

Rating the Packers: Wild Card at Redskins

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

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Green Bay - What looked like a dead football team in the first 18 minutes of the NFC wild-card playoff game late Sunday afternoon in Washington was transformed into a vibrant one over the last 42 minutes. The Green Bay Packers outscored the Redskins, 35-7, in the final 2½ quarters to erase memories of their stagnant start and propel them into the divisional round Saturday night in Arizona.

Here is a rating of the Packers in their 35-18 victory, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

RECEIVERS (3½)

Davante Adams (played 38 of the 75 snaps on offense) was having his second solid game in a row when a knee injury KO'd him on the Packers' first play of the third quarter. Everything about the passing game must be taken with a grain of salt because the Redskins' makeshift secondary was missing three of its top six players. Still, Adams had moments that have been much too few and far between. He made CB Will Blackmon miss the tackle on a 9-yard hitch. He went up and attacked the ball on a 20-yard slant-and-go, seizing it from CB Quinton Dunbar. And he used sharp head fakes on a very precise corner route for a 10-yard TD. He looked fresh. For once, there was some sizzle in his game. James Jones (69) failed to separate on his four targeted incompletions. However, he continued to give Aaron Rodgers a safe haven on third down and in scramble situations. Blackmon had Jones covered across the middle, but when he let his guard down Jones bolted deep and made a tough catch down the middle for 34. Jones is able to succeed on those sideline stop routes because he runs all his routes at the same speed and defenders can only guess what's coming next. His seven receptions were worth 81 yards, and he also drew a 20-yard interference penalty against Dunbar. Randall Cobb (56 at WR, 10 at RB) seemed to pick up his level of intensity for the playoffs. Jared Abbrederis (28) got the nod over Jeff Janis (four) as Adams' replacement. He dropped a short pass, made Blackmon miss on another short pass and ran a terrific shake route to give the former Packer no chance to defend a two-point conversion. Since returning from injury in Game 15, Andrew Quarless has been a nonentity. In 70 snaps (just 14 against Washington) since coming back, he has been targeted twice. Richard Rodgers' snap count of 66 was his highest since Game 8. In this game, there were runs and passes in which his blocking was a liability. On another, he led beautifully from the backfield on WILB Mason Foster enabling James Starks to gain 11.

OFFENSIVE LINE (4)

It really was inexcusable, but after three games coach Mike McCarthy finally got it right identifying the most suitable replacement for injured David Bakhtiari (ankle). It didn't look good for JC Tretter on his second series, when a false-start penalty was followed by OLB Preston Smith's sack-safety on a bull rush at his expense. With the ball at the 5, why was help given to Bryan Bulaga and not Tretter on the play? After that, Tretter was responsible for just one-half pressure and one-half "bad" run in his first action of the season at LT. Tretter is too small (6-3½, 300) to be a tackle. But with his feet, intelligence and determination, he found out that he could win out there against Smith and Trent Murphy if he got his hands inside, which he did. As the game went on, his pass sets became more consistent and helped him bow up against power rushes on the third or fourth step back. His run game was an adventure at the point, but there were times he moved easily to pick off LBs. Corey Linsley had an adventure of his own against NT Terrance "Pot Roast" Knighton, whose weight has been estimated at 380. He had three "bad" runs in all, including two in which Linsley simply couldn't head him off. OLB Ryan Kerrigan, the Redskins' premier rusher, was limited to one pressure by Bulaga. Kerrigan's a leverage-power rusher, and Bulaga is best against those types. Guards Josh Sitton and T.J. Lang had little trouble protecting against the Redskins' jumbo-sized interior rushers.

QUARTERBACKS (4)

Rodgers appeared to rise to the challenge with the offense in the tank and the Redskins ahead, 11-0. He knew the grief both he and the team would have been subjected to if their horrendous first-quarter performance had lingered and led to defeat. Seemingly in unison with McCarthy, Rodgers managed the up-tempo initiative that eventually wore down the opponent. He continues to miss throws that once were routine. He didn't come close to stepping into the overthrown corner route to Cobb in the third series that should have been a 25-yard gain. Later, Cobb came in motion and ran right by CB Bashaud Breeland, but instead of a 32-yard TD pass Rodgers made an all-arm toss that was three yards too far. Wind was a factor, but he has been missing open receivers like this all season. Even the TD pass to Adams was thrown from a poor base. During the Mike Sherman years, Brett Favre fell into poor throwing mechanics. Early on, Rodgers decided to extend plays even when there was no pressure. On the 34-yard pitch to Jones, he resisted the temptation to bolt, stayed put and an open man materialized. A key to the turnaround was Rodgers' hard count (Kerrigan jumped twice, DE Ricky Jean Francois once) and acute powers of observation (two 12-men penalties). It might have contributed to the decision by coordinator Joe Barry to blitz on just 22% of passes, the lowest against Rodgers since Game 4. They also damaged the Redskins' substitution patterns, and that in turn led to long drives against exhausted pass rushers.

RUNNING BACKS (4)

Cobb's 10 snaps at RB tied for his third most in four seasons. It was a dynamic performance. In just five carries he broke four tackles, including two on a jet sweep for 7. Cobb isn't very big but he runs fearlessly inside as well as on the edge. He slashes. He spins. He runs to daylight. McCarthy is going to him earlier and earlier, and for good reason. Almost everything that Cobb does from the backfield is positive. James Starks (33) should be back in good graces after a 12 for 53 day that didn't include a fumble. On one carry, an unblocked Kerrigan flattened hard inside and tackled Starks after a gain of 3. Later, Smith tried the same thing from the other side. This time Starks saw him creeping down so he planted and cut back outside Smith for 22 yards. Eddie Lacy (27) broke a pair of tackles in his 12 touches. On fourth and 1, Lacy hit the off-tackle hole so fast that the problem Tretter was having trying to block Jean Francois didn't wreck the play. When Lacy burst for 30 to the 4 on the next play, he asked out. If he was in better shape it would have been Lacy finishing the drive instead of Starks on a patient sweep to the right. John Kuhn (30) played considerably less this week. However, when the Packers were taking control of things in the third quarter, he played the first 16 snaps. He eliminated two defenders on back-to-back lead plays and made a tough catch on an off-line third-and-1 bootleg pass for 6.

DEFENSIVE LINE (4)

Mike Daniels (52 of a possible 72 snaps), after a mildly productive December, had an outstanding performance with 3½ pressures and two or three tackles in which he stacked and shed blockers. He was displaced and covered up by rookie RG Brandon Scherff on a 19-yard run. Most of the damage Daniels did on leverage rushes came against Scherff, his former teammate at Iowa. He's built so low to the ground and is so strong. He creased or at least collapsed the pocket at least 10 times. With the Packers in their base 3-4 on just 11 snaps, B.J. Raji (22), Letroy Guion (19) and Mike Pennel (14) saw limited time and should be fresh in the short coming week. Raji blew up undersized C Kory Lichtensteiger's attempted reach block for minus-4 and knocked him to his knees on another run. Raji showed outstanding downfield pursuit but did get wham-blocked by TE Alex Smith. Guion has been the team's best down lineman in its 4-4 goal-line defense because his intensity rises and his strength is almost superhuman. He'd fit the scouts' definition of "country strong." On the goal line, he powered right through LG Spencer Long on a tackle for loss, and Long had to miss 16 snaps with an ankle injury. Pennel was OK, and in 27 snaps Datone Jones got shut out. He was penalized for roughing the passer.

LINEBACKERS (4½)

In an exceptional rush day against a good offense, the pressures totals were Nick Perry (four in 26 snaps), Julius Peppers (four in 48), Mike Neal (three in 54) and Clay Matthews (2½ in 66). Perry's work against LT Trent Williams, an elite player, without question made him money either back in Green Bay next year or as a free agent. He turned the corner three times against Williams, garnering a full sack in 3.1 seconds, a half sack in 4.5 and a knockdown. His flurry came in the fourth quarter with the game out of reach and Williams maybe dreaming about vacation. Regardless, the tape will there for 31 other teams to interpret and study. Peppers did much of his damage against the Redskins' interior from his inside berth in dime. In the second half, he detonated hump moves on Williams half a dozen times and almost got home twice. It might have been his best game of the year. Neal beat long-armed RT Morgan Moses outside for a strip-sack, picked up a late garbage sack after a setup by Peppers and Daniels on a stunt, and split a double-team block for a knockdown. He is one hard-trying player. Matthews (34 snaps outside) always runs a number of stunts in conjunction with Peppers, but usually they work a two-man game. This time, Dom Capers put in slower-developing twists in which Matthews effectively looped around not one but two blockers. Both tackles struggled keeping up with his circuitous charges. When six Packers stood around the pile watching Scherff gore Jake Ryan (28), only Matthews came to the rookie's defense. His intervention led to shoving and tough talk, but perhaps inspired the defense, too. Ryan got run over in the open field by Smith on an early 16-yard boot, and continues getting manhandled too often. He needs strength development, but there also are instances where he flows nicely to the ball. Joe Thomas played a season-high 44 snaps because the Packers were in dime a ton. His range into the deep middle of Cover 2 is almost limitless. It's just unclear why he isn't more into tattooing receivers that cross his territory.

SECONDARY (4½)

Ha Ha Clinton-Dix (72) played one of his finest games. He hustled and chased DeSean Jackson out of bounds to save a TD, made Alfred Morris miss on a snaky edge rush, delivered a booming hit on Morris at the 1 and broke up a pass to Garcon that would have been a 7-yard TD and another to TE Jordan Reed that would have been a 15-yard TD. Also playing every snap was Morgan Burnett, who kept Jackson under wraps deep but also dropped two interceptions. Nickel back Casey Hayward (70) made two excellent breakups on third-down passes, a knifing tackle on RB Pierre Thomas from the slot and was aware in zones. He missed two tackles, but overall he might have been as active and productive as he has been all season. The thankless matchup with Reed fell mostly to Micah Hyde (56), and as expected it was a long day. On Reed's 24-yard TD, Hyde was in man coverage but backed away, gave away the inside and was never in good position. Damarious Randall (63) was only adequate in coverage and the physical part of the game. As Randall has begun to plateau, Quinten Rollins (22) has been improving. He's closing fast and hitting people. When Rollins departed early (thigh), LaDarius Gunter (31) had his longest stint by far and held up just fine.

KICKERS (4)

Mason Crosby hit from 43 and 29 yards, and averaged 65.9 yards and 4.03 seconds of hang time in seven kickoffs. Tim Masthay's first two low punts into the wind benefited from 13 yards of roll. His four-punt averages were 45.3 (gross), 44.0 (net) and 3.98 hang time.

SPECIAL TEAMS (3)

Hyde decided not to run up and field a punt with 3.42 hang time, and watched it roll 19 yards. Don't ask me to question Hyde's judgment. He's one of the best decision-makers on punts the Packers have ever had. Later, his 17-yard return was the longest of the season. Demetri Goodson and Clinton-Dix were fortunate not to receive roughing penalties for hits on or beyond the sideline. Goodson had an illegal-block penalty. In his first real pressure game, long snapper Rick Lovato was money. Coverage was solid.

OVERALL (4)

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