

Rating The Packers : Week 1 at Bears

By Bob McGinn Posted 9/6/2019

Mike McCarthy's baptismal as coach of the Packers was a 26-0 whitewashing administered by the Bears on opening day 2006 at Lambeau Field.

"It's not the way you want to start a season, but I'm not diving on no sword," McCarthy said afterward. "We have some work to do. ... We've got a lot of better days ahead."

From that day on McCarthy's teams defeated the Bears 19 times in 25 games. What started horribly for McCarthy eventually would take him to the NFL mountaintop and the Packers' 13th championship.

We have no clue where Matt LaFleur is headed as McCarthy's successor. What we do know is that the 39-year-old coach experienced Thursday night the greatest opener for a Packers coach since Vince Lombardi upset the Bears, 9-6, in 1959.

While they don't carry coaches off the field anymore they do present game balls. LaFleur was presented with one after his underdog Packers knocked off the Bears, the defending NFC North Division champions, 10-3 at Soldier Field.

Mike Pettine, the defensive coordinator that McCarthy first brought to town a year ago, deserved a game ball as well. LaFleur declared the performance of Pettine's unit "smothering."

"I think we showed the league and the folks watching that we're not just an offensive football team anymore," quarterback Aaron Rodgers said. "That we've got a defense."

Of the seven players on the Packers' defense that played at least 90 percent of the snaps, four were making their debut for Green Bay. Raven Greene, who played 77 percent, was a little-used rookie free agent from James Madison during the 6-9-1 debacle that cost McCarthy his job after 12 games.

It was these new players plus a sprinkling of veterans that coalesced Thursday night in a wonderful display of chase and ceaseless hustle, physical play and deception. The Packers even tackled relatively crisply after an August filled with misses.

"Three points is ridiculous," Bears coach Matt Nagy said. "I give credit to Coach Pettine on defense. I said it to you guys last year. He's a good defensive coordinator. You live in third down against this defense, you go back and look at the numbers, this defense is one of the best on third and that medium range in the NFL."

Just remember one thing. The Packers never really came close to playing as well on defense in the final 15 games of the 2017 season as they did in the opener against Seattle at Lambeau Field, a 17-9 victory.

The Bears' defense was outstanding as well. Combine that with crowd noise, LaFleur's brand-new offense and little or no playing time in exhibition games and it wasn't surprising that the Packers made little headway offensively.

Yet, for the first time, there were indications of how LaFleur wants to play on offense. He likes double tight-end sets, often with one or both in a two-point wing position rather than a three-point stance. He can be old-fashioned, using base personnel (two wides, two backs, one tight end) on the first two snaps of each half. He loves motion. The quarterback was under center more than in the recent past. Here is a rating of the Packers against the Bears. Five footballs are the maximum, one-half football is the minimum. As a team, they received four footballs.

The three stars of the game were: 1. Za'Darius Smith. 2. Kenny Clark. 3. Bryan Bulaga.

Receivers (2)

Until one of his teammates elevates his game the Packers are going to see defenses primed to stop Davante Adams (played 62 of the possible 64 snaps on offense). CB Kyle Fuller generally fronted Adams, and one of the safeties often played over the top of him. All he could find was short stuff in the flats or off motion. His long was 11 yards. Marquez Valdes-Scantling (42) played almost every snap in the first 2 ½ quarters before being replaced by Trevor Davis (19). "He kind of teases us from time to time over the years," Rodgers said, "but I think he turned the corner this training camp." Davis made his only target count, catching a low 17-yard pass on his knees and then scrambling up and aggressively gaining 11 more. The longest play by either team was the 47-yard bomb to MVS in which one of the safeties vacated the middle. He can fly. Geronimo Allison (32), the No. 3, had just one target and was shut out. Somewhat surprisingly, Jake Kumerow (one) wasn't involved after the coaches went with the speedier Davis as No. 4. In both meetings last season Bears defensive coordinator Vic Fangio was so concerned about Jimmy Graham that he required one of his edge rushers to chuck the tight end before joining the rush. Graham was a non-factor with five catches for 40 yards in 106 snaps. Fangio's replacement, Chuck Pagano, had no such concerns and thus Graham made an impact. After scoring merely two touchdowns all last season he scored the only one here, using his six-inch height advantage on SS Deon Bush to clutch an 8-yard 50-50 ball in the corner of the end zone. Graham got down the field fairly well on a vertical shot that drew a 38-yard penalty for pass interference against speedy ILB Roquan Smith. He also threw caution to the wind by hurdling FS Eddie Jackson. Of Graham's 35 snaps, 18 came split out, 14 as a wing and three with his hand down. Mercedes Lewis played almost as much as Graham (34, including 14 with his hand down and 12 as a wing) after being an after-thought a year ago. Not only didn't Lewis catch a pass until Game 8, he wasn't targeted, either. His three targets here equaled his total for the entire 2018 season. Lewis made one nice hands catch, had the team's only drop on a difficult sideline chance and blocked OK. Robert Tonyan (20, including 11 as a wing and five with his hand down) is a willing mixer as a blocker but isn't equipped at the point to do heavy lifting.

Offensive Line (2)

Last December at Soldier Field, the five starters were charged with four sacks, one knockdown, 12 hurries and two “bad” runs (a bad run is a rush for 1 yard or less in non-goalline or short-yardage situations). In the lineup were Jason Spriggs at right tackle and Lucas Patrick at right guard. The damage report for the starters this time was four sacks, 1 ½ knockdowns, five hurries and 5 ½ “bad” runs. In the lineup here were RT Bryan Bulaga and RG Billy Turner. The best performer was Bulaga, the 10-year veteran whose health is of paramount importance again this season. Matched at times against Khalil Mack as well as Leonard Floyd and Akiem Hicks, Bulaga allowed one hurry and didn’t have an obvious miss in the run game. Keeping Bulaga in mothballs for eight months makes sense. He’s fragile. But as well as Bulaga moved and bended Thursday night it’s obvious he still is a high-quality tackle. On the other side, David Bakhtiari needs to play a whole lot better than that. He was beaten by Floyd for a bull-rush sack in 3.0 seconds, allowed another but was saved by a penalty, drew two holding penalties and twice had problems with undersized OLB Isaiah Irving in his seven snaps. Granted, Bakhtiari wasn’t responsible for any of Mack’s 2 ½ pressures, and he had him a lot. But a player of Bakhtiari’s caliber shouldn’t have three total pressures and two “bad” runs, not to mention the two holds. Corey Linsley started poorly on the first two plays and posted a rather ugly stat line: three pressures, one “bad” run. Turner didn’t look like a legitimate starter in his debut for Green Bay. At 6 foot 5 and 310 pounds, Turner looks more like a tackle. Initially, being late off the ball led to problems. He was taken apart by Mack on an up-field sack and by Hicks on a power-rush sack. He gave up 3 ½ pressures, struggling to sit down against power and handling movement off his edge. He’s a catcher with high pad level. Turner was better in the run game. He looks like another Band-Aid at right guard following Jahri Evans in 2017 and Byron Bell last season. They never played after Green Bay; Turner’s niche should be as a versatile No. 7 lineman. LG Lane Taylor allowed a bad bull rush sack to Roy Robertson-Harris on the third snap and had a team-high 2 ½ “bad” runs. Before long, rookie Elgton Jenkins is going to get the call at one of the guards.

Quarterbacks (3)

What might have beat the Packers was a quarterback turning the ball over. Aaron Rodgers didn’t, and for that deserves a passing grade. He got a break on a lousy throw early to Graham in the flat that barely creased the grass before being intercepted. Old teammate Ha Ha Clinton-Dix also stripped Rodgers from behind on a scramble; the play was overturned by a penalty but Rodgers did make the recovery, anyway. Hey, that was a fierce pass rush. Arms and legs were flying all over the place. Yet, Rodgers didn’t lose the ball because he religiously keeps two hands on it in the melee. His footwork throwing the football has gone steadily downhill over time. His pocket and anti-turnover discipline have only increased. After three awful series followed by a timeout, of all things, to open the fourth, Rodgers resurrected an old standby with a deep ball off two run fakes. Turning his back to the Bears, the action drew up a safety so MVS was free. The ball was underthrown but the 47-yard gain set up the only TD. He took a chance on the end-zone throw to Graham in traffic knowing a flag would fly on the Bears for not getting their 12th man off the field. Parrying the rush, he flipped the ball to Jamaal Williams for gains of 8 and 10 yards. He was partially responsible for two of the five sacks and 2 ½ pressures in all. On the Hail Mary to Graham, he needed to throw the ball 58 yards to reach the end zone but could only get it 56. In a very strange decision, Rodgers elected to throw the ball in the flat to MVS as the Packers were trying to kill the clock. With Fuller lurking and the pass thrown inaccurately, it came remarkably close to being a pick-6.

Running backs (2)

The Packers generally have employed a zone-type running attack since McCarthy and offensive coordinator Jeff Jagodzinski arrived in 2006. Throughout the McCarthy years, the ground game always included some gap or pattern runs in which the objective was to cut the defense in half by blocking down and then pulling a lineman or two for thrust at the point of attack. There has been no gap scheme to be seen under LaFleur. He's committed to outside zone lock, stock and barrel. Neither Aaron Jones (38) nor Jamaal Williams played a snap in exhibition games; thus, they hadn't been brought to the ground in forever. The Bears are a beastly bunch to run on. So much mass, some much strength and so much speed. It was a savage, physical game. No one was offering the opponent a hand. There was more than the usual grinding and mashing of running backs in piles. Jones touched the ball 14 times and did break four tackles. When on the field, he is a major threat. Williams had one carry for 5 yards; his others went for minus-1 (Bakhtiari and Taylor missed blocks), minus-2 (Adams fanned), 0 (NT Eddie Goldman blew up Taylor) and minus-2 (Taylor couldn't turn back to get Smith). In other words, Williams had no chance. FB Danny Vitale (11) also played.

Defensive Line (4)

In a rivalry as physical as Chicago-Green Bay, isn't it a marvel that the Packers can play an entire game with just one inside linebacker? That's what they did as Ty Summers and newcomer B.J. Goodson never played from scrimmage. How is it possible that Blake Martinez' partner wasn't a 230-pounder but Raven Greene, who in March 2018 measured a shade over 5-11 and weighed 197 pounds? His bench press was 14 reps. How can and did Greene hold up, helping stymie the Bears' three running backs to 35 yards on 12 carries (2.9)? The reason should be rather obvious. The Packers have three defensive linemen that are extremely hard to turn or move back, and their new pair of edge-setters outside also prevent blockers from getting to Greene and Martinez. Kenny Clark (played 56 of the possible 73 defensive snaps) made two of probably the three biggest plays on defense. On the first third and 1, he backdoored C James Daniels to stuff Cordarrelle Patterson for minus-2. On the second, Clark and Preston Smith were quick to see that Mitchell Trubisky pulled the ball down and was going to throw short. They got him down for no gain and another punt followed. "When you have third and 1 you've got to get the first (down)," Nagy said. Clark didn't play in the December meeting because of an elbow injury and the Bears rushed for 100 yards. Meanwhile, Dean Lowry (47), Montravius Adams (22), Tyler Lancaster (14) and even Fadol Brown (three) remained square cutting off run lanes. Wasn't there just a mass of bodies every time Nagy called a run? The Bears are more than adequate upfront, too. Rookie Kingsley Keke, an impressive player in August, was inactive. Adams, a non-hustler for much of his first two seasons, isn't anymore. He chased hard out of the box to nab Taylor Gabriel on a bubble screen. Later, he ran down a back in the flat. Adams isn't as stout at the point as Clark, Lowry and Lancaster but you don't see him getting buckled or walked back as if on roller skates like earlier in his career. The unit contributed just 1 ½ pressures, but so what? Their lane integrity helped cut off Trubisky and his dangerous scrambles.

Linebackers (4 ½)

It was interesting to see just how much the starters outside played. Preston Smith (72) sat out only one snap whereas Za'Darius Smith missed just six. Maybe that's why the Packers were willing to trade Reggie Gilbert, who was an effective rusher this summer. Barring injury, the Smiths are young enough to dominate the position. Ex-starter Kyler Fackrell (23) and Rashan Gary (six) provided breathers. Preston set a nasty edge. He's big and strong, has seen it all and seems to enjoy handling the run. His half-sack was unblocked; his full sack came on the final play against LG Cody Whitehair in a well-choreographed stunt with Za'Darius. In all, Preston had 3 ½ pressures, 1 ½ fewer than Za'Darius' team-leading total of five. Za'Darius brings some of that Ravens' nasty. He played the first 15 snaps, something Clay Matthews hasn't done in a few years. Za'Darius was surprisingly disciplined in back-side containment. He provides just a big body at the point. Of his 67 snaps, eight came with his hand down as a defensive tackle on passing downs and 10 more came standing up. Preston, with a more linear build, remained outside for all but two snaps. Za'Darius beat almost every one of the Bears' linemen for a pressure. It doesn't seem to matter where he lines up. Fackrell stood up as a rover on 10 plays. Pettine blitzed just 17.7 percent on passes. Since last year, he appears to have confidence that Fackrell will make good decisions on the fly and drop when it's best to drop from a stand-up position. Fackrell didn't have a pressure but wasn't asked to rush much, either. Making his debut, Gary had to watch the first 30 snaps of each half before entering for a pair of three-play stints. He did have one good rush but was denied credit for the knockdown because Preston arrived first. In August, Gary appeared to be a long way away from being able to play linebacker, and for now must wait his turn for snaps in sub-packages because of the Smiths, Clark and Fackrell.

Defensive Backs (4 ½)

Tarik Cohen is one of the NFL's most difficult players to get down. It's a tribute to the Packers' rebuilt secondary that his long gain in eight receptions was 9 yards. After several years of slovenly play by the secondary, the Packers were on receivers like stink on you know what. Just about everyone played well but rookie Darnell Savage (73) probably was most impressive. Small but mighty would be an apt description of his work Thursday night. He showed instincts, quick feet and rapid acceleration, breaking up two passes and missing just one tackle. After not blitzing Savage in the first half Pettine called his number seven times in the second half. The result was 1 ½ pressures. He showed great timing, that quick burst and no hesitation when the linemen came off on him. Neither did Greene, whose 56 snaps might all have come at inside linebacker. After watching people like Josh Jones and Eddie Pleasant play the hybrid role for two years, Greene more closely resembles Morgan Burnett. That is a tough guy with adequate speed. Greene isn't as big as Burnett but he isn't afraid. He sifted through trash to help stop Mike Davis on second and 2. On back-to-back blitzes, he spun nicely off Whitehair before registering a flush against Leno. ILB Oren Burks will have to show more than he has in his brief career to steal time from Greene. Adrian Amos (73) went over the top late to intercept a pass to Allen Robinson in the end-zone corner. He slipped a block by TE Bradley Sowell to assist Clark on the third-and-1 stop. Back from a summer-long hamstring, Kevin King (42) and Tony Brown (27) alternated at right corner. King looked like a guy who was eager to hit somebody. He also dropped a routine interception at the Bears 46. On the other side, Jaire Alexander (73) got off to a solid start. In the slot, Tramon Williams (73) made two fine plays in coverage that were offset by a pass-interference penalty on third and 4 and an unnecessary roughness. Trubisky attacked Brown, getting him on two sideline tosses to Robinson for 49. He's eager but still has a lot to learn. Josh Jackson (three) blitzed on his first two snaps.

Kickers (4 ½)

In 2019 exhibition games, JK Scott's 22 punts averaged 48 yards (gross), 41.2 (net) and 4.66 seconds of hang time (he averaged 4.70 in the summer of 2018). In this game, his nine punts averaged 47.6, 43.6 and 4.44 hang time. Five stopped inside the 20. By his standards, he didn't hit the ball all that well. Just three had hang time over 4.6. Fresh off a training-camp challenge from Sam Ficken, Mason Crosby prevented one of the greatest kickoff returners in NFL history (Patterson) from returning any of his three boots. He drove two touchbacks 76 and 74 yards before changing up with an effective squib for another touchback. His only field-goal attempt (39 yards) was true.

Special teams (3 ½)

Cohen projected frustration. He had to make three fair catches, and the four that he returned were for a 9-yard average. Exceptional outside work by Will Redmond and Davis kept him bottled up. The speed of Summers running down the middle also prevented Cohen from finding a crease. Davis didn't get anything going as a punt returner but did make better decisions than Cohen, which mattered in a field-position game. Tony Brown picked up two penalties, resembling the foul-ridden player he was early last season before McCarthy laid down the law. LaFleur needs to follow suit. Hunter Bradley's punt snaps appeared to be faster and more accurate than they were during his rookie season, especially late in the year. On his two placements, he snapped perfect laces once.