

Rating The Packers : Week 16 at Vikings

By Bob McGinn Dec 25, 2019

The heavy hitters that carried the Packers all season long did it again Monday night in their 23-10 throttling of the Vikings at U.S. Bank Stadium.

Any judgment regarding the team's most valuable player will have to wait until after the regular-season finale in Detroit and the playoffs. With few games in the NFL, a player's stock can rise or fall every time he takes the field.

It's certainly not premature, however, to point out the Packers who have been the most outstanding regardless of position.

In alphabetical order, the most impressive six might be David Bakhtiari, Bryan Bulaga, Kenny Clark, Mason Crosby, Aaron Jones and Za'Darius Smith.

Each excelled once again in Minnesota as the onrushing Packers (12-3) clinched the NFC North Division championship and moved within a victory of claiming one of the top two berths and a first-round bye in the NFC playoffs.

On defense, the Packers rushed the passer as well away from Lambeau Field as they have in several years with five sacks and 13 additional pressures. Smith bordered on being Reggie White-like in his dominance. The Vikings, with their offensive line intact and ranked seventh in sack percentage, simply were overwhelmed upfront for the entire 60 minutes.

"Seemed like he (Smith) was unblockable," Packers coach Matt LaFleur said. "Can't say enough about him, not only as a player but as a leader and just how he totally embraces the team concept."

Clark had been the one shining star of consistency in the Packers' three defeats in downtown Minneapolis since the \$1.1 billion edifice opened in 2016. He was terrific again with 5 ½ pressures.

The Packers missed 15 tackles in a 23-10 defeat at U.S. Bank two seasons ago, then 13 more a year ago in a 24-17 setback. This time, incredibly, not a single tackle was missed.

"We were locked in," Packers defensive back Tramon Williams said. "We were able to put together one of the performances we were looking for all year long."

Jones rushed 23 times for 154 yards, a career-high and the same total that Minnesota's Dalvin Cook (in 20 carries) gained in the Packers' 21-16 triumph Sept. 15 at Lambeau Field. Neither Cook nor his capable

backup, rookie Alexander Mattison, were in uniform due to injury, and partially, as a result, the Vikings' 10th-ranked offense managed merely seven first downs, one-third of their average.

"(Jones) has been so valuable out of the backfield, as a receiver and in pass protection," LaFleur said. "He's done a great job all season."

Other than one garbage sack, elite defensive ends Danielle Hunter and Everson Griffen were held to a combined 1 ½ pressures largely because Bulaga and Bakhtiari were in peak form.

Counting playoffs, Crosby had made 645 of 656 extra-point attempts in his 13-year career. He picked a good time – midway in the fourth quarter – for his first miss of the season, leaving him with a career mark of 98.2 percent. Before that, he kicked three field goals, improving to 19 of 20 for the season.

While the other four playoff teams in the NFC and the two contenders in the NFC East have been dealing with substantial injury lists, the Packers have demonstrated steady improvement due in part to a highly favorable injury situation that allows all 53 players to practice and be available to play each week. The Lions (3-11-1), their next opponent, are expected to be without eight starters and nine useful situational substitutes.

"We can check that (divisional title) off the list," receiver Davante Adams said. "But this team has much bigger goals it wants to accomplish. We want to win the Super Bowl."

At this point, the Packers shouldn't hesitate to discuss winning the franchise's 14th championship. They're primed and extremely dangerous regardless of whom they play in January.

Here is a rating of the Packers against the Vikings. Five footballs are the maximum, one-half football is the minimum. As a team, the Packers received 4 ½ footballs.

The three stars of the game were: 1. Za'Darius Smith. 2. Kenny Clark. 3. Kevin King.

Receivers (2 ½)

Two years ago in Minneapolis, Xavier Rhodes traveled with Davante Adams from side to side and won the decision. Last season at U.S. Bank, Adams devoured Rhodes early before the Vikings switched to zone. In the first meeting this season, Adams easily ran away from Rhodes when they matched against one another. In this meeting, coach Mike Zimmer kept the slowing Rhodes on the right outside; when Adams was wide to a side, he had 34 snaps over Rhodes compared to 13 over Trae Waynes and others on the left side. As he did in mid-September, Zimmer made extensive use of a two-safety shell, presumably to protect Rhodes. It worked, too. Adams, who played 62 of the possible 77 snaps on offense, gained 116 yards but needed 13 catches and 16 targets to do it. His long, 18 yards, was the Packers' longest completion. Six of Adams' catches were at or behind the line. Rhodes and his teammates outside kept their distance. Adams always is ready for the ball. He has a good feel for hitches and run-pass options. Although the pass at the front pylon was slightly behind him, it's a catch he must make. His fumble came after he got off schedule double-catching the ball. Thus, he wasn't quite prepared to withstand SS Harrison Smith's strike at the ball, which led to a Vikings' recovery.

Allen Lazard (58), the other starter, seems to have gained the trust of Aaron Rodgers. On third and 2, 4 and 6 yards, Lazard won one-on-one matchups to make catches for 6, 10 and 8 yards. He will be charged with a drop 19 yards downfield but that ball was slightly behind him, too. As blockers, Lazard, Geronimo Allison (33) and Jake Kumerow (28) were nasty good. Lazard handled Rhodes at the point of attack on Aaron Jones' 12-yard TD, cut Rhodes downfield once and impeded LB Anthony Barr on a blitz. On that TD, Allison got a piece of three defenders: DE Everson Griffen, nickel back Mackensie Alexander and LB Eric Wilson. Also, he alertly recovered a fumble by Jimmy Graham and caught a fastball for a two-point conversion. Kumerow resembled a 260-pound tight end pancaking FS Anthony Harris from a wing position on one run. Maybe that rubbed off on spindly Marquez Valdes-Scantling (11), who along with Adams is the least physical wideout. MVS took care of the aggressive Rhodes on Jones' 56-yard TD, then raised eyebrows by plowing straight into Waynes without hesitation on a 6-yard hitch. The coaches often had Graham (41) throwing a shoulder into one of the defensive ends before setting forth on his route. Given Graham's marginal threat as a receiver, they must have thought the trade-off made sense. Graham didn't endear himself to the staff by fumbling on his only target. Mercedes Lewis (41) has been adequate as a run-game blocker. With Jace Sternberger a healthy scratch, Robert Tonyan (23) and not Graham was used moving across the formation to block the back-side end. He had a pretty good day blocking for the run but also got beat by DE Ifeadi Odenigbo for a sack.

Offensive Line (4 ½)

Danielle Hunter, who is tied for third with 14 ½ sacks and was voted to another Pro Bowl, added one sack Sunday but that was because Aaron Rodgers held the ball for 6.3 seconds on a bootleg. Hunter beat Jimmy Graham for a sack in Game 2 but, once again, was outplayed by Bryan Bulaga. His only pressure against Bulaga came late on a flush up the field. Bulaga exuded patience. Hunter's pass-rush repertoire increases each year but Bulaga was able to turn it all aside. Probably his worst moments came against backup Stephen Weatherly on inside penetration in the run game. On the other side, Bakhtiari wasn't charged with a pressure or "bad" run after allowing 2 ½ pressures to Griffen in September. Bakhtiari has had a big December after a so-so first 10 weeks. Griffen tried spins, bull rush and speed. When Bakhtiari's dialed in he can be extremely difficult to beat. On a 7-yard run, Bakhtiari spotted MLB Eric Kendricks starting to run through the line for an attempted tackle in the backfield. He made a quick adjustment, peeled back and blotted him out beautifully. Although Alex Light missed practice Thursday because of illness, it was noteworthy that he was inactive for the first time since the opener and veteran Jared Veldheer was on the 46 as the No. 3 tackle. Rookie Elgton Jenkins, in his U.S. Bank debut, handled the noise well. In fact, all five did. For the third straight game, no lineman had a false start. Jenkins allowed one hurry and no "bad" runs, Corey Linsley gave up one-half pressure and 1 ½ "bad" runs and Billy Turner yielded 2 ½ pressures and one "bad" run.

Quarterbacks (2 ½)

Given the extraordinary play of the defense, this didn't need to be such a close game. The Packers protected very well, and their 184 yards on the ground represented a season-high. Aaron Rodgers' pedestrian performance held the offense back. It was another game in which his old razor-sharp accuracy was missing. Take the three passes that were dropped. In each case, what should have been routine completions were thrown slightly behind Davante Adams, Allen Lazard and Aaron Jones. Danny Vitale inserted into the line as a blocker and had MLB Eric Kendricks beat for a 24-yard touchdown, but the throw lacked touch and went over his head. Rodgers overthrew Lazard for a 20-yard gain near the end of the half and later underthrew him deep. He fired over the head of Geronimo Allison on an out cut from the slot. Anthony Harris fooled Rodgers

in the second quarter and wasn't one of the defenders who dropped an interception in his hands. Other than three kneels, he didn't break away and run all night. After his interception set up the Vikings' TD, Rodgers extended left on third and 5 at the Minnesota 15 in the following series. Even though Allison never looked open in the end zone Rodgers risked a throw into traffic and was fortunate the ball was deflected and not picked off. Rodgers was at his best flipping 10 of his 26 completions at or behind the line against soft corners. His longest catch-point was just 17 yards downfield; only five of the 26 had catch-points of six yards or longer. Rodgers showed his poise dealing with the cauldron of noise. His vast experience shows. Despite several all-day pockets stemming from play-action fakes, he kept holding the ball or meandering toward the sideline. In a flashback to October 2017 on the same side of the field, he misjudged Anthony Barr's closing speed and was fortunate to dump the ball. Barr broke Rodgers' collarbone two years ago in almost the same situation and was accelerating toward another smashing hit before pulling off. Mike Zimmer was able to blunt Rodgers and the passing game, but he couldn't contain the Packers in any other phase.

Running Backs (4)

The night began badly, very badly, for Aaron Jones (52). On the third play, he also misjudged Anthony Barr's rare speed (4.46 in 2014) as the linebacker backed out of a Double-A gap bluff and began pursuit of Jones toward the boundary. With traffic coming, Jones made the mistake of switching hands with the ball. When he did so, Barr slammed into him from the side and the fumble was recovered by Eric Kendricks. Jones might have saved a touchdown by jumping to his feet and stopping Kendricks at the 10 after a 24-yard return. Later, Jones was tagged for a drop in the flat although it wasn't an accurate throw. After that, Jones was money. Plant and go, plant and go, plant and go. See color, go elsewhere. Always go hard, always go fast. It'd be great if Jones were more patient at times but that isn't him. Every game Jones makes extra yardage running backward amid contact. That's hard to do. His 25 touches for 160 yards included some punishing hits. In the second half, his TD runs of 12 and 56 yards determined the outcome. When Kendricks, who along with Danielle Hunter probably are the Vikings' defensive MVPs in 2019, went out with a thigh injury late in the second quarter, career special-teamer Kentrell Brothers replaced him. When Brothers and Anthony Harris took bad angles, Jones made them pay with an exhilarating burst to the sideline for 56. Jones had to play much more than usual because Jamaal Williams (21) departed with a shoulder injury midway through the third quarter after absorbing a shot from Brothers. The ability of Jones and Williams to crash through a stout front for sizeable gains on first down in the first half foreshadowed the collapse of a whipped defense in the second half. Just three weeks after being claimed off Jacksonville's waivers Tyler Ervin (seven) debuted on offense. He swooped off the edge in jet motion, gaining 6 on one push pass. The guy has ability.

Defensive Line (4 ½)

Every opponent must have a plan to deal with Kenny Clark (played 50 of the 54 possible snaps on defense). It's just one of many reasons why the Vikings drafted North Carolina State C Garrett Bradbury with the 18th pick in April. A starter since Day 1, he has been smart, steady and effective. In the first meeting, Clark wasn't dominating. The undersized Bradbury (6-3, 305) held his own. Dalvin Cook gained 154 yards, averaging 7.7. This time, it was all Clark. Bradbury bench-pressed a position-best 34 times at the combine but his arms measured just 31 ¾ inches. He wasn't able to keep Clark away from him, and when Clark got an edge he didn't have the horsepower to hold him off. The result was 5 ½ pressures for Clark, including four against Bradbury. The mauling got out of control in the fourth quarter. Out of frustration, Bradbury (Wonderlic score of 35) illegally hit Clark from the blind side. They'll be playing against each other twice a season for a long

time. Once purely a power rusher, Clark now has an arsenal of moves. Dean Lowry (31) and Tyler Lancaster (22) held the point well against aggressive guards Pat Elflein and Josh Kline. Lowry batted a pass, knocked Elflein deep into the backfield and into RB Mike Boone on a carry for minus-2 and played through RT Brian O'Neill to foul up a third-and-3 jet sweep. The defensive coaches weren't messing around with playing time. Montravius Adams (one) took the field in the second quarter on first and 10. Kline and O'Neill immediately double-teamed him into roadkill and the running play gained 4. Out Adams went, never to play against, and in came Lancaster, who rarely ends up in a heap as Adams did. Rookie Kingsley Keke didn't play at all.

Linebackers (5)

Last week, Za'Darius Smith (47) encountered more double-teaming (50 percent) on individual rushes from the Bears than he had all season. He had three pressures. The Vikings, who double-teamed him 39.3 percent in Game 2, ended up at just 22.2 percent and paid an awful toll. Smith, with 3 ½ sacks and eight pressures in all, dominated the game as few rushers from Green Bay have since Reggie White. Part of the problem for Minnesota was not being able to tell until it was too late where he would line up. He was wide left and wide right in the 3-4, put his hand down at tackle six times on four-man fronts and walked around over one of the guards 10 times. All five O-linemen were nicked for a pressure by Za'Darius: LT Riley Reiff (two), LG Pat Elflein (2 ½), C Garrett Bradbury (two), RG Josh Kline (one) and RT Brian O'Neill (one-half). He was swatting and spinning, menacing and marauding. He'd make contact, knock off the blocker's punch and proceed to Kirk Cousins in a hurry. In the run game, he beat Reiff inside for minus-2 and drove back Kline for another minus-2. When Mike Boone was setting sail into a big hole and probable 10-to-15 yard gain, Za'Darius came off Reiff and yanked him down after a demoralizing gain of only 4. Coordinator Mike Pettine blitzed just twice all day; amazingly, he sent just one defensive back. When the Packers rushed four on early downs, Preston Smith (53) always drops just as Za'Darius always rushes as the fourth man. Thus, Preston has fewer opportunities to get after the passer. He settled for one pressure, Kyler Fackrell (22) had two and Rashan Gary (15) posted 1 ½. For possibly the first time, the coaches used Gary in the sub rush before Fackrell. Gary's athletic gifts, strength and fresh legs added to the overall fierceness of the rush. He showed growing awareness, too, by diagnosing a screen to TE Kyle Rudolph that had to be tossed into the dirt. When Fackrell wiggled around Reiff, the tackle's holding penalty wiped out a 53-yard TD pass to Bisi Johnson. Eight of Fackrell's snaps came as a passing-down rover, a role in which he makes a living smelling out screens. On the inside, Blake Martinez (54) did his job and B.J. Goodson (12) played in the 3-4 rather than Oren Burks (none).

Secondary (4 ½)

The defense missed 10 tackles in the September meeting, including four by the defensive backs. This time, they didn't miss any. Kevin King (54) stood out, maintaining leverage and making solo tackles of Adam Thielen on a third-and-3 sweep for 2 and on TE Irv Smith on a hitch for 1. Matched most often against Thielen, King defended two home-run balls and helped shut him out. His interception could hardly have been more impressive. The Vikings and 49ers had completed long TD passes against the Packers partially because Jaire Alexander, the back-side corner, didn't sink into the play fast enough when his half of the field was vacant. Kirk Cousins probably assumed King wouldn't react properly when Stefon Diggs went deep. Only this time King looked for work and was back there to make the interception, one he returned 39 yards. That was the longest by a Packer in the regular season since Damarious Randall went 44 against Detroit in Game 3 of 2016. Alexander (54) traveled with Diggs and didn't give up much. On Diggs' 21-yard TD, he froze Alexander in the bump zone, released outside and took advantage of a perfect pass in the end zone. Alexander was

close enough to turn toward Diggs, elevate and contest the catch. He never turned. In the slot, Tramon Williams (30) didn't bite on a fourth-and-4 double move by Thielen, nearly picked a third-and-5 pass to Laquon Treadwell and knocked off the much larger Smith on a third-and-3 slant. The rush was so fearsome and the big bodies so staunch at the point that safeties Adrian Amos (54) and Darnell Savage (54), dime back Chandon Sullivan (26) and nickel LB Ibraheim Campbell (15) weren't challenged to cover or tackle. Savage and Sullivan were saved embarrassment with their pratfall on the long TD that was called back.

Kickers (4)

JK Scott's first punt was an end-over-ender that hung 4.07 seconds and was fair caught at the 9. Kicking away after that, his hangs were 4.81, 4.84, 4.85 and 5.05. In all, his best performance in weeks included averages of 46.8 yards (gross), 42.2 (net) and 4.72. He placed two of the five inside the 12 and had four fair catches. Mason Crosby made field goals of 42, 33 and 19 yards. He also missed wide right on an extra point. His five kickoffs, all touchbacks, averaged 71.8 and 4.14.

Special Teams (3)

It was an uneventful night in the kicking game. With P Britton Colquitt in top form (47.1, 43.9), Tyler Ervin made four fair catches and averaged 6.5 in four returns. He ran a long way to field a punt near the boundary only to muff the ball at the 10 before hopping on it. Mike Hughes' lone punt return went for 23 on a play in which Ibraheim Campbell and Chandon Sullivan both were penalized. Marquez Valdes-Scantling chased downfield so fast on his first punt-cover assignment in weeks that the Vikings chose to double-team him, not Josh Jackson, on the next one. Hunter Bradley snapped at least two of the four placements with perfect laces. Oren Burks and Ty Summers shared the snap lead with 21.