

Rating the Packers: NFC Championship at Seahawks

Poor ending a team effort

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

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Green Bay - The Green Bay Packers opened and closed their season with defeats in Seattle.

It tells you they're just not as good as the Seahawks, at least not at CenturyLink Field, but that wasn't the case for most of the way Sunday in the NFC Championship Game. The Packers had excellent schemes and gave tremendous effort. They just fell apart at the end. Offense, defense, special teams and coaching. All four shared almost equally in the 28-22 overtime defeat. Here is a rating of the Packers in their loss to the Seahawks, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

RECEIVERS (2 ½)

Unlike the first game, there were a few occasions when Jordy Nelson (66 of 69 snaps) did line up across from LC Richard Sherman. The great majority of his plays came against RC Byron Maxwell. Four of his receptions (for 65 yards) were against Maxwell, an aggressive, long, press-man specialist. There were several deep balls in which Nelson failed to separate. He dropped one stop route and, from the 6, tripped at the top of the route on a corner route against nickel back Jeremy Lane that skipped off his fingers. Upon drawing a pass-interference penalty on Maxwell, Nelson barked back when Seattle coaches complained to the side judge. It's something Nelson never does. Cobb (60 at WR, five at RB) wasn't able to dominate Lane, a matchup that should have been in his favor. It was impressive to watch the 195-pound Cobb crack back on SS Kam Chancellor without fear. Even with Sherman playing one-armed the entire fourth quarter (elbow), the Packers didn't test him with Davante Adams (61) or Nelson. Failing to make Sherman cover and tackle in that circumstance was a miscue. As has happened many times, the opponent kind of ignored Richard Rodgers (28) and he made plays. From detached locations, he displayed fast feet in and out of his breaks, presented himself well as a target and caught everything. His blocking is another matter. Eddie Lacy was stacked up on third and goal from the 1 because JC Tretter was late off the ball and because Rodgers couldn't sustain against SLB Bruce Irvin. When the Packers' four-minute offense failed, Rodgers was manhandled by DE Michael Bennett at the point of attack. Asked to lead-block against Chancellor from the backfield, Rodgers came in soft and went flying back faster than he approached. His size screams blocker but his play doesn't. Andrew Quarless (27) was unable to separate from WLB K.J. Wright from a split-receiver location on a late third-and-4 incomplection.

OFFENSIVE LINE (4 ½)

Generally, Bryan Bulaga's two false-start penalties should disqualify him from "Stars of the Game" consideration. His down-in, down-out performance, however, was too special to leave out. Bulaga didn't allow a "bad" run and his only pressure came on a bull rush by DE Cliff Avril. Both Avril and DE Michael Bennett power-rushed Bulaga but he anchored well. A massive man, he has learned how to use that size. He's also improved his pass sets and doesn't often miss with hand placement. On the other side, David Bakhtiari wasn't quite as flawless as Bulaga but played well, too. Bakhtiari displaced the ends on runs to his side and executed some combo blocks with Josh Sitton. He was late cutting off NT Kevin Williams; otherwise, John Kuhn would have scored from the 1. He also had a mental error in four-minute that partially led to a minus-4 for Lacy. Coordinator Dan Quinn relied on four-man rushes but when they were repelled he had to send a fifth rusher. His final blitz rate was 23.7%. Guards T.J. Lang and Sitton stayed off the ground and in front of their man. The only sack came on a stunt when Lang overset too wide to halt Bennett but then couldn't get back to pick up Avril. Corey Linsley got flattened out a few times on reach blocks and back-doored once by Williams, the distinguished old Vikings.

QUARTERBACKS (2 ½)

Aaron Rodgers is 0-3 against Pete Carroll's Seahawks with a long completion of 31 yards. This time, he didn't hit a pass more than 13 yards downfield. Granted, the Seahawks have the NFL's best secondary, but many regard Rodgers as its best quarterback. His protection was little short of superlative. He missed deep five times, including two to Nelson and two to Adams. The trajectory of his long balls was off. He cost the Packers a field goal by throwing late to Adams and having it picked off by Sherman in the back of the end zone. There was no need to throw that second interception on first down from the Seattle 33. He came close to a third on a too-flat throw to Nelson when Maxwell was all over him at the front pylon. Yes, the calf might have been an inconvenience. It also was his fourth game playing with the injury, and he moved better on it this time. Lacy was set up for a big gain on a screen when Rodgers stepped the wrong way and then bailed out on the throw, never even giving the play a chance. He could have attacked the wounded Sherman but didn't. When Russell Wilson emerged from his horrendous funk to make game-winning plays, Rodgers offered little in the second half. Of course, he made a few great throws. His lethal hard counts also drew Seattle off three times. In the end, Wilson proved to be the tougher man to beat. Great players need to make great plays in conference title games, and Rodgers really didn't make any.

RUNNING BACKS (4 ½)

Lacy (49) isn't as good as Marshawn Lynch. Perhaps nobody is. Still, Lacy is a tremendous back for a big game like this. After being KO'd by Chancellor in September, he almost appeared to have a vendetta against Seattle. He spun less. He eluded less. It was almost like he ran toward contact and tried to bull over or through as many Seahawks as he could. In all, he broke three tackles. This season, perhaps more than any other, offensive linemen across the league have "helped" their backs by pushing the pile from behind. Both Lynch and Lacy benefited several times. Once or two, he made desperate late lunges for extra yardage. When Bennett penetrated between Bulaga and Lang, Lacy shrugged him off and turned a 3-yard loss into a gain of 7. James Starks (14) was terrific, too. His 32-yard cutback was awesome because he made the great FS Earl Thomas miss on a no-excuse shot. DE O'Brien Schofield had Starks dead to rights 5 yards in the backfield but he darted left and made 3 out of nothing. It wasn't Kuhn's fault that he came up a foot short of a TD. On a third and 1, Williams shoved Lang back two yards on the snap and gave Kuhn (23) a substantial lick from the side. With a good piece of running Kuhn still picked up 3. He had a booming lead block on Chancellor, too, as the Packers prevented the intimidator from causing much harm.

DEFENSIVE LINE (3)

What in heaven's name was Mike Daniels' thinking on Wilson's first interception? He wasn't even in the game on his taunting penalty that might have been the difference between 7 points and 3. Daniels took it upon himself to run 30 yards down the sideline to harass RG J.R. Sweezy, who made a clean tackle. True, Sweezy is a cutthroat competitor, but there is no excuse for such selfish behavior. Awful in Week 1, Daniels (50 of 70 snaps) was better Sunday against massive LG James Carpenter. He held his ground adequately, disengaged several times to collaborate on dragging down Lynch and set up one of Morgan Burnett's two sacks by beating a double team. The Packers played 13 snaps of 3-4, and for the first time in several months the starter at LE was Datone Jones (31) rather than Josh Boyd (17). Jones had two of the 17 missed tackles by the defense, the same number as in the opener. However, he held the point respectably and did play hard. Boyd made back-to-back big plays to halt a second-quarter drive but wasn't as stout in the second half. NT Letroy Guion (36) appeared to have problems with the Seahawks' run game, which is a thorny blend of misdirection and power. He looked indecisive, started standing up and got displaced too much.

LINEBACKERS (2 ½)

Julius Peppers knocked backup RT Alvin Bailey off balance for an easy early sack. He also knocked Sweezy on his back side for a knockdown and set up Burnett's other sack by KO'ing Sweezy, who was gimping. Of Peppers' 56 snaps, 13 came as a defensive lineman when he moved to find the best matchup. In all, he had five of the Packers' 16 pressures. His split-second decision to put the stop sign on Burnett 4 yards into his interception return was rash and wrong. Nick Perry (40) looked stiff and slow in space and was just OK as a rusher; he also was hard to block in the run game. Mike Neal (27 at LB, 11 at DL), Clay Matthews (29 at ILB, 24 at OLB), Sam Barrington (career-high 69) and Perry each missed two tackles as the LBs had 10 misses total. Matthews was up and down. His only pressure came on a risky inside pressure against LT Russell Okung when he not only flushed Wilson but had the burst to hunt him down for minus-15. He also was guilty of a gratuitous penalty against Wilson, but at least he went after people. Neal played fast. Named to replace Brad Jones as the dime LB at week's start, Barrington kept striking Lynch at the knees or below and getting him down. Lynch has caught just one long wheel route all season. Barrington went over the top to break up the first but then improperly went underneath a pick and paid the price on the 26-yard reception. Most of A.J. Hawk's 17 snaps came when Matthews became exhausted late and had to leave. Because Hawk worked to the A rather than the B gap, Lynch had an easy 24-yard TD through the B gap. Of course, when Hawk was in the right gap, it didn't make any difference when he dived and missed on an 11-yard carry by Lynch.

SECONDARY (4)

Ha Ha Clinton-Dix (69) closed with two interceptions, including a one-handed snag of Wilson's heave off deep-bootleg action. He also pulled the trigger twice and brought Lynch down with sharp open-field tackles. However, he dropped a third interception right in his hands and then played patty-cake instead of breaking up the 2-point pass that hung for 2.8 seconds. The decision by Burnett (70) to go down with blockers and open field ahead will be talked about for a long time. Lynch had a 14-yard run because of Burnett's incorrect run fit. Micah Hyde (57) was solid. Dime back Casey Hayward (25) was burned late by Doug Baldwin twice for 55 yards. Probably the top CB was Sam Shields (65), who saw the take-off coming by Jermaine Kearse and positioned himself for the pick. Tramon Williams also covered well, setting up Clinton-Dix for one pick and blanketing Kearse on the deep route for the other. On Kearse's winning TD, it's difficult to fault Williams for anything in thankless Cover 0 except not making the play.

KICKERS (4)

Mason Crosby was the man. That 48-yarder through gusting wind to tie with 14 seconds left was stunning. He added another from 48 and boots from 40, 20 and 18. His seven kickoffs averaged 72.1 yards and 3.91 hang time. Tim Masthay's five-punt averages were 39.4 (gross), 35.2 (net) and 3.68.

SPECIAL TEAMS (1 ½)

On his flubbed onside recovery, Brandon Bostick left his feet but didn't extend his arms. Nelson was right there, too, just waiting to catch it. Hawk was stationed behind the FG block front for his experience, not his athleticism. His mistake — running up on fourth and 10 when the punter couldn't hurt the Packers instead of staying back on the man who could — probably was as egregious as Bostick's. Brad Jones beat the block of FS DeShawn Shead to strip Baldwin on a kickoff (Burnett recovered). Hyde returned a punt 29 after being fortunate to recover his fumble of a fair catch. Jarrett Bush sizzled in coverage.

OVERALL (2 ½)