

Rating the Packers: Week 2 At Vikings

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

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Green Bay - Thirteen years ago, the Minnesota Vikings were the Green Bay Packers' opponent for the official rededication of \$295 million Lambeau Field.

NFL Commissioner Paul Tagliabue and Gov. Jim Doyle were in the record crowd of 70,505. Alumni from the Glory Years and other eras were seated alongside the team bench. It was an opening day with historical significance.

The Vikings turned out to be rude guests, building a 27-3 lead at halftime before going on to a 30-25 victory. Afterward, some Vikings players said they were told by the coaching staff to treat the game like a Super Bowl.

On Sunday night the Packers had a chance to return the favor as the Vikings' foe for the first game at \$1.1 billion U.S. Bank Stadium. The Vikings tried to be hospitable hosts, getting off to a sluggish start and finishing with 13 penalties for 137 yards.

Just as Lambeau Field was hopping in 2003, U.S. Bank Stadium was alive for its debut. The only other similarity is that the Packers lost again, this time by 17-14.

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

RECEIVERS (1)

Two completions for more than 20 yards, both to Jordy Nelson (39 and 21 yards), weren't enough, especially against a secondary missing clingy CB Xavier Rhodes (knee). So much for easing Nelson back from reconstructive knee surgery. He played 68 of the 71 snaps, an indication the coaches think they cannot function without him or they have little or no faith in Jared Abbrederis (six), Trevor Davis (five) and Ty Montgomery (none). Trae Waynes, the fill-in for Rhodes, wasn't the least bit in awe of Nelson. On plays that weren't extended, Waynes didn't give him much breathing room. The 39-yard reception was a broken route in which Nelson made a veteran's adjustment over a relative neophyte. The 21-yard catch was a 6-yard stop route in which Waynes was all over Nelson but somehow failed to intercept or break it up. In Jacksonville, Mike McCarthy helped Nelson get an easier release by using him as the No. 3 receiver in a "trips" formation. It happened just one time this week. Randall Cobb (62 at WR, eight at RB) didn't get much done against aggressive nickel Captain Munneryn. Of his five receptions, just one gained more than 10 yards (14). Cobb did make a fantastic hustle play ripping the fumble-recovery return from the grasp of SS Andrew Sendejo. Adams (54) was a non-factor with three catches in seven targets for 26. He fumbled for the first time in his career, dropped a 44-yard TD, let Terence Newman cut him off on a lazy slant route that probably should have been intercepted and was flagged for offensive pass interference with a ridiculous shove of Waynes. Adams turned Waynes in circles with a nifty double move and take-off route, but because Adams runs 4.55 and Waynes runs 4.26 there was little separation by the time the ball arrived. TE Jared Cook played 15 of his 46 snaps with his hand down, squandered a first down by showing no awareness after a third-down catch and made a terrific hustle play to recover a downfield fumble. It was a rough day as a blocker for Richard Rodgers (36, 13 down).

OFFENSIVE LINE (2½)

The five starters and Don Barclay (one snap) were responsible for all five sacks, 4½ of the seven knockdowns, one of the three hurries, five of the nine “bad” runs and two of the four offensive penalties. Look, it was loud and the track was fast and the Vikings have an excellent front, but if this group is as good as its members think it is the number of poor plays should have been less. If undersized but quick 3-technique Sharrif Floyd had been able to play (knee), it would have been a superb test for Lane Taylor. His replacement on passing downs, hard-charging veteran Tom Johnson, was the Vikings’ most productive rusher with one sack and 3½ knockdowns. Taylor gave up 1½ pressures and 1½ “bad” runs. He’s a competitive player; it’s an excellent sign that he has played much better in the two games that count rather than the four in August that didn’t. T.J. Lang knows he must let his man go; his penalty for holding was deserved and costly. Otherwise, Lang played well. JC Tretter had a brutal matchup against NT Linval Joseph and, much like Tennessee’s Ben Jones the week before, encountered problems. Tretter was partially responsible for three “bad” runs because of Joseph, and one of his two sacks was directly attributable to Joseph. Tretter made a great hustle play recovering a fumble. He also lost his poise and was tagged with an unsportsmanlike conduct penalty that came at a terrible time. David Bakhtiari’s 2½ pressures all came at the hands of RE Everson Griffen, a premier player. For long stretches Bakhtiari stayed in front of him. On the sack, he changed his set and didn’t maintain the width of the pocket. Bryan Bulaga’s solid performance was marred by an up-the-field strip-sack by DE Brian Robison. He was effective against ascending DE Danielle Hunter. Tossed into the lineup when Lang exited briefly for one snap, Barclay got walked back for a sack by Johnson.

QUARTERBACKS (1)

From his first season as a starter (2008) through the first 14 games of 2015, Aaron Rodgers never had fumbled more than twice in a game, and that only happened eight times. Now, after a three-fumble showing in Game 15 last year and three more Sunday night, one of Rodgers’ most remarkable assets is starting to desert him. Taking care of the ball is No. 1 for Mike McCarthy, and it has been for Rodgers, too. He did well to elude a free runner, MLB Eric Kendricks, and then had his back turned momentarily when hit and the ball popped out. Robison’s hit came from the blind side, but in the past Rodgers almost always was able to maintain possession because of his large, strong hands. On the scramble, he was careless. With the outcome on the line, Rodgers made an almost all-arm throw on the sideline that floated because he had no base. It was slightly behind Adams and picked by Waynes. He was fortunate not to have given Kendricks a pick-6 early. In contrast, Sam Bradford trusted his leaky protection and stepped into his throws with velocity, accuracy and touch. Sometimes Rodgers almost skips into his passes, almost as if the mechanics of the position aren’t all that important at this point. If memory serves Rodgers developed into a deadly pocket passer when he wanted to be, replete with textbook form and fundamentals, for at least the first two-thirds of his nine seasons as starter. Priorities can change. Mike Zimmer blitzed Rodgers more than in their five most recent meetings (37.3 percent), but he kept sailing balls high and seldom made him pay. Yes, Tretter cost the Packers a free play downfield by not snapping the ball when Robison entered the neutral zone, but at that point was it necessary to get all over the guy? Nevertheless, it all starts with turnover avoidance.

RUNNING BACKS (2½)

In just 12 touches Eddie Lacy (35) looked really good on gains of 12 and 13 yards. With Taylor knocked back into his lap by Johnson, Lacy broke three tackles for 12. On the 13-yard gain, he charged through a cutback lane created by Taylor, Bakhtiari and Cook. It’s an occupational hazard for the Packers’ ground game that daylight can be gone because at his weight Lacy isn’t as quick to pounce as most featured backs. His advantage, of course, is the ability to lean on people and bleed runs. Meanwhile, James Starks (30) can’t get on track. Granted, Tretter didn’t get the job done against Joseph on the fourth-and-2 at the Vikings 14 when McCarthy didn’t take the points. It should be expected of a strong, fresh back such as Starks to ram through Joseph and the unblocked Robison for first-down yardage. Starks also didn’t always exercise patience. As the saying goes, slow to the hole and speed through the hole. FB Aaron Ripkowski played two snaps. McCarthy dusted off the shovel pass not once but twice for a total of 25 yards.

DEFENSIVE LINE (4)

Last week, one personnel man didn't hesitate saying Tennessee's Jurrell Casey, another sawed-off 3-technique, was a better player than Mike Daniels. Just as Casey belabored the Vikings' O-line a week ago, Daniels (42 of the defense's 58 snaps) did the same and might have changed that scout's mind. He had all three of the D-line's pressures, and all came at the expense of RG Brandon Fusco. Daniels' natural leverage and unreal strength enabled him to manhandle Fusco and others in one-on-one matchups. After Daniels' utter domination in the first quarter, offensive coordinator Norv Turner made doubly sure he'd be double-teamed. Letroy Guion was off to a solid start against his old team before departing after eight snaps with a knee injury. It opened the door for rookie Kenny Clark to play 38 snaps and, for the first time, show what he's about. He showed a burst to the ball laterally. He recoiled off a double team to tackle Jerick McKinnon for a 2-yard gain. He split a double team with a back-door move that led to a tackle for loss. He batted a pass. He played with some emotion. Christian Ringo and Dean Lowry split 12 snaps.

LINEBACKERS (4½)

Julius Peppers, almost invisible in the opener, demonstrated he still has life with a team-leading 1½ sacks, two knockdowns and 4½ pressures. Much of his damage came against RT Andre Smith, the ex-Bengal who appeared petrified of getting beat by quickness and backed up five or six steps before engaging him. Peppers' 27 snaps included 16 at OLB and 11 as an interior rusher in sub. Until the last series, he almost never played in base. With the Packers in the 3-4 base on 23 snaps, Datone Jones was the 5-technique for all but three ahead of Lowry. Jones is so strong and determined that the coaches must feel he can hold up even at a reduced weight. Clay Matthews (38) sat out the seven-play final series apparently due to injury. He's playing fast and strong. Nick Perry (49) had 2½ pressures and, along with Matthews and the other OLBs, set a rugged edge so Adrian Peterson had no room to bounce outside. Even rookie Kyler Fackrell flashed ability on several of his seven snaps. On the inside, Jake Ryan (45), Blake Martinez (41) and Joe Thomas (17) were gap sound, tackled crisply and played with the confidence necessary to compete against Peterson. Ryan played a role in three tackles for loss and was sticky in matchup coverage. It won't be long before Martinez notches an interception or two. He sees routes developing and gets in throwing lanes. Thomas continues to show that he can break down in space, come to balance and hammer small, quick backs in their tracks.

DEFENSIVE BACKS (1½)

In Jacksonville, Damrarious Randall (58) played as well as almost anyone on the roster. In Minnesota, he got torched. Stefon Diggs' nine-catch, 182-yard night wasn't all his responsibility but the bulk of it probably was. In the first 16 minutes, slot receiver Adam Thielen beat Randall easily on sideline passes worth 15 and 12 yards when he played too soft. When Diggs crossed behind the line on fourth and 1, Randall was too nonchalant getting into position and didn't look ready when Diggs broke it across his face for four yards. At times, Randall appeared to expect safety or linebacker help, but he was within range to make plays and didn't on Diggs' catches for 44, 46 and a 25-yard TD. He also was penalized twice for interference, and the last one killed the team's last chance. There's no excuse for having a game like that. He must get into better football position earlier and stop thinking he can open his hips and run with everybody. With Sam Shields (concussion) out, LaDarius Gunter (35) started, forced a fumble and was OK, as was nickel back Quinten Rollins (41). Shields is the stopper that the Packers lacked. TE Kyle Rudolph didn't run much of a route but still was able to win a contested eight-yard TD from Morgan Burnett (45). It's a tough coverage but with faster reaction it can be defended.

KICKERS (1½)

Even though P Jacob Schum had the pleasure of working in a dome, two of his five punts were unsatisfactory. His averages were 38.6 yards, gross and net, and 4.35 seconds of hang time. Mason Crosby's three kickoffs averaged 72.3 and 4.10.

SPECIAL TEAMS (4)

Montgomery, with a timely assist from Thomas, broke through the middle and blocked the second of Jeff Locke's seven punts. The dynamic Cordarrelle Patterson returned one kickoff for 37 yards before Randall made a sure tackle. His other runback, 25 yards, could have been for far more if Marwin Evans hadn't made a hard-nosed frontal hit. It's hard to quibble with Davis' decision not to field Locke's late punt that landed just inside the boundary. It rolled about 15 yards but the rookie knows what he's capable of and played the percentages.

OVERALL RATING: 3 footballs

STARS OF THE GAME: 1. Mike Daniels; 2. Julius Peppers; 3. Jake Ryan.