

Rating the Packers: Week 13 at Lions

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

Posted: Dec. 05, 2015

Green Bay - The first half was about as poorly as the Green Bay Packers have played, particularly on offense, in many a year.

The comeback and Hail Mary touchdown after time expired couldn't have been more invigorating and exhilarating.

What it means is the Packers are 8-4. Where they go from here is up to them.

Here is a rating of the Packers on Thursday night in their 27-23 victory over the Detroit Lions at Ford Field, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

RECEIVERS (2½)

Richard Rodgers played a fewer percentage of the plays than he has all season but still had the best game of his career. Even before winning the game on the 61-yard heave into the end zone, he caught all seven of his targets for 85 yards and drew a 40-yard interference penalty on SS Isa Abdul-Quddus. With wide receivers blanketed by aggressive man coverage, the Packers decided their best bet was Rodgers in the middle of the field. In 2011, Abdul-Quddus ran a 4.48-second 40 coming out of Fordham and SLB Josh Byner ran 4.81 out of Auburn. Two years ago, Rodgers ran 4.87. But by releasing cleanly and using his leverage and massive frame, Rodgers gained separation and 51 yards after the catch (two receptions were screens). One reason he wasn't responsible for a "bad" run was the fact John Kuhn was used instead to insert across the formation in running plays. When the Hail Mary was caught, there were 11 players in the end zone. The last player to arrive was Rodgers, who was at the 10 when the ball was thrown before beginning his circuitous path to NFL glory. It's very possible he has the best hands on offense. He attacked the ball above his head with white-gloved hands, hugged it to his chest as OLB Tahir Whitehead grabbed him by the waist and clutched it tightly on the ground. The game was over. Justin Perillo received four of the merely 11 snaps in which a TE had his hand down. At wide receiver, it was business as usual with merely 10 receptions for 85 yards. The highlight was the isolation route off short motion for Davante Adams (64) in which he stuttered and beat Byner vertically for an 8-yard TD. Jerry Rice used to run that. Otherwise, Adams basically was stymied by aggressive little Nevin Lawson. On the other side, James Jones (55) played a little less but was rendered null and void once again by Darius Slay. He must be credited with partial responsibility on Glover Quin's interception. Randall Cobb (66, including four at RB) was hustling in the end zone so he was available to recover James Starks' fumble for a fortuitous TD. Covered by Quandre Diggs and Don Carey, Cobb caught 4 of 5 targets for 29. Apparently, he just isn't as dynamic as the elite slots. But when it was fourth and 1 early on the long TD drive at the end, Mike McCarthy called time and settled on a rollout designed to hit Cobb on a quick out-breaker against Diggs. He ran a snappy route, took it up the sideline and gained 16. Fourteen of Jared Abbrederis' 16 snaps came from the slot. He works hard and might contribute inside, but slots take the most punishment, too. Jeff Janis had a 50-yard bomb thrown to him against Lawson but it didn't look good. He wasn't smooth down the field. He'll need better body control to give himself a chance.

OFFENSIVE LINE (1)

Backups played 174 snaps (51.9%) of the snaps, and it showed. The unit was charged with three sacks, 5½ knockdowns, seven hurries and 5½ "bad" runs besides drawing three penalties. The best player was Josh Sitton. He allowed just one-half pressure and both covered up and moved his man in the run game. For a seven-year starter, it's inexcusable to grab a facemask on a screen pass, and without his trip on another screen it might have been a TD. Replacing T.J. Lang (shoulder), Lane Taylor played for the first time since August. He used his bulk and improving strength and balance on three successful runs against powerful old pro Haloti Ngata and his poise to neutralize Ziggy Ansah on a pair of stunts. He demolished former Packer Khyri Thornton on a 12-yard run, too. His day also included 1½ "bad" runs and 1½ pressures. Corey Linsley sucked it up and went 28 snaps on a bad ankle before giving way to JC Tretter, who had an ankle injury of his own. Both were adequate. Tretter overset Ngata on his first snap and drew a hold, but for the most part he was competitive. DE Devin Taylor, a fourth-round pick in 2013, surprisingly was even more of a problem (five pressures) than Ansah (three). David Bakhtiari held up extremely well against Ansah, who is fast becoming an elite player. He has a terrific pass set, uses his hands better all the time and can really move his feet. But in Bakhtiari's first extended exposure against Taylor he didn't measure up. When Bakhtiari (leg) left for one snap, the Lions smartly ran a tackle-end twist and Ansah sailed around Josh Walker for a sack. McCarthy began the game as if Don Barclay was Bulaga. Two power sacks by Taylor against Barclay resulted in more chipping, but still damage was done. There can be no excuses. Barclay, a seasoned player, yielded 7½ pressures.

QUARTERBACKS (4½)

Aaron Rodgers was down 14 times (three sacks, 11 knockdowns), tying his season high set in Carolina. He was well aware that Barclay would be overpowered, and that there were deficiencies elsewhere. Teryl Austin, the Lions' coordinator, cut his blitz rate from 36.8% Nov. 15 to 26.2% Thursday. If this were previous games, Rodgers might have quit on his progression prematurely and started running around, which would have done the offense little good. Instead, he hung in the pocket, took one for the team and accepted the hits to deliver the ball downfield more. It didn't work early, and Rodgers' terrible throw to an open Jones looked like one of disgust and frustration. The offense was pathetic. It was third and 10 starting out in the third quarter when he ran beautifully up through the pocket against a zone blitz and flung it to his tight end for 26. When the Packers got the ball back, he threw a third-down strike to Adams for a score. Then it was the old Rodgers on third and 11, seeing an entire secondary plastering receivers with their backs to him and then seizing the chance on a 17-yard TD run in which he outsprinted Ansah (4.63). On the Hail Mary, he scrambled away from a three-man rush that embarrassed his five-man protection. After 8.2 seconds Rodgers torqued his body and rainbowed the ball 66 yards. It hung in the air for 4.3 seconds. Not many QBs can throw a pass that far and that high and that accurately and that softly. He did.

RUNNING BACKS (½)

Eddie Lacy (19) played the third, fourth and sixth series of the first half, then just one snap in the second half. Apparently, he was demoted for missing curfew the night before the game. On his first carry, Devin Taylor broke through and hit Lacy, who bobbed the ball but didn't fumble. Near the end of Quin's 24-yard interception return, Lacy missed the tackle. One time he broke a tackle by Ngata only to be crushed when Lane Taylor missed his block. Two of his five carries were draw plays, perhaps designed to give him some room to see a hole. He probably could be faulted for one poor run read. Benched for James Starks (33) and free agent John Crockett (seven) in the second half, Lacy chewed on his mouthpiece. Starks was awful as well, fumbling at the 5 (saved by Cobb) and fumbling again (ball stayed close so he recovered). He also dropped two passes, twice failed to extricate himself from chip blocks getting to the check-down and wasn't sharp in protection. You can't blame Starks for failing to gain on a third-and-1 quick pitch that was one of the wackiest of calls. With the vets in the tank, McCarthy gave Crockett five of the second-half carries by RBs. The vivacious rookie showed ability to gear down and cut, OK power, a willingness to get north-south and fresh legs. He's raw, obviously, getting too close to Rodgers and bobbling a handoff, but he'll get plenty of more chances now.

DEFENSIVE LINE (4)

Perhaps a changing of the guard took place for the No. 3 berth on the unit, which has been manned by Letroy Guion since his return from suspension in Game 4. For the first time, Mike Pennel started at 5-technique in the 3-4 ahead of Guion. When the Lions sent out their four-minute offense needing to gain two first downs on the ground to wrap it up, it was significant that Pennel was on the field for five of six plays while Guion watched. In all, Pennel's snap margin (28-16) was larger than ever before. A tower of power, Pennel is getting better with his hands and, in keeping with group mindset, doesn't take crap from anybody. Guion made two fine plays, beating LG Laken Tomlinson for a knockdown and aborting his rush to ruin a screen that fractured into RG Larry Warford being illegally downfield. He also jumped offside, and later was trapped. Tomlinson, the 28th player drafted in April, received quite an indoctrination from Mike Daniels (47 of a possible 65 snaps). Time after time Daniels would hit Tomlinson with his lethal 6-inch punch, jar him backward or off-balance and proceed to the ball. RT Michael Ola (knee) departed late in the third quarter after Daniels smashed him over a pile. Daniels had two tackles for loss. However, on Ameer Abdullah's 36-yard run, Daniels was destroyed by Warford. B.J. Raji (34) more than held his own inside but got trapped twice by FB Michael Burton on runs totaling 42 yards. He had an ongoing war of words with Lions players. Datone Jones (27, including nine at DL) started the second half at LOLB for Julius Peppers but didn't have a pressure.

LINEBACKERS (3½)

Jake Ryan, who played one snap in the last three games compared to Nate Palmer's 147, had the 49-0 advantage this time in their fight for playing time. Early, Ryan looked like someone who hadn't played in a month. He paid a terrible physical price, too, playing high and getting buffeted by offensive linemen in the run game. Later, he settled in, slipped off some blocks and bear-hugged a few ball carriers. He lit up Burton on an iso and made the tackle. He reacted nicely and made a textbook recovery of Matthew Stafford's game-changing fumble. Clay Matthews (50 ILB, 15 OLB) was up and down with just one pressure and no big plays. Meanwhile, Peppers (41) caused the fumble by Stafford, feinting LT Riley Reiff inside and then beating around the corner. With average arm length (33¾ inches), Reiff had trouble keeping Peppers at bay. All three of Peppers' pressures were against Reiff, who really would be a better guard. Mike Neal (34 OLB, 14 DL) had a tackle for loss for the third time in four games and saved a first down by leaving the pack and tripping up TJ Jones on a third-and-11 screen for 8. Neal, Nick Perry (15) and Jayrone Elliott (eight) contributed nothing to the rush.

SECONDARY (4)

The sack by Ha Ha Clinton-Dix (65) should be on a teaching reel for aspiring safeties. When RB Theo Riddick came over in blitz pickup, Clinton-Dix didn't just pull up and shut down. He attacked Riddick with violence and technique, got rid of him and surged forward to sack Stafford. He also did well forcing the run and fought off Burton to stop a reverse by Tate for 3. Morgan Burnett (65) had four of his typically solid wrap-up tackles in the box. In space, Burnett is less effective. When Abdullah suddenly appeared on his 36-yard run, Burnett froze and then guessed as the rookie flew by. Sam Shields (65) covered Calvin Johnson most of the day and, with some over-the-top help, limited him to 44 yards in eight targets (three catches). His best plays were a fourth-quarter breakup and three nifty tackles, including two against the shifty Riddick. Johnson had Shields beat in the second half for a pair of TDs (48, 33) but the passes were overthrown. A spectacular catch by Johnson on a 17-yard fade did cost Shields a TD. With Damarious Randall (knee-hamstring) out, Quinten Rollins had his longest stint (39) of his rookie season. He's all business. He got a jam at the line, trashed TE Brandon Pettigrew on a bubble screen, wouldn't stay blocked and broke up a third-and-6 to speedy Corey Fuller. He also took a bad gamble by undercutting the late third-and-12 dig to TJ Jones that ruptured into 29, and was too soft and slipped on a 15-yard curl to Fuller. Casey Hayward (49) wasn't at all physical but avoided the bad play in coverage. Back from a hip injury to serve as an extra back, Micah Hyde (33) took a chance by dropping coverage on Burton and made it work with a sack.

KICKERS (1)

It was a bad miss by Mason Crosby, his 41-yard boot that caromed off the left upright. His four kickoffs (two touchbacks) averaged 73.8 yards and 3.89 seconds of hang time. Tim Masthay's six punts averaged 47.7 (gross), 44.3 (net) and 4.34. His poor first punt contributed to the team's lousy start.

SPECIAL TEAMS (3)

Jeff Janis assumed the kickoff job over Hyde and Abbrederis. His two returns carried just to the 18 and 16. He has a herky-jerky style of running that makes him an easier target to hit. Hyde hasn't broken a punt return all year (long of 16, 32 catches) but is money fielding boots no matter how long, high or wide. Coverage against dangerous returners was effective.

OVERALL (3)

Dec. 05, 2015, editions of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel