

Rating the Packers: Week 15 at Bears

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

Posted: Dec 20, 2016

Green Bay - Two weeks ago the Green Bay Packers were languishing in a tie for 24th place in turnover differential at minus-5. They ranked in the bottom half of the NFL for most of the season. Now, after compiling a plus-10 ratio against Seattle and Chicago, the Packers have vaulted into a tie for eighth place at plus-5. Their four takeaways Sunday at Soldier Field led directly to 17 points. Year after year, the teams that lead the league in turnover differential also lead the standings. The same holds true this season. Here is a rating of the Packers in their 38-10 victory, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

RECEIVERS (1)

Jared Cook (played 40 of the 61 offensive snaps) had his second most productive game of the season. Just 12 of the 40 came with his hand down. Of his six receptions (for 85 yards), the first three came from the slot and the last three came from the inside of a trips formation. Despite the cold, he caught the ball beautifully away from his body. He also did an effective job chipping at times on the Bears' trio of outstanding pass rushers. There's an art to it so not to interfere with the tackle, and Cook was able to stick the man and get into his route easily. Cook doesn't offer much after the catch because he's on the stiff side and is an upright runner. With minimal low-tackle shield, he usually just gets chopped down. Richard Rodgers' snap count dwindled to 20 (10 with his hand down). It isn't often the coaches ask either tight end to block at the point of attack. When they asked Rodgers to on third and 1, OLB Pernell McPhee blew him up and the ball carrier lost a yard. Jordy Nelson (60) had an inauspicious start, vaulting high over CB Tracy Porter but then dropping a 40-yard pass. Later, he had a 32-yard bomb raked from his clutches by CB Cre'Von LeBlanc. With the game on the line, however, Nelson beat the slow-footed LeBlanc (4.67) to the post and kept running before hauling in a 60-yard mortar shot that hung in the air for 3.2 seconds. On Nelson's other six receptions, he gained just nine yards after the catch. Sometimes it seems Nelson is so consumed with ball security that it limits his athleticism. It was just a terrible day for Davante Adams (60), who dropped a routine pair of 16-yard TD passes. It's hard to remember any Green Bay player having done that. Since becoming a starter in 2012 Randall Cobb had been shut out just once. It was in the playoff game last year in Arizona when he departed after 15 snaps because of a chest injury. It was bizarre that Cobb had 51 snaps against fill-in nickel back Demontre Hurst and wasn't targeted once.

OFFENSIVE LINE (4)

Rookie Leonard Floyd hurt the Packers (two sacks) in Game 6 and other teams in the past month. He's a tremendous talent with a hard-charging approach. Matched most often against David Bakhtiari, he had neither a pressure nor tackle. It was a schooling of the first degree. Bakhtiari took away everything Floyd tried with his strength, athleticism and technical approach to pass protection. He also was the only offensive lineman without a "bad" run. On the other side, Bryan Bulaga was solid overall but nowhere near as consistent as Bakhtiari. All three of Bulaga's pressures came in the first half. As the game wore on, he frustrated the unconventional rushes of Willie Young just as he did in the first meeting. McPhee, who was snorting fire all afternoon, was harder to handle and totaled four pressures in all. Probably the best Bears defensive player against run and pass was Akiem Hicks. He's a Pro Bowl-caliber big man. T.J. Lang was late blocking LBs twice in the first series. It's crucial for the offense that he's on the field, but it's obvious that his assortment of injuries has reduced his ability to bend, change direction and strike with full authority. He allowed 2 ½ pressures and one "bad" run, and his nit-picky holding penalty against Hicks wrecked a third-quarter drive. Lane Taylor eliminated ILB John Timu on Christine Michael's 42-yard TD when he long-pulled around three other linemen. However, he allowed two pressures and 1 ½ "bad" runs. It's unclear if JC Tretter is ready to play. Both he and Corey Linsley have started seven games, and there seems little inclination on the part of the coaches to switch back to Tretter. They're both capable players.

QUARTERBACKS (4)

Aaron Rodgers doesn't have many game-winning drives on his resume. He was zero for two this season. Also, his deep-ball accuracy in the first two months of the season was spotty at best. Rodgers killed two birds with one stone with the 60-yard home-run ball that he dropped into Nelson's hands to set up the decisive field goal. Besides the W, Rodgers was looking at a line with two new guards (Don Barclay, Jason Spriggs) because Taylor (hip) and Lang (back) had just gone out following a collision. Coordinator Vic Fangio, his nemesis (4-0) in San Francisco, called an aggressive "quarters" coverage trying to get the Packers off the field on third and 11. Rodgers, however, spotted the no-safety deep vulnerability, stepped left and exploited LeBlanc's lack of range with Nelson. As confusion reigned, he waved off a sideline substitution by Lang, assembled the team at the line and spiked the ball in smart order to win the day. That's having complete command. The drops by Adams and Nelson had to be disheartening to a degree. At the same time, Rodgers was responsible for 3 ½ of the four sacks by holding the ball excessively. One of the sacks came on Fangio's first blitz (he pressured at just a 12.8 percent rate). It's hard to believe Rodgers could miss Hurst charging from the slot to his right, but he did. Besides the sacks, he was knocked down six other times. He must limit unnecessary hits. Unable to practice because of a calf injury, he moved adequately in the first half before showing near-optimum acceleration on three scrambles for 26 yards (one was eliminated by penalty). Despite the cold and hard-hitting play, his ball security was exceptional.

RUNNING BACKS (5)

In some ways the 162-yard rushing outburst by Ty Montgomery (51) was stylistically similar to Pittsburgh's LeVeon Bell. They're relatively big backs with the ability to move defenders before they commit to a run. On a 61-yard gain, he was surrounded by three tacklers two yards behind the line but stayed calm and found an opening. Four of his nine broken tackles were on that play. On a 26-yard gain, he looked trapped by two defenders also two yards behind the line. On a 36-yard gain, he dragged Adrian Amos for 14 yards as the strong safety kept trying to rip the ball out. He stiff-armed effectively on three carries totaling 20 yards. When hit hard, he has the ability to withstand the blow and stay up. He isn't the type of back that will seek contact rather than slipping out of bounds. Such backs might last longer, too. Michael's four first-half snaps weren't impressive. He was impatient or danced on two runs. Amazingly enough, his only snap in the second half was the long TD. It was smooth sailing for the final 30 yards after he stiff-armed LeBlanc into submission. He's a violent runner who can uncoil on contact. Aaron Ripkowski (11) didn't have a touch.

DEFENSIVE LINE (1 ½)

The Packers complimented the stadium grounds crew for the condition of the field. It was somewhat soft, which is much better than frozen like the old days. Thus, it was an afternoon for bull-rushing more than speed-rushing, and Green Bay failed on both counts. Mike Daniels (played 50 of the 66 defensive snaps), one week after generating 5 ½ pressures against Seattle, had none. Twenty-one of his snaps came on LG Josh Sitton's side of the line, but there were only half a dozen passes in which the former teammates went at it one-on-one. "Sitton was Sitton," said Daniels. "He played the way he always plays. Definitely still a challenge." With Julius Peppers and Datone Jones forced to play OLB only, Letroy Guion (45) and Daniels played pass downs, too. Guion did his usual thrashing at the line on his rushes. He did well to smell out two screen passes but then failed to finish. Prized rookie C Cody Whitehair outplayed Guion in the run game, which doesn't often happen. Guion came inches away from knocking Micah Hyde off his late coverage as he rushed pell-mell onto the field. If he had, Cameron Meredith would have walked in with possibly the winning TD. The Bears' comeback began midway through the second half with five plays for 67 yards when rookies Dean Lowry (22) and Kenny Clark (14) were on the field. The lone pressure was by Lowry.

LINEBACKERS (1)

Peppers (52) says a pass rusher's day can be made by one play. For most of the game Peppers couldn't solve LT Charles Leno, an undersized but athletic third-year man. But, when Leno let Peppers get to his edge on the first play of the third quarter, the veteran pulled himself around the corner for a strip-sack-recovery. It changed the complexion of the game. Minus Nick Perry (hand), Datone Jones (49) started opposite Peppers and wasn't sharp against vulnerable RT Bobby Massie. For the second game in a row Clay Matthews (29) served as designated pass rusher. At first, the Bears were chipping on him. Then, after it became apparent Matthews couldn't beat the tackles with his bad left shoulder, they treated him like just another rusher. TE Daniel Brown isn't regarded as much of a blocker. Well aware of the injury report, he attacked Matthews on a fourth-quarter, punishing wham block that put him on the ground. It was revealing that Matthews wasn't in the lineup on the Bears' final play from the 4. Joe Thomas (49) helped stop a drive with a hard tackle of RB Ka'Deem Carey and broke up a third-and-3 crossing pattern to Alshon Jeffery. He also blew a sack. Jake Ryan (55) blitzed a season-high nine times but didn't produce. He has to trust his size and speed, smash backs and create havoc. Blake Martinez (14) and Kyler Fackrell (four) returned after three-game absences due to injury.

SECONDARY (2)

Micah Hyde (31) didn't play much until Damarious Randall (42) was pulled for poor play and Quinten Rollins (65) moved from the slot to outside. On the Bears' last snap, he went nose-to-nose against talented Cameron Meredith from the slot. Dom Capers didn't man-blitz much but he did there. Looking at Meredith all the way, red-hot Matt Barkley threw a respectable ball. Hyde, however, made a better play, gambling that he could undercut the out-breaking route and knock it away. He also carried Brown deep on his vertical route in the third quarter and Barkley, wanting his tight end, sailed the pass into the hands of Ha Ha Clinton-Dix (66) for the first of his two interceptions. As the first half ended, rookie Makinton Dorleant (one) batted down a Hail Mary that Hyde positioned himself smartly to intercept. One thing about Hyde: He gives coaches everything he has every game. Clinton-Dix looked like Darren Sharper patrolling center field and snaring errant throws. He just can't carry the ball that loosely on returns. He tackled well. Morgan Burnett (66) wasn't in good shape on some inside routes off play-action. LaDarius Gunter (64) was the best cornerback but escaped damage deep when passes were thrown inaccurately or not at all. On the other side, Randall could hardly have played worse. When a player displays weakness, as Randall has of late in terms of tackling and lining up properly, opponents will strike until he adjusts or is gone. This was one of many games in which he didn't want in on the action. Barkley made Randall tackle twice on runs-turned-hitches, and the result was a 10-yard TD and a 17-yard gain. He did have two fine breakups but they were more than offset by a raft of completions. Rollins' problem appears to be route recognition. Jeffery was turning him in circles. Blitzing Kentrell Brice (five) made a big stick on the goal-line against Jordan Howard that might have saved a TD.

KICKERS (4)

Mason Crosby delivered the game-winner from 32 yards as time expired. For a 10-year veteran, his clutch opportunities have been few and far between. He also made FGs from 34 (it barely screw-balled over) and 18 plus three extra points. His six kickoffs averaged 64.3 yards and 3.90 seconds of hang time. Two of Jacob Schum's four punts had hang time less than 3.1. His four-boot averages were 42.0 (gross), 37.8 (net) and 3.53 (hang time).

SPECIAL TEAMS (4)

Hyde replaced Cobb on punt returns. Penalty-ridden Josh Hawkins was a healthy scratch for the first time; he was replaced by Dorleant. The kickoff-return game was miserable (five for 15.6); on one, WR Josh Bellamy split Jones and Ripkowski, then upended Montgomery at the 15. The holding penalty on Jeff Janis was nullified; he has had minimal impact in the kicking game this year. Brice and Martinez also were penalized. Fackrell led OK coverage.

STARS OF THE GAME: 1. Ty Montgomery; 2. David Bakhtiari; 3. Micah Hyde.

OVERALL RATING: 3 footballs