

Rating the Packers: Divisional Round at Cardinals

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

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Green Bay - The Green Bay Packers played pretty well Saturday night. They just weren't good enough to win an NFC divisional playoff game. One minute the Packers were celebrating their Hail Mary, tying touchdown pass to close regulation, one of the more uplifting plays in their 53-game playoff history. The next time the ball was snapped from scrimmage, they were blowing a coverage and tackling atrociously on Larry Fitzgerald's 75-yard reception (60 after the catch) that set up the winning touchdown for the Arizona Cardinals. Coach Mike McCarthy's 10th team demonstrated they could play with the Cardinals. They just couldn't beat them.

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

RECEIVERS (3 ½)

Three weeks earlier, CB Patrick Peterson basically covered Randall Cobb, which enabled James Jones to have a field day against fill-in Justin Bethel. In the rematch Peterson took Jones (played all 73 snaps) and shut him out. It was a mismatch, which was no surprise. Cobb played outside so Jared Abbrederis (72) could work from the slot. Cobb had a terrible drop 16 yards downfield on his 11th snap. On his 15th snap, Cobb made a phenomenal catch of a long bomb for 51 yards against Bethel (it was called back) but suffered a chest injury and didn't return. Abbrederis, after a drop on his third snap, was fairly effective. He's more than willing to run slants into the teeth of a defense. He gets north-south quickly and has respectable hands. His problem will be avoiding injury with such an upright style of running. He must learn to get behind his pads and run lower. Jeff Janis (40) didn't get on the field until Cobb went down. He finished with seven catches for 145 yards, which ranks third in the Packers' playoff record book behind Jermichael Finley (159) and John Jefferson (148). Janis ran the wrong route (corner) in the red zone; if he had been flatter, it might have been a TD. However, Janis made a spectacular catch of the Hail Mary (the great Peterson was one of the two defenders clawing at the ball), beat Bethel on a take-off for 60 and was open on two other long passes that were poorly thrown. He can track a deep ball and muscle it away from people. The best of Richard Rodgers' five receptions was for 11 against OLB Markus Golden when he twisted his torso for an imprecise throw. After a few weeks of improved blocking, he was at least partly responsible for four "bad" runs. Sometimes he's late, sometimes he offers no pop, sometimes he just falls off.

OFFENSIVE LINE (4)

Corey Linsley completed his up-and-down season with a top-notch performance. On almost all of the Packers' best running plays, he was hitting his landmarks and controlling people. He delivered a few excellent reach blocks on Ed Stinson, a rugged interior run defender. Overall, the pass protection was a lot better than the run blocking. Linsley didn't allow a pressure and wasn't responsible for any of the 11 "bad" runs. Meanwhile, Josh Sitton did an exceptional job latching on to DE Calais Campbell, the Cardinals' best front-seven player, and moving him out of the way on stretch plays. Sitton was penalized twice, and that detracts from his performance. Other than a weak double-team with David Bakhtiari on a first-quarter run and a poor pickup of a stunt with Bakhtiari, Sitton was in control of his crucial matchup with the towering Campbell. Back for the first time since Game 14, Bakhtiari held up very well against Dwight Freeney until the final minutes when the old pro nicked him for two of the 3½ pressures that he allowed. Bakhtiari is a competitive pass protector. His only problem in the run game was inconsistent sustain. Bryan Bulaga was solid, too, but was involved in four of the "bad" runs. Three of them came against Stinson, including two on back-side cutoff blocks that have been his nemesis this season. Bulaga's penalty for an illegal shift negated the 51-yard bomb to Cobb. T.J. Lang was involved in three "bad" runs and had 1½ pressures.

QUARTERBACKS (4)

Aaron Rodgers proved to be a hard man to beat, and that's so important at the position. Based on facial expressions, he was just dialed in no matter who was playing receiver. Sacked and situated at his own 4 at the end, he willed the offense to the end zone 96 yards away. He never got the ball in overtime but it wouldn't have been smart to bet against him after that display of derring-do. His 41-yard Hail Mary rainbow traveled 60 yards and hung 3.7 seconds, but only after he spun left away from a surprise seven-man rush. He also threw on-target long to Cobb, to Janis for 60 and to Janis 55 yards down the field on a ball that might have warranted a pass-interference foul on Bethel. On the other hand, Rodgers missed what for him should have been routine throws for TDs to Janis for 41 and 36 yards. DE Frostee Rucker's illegal hands-penalty against Bulaga saved Rodgers the interception return of 100 yards by Peterson. It would have been just the second TD return of a pick ever against Rodgers. It was a bad mistake to think he could beat Peterson on that back-shoulder to Jones. He also made several questionable decisions where to throw the ball. Late in the game, he skipped an easy low pass to Jones on fourth and 5. On the move, his 8-yard dart to Janis for his first TD was a thing of beauty.

RUNNING BACKS (3 ½)

The 61-yard run by Eddie Lacy (34) was the second longest in the team's playoff annals behind WR James Lofton's 71-yard reverse. He spun near the line, picked up a wonderful block by Bulaga on ILB Kevin Minter and was off. Actually, the last 50 yards were rather embarrassing. It appeared as if he was just looking for a place to fall over. Not only is Lacy overweight and slow, he's in poor condition. He'll either dedicate himself in the off-season or probably be out of football in a year or two. His blitz pickup (1 ½ pressures) wasn't good enough. James Starks (39) was adequate. John Kuhn (28) was on the field for the first eight plays of the second half after he played just 10 in the first half. He pancaked Minter on an inside run. He also drew a false start.

DEFENSIVE LINE (3 ½)

The four main players put their strength and brawn to good use against an offensive line that's just average. All in all, it was a workmanlike effort. At times, Mike Daniels (49 of a possible 66 snaps) and B.J. Raji (32) were displaced against the run. The Cardinals were most effective in their combination run blocks. To set up the first TD, David Johnson gained 2 on fourth and 1 when Raji didn't anchor against a double team. There were other instances in which he was too powerful for C Lyle Sendlein, particularly when they were one on one. Raji suffered an uncharacteristic loss of poise and deserved his 15-yard penalty for piling on. It was akin to the playoffs a year ago in Seattle when Daniels was penalized for losing his cool, leaving the bench area and going after a Seahawks guard 40 yards away. On Fitzgerald's decisive 5-yard shovel pass, a play Arizona coach Bruce Arians hadn't shown all year, Raji might have been so out of position because it appeared as if he was executing a "jet" (pass rush) call. Daniels was just about the only player on defense who reacted fairly well but he just couldn't get there. On Fitzgerald's 75-yard jaunt, Daniels was knocked out of his rush lane by LG Mike Iupati. They went at it all day. Of the three pressures by D-linemen, Daniels' two included a bull-rush sack against RG Ted Larsen. Letroy Guion (25) closed the season on the upswing. He batted down a pass, shed Iupati to make a tackle for no gain and probably was the hardest to move. With the Packers in their 3-4 base for just eight snaps, Mike Pennel (14) didn't play much but got off blocks three times and found the ball.

LINEBACKERS (3)

Twelve months ago, Julius Peppers gave the stop sign to Morgan Burnett on his fourth-quarter interception return that might have clinched victory over the Seahawks. On Saturday night, he took a nice drop on a five-man zone pressure but then inexplicably vacated his area when Carson Palmer appeared that he might run. Daniels was about to tackle Palmer, who couldn't hurt the Packers by running, anyway. A receiver in an open half of the field not only could hurt the Packers but did hurt the Packers. It was another egregious mistake by the veteran. Peppers (42, including 11 in the DL) led the disappointing pass rush with three pressures, including a sack and knockdown around the outside of LT Jared Veldheer. Mike Neal (40) set a strong edge against the run, especially early. His only pressure will cause him nightmares. After coming free on a stunt against RT Bobby Massie, Neal had Palmer almost in his grasp but missed. Two counts later, Palmer got the ball out to the wide-open Fitzgerald. Nick Perry (27) and Datone Jones (31, 23 at OLB) played extensively on first down and then Peppers and Neal would check in on second down. Perry posted an easy sack when unblocked and was a bull stopping the run. Jones' pass rush petered out down the stretch. Dom Capers used Clay Matthews (66, 12 OLB) in coverage so the Cardinals couldn't take advantage of Jake Ryan (41) with David Johnson. Matthews didn't have a great day in coverage but was tough and active against the run. After running down Fitzgerald on his decisive breakout, he just has to get him down. Neither Matthews nor Ryan saw the shovel pass unfolding. Ryan was a little too shallow on the 21-yard curl to John Brown and a step slow on a run or two to the perimeter. Dime backer Joe Thomas (25) had one of the team's two knockdowns with a well-timed speed rush inside but was inconsistent in coverage.

SECONDARY (3)

Fitzgerald won the game by dominating the second half. He beat Damarious Randall (55) on a takeoff for 32 when the rookie didn't stay square in press and failed to get his hands on the veteran. He beat Casey Hayward (64) from the slot on two catches for 41. On Fitzgerald's 75-yard killer, Sam Shields (66) made a pathetic attempt at the tackle and Morgan Burnett (66) got stiff-armed into the turf. Shields had a chance to win the game but dropped a terrible pass by Palmer at the Green Bay 3. He also dropped another interception. Following a month hiatus (concussion), Shields covered well with his fresh legs. Randall made a textbook interception in the corner against Brown by staying within reach of the speedy wideout and looking back for the ball at the right moment. Randall also missed a team-high three tackles. Hayward did some good things in coverage but was almost too gentle at times. When the ball caromed off Randall's hands to Floyd for a gift TD, Hayward was right there but didn't do anything. That's the time to be violent to the ball, as was Ha Ha Clinton-Dix (66) on his superb interception at the boundary. Whereas Clinton-Dix closed the season well, Burnett had a long day. He showed minimal acceleration when the Cardinals succeeded in matching Floyd on him for the 8-yard early TD. He also was a step or two late to the sideline on a 19-yard pass to Brown and drew a holding penalty in the back end. Micah Hyde left with a hip injury after six plays.

KICKERS (2)

Peterson hasn't had a good season returning punts, and the Packers possibly paid him too much respect. Tim Masthay's poor four-punt averages (35.8-yard gross, 32.8 net, 3.66-second average hang time) appeared to be at least partially the result of trying to be too fine rather than just hitting the ball well. Mason Crosby made field goals of 28 and 34 yards and capped a perfect 41-for-41 season on extra points with two more. He also averaged 70.6 and 4.10 on five kickoffs.

SPECIAL TEAMS (2)

Mistakes here contributed significantly to the Packers' bad start. Nate Palmer's holding penalty just past the line of scrimmage wiped out Hyde's season-best 20-yard punt return and cost 30 yards of field position. A short time later, Hyde decided neither to catch nor field on the bounce a sideline punt that rolled 17 yards. Janis broke one tackle on his first KO return and took another straight between the hash marks for 35.

OVERALL (3 ½)

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