

Rating The Packers : Week 17 at Lions

By Bob McGinn Dec 31, 2019

Just as most prognosticators were wrong about the Packers entering the season, the majority might be wrong about them again as they enter the postseason.

As exhilarating as the Packers' 6 ½-game climb from last season in the NFL standings was, a one-and-done postseason might be equally traumatic.

Their season concluded Sunday at Ford Field in Detroit with an awful performance against a weak opponent rendered even worse by injury. Yet, for the 13th time in 16 games, the Packers emerged with the victory.

Are the Packers, as coach Matt LaFleur likes to say, a team that has learned to do what it takes to win? Or is that 13-3 record the result of good fortune as much as it was talent and skill?

Only the Ravens (14-2) finished with a better record than the Packers. Green Bay was 7-1 at home and 6-2 on the road; the 6-0 mark in the division was their first since 2011.

Despite their record, the Packers finished with a modest point differential of plus-63, which ranked ninth in the NFL.

Since the 16-game schedule was instituted in 1978, Green Bay previously had won at least 13 games four times. The point differential for those four squads – plus-246 in 1996, plus-201 in 2011, plus-144 in 2007 and plus-140 in 1997 – suggest greater overall strength than the current team.

The Packers won the Super Bowl in 1996, lost in the Super Bowl in 1997, were eliminated in the NFC Championship Game in 2007 and fell in the divisional round in 2011.

Other leading indicators of a team's strength would be yards, points and the performance level of the quarterback.

When the final rankings for yards gained and yards allowed were considered for the 12 playoff teams, the Packers' combined total of 36 (18th on offense, 18th on defense) ranked 11th ahead of only the Texans (41).

When the final rankings for points scored and points allowed were considered for the 12 playoff teams, the Packers' combined total of 24 (15th on offense, ninth on defense) ranked eighth ahead of the Bills (25), the Eagles (27), the Seahawks (31) and the Texans (33).

Aaron Rodgers' final passer rating of 95.4 ranks ninth among the 12 starting quarterbacks. He's ahead of Philadelphia's Carson Wentz (13th, 93.1), New England's Tom Brady (19th, 88.0) and Buffalo's Josh Allen (24th, 85.3).

Probably the most meaningful statistic is and always has been turnover differential, and in this category, the Packers excel. Their plus-12 finish, which tied for third in the NFL, also is tied for third in the playoff field behind the Patriots (plus-21) and the Saints (plus-15). The Seahawks were plus-12 as well.

When the Packers and Lions closed the 2018 season at Lambeau Field (Detroit won, 31-0), Green Bay opened without 11 starters due to injury before losing Rodgers and David Bakhtiari after halftime. Detroit was missing eight starters.

On Sunday, the Lions were minus nine starters and seven useful reserves due to injury. On the other hand, the Packers were missing one starter and five useful reserves.

In the game, each team lost four players due to injury.

Based on the respective records and injury lists, the Packers should have had the game wrapped up by halftime. Despite a substantial presence by Packers fans, the Packers had to play a patently pathetic first half to allow a team quarterbacked by third-stringer David Blough to lead, 17-3.

The Packers' comeback victory was more inevitable than heroic. The Lions, a 12-point underdog, seemed powerless to sustain their remarkable start for three-plus hours and lost, 23-20, on Mason Crosby's field goal as time expired.

How the Packers clinched the No. 2 seeding in the NFC playoffs will soon be forgotten. What will long be remembered is the mark they make attempting to bring a 14th NFL championship to Green Bay.

Here is a rating of the Packers against the Lions. Five footballs are the maximum, one-half football is the minimum. As a team, the Packers received 3 footballs.

The three stars of the game were: 1. Aaron Jones. 2. Lucas Patrick. 3. Blake Martinez.

Receivers (3)

Jimmy Graham (played 48 of the possible 88 snaps on offense) has caught the ball fairly well this season. His three drops, however, have come at inopportune times. In Games 4 and 6, he dropped short passes in the end zone. On Sunday, Matt LaFleur's opening play was a 22-yard vertical route to Graham between the hash marks. It appeared as if Graham lost focus expecting to get hit. His awful drop sent the Packers to their seventh three-and-out on the first possession. On the next series, Graham didn't help the cause getting rocked back by SS Miles Killebrew on a failed third and 1. At this point in their careers, Graham and Marcedes Lewis (32) are better suited in the passing game leaking out of max protections. Graham had one for 21 yards, Lewis another for 11. With his size, Graham should be punishing defensive backs with the ball in his hand. Instead, he just glided out of bounds twice. Minus Danny Vitale (knee), LaFleur put Jace Sternberger at fullback on four of his 12 snaps. Sternberger isn't a lead blocker. Why the Packers haven't tried to use his speed and skills as a receiver is unclear. Robert Tonyan (16) also played. The matchup of Davante Adams (78) against Pro Bowl CB Darius Slay wasn't must-see because Slay was in and out of the lineup (he played 70 percent of snaps) limping on what looked like a bad ankle. Adams beat Slay on a 33-yard fade off an outside release. He was behind Slay for what would have been a 28-yard TD but dropped the pass. Adams did score from the 20 on third and 10 with a patient, silky-smooth post-corner route against a double-team from CB Amani Oruwariye and SS Will Harris. Three plays before the tying TD, the Packers faced fourth and 1. Aligned in the left slot, Adams separated easily from Slay on a 3-yard out. Both Adams and Jake Kumerow (17) were penalized for offensive-pass interference. Allen Lazard (67), the clear No. 2, played well again. With Slay in close coverage, Lazard secured a pass off his face mask on an over route for 18. Having studied Adams, Lazard is similarly working his feet against press coverage. It's helped him release more freely. His biggest play came on third and 10 when he spun Slay with a deke to the corner before overpowering him to the post for a 28-yard score. Geronimo Allison (54) didn't inspire much confidence by being loose with the ball again. His fumble on a strip by CB Justin Coleman went out of bounds. Marquez Valdes-Scantling (20) made the start but just can't seem to get on the same page as the quarterback. Aaron Rodgers scolded MVS for a fourth-quarter route that LaFleur said he flattened when Rodgers expected him to go deeper.

Offensive Line (3 ½)

After 15 games, the Packers found out what it was like to be down two starters upfront. In truth, it wasn't bad at all. This was the first time since Games 8-9 that Corey Linsley had been on the injury report with a back injury. He walked to the locker room after 20 snaps and didn't return because of the back. Lucas Patrick (68), who hadn't played more than six snaps in a game since Oct. 6, took over one day after it had been announced that he had signed a contract extension. Linsley had problems with Damon "Snacks" Harrison, particularly on a failed third and 1. When fresh, Harrison is a load, and he was plugging up the A gaps. As fresh as they come, Patrick carried the fight to the gargantuan nose tackle. Partly because of Patrick's physical play, the Packers did a superb job establishing the first-down run when little else was working. He passed off stunts neatly, not allowing a pressure. He didn't yield a "bad" run, either, although he was saved by Aaron Jones' fast feet for an 11-yard run after Harrison slipped his block and got in the backfield. Later, Patrick pancaked Harrison. His shotgun snaps were money, too. Bryan Bulaga suffered a concussion on his 53rd snap and veteran Jared Veldheer (35) got the call over Alex Light, who was inactive. It was a safe first test for Veldheer because rush LB Devon Kennard was out by then with a hamstring injury, and all the Lions had left to rush on that side was rookie Austin Bryant. Veldheer was knocked back on his haunches by Bryant on one charge but regained his balance and won the down. As effective as Veldheer was in pass protection

he was somewhat soft in the run game. DT John Atkins crushed him at the point of attack on a “bad” run. DE Trey Flowers, the Lions’ only legitimate rusher, spent most of the game over the guards and beat Elgton Jenkins for three pressures and Billy Turner for two. It was a long afternoon for Jenkins, who yielded five pressures in all. Turner gave up three. David Bakhtiari has been in a groove for about a month. With his athleticism and current level of focus, it’ll take a good player to beat him. Other than a false-start penalty, the first by an offensive lineman since Game 12, Bulaga was playing well.

Quarterbacks (2)

Pass protection? One sack, three knockdowns. Porous pass defense? The Lions finished 32nd. Weather conditions? Climate-controlled. No wonder Matt LaFleur wanted to attack downfield. Like everyone else, LaFleur probably expected a turkey shoot. With receivers in sufficient numbers running free Aaron Rodgers should have a field day. Instead, he completed 49.1 percent in a sobering performance. Of his 28 incompletions, two were dropped, one was thrown away and five didn’t fall into an easy category. Of the other 20, almost all involving open targets, 12 were overthrown, two were underthrown, two were wild, two were thrown behind receivers, one was low and one hung a receiver out to dry. Five of the 20 were to targets in the end zone. He was missing what for a player of his caliber should be routine throws. Aaron Jones was the unlucky open receiver five times whereas Marquez Valdes-Scantling and Allen Lazard each had three. Rodgers seems to have reverted to his form of a few years ago when he was throwing more with his arm than his legs. He’s also falling away from throws even with the rush several yards away. From 2008 to ’14, Rodgers ranked 10th, ninth, sixth, second, third, five and ninth in completion percentage. From 2015 to ’19, he finished 26th, ninth, seventh, 26th and 21st this year at 62 percent, the second-lowest mark of his career. His age (36) shouldn’t be a factor, and I don’t believe it is. He appears healthy, his arm is live and he doesn’t seem to lack stamina. The team has dropped 32 passes, two more than last season but nine fewer than in 2017. He has a fine offensive line, a top-10 threat on the perimeter in Adams and an ideal one-two punch in the backfield, both as receivers and rushers. His apologists might point to a perceived lack of trust in the receiving corps, but that doesn’t hold much water. Great quarterbacks always have made do with what they have, lifting rather than chastising those around them. He has worked portions of at least two seasons with the eight top wideouts and tight ends. And LaFleur has been coaching him since April. All these inaccurate throws might have doomed the Packers against a legitimate opponent. As game as the Lions were, they had such a dreadful lineup that Rodgers kept getting chance after chance to come around. He did so for some of the second half, making a handful of on-target throws to assist the comeback. He continues overseeing a steady game, handling the shifts, motions and checks in seemingly proper order. His ballhandling and fakes are outstanding. The best that can be said for Rodgers this season is the team is 13-3 and he has played 1,082 of 1,103 snaps (98.1 percent).

Running Backs (4 ½)

Aaron Jones gained 143 yards in 27 touches to finish eighth in yards from scrimmage with 1,558. With improved quarterback play Sunday, he was in position to add in the neighborhood of 100 receiving yards. Unlike recent opponents, Lions coach Matt Patricia didn’t allocate a defensive back to cover Jones. LB Jalen Reeves-Maybin, who ran a 4.70 40 in 2017, often was matched on Jones. Matt LaFleur split Jones wide seven times and wanted the ball going to him out of the backfield on swing passes. Jones either was uncovered or beat the coverage, but the ball wasn’t thrown where he could catch it. His best moment came with 44 seconds left on a 31-yard screen pass that set up the decisive score. He gave the harassed Aaron Rodgers a

clean target, caught the ball in traffic, stiff-armed dime LB Miles Killebrew, outran SS Tavon Wilson and skipped away from FS Tracy Walker. Without Jamaal Williams (shoulder), Jones' snap count of 75 was seven more than his career-high. On fourth and 1, Reeves-Maybin beat Mercedes Lewis inside and hit Jones behind the line, but due to his second effort, he reached the sticks. He broke six tackles in all and, with one exception, picked up the blitz effectively half a dozen times. Seeking more pizzazz on the perimeter, LaFleur used Tyler Ervin as a split receiver on 10 of his 17 snaps and kept running him off late jet-sweep action. Ervin looked good on a run for 10, beat Reeves-Maybin on a sharp slant-and-go that would have been a 33-yard TD if not overthrown and seemed quite comfortable and aware as a check-down receiver. Rookie Dexter Williams (four) had played from scrimmage in just one game. He gained 4 on a toss before stringing moves together on a carry for 5.

Defensive Line (1 ½)

Despite being down two starters (LG Joe Dahl, RT Ricky Wagner), the Lions more than made do with journeyman Oday Aboushi for Dahl and Tyrell Crosby for Wagner. They pounded Green Bay's front for 171 yards on the ground, the Lions' third-highest total of the season, and a season-best 6.8 average. Relatively immobile David Blough, who subbed for Matthew Stafford and Jeff Driskel, was sacked just once. Dean Lowry (played 44 of the possible 60 defensive snaps) had a brutal first half. On the first play, he got too high against a double-team and the result was a 10-yard carry through his gap. The Lions also ran at him for carries of 15, eight and 14 yards. Lowry and the entire unit was better in the second half, but that was infinitely easier after WR Kenny Golladay's concussion in the second quarter made the Lions one-dimensional. Kenny Clark (54) failed to generate a single pressure against Frank Ragnow, a good second-year center. It appeared as if Ragnow patiently waited for Clark to charge and then just pushed him where he was going. Clark did beat Ragnow twice for "bad" runs. Mike Pettine continued to trust Tyler Lancaster (24) as his third big man over Kingsley Keke (four) and Montravius Adams (one). In on the goal-line defense, Adams got buried by LT Taylor Decker and Kerryon Johnson powered through for the TD.

Linebackers (3 ½)

Preston Smith (41) didn't play nearly as well in the final quarter of the season as he had in the first three quarters. Working primarily one-on-one against backup RT Tyrell Crosby, his best moment as a rusher was a batted ball on a naked bootleg. He didn't have a pressure. Preston has had some inopportune off-sides penalties. This time he jumped on third and 7, enabling Matt Prater to attempt (and make) a field goal from 56 rather than 61. Za'Darius Smith (54) burnished his tremendous résumé by registering 5 ½ pressures and playing a part in two "bad" runs. Pettine used Za'Darius 10 times as a walk-around linebacker in front of Blake Martinez as part of a 4-2 look. On one, he was too quick for C Frank Ragnow and recorded a tackle for a loss. On another, he guessed wrong and missed the tackle in the backfield on a 20-yard run. Offenses have difficulty targeting Za'Darius from a two-point stance; however, he's also prone to charging out of control and making himself susceptible to runs straight at him. When David Blough hit the longest pass of the game (42 yards), one reason he had all day (3.7 seconds) to deliver the ball was the fact the Smiths were on the sideline for breathers. Kyler Fackrell (37) and Rashon Gary (13) have played the same backup roles all season because the position has been injury-free. Fackrell posted 1 ½ pressures. Pleased with the team's four- and sometimes five-man pass rush, Mike Pettine had rushed more than five only one time in the last eight games. With the callow Blough under center, Pettine sent Martinez (60) on a pair of six-man pressures. Martinez rushed four times in all. RB Bo Scarbrough stoned him on the first. On their second hookup, Martinez kept

moving after a heavy collision and notched the sack. He also beat Ragnow on an A-gap blitz for a hurry. The Packers had been getting beat all season in the middle of the field. In the fourth quarter, Martinez made Blough pay for a poor decision/throw by intercepting the pass in his hands almost 30 yards downfield and bringing it back 22. As usual, Martinez got covered up on the Lions' long runs up the middle. B.J. Goodson departed after three plays with a neck injury.

Secondary (2 ½)

The Packers might not have been able to catch up if Kenny Golladay (concussion) had played more than 23 snaps. He had two catches for 30 yards (one against Kevin King) to set up the first TD and a 42-yard bomb to set up the second. The Lions already were missing Marvin Jones, big-play threat Marvin Hall and Jermaine Kearse. It's hard to judge this unit post-Golladay because the outside wide receivers were nobodies Chris Lacy and Travis Fulgham. When they needed a breather CB Jamal Agnew came over for 10 snaps. Without Golladay, the Lions' best player, the Packers could squat on routes and attack bubble screens. Matt LaFleur said Jaire Alexander (59) made a smart play tackling Lacy for a 30-yard pass-interference penalty when he was hopelessly beat for what might have been a 75-yard TD. Alexander also was hit with an unnecessary-roughness foul for body-smashing Danny Amendola, a no-no in today's game. King (58) broke up two passes early before dime back Chandon Sullivan (22) defended three in the last five minutes. Safety Darnell Savage's tackling has become an issue. He missed rookie Ty Johnson twice in the open field, giving him 39 extra yards. He's undersized, so it's even more important for him to exercise sound tackling technique. Savage (60) can be overly aggressive, leaving his feet prematurely when his job is to just get the guy down. Tramon Williams (45) and Adrian Amos (60) swooped in to foil bubble screens. Williams dropped an interception that struck his face mask. If Mike Pettine keeps playing Ibraheim Campbell (18) alongside Blake Martinez in some nickel packages, offenses in the playoffs will try to exploit his lack of size in the run game. Minnesota's Stefon Diggs overthrew quarterback Kirk Cousins last week. On Sunday, Amendola threw a strike to Blough for a "gotcha" TD.

Kickers (4)

In his first 12 appearances at Ford Field, Mason Crosby missed eight field goals (43, 50, 38, 41, 41, 42, 38, 56) and two extra points, including four and one in 2018. That's a lot of misfires in a dome. He was two of three (32g, 51wl, 40g) Sunday before he lined up for a 33-yard attempt from the right hash with 3 seconds left to decide the outcome. The snap was high but JK Scott's hold was money, and Crosby's boot slipped just inside the left upright. It was his second game-winning kick as time expired this season against the Lions, who never trailed the Packers but still were swept. On kickoffs, Crosby is having one of his finest seasons. He extended his streak of touchbacks to 12 with five more, averaging 69.8 yards and 4.09 seconds of hang time. Scott punted five times for averages of 44.2 (gross), 38.0 (net) and 4.56 hang time. After a fast start he finished 28th in gross (44.0) and 24th in net (39.9).

Special Teams (3)

Jace Sternberger picked up an illegal-block penalty on a kickoff even though the aggrieved party, LB Jason Cabinda, made the tackle, anyway. It was the Packers' first penalty on a kickoff return since Game 9. If the Packers need to block a field goal in the playoffs they probably won't have an answer. Their rush has been so tepid that generally they just play it safe. Tyler Ervin continues to make smart choices; he must spawn confidence among the coaches. On kickoffs and punts, he picks a spot, accelerates to it and gets what's there. Hunter Bradley had a rough day with two low punts snaps, the one high placement snap and a minority of perfect-laces snaps. Rookie Ka'dar Hollman replaced injured punt gunner Will Redmond (hamstring) as Josh Jackson's partner. The snap leaders were Oren Burks, Ty Summers and Jackson, each with 22.