

# Rating the Packers: Week 8 at Patriots

By Bob McGinn Posted: Nov 6, 2018

During the first six weeks of the season Mike McCarthy kept making the point that the hard times his team was going through would pay dividends later.

If the fourth quarters of the last two games are any indication the Green Bay Packers didn't benefit one bit. Quite to the contrary, they folded like a cheap suit when the Los Angeles Rams and New England Patriots took the lead down the stretch.

In typical McCarthy style, the coach promised a collective initiative to diagnose the problem and rectify what has ailed the Packers late in games.

"Our challenges have been the fourth quarter two weeks in a row," McCarthy said Monday. "We're not finishing games. That's really been the common thread in the last two weeks that's kept us from getting the win that we thought we were in position to get."

On Sunday night in Foxborough, the Packers went in the tank after New England regained the lead, 24-17, with 10 minutes, 6 seconds remaining.

Green Bay's final two possessions ended with a punt and on downs. The Packers picked up two first downs and 16 yards in 12 plays. It appeared as if the offensive line decided to pack it in early. The Patriots kept on using standard four-man rushes but the blocking was so poor that Aaron Rodgers had almost no chance at the end.

Meanwhile, the defense couldn't prevent the Patriots from running out the last 3:48. A 15-yard slant to Josh Gordon against Jaire Alexander produced one first down, and an 11-yard reverse by Julian Edelman got the other before Tom Brady took a knee three times to conclude New England's 31-17 victory.

Ty Montgomery's decision to return a kickoff from the end zone in Los Angeles with 2:05 left was almost as bad as his fumble. Before that, a third-down sack and JK Scott's 25-yard punt set up the Rams for the winning field goal.

When the Packers' defense took the field after Montgomery's gaffe, they still would have gotten the ball back with a three and out. Instead, Kentrell Brice and Tramon Williams were so far out of position that Todd Gurley had no opposition on a 17-yard toss sweep on third and 10.

Thus, in successive weeks, both the offense and defense seemed to lose their competitive spirit and collapsed in the face of adversity. Identifying the basic problem is easy; correcting it might be hard. Here is a rating of the Packers against the Patriots, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses. As a team, they were awarded 2 footballs.

The three stars of the game were: **1. Marquez Valdes-Scantling; 2. Corey Linsley; 3. Antonio Morrison.**

## **RECEIVERS (4)**

Burned by Davante Adams (6-121) in 2014, Patriots coach Bill Belichick wasn't about to let that happen again. That same year, CB Stephon Gilmore had a great day working nose-to-nose against Jordy Nelson and Adams when he was playing for Buffalo in the Bills' 21-13 upset in Orchard Park. Belichick assigned Adams to Gilmore. Generally, Gilmore kept his distance. Trying to press Adams has been suicidal. In many cases, Gilmore had double-team help. The Packers tried to make Gilmore's job more difficult by placing Adams inside in a trips formation on 19 of his 71 snaps (out of a possible 74 on offense). Still, Gilmore stayed in range and helped limit Adams to six catches for just 40 yards. That left a lot of one-on-one's for Marquez Valdes-Scantling (60), whose three receptions were for 51, 26 and 24 yards. He also would have had a 48-yard touchdown behind CB Jason McCourty but the ball was underthrown. MVS' speed is exactly what this receiving corps needed. His sideline catch for 24 on third and 1 was phenomenal, and on the next play he handled a low dig for 26. Plus, he is giving good effort as a blocker, emulating Adams. Of Randall Cobb's five receptions, four were caught behind the line. Those are just glorified handoffs for a player that's morphing into a gadget guy. On the one play (third and 7) when Cobb (56) was asked to go deep, he managed no separation whatsoever against Jason McCourty. Equanimeous St. Brown (15) played from scrimmage whereas J'Mon Moore played only on special teams. Jimmy Graham (59, including five with his hand down) made his longest reception (19) in his first play out of the backfield all season. He ran and out-and-up and the Patriots neglected to see it. On his 15-yard TD, Graham ran an over route through traffic before making a contested catch with SS Patrick Chung hanging on. That took place early in the third quarter; strangely, he wasn't targeted again. His blocking is just an after-thought. Mercedes Lewis (seven, five with his hand down) stumbled in the flat but turned his first target of the season into a 4-yard reception. Lance Kendricks (26, including six at FB and five with his hand down) and Robert Tonyan (two, both with his hand down) also played.

## **OFFENSIVE LINE (3)**

Corey Linsley has become much more proficient as a reach blocker. Many more times than not, he can neutralize a nose tackle on outside zone runs even if the defender is to the play side. He reached NT Malcom Brown twice in the early going for gains of 6 and 13 yards. On the only "bad" run charged to the line, Linsley didn't sustain against Brown just as Lane Taylor was failing to get LB Kyle Van Noy blocked. Linsley also had success climbing to the linebacker level. Although Linsley can't begin to match athleticism against today's small, fast ILBs, he understands many times all he needs to get is a piece. It requires patience and consistency, traits that Linsley certainly has. Aaron Jones was breaking off Linsley's blocks on a series of productive inside zones. David Bakhtiari is having another excellent year but he must wish the tape of his second half Sunday could be erased. It was shocking to see Bakhtiari allow six pressures, including more than half in an ugly fourth quarter. DE Adrian Clayborn, one of the league's hardest-working rushers, just seemed to want it more than Bakhtiari at the time. That shouldn't happen. Bryan Bulaga (22) suffered an injury to his problematic right knee but on Monday Mike McCarthy said it wasn't major. He gutted it out for four snaps after being hurt in a collision with Jamaal Williams. Jason Spriggs, who hadn't played since Game 3, at least didn't embarrass himself in 52 snaps. He escaped with 2 ½ pressures and no "bad" runs. Spriggs has added so much weight since his days at Indiana that there's almost no evidence of the sleek, fast athlete anymore. The lone sack was a twist by hard-charging Trey Flowers and Clayborn that knocked Taylor and Bakhtiari off balance. Taylor probably has been better passing off stunts than blocking straight rushes this year. Byron Bell,

the other guard, looks worse in pass protection the more he plays. Best thing he does is use mass to lean on folks in the run game. He's almost equally susceptible to bull rushes and quickness.

## **QUARTERBACKS (2 ½)**

Bill Belichick and defensive coach Brian Flores blitzed just 16.3% on passes, hoping that four-man rushes and disguises in coverage would keep Aaron Rodgers in check. The plan worked. Rodgers' inconsistent play continued with just 55.8% accuracy (24-43), one fumble (and almost a second) and a flock of squandered scoring chances. After a long drive to start the game, Rodgers didn't take charge when calls were being made up front and was tagged with a delay penalty that led to three points, not seven. He underthrew MVS on the next series for a possible TD, then made an awful decision on third and 1 near midfield with two timeouts and plenty of time left before halftime. Instead of handing to Jamaal Williams, Rodgers pulled it on a naked bootleg even though Adrian Clayborn hadn't bought the fake. Not only did he fail on the third and 1, his fumble out of bounds was returned to the spot and the Packers then punted on fourth and 3. Rodgers did the same thing against Minnesota in Game 2 on a second and 1 in overtime. On that occasion he had to recover his own fumble and the game ended in a tie. Rodgers dearly loves to show how fast and athletic he is, and this was his first game without the knee brace. Rodgers escaped steady pressure several times, made some excellent throws and caught the Patriots twice with 12 men on the field and once in the neutral zone. Unlike lesser-coached teams, the Patriots kept chasing hard on so-called "free" plays. On one, Clayborn ran down Rodgers from behind (he hurt his right hand or arm) and the ball came out, but the play was brought back. Rodgers' TD to Graham was dead on the money. Davante Adams would have had a 14-yard TD in the same left corner but the throw wasn't accurate. Rodgers second-guessed himself for not going long to Adams in the fourth quarter off deep play-action.

## **RUNNING BACKS (2 ½)**

Aaron Jones (43) had one of his best games (14-76) but all that will be remembered was his fumble at the New England 28 on the opening play of the fourth quarter that sucked the momentum and life out of a fragile football team. Jones had both arms wrapped tightly around the ball when, just as turbulence arrived, he was beginning to raise his right arm in an apparent attempt to employ a stiff-arm. DE Lawrence Guy, a hard worker drafted in the seventh round by Green Bay in 2011, disengaged from Jason Spriggs' back-side block and displayed extreme hustle, as Bill Belichick's players are wont to do. Guy knocked the ball out and Stephon Gilmore recovered even though Davante Adams had first shot at it. With Ty Montgomery traded to Baltimore Tuesday, the two-man rotation made more sense provided Jones and Jamaal Williams (31) don't go down. Jones runs with violence, speed and vision. He's a fighter, as is Williams. Jones made progress in blitz pickup, too. On the 51-yard bomb to MVS, he made a nice late adjustment and picked up SS Duron Harman. He also saved Byron Bell a possible sack by bumping off Trey Flowers on one rush. Bulaga was minding his own business pass-blocking Flowers when Williams inexplicably ran into his knee on his way out as a receiver, causing the injury that knocked Bulaga out of the game.

## **DEFENSIVE LINE (2 ½ )**

Kenny Clark (played 49 of the 71 snaps on defense) had his first ho-hum game of the season. Just as Bill Belichick strives to take away the No. 1 weapon on offense, savvy O-line coach Dante Scarnecchia does the same for the standout on the opponent's defensive front. Mission accomplished. Clark didn't have a pressure and for the first time wasn't getting off blocks consistently. Mike Daniels (43) registered his first legitimate sack of the season (2.8 seconds) on a third and 10 in the first quarter, beating RG Ted Karras inside. With the brawny but athletically limited Karras replacing Shaq Mason (calf), the expectation was Daniels and Clark could have their way inside. Scrappy C David Andrews, speedy LG Joe Thuney and Karras used their hands well and clamped down after Daniels' sack. When the Packers turned away the Patriots on seven snaps inside the 10 (four were from the 1), the entire unit excelled. Dean Lowry (49) logged the second-most playing time. Backups Tyler Lancaster (20) and Montravius Adams (13) played more than they have, too. The Packers could ill afford an injury to Clark or Daniels. Lancaster shed Andrews to make a stop before the center came back to handle him on two rushes for 25 yards. The Packers had three bigs in the lineup for 31 plays in the second half compared to only one in the first half.

## **LINEBACKERS (2)**

The plan was to play rookie ILB Oren Burks, the third-round draft choice from Vanderbilt, alongside Blake Martinez. That had to be scrapped when Burks was awful in the Patriots' opening 10-play, 59-yard TD drive. The game is too fast for Burks right now. He was crunched by LT Trent Brown on the first play. On the fourth play, he was late covering James White in the flat and the gain was 14. On White's 8-yard TD around left end, Burks failed to prevent LG Joe Thuney from getting to his legs and was cut down. Burks is much faster than Antonio Morrison but is feeling his way on assignments and isn't physical at this point. Burks (15) was benched in favor of Morrison (31), who played with a ferocity associated with someone that had played just three snaps in the last two games and wasn't happy about it. He made a big tackle on the goal-line. When Thuney pulled Morrison met him in the hole and knocked the guard backward over the pile. When White blocked outside, Morrison delayed a count before steaming inside to sack Tom Brady in 2.7 seconds. Josh Gordon was standing near a pile when Morrison risked a penalty and sent him flying with an enormous hit. He showed exceptional desire and chase catching White inside the 5 on the 37-yard throwback screen. Morrison makes his share of mistakes, too, but at least he's flying around. Martinez (56) sat out 15 snaps with an ankle injury suffered stepping on Brady's foot as he recorded a pressure. It was another rough outing for Martinez, who was late covering TE Dwayne Allen on a quick flat pass for 21, missed two tackles and got wired on blocks. On the outside, the pass rush was almost non-existent. Despite season-low doubling on dropbacks (one in 17) Clay Matthews (46) was shut out. He has started to power rush more because his edge stuff isn't working. From a rover position behind the line, he broke hard inside and was knocked ass over tea kettle by RB Kenjon Barner (5-9, 195). During the seven-play goal-line stand Matthews wasn't even on the field. Nick Perry (29), who was questionable with an ankle injury, contributed mightily on the goal-line but was dominated at other times by Brown. Reggie Gilbert (30) always plays hard but sometimes isn't an alert player. Working against the massive Brown, Kyler Fackrell (36) uncorked some fine rushes but the ball was away. He saved a TD by picking up Edelman out of the backfield and Brady threw incomplete. Allen, possibly the best blocking tight end the Packers have seen this season, was shed by Fackrell on a 2-yard gain. His edge-setting was sometimes great, sometimes poor.

## **DEFENSIVE BACKS (2)**

The first appearance at safety for Tramon Williams (71) as a Packer went OK. Tom Brady tried to beat the old pro with a bomb to Josh Gordon on the game's third play but he stayed deeper than the deepest and the throw never had a chance. The Patriots seemed to be trying to exploit Williams on other shots in the deep middle given that other teams have victimized Kentrell Brice in center field. Williams made a terrible mistake late on a fake bubble screen; a 17-yard pass to Gordon ruptured into a 55-yard TD when he missed the tackle. He was in-between trying for the interception or making the tackle and wound up doing neither. Williams made a strong tackle of James White at the 1 but the Packers can't expect him to fill the alley. At 35, he's anything but a run-support safety. Brice (23) left with a knee injury suffered when he vaulted over Bashaud Breeland in an effort not to hurt his teammate. Josh Jones (51) took over for Brice and was up and down. He has a long way to go when it comes to assignments, angles and playing hard every snap. He can be a plus as a tackler in the box. Jermaine Whitehead (15) was giving great effort early before being ejected. He threw a punch at C David Andrews, and the league has warned players that won't be tolerated. Breeland made his debut in Green Bay after four seasons of covering the likes of Odell Beckham, Dez Bryant and Alshon Jeffery for the Redskins in the NFC East. On the minus side, he drew two penalties, failed to compete for a 50-50 ball that was caught by Gordon for 29 and was out of position on a big third-and-7 completion on the Patriots' drive for the go-ahead TD. On the plus side, he's eager to challenge receivers at the line and wasn't shy about tackling. He should improve with increased knowledge of the scheme. Jaire Alexander (71) had the speed and quickness to keep up with slot Julian Edelman. On the left outside, Kevin King (24) was knocked out of his third game in 2018, this time with a left hamstring injury. Josh Jackson (41) took over and was adequate.

## **KICKERS (4)**

The Packers signed ex-Charger P Drew Kaser Saturday because JK Scott's wife was due for their first child. Kaser made the trip but it wasn't necessary to activate him. He was released Monday after the Packers claimed SS Ibrahaim Campbell off waivers from the Jets. Scott performed well, posting five-punt averages of 42 yards (gross and net) and 4.52 seconds of hang time. Edelman was forced to make four fair catches. Mason Crosby made his only attempt (29) and averaged 67 and 4.14 on four kickoffs.

## **SPECIAL TEAMS (1)**

Ron Zook's crew got off to a woeful start when Josh Jones was offside on the opening kickoff. Cordarrelle Patterson brought it back 36 yards when Raven Greene missed the tackle. Otherwise, the gain would have been 22. The replacement for kick returner Ty Montgomery was Breeland, who hit the hole hard on his two runbacks. His spins in traffic, however, don't lend themselves to ball security. Robert Tonyan was penalized for roughing P Ryan Allen, giving New England a first down on fourth and 21. When Tonyan came clean inside, he should have gone after the block even more aggressively. He held back a bit, ended up in no man's land and was flagged.