

Rating the Packers: Week 5 vs Rams

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

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Green Bay - The St. Louis Rams demonstrated Sunday at Lambeau Field that their reputation for fielding one of the NFL's leading defenses was legitimate.

Equally as impressive, however, was the defense of the Green Bay Packers, which registered three sacks, eight knockdowns and four hurries in a 24-10 victory over the Rams.

"We had too many hits but I'm going to credit their front," St. Louis coach Jeff Fisher said Monday. "Clay (Matthews) is really disruptive regardless of where he comes from. They pressure the back, they pressure the A gap with him, they rush him on the edge.

"Then you've got (Julius) Peppers and the rest of that group that can collapse the pocket pretty quickly, especially when it's hard to hear."

Here is a rating of the Packers against the Rams, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

RECEIVERS (2)

Part of the reason the Packers aren't able to stretch defenses is their tight end. Richard Rodgers (58 of 62 snaps, including 16 in a three-point stance) led the team in receptions (six) and targets (eight) largely because the Rams paid him little heed. If the Packers want him with the ball in the flats or on check-downs, the Rams weren't concerned. Rodgers never breaks a tackle. He's 270 pounds, but little bitty defensive backs just chop him down with no problem. When he ran a slant from out wide on third and 3, SS T.J. McDonald stopped him from reaching the marker. On a 10-yard screen pass, Rodgers couldn't get CB Janoris Jenkins blocked and the gain was wiped out on his illegal-block penalty. Rodgers' exceptional hands failed him on a dropped 30-yard TD pass. His blocking was uneven, too. Rodgers had to play too much (94%) because rookie Kennard Backman (three) must not be ready. The Packers kept their distance from Jenkins, the Rams' best cover man. When James Jones (57) or Ty Montgomery (61) was across from Jenkins, Aaron Rodgers ignored them. The Rams loaded the box to stop the run, confident that Jenkins, Johnson and nickel Lamarcus Joyner would prevent separation and that bracket-type coverage would contain Randall Cobb (54). The only way Cobb could get the ball was on short turn-outs. Not one time did the Packers line up Cobb alone to a side. He wasn't in the backfield, either. The game plan was static, and the results were just as dull. His bum shoulder seems to be affecting Cobb's normally robust run blocking, too. Montgomery tried a stop-and-go against Jenkins on the second play and was blanketed deep. When Johnson short-circuited on Montgomery's two-man game with Rodgers, the rookie had a gimme 31-yard TD. Disrespecting Jones' ability to blow past him, Johnson gambled and won on the interception. Jones came back against Joyner, beating him on a 17-yard turn-in and outracing everyone for the 65-yard TD. Jones juggled that ball, but he still hasn't dropped one in five games. Jared Abbrederis debuted on the closing kneel-down; Jeff Janis played special teams only. At this point, the Packers seem to have no interest in a four-WR formation.

OFFENSIVE LINE (4½)

Josh Sitton solidified his standing as a premier guard by shutting down Aaron Donald, probably the hottest 3-technique in the league. Everyone has the size advantage over Donald. Most guards, however, can't cope with his sudden take-off, quick hands, underrated strength and all-out style. Sitton is different because he's smart, patient and agile, besides being massive. At least half of Donald's 50 snaps were against Sitton. Donald's lone pressure came against T.J. Lang before he departed with a knee injury on his 24th snap. Donald's only involvement in a "bad" run came against Josh Walker (32), the replacement for Lang. Don Barclay played right guard in the two-minute drive of six plays at the end of the half, wasn't sharp after having played mostly tackle for the past two months and gave way to Walker. Once Walker settled down, he belonged. He's even bigger than Lang, and his aggressive traits serve him well. Corey Linsley slid over to help the guard that was pass blocking Donald. Still, for Walker to escape unscathed in pass pro against Donald was unreal. Linsley took the blame for Robert Quinn's strip-sack because he snapped the ball prematurely assuming the Rams had jumped when they hadn't. Nose tackle Michael Brockers' bull-rush sack was at least partly on Linsley, too. On routes that required at least 2.5 seconds, the Packers often used either Richard Rodgers or Eddie Lacy to smash Quinn in conjunction with David Bakhtiari. It was smart football. Hard to knock Bakhtiari for the strip-sack because the early snap made him late off the ball. Other than that, the talented Quinn beat him for just one-half pressure. Bryan Bulaga returned from a three-game absence (knee) and was top-notch. He caught a break when defensive end Chris Long suffered a hyperextended knee on his 15th snap. Backup William Hayes is starter-caliber, but Bulaga didn't yield a pressure to either one. The Rams did a lot of two-gapping up front, and the entire unit wasn't sustaining drive blocks. On five power runs with pulling linemen, the net was just 10 yards.

QUARTERBACKS (1½)

It was almost like Rodgers didn't trust his offensive line, especially after Lang departed. Some of that is understandable because the Rams raised Cain with previous opponents. Even though the protection was remarkably good, he remained impatient in the pocket. Half the time Rodgers ran, the pocket was firm. Maybe he felt the called route combinations wouldn't succeed, and his only way to get a receiver open intermediate to deep was on a broken play. This was just his second game (Tampa Bay, 2009) when he turned it over three times. The batted interception was bad luck, but the check-down that nose tackle Nick Fairley dropped was good luck. The pick on the hitch was a mistake and the lost fumble, his first since the Dallas playoff game, was the result of not stepping up and holding the ball low. His delay-of-game penalty off a stoppage was awful. The handoff to James Starks worked for 7 yards and avoided a sack, but that's a risky play. Defensive coordinator Gregg Williams blitzed 41.5% on passes, including 10.9% with six or more. He won many of the plays but Rodgers won the game.

RUNNING BACKS (1½)

Part of the bad day running stemmed from Williams' decision to crowd the box. Still, his nickel package usually had just five "bigs," with safety Mark Barron playing the other linebacker. The three backs should average more than 2.5 in their 19 carries no matter what the Rams were doing. In 14 touches, Lacy (36) never broke a tackle all day. On fourth and 1, he was cut from the side by a safety (McDonald) and came up a foot short. He also tripped on a promising draw that gained only 3. The difference between Todd Gurley and Lacy was startling. Starks (26) broke one tackle in his eight touches. That came early against Barron on a screen that went for 19. Lacy remains more dependable than Starks in protection and as a receiver. Starks had two drops: a sideline pass that would have converted on third and 4, and another screen. Most passes are an adventure with him.

DEFENSIVE LINE (4)

The unit was better rushing the passer than stopping the run. Exhibit A was Datone Jones. In just 22 snaps, almost all coming inside in the dime next to Julius Peppers, he had three knockdowns. He beat right guard Rodger Saffold on two stunts, and on the second Saffold left with what Fisher suggested might be a major shoulder injury. He also beat veteran Garrett Reynolds, the veteran replacement for Saffold. On his few snaps when the Rams ran, Jones did get abused physically. The Packers played a season-high 22 snaps of base, and Mike Daniels (45), Letroy Guion (35), B.J. Raji (26) and Mike Pennel (17) all had impressive moments stuffing blockers and piling up Gurley. They all got steamrolled as well. As the game wore on, left tackle Greg Robinson played like a man among boys, and rookie left guard Jamon Brown moved people, too. With refinement, Robinson might have the dancing-bear feet and aggressive temperament to become the next dominant tackle. Daniels, who posted 2½ hurries, appeared to peek inside and void his gap on Gurley's 55-yard burst. Raji (groin) departed early in the third quarter after being cut by Reynolds. Muscled up to the max, Guion now epitomizes a "phone booth" player. Blockers tend to fall off him, but his range has lessened. For the second straight week, he risked a taunting penalty with some over-the-top woofing. Maybe someone should calm him down.

LINEBACKERS (4)

Matthews (45 inside, 17 outside, nine in "Bear") played every snap again. At this rate, he'll be a candidate for defensive player of the year honors. Matthews had 1½ sacks, 1½ knockdowns and one hurry. On his full sack, he stayed in the middle in "Bear" when Nate Palmer moved outside to the line and promptly blitzed the A gap right by Reynolds to demolish luckless Nick Foles in 1.9 seconds. Like everyone else, Matthews paid a physical price getting tagged by Robinson and assorted wham blocks. Palmer (52) probably had his poorest game on an afternoon when the Gurley-led opposition cried out for a swashbuckling middle backer. He was late reacting at times, a step slow and neither physical nor effective getting to the football. Dime backer Joe Thomas (19) positioned himself right in Foles' throwing lane on third down from the 7. He didn't make the catch but, on a tip, Ha Ha Clinton-Dix did. Peppers (48) registered 3½ pressures, and two came at Robinson's expense. In dime, he stunts almost every time, and it has been effective. Mike Neal (45) managed the club's only tackle for loss when he crashed in to upend Gurley for minus-3 at a key juncture in the third quarter. Before that, he seemed a little overwhelmed by Gurley's power and burst. When Nick Perry went out with a shoulder injury on his 12th snap, Andy Mulumba (13) joined Jayrone Elliott (24) on the second line. Mulumba showed smarts by widening on motion, putting him in position to corral speedy Tavon Austin for no gain on a third-and-2 jet sweep. Elliott flattened inside twice to drag down Gurley but also was blown up or fooled on a few other plays.

SECONDARY (5)

Quinten Rollins made the most of his 16 snaps, picking two passes in zone drops and taking one back for a 45-yard TD. Stedman Bailey, who isn't a burner at 4.53, sprinted away from Rollins on a slot corner route for 68. Clinton-Dix (71) made a marvelous hustle play chasing down Bailey to save a TD and, possibly, the game. Other than two or three plays, he was outstanding. Micah Hyde (71) again filled in for Morgan Burnett (calf). He was around the ball and tackled well except for his miss on Gurley's breakaway run that resulted in 39 extra yards. He was right there to nab Foles' pass when Gurley fell down on a check-down. There's nothing wrong with Chris Banjo (31) as the No. 3 safety. He really knows the defense, showed off his speed cutting off a promising swing pass to Tre Mason and even nailed a pressure off the edge. Not many people can go stride-for-stride with Austin on a "9" route but Sam Shields (71) did, and with relative ease. He's playing almost all bump coverage and making exceptional deflections downfield. On the other side, Casey Hayward (59) and nickel back Damarious Randall (33) helped stifle the Rams.

KICKERS (3½)

Mason Crosby had a 47-yard FG waved off by penalty. His 35-yarder did count, and his five kickoffs averaged 74.2 yards and 3.40 seconds of hang time. Four were touchbacks. Other than having poor touch on an Aussie punt, Tim Masthay hit the ball better. His four-punt averages were 47.8 (gross), 36.8 (net) and 4.34 (hang time).

SPECIAL TEAMS (3)

Peppers has been a kick-blocking threat for years. Datone Jones looks like another. Taking advantage of poor technique by Robinson, he rejected Greg Zuerlein's 50-yard try. His effort is high on a consistent basis. When Demetri Goodson slipped not once but twice in coverage, punter Johnny Hekker was able to complete a 20-yard over him for a first down. Richard Rodgers' illegal-hands penalty cost three points. St. Louis started what turned out to be an 80-yard TD drive after Janis botched downing a punt at the 1.

OVERALL (3½)

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