

Packers Individual Report Card:Defense

By Bob McGinn of the Journal Sentinel

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DEFENSIVE LINE (6)

JOSH BOYD: Posted the third-most snaps (23) on the unit in the opener before suffering a broken ankle on his third snap in Game 2 that sent him to injured reserve. Underwent surgery, should be ready for training camp. Modest, down-home 310-pounder with surprisingly quick twitch for his size. Just OK against double-teams. **Grade: Incomplete.**

MIKE DANIELS: The Packers' best player this season. Formidable inside pass rusher, winning with raw power and never-quit attitude. Because he's just 6-0 ½, his two-armed punch on bull rushes gets under the pads of blockers and often jars them onto their heels. Played 807 snaps (67.9%), 309 more than anyone else, and led the unit in pressures (32) and was third in tackles per snap (one every 11.4). Manhandles some guards with stack-and-shed strength. Has a knack for the ball, but there are times he gets covered up and just can't see. Encompassing leader on the field and in the locker room. Posted a career-high in tackles for loss (6 ½). Ted Thompson made a smart move Dec. 14 when he signed Daniels to a four-year, \$41 million extension. He would have bettered that on the open market. **Grade: A.**

LETROY GUION: Management re-signed Guion on the cheap (no guaranteed money) March 31 two months after gun-drug charges led to his three-game suspension. Immediately regained his starting job at LE in Game 4 but played poorly and was aligned behind Mike Pennel. He looked more like a weight-lifter than a football player. Starting with Game 14, he turned his season around and now has to be under consideration for another contract. Guion's pass rush was a major disappointment, especially considering he moved outside from NT last year. His pressure total crashed from 16 to 3 ½. However, Guion finished second on the unit in tackles per snap (one every 8.3), and some of his play in goal-line and short-yardage was stunning. **Grade: C+.**

DATONE JONES: Beginning in Game 9, Jones played more snaps as an OLB (163) than he did as a DE (149). Obviously, the Packers almost never asked him to drop in coverage. Athletic enough to play from a two-point stance, he set an adequate edge and chased hard. In all, he played 35.5% and registered 18 pressures, two more than last year. He stood out in Games 5 and 10 before tapering off late. He led the team in batted balls (three) but also missed eight tackles. When scouts evaluate Jones, they see a straight-line player with no more than adequate speed, intensity and toughness. **Grade: C.**

MIKE PENNEL: It was a good second season for the mountainous ex-free agent. He stayed healthy again, his snaps increased from 175 to 315 and he made strides reading blocking combinations and keeping his pads down. When Pennel is fresh and dialed in, he doesn't stay blocked for long. Makes a lot of tackles for gains of 1 to 3 yards. Second to Guion last year in tackles per snap (one every 9.2), he led the unit this year with one every 8.3. He's a diligent worker with a promising future. **Grade: C+.**

B.J. RAJI: Started out like gangbusters as if it were 2010 all over again, dominating the Seahawks' interior in Game 2. Suffered a groin injury in Game 5, returned in Game 7 and just kind of held the fort until he began feeling and moving better in December. Started at NT in base and played some early downs in sub. Finished with six pressures, just 1 ½ fewer than the last time he played (2013) but a far cry from '10, when he posted 33 ½ in astronomical 85% play time. He's a consistent, smart, committed anchor against the run. He'll be unrestricted come March. **Grade: B-.**

LINEBACKERS (10)

SAM BARRINGTON: Entered the season ranked 15th on the Journal Sentinel's most-important player list because he was projected to play every snap at strong inside LB. His season ended 16 snaps into the opener with a foot injury that required surgery. The Packers are expected to draft or sign at least two ILBs, but at this point he's the best on the roster. Barrington isn't big, but he burns with intensity and shows pop as a tackler. If he can play beyond his size (6-1, 240) and 4.76 speed in coverage, he could be the answer. **Grade: Incomplete.**

JAYRONE ELLIOTT: Finished with eight pressures in 174 snaps after posting three in 54 snaps as a rookie. Didn't make the second-year jump the Packers were hoping for, but players from the Mid-American Conference sometimes need more time. Speedy edge rusher with long arms and more than enough acceleration. Needs strength development. Gets redirected too easily. Played the second-most snaps (341) on special teams but didn't have as much impact this season. **Grade: D+.**

CLAY MATTHEWS: Played 1,152 of 1,189 snaps, including 882 at ILB (74.2%) and 270 (22.7%) at OLB. He took one for the team, spending 1½ years inside, but he belongs outside. His production in 2015 was disappointing. Among the four ILBs, he ranked a distant last in tackles per snap (one every 12.1). An extremely accurate tackler throughout his career, he missed 12 (five more than his career high) to rank third on the defense. He did equal his career-high in tackles for loss with 7 ½, and for the fifth time in seven seasons led the club in pressures (34 ½). Matthews also was out of position too often in coverage. Of the 12 pass plays of 20 yards or more allowed by the LBs, he was responsible for 6 ½. He also gave up two TD passes, equaling his total from his first six seasons. His high-energy, fast-paced style simply is more conducive outside than inside. **Grade: B-.**

ANDY MULUMBA: As the last player in line at OLB, he was active for just seven games. Will be another year removed from ACL surgery in September 2014. If he makes it to August, he'll be challenged to survive. **Grade: D.**

MIKE NEAL: Neal played the most snaps at OLB (731). He also played 97 more from a three-point stance, usually at DT in the dime defense. Whatever the assignment, Neal goes all-out. He finished the season weighing about 255, 50 pounds lighter than three years ago when he was a 3-4 base end. With a hand down, his excellent takeoff enables him occasionally to beat a guard off the edge despite the huge weight disparity. Neal finished fourth among OLBs in tackles per snap (one every 18.4) but led the team with a career-high 8 ½ tackles for loss. His four missed tackles this year underscored his increasing comfort level standing up. He finished fourth on the club in pressures with 24 ½. **Grade: B-.**

NATE PALMER: Third-year man beat out Joe Thomas and Carl Bradford for the fourth berth at ILB. He moved into the lineup when Barrington went down in the opener and started the next 10 games, playing 478 snaps to 45 for Jake Ryan. The only deviation came in Game 8 at Carolina when Palmer was benched late in the first half. When Palmer was too hesitant and struggled in coverage, he never played another snap inside. He did finish second among ILBs in tackles per snap (one every 6.8) but also missed 13, second most on the defense. **Grade: D.**

JULIUS PEPPERS: The Packers were successful trimming his playing time. Last year, he averaged 50.2 snaps (904). This year, he averaged 43.8 (789). Still a marvelous physical specimen at 36, he hasn't missed a game since 2007. He finished with 34 pressures, down from a team-high 43 ½ a year ago. His number of takeaway plays crashed from 11 to two. Scouts often question Peppers' intensity on a down-in, down-out basis. He isn't as gung-ho as some players, but the Packers seem more than content with his effort, production and leadership. Assuming Peppers wants to fulfill the final year of his contract, there's no reason to think the team wouldn't want him back at his \$7 million base salary. **Grade: B.**

NICK PERRY: He played 404 snaps in 16 games, 13 fewer than a year ago in 17 games. Let's compare his production, with 2014 numbers followed by 2015. Pressures (8 ½, 16 ½). Tackles (31, 43). Tackles for loss (2 ½, 4 ½). Missed tackles (six, three). By all four statistical measures, Perry was better this season. Will it be enough to warrant a new contract? It depends. He still hasn't played a full season because of injury. Neal also will be unrestricted. Perry does appear cumbersome and thick-legged running in space. But many teams, including the Packers, will watch Perry beating Redskins LT Trent Williams three times around the corner and no doubt wonder if they can get him to do it all the time. **Grade: C.**

JAKE RYAN: Were the Packers able to find a starting ILB in the fourth round? The jury's still out, but at least they saw Ryan start seven games and have 329 snaps to make their off-season evaluation. Ryan tried hard, played intelligently and seemed tough enough. He also was a step slow at times, played high and couldn't extricate himself from blockers. He missed too many tackles (nine) but also paced ILBs in tackles per snap (one every 5.8, more than twice the rate of Matthews). **Grade: C-.**

JOE THOMAS: Needing a cover LB so Matthews could move outside in dime, the Packers plucked Thomas off the Cowboys' practice squad and began using him immediately. As their first true dime LB in some time, Thomas played 319 snaps to mixed reviews. He was the team's second-most effective blitzer with one pressure every seven rushes. A smart player, he handled a difficult scheme without glaring issue. And he missed only 3 tackles. He was off and on in coverage, at times a step or two late reacting. **Grade: D.**

DEFENSIVE BACKS (12)

CHRIS BANJO: Assumed Jarrett Bush's role as the heart and soul of special teams. Played 375 snaps, 34 more than anyone else, and finished with 24 tackles, nine more than runner-up Jeff Janis. Consistent, smart and fast. Covers a lot of ground, takes proper angles and doesn't stay blocked. Played most of his 102 snaps from scrimmage early when Morgan Burnett was injured. Didn't miss a tackle and didn't have a bad play in coverage. He's just short (5-10). Will be an exclusive rights free agent. **Grade: C-.**

MORGAN BURNETT: Without Burnett's patient, studious approach, the Packers would have been hard-pressed to go as young as they did at cornerback. Without question, Burnett runs the defense. After returning from a calf injury that KO'd him from five of the first six games, he played all but seven snaps the rest of the way. He led the secondary in tackles per snap (one every 9.3) and missed just eight, down from an average of 13.3 the last four years. Burnett is most effective in the box. Shut out in interceptions, he has just two in the last three seasons. He allowed just one-half of a TD pass, the least amount by a Packers starting safety since LeRoy Butler and later Bhawoh Jue didn't allow any sharing the strong-safety position in 2001. He also gave up just three plays of 20 yards or more. That marks major improvement from his coverage deficiencies from 2011-'13. **Grade: B.**

HA HA CLINTON-DIX: Made significant strides in second season. For one thing, he tackled better (nine misses compared to a team-leading 16 as a rookie). For another, he sliced his yield of plays of 20 yards or more from 8 ½ to three. He shared the team lead in takeaways with four. He also was the club's most effective pressure player with one every 5.5 blitzes. He's durable, too, playing 87.3% as a rookie and 99.8% this year. **Grade: B+.**

ROBERTSON DANIEL: Daniel, a rookie from Brigham Young, was cut by Oakland and signed to the Packers' practice quad Sept. 7. The Packers promoted him to the 53-man roster for the divisional playoff game because they're extremely high on him. He's a big (6-1, 207), press-man type cornerback with 4.46 speed, a 35 ½-inch vertical jump, 24 reps on the bench press and a score of 11 on the 50-question Wonderlic intelligence test. He'll challenge to make the roster in '16. **Grade: Incomplete.**

DEMETRI GOODSON: Goodson ranked third in special-teams tackles with 12. Of his 74 snaps from scrimmage, 49 came at Carolina when injuries struck. Goodson is tough, tenacious and probably fast enough. His transition from basketball hasn't been easy. **Grade: D+.**

LADARIUS GUNTER: Played even less than Goodson from scrimmage (39) and wasn't used much on special teams (59), possibly because his deficiencies in speed were costly in open-field situations. Gunter doesn't run well on the watch (4.67) but played better than that at cornerback in August. He's a willing worker, has long arms and likes challenging receivers. **Grade: D.**

CASEY HAYWARD: Played 88.1% of the downs, providing a steadying influence for the rookies and usually being where he was supposed to be. The Packers normally would re-sign him, but with all the young prospects at cornerback they're probably not going to make a legitimate offer. After allowing eight plays of 20 yards or more from 2012-'14, he gave up too many (nine) this year. Hayward isn't physical in the bump zone and is susceptible outside on take-off routes. He tied for third in tackles with 88, but also led the team in misses with 14. He failed to intercept a pass, and with only nine passes broken up in 1,048 snaps he was last in PBUs with one every 116.4. His ability to find the ball might have waned due to numerous hamstringing injuries and a stress fracture in his foot. **Grade: C-.**

MICAH HYDE: Hyde really can't run, either, but has more value than Hayward because of the return dimension, special teams, physicality and the ability to play safety. Hyde started for an injured Burnett at strong safety for a month before seeing extensive duty covering tight ends in the dime. He had a rough year in coverage, yielding a team-high 4 ½ TD passes and five passes of 20 yards or more. He didn't break a punt return all year, either. **Grade: C-.**

DAMARIOUS RANDALL: He worked his way ahead of Hayward after about a month and became entrenched as the starter at left cornerback. He played 73.4%, led the team in interceptions with four and played with remarkable confidence for a rookie. The longer the season went, the more Randall got beat. He allowed a team-high 12 ½ plays of 20 yards or more, the most by a Packers cornerback since Tramon Williams gave up 16 ½ in '11. The season all but ended last Sunday on Larry Fitzgerald's 75-yard reception in overtime when Randall blew the coverage by stopping instead of following his assignment and covering Fitzgerald man-to-man all the way across the field. On Tuesday, I incorrectly reported that it was Peppers who blew the coverage. Randall needs to tackle better and become tougher. **Grade: C.**

SEAN RICHARDSON: The fourth-year strong safety suffered a herniated disc in the cervical area of his spine in October. Sources have said his career is over, but the Packers have never made it official. **Grade: Incomplete.**

QUINTEN ROLLINS: It took until mid-season before Rollins gained full health and was able to move past Hyde in the nickel defense. Later, when Sam Shields missed 4 ½ games, he played extensively at right cornerback. In all, he played 30% and offered promise of an outstanding future. He's a hitter, a ball-hawk and a rugged, effective blitzer. Of the seven cornerbacks, his rate of passes defended (one every 35.7 snaps) and his rate of tackles (one every 9.9 snaps) both ranked No. 1. He dropped four interceptions, too. **Grade: C.**

SAM SHIELDS: He missed the equivalent of six games with a concussion and a shoulder injury. If he hadn't missed so much time, it's likely his yield of just three plays of 20 yards or more would have been higher. Shields averaged 8.9 from 2010-'14. It bears pointing out, however, that in the previous 21 seasons no starting cornerback ever gave up as few 20+ plays as three. Shields' ability to play press-man without over-the-top help gave Dom Capers freedom to allocate his safeties to other tasks. He intercepted three passes but dropped five Shields was penalized just once. He'll never be a strong tackler, but his total of nine misses was an improvement from 13 last year and 12 in 2013. **Grade: A-.**