

Rating the Packers: Week 17 vs Vikings

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

Posted: Jan. 05, 2016

Green Bay - As presently configured, there weren't many areas in which the Minnesota Vikings appeared vulnerable against the Green Bay Packers.

Foremost was the Vikings' ability to prevent the Packers from beating them again running the ball through the A gaps with Eddie Lacy and James Starks. The absence of dominating nose tackle Linval Joseph (foot) made their task that much more challenging.

The Packers pounded away on their opening drive with their running backs gaining 36 yards in nine rushes. After that, the backs were shut down, carrying just 14 times for 28.

Coach Mike Zimmer, in his brutally honest assessment, said that the Packers ran the ball down the Vikings' throat in Minnesota's 42-10 defeat at Lambeau Field last season. When the Packers rushed for 124 in their 30-13 victory this season over the Vikings, Zimmer said his team had been "outphysicaled."

On Monday, Zimmer viewed the Vikings' 20-13 victory at Lambeau Field through a much brighter prism.

"I saw someone said we had to play the run good in order to win, and they were right," Zimmer said. "I thought we were physical up front defensively. We got off blocks better. We were much more physical."

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

RECEIVERS (2½)

Until the Packers went playground late in the third quarter trailing by 17 points, the Vikings' press coverage against Randall Cobb, James Jones and Davante Adams was stifling. Cobb (64 of a possible 79 snaps, including six at RB) wasn't targeted until 1½ minutes remained in the first half, and he dropped the pass. Mike McCarthy obviously isn't designing many specific plays for him. On two third-and-medium receptions, he got the first down on one and came up a yard short on another. Twice Cobb failed to execute his blocks on runs that were blown up. Jones (79) didn't block well, either, but did catch four of his 11 targets for 102 yards. For the second time, he used his size and savvy to beat veteran Terence Newman deep, this time on a 32-yard takeoff and a 37-yard bomb on an extended play. Jones ran a terrific stop-go-and-go route against Xavier Rhodes that should have been a 40-yard TD but the pass was badly underthrown. Jones failed to make what would have been a tough contested catch with Rhodes in coverage 52 yards downfield on a free play. For a change, Adams (54) showed some pizzazz after the catch. On a routine 4-yard speed out, he made Newman and FS Harrison Smith miss near the sideline, turning it into a 24-yard gain before being run down by a defensive end (Danielle Hunter). It was the second longest reception for Adams in the last eight games. Neither Jared Abbrederis nor Jeff Janis played from scrimmage. With McCarthy using multiple TEs and RBs on the opening 15-play march, Cobb was on the field for just one of the snaps. Richard Rodgers (61) broke SS Andrew Sendejo's tackle in the flat and showed desire for the end zone on his 16-yard TD. His pedestrian speed was evident on a third-and-4 catch for minus-1 when MLB Eric Kendricks actually was able to peel out of the box at the snap and run him down in the flat.

OFFENSIVE LINE (1½)

Obviously, the Packers couldn't line up another Sunday with Don Barclay subbing for LT David Bakhtiari (ankle). JC Tretter isn't a tackle, either, but he is an athlete with good feet. My inclination was to start Tretter outside with instructions to mirror DE Everson Griffen as best he could, and keep Josh Sitton at LG. The Packers wouldn't be able to run wide or off-tackle to the left, but their best chance of winning was pounding those A gaps with Sitton leading the charge. LG Lane Taylor wasn't great (three pressures, one "bad" run), but he wasn't a liability, either. He has some brawler in him. The mistake the Packers made with Sitton outside was thinking they could run their regular offense. The tone was set on the first play when Sitton whiffed on Griffen inside and Lacy was stacked up for gain of 1. Sitton gave it his all, but six pressures and two "bad" runs (all at the hands of Griffen) were almost impossible for the offense to overcome. T.J. Lang, who faces shoulder surgery in the off-season, showed increasing signs of wearing down. His totals were four pressures and one-half "bad" run. Almost all his problems came against all-out, underrated backup DT Tom Johnson. Bryan Bulaga, who missed half the Arizona debacle with an ankle injury, went the distance and performed well, especially in his shutout of the speedy Hunter. Zimmer blitzed on just 28.3% of passes because his four-man rushes were satisfactory. Corey Linsley, who was up and down, and Sitton had holding penalties.

QUARTERBACKS (2½)

The 20-3 deficit wasn't the only reason McCarthy went 90% pass down the stretch. Another was the poor showing by Aaron Rodgers in the structured offense. There were better choices on the crucial third-and-2 pass capping the opening drive than his flat pass to John Kuhn that managed barely a yard. Cobb was charged with a drop on the belly route in the flat but the ball was poorly thrown. On the fourth-and-5 bomb to Jones at the end of the half, he waited too long to release the ball and ended up underthrowing what should have been a routine TD. Seven of Rodgers' eight fumbles this year occurred on sacks (in 2010, he fumbled on just three sacks in 20 games). The strip-sack by Griffen that ended up being returned 55 yards for a TD by CB Captain Munnerylyn showed little pocket awareness on Rodgers' part. He also ran into two sacks. Rodgers picked up the pace late in the third quarter, zipping the ball all over the field both from the pocket and on the move. The 32-yard takeoff to Jones was letter perfect. But then, with the outcome at hand, he failed to finish. Jones had all kinds of room for a tying TD on a low bullet in the left corner of the end zone. Instead, Rodgers not only threw inside but lobbed the ball, which was intercepted easily by Rhodes. In the final seconds, he had Jones running free manned up against a box-style safety (Sendejo) at the goal line. It was an ideal setting to get the ball on the 1 via a pass-interference penalty. Instead, his pass sailed well beyond the end line.

RUNNING BACKS (3½)

Eddie Lacy (25) came to play even if the game plan veered away from him. His gain of 2 on an early fourth and 1 was all him. With Lang and Kuhn getting no movement on the carry, Lacy proved to be his own blocker. Twice he carried the pile for 3-to-5 extra yards. After lining up on the first 10 plays of the second half, Lacy watched the last 38. James Starks (28) didn't fumble, had one miss in blitz pickup but otherwise hung in there, and made a fine cut or two. Starks stood next to Lacy for the final 26 snaps watching Kuhn play a career-high 53. You might remember all that talk by McCarthy about Lacy and Starks being three-down backs. Entering the playoffs, the 33-year-old Kuhn is back in that saddle. Kuhn did nice work jamming his elbow into D-ends on his way out of the backfield. He went the other way on an aborted screen to turn it into a 13-yard gain. His run blocking, however, was barely adequate. They have a real thumper in rookie Aaron Ripkowski but the coaches won't play him.

DEFENSIVE LINE (2½)

Last week, Mike Daniels was listed as questionable with a groin injury. He was probable the previous two weeks with a hamstring. It's certainly no coincidence that his production has waned in the last three games. Playing 36 of a possible 48 snaps, Daniels didn't have a pressure against an opponent that he dominated six weeks ago. That first Viking game represented the high-water mark for a Dom Capers-coached front in Green Bay. This time, nobody on the D-line had a single pressure against an O-line that has a ton of holes. However, the unit did exhibit strength and discipline helping limit Adrian Peterson to 67 yards and a 3.5 average. B.J. Raji (26) saw most of his action in the 18 snaps of the 3-4 base front, the most the Packers have used it since Game 12. He was coming off a concussion and is trying to get by with a three-month old groin injury. Raji, Mike Pennel (22) and Letroy Guion (21) all were fairly resilient against double-teams. None of them stayed blocked for long. They're massive men, and they know how to clog things up. Pennel was trapped by LG Brandon Fusco as Guion was being buried on Peterson's 3-yard TD. Datone Jones (12, including two at DE) left with a neck injury after he lightly butted C Joe Berger.

LINEBACKERS (4)

Offensive coordinator Norv Turner was intent on matching the talents of RB Jerick McKinnon against this unit. McKinnon had Jake Ryan (39) beat by 5 yards on a sideline go route but the ball was thrown too far. He toasted Nick Perry (21) in the flat for 15 yards and ran right by an unsuspecting Joe Thomas (9) for 8. At least Thomas was able to outrun his mistake. Clay Matthews (48, including nine at OLB) was beat on a wheel route by TE MyCole Pruitt but escaped a 21-yard TD when erratic Teddy Bridgewater overshot him, too. The contrast in ability to cover between the Packers' inside players and Kendrick, a second-round draft choice in April, was considerable. Matthews started out with four snaps on passing downs over RG Mike Harris, a matchup the Packers wanted to exploit. When Harris held his ground, Matthews moved outside against LT Matt Kalil and registered three of his four pressures. He seemed healthier (foot), energized and active. After Harris got the better of him with a close-quarters mauling, Matthews either took a swing or hard shove. It cost him an unnecessary roughness penalty and sustained a field-goal drive. Perry partially redeemed himself with a fine coverage play in the flat against TE Rhett Ellison, who suffered a season-ending knee injury. Also, Perry played through TE Kyle Rudolph twice to make short-gain tackles. Ryan lost a scramble with Peterson to recover Bridgewater's late fumbled handoff. Mike Neal (34) had two pressures and Julius Peppers (33, including nine at DL) had one.

SECONDARY (4)

Micah Hyde (17), the dime back, made one of the more phenomenal interceptions in recent team history. Bridgewater opened the door with a boneheaded left-handed push pass, and Hyde did the rest with a backhanded one-handed pick as he was tightly covering WR Mike Wallace. He also took on pulling linemen with leverage and aggression. Casey Hayward (48), Damarious Randall (34) and Quinten Rollins (33) were rarely challenged by Bridgewater, who threw the ball just 19 times. The only blip in coverage was a 22-yard completion to Wallace in which Hayward dropped excessively deep in a zone and slipped on the break. Randall could be more physical in run support. Rollins has been a hard player to beat for about a month. Safeties Ha Ha Clinton-Dix (48) and Morgan Burnett (48) contributed heavily to the gang-tackling initiative against Peterson, filling gaps efficiently. Burnett's only miss came in the open field on the 26-yard tear sweep by WR Adam Thielen. Part of Bridgewater's long day (45.7 passer rating) stemmed partially on Burnett's ability to stay home on bootlegs.

KICKERS (4½)

Every team is scared to death of Cordarrelle Patterson. Mason Crosby's first three kickoffs were excellent and his fourth was fine (66 yards, 4.07 seconds of hang time). Patterson still brought it back 70 yards in breathtaking fashion. He was threatening to score, too, when Crosby zeroed in from the side and jarred the ball loose. It was an unforgettable moment for kickers everywhere. Crosby also connected from 28 and 43 yards. The lone bad punt by Tom Masthay set up the Vikings for a 58-yard TD drive. His four-punt averages were 44.5 yards (gross), 39.3 (net) and 3.65 (hang time).

SPECIAL TEAMS (1½)

Hyde simply has unreal ball skills. With Patterson's fumble rolling away, he secured the ball so exquisitely that there was never a doubt about the recovery. Patterson's long runback was a black mark. Even worse was Kennard Backman's inability to maintain outside leverage on the weak side in an overloaded punt-return formation. Thus, Thielen zipped 41 yards around his exposed flank. With Justin Perillo (hamstring) inactive, the Packers elected not to use Richard Rodgers and gave 11 snaps to Backman, who had just 26 special-teams plays all season. He hasn't been ready for any task as a rookie. Janis and snapper Rick Lovato drew penalties. Blair Walsh's booming kickoffs on a 24-degree night muted Janis on kickoff returns.

OVERALL (2½)

Jan. 5, 2016, editions of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel