

Rating the Packers: Week 11 at Vikings

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

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Green Bay - Judging from email, some fans either had given up or were in the process of giving up on the Green Bay Packers entering their game Sunday against the Minnesota Vikings at TCF Bank Stadium.

That made absolutely no sense for a team as talented as the Packers are at quarterback and many other positions. The Packers hadn't been playing well for more than a month, but it's a franchise that knows how to win and has a long history of reaching its stride from mid-November on.

Once again, coach Mike McCarthy prepared his team beautifully for an upwardly mobile NFC North Division rival. Green Bay's 30-13 victory over the Vikings left the two clubs atop the division at 7-3.

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

RECEIVERS (2 ½)

One week after a game plan that targeted Davante Adams a record 22 times bore little fruit, the coaches turned Adams into a decoy opposite RC Xavier Rhodes. It was Rhodes who went chest-to-chest with success against Jordy Nelson a year ago. This time, the Packers basically let Rhodes press on his side of the field and attacked Terence Newman, the 37-year-old on the left side. When the Packers needed a completion, it was at Newman's expense. At some point, the Vikings have to insert rookie Trae Waynes, don't they? Newman gambled on a pass to the first-down marker on third and 15 and let Jeff Janis (20 of a possible 77 snaps) run by him for a 50-yard interference penalty. When Newman lost track of James Jones (66) when he moseyed along on his circuitous path to the end-zone corner, the result was a 27-yard TD. After being almost forgotten (15 targets in the last five games), Jones was the team leader (12) for the first time in 2015. He's bowlegged, lacks a classic gait and wore a hoodie under his jersey. Jones also is a gamer with a sixth sense for getting open. For Jones to get his feet down in the corner was incredible. Matched against Rhodes three plays before the TD, he looked back to see Aaron Rodgers scrambling left and took off down the sideline to beat him for a 37-yard gain. Jones dropped a 15-yard sideline pass and didn't make himself available to Rodgers on a quick throw that had to be thrown into the dirt. Matched against feisty veteran Captain Munnerlyn in the slot, Randall Cobb (63 at WR, three at RB) had a forgettable day. He hung onto a 10-yard TD and blocked well once again, but there were two drops and too many occasions where he didn't appear to be working that strenuously to come free. Adams (61) missed a few snaps with a recurring ankle problem and was targeted just three times. Richard Rodgers (51) played from a three-point stance six times in the opening drive, and 23 times in all. It was from that location he made two one-on-one blocks against DE Brian Robison to secure the point of attack on running plays. His ability to be a more consistent blocker is critical to the ground game.

OFFENSIVE LINE (2 ½)

In some ways, you could say Eddie Lacy was his own blocker. On his good runs, this unit obviously got him to the line of scrimmage, where his individual excellence took over. But the Packers averaged just 3.6 yards per carry against a defense ranked 25th at 4.4. Of the 34 rushes, 13 were "bad" runs (1 yard or less), and the line was charged with 9 ½. It was a season-high. Bryan Bulaga was involved in at least five "bad" runs, either missing or failing to sustain against Robison and rookie Danielle Hunter. His two pressures (and declined holding penalty) came on power rushes by Robison. It's tough to say how much Bulaga is limited by injury. On the other side, David Bakhtiari had the toughest matchup in Everson Griffen. It seems to be that way for him almost every week. He was involved in two "bad" runs against Griffen, gave up two pressures and was penalized four times (three were accepted). Bakhtiari is an improving player. However, the officials aren't picking on him. Athleticism and feet are the hardest-to-find commodities for a left tackle. His problem has been lazy hands, and it's one that shouldn't be hard to correct. When Corey Linsley (ankle) went out after 12 plays, the call went to JC Tretter, who had played two snaps from scrimmage (LG) this year. Linval Joseph, a premier nose tackle, suddenly became his responsibility. Tretter was impressive. He showed the quickness and footwork to reach 1- and 2-techniques. He flashed quickness to the LB level, especially smothering MLB Eric Kendricks about five times, and good snap and punch. His numbers (one pressure, partial involvement in four "bad" runs) were reasonable for a 65-snap effort with minimal practice time. Probably the top player was Josh Sitton followed by T.J. Lang, although they combined for three pressures and two "bad" runs.

QUARTERBACKS (3)

Vikings coach Mike Zimmer decided to play coverage against Rodgers. His five-man blitz rate of 24.4% on passes was the lowest by a Packers opponent since the 49ers in Game 4. Keeping away from Rhodes, Rodgers played chess with FS Harrison Smith and tried to go where he wasn't. He made two plays in the clinching TD drive that made the difference. The throw to Jones in the corner was threaded as he was scrambling to his right, and was airborne for 36 yards. His feet and throwing mechanics certainly weren't textbook, but the pass was fantastic. Of his 18 incompletions, three were dropped and half a dozen were off-target to open receivers. The 47.1% completion mark was hard to fathom for a player of this caliber. Considering the opponent, the protection wasn't bad. Once again, Rodgers would hang in the pocket for about 2.5 seconds or so before extending to seek greener pastures. Sometimes it seems he is avoiding pressure that really isn't there.

RUNNING BACKS (4)

James Starks started, played the first 10 snaps and finished with 33. Unfortunately for Starks, five of his eight carries were "bad" runs, and it would be difficult to fault Starks for more than one-half of the five. Enter Lacy (41), who returned from a week off (groin) with a vengeance. McCarthy probably helped Lacy (two-way go) and Rodgers (simpler ball handling) by putting him directly behind the quarterback in a "pistol" formation. Lacy responded with 100 yards and a 4.5 average. He broke five tackles (two by Smith), which was three more than he broke in Games 4-8. Early on, Lacy gained an extra 6 yards lugging Joseph on his back. He hit holes quicker, splitting Joseph and Robison for 8. He offered determination, emotion and fight. Helping sort out Zimmer's unique blitz package, John Kuhn contributed with a season-high 26 snaps. On rookie FB Aaron Ripkowski's lone snap, he took on SS Andrew Sendejo in the role and pancaked him.

DEFENSIVE LINE (5)

To think the Vikings entered with the NFL's best rushing attack only underscored the abilities of RB Adrian Peterson and coordinator Norv Turner. They've made do with an inferior offensive line. It's fairly remarkable the Vikings won seven games and 147.2 yards per game on the ground even after two of their top three linemen (C John Sullivan, RT Phil Loadholt) won't play a down this season because of injury. Turner massaged the starters up front with cleverness and scheme, but when the Packers' front came to play the jig was up. On Peterson's first carry (minus-1), Letroy Guion (19 of a possible 64 snaps) whipped RT T.J. Clemmings, B.J. Raji (34) demolished RG Mike Harris and Mike Daniels (44) shed LG Brandon Fusco. It was the start of one of the dominating games ever by a 3-4 front in Green Bay. Daniels almost always demands double teams, but so did Raji in this game. Time after time, they went over, around or through blockers. Fusco, a strong four-year starter, got abused physically. The many warts of aging backup C Joe Berger were exposed. Daniels used his low center of gravity and unreal power to trash blockers, and a two-armed punch to push the pocket all day long. Raji probably had his best game since Week 2. Guion didn't do anything and Mike Pennel (thigh) lasted just five snaps, but it made no difference because their teammates were on fire. Datone Jones had a career game with two sacks, two knockdowns and two hurries in just 31 snaps. His day included 22 as a DE and nine as an OLB in both nickel and dime packages. Together with Raji and Daniels, his level of effort was high.

LINEBACKERS (4 ½)

The Vikings had all they could handle up front trying to prevent Daniels and Raji from penetrating on run plays. They had little chance even to worry about blocking effectively at the second level. Turner must just leave that to Peterson's greatness to overcome. As a result, Clay Matthews (43 at ILB, 17 at OLB) was free to flow unimpeded to Peterson without 315-pound obstacles in his path. One time, Kyle Rudolph tried to block Matthews. He played through him easily and crunched Peterson for minus-3. On another play, Matthews made FB Zach Line miss and then tackled Peterson for another minus-3. Matthews wasn't able to solve LT Matt Kalil (his lone pressure came on an unblocked A-gap blitz) but with Julius Peppers (40) and Mike Neal (20 at OLB, 18 at DT) combining for eight pressures it didn't make much difference. Turner designed his game plan to double Peppers, who saw more extra attention from RBs and TEs (34.8%) than he has in any game but one. For the first time since Game 3, Neal saw extensive time with his hand down inside in the dime. He replaced Peppers, who stayed on the outside. Neal looked revitalized being back in his old stomping ground. He was flying off the ball from a three-point stance and applying consistent heat. Nate Palmer (41) played ahead of Jake Ryan (one) for a second straight week and did OK. Relegated to special teams the past two weeks, Jayrone Elliott played 20 snaps but didn't have a pressure.

SECONDARY (4)

Morgan Burnett (58) probably had his best game in an injury-shortened season. The defensive priority — stop the run — plays to his strength. Usually patrolling in the box, Burnett bumped among the bigger bodies, kept his shoulders square and helped the all-hands-to-the-ball effort. He also made a great play, coming in high and violently from the side to force the fumble from Peterson that Sam Shields (62) alertly scurried to recover. Shields seemed to be excited to play, too. He had three impressive tackles, missed one and guarded his man. Ha Ha Clinton-Dix (64) registered what was an easy sack in 2.8 seconds because he disguised his pressure until just a few seconds were left on the play clock leaving Teddy Bridgewater little time to spot him. Micah Hyde (seven), the starting dime back, was replaced by Quinten Rollins (21) after reinjuring his hip. Hyde took a bad gamble on his last play, undercutting a deep route to Rudolph even though it was a seven-man pressure and there was no help. When Bridgewater threw a perfect touch pass, Hyde was toast on the 47-yard TD. Later, Rudolph beat Burnett's shoddy coverage for 33 and had Damarious Randall (57) beat deep, but pressure caused the pass to be underthrown. Randall wasn't sharp. He's starting to peek in the backfield too much. Nickel back Casey Hayward (48) made several nice tackles but missed two others.

KICKERS (4 ½)

Mason Crosby was back to his machine-like ways, connecting from 42, 47, 40, 42 and 52. It wasn't an easy day to kick, either. His five kickoffs for distance averaged 69.2 yards and 3.83 seconds of hang time. It's hard to say if Tim Masthay was slow on an 18-yard punt that was deflected by RB Jerick McKinnon. Averaging 38.0 (gross and net) and 3.92 hang time, Masthay placed two of his four punts inside the 20.

SPECIAL TEAMS (3)

Janis' 70-yard kickoff return was the team's longest since Hyde also went 70 in Game 15 of 2013. He paused, waiting for his blockers, and then accelerated so fast the speedy Waynes (4.26) failed to cut him off initially. Ryan missed the tackle on Cordarrelle Patterson's 52-yard kickoff return. Chris Banjo sustained his key block on RB Matt Asiata for almost 3 seconds to give Janis room to run. Later, Banjo could have done a better job preventing McKinnon's block. When Hyde went out, Cobb replaced him on punt returns. His five snaps were his first on special teams this season.

OVERALL (4)

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