

Rating the Packers: Week 8 at Broncos

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

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Green Bay - At least coach Mike McCarthy acknowledged the encompassing nature of the Green Bay Packers' 29-10 pasting at the hands of the Broncos on Sunday night in Denver. Maybe the Packers were reading their press clippings. Maybe McCarthy shouldn't have given his players a full week off during the bye. Maybe a lot of things. It looked almost as if the offense was spooked by the Broncos' formidable defense and that the defense, despite starting the game at full strength, wasn't well prepared. Here is a rating of the Packers against the Broncos, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

RECEIVERS (½)

Week after week, Richard Rodgers doesn't execute his block and two or three plays run amok. Can teammates have confidence in him? The Packers feel compelled to keep using Rodgers on almost every snap (51 of a possible 53 Sunday) because they apparently don't feel Justin Perillo (six) has enough horsepower to block and Kennard Backman (inactive) must not be ready. Despite all this, it was the Broncos, with a better stable of tight ends than the Packers, that traded for San Francisco's Vernon Davis on Monday. The teams swapped sixth- and seventh-round draft choices in 2016, and the 49ers will receive a sixth in '17. On the second sack, Rodgers motioned across and was in front of OLB DeMarcus Ware. When he set too far inside, Ware had an easy sack-fumble-safety. In the run game, Rodgers either missed or was trashed twice by backup OLB Lerentee McCray on two runs that went nowhere. The Broncos, with the elite CB corps of Aqib Talib, Chris Harris and Bradley Roby, owned the WRs. Even though there was ample time on numerous passes, there was precious little obvious separation. The long gain was 17 yards. The three longest catch points were 17, 11 and six yards. It was a blanketing. Randall Cobb (51), usually covered by Harris, was open a few times but the ball was thrown poorly or not at all. Four of his six receptions came from the slot, and two from the backfield. He never made anyone miss, and two or three times he was flung down and abused by defenders. When the Packers blocked with eight and Cobb was the primary deep down the left sideline, he was unable to get free of Harris. Jones' quirky style that has taken the measure of other corners didn't surprise the Broncos. They saw him twice last year for Oakland. Jones had two targets in 47 snaps, and fumbled on one of them. Returning from an ankle injury, Davante Adams (51) dropped one of his two targets and contributed nothing.

OFFENSIVE LINE (2 ½)

The longer the game went, the worse this unit performed. Von Miller and Ware are elite edge rushers, and all five of the D-linemen have pass rush, too. Given the level of competition, the damage report for the group (one sack, two knockdowns, two hurries) was solid. Wade Phillips blitzed extensively (34.4% five or more, 15.6% with six), too. The sack went to Corey Linsley, whose main responsibility on that interior stunt has to be stopping the penetrator. That was DE Antonio Smith, who made the sack in 2.4 seconds when Linsley let him go. In general, Linsley had difficulty with Sylvester Williams, an emerging nose tackle. The problems in the run game started when Josh Sitton pulled wide right and missed OLB Shaquil Barrett. What a shock it was to see that. He stumbled coming across and showed almost no base, allowing Barrett to dip underneath and smear James Starks on what looked like a promising play. Bryan Bulaga kept Miller at bay for much of the first half. In the second half, he seemed late off the ball and couldn't prevent DE Derek Wolfe from surging through on the back side (the Broncos voted Wolfe defensive player of the game). The most effective players were T.J. Lang and David Bakhtiari. On first and goal from the 3, the Packers used an unbalanced line (Bulaga lined up outside Bakhtiari of Bulaga) for the first time in ages but the run went nowhere. A fitting way to end the Packers' overall debacle was watching RG Don Barclay and C JC Tretter mess up on inside runs in their only two snaps.

QUARTERBACKS (½)

Let's be honest. No matter how good the defense is, it should be impossible for a player as great as Aaron Rodgers to play 60 minutes and pass for 77 yards. The rules favoring passing, the head coach favoring passing and his 11 years of experience should preclude such a thing happening. The protection was more than adequate. You see whiff sacks all the time around the league, but there was almost none of that. Sometimes it just comes down to standing tall in the pocket and following through to make a great throw. If the lick comes, so be it. All this bouncing around must make receivers and blockers a little confused. Jones and Adams really aren't separating-type receivers. To win road games against teams with elite defenses makes it almost incumbent upon the quarterback to throw people open. Interceptions hurt passer rating but they don't automatically spell defeat. Sometimes they're better than a punt. Rodgers looked deep a lot but couldn't pull the trigger. There was enough room for someone with his extreme arm talent to make the spectacular play and thereby galvanize a stagnant offense. He's the face of the franchise for moments like this. Rodgers was responsible for the third sack holding the ball for 5 seconds when a check-down receiver was in clear view. He overthrew Cobb on what might have been a 77-yard TD. He made a poor throw to Richard Rodgers on a free play that could have been a 7-yard TD. Many times he has wiggled out of sacks by flicking the ball away on the way down. This time, it cost his team a lost fumble and a safety.

RUNNING BACKS (1 ½)

Second play of the game. Eddie Lacy (25) beats DE Malik Jackson to the junction point and bursts into the secondary. T.J. Ward, a small but tough safety, is dead ahead as the only defender separating Lacy from a gain of 40 or 50 yards. Ward charged up, Lacy was unable to avoid and the jarring shin tackle knocked the big back down like a ton of bricks. Would he have found a way to stay on his feet in the last two seasons? Maybe. Lacy did break a pair of tackles (McCray, FS Darian Stewart) with spin moves after not breaking even one in the previous two games. He lowered his pads to bowl over ILB Brandon Marshall on a 2-yard TD. His blitz pickup was good but his route on a check-down in the flat appeared shaky. He was lucky to recover his own fumble; earlier, his fumble in the end zone came just after he broke the plane. James Starks (22) didn't seem as robust physically playing on a sore hip. With the weather beginning to turn, the Packers need to find out if rookie FB Aaron Ripkowski (four) can dig out some LBs in the power game.

DEFENSIVE LINE (½)

Other than a play here or there, there was too much sitting and reading instead of aggressively trying to play into the backfield. Denver's O-line ranked as the team's weakness. In this game, the Broncos controlled the line of scrimmage. The linemen weren't getting off blocks, and against a one-cut-and-go zone run game the result was 160 yards and a 4.7-yard average. No one stood out except possibly Datone Jones (18 of a possible 67 snaps). Although Jones didn't have a pressure, he had the presence of mind to recognize two unexpected runs, disengage and make the tackle. Mike Daniels (40) kept getting close against the Broncos' mediocre interior but only got home for one knockdown. Returning from a groin injury, B.J. Raji (29) was just so-so. He was trapped by a blocking back (C James Ferentz) on a 1-yard TD. There was just one snap of 3-4 and one snap of goal-line; everything else called for just two D-linemen. When Daniels and Raji took a breather, it was Mike Pennel (17) at 1-technique and Letroy Guion (23) at 3-technique. Pennel was the more effective of the two.

LINEBACKERS (1)

The Packers can ill afford having another performance at strong inside linebacker like the one that Nate Palmer (53) turned in. With undersized Joe Thomas (13) and raw rookie Jake Ryan (two) as the other options, they'll probably stick with Palmer and pray this was his worst day. In coverage, he should be demolishing wide receivers running 3-yard shallow crossers in front of his nose. That's what Sam Barrington used to do; his violent, smash-them mentality has been missed. Palmer also was painfully oblivious to the ball far downfield on the 32-yard pass that TE Virgil Green caught behind Clay Matthews (63), who by then was just gutting it out on a damaged ankle. Against the run, Palmer's mediocre speed was more noticeable because Ronnie Hillman is so speedy and C.J. Anderson accelerates instantly. Besides being a step or two late to the perimeter, Palmer wasn't getting them down when the play was there. He missed three tackles, including a whiff of Anderson on a third-and-2 run that ruptured into 19. McCarthy yanked Palmer on the spot, waving in Ryan. Palmer weighs 250, and in previous weeks held his own in close quarters. He was taking more than giving here. Matthews ran around at 110 mph, making and missing some plays. At least his intensity matched the opponent's. The Packers jumped into the "Bear" front 10 times, with Matthews moving to the line on eight. When Matthews shifted up too early, Peyton Manning checked to runs away from him for sizable yardage. Neither Nick Perry (15) nor Jayrone Elliott (17) contributed much. It's just Elliott's second season, but he will have to find a way to bring more muscle to his game. OLBs Julius Peppers (51, one pressure) and Mike Neal (51, no pressures) failed to rattle Manning, and that undermined the entire defense. Their rush shortage was even more disappointing because Denver's three tackles have mediocre pedigree. Rather than remain disciplined, Peppers peeked inside on a run toward his side and as a result it got out the gate. Earlier, Green hooked him on an outside zone run for 16. He just didn't play with fervor. Neal did make a handful of strong tackles. Listed at just 227 pounds, Thomas jumped in at right end across from LT Ryan Harris and, using wonderful technique, turned the corner for one of the team's three knockdowns of Manning. On Anderson's 28-yard TD through the heart of the defense, Thomas has to play it inside-out and know his leverage against LG Evan Mathis, who outweighed him by 75 pounds. When he didn't, Mathis covered him up and it was Katy bar the door.

SECONDARY (1 ½)

If the Packers had matched Sam Shields against Demaryius Thomas, they might have gotten off to a more positive start. Granted, Shields departed after 11 snaps with a shoulder injury. However, Denver coach Gary Kubiak matched Thomas on Casey Hayward (66) on the first three plays, found immediate success and saw it carry over into a 500-yard night. At least Shields, even Damarious Randall (55), would have had the speed, swagger and body snap to compete with Thomas. Hayward does not, and as a result played a cautious style that was destined for failure. Every cornerback has a game like this, and it has been somewhat surprising that it didn't come until Game 7 for Hayward. He played high, small and tentative. Randall was victimized at times, too, but at least he fought back with an air of confidence about him. He retaliated with a superb interception as well. When Quinten Rollins (shoulder) departed early, too, Demetri Goodson (12) impressed with some solid snaps. It was an up-and-down outing for Ha Ha Clinton-Dix (67), who no longer was top dog in the back end with the return of Morgan Burnett (67). Clinton-Dix was premature in some of his rotations, turning chances to confuse Manning into chances for the master to strike. When Manning needed a clutch short completion, he seemed comfortable going to the man covered by nickel back Micah Hyde (67).

KICKERS (4 ½)

Flourishing at altitude, Tim Masthay had by far his best game of the season with five-punt averages of 46.2 yards (gross), 43.8 (net) and 4.65 seconds of hang time. Two punts surpassed 5 (5.12, 5.00). Mason Crosby was dead-center perfect from 56; his three-kickoff numbers were 78.3 and 4.03.

SPECIAL TEAMS (3)

Chris Banjo continued to excel, and Rollins made an eye-catching tackle in punt coverage. Hyde and Jared Abbrederis alternated on kickoff returns for the injured Ty Montgomery. Abbrederis foolishly brought one back from 9 deep. The snap leader was Elliott (23).

OVERALL (½)

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