

Rating the Packers: Week 17 at Lions

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

Posted: Jan 3, 2017

Green Bay - Detroit's Jim Caldwell, who has spent 38 years as an NFL and collegiate coach, said Monday the atmosphere at Ford Field on Sunday night was one of the most electrifying of his career.

"I thought our fans were tremendous," Caldwell said. "There were four false starts (penalties) and a delay of game, so they were a factor."

The high-spirited crowd and the Lions' thirst for their first divisional championship since 1993 combined to make the Packers' 31-24 victory all the more rewarding. It took four months, but when it mattered most they finally were the team alone atop the NFC North.

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

RECEIVERS (4)

Rookie free agent Geronimo Allison (played 61 of the 75 offensive snaps) has leapfrogged Jeff Janis (12) and Trevor Davis (one), and now it remains to be seen how much Randall Cobb's playing time will decrease upon his return from an ankle injury. Allison deserves to keep playing. At 6 feet 3 ½ inches, he towers five inches above Cobb. Already Allison has learned how to scramble routes when the quarterback extends. He has demonstrated since August that, not unlike James Jones, he's an outstanding low-ball catcher. MLB Tahir Whitehead was draped all over him in the end zone but he cradled that 10-yard TD. He's also remarkably aware of his surroundings. When the Lions blew containment and coverage late in the first half, he knew enough to stay tucked near the open sideline and then get out of bounds to stop the clock. One reason Allison looked so good was the caliber of nickel back covering him in the slot. Asa Jackson, a backup to begin with, left after seven plays (ankle) and was replaced by slow-footed veteran Don Carey. When coordinator Teryl Austin got sick of that, he waved in veteran Crezdon Butler, who had been out of work for four months before being re-signed five days before the game. Butler's stint ended at five snaps after Allison ran by him on and out-and-up from the slot for 31. Darius Slay, who played 69 snaps on a bad hamstring, shadowed Jordy Nelson (70) when he was outside. When Nelson didn't make much head way, the Packers moved him inside and away from Slay and he had a solid second half. It was surprising to see SS Tavon Wilson not want much of Jared Cook (40, 19 with his hand down) on a 24-yard reception. Cook also beat athletic rookie hybrid Miles Killebrew to the sideline for 15 and was open deep behind CB Nevin Lawson for a 48-yard TD but the ball was overthrown. Cook's blocking wasn't as effective as Richard Rodgers'. Rodgers (37, 17 with hand down) blocked DEs a few times and gained an extra 14 in the flat by making Wilson miss. Adams (70, including four at WR) was open several times but didn't get the ball. He also was hustling downfield as a blocker. Janis' holding penalty on a screen to Adams was careless.

OFFENSIVE LINE (3)

Yes, it was loud. Very loud. That makes one false-start penalty understandable. Four, however, was bad football. Bryan Bulaga had two whereas David Bakhtiari and Lane Taylor each had one. Meanwhile, T.J. Lang drew an illegal-block-in-the-back penalty and had a holding foul declined. Probably the best performer was Bakhtiari. Ziggy Ansah worked his tail off before finally tallying one-half of a flush in the second half. Week after week Bakhtiari just kind of owns his opponent. He's playing focused and hard no matter whom it is. Of the four "bad" runs, Bakhtiari's came late when rookie DE Anthony Zettel beat him inside. All the starters were charged with at least one-half of a "bad" run. Corey Linsley and Taylor applied some stiff double-team blocks when the Packers spread the formation and ran their zone-read plays against a reduced box. Playing with an assortment of injuries, Lang isn't able to move or bend as well. He's become a "phone booth" player, and in close quarters he was still winning most of the time against Haloti Ngata. He just can't cover downfield or get much done in the screen game. Bulaga didn't allow a sack but did yield five pressures. The five were evenly split between long-armed Devin Taylor and hustling Kerry Hyder.

QUARTERBACKS (4 ½)

It was a rugged 1-of-6, 8 yards start for Aaron Rodgers. It was boisterous; some couldn't hear themselves think. The offense was headed for its third straight punt when Rodgers made one of the plays of the game. Ansah, having beaten Linsley on an inside twist, had Rodgers dead to rights but got greedy and went for the kill shot. Some quarterbacks would have just gone fetal. Not Rodgers, who remains supple enough at 33 to duck as Ansah went over the top. At that point some quarterbacks would have tried and probably failed to run for it on the third and 7. Not Rodgers, who immediately regained composure, moved forward and tossed to Cook for 11. Six plays later Rodgers threw the first of his four TD passes in what became another in his series of stellar showings. Hard to say if anyone else could have bolted left under some pressure and drilled the accurate shot to Allison for the TD. On the first TD, he spotted Cook being doubled in the end zone and dropped the ball off with perfect timing to Aaron Ripkowski. Austin's "wide-9" front is designed for containment, but a fully healthy Rodgers killed it with eight carries for 45 yards (excluding kneel-downs). When Hyder and Ngata inexplicably blew containment with :23 left in the half, Rodgers accepted the invitation to roll outside them and eventually fire the sideline pass to Allison for 39. Rodgers wasn't as accurate as he has been of late, even indoors. He was plenty accurate enough, however, and perhaps most importantly has slammed the door shut on giveaways. In some ways he's returned to basics, as his two-handed grip on the football in harm's way indicates.

RUNNING BACKS (3 ½)

Ripkowski, who played merely 17 snaps as a rookie behind John Kuhn, posted career-high totals of 36 snaps, nine carries and 61 rushing yards. At one point in the first half he was on the field for 18 straight plays; he had a streak of 12 in the second half. Yes, there were some big holes created against a spread-out defense, and he powered through them. At other times, he made more than was blocked. When DT A'Shawn Robinson beat Linsley back door, Ripkowski stiff-armed his way to a gain of 4. He had such success that the ILBs bit on the play fake to him leaving Cook wide open in the middle for 24. He caught the ball easily, too, with more catch radius than the aging version of Kuhn. His negative was allowing 1 ½ pressures in pass protection. Ty Montgomery (35) started, went the wrong way on an aborted screen pass and twisted his ankle. In the second half, Lang was pushed back by Ngata but he bounced wide for 11. When Bulaga struggled to control his man at the point, he made a hard cut inside to daylight for 9. Montgomery's third drop as a Packer cost him a 10-yard TD. Christine Michael (nine) made two tacklers miss in seven touches. FB Joe Kerridge (six) sprung Ripkowski for 15 with a booming iso block on SLB Josh Byner.

DEFENSIVE LINE (2 ½)

The Lions were without C Travis Swanson (head) and RT Riley Reiff (hip). Two of the five starters were rookies, and second-year RT Corey Robinson was making just his second start. There was opportunity to dominate. Instead, rookie free agent Zach Zenner pounded away between the tackles for 69 yards in 20 carries and the pass rush was negligible. Mike Daniels (played 45 of the 66 defensive snaps) continued to make plays in long pursuit because his level of energy and commitment knows no bounds. At times, he mauled LG Laken Tomlinson, who struggles. He spotted RG Larry Warford coming on a trap and squeezed it for a gain of 2. Nevertheless, Daniels was covered up and knocked around on some runs. So was Letroy Guion (34), who in a departure from last week played more than twice as many snaps as Kenny Clark (15). Warford is a top-notch wide body, and he was creating movement. Clark made a nice read on a screen and played through Tomlinson on a Zenner carry for no gain. Dean Lowry (12) tries hard and generated one of the unit's two pressures. He also tends to get high, and when that happens he gets washed.

LINEBACKERS (3)

One week after getting after Vikings LT T.J. Clemmings it was a completely different story for Clay Matthews (51) against LT Taylor Decker. Because of his damaged left shoulder, Matthews didn't play a single snap over Robinson. Offensive coordinator Jim Bob Cooter ordered some chipping early but when it became evident Decker needed no help Matthews ended up being doubled a season-low 12.5% of individual (non-stunt) rushes. Decker, the big rookie from Ohio State, has had his share of problems but shut out Matthews. He can't take on cut-off blocks with his left shoulder. TE Matthew Mulligan trashed him more than once. When Dom Capers drew up a perfect fire-zone blitz, Matthews flowed to the throwing line but dropped Matthew Stafford's pass that he might have returned for a 48-yard TD. He's a hands catcher, too, but seemed unsure whether to hands or body catch it. Nick Perry (36) had two of his team-high three pressures off the edge against Robinson. Julius Peppers (35, including 18 at OLB) had two pressures but needs to contribute more as a run defender. Datone Jones (34, including 26 at OLB) almost always is there to eat up a lot of snaps. He was attacking tight ends on cut-off blocks but his rush was minimal. His off-sides penalty caused him to be benched for the final 7 minutes of the second quarter. Joe Thomas made two wow plays early, breaking up a third-and-4 out to WR Golden Tate from the left slot in man coverage and slipping Tomlinson's block to drive Zenner backward after a 2-yard gain. Then his back went out after 15 snaps and the signal-calling role went to Jake Ryan (58). He's often quick to diagnose and can be active, but his impact in this game was moderate. Wearing his knee brace, Blake Martinez (15) beat Zenner for a sack using timing, burst and change of direction.

SECONDARY (3)

LC Damarious Randall (26) started ahead of Quinten Rollins (23), with mainstay LaDarius Gunter (66) at RC and Micah Hyde (66) in the slot. Randall was in and out with a knee problem; Rollins suffered a neck injury late in the third quarter. There's no telling if the coaches would have had enough confidence to play rookie CB Makinton Dorleant; he departed with a knee injury. It was a mess but to the rescue rode Morgan Burnett (66), the old standby. When Hyde moved outside, Burnett manned up against wideouts inside. He did the job, too. When Burnett played extensively at ILB early, Zenner carried eight times for 43 yards. There's a price to be paid for playing him across from 300-pounders. But Burnett's rare versatility – he played SS, ILB, nickel, dime – helped save a thin secondary. Randall kept trying to go but wasn't effective. Neither was Rollins, who just isn't very aware, physical or fast. Hyde made a textbook interception of a back-shoulder pass at the 1 to Tate. The official let the contact go because both players were grabby. Stafford got after Gunter with some success early but he held up better as the game went on. It was a down day for Ha Ha Clinton-Dix (66). On third and 15, it's his job to be wide enough so he can get over the top and defend the 35-yard sideline completion to TJ Jones. He was caught setting up late twice by Stafford and the results were easy completions in the flat. He got beat in man coverage by TE Eric Ebron on a goal-line slant. The communication was poor between Hyde and Randall on Tate's 3-yard TD. Earlier, Hyde closed well on the Lions' trademark flat pass inside the 5 to Anquan Boldin. Gunter, Burnett and SS Marwin Evans (12) were right there when Boldin seized the 35-yard TD on a Hail Mary. Playing a season-high 49 snaps, Kentrell Brice showed deficiencies in coverage.

KICKERS (2 ½)

Mason Crosby connected from 53, his longest make since a 56-yarder in the rarefied air of Denver last season. He missed an extra point with a strange-looking screwball that faded right. His five kickoffs averaged 70.2 yards and 4.04 seconds of hang time. Jacob Schum had three good punts (all inside the 20) and two abysmal ones that went out of bounds. His season's worst, an 18-yard catastrophe, was snagged by QB Brett Hundley deep in the bench area. Schum's five-boot averages were 37.2 (gross, net) and 4.09 hang time.

SPECIAL TEAMS (3)

Following the Hail Mary TD, there were 13 seconds left and time for another bomb if the Packers couldn't recover Sam Martin's tricky onside kick. In one of Ron Zook's well-designed schemes, those who were supposed to block did and the designated recovery man, Richard Rodgers, secured the low hopper. Playing teams for the first time in five games, Davis was burned by gunner Johnson Bademosi on a punt and Hyde got smeared. Earlier, Bademosi did the same thing to Randall, but Randall gave in and held him for a penalty. An aggressive tackler was Evans.

STARS OF THE GAME: 1. Aaron Rodgers; 2. Morgan Burnett; 3. Geronimo Allison.

OVERALL RATING: 4.0 footballs