

Rating the Packers: Week 15 vs Panthers

By Bob McGinn Posted: Dec 19, 2017

The fortnight ahead will represent almost uncharted and most-assuredly unwanted territory for coach Mike McCarthy and the Green Bay Packers.

McCarthy has coached 190 regular-season games since taking over in 2006. Just two of those 190 games were played with the Packers out of playoff contention.

His third and fourth meaningless games will be played against the Minnesota Vikings (11-3) Saturday night at Lambeau Field and against the Detroit Lions (8-6) on New Year's Eve at Ford Field.

It's time to play out the string, gas up the players' cars and prepare for the off-season. The Packers' club record of eight straight playoff appearances is over.

Green Bay (7-7) was officially eliminated Monday night because the Atlanta Falcons (9-5) defeated the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, 24-21.

On Tuesday afternoon, McCarthy will address his modus operandi for the next two weeks and perhaps announce if Aaron Rodgers or Brett Hundley will be his starting quarterback.

"We're obviously watching the game tonight," McCarthy said not long before the kickoff of Atlanta-Tampa Bay. "It impacts our opportunity to move forward."

"Aaron Rodgers is sore. Rightfully so. He was hit too many times. Took two big hits. So we're working through that. We'll see what tomorrow brings."

Vikings coach Mike Zimmer knows that a sweep of the Packers would enhance his team's chances to gain home-field advantage throughout the NFC playoffs.

"We'll prepare for both and assume Rodgers is going to play," Zimmer said Monday. "We just play whoever comes out. It doesn't matter to me."

"It's a great rivalry. They're an excellent football team and a great organization. We'll have to play really good to win."

In 2008, the first for Rodgers as a starter, the Packers finished 6-10. Still, they were locked in a three-way tie for the NFC North Division lead with a 5-5 record after 10 games.

Green Bay was mathematically eliminated after Game 14 when its record dipped to 5-9. After that, the Packers lost in overtime at Chicago, 20-17, before turning back winless Detroit, 31-21, at Lambeau Field.

The only other non-playoff season for McCarthy was 2006. Despite finishing 8-8 after a victory in the finale, the Packers were in playoff contention until the final Sunday before losing the final wild-card berth to the New York Giants on a tiebreaker.

Here is a rating of the Packers in their 31-24 loss Sunday to the Carolina Panthers in Charlotte, N.C., with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses. The three stars of the game were: 1. David Bakhtiari. 2. Randall Cobb. 3. Damarious Randall. As a team, the Packers received 2 ½ footballs.

RECEIVERS (1 ½)

The Packers suffered a major loss when Davante Adams (played 27 of the possible 70 snaps on offense) left with a concussion on their second play of the third quarter. On Monday, LB Thomas Davis was suspended for two games by the league for a “violent and unnecessary blind-side block to (Adams’) head and neck area.” Tweeted Adams: “I’ll never understand it. Game is already dangerous enough and we got Pro Bowl players out here head hunting and saying they ‘don’t mean to harm me.’” Tweeted Davis: “In all sincerity I do apologize. I truly respect you as a player and I made a mistake!” Adams missed three plays in the first series with an apparent leg injury. He made a fine read on his 13-yard TD, blistering FS Kurt Coleman with an explosive break to the post. Adams was splitting double teams and getting after second-year CBs James Bradberry and Daryl Worley. Geronimo Allison (46) filled in and struggled. On a one-stepper, he went a yard too far beyond the line and the pass whistled where he should have been. The game ended when Allison failed to put the ball away on a 10-yard slant to the Carolina 28 and fumbled on a strip by Bradberry. It was the first lost fumble by a Packers wide receiver since Game 5 last season. Randall Cobb (67) had a field day taking advantage of backup slot players forced into the lineup when LB Shaq Thompson (foot) and CB Captain Munnerlyn (discipline) were out. Cobb ran an exquisite nod-and-go to beat MLB Luke Kuechly for 23. He eluded two defensive backs inside the 5 to turn a 10-yard pass against a blown coverage into a 33-yard TD. Cobb might have scored from 74 yards out on a seam route but the pass was underthrown at the 50. He also delivered a nice cut block on DE Bryan Cox for a successful third-and-2 run. He did drop his first pass of the season. Cobb always has been a wonderfully exciting player to watch in the open field. Jordy Nelson (70) played every snap for the first time in 2017 but remained an after-thought even with the change at quarterback. It was almost shocking to see him catch a turn-in, stay on his feet and pick up 4 yards after the catch for a gain of 17. It matched his longest reception since Oct. 15. An underthrown pass ruined Nelson’s bid for a 75-yard TD after he ran a sharp double move against Bradberry. Nelson needed to prevent that from being a pick. Lance Kendricks (22, 11 with his hand down) started but when Richard Rodgers (38, 10 with his hand down) got hot position coach Brian Angelichio stayed with him. On third and 2 Rodgers buried Kuechly on an iso block and talked some trash when they unpled. Later, he aggressively bumped Worley off a pile. Rodgers was feeling it. When the Panthers substituted late and didn’t even have the call in, Rodgers ran a “free play” vertical route for a 24-yard TD. When the Panthers left him alone he made an effortless catch in stride and took it for 36. On a quick out, he barged into Coleman rather than slip out of bounds. On the downside, Rodgers and SS Mike Adams had almost an equal chance at recovering Allison’s fumble. Looked like Adams wanted it more. As an entire corps, the receivers didn’t break enough tackles. Although he blocked much of the time, Kendricks had the chance to score on a wheel route from the 10 but was smothered by Davis.

OFFENSIVE LINE (3 ½)

Statistically, RE Mario Addison has been Carolina’s No. 1 pass rusher. Most of his 48 snaps came against David Bakhtiari, and Bakhtiari shut him down. As Ross Verba used to love saying after his prime games, “No sacks, no hurries.” In this case, Bakhtiari wasn’t charged with a “bad” run, either (the team had just three in the 13 carries by RBs). On the other side, Jason Spriggs was sailing along against Julius Peppers and others until he fell apart in the fourth quarter. DE Wes Horton knocked him off balance and registered a sack in 3.0 seconds. He was trashed on the next play by Horton but wasn’t charged because two other Panthers got there first. Later, Peppers revved up for one big move and slipped around him for a sack in 2.9. In all, Spriggs’ scorecard – 4 ½ pressures, partial fault on two “bad” runs – represented another losing performance. The best player inside was Lane Taylor (1 ½ pressures, no “bad” runs). Jahri Evans got away with a false start on fourth and 1 that ended up being successful. On the second series, he made a great get on Davis so Jamaal Williams could gain 9. Despite considerable success on power plays this season, the only gap play was an 8-yard gain in which Evans pulled. Of Evans’ 3 ½ pressures, 2 ½ came on stunts. He’s limited athletically and doesn’t seem to process fast enough at times. As games progress, Corey Linsley sometimes falls into a dangerous routine of sending back lower and lower snaps. It wasn’t one of his better games, either (three pressures, partial fault on two “bad” runs). Possibly his best moment was a reach-block pancake of DT Kawann Short on a 9-yard run.

QUARTERBACKS (1 ½)

Aaron Rodgers throwing three interceptions in one game would be like an average quarterback throwing five or six. This game, his first since suffering a broken right clavicle nine weeks earlier, marked the 158th start of his 12-year career. Before Sunday, Rodgers had never thrown more than three in a game, and he had done that only three times (once in 2009, twice in '08). Just as remarkable is the fact he had merely 13 two-interception games. Rodgers owned up to his poor performance but that doesn't change the results. In an enormous game he came up empty. All three picks rested solely on his shoulders. Under pressure, he made a dumb decision throwing deep when he was just trying to throw the ball away. It came up short, as did the possible TDs to Cobb and Nelson that were picked. Of his 45 attempts, Rodgers had six other bad throws, including a costly incompleteness in the dirt to an open Allison on third down at the 4. He called time out three times with the play clock about to strike :00. At the same time, he couldn't draw the Panthers offsides. There was considerable pressure from coordinator Steve Wilks, who blitzed on 55.8% of dropbacks. Still, the damage report (three sacks, two knockdowns) wasn't bad at all against a rugged rush. He was terrific sorting out what was coming and preventing even one free runner from showing up in his face. Rodgers did hurt the Panthers with his legs. His two longest completions were on extended plays, and he scrambled five times for 36 to go with a fourth-and-1 keeper for 7. Rodgers sees himself as a world-class athlete, and undoubtedly wanted to prove some things being on the same field as Cam Newton. He's tough and a daredevil, too, which are reasons why he risked further injury to play at some level below full fitness. Leading the Packers to the Super Bowl coming off a fractured collarbone on his throwing side would have set him apart in the league of franchise quarterbacks. It just didn't work.

RUNNING BACKS (3 ½)

Jamaal Williams (43) made the start but Aaron Jones (26) played extensively and Cobb was limited to one snap. Jones' three carries were for 23, 20 and 4 yards. On the 23-yarder, he hit the hole so fast that Davis and Peppers couldn't gather him up at the line. On the 20-yarder, he veered away from Kuechly and then away from the zone-dropping Cox to break into the clear. He's a slashing runner with an intriguing north-south approach and home-run speed. On the down side, Jones was walked back twice in blitz pickup by Davis. He's got to get a lot stronger in the months ahead in order to anchor better next season. Williams was one-for-two in third-and-1 situations, leaving him three-for-five this season. Late last year FB Aaron Ripkowski was averaging about 25 snaps per game. He had nine Sunday, making a fine cut block on NT Star Lotulelei to spring Williams for 9. Meanwhile, FB Joe Kerrigan was inactive for the first time in his five games after playing only three snaps in his first month. In the past few years Mike McCarthy got good mileage out of an inverted wishbone formation and other power-based sets.

DEFENSIVE LINE (2 ½)

Something's amiss. Mike Trgovac, the position coach since 2009, has a long and proud history of tutoring players that almost never jumped offsides. In some early years, his entire unit might have gone offsides once or twice in a season (accepted penalties only). Two weeks ago against Tampa Bay, Mike Daniels had a pair of encroachments and Dean Lowry had another. On Sunday, Daniels gave the Panthers a first down by jumping on third and 4, Kenny Clark was penalized for a neutral-zone violation and so were LBs Clay Matthews and Vince Biegel. Cam Newton's sing-songy cadence wasn't the issue. Minimal poise and discipline were. Daniels (played 46 of the 75 possible snaps on defense) saw a ton of double teams, didn't register a pressure and had one tackle for loss. He was moved out on three runs totaling 18 yards. Neither Daniels nor Clark (55) was able to exploit RG Amini Silatolu, who was subbing for solid starter Trai Turner (concussion). The return of C Ryan Kalil from a neck injury in Game 13 solidified Carolina's interior. Dean Lowry (40) batted a pass, Quinton Dial (17) was in on most of the 20 snaps in base and rookie Montravius Adams, a third-round draft choice, was a healthy scratch for the seventh time in the last 11 games. Maybe he'll start playing now.

LINEBACKERS (2)

The best player was Ahmad Brooks (47). His team-high three pressures included a knockdown against LT Matt Kalil, a flush up the field against Kalil and a flush off the edge against RT Daryl Williams. He also beat Matt Kalil off the ball and mauled Jonathan Stewart for minus-4. At the point of attack Brooks shed TE Ed Dickson and made the tackle for 2. He's just so physical. Coordinator Mike Shula smartly used Brooks' energy against him on a pair of Newton keepers around him and a naked pitch his way for 15. Brooks played so much because Nick Perry (27) tried to play hurt, wasn't effective and then departed with an ankle injury. Clay Matthews (46) was limited to two pressures by the tackles and 35.3% double-teaming on passes. Dom Capers employed Matthews five times from an interior standup position on third and long but the results were ordinary. Matthews tripped with a chance to stop Newton short on a successful third-and-7 run and lost lane integrity on another first-down run by the quarterback. He and Newton engaged in byplay at various points. Vince Biegel (17) is like a bull in a china shop. He did set up Clark's sack with a spin move against Williams. He also shed Greg Olsen and stuffed a carry for 1. On the inside, it's unclear why Joe Thomas played 59 snaps alongside Blake Martinez (71) while Jake Ryan didn't play from scrimmage but did on special teams (12). Ryan (knee) had been questionable. Having the smaller but more athletic Thomas in the lineup made sense because of RB Christian McCaffrey and Olsen. Thomas impressed against the run, slipping Matt Kalil twice and WR Russell Shepard once to make tackles. He also shed McCaffrey's lead block easily to halt Newton for minus-3 on a QB draw. On the other hand, Thomas was one of many who failed trying to cover McCaffrey (6-73) and Olsen (9-116). By the way, Ryan didn't play well the week before. Martinez made the only breakup against either standout, undercutting a throw inside to McCaffrey on third-and-9.

SECONDARY (2 ½)

The only player with a winning grade had to be Damarious Randall (75). Essentially, he matched against 6-4 Devin Funchess, the Panthers' best wideout who played hurt with a bum shoulder. Randall appears to relish individual matchups. Newton threw just four passes to Funchess, and his only reception was for 19 on a dig route with Randall in close proximity to open the second half. Later, Randall left his man to range over into the end zone and break up what would have been a 12-yard TD pass to Funchess. Starting for injured Davon House (shoulder-back), Josh Hawkins (59) gave up a pair of touchdown passes to free agent Damiere Byrd. The nickel again was Morgan Burnett (75), who couldn't handle McCaffrey's quickness. He made two strong plays, aborting a halfback option pass by blanketing Olsen and hopping over a cut block by Olsen to stop Newton short on a zone read. Jermaine Whitehead (16), the dime back, drew a pass-interference penalty after getting beat inside by Shepard on third-and-6 at the 12. Safeties Josh Jones (70) and Ha Ha Clinton-Dix (75) could hardly have played worse. Jones has been a liability in coverage most of the season. Several times he needed teammates to tell him where to line up before the snap. On the 30-yard TD to Olsen, he was peeking in the backfield when the appreciative tight end ran right on by. He couldn't handle McCaffrey out of the backfield because his 4.40 speed is straight-line speed. His pursuit angles weren't sharp, either. Clinton-Dix saw the first TD pass to Byrd all the way. The ball was caught right next to him but the safety neither went up for the ball nor attacked the receiver. A great safety might have recognized the formation and what was coming on Byrd's second TD but Clinton-Dix is far from that and never got close to breaking it up. Sometimes he tries to do more officiating than playing.

KICKERS (4 ½)

Mason Crosby beat his onside kick into the ground off the tee. Imagine the practice that requires. It went the perfect distance, skidded and spun, and the Packers recovered for a chance to tie the game. His four kickoffs (two touchbacks) averaged 67.8 yards and 3.91 seconds of hang time. Justin Vogel's two punts averaged 41.0 yards (gross), 38.5 (net) and 4.07 hang time.

SPECIAL TEAMS (4 ½)

Without the hustle of Marwin Evans the gorgeous onside by Crosby would have gone for naught. Evans played through the block of SS Colin Jones. When McCaffrey couldn't grab the spinning ball, Evans swooped in to make a swift, sure recovery. Three of Brett Goode's four placements appeared to present "perfect laces" for Vogel, the holder. Kick coverage was top-shelf.