

# Rating the Packers: Week 12 at Eagles

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**Green Bay** - Good teams in the NFL that aren't playing well gradually turn into bad teams.

Injuries or no injuries, the Green Bay Packers always have had plenty of talent. It's why they were the consensus pick as one of the two or three Super Bowl favorites starting the season.

For all their organizational and fan bravado over past success, many of the young players weren't a part of those teams. This appeared to be another young team with a veteran coaching staff that lacked confidence, one of the most critical components of all when it comes to athletic endeavors.

Then the Packers caught fire Monday night at Lincoln Financial Field and defeated the Philadelphia Eagles, 27-13. It was only one good game, but sometimes seasons can turn after one good game.

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

## **RECEIVERS ( 4 )**

For the second time in the last three games Davante Adams (played 64 of the 71 offensive snaps) was the Packers' best player. Suddenly, in the middle of his third season, he almost can't be jammed at the line. He's big, strong and has excellent feet. Leodis McKelvin and Nolan Carroll aren't top-notch cornerbacks but at least they've been in the league for a long time. They were overmatched. Adams is becoming more precise with his footwork as he moves along the stem of his routes. When he exploded out of his break on a slant against McKelvin from the 12, the former Bill spun the wrong way and was toast. There still was the matter of the safety but Adams smells the end zone inside the 5 and pinballed for the score. He has exceptional change of direction after the catch and his ball security in traffic appears much improved. On his 20-yard TD, he beat Carroll on the release, ran to the point where the ball had to come down and made a breath-taking catch with Carroll lunging for the ball. He ran by McKelvin on a take-off for 50 and scalded Carroll on a quick slant for 23. The only miscue he made, and it was an inexcusable one, was going out of bounds with 3 minutes left when the Packers were nursing an 11-point lead. Jordy Nelson (64) has a great sense of when to sit down in zones and how to present himself to the passer. He's not doing much of anything after the catch and isn't winning deep, but it's been a month since his last drop and his performance level is going up ever so slightly. Randall Cobb (56, 52 at WR) juke FS Rodney McLeod into a big missed tackle early. He fit in with the rest, producing on simple little routes. Richard Rodgers (26, including 17 in a three-point stance) had four snaps before Jared Cook (33, 11) got off the bench. Cook was targeted just twice but was charged with 1 ½ "bad" runs.

## **OFFENSIVE LINE ( 4 )**

The best player was David Bakhtiari. His opponent was RE Connor Barwin, a hard-trying bull rusher with 49 ½ sacks in eight seasons. Time after time he came off with purpose and intensity only to be turned back. It was a shutout. Not only is Bakhtiari athletic and tough, he plays a knowledgeable game. He's a hard man to beat. Lane Taylor had an all-day tussle with NT Bennie Logan. The fact the ball was coming out so fast made everyone's job markedly easier. Taylor is no gazelle but he has a massive body, looks to finish and doesn't whiff much in pass pro. Playing his fourth game for injured JC Tretter, Corey Linsley didn't allow a pressure and had one "bad" run. His reach-blocking probably isn't where it was a year ago. He gets too high at times and then can't utilize his strength. Maybe his pancake of NT Beau Allen on a fourth-quarter reach will give him momentum. Making the first start of his life at guard, Jason Spriggs had Pro Bowler Fletcher Cox over him most of the game. Talk about trial by fire. On the second play he was destroyed by Cox for the first of his three "bad" runs. He also gave up four pressures, including three by Cox. He's too light for guard, especially when the opponent has incredible strength. It was a mauling. Spriggs struggled when to set his anchor against bull rush. At times, he waited too long to shoot his hands and kept getting walked back. He was knocked around and down often. He's just feeling his way inside, but the Packers felt he was a better option than Don Barclay. Linsley was called for a late holding penalty but it appeared he was just trying to bail out Spriggs. If Spriggs goes on to have a solid career, presumably at tackle, he'll always remember Cox and this first start. Bryan Bulaga allowed two of his three pressures and one of his 1 ½ "bad" runs to LE Brandon Graham. The Packers were more than satisfied because Graham is having a Pro Bowl season.

## **QUARTERBACKS ( 4 ½ )**

Aaron Rodgers will have remembered well his last game against a defense coordinated by Jim Schwartz. It was December 2014 in chilly Buffalo. The Bills, playing physical coverage and blitzing just 14.9 percent, held Rodgers to a career-low passer rating of 34.3 and pulled off their biggest victory in years, 21-13. This time, Rodgers came equipped with new ideas and a creative game plan, and emerged triumphant (116.7 rating). Schwartz didn't disguise much of anything. He loves blitzing Malcolm Jenkins off the slot, but when he did Rodgers threw hot and beat it. Of 42 dropbacks, Schwartz sent five eight times but six just twice. Whatever he tried, Rodgers seemed two steps ahead. He bought in to McCarthy's dink-and-dunk passing game and executed extremely well. In effect, Rodgers was the master of all he saw, turning runs into one-step passes and never letting the rush gain momentum. His third-down work was superb. So was his accuracy, even deep. Before Rodgers pulled a hamstring early in the third quarter, he hurt Schwartz running, too. He wasn't as mobile later but his overall effectiveness and determination didn't wane.

## **RUNNING BACKS ( 3 )**

Eight of James Starks' 17 carries were "bad" runs (a yard or less) but it'd be hard to pin any of them on him. At the end, there were just too many Eagles in the box to block. He did make two questionable decisions: a 2-yard run early and a screen pass late. When Bakhtiari influenced his man to go up the field on third and 1, Starks (54) circled outside on a toss before making a beautiful cut up the field for 8. He also gives tremendous effort and is really tough. As a receiver, he'll always fight the ball to an extent. However, he was able to come up with a big check-down on third-and-5 when Rodgers was scrambling his way. That required adjustment. His protection wasn't bad, either. With Eddie Lacy done for the year, it's basically Starks' show unless he was to start fumbling. Ty Montgomery (16, 13 at RB) and Christine Michael (two) also played, as did Cobb. FB Aaron Ripkowski (25) shows even more power than an older John Kuhn did. From a new one-back set on the goal line, Ripkowski basically served as his own blocker blasting through two defenders for the 1-yard TD. He almost never goes down on first contact. As part of several new formations, rookie FB Joe Kerridge blocked well on two of his three snaps. The shotgun ground game included several draws and a couple traps.

## **DEFENSIVE LINE ( 3 )**

The base defense isn't the 3-4. There were just three snaps with a three-man front this week, increasing the 11-game total to merely 84. All season the base has been the 4-2 nickel in which the starting linemen are Mike Daniels (played 38 of the 59 defensive snaps) and Letroy Guion (32). Daniels showed tremendous hustle coming out of the stack and chasing down two screen passes. His only pressure was a sack against backup RG Isaac Seumalo on a stunt. One of Nick Perry's two offsides penalties should have been announced on Daniels. Guion made a big play in the second quarter, blowing up a reach block by C Jason Kelce for minus-2 on a first-down run. It knocked the Eagles off schedule and led to a punt. Later, he beat Seumalo on a rush only to trip and fall creating a gap through which Carson Wentz scrambled for 8. He also was pancaked on a third-and-1 run for 9. The second unit was manned again by Kenny Clark (13) and Mike Pannel (11), and for the first time Dean Lowry didn't get in. Clark has been coming closer as a rusher. He beat Seumalo for a flush on one of his only chances.

## **LINEBACKERS (4 ½ )**

The Eagles had their preferred starters at just two O-line positions. Presumably in an attempt to confuse Seumalo, LG Stefen Wisniewski and RT Allen Barbre, Dom Capers went back to his fire-zone days and sent 12 five-man zone blitzes. One of the front four dropped to cover and was replaced by two rushers from the back seven, usually ILBs. Capers, who has called fewer and fewer zone blitzes with each passing year, had used only 13 in the first 10 games. The sacks by Daniels and Clay Matthews, as well as some of the other pressures, came on zone blitzes. Matthews (44, including 30 at ILB) suffered a shoulder injury in the first series, sat out about 10 snaps and returned to the lineup even though he was favoring his left shoulder and couldn't hit. Matthews got to the jet sweep faster than Blake Martinez or Jake Ryan would have, but if had really been chasing all-out Barbre never would have had the angle to deliver his vicious but legal blind-side block. It was important that Matthews return because Carl Bradford (three) played poorly again in his brief stint. Alongside Matthews, Joe Thomas (59) might have played his finest game in Green Bay. In 10 rushes he flattened Wentz twice; on the first, he ran over RB Darren Sproles. He carried TE Zach Ertz to the deep middle on the overthrown pass that was intercepted by Ha Ha Clinton-Dix. He took on blocks three times and made the tackle for short gains. Datone Jones (28, 14 at OLB), the starter at 5-technique in the base over Pannel, contributed back-to-back knockdowns of Wentz. The second resulted in the pick. On the outside, Julius Peppers (43, 28 at OLB) registered 3 ½ pressures while Perry (53) had two. Peppers isn't as supple or effective setting the edge anymore, and his pure speed rushes aren't anywhere near as explosive. However, he still plays heavy, especially on stunts. When he loops inside and is moving unencumbered for three or four strides, it takes a strong guard to prevent a collapsed pocket.

## **SECONDARY ( 4 )**

With Damarious Randall (57) playing almost a full game for the first time since Sept. 25, he started at the left outside and LaDarius Gunter (55) remained the starter on the right outside. The change came at nickel back, where Quinten Rollins (46) took most of the snaps and Micah Hyde (39) returned to dime back. After allowing 15 passes of 20 yards or more in the last three games, holding the Eagles to three (24, 20, 24) was an achievement. Granted, one of the NFL's poorest corps of WRs became even weaker when an ankle injury limited Jordan Matthews to 24 snaps. Randall must get the ball out on the 20-yard back shoulder he allowed to Matthews. Despite having fresh legs, Randall probably was wise to play cautiously with his groin injury. He also missed three tackles, which certainly can't continue. It looked like he didn't really want in on the action. Gunter has been averaging about one big third-down pass breakup. Rollins had a clean day in coverage and was sent by Capers six times from the slot. He's no Hyde as a rusher but he batted down one pass and got physical with RB Wendell Smallwood on another. Hyde played through Sproles to ruin another pass attempt. Ha Ha Clinton-Dix (58) made an easy catch of Wentz' overthrow for the game's only turnover, but DBs drop those all the time. With Matthews mending and Bradford pulled, Morgan Burnett (59) lined up next to Thomas at ILB in nickel for about 10 snaps. At one point, he played off the 303-pound Seumalo and made the tackle. When a hard hit needs to be made downfield, chances are Burnett is doing the hitting. One thing's for sure: He'll never turn anything down.

## **KICKERS (4)**

Mason Crosby hit from 33 and 32 yards and averaged 69.5 yards and 3.99 seconds of hang time on his six kickoffs. Jacob Schum's lone punt was a beauty. His Aussie-style boot of 43 yards (4.39 hang time) nosedived at the 1 and was downed.

## **SPECIAL TEAMS ( 4 )**

On the six kickoffs, three were touchbacks and three were returned to the 19, 14 and 13. Crosby kicked precisely to the corner and his teammates swarmed to the ball. Big hits were delivered by Jayrone Elliott, Marwin Evans, Josh Hawkins and Ripkowski. With Trevor Davis limited to one special-teams snap, Cobb was the No. 1 punt returner for the second straight game. Cobb recovered his own fumble on the only one he fielded.

**STARS OF THE GAME:** 1. Davante Adams; 2. Aaron Rodgers; 3. Joe Thomas.

**OVERALL RATING:** 4 ½ footballs