard count was coming but still Suh and Jones couldn't contain themselves and jumped. He also caught the Lions substituting and bagged a 12-man penalty as the unsuspecting Suh took his good, sweet time jogging off. Matt Flynn's four-play stint didn't inspire confidence.

RUNNING BACKS (4)

Lacy (52) broke seven tackles in his first three rushes en route to 10 in all, the same number that he had in the last three games combined. Whitehead missed Lacy three times, and Levy failed twice. He ran right through Quin for an extra 13 yards. When Jones beat Bulaga inside, he eluded Jones and gained 8. When an inside zone was clogged, he made a jump cut left and picked up 11. He dragged RDT C.J. Mosley for five yards. On Austin's only six-man rush, Lacy got out uneventfully on third and 3 and made a leaping catch of a check-down for 5. The big man incorporated a spin move in about half of his season-high 29 touches. Ihedigbo was able to force the fumble because Lacy, unlike John Kuhn, didn't have two hands on the ball after the spin as he was going down. He absorbed so much punishment. Starks had just 11 snaps. Kuhn (23) was inconsistent blocking.

DEFENSIVE LINE (4)

The Lions' offensive line was short three starters from late in the second quarter on. Rookie Travis Swanson made his debut replacing C Dominic Raiola (suspended), rookie free agent Cornelius Lucas replaced RT LaAdrian Waddle (knee) and journeyman Garrett Reynolds had to come in when RG Larry Warford (knee) went down. Against this makeshift operation the defensive line was good, not great. As usual, Mike Daniels (50 of 69 snaps) was the top performer. He beat Lucas for a "bad" run, got on the inside edge of LG Rob Sims and beat him for a straight one-on-one sack in 3.0 seconds, and had a pressure against both Swanson and Reynolds. Letroy Guion (34) trashed Swanson once or twice early with his vast advantage in experience and strength but didn't come close to dominating. Josh Boyd (20) played in the base defense whereas Datone Jones (26) played only in rush situations. Both Jones and Guion garnered their only pressures against Reynolds, the former Falcon who can't play. When the Lions decided to run Joique Bell off right tackle and Jones was on the field, the Lions screwed him into the ground with a double-team block. Plays such as that call into question if Jones ever will be a full-time player.

LINEBACKERS (4)

For the second week in a row, the Packers cut back Julius Peppers' playing time. Instead of his customary 75 to 80%, he was down to 63% in Tampa and 48% Sunday. Fourth-quarter pass rush remains one of the integral components of successful defense, and if fresh legs enabled Peppers to produce as he did late the Packers were the better for it. Granted, Reynolds is a pushover, and most of Peppers' late damage came one-on-one against him in a colossal mismatch. He also tipped two passes with his gigantic wingspan. The other snap counts outside were 53 for Clay Matthews (he played 15 inside), 30 for Mike Neal (he also had 22 on the line), 25 for Nick Perry and four for Jayrone Elliott. Matthews was violent, as usual. One time Sims was double-teaming the nose tackle when Matthews shot forward from ILB and crashed over the top of the guard as they both mashed to the ground. The ball was somewhere else. Matthews made a great play on the two-point conversion, scrambling off TE Brandon Pettigrew's block and upending Bell a foot short. He also beat hapless TE Kellen Davis inside a few times. However, despite being double-teamed just 33% on individual rushes, he never beat LT Riley Reiff. Matthews makes and misses plays, hits everything that moves and keeps offenses on edge. Neal and Perry combined for several tackles after shedding blocks by Pettigrew. It was more of the same for SLB Sam Barrington (41). He's a more explosive hitter than base ILB A.J. Hawk (22) or dime LB Brad Jones (28). Barrington also is giving up his share of big plays with imprecise zone drops and mistakes, gets engulfed at times and lacks desired speed to the boundary. Jones cost the Packers a TD with a third-and-13 slap to the side of Matthew Stafford's helmet. He didn't get much done in eight A-gap blitzes, lunged against RB Theo Riddick and allowed a 21-yard check-down, and showed agility deficiencies in space. He does provide a far more physical presence than Hawk.

SECONDARY (4)

The best CB was Casey Hayward (31). With Davon House (shoulder) out, Micah Hyde (43) started as the nickel before giving way to Hayward. In dime, Hayward and Hyde were the slots. Hayward made a great read on third and 10, slicing in front of Reggie Bush to break up a pass that he should have intercepted. He also jolted Bush out of bounds a yard shy of the sticks on a third-down screen and reacted fast to tackle Riddick in the flat for minus-3. Hyde wasn't as sharp covering. With Dom Capers blitzing 45.7% on passes, LC Tramon Williams (69) and RC Sam Shields (55) both saw a lot of Calvin Johnson on his 61 snaps and held him to just 39 yards. The highlight for Williams was his deft deflection of a 10-yard slant to Johnson. Shields gave up some completions but nothing deep, and that was the overriding objective. Morgan Burnett (69) went deep on a out-and-up route by talented Eric Ebron and, with the rookie tight end in position to make the catch at the 4, dug the ball out. He also recovered a fumble and missed two tackles, one in the backfield against Bell when he hesitated rather than attacking. Ha Ha Clinton-Dix (69) was late reacting in coverage, which shouldn't be happening at this point in the season. Most of Sean Richardson's 11 snaps came when he replaced Shields against some jumbo sets.

KICKERS (2)

It wasn't Mason Crosby's fault that his 52-yard boot was blocked. One wonders how's his mental health after having five placements stuffed in the last 13 games? Tim Masthay's three punts averaged 39 yards (gross), 27.7 (net) and 3.59 seconds of hang time. His first punt, which hung just 3.05, rolled 11 yards.

SPECIAL TEAMS (3)

Hyde just has a knack for returning punts. FB Jed Collins got an arm on Hyde's leg, but it didn't even slow him down as he bolted between the hash marks on a 55-yard TD jaunt. Key blocks were delivered outside by Jarrett Bush and Shields out, which gave Hyde space because Sam Martin's punt hung 4.56, and inside by Brad Jones and Clinton-Dix. Quarless, the left wing, let SS Isa Abdul-Quddus inside and the result was the blocked FG. The novel 23-yard pooch free kick by Martin was recovered by the Lions largely because Jarrett Boykin reacted poorly and didn't prevent defenders from impeding players waving for a fair catch. Later, Burnett blew the recovery of a conventional onside kick but was saved when Lions RB George Winn fanned and Williams finally got the ball. Brett Goode snapped exceptionally well.

OVERALL (4)

Dec 30, 2014, editions of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel