

Rating The Packers : Week 3 vs Broncos

By Bob McGinn Posted 9/24/2019

The NFL has undergone drastic change from one decade to the next, but turnover differential has been and perhaps always will be the leading predictor of winning and losing.

As long as Aaron Rodgers is at quarterback, the Packers should rank among the league's stingiest teams when it comes to giveaways.

The Packers improved to 3-0 with a 27-16 victory over the Broncos on Sunday at Lambeau Field largely because they took the ball away three times and didn't have a turnover themselves.

It increased their takeaway total to eight, which leads the NFL. It took them six games to post nine takeaways a season ago; then, in the last 10 games, they posted just six.

The Packers' 15 takeaways, which tied for the lowest total in their history, also tied for 29th in the league.

Mike Pettine is still the defensive coordinator. There are, however, five new starters and a fresh mindset permeating the unit.

"If you just watch the film you constantly see guys punching at the ball, ripping at the ball, picking up the ball when it's on the ground even when it's an incomplete pass," nose tackle Kenny Clark said. "You just see guys being all about the ball. That's how we practiced this whole preseason.

"Whenever you're doing that, it just becomes second nature."

Everyone that's been around the game can cite examples of teams that got on a takeaway roll and never seemed to stop. The Packers were like that in their first three seasons with Dom Capers as defensive coordinator.

From 2009-'11, Green Bay ranked first, sixth and tied for first in takeaways with a league-leading total of 110, including 85 interceptions and 25 fumble recoveries. Then, just like that, the well ran dry. After averaging 36.7 in their first three seasons, Capers' defenses averaged just 23.5 in his last six.

Look at the Vikings, who forced only 20 takeaways in 2018. Today, they're among the NFL leaders with six.

"We emphasize it every day," Minnesota coach Mike Zimmer said Monday. "But sometimes they come and sometimes they don't."

Now, look at the teams that led the NFL in takeaways over the last 10 seasons. There are 11 because the Packers and 49ers shared the top spot in 2011. Those 11 teams averaged 37.6 takeaways.

Only one of the 11 teams reached the Super Bowl (Carolina, 2015) but the yearly improvement for the group as a whole was dramatic. On average, those 11 teams improved by 4.23 games in the standings from the year before. Four clubs climbed by at least seven games: Chicago in 2018 (12-4 from 5-11), Carolina in 2015 (15-1 from 7-8-1), Houston in 2014 (9-7 from 2-14) and San Francisco in 2011 (13-3 from 6-10).

The Packers, 6-9-1 a year ago, already have doubled their three-game sack total of last season with 12. They already have forced and recovered fumbles on two sacks: one by Clark, one by Preston Smith. Last year, after the departed Nick Perry beat Chicago's Charles Leno for a strip-sack in Game 1, the Packers remarkably didn't have another strip-sack-recovery all season.

Before Capers, who helped the Packers win their last Super Bowl (2010), Green Bay's most recent championship was 1996. In that season, the defense as coordinated by Fritz Shurmur posted 13 takeaways in the first three games. Those Packers finished with 39 takeaways, a notch below the 42 by the Packers of 1966 and the 40 by the Packers of 1967.

It's safe to say that Green Bay's four championship teams of the Super Bowl era all excelled at taking the ball away.

The current Packers already have scored 21 points off their four recovered fumbles, just two fewer than all last season.

Where are the current Packers headed? No one can say for sure. Let's be clear not to compare them in any way to the 1996 squad, which probably ranks among the top 10 teams in NFL history. The '96 Packers had a point differential of plus-89 after three games whereas this team sits at plus-23.

Suffice it to say the Packers are off to a terrific start in the most important statistical category.

Here is a rating of the Packers against the Broncos. Five footballs are the maximum, one-half football is the minimum. As a team, they received 3 ½ footballs.

The three stars of the game were: 1. Preston Smith. 2. Jaire Alexander. 3. Elgton Jenkins.

Receivers (2)

Green Bay's last legitimate threat at tight end was Jared Cook in 2016. Through three games the three tight ends have eight receptions for 95 yards. It's hard to field an explosive offense with next to nothing at one of the five skill positions. Five lined up Sunday: Mercedes Lewis (played 31 of the possible 57 snaps on offense), Jimmy Graham (24), Robert Tonyan (17), Evan Baylis (one) and Lucas Patrick (one), the guard who entered on the goal line. If Graham's groin injury was debilitating, he wouldn't have played. At this point, he can't be trusted to get open on a conventional route or get his man blocked. Coach Matt LaFleur uses Lewis as his Y tight end, but he's a far cry from being a consistent blocker. Categorize him as hit or miss. His best move was letting LB Von Miller go to another blocker on an inside charge and making a beautiful adjustment onto blitzing SS Kareem Jackson on a 9-yard run. Tonyan is getting better. He delivered a sharp cut block on FS Justin Simmons and made a tremendous, stretched-out effort for an overthrown deep ball after running past CB Isaac Yiadom. Coach Vic Fangio and his coordinator, Ed Donatell, had CB Chris Harris travel with Davante Adams (52). Harris is a tough, crafty and skilled veteran, but the Broncos were in soft coverage. Adams' four targets were his fewest since Game 7 of 2017. With the Broncos struggling at the other cornerback it seemed reasonable to test that side. The problem is that Marquez Valdes-Scantling (50), with nine targets, isn't in Adams' class. We know he's big (6 foot 4, 206 pounds) and we know he's fast (4.38 seconds in 40). On the free-play touchdown of 40 yards, Jackson was playing eight yards off but MVS shot by him in a flash. Early in his second season, when MVS has to run possession-type routes, he's better running speed cuts than sharp cuts. On third and 6, he turned toward the sideline a yard short of the marker and journeyman De'Vante Bausby broke it up. On another sideline play with Bausby covering, MVS dropped a third-and-3 throw. Geronimo Allison (26) didn't engender much confidence, either, with a drop of his own. With Jake Kumerow (shoulder) inactive and Trevor Davis traded to Oakland for a sixth-round pick, Allen Lazard (five) and Darrius Shepherd (two) got in. LaFleur used Lazard (6-4 1/2, 227) primarily as a blocker, both on run and pass.

Offensive Line (4 ½)

Lane Taylor was in the middle of his second season when an injury to RG T.J. Lang five snaps into a game at New Orleans in mid-2014 gave him his first legitimate playing time. He was awful. On Sunday, Elgton Jenkins had just 18 snaps of seasoning when Taylor's biceps injury thrust Jenkins into the lineup. Unlike Taylor, an undrafted free agent, Jenkins did have a full week of practice. Then Jenkins showed why he was drafted in the second round. Jenkins' two glaring negative plays occurred early with a flush to DE Adam Gotsis and a false-start penalty. Otherwise, he was the only offensive lineman that wasn't charged with a "bad" run, and he didn't yield another pressure. At times, Jenkins got major movement in the run game. He plays with heavy hands. He ran easily in front of screens. On one combo block, he came off Gotsis at the right moment and used his athletic ability to pick up ILB Josey Jewell, who was charging hard on a run blitz. He turned the wrong way in a help situation in pass protection, which led to a flush. He also seemed to be somewhat wayward with his hand placement. All that can be easily corrected. Matched against Von Miller and Bradley Chubb, Bryan Bulaga and David Bakhtiari did their jobs. They deep-set the premier edge rushers, helped by a quick-release passing game and a slow, rain-slickened field. They combined to allow three pressures and one "bad" run, a winning performance. Perhaps because he was playing his former team, Billy Turner played more aggressively this week. A few times, however, he ducked his head in pass pro and would have given up a sack or knockdown but the ball was out. Corey Linsley never does anything to call attention to himself. He shows zero emotion. He doesn't play with violence. He rarely gets beat. Week after week, Linsley delivers winning performances and no one seems to notice.

Quarterbacks (2 ½)

It was more of the same for Aaron Rodgers, who has been a game manager for three weeks. Once again, he started fast. On the third play, he eluded a sack and flipped it to Mercedes Lewis for 19 yards. One play later, his hard count got Bradley Chubb and Von Miller to jump. When officials permitted the play to continue, he lofted a rainbow to Marquez Valdes-Scantling for the 40-yard TD. On the second series, he extended another play and found MVS for 28. On the third series, he delivered a laser shot to Davante Adams on his back shoulder for 22. And that was about all she wrote. Continuing with the hard count, Elgton Jenkins and David Bakhtiari jumped for penalties but not the Broncos. In his last 10 games, Rodgers has caused opponents to jump offsides only three times for 15 yards. There were two squandered timeouts. Three times he overthrew open receivers: Tonyan on the sideline, Allison in the middle on third and 13 and Tonyan deep. He threw four passes away, including three in a row to end one possession. Nothing was even close to an interception. Down just once, Rodgers was on easy street after being knocked around by the Bears and Vikings. Three games in, he has five rushes for seven yards. Coach Vic Fangio had to bring extra rushers in the final quarter because his four-man rush wasn't getting home. His blitz rate of 32.1 percent gave Rodgers pause, but certainly not enough to coax him into a giveaway. As frustrating as it must be, Rodgers can see the big picture and is playing a role in the return of respectable football.

Running Backs (4)

Aaron Jones played 81 snaps in the first two games compared to 61 for Jamaal Williams. Injuries weren't a factor Sunday but Matt LaFleur gave Williams the edge here, 35-22. This was one of Williams' better games. He broke three tackles in his 14 touches (for 86 yards), several times carrying tacklers and usually falling forward. On a late third and 5, he slipped out as a check-down receiver, froze ILB Todd Davis and ran away from the man coverage for nine yards. Facing a loss at left end on a toss, he reversed field and turned it into a 12-yard gain. It was a long day for Jones, who had "bad" runs on five of his 10 carries. Can't find fault with him on any of the negative plays. He's hitting what hole is there, protecting the ball and helping in pass pro. On his 7-yard TD, he was able to step over trash and squirt into the end zone. On his 1-yard TD, NT Shelby Harris shoved Corey Linsley three yards deep into the backfield and right where Jones was heading. He stopped, stiff-armed Harris and bounced wide right into the end zone. Green Bay is Danny Vitale's fourth team but LaFleur sees something in him. He played 19 snaps, almost always as the fullback in an I. Other than four-minute situations, that formation has been almost extinct in Green Bay for a decade. Vitale isn't a crunching lead blocker. As a receiver, he executed a play-action fake to haul in a 27-yard dart behind ILB Josey Jewell, who said the hamstring that would knock him out of the game a short while later also was an issue in his coverage on the play.

Defensive Line (2 ½)

The offensive line isn't a strength for the Broncos, especially with their best starter, RT Ja'Wuan James, sitting out (knee). LT Garrett Bolles entered with five holding penalties, two more than anyone else in the league. Yet, in its matchup strictly with the Packers' 300-pounders, Denver won the decision. Other than Kenny Clark, who had one-half of a pressure, the pass rush was nonexistent. The Broncos had 38 carries but the only tackles for a loss from the unit were one-half each for Dean Lowry and Tyler Lancaster, the former Northwestern duo. This was only the second game in six years that the Broncos rushed at least 38 times and still lost. Phillip Lindsay (21-81, 3.9) and Royce Freeman (15-63, 4.2) kept the game close. Mike Pettine played base defense (three 300-pounders) on 49.3 percent of the snaps. Even with that, Denver ground out first downs. Lowry, who played 45 of the possible 73 snaps on defense, discovered RG Ronald Leary was as strong if not stronger than he was. Both Lowry and Clark (56) suffered the indignity of missing the tackle on Lindsay's 1-yard TD run on fourth down. It looked like he just wanted it more. C Connor McGovern played well against Clark, too. Minus Montravius Adams (shoulder), Lancaster (38) played more than usual. He started well, getting off blocks and making tackles just past the line of scrimmage, before maybe tiring and becoming less effective. Active for the first time, rookie Kingsley Keke (12) took Adams' place and probably performed as well as the third-year man had. Keke isn't as big as Adams but seems more active. Depending on the opponent, he's likely to have a role.

Linebackers (4 ½)

Preston Smith (63) continues to surprise. Late in the game, he timed the snap count to perfection and shot off the ball unlike anything he had demonstrated before as a Packer. RT Elijah Wilkinson, who had a brutal afternoon, almost didn't lay a glove on Preston, who turned the corner and sacked Joe Flacco in just 2.4 seconds. That's an incredible time considering he was lined up in a 9-technique. His other two sacks also came against Wilkinson, one in 2.5 and another in 4.3 on which Flacco held the ball too long. Preston was up and down against the run, missing two tackles. Late in the first half, it was interesting to watch him shooining Dean Lowry off the field as the 12th man and then instructing Za'Darius Smith (59, including 21 with his hand down as a defensive tackle) and Rashan Gary (26) where to line up. Preston finished with four pressures, one more than Za'Darius. The former Raven has been on the field for 182 snaps, including 43 with his hand down at tackle. Not once has Za'Darius been asked to drop into coverage. Mike Pettine is playing fully to Za'Darius's strengths. He bull-rushed Garrett Bolles for a sack in 3.0. On the second sack, he tossed aside LG Dalton Risner after Kyler Fackrell (24) set it up with an up-field surge around Bolles. Denver had some success running at Fackrell. For the first time, Gary replaced Fackrell as the fourth member of the starting sub-rush unit and demonstrated improvement. Chucked by TE Troy Fumagalli, Gary kept coming and tore through Wilkinson for his first sack. Earlier, when Wilkinson fanned on a recovery, Gary hopped on the ball. He and Preston each missed two tackles. The immobile Flacco is an easy quarterback to rush, and six sacks were the prize. Blake Martinez (73) registered 2 ½ tackles for a loss by making nice reads and arriving under control in the flats. Earlier, he offered little against the interior ground game. When left unprotected by the linemen up front, he had no chance getting off blocks. His lack of speed was glaring in coverage and pursuit, even when he failed to track down Flacco before he loped for a first down. B.J. Goodson (25) wasn't much of a factor against the run, either. He was fortunate not to have been penalized for his gratuitous shove in the back that knocked down FB Andrew Beck outside a pile after the whistle had blown.

Secondary (4)

With his four-man rush applying plenty of pressure Mike Pettine could afford to blitz on just 14.3 percent of passes. Thus, Joe Flacco didn't have much time for much other than underneath throws. Jaire Alexander (73) made the defensive play of the game when he attacked TE Noah Fant like a piranha and seized the ball from his grasp. Plays like that get guys to the Pro Bowl. Also, he ran with clever Emmanuel Sanders before making a spectacular deflection of a well-thrown ball in the corner of the end zone and later broke up a curl to Sanders. Coach Vic Fangio acknowledged Monday that Sanders did hold Alexander on an 18-yard TD run that was brought back. On the other side, Kevin King (68) probably would have been exploited even worse than he was if Flacco had been afforded better protection. Early on, King lost contact with Courtland Sutton on a 16-yard in-breaking route and Fant on a skinny post for 17. It was much worse in the third quarter. On a swing pass to Lindsay, King left his feet too early and his missed tackle turned a short gain into 36. On the next play, Sutton beat King badly on a slant-and-go but what should have been a 28-yard TD was overthrown. Later, King was out of control and peeking in the backfield when Sutton raced past him on a double move for 52. King's poor effort in chase on the play was as disappointing as his coverage. Tramon Williams (45) had an uneventful afternoon in the slot. When Pettine needed another cover guy late he inserted Josh Jackson (15). Tony Brown's lone snap came as an end-of-the-line rusher on third and 7. Almost as special as Alexander's strip-recovery was the interception by Darnell Savage (73). Yes, Flacco's pass was a wounded duck, but it was low and the rain was falling. Savage looked the ball in and cradled it at ankle height. He made several stinging hits, too. Adrian Amos (73) played both nickel LB and safety. He hasn't missed a tackle in the three games. Will Redmond (27) played alongside Savage on the third level when Amos played alongside Martinez on the second level. Redmond missed two tackles but was physical for his size (5-11, 186).

Kickers (4)

JK Scott had another impressive showing. Punting four times, he averaged 53 yards (gross), 47.3 (net) and 4.63 seconds of hang time. Three of his balls were inside the 20. Mason Crosby hit from 42 and 41 yards before missing wide right of the left hashmark from 45. His poor first kickoff (68 yards, 3.64) was part of the reason why Diontae Spencer returned it 60 yards. Crosby made amends by hitting touchbacks on his last five. His averages on his five kickoffs for distance were 73.8 and 3.87.

Special Teams (1)

Josh Jackson missed the tackle on the 60-yard runback. Chandon Sullivan, a safety on the play, was out of position and failed to prevent the breakout. Later, Jackson was penalized for not being on the line of scrimmage as a punt gunner. Tony Brown's third penalty on special teams in three games was 15 yards for fair-catch interference. Brown and Redmond, the replacements for Trevor Davis, each were doubled at times in their role as primary gunners. Davis' replacements in the return game, newcomer Tremon Smith (kickoffs) and Darrius Shepherd (punts), didn't have a runback. B.J. Goodson led the teams in snaps with 18.