

Rating The Packers : Week 4 at Cowboys

By Bob McGinn Posted 10/08/2019

The talk in the meeting rooms and on the practice field all last week in Green Bay was about getting after the Cowboys.

“We knew going in we had to be physical,” coach Matt LaFleur said Sunday after his Packers defeated Dallas, 34-24, at AT&T Stadium. “It starts upfront.”

Largely as a result, the Packers won as a 3 ½-point underdog. In their only other game as an underdog (three points), they won at Soldier Field in Chicago.

Green Bay was 0-6-1 straight-up as an underdog last season, 2-8 in 2017. The Packers hadn't won as more than a 3 ½-point underdog since a November 2016 game in Chicago when the Bears were favored by 4 ½.

The opening plays for both teams set the tone. They made it clear the Packers wouldn't be bullied before a crowd of 93,024.

On the Packers' first running play, Aaron Jones was fortunate to gain a yard because Corey Linsley failed to get defensive tackle Christian Covington blocked. Otherwise, the Packers went after people.

Elgton Jenkins came off a combination block and jarred linebacker Jaylon Smith. Billy Turner, the other guard, belted linebacker Leighton Vander Esch, knocking him back four yards.

On the right side, Bryan Bulaga pancaked end DeMarcus Lawrence at the point of attack. On the weak side, Robert Tonyan swept across the formation and cut down end Robert Quinn at the knees.

That possession went nowhere when David Bakhtiari drew a pair of penalties, and so the Packers punted.

The Cowboys' opener was a screen pass to Ezekiel Elliott. Zack Martin, a perennial Pro Bowl guard, had a head of steam as B.J. Goodson approached. At 242 pounds, Goodson was giving up almost 75 pounds.

What happened next was remarkable. Goodson smacked Martin with a forearm shiver that sent the six-year veteran flying backward and to the turf. Blake Martinez came over to deliver a hard tackle and the gain was 2 yards.

A telltale sign of toughness and readiness is tackling. Green Bay's defense didn't miss its first tackle until 2 minutes remaining in the third quarter. Dallas' defenders either missed or failed to bring down Jones 17 times in his 26 touches as he went for 182 total yards.

The Packers' hard-nosed approach and plus-3 turnover differential carried the day despite a statistical collapse by the defense. The Cowboys gained 563 yards, the most the Packers have allowed since the 49ers amassed 579 in an NFC Divisional playoff loss at Candlestick Park in 2012. Dallas averaged 8.3 yards per play (68-563); the Packers haven't allowed more than that since the Cardinals averaged 9.3 (57-531) in an NFC wild-card playoff game in Glendale, Ariz., in 2009.

"Way too many big plays," LaFleur said. "The turnovers, that was the difference."

Here is a rating of the Packers against the Cowboys. Five footballs are the maximum, one-half football is the minimum. As a team, the Packers received 4 ½ footballs.

The three stars of the game were: 1. Aaron Jones. 2. Aaron Rodgers. 3. Chandon Sullivan.

Receivers (3 ½)

It could be argued that Davante Adams is the Packers' second most indispensable player. With Adams on the sidelines nursing a turf toe, Aaron Rodgers threw only 12 passes to wide receivers. That's the fewest targeted throws the wideouts have received since they also had 12 in a 40-10 loss on Thanksgiving Day in 2013 when Matt Flynn started for the injured Rodgers (collarbone) against the Lions. Marquez Valdes-Scantling assumed the No. 1 role, playing 70 of the possible 74 snaps on offense, but he didn't perform like a front-line player. After catching an 18-yard out against Byron Jones he was shut out over the last 55 minutes. At least twice MVS was open deep but the ball wasn't thrown accurately. On two other occasions, he appeared to be chastised by Rodgers for cutting routes. The Packers seldom use MVS in motion. Most of the time, he's a deep decoy receiver clearing zones for others. Geronimo Allison (64) and Jake Kumerow (50) each dropped a pass in their quiet afternoons. Rookie Darrius Shepherd (four) was used as a slot in the red zone. He ran a nifty out-and-up route against Anthony Brown but couldn't make a tough catch for what would have been a 10-yard touchdown. However, the nickel back was penalized for holding him. One snap was it for Allen Lazard. Where the wide receivers did make a major contribution was blocking downfield in the run game. Robert Tonyan (seven) started well before departing with a hip injury. On his 23-yard reception, he leaked out of the protection, saw Rodgers scrambling, went up the sideline against FS Xavier Woods and made a spectacular play tight to the boundary before crashing down on his side. The Indiana State product even had the chutzpah to signal first down right in front of the Cowboys' bench. Jimmy Graham (52) also gave a better effort as a blocker. Even without Adams, Rodgers went to Graham just three times. He's just so limited. He still can use his size on short stick routes. He has a good feel for breaking off routes when Rodgers extends. When Rodgers liked the looks of Graham's one-on-one matchup against veteran SS Jeff Heath, he hit him on a third-and-7 shallow crosser for 12. Mercedes Lewis (34) was the primary target on a two-man route from the 1 but couldn't come free against WLB Leighton Vander Esch. None of the tight ends were charged with a "bad" run.

Offensive Line (4)

At various points over the years, the offense might have been incapacitated without its starting center. Thanks to Lucas Patrick, that didn't happen when Corey Linsley left after 19 snaps for concussion testing. Linsley had played all 2,757 snaps since Game 14 of 2016. He's smart, tough and steady. Enter Patrick, who had played center in exhibition games but never in the regular season. Other than an occasional play at tight end, all of his 506 snaps had come at guard. Patrick runs hot. He'll push, shove and bloody your nose. On his first play, he finished his block on Leighton Vander Esch. His pass protection (one-half pressure) was better than his run blocking (team-high two "bad" runs). He was late to the second level and getting out in the screen game. According to Rodgers, there were two instances in which Patrick's shotgun snaps were so off line that Aaron Jones fielded them and took off. All in all, the offense continued to function with him over the ball. After breaking out as an A or A-minus player in 2016 and '17, David Bakhtiari slipped to B-player status last season and has been no better than a B player through five games this season. In the first series, he outsmarted himself into a false-start penalty when DE Robert Quinn jumped and got back. On the next play, Bakhtiari was penalized for holding Quinn, giving him six penalties. Bakhtiari spent much of the day attempting to short-set Quinn, a relentless edge rusher. It worked to a degree, but in the final accounting, Bakhtiari's total of four pressures all came against Quinn. He had 1 1/2 "bad" runs, too. The Packers' top tackle has been Bryan Bulaga, who turned in another strong performance despite dealing with a bum shoulder. Operating against DeMarcus Lawrence and ex-Lion Kerry Hyder, Bulaga was charged with 1 1/2 pressures and one-half "bad" run. Elgton Jenkins continues to impress with his explosiveness and aggression as a run blocker. Making just his third start, he drew two holding penalties after getting in awkward positions. Billy Turner gives consistent effort and looks to finish. Once again, the longer he plays the more problems he encounters. Most of his team-high total of 4 1/2 pressures came against Maliek Collins, a gap-shooting nose tackle.

Quarterbacks (4)

When the Packers were building their big early lead Aaron Rodgers thwarted the defense coached by Rod Marinelli and Kris Richard at every turn. They wanted to rush just four and ended up doing that on 23.8 percent of passes. While there was substantial pressure, Rodgers broke the Cowboys' hearts by making four large gains out of nothing. One of them, a 10-yard scramble for a first down on third and 8, was brought back when David Bakhtiari was detected holding. Then, in the third possession, he completed three passes for 54 yards on extended plays. An eight-yarder came via a left-handed flip to Tra Carson. The Packers needed Rodgers to show some magic because Davante Adams was out. It didn't seem that Rodgers failed to trust the wide receivers. He just felt better about his running backs and let them make the plays, running and receiving. Despite having rushers flying past ripping at the ball Rodgers was turnover-free. He averted a lost fumble inside the Green Bay 30 by having the presence of mind to move his arm forward as he was going down; replay review ruled it as an incomplete pass. The key play in a touchdown drive that extended the lead to 17-0 was a dump to Aaron Jones for 22. Rodgers side-armed the ball just before he was sandwiched by CB Chidobe Awuzie and DE Robert Quinn. In the screen game, Rodgers has taken to using shovel passes as an alternative to overhand tosses. The Packers failed to put the game away early in part because Rodgers overthrew Geronimo Allison and Marquez Valdes-Scantling on deep balls, underthrew MVS on another long ball and didn't put enough air under a seam route to Allison. Rodgers also had a chance to help Jones on a crazy-quilt run that ended up losing 10. Instead, he elected not to get in front of the hard-charging Awuzie, who unloaded on Jones. Rodgers stood there pointing at the pile hoping officials would flag the hit.

Running Backs (5)

The Cowboys blamed themselves for their terrible tackling. Aaron Jones (50) had a lot to do with it. In the first four games, Jones either broke tackles or made defenders miss tackles 11 times. In this game that number was 17. Eleven were by linebackers, including six for WLB Leighton Vander Esch, three by MLB Jaylon Smith and two by SLB Sean Lee. The defensive line and the secondary each missed three. Matt LaFleur's misdirection style of ground game seemed to cause indecision in the defense. Jones also was accelerating into gaps so quickly that the linebackers found themselves diving too late. Because of Jones' rare burst, linemen weren't required to sustain their blocks as long. In the fourth quarter, Lucas Patrick and Marcedes Lewis allowed quick penetration but Jones shot right by DeMarcus Lawrence and DT Christian Covington for a 5-yard gain. LaFleur emphasized inside zone runs perhaps because Vander Esch, a tall player much like Bears Hall of Famer Brian Urlacher, is better laterally than straight ahead. Also, the Cowboys' defensive line is somewhat undersized. Jones' vision was razor-sharp. Hitting a stone wall over the center, Jones caught Vander Esch getting a tad nosy on the right outside and circled him for 16. He did the same thing on the other side to CB Byron Jones. Jones did more than slash and outrun defenders. At least two of his four TDs were the result of determination and leg drive. That Jones led the team with eight targets offers testimony to his vast improvement as a receiver over three seasons and Aaron Rodgers' confidence in him. On third and 4, Rodgers flanked him wide right. When Smith went out to cover him, Jones ran a crisp in-breaking route and made a juggling catch for 12. He stiff-armed FS Xavier Woods on the 18-yard TD and ran through SS Jeff Heath and Vander Esch on another score. Jones could have and probably should have been penalized for taunting when he waved bye to Jones on the 5-yard TD. The obvious choice to replace Jamaal Williams (concussion) was rookie Dexter Williams, the sixth-round draft choice from Notre Dame. Displeased with Williams' grasp of the offense, the Packers instead promoted Tra Carson from the practice squad on Saturday and gave him 24 snaps in his regular-season debut from scrimmage. He was OK. FB Danny Vitale is a better receiver than blocker. He was involved in two "bad" runs.

Defensive Line (3)

Improvement was evident from the unit's atrocious performance 10 days ago against Philadelphia. Still, the feeling persists that if the Cowboys hadn't fallen so far behind so fast Ezekiel Elliott would have had his way again against this front. Kenny Clark (played 64 of the possible 72 defensive snaps) didn't get anything done against Eagles C Jason Kelce. His opponent here, C Travis Frederick, is the exact opposite. His game is muscle whereas Kelce relies on athleticism and guile. For the second week in a row, Clark was moved too easily off the spot and didn't make any plays across the line of scrimmage. Clark is playing a ton of snaps because the Packers feel they can't protect the weak underbelly of their defense without him. The coaches will have to determine how much is too much. On third and long, Clark was the only 300-pounder on the field 13 times in 15 snaps. Maybe Montravius Adams (23) or rookie Kingsley Keke (seven) could take some of the burden off Clark by playing in that package. Clark lost his poise in the fourth quarter and did something to warrant a penalty for unsportsmanlike conduct. It was his fourth penalty, one fewer than he had in his first three seasons. Dean Lowry (32) and Tyler Lancaster (16) were adequate. Lancaster diagnosed an early screen pass and shed RT La'el Collins on a run for no gain. Keke didn't see the field until late in the third quarter. Of the three pressures by the unit, he recorded the lone knockdown on a bull rush against LG Connor Williams. Adams generated two or three solid rushes but didn't get home.

Linebackers (4)

A wonderful matchup between Za'Darius Smith (52) and LT Tyron Smith will have to wait. Tyron Smith, out with a high-ankle sprain, was replaced by ex-Patriot Cam Fleming. Za'Darius beat Fleming for two sacks, both on bull rushes with snap-to-grasp times of 2.9 and 3.7 seconds. He also had 1 ½ additional pressures. The Cowboys single-blocked Za'Darius on 24 of his 27 individual rushes. On one of his nine stunts, he beat LG Connor Williams for a knockdown. Defensive coordinator Mike Pettine still hasn't asked him to drop even one time in coverage. There were a few instances where Za'Darius showed a distinct lack of awareness and was fooled easily. His best rush involves power, often with two arms straight to the chest. On Sunday, his hands got too high and he drew two penalties for illegal hands to the face. After a rush in which Williams jammed him off his feet on the initial charge, Za'Darius lost his cool and was hit with an unnecessary roughness penalty. He risked drawing another after getting in Dak Prescott's face and bumping him following his interception. Za'Darius is an agitator, and officials will be watching him ever more closely now. At the same time, Prescott and some Cowboys coaches complained to official Ronald Torbert when Za'Darius went down and requested the trainers on three separate occasions. In the second quarter, he lay on his back for 55 seconds before walking off and returning three plays later. In the third quarter, he lay on his back for 1:30 as trainers held his hands and worked on his right knee. He walked off only to return on the third play of the next series. In the fourth quarter, he lay on his back for 1:05 before walking off and returning five plays later. A similar scenario played out in the second half of the Vikings game over an ankle issue. Za'Darius is coming across as a drama queen; the last Packer to leave the lineup so frequently with the medical staff in tow was CB Damarious Randall. Prescott seemed angry because each time Za'Darius went flat the Cowboys had just gained a first down and were trying to gain momentum. Primarily an outside rusher, Preston Smith (54) surprised RT La'el Collins with an inside charge for a sack in 2.8. That was his only pressure against Collins, who suffered a sprained knee on his 44th snap. Brandon Knight, a rookie free agent from Indiana, then had to make his NFL debut. In his 28 snaps, Preston beat him for four pressures and a batted ball. Kyler Fackrell (29) and Rashan Gary (22) combined for 2 ½ pressures. The rush was so heavy that Pettine rushed more than four on a mere 5.7 percent of passes. His first blitz came in the final minute of the first half. Blake Martinez (72) got carried along with the flow several times against the run but at least didn't miss any tackles. Pettine played B.J. Goodson next to Martinez because of the Cowboys' physical offensive philosophy. Goodson was a solid performer in 19 first-half snaps before departing with a neck injury suffered on the second-half kickoff. Oren Burks jumped in for the first time since early August, made a solo tackle and finished with 11 snaps in his return from an Aug. 8 pectoral injury.

Secondary (3 ½)

Chandon Sullivan (38) had played just five snaps from scrimmage in the first month. With Kevin King (37) reduced to a part-time player because of a groin injury and Tony Brown (hamstring) out, Mike Pettine moved Tramon Williams (65) from nickel back to King's position outside and went with Sullivan over Josh Jackson (35) or Ka'dar Hollman (none) in the slot. Sullivan made the defensive play of the game, leaping high in the second quarter to make Dak Prescott pay for an impetuous decision. Prescott should have gone to Ezekiel Elliott in the flat. Sullivan made a perfect read, reacted to Prescott's eyes and was between him and Randall Cobb to make the interception. In the fourth quarter, Sullivan blanketed Cobb from the slot to the end zone and leaped high again to tip away a pass that was intercepted by Will Redmond. The pick was wiped away because of penalties on Za'Darius Smith and Kenny Clark but that certainly doesn't detract from Sullivan's effort. Sullivan killed pro day at Georgia State in March 2018 with a 39-inch vertical jump and an 11-2 broad

jump. He also tackled well. In a deep, competitive secondary, he made his bid for playing time. Jackson is bigger than Sullivan but not as fast or as natural in coverage. Jackson's job was to stick on Jason Witten but the ancient tight end exposed his coverage deficiencies down the stretch. Redmond (55) took over for Darnell Savage (19) after he went out with an ankle injury. He wrecked an option pitch to Elliott for the team's only tackle for loss, recklessly sold out on a 27-yard boundary bomb to Elliott behind Rashan Gary and was a firm tackler except for one late miss. Covering old teammate Cobb from the slot, Williams broke up two passes before giving up inside position and being overpowered by Michael Gallup on an underthrown 40-yard TD. Pettine might have set a career-low by sending defensive backs just four times. Adrian Amos (72) had three of the rushes and delivered one knockdown. The feature matchup between Jaire Alexander (70) and Amari Cooper (63) was a mismatch. Alexander traveled with Cooper, an exquisite route runner who ended up taking the second-year man to school. Of the 12 passes thrown to Cooper with Alexander in coverage, Cooper caught eight for 201 yards. It would have been nine for 239 if Cooper hadn't dropped a post pattern that would have been a 38-yard TD. Cooper was so open that he thought about the TD more than the catch. The ball bounced off his hands right to Alexander, who was beaten but chasing three yards in arrears. His 37-yard return was the longest by a Packer since Damarious Randall went 78 against the Giants in the NFC wild-card playoffs of 2016. You name it, Alexander gave it up. He did break up two slants, including one to Cooper. He also led the defense in missed tackles with two. Listed as doubtful as late as Friday, King started and was a contribution. His biggest play was the fourth-quarter interception on a hook to Gallup. Yes, King was all over Gallup 10 yards downfield, but illegal contact wasn't called so it was a great play. He was penalized for that foul earlier. He also dropped a routine interception, his second of the season. Prescott completed five of eight passes for 59 yards with King in coverage.

Kickers (4 ½)

The punting matchup was a mismatch as well. Punting six times, JK Scott averaged 49.5 yards (gross) and 46.5 (net). In three punts, the Cowboys' Chris Jones averaged 33.3, 33.3. Scott's average hang time of 4.81 included a high of 5.15 and a low of 4.49. He placed two inside the 20, two were fair catches and one went out of bounds. When the kickoff team was pierced for a third long return (57 yards, shortened to 28 by penalty) in as many games, Mason Crosby had to go low again to make the tackle. He limped off favoring his upper left leg. Yet, when it came time to kick, Crosby was true from 20 and 38 yards on field goals in addition to making four extra points. He averaged 70.7 and 4.00 in seven kickoffs.

Special Teams (4)

Tone-setting Will Redmond was an absolute standout. On Scott's first punt, he defeated a double-team block and timed his head-long dash to smash Tavon Austin upon the catch. Redmond made three tackles. Four players each had three chances to serve as punt gunners: Josh Jackson, Tremon Smith, Ka'dar Hollman and Redmond. B.J. Goodson led the units in snaps with 21. Smith, the ex-Chief, has the size, speed and courage to do some damage as the kickoff returner. Darrius Shepherd doesn't inspire much confidence returning punts. The 57-yard kickoff return by Tony Pollard was cut back when the Cowboys were called for holding LB Ty Summers despite a double-team block. Hunter Bradley's placement snaps were a mix of perfect laces and some requiring a degree of spin by Scott, the holder.