

Rating The Packers : Playoffs Week 1 vs Seahawks

By Bob McGinn Jan, 14,2020

What happened Sunday night at Lambeau Field would have little or no historical meaning to 89 percent of the players and 69 percent of the coaches.

They weren't there five years ago at CenturyLink Field when the Packers played the Seahawks in the NFC Championship Game.

On the other hand, it's safe to say that devoted fans of both teams, especially of the Packers, have not and maybe never will forget the Seahawks' 28-22 victory in overtime.

Since their agonizing defeat against the Broncos in the 32nd Super Bowl, the Packers have had their share of excruciating playoff ousters. Based on anecdotal evidence, none cut as deeply as Jan. 18, 2015, in Seattle.

As the Seahawks battled back Sunday from a pair of 18-point deficits, Packers fans held their collective breath. They remembered how their team squandered a 16-0 advantage late in the third quarter and then a 19-7 lead with 3 minutes, 52 seconds remaining and the Seahawks starting from their 31.

The way Russell Wilson was playing, nothing was safe. The Packers had to win this game; Wilson and the Seahawks gave them nothing.

There's no way to compare all the crazy, red-letter plays in that game to what took place this time. What can be compared is how Matt LaFleur's first team in Green Bay and Mike McCarthy's ninth team handled the last five minutes of the games.

Five years ago, the bottom line is the Packers had the ball twice in the final seven minutes with a chance to run the clock down or out. The first time, James Starks carried twice for 6 yards and a sideline pass to Andrew Quarless was broken up. The second time, Eddie Lacy rushed three times from pistol formation and had a net of minus-4. Each time, Tim Masthay punted poorly.

Contrast that to Sunday night when the Packers ran off the final 2:32 by converting a pair of third-and-long situations with clutch pass plays.

The Packers' defense also fell completely apart that day in Seattle, allowing touchdown drives of 69, 50 and 87 yards in the Seahawks' last three possessions. On Sunday, they made the Seahawks pay for Malik Turner's dropped pass with 4 ½ minutes remaining by sacking Wilson two plays later on third and 5. Seattle punted, and never got the ball back.

“We’ve had a lot of those moments where we’ve needed a play at a certain time,” Aaron Rodgers said. “We needed a stop on defense, Preston (Smith) came up with a sack. We needed a couple of big third downs, we made it happen.”

Revenge couldn’t have been more satisfying for Packers fans. The Seahawks flew back to the Pacific Northwest having concluded their 12-6 season whereas the Packers (14-3) began preparations for the San Francisco 49ers (14-3) at Levi’s Stadium in Santa Clara, Calif.

Since the 49ers routed the Packers, 37-8, on Nov. 24, they’ve welcomed four players back from injury while losing a pair of starters. Playing against the Packers this time will be left tackle Joe Staley, running back Matt Breida, designated pass rusher Dee Ford and strong-side linebacker Kwon Alexander. The Packers no longer have to contend with center Weston Richburg (knee) and nose tackle D.J. Jones (ankle), both of whom suffered season-ending injuries in Game 13.

The Packers had all 22 preferred starters for the first meeting and should have them all Sunday as well. San Francisco is favored by 7 ½ points.

“We know it’ll be different,” Niners coach Kyle Shanahan said Monday. “That game got away from them early. That’s definitely not the team we’re going to see this week.

“Everyone knows how good Green Bay is, how good their coaching staff is, how good their players are, how good their quarterback is. I don’t think they’ve lost a game since then. I think that game holds zero relevance to what’s going to happen this Sunday.”

Aside from the vast disparity in offensive efficiency in the first meeting, there also was a noticeable difference in how much harder and more physical the 49ers’ defense performed under coordinator Robert Saleh than the Packers’ defense did under Mike Pettine.

Middle linebacker Fred Warner, free safety Jimmie Ward and several defensive linemen demonstrated a level of intensity and violent play seen infrequently by a Pettine-coached defense in Green Bay.

Quarterback Jimmy Garoppolo can be skittish and will force the ball into coverage; he falls short in any comparison with Wilson. However, the 49ers’ three running backs are better than any the Seahawks played with Sunday, they have four legitimate pass rushers compared to one for the Seahawks, they have a much healthier offensive line and their tight end, George Kittle, could be the best in the NFL.

The play-callers in San Francisco, Shanahan on offense and Saleh on defense, also would rate the nod over the Seahawks’ combination of Brian Schottenheimer and Ken Norton.

On Saturday, the 49ers manhandled the Vikings, 27-10, in Santa Clara. Even with Dalvin Cook in the lineup, the Vikings rushed for 21 yards and managed just seven first downs.

“We kind of ran into a buzz saw a little bit, I think,” Vikings coach Mike Zimmer said Monday. “We didn’t look as fresh as we did the week before. Obviously, I’m not making any excuses. They’re a good football team. They played really, really well. They got after us pretty good.”

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

The three stars of the game were: 1. Davante Adams. 2. Za’Darius Smith. 3. Aaron Rodgers.

Receivers (4 ½)

The Packers don’t have a plethora of weapons. They need their best wide receiver, Davante Adams, and their best tight end, Jimmy Graham, to be at the top of their games. They were Sunday, a comforting feeling for the coaches heading to the West Coast. Adams, who played 59 of the possible 64 snaps on offense, had his way with a defense ranked 27th in passing yards allowed. On days like this, it’s possible to say he runs routes as well as any receiver in the NFL. By shifting his body weight just enough, Adams spun CB Tre Flowers almost out of the picture on something of an over-corner route that ruptured into 40 yards and the winning touchdown. He fooled nickel back Ugo Amadi and Flowers for a 20-yard TD on a fake rub route just past the line. With irrepressible Russell Wilson just a third-and-8 stop away from one final chance, Adams released cleanly past Amadi on a takeoff for 32. Sixty-five of his 160 yards came after the catch; he also drew an 18-yard interference penalty on CB Shaquill Griffin. Adams looked like a burner accelerating past people on shallow crossers. Ding him if you like for a drop on the push pass. Graham, third at the position in playing time with just 24 snaps, turned in one of his best games as a Packer. On third and 8, he beat SS Bradley McDougald across the middle for 13. On third and 6, he went deep between ILBs K.J. Wright and Bobby Wagner for 27. They didn’t respect their former teammate as a threat anymore, and he made them pay. On third and 9 with 2:00 left, SS Lano Hill gave Graham too much cushion underneath. A thigh-high pass like that fired from out of the pack has been dropped many times before, but although Graham stumbled he held on to convert the first down by the slimmest of margins. On the outside, it was all Allen Lazard before he suffered a game-ending ankle injury on his 20th snap. It was interesting that Jake Kumerow’s role expanded (30 snaps) whereas that of Geronimo Allison (20) and Marquez Valdes-Scantling (five) didn’t. Each was the recipient of just one target. Kumerow dropped a six-yard speed out but generally blocked well, including crackbacks on SLB Cody Barton and Wagner for consecutive runs that gained 21 yards. He even neutralized DE Jadeveon Clowney on a 1-yard TD run. Allison made a tough catch of a low ball for 11 on third and 10 with Flowers draped on his back. He did drop a pass in the end zone on a play brought back by penalty. Matt LaFleur was in the mood to play tight ends more than wide receivers. Mercedes Lewis (42) was partially at fault on three of the nine “bad” runs. Of Jace Sternberger’s season-high total of 28 snaps, nine came as an information fullback replacing injured Danny Vitale (illness). Sternberger showed good speed to the edge leading on toss plays but didn’t get much done once he got there. The first reception of his career (a 2-yard flat) was noteworthy for how he confronted Clowney after having his helmet yanked partially off. For a second, the veteran appeared stunned the rookie hothead was getting into his face. When Sternberger wouldn’t back down David Bakhtiari intervened to avoid a penalty. Later, Sternberger appeared to glare at Clowney after upending him on a low wham block. Robert Tonyan (21) also played.

Offensive Line (4)

RT Jared Veldheer didn't discover he was starting until warm-ups. Bryan Bulaga took ill on the weekend, dressed and started to warm up. He was active but didn't play. Veldheer played well, giving up one "bad" run and no pressures. Even at 32, Veldheer doesn't show stiffness. He slides his feet, works his hands and stays in front of his man. At this point, he's less effective in the run game. Veldheer didn't move defenders, but only the one time did he appear to miss his man cleanly. The Packers naturally ran more to the left behind David Bakhtiari, who continued his last-season surge with another "no-no" (no pressures, no "bad" runs). He blocked Jadeveon Clowney one-on-one and with a little help. Clowney beat him badly to the inside on the 27-yard pass to Jimmy Graham but the ball was out. With brittle Ziggy Ansah (neck) sidelined, the Seahawks had as inadequate a group of rushers as the Packers have seen all season. Rasheem Green, Shaquem Griffin and 291-pound Quinton Jefferson tried their hand rushing off the edge. Seattle had much more competitive personnel inside. Corey Linsley was solid but guards Elgton Jenkins and Billy Turner weren't. Jenkins continued to react late at times, giving up an early knockdown. He also was charged with two hurries and drew an illegal-block penalty. Turner's play has started to slip the longer the season goes. Four of his five pressures involved tackle-end stunts in which he didn't get off the double-team with Veldheer fast enough. He's ducking his head, turning guys loose and not sustaining well in the run game. Assuming Bulaga returns, the Packers can count on the 49ers running twists to test Turner.

Quarterbacks (4 ½)

It's hard for any quarterback on the same field as Russell Wilson to stand out. In his inimitable style, Wilson willed his underdog squad to the brink of an upset with remarkable spirals, scrambles and derring-do. Aaron Rodgers, however, accepted the challenge and turned in his best performance since Dec. 1 vs. the Giants. After so many overthrows and misfires this season, it was almost a surprise to see him be so accurate. The 20-yard TD pass to Davante Adams was one he has air-mailed all season. It was perfect this time on third and 7 and so the Packers led, 7-0, instead of 3-0. He only needed to attempt 27 passes, but in most cases his balls were well-placed. On fire on third down, he completed 7 of 8 for 121 yards. From an offensive standpoint, third down was where the game was won. Rodgers seems to thrive in the cold, and it was 23 degrees with 8 mph wind for the 5:40 p.m. kickoff. His powers of concentration become even more acute, if that's possible. He was an all-business, grim competitor Sunday. His 14-yard scramble was welcomed by an offense needing him to run. He used the hard count incessantly, and after five games of no luck drew two Seahawks offsides. That gives him seven for the season, less than half the number of times his teammates have jumped. The last time two opponents jumped came against the Patriots last season in Game 8. He even brought out the quarterback sneak for a conversion on third and 1. Ranked 30th in sack percentage, the Seahawks had Rodgers down just four times. The play-action game was there because Seattle was primed to stop the run, and his fakes were exceptional as always. Because Rodgers held the ball several times he was charged with 2 ½ pressures. That won't cut it against San Francisco. He threw the ball away five times, his high since Game 2. Despite a quiet day on the ground, Packers running back Aaron Jones still scored two touchdowns against the Seahawks in Sunday's NFC Divisional playoff game at Lambeau Field. (Benny Sieu / USA Today Sports)

Running Backs (4)

It wouldn't be surprising in the least if Tyler Ervin takes on a larger role than his seven snaps Sunday. Matt LaFleur showed a double sidecar set in shotgun with Aaron Jones (54) and Ervin flanking Aaron Rodgers. Against a four-man rush, the combination of those backs working coordinated check-down or wheel routes would place pressure on linebacker-safety coverage. Ervin gained 7 on a jet sweep and 18 on a jet-sweep toss. He's quick, decisive and elusive. Whereas Ervin broke two tackles in his two touches, Jones broke four in 22. During the week Pete Carroll praised Jones for making the difference in the offensive resurgence under LaFleur. His game plan was to stop Jones and make the previously inaccurate Rodgers beat him. Jones ran an outside zone to the left on his first carry for 23 but couldn't get anything going after that, finishing 21 for 62 (2.95). The Seahawks pounded Jones physically, and the Packers were fortunate that he made it through OK. Jamaal Williams would have taken some of the load off Jones were it not for the lingering shoulder issue that limited him to a mere nine snaps. Even with a two-way go, Williams couldn't get past SS Bradley McDougald in the right flat and the Packers had to punt. Jones did score twice, once on a lethal jump cut and another with second effort. His blitz pickup was gritty, too.

Defensive Line (3 ½)

The Seahawks had a phenomenal run game with Chris Carson and Rashaad Penny in the backfield, Will Dissly at tight end, Justin Britt at center and Mike Lupati at left guard. With Lupati (neck) out and the other four on injured reserve, the threat in January was minimal. Marshawn Lynch looks over the hill but he's still better than his three-game totals (30 carries, 67 yards) would suggest. The same thing that happened Sunday night took place against the Eagles in the wild-card round. C Joey Hunt, a sixth-round draft choice in 2016, might be scrappy but he has remarkably short arms (30 inches) and stands just 6-1 ½. On the second series, Kenny Clark handled Hunt on second and 2 and third and 1. Hunt's shortcomings became magnified when Jamarco Jones, the replacement for Lupati, appeared to take a slap on the helmet from Clark on his 19th snap and left with a head injury. In came rookie Phil Haynes, who not only hadn't taken a snap in the regular season but in exhibition games, too. Other than two rough-housing TD runs, Lynch kept running into the posteriors of his linemen as they were shoved into the backfield. Questionable with ongoing back issues, Clark played 55 of the possible 64 snaps on defense. As usual, he was effective with 2 ½ pressures and 1 ½ "bad" runs. Dean Lowry (43) stayed square and wasn't budging. Tyler Lancaster (26), who was hit by illness at mid-week, played despite being questionable but wasn't himself. He got washed out on Lynch's longest run of 8 yards and was blasted out of the gap through which Lynch surged for his first of two 1-yard TDs. Weakened or not, Lancaster was deemed a better run-stop option by the coaches than Montravius Adams (13) or Kingsley Keke (three). When Lancaster was shaken up and out for three plays, RT Germain Ifedi buckled and displaced Adams at the point and Lynch pounded through the chasm for 4 yards to the 1.

Linebackers (4 ½)

No team tried to stop Za'Darius Smith (57) as much as the Seahawks. On his 31 individual rushes (he also stunted seven times), he encountered some form of double-team blocking 19 times. That 61.3-percent rate was well above his previous high of 50 percent by the Bears in Game 14. It didn't much matter. Za'Darius finished with 6 ½ pressures, including two sacks that easily could have been four if not for Russell Wilson bobbing and ducking under bodies. LT Duane Brown returned from knee surgery three weeks ago to play all 64 snaps. Za'Darius beat the distinguished 12-year veteran for one sack but was an equal opportunity rusher. He walked around behind the line 13 times, including eight on early downs as a rover. He crawled on his belly after one sack, then drew even further attention to himself by lifting his jersey to reveal an undershirt with "snubbed" written on it. That likely will warrant a fine from the league. As much effort as Za'Darius gives going for sacks, it's interesting that he often loafes in long pursuit. While Za'Darius rarely drops into coverage, Preston Smith (48) averages about 10 a game. It reduces his reps rushing, but on the other hand, Za'Darius' presence means primarily single blocks for him. This was Preston's best game in weeks. He finished with 5 ½ pressures, including the decisive late sack when RT Germain Ifedi waited too long to help TE Jacob Hollister. Neither Kyler Fackrell (34) nor Rashan Gary (10) was a factor. Blake Martinez (64) had a field day largely because Seattle's inferior interior left him unblocked a lot. As a result, he popped Marshawn Lynch hard several times. Martinez played cat and mouse with C Joey Hunt, ramming head-long into him on occasion or slipping past him on others. One of the issues on Wilson's long run of 22 yards was Martinez's decision to run into the left A gap giving the quarterback the right A gap to escape. Oren Burks played more snaps (nine) alongside Martinez than he has since Oct. 20. As usual, Burks looks better than he plays. Finding himself one-on-one with Wilson, Burks took a fake and never laid a glove on him as he motored past for 11. B.J. Goodson (12) was the choice when Mike Pettine smelled run.

Defensive Backs (2 ½)

With Russell Wilson under supreme control despite bodies clawing at him, the players in coverage needed to plaster their man. Tyler Lockett gouged the unit for 136 yards in nine catches (10 targets) by finding openings largely on extended plays. Wilson threw for 277 yards. With a 21-3 halftime lead, the Packers played a lot of zone, and by the fourth quarter, they were hanging on for dear life. Jaire Alexander (64) has had better days. Lockett shook him off in the right corner and the result was a 7-yard TD. Alexander did OK in his one-on-one matchups with high-flying rookie DK Metcalf. On one inside route, Alexander panicked and grabbed Metcalf for a holding penalty. Alexander lost a forced fumble on the Seahawks' first play because of an officiating technicality. With no wideout to his side on the two-point try, Alexander seemed to clear his decision to blitz with Adrian Amos (64) and smashed the unsuspecting Wilson. It was just his second rush of the season. On the other side, Kevin King (62) had a chance to intercept Wilson's worst throw of the night but for some reason jumped and dropped the ball. It was his team-high third drop of the season but first since Game 5. After two opening three and outs, the Seahawks got moving when King guessed wrong on a route and was burned deep by Lockett for 28. Perhaps King's best moment came on a hard low tackle of Lynch in the box. Nickel back Tramon Williams (41) and dime back Chandon Sullivan (23) were fine. The unit's only missed tackle was by Williams. The question on rookie Darnell Savage is whether he can control his tempo and play the call against top-drawer passing attacks. Ibraheim Campbell (10) also played as a nickel linebacker.

Kickers (2 ½)

Many variables affect punters. Be that as it may, the opposing punter has posted a better net average than JK Scott in the last seven games, and 10 of the last 11. This was the latest with Scott's four punts averaging 43.3 (gross) and 40.8 (net) compared to 53.7 and 45.0 for Michael Dickson. Scott's hang time averaged 4.21 seconds. His first punt, coming from his end zone, was fantastic (55 yards, 4.81, fair catch). His three other efforts were not what the doctor ordered. Mason Crosby made all four extra points, including the first one in which the ball might still have been moving. His five kickoffs averaged 60.6 and 3.72.

Special Teams (3)

Hunter Bradley's first conversion snap was wobbly and somewhat off-line. JK Scott bobbled the ball, recovered and made a lightning-fast spin to adjust the laces properly for a successful boot. Bradley has been a tad shaky in the second half of the season. The coverage was fast, aggressive and sharp. Of the six solid hits, Oren Burks delivered three. The punt gunners were Will Redmond and Marquez Valdes-Scantling, who replaced Josh Jackson (illness). Tyler Ervin broke two tackles on his lone punt return of 6 yards.