

# Rating the Packers: Week 19 at Cowboys

By Bob McGinn – Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel

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**Green Bay** - Now owner Jerry Jones and son Stephen, his top personnel man, understand keen disappointment when it comes to playoff football between the Dallas Cowboys and the Green Bay Packers.

Three straight times in the 1990s ('93, '94 and '95) the Cowboys eliminated the Packers. Now the Cowboys have been ousted by the Packers twice in the last three years.

"We have a team and we have players that can win these big games," Jones said Sunday after the Cowboys fell to the Packers, 34-31, in an NFC divisional game at AT&T Stadium. "As much credit as we're going to give Green Bay, and we're giving them their due, we now know we're capable of taking it all the way, too."

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

## RECEIVERS ( 4 ½ )

There's a major reason why the offense sputtered in the Game 5 loss to the Cowboys. Jared Cook was out with an ankle injury. Obviously, Jordy Nelson (ribs) was missed in this game, but probably not to the extent that Cook would have been. Cook (played 51 of the 67 offensive snaps, including 23 with his hand down) is a unique player on this roster. The 36-yard reception to set up the winning field goal would have been difficult for a WR, let alone a TE. His hands, his sideline awareness and his ability to read a coverage coming all the way across the field were just outstanding. He made two other tough catches. He ran right by CB Morris Claiborne for 26 yards, and was open deep against CB Brandon Carr but the pass was overthrown. He isn't a fabulous athlete and is a little stiff, but his hands are consistent, he can still run and he's a willing if not always effective blocker. Cook led in targets with 11 followed by Davante Adams (60) with 10 and Randall Cobb (62) with eight. Adams is hard for any CB to handle on split end-slants against press coverage. When Adams moved inside in a trips formation, FS Byron Jones came down to cover him. Jones had outside leverage but Adams beat him outside anyway with his fast feet for 32. Cobb outplayed nickel back Orlando Scandrick, an old adversary. He also showed tremendous toe-tapping ability on the first play of the third quarter. What endears Cobb to scouts is the fact he gets north-south after the catch without messing around. Geronimo Allison (51) is still a little soft and can be ridden off routes. However, he's aggressive after the catch and even on crack-back blocks. He's a consistent catcher, too. When Richard Rodgers (25, 12 in a three-point stance) went one-on-one against WLB Sean Lee, the 34-yard TD was his longest gain since the Hail Mary in Detroit last season. Rodgers surprisingly had Lee beat by several steps but then came back to make a tough catch falling into the end zone as the pass was underthrown ... maybe intentionally.

## **OFFENSIVE LINE ( 4 ½ )**

David Irving, perhaps the most talented member of the Cowboys' eight-man rotation in the D-line, also played the most snaps (45). With his height, long arms and speed, he had been disrupting foes in the last six weeks. Against the Packers' veterans, he made one tackle and didn't have a pressure. When Irving played DE, Bryan Bulaga handled him. When he worked inside, T.J. Lang and Corey Linsley were in total control. Rod Marinelli's group plays as hard as any in the NFL, but hustle can't make up for pedestrian talent against a pass-blocking unit like the Packers. All three sacks were by defensive backs on five-man pressures. In all, Marinelli rushed five on 36 percent of dropbacks (he never rushed six). Even after returning from a second-quarter knee injury, David Bakhtiari owned DEs DeMarcus Lawrence and Benson Mayowa. DE Tyrone Crawford, a solid vet, didn't come close to solving Bulaga. Lang blocked authoritatively on the second level, and on Aaron Ripkowski's 20-yard run he pulled and took out Lee. Linsley's pull on MLB Anthony Hitchens for a 15-yard gain was reminiscent of how Cowboys C Mark Stepnoski worked in space in the 1990s. As the game went on Linsley's shotgun snaps started floating back. On Ty Montgomery's 3-yard TD run, Lane Taylor combo-blocked off DT Terrell McClain and onto Lee. Fortunately for the Packers, Jason Spriggs had to play just six snaps (three at LT, three at TE). That was time enough for the rookie to miss Lawrence on a run for minus-5 and miss Lee for a hurry on a stunt. He has a ton of work to do before 2017 training camp.

## **QUARTERBACKS ( 4 ½ )**

Based on the first three series, it looked as if Aaron Rodgers had a snitch in Marinelli's staff meeting room all week. Everything worked: the quick game, the play-action game, the deep game, the check-down game, the blitz-beater game and the extend game. When Mayowa took his good sweet time subbing out on third and 5, Rodgers had the ball snapped to gain the penalty that sustained the opening TD drive. When Irving jumped offside, Rodgers was able to complete just his second pass of the season on a "free" play (the TD to Richard Rodgers). He seemed so calm. His accuracy in the first half was good, not great. He probably missed not having Nelson around as his default receiver. Rodgers had a chance to do away with Dallas late in the third quarter but threw a bad ball inside rather than outside to Adams and FS Jeff Heath intercepted to initiate the Cowboys' comeback. Dallas didn't register a single pressure until the five-minute mark of the second quarter. When Marinelli began sending an extra rusher, Rodgers was responsible for 1 ½ of the three sacks and one of the two knockdowns. He was hit much harder than in most games. Probably the most jarring contact was the blind-side shot by Heath for a sack with 18 seconds left and the score tied. Some quarterbacks fumble from that hit. Not only didn't Rodgers fumble, it took no more than a second for him to look at referee Tony Corrente and call a timeout. On the next play, he extended right and threw a perfect 20-yard pass to Cook that Jones made a stellar play to break up. On the next play, one that will be remembered for years, he rolled by design to the left, spotted Cook running through the zone and, throwing across his torso, delivered a somewhat wobbly pass on the dime for 36 yards. Rodgers hasn't experienced the thrill and satisfaction of many game-winning drives in his illustrious career. If the situation occurs in Atlanta or perhaps Houston, he'll be ready.

## **RUNNING BACKS ( 3 ½ )**

Mike McCarthy used an empty backfield 11 times, tying his highest total in the last 10 games. The result was 52 snaps for Ty Montgomery, 21 for Ripkowski and four for Christine Michael. Montgomery thrived, rushing 11 times for 47 yards against a reduced box and adding 34 yards in six receptions. When Lang blocked SS Barry Church, Montgomery made a great cut through trash for a gain of 15. On another rush he ran over Church, a certified tough guy. He vaulted into the end zone with authority, too. When the inside was plugged up, he showed speed to turn the corner and gain a couple yards. Church made amends, however, by running over Montgomery for a sack and beating him for a pressure. With seasoning, Montgomery might have picked up Heath on his last-minute knockdown. Ripkowski isn't John Kuhn yet in protection, either. But he is tough. Michael undercut Rodgers on one of his one-step throws. That's not the recommended path for further playing time.

## **DEFENSIVE LINE ( 3 )**

From a personnel standpoint, the best development was the performance of DT Kenny Clark. Considering the opposition, the Packers have to be ebullient about his showing, at least as a pass rusher. The D-line rotation consisted of Mike Daniels (played 43 of the 69 defensive snaps), Letroy Guion (27), Dean Lowry (21) and Clark (26). The only pressures were the two by Clark. He bulled All-Pro RG Zack Martin into Dak Prescott, forcing a third-down incompleteness and subsequent FG. He also successfully bull-rushed LG Ronald Leary and C Travis Frederick. These were two-armed chest jams accompanied by leverage and lower-body strength. The Packers' only tackle for loss came on a screen to Ezekiel Elliott in which Clark recognized it instantly, wouldn't be faked and made the tackle in space. On Nick Perry's sack, it was hustle and spatial awareness by Clark that prevented Prescott from escaping toward the sideline. Elliott made some of his 125 yards bouncing outside. Some also came straight through the A gaps. Everyone got obliterated more than once. Most damaging were the times blockers occupied Guion and Clark one-on-one freeing another to cover up one of the ILBs. After playing three D-linemen 28 times in the first meeting Dom Capers did that just five times Sunday.

## **LINEBACKERS ( 2 ½ )**

Though healthy, Blake Martinez played merely one snap from scrimmage compared to 67 for Joe Thomas and 53 for Jake Ryan. Thomas has back problems but it didn't stop him from a respectable performance. He's not a take-on guy. FB Keith Smith, a violent lead blocker, flattened Thomas twice. Martin rag-dolled him once. He's small and will get bounced. At the same time, Thomas keeps running to the ball and, when he gets there, the hits can be explosive. In coverage, he kept TE Jason Witten from scoring a 15-yard TD with two excellent plays in coverage (one in man, one in zone) late in the first half. It was Ryan's play to make on Prescott's QB draw for 2 points that tied the score. Ryan usually shoots his gun but in this case he hesitated and was lost. Clearly, the Packers need better performance at the position. The battle between beat-up perennial Pro Bowlers Clay Matthews (49) and LT Tyron Smith was no contest. Of Matthews' 28 non-stunt rushes, he was one-on-one with Smith on 25. His two pressures came on a stunt against Leary and a "rover" rush around RT Doug Free. Julius Peppers (45 snaps, including 30 at OLB) continued to start over Perry (37). Peppers had a quiet day whereas Perry came through with a critical batted ball on the Cowboys' last snap, the sack and a knockdown inside against Free. Perry's sack actually was set up on a flush by Datone Jones (31, including 23 at OLB) on an inside move against Free. For the first time in his 15 "healthy" games Kyler Fackrell wasn't used from scrimmage.

## **SECONDARY ( 1 )**

Easily the best of the cornerbacks was nickel back Micah Hyde (69). His interception was phenomenal, even better than his textbook pick at the front pylon at Ford Field. He trusted his film study and his keen instincts, communicated with LaDarius Gunter and jumped Prescott's dump-off. Witten came across the formation to pick up Hyde's slot blitz expecting another timid DB that would give himself up. Instead, Hyde adjusted to a blocker outweighing him by 65 pounds and won inside in 2.9 seconds. Hyde has enjoyed better days playing the run but also deflected a pass to speedy Brice Butler 28 yards downfield. Ha Ha Clinton-Dix (69) isn't finishing the season strong. He had Elliott dead to rights in front of the Packers' bench and missed. He's just not getting much done. Morgan Burnett suffered a basketball-type thigh injury in his seventh snap before limping around for nine more and giving way to Kentrell Brice (52). Brice was erratic, which might be expected but can't be accepted this time of year. He cut down Elliott twice in the clear with sharp low tackles, and demolished slot Cole Beasley after a catch. At the same time, he waited for a wayward long pass instead of attacking the ball and dropped the pick. He also left himself too vulnerable to punishment in front of pulling linemen, covered down on the slot for the blitzing Hyde and gave up a too-easy 19-yard pass to Terrance Williams and lost containment once. Gunter (69) shadowed Dez Bryant for the most part, which was an impossible assignment from the jump. Gunter is physical and good with his hands, but not to such an extent where he could stop a rare talent such as Bryant. When Bryant did release cleanly, Gunter's marginal catch-up speed led to the 40-yard TD. The tipoff that Gunter is playing hurt was his poor tackling. On the other side, Damarious Randall (67) was awful. Maybe he's hurt; on Saturday, he was added to the injury report (foot). He was late lining up at times, wasn't in proper football position and offering little or no challenge to receivers. His run support was non-existent. Even Witten was doing whatever he wanted to Randall. The Packers can be expected to do everything possible so Quinten Rollins starts at LC.

## **KICKERS ( 5 )**

Mason Crosby had to kick the decisive 51-yard FG as time expired twice after coach Jason Garrett attempted to freeze him with his final timeout. The second boot wasn't quite as true but fit just inside the left upright by a few feet. Ten minutes or so earlier, he drilled the third-longest FG in playoff history (56). That extends his postseason record to 23 straight. All six of his kickoffs were touchbacks; the averages were 73.8 yards and 4.0 seconds of hang time. Jacob Schum's three-punt averages were 54.7 (gross), 45.3 (net) and 4.62.

## **SPECIAL TEAMS ( 3 )**

Michael is an accident waiting to happen on kickoff returns. Intelligence and stability are important qualities in that position. Michael muffed a catch Sunday, panicked and got out only to the 6. In previous games he has caught kickoffs above his head. It would be somewhat surprising if he plays again for the Packers. Something's missing.

**STARS OF THE GAME:** 1. Mason Crosby; 2. Aaron Rodgers; 3. Jared Cook.

**OVERALL RATING:** 4.5 footballs