

# Rating the Packers: Week 9 at Panthers

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**Green Bay** - Run the football. Stop the run.

Make big plays. Prevent big plays.

Protect the quarterback. Rush the quarterback.

The most important elements in a football game continued to elude the Green Bay Packers Sunday in their 37-29 loss to the Carolina Panthers in Charlotte, N.C.

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

## RECEIVERS (1)

It's probably safe to say that Davante Adams (75 of a possible 77 snaps) isn't all the way back from a bad ankle injury. Still, his seven-catch, 93-yard performance was far superior to his return a week ago against Denver and offered some hope for a somewhat stagnant receiving corps. Adams showed the ability to tightrope the sidelines and the hands to scoop low throws. He's not separating like normal, but that's not his game. Maybe he can run some of those sideline stops, comebacks and hitches that Jordy Nelson provided as a comfort zone for the offense. James Jones (71) doesn't have the firepower to beat man coverage from a terrific young cornerback like Josh Norman. Thus, for most of the game, he ran clearouts for Randall Cobb (68 at WR, four at RB). Jones did beat clingy old pro Charles Tillman on a skinny post for 21 yards. Plus, on the play of the game, he took the ball away from a leaping Norman for 36 on fourth and 14. Cobb's effort level was remarkable. Boy, that man plays hard. It was an eye-opener to see Cobb flank right and run by Norman on a 60-yard take-off that was just overthrown. Fearlessly, he laid out for the ball. Cobb's 53-yard TD on an out-and-up from the left slot against nickel Bene Benewikere was spectacular. He also dropped two or three passes, which cannot happen. With Ty Montgomery (ankle) missing a second straight game, the coaches gave three snaps each to Jeff Janis and Jared Abbrederis. Richard Rodgers (67) posted his first two-TD game. He's valuable inside the 5 because teams tend to ignore him. On the fourth-quarter TD, defensive coordinator Sean McDermott blitzed seven leaving DE Kony Ealy to drop off and try to cover Rodgers. He couldn't. His sure hands come in handy when the quarterback rifles the ball at point-blank range. Of course, Rodgers' limitations dog the offense. McDermott was able to hide slow-footed SS Roman Harper on him. The first half of the season ended with Justin Perillo playing 19 snaps and Kennard Backman playing six.

## OFFENSIVE LINE (1½)

The best player, probably for the second game in a row, was T.J. Lang. Playing much of the day against Star Lotulelei, he was able to match up physically against the muscular nose tackle and stop him from penetrating. Lang wasn't responsible for a pressure or a "bad" run. Even in his seventh season, he still looks like an athlete with respectable speed when operating downfield on screens. Corey Linsley and Josh Sitton had the more quick-twitched opponent in DT Kawann Short, and the results weren't nearly as good. Linsley is having assignment and protection issues. On one of the sacks, Linsley was too preoccupied with the rusher to his right and was late getting over. He had several low shotgun snaps. His holding penalty was legitimate because he had Short's arm on a running play. He was responsible for a delay penalty and wasted timeout by not snapping the ball on time. He was responsible for 1 ½ "bad" runs when he failed to get MLB Luke Kuechly blocked. Finally, on the decisive fourth down at the 3, Short knocked him back before pressuring Aaron Rodgers. It was also a bad day for Bryan Bulaga: one sack, two knockdowns, 2 ½ hurries and 1 ½ "bad" runs. DE Kony Ealy, an improving second-year man, knocked Bulaga's hands down and turned the corner for a strip-sack in 2.6 seconds. Bulaga continues to struggle on back-side cutoffs. On the other side, David Bakhtiari continues to be tested weekly by an abundance of bull rushes. The book on beating Bakhtiari must be employing power. Another Bakhtiari-Jared Allen battle probably was a draw. DE Mario Addison accounted for the 1 ½ pressures against Bakhtiari.

## **QUARTERBACKS (1 ½)**

Credit Rodgers for accepting blame on his decision not to get the ball immediately to an open Cobb on the most meaningful play of the game. That doesn't minimize the costliness of his inability to pull the trigger. The coaches had the interminably long 2-minute warning and a subsequent Panthers timeout to pound home their expectation that the catch by Jones would be successful and that Cobb would walk in from the flat. Rodgers feared Tillman would slough off onto Cobb, which he didn't. Just throw the damn football. Instead, Rodgers held the ball, as he did in the first series on Lotulelei's sack that came after 6.6 seconds, and when the protection broke down had to fling up a lob hope pass that was intercepted. The only way the Packers could have won would have been through superlative play at quarterback. Instead, Rodgers' accuracy was almost on a par with Cam Newton's. OK, that's somewhat of an exaggeration, but he had about seven passes in which receivers had separation but the ball wasn't on target. When the game was being won, Rodgers remained out of sync. He has to be aware of the safety blitz, but when Kurt Coleman came down late Rodgers didn't see him and was sacked. He caught a break when a replay revealed Coleman trapped an interception. When the second half became a 30-minute last resort, Rodgers was much more effective leading three TD drives. His blind escape to the left against a free runner and subsequent heave to Jones was memorable stuff.

## **RUNNING BACKS (3)**

The first three carries by James Starks (55, the second highest snap count of his career) were big time. NT Kyle Love beats Lang inside, Starks makes him miss and gains 4. He makes LB Thomas Davis miss, gaining 9. He makes Norman miss, gaining 15. In all, Starks broke five tackles in 16 touches, gaining 122 total yards (76 on three screens). He even caught an outside-breaking route from the slot. As usual, Starks' work in pass protection was an adventure. John Kuhn (10) might have been a better option on a play or two late. However, Kuhn's blocking wasn't good in this game, either. In truth, the Packers would have been better off if Eddie Lacy (19) had been inactive. He isn't taking care of the football. He's not running hard. If he's miffed by Starks' playing time, he shouldn't be. Yes, Tillman surprised Lacy on McDermott's corner blitz, but the ease with which the artful ex-Bear poked it out from under Lacy's arm was jarring. Two games in a row he has lost the football at the goal line but was saved further embarrassment by barely being down by contact. When Lacy stood next to Linsley at one point, their lower bodies didn't seem all that much different. In five touches, he didn't break a tackle. Rookie FB Aaron Ripkowski (six) ran a clever bootleg route against Allen and then gained five of his 18 yards after resounding contact with Benwikere.

## **DEFENSIVE LINE (1 ½)**

Carolina's vast improvement in the offensive line is at the heart of their undefeated start. The Packers' front seven is massive and experienced. Generally, the Packers' front seven gets after people, but they weren't getting after the Panthers. RG Trai Turner, a roughhousing second-year man, took shots and played well. The other four players went for the throat, too, and mauling LG Andrew Norwell (hamstring) didn't play. Mike Daniels (56 of a possible 67 snaps) probably had the easiest matchup against backup Amini Silatolu, a brutish veteran with shortcomings. Playing with high intensity, Daniels was the best man against the run and registered the only knockdown by a D-lineman. B.J. Raji (32) won some and lost some in a great matchup with nine-year veteran C Ryan Kalil, who still might be Carolina's leading blocker. Raji generally didn't budge against the Panthers' power run game, but he was unable to do anything in the backfield, either. Letroy Guion (39) shoved Turner deep on a carry for minus-7, his finest play since returning from suspension Oct. 4. Otherwise, he wasn't sharp. When the Packers played 27 snaps in the 3-4, Mike Pennel (16) was the backup NT 11 times. Datone Jones (16) had one hurry.

## **LINEBACKERS (1)**

Here's the extent of the pass rush: a knockdown and one-half pressure for Julius Peppers (37). Everyone else was shut out by a team that ranked 18th in percentage of sacks allowed. Dom Capers threw everything that he had at Newton. He blitzed five or more on 62.9% of passes, the third highest total in his seven-year tenure. His 25.7% blitz rate of six or more was a record for Capers in Green Bay. Clay Matthews (60 at ILB, seven at OLB) leaped to chuck a shallow crossing receiver and got out of position, enabling Newton to steam through the vacated middle for 23. After that, Capers blitzed as much to plug lanes against Newton's runs as to generate rush. Playing on a sore leg, Matthews was strangely invisible. His 11 interior pass blitzes, mostly through the A gaps, were stifled by RB Jonathan Stewart, a rugged protector. When Nate Palmer (23) started slowly, Jake Ryan (38) came on late in the second quarter and finished. There were flashes of Ryan striking a blow against linemen, disengaging and preventing backs from bleeding runs. He made a terrific read and tackle to foil a naked pitch. His speed to the outside wasn't bad. On the outside, Mike Neal (59), Nick Perry (38) and Peppers offered nothing as rushers against the tackle tandem of Michael Oher and Mike Remmers. Peppers encountered more double-teaming on rushes by his old team (31.8%) than he has seen since Week 3. He just didn't have any success. At least Perry was hard to move in the run game, including a wonderful read to turn a reverse into minus-10. The other two weren't consistent in the run defense. Jayrone Elliott didn't take a scrimmage snap for the first time, presumably because the Packers wanted muscle players against a muscle opponent.

## **SECONDARY (1)**

Ha Ha Clinton-Dix (67) reverted to some of his poor first-year showings. When Newton spied him squatting in a single-high look, he threw the ball over his head to Devin Funchess for 52 yards. Damarious Randall (67), who started for Sam Shields (shoulder), had perfect coverage. However, Clinton-Dix should realize he isn't fast enough to turn and run with Funchess. He's got to be deeper. On the too-easy 7-yard TD pass to TE Greg Olsen, Clinton-Dix has to assume the inside linebackers must respect Newton's play fake and therefore become much more aggressive in his coverage. Sometimes, Clinton-Dix flies around and shows extreme hustle. On the 59-yard over route to Jericho Cotchery, he didn't show much hustle at all. Morgan Burnett (66) and others should have been looking for someone to cover in that eight-deep zone on third and 16 that Cotchery skated through. That play epitomized wretched defense. Burnett's play speed has diminished, presumably because of his ongoing calf problem. Capers' heavy blitzing put the onus on the young cornerbacks, and the results were about what you'd expect. Demetri Goodson (49), who played extensively after Casey Hayward (concussion) departed early (41), is a tough competitor. But when he failed to get his hands on Corey Brown in the bump zone, it was over on Brown's 39-yard TD. That's the difference between Goodson (4.52 speed) and Shields (4.30). Randall battled, too. This is his school of hard knocks. He made a great pick, gave up a slew of slants and never cried uncle. Playing time for Micah Hyde (19) was cut dramatically.

## **KICKERS (2)**

Mason Crosby contributed to the team's awful start when he mishit the opening kickoff and the Panthers started from the 30. His four kickoffs for distance averaged 69.8 yards and 3.44 seconds of hang time. Tim Masthay did a magnificent job getting a punt off when CB Teddy Williams, a world-class sprinter, charged in off the edge looking for a block. His eight-punt averages were 44.6 (gross), 40.3 (net) and 4.04 (hang time).

## **SPECIAL TEAMS (2)**

Each week, Hyde shows why he's an elite kick returner. He makes coach-like decisions, is slippery and clever with the ball, and shows no fear. Rookie CB Ladarius Gunter had two penalties in 18 snaps, including a blatant illegal block in the final minute to shorten Hyde's punt return. Gunter's shortcomings in speed were evident in some midfield chase situations. Steady, disciplined coverage contained Ted Ginn. Elliott led the way with 35 snaps.

## **OVERALL (1½)**

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