

Rating The Packers : Week 15 vs Bears

By Bob McGinn Dec 17, 2019

Despite sharing the conference's best record at 11-3, almost nobody with a finger on the pulse of the Packers has categorized them as a powerful team that should be favored to represent the NFC in the 54th Super Bowl.

Sometimes, however, it's just your year. You can't help but win. The popular refrain used to be getting on a roll.

The Packers won another game in unimpressive fashion Sunday, a 21-13 triumph over the Bears at Lambeau Field in the 200th meeting between the ancient rivals. And by doing so, they clinched a berth in the playoffs. Win at high-flying Minnesota on Monday night or at decimated Detroit in the regular-season finale and the NFC North championship would be theirs. If the Packers lose as a 4 ½-point underdog at U.S. Bank Stadium, they could be favored by more than two touchdowns at Ford Field.

Start fast, fade, do enough at the end to win. That same pattern has carried the Packers much of their bounce-back season.

The Packers' winning formula should be familiar by now.

Injury differential

For the 13th time in 14 games, the opponent was missing more starters than the Packers due to injury.

The Bears were down one wide receiver (Taylor Gabriel), a tight end (Trey Burton), two offensive linemen (Kyle Long, Bobby Massie) and both inside linebackers (Roquan Smith, Danny Trevathan). All 22 of the Packers' preferred starters were in uniform, not to mention almost every single useful reserve.

In all, the opponents have been without 49 starters in the 14 games compared to only nine for the Packers.

Green Bay's biggest break was the absence of quarterback Patrick Mahomes for the Packers' visit to Kansas City on Oct. 27. Playing against No. 3 Matt Moore, the Packers went on to win, 31-24.

Turnover differential

The Bears turned the ball over three times and the Packers didn't turn it over.

Entering play Monday night, the Packers ranked seventh in takeaways with 23 and second in giveaways with nine. Their plus-14 differential ranked second to New England's plus-24.

Replay review showed that Tramon Williams' muff on a punt return should have been the Bears' ball at the Green Bay 48. Instead, officials penalized the Bears for fair-catch interference, and four plays later the Packers scored the opening touchdown.

In the fourth quarter, a replay review correctly reversed the ruling of a fumble by Aaron Rodgers that had been recovered by Chicago at the Green Bay 21.

Dean Lowry's unusual but phenomenal interception near midfield halted another Bears' possession in the fourth quarter. The game ended at the 2 when tight end Jesper Horsted fumbled. Had he pitched the ball to a trailing teammate the Bears probably would have been in possession to force overtime with a two-point conversion.

"Kind of uncommon for that many plays to be a game of inches," Bears coach Mike Nagy said.

Red-zone differential

The Packers were 1 of 1 in the red zone whereas the Bears were 1 of 3.

For the season, Green Bay ranks second on offense red-zone possessions with 31 touchdowns in 45 attempts for 68.9 percent. The Packers have held their opponents to 22 of 45, a 48.9-percent mark that ranks fifth in the league.

Penalty-yard differential

The Packers rank sixth in penalty yards differential at plus-231. Their opponents have 888 penalty yards and they have 657.

In the 14 games, the Packers are 9-4-1 against the opposition when it comes to penalty yards. Aside from Matthew Stafford's back injury, the Lions might well pinpoint the two illegal-use-of-hands penalties in the fourth quarter against defensive end Trey Flowers (the NFL acknowledged one penalty was called incorrectly) for the collapse of their season.

Green Bay's defense has been remarkably free of penalty, especially the secondary. Counting only accepted penalties, the Packers' defense has just two penalties for pass interference, three for holding and none for illegal contact. Three illegal-contact penalties have been offsetting.

Across the league, teams are bemoaning the loss of starters and key backups due to injury. The Packers, who had their fair share of injuries year after year, are living a charmed existence this season. They appeared to escape without significant injury again Sunday.

Stay healthy as opponents keep getting hurt. Win the turnover battle. Excel in the red zone. Let the other team commit more penalties.

That formula certainly could lead to the Packers' 14th championship.

Here is a rating of the Packers against the Bears. 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. Kenny Clark. 2. Chandon Sullivan. 3. David Bakhtiari.

Receiver Marquez Valdes-Scantling can't hold on to a long pass from Aaron Rodgers in the first quarter Sunday in the Packers' win over the Bears at Lambeau Field. (Benny Sieu / USA Today Sports)

Receivers (1 ½)

Last season, by my count, Davante Adams dropped three of 168 targeted throws. He dropped four Sunday, all in the second half, giving him nine in the last six games. There was a tough low catch on the sideline, a 15-yard dig route, a bubble screen and a 10-yard stop route. Since returning from a turf toe injury in Game 9 Adams hasn't been as willing to mix it up. Unless it's wide-open space he hasn't tried to punish defenders after the catch. At times, he has just slipped out of bounds when there's another yard or three available. Yes, he's still a better blocker than Marquez Valdes-Scantling, but there's little doubt that Geronimo Allison, Jake Kumerow and Allen Lazard have been much more physical in the run game. Adams, who played 55 of the possible 59 snaps on offense, made three receptions that only he can make in Green Bay. He froze nickel back Buster Skrine, gained immediate separation and snared a 29-yard touchdown pass. He took advantage of a slip by CB Kyle Fuller and turned an intermediate dig route into a gain of 34. He ran an exquisite sideline comeback against CB Prince Amukamara for 17. With Fuller isolated on the left outside, it was interesting that the Packers put Adams on the other side for 20 of the 23 plays in the first half when he was the widest receiver. In the second half, he had 12 snaps opposite Fuller compared to five on the other side. You can imagine that the coaches had talked all week to MVS (seven) about the opening play, a take-off to him with eight players blocking four off a play-action fake. Just keeping running and the ball will show up. It did, too, 52 yards downfield where MVS dropped it. Allison (32) had another drop, his fifth of the season. Kumerow (11), the forgotten man with one target in the last three games, made one of the team's best catches of the season on a Cover-2 beater along the sideline. The Packers traded FS Ha Ha Clinton-Dix for exactly the type of missed tackle he committed right in front of the Packers' bench. Fuller and LB Kevin Pierre-Louis were idling along figuring their half-hearted bumps would knock down Kumerow. They didn't. The 49-yard reception set up the clinching TD. Lazard (46) and Allison delivered crack-back blocks on Aaron Jones' 21-yard TD run. Until the Washington game, Jimmy Graham's position as No. 1 tight end was unchallenged. The snap counts here were 32 for Mercedes Lewis, 25 for Graham, 14 for Jace Sternberger and nine for Robert Tonyan. Graham's reduced role was evident in the second half when he had just eight snaps. He looked lead-footed on two intermediate-to-deep incompletions and on a pass in the flat for no gain. In empty sets, the Bears at times covered him with a linebacker, and his attempted wham block was feeble. Lewis went nose-to-nose with DE Akiem Hicks in the run game. It's starting to become clear that the coaches think Sternberger can give the offense a boost. On the final possession, they had Lewis and Sternberger on the field for the first two plays to block. Sternberger can run and was open on the sideline when Aaron Rodgers jammed the ball into double coverage to Adams. This was his fifth game, and Rodgers has thrown him the ball only once. With Tonyan coming off a bad blocking game and then making an adjustment on an extended route that appeared to displease Rodgers, the door is open for Sternberger down the stretch.

Offensive Line (3 ½)

The tackles, David Bakhtiari and Bryan Bulaga, held Khalil Mack without a pressure in his 52 snaps. Bulaga opposed him the majority of the time; there were instances in which the tackles had help from a running back or tight end. The only time that Mack beat Bulaga was on an inside charge that drew a holding penalty on a running play. Bakhtiari soundly outplayed Leonard Floyd, who settled for one pressure. After a slow, penalty-filled start to the season Bakhtiari has been solid as an oak in recent games. Akiem Hicks, returning from an elbow injury, used his fresh legs and pent-up emotions to manhandle Billy Turner a time or two. Bulaga had another “bad” run when he couldn’t cut off Hicks on the back side. Corey Linsley, Elgton Jenkins and Turner each allowed two pressures. Both of Linsley’s came against Hicks. The Bears are a difficult team for Linsley because of the massive size of their defensive linemen. Linsley wasn’t responsible for a single “bad” run. On several occasions, however, the gain was just 2 or 3 yards because NT Eddie Goldman and others would disengage from Linsley.

Quarterbacks (2)

Aaron Rodgers was as below-average as below-average can be. Many facets of the offense aren’t performing well. He’s the man with the ball, the man with deep experience in every situation imaginable. The Packers are winning games with him behind center, but that’s about it. If he truly accepted fault, one would have a hard time knowing it watching his actions and listening to his words. The Packers started their last four possessions at the 25, the 25, the Chicago 33 and the 49, and failed to gain a first down. He made a sharp adjustment at the line after spotting the coverage on fourth and 4 and threw a good ball to Davante Adams for the early TD. His well-thrown bomb to Marquez Valdes-Scantling and five other passes were dropped, but he had been the beneficiary of just 21 drops in the first 13 games. Stuff happens. In the second quarter, he made an awful throw to Jimmy Graham that went right to LB Nick Kwiatkoski, who dropped it. On the next series, Rodgers’ pass to Jimmy Graham was batted down by OLB Aaron Lynch. Remarkably, the last pass Rodgers had batted down was by Akiem Hicks in Game 14 last season. On the Packers’ final play of the half, Rodgers elected not to try a Hail Mary from the Bears 41 and instead threw 20 yards downfield even though the Packers had no way to stop the clock. In the fourth quarter, he didn’t make the proper adjustment on a third-and-5 pass that fell incomplete, then was saved a lost fumble by inches on a third-and-20 scramble on which he didn’t slide. At least this week his hard count didn’t cause his own team to jump. Almost every quarterback in the NFL is making do during this time of the season with a supporting cast reduced by injury. The Packers have all hands on deck and still have been outgained in five of the last six games and nine of 14 overall. If Rodgers doesn’t elevate his game appreciably, the Packers will have difficulty beating good teams on the road.

Running Backs (3 ½)

Aaron Jones (35) was limited to 13 touches, all running plays, partially because the quarterback is eager to throw the ball and makes corresponding adjustments at the line. Jones and the offensive line are the reasons why the Packers have been so effective in the red zone. From the 21, he cut downhill through left tackle, ran through the attempted tackle of Prince Amukamara and stiff-armed SS Eddie Jackson en route to the pylon. From the 2, he ran through CB Kevin Toliver and went in standing up. Jones broke four tackles against a stout defense. His pass protection, an improved area of his game in the last year and a half, went kaput in the second half. Buster Skrine, the nickel back, beat him for a knockdown. Jackson bull-rushed Jones for a flush. On a double-A gap blitz Nick Kwiatkoski charged over the top of Jones so fast that he was able to grab Aaron

Rodgers in one motion for an 11-yard sack. That knocked the Packers from field-goal range. In all three cases, Jones took the rusher on up high. It's the preferred method of pass protection, to be sure, but at times it behooves a lighter back like Jones to cut the rusher. Defenders hate being cut. After being cut they won't be blitzing as recklessly the next time. Both Jamaal Williams (24) and Jones were partially at fault on a pair of "bad" runs for not running to daylight. One play after his hesitant read, Williams put his head down and barreled for 6 on third and 1. On third- and fourth-and-1 situations, he has converted four of five this season. Later, on third and 3, he made an outstanding effort to convert by making Kwiatkoski miss and not being driven back by hulking Akiem Hicks. This has become a 100 percent zone run game. The last time a lineman pulled was Game 11. When Matt LaFleur tried a lead draw, FB Danny Vitale (five) got stuffed by Kwiatkoski and Williams' gain was 2.

Defensive Line (4 ½)

Kenny Clark has had many terrific games in his stellar four-year career, and this one ranks high on that list. On the first play, he powered inside LG James Daniels and tackled Tarik Cohen for minus-3. On the next run, he worked through a double-team block by RG Rashaad Coward and C Cody Whitehair to stop David Montgomery after a gain of 1. The Bears' three running backs averaged just 2.9 (23 carries for 67 yards) but it wasn't only because of Clark. Dean Lowry (34) and Tyler Lancaster (20) stayed square much of the time, too. Clark was too much for Coward, who replaced injured Kyle Long in Game 6. Of his five pressures, three came against Coward. If he wasn't jerking Coward and setting sail for Mitchell Trubisky, he was getting after Whitehair. All five of the pressures by the D-line came from Clark, who played 65 of the 84 possible snaps on defense. He led the team in "bad" runs forced with 2 ½. Lowry's fourth-quarter interception wasn't some fluke play. It was textbook. He played the passing lane, raising his arms at the right moment. With just four yards separating him from Trubisky, he used soft hands to cushion the impact before snatching the ball at ankle height. For the second week in a row, Lancaster not only held his ground but found the ball carrier. Because the Packers have been so injury-free at this position it's difficult getting a read on Montravius Adams (12) and Kingsley Keke (seven) because of such limited playing time. This week, Adams got the call before Keke. Adams had one nice up-field rush but also was pancaked by Coward one-on-one when Cohen ran for 8.

Linebackers (3 ½)

Bears coach Matt Nagy wasn't going to let Za'Darius Smith (77) undermine his offense. Of the 53 dropbacks with Za'Darius on the field, he was single-blocked 22 times, double-teamed 22 times, ran eight stunts and dropped once into coverage. Only once before this season (Carolina, 48.6 percent) has he been double-teamed more than 40 percent. Of Za'Darius' snap total, almost half (35) came from a standup position. On his feet he can spot draws and screens better; a three-point stance is more ideally suited for running twists and games. For some reason, the Bears appeared more concerned about him when he was walking around than in a three-point stance. Za'Darius' three-pressure day was highlighted by a knockdown of Mitchell Trubisky against Cody Whitehair that turned into Dean Lowry's interception. Preston Smith (72) registered three flushes in the second half. Operating against backup RT Cornelius Lucas, the lanky six-year veteran on his fourth team, it was surprising not to see him post a sack with so many one-on-one's. Rashan Gary (18) did turn the corner against Lucas for a sack in 3.8 seconds. Kyler Fackrell (42) settled for one pressure. With the game on the line, what coaching staffs really think of players becomes evident. When the Bears ran 10 plays from 4:16 to the 1:42 mark of the fourth quarter, the Packers were in a four-man front with three outside

linebackers and Kenny Clark. Despite the fatigue associated with all that rushing, the coaches kept the Smiths and Fackrell on the field without substituting Gary, the rested rookie. Montravius Adams (two) and Lowry (one) gave Clark a breather. The coaches obviously thought an exhausted Fackrell was better than a fresh Gary. When the Bears got the ball back for the final six plays, Gary never saw the field, either. Mike Pettine rushed five on 14.8 percent of passes but never six all day. Blake Martinez (81) certainly isn't as good as injured Bears ILBs Roquan Smith and Danny Trevathan, and based on Sunday you could build a case that backups Nick Kwiatkoski and Kevin Pierre-Louis are more active and effective, too. Martinez was slow to the sideline against the quick game. He also showed minimal instinct, range and coverage radius in the middle of the field. The Packers thought so little of the Bears' ability to play power football that they made B.J. Goodson inactive for the first time. He isn't as fast as Oren Burks (three) and doesn't contribute nearly as much on special teams.

Packers cornerback Jaire Alexander celebrates after knocking down a pass intended for Bears receiver Allen Robinson during the fourth quarter Sunday. (Jeff Hanisch / USA Today Sports)

Defensive Backs (3)

Improving Chandon Sullivan played a season-high 56 snaps. In the biggest play (and last) of the game, it was Sullivan's hustle, awareness and toughness that saved the day. When the ball was lateraled to Mitchell Trubisky. Preston Smith was loafing. Tyler Fackrell tried to bring down Trubisky, as did Kenny Clark and Smith. They all missed. Trubisky flipped it to TE Jesper Horsted, who came across the field with WR Allen Robinson to his right waiting for another pitch with little but the pylon in front of him. Horsted never made that pitch because Sullivan chased him down and made a strong tackle. His fumble was recovered by Tramon Williams (63) at the 2 with time expired, but the hero was Sullivan. Earlier, he had played with a rugged flair in the box. He got so physical on the sideline that an official might have saved him a penalty by ending his trash-talking spasm at Tarik Cohen. Sullivan also stayed with Anthony Miller for about 8 seconds before pushing him out of bounds to deny his reception at the 1. After this performance it should be clear why he is playing and Josh Jackson isn't. Sullivan is a solid football player. Darnell Savage (84) and Sullivan each dropped an interception, and Adrian Amos (84) would have had another if he were looking at the ball instead of just the receiver. Trubisky threw for 348 yards, gashing the middle of the field on a consistent basis in the second half. He tried to exploit both Blake Martinez and nickel LB Ibraheim Campbell (38) in the flats. Campbell isn't flashy but he knows what he's doing. The Bears were one of the few foes that went after Jaire Alexander (84). For the most part, he held up, allowing five completions in 12 attempts for 44 yards. He was a little too passive a few times against Robinson. Alexander intercepted one Hail Mary on a rebound and almost had another. He missed a tackle on Trubisky on a scramble but also blew up two bubble screens. The Bears tried to exploit Kevin King (84) across the field but a long route to Miller was overthrown. When King peeked in the backfield, Robinson beat him on a double move for 34.

Kickers (4)

Given the 11-degree weather, JK Scott was OK with seven-punt averages of 35.7 yards (gross), 33.0 (net) and 4.47 seconds of hang time. He parked two inside the 20 and two out of bounds left, and coaxed two fair catches from jitter-bugging Tarik Cohen. His counterpart, Pat O'Donnell, posted a net of 35.8 in four punts. Mason Crosby made his three extra points effortlessly. His counterpart, Eddy Pineiro, was perfect too on all his kicks. In those conditions, Crosby's four-kickoff averages of 65 and 3.94 represented a job well done.

Special Teams (4 ½)

Hunter Bradley generally snapped well on punts but failed to send perfect laces on the three placements. Not to worry because the holder, JK Scott, beautifully spun the laces to proper position despite frigid conditions. Tyler Ervin was back at it, returning a punt 12 yards with SS Deon Bush right in his face and kickoffs for 45 and 26. When Jake Kumerow and Oren Burks made solid blocks, Ervin caught TE Jesper Horsted and CB Kevin Toliver napping outside and turned the corner for the Packers' longest return of the season. So far, he has been a valuable acquisition. The coverage against the great Cordarrelle Patterson was superb. The knockback tackle by Josh Jackson after an 18-yard return of the opening kickoff with merely 3.74 hang time was a sensational way to start. Good gun work by Will Redmond and Jackson kept the lid on punt returner Tarik Cohen. When Ervin suffered a minor hand injury, Tramon Williams replaced him. He ran up without signaling for a fair catch and muffed it but was saved a lost fumble by what appeared to be an officiating error. Darnell Savage nearly blocked a punt charging inside of TE J.P. Holtz whereas Patterson almost blocked one working inside of Jamaal Williams.