

Rating the Packers: Week 12 at Steelers

By Bob McGinn Posted: Nov 28, 2017

They made some breaks and took advantage of some others. That's usually how upsets happen.

For 59 minutes, 43 seconds on Sunday night the Green Bay Packers played the heavily favored Pittsburgh Steelers on even terms at Heinz Field. The score was tied, 28-28, and with the Steelers 37 yards from field-goal range it appeared as if the game was headed to overtime.

Defensive coordinator Dom Capers had steadfastly adhered to one of the most conservative game plans of his nine-year tenure in Green Bay. His final blitz rate on passes of 7.6% was the second lowest of his 155 games.

The Steelers' 53 dropbacks included three three-man rushes, 46 four-man rushes, one five-man rush, two six-man rushes and one seven-man rush.

Minus stalwarts Clay Matthews and Kenny Clark for the first time this season, Capers' plan was to play coverage all night long against Ben Roethlisberger, Antonio Brown and Le'Veon Bell. He maneuvered his safeties back and forth just before the snap to create at least a little doubt in what Roethlisberger was seeing.

Capers urged his inside linebackers to get depth against Brown, and as a result the check-downs were available for Bell.

The only other time that Capers blitzed less (5.6%) was in the 51-45 wild-card playoff loss in overtime to Kurt Warner and the Arizona Cardinals in 2009. Through 10 games, his blitz rate had been almost 40%.

With 17 seconds left, Capers tried another four-man rush and Brown made a spectacular catch on the sideline for 23 yards. On second down, Capers brought a six-man pressure and Brown easily beat Kevin King on another sideline route for 14.

Chris Boswell followed with a 53-yard field goal as time expired and the inspired Packers flew home with a 31-28 setback.

The Packers held a plus-3 turnover differential, scored on three long touchdown passes and dropped two passes compared to the Steelers' five. A double-digit underdog just three other times under Mike McCarthy, this would have been the Packers' first victory as a prohibitive underdog in his 11-plus seasons.

They probably would have pulled it off, too, had it not been for the season-high 19 missed tackles by the defense.

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

The three stars of the game were: 1. Damarious Randall; 2. Davante Adams; 3. Brett Hundley.

As a team, the Packers received 3 footballs.

RECEIVERS (3)

Antonio Brown was far and away the best player on the field, let alone the best wide receiver. But the 55-yard TD reception by Davante Adams (played 48 of the possible 55 snaps on offense) demonstrated again that he's far and away the best receiver in Green Bay. Matched against backup CB Coty Sensabaugh, he sold a stop-and-go route off play-action and zoomed into the clear. With 22 yards remaining to the end zone at the catch, Adams made FS Mike Mitchell miss. Striding into the middle of the field, he gave the so-called "dead leg" as Sensabaugh closed in and slipped past him to the end zone. On fourth and 6, Adams ran a crisp in-and-out route against veteran dime back William Gay and made a contested catch for 8. Jordy Nelson (52) was invisible again. Targeted five times, his three receptions were for 2, 7 and 2 yards. At least twice the Steelers just stayed in their base defense against an empty backfield and let OLB T.J. Watt cover Nelson from the slot. Adding insult to injury, Watt even broke up a slant. Nelson had a poor day blocking as well, failing to cut off slot Mike Hilton before he made two tackles for no gain. Randall Cobb (35) was the beneficiary of a blown coverage that left him by himself for a 39-yard TD on a simple wheel route. Eight times Cobb basically was removed from the play by being asked to go in motion just before the snap and keep both sides of the defense honest. Geronimo Allison (eight) has been the No. 4 WR all season but this was the fourth straight game in which no ball was thrown to him. Lance Kendricks (29, nine with his hand down) was the big hope early but his blocking fell off and the coaches never looked at him much as a receiver. Thus, Richard Rodgers (37, 14 with his hand down) is starting to overtake Kendricks for playing time. Both tight ends were thrown aside by Watt on running plays. Rodgers' advantage is four years in the system. He's especially good reading pressures and presenting himself nicely to the quarterback as a hot receiver.

OFFENSIVE LINE (3 ½)

Given how poorly Jason Spriggs played against Baltimore, it was a gamble starting him over hard-trying Justin McCray at right tackle. Spriggs, however, was more competitive in his matchup against OLB Bud Dupree. For a change, Spriggs let loose and tried to be more aggressive. His only hurries came on a power move by ILB Vince Williams and another by DE Stephon Tuitt. However, Spriggs was involved in three "bad" runs. Part of the reason is he seems to struggle adjusting on the move to changes in the defense. He overset a few times and let defenders pour through inside. RG Jahri Evans might be a 12-year veteran but he short-circuits too much on assignments. It remains to be seen how they fare as a pair when teams start challenging them with twists and designer pressures. Every week basically is the same for Evans. He allowed two pressures and 1 ½ "bad" runs. It's almost comical watching him get out on screens. They say you get what you pay for. It has been true in Evans' case. Corey Linsley was terrific on all three screens, especially the 55-yard TD when he waited a count for ILB Ryan Shazier to commit and then shoved him out of the play. Linsley is a disciplined fundamentalist with strength who strives to take the proper angle and exercise desired footwork. LG Lane Taylor folded behind down blocks by Linsley on six power plays and the net was 24 yards. He yielded one pressure and one "bad" run. David Bakhtiari didn't have any trouble with Watt in the run or pass game but had too many disappointing plays against others for a player of his stature. Cameron Heyward is much stronger and heavier than most of Bakhtiari's opponents. He bulled through Bakhtiari for one sack in 3.2 seconds. On the final series, Bakhtiari was charged with a second sack when Tuitt, another brawny 5-technique, beat him off the edge to flush Brett Hundley into the sack by Watt.

QUARTERBACKS (4 ½)

Brett Hundley had made steady improvement for four games before the Baltimore debacle. This was a litmus test: week of intense criticism if not ridicule, a proud defense, Sunday night, on the road in 38 degrees. He still tends to lock in on his primary receiver. His progression isn't what it needs to be, but it might be in the future. Still, he looked much smoother running the screen game. Also, he stopped fleeing dead right, a tendency defenses probably were all over. He stepped up and underneath Spriggs several times, threw some beautiful passes on the move and scrambled for six on third and 6. When Adams set up and beat Sensabaugh, he pump-faked and hit him in stride. When the Steelers blew coverage on Cobb, he spun a good ball for another TD. He was at fault for one of the four sacks by holding the ball too long. Hundley also got a break on the Packers' fifth play when he fumbled on a sack only to have the play wiped away by an illegal-hands-to-the-face penalty downfield. These Steelers are fast, furious and gnarly. They can eat young quarterbacks like this for breakfast. That they didn't in the least is the best sign yet for Hundley's future.

RUNNING BACKS (3 ½)

Mike McCarthy might get back to Devante Mays later. His two-fumble, five-play showing last week earned him a “did not play” Sunday. Thus, the play counts were 45 for Jamaal Williams, 12 for Aaron Ripkowski, three for Randall Cobb and one for Trevor Davis. Joe Kerridge didn’t play from scrimmage. Williams ran a respectable 4.54 out of Brigham Young. On his 54-yard screen, he burst through an overpursuing secondary and then outran William Gay, 32, over the last 35 yards. After going one for two on fourth and 1 against the Ravens, Williams knocked out two 5-yard carries off the right side on a pair of third and 1’s. He wasn’t going to be denied on his 4-yard TD run, either. At times, Williams lined up a full eight yards deep in a one-back set. He broke just two tackles in 25 touches. However, he bled many of his runs, churning his legs and not succumbing easily. Flanked as a receiver, Williams went up the sidelines when Hundley scrambled and dropped a 30-yard pass. Ripkowski cut Watt on a 4-yard gain and, when Evans fell off NT Javon Hargrave, he got enough of the 300-pounder at the point of attack to secure a 6-yard carry. There was no “wildcat” with Cobb this week.

DEFENSIVE LINE (2 ½)

With Dom Capers playing coverage and rushing only four, the onus was on someone to knock Ben Roethlisberger off his spot. Basically a stationary target, Big Ben will be behind center or, at times, moving straight forward. Yet, for the life of the rushers, they couldn’t do a thing. The lone pressure by the unit was the sack by Mike Daniels in 5.1 seconds after Nick Perry flushed Roethlisberger. LG Ramon Foster, C Maurkice Pouncey and RG David DeCastro owned Daniels (played 53 of the possible 74 snaps on defense), Quinton Dial (34), Dean Lowry (33) and Montravius Adams (15). The pass rush of Kenny Clark (ankle) was missed. The Steelers generally double-teamed Daniels without worry that any of his teammates would win a one-on-one. Adams got four cracks as the lone defensive lineman in the 4-1 rush unit. Billed as an explosive rusher, he showed none of that. The main focus for the wide bodies was staying gap-conscious as Le’Veon Bell bided his time behind his blockers. Bell finished 20-95 with a long of 14, a 4.8-yard average the Packers couldn’t have been unhappy about. Daniels replaced Clark as the nose tackle in the six snaps of base defense. He shed blocks and made the tackle three times on runs totaling 7 yards. Lowry is a more athletic and active player than Dial, a veteran the 49ers gave up on. At this point, the coaches don’t seem to trust that Adams will stay square and won’t buckle against double teams.

LINEBACKERS (2)

With RT Marcus Gilbert beginning a four-game suspension, Chris Hubbard was paired with giant LT Alejandro Villanueva. Other than Nick Perry’s two knockdowns and one hurry against Villanueva, the linebackers didn’t register a pressure without Clay Matthews (groin) stirring up things. The snap counts outside were 50 for Perry, 48 for Ahmad Brooks, 46 for Kyler Fackrell and 22 for Vince Biegel. Perry saw a lot of extra blocking attention as a rusher and had an off day against the run. This was a season-high snap count for Brooks, a sign his back woes might be abating. Brooks is a scream to watch. At the slightest provocation he’s ready to drop and start fighting. He takes nothing. Brooks might be 33 but he hops over blockers and contorts his body in various ways. Good with his hands, he shed Villanueva in a heartbeat and tackled Bell for 2. When his rush bogs down, Brooks has been flinging his arms up. It paid off when his tip fell into the waiting arms of Martinez (74). Fackrell has inadequate power but also a knack for getting small and slipping between bodies. His hustle was evident when he came all the way around the circle against Hubbard and tackled the scrambling Roethlisberger two yards shy of a first down. He also keeps pulling off his stymied rushes in order to get involved in the check-down game. Biegel plays shorter than 6-3 and hasn’t shown signs yet of having the twitch or horsepower necessary to rush successfully against massive, long-armed NFL tackles. Martinez missed four tackles for the second game in a row, a terrible trend that no defense can tolerate. He’s played 412 of a possible 414 snaps in the last six games. Joe Thomas has been healthy for the last three games but hasn’t played a down from scrimmage. Martinez is an improved player, and besides his interception he recovered a fumble and had the team’s only tackle for loss. Jake Ryan played a season-high 52 snaps, missed two tackles and was OK.

SECONDARY (1 ½)

Damarious Randall (66), the nickel inside corner, played one of his best games as a Packer. Roethlisberger hadn't been stopped late in the first quarter when Randall shadowed slot Eli Rogers over the middle and then zeroed in on the ball for a juggling interception. It would have been a 55-yard TD return if Rogers hadn't almost accidentally laid a glove on Randall. One of Randall's weaknesses has been his rather phlegmatic approach at the ball. This time, he attacked Rogers on a 20-yard seam route that should have been a catch but Randall made sure it wasn't. Later, he leaped high on a sideline route to tip a well-thrown pass from Rogers' grasp. He even had the fortitude on a screen to run up 10 yards and make a solid tackle on Bell. Randall's next objective should be to play an entire game. Every week something occurs to knock him off the field for a spell. The damage was done outside to Davon House (68), Kevin King (39) and Josh Hawkins (36). House is a competitive, hard-working individual with ordinary speed and athleticism. Playing much of the year with a bum left shoulder, it just so happened that King found himself in position about six times where he had to make a painful frontal tackle. He missed three, made a couple and was in and out of the lineup. His coverage, which wasn't good, is hard to evaluate because of the wing. Hawkins is a bundle of energy who players must like being alongside. However, he was destroyed on a double move by Martavis Bryant for a 17-yard TD and by Antonio Brown on a 13-yard out cut. The return of Morgan Burnett (73) after missing four of the last five games brought much-needed order to the back end. He exudes drive and professionalism. He also forced Bell to fumble. On the 33-yard TD to Brown that carried 29 yards, he showed diminished range on a play that he must make from a two-deep shell. There were two more missed tackles for Ha Ha Clinton-Dix (74), who took some bad angles and constantly looked out of position. If Josh Jones (26) was a more fundamentally sound player he would have either shoved Brown out of bounds or dislodged the football on his miraculous catch at the end.

KICKERS (2 ½)

My impulse is to almost exonerate Mason Crosby for his badly hooked miss from 57. On Monday, Mike McCarthy continued to insist that four yards longer than any kick ever made in 16 ½ seasons at Heinz Field still was comfortably within Crosby's range. McCarthy misread the situation, the venue and the environment, and he also overrated his kicker. The snap was high but the ball also was mis-hit. Crosby kicked off five times, averaging 66.4 yards and 3.74 seconds of hang time. Justin Vogel's five-punt averages were 48.2 yards (gross), 46.4 (net) and an excellent 4.44 hang time. One of his boots was between the hashmarks and too easily returnable. He also had a 44-yard punt with 5.0 hang brought back.

SPECIAL TEAMS (2)

Josh Jones was penalized for grabbing the facemask on a punt, his fifth penalty on special teams. If the Packers can afford to pull Jones they should. Jermaine Whitehead gave up the sideline on the opening kickoff so Martavis Bryant had an alleyway for a 38-yard return. Brett Goode's five conversion snaps appeared to have three perfect laces and two that needed a spin. His velocity on punts looks subpar. If Geronimo Allison hadn't been misaligned his near-block of a punt might have been a block. The three KO returns by Trevor Davis averaged just 19.7. Jeff Janis' playing time on teams is substantially less than it was early in the season.