

Packers Team Report Card

By Bob McGinn of the Journal Sentinel

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PASS OFFENSE (A)

With probable MVP Aaron Rodgers at the throttle, the Packers ranked a deceptively unimpressive eighth in passing yards (266.3). However, they ranked just 20th in pass attempts (536) because of a balanced offense and having won seven games by 10 or more points. A better barometer of strength would be their first-place finish in passing average (net yards divided by attempts and sacks). Rodgers' 18-game passer rating was 109.7; he was second to Dallas' Tony Romo in the regular season. Given even greater liberty at the line, Rodgers worked the muddle huddle and pistol formation to advantage. The Packers threw five interceptions, their lowest total since 1966. Their 12.7-yard completion average finished second to Cleveland's 13.4. According to STATS, Green Bay tied for third in TD passes of 20 yards or more. In 18 games, Randall Cobb caught 106 passes (13.8) and Jordy Nelson snagged 105 (15.4). Each scored 13 TDs, and Cobb averaged a team-best 5.98 yards after the catch. Thanks to a terrific offensive line, the Packers had their best finish (14th) in sack percentage since '07. Rodgers was responsible for 11 of the 33 sacks, followed by David Bakhtiari with 5½. The pressure total of 153 marked significant reduction from last year (185). Dropped passes increased from 26 to 41, including 17 in the last five games.

RUSHING OFFENSE (B-plus)

After getting off to a balky start (73.0) in the first four games, the Packers averaged 134.2 in the final 14. They surpassed 100 13 times in those 14 games, including the last 10. It was good enough for a No. 10 ranking in yards per rush (4.41) and No. 11 in rushing yards (119.8). Mike McCarthy oversaw the 43.6% rush rate, the team's highest since '03 and above the NFL average of 41.8%. It was primarily a zone scheme, both from shotgun and under center. A lineman pulled on power and/or misdirection plays 87 times in 494 runs (17.6%), gaining 3.9 per carry. Eddie Lacy's 18-game totals were 286 carries for 1,313 (4.59) and nine TDs. Last year, he averaged 4.13. He had nine rushes for 20 yards or longer, more than the entire team had in 2012, '10 and '06. Twelve of the team's 13 20-plus runs came in the last nine games. The Packers used their muscular ground game in textbook four-minute maneuvers to close out narrow victories over the Jets, Vikings, Patriots, Falcons and Cowboys. Twice, however, they failed last Sunday in Seattle. The Packers used the run to convert 13 of 19 third-and-1s, including eight of the last nine. The "bad" run count of 122 was nearly identical to recent seasons. Bakhtiari was charged with 19½ followed by Richard Rodgers with 13. Lacy had the two lost fumbles on running plays.

PASS DEFENSE (B-plus)

Desperate to stem the run near midseason, the Packers usually played with a single-high secondary down the stretch. That put undue stress on the cornerbacks, whose ability to man and lock up outside made the bold strategy pay off. According to STATS, the Packers ranked sixth in blitz rate (37.1%), too, which provided even less help for Tramon Williams and Sam Shields. Despite even more rules emphasis favoring passing games, the secondary was penalized just 17 times in 18 games. The Packers ranked No. 10 in passing yards allowed (226.4), No. 8 in pass average. The opponents' passer rating of 82.0 ranked seventh. After tying for seventh in interceptions with 18, the Packers picked off a season-high four in Seattle. The outlier was Atlanta, which bombed for 374 in the air. Julio Jones, with 259 yards, broke the franchise record for receiving yards allowed. The pass rush slipped from sixth to 12th. Julius Peppers led in pressures (43½) and Clay Matthews led in sacks (12). The Packers, led by Matthews with six, batted more passes (18) than they have in at least 15 years. Shields allowed 10½ passes of 20 yards or more, followed by Ha Ha Clinton-Dix (8½). Williams gave up a team-high eight TD passes. There wasn't a single TD pass completed against a linebacker from scrimmage all season.

RUN DEFENSE (D-plus)

No one would have given a plug nickel for this run defense at midseason based on league-worst averages of 153.5 and 4.78. In a shocking about-face, those averages were trimmed to 86.4 and 3.60 in the last eight games. Things went bad again in the playoffs (169.5, 5.38). The No. 23 final rank in rush yards (119.9) was in keeping with rankings of 18th, 14th, 17th and 25th since a No. 1 finish in '09. Moving Matthews inside on run downs was enormously beneficial. So was making Morgan Burnett a fixture near the line, more diligent fits and crisper tackling. Still, there were 145 missed tackles (the leader was Clinton-Dix with 16), the most during the McCarthy administration. Letroy Guion led D-linemen in tackles per snap (one every 8.4), Sam Barrington led LBs (one every 5.7) and Burnett led the DBs (one every 7.7). Marshawn Lynch registered two of the 100-yard games (20-100, 25-157); the other three were courtesy of Matt Forte (23-122), Mark Ingram (24-172) and DeMarco Murray (25-123). The defensive play of the year was Peppers' forced fumble against Murray that saved a 59-yard TD. QBs rushed 65 times for 314 (4.8). A low point came in Game 3 when the Joique Bell-led Lions rushed 12 times to kill the last 6:54. Buffalo's ability to control the tempo with Fred Jackson (20-71) was a killer, too.

SPECIAL TEAMS (F)

At midyear, the Packers ranked ninth in a 10-category breakdown. In a collapse of collapses, they finished 32nd in the annual Dallas Morning News rankings. That was based on the regular season, too, so Brandon Bostick's botched onside-kick recovery and A.J. Hawk's awful decision on the fake-FG TD pass in the Seattle debacle weren't considered. Where did it all go wrong? According to STATS, the 32 teams combined for 61 blocked kicks; Green Bay, with seven, accounted for 11.5% itself. The only other team to suffer more than three blocks was 3-13 Jacksonville (five). Minus a blocked FG since November 2010, a blocked PAT since December 2011 and a blocked punt since October 2012, the Packers had more than one in each category (and five from Games 10-16). Forced to deal with abominable blocking, Mason Crosby blocked it out and was the leading light. Despite Crosby's effective kickoffs, the Packers still ranked 30th in opponents' average starting point (24.1). Punter Tim Masthay had a woeful second half. DuJuan Harris (20.7) failed to ignite what was the NFL's poorest kick-return game the past two seasons. On the other hand, Micah Hyde averaged a

whopping 15.4 on punts, bringing back two (75, 55) for TDs. Brad Jones' forced fumble on a KO return and Burnett's recovery in Seattle enabled the units to have their first positive turnover differential (plus-1) since '07. Jones' blocked FG against Atlanta was the Packers' first since '09. Jarrett Boykin smothered a punt against Chicago. Jayrone Elliott led in tackles (21) and Sean Richardson led in missed tackles (five).

PERSONNEL MOVES (A-)

It was business as usual under 10th-year general manager Ted Thompson, who was rewarded July 30 with a long-term contract extension. For a change, Thompson didn't make a trade on draft days. Of his nine selections, Corey Linsley and Clinton-Dix made the all-rookie team and both Richard Rodgers and Elliott came close. Five of the picks combined to play 3,225 regular-season snaps from scrimmage, fourth-most of any NFL draft class, and start 42 games. Besides Elliott, free agent Mike Pennel showed promise, too. The "street" signings of Peppers (\$7.5 million guaranteed) and Guion (\$100,000 guaranteed) were highly successful. Peppers had 11 turnover plays, most by a Packers' front-seven player in more than 25 years. DE Khyri Thornton (third round) and LB Carl Bradford (fourth) were first-year busts. At season's end, the Packers owned the league's fourth-youngest roster. Of the seven players added to the 53-man roster after Game 1, four came off the practice squad and another off temporary injured reserve. None made much of a contribution. Almost all the re-signings and departures (James Jones, Evan Dietrich-Smith, Marshall Newhouse, Ryan Pickett) made sense. Thompson got plain lucky when TE Colt Lyerla was arrested right after the Packers moved him off injured reserve and out of town. They badly misjudged Lyerla both as a player and as a person. The Oct. 6 release of TE Ryan Taylor hurt the special teams.

COACHING (B-)

Mike McCarthy bore the brunt of criticism for the epidemic of injuries that pounded the Packers from 2010-'13. Now he deserved the bulk of the credit for why the Packers had their healthiest team since '07. Over 18 games, seven starters missed just 29 games (NT B.J. Raji accounted for 18) while 13 others missed 78 games. McCarthy revamped his schedule, basically turning Friday into Saturday, and made important use of the new indoor training field/facility. Players routinely praised him for keeping their bodies fresh. McCarthy won his 100th game Dec. 28, eight weeks after signing a multiyear extension. His fixation on turnover differential saw the Packers lead the NFL at plus-14; his nine-year mark in the regular season is a remarkable plus-87. Those 33 takeaways were turned into 123 points, almost double the total from a year ago. His offense, No. 1 in points, was balanced and explosive. One reason for the 1-2 start was McCarthy's "Quad" version of the 4-3 defense, inadequately prepared and poorly executed before being mothballed after Game 4. He waited too long to bench A.J. Hawk for Barrington, but persuading Matthews to shift inside paid off. Lowlights were Peppers' butchered cameo at WR in New Orleans, having 10 men on the field for a Seattle TD Sept. 4 and paying way too much respect to CB Richard Sherman the same night.

OVERALL (B)

For the fourth time in five years the Packers found themselves with a 5-3 record at midseason. It put them seventh in the NFC. Almost like clockwork, the Packers finished much better (7-1) than they started for a 12-4 mark and No. 2 seeding in the NFC playoff field. The Week 17 victory over Detroit gave Green Bay a record fourth straight division championship (divisional play began in 1967), a feat accomplished previously in the NFC North/Central by Chicago's Mike Ditka and Minnesota's Bud Grant. Aaron Rodgers' stirring third-quarter return from a calf injury helped subdue the Lions, 30-20. The Packers regained their mojo in the division (5-1), joined Denver as the only teams with 8-0 regular seasons at home and trailed only New England (plus-155) and Seattle (plus-140) in point differential at plus-138. The Packers won all seven games when favored by seven points or more but finished just 9-8-1 against the spread. In four games as an underdog (two with Seattle, at Detroit, at New Orleans), they went 0-4 and were outscored, 127-68. Knowing full well that playing the NFC Championship Game at Lambeau Field instead of CenturyLink Field was at stake, they hardly showed up Dec. 14 in Buffalo. Then, in unforgettable fashion, the Packers executed a colossal late collapse against the almost comatose Seahawks and frittered away the franchise's sixth Super Bowl appearance.