

Rating the Packers: Week 1 at Bears

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

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Green Bay - Given what the Chicago Bears' new coaching staff asked him to do and his track record against Dom Capers, Jay Cutler played about as well as he has ever played against the Green Bay Packers.

The fact that Cutler and the Bears fell short, 31-23, Sunday at Soldier Field had little to do with them and everything to do with Aaron Rodgers. He dominated the game.

As obvious as Rodgers' excellence is at the game's most vital position, sometimes the obvious gets overlooked. In this case, it shouldn't.

Here is a rating of the Packers in their 191st game against the Bears, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

RECEIVERS (4 ½)

Time can stand still. Did James Jones ever leave? You wouldn't have known it by his performance. The trust between veteran receiver and veteran quarterback, both 31, was overwhelming. On the TD that was brought back, Jones glanced back to see Rodgers was rolling his way. On cue, he scrambled his route back toward the end-zone corner, then broke it off toward the sideline. Rodgers knew just what Jones was doing and the ball was right there. When Rodgers enticed DE Willie Young to jump offside, Jones didn't just stop like many young players would have. He accelerated on his post route into unsuspecting CB Alan Ball and had just enough separation to haul in a 34-yard completion. On the goal line, Jones responded perfectly to Rodgers' check from a run to a pass and made Ball look awful on a slant for the TD. With the Packers in danger of going three-and-out for the second time in three series, Jones meandered his way to separation from Ball on third and 3 and made a difficult lunging catch exactly at the marker for 3 yards. Then there was the 13-yard TD, also on third and 3, when Jones really wasn't open but Rodgers trusted him on the back-shoulder toss in the corner. He bear-hugged the ball to his chest with his left hand while fighting off Ball with his right. When Andre Rison showed up on waivers in November 1996, he didn't know anything about the West Coast offense. Jones knows it all. It took Rison several weeks to get acclimated. It took Jones a few hours. Jones played 53 snaps, including 19 as the only split receiver to the left. Davante Adams (57 snaps), the other outside receiver, made one exceptional sideline catch and one terrific run after the catch. In the slot, it was noticeable that Randall Cobb (53) played hurt with a sprained shoulder. He caught five balls, and other players probably would have just gone down or out of bounds to protect themselves. Cobb played all-in, as if he wasn't injured at all. Mike McCarthy positioned Cobb in the backfield for one snap before motioning him to the slot. Richard Rodgers (36) turned in a strong effort, blocking effectively from the backfield on leads and in space. He's not fast or overly instinctive, but he has a gigantic catching radius, catching everything and just seems to get open. Andrew Quarless (23), something of a forgotten man, blocked acceptably, too.

OFFENSIVE LINE (4)

Three of the five starters hadn't played in almost a month because of injury, but there were almost no signs of inactivity. The unit allowed no sacks, no knockdowns, five hurries and 3½ "bad" runs. The leader was Josh Sitton, who at 29 shows absolutely no signs of losing any of his ability to mash and maul. When he and Corey Linsley combo-block together in the run game, they know just when it's OK for the partner to leave the double-team to get on the linebacker. That isn't easy, but they make it seem that way. On a big fourth and 1 early in the fourth quarter, Tom Clements sent James Starks behind Sitton, who displaced DE Ego Ferguson for a 3-yard gain. A few plays later, Clements made the rare decision to call a run on third and 4. Again the point of attack was behind Sitton, who double-teamed off NT Eddie Goldman and onto ILB Shea McClellin so Eddie Lacy had room to pick up 5. Linsley also had a fine game. T.J. Lang was at least partially at fault on three "bad" runs. He had a few poor snaps against Goldman, an impressive 332-pound rookie. Lang's problems stemmed mostly from playing too high and lack of some timing sustaining a few run blocks. The toughest matchup fell to Bryan Bulaga, who had to deal with strapping OLB Pernell McPhee all the way. His holding penalty against McPhee was the result of looking inside, not expecting the ball to be snapped and being late off the ball. With the Bears playing almost every snap in nickel, David Bakhtiari was back playing against Jared Allen from a three-point stance. Call it a draw. Bakhtiari did have two penalties.

QUARTERBACKS (5)

When Vic Fangio was coordinating the 49ers' defense four times against Green Bay in the past four years, his blitz rates (five or more rushers) were 19.6%, 4.6%, 15% and 11.8%. Just once in Fangio's 4-0 streak did he rush more than five. A Capers disciple, Fangio took the same conservative approach Sunday, blitzing 14.7%. The closest Fangio came to an all-out rush was in the second half when he crashed seven into the line in classic zone blitzes on two third-and-long situations before quickly dropping a pair back into coverage. Rodgers and Cobb read it quickly, and their quick out completions from the slot gained 19 yards. Not only did Rodgers have to deal with Fangio, defensive-minded John Fox and new secondary coach Ed Donatell, he was working with a first-time play-caller and a receiving corps adjusting to new roles. The Bears gave him their best shot. Nothing came easy. Rodgers made an array of accurate passes and cagey decisions that proved decisive. The TD to Cobb on the sideline-and-up against nickel back Sherrick McManis had no room for error. Rodgers scrambled five times for 34 yards, including a gain of 12 on third and 4 when McPhee appeared to be spying him. He caught the Bears twice on hard counts and was a split second from nailing them on a 12-man penalty before McPhee called time out. New from Clements: Rodgers being allowed to QB sneak (he burrowed for 2 on third and 1), and less shotgun (15 of the 25 first-half plays originated under center). Of his five incompletions, one was batted and one was on target for Adams before he slipped.

RUNNING BACKS (3 ½)

Even when the Packers had two players in the backfield with their base three wideouts, Fangio remained in nickel. Fangio was going to play coverage first come hell or high water. Having played just 36 snaps in August, Lacy (44) wasn't in midseason form. Despite the presence of two new starters at inside linebacker and other vulnerable personnel on defense, he didn't break his customary number of tackles and wasn't dragging tacklers. Two of the "bad" runs were at least partially his fault for questionable reads. His development in the passing game was evident in the first quarter. As he was pass protecting, Lacy noticed ILB Christian Jones, the player assigned to cover him, suddenly deciding to gamble on a late rush. That's when Lacy headed for open ground. His one-handed snatch of Rodgers' push pass was nice, but his heady decision bodes well for the future. On the first of Starks' two carries, he ran into Lang's backside for minus-1.

DEFENSIVE LINE (2)

B.J. Raji (43) was the best player. Working against undersized but strong veteran C Will Montgomery, Raji detonated three or four of his explosive arm-over rushes that allowed him to win at times against Linsley in August. The Packers slipped an excessive amount of times, and the turf monster got Raji once after he trashed Montgomery and was careening toward a sack of Cutler. The staff also had to be encouraged seeing Raji still pursuing to the outside in the fourth quarter. Dropping 8 to 10 pounds from previous seasons should pay off. Mike Daniels (55) posted 2½ hurries in a tenacious if unproductive effort. Lack of height somewhat limits Daniels' ability to find the ball carrier, especially against 6-5 guards like Matt Slauson and Vladimir Ducasse. Still, with his strength and quickness, Daniels needs to start getting home. He was on the ground too much as well, a sign that he might be playing too high. It's back to the drawing board for Mike Pennel, who was so up and down in the first five snaps of the game that he was in for just nine plays the rest of the way. Active Josh Boyd (23), a more seasoned player, wasn't bad with 1 ½ hurries.

LINEBACKERS (2)

Clay Matthews, who played every snap (66 at ILB, 11 at OLB), saved a touchdown by chasing down Matt Forte from behind. On his game-changing interception, he made a great play trusting his instincts, disregarding a possible run and reacting on the snap to TE Martellus Bennett on his seam route. His pass-rush production was minimal, but he saved another TD by dipping underneath LT Jermon Bushrod and drawing a holding penalty. Julius Peppers (40 at ILB, 12 at DL) had 1½ sacks but no other pressures. Of the four OLBs, however, his work against the run was the most consistent. Mike Neal (48 at OLB, four at DL) gets into bad situations because his eyes seem to be in the backfield too much. If he lets the game come to him and increases his eye discipline, he can be a suitable running mate for Peppers. Nick Perry (30) didn't get a sniff as a rusher and was caved at the point of attack twice by Bennett. Not only did the coaches give Jayrone Elliott a uniform over Andy Mulumba, they gave him 18 snaps in the rotation. He responded with three pressures; now he needs to show more anchor against the run. Sam Barrington (16) departed with an ankle injury. At least Nate Palmer, his replacement, didn't play scared. All in all, his coverage was OK. Two or three times Montgomery was able to cut Palmer, who must improve his low-block shield, use his hands to get over the trash and reach the outside run.

SECONDARY (1)

The Bears' game plan was to go after Sam Shields. They tested his ability and willingness to support the run and won when Shields missed Forte 9 yards downfield on a sweep that ruptured into 23. For some reason, Shields seemed to slip more than just about any other player. It wasn't all bad. His end-zone breakup on a take-off to Alshon Jeffery in press-man coverage was spectacular. But then in the fourth quarter he got caught peeking in the backfield instead of concentrating on WR Marquess Wilson. When Wilson broke his route off to the sidelines, Shields used terrible judgment diving for the deflection when the smart play was let him catch it and make the tackle for a 15-yard gain. Instead, the cost was 50. Casey Hayward spent almost the entire game in the slot and had a more than adequate showing. Damarious Randall (61) got the nod as the nickel back over Quinten Rollins and was OK. The absence of Morgan Burnett (calf) led to a few voided zones and a degree of uncertainty in the back end. Ha Ha Clinton-Dix was way too premature rotating into the box. All that did was give Cutler time to check into a better play and negate any element of surprise for the Packers. Until Clinton-Dix starts moving another step closer to his target before committing himself, he will continue missing point-blank tackles as he did against Cutler and Bennett. The anticipated impact of using Sean Richardson (28) to fortify the run defense was negligible. When Forte cut back on the second play of the game for 22, both Pennel and Richardson had no idea where the ball was.

KICKERS (3)

Mason Crosby's five kickoffs for distance averaged 73.4 yards and 3.81 seconds of hang time. His only field-goal attempt (37) was good. Tim Masthay's two-punt averages were 48.5 (gross), 33.0 (net) and 4.13 (hang time).

SPECIAL TEAMS (3½)

Ty Montgomery took advantage of outstanding blocking, which was rarely seen last year, for kickoff returns of 46 and 41 yards. Shields turned a Bears field goal into a TD by jumping offsides on the FG block unit. Adams' recovery of a perfect onside kick by Robbie Gould required textbook execution by him and the five blockers in front of him. Three starters saw extensive duty: Clinton-Dix (14), Shields (13) and Richard Rodgers (eight).

OVERALL (3 ½)

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