

Rating the Packers: Week 18 vs Giants

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

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Green Bay - It was left to the Green Bay Packers' defense and the special teams to hold the fort in the first 26 minutes Sunday at Lambeau Field because the offense was going nowhere fast against the staunch defense of the New York Giants.

That's how Super Bowl contenders must play. When one segment of the team sags, the others have to pick up the slack.

Here is a rating of the Packers in their 38-13 NFC wild-card playoff victory, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses:

RECEIVERS (4 ½)

It appeared as if coach Mike McCarthy wasn't planning on a major role for Randall Cobb in his return from a two-game ankle injury. Before Jordy Nelson departed with damaged ribs on his 16th snap, Cobb had played only six and Geronimo Allison had played four. Without Nelson, Cobb played 55 of the 71 offensive snaps and Allison logged 41. Cobb's ankle must have been tender but he was overflowing with pent-up energy and had fresh legs. His three TDs tied the NFL playoff record. On the 42-yard Hail Mary that turned the game toward the Packers, he delivered a subtle push to FS Leon Hall, the ex-Bengal who had outplayed him from the slot in 2013. That gave Cobb the extra yard that he needed to hug the bomb and get his feet down just inside the end line. The anticipated slot matchup between Cobb and Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie ended when DRC bumped legs with Jared Cook on the second play and suffered a thigh bruise so bad he wasn't able to return from scrimmage. Veterans Trevin Wade (nickel) and Coty Sensabaugh (dime) played poorly in his place. Cobb destroyed Wade with a quick move to the post for a 30-yard TD before snatching a high end-zone shot against CB Eli Apple for a 16-yard score. Nelson often has avoided putting himself in vulnerable positions by getting down before contact. This time, he was reaching for a sideline pass that he dropped when Hall hit him in the left side with his helmet. Cook (49, 17 with his hand down) had two of his catches for 29 yards against man coverage by WLB Jonathan Casillas. Aaron Rodgers likes throwing to Cook so much that he came off a designed screen and flipped it to him for 6. Cook's drop of a 20-yard pass with seconds left in the half enabled the Packers to try the Hail Mary. Davante Adams (68) looked every bit a No. 1 after Nelson went down. His releases are special. Miss in the five-yard bump zone and big plays almost are inevitable. Untimely drops are Adams' only shortcoming. Allison was getting open but the ball didn't arrive. Neither Richard Rodgers (25, 15 with his hand down) nor Jeff Janis (16) was targeted.

OFFENSIVE LINE (4 ½)

In the Oct. 9 meeting, DE Olivier Vernon spent the first half trying to solve David Bakhtiari and the second toiling against Bryan Bulaga. In this game, Vernon was aligned to Bakhtiari's side for all but one snap. Once again, Bakhtiari had the answers, and he almost never had help. It was a great matchup to watch. Vernon ended up beating Bakhtiari for one flush and one "bad" run. With DE Jason Pierre-Paul (sports hernia) out, Bulaga was in total control against pedestrian rookie Romeo Okwara. Although Bulaga didn't allow a pressure, he and T.J. Lang were guilty of getting their pads too high on a failed third and 1. DT Johnathan Hankins split their double-team and stuffed Aaron Ripkowski. Bulaga's other "bad" run came when NT Damon Harrison moved outside and dismissed him. The 350-pound Harrison has been collapsing pockets all season but Corey Linsley stood his ground snap after snap and didn't yield a pressure. It was the best evidence yet of how strong the undersized Linsley really is. Linsley also did an excellent job cutting off Harrison on outside-zone runs. Later, Harrison did obliterate Linsley on an attempted reach block, as did backup Jay Bromley. Lang (no pressures, one-half "bad" run) turned in his best game since assorted injuries began to affect his level of play several weeks ago. Despite the frigid weather, he was moving more fluidly. Steady Lane Taylor gave up 1 ½ pressures and 1 ½ "bad" runs.

QUARTERBACKS (4)

Aaron Rodgers was headed for one-half football for most of the first half. Four of the five sacks were his fault. One of the sacks and his intentional grounding penalty cost the Packers one field-goal attempt and perhaps two. Even referee Ed Hochuli, a most lenient arbiter of grounding calls, had to agree with his fellow officials that Rodgers was at fault. He probably grounded the ball because he couldn't bear taking another sack. For some reason, Rodgers kept looking downfield instead of taking what defensive coordinator Steve Spagnuolo was giving. Rodgers had all day; the line has been so protective all season that he might have forgotten what real pressure feels like. When he did throw, half a dozen of his 22 first-half passes were off target. Given his remarkable play for weeks, it was almost surreal to see him struggle. Just like that, his performance shifted from the ridiculous to the sublime. The 31-yard sideline strike followed by the 5-yard TD dart, both to Adams, changed everything. It didn't matter that Nelson was gone. Having seen what Spagnuolo was up to (21.3 percent blitz rate, usually with defensive backs), he started scanning the field better and putting the ball on receivers. On the 16-yard TD to Cobb, Rodgers danced in place actually looking off one safety and then the other. The Hail Mary traveled 60 yards and hung 3.99 seconds. Many quarterbacks throw them with too flat of a trajectory. His is perfect. DE Kerry Wynn said Spagnuolo's containment-rush strategy was designed to put Rodgers "in a little cage." It eliminated Rodgers as a rusher but not quite as a passer.

RUNNING BACKS (3)

In the first half, McCarthy went with one back for 30 plays and no back for three. Christine Michael didn't play. In the second series of the third quarter, McCarthy inserted Michael (14) to team with Ripkowski (25) in offset-I formations and then ran the ball four straight times (for 27 yards). Michael probably had his best day since debuting in Game 11. When he's on the field, it's to carry. He's still feeling his way in pass protection and running routes, including screens. As a ball carrier, he's bouncy and determined. His stiff-arm is a weapon. He's hard to knock backward. Michael is an impatient runner, and that's why Seattle got rid of him. He was quick to cut back Sunday, but it's hard to fault him for any decision. Ty Montgomery (41) looked very common. Ripkowski delivered several effective blocks. When McCarthy went for it on fourth and 1, however, he couldn't get blitzing SS Landon Collins out of the hole. Together with the tepid combo block by Linsley and Taylor against Hankins, Montgomery lost a yard. When Ripkowski took a stiff shot from Collins in front of the Green Bay bench, he bounced up clutching the football woofing as if to say, 'Is that all you got?'" The second-year man has some swagger to him, and teammates eat that up.

DEFENSIVE LINE (4)

The Packers knew they would have to stop the run with two DTs, two OLBs and two ILBs. They could not permit Paul Perkins and Rashad Jennings to control the tempo. In doing so, Dom Capers shifted his front just before the snap possibly more than at any time this year. "They wanted to make things a little more hectic when you want to run the ball," RT Marshall Newhouse said. "When you're run blocking you have (many) different types of assignments. It can be a little confusing." Despite the light box, Perkins, Jennings and Bobby Rainey rushed 16 times for 59 yards (3.7). That was a win for Green Bay. The best player, as always, was Mike Daniels (played 40 of the 65 defensive snaps). At times, he was borderline unblockable, either making the tackle or setting up the tackle on six runs totaling 7 yards. On four of the six he beat Justin Pugh, one of the NFL's better left guards. Daniels didn't have a pressure, but he wasn't on the field for many sure passing downs. Kenny Clark (22) stuffed C Weston Richburg on one rush for no gain. He also had the unit's only pressure by getting to the up-field edge of RG John Jerry. The big day for Letroy Guion (25) comes Sunday against the Cowboys' ground game. On Sunday, he penetrated effectively on third and 1 when coach Ben McDoo curiously ran scatback Rainey up the gut. Other times, Guion was washed away. Rookie Dean Lowry (16) does a good job throwing his arms up to obstruct throwing lanes.

LINEBACKERS (3 ½)

The best player on defense was Julius Peppers (38, including 30 at OLB). He registered three pressures and two batted balls. Peppers didn't beat LT Ereck Flowers on his sack, but when Eli Manning tried to duck away underneath him he was quick to shed and pounce. He did beat Flowers cleanly for a knockdown and Pugh cleanly for a flush. One of Peppers' deflections came on a third and 3 when he rushed inside standing up and, when Richburg shut him down, had the awareness to leap with perfect timing. Peppers started ahead of Nick Perry (22), who surprisingly couldn't get a sniff against Newhouse. On the other side, Clay Matthews (52) didn't get enough done considering McDoo gave Flowers just 20 percent double-team help against him. His two pressures included a strip-sack around the corner against Flowers in 3.3 seconds. The ball was rolling around for 7.2 seconds before Matthews, the only alert player on the field, bowled over Perkins to make the recovery. Datone Jones (20, including 12 at OLB) had a two-pressure day, which was two more than Kyler Fackrell (15). On the inside, Jake Ryan (42) made a bunch of tackles a few yards downfield and broke up a pair of passes, including one 25 yards downfield to Odell Beckham Jr. Manning kept throwing "Y-stick" routes to TE Will Tye, and Ryan's coverage was tight. When Tye took that route vertically, it appeared Blake Martinez (23) was guessing on the play. Tye gained 33 of the 51 yards after the catch when Martinez left his feet trying for the tackle and fell off. Almost no one on defense was set; it was just a bad play all the way around. Joe Thomas (42) tried to play with a bad back and wasn't himself.

SECONDARY (3 ½)

Capers blitzed on 17.4 percent of dropbacks, slightly more than in the Oct. 9 game (10.2 percent). When LaDarius Gunter (65) was left one-on-one, Beckham got open deep. Unlike the first meeting, when Gunter stayed on the right side, he followed Beckham on 55 of his 65 snaps. Of those 55 snaps, he played press coverage on 36 and off on 19. Beckham caught two of his four passes for minimal yardage against Gunter. He's a fierce competitor who plays faster than he timed. Morgan Burnett (65) usually provided the help for Gunter. After Guion created a bubble with his penetration, Burnett surged in and finished off Rainey on the third and 1. On the other side, Damarious Randall (65) got worked by Tavarres King to the post for a 41-yard TD. He also pulled up on a pass in which Manning was baited and should have been an interception. He was slow reacting on an early pick play but then reacted fast later for a breakup. His return of 78 yards on a garbage-time pick was the second longest in Packers' playoff annals. Micah Hyde (65), the nickel back, was run by early for 26 when Sterling Shepard ran a take-off from the slot. When Shepard beat him again from the 15, Hyde recovered and helped force an incompletion. He'll never give up on a play. It was a relatively quiet day for Ha Ha Clinton-Dix (65). Kentrell Brice (23), the dime safety, continues to show hesitation in his play.

KICKERS (4 ½)

Giants P Brad Wing ranked well ahead (10th compared to 24th in net average) of Jacob Schum during the season. In this cold-weather game, Schum won by knockout. His six-punt averages were 41.8 yards (gross), 41.2 (net) and 4.01 seconds (hang time). Wing's eight-punt averages were 39.0, 32.8 and 3.56. Schum put three inside the 20, one more than Wing. Mason Crosby extended his NFL playoff record for consecutive field goals to 21 with a 32-yarder. One of his kickoffs was so close to the right front pylon that Rainey fielded it before falling out of bounds at the 3. His six-kickoff averages were 64.7 and 3.92. The four-kickoff averages for Giants vet Robbie Gould were 58.8 and 4.01.

SPECIAL TEAMS (3)

Having been whipped in the Game 4 meeting, the Packers' units carried the day this time. Dwayne Harris is an elite dual return specialist. Janis beat a double-team block outside to force Harris to fair catch before tackling him twice for a gain of 1. After a sluggish season in coverage, Janis has been making his presence felt in the last month. The terrific return game included kickoff returns of 33 by Janis and 31 by Michael, and Hyde's 23-yard punt return. The three missed tackles represented vast improvement from eight on Oct. 9, but still were too many. A sideline communication snafu regarding substitution before a punt by Wing led to McCarthy's last-second timeout.

STARS OF THE GAME: 1. Randall Cobb; 2. Julius Peppers; 3. Davante Adams.

OVERALL RATING: 4.0 footballs