

Rating the Packers: Week 16 at Cardinals

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

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Green Bay - The Arizona Cardinals' 38-8 trouncing of the visiting Green Bay Packers on Sunday must have been quite an eye-opener for general manager Ted Thompson and coach Mike McCarthy.

Starting the day, just two games separated the two teams in the standings. At the end of the day, the Cardinals' superiority in how GM Steve Keim has built a team and coach Bruce Arians has prepared a team was rather obvious.

Now we'll find out if Thompson and McCarthy have something more to draw upon as the Packers attempt to win the NFC North Division and advance through the playoffs.

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

RECEIVERS (1 ½)

Playing press-man coverage in front of two backup safeties, the Cardinals basically stifled the receivers other than James Jones (played 66 of a possible 72 snaps). Operating against Justin Bethel, a special-teams ace pressed into starting duty outside with the season-ending injury to Tyrann Mathieu, Jones had team-high totals of five receptions and 46 yards plus a two-point conversion. He schooled Bethel three times on back-shoulder throws for 28 yards and drew a 49-yard penalty for pass interference against him. Jones also beat him deep on a stop-and-go route for what should have been a 37-yard TD but the ball was overthrown. On the down side, Jones failed to free himself deep when McCarthy called the old deep bootleg pass that used to go to Jordy Nelson and Greg Jennings, and he should have done more to break up the interception by Bethel in the end-zone corner. Patrick Peterson shadowed Randall Cobb (62 at WR, seven at RB) more than anyone else and took him out of the game. Targeted just three times, Cobb caught them for 15 yards. He was 1-2 against Peterson. Cobb also let Peterson play right through his block before he tackled Jones on a bubble screen. Other than a 38-yard reception against blown coverage, Davante Adams (51) was shackled by veteran Jeraud Powers. After the catch, Adams demonstrated no poise whatsoever spiking the ball for a penalty. He also dropped a short TD pass and was unable to fight his way into the end zone on a slant from the 2. For the fourth straight game Jared Abbrederis (14) got the call ahead of Jeff Janis (two). Abbrederis ran a nice over route with a subtle secondary move well downfield but then dropped the 23-yard pass. Andrew Quarless (25) returned for the first time since Game 3 and showed good hands catching a third-and-6 pass for 13 that was behind him. Neither Quarless nor Richard Rodgers (48) was an effective run blocker.

OFFENSIVE LINE (½)

Of Don Barclay's 351 snaps this season before Sunday, just 39 came at LT. He did a respectable job as 21-game starter in 2012-'13, but that was at RT and before August 2014 reconstructive knee surgery. Starting for injured LT David Bakhtiari (ankle), Barclay was overmatched. Of his 4½ sacks, three were to old pro Dwight Freeney and 1½ on end-tackle twists to dominating DE Calais Campbell. He also allowed four hurries for a total of 8½ pressures. Barclay was much better in the run game, but he did have a critical miss on an off-tackle toss that started out looking like it would be a TD. When Barclay overran ILB Kevin Minter, Eddie Lacy was tackled for a gain of only 3. Bryan Bulaga was humming along against the edge rushers on the other side when he departed after 36 snaps with an ankle injury. Josh Walker got the call, but after he allowed four pressures in a disastrous 20 snaps, the coaches inserted JC Tretter for the final 16. Tretter was much more effective than Walker, who is better at guard than tackle. The unit drew five penalties (two were accepted), and early holds against Corey Linsley (71) and Josh Sitton (66) were costly. Sitton and T.J. Lang (65) both played better than Linsley before making their exits during garbage time. Another reason why the run by Lacy didn't go the 13-yard distance before the half was the fact that undersized ILB Deone Bucannon made a great play, getting leverage on the pulling Linsley and compressing the hole. Coordinator Jeff Bettcher blitzed on 38.1% of passes, one of his lowest totals of the season, because five of the nine sacks came on either three- or four-man rushes.

QUARTERBACKS (½)

Against a team as formidable as Arizona, the Packers' best chance was to get magnificent play from their quarterback. When Aaron Rodgers turned the ball over three times, completed 53.6% and didn't cut an inspiring figure around whom the team could rally, the offense and the team were doomed. On the second series, he threw high for an open Adams on third and 5. On the fourth series, he threw slightly behind Rodgers on third and 2. In the third quarter, he missed Jones on what for him should be an almost routine 37-yard TD. But Rodgers hasn't been accurate on the deep ball all year. On two of his eight sacks, he pump-faked for 3.7 and 4.2 seconds when it was incumbent upon him to get the ball out of his hand. This also was the first time in Rodgers' career that he fumbled three times. Two were from the blind side, but ball security is priority No. 1 for McCarthy's quarterbacks. His interception was placed high and in the middle when it probably had to be thrown low and away. On the blown coverage, Adams had a chance to go all or a lot of the 98 yards but the pass made him turn back and around, destroying his momentum. Sometimes Rodgers is throwing as he leaves his feet, and at times it leaves him in poor position to get the ball out of his hand. Why did Rodgers spin the ball and jaw at the Cardinals' bench when Powers upended him near the sideline after a scramble? He didn't run out of bounds. The Packers need a leader, and that isn't leadership. Rodgers has been remarkably durable. He takes a beating and always comes back for more. That has been the best part of his game this season. Scott Tolzien's six snaps included a fumbled exchange.

RUNNING BACKS (1 ½)

Eddie Lacy (45) made his third straight start and did some damage. He didn't break any tackles but he dragged the pile on a consistent basis. When Minter hit him solidly on a second-half carry, Lacy carried him and others five more yards. Presumably injured in the Oakland game, Lacy practiced sparingly all week because of a rib injury. After several of his 13 touches, Lacy was holding his ribs as if in pain. He continues to show patience and burst on screens, following Lang on one for a 28-yard TD. Of the team's last 13 TD passes, four have come on screens. His pass blocking was spotty; the 187-pound Powers actually shoved him out of the way and got in on a sack. This was the second game in a month in which Lacy made a poor effort on a return by the defense. There is no excuse for not getting DE Cory Redding down at the 25 on the fumble return that went 36 for a TD. James Starks' day ended on the sixth play when he probably tried to do too much and fumbled on a hit by FS D.J. Swearinger. Although Starks was running left, the ball was in his right hand. Swearinger said he noticed that on tape and judged the angle of his strike accordingly.

DEFENSIVE LINE (1 ½)

B.J. Raji got off to a fast start, blowing up C Lyle Sendlein on a tackle for loss. When he suffered a concussion on his sixth snap, Mike Pannel (30 of a possible 58 snaps) and Letroy Guion (23) traded off next to Mike Daniels (37) in nickel and with him in just the eight snaps of 3-4. Pannel registered a most impressive sack, rag-dolling RG Ted Larsen. Later, he came off a block by backup LG Jonathan Cooper with one arm and forced a fumble by Kerwynn Williams. It was the third fumble on a running play that the Packers have recovered this season. Guion continued his late-season rise, shedding Sendlein and his backup, A.Q. Shipley, three times for tackles on rushes. Too often, however, Carson Palmer was able to step up because the inside rush failed to collapse his throwing cup. This might have been the first game all season that Daniels didn't have a pressure. Daniels did make an exceptional interception, reading screen and making the catch at point-blank range. If the high-school running back had cut back, it would have been a TD. Datone Jones played more at OLB (27) than at DE (seven). His pass rush has hit a lull. The Packers need him to get going again.

LINEBACKERS (½)

With a stationary target like Palmer, pass rushers are allowed to work inside at times in addition to bull and edge rush. On Palmer's 32 dropbacks, the unit tallied just two pressures. Mike Neal (20 at OLB, 12 at DL) made a spectacular sack on an early third and 4, beating LG Mike Lupati on his outside edge. The only other pressure came from Clay Matthews (30 at ILB, 18 at OLB) on a bull rush and chase. Julius Peppers (17 at OLB, nine at DL) never could solve RT Bobby Massie despite just 20% double-teaming on passes. With Jayrone Elliott (thigh) out, Nick Perry (34) got more exposure and set a strong edge against the run. Once again, Perry offered next to nothing as a rusher. The rush flashes that were there a year ago haven't been seen in 2015. Perry's limitations in space were evident on his missed tackle of David Johnson's 44-yard swing pass. Jake Ryan (41) also failed on that play, one of his three missed tackles. Palmer succeeded in matching Johnson on Ryan three times for big gains. If Ryan has any chance of holding up against a talent like Johnson, he must be perfect with his leverage and technique. When he wasn't, it was Katy bar the door. At the end, Nate Palmer (one) and Ryan (two) lined up at OLB. When they screamed up the field, the Cardinals ran the ball underneath them off right tackle for gains of 18 and 19 yards. For the second straight game, Matthews didn't have a tackle. On Johnson's second carry, Matthews met him squarely at the line, crumpled and the gain was 6. As a rusher against LT Jared Veldheer and as a run stuffer, Matthews was next to invisible. Dime LB Joe Thomas (27) ran back so far in the deep middle on the 47-yard dig to Michael Floyd, it looked like he was defending a Hail Mary.

SECONDARY (1 ½)

If Thomas was too deep, Micah Hyde (21) wasn't quite deep enough on the dig to Floyd that began Arizona's backbreaking 80-yard TD drive in 51 seconds to end the half. Palmer's pass cleared Hyde on his curl drop and then Floyd ran away from the pack. It seemed as if the matchups coach Bruce Arians desired were Johnson against Ryan and Floyd against Casey Hayward (56). On the first play, Floyd used his big advantages in size and speed to run by Hayward on a slot fade but short-armed the catch when Ha Ha Clinton-Dix (58) closed fast to the boundary and delivered a solid body shot. On the left side, Damarious Randall (57) once again wasn't on top of his game. Too often, he's still moving and not set up properly when the ball's about to be snapped. He didn't play very physically, which leads to larger receivers gaining leverage on him. On the right side, Quinten Rollins (49) was the team's best cornerback. He isn't as speedy as Randall but there's a competitive edge to him. His overall game is progressing nicely. Clinton-Dix didn't show much speed on Johnson's 14-yard TD burst, but both he and Morgan Burnett (58) were solid. Burnett made a terrific play on the goal-line breaking with explosiveness as Johnson dropped the pass in the flat.

KICKERS (3)

Tim Masthay made the gutsy fake-punt call work, sticking his foot in the ground and taking the ball down the alley for 7 on fourth and 2. He also punted well, averaging 44.7 yards (gross), 43.2 (net) and 4.22 seconds (hang time) on six attempts. Mason Crosby's only kickoff was stellar but his onside kick wasn't. It went just eight yards.

SPECIAL TEAMS (1)

For the first time all season this area had three penalties. In fact, the special teams had been hit with merely five fouls in the previous six games. Janis' facemask penalty set up the short field leading to the Cardinals' opening TD. He met his match on the perimeter in Bethel, a three-time Pro Bowl choice. Chris Banjo sustained his block in space forever on Williams to give Masthay daylight. The snapping debut of rookie Rick Lovato was uneventful, just the way he wanted it. Demetri Goodson seemed to get away with punt-coverage interference on the catch that Peterson fumbled. The Packers' return game was kept at bay.

OVERALL (½)

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