

Rating the Packers: Week 5 vs Giants

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

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Green Bay - A week ago Green Bay Packers coach Mike McCarthy offered his general assessment of how to gauge an NFL schedule.

“Everybody wants to look at statistics and strength of schedule and personnel,” McCarthy said. “I always think it’s nonsense. I’ve learned a long time ago it’s not who you play, it’s really when you play them.”

His Packers, with 14 days between games, couldn’t have picked a better time to play the New York Giants, who had six days.

The Packers weren’t sharp on offense and were downright lousy on special teams, but given a favorable spot they had enough Sunday night to get past the Giants, 23-16, at Lambeau Field.

Here is a rating of the Packers in their 34-27 victory, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

RECEIVERS (1 ½)

The Giants were down to their third-string free safety (Andrew Adams), cornerback Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie was limited by a groin injury and nickel back Eli Apple (groin) exited after playing seven snaps. With the offensive line offering dominant protection, the receivers were in position to dominate. They didn’t come close. Jordy Nelson (played 72 of the 80 offensive snaps) was responsible for three of the unit’s five drops. Over the years he generally has caught the ball well, but in his most recent season (2014) he had nine drops. One of his drops Sunday ricocheted into an interception and the other two helped ruin possessions. Regardless of the defender, Nelson usually found himself in contested situations. He scored his fifth touchdown in four games, a 2-yarder that left his average gain on the TDs at 6.8 yards. With McCarthy calling almost 20 play-action passes, he tried unsuccessfully to get the ball deep to Nelson. There are no excuses for a three-drop day. Meanwhile, Randall Cobb (55 snaps, including three at RB) re-established himself by catching nine of 11 targets for 108 yards. He gained 69 yards after the catch, ran with authority and played with emotion. Most of the day he was covered by aging Leon Hall, the ex-Bengal who outplayed Cobb in their only previous matchup (2013). This time, Cobb basically could get open whenever he wanted. Cobb’s wonderful 21-yard TD reception on a stop-and-go behind Hall was brought back when Davante Adams (60) couldn’t get set on a quick count that caught the Giants with 12 men on the field. Cobb did have a costly drop on a long third-down pass. Adams also made a mistake not going for a high pass that he must have thought was headed for another receiver. He was lucky Janoris Jenkins (two interceptions) didn’t pick that, too. Adams, however, had another positive showing. He showed superlative sideline awareness and feet on a 29-yard TD against rookie free agent Michael Hunter, and made a big-time move to elude MLB Kelvin Sheppard on a 17-yard slant. It was a forgettable night for Richard Rodgers, who played a career-high 73 snaps (36 in a three-point stance) with Jared Cook (ankle) out. It’s a rarity for him to drop a pass but he did in the end-zone corner on a 7-yard bullet. He also either missed or got trashed by DE Olivier Vernon for a pair of “bad” runs, cost the defense 20 yards of field position by blowing an easy tackle of Jenkins on an interception return and spent too much time on the ground. Justin Perillo played 13 uneventful snaps. When McCarthy wanted to load up for the run, he inserted T Jason Spriggs (five) as a blocking TE for the first time.

OFFENSIVE LINE (4 ½)

It's a little hard to judge the pass protection because defensive coordinator Steve Spagnuolo played it so close to the vest in an attempt to hide his defensive backs. Of the Packers' 49 dropbacks, 43 came with a basic four-man rush. The 10.2% blitz rate was Spagnuolo's lowest in four games against Aaron Rodgers. Even when the Giants' highly paid front four offered no rush early, Spagnuolo never deviated. T.J. Lang, David Bakhtiari and JC Tretter played exceptionally well. Lang (no pressures, no "bad" runs) became just the Packers' second lineman to pull on a running play in three games. He blocked ILB Keenan Robinson, helping spring Eddie Lacy for 31 yards. On the team's other red-letter run (Aaron Ripkowski, 13), Lang flat-backed off the ball and sustained in textbook fashion against Damon Harrison, a top-flight NT. Lang used his hands well and couldn't be beat in pass pro. Bakhtiari engulfed Vernon in the first half before the ends traded sides and he yielded just one-half pressure to Jason Pierre-Paul. Power, speed, spin, counters or stunts, Bakhtiari had all the answers. His holding penalty was questionable, to say the least. Tretter's ability to reach and snatch Harrison in the first half was instrumental in Lacy's fast start. His only blemish was partial responsibility on two "bad" runs. When Robinson timed up the snap count and run blitzed, Tretter adjusted in an instant and Lacy gained 12. Bryan Bulaga and Lane Taylor had winning performances, too. Bulaga did have trouble sustaining against Pierre-Paul early and finished with 1 ½ "bad" runs and 1 ½ pressures; Taylor's totals were three pressures and one-half "bad" run.

QUARTERBACKS (3)

Aaron Rodgers' statistics would have looked much better if not for six dropped passes. On the other hand, he benefited from having just four drops in the first three games. In any event, Rodgers didn't seem agitated by his teammates' shortcomings, kept his poise and notched the "W." Certainly, he wasn't sharp. He had incredible time to pick out receivers all night but appeared indecisive at times and wasn't able to take advantage. His best work came in the first quarter. He ran for two first downs and dropped in the long TD pass to Adams. His completion mark (51.1%) was extremely low given the protection and the Giants' back-seven personnel. The fact Rodgers failed to expose Andrew Adams, a free-agent rookie, was remarkable. His second interception was an awful throw back inside. Even though the pressure was negligible, he continues to make a lot of arm throws without a stable base.

RUNNING BACKS (2 ½)

When the offense was at peak efficiency early, Eddie Lacy was on the field for 20 of the first 24 snaps. On the four plays he wasn't, Ty Montgomery and Cobb each had a carry that totaled one yard. It was Montgomery's only backfield snap; obviously, he wasn't Lacy. Lacy's snap count reached 27 before he left in the third quarter (ankle). In just 12 touches he broke six tackles, including two each by Pierre-Paul and Adams. You could tell Lacy was ready to be physical by the way he popped Harrison on a first-play chip block. He served as his own blocker for some of his 84 yards from scrimmage. On the 31-yard burst, Richard Rodgers was stoned by Vernon at the point so Lacy, stymied for a moment, restarted and began running through people. James Starks (49) replaced Lacy and had one of the worst games of his seven-year career. Yes, he did recover his own fumble at the end, but the fact he lost the ball without even being hit suggests a startling lack of concentration. Just how much can he be trusted? Aaron Rodgers deserves as much blame as Starks for the screen pass that went to the ground, but still it should have been caught. Late in the game, Starks was charged with two "bad" runs for poor reads. He was a picture of frustration, his head down and muttering to himself. The Packers can ill afford him going in the tank. Aided by a more traditional game plan, Ripkowski played four more snaps (25) than he had in the first three games. Both of his carries went for first downs, and he was physical.

DEFENSIVE LINE (3 ½)

Dom Capers' strategy reflected his confidence that this unit could hold the fort without safety help against a marginal run offense. In what might be a first, the Packers played the entire game without a single snap of base 3-4. Capers needed the four linemen not only to hold their ground but also to prevent combination blockers from getting out on linebackers. Neither Mike Daniels (32 of the 56 defensive snaps) nor Letroy Guion (28) made any splash plays. The Giants' center and guards might be one of the better threesomes in the NFL. Daniels lined up on the side of LG Justin Pugh 19 times and didn't have a pressure or tackle for loss. Back from a knee injury, Guion didn't make a play, either. However, they both kept blockers off the linebackers, and with a light box it was critical in the Giants' 43-yard rushing output. Kenny Clark (18) had the only pressure, and also recovered a fumble.

LINEBACKERS (4 ½)

Six players split the OLB snaps: Nick Perry (42), Clay Matthews (28), Kyler Fackrell (14), Datone Jones (13), Julius Peppers (seven) and Jayrone Elliott (seven). As defensive linemen, Peppers added 15 and Jones had 11. Once again, Perry was the man. His 5 1/2 pressures included 2 1/2 against LT Ereck Flowers and 2 1/2 against RT Bobby Hart. Perry is improving his hands and footwork that he needs to win outside, and together with his bull rushes his arsenal is expanding. Back from a hamstring injury, Clay Matthews beat Flowers for a sack and hurry before sitting out all but 12 plays of the second half. Six days earlier, Hart held up well against Minnesota's Brian Robison and Danielle Hunter. Fackrell, in just 14 snaps, beat Hart for a strip-sack, a knockdown and a hurry. That was a veteran move going for the fumble as he hit Manning from behind. Peppers, who is being asked to run a lot of stunts, slipped around Flowers for a pressure on a twist. When Peppers didn't see a counter play headed his direction, he dipped inside and gave up 14 yards. Active and alert, Jones posted 2 1/2 pressures. Even Elliott had a strip-sack against Flowers but it was wiped out by a 12-man penalty on Jones. The unit seemed energized being able to rush a quarterback that's a statue. The snap counts inside were 41 for Joe Thomas and Jake Ryan and 15 for Blake Martinez. After Martinez bit and saw Will Tye go vertical behind him for a 27-yard completion, Capers seemed more eager to have Thomas matched against the speedy tight end. Thomas' performance was marred by three missed tackles. Given space to flow to the football, Ryan and Martinez attacked ball carriers. They just need to play under control and get proper depth in their zone drops.

SECONDARY (4 ½)

Capers' blitz rate was a lowly 17.1%, and not once did he send more than five. Minus Sam Shields (concussion) and Damarious Randall (groin), Capers used a two-high safety look much more than usual to assist his backup cornerbacks. Based on LaDarius Gunter's showing, he might have earned a starting job. Odell Beckham Jr. deployed to Gunter's right side 27 times, and Gunter played press coverage 19 times and off coverage eight times. When Beckham went left 23 times, Rollins played press coverage on 14 and off coverage on nine. In most cases, they were able to play aggressively underneath even against a supreme talent like Beckham because of the safety help. Nevertheless, Beckham didn't catch a ball on Gunter (56) and he had a manageable three for 42 against Rollins (56). Beckham tried a ton of double moves against Gunter but nothing much worked. Gunter's size and physical style gave Beckham some problems. Safety Micah Hyde (56) showed his value, moving to nickel back and helping contain dangerous slot Sterling Shepard. Ha Ha Clinton-Dix (56) had to play off the hashes more than usual but, together with Morgan Burnett (56), played with discipline to eliminate the deep ball. At times, Burnett moved next to Thomas as a hybrid linebacker with Kentrell Brice (15) replacing him at safety.

KICKERS (2)

Jacob Schum already is struggling and winter weather has yet to arrive. His four-punt averages of 36.5 yards (gross), 35.0 (net) and 4.13 seconds (hang time) were poor. Mason Crosby hit from 44, 33 and 25 yards; his six-kickoff averages were 70.5 yards and 4.20 hang time.

SPECIAL TEAMS (½)

After being penalized merely once in the first three games, Ron Zook's unit had four. That's the high for the special teams since they had five in Game 11 of the 2010 season. The guilty parties were Jeff Janis, Josh Hawkins, Brice and Montgomery. There were eight missed tackles, including two each by Marwin Evans and Elliott. It enabled the Giants to have a field day returning kickoffs (35, 42, 37). Brett Goode had a low punt snap and a high extra-point snap.

OVERALL RATING: 3.5 footballs

STARS OF THE GAME: 1. LaDarius Gunter; 2. T.J. Lang; 3. Nick Perry.