

# Packers Individual Report Card:Defense

*By Bob McGinn of the Journal Sentinel*

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## DEFENSIVE LINE (8)

**Josh Boyd:** In mid-October, he replaced injured Datone Jones at LE in the 3-4 defense and held that berth the rest of the way. Shows surprising quick twitch for a 305-pounder drafted in the fifth round. Demonstrates the ability to play on the other side of the line of scrimmage. Active, aggressive and coachable. OK now against double-teams, but with more seasoning could be even stouter. Height (6-2½) isn't ideal for a base end. Playing time was 33.3%. **Grade: C.**

**Mike Daniels:** Given the RE job in base after Ryan Pickett and Johnny Jolly weren't re-signed. A first-year starter and third-year contributor, he ranked second on the D-line in pressures per snap (one every 31.2) and third in tackles per snap (one every 9.9). Brimming with toughness, pride and desire. Limited somewhat by height (6-0½) but sheds blocks and finds the ball. Becoming more disciplined as pass rusher and run defender each year. Played 63.8%. Used less in sub rush, one reason his pressure total fell from 31 to 25. Missed eight tackles, two more than he did from 2012-'13. Drew four of the unit's eight penalties. Needs to start taking the ball away; hasn't had a turnover play since rookie year. **Grade: B.**

**Bruce Gaston:** Plucked off Arizona's practice squad Dec. 8 but never played a down. Green Bay was the rookie's fourth team. At 6-2 and 315, Gaston looks like a NT but probably fits best at DE in the base and DT in sub. At Purdue, he ran a swift 40 (4.96) and bench-pressed 34 times. He's under contract for 2015. **Grade: Incomplete.**

**Letroy Guion:** He was a unanimous pick by scouts as the worst NT in the NFC North but the Packers had no complaints. A salary-cap casualty of Minnesota's on March 6, he signed 11 days later for one year at \$985,000. It took awhile (a hamstring sidelined him for 19 of the first 21 practices), but in the end he replaced injured NT B.J. Raji and played 50.9% of the downs. Guion provided more range than the Packers had in recent years and, after bulking up to 325, wasn't a weakness against double-teams providing his pad level was down. At times, his gap control went askew. He led the D-linemen in tackles per snap (one every 8.4) and was fourth in pressures per snap (one every 38.9). Missed eight tackles. More active early in the season than late. Finished second on the team to Clay Matthews in tackles for loss with five. **Grade: C+.**

**Datone Jones:** The Packers wanted Jones to be a starting base end. He wasn't bad stacking blockers, but at 287 that's not his thing. He averaged 25 snaps in 15 games, primarily as an interior rusher in sub. As the lightest and fastest of the D-linemen, Jones' lead in pressures per snap (one every 23.4) should have been expected. At the same time, it made sense that he ranked only fifth in tackles per snap (one every 11.0). Jones has good get-off and straight-line speed, but often just misses sacks because he's somewhat stiff and doesn't break down easily. His pressure total did rise from 10½ to 16. Did he make the first-to-second-year jump the Packers hoped to see? Probably not. **Grade: C-.**

**Mike Pennel:** The undrafted rookie logged 141 of his 175 snaps from Game 4-10 before playing merely 34 in Games 11-18. As the games became more important, the Packers decided his play level wasn't quite up to snuff. With his size (6-4, 336) and speed (5.22), Pennel passes the eyeball/athletic test immediately. He's just learning how to play lower for a demanding technical coach in Mike Trgovac. There was a time or two when Pennel trashed a blocker and engulfed the ball carrier. He also shows good lateral pursuit. Given a scant Division I background (five games), Pennel's future depends on how fast he can recognize blocking combinations and start consistently making plays. **Grade: D+.**

**B.J. Raji:** Reported for training camp at a trim 334 pounds and practiced well upon return to NT for the departed Pickett. On Aug. 22, he tore the tendon off his right biceps and underwent season-ending surgery. He'll be 29 in July with 71 starts under his belt. Last year, Raji came back to the Packers for one year at \$4 million. One would think his market appeal would be further diminished, but with big men you never know. **Grade: Incomplete.**

**Luther Robinson:** Undrafted rookie from Miami played 62 snaps in Games 5-8 when Jones was injured. He suffered a calf injury Dec. 4 in practice and went on injured reserve. He has below-average size for a base end, good strength and excellent versatility. He warrants another look. **Grade: D.**

**Khyri Thornton:** Compared by one scout to Justin Harrell, the Packers' first-round bust in 2007. As the 85th overall pick (third round), Thornton was either the sixth 3-4 DE or the eighth inside pass rusher off the board. Based on one training camp, he'd be one of Ted Thompson's worst picks. Thornton came up with a hamstring injury in the exhibition finale so the Packers were able to stash him away for a year on IR. Not only is Thornton on the short side (6-2½) for base end, he didn't play hard, get off blocks or show pass rush using power or working an edge. If a year on scholarship can't amp up his level of aggressiveness, he'll be gone by late August. **Grade: Incomplete.**

## LINEBACKERS (12)

**Sam Barrington:** When Barrington was made a surprise starter in Game 7 he had played two snaps from scrimmage in 1½ years. From Game 7-11, Barrington played 32.1% because when Clay Matthews moved inside in Game 9 it was his playing time, not A.J. Hawk's, that plummeted. It wasn't until Games 12-18 when Hawk was demoted and Barrington's playing time swelled to 77.2%. Excluding Matthews, Barrington paced ILBs in tackles per snap (one every 5.7) and pressures per blitz (one every 3.1). Barrington isn't big (6-1, 240) or fast (4.76). He is aggressive, tough and can deliver a blow. Not unlike Desmond Bishop, he possesses the maniacal look and temperament that some of the great MLBs had. He got stuck on some blocks, ran around some others and tended to play small in traffic. He also needs a ton of work in both man and zone coverage. But, at this point, he's the best the Packers have. **Grade: C+.**

**Carl Bradford:** Want to know the difference between big-time college football and the NFL? At Arizona State, Bradford had 21½ sacks rushing outside. In Green Bay, his height (6-1) and short arms (30½) rendered him worthless attempting those exact type rushes. After 53 fruitless exhibition snaps at OLB, the Packers gave him a 51-snap stint at a foreign but better-suited position (ILB) in the exhibition finale. Rather than cut a fourth-round choice, the Packers kept Bradford as the 53rd man on the roster. It's a shot in the dark, but there's no harm in giving him a long look inside. **Grade: Incomplete.**

**Jayrone Elliott:** The rookie free agent from Toledo, inactive for the first two games, became a ball of fire by midseason on special teams and wound up as the tackling leader with 21. What made his total even more impressive was his snap count of 242 ranked only fifth. The Packers would have liked to have played Elliott more from scrimmage, but when none of the four veterans missed a game all they could spare was 54 snaps. He has the size, athletic ability and attitude to be much more than just a special-teamer beginning in 2015. **Grade: D+.**

**A.J. Hawk:** It was sad, really. Hawk, a durable, contributing part of this defense for eight years, hit the wall. Hawk had been slipping but it was never this bad. Despite playing 71.6% of the downs, he didn't have a single tackle for loss after averaging 3.44 from 2006-'13. Largely because he couldn't run anymore, he allowed a LB-high 4½ passes of 20 yards or more. One reason he missed just four tackles was the fact he couldn't get to plays. He had just five pressures in 77 blitzes. When he did make it to the right gap, blockers and backs frequently surged right over the top of him. Even Hawk's ability to think on his feet deserted him on Seattle's fake FG-TD pass when he didn't stay as deep as the deepest receiver. Ted Thompson has to admit the tape doesn't lie. They'll cut Hawk, save \$3.5 million against the cap and bring in a flock of new ILBs. It's possible someone like Rex Ryan might sign Hawk for the minimum to make calls for a complex system. **Grade: F.**

**Brad Jones:** The Packers will move on from Jones as well; his expected release will amount to \$3.75 million in cap savings. So satisfied with his LB rotation down the stretch, even Mike McCarthy couldn't fool himself any longer and replaced Jones as his dime LB with Barrington in Seattle. After playing 68 of 70 snaps with a bad thigh injury in the opener, Jones was put down for three weeks before returning in bit roles here and there. Despite 17.4% playing time, Jones drew five of the ILB's seven penalties. The heavy-legged Jones, still able to strike a blow and play special teams, has lost too much quickness and change of direction. He is a tough guy. **Grade: D+.**

**Jamari Lattimore:** When Jones was rendered hors de combat in Game 2, it was Lattimore, not Barrington, who became a regular for the next five games. He's faster and a much heavier hitter than Hawk, but he also was inconsistent in coverage, his run fits and just lining up. An ankle injury, the latest in a series of injuries, landed him on IR Dec. 13. If the object is to get better, there's no reason to offer him another contract. **Grade: D+.**

**Clay Matthews:** Matthews took one for the team moving inside in Game 9 and playing 345 snaps there (28.2%) in the final 10 weeks. Asked on Jan. 16 if his preference was to return outside in 2015, he replied, "As I've said all along, I think I can do it all. But everybody knows what I'm really good at." Obviously, he meant rushing the passer. With all the bouncing around, Matthews settled for 36½ pressures, well below his average of 50.5 from 2009-'12. His playing time outside was 659 snaps (53.9%). He led the team in tackles for loss with 7½ and the OLBs in tackles per snap (one every 12.9). The Packers need Matthews to regain his big-play form: he averaged 5.7 turnover plays in his first three years and 3.0 in the last three. Still, what he brings to this defense in terms of explosiveness, athleticism and energy is immense. **Grade: B+.**

**Andy Mulumba:** Free agent from Eastern Michigan made the team for the second straight year before suffering a torn ACL on special teams in Game 2. As a rookie, he was called upon to play 348 snaps at OLB. **Grade: Incomplete.**

**Mike Neal:** After three injury-filled seasons, Neal has played all 35 games the past two seasons. He played 449 snaps at OLB and 264 as a D-lineman, giving tremendous effort in a variety of roles and packages. His 27½ pressures, 2½ fewer than last year, still ranked third on the team. As Neal has matured and changed positions he has lost close to 40 pounds. Still, his exceptional strength remains, and prevents him from getting blown out at the point even as a DT in sub packages. He and Matthews, his close friend, team up for some excellent two-man twists. **Grade: B-.**

**Nate Palmer:** He was in danger of not making the team in his second season when he suffered a torn MCL in the exhibition finale and landed on IR. A sixth-round draft choice in 2013, he had to play 195 snaps at OLB as a rookie. Not as physically gifted or as big as Mulumba. **Grade: Incomplete.**

**Julius Peppers:** The imposing ex-Panther and Bear led the team in pressures with 43½. As a comparison, DE Kaberé Gbaja-Biamila had 42½ in his best season, which was 2003. Even more impressive was Peppers' team-high turnover total of 11, which was the most by a Packers' front-seven player in more than 25 years. He dropped into zone coverage and returned interceptions 49 and 52 yards for TDs. He also made the most impressive play by a defender all season, the strip of Dallas' DeMarco Murray on the edge to save a 59-yard TD. Peppers played 74%, with 788 snaps at OLB and 116 at D-line. For a player of his stature, there were stretches and even games where he was almost a non-factor. He ranked fourth at OLB in tackles per snap (one every 15.9), had just 2½ tackles for loss and led all LBs in missed tackles with nine. The assumption is that the two sides will restructure the final two years of his contract and he'll return in 2015. **Grade: A-.**

**Nick Perry:** Perry's role really didn't change this season. The difference was he stayed healthy. With his thick legs and lower half, he handled business at the point. He shed blocks, too, evidenced by his second-place finish among OLBs in tackles per snap (one every 13.5). On the other hand, his rush production fell dramatically. He had just 8½ pressures in 417 snaps compared to 18½ in 425 snaps a year ago. He's a pure power player in what increasingly is an athletic-speed game. **Grade: C-.**

## DEFENSIVE BACKS (10)

**Chris Banjo:** Tied for eighth in special-teams tackles with six even though he wasn't moved up from the practice squad until Game 14. Undersized at 5-10 but a big hitter with 4.46 speed. He'll be back battling for No. 3 safety job. **Grade: D.**

**Morgan Burnett:** Bounced back from a poor season with his best season in a five-year career. By applying himself fully, Burnett is well-schooled in the defense and minimizes his mistakes. The addition of Ha Ha Clinton-Dix enabled Burnett to play near the line of scrimmage, which was a crucial factor in his improved play. There's no longer a doubt where Burnett is best suited. He led the team in tackles (138) while missing 14, three fewer than a year ago. Burnett also improved markedly as a pressure player, leading all blitzers with 7½ pressures compared to none in 2013. He yielded just 2½ plays of 20 or more, down from an average of 6.7 from 2011-'13. Burnett is somewhat stiff and limited in deep zones and when matched on WRs. He can handle TEs and RBs. His dedication to duty shouldn't be taken lightly. **Grade: B.**

**Jarrett Bush:** Second in special-teams tackles with 359, Bush at 30 played with as much energy as ever but didn't make as many red-letter plays. After covering TEs well from the slot late last season, he was limited to 44 scrimmage snaps this time. He'll be unrestricted in March. **Grade: D+.**

**Ha Ha Clinton-Dix:** By the seventh game on he played just about every down at FS. Anyone with a pulse would have been better than M.D. Jennings and Jerron McMillian, and through comparison the rookie almost always received the benefit of the doubt. Clinton-Dix attacked downhill more aggressively than anyone in the secondary. He wasn't afraid. Clinton-Dix also missed a team-high 16 tackles; he needs tons more work on the technique of tackling. He also gave up 8½ plays of 20 yards or more, which were six more than Burnett. His problems in coverage were more reactionary than physical. He has more than enough speed and athleticism. The Packers can only hope he's a much more sound player in Year 2 than he was as a rookie. **Grade: C.**

**Demetri Goodson:** Played special teams in six games, showing the gutsy, reckless style that he employs at cornerback. The former Gonzaga basketball point guard has enough size and speed to make it if he can improve at the ball. Failing that, he could make a living in the kicking game as the next Bush. **Grade: D.**

**Casey Hayward:** He left an awful final impression, getting burned twice for 55 yards in the fourth quarter/overtime by Seattle's Doug Baldwin. There were times near midseason when Hayward's quickness and anticipation leaped off the field. He made picture-perfect, skilled interceptions against Miami's Ryan Tannehill and Carolina's Cam Newton. At other times, he looked small, played small and didn't seem capable of ever starting outside. Might have been the most impressive player in camp during the first week. His career could go either way. **Grade: C.**

**Davon House:** The guess is that House will get unrestricted offers for more than the Packers expect and he'll be gone in the first few days of free agency. Can he be trusted as a full-fledged starter? That's what the Packers and those many teams in need of a press-man CB with size must answer. House averaged 27 snaps in the first 13 games before a fractured scapula knocked him out of Games 14-16; he was relegated to special teams only in the playoffs. Learned a lot from all-pro Darrelle Revis last off-season. More fast than quick. Led CBs in passes defenses per snap (one every 36.8). **Grade: C.**

**Micah Hyde:** Jack of all trades, master of none. He made a nice transition to safety during the off-season but that's not his position. He played outside at Iowa and sometimes as a rookie but isn't fast enough for a steady diet of that. Hyde's best suited for the nickel-dime role, but even there he suffers breakdowns in coverage largely because of speed. Hyde didn't tackle nearly as well as last year, missing nine tackles compared to two as a rookie. He was exceptional returning punts and a top-notch blitzer. **Grade: B-.**

**Sean Richardson:** When Hyde moved back to CB in mid-October, Richardson was the No. 3 safety the rest of the way. Many of Richardson's 133 snaps came in 4-4 and run-oriented defenses. His lack of quickness and change of direction were apparent in coverage and chase situations. He led the team in special-teams snaps (361) and missed tackles (five), and was second in tackles (17). It's doubtful that the Packers will make the \$1.574 million tender offer to Richardson, a restricted free agent. **Grade: D.**

**Sam Shields:** Playing 75.9%, Shields finished third on the club in missed tackles with 13 and led in plays of 20 yards or more allowed with 10½. He has undisciplined moments in which his focus and mental toughness can be questioned. At the same time, he's a fabulous talent with the speed, quickness and hands not only to challenge but to take the ball away from premier receivers. Bump-and-run coverage is his specialty. He's also among the least-penalized CBs in the NFL. He had one this season, giving him just nine in five seasons. Shields continues to peek too much in the backfield and therefore loses sight of his man. Sometimes he can outrun his mistakes. Other times he can't. **Grade: B-.**

**Tramon Williams:** A first-team All-NFC North choice the past four seasons, he settled for second this year behind Detroit's Darius Slay. Knowledgeable, committed and, at 31, still highly athletic and in exceptional condition. Some personnel men have said they detected a slight drop-off in his speed but the Packers said it didn't happen. Yielded eight plays of 20 yards or more and a team-high eight TDs. Might be the best unrestricted CB so the Packers have to know that if Williams reaches the market he probably isn't coming back. Led CBs in tackles per snap (one every 6.7) while missing only nine. **Grade: B.**