

Rating The Packers : Week 2 vs Vikings

By Bob McGinn Posted 9/17/2019

It took Matt LaFleur just one Sunday to accomplish what it took Mike Zimmer four games and almost two full seasons. That is, win in the border rivalry between the Packers and the Vikings.

For the first time in 59 years, the Packers are off to a 2-0 start under a new coach after holding off the Vikings, 21-16, at Lambeau Field.

When Zimmer took over for Leslie Frazier in 2014 the Vikings were in a 1-7-1 skid against the Packers. Minnesota hadn't captured the NFC North Division since 2009 whereas Green Bay had won three titles in a row under Mike McCarthy.

Then in his ninth season, McCarthy had become entrenched in Green Bay due in large part to his domination of the division. The Packers were an 8 ½-point favorite on a rainy Thursday night in early October when Zimmer first brought his Vikings to town.

The grim-faced Zimmer watched as Eddie Lacy ran for 105 yards and two touchdowns on 13 carries, Aaron Rodgers posted a passer rating of 138.7, the Packers amassed six sacks and his Christian Ponder-quarterbacked offense turned the ball over three times in a 42-10 rout. It was 42-0 after three quarters.

Zimmer didn't linger that night in his postgame handshake with McCarthy just like he barely looked at LaFleur as they quickly shook hands Sunday.

After that game five years ago, Zimmer spoke of the Packers being "much more physical than we were," how frustrating it is "when people run the ball down your throats" and that "a lot of it was the back running over us."

The next day, Zimmer said, "There's nothing more disheartening as a coach than for you to get manhandled up front." He also said the Vikings' defense perhaps had "lost the fire."

McCarthy would beat Zimmer later in 2014, 24-21, and again in November 2015, 30-13. However, with the division crown at stake in the finale six weeks later in Green Bay, Zimmer finally drew first blood against the Packers with a 20-13 triumph.

That was the start of Zimmer's 5-1-1 run against the Vikings' archrival that helped get McCarthy fired late last season.

Zimmer knows as well as anyone how difficult it is to win as a rookie coach trying to implement new methods of football. He started 2-5 in his first season before finishing 7-9, which has been his only losing

season. The Packers know, too. Their three successful Mike's – Holmgren, Sherman and McCarthy – all started 0-2. The first 14 coaches in franchise history own an 8-19-1 record in Games 1-2. The only other coach in Green Bay to start 2-0 was none other than Vince Lombardi.

Coupled with their 10-3 victory in Chicago on opening night, the Packers suddenly are a team to watch after successive losing seasons. When the NFL season started Sept. 5 the Packers had the ninth-best odds (20-1) to win the Super Bowl, according to betonline.com. On Monday, they were tied for fourth at 12-1. Here is a rating of the Packers against the Vikings. 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. Aaron Jones. 2. Bryan Bulaga. 3. Kenny Clark.**

Receivers (2 ½)

The days of Xavier Rhodes being able either to travel and/or contain Davante Adams (played 71 of a possible 74 offensive snaps) are all but over. Rhodes entered the league one year before Adams but the wear and tear seems to have affected Rhodes more. Adams certainly isn't a burner, but when the two were matched on Sunday he easily ran away from Rhodes. Adams said the Vikings made extensive use of Cover 2, presumably to protect Rhodes. On Adams' one targeted deep throw against Rhodes, he was breaking free in the middle of the field when Rhodes held and drew a 25-yard penalty for pass interference. He beat Rhodes on two third-down completions for 18 yards, and then on a crossing route off bootleg action at the 2-minute mark in which Rhodes trailed badly. The downside at the position was the dismal downfield blocking. Adams and Geronimo Allison (34) missed multiple blocks in the run game, and Marquez Valdes-Scantling (65) didn't even try to block FS Jayron Kearse before he swooped in to halt a quick pass to Allison on third and 1. Health is important, but at times the Packers' wide receivers seemed more concerned about getting rolled up on from behind than sustaining their blocks. On second and goal from the 12, LaFleur presented the Vikings with an unscouted look in which Adams was in the backfield in a five-receiver set. On the left, Allison beat rookie free agent Nate Meadors on a crisp cut to the post for a touchdown. The Packers were driving for a fourth straight score when Allison fumbled on the sideline and SS Harrison Smith recovered. Under LaFleur, the Packers are using jet-sweep action with wideouts, who then convert into sideline safety valves. Allison also drew a holding penalty after being overpowered by Kearse. The highlight of MVS' day was a 14-yard skinny post on third and 6 with Trae Waynes in tight coverage. Later, MVS couldn't hang on to a 27-yard pass with Kearse all over him. Jake Kumerow (six) was on the field for two touchdowns. With six wideouts active, LaFleur also played Trevor Davis (four) and Allen Lazard (one). Jimmy Graham was shut out for only the fifth time since his career got going in October 2010. Officially, he was targeted twice, but those were more throwaways. Showing a significant decline in speed, Graham did make a catch for six yards but drew a pass-interference penalty for pushing off against FS Anthony Harris. Nursing a finger injury for several weeks, Graham is trying to block without using his right hand. He was charged with a sack, a knockdown and one-half "bad" run. In all, Graham's 54 snaps included nine with his hand down and 19 in a wing position. The breakdown for Mercedes Lewis (31) was 15 hand down, 14 wing; for Robert Tonyan (22), it was six hand down, 11 wing. Lewis can't run anymore, either, and was involved in two "bad" runs, but LaFleur likes to employ the veteran at the point-of-attack on wide runs to his side.

Offensive Line (4)

For the second straight game, Bryan Bulaga was a standout. His opponent, LE Danielle Hunter, has developed into a premier player. Much like McCarthy once did, LaFleur asked Bulaga to block Hunter one-on-one just as he asked David Bakhtiari to win his solo matchup against Everson Griffen. Hunter had one sack (against Graham), two knockdowns and one hurry, but only one-half of that hurry came against Bulaga. After a less-than-rigorous training camp, Bulaga is fit, moving very well and in top form. He and Lane Taylor also were the only starters without a “bad” run. Bakhtiari missed one day of practice last week with a back injury but went the distance and played OK. His ½ sack and two knockdowns came against Griffen, who at 31 is off to a sizzling start. Rookie Elgton Jenkins, a second-round draft choice, made his debut with four series and 18 snaps at left guard compared to 10 series and 56 snaps for Taylor. Jenkins didn’t have a glaring miscue; Taylor was more effective than in the opener with 1 ½ hurries and no “bad” runs. Out of a three-tight end set, Taylor became the first O-lineman this season to execute a long pull block. He also did a great job shielding Harrison Smith on the 15-yard screen pass for a TD. On a 2-yard TD run. Jenkins got movement against Mr. Immovable, NT Linval Joseph. On another play, the rookie got a late shove in on LB Anthony Barr. When 3-technique Sheldon Richardson signed with Cleveland in March it hurt the Vikings’ interior rush. Still, Hercules Mata’afa is active inside, and so it was a good day when Corey Linsley didn’t allow a pressure. Linsley did have a false-start penalty and, most critically, a low shotgun snap that officially was scored as a fumble for Aaron Rodgers but was all on the center. The Packers are higher on Billy Turner, the newcomer at right guard, than Taylor, their starter at left guard since 2016. Yet, for the second straight week, Turner was the weak link. This time, he was involved in four of the seven “bad” runs and had one pressure. He’s stiff, plays high, lacks horsepower and is missing too often on the front and back side.

Quarterbacks (3)

After a 5-football first quarter, Aaron Rodgers had a 1-football last three quarters. It was all there in the opening 15 minutes. The beautiful deep corner route to Davante Adams for 39 on the first play. The 12-yard shot to Allison in the end zone. The 15-yard bullet to Adams on a bootleg as he sprinted left to avoid the fast-closing Griffen. Precise, deceptive ball-handling. Zimmer was ready to cry “uncle.” Then Allison fumbled, the Vikings adjusted and Rodgers was neutered. This is all new for Rodgers, who had 14 seasons of West Coast concepts. Now he’s being asked to wear a wristband, of all things, and respond to a coach just four years his senior as well as a new coordinator, wide receivers coach, tight ends coach and offensive line coach. He might be overthinking it. His progressions seem hit or miss. Try as he might, his incessant hard cadence never coaxed the Vikings to jump but his teammates did twice. Late in the second quarter, he erred assuming it was first down and a subsequent rush on fourth and 1 got stuffed. Rodgers would feel better about the whole deal if he could get away from the rush and either throw on the move or show off his wheels. When he tried to take off Hunter, Griffen and Joseph all nabbed him almost in his tracks. The fumble certainly wasn’t his fault but Rodgers has such fantastic hands he probably blamed himself. Then it appeared as though Must’afa wrestled the ball away from him under the cover of the pile. Of his 34 attempts, I scored five as throwaways. Through Sunday’s games, he ranked 13th in passer rating largely because his average per attempt (6.44) was 25th. After throwing a career-low two picks in 2018, you can bet Rodgers thinks a no-interception season is possible. But it’s hard to imagine the Packers going all the way unless Rodgers get back to his moderate risk ways of a few years ago. With an arm like his, he can hit 50-50 throws in his sleep.

Running Backs (4 ½)

Aaron Jones (fifth round, No. 182, 2017) isn't as good as Minnesota's Dalvin Cook (second round, No. 41, 2017). Cook was given serious consideration by the Packers at No. 33 before they took Kevin King. Still, Jones (43) has become an outstanding player in his own right. In his 23-carry (a career-high) day for 116 yards (5.0), Jones broke only three tackles. Vision and speed were his calling cards. Five times he cut back for gains totaling 44 yards (9, 5, 8, 9, 13). In that respect, he's a one-cut-and-go runner. His ability to reach top speed after two-to-four steps hurt the Vikings equally as much. Given even a respectable block on the edge, Jones just outran defenders to the outside. He gained 28 yards on three tosses plus another six on a jet sweep off creative motion. In the passing game, LaFleur released Jones on speed diagonal routes to the flat; two of those were worth 22. MLB Eric Kendricks and SLB Anthony Barr have exceptional speed but Jones was beating them to the corner. His hands are ordinary but he isn't dropping the ball. He's improved his pass blocking, too. He buried Harrison Smith on one pickup and neutralized Kendricks twice as Zimmer felt compelled to rush five or more on 32.4 percent of passes. Jamaal Williams (35) is what he's always been, a meat-and-potatoes ball carrier between the numbers. He squared those shoulders on that screen and wouldn't be denied on his 15-yard TD. Six of FB Danny Vitale's eight snaps came as the upback in an old-fashioned I formation.

Defensive Line (4)

Kenny Clark played 56 of the possible 65 defensive snaps. It's telling to note that of the Vikings' three gains of more than 30 yards he was on the sidelines for two of them. On Cook's 75-yard TD run, NT Tyler Lancaster (32) was pushed out of his gap by C Garrett Bradbury. Montravius Adams (19), the 3-technique, showed no feel for the ball by spinning the wrong way off a block. By the time Adams saw Cook passing by him, his dive was too late. On the 45-yard TD pass to Stefon Diggs, coordinator Mike Pettine used Fadol Brown (six) in Clark's role as the lone lineman in a four-man front filled out with outside linebackers. Pettine called a five-man pressure, inserting two defensive backs. After being burned, Pettine never sent another defensive back or inside linebacker in the final 26 snaps. Clark wasn't dominating. This was the first of many battles with Bradbury, a first-round pick in April, and Bradbury held his own. After all, Cook gained 154 yards on 20 rushes (7.7); it was the most against Green Bay since the Cowboys' Ezekiel Elliott carried 28 for 157 in Game 5 of 2016. Nevertheless, Clark posted a team-high four pressures; the only others by a D-linemen were two by Dean Lowry (43). Clark was charged with his second holding penalty in two weeks. He also caused Bradbury to hold him twice. The coaches started Adams but played Lancaster more because of stoutness against double teams. Even without LG Pat Elflein (knee), the Vikings seem to have a better offensive line after several seasons of inferior interior play. Adams doesn't get rooted out by double-teams as he once did but it's still an issue. Lancaster made a few stuffs but was on the ground too much. Lowry had a big game with two hurries, one batted ball, one recovered fumble and one tackle for loss. His charge set up Clark's sack. He was pressuring Kirk Cousins on his decisive interception.

Linebackers (4)

This was the Packers' first look at B.J. Goodson from scrimmage. He played because the Packers needed some bulk next to Blake Martinez (65). Goodson was just kind of out there. The former Giant looked to be conscientious in his run fits. At the same time, he wasn't getting off blocks and making any plays. Antonio Morrison, the Band-Aid inside a year ago, talked a better game than he played but at least made his presence felt. Goodson was a nonentity. Martinez made a flock of tackles, as usual, but on this day almost all were downfield other than one hard hit early for no gain. His marginal speed was evident on Cousins' scrambles. On the outside, it was Za'Darius Smith (56), Preston Smith (57), Kyler Fackrell (21) and Rashan Gary (14). Za'Darius might be equally valuable rushing the passer and setting the edge. The staff, however, better be careful not to burn him out. When Za'Darius tapped out late in the third quarter he had played all 42 snaps to that point. The Vikings double-teamed him on 39.3 percent of his individual rushes and limited him to 2 ½ pressures. All four of his stunts came in the second half. Dakota Dozier, the replacement for Elflein, and RG Josh Kline, a former Titan, did a good job handling Smith on his 14 snaps as a defensive tackle in a three-point stance on passing downs. Preston, who lines up mainly to the tight-end side of the formation, also generated 2 ½ pressures. You can tell he's a smart football player. He was in the right spot on a zone drop and intercepted a deflected pass. On third and 12, he slipped through two blockers and threw his body at Cook to knock him out of bounds a yard short. After a sluggish summer and opener, Fackrell slithered off and around LT Riley Reiff for two of his 2 ½ second-half pressures. The coaches seem to be minimizing Gary's mental burden. In his brief exposure, he is lining up in a 7-technique and rushing the passer. Other than making one tackle with good hustle, there has been no production.

Defensive Backs (4)

When the teams last met in late November, this unit performed pathetically. Instead of Josh Jones, Kentrell Brice and Ibraheim Campbell at safety, now it's Darnell Savage and Adrian Amos. Instead of Josh Jackson at right cornerback, it's King. No one played well in that 24-17 defeat when Cousins threw for 342 and three TDs. Everyone at least competed Sunday. Jaire Alexander (65) looks to be lighter and in better shape. He can cover man-to-man and likes a challenge. He deftly broke up an end-zone dart to Diggs. He ripped a flat pass from FB C.J. Ham. He was in Diggs' hip pocket on a back-shoulder incompleting. His day wasn't all rosy. On the Diggs' TD, he tried to intercept the pass instead of extending and making sure the receiver didn't catch it. Later, he dropped an easy interception. King was late lining up on Diggs' TD when the call was tardy and the Vikings snapped the ball hurriedly. He trailed Diggs but had to be concerned if the receiver would have headed outside to the flag. On third and 2, King gambled undercutting an inside route to Diggs. It would have been a long gainer but the pass was dropped. With the game on the line, King ran with Diggs across the field and then made a tremendous interception in the corner by snaring it above the receiver. There were 10 missed tackles on defense, and King was the only player with two. Tramon Williams (21), the nickel back, took his eyes off slot receiver Chad Beebe and looked back at Cousins. That was all it took for Beebe to pivot back and race away for a 61-yard gain. Neither Tony Brown nor Jackson, who played 60 snaps in the meeting late last season, played from scrimmage. Savage (65) was up and down. Somehow he was in a position to deflect a pass to Diggs that was picked by Preston Smith. He also played a deep ball to Adam Thielen reasonably well that was offensive pass interference. Cook's 75-yard run would have been about 20 if Savage, as a single-high safety, had closed the gap and not left his feet on the attempted tackle. Instead, he froze,

moved laterally and never forced Cook to do anything except run away from him, which he did. On third and 7, Savage allowed Diggs to get behind him 50 yards downfield but Cousins overthrew the pass. Savage's season might be an adventure every week. Amos (65) was solid. Raven Greene (15) suffered a season-ending ankle injury when athletic rookie TE Irv Smith, a surprisingly aggressive blocker all afternoon, cut him in the box. Greene had been the nickel linebacker, a dangerous position for a 197-pound safety. Minus Greene, Amos played alongside Martinez in some throwing situations and free agent Will Redmond (12) was inserted alongside Savage.

Kickers (4)

JK Scott punted eight times for averages of 47.6 yards (gross), 42.0 (net) and a whopping 4.80 seconds of hang time. His final punt, a touchback, hung for an incredible 5.45. Scott had two fair catches, one out of bounds and just one inside the 20. His counterpart, Minnesota's Britton Colquitt, didn't display nearly Scott's leg strength but his six-punt net of 44.0 was slightly better. Mason Crosby's four kickoffs, all touchbacks, averaged 70.8 and 3.89.

Special Teams (4)

Tony Brown, an all-out hustler, blocked an extra point charging off the right edge. Having had success, the coaches must exercise caution so that he doesn't go rogue and start jumping offsides in his zeal to block another. Trevor Davis and Brown were an effective pair of gunners on punts. As a fullback, Greene was in the brains position of the punt-protection unit. When he went down, Amos replaced him. Davis had a shaky day as the punt returner. Fackrell played 25 snaps, five more than anyone else on special teams.