

# Rating the Packers: Week 14 vs Browns

By Bob McGinn Posted: Dec 12, 2017

It was a foregone conclusion that no matter how much progress Brett Hundley displayed this season some fans would dismiss him as simply not good enough. It's human nature to compare Hundley to Aaron Rodgers, the Green Bay Packers' quarterback for the last 10 seasons and the man Hundley replaced midway through the first quarter of the Oct. 15 game in Minnesota. Rodgers lived through the same type of comparison after taking over the starting job from Brett Favre in 2008. On Sunday, Hundley engineered his second straight victory in a late game-on-the-line situation. No Packers quarterback has ever won consecutive games in overtime before he beat the Buccaneers and Browns. Hundley really should be cut some slack for a host of reasons, not the least of which was Rodgers' record in the clutch in that first year starting. Rodgers was in his fourth season when he assumed the No. 1 job. He was the guy that entire off-season and training camp. In his first three regular seasons he didn't play much but still attempted 59 passes. In Hundley's first two seasons he attempted 10 passes. Until Rodgers went down with a broken collarbone against the Vikings, Hundley had received precious few snaps with the No. 1 offense during the regular season. Rodgers exceeded just about every expectation in his first season as a starter. What he didn't do was win, going 0-for-7 in late game-on-the-line situations. All those close defeats doomed the Packers to a 6-10 record in 2008. That's a winning percentage of .375. If the medical staff clears Rodgers to start Sunday in Carolina, Hundley will sit down with a 3-4 record as a starter (.429) and a 3-5 record if the Vikings game is counted. That .375 is exactly what Rodgers logged as a first-time starter. Playing quarterback in the NFL is one of the most difficult assignments in all of sports. Hundley played about how I expected him to play. Probably the best thing about his season is he showed steady improvement. Here is a rating of the Packers in their 27-21 overtime victory over the Browns, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses. The three stars of the game were: 1. Clay Matthews. 2. Brett Hundley. 3. Damarious Randall. As a team, the Packers received 3 footballs.

## RECEIVERS (3)

Davante Adams (played 64 of the possible 76 snaps on offense) grabbed the game by the throat in the second half and overtime, catching 10 of 12 targets for 84 yards after being blanked on two targets in the first half. Opponents generally don't spend a lot of time focusing their coverage on Adams when they most assuredly should. It's as if teams still think of Jordy Nelson (70) and Randall Cobb (52 at WR, five at RB) as the threats they used to be. Then again, it'd be hard to double Adams because Mike McCarthy positions him everywhere known to man. Average cornerbacks can't afford to get too close to Adams because his releases are so outstanding. He's hard to jam because of his quick feet and fast hands. Adams sustained one drive by drawing an illegal-contact penalty on CB Jason McCourty. He sold a slant-and-go and McCourty felt compelled to grab. He scored the tying touchdown on a crisp back-shoulder route. He scored the winner on a block-block-screen after eluding DE Myles Garrett, CB Mike Jordan and FS Kai Nacua in the space of three yards. With the Browns blitzing heavily and playing a safety very deep, the routes were shortened to take what was there. Adams averaged 6.0 yards after the catch, Nelson an improved 4.5 and Cobb just 2.5. Cobb is a screen-flat-gadget receiver. He's still pretty good at it, too. He caught all eight targets; in fact, he hasn't dropped a pass all season. Geronimo Allison (19) hauled in four shorties of his own. Last week wasn't a great one for Lance Kendricks (49, 25 with his hand down) when charges were filed against him in Outagamie County for possession of THC. He played a solid game, however, dropping one pass but catching a third-and-1 slant for 5 despite clingy coverage by SS Derrick Kindred. Richard Rodgers (40, 21 with his hand down) failed to make a difficult catch and then lost a 19-yard reception to penalty in which he ran over Nacua for eight additional yards. After tinkering with T Ulrick John as the No. 3 tight end in the past two games, the staff sat him down and went with Justin McCray (nine). He was late off the ball on a third and 1, enabling Kindred to wreck a running play.

## **OFFENSIVE LINE (2)**

The Browns were without NT Danny Shelton (chest-ribs), the fulcrum of their clever and effective run defense. Apparently it's scheme that matters most in Cleveland because Larry Ogunjobi, Caleb Brantley and T.Y. McGill filled in well opposite 3-technique Trevon Coley. The Browns didn't stuff the Packers' by filling the box. They did it with a wonderfully choreographed blend of slants, stunts and overall movement. The running backs had only 19 carries but 10 were for 1 yard or less. David Bakhtiari pass-blocked well against top pick Myles Garrett but also played a role in three "bad" runs, including two misses against MLB Joe Schobert in the same series. When the Packers ran power, those seven plays with a pull blocker gained just 16 yards. All five starters had at least one-half "bad" run. Certainly the left side was more solid than the right, although RG Jahri Evans was the only starter without a pressure. Late in regulation, Hundley made sure to sneak left on third and 1 and Lane Taylor/Bakhtiari paved the way for a 2-yard gain. Easily the least effective player was Jason Spriggs, who had team-high totals of 2 ½ "bad" runs and three pressures. He isn't the least bit assignment-sure, he misses too often with his hands against rushers and he doesn't play with power. The Packers never would have had to go for it on fourth and 2 early if Evans had been able to break down in space and block WLB Christian Kirksey on a screen. His lack of athletic ability has diminished the screen game all season.

## **QUARTERBACKS (4 ½ )**

Gregg Williams has been coordinating NFL defenses for about 20 years. Clearly, he was jacked to unleash his exotic blitzes on Mr. Hundley. On 54 dropbacks, Williams rushed two once, three three times, four 16 times, five 23 times, six nine times and seven twice. That computes to a 63% rate of five or more and a 20.4% rate of six or more. It's the most against Green Bay since the Rams' Jim Haslett blitzed five or more 72.7% in Game 14 of 2007 and since Haslett, by then with the Redskins, blitzed six or more 23% in Game 2 of 2013. In other words, Hundley got the royal treatment from one of the league's best and didn't turn the ball over. Williams had to settle for one sack because Hundley ran out of the grasp of Kindred twice and DE Carl Nassib once. He was high-stepping through the trash so not to be tripped. With no running game and trailing 21-7, McCarthy finally threw up his hands, emptied the backfield and asked Hundley to be Aaron Rodgers. By Jove, it was a darn good impersonation. He threw short, accurate darts all over the field, taking what Williams was giving and sustaining drives. Early, Hundley overthrew an open Kendrick down the seam and Adams deep. In an apparent brain fart, he turned the wrong way on fourth-and-1 instead of making the naked pitch to Aaron Jones that probably would have been a 10-yard TD. Other than that, it was almost all good. With Kirksey in his face as a free runner, Hundley had the vision to spot Jamaal Williams 15 yards behind the defense and the arm strength to get him the ball. He zinged the Rodgers-like back shoulder to Adams. He ran for 31 yards, three times picking up first downs. If it is clipboard time for Hundley, he should be remembered for being imperturbable regardless of the situation. That quality alone makes him a player besides all his other attributes.

## **RUNNING BACKS (2 ½)**

Two weeks ago the Steelers dropped coverage on Williams 30 yards up the sideline. In that instance, he might have lifted his hands into catching position too soon and suffered an embarrassing drop. He also had a dropped check-down against Baltimore last month. Eleven plays into the game, Williams flanked wide right and kept going up the boundary. When Nacua bit up, he was by himself. Sometimes the easiest catches are the hardest. This time, Williams (50) looked it in at the 1 for a 30-yard TD. He caught six other passes, all check-downs, and looked proficient in the areas of spacing and timing. Williams also did well sorting out and meeting the Browns' blitzes. Aaron Jones (eight) barely played after he lunged and missed Kindred in protection. Jones must be careful to think north-south even though his east-west instant reaction turned into the game-winner against Tampa Bay. Aaron Ripkowski (11) was playing considerably more last year at this time than he is now.

## **DEFENSIVE LINE (1 ½)**

For all their many weaknesses, the interior of the Browns' offensive line ranks as a definite strength. The Packers' five defensive linemen managed almost no penetration and just one pressure. LG Joel Bitonio, C JC Tretter and RG Kevin Zeitler carried the day against Mike Daniels (played 53 of the possible 58 snaps on defense), Kenny Clark (39), Dean Lowry (27), Quinton Dial (eight) and Montravius Adams (three). Possibly frustrated, Daniels went back-door against Tretter and took himself out of the gap, resulting in nine of Isaiah Crowell's 121 rushing yards. Generally speaking, the Browns were able to move or at least gain stalemates against Daniels and Clark for the inside run. The best play that Daniels made came on the first snap of overtime when he disengaged from Bitonio and stopped Crowell for 1. Clark didn't look like himself, either because of the level of opposition or his bad ankle. Dial doesn't have much range but seldom gets knocked around. That happened a few times Sunday. Adams might be a third-round draft choice but the coaches simply don't trust him to withstand double teams and execute what's called.

## **LINEBACKERS (2)**

This ranked as one of the Packers' two or three worst pass-rushing games of the season. If not for Clay Matthews (49), rookie DeShone Kizer would have had even more of a field day. Of the team's five pressures, Matthews had four. He made the defensive play of the game in overtime, getting into RT Shon Coleman's chest and walking him back to Kizer. When Kizer scrambled the other way, Matthews chased him down for a knockdown-deflection-interception that set up the winning TD. Minus Nick Perry (foot/shoulder), the Packers started the first half with Ahmad Brooks (33) opposite Matthews and the second half with Kyler Fackrell (30) opposite him. Vince Biegel (15) also got a look. Brooks had a forgettable performance. His lane integrity was shaky, he jumped off-sides, his rush was negligible and he was hopelessly overmatched in coverage by RB Duke Johnson on an 18-yard option route. Fackrell remains an interesting player. He's not a classic pass rusher. However, he's always in pretty good position and keeps going to the whistle. Five times he lined up off the ball in Dom Capers' version of the 4-3 defense. From there, he read a screen and made the tackle for a 1-yard gain by beating the blockers. Fackrell and others failed to contain Crowell on a 37-yard read option inside. As a group, the linebackers missed five tackles. The inside work of Blake Martinez (58) and Jake Ryan (44) was pedestrian, to say the least. Ryan eluded Coleman early to stop Crowell for a 1-yard gain. On the 7-yard shovel pass for a TD, Ryan reacted late and got hooked by the pulling Bitonio. Ryan and Martinez can't improve their speed but need to get stronger. Martinez wasn't as decisive or explosive hitting as he was near mid-season.

## **SECONDARY (4)**

Already down Kevin King for the rest of the season, the Packers appreciated Davon House's decision to play with a left shoulder basically useless and by his side. House (30) departed early in the fourth quarter with an apparent significant back injury. He took one for the team. On the first play, Josh Gordon ran a deep over route in the soft spot of zone coverage for 38. Six plays later, Gordon caught an 18-yard TD against another zone when Morgan Burnett (58) was too wide and the leaping Ryan didn't quite have enough depth. At that point, the Packers basically put Damarious Randall (57) across from Gordon almost wherever he went with safety help almost always available. Gordon beat Randall only on a third-and-1 slant for 13, a fact Randall pointed out in interviews. In a tweet, Gordon said, "Great Win for them but let's be serious.. Considering several of our disadvantages as a team, this kid couldn't hold my jock strap on my worst day. Lol.. @randalltime. Randall, who has been campaigning for Pro Bowl votes from fans, tweeted: "You must be on that s— again." Randall made two key plays to deny Gordon. One, he broke up a take-off route. Two, the origination of Josh Jones' interception in overtime was Randall's tight, grabby coverage on an intended third-and-2 slant. Yes, Randall took a chance and held. It was a gamble worth taking because officials tend to swallow their whistles late. Randall also tackled Johnson for minus-2 and played off a guard on a screen and assisted on the tackle. Josh Hawkins (11) filled in for House late and, with Josh Jones (49), gave up a 2-yard TD pass to Corey Coleman. Hawkins must be more physical against that route and Jones can't be so deep. Burnett was adequate in the slot, as was Jermaine Whitehead (15) as the dime. Undoubtedly worried about the back end, Capers blitzed just 12.9%. Jones bear-hugged the tipped ball for his first pick and showed man coverage skill against tight ends. On Monday, Browns coach Hue Jackson said that Jones "definitely hit the offensive player (Gordon) before the ball got there" on his end-zone break-up of a 46-yard bomb late in the first half. When Kizer made a terrible read before the half, Ha Ha Clinton-Dix (58) came on over and made a boundary interception.

### **KICKERS (3 ½ )**

In exhibition games, Justin Vogel had one touchback in 24 punts. In the regular season, he had gone 56 punts without a touchback before notching his first in the fourth quarter. Given the weather (29 degrees, 24 mph wind), his average hang time of 4.57 seconds was impressive. His four-punt averages were 47.8 yards (gross) and 41.5 (net). Mason Crosby's five kickoffs averaged 65.8 yards and 3.95 hang time.

### **SPECIAL TEAMS (5)**

The fake punt on fourth and 2 didn't fool CB Darius Hillary, the former Badger who reacted expeditiously when Whitehead tugged and began circling left end. Bigger, stronger and seemingly more motivated, Whitehead made Hillary miss with the help of a solid stiff-arm and picked up 7. An even bigger play was the 65-yard punt return by Trevor Davis that set up the tying TD in regulation. When Britton Colquitt made the mistake of punting between the hashmarks, Davis made him pay by breaking three tackles in a marvelous display of awareness, courage and skill. A lean wide receiver, he breaks arm tackles. Brett Goode's three conversion snaps required little adjustment. The only minus were the two missed tackles each by Marwin Evans and Jeff Janis.