

# 2016 Packers Team Report Card

*By Bob McGinn of the Journal Sentinel*

*Posted: Jan. 28, 2017*

## PASS OFFENSE

Perhaps the best way to judge a passing attack is pass average (yards divided by attempts and sacks). Just 28th at midseason, the Packers finished with a flourish to end 17th. Thus, they settled near the middle of the pack after a No. 31 finish last year and a No. 1 finish in 2014. It's easy to forget the Packers tied for 25th in passing yards (218.9) a year ago, their worst finish since '87. This year, they were seventh (262.4). Just 11th in passer rating (96.1) after eight games, Aaron Rodgers rebounded to finish fourth (104.2). His full-season numbers (playoffs included) showed personal bests in attempts (738), completions (481), yards (5,432) and touchdowns (49). His all-game rating of 104.1 was the sixth-best of his career and his average per attempt of 7.38 was his eighth-best. Opponents blitzed on just 23.7% of passes, lowest against Green Bay in at least 20 years. The protection unit ranked 13th in sack percentage, its best finish since '07. Of the 45 sacks, just 21½ were charged to the line and 16½ went on Rodgers. Bryan Bulaga allowed the most pressures (33). Jordy Nelson tied for fifth in receptions (97) and was sixth in yards (1,257). His 14 TDs tied for fourth; Davante Adams' 12 tied for seventh. After snagging seven in each of his first two seasons, Adams led the team in receptions of 20 yards or more with 21. The Packers tied for 21st in yards per completion (11.0). According to Sportradar, Green Bay ranked 16th in dropped passes. Nelson and Adams shared the team lead in drops with nine; Randall Cobb had the lowest drop rate (1.9%). Cobb also led the club in average gain after the catch (5.05). **Grade: B.**

## RUSHING OFFENSE

Overweight or not, Eddie Lacy was running effectively when his season ended in Game 5 (after 166 snaps) with an ankle injury. He averaged a hefty 5.1 in 71 carries for 360 yards. At that point, coach Mike McCarthy's run rate was 40.3%. Playing even more spread offense, the Packers rushed merely 33.6% in Games 6-19 to finish at 35.3%. It was far off McCarthy's 41.5% rate in his first 10 seasons, which also happened to be the NFL average this season. In the end, the Packers ranked 20th in rushing (106.3), down from 12th, 11th and seventh in the last three seasons when Lacy was at full throttle. Impressively, their average per carry of 4.5 (4.4 in the playoffs) came in seventh. Converted WR Ty Montgomery ranked 41st with 457 yards, lowest by a rusher leader in Green Bay since Darick Holmes gained 386 in '98. Chipping in with 22% of the 19-game rushing total was Aaron Rodgers with a career-best 431 yards. In the regular season, his total of 369 trailed only Tyrod Taylor (580) and Colin Kaepernick (468) at the position. Rodgers, without a rush for 20 yards or more since 2012, had four. The "bad" run rate was 26.8%; Lane Taylor had a team-high 13. Utilizing a predominantly zone scheme, the Packers pulled a lineman on just 42 of their 433 rushes. Those 42 rushes, however, gained 313 yards (7.5). On T.J. Lang's 12 pulls, the gain was 175 yards (14.6). Of the 14 rushing TDs, just three came in the first 10 games. When push came to shove, however, the Packers often failed to get the tough yard. On 21 third- and fourth-and-1 situations, they converted just 57.1% (12) on the ground. **Grade: C-**

## PASSING DEFENSE

Statistically, at least, pass rush wasn't the problem. The Packers had 44 sacks, ranking seventh in sack percentage. The linebackers amassed 149 pressures, 19 more than ever before in Dom Capers' eight seasons as coordinator. Nick Perry enjoyed his finest season with a team-high 36 pressures. Other productive rushers were Julius Peppers (32½), Mike Daniels (31½), Datone Jones (31½) and Clay Matthews (28½). The Packers recovered all five fumbles on their five strip-sacks. The four-man rush needed to be active because Capers blitzed on just 27.3% of passes, a far cry from 36.3% last season. When Sam Shields suffered a season-ending concussion late in Game 1, Capers soon would discover the others couldn't cover. One year after ranking 11th in pass average, the Packers crashed to 30th. They ranked 31st in passing yards (269.3) and 26th in opposing passer rating (95.9), long a strength for a Capers-coordinated defense. The playoff results (326.0, 103.2) were even worse. Over the last six games, foes averaged 337.5 net yards passing. Damarious Randall allowed 8½ TD passes; the last Packers cornerback to give up more was Craig Newsome (10½) in '95. LaDarius Gunter yielded eight; Gunter led the team in passes of 20 yards or more allowed with 11½. Ten receivers had 100-yard games, including four of at least 180: Marvin Jones (6-205), Adam Thielen (12-202), Stefon Diggs (9-182) and Julio Jones (9-180). The Packers fought back with 19 interceptions; Ha Ha Clinton-Dix tied for fifth with five. Eight of the picks came in Games 13-14. There were 20 batted passes, nine more than a year ago and the most in Green Bay in more than 18 years. Peppers led with five. **Grade: D.**

## RUSHING DEFENSE

It couldn't last. That was obvious. Yet, it was an eye-opening way to start a season. Merely a 21st-ranked run defense last year, the Packers found themselves leading the NFL four games in with shockingly impressive yields of 42.8 yards per game and 1.99 per carry. Normalcy returned over the last 15 games as opponents averaged 110.2 and 4.58. In the end, Green Bay's No. 8 finish (94.7) was their best since the '09 club led the league (83.3). In yards allowed per rush, the Packers ranked 14th (4.03). There were 26 tackles for loss in Games 1-4 but just 30 in Games 5-19. Capers decided he had to play more defenders in coverage than at the line. Letroy Guion led in tackles for loss (7½) and the D-line in tackles per snap (one every 9.3). Jake Ryan paced the ILBs (one tackle every 6.9), Jayrone Elliott led the OLBs (one every 10.4) and Morgan Burnett was No. 1 among the DBs (one every 10.2). Forget about referring to the 3-4 as the Packers' base defense; they used it just 11% of the time (136 of 1,239 snaps). Three backs, including Ezekiel Elliott twice, surpassed 100: DeMarco Murray (17-123), Robert Kelley (24-137) and Elliott (28-157, 22-125). Of the nine carries allowed that were for 20 yards or more, Mike Daniels was responsible for the most (two). The only running-back lost fumble all season was by Seattle's Alex Collins in garbage time on a strip by Christian Ringo. Burnett led in total tackles with 108, seven more than Ha Ha Clinton-Dix. Joe Thomas had the most missed tackles (13), three more than Gunter. Two years after missing 16, Clinton-Dix missed just three. **Grade: B.**

## SPECIAL TEAMS

The second season with Ron Zook coordinating was adequate, and nothing more. In a 10-category statistical breakdown of special teams, the Packers finished 24th. The shining light was Mason Crosby. He beat the Bears, 30-27, at windy Soldier Field with a 32-yard FG as time expired. Then, in the divisional playoffs at Dallas, he connected from 56 with 1:33 left and from 51 as time expired for the 34-31 victory. He ranked 11th in FG accuracy (86.7%). He did miss three of 57 extra points and a 41-yard boot in Atlanta last Sunday. The new punter, Jacob Schum, ranked 24th in net (39.1). His average hang time (4.25) was better than any Packers punter has mustered in the last 17 years with the exception of Tim Masthay (4.35) in 2012. The return game was a mess. Zook rotated four players on kickoffs and three on punts, but largely because of inconsistent blocking there was just one runback for more than 40 yards (Trevor Davis, 55, punt return). The Packers also failed to use the new touchback rule to their advantage. Their opponents had the most favorable starting position (26.6) in the NFL. Jordan Todman's two returns for 160 yards sparked the Colts' upset victory in Game 8. Green Bay's turnover differential was minus-1. The biggest play might have been Ty Montgomery's blocked punt in Minnesota. The penalty leaders, with four apiece, were Kentrell Brice and Josh Hawkins. Jayrone Elliott was the tackling leader with 14 followed by Marwin Evans and Brice, each with 11. The leader in missed tackles was Elliott with three. **Grade: C.**

## PERSONNEL MOVES

In the last 12 months GM Ted Thompson procured one starter (Jared Cook) and one semi-starter (Blake Martinez). Cook arrived three weeks into free agency from the Rams for \$2.75 million over one year. After losing most of training camp and six games due to injury, he turned into the Packers' best receiving TE since Jermichael Finley. Another spring "street" signing, LB Lerentee McCray, was traded to Buffalo on Sept. 3 for a seventh-round draft choice. The same day, Thompson cut Pro Bowl G Josh Sitton. Not only did the Packers weaken their line, they lost the chance for a high compensatory pick in 2018 if he walked as a free agent in March. The time to deal Sitton, assuming management didn't want him around, was last spring, not under the pressure of final cut day. Thompson traded for his first player in six years; 12 days later, he returned RB Knile Davis to Kansas City, voiding the seventh-round tariff. In the draft, Thompson replaced NT B.J. Raji, who unexpectedly quit, by taking NT Kenny Clark with the 27th pick. He also traded up nine slots in the second round for T Jason Spriggs, who repeatedly demonstrated that he has a long way to go. As usual, the Packers assembled one of the NFL's youngest opening-day rosters (fifth at 25.55); the Browns, the youngest (25.05), went 1-15. Green Bay started with 12 rookies before ending with a whopping 15. Excluding moves made from the PUP, injured reserve and suspended categories, nine of the 12 roster additions after the opener came directly from the practice squad. The only contributor was WR Geronimo Allison. It's ridiculous to second-guess Thompson for his decision not to re-sign CB Casey Hayward. He didn't make a play all last year, can't run, isn't physical and fits a zone team like the Chargers much better than the Packers, who feature more man coverage. Thompson, however, failed to reinforce cornerback and running when injuries struck. **Grade: D.**

## COACHING

The Packers and the Patriots were the consensus picks to play in the Super Bowl. New England advanced whereas Green Bay, with a team capable of winning it all for the eighth straight year, failed for the seventh time. Mike McCarthy's team got off to one of its patented slow starts; playing Aaron Rodgers in just one exhibition game stalled the offense for weeks. The Packers' first defeat came by three points in Minnesota after McCarthy went for it and failed on fourth and 2 at the Vikings 14 late in the third quarter. Coach-to-player communication errors were evident throughout the year. McCarthy did his best work implementing imaginative game plans and personnel groupings in the face of upheaval at running back. Back calling the plays after allowing Tom Clements to do it in Games 1-12 last year, McCarthy's offense finally returned to its old devastating form down the stretch. The 19-game average of 4.68 gains of 20 yards (74 passes, 15 runs) or more was the club's highest in at least 23 years. The Packers scored 65 points on opening drives, their most under McCarthy. They also scored a McCarthy-high 43 points on end-of-first-half sorties. For the fourth straight year the Packers ranked among the top 10 teams in fewest penalties. Under Dom Capers, this was a good tackling defense: the 103 missed tackles was the unit's low since 2012. What really fueled the turnaround was turnover differential, McCarthy's secret of success. Tied for 27th at minus-6 after 10 games, Green Bay went on a tear to finish sixth at plus-8. **Grade: B-**

## OVERALL

The season started in exhilarating style. Battling sultry weather and what was forecast to be a promising young team, the Packers received a great play from Damarious Randall on a wide-receiver screen in the final seconds to beat Jacksonville, 27-23. While far from a masterpiece, it ranked as a most happy memory when the Packers stood 4-6 after a fourth straight defeat. At that point, they were arguably the most disappointing team in the league. They also were tied for the 11th-best record in the NFC and two games behind Minnesota and Detroit in the NFC North Division. The Packers defeated the Lions, 31-24, in the finale to deny Detroit its first divisional title in 23 years. It landed the fourth-seeded Packers in the playoffs for the eighth straight season. According to Man-Games Lost, a total of 19 teams were hit harder by injury than the No. 20 Packers. Counting playoffs, they had 15 starters miss 76 games and 13 backups miss 76 games (28-152 overall). The Packers had seven players on injured reserve at year's end; CBs Demetri Goodson and Makinton Dorleant were the two players who required reconstructive knee surgery in 2016. On offense, they improved from 28th to second on third down and from 18th to 10th in the red zone. Those gains were offset by defensive slippage on third down (ninth to 24th) and red zone (16th to 28th). The Packers were 11-7-1 against the spread. With a Super Bowl berth at hand in a building the Packers had destroyed the Falcons by 27 points six years earlier in the divisional playoffs, they weren't even competitive and lost by 23. It ended the Packers' winning streak at eight games and left them with a final record of 12-7. **Grade: B-**