

Rating the Packers: Week 14 vs Cowboys

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

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Green Bay - The Green Bay Packers didn't solve all their problems on offense Sunday at Lambeau Field just because coach Mike McCarthy was back calling the plays.

Suffice it to say, however, that they're much further along in the correction department with McCarthy controlling the game than they were with him just observing the offense from the sideline over the previous three months.

Here is a rating of the Packers in their 28-7 victory over the Dallas Cowboys, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

RECEIVERS (2 ½)

Unlike most other opponents, the Cowboys played an extensive amount of two-shell with soft corners. The Packers have no vertical game to speak of, and with McCarthy hellbent on running the ball it's unclear what defensive coordinator Rod Marinelli was thinking. True, whenever Green Bay did try to get deep, the receivers were smothered so Aaron Rodgers just sailed the ball over everyone's head. What the strategy did, however, was enable the Packers to find a series of pleasantly routine completions. The bellies from the slot to Randall Cobb (83 of a possible 87 snaps, including 76 at WR) were effective, although if Davante Adams (71) had blocked better the gains would have been greater. Cobb certainly excelled as a blocker and made two contested catches. Depending on the criteria, he also dropped between one and three passes. After failing to beat Brandon Carr on a third-and-3 slant to open the game, James Jones (82) beat Carr for 13 on a third-and-10 out and Morris Claiborne for 16 on a deep comeback. Jones gained 15 of his 49 yards after the catch whereas Cobb gained 44 of his 81. Jones also drew his third penalty (for pass interference) in the last four games. Davante Adams has gone from receiving 22 targets Nov. 15 against Detroit to two Sunday in 71 snaps. Not having a legitimate blocking tight end cost the Packers an early touchdown. On third and goal from the 1, lead blocker Richard Rodgers (42) took a side instead of taking on SS Barry Church down the middle and James Starks was stuffed. The main culprit on the fourth-down QB sneak for no gain was Justin Perillo (13), who was unable to prevent DE Greg Hardy from crossing his face. But the Packers get so many downfield plays from their tight ends, I guess it's a push. Sarcasm aside, Rodgers did produce an excellent route-reception for his seventh TD.

OFFENSIVE LINE (4 ½)

With Corey Linsley (ankle) sidelined and the other four starters on the injury report, it was gut-check time against a talented front. The Packers rushed for 230 yards, their highest total since the Seattle playoff game (235) in January 2008. The unit was charged with six pressures, a winning number. Probably the toughest matchup fell to David Bakhtiari, although Hardy is overweight and not the dynamic player he was for Carolina in 2012-'13. Bakhtiari drew another penalty, his 10th of the season, but it shouldn't detract from his no-pressure, one-"bad" run performance. He hunkered down and pitched a shutout against Hardy, who after a while moved to other positions seeking a more favorable matchup. Hardy's sack came at the expense of T.J. Lang, who appeared to look away from Hardy for a split-second checking for one of Marinelli's endless series of stunts. For the most part, the unit handled the well-choreographed stunts that had wrecked Washington last week. Lang did have 2½ "bad" runs, but more important were the countless runs in which he not only controlled his opponent but achieved movement. Josh Sitton was involved in three of the 12 "bad" runs (there were 44 rushes) but usually got his man and was flawless in protection. Bryan Bulaga sucked it up on a bad ankle, played with a limp and did a terrific job, all things considered. The Packers made a living on outside zone plays to his side in which he would stretch DeMarcus Lawrence, the undersized left defensive end. The nine rushes directed at Lawrence gained 60 yards. Bulaga allowed 3½ pressures, but that was gravy for the Packers after they watched Don Barclay struggle in Detroit. JC Tretter was involved in three "bad" runs and had one-half pressure. The Packers pulled linemen on only five plays, but the mobile Tretter had three and the gain was 29. He gives ground on some reach blocks because of size-strength issues, but he usually recovered sufficiently. He does play a little high but he's fleet afoot, alert on stunts and runs his feet on outside zones.

QUARTERBACKS (4)

There's little doubt that Rodgers was disappointed when Tom Clements lost his play-calling gig. Clements has been instrumental in Rodgers' development, and they've always been close. But there was a game to win and, for the first time in seven games, Rodgers posted a better passer rating than the opposing quarterback. There was a stark difference in how Rodgers (99.5 rating) and Matt Cassel (41.5) handled the steady rain and wet footballs. With his large hands and incredible mechanics, Rodgers made it seem as if the weather wasn't a factor. Meanwhile, Cassel was a disaster from start to finish. Rodgers was back in rhythm, dealing check-downs and hitches and screens with accuracy and decisiveness. In 35 attempts, he threw only one really off-target pass. McCarthy split the plays almost equally from under center, shotgun and pistol. On the five screens, Rodgers sold them by looking one way and back to the receiver at the last instant. Marinelli rushed five on 25% of dropbacks, and six just once. It came on third and 9 early in the fourth quarter of a 14-7 game, and was the game's most significant play. With the rush closing fast, Rodgers ran up inside, broke the tackle of DT Tyrone Crawford and made a bold burst between tacklers for 11. At times reluctant to run in the last two months, Rodgers should hunt those opportunities down the stretch.

RUNNING BACKS (5)

Eddie Lacy (49) bounced back from a bad game in Detroit with 148 yards from scrimmage. Ditto for James Starks (32), who had 103. Lacy broke five tackles in 25 touches. On the opening play, Crawford shoved Tretter back into Lacy's lap on an outside zone. If Lacy had been distracted or less than fully motivated, it would have been minus-3. Instead, he cut back away from Crawford and turned it into a gain of 5. When Lacy finds himself one-on-one with a defender, invariably he'll either spin or make a shake-and-bake move. As the game wore on, he dragged more and more tacklers. He held the ball firm and tight, and was sharp in pass pro. Starks seems most effective cutting back on plays headed left. He stuck his foot in the ground a few times and was off. Draws weren't productive for Lacy (four carries, 3 yards), but on Starks' lone draw he made a great cut and sprinted between the hashes for a 30-yard TD. John Kuhn's career high for snaps is 45 at Seattle in 2012. He logged 44 here, posted half a dozen excellent blocks and didn't participate in a "bad" run. As a blocker, he's somewhere between a thumper and a finesse guy.

DEFENSIVE LINE (3 ½)

After the defense was on the field for at least 64 snaps in the last eight games, playing just 52 against Dallas should be beneficial in the week ahead. Probably the best play was made by Letroy Guion (17 of the 52) on a third and 1 early in the second quarter. He got lower than LG La'el Collins, the extremely aggressive and powerful rookie, and halted Robert Turbin for no gain. Guion also showed sideline pursuit twice and smelled out another screen pass that was aborted. Mike Pennel started again at 5-technique but had a rough outing and was limited to 15 snaps. On two long runs totaling 95 yards that went outside him, Pennel was sealed at the point by TE Jason Witten. He also played too high on a run for 9. His best moment came on the early goal-line stand when he blew up RG Zack Martin and tackled Darren McFadden for minus-1. Mike Daniels (27) was quiet for one of the first times all season, a tribute to how good Martin, Collins and C Travis Frederick are. He manhandled RT Doug Free twice in short-yardage but was covered up on the TD run and registered just one pressure. B.J. Raji's 25 snaps were adequate.

LINEBACKERS (3 ½)

Jake Ryan (33) started again ahead of Nate Palmer, who played only on special teams. Ryan started out by overrunning McFadden on his 50-yard jaunt on a toss. On McFadden's 45-yard burst, Ryan was caught in the wash. He tends to play high, and as a result absorbs considerable punishment rather than attack the line of scrimmage. He isn't playing with much strength, and with his average quickness and speed an off-season spent in the weight room probably will be critical in his development. Clay Matthews (49, including 35 inside) jolted Cassel when he delayed just enough on an interior blitz to pull Turbin away from his assignment, which was to block him. Matthews' toughness is on display every game, but he also tends to play high and isn't always on point in terms of reading blocking combinations. Dime backer Joe Thomas (19) keeps trying to blitz but because he's so undersized he can't make any impact between the tackles. Julius Peppers (40, including 33 outside) couldn't get anything going against Free, the weakest member of the Dallas offensive line. It was the same for Mike Neal (42, including 31 outside), but few rushers get much against LT Tyron Smith. After playing just 35 snaps in the last five games, Jayrone Elliott had 13 because Nick Perry (shoulder) sat out. When Smith appeared to short-circuit late, Elliott received an unblocked gift sack in 2.2 seconds. He also had an unblocked knockdown, a batted ball and a hustle tackle from the back side. The 45-yard by McFadden ruptured when Elliott lined up late and reacted poorly. Datone Jones (31, including 17 at DE) had two pressures and one batted ball.

SECONDARY (3 ½)

The Packers would like to face more quarterbacks like Cassel, who was just awful. Dez Bryant, his No. 1 WR, was equally inept. At least Bryant has an excuse. He's probably playing prematurely on a post-operative foot. Before departing with a concussion on his 12th snap, Sam Shields traveled with Bryant and was all over him. Damarious Randall (44) replaced Shields in the same role and didn't allow a reception. He did just enough to win a replay reversal on what was ruled a 28-yard completion to Bryant. Randall caught a break once or twice when Cassel didn't throw to Bryant, who looked open. In the slot, Casey Hayward (39) played tight coverage on little Cole Beasley, whose 19-yard reception with 2½ minutes left was the Cowboys' longest. Quinten Rollins (33) continues to challenge receivers but really struggled as a tackler for the first time. Turbin's 22-yard run off tackle would have been for 2 if Rollins had brought him down. It wasn't the best of games for Ha Ha Clinton-Dix (52) or Morgan Burnett (52), either. Instead of playing inside-out on the 50-yard run by McFadden, Clinton-Dix lost leverage, missed the tackle and the back was out the gate across his face. Collins mauled him on McFadden's 45-yard run, too. Unafraid of Witten's speed, Micah Hyde (27) was able to cover the legendary tight end closely and effectively.

KICKERS (4)

Needing improvement, Tim Masthay got it with six-punt averages of 47.0 yards (gross), 44.7 (net) and 4.21 seconds of hang time. He helped take dangerous Lucky Whitehead out of the game. Mason Crosby averaged 77.2 and 3.96 on five kickoffs. Four were touchbacks.

SPECIAL TEAMS (3 ½)

It was the Jeff Janis show. Three times he hustled down on punts to tackle Whitehead for returns of minus-2. He beat single coverage by Carr on the first, then double-teams from Carr and Church on the last two. On the second, Carr shoved Janis five yards out of bounds, but he recovered and sped by the veteran cornerback to the ball. His speed was so much better than Carr's or Church's. Datone Jones drew a holding penalty on the opening kickoff, then missed a block on a kickoff return by Janis to the 14.

OVERALL (4)

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