

# Rating the Packers: Week 4 vs Bengals

*By Bob McGinn Posted: Sept. 26, 2017*

It was an appealing Sunday afternoon at Lambeau Field when three youngsters on defense made their first starts, one veteran on defense played substantially for the first time and three rookies debuted as significant contributors on special teams. Kevin King, Josh James and Marwin Evans all started in a revamped secondary. Ahmad Brooks also started, and Atlanta refugee Chris Odom got his feet wet from scrimmage, too. On special teams, running backs Devante Mays and Jamaal Williams along with cornerback Lenzy Pipkins combined to play 36 snaps. Most of the fresh faces were on the field because the Green Bay Packers had been slammed by injuries in the first two games. Six starters and situational substitute Jake Ryan had to be content watching from the sidelines in T-shirts and shorts in humid 89-degree weather. As expected, this wasn't any masterpiece. Green Bay's long injury list and Cincinnati's desperation as an 0-2 team without a touchdown dropped the closing line to Packers minus-7 from minus-9 at the start of the week. After a horrendous first-half showing, the Packers finally drew even with 17 seconds left in regulation before winning in overtime for the first time with Aaron Rodgers at quarterback.

Here is a rating of the Packers in their 27-24 victory over the Bengals, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses.

The three stars of the game were: 1. Corey Linsley; 2. Josh Jones; 3. Justin Vogel. As a team, the Packers received 3 ½ footballs.

## RECEIVERS (2 ½)

With the game on the line and receivers struggling to free themselves against a capable secondary and clever scheme, Geronimo Allison came to the fore. Of the nine passes thrown to wide receivers in the decisive last two drives, five went to Allison (played 47 of the 70 snaps on offense). Two or three of his six receptions for a career-high 122 yards were contested. He started the tying drive with two leaping sidelines catches for 28, then looked the ball in beautifully on the 36-yard Cover 2-beater between CB Pacman Jones and FS George Iloka. Not only that but when he made both veterans miss the gain doubled to 72 yards. It essentially won the game. Davante Adams (67) and Jordy Nelson (67) also played more than ideal given the conditions because Randall Cobb (chest) had to sit out. When Mike McCarthy called one of the precious few trick plays of his tenure, Adams rope-a-doped CB William Jackson and made the grab behind him for 41 yards (21 after the catch). He broke or eluded four tacklers in just three receptions. Sometimes players that stretch for touchdowns inside the 1 on an early down come off as somewhat selfish because the risk of fumble looms large. Adams' fumble at the one-foot line was overturned by replay review. He was fortunate. Jackson, a speedy but scattered first-round draft choice (No. 24) in 2016, sat on Nelson's third-and-6 out cut and returned the ball 75 yards for a TD. At this point, Nelson scares no one in the open field. He needs a scrambling quarterback, designed routes, play-action or the red zone to make plays. He did exactly that three times, twice for touchdowns and another for 23 on a third-and-1 play fake. Martellus Bennett (67, including just 18 with his hand down) wasn't a factor. The Bengals had no problem covering him with SLB Nick Vigil or one of their safeties. His dropped pass on a third-and-5 slant heaped even more pressure on the last four minutes. Bennett can be an effective blocker but right now seems to be playing with little passion or joy. He got beat inside by DE Carlos Dunlap for one of the four "bad" runs and again by Dunlap for a hurry on the flea-flicker. There doesn't seem to be urgency or extra effort in his performance. Lance Kendricks (19, six with hand down) and Richard Rodgers (10, two with hand down) are fairly attractive alternatives but it has been the Bennett show at tight end thus far. Bennett's advantage on the backups is his run blocking although McCarthy doesn't seem overly interested in getting it untracked. Kendricks broke off a deep route for a 17-yard catch, made CB Dre Kirkpatrick miss and turned it into a 51-yard gain before WLB Vincent Rey ran him down.

## **OFFENSIVE LINE (1 ½)**

Geno Atkins, the Bengals 3-technique, is a premier player because of quickness and his strength as a bull rusher. The Packers gave up 19 pressures but Atkins had just three: a late run-in charged to no one, an inside charge against Bryan Bulaga and a flush between Jahri Evans and Corey Linsley. He also made one tackle. If Atkins had been able to run roughshod inside, given the ineptitude at tackle, the Packers' offense might have been paralyzed. Of the 35 pass plays in which Atkins rushed one side or the other, 23 were over Lane Taylor and 12 over Evans. Linsley double-teamed Atkins with the guard on almost every one of his rushes. The plan worked to perfection because Linsley and Taylor play with outstanding strength. Atkins had no chance much of the game, and down the stretch there were a handful of plays when he didn't even bother rushing against their joint front. The run game wasn't much, but on the better plays Linsley usually got Atkins blocked. Also, the highly intelligent Linsley has become almost automatic at snapping the ball when Rodgers' hard counts draw defenders offsides. Taylor played well, too, but did miss Atkins for an early "bad" run. He sat out two snaps with an apparent foot injury. Evans was responsible for three pressures but Rodgers was never knocked down. He has a sneaky way of holding the back of a rusher's jersey as the man is slipping by him. He did that to DE Michael Johnson and Vigil, and got away with it. Bulaga moved OK for a half or so before his bum ankle acted up and he departed after 47 snaps. He didn't play well, yielding three pressures and one "bad" run. On the left side, Kyle Murphy landed on the injury report Monday with a foot injury. It's unclear if the foot was a reason why he couldn't block rookie rusher Carl Lawson. Of his five pressures, four were to Lawson: two sacks, one knockdown and one hurry. Murphy kept oversetting to the outside and Lawson kept knocking him out of the play. He needs more strength. Justin McCray played the two snaps for Taylor and 23 for Bulaga. It wasn't pretty against Dunlap.

## **QUARTERBACKS (4)**

Aaron Rodgers hasn't played many quarters as poorly as the second quarter Sunday. It began with just the second pick-six of his career. He watched Nelson all the way, enabling Jackson to gamble on his hunch. As usual, he threw the ball leaning slightly away from the target, and by his standards it didn't have a whole lot on it. He suffered a delay penalty on third and 4, leading to a sack and punt. From deep in Green Bay territory in the final 3 minutes, he was nearly intercepted on an errant throw inside and a beach-ball of an overthrow on a check-down. The game, however, was just half over. He remained poised for 6.2 seconds before spotting Kendricks for the 51. When Bulaga's exit turned the tackle position into a royal disaster, Rodgers started extending almost everything and giving his ho-hum corps of receivers a few extra seconds to uncover. He did everything right on the 12-play, 75-yard TD drive to force overtime. In overtime, he faced third and 10 with little chance of a conventional call working. Ever resourceful, Rodgers tempted the Bengals with a wicked hard count and just before the ball would have to be snapped got Johnson to jump. Voila. It threw off the Bengals' rush and coverage and, after looking off Iloka, Rodgers spun a sideline shot brimming with rpms to Allison that won the game. When Rodgers looks back on his career, he'll remember this comeback.

## **RUNNING BACKS (one-half)**

The Packers have a problem at the position. Ty Montgomery (65) was awful, and the coaching staff apparently doesn't have confidence in rookies Jamaal Williams (five), Devante Mays and Aaron Jones to compete with him. Montgomery touched the ball 20 times and broke one tackle (Dunlap). Targeted 12 times, he caught eight for a paltry 15 yards. Nothing good happened. The first tackler kept cutting him down. He was indecisive as a runner, receiver and pass blocker. Montgomery had been adequate in Games 1-2. This time, he just wasn't running hard or with vision. Williams wrapped both arms around the ball on his only attempt and gained 6. FB Aaron Ripkowski played only three snaps, all in an I formation in front of Montgomery from the 1-yard line. Hardy Nickerson, a rookie free agent, also played his three snaps of the game across from Ripkowski in goal-line defense. On the first of two carries for no gain by Montgomery, Nickerson attacked Ripkowski in the hole, blew him up and made the tackle. On the second, Ripkowski avoided humiliation but still ended up being shoved backward onto the pile by Nickerson, who at 5-11 ½, 235 is considerably smaller. It's hard to gain tough yards on the ground with a finesse-type fullback.

## **DEFENSIVE LINE (2)**

Not having Mike Daniels (hip) meant many things, not the least of which was backup RG T.J. Johnson escaped without giving up a pressure or tackle for loss. In a 61-snap game, Dom Capers didn't play a down with three linemen on the field; on eight of the 61, just one lineman was needed. Kenny Clark (43) and Dean Lowry (37) started, Quinton Dial (18) and Ricky Jean Francois (12) were the 2's and rookie Montravius Adams (four) played in a football game for the first time since Auburn's contest Jan. 2 against Oklahoma in the Sugar Bowl. None of the five generated a pressure on Andy Dalton. Clark was up and down. He penetrated and beat C Russell Bodine twice (once on a nifty back-door charge) and LT Cedric Ogbuehi once, disrupting rushes. He also missed tackles on a pair of runs totaling 33 yards and was shoved wide on another run for 8. Lowry chased hard and gave as much as he got. In the third quarter, he was slow diagnosing a screen pass and it ruptured into a gain of 21. On the first play of overtime, Lowry redeemed himself by defeating LT Andre Smith and, at the same time, grabbing LG Clint Boling by the pads. Therefore, Boling was unable to get out on Blake Martinez, who ran free and smashed Joe Mixon for minus-2. Dial is a hard man to move.

## **LINEBACKERS (4 ½)**

Jones (61) played every snap at inside linebacker and had two sacks. On the first, he took a tight course off the right edge on a five-man zone blitz and took down Dalton in 2.4 seconds. On the second, he came off the other side, trashed TE Tyler Kroft and dumped Dalton in 2.8. He has a knack for dogging quarterbacks. He came with strength and violence. Against the interior run, Jones' 15-pound weight advantage on Morgan Burnett was readily apparent. When Boling pulled, Jones beat him to the spot and mashed Mixon for 1. When Smith tripped on a pull, Jones tackled Mixon for minus-1. Later, Jones took frightful punishment throwing his body into Smith on a successful pull. His ability to cover remains uncertain, but he surely seems home dogging and mixing it up in the box. Meanwhile, many of the 11 tackles by Blake Martinez (47) were of a jarring nature. He was running his feet on contact. He was hog-tying ball carriers, preventing them from falling forward. He was taking on blockers, disengaging and assisting on tackles. He's off to a solid start against the run. Biting on play-action fakes and his rather aimless attempts to get back into throwing lanes remains his weakness. Joe Thomas (14), the dime linebacker, overran Giovani Bernard on his 25-yard run and was run at effectively a few other times. On the outside, Clay Matthews (49) and Kyle Fackrell (41) each had 2 ½ pressures and Ahmad Brooks (32) had two. Matthews looks healthy and fresh but didn't get much done against shaky tackles Eric Fisher, Ogbuehi and Smith. He was double-teamed on 35% of rushes. Brooks started ahead of Fackrell and showed off his quick hands slipping blocks by Fisher and the tight ends. He is a hulking physical presence off the left edge. He ripped under Fisher for a sack in 2.9. Maybe conditioning became an issue for the 33-year-old Brooks because he played just three snaps in the second quarter and was on the bench for the first two plays of overtime. Chris Odom made an eight-snap debut.

## **SECONDARY (3)**

Marwin Evans (54) started for the injured Kentrell Brice (groin) alongside Ha Ha Clinton-Dix (61). With Jones getting the call at inside linebacker, Morgan Burnett (61) stepped out to the slot nickel position replacing Quinten Rollins (seven). Kevin King (61) covered A.J. Green (10-111) much of the first half before Green said the Packers switched to more zone coverage in the second half. On the other side, Damarious Randall (52) and Josh Hawkins (nine) filled in for injured Davon House (quadriceps). King had a rugged baptismal but didn't lose confidence. He looks more natural playing the right side. On the left, his long legs tend to get tied up when he moves forward out of his backpedal. The Packers could get away with Burnett in the slot because slots Tyler Boyd, Brandon LaFell and Alex Erickson all have possession-type speed. Hawkins, who is trying to gain the trust of the coaches, caught a break when Dalton badly overthrew LaFell for what would have been a 36-yard TD against him. The Packers haven't had an interception this season; the last time they went four games in a row during a season without a pick was Games 12-15 in 2004. Clinton-Dix isn't off to a very good start. After missing an easy play in coverage last week, he didn't bring his feet and missed two tackles, Sunday.

## **KICKERS (5)**

In some seasons, the Packers' punter might not have had more than two or three punts with hang time of 5 seconds. Justin Vogel punted six times Sunday and had four: 5.06, 5.19, 5.39 and 5.10. Combined with clinkers of 4.18 and 4.00, his six-punt averages were an astronomical 4.82 seconds to go with 49.3 yards (gross) and 44.2 (net). Mason Crosby made an extra point to force overtime and a 27-yard field goal for the victory. It was his third game-winning FG in his last nine games. Of his six kickoffs, five were touchbacks. He averaged 75.3 and 4.05.

## **SPECIAL TEAMS (3)**

Punt returner Trevor Davis continues to improve. On five returns he averaged 14.0, including a 33-yard runback in which he broke several tackles. Playing extensively on special teams for the first time, Devante Mays came close to blocking a punt and delivered a crushing block on Vigil during Davis' long return. Marwin Evans continued his aggressive play in coverage but also missed a tackle on Erickson, a dangerous return man. Brett Goode went on injured reserve Monday with a hamstring injury suffered during the game. Coach Mike McCarthy saluted Goode for "gutting it out" so backup Richard Rodgers didn't have to snap. Taybor Pepper, who was with the Packers from Jan. 27 to May 9, was re-signed to replace him. He also was with Baltimore from Aug. 28-Sept. 3. Thursday night against Chicago would mark his first regular-season game.