

Rating The Packers : Week 10 vs Panthers

By Bob McGinn Posted 11/12/2019

In the sense that no football games are exactly alike, coach Matt LaFleur was correct Sunday when he said his Packers have found different ways to win.

Yet, it's fairly safe to say that the Packers generally have followed the same time-tested formula in forging their 8-2 record.

With little doubt, the overriding factor in their surprising success has been the lack of injuries. In the last two weeks just one player on the 53-man roster, tight end Robert Tonyan, missed even a day of practice. Guard Lane Taylor, safety-linebacker Raven Greene and wide receiver Equanimeous St. Brown were the only players of value that the Packers were missing Sunday in a 24-16 victory over the Panthers at Lambeau Field.

The Panthers had an injury list typical for mid-November, one comparable to what the Packers usually have had to work around in past seasons. They were missing quarterback Cam Newton, left tackle Greg Little, defensive tackle Kawann Short, cornerback James Bradberry and kicker Graham Gano.

Green Bay hasn't even had its bye yet. The Packers will this week, their latest since the 17-week season was introduced in 1990. It stands to reason they'll be in even more robust health for their important game Nov. 24 in San Francisco.

"We're in a blessed position with our record and with our health right now," said wide receiver Davante Adams, whose four-game absence with turf toe was the Packers' biggest hit of the season. "We have to make sure we don't take that for granted and take care of business."

When you look at traditional statistical barometers, the Packers hardly seem like a team that has won 80 percent of their games. Using older terminology, they rank 17th in total offense and 28th in total defense.

That's based on yards, of course, which has never been as important as points but still isn't without significance in analyzing a team.

Their opponents are averaging more yards on the ground (126.9 to 102.1) and in the air (257.8 to 253.9). The Packers have been outgained in six of their 10 games.

It's become popular to say that the Packers are running the ball more effectively. Yet, their average per game on the ground would be their worst in a full season since 2011 just like their average per carry (4.2) would be their lowest since 2015.

The Packers also own a worse third-down conversion rate than their foes, and their special teams rank in the bottom third of the league.

Besides the gift of good fortune on the injury front, the Packers are winning largely because of turnover differential and their performance in the red zone. Their 2-0 giveaway-takeaway advantage over Carolina improved Green Bay to plus-9, which ranked third in the NFL. The Packers are tied for fourth in most takeaways with 16; they rank third in fewest giveaways with seven.

Not only haven't the Packers lost a fumble since Game 6, but they also haven't fumbled – period – in the last four games. As for interceptions, Aaron Rodgers has thrown exactly four in his last 26 starts. This season, the Packers have a plus-45 point differential, 250-205. Most of that margin can be attributed to their plus-39 point differential in points stemming directly from takeaways (62) compared to their opponents' total of 23.

Turnover differential has been and perhaps always will be the most telling stat in the winning equation. Another vital barometer is proficiency inside the 20-yard-line.

Presently, the Packers rank third in red-zone offense and eighth in red-zone defense. On offense, Green Bay also ranked third in 2017, '12 and '11 in the red zone. Thus, its current ranking of third isn't a huge departure.

The No. 8 ranking in red-zone defense, however, does represent rarefied air for the Packers. Since finishing eighth in 2007, they have ranked 23rd in 2008, 28th in '09, 12th in '10, 20th in '11, 29th in '12, 24th in '13, 20th in '14, tied for 16th in '15, 28th in '16, 31st in '17 and tied for 19th last year under Mike Pettine in his first season as the team's defensive coordinator.

On Sunday, the Panthers probably were ecstatic to have gained 401 yards behind a backup quarterback on a snowy afternoon at Lambeau Field. But in keeping with the familiar script for 2 ½ months, Green Bay escaped virtually injury-free, won the turnover battle and used a stop at their one-foot line as time expired to preserve another victory.

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

The three stars of the game were: 1. Za'Darius Smith. 2. Kenny Clark. 5. Elgton Jenkins.

Receivers (3)

Marquez Valdes-Scantling finished first twice and second five times in playing time among the wide receivers in the eight games that he went the distance. On Sunday, he logged 11 of the 68 possible snaps on offense to rank fifth at the position. MVS has one of the NFL's highest averages per catch (19.1). His ability to run by people is legit. Yet, on a sloppy track with the temperature hovering around freezing, the coaches went with thicker players that maybe could keep their feet under them better. One bad play surely didn't help MVS's cause. Early in the second quarter, Aaron Jones hit a crease off right tackle. MVS went in to block SS Eric Reid, who is three inches shorter but 10 pounds heavier. His initial strike was OK, but Reid then flung MVS aside and tackled Jones for a gain of 5. MVS sat out the rest of that series. His only target was a deep post in which FS Tre Boston stayed back and broke it up. Besides Davante Adams (54), those playing ahead of MVS were

Geronimo Allison (42), Allen Lazard (30) and Jake Kumerow (23). Overall, it was a ho-hum performance by the group. CB James Bradberry, a four-year starter, sat out his first game of the season (groin). There was a major drop-off to Ross Cockrell, a journeyman playing for his fourth team. Other than Adams' outstanding catch on a take-off route for 37 yards, the unit didn't exploit Cockrell. Adams was charged with a drop for failing to put away a 44-yard bomb that CB Donte Jackson ripped from his grasp. Adams did burn Jackson on a precise post-corner route for 38. Cockrell attempted to press Adams on the play in which he was beaten. Unless the cornerback is an elite player, opponents should just stay away from Adams at the line. He's a hard man to jam. Adams and Lazard were penalized for pushing off Cockrell. Lazard also dropped a pass before slipping down on a promising bubble screen. Kumerow delivered three or four impressive blocks at or near the point of attack. Rookie TE Jace Sternberger (15), the third-round draft choice from Texas A&M, saw his first substantial playing time. His job was to block, and he did with seven snaps from a three-point stance and seven from a wing look. On his first play, he failed to cut off SLB Bruce Irvin and Aaron Jones didn't go anywhere. He came across the formation three or four times on defenders and generally at least got in the way. Sternberger looked like someone who was trying to be physical and earn a little respect from the opposition. Maybe next week he'll be used in the passing game where his 4.72 speed could be useful. The Panthers didn't even bother covering Jimmy Graham (44) on a seam route. He made the catch 21 yards downfield and ran for another 13 before Reid and Boston arrived. Then it took them 14 more yards to knock him down. The 48-yard reception was offset later when Graham failed to get his feet down inbounds on what would have been a 7-yard touchdown. Mercedes Lewis (38) continued to contribute in the run game.

Offensive Line (4)

The Panthers entered the game ranked second in sack percentage. In a solid showing, this unit was responsible for one sack, two knockdowns and four hurries. There also were three "bad" runs. The only player with a clean report card was Elgton Jenkins. The rookie, however, is doing much more than not missing blocks. In the run game, he demonstrates upper and lower body strength and a violent strike. In the passing game, each week he becomes more difficult to beat. He tries to finish run blocks, looks for someone to unload on when uncovered in pass pro and doesn't take grief from anybody. On the sack, Billy Turner departed his double-team with Corey Linsley too soon and DE Vernon Butler roared in to demolish Aaron Rodgers. Turner doesn't have great anything but his effort has been good. It's obvious that he cares a lot about the product. Linsley gets displaced now and again by bigger people. He's just so reliable on shotgun snaps and executing reach blocks for the run. The tackles got a break when rookie OLB Brian Burns, a first-round draft choice who had 4 ½ sacks in the first month, was a nonfactor in 11 snaps as he makes his way back from wrist surgery. David Bakhtiari and Bryan Bulaga blocked better in the run game than pass. Bakhtiari's two pressures came on up-field rushes by OLB Mario Addison. On the final play of the first half, DT Gerald McCoy blew up Jamaal Williams when Bakhtiari failed to cut him off inside. "I saw a little key to give me a tip to what was happening," said McCoy, a six-time Pro Bowl selection. "So I was able to jump the count and make a play." Bakhtiari picked up his 10th penalty of the season on an illegal hands to the face call. Bulaga, who allowed 2 ½ pressures but no "bad" runs, frequently has caved in the right side of the line with down blocks on toss plays outside him.

Quarterbacks (3)

For an organization that works cadence from spring workouts on, the Packers are getting next to nothing out of it. Two more false-start penalties, including one before the second snap against Jimmy Graham on a hard count, increased the team's total to 15. Opponents seem immune to the cadence of Aaron Rodgers. They've been penalized just four times for offsides in the 10 games. With the ball at the Panthers 1 and 2 seconds left in the first half, Rodgers launched into a hard count. Even if the Panthers came across, the gain via penalty might have been a foot. That hard count also could have contributed to Gerald McCoy being able to jump the count and David Bakhtiari being late off the ball. It's hard to get off fast when a player like Bakhtiari, who has been called for false starts four times, has that in the back of his mind. Rodgers earned a passing grade because he never made a terrible mistake. He's the master of disaster avoidance. In his last 21 starts, he has fumbled on just one sack. When trouble draws near, Rodgers senses it and grips the ball solidly with two hands. On back-to-back plays in the Packers' end of the field, he avoided a sack and a lousy looking screen pass by almost spiking the ball. Rodgers probably knows the rulebook cold. He seems to know exactly what he can and can't get away with it when it comes to the officials. He is an extremely deft ballhandler, an underappreciated aspect of quarterbacking. As a passer, he didn't have much of a day. He missed some open receivers. He looked more interested in looking deep than to chain-moving short receivers. There were two more delay-of-game penalties. On that matter, it might be that he and Matt LaFleur can't agree on the play and the call isn't finalized until too late. Rodgers almost outsmarted himself late in the fourth quarter on a toss-away near Danny Vitale that fluttered dangerously close to LB Shaq Thompson and a possible 53-yard interception return for a TD.

Running Backs (4 ½)

This unit had been targeted 79 times in Games 1-9 before the only target went to Jamaal Williams (34) Sunday. What happened? Other opponents had switched defenders when Aaron Jones (34) and sometimes Williams either lined up or motioned near the sideline. The Panthers had seen enough of them eating up linebackers and safeties. Instead, they didn't switch. So if Jones ended up wide left, CB Donte Jackson sat tight and covered him. One reason coach Ron Rivera felt comfortable doing it was the 4.59 speed of WLB Shaq Thompson. Seeing Davante Adams with a linebacker across from him was partially why Aaron Rodgers allocated 22 of his 29 targets on the wide receivers. The strategy worked for Carolina in that Jones had just 13 touches. He was exceptional again, averaging 7.2 yards (13-93) and scoring three touchdowns. There's no telling how many yards from scrimmage he might have had with 10 more touches. Jones broke six tackles, including two apiece by MLB Luke Kuechly and FS Tre Boston. The beauty of blocking for Jones is he's so fast to the hole that no one has to sustain contact for long. He pinballs into gaps, showing sensational balance, toughness and elusiveness. On one handoff NT Dontari Poe beat Billy Turner right where Jones was headed. He slipped away from Poe's left paw, outran CB Ross Cockrell to the boundary and picked up 9. "He is a great running back," DT Gerald McCoy said. "He is taking the league by storm. Everyone should know his name at this point." Williams was terrific in his own right, averaging 4.8 (13-63). He's a back everyone would love playing alongside. He did have a pair of questionable reads. Danny Vitale (13) has had better days as a blocker.

Defensive Line (4)

One week after a bad game against the Chargers, NT Kenny Clark might have had the best pass-rushing game of his four-year career. Playing 63 of the possible 73 snaps on defense, he was almost unblockable. In March, the Panthers gave C Matt Paradis \$29 million over five years (\$12M guaranteed) to leave Denver after starting there from 2015-'18. Clark didn't register a sack or a knockdown, partially because he has been penalized for roughing the passer this season and looks wary of another. But he did collect a whopping eight pressures, including 5 ½ against Paradis and 2 ½ against RG Trai Turner, a seven-year starter and Pro Bowl selection in 2015. Paradis simply couldn't stop Clark from walking him back to QB Kyle Allen. He beat Turner by getting to his right edge. Clark was more than adequate against the run, too. Dean Lowry (35) and Tyler Lancaster (19) were OK at the point but also were guilty of miscues. Christian McCaffrey is a wonderful running back. When Lowry slipped down almost without being touched at the point of attack, McCaffrey poured through the gift gap for his longest run (18 yards). Thanks to a pressure by Za'Darius Smith, Lancaster was able to record his first full sack. But he can't afford to lose focus; he hit Allen in the head and was penalized later. Montravius Adams (15) recovered Allen's fumbled snap by digging the ball out from under his legs. Adams is working his hands and feet in better unison on his pass rushes. The coaches appear to be gaining more confidence that both he and Kingsley Keke (11) can hold the fort against double-teams.

Linebackers (4 ½)

No team has double-teamed Za'Darius Smith (64) more on passes than the Panthers. They weren't giving him much extra attention until the fourth quarter when the doubles became the only chance LT Taylor Moton and RT Daryl Williams had. In the end, the double-team rate for Za'Darius was 48.6 percent; his previous high was 39.3 percent by the Vikings in Game 2. His total of 8 ½ pressures included three knockdowns and 5 ½ hurries. He beat six different blockers. With the Panthers on an extended drive at the end, Za'Darius stayed on the field for all 19 snaps. In addition to playing left and right end all season, he had played in a three-point stance on a lot of passing downs. In a departure, Za'Darius stood up over a guard on 12 of the 16 snaps he was inside. It was quite a show in the last two minutes as the Panthers' offensive linemen started to show fatigue as well. Other than an offsides penalty with 19 seconds left, there wasn't much negative. Preston Smith (62) wasn't as dominating but still had a strong day with two sacks and 4 ½ pressures in all. His sacks came around the corner against rookie Dennis Daley, who started at left tackle before leaving with a leg injury early in the fourth quarter, and Taylor Moton, the right tackle who had to switch sides down the stretch. Part of Preston's success has been Za'Darius attracting most of the double-teams. Preston also had an inexcusable penalty (offsides) in the final seconds. Kyler Fackrell (29) made the defensive play of the game with 2 seconds left from the 2. In as a rover against a spread formation, Fackrell was instructed to move from over right guard to over left guard by Blake Martinez right before the ball was snapped with 9 seconds on the play clock. Giving up more than 50 pounds and standing up across from LG Greg Van Roten, the Ivy Leaguer (Penn) and ex-Packer (2012-'13), Fackrell probably should have been rolled back and out of the end zone. Instead, Fackrell won. When Van Roten lunged ever so slightly, Fackrell slipped past him and directly into the path of Christian McCaffrey as he hit the middle. Fackrell was in no position to make the tackle but the unblocked Preston Smith was as he flattened in from outside right tackle. Preston grabbed McCaffrey's legs, effectively stopping him inches short of a possible tying touchdown. Rashan Gary (16) had another empty stat line. No doubt helped by Kenny Clark's outstanding effort, Martinez (73) experienced less turbulence and made some solid tackles within five yards of the line. He was playing more squarely. Mike Pettine used B.J. Goodson (20) when the Panthers' personnel grouping suggested run and Oren Burks (four) in a few passing

situations. Martinez was one of five or six defenders that were in coverage on TE Greg Olsen but failed to impede his banner day (8-98).

Defensive Backs (2 ½)

Mike Pettine and the staff really must have liked Ibraheim Campbell in his three-game, 114-snap stint a year ago. Activated last week from the physically unable to perform list (torn ACL), he played 42 snaps. Campbell filled the spot next to Blake Martinez that had been handled by Raven Greene, Adrian Amos and Will Redmond. Campbell gave Pettine a bigger, stronger player than Redmond and a better cover man than Burks. Christian McCaffrey is a phenomenal threat as a receiver. In many situations, Campbell either had McCaffrey in man or some form of box-and-one coverage. Late in the game, he wouldn't let McCaffrey cross his face into the open middle and then the pass outside fell incomplete. Campbell's shortcomings also were on display, especially early. He was either out of position or slow to react on some crossing routes, and with his very mediocre speed, some receivers ran away from him. Entering Sunday, McCaffrey hadn't fumbled in 207 touches. In the third quarter, Campbell showed strength, timing and judgment with a strip of McCaffrey after a 9-yard carry. Carolina recovered the fumble. Amos (73) dropped a pass in the end zone that Tramon Williams (53) cradled for an interception. Darnell Savage (73) got beat in the slot by Curtis Samuel for a 2-yard TD, blew an easy sack on one of his three blitzes and made a few nice tackles. As usual, the Panthers went after Kevin King (73) and left Jaire Alexander (73) alone. Of the 13 balls thrown with King in coverage, nine were completed for 120 yards. In the fourth quarter alone, Kyle Allen completed four passes along the sideline against King for 56. King did break up a couple of passes and tackled well. Few players should benefit more from the bye than King, who seems to be playing hurt. Alexander should have had an easy catch for a 38-yard pick-6 but dropped the ball. Nobody in the secondary had any luck trying to cover Greg Olsen.

Kickers (3)

This was the third shaky game in a row for JK Scott, who declined later in the season as a rookie, too. His four-punt averages were 35.3 yards (gross, net) and 4.12 seconds of hang time. He had three fair catches, two inside the 15. Mason Crosby missed wide right from 52, was able to reload after an illegal-formation penalty on Carolina and made amends from 47. His five-kickoff averages were 64.8 and 3.64.

Special Teams (3)

JK Scott has developed into a top-notch holder. Four times on Sunday the snaps from Hunter Bradley on placements didn't provide perfect laces. Each time, Scott overcame the cold and blowing snow to make the necessary spin adjustment so the laces were facing away from Mason Crosby. Carolina's DeAndrew White returned the opening kickoff for 36 yards. The Packers lost dual returner Tremon Smith to a head injury in the second quarter. Chandon Sullivan replaced him on kickoffs, Tramon Williams on punts. On two occasions, Williams was reluctant to move up and field punts that ended up rolling and costing the Packers hidden yardage. Tony Brown and Will Redmond provide a pair of speedy, aggressive gunners on punts. LB Ty Summers, who led these units in snaps each of the past four games, saw his snap total reduced to a season-low total of nine.