

Rating the Packers: Week 13 vs Texans

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

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Green Bay - Two battered teams with aspirations of winning division championships battled for four quarters as snow fell and accumulated Sunday at Lambeau Field.

The Green Bay Packers had the better quarterback, the better receiving corps and home-field advantage. The Houston Texans had better running backs and better personnel on defense.

Green Bay's edge in total yardage was scant, 309-307. Houston had one more first down, 17-16. The turnover differential was even.

About all that separated the two teams was the final score. Here is a rating of the Packers against the Eagles, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

RECEIVERS (4)

Jordy Nelson (played 55 of 58 offensive snaps) probably turned in his finest game since undergoing reconstructive knee surgery 15 months ago. On the Packers' fourth play, he made nickel back Kareem Jackson miss on a hitch for 7. On the seventh play, he ran an exquisite pivot route against aggressive A.J. Bouye for 9. On and on the dominant performance went as Nelson caught all eight of the passes intended for him (for 118 yards). When the outcome was at hand, he had three receptions for 81. As always, he did it in such gentlemanly fashion. Jared Cook (29, 10 with hand down) converted a pair of third downs on out-breaking routes to beat safeties Corey Moore and Eddie Pleasant. Davante Adams (49) dropped a 35-yard sideline pass, drew an illegal-block penalty and caught one of six targets. When Aaron Rodgers scrambled in the red zone, Randall Cobb (44, 42 at WR) broke off routes almost simultaneously and raised his left arm to signal separation. It happened twice, and Jackson marveled after their connection beat him for a 6-yard TD. The crumbs at WR included five snaps for Geronimo Allison and two apiece for Jeff Janis and Ty Montgomery. Janis gained 19 on a tear sweep.

OFFENSIVE LINE (4)

RG Jason Spriggs' second start was better than the first. The damage report of one-half knockdown, 1 ½ hurries and one-half "bad" run indicated improvement. He made a key block on Montgomery's 13-yard run that ignited the 98-yard drive, getting on ILB Benardrick McKinney just long enough. Spriggs had his share of misses and ugly plays, but there were fewer than in the Eagles game and he wasn't on the ground as much. Lane Taylor had a strong game going (two pressures) until the final series when DT Antonio Smith whipped him twice for "bad" runs. Corey Linsley, the other starter inside, more than held his own against NT Vince Wilfork, the hulking ex-Patriot. Despite being outweighed by perhaps 75 pounds, Linsley used his outstanding strength to stay on his feet and stay after Wilfork. With Jadeveon Clowney (elbow) out, OLB Whitney Mercilus was the only rusher capable of beating tackles David Bakhtiari and Bryan Bulaga. Rookie Ufomba Kamalu slipped by Bulaga for 1 ½ hurries but Bulaga was almost flawless blocking for the run. It wasn't one of Bakhtiari's better days. Mercilus got to Bakhtiari's hands in the third quarter and pulled himself around the corner for a sack in 3.2 seconds. That was Mercilus' only pressure but he also slipped around Bakhtiari on two runs by James Starks for no gain.

QUARTERBACKS (4 ½)

Minus Clowney and DT J.J. Watt, defensive coordinator Romeo Crennel elected to play coverage and see if Rodgers could win the long way. The Texans rushed four men on 22 dropbacks, three on seven and five on four. That's a low blitz rate of 12.1%. The strategy succeeded early when Rodgers was charged with a fumble at the 2 and missed open receivers on a third and 5 and a third and 7. The responsibility for the goal-line fumble probably should be split 50-50 with Linsley. It appeared as if Linsley might have short-armed it with Wilfork on his nose and a third-and-1 run block forthcoming. Rodgers' hands might have been a little wet and it's possible he backed out a tad prematurely. Finally, with the game on the line, Rodgers made completion after completion on two TD drives totaling 187 yards. The 32-yard, go-ahead TD to Nelson was easy when CB Charles James fell down, but it came one play after Rodgers took a nasty low hit from Smith. Despite the balky hamstring, he scrambled twice for 16 yards, remained squarely in the moment and kept on fighting. On Aaron Ripkowski's clinching 3-yard TD, Rodgers' deft ballhandling helped fool the defense.

RUNNING BACKS (3)

James Starks (seven) started and played five snaps in the first half. He also started the second half and was done after two plays. In between, there was Christine Michael (11), Montgomery (25), Ripkowski (24), Joe Kerridge (five) and Cobb (two). It was remarkable to see Montgomery for 20 snaps in a row, something Mike McCarthy never does with his backs. Those 20 snaps coincided with the decisive long TD drives. Montgomery skipped away from McKinney on the 13-yard run and from Jackson on an 11-yard carry. Michael, the former Seahawk, twice avoided McKinney after Spriggs missed his block. He's a two-arms-around-the-ball, almost eyes-down runner who seeks to get his pads lower than defenders. He has fresh legs, springiness and talent. Starks was benched after he showed no patience on a third-and-1, made a poor read bypassing a lane inside and went outside to oblivion and minus-3. He was fortunate, indeed, that his lost fumble was ruled down by contact. Ripkowski made a bad read on fourth and 2, running up the backsides of his blockers when a cut to his right would have made it easily. His redemption came at the end when he lowered the boom on ILB Max Bullough and powered over him into the end zone.

DEFENSIVE LINE (3 ½)

Last game, Dean Lowry was inactive for the first time. This game, he played a season-high 18 snaps (of the 66 played by the defense), and for the first time showed some of the explosiveness and big-play ability that was on display at Northwestern. Because of the Texans' personnel groupings (FB Jay Prosch played 12 snaps), the Packers were in their base 3-4 a total of 21 times, most since Game 5. Datone Jones (56 snaps, including 19 at DL) started at 5-technique in base, and was followed by Mike Pennel (eight). Lowry got the call in the second series, and when he played well veteran position coach Mike Trgovac stayed with him. The snaps at 5-technique in base were 17 for Lowry, five for Pennel and four for Jones. Lowry's first sack came when he split LT Duane Brown and LG Xavier Su'a-Filo. He slipped on takeoff but still got to Brock Osweiler in 2.5 seconds. Lowry also bulled Su'a-Filo back to bat down a pass and worked up the field against Brown for a pressure. This is what the Packers hoped to see out of their fourth-round draft choice. Jones, who was run at in the fourth quarter, shed TE C.J. Fiedorowicz to help stop a fourth-and-1 and barged around to register 2 ½ pressures. Pennel used a fast arm-over move, beat RG Jeff Allen and swallowed Lamar Miller for minus-4. Letroy Guion (36) couldn't have gotten off to a worse start, lining up offside (penalty) and jumping offside (penalty) within the first 10 plays. Still, coach Mike McCarthy didn't pull him. Guion bounced back with a tackle for loss in which he moved well laterally and made a great read on a check-down for minus-9. As oblivious to the ball as Guion sometimes is, he also provides enforcer-type muscle inside. Mike Daniels (45) seemed to have trouble seeing little RB Jonathan Grimes, who squirted inside for 43 yards in five carries. Daniels was largely a non-factor until late when his bull-rushing wore down the Texans' interior. On Monday, Texans coach Bill O'Brien said of his team's pass protection in the game, "It was terrible." Rookie Kenny Clark played seven snaps.

LINEBACKERS (3 ½)

With Kyler Fackrell (hamstring) sidelined for a second straight game, Clay Matthews hurting and Nick Perry limited to 12 snaps by a hand injury, Jayrone Elliott had a perfect opportunity to strike a blow for his future in Green Bay as something more than a stellar special-teams performer. He played 24 snaps, his most since Game 3. Yet, nothing happened. He has size, speed, length and smarts, but the defense needs him to produce. In a way, it was remarkable that Matthews even played (21 snaps at OLB, eight at ILB). He couldn't take on blocks in the run game, and as a rusher his only chance was to line up wide left and run the horn. Dom Capers used Matthews at the line twice in a "bear" front but it wasn't effective. Perry was shedding blocks and making tackles before hurting his left hand. He returned with a giant club on the hand to start the second half but lasted just five plays. It left Julius Peppers (58, 39 at OLB) and Jones to hold the fort. Peppers jarred Allen off his haunches with a heavy hump move, then waded forward to sack Osweiler in 4.6. He, Jones and Daniels all came up short when it came to containing Osweiler's scrambles and halting third-down runs. On the inside, undersized Joe Thomas (63) continued fighting the good fight as the only healthy option. There was much to like about Thomas' performance. He shot gaps three times effectively, once to foil a fourth-and-1 run. He ran deep in a "Tampa 2" coverage to tip away a 30-yard pass for TE Ryan Griffin. He wasn't the least bit hesitant about taking on Prosch, a heavy-duty lead blocker. At the same time, Thomas gets engulfed at times against the big boys inside. Jake Ryan returned after what in effect was a three-game absence (ankle) before being reinjured, sitting out for about a quarter and then playing the second half. His intensity and run-game instincts were missed. His play against the pass was spotty.

SECONDARY (4)

The slow, slippery track was made to order for LaDarius Gunter (63). DeAndre Hopkins is one of the NFL's finest possession receivers, and his speed was even more pedestrian in the snow. Gunter broke up a short pass to Hopkins, made a knifing tackle on a promising screen and forced a fumble from Griffin's two-armed grasp that was recovered by Morgan Burnett (66) and returned 35 yards. It was the first opponents' fumble recovered by the Packers since Game 5. When speed demon Will Fuller tried to go deep, Gunter kept pace and broke it up. On the other side and the slot, it was Quinten Rollins (63) and Damarious Randall (48). Rollins sat on one of Hopkins' stop routes and knocked it away. He's playing a little better, but was too soft in man coverage on fourth-and-1 when Griffin got away from him for a 6-yard TD. Randall, in his second game back from a groin injury, was mediocre. He was out of position on Alfred Blue's 25-yard run down the sideline. When Griffin beat Burnett on a crossing route, Randall was in position to tattoo him but gave him a shoulder tap and off he went for another 5 yards. Micah Hyde (26), the dime safety over Kentrell Brice (zero), whiffed trying to get Hopkins down on his 44-yard TD. However, Randall was there as well but seemed to stand down as if to let Hyde make the tackle. That just cannot continue. Once again, Burnett's hustle stood out. There was the fumble return but also, when Rollins missed a tackle on Fuller, Burnett was rushing over and limited the gain. He plays with a lot of heart. Burnett had the most tackles but Ha Ha Clinton-Dix (66) delivered the hardest shots. He smashed Blue on the fourth and 1, KO'd slot WR Braxton Miller (shoulder), drilled Miller and Fuller, too.

KICKERS (4)

Mason Crosby was perfect on extra points (3 for 3) while Nick Novak missed one. His four kickoffs averaged 64.8 yards and 3.73 seconds of hang time. At the same time, Jacob Schum outperformed venerable Shane Lechler. Of his five punts, three were inside the 15 and one was a touchback. His averages were 43.0 yards (gross), 35.8 (net) and 4.27 (hang time).

SPECIAL TEAMS (4 ½)

With Trevor Davis a healthy scratch for the first time and Hyde in mothballs, Cobb broke three tackles on a 23-yard punt return and charged 21 on another. Jeff Janis broke one tackle returning a kickoff for 28. With Janis and Montgomery deep, O'Brien instructed Novak to squib. Montgomery fielded the ball cleanly, broke two tackles and gained 39. Marwin Evans put himself in position to make a critical mistake by jumping on a rolling punt. Adams' recovery of Novak's crafty onside kick was superb.

STARS OF THE GAME: 1. Jordy Nelson; 2. LaDarius Gunter; 3. Morgan Burnett.

OVERALL RATING: 4 footballs