

Rating the Packers: Week 5 vs Cowboys

By Bob McGinn Posted: Oct 10, 2017

When the game started the Green Bay Packers were missing two starters. By the end they were down five. It continues to be next man up for the Packers. Unlike most teams, not one starter has suffered a season-ending injury. The Packers can be thankful for that, but the game-to-game injury list has been a nuisance.

So what happens?

Davante Adams assumes Jordy Nelson's red-zone role in the final drive. Aaron Jones stars as the substitute for Ty Montgomery. Lane Taylor fights the good fight for a second week, replacing David Bakhtiari. On defense, it was a cluster of players filling in for Kevin King, and the young safeties and linebackers taking over the leadership role of Morgan Burnett.

"Our identity is when we have to have it, there's zero excuses," said Aaron Rodgers.

Here is a rating of the Packers in their 35-31 victory over the Dallas Cowboys Sunday at AT&T Stadium, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses.

The three stars of the game were: 1. Aaron Rodgers; 2. Aaron Jones; 3. Davante Adams. As a team, the Packers received 4 footballs.

RECEIVERS (4)

Not many tight ends have made better use of 18 snaps than Lance Kendricks did Sunday. On the second play he blocked DE Tyrone Crawford at the point of attack on a 13-yard run. On the fourth play another one-on-one block of Crawford at the point was crucial in an 8-yard carry. Later, he combo blocked off Crawford to SLB Kyle Wilber on another rush for 8. Kendricks wasn't perfect. He got beat by DE Taco Charlton on a carry for no gain. Kendricks (6-3, 250) is undersized but his strength and want-to make him a better blocker than Richard Rodgers. His competitiveness blocking defensive ends has led coach Mike McCarthy to redesign some running plays. Targeted just once, Kendricks (played 18 of the 60 possible snaps on offense, including 11 with his hand down) made it count with a 24-yard reception down the field in which MLB Jaylon Smith was exposed in coverage. It also was a good day for Martellus Bennett (49, 13 with hand down), probably his best as a Packer. Bennett can't run anymore, of course, but when Rodgers extended a play he used his massive body to gain leverage on speedster Byron Jones and make a difficult catch for 33 yards. Later, he caught a shin-high ball for 14 and was a fairly consistent blocker at the point. When CB Orlando Scandrick didn't pay much attention to Rodgers (six, four with hand down), he vaulted above him for a 16-yard reception. With Scandrick, the Cowboys' best cover man, assigned to Randall Cobb (47), Davante Adams became the top target on the far left against rookie Jourdan Lewis. By playing 10 days after absorbing the violent hit by Chicago's Danny Trevathan, Adams demonstrated he wouldn't be intimidated. He scored twice, including the game-winner with 11 seconds left on a twisting catch above Lewis. Nelson (49) departed with what appeared to be a leg injury (McCarthy wouldn't identify the injury Monday) on the two-point try. Geronimo Allison (13) took over on the right outside for the last nine snaps and it was business as usual. Nelson drew considerable attention from the Cowboys, finishing with 2-24 in five targets. The depth of his chemistry with Aaron Rodgers was evident on their 10-yard TD connection. Rodgers motioned Nelson down toward a pair of tight ends, play-faked and zipped it to Nelson behind the drawn-up linebackers in a four-deep coverage. "That was a play we hit in Miami in '14," said Rodgers. "I hadn't really used that check in three years. That's the beauty of the experience that we have together." The Packers were down, 21-6, and facing third and 9 when Cobb surprised Scandrick by breaking off his inside route and making the catch for 13. The comeback was on after that.

OFFENSIVE LINE (3 ½)

LE Demarcus Lawrence has been giving right tackles fits for a month. His 7 ½ sacks coming in were due largely to hustle and speed. Lawrence did register a sack but it was charged to Rodgers for holding the ball an eternity (7.5 seconds). Playing a full game on his high ankle sprain for the first time this season, Bryan Bulaga kept the lid on Lawrence. His yield was one flush to Lawrence and one to DE Damontre Moore. Jahri Evans allowed one of the four sacks but otherwise went without an obvious blemish. Maliek Collins, one of the quicker 3-technique's the Packers will see, had to settle for just one pressure. After playing well most of the season Cory Linsley had an off day with two pressures and one "bad" run. Collins got the jump and penetrated four yards deep against Linsley to spoil one carry. Talented, towering David Irving, reinstated last week from a four-game suspension, lined up in tight proximity to Linsley much of the game. Linsley got to his chest and controlled him often for the run. It was a terrific battle to watch. Linsley had at least four low, slow shotgun snaps, a recipe for disaster if it continues. Minus Bakhtiari, McCarthy went another game with LG Lane Taylor at left tackle and Justin McCray rather than Lucas Patrick at left guard. When personnel people watch this tape, they'll remark how two players with such ill-defined bodies could hold up as well as they did. Taylor allowed a team-high 3 ½ pressures just as McCray was yielding two. It wasn't pretty. However, they got even in the run game. McCarthy pulled at least one lineman on nine runs, a season high. Taylor's four pull blocks netted 25 yards. Taylor and McCray lean on people, mete out punishment and take pride in their performance.

QUARTERBACKS (5)

At times during Rodgers' slump from mid-2015 to mid-2016 part of his problem was the inability to just cut loose. This season, he has been playing with an extremely aggressive approach, and the results have benefited the team more with each passing week. He's exhibiting a laser-like focus, perhaps the result of playing with free-agent offensive linemen and a batch of young backs. He's got their backs. After being obliterated four times in the first half stemming from blocker error, he wasn't pointing fingers. He knows they're trying as hard as they can, and certainly they've got his back. Rodgers' rapid-fire release helps an offensive line, and don't think the blockers don't appreciate it. Without WLB Sean Lee (hamstring), the heart and soul of coordinator Rod Marinelli's defense, Rodgers understood he basically could do whatever he wanted. Marinelli blitzed on 25% of passes, but without Lee the Cowboys were sitting ducks because Jaylon Smith can't run at all at this point in his recovery from a horrific knee injury. Other than failing to set his feet and overthrowing Nelson on the conversion, it's hard to find fault with anything. Trailing by 15 points and on the road, Rodgers bowed his neck and got it done. The 18-yard scramble away from the clutches of DE Benson Mayowa and Irving was the crowning moment of the nine-play, 75-yard sortie in 1:02 that capped the comeback. The back-shoulder TD to Adams wasn't half bad, either. That's impossible to defend.

RUNNING BACKS (4 ½)

Without Montgomery (ribs), Jones' snap total of 53 was 23 more than he had in Games 1-4. My, what a show it was. Fresh legs or not, he made a tremendous impression in his first start. Jones showed an economical running style with little wasted movement. He's a one-cut slasher with forward body lean. When Taylor missed Mayowa at the point, Jones had the vision to adjust, sense the cutback was available and take it for 22 yards. Of his 19 carries (for 125 yards), maybe you could find slight fault for one decision. Unlike Montgomery in recent games, Jones didn't dilly-dally on his reads. He trusted that the hole would be there, and then ran through the hole with burst and authority. He turned the corner several times, too, although Smith's deficiencies made the task easier. On four occasions Jones appeared comfortable lining up as a split receiver. Can you imagine a back from last season, Christine Michael, going out wide? Rodgers continually had to waste time and energy telling Michael where to go. Afterward, Rodgers indicated he trusted Jones implicitly on assignments. Late in the half, Jones came back toward the scrambling Rodgers and cradled a low pass at the boundary for 9 yards. Best of all, he didn't fumble. He broke four tackles, too. Jamaal Williams (two), who was drafted 48 slots ahead of Jones, ran a straight-line plunge for 1. Aaron Ripkowski (seven) also played.

DEFENSIVE LINE (1 ½)

For three quarters this unit stood toe-to-toe with the Cowboys' superb offensive line. The Packers have the size, the strength and the experience to hang with Dallas. Yet, in the final analysis, the results weren't there. None of the five defensive linemen notched a pressure or a tackle for loss. Ezekiel Elliott surpassed 100 yards (116) against Green Bay for the third time in a year and averaged 4.0. Mike Daniels (played 51 of the 74 possible snaps on defense) wasn't a factor. It was his first game back since Sept. 17 because of a hip injury so timing was an issue. More of the problem was playing a ton of snaps against Zack Martin, probably the NFL's best guard. It isn't that Daniels didn't slug it out. He did, but four or five times Martin was just too big and ended up burying him. When the Cowboys at last wore down the front on a 17-play TD drive, Daniels was whipped by LG Jonathan Cooper on an 8-yard run, hammered by Martin on a 9-yard run and took a side against Cooper, guessed wrong and the result was another 8-yard run. Kenny Clark (51) and C Travis Frederick perhaps battled to a draw. Dean Lowry (29), Quinton Dial (27) and Ricky Jean Francois (seven) joined the fray as well. In an old-fashioned type game, the Packers played 15 snaps in their base 3-4 and 13 snaps in a 4-3 type front in which Clay Matthews stacked off the line in unison with the two inside linebackers.

LINEBACKERS (3)

Blake Martinez is becoming indispensable, at least against a ground-oriented opponent. His 70 snaps were 15 more than his career high. It's obvious that Martinez is trusting his reads and his instincts far more than he did as a rookie. Four of his 12 tackles were unassisted on carries totaling 10 yards. He still makes his share of mistakes but at least he need not apologize for hesitating. He's more confident in the defense and what he can do in his role. The unnecessary roughness penalty on Martinez for hitting WR Dez Bryant when he was defenseless shouldn't have been called. It probably curtailed his aggressiveness for a time. He also blitzed six times, blowing one sack and beating FB Keith Smith for a hurry. After the defense repeatedly lost containment of Dak Prescott in the first half, Martinez took care of the problem as a semi-spy in the second half. Jake Ryan (37) can't afford to get cut down on a block by Smith that sprung Elliott for 25. The Packers were guilty of having only 10 men on the field on that fourth-quarter toss sweep, too. Matthews (67, including 11 off the ball) was double-teamed on just 18.9% of his 16 non-stunt rushes but for one of the few times failed to generate a pressure. RT La'el Collins had all the answers. Matthews set a terrific edge several times against Elliott and showed the inside linebackers a thing or two about how to read routes and break on receivers. Matthews always has taken pride in his ability to drop and play pass, and it showed. The only consistent pass rusher was Nick Perry (48), who had four pressures. He beat all-pro LT Tyron Smith for a strip-sack and a flush, Collins for a flush and Cooper for a knockdown. He also jumped off-sides twice in the fourth quarter. Kyler Fackrell (25, two off the ball) was invisible. Ahmad Brooks (23) was in and out with an injury but posted two pressures. It's hard for taller tackles to gain leverage on Brooks because he's so close to the ground exploding out of his stance.

SECONDARY (2 ½)

King's departure (concussion) after 16 snaps forced Davon House (58) into the role of No. 1 corner. House didn't recognize the quick out by Cole Beasley in the red zone from a tight split that he beat the Packers on last year and subsequently gave up a 2-yard TD. Otherwise, he was fairly solid. He goes for the ball and isn't afraid to mix it up. Without King, Damarious Randall (60) moved from slot to left outside and Quinten Rollins (29) had an eventful day inside. When Rollins' first move was back at the 5, Beasley had an easy two-way go and took him to the post for a routine TD. Rollins plays high and just can't seem to find ways to compensate for his average speed and quickness. As a tackler and blitzer, it was a different story. Rollins was quick to support the run, lancing in low and fast for several tackles. He also got the defense a stop on a third-and-12 screen, splitting Tyron Smith and Cooper to stop Terrance Williams two yards short. Randall scored a defensive TD off a dropped pass by Williams. He gambled leaving his coverage in the flat. His unsportsmanlike conduct penalty for flipping the ball at Prescott in the end zone was unacceptable. On a free play, he ran with Williams deep and made an athletic breakup. Randall was in good shape even without a jam on the 10-yard fade to Bryant but gave up the TD because he wasn't violent at the ball. On the last-second bomb to Beasley, Randall didn't seem to be paying attention from a safety position and let him run past him. Fortunately for the Packers, the pass was overthrown. If feisty Josh Hawkins (25) hopes to play more he can't afford to miss two tackles. The longest play from scrimmage, 49 yards, came on third and 13 early when Brice Butler came free in the deep middle where Ha Ha Clinton-Dix was patrolling. He didn't distinguish the route quickly enough, was slow getting over and then missed the tackle. He should be playing much better. Kentrell Brice (28), who tackled crisply otherwise, failed to get Butler down as well. Loafing near midfield, Randall only started to sprint when his teammates whiffed on the tackle. Brice fueled the late charge with a third-down deflection against TE Jason Witten in man coverage. Burnett (hamstring) left after 47 snaps; most of his day was spent at safety. When Dom Capers tried playing a safety at inside linebacker, it was Josh Jones (38). He isn't afraid to take on linemen but didn't plaster RB Rod Smith and gave up an 18-yard completion on third and 6.

KICKERS (one-half)

It was a day to forget for Mason Crosby. First, he hit a screwball on an extra point that bounced no good off the right upright. Second, he hooked an extra point when the snap from Taybor Pepper was low and bobbled by holder Justin Vogel. Crosby made two extra points and a 22-yard field goal. His seven kickoffs (six touchbacks) averaged 77 yards and 3.85 seconds of hang time. Vogel hit one poor punt and one excellent punt. His averages were 48.5 yards (gross), 49.0 (net) and 4.2 hang time.

SPECIAL TEAMS (2)

Pepper's snaps aren't consistent. Unlike departed/injured Brett Goode, his snaps usually require the holder to spin the ball so the laces are pointed toward the goalpost. In the specialized, pressurized world of placekicking, that can make a world of difference. Peppers' velocity on punts is better than Goode's, although he's probably not as accurate. Pepper's ability to protect was called into question after TE Geoff Swaim drove him off his feet and almost into Vogel on a punt. Jeff Janis beat two blockers to spill Ryan Switzer for minus-1 after a 59-yard punt. The unit had two penalties.