

Rating the Packers: Week 1 at Jaguars

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

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Green Bay - It's remarkable that in Mike McCarthy's first decade as coach of the Green Bay Packers, just 36 of his 175 games were decided by four points or less.

It's even more remarkable that McCarthy's winning rate in those 36 games was merely 40.3 percent (14-21-1). In all other games, his teams had won at a 70.5 percent clip (98-41).

So the last-second manner in which the Packers triumphed Sunday on opening day in Jacksonville, 27-23, couldn't have been more out of the ordinary, uplifting and potentially beneficial for the season ahead.

"Our guys are having a hard time with this one right now in the locker room," Jaguars coach Gus Bradley said Monday, and well they should.

Jacksonville was on the doorstep of its most significant victory in years but the Packers wouldn't be denied on the Jaguars' final drive despite the oppressive weather conditions.

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

RECEIVERS (2 ½)

The Packers didn't exactly have targets running free. For long stretches cornerbacks Davon House, Jalen Ramsey and Prince Amukamara smothered the wide receivers and there was nowhere to go with the ball. It wasn't a promising debut after the problems this unit had getting open a year ago. Returning for the first time in 12 1/2 months, Jordy Nelson played 54 of 64 snaps (84.4 percent). House, the former Packer who covered him for four years in practice and for a portion of the game, estimated Nelson was at 80 percent of his past efficiency. Nelson wasn't a factor until McCarthy cleverly inserted him in the No. 3 inside slot in a "trips" formation. It cleared Nelson from specified press coverage outside and enabled him to get started with little pitches in the flat. Randall Cobb (48 at WR) juggled the ball for 32 on a nice route adjustment that probably would have been a 63-yard TD with a clean catch. Later, he had Ramsey beat to the outside for a 15-yard TD with a nice route but, as has been the case throughout his career, lacked the second gear, or burst, to go get the ball. The snap counts for the other three WRs at last made clear how the Packers view the position: Davante Adams, 59; Jared Abbrederis, 14, and Ty Montgomery, 11. House still was shaking his head after the game over how Adams caught his 29-yard TD. House was all over him. On another well-thrown ball 48 yards downfield, Adams vaulted over Amukamara beautifully but couldn't make the grab. It also can be said now that Jared Cook is the starting tight end. He played six of the first seven snaps and 33 in all, whereas the first of Richard Rodgers' 25 snaps wasn't until the second series. The hand-down, three-point stance count was 11 for Rodgers, 10 for Cook. It was surprising to see Cook not utilized more as a receiver, but when he was his speed led to the 30-yard pass-interference call against SS Johnathan Cyprien. The Packers picked on Cyprien; Rodgers beat him on an exquisite corner route for 22.

OFFENSIVE LINE (4)

Undoubtedly buoyed by developments with his lucrative contract extension, David Bakhtiari continued his outstanding play from August. He was the lone O-lineman to escape unblemished in protection. Speed rushers Dante Fowler and Yannick Ngakoue didn't get a sniff on his side. Each year, Bakhtiari seems to have improved in the run game. In this game he was more consistent getting his hands inside his man's chest. Lane Taylor was a portrait of intensity and focus as he took several final sets on the field moments before kickoff. It was his first game as the man at left guard, and he made a favorable impression. He passed off stunts two or three times with veteran aplomb. He moved people on a pair of short-yardage runs. He outmuscled some defenders, depositing them on the ground. Of 22 straight dropbacks, Taylor had help 12 times and was by himself 10 times. He faced five different rushers on those 10 one-on-one's, with DE Jared Odrick the leader with three. He allowed 1 1/2 pressures of the mere four yielded by the unit; his only terrible play in pass pro was a whiff against DT Malik Jackson. His "bad" run count was two halves for a total of one. JC Tretter was able to jam his back-side arm into the chest/armpit of the nose tackle on several well-executed reach blocks. T.J. Lang and Bryan Bulaga are off to solid starts after combining to yield just one pressure and two "bad" runs. Jackson and Sen'Derrick Marks, the Jaguars' veteran 3-techniques, will give lesser units fits with their athleticism, power and speed. They really weren't factors against this inside trio.

QUARTERBACKS (3 ½)

Aaron Rodgers started the game completing two of seven passes, and finished it missing his last three. In between, he was 18 of 24 in another winning performance. The overriding first-look impression of Rodgers was he must be in great shape. He's playing seven to 10 pounds lighter this season, and it showed with his speed to the pylon on a 6-yard TD and overall athleticism. Despite the heat and humidity, he ran around all day and never seemed the worse for wear. When the Packers huddled early and used their conventional scheme, Rodgers couldn't get going. He bounced a couple of balls to the sideline. Maybe he was getting a feel for how his protection might fare, and he wasn't stepping into throws. His fortunes dramatically changed in the mid-second quarter when McCarthy went all shotgun (the final count was 45 of 64) and no-huddle. His two TD passes at the end of the half were fantastic. Both came on extended plays despite the fact Bradley had instructed his D-linemen to rush in controlled fashion and keep Rodgers contained. Still, Rodgers was able to get skinny and find the empty gap in the Jaguars' conservative rush (21.1 percent five or more rushers, 2.6 percent six or more). The TD to Adams came on one of coordinator Todd Wash's two zone blitzes, and Rodgers suffered one of his mere three knockdowns of the day. McCarthy creatively found ways to find openings in tight coverage with play-action short passes off zone-read action. Rodgers had the last say and the ball last; blame him for the delay-of-game penalties and timeout snafus.

RUNNING BACKS (3 ½)

Cobb played 14 snaps in the backfield, a total he hadn't exceeded since the 2012 opener against San Francisco (20). Four of his catches came as a back, too. It wasn't change-of-pace stuff like years past, either. Cobb moved inside on the second and third plays. For a small man, you've got to admire the courage with which Cobb runs between the tackles. He never backs off. Eddie Lacy (36) started out slowly by making questionable reads on two of his first three carries. After that first series he rushed 11 times for 54 yards. It's hard to say at this point if his weight is any less than it was a year ago. He's just a huge man. Conditioned or not, Lacy was able to surge straight through the middle late in the third quarter for 28, causing FS Tashaun Gipson to fan in the open field. Gipson said he was surprised Lacy made a move rather than punishing him with power. On the screen for 17, the hard-hitting Cyprien jolted Lacy four yards deep soon after the ball arrived. He wouldn't go down, and eluded MLB Paul Posluszny, too. James Starks (18) probably expected a larger role given the weather but had to be content with five touches, none of which were impressive.

DEFENSIVE LINE (3 ½)

Without hard-charging RB Chris Ivory (illness), Jaguars offensive coordinator Greg Olson probably used fewer power sets. In turn, the Packers used three linemen on just three of 72 snaps. Olson tested the two-big-man schemes of Dom Capers, and play after play the interior pair held up. Mike Daniels (43) wasn't able to dominate Luke Joeckel, the ex-LT making his first start at LG. He did nick Joeckel for one tackle for loss and one of his two pressures, the only ones recorded by the down linemen. By no means was Joeckel all bad. He covered up Daniels at times, including a nasty double-team with rugged C Brandon Linder that blew open a hole for T.J. Yeldon's five-yard TD run. Letroy Guion (39) was the only other lineman that the coaches really trusted. He didn't do anything as a rusher but was stout and active (1 1/2 tackles for loss) against the run. By the second series, Guion had yanked his dark green socks down to his ankles, presumably to beat the heat. The uniform-violation people might nab him for that. Christian Ringo (12), Kenny Clark (nine) and Dean Lowry (seven) also played.

LINEBACKERS (4)

Nick Perry (52) was the most consistent player in the front seven. He gets credit for one hurry, but on four other occasions he delivered good rushes and the ball happened to come out. He set a physical tone early, getting rid of TE Julius Thomas to stop Yeldon for a two-yard gain. Later, he sifted through a bunched pack of blockers to wreck a third-and-2 carry. Perry and Clay Matthews kept changing sides. Of Matthews' 53 snaps, he was wide left on 14, wide right on 32 and seven as a stand-up rover in dime. Despite just 20 percent double-teaming, Matthews mustered only one pressure. He couldn't solve unorthodox LT Kelvin Beachum or RT Jermeay Parnell. Matthews' best play came on a toss when he slashed by three blockers to stuff Yeldon for minus-3. He was in position for two other tackles for loss but missed Yeldon. Datone Jones did top-notch work in 22 snaps at OLB and 18 more with his hand down. As the team's best rusher, he set up Perry's sack with a bull-back of Joeckel. When Jones stays low and under control his double-armed chest jolt can set a mean edge or collapse a pocket. Julius Peppers, with 10 snaps at OLB and 19 down, appeared sluggish and didn't make a play. Rookie Kyler Fackrell made no impact but did get his feet wet (seven). ILBs Blake Martinez (47), Jake Ryan (43) and Joe Thomas (25 in dime) were on point. Martinez and Ryan were quick to trigger, played smart and played tough. Thomas set up Matthews' sack with a stunning bull rush that knocked RB Denard Robinson on his back. Thomas also chased down fleet-footed WR Marqise Lee on a screen. Thomas was 10 yards away hugging up on the rush when the ball that he intercepted was first batted. His A-plus for the play was downgraded to C-plus or worse because of a careless fumble.

SECONDARY (3 ½)

Damarius Randall (68) and Ha Ha Clinton-Dix (72) are off to sizzling starts. Randall failed to get Allen Hurns down on the decisive play but it was his instantaneous force on the bubble screen that brought the ball inside. Three times he also was in excellent position against Allen Robinson, a tremendous young player, and able to prevent lengthy completions. He still needs to be set more when the ball is snapped, but his swagger could become contagious. Also denying Robinson was Clinton-Dix with a terrific read inside the 5 late. He also forced Robinson to fumble, caught a tipped pass for a pick that was overturned and disguised his intentions with increasing confidence. He did get run over on the goal line by Yeldon. After not playing a snap in August (hamstring), Morgan Burnett (72) was physical with the finishing-off hit on Hurns, a sharp sack against Beachum and a swarm of tackles. In coverage, his timing seemed off, he drew two penalties and wasn't always in ideal position. Micah Hyde (32) played some nickel, some dime and some nickel LB. He shed the block by Robinson, a bigger man, so Burnett had time to finish him off. Because Hyde was hustling, he was there to recover the fumble by Joe Thomas. Nickel back Quinten Rollins (47) opened by tipping the pick to Thomas. However, he was benched for LaDarius Gunter (24) after missing TE Marcedes Lewis on a 37-yard screen, getting toasted by Hurns on a double move for 30 and losing a shoving match with Julius Thomas in the bump zone for a 22-yard TD. When Sam Shields (62) suffered a concussion, Rollins returned to use his basketball background for a late end-zone deflection against Robinson. Gunter reacted poorly, lost leverage and gave up a 38-yard in route to Hurns. His tackle of Yeldon that caused the concussion was the last of several times Shields threw his body around. His coverage against Robinson turned out better than it was due to Blake Bortles' overthrows.

KICKERS (3 ½)

Jacob Schum's regular-season debut included three towering punts and a fourth, in crunch time, that was poor. His averages were 46 yards (gross), 42.5 (net) and 4.46 seconds of hang time. Kicking with Schum as holder for the first real game, Mason Crosby hit two chippies (25, 20) and averaged 71.7 yards and 4.18 hang time on six kickoffs.

SPECIAL TEAMS (2)

Brett Goode made a smooth return as long snapper 8 1/2 months after reconstructive knee surgery. Two missed tackles contributed to Corey Grant's 32-yard KO return. Poor work by gunners enabled Rashad Greene to return a punt for 14. A high sun caused Hyde to let two punts fall that rolled a total of 15 yards before stopping at the 3.

OVERALL RATING: 4 footballs

STARS OF THE GAME: 1. Damarious Randall; 2. Nick Perry; 3. Ha Ha Clinton-Dix