

Rating The Packers : Week 14 vs Redskins

By Bob McGinn Dec 10, 2019

At least the Packers aren't pretending to be something they're not. Not at this juncture, anyway.

At 10-3, the Packers are tied for the third-best record in the NFL. At plus-39, they rank merely 11th in point differential. They're 8-5 against the spread.

Matt LaFleur, the first-year coach, could get all hot and bothered by those that would pick at the performance of his team Sunday in a 20-15 victory over the lowly Redskins at Lambeau Field. In truth, the Packers have yet to play back to their form of Oct. 6 in Dallas, which probably was their best showing of the season.

Instead, LaFleur has taken a sensible, professional approach when it comes to the doubters that have come to expect more despite the fact Green Bay was coming off successive losing seasons under Mike McCarthy.

"Right after the game yesterday I went upstairs and I put on the film because I knew that there was so much more for us and I was pretty upset with myself as well," LaFleur said Monday. "I just know we're not where we need to be as a football team. I'm optimistic we can get there.

"I love the mentality of our guys. I don't think anybody was satisfied with yesterday. I'd be disappointed if they were."

After the game, LaFleur was dead right to assert, "We'll never apologize for winning."

Yet, some coaches off to a 10-3 start would bury their head in the sand and push back against all criticism. LaFleur hasn't gone that route.

It bears repeating that the Packers are winning because of their amazing injury differential compared to the opposition, their turnover differential (plus-11, tied for third in the NFL) and their success in the red zone (tied for second on offense, tied for sixth on defense).

When cornerback Kevin King (shoulder) was withheld Sunday, it marked the first time in five games the Packers played without a starter. The Redskins opened without five starters, but by the end, they were missing seven, plus running back Derrius Guice.

As a member of the NFC North, Green Bay also has had the good fortune this season of being matched against the NFC East, the worst of the eight divisions with a 17-35 record, and the AFC West, which is tied for sixth at 25-27.

The Packers put up a pair of touchdowns in a terrific first quarter before, as LaFleur put it, they “had a lot of short fields and didn’t capitalize on those.”

Five of their last six possessions (excluding kneels) penetrated to the Washington 47, 27, 15, 44 and 15. Those five possessions, which ended with two field goals, two punts and a giveaway, stalled largely because of an overthrown touchdown, a strip-sack, a missed block by Robert Tonyan, a pair of knockdowns when Aaron Rodgers elected not to throw and another missed block by Tonyan.

When LaFleur said, “We’ve got a lot to clean up in order to move forward,” these are the type of plays on offense that must be expunged for the Packers to win the Super Bowl.

The team’s management also needs to clean up the deplorable field conditions at Lambeau Field before their 200th meeting Sunday against the Chicago Bears.

At least one player slipped on just about every play during the game Sunday on the messy SISGrass surface.

“That was the worst field that I have played on, besides Buffalo,” said Redskins cornerback Quinton Dunbar, a five-year veteran who suffered a hamstring injury early in the second quarter and didn’t return. Dunbar departed with a hamstring injury early in the second quarter. Guice, who missed all of his rookie season with a torn ACL in his left knee, exited a few plays later with an injury to the same knee that coach Bill Callahan suggested was serious. Guice broke loose on a 23-year run before being tackled by Darnell Savage.

“It was a different type of field yesterday,” Callahan said Monday. “We had prepped the team on Wednesday knowing that it would be a slick field. As you go through the film, you can see numerous slips by both teams.

“I don’t know if it was the fact that the field was frozen, thawed out, got slicker. It was moist. Both teams’ footing was pretty tough. You can see instances of a lot of slides and the base was lost on a lot of players throughout the game.

“I think it was one of those instances where his (Guice’s) foot got planted and it didn’t slip. It got caught. It got stuck. I think this was a weird injury in the way that he planted. Those are freakish things. I don’t think it’s necessarily running style or anything of that nature.”

On Oct. 14, the Lions played the fourth regular-season game at Lambeau Field. Afterward, quarterback Matthew Stafford said, “If you watch tape, all of the games here, there’s guys slipping all over the place.”

It was cloudy and 37 degrees Sunday at kickoff. To have a dangerous field like that in an \$8 billion business should be an embarrassment for the organization. Don’t be surprised if league officials bail out the fields staff if Green Bay plays host to a playoff game. Here is a rating of the Packers in their victory over the Redskins. 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 Jones. 2. Za’Darius Smith. 3. Kenny Clark.

Receivers (2 ½)

If Davante Adams doesn't repeat as a Pro Bowl selection, the four games that he missed because of a turf toe injury will be only part of the reason. He can't even dominate inexperienced defensive backs. On Sunday, the Redskins went with Simeon Thomas, a second-year player, when RC Quinton Dunbar departed. Thomas had played merely two snaps this season after being drafted in the sixth round by Cleveland in 2018. Washington is his third team. He played 39 snaps Sunday and was never exploited. Adams beat Thomas for 27 yards in two receptions late in the first half before being shut out except for a 5-yard pass behind the line. Adams dropped another pass, giving him one in each of the five games since his return. Matt LaFleur used a three-tight end formation on eight plays, a season-high. If he liked his wide receivers more that wouldn't have happened. The snaps counts were 52 for Adams (of the possible 62 on offense), 36 for Geronimo Allison, 34 for Allen Lazard, 10 for Marquez Valdes-Scantling and seven for Jake Kumerow. Allison is a persistent blocker. He was saved a lost fumble after replay review ruled him down by contact following his lone reception. Lazard displays confidence in his hands and blocking ability. He also had a false start and missed a run block. MVS was used mainly to clear out zones. Kumerow motioned inside on Aaron Jones' 42-yard run and made a booming lead block on SS Landon Collins at the point of attack. Kumerow has been targeted just twice in the last three games. Jimmy Graham (32) led the tight ends. His blocking hasn't been as much of an issue this season. He pancaked OLB Montez Sweat with a surprise chip on one occasion before running his route. Graham beat backup SS Jeremy Reaves, a free agent, for 20 yards off play-action. Later, he got behind Reaves for what would have been a 46-yard touchdown but the ball was overthrown. Later, he ran a clean route against man coverage by Collins for a gain of 25. Mercedes Lewis (39) drew a false-start penalty on third and 1. When Jones bounced wide right for 23, Lewis enabled him to scoot free by sustaining his edge block on Sweat. Robert Tonyan (20) snapped his head around quickly on a well-run seam route and was in a perfect position to catch a 12-yard TD. As a blocker, he is much improved since his arrival in 2017. On a toss for 16, he handled OLB Ryan Kerrigan. Still, his missed blocks were costly. He got whipped by Sweat on a carry for no gain. He failed to cut off ILB Jon Bostic on third-and-2, forcing the Packers to settle for a field goal after a 74-yard drive. The chippiness that Jace Sternberger (six) brings as a blocker annoys defenders. LaFleur appears eager to get something out of his athletic ability and speed in the passing game. Sternberger will learn to slow down on his adjusted route in the end zone on a pass that fell incomplete.

Offensive Line (3)

Bryan Bulaga continues to move people as a drive blocker. On the goal line, he flattened DE Matt Ioannidis and Aaron Jones scored. As a pass blocker, he has started to level off after his tremendous start. On third and 4 at the Washington 42, Ryan Kerrigan walked Bulaga back for a sack. On first down at the Washington 27, Bulaga let OLB Ryan Anderson work around him and his strip-sack occurred in 3.8 seconds. In the fourth quarter, Bulaga and Billy Turner were involved in a sack by Ioannidis in 2.7 seconds. The only starter without a "bad" run was David Bakhtiari. He yielded two pressures but did snap his five-game streak of having at least one penalty. On the left side, Bakhtiari avoided the key miss whereas Elgton Jenkins ducked his head and missed DE Jonathan Allen for his one "bad" run. Jenkins, the rookie, obviously takes a lot of pride in his performance and provides a physical presence each week. He's a finisher. Corey Linsley had a strong effort against Daron Payne, a top-flight young nose tackle. He wasn't always able to stick with his block because of Payne's explosive strength, but that was rare before the ball carrier reached the hole. Turner got beat by Payne on a bull rush for a sack but otherwise more than held his own. The fact this unit has had the same five players available for all 13 games has led to a cohesiveness that most teams can only dream about having.

Quarterbacks (3)

When Aaron Rodgers deigns to take a chance down the field, he remains capable of the big-time throw. The third-and-14 shot to Aaron Jones between the corner and safety was remarkable and clutch. Earlier, he worked through his progression before getting to Robert Tonyan for the TD. Otherwise, it was just another in his series of average performances. Early in the second quarter, on the play after Jones ran for 42, Jimmy Graham was wide open behind Jeremy Reaves from a three-TE set. If Rodgers had thrown a laser, it would have been a 46-yard TD. Instead, he put too much arc on the pass and the lumbering Graham was incapable of catching up to it. On another pass to Graham, he caught a break after overlooking ILB Shaun Dion Hamilton, who promptly dropped the interception. Rodgers continues to check out of runs in favor of passes, and on a day when the linemen were winning coming off the ball and Jones was on fire, it made little sense. Also at the line, the hard count caused two of his teammates to move prematurely. No matter how clever Rodgers is with his voice, the hard count remains counterproductive. Rodgers' teammates have been penalized 18 times for false starts this season whereas the opponents have been penalized five times for offsides. The Packers can live with that 65-yard differential as Rodgers hunts the elusive free play. According to Eric Goska, the independent Packers' statistician-author, the 72.4 percent of plays (21 of 29) that Green Bay ran in enemy territory was its highest in a first half since Rodgers became the starter in 2008. In the second half, 17 of 31 plays (54.8 percent) were initiated from the Redskins' side of the field. To beat the good teams Rodgers will have to make more impact plays.

Running Backs (4 ½)

For the first time in a few weeks, the opposing defensive coordinator didn't keep a cornerback in front of Aaron Jones (36) on the four times when he flanked near the sideline. Early in the fourth quarter, Jones ran an exquisite slant-and-go pattern against SS Landon Collins, who slipped as he turned to recover. It might have been a 64-yard TD except Jones turned inside for the ball rather than outside and the pass fell over his head incomplete. On third and 14 from the Green Bay 7, coordinator Greg Manusky had ILB Shaun Dion Hamilton across from Jones at No. 2 to the right when the Packers emptied the backfield. Against zone coverage, Jones worked toward the sideline behind defenders and then snared the ball on the sideline before FS Montae Nicholson could get over. That 25-yard reception was one that few, if any, running backs in team history could execute. It was a banner day for Jones, 192 yards in 22 touches. On the 4-yard TD, he powered through Collins at the 2. On the 42-yard burst, he hit the hole so fast that all DE Jonathan Allen, Hamilton and Collins could do was stick out their arms as he raced past. When the Packers needed a chain-moving completion Jones ran option routes for catches in the flat against ILB Cole Holcomb, who ran 4.49 last spring. When Collins appeared ready to tackle him in the backfield for a loss, he veered out of his reach and to the boundary for 23. Jones broke six tackles; he was the best player on the field. Jamaal Williams (26) slammed it hard on fourth and 1 for a gain of 7. In their run game, the Redskins used FB Michael Burton to lead on linebackers. It's a thankless line of work that would ill suit finesse FB Danny Vitale (12), who had one of the club's two dropped passes.

Defensive Line (4)

Tyler Lancaster (played 23 of the 65 possible snaps on defense) made a solid impression down the stretch of a lost season in 2018. The rookie free agent represented one of the front office's few finds. In his second season, he remained stout at the point but wasn't finding the ball as often. Last season, Lancaster averaged one tackle every 8.2 snaps. Through 12 games in 2019, he was averaging one every 11.3. On Sunday, he was credited unofficially with five tackles in what probably was his most productive game of the season. On one play, hulking LG Ereck Flowers put Lancaster on the ground, but he got right back up and tackled Adrian Peterson for a gain of 1. He stopped Peterson for his only loss (minus-1) in 20 rushes. If he hadn't split a double-team by C Chase Roullier and RG Brandon Scherff and tackled Peterson, a 4-yard gain might have been much longer. Invariably this season, when Kenny Clark (56) is taking a breather bad things happen to the defense. He's extremely valuable in everything Mike Pettine tries to do. Roullier, a third-year starter, had a long day trying to cope with Clark. He had three pressures, including a bull sack against Roullier in 3.1 seconds. Dean Lowry (39) holds the fort week after week. His production as a pass rusher has decreased this season but part of it is his increased attention to lane integrity with the Smiths gallivanting all over. Finding few running lanes, opposing quarterbacks have rushed 37 times for just 103 yards (2.8). In the second quarter, Kingsley Keke didn't handle his gap responsibility properly enabling RT Morgan Moses to reach easily the second level and manhandle Blake Martinez on a carry for 11. That was Keke's third and final snap of the day. Montravius Adams (six) then moved up to No. 4. With virtually no injuries at this position, snaps have been few and far between for the two backups.

Linebackers (4 ½)

Za'Darius Smith (61) is affecting the passer almost as many times as he doesn't. On the first drop back for rookie Dwayne Haskins, he ran a tackle-tackle twist with Kenny Clark. It probably caught the Redskins by surprise. Mike Pettine rarely starts stunting until the second quarter, and not heavily until the second half. On the play, Za'Darius went first, charging inside against LG Ereck Flowers (6-6 ½, 330). He then shrugged Flowers off him and into a heap on the ground. Za'Darius dived at Haskins but couldn't quite bring him down; Clark and Kyler Fackrell (33) undoubtedly thanked him for their shared sack. For the first time, Pettine showed a front on early downs with Za'Darius as a rover walking around behind a four-man front. He did that five times. On one, he shot a gap and forced Adrian Peterson to fumble. Besides 3 ½ pressures, Za'Darius also was credited with three "bad" runs. He effectively took on pulling guards, a key facet of coach Bill Callahan's gap-style rushing attack. It also was interesting to see Za'Darius begin to use more of a spin move. Late in the third quarter, Lambeau Field grew silent when Za'Darius went down with what appeared to be a left knee injury. Out came the medical staff; eventually, off he walked. By the start of the next series, he was back on the field, presumably as good as new. That was the sixth time this season in which Za'Darius was down on the field and required medical attention only to return shortly thereafter. Preston Smith (59) had a team-high five pressures, including a sack in 3.2 seconds on a bull rush against LT Donald Penn. On the play, Preston landed on Haskins' ankle; the rookie limped around with almost no mobility for the remainder of the game. Preston had two other pressures against Penn, a wily 13-year veteran, and a hump move against Morgan Moses for a knockdown. Fackrell jumped offsides on third and 3, giving Washington its initial first down after three three and outs. As usual, Fackrell proved to be alert against the screen game. When Pettine needs pass rush, he almost always inserts Fackrell rather than Rashan Gary (13). Some continue to excuse Gary's lack of production just as they did during his collegiate career. Gary played a season-high total of seven snaps with his hand down in the new rover defense. Blake Martinez (65) took a chance by running through on the sweep

by Derrius Guice. He was late arriving and thus wasn't there to scrape over the top and limit that 23-yard gain. He also was slow to react on a 13-yard cutback by Adrian Peterson. He was catching the lead blocks by FB Michael Burton. When running backs bleed extra yardage against Green Bay, often it's because Martinez isn't big or physical enough to take a stand. Yet, he remains an utter portrait in durability and also is a threat as a rusher. B.J. Goodson (14) had a team-leading total of two missed tackles. Oren Burks has shown so little that he didn't even play from scrimmage in what was an intensely physical game.

Secondary (3 ½)

The decision to withhold Kevin King made perfect sense. Questionable with a shoulder injury, he did practice all week. But Dwayne Haskins, in his fifth start, didn't represent much of a threat, especially without the top two tight ends (Jordan Reed, Vernon Davis) and the No. 2 and No. 3 wideouts (Paul Richardson, Trey Quinn). Minus King, the decision was made to have Jaire Alexander (63) travel with rookie Terry McLaurin, the third-round draft choice from Ohio State. Call that a draw. Alexander played the long pass better than the short-to-intermediate stuff. Tramon Williams (60) replaced King on the right outside, Chandon Sullivan (49) replaced Williams as the nickel and Josh Jackson (26) replaced Sullivan as the dime. Jackson played the right outside, which appears to be his only position. He lacks the quickness and the cover skills to work inside. Williams struggled against both run and pass. Sullivan is gutsy, made a fine tackle to cut short a screen of promise and batted the ball down on one of his two rushes. Darnell Savage (65) forced a fumble by Chris Thompson that McLaurin recovered amid a sea of green. He also gave up Haskins' longest completion (30) and probably should have intercepted the 13-yard TD pass to McLaurin. An unblocked Adrian Amos (65) managed to get Haskins down on a well-timed, unblocked sack. When the rookie made a poor decision, Amos came out of a two-safety shell to intercept a pass at the boundary. The safeties didn't miss a tackle despite the presence of three elusive backs. Ibraheim Campbell (15) remains Mike Pettine's choice as Martinez' sidekick in most 4-2 defenses.

Kickers (3 ½)

Mason Crosby is in an ideal rhythm. He made two more (32, 33 yards) field goals and two more extra points, extending his streaks this season to 13 and 35. When Crosby has problems, he often has kicked screwballs that move left to right. Now that his ball is moving right to left he can control the flight with simple adjustments. Entering cold-weather, big-game season, the Packers have few players more reliable than their 13-year kicker. His five kickoffs averaged 69.4 yards and 3.79 seconds of hang time. Four were touchbacks, a feat in sub-40 weather. JK Scott's first two punts were inside the 15. On his last two, he had a touchback and a line drive in the middle of the field. His averages were 40.3 (gross), 33.8 (net) and a season-low 3.87 (hang time).

Special Teams (4)

Veteran RB Tyler Ervin (5-10, 192) made his debut as the dual return man following Trevor Davis, Darrius Shepherd and Tremon Smith. Ervin was impressive, returning four punts for a 12.8 average. He looked fundamentally sound fielding six punts (two were fair catches). Despite his size, he ran north-south and gained 10 of his 51 yards after contact. Coordinator Shawn Mennenga switched it up. On the two punts that the Packers double-teamed the gunners, Ervin gained 22 yards. On the two returns the Packers single-blocked with Will Redmond and Josh Jackson, Ervin gained 29. Ervin ran 4.39 seconds in the 40 in 2016 with a 39-inch vertical jump and a 10-10 broad jump. His score on the Wonderlic intelligence test was 21. Redmond and Jackson, the gunners on the punt team, were solid. With Davante Adams and Jimmy Graham deployed in the critical recovering positions, Adams gobbled up the late onside kick. This was the third game in a row in which the Packers had no penalties in the kicking game. Oren Burks led with 19 snaps.