

# Rating the Packers: Week 16 vs Vikings

*By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*

*Posted: Dec 26, 2016*

**Green Bay** - It took the Green Bay Packers three months to draw even with the Minnesota Vikings in the NFC North standings. The Vikings' 17-14 victory in Game 2 set the tone for the divisional race.

Finally, on Saturday afternoon at Lambeau Field, the Packers were able to eliminate their border rival from playoff contention.

"We fought," Vikings coach Mike Zimmer said Monday. "Watching the tape ... I was curious if we would play hard. I thought we did that. Obviously, we didn't play good enough to win."

Here is a rating of the Packers in their 38-25 victory, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

## **RECEIVERS ( 4 )**

Randall Cobb (ankle) didn't play. Rookie Geronimo Allison, a free agent from Illinois, got the call ahead of Jeff Janis (played seven of the 59 offensive snaps) and Trevor Davis, who was active but didn't play. Allison's 43 snaps were 24 more than his previous high. The Packers have mixed and matched receivers all over the formation all season, but Cobb probably has been the most used slot receiver. In this game, when two receivers were split wide to a side, the slot counts were 18 for Allison, six for Jordy Nelson (56), four for Jared Cook (35, including 12 in a three-point stance), three for Davante Adams (50) and one for Richard Rodgers (29, including 13 from a three-point). Nelson had an enormous day with six receptions outside for 119 and three from the slot for 35. One reason Nelson is so hard to cover is that he runs every route at basically the same speed. Defenders have no idea where he's going. Against zone, he's a master knowing when to sit and where Aaron Rodgers would want him to be. And, on extended plays, he has a sixth sense knowing where open areas should be and making quick breaks to get there. He hasn't done much after the catch this season but, on an early 21-yard touchdown, he made SS Andrew Sendejo miss and charged 12 yards into the end zone. Nelson was so caught up in the moment, he burst into several "hey, look at me" celebrations that in the past were never part of his conservative approach. Nelson did drop a 24-yard sideline pass off extended action just as Adams couldn't handle a 19-yard pass in the back of the end zone. Adams and Cook each beat CB Trae Waynes for long gains. Cook separated from the speedster on a WR-type take-off and took the ball away for 30. Cook, however, has been in Green Bay too long to make such costly miscues as a pass blocker. Allison's 5 ½-inch height advantage over Cobb gave an entirely new and imposing look to the receiving corps. When Waynes blew a coverage, Allison's sideline-and-up route was good for 31. He came back on third and 10 to snag a low pass on an in-breaking route against FS Harrison Smith for 11. Finally, Rodgers ran a precise seam route into harm's way for 13 yards and a TD, his first since Game 3.

## **OFFENSIVE LINE ( 4 ½ )**

David Bakhtiari's twice-a-year rivalry with RE Everson Griffen continued with Bakhtiari earning the decision. Griffen expended his entire pass-rushing arsenal but had to settle for one second-half pressure on an up-field move. His most frequent tactic was the bull rush, but Bakhtiari knows how to set his anchor after four seasons and managed to bow up every time. Griffen also beat Bakhtiari inside for one-half of the four "bad" runs charged to the line. Of the four sacks, LE Danielle Hunter's hump move against Bryan Bulaga was the only one that appeared to be the responsibility of the line. Otherwise, Bulaga played well before exiting with a right shoulder injury early in the fourth quarter after 49 snaps. Jason Spriggs (14, including four at TE, three at LT and seven at RT) wasn't very good. He couldn't get Griffen blocked in the run game. When Spriggs relieved Bakhtiari in the final series and Don Barclay entered at RT, they both false-started on the same play. The Packers need Bulaga in Detroit. It's safe to say that Corey Linsley fared better against NT Linval Joseph, a great player, than JC Tretter in the first meeting. After failing to reach Joseph on an early "bad" run, Linsley didn't have another. He anchored well on power rushes and never quit battling. T.J. Lang had no pressures and one "bad" run; Lane Taylor had 1 ½ pressures and one-half "bad" run. They benefited from not having to face 3-techniques Tom Johnson and Sharrif Floyd.

## **QUARTERBACKS ( 5 )**

Not since Game 5 of 2014, a 42-10 victory, has Rodgers played this well against a Zimmer-coached defense. Trusting his four-man rush, Zimmer didn't blitz on 14 of the first 16 passes. The offensive line held firm as always, and Rodgers fired three TD passes for a 21-6 lead. Probably stunned by the avalanche of big plays, Zimmer called his first six-man blitz on the next series; he ended up blitzing on 31.8 percent of passes. The Vikings sacked Rodgers four times, and two came on blitzes (one with eight against seven blockers). Rodgers ran through his progressions superbly. He was a step or three ahead of his nemesis all day. Buoyed by 37-degree weather and little wind, he made an exceptional secondary look bad. He eluded LE Brian Robison, danced right and gunned a 2-yard TD to Nelson. His 20-yard TD to Adams was a phenomenal throw in the corner to beat Waynes. Forget about the calf injury. With Griffen bearing down and no one to block him, Rodgers pirouetted away and on the dead run made CB Xavier Rhodes look awful to complete a 6-yard TD. When Zimmer tried a zone blitz, Rodgers ran away from it and gunned a dart to Allison for 32. He lay on the field for 45 seconds after a third-down, third-quarter sack. Shaking off the stinger, he produced 10 more points before turning over the final series to Brett Hundley. If there was a negative, it would be holding the ball too long a few times and taking unnecessary hits.

## **RUNNING BACKS ( 1 )**

One week after his boffo showing in Chicago, Ty Montgomery (33 snaps, including 29 at RB) was about as ordinary as ordinary can be. In nine rushes his long gain was 6 yards, and his four receptions out of the backfield totaled 17. Mike McCarthy appeared convinced he could do business against the Vikings' coverage unit, and he did. Montgomery did make a nice cut for 6 in the second quarter when Joseph drove Linsley in the backfield. He also slipped on another carry and was late getting over to pick up MLB Eric Kendricks on a sack. With James Starks (concussion) sidelined indefinitely, Christine Michael (14) replaced Montgomery for the entire fourth quarter. He's unpredictable. One time he'll cut back immediately without giving the linemen a chance to set their backs. The next time he'll run laterally and suffer a loss when an earlier cut would have least got him back to the line of scrimmage. Michael also earned a glare from the quarterback for not hustling off the field when his replacement already was in position and the Packers had CB Terence Newman dead-to-rights for a 12-man penalty. It's also interesting to note that at least one other team, Minnesota, claimed Michael after Seattle waived him Nov. 15. At the time, the Packers had a worse record than the Vikings and thus were awarded him.

## **DEFENSIVE LINE ( 2 ½ )**

The Packers played just two snaps of base defense. In the first half, the two-man combination on 21 of 31 snaps was the accustomed pairing of Mike Daniels and Letroy Guion. In the second half, Guion's playing time crashed from 22 to four just as Kenny Clark's swelled from three to 17. Clark (played 20 of the 78 defensive snaps) turned in one of his better efforts of the season whereas Guion (26) was pedestrian. Clark didn't cause C Nick Easton to bungle the center snap but he made him pay for it by beating him to the recovery. Nose tackles blow that type of takeaway all the time. More impressively, the UCLA rookie beat LG Alex Boone, the Vikings' best blocker, for one knockdown before coming off Easton late for another. He also beat a pair of double-team blocks for tackles on short gainers. Guion is a tower of power in short-yardage and has been a tough reach block. However, he can't beat a single block as a rusher and lacks overall awareness. Averaging a league-worst 2.98 yards per rush, the Vikings' 4.65 mark Saturday was a black mark. Daniels (49) deserved his share of the blame but also contributed a sack on a stunt with Clay Matthews, showed sharp ball skills recovering Sam Bradford's fumble and hustled all over the field. Dean Lowry (19), who beat backup Zac Kerin on a spin move for a hurry, and Christian Ringo (six) also played.

## **LINEBACKERS ( 3 ½ )**

A Super Bowl team needs at least one dominant pass rusher. You can't say Matthews (55) has returned to being one because the Vikings' offensive line is one of the NFL's weakest. Nevertheless, it was by far his best performance since suffering left shoulder damage in Game 11. He made seven significant plays (one strip-sack, two knockdowns, two batted balls, drew one holding penalty, one tackle to stop a two-point run). In all, he posted five pressures, three more than anyone else, but four did come against young, overmatched LT T.J. Clemmings. For the first time since the injury, Matthews was bouncing around feeling it and showing some swagger. Nick Perry (34) wasn't nearly as good in his return from hand surgery. After a sluggish start, he took advantage of garbage time with sacks against Clemmings in 2.5 seconds and RT Jeremiah Sirles in 3.5. Neither Datone Jones (51 snaps, including 37 at OLB) nor Julius Peppers (42, 22 at OLB) were major factors. With Morgan Burnett back at safety for the most part, the ILB snaps were 66 for Joe Thomas, 36 for Jake Ryan and 10 for Blake Martinez. Each week, Thomas earns his keep. He slipped a block by Clemmings and made the tackle for a gain of 2. He stepped up and helped halt the two-point run. At times, he wasn't sharp in coverage, but it's hard to fault his tight coverage on TE Kyle Rudolph's 21-yard catch. Ryan probably played his best game since sitting out Games 10-11 (ankle). He showed reckless range to the sideline and was physical. It's possible Martinez might have hit the rookie wall.

## **SECONDARY ( 1 ½ )**

The starting lineup was LC Quinten Rollins (78), RC LaDarius Gunter (19) and nickel back Micah Hyde (71). Damarious Randall (62) was on the bench, and McCarthy said injuries (shoulder, groin) almost made him inactive. When Gunter exited with an elbow injury, Randall played LC and Rollins went to the slot. The best of the group was Hyde, but that isn't saying much. At least he challenged receivers, reacted quickly and broke up some passes. Gunter's speed deficiency was apparent on the 32-yard take-off route by Adam Thielen, who burned the defense for 202 yards in 12 receptions (15 targets). Rollins continues to play soft with limited aggressiveness and awareness. It's as if he's thinking on the field instead of just cutting it loose. Randall broke up a well-thrown bomb to Cordarrelle Patterson and a slant to Charles Johnson. Once again, he gave up too many easy completions and stood around letting others make the tackle. The responsibility for Thielen's longest gain, a 71-yard TD, fell on Ha Ha Clinton-Dix (78) and Rollins. A Pro Bowl safety should be beyond taking a terrible angle on a long pass as did HHCD. Rollins might have at least made the tackle but HHCD knocked him off. Maybe he was hunting an interception; whatever the reason, it was an embarrassing moment. It was a quiet day for Burnett (78).

## **KICKERS (5)**

Chris Jacke and Ryan Longwell were excellent field-goal kickers but were average to below on kickoffs. Mason Crosby exhibited his tremendous skill on seven kickoffs to take Patterson, a Packers killer, right out of the game. It's fairly easy to do that in a dome or warm weather. Just hit it far, and Crosby is among the best doing that. Green Bay on Christmas Eve is dicey because the ball is cold and doesn't go as far. So Crosby kept the Vikings guessing. He hit two pop-ups short of Patterson. He hit a low, 70-yard touchback in the left corner. He changed up and drilled three touchbacks to the right side, and his seventh boot from midfield after a penalty was a middle touchback. Patterson didn't touch the ball, and the two that were returned totaled 30 yards. Of the five balls that were hit deep, Crosby averaged 72 yards and 3.74 seconds of hang time. His only FG attempt (48 yards) was his longest make since Game 11 last season. Meanwhile, Jacob Schum out-kicked Jeff Locke by a wide margin, negating dangerous Marcus Sherels on punt returns. His six-punt averages were 43.2 (gross), 36.5 (net) and 4.42, which was exceptional hang time for the conditions.

## **SPECIAL TEAMS ( 3 )**

Replacing Cobb, Hyde broke three tackles on a 19-yard punt return, which was three yards longer than his best in the 2015 regular season. He made a great play rushing up to fair catch one of Locke's ducks. On another, he managed to recover his own fumble after Kentrell Brice impeded his vision/space. Michael had a 30-yard kickoff return but tried to field another over his head and botched the catch. Richard Rodgers made a weak attempt to recover a successful onside kick that hit off Martinez' ankle. Janis was in position to prevent Schum's lone touchback but did a poor job tracking the ball. Later, he covered well twice.

**STARS OF THE GAME:** 1. Aaron Rodgers; 2. Jordy Nelson; 3. Clay Matthews.

**OVERALL RATING:** 4.0 footballs