

Rating the Packers: Week 13 vs Falcons

By Bob McGinn Posted: Dec 11, 2018

For the sake of argument, let's agree that the Green Bay Packers' starting base offense consists of three wide receivers, one tight end and one running back.

With that in mind, the Packers won a football game Sunday, just their second since mid-October, without nine starters. *Nine starters.*

On offense, wide receiver Geronimo Allison is on injured reserve and offensive linemen Bryan Bulaga, Lane Taylor and Byron Bell all sat out after being categorized as either questionable or doubtful on the injury report.

On defense, linemen Mike Daniels and Muhammad Wilkerson are on injured reserve along with inside linebacker Jake Ryan, outside linebacker Nick Perry and cornerback Kevin King.

The opponent, the Atlanta Falcons, were down five starters itself: running back Devonta Freeman, guards Brandon Fusco and Andy Levitre, and safeties Keanu Neal and Ricardo Allen.

What the Disappointment Bowl came down to at Lambeau Field basically was depth and desire. With an assist from Mother Nature, the reserivist Packers handled the cold, slippery ball better than the backup Falcons and came together under interim coach Joe Philbin.

In one of their three top performances in a 5-7-1 season, the Packers trounced the Falcons, 34-20.

Here is a rating of the Packers against the Falcons, with their 1 to 5 football totals in parentheses. The Packers received four footballs.

The three stars of the game were: **1. Aaron Rodgers; 2. Bashaud Breeland; 3. Davante Adams.**

RECEIVERS (3 ½)

The Falcons have substantial confidence in their three seasoned cover guys: LC Desmond Trufant, RC Robert Alford and nickel Brian Poole. Wherever Davante Adams (played 56 of the 65 possible offensive snaps) lined up, they played their defense. Immediately, Adams took charge of the situation. On the Packers' fifth play from scrimmage, he released outside Alford and made a contested catch of a back-shoulder dart for 21 with the opponent clawing at the ball. Three plays later from the 7, Adams caught Alford playing too deep, ran a speed out and made a difficult catch of a pass slightly behind him for a touchdown. With the Packers driving for an insurance score, Adams went to the sticks on third and 14 and ran a dig route ala James Lofton 35 years ago and the gain was 16 against Alford. In those days, that was called a deep crossing pattern, and Lynn Dickey threw it with the best of them. Adams would have chalked up his fifth 100-yard game in nine weeks but a 30-yard reception was erased when Jimmy Graham (47, 13 with his hand down) was penalized for picking Alford. As expected, Graham's athletic limitations were even more evident as he tried to separate from speedy linebackers Deion Jones, De'Vondre Campbell and Foyesade Oluokun. He did draw a pair of penalties. At the same time, he caught only two balls for 13 yards, was charged with drops on two anything-but-routine targets and ran a lazy stick route enabling Jones to slice in from the side and almost make an interception. Lance Kendricks (17, 11 with his hand down), Mercedes Lewis (16, all with his hand down) and Robert Tonyan (seven, three with his hand down) weren't targeted. Randall Cobb (44) is like a favorite old binky for Aaron Rodgers. When defensive coordinator Marquand Manuel sent a slot blitz on the third play, Rodgers-Cobb read it like a first-grade primer and the quick pass behind the pressure picked up 8. Cobb didn't have daylight from SS Sharrod Neasman on his out-and-up route but the ball couldn't have been thrown any better and he didn't drop the ball in his hands for a 24-yard TD. On the outside, Equanimeous St. Brown (34), Marquez Valdes-Scantling (30) and Jake Kumerow (six), who failed to see the field until the 9-minute mark of the third quarter, didn't have many chances to show.

OFFENSIVE LINE (3)

Last season, free agent Lucas Patrick got a chance to play extensively in four games. In 227 snaps, he showed a degree of promise. With LG Lane Taylor (foot) out, Patrick saw his first ample opportunity this season and didn't demonstrate much improvement. His 3 ½ pressures and 2 ½ "bad" runs were highs on the line. Undrafted out of Duke in 2016, Patrick tested well on the bench press (29 reps) but ran just 5.26 and his arms measured only 32 ¼ inches. The more he played Sunday, the more he had trouble handling quickness and speed. He was a count late to the second level and cutting off on the back side. When there was double-team help available in pass protection, Patrick was OK. Left one-on-one, he was hit-or-miss. What has kept Patrick in Green Bay, besides versatility, is determination. For the opponent, he is an annoying pest who always looks to finish. His need to administer the last shove enraged LB De'Vondre Campbell and the result was his 15-yard penalty for unnecessary roughness. For his coaches and teammates, he's what they want as a gung-ho competitor. When Aaron Rodgers slid late and got hammered from the side by Brian Poole on a legal hit, it was Patrick who ignited the melee by storming in five seconds late. He wasn't penalized but it might have been a finable action. RG Justin McCray played extensively for the sixth time this season with Byron Bell (knee) out. He allowed two pressures and two "bad" runs. He's similar to Patrick, a non-athlete with a big heart and good intelligence. RT Jason Spriggs, subbing for Bryan Bulaga (knee), allowed two pressures and one "bad" run. He was going along fairly well until his game disintegrated in the fourth quarter. David Bakhtiari gave up a pair of bull-rush hurries to DE Takk McKinley. Foes sometimes knock Bakhtiari off balance with an initial move but they don't often get home because he recovers so well. Corey Linsley didn't have any major lapses in the run game but did allow 2 ½ pressures, almost an exorbitant number for a pass protector of his consistency.

QUARTERBACKS (4 ½)

The Falcons have a time-tested scheme, sound coaching, a good eight-man rotation up front, fine linebackers and competitive cornerbacks. With a patchwork offensive line the Packers needed Aaron Rodgers to be on top of his game. This time, he was. "I just was trying to have fun out there and lead and inspire," he said afterward. "It probably has nothing to do with the way we played but the guys knew basically by the way I was playing I was going to put my body on the line. Took a couple shots. I'm dealing with a little bit of a sore back." On third down, the team's Achilles' heel most of the season, Rodgers completed five of six passes for 70 yards and ran twice for 23. The Falcons' blitz rate of 42.5% was the third highest against Green Bay this season. Two of the four sacks came on pressures. His feet and nerve helped turn other sack situations into big plays. With the score tied early in the second quarter DT Grady Jarrett had a quick flush against Lucas Patrick. Rodgers spun wide left, spotted DE Bruce Irvin too far inside and circled him for a gain of 7. When Takk McKinley walked back David Bakhtiari and seized Rodgers by the chest, he extricated himself and took off sprinting for 16. The TD pass to Randall Cobb was special. If the ball had been lobbed, it would have been overthrown. Instead, he stepped into the throw, delivering a tight laser that was in effect a 50-50 ball to a covered receiver. It was on the money. Rodgers set the NFL record for most consecutive passes without an interception helped by Deion Jones' two dropped picks. Equally important was the fact he didn't fumble with hungry Falcons everywhere. That's eight games in a row in which Rodgers hasn't lost a fumble after he lost three in Games 4-5. His last season with a streak that long was 2014.

RUNNING BACKS (4)

Joe Philbin changed the batting order, giving Jamaal Williams all 10 snaps of the opening drive. Aaron Jones handled the next two series, and in the end Jones played 42 snaps compared to Williams' 24. Jones equaled his career high with 20 touches, gained 106 yards and was sharp. After failing on their last three third and 1's in the last two games, Joe Philbin had his fingers crossed giving it to Jones in that situation in the second quarter. It looked bad, too, when DE Vic Beasley displaced Mercedes Lewis where the run appeared to be aimed. Somehow, Jones adjusted his track and didn't let Beasley tackle him. SS Sharrod Neasman belted Jones from the side but he ricocheted off for a gain of 2 and the first down. He outran two pulling linemen on a carry for 8. He surged through LB Deion Jones for 6 additional yards. On the 29-yard TD, he made a great cut against an overpursuing defense, skipped out of FS Damontae Kazee's tackle at the 10 and steamed into the end zone. In all, he broke three tackles. Williams barreled up the middle for 7 yards after contact on his first of four carries. In a new set that might be seen again, Philbin placed Williams and Jones on either side of Aaron Rodgers in shotgun. Operating then as a fullback, the 215-pound Williams unloaded a strong iso block on Neasman behind which Jones charged for 14. Danny Vitale (two) isn't regarded as a classic blocking fullback. Lance Kendricks certainly isn't, either. As it stands now, the Packers will play three more games in cold weather without a legitimate two-back option.

DEFENSIVE LINE (3)

When the Falcons drove 75 yards in seven plays for a touchdown to start the game, the Packers used three defensive linemen on three of the snaps. In the Falcons' 64 snaps after that coordinator Mike Pettine used two bigs 60 times and one big four times. He never went with three again. Atlanta's three running backs were successful on the ground (22-110-5.0). Kenny Clark (played 51 of the 71 possible snaps on defense) went to the locker room in the second series to have an elbow injury examined. After missing 12 plays, Clark returned to play all but eight snaps in another courageous effort. Clark demands double teams; because of it, he's a huge reason why Blake Martinez has far more tackles than anyone else. It was just a 6-yard run, but to see LG Wes Schweitzer move Clark out of the hole one-on-one was a stunner. That just never happens. On the Falcons' failed third and 1, Clark destroyed RG Zane Beadles forcing Ito Smith to change course and right into Clay Matthews' clutches. When Dean Lowry (56) gives ground at the point it typically isn't much. He had three pressures, including a holding penalty against LT Jake Matthews that wiped out a 32-yard reception to Mohamed Sanu. Tyler Lancaster showed surprising burst to the football in three impressive plays during a 22-snap stint. On a run, he shed a block by Beadles and made a jarring tackle for a 2-yard gain. He came off Schweitzer to draw a holding penalty and erase a 32-yard pass to Julio Jones. On a screen, he kept his eyes up while engaged with Schweitzer, jerked him aside when ball showed and accelerated to make the tackle for a 4-yard loss. In Montravius Adams' first play for the injured Clark, the Falcons ran inside for 13. Adams (12) detonated a hump move on Beadles and almost got home. He must keep working on his stamina and stringing pass-rush moves together.

LINEBACKERS (4)

Antonio Morrison (seven) started alongside Blake Martinez (71) but after the first series he was replaced by safeties, usually Josh Jones. Martinez continues to be out of position too often while making the majority of his tackles downfield. He took a chance by running through behind a running play and made the stop after a 1-yard gain. His only miss was on a run that ruptured into a gain of 17. For the third time in five games the coaches didn't feel comfortable playing rookie Oren Burks at all from scrimmage. On a well-run tackle-end twist with Kenny Clark, Clay Matthews (55) flowed inside for a sack in 2.9 seconds. He also had a knockdown of Matt Ryan on a naked bootleg and shed his cousin, Jake, for a tackle for loss on third and 1. Kyler Fackrell (57) has come back to earth after his three-sack splurges in games 4 and 10. His lone pressure still was one more than Reggie Gilbert (30), who has hit the doldrums, too.

DEFENSIVE BACKS (4)

Jaire Alexander (71) basically shadowed the great Julio Jones. Of the eight passes thrown to Jones with Alexander in coverage, seven were completed for 90 yards. Two other passes – one 32-yard completion, one incompleteness – fit the same description but were nullified by penalty. Alexander didn't break up a pass. On the only incompleteness, Jones burned him deep for what would have been a 70-yard TD but Matt Ryan's pass was overthrown. Yet, as one-sided as the numbers were, the coaches had reason to be satisfied because they remember how people like Sam Shields and LaDarius Gunter were overwhelmed by Jones, too. At least Alexander challenged Jones most of the time. When Alexander didn't, like when he was too deep in the red zone, Jones' 7-yard TD was too easy. Alexander tackled well in close quarters and batted down a pass on his only blitz. Tony Brown (59) played more than fellow rookie Josh Jackson (56) for the first time. Brown gave up the inside to Justin Hardy on his 19-yard TD pass and Kentrell Brice (65) wasn't in position to help. Brown was up-and-down as a tackler. He forced Mohamed Sanu to fumble but a quick whistle took it away. Jackson broke up two passes, missed a tackle and looked awful on Sanu's 32-yard reception that was called back. He also drew a holding penalty, his seventh accepted penalty on defense of the season. Back from a 2 ½-game groin injury, Bashaud Breeland (23) made the play of the game with a 22-yard interception return for a TD. Working from the slot, Breeland never even back-pedaled on third and 4 in coverage on a tight end, Austin Hooper. He watched Ryan's eyes, and when the ball came to the boundary on the anticipated out cut it was over. It was a cagy play by a five-year veteran. He also recovered the shotgun snap that caromed off Sanu's leg and had tight coverage on a third-and-20 incompleteness. Newcomer Natrell Jamerson was inactive but the other nine DBs all got in from scrimmage. With Tramon Williams (71) on the field at least the top no longer gets taken off the defense. Josh Jones (63) played mostly at linebacker and was adequate. SS Eddie Pleasant (six) got a shot early and CB Will Redmond (five) got a shot late.

KICKERS (4 ½)

After missing five kicks in Detroit, Mason Crosby made four field goals in the next game. After missing from 49 a week ago that would have forced overtime against Arizona, he bounced back with field goals from 50 and 48 Sunday in sub-freezing weather. Crosby made difficult kicks look rather routine. His six kickoffs averaged 65 yards and 3.79 seconds of hang time. JK Scott averaged 42.3 yards (gross), 38.8 (net) and 4.44 hang time in the cold. His first three punts had solid net average before he hit possibly his worst ball of the season. It went 20 yards and out of bounds, setting up Atlanta's final touchdown.

SPECIAL TEAMS (2 ½)

Can anyone secure a punt? Jaire Alexander's two fumbles increased to six the number of fumbles the Packers have had on punt returns this season. Fortunately for Alexander, he managed to recover both and so the team's lost fumble total on punt returns remained at three. Earlier, the Packers lost 17 yards on punt roll when the rookie didn't run up and field a ball. Randall Cobb came on to make a fair catch after Alexander was benched. Rookie WR J'Mon Moore hit it pretty good on his first kickoff return for 26. Kick coverage was so-so.