

Rating The Packers : Week 13 at NY Giants

By Bob McGinn Dec 3, 2019

It has been said that in pro football you win with people. It also can be said you win with those people staying healthy, your opponents being injured and dominating turnover differential.

Just ask the Packers. Their season-long shortage of injuries, the injury woes of some of their foes and overwhelming giveaway-takeaway success has enabled them to stand with a 9-3 record following a 31-13 victory Sunday over the Giants at MetLife Stadium.

The Packers didn't have to play a great game to send the Giants to their eighth straight defeat, one short of the franchise record. They led by just four points, 17-13, as the fourth quarter began.

But with their superior health and 3-0 advantage in turnover differential, the Packers won for the sixth time this season despite being outgained.

Entering Monday, the Packers were tied for second in turnover differential at plus-11. They ranked second in fewest giveaways (eight) and tied for seventh in most takeaways (19).

Mike McCarthy made a living in Green Bay on turnover differential. In his first season (2006), the Packers broke even after Mike Sherman, McCarthy's predecessor, posted a club-record minus-24 in his final season.

McCarthy's high-water marks were plus-24 in both 2009 and '11. The Packers were minus-3 in 2017 and even in 2018, helping pave the way for a coaching change.

On the injury front, the Packers have been blessed almost since the start of training camp. On Sunday, they had all 22 of their preferred starters on the field whereas the Giants were without their leading tackler and their two leading receivers. In a scenario that often has been repeated in 2019, the opponent suffered injuries to critical players in the game before playing the Packers. In the case of the Giants, wide receiver Golden Tate (concussion) and safety Jabrill Peppers (back) went down Nov. 24 against Chicago.

Aaron Rodgers has been available for every snap. The defensive line, linebackers and cornerbacks have been intact for 12 games. The five starting offensive linemen have played every game.

"It's just the cohesiveness of that group, I think, more than anything else," coach Matt LaFleur said Monday about the offensive line. "The more you can keep the starting five, I think anybody around the league (knows), the better the performance will be."

Lane Taylor, the starter at left guard since 2016, suffered a season-ending biceps injury in Game 2. Rookie Elgton Jenkins, however, had begun to alternate with Taylor in that game.

In calculating games missed by starters, my best guess is that Taylor might have started two more games before Jenkins would have supplanted him.

Therefore, through 12 games, let's say the Packers have had eight games missed by starters due to injury: four by Davante Adams, two by Darnell Savage and two by Taylor.

In comparison, their 12 opponents had 38 starters missing when they played the Packers.

In chronological order, here's the list of starters that the Packers didn't have to play.

Chicago: TE Trey Burton.

Minnesota: LG Pat Elflein, SLB Ben Gedeon.

Denver: RT Ja'Wuan James, FB Andy Janovich.

Philadelphia: WR DeSean Jackson, DT Malik Jackson,
B Jalen Mills, CB Ronald Darby.

Dallas: LT Tyron Smith, DT Antwaun Woods.

Detroit: SS Quandre Diggs.

Oakland: WR Tyrell Williams, RT Trent Brown, DE Arden Key.

Kansas City: LT Eric Fisher, LG Andrew Wylie, QB Patrick Mahomes, DE Frank Clark, DT Chris Jones, CB Kendall Fuller.

L.A. Chargers: C Mike Pouncey, NT Brandon Mebane, DT Justin Jones, SS Derwin James, FS Roderic Teamer.

Carolina: LT Greg Little, QB Cam Newton, DT Kawann Short, CB James Bradberry.

San Francisco: LT Joe Staley, RB Matt Breida, DE Dee Ford, WLB Kwon Alexander.

N.Y. Giants: WR Golden Tate, TE Evan Engram, SS Jabrill Peppers, SLB Kareem Martin.

The Redskins might be without six starters when they play the Packers on Sunday at Lambeau Field. On Sunday, in a 29-21 victory at Carolina, right tackle Morgan Moses left in the first half with a back injury. Missing with injuries suffered the week before against Detroit were outside linebacker Ryan Kerrigan (concussion) and wide receiver Paul Richardson.

Green Bay ranks 22nd in total offense and 28th in total defense, the traditional statistical barometer of a team's strength. But any team benefiting from turnover differential as well as the injury factor for itself and the opponent to the extent the Packers have must be considered a threat to win the Super Bowl if those phenomena continue.

Here is a rating of the Packers in their victory over the Giants. Five footballs are the maximum, one-half football is the minimum. As a team, the Packers received 3 ½ footballs.

The three stars of the game were: 1. Aaron Rodgers. 2. Za'Darius Smith. 3. Allen Lazard.

Receivers (3 ½)

After a series of lackluster showings, Geronimo Allison (played 42 of a possible 67 snaps on offense) came to the forefront with one of his better performances. After missing a crack-back block early on a sweep for minus-2, he delivered several cut blocks to spring split receivers. On fourth and 10, he ran a terrific route to win inside against CB Grant Haley for a 15-yard reception. He also gained precisely 5 yards on a third-and-5 out with Haley in coverage. Allen Lazard (37) probably had the best game of his surprising season. On the second snap, he found his way into the deep open middle and caught the ball falling for 43 yards. With the Giants in quarters coverage, Lazard found himself in an advantageous matchup against aging FS Antoine Bethea. At 17 yards he faked out and went in, spinning Bethea around en route to a 37-yard touchdown. On third and 13, he found a window in a zone and sat down at 15 yards, giving Aaron Rodgers a nice, big target. That gain was 23. Lazard could be the answer at tight end down the road. Jake Kumerow (14) started opposite Davante Adams (52) and ahead of Marquez Valdes-Scantling (18), who didn't see the field until the third series and looks to be No. 5 in the pecking order. Kumerow, Lazard and Allison all are much more physical blockers and route runners than MVS, and on a snow-covered field that was of paramount importance to the coaches. MVS didn't look like an alert player on the final third down when he failed to sight adjust and break off his route when the Giants blitzed six inside of him. Adams exploited a young, below-average secondary by scoring two TDs and drawing pass-interference penalties for 11 and 15 yards to convert a pair of third and longs. Veteran Janoris Jenkins, easily the Giants' best cover guy, was upset that defensive coordinator James Bettcher didn't allow him to travel with Adams. The only drop was by Adams. Jimmy Graham (28) is playing less and less. He made good on his only target, a 16-yard reception on a low ball on third and 4. Mercedes Lewis (27), Robert Tonyan (20) and Jace Sternberger (16), who didn't get in until the third quarter, also contributed. Tonyan, the third-year free agent from FCS Indiana State, is much bigger and stronger these days. He was persistence personified blocking for a late check-down. He tried to do too much on a combo block on the goal line and was called for holding SS Julian Love. His penalty wiped out a TD. Sternberger, another receiver type, also is demonstrating considerable want-to in the run game.

Offensive Line (3)

Given Bryan Bulaga's long history of injuries, it had to be a surprise seeing him play the first 64 snaps one week after suffering what coach Matt LaFleur described as a "pretty significant (knee) injury." Matched mainly against OLB Markus Golden, the Giants' best pass rusher, Bulaga allowed just one pressure. Even in his 10th season and on a bad knee, the 30-year-old Bulaga still can move pretty darn well toward the boundary in bubble screens. On the other side, David Bakhtiari yielded merely one-half pressure to OLB Lorenzo Carter. Corey Linsley rebounded from a brutal showing in San Francisco by allowing one-half pressure and no "bad" runs. This was by far the worst game for rookie Elgton Jenkins. Of the seven "bad" runs, he was responsible for 4 ½. He was late twice coming off on ILB Alec Ogletree, was unable to handle DT Dalvin Tomlinson on a pair of "bad" runs and missed ex-Jet Leonard Williams on another carry for minus-3. He wasn't much better in pass protection, allowing a team-leading total of 2 ½ pressures. His pass-blocking troubles came largely against Williams, the talented former Jet. His holding penalty against Williams was Jenkins' fourth of the season. Billy Turner was solid.

Quarterbacks (4 ½)

The turning point came early in the fourth quarter with the Packers, leading, 17-13, facing third and goal from the 17. A second-down screen pass had just lost 3 yards. Behind the line, Aaron Rodgers was listening through his headset to Matt LaFleur, who was communicating the next play. Only Rodgers was multi-tasking. He spotted defensive coordinator James Bettcher pushing Lorenzo Carter onto the field to augment his pass rush. Not since Sept. 5 against the Bears at Lambeau Field had Rodgers caught an opponent with 12 men on the field. No matter. With LaFleur probably still talking in his ear Rodgers sprang into action, screaming out a code word informing the other 10 players to get set immediately. The play clock was at 23 seconds when Corey Linsley snapped the ball; dime LB Deone Bucannon wasn't quite off the field. Taking an old-fashioned five-step drop from under center, Rodgers scanned the field and went to Davante Adams, who worked between two safeties for the TD. After a long night against the 49ers, it appeared Rodgers loved this situation. His vast experience on slick fields gave him better angles to escape the youthful rushers seeking to trap him. Bettcher, the aggressive coordinator in Arizona from 2015-'17, also kept bringing the house, rushing six or more on 18 percent of dropbacks. That's the highest against the Packers since Cleveland's Gregg Williams all-out blitzed on 20 percent against Brett Hundley in Game 13 of 2017. Rodgers loves battling the blitz. No one had come close to blitzing him that much in recent times. Bettcher began to gamble because Rodgers had been so successful early stepping away from his four- and five-man rushes. His performance in the first stanza, a seven-play, 72-yard TD march, was superlative in terms of buying time for receivers to uncover. On the two times Rodgers was knocked down, he stood in to complete passes for 43 and 15 yards. The 15-yard pass to Geronimo Allison on fourth and 10 led to the clinching TD. Bettcher had gone 2-0 against Rodgers four years ago. This time he had no answers. "You can see what happens when you don't get pressure on him," coach Pat Shurmur said. "He's really good." Rodgers did overthrow and underthrow open deep receivers. He also had half a dozen passes that were low or offline.

Running Backs (3 ½)

James Bettcher wasn't going to get beat by Aaron Jones. He played a heavy box. He ran some early-down blitzes designed to stop the run. His calls and some tough customers in the front seven limited Green Bay's running backs to a 2.8-yard average (21-59). Jamaal Williams (28) gained 67 yards from scrimmage in 14 touches compared to 15-31 for Jones (39). After two weeks of almost identical playing time (Jones 75, Williams 73), the coaches got Jones on the field more. It was Jones for 22 of the first 23 plays of the second half. His mediocre day included a dropped pass and only two broken tackles. When Williams took over with 11 minutes remaining, he put a hurtin' on the Giants' tired defense. He was hitting holes like a steer shot out of a rodeo chute. Plowing over defensive backs, he finished with four broken tackles. FB Danny Vitale (12) is in the ideal system. He couldn't play for an I-formation team that would require him to hard-hat linebackers in the hole.

Defensive Line (3)

Saquon Barkley is a phenomenal talent. Hampered by an ankle injury for about a month, he ran with agility, speed and power for 83 yards in 19 carries (4.4). Defensive coordinator Mike Pettine relied on his big men to hold the fort. He played S Ibraheim Campbell rather than ILB B.J. Goodson alongside Blake Martinez in most one-back, three-wide sets, almost daring offensive coordinator Mike Shula to run. He did, but not successful enough to win the game. Six of Barkley's rushes were for 1 yard or less. Of the eight "bad" runs in all, Kenny Clark (played 52 of the possible 67 snaps on defense) and Dean Lowry (42) each had two. On an early third-

and-1 play, Clark beat C Jon Halapio and tackled Barkley for minus-3. Later, Clark swallowed Halapio on a Barkley carry for no gain. Lowry is strong, tough and durable. Fortunate not to have injuries at the position, Tyler Lancaster (23) has been the No. 3 run-stuffer all season. The staff seems satisfied with him. For the second straight game rookie Kingsley Keke (15) played ahead of Montravius Adams (six). Part of a defensive lineman's job description is to smell out screens. All of them were oblivious to the screen that Barkley broke for 27 yards in garbage time.

Linebackers (4)

Za'Darius Smith has been so good for so many games. He is playing like an all-pro. The Giants started by letting tackles Nate Solder and ex-Viking Mike Remmers to try and block him one-on-one. As usual, Smith is an equal-opportunity rusher. Of his 58 snaps, 14 came from a stand-up rover position in which he would charge from any location. Until last month he would always rush from a three-point stance over a guard on long passing downs. Now he's operating from a two-point stance and perhaps being even more hard to handle. Smith had four of his five knockdowns in the first half. He settled for 5 ½ pressures largely because the Giants started double-teaming him on about every other rush. Most tight ends and running backs have little chance. He discards many of them. The best way to control Smith is having a tremendous tackle or sliding the line his way a lot. Preston Smith (57) turned in a pedestrian performance. Besides just one pressure, he was penalized for jumping the count on third and 6 and suffered the indignity of having QB Daniel Jones run through him for 2 yards on a fourth-and-1 keep. Kyler Fackrell (28) was in top form with four pressures, including three up the field against Solder, and an exceptional reaction play to wreck a promising screen to Barkley. Rashan Gary (12) limped off late (left ankle) with one hurry on a bull rush against Remmers. The best thing Gary has done is come off his rush or block and speed to the ball carrier downfield. Blake Martinez (59) stayed home on a misdirection carry by Barkley for no gain; however, he didn't manage to wrestle him down. It was a rare Sunday when Martinez didn't play every snap. For the last eight plays, however, Martinez was out and B.J. Goodson (15) and Owen Burks (eight) took over. Goodson was solid against his old team. The Giants hit two passes for 59 yards on Burks' side of the field.

Secondary (4)

Two interceptions in the last six games weren't what Mike Pettine was seeking. Three vs. the Giants were much more like it. Daniel Jones hadn't thrown many picks in the last month, but as a rookie, he's susceptible to poor reads. The Packers will see another rookie Sunday (Washington's Dwayne Haskins) and very likely a third (David Blough) at Detroit in the finale. Kevin King (48), who wasn't listed on the injury report this week, didn't play in the fourth quarter. In the second quarter, he held his ground inside knowing there was a two-deep shell behind him and then made the catch when Jones threw the ball right to him. The interception by Darnell Savage (67) simply was the result of a bad overthrow by Jones to an open Sterling Shepard. After Tramon Williams (44) shifted from the slot to relieve King outside, Jones tried him deep with speedster Darius Slayton, who ran a 4.35 at the combine. Williams stayed away from Slayton and made a great catch for a pick. Like most teams, the Giants attacked King more than Jaire Alexander (67). King took the bait, played too far inside and gave up an 18-yard TD to Shepard on a double move. He lacked depth on a 29-yard fade to Slayton against his press coverage that went away because of offsetting fouls (King was called for illegal contact). One week after getting burned by the 49ers' Deebo Samuel for a long TD, Williams was at least partially responsible on a similar 43-yard go route to journeyman Cody Latimer from the slot. When Williams moved outside the Giants tried to make him tackle by sending Barkley wide. Williams missed at the

line, enabling Barkley to have his long gain of 16. Chandon Sullivan (28) was OK as the dime back. The more Savage plays the more it appears he takes a lot of chances in the middle of the field. His game needs tightening. Adrian Amos (67), Ibraheim Campbell (33) and Savage haven't shown the ability to contain a tight end let alone shut one down. Rookie Kaden Smith, substituting for injured Evan Engram, had six catches for 70 yards.

Kickers (4)

If two out of three ain't bad, JK Scott is out of his slump. He had superb hang time and good distance on two balls that were inside the 15. His other punt, however, was weak. His three-punt averages were 46.7 yards (gross), 42.7 (net) and 4.47 seconds of hang time. Mason Crosby was able to forge very good hang time (3.97) and more than acceptable distance (60.0) on his six kickoffs. His 47-yard field goal off the icy track, not to mention four extra points, was impressive.

Special Teams (3 ½)

The assumption is that Tony Brown (heel) and Will Redmond (foot) were inactive because of injury. In need of different gunners on the punt team, the call went to Tremon Smith and Josh Jackson. The coverage on kickoffs was excellent, especially by Allen Lazard. Smith was waived Monday, leaving the Packers in need of a dual return specialist. Smith fumbled his only punt return but the ball went out of bounds. On Smith's 33-yard kickoff return that was well-blocked, he might have been gone had K Aldrick Rosas not tripped him up. CB Corey Ballentine suffered a concussion in the third quarter when he slammed into Smith's thick frame. For the sixth time in the last nine games, the units weren't charged with any accepted penalties. Oren Burks and Ty Summers shared the snap lead for the fifth time in six games with 17.