

# Rating the Packers: Divisional Playoff vs Cowboys

Green Bay does enough to meet Seattle

*By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*

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**Green Bay** - It was a matter of holding serve against the Dallas Cowboys Sunday afternoon for the Green Bay Packers in the NFC divisional playoffs after the Seattle Seahawks dispatched the Carolina Panthers on Saturday night.

Neither the Packers nor the Seahawks were overly impressive, but then they didn't have to be. The NFC Championship Game Sunday in Seattle probably will require a dominant performance to win.

Here is a rating of the Packers in their 26-21 victory over the Cowboys at Lambeau Field, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

## **RECEIVERS (4)**

The Cowboys matched RC Orlando Scandrick, their best cover man, on Randall Cobb (54 snaps at WR, eight at RB). Scandrick played with speed and aggressiveness. He's a top-flight cover man. Still, he couldn't keep up with Cobb, who certainly must have earned Scandrick's respect with another in a long line of outstanding performances. Cobb's made three great catches: an ankle-top throw for 12 to start the FG drive late in the first half, touching his feet just inbounds two plays later on a 31-yard corner route against zone coverage and the game-clincher for 12 on a batted ball with Scandrick all over him. Moreover, Cobb continued to show his toughness by cracking back on inside defenders two or three times in the run game. After a dryspell, Davante Adams (61) exploited his matchup against Sterling Moore, the nickel back who had the same role for New England in Super Bowl XLVI. Of Adams' 117 yards, a whopping 78 came after the catch. He broke two tackles by Moore and another by FS J.J. Wilcox. He was beating Moore at the line with razor-sharp cuts and feints, and he played with strength at the ball and with the ball under his arm. Adams caught the ball away from his body, too. While Cobb and Adams were gaining consistent separation, Jordy Nelson didn't make much headway against LC Brandon Carr. That was a surprise because Carr hadn't played well recently. One reason Nelson saw only five balls compared to 11 apiece for Cobb and Adams was separation. The vertical pass that partially deflected off Nelson's helmet was thrown slightly behind him, but if he had created more space from Moore it would have given Aaron Rodgers a better throwing window. Nelson did beat Carr deep on a free play but the pass led him out of bounds. After running 50 yards like that, many receivers will take a blow. Not Nelson, who lined up all 69 snaps. Andrew Quarless (37) is becoming more useful all the time. Of his 37 snaps, seven came as the lone receiver to a side. Matched against Bruce Carter, a talented but lackadaisical linebacker, Quarless was two steps before him crossing the back of the end zone to attract Rodgers' attention for a 4-yard TD. Quarless also leaked out of the protection to catch a dump-off for 13 and navigated through defenders to take Rodgers' flip for 8. However, getting two false-start penalties in one game was abominable. Richard Rodgers (21) will remember this game for his 13-yard TD, but he also blocked poorly on three of his six snaps in the first half. He blocks much better in space.

## **OFFENSIVE LINE (4 ½)**

Tyrone Crawford, the Cowboys' three-technique and best defensive lineman, was a factor week after week this season with quickness, strength and resolve. Other than a hurry on a stunt against David Bakhtiari and a late batted ball, he was invisible. It's an indication just how well this unit is playing. Josh Sitton allowed no pressures and no "bad" runs. He's just so strong. It's over when he gets his hands on them. Bryan Bulaga continued building on his excellent second half of the season by neutralizing LEs George Selvie and Anthony Spencer. As his confidence grows even higher, Bulaga is knocking people around and mashing them into the ground when he gets the chance. Bakhtiari handled rookie DeMarcus Lawrence but had his share of problems anchoring and staying in front of RE Jeremy Mincey. T.J. Lang's decision to pick out NT Nick Hayden near a pile and send him flying earned a 15-yard roughing penalty and a probable fine. It detracted from a good showing. You've got to be smarter than that all the time but especially with third and 1 coming from the Dallas 7. His lack of restraint might have cost the team four points. Corey Linsley got his shoulders turned on a twist and yielded the first sack of his first season to Lawrence on an inside spin. The premature shotgun snap was charged as a fumble for Rodgers but Linsley was the culprit.

## **QUARTERBACKS (4)**

Playing on an injured left calf, Rodgers apparently went into the game trying to go the distance at all costs. It made perfect sense. The Packers probably would have struggled to win with Matt Flynn or Scott Tolzien, who also was active. Taking the global view was smart. As much as Rodgers might have liked to start running and sliding, he knew discretion often is the better part of valor. If he babied the calf, so be it. His performance was spotty for three quarters, but he never left the field and in the end his arm and brain proved too much for coordinator Rod Marinelli's determined defense. Marinelli stayed true to form, sending five or more on just 15% of passes and never rushing six. Mike McCarthy protected Rodgers by putting him in shotgun for all but three late kneel-downs in a 69-snap game. With the running backs right next to him, Rodgers wasn't required to stretch on handoffs or perform other intricate ball handling/footwork. He was wild high early. He was blindsided by Mincey for a strip-sack after holding the ball too long. He held the ball 8.3 seconds before being knocked down on a careless pass that almost was intercepted. The Packers hadn't trailed once in their last seven home games but found themselves down by eight late in the third quarter. Then McCarthy took the gloves off, putting Rodgers in an empty set for a season-high eight times. It was from spread sets that Rodgers zinged his two TD passes that few quarterbacks, if any, can make.

## **RUNNING BACKS (4)**

For the fifth time in the last six games Cobb made a difference at RB. Cobb would line up in the backfield, Rodgers would check if Dallas had a LB or a DB in coverage and call the play accordingly after several times motioning Cobb wide. When Carter was covering Cobb, he beat him twice for 20 yards. After a dominant start, Eddie Lacy's asthma flared up and he was limited to 38 snaps. Lacy converted on third and 1, making him six for eight in 17 games. Although he averaged 5.3 and gained 101 yards, it wasn't one of his finer outings. He broke just one tackle. Basically, the line was getting him to the second level. Of John Kuhn's season-high 30 snaps, eight came in the first eight plays. He had a terrible drop on a check-down and one "bad" run block.

## **DEFENSIVE LINE (3 ½)**

With the stakes higher, the Packers determined that Mike Daniels had to be on the field. He played 83.9% (47 of 56), winning some and losing some but never letting his intensity wane in a physical battle with LG Ronald Leary. Daniels' partial sack came on a rip move against Leary. Another reason for Daniels' increased workload was Josh Boyd's knee problem. He reinjured his right knee on his eighth snap and, after a strong early showing, came back for just three more plays. Datone Jones (30) replaced Boyd at LE in the base 3-4, a role the Packers haven't been sure he's reliable playing. Jones wasn't bad. He came off RG Zack Martin to tackle DeMarco Murray on a 2-yard gain, moved well laterally and never just got blown away. After being down-blocked by RT Jermeay Parnell, Jones spun away refusing to be blocked and by doing so was in position to hop on Murray's critical fumble. NT Letroy Guion (40) creates problems when he doesn't play into the wrong gap. He was able to resist some of the NFL's stiffest double-teams courtesy of C Travis Frederick and either Martin or Leary. Rather than be pancaked, Guion has the pride and strength to spring back after the initial 640-pound surge. His knockdown of Tony Romo at Frederick's expense left the quarterback limping; later in the game, the courageous Romo was too banged up to make plays.

## **LINEBACKERS (4)**

The best play of the game was made by the best player on the field. When Martin pulled right onto Julius Peppers (36), no one knew how important that block would be. If Martin handled Peppers, Murray was into an open half of the field with just one faraway defender, Ha Ha Clinton-Dix, in any position to deny a 59-yard TD. Then Peppers used his arms and strength to shed Martin quickly. In an instant, he launched himself headlong toward Murray, who was halfway through the hole. His right hand hit the ball, the ball came loose and Jones recovered. Some have rhapsodized about Peppers' pair of pick-6's, but this was his greatest play of the year. He also beat Leary for a strip-sack in 2.8 seconds, beat TE Gavin Escobar to draw a holding penalty against Martin and had two other pressures. Mike Neal (36) played more than Nick Perry (20). It was Perry, however, who circled wide around LT Tyron Smith for a sack in 4.0 and then collected one-half of another in which Daniels did the heavy lifting. On a zone drop, Perry's limitations in space were evident on an 18-yard gain by TE Jason Witten. Neal doesn't weigh much anymore but he tackled Murray twice for no gain by setting a solid edge. Clay Matthews is bouncing around so much between OLB (29) and ILB (26) that it can't help but affect his production. Sam Barrington (46) played a lot, A.J. Hawk (18) played on some run downs and Brad Jones (eight) remained the dime LB. Hawk delivered two strong hits on Murray near the line before being escorted 20 yards down the field by Frederick on Murray's 26-yard run. Drawing another costly holding penalty, Jones grabbed Murray instead of redirecting him on a third-and-4 screen.

## **SECONDARY (3 ½)**

The Packers used more press than off-man coverage against Dez Bryant and both Sam Shields (42) and Tramon Williams (52), staying on their respective sides, held up well. Bryant caught an 8-yard tear screen, a 10-yard comeback against Williams on a five-man pressure and a 20-yard dig against Shields on a six-man pressure. Even though Dom Capers pressured 44.4% on passes, his cornerbacks held up. On the late fourth-and-2, Bryant out-jumped Shields but the 31-yard reception was reversed by replay. Micah Hyde (32) was the nickel back but the primary coverage responsibility for Witten went to Morgan Burnett (55). Casey Hayward (nine) played in the dime only. Burnett had major problems with Witten and on other routes. Hyde might have been the better choice. Certainly Clinton-Dix (55) isn't capable at this point of covering a resourceful veteran such as Witten. It's on Williams for blowing the tackle on Terrance Williams' 38-yard TD, but Hyde got outflanked and Clinton-Dix showed a disappointing lack of pursuit. Sean Richardson (nine) substituted for Shields on some run downs. Murray got wide on his 26-yard run when Richardson failed to contain him. The 30-yard run by Murray ruptured when Clinton-Dix took a bad angle.

## **KICKERS (4)**

As the Cowboys' Dan Bailey struggled, Mason Crosby soared with field goals from 40 and 30 plus five kickoffs that averaged 64.4 yards and 4.02 seconds of hang time. Dallas' Chris Jones hit his two punts better than Tim Masthay hit his two (37.5 gross, 34.0 net, 3.99 hang time).

## **SPECIAL TEAMS (3)**

Getting penetration assistance from Boyd, Datone Jones leapt high and tipped Bailey's attempt from 50 enough so it screw-balled way wide right. Jones also got after people blocking for kickoffs. Instead of hitting it on two kickoff returns, Cobb tried a rope-a-dope delay. He paid the price on the second when C.J. Spillman knocked the ball out. Cobb and the Packers were saved when Quarless pushed through TE James Hanna and CB Tyler Patmon to make the recovery. The best player in coverage was Jayrone Elliott. Burnett had two of the four missed tackles. Brad Jones was penalized for holding on a KO return. Placement protection was solid partially because Josh Sitton was back (at left wing) after an eight-game absence.

## **OVERALL (4)**

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