

# Rating The Packers : Week 9 at Chargers

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By Bob McGinn Posted 11/05/2019

Excuses do not exist for the way the Packers played Sunday in their 26-11 defeat at the hands of the Chargers in Carson, Calif.

The Packers might be the healthiest team in the NFL. The Chargers have been one of the teams hardest hit by injury.

If anyone were to suggest the Packers have encountered adversity this season, don't believe it. Matt LaFleur has lived a charmed first season as coach of the Packers when it comes to the great equalizer: injuries.

Last week, all 53 players on his roster practiced every day. That's almost unheard of midway through a season.

Lane Taylor was the only starter on injured reserve, but it probably was just a matter of time before Elgton Jenkins would have taken over at left guard. Nickel linebacker-safety Raven Greene and backup wide receiver Equanimeous St. Brown were the only other players of usefulness that weren't available Sunday.

Other than Davante Adams' four missed games because of turf toe, the Packers have been remarkably unaffected by injury. It's reminiscent of 2006, Mike McCarthy's first season, when his team had six starters miss a total of just 12 starts. The Packers were fortunate in 2007 as well (eight players, 18 starts) before being crunched on an almost annual basis after that.

The Chargers' injury list Sunday (four starters out) wasn't uncommon for an NFL team in early November. They started the afternoon without center Mike Pouncey, defensive tackles Brandon Mebane and Justin Jones, and safety Derwin James. Then they lost right tackle Sam Tevi after the first series and middle linebacker Denzel Perryman in the third quarter with knee injuries.

Chargers coach Anthony Lynn, however, was just thankful for the return of left tackle Russell Okung, tight end Hunter Henry and kicker Michael Badgley in the past few weeks.

"It's starting to look like the team we took to training camp, yeah," Lynn said Monday. "This team has played really good, just not as consistent as we'd like. There's a reason for that; we've had people in and out of the lineup. It was just one of those games where it all came together."

By comparison, LaFleur has had all hands on deck all season. He's taken advantage of it, too, with a steady pattern of improvement and a 7-1 record at midseason.

Then Sunday happened, when the Packers not only were outplayed but also outthit. On offense, they failed to have a gain of 20 yards or more for the first time since the 29-10 loss at Denver in Game 7 of 2015. On defense, they yielded 159 yards on the ground to a team that ranked 28th in rushing at 69.5. On special teams, they had a punt blocked.

The best thing about Sunday for the Packers (7-2) is they appeared to make it through yet another game without a major injury. Green Bay always won't be so fortunate. The Packers must get back to playing solid football, especially in light of the adversity-free season they've enjoyed thus far.

"I just think you can never get comfortable in this league," LaFleur said Monday. "Ever. The moment you start feeling yourself or get comfortable, that happens.

"Hopefully, we learn from this ... we use it as motivation to have that sense of urgency in our preparation to make sure something like that doesn't happen again."

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

The three stars of the game were: 1. Za'Darius Smith. 2. Jamaal Williams. 3. Mason Crosby.

## **Receivers (1)**

Other than the fact that he wasn't reinjured, the return of Davante Adams was a dud. Playing 45 of the 54 possible snaps on offense, all he could muster was a long of nine yards and 41 total out of 11 targets. On the first play, Adams was loafing outside, missed his block and Aaron Jones was smeared for minus-1 on a screen off motion. He looked tentative in traffic, dropped a sideline pass and was held to nothing after the catch on five of his seven receptions. Aaron Rodgers did what he could to get Adams the ball, too. Adams just didn't perform. Marquez Valdes-Scantling (37), the other starter, was a nonentity (no catches, two targets). Other than Adams, Rodgers' guy appears to be Allen Lazard (25). After having no catches and six snaps in the first half, Lazard hauled in three of his four targets for 44 in the second half. Of any pass caught downfield, Lazard had the two longest (seven yards) gains after the catch. He loves to punish defensive backs who typically delight in being the aggressor and belting the wideouts. He'll lower his shoulder and get the additional yard or three. His large catch radius is inviting for a quarterback as well. Geronimo Allison (35) took another wicked hit as he did dirty work running a route through the middle of the field. He's somewhat of a straight-line possession receiver who needs to be more consistent getting off the jam. Jake Kumerow (13) had a chance to haul in a bomb behind FS Jaylen Watkins but appeared to lose the ball in the California sun (it was 79 degrees at kickoff). Jimmy Graham (35) has a big name but that's about it. The Packers have been hurt by Oakland's Darren Waller (7-126), Kansas City's Travis Kelce (4-63) and L.A.'s Hunter Henry (7-84) in the last three games. Those tight ends can slice through defensive backfields and even beat cornerbacks. If the Packers run a play on time, Graham is capable of getting free on quick flats or Y-sticks. Lately, many of his catches have come after leaking out of the protection. His only chance downfield comes on extended plays when coverage drops him. The Packers continue to do a superb job getting their running backs to the line and let them take it from there. The only "bad" run was charged to Mercedes Lewis (19); he failed to block Watkins on the edge and the result was a carry for minus-3.

## **Offensive Line (1)**

DE Joey Bosa dominated with 6 ½ pressures. It came mostly at the expense of David Bakhtiari (3 ½ pressures in all) and Bryan Bulaga (3 ½). Bakhtiari was an A-minus player in 2016 and '17 and a B player last season. His play has declined this season. On the Packers' third snap (third and 8), Matt LaFleur gave Bakhtiari the chance to block Bosa without help. Bakhtiari retreated way back as if he wasn't confident in his ability, and with Bosa flying off the edge, Bakhtiari barely laid a glove on him before he was beaten inside for a sack. Early in the third quarter, LaFleur tried it again, this time on second and 10. Bosa was lined up as a 5-technique. Despite not having a rush angle, he still was able to beat Bakhtiari cleanly off his left shoulder and post a sack that he shared with Melvin Ingram. For some reason, Bosa lined up over Bakhtiari on just three of his last 19 snaps, but the damage had been done. In all, Bosa had 23 plays across from Bulaga, 15 across from Bakhtiari and three across from Elgton Jenkins. On pass plays, Bulaga received double-team help 50 percent of the time against Bosa whereas Bakhtiari was helped 40 percent. In most cases, the Packers simply slid the line toward Bosa's side and either Billy Turner or Jenkins doubled outside. Bulaga sprung a leak against inside rushes. After oversetting, he was beaten inside twice by Bosa for knockdowns and once by Ingram for a half-sack. Bosa had another flush up the field against Bulaga. The other sack was up the field by Ingram against Turner. For a six-year veteran, Turner leaves much to be desired in terms of alertness to help on inside rushes against Bulaga. In ignominious fashion, Bulaga, Jenkins and Bakhtiari picked up false-start penalties in the span of nine would-be plays. That gives the Packers 13 false starts in nine games, including Bakhtiari's team-high total of four (he has nine penalties in all). The Packers' opponents have had merely four off-sides penalties. Aaron Rodgers' hard count used to be effective when James Campen, not Adam Stenavich, was coaching the offensive line. Now with Stenavich, who is running an NFL unit for the first time, the hard count is undermining the offense because his linemen show neither poise nor discipline. If Stenavich can't get a handle on this, the Packers would be further ahead snapping the ball without any clever cadence. Despite playing a front missing its starting defensive tackles, the inside threesome combined to give up four pressures. Jenkins looked good in space, pulling on two rushes for 8 yards and providing a menacing presence in front of screens.

## **Quarterbacks (1 ½)**

Aaron Rodgers reverted to some of the form that often made him an ordinary player from mid-2015 through last season. On five or six occasions he threw low, inaccurate passes that had little or no chance to be caught. Chargers defensive coordinator Gus Bradley, an old adversary from his days in Seattle and Jacksonville, didn't surprise Rodgers. He played his customary Cover 3, a bend-but-don't-break system without blitzing. On Rodgers' 39 dropbacks, Bradley rushed four 35 times, three three times and five once. The 2.6 percent blitz rate is the lowest against the Packers since 2012 when the Lions coordinated by Gunther Cunningham and coached by Jim Schwartz didn't pressure a single time in the 66 dropbacks during the two meetings. Even with Davante Adams and everyone else in the lineup, Rodgers couldn't make anything happen. Take it back. On a 2-point play, he scanned the field for 5 ½ seconds before deciding to make a run for it. He got by DT Jerry Tillery and angled away from LB Thomas Davis to convert. Otherwise, he didn't seem all that interested in escaping, running and doing the things inspirational leaders at the position do when their team is flat as a pancake. He did float some beautiful looking rainbows. In order, they carried 55, 60, 63 and 59 yards. "Throws the ball far," said Philip Rivers. "I just saw a couple of today where they ended up incomplete and I just said, 'I wonder what that feels like to throw it that far.' I seriously don't know." The first two were close to being on target. In the final minute, Rodgers removed any suspense by air-mailing it over Marquez Valdes-

Scantling on the first and both Jimmy Graham and Adams on the second. Throwing the ball shorter would have given his team an actual chance to score a touchdown. It also would have given the Chargers a chance for an interception. Rodgers decided to forgo the possible score while at the same time preserving the team's turnover differential and his passer rating. Don't kid yourself. Every throw, almost every action he takes on a football field is calculated. The delay of game penalty in the second quarter was the Packers' sixth on offense. That's a black eye for Rodgers, Matt LaFleur, offensive coordinator Nathaniel Hackett and quarterbacks coach Luke Getsy.

### **Running Backs (3 ½)**

Some of his teammates might have been out to lunch but Jamaal Williams (24) never is. He buckles his chinstrap each week and tries to kick butt. The guy must just like hitting people. The Packers were down and almost out cold in the fourth quarter when Aaron Rodgers spread the field and started getting the ball out of his hand almost as fast as he could. On second and 5, he dumped to Williams in the left flat where FS Jaylen Watkins immediately arrived. Williams broke that tackle, then refused to go down on a stiff shot from onrushing LB Thomas Davis. Rather than head for the nearby sideline, he lowered his head and crashed through MLB Drue Tranquill for a couple of extra yards. No, Williams didn't tap out for Aaron Jones (32). On the next play, Rodgers extended to his left where Williams was running a swing pass toward the sideline. Seeing Rodgers coming toward him, he went into scramble mode behind Watkins and then clutched the 10-yard pass to his chest as he fell backward into the end zone. He's just a good football player. Jones and Williams ran the ball with authority (a combined 10-40) but just didn't get the chance to do it enough. With Davante Adams back in uniform, one could say that Adams was the main focus of Matt LaFleur's game plan and that Jones was a secondary focus even after he carried the attack in the last month. FB Danny Vitale (four) came across the formation to lead Jones on a carry but missed MLB Denzel Perryman and a potentially explosive play gained just 3.

### **Defensive Line ( ½ )**

By an unofficial count, the Packers' defense had used the "bear" front just once in the first half of the season. All you need to know about the run defense as coordinated by Mike Pettine was the seven snaps in which he turned to the "bear" in the fourth quarter. In it, SS Adrian Amos took up a position at the line of scrimmage giving the Packers what in effect was a six-man front. It's a last-resort tactic used by coordinators who are getting the stuffing kicked out of them on the ground. That was Green Bay on Sunday. The Chargers were averaging 69.5 yards but Shane Steichen, the quarterbacks coach promoted to coordinator Monday after the firing of Ken Whisenhunt, had seen just about everyone being able to run on the Packers. Why not the Chargers? Why not, indeed. Melvin Gordon, who was off to a woeful start after ending his holdout Sept. 26, broke out with a 20-80 performance and Austin Ekeler slashed 12 times for 70. It was surprising if not shocking to see C Scott Quessenberry, a fifth-round draft choice in 2018 subbing for injured Mike Pouncey, getting after Kenny Clark (played 55 of the possible 71 snaps on defense). Quessenberry played 41 snaps off the bench as a rookie, and this was his second start at center. Quessenberry is somewhat undersized (6-3 ½, 310), lacks top strength and has short arms (31 ¾). He is a good athlete. In the last year or two, Quessenberry is the type of player that Clark would have dominated. Instead, on play after play, it was Quessenberry who was sustaining what sometimes were one-on-one blocks. The Packers limited seven carries to gains of 1 yard or less, but Clark didn't make any of those plays. He isn't attacking blocks with as much aggressiveness this season, and he isn't disengaging and making as many tackles at or across the line of scrimmage. He also

missed two tackles. Clark did have better success as a rusher, posting 1 ½ pressures. Dean Lowry (41) has played much better in the past, too. On fourth and goal at the 1, everyone else on the front played across the line. Lowry's pad level was way too high, so he was displaced by LT Russell Okung and Gordon scored easily through his gap. Later, on a third and 1, Lowry got out of his gap and Ekeler pounded for 10. Tyler Lancaster (29) wasn't getting off blocks, either. The best player might have been Montravius Adams (24), who accounted for 1 ½ "bad" runs, continued hustling downfield and one time manhandled Quessenberry, flinging him to the ground. On one snap, Kingsley Keke (11) showed good feet stepping over trash as he worked down the line. It'll be interesting to see if the playing time for Adams and Keke increases.

### **Linebackers (1 ½)**

Playing all over the front, Za'Darius Smith (56) had a team-high 2 ½ pressures and 1 ½ "bad" runs. Against the run, Smith was both active and stout. The only reason Austin Ekeler didn't plow across on third and goal from the 2 in the fourth quarter was the ability of Smith slipping the block of LT Russell Okung and making the tackle. He was reading and reacting well setting the edge and closed fast to make the tackle on a first-half bubble screen. On the other side, Preston Smith (56) beat RT Sam Tevi outside in 2.9 seconds for a quick sack. However, when Tevi departed after 14 snaps with a knee injury, Preston failed to register a single hurry against backup Trent Scott, a second-year free agent with minimal experience on the right side. Kyler Fackrell (24) beat Okung for a knockdown. Rashan Gary (18) didn't play in the second half until the last minute when Philip Rivers took a knee twice. Gary usually brings a ton of effort but that rarely translates to production. Until the bitter end, Mike Pettine resisted selling out against the run. He played a safety next to Blake Martinez (70) in the nickel defense most of the time rather than actual linebackers B.J. Goodson (13) and Oren Burks (eight). It's not working largely because Martinez provided almost no physical presence until the fourth quarter. The contrast between Martinez and the Chargers' three ILBs – Denzel Perryman, Thomas Davis and Drue Tranquill – was stark. Aaron Jones was given entry past the line of scrimmage by Green Bay's line, and he was bringing it. His longest carry was just 7 yards, however, largely because the LA backers were bringing the wood right back at him. In Martinez's case, ball carriers barge through him. Martinez missed just one tackle, making 12. He gets people down, but not where a good defense needs them down. For example, Martinez was unblocked and in the hole on third and 1 to meet Gordon, who slammed through him for a 4-yard gain. On Ekeler's long run of 16, C Scott Quessenberry shoved Martinez off the play by 10 yards. In coverage, his play is equally ineffectual. He drifts, he's a limited athlete and he's slow. Maybe the coaches think command of the defense makes him untouchable. If not, Goodson, Burks and rookie Ty Summers all are available.

### **Secondary (1)**

Jaire Alexander loves to compete; he's quick and will tackle. Week after week, however, he is giving up big plays at a high rate. The Chargers, leading by a field goal, faced first and 20 when Mike Williams came across the field on a shallow crosser with Alexander in man coverage. Alexander's job is to play through the receiver's up-field shoulder and minimize the gain. Instead, he committed the cardinal sin by going underneath the route looking for a breakup or pick-6. This is the NFL. The ball by Philip Rivers was surgically placed so Williams could make the catch before Alexander could make the deflection. The catch was made three yards downfield. With Alexander unable to catch Williams, who ran 4.52 seconds in the 40 in 2017, a reception for 3 yards ruptured into 56. Mistakes such as this have added up to where Alexander's second season has become something of a disappointment. His lack of size came into play later on a long pass in

which Rivers threw to Williams for 46. The assumption is that there was supposed to be a safety in the middle of the field to help Alexander defend the deep post. Regardless, it is Alexander's job to get that ball out, and he couldn't do it. Kevin King (20) started but gave way on the right outside to Tramon Williams (69) and Tony Brown (19), who was active ahead of Josh Jackson and Ka'dar Hollman. Williams played hard. Mike Pettine wasn't interested in matching wits with a veteran passer such as Rivers. He blitzed on just 9.4 percent of passes, relying on the rush of the two Smiths and hoping his man coverage scheme would hold up. The Packers never broke up a pass all day and Rivers compiled a passer rating of 108.3. The entire group, however, did well keeping Pro Bowl WR Keenan Allen (3-40) under wraps. Neither of the safeties, Darnell Savage (71) nor Adrian Amos (71), could hang with TE Hunter Henry one-on-one. On almost identical routes in the first half, Henry released into the middle and ran across the middle for gains of 19 and 18. Savage has had zero impact since returning from an ankle injury in Game 8. Amos is a gutsy, reliable tackler in the box. Chandon Sullivan (36) and Will Redmond (22) played extensively, too.

### **Kickers (3)**

The Packers had yet to score late in the third quarter when Mason Crosby drilled a 54-yard field goal dead-center perfect. His two kickoffs for distance averaged 69 yards and 4.20 seconds of hang time. JK Scott's five-punt averages were diminished by a blocked punt that was scored as an 8-yard boot. He averaged 37.6 (gross), 37.4 (net) with a 4.55 hang time.

### **Special Teams (1 ½)**

The Packers probably determined that Darrius Shepherd was needed as a wide receiver when injuries hit last month and so CB Tremon Smith was cut. He had been back on kickoffs in Games 3-5. With Shepherd having played his way off the roster, Smith was brought back on Oct. 29 to handle kickoffs and punts. He impressed, running with the assertiveness that Shepherd didn't provide. His 36-yard return of a kickoff across the field was the team's longest of the season. The only negative was carrying the ball a little too loosely. Led by Will Redmond (three hits), the Packers contained dual return threat Desmond King in one of their better coverage efforts. Hunter Bradley snapped perfect laces, assisting Mason Crosby on his bomb. The blocked punt by MLB Drue Tranquill came between B.J. Goodson and Kyler Fackrell and past FB Danny Vitale. Tony Brown was back at it, drawing two penalties on one kickoff (offsides and illegal formation) and three in all. He now has six penalties on special teams in seven games. When Brown lined up in the neutral zone on the field-goal block unit, the Chargers took the penalty and scored a touchdown for a gift – four extra points. Dating to his days at Alabama, Brown has exhibited some attractive physical traits and some others that will get you beat. You can count on him continuing to be penalized. Do Matt LaFleur and his rookie special teams coordinator Shawn Mennenga want to live with that? Oren Burks and Ty Summers shared the snap lead with 25.