

Rating The Packers : Playoffs Week 2 at San Francisco

By Bob McGinn Jan. 21, 2020

Dom Capers lasted five more seasons after the 2012 NFC Divisional playoff debacle, but it could be argued that his nine-year tenure as the Packers' defensive coordinator was never the same after that night at Candlestick Park.

Now the question becomes, can Mike Pettine ever get past what happened to him Sunday night in the NFC Championship Game at Levi's Stadium?

The 49ers made Capers look foolish by scoring 45 points and gaining 579 yards, but at least what 49ers coach Jim Harbaugh and offensive coordinator Greg Roman did was considered innovative. No quarterback had ever run for 181 yards in a playoff game before Colin Kaepernick bamboozled Capers with the zone read.

San Francisco's Kyle Shanahan runs a sophisticated offense with deceptive motioning and elaborate disguise. What destroyed the Packers was the Football 101 part of it that featured 82.4 percent running plays and a second-string running back that gained more yards (220) than all but two opposing players in the history of Packers football, regular season included.

Raheem Mostert, a speedy (4.32 in 40-yard dash) fifth-year man from Purdue working for his seventh team, replaced injured starter Tevin Coleman (dislocated shoulder) early in the second quarter and was unstoppable.

"That's the first rule of football: stop the run," cornerback Tramon Williams said. "And we weren't able to do that."

Pettine had praised his coaches and players in recent weeks for tightening up communication and assignment errors that saw the Packers frequently gouged on the ground during the first nine games of the season. Not having to face Minnesota's Dalvin Cook and Seattle's 1-2 punch of Chris Carson and Rashaad Penny down the stretch naturally made the job easier, but the Packers had grown accustomed to an overwhelmingly positive injury differential and all-around good fortune throughout the season.

What took place in the 49ers' 37-8 victory on the same field Nov. 24 basically took place again on Sunday. Not only did Pettine's defense fail schematically but it also came up far short in the intangible areas of intensity and desire when compared to Shanahan's offense. The same might be said for the Packers' offense and special teams.

"The guys played as aggressive as any team I've been on," Shanahan said. "They made it very easy to call plays."

According to author and statistical authority Eric Goska, the 49ers' eight pass attempts were the fewest against the Packers since November 1977 when backup Bob Lee also threw eight times in the Vikings' 13-6 victory at Lambeau Field.

The Packers' best chance going in seemed to be intercepting some of the careless passes that Jimmy Garoppolo put up almost every week. Shanahan appeared to recognize that when, on third and 8 from the Green Bay 36 in a scoreless game, he called Mostert's number on a draw play with trap blocking. It appeared to reflect Shanahan's modest confidence in Garoppolo and his belief that his defense could throttle the Packers.

"We would have been happy with a field goal," Shanahan said. "For him to take it to the house was a lot better than anticipated."

Mostert's 36-yard touchdown was the first of 11 rushes that gained 9 yards or more. The play broke because the Packers were fooled, out of position and tackled poorly.

Pettine and his defensive staff were largely responsible because their players appeared to be unprepared and poorly coached. Matt LaFleur's position coaches on defense include Jerry Montgomery (defensive line), Mike Smith (outside linebackers), Kirk Olivadotti (inside linebackers) and Jason Simmons (defensive backs).

Pettine used three defensive linemen on 43 of the 49ers' 55 gradable snaps. Other than a couple of plays, however, it wasn't until the midway mark of the fourth quarter that the coordinator sold out with a six-man front that included three 300-pounders and three outside linebackers.

The Packers could have done that much earlier. Given how the run defense was performing, what harm would it have done? But for 3 ½ quarters, Pettine remained steadfast trying to prevent Garoppolo and tight end George Kittle from beating him rather than Mostert and the 49ers' run-blocking unit.

San Francisco's 11 rushes for 9 yards or more came against six different fronts and personnel combinations. Three for 51 yards came against a 4-2 with Za'Darius Smith walking behind the line as a rover, three for 44 yards came against a 3-4 with B.J. Goodson at inside linebacker, two for 29 came against a 4-2 with Ibraheim Campbell at inside linebacker, one for 36 came against a 4-1, one for 34 came against a 3-4 with Campbell at inside linebacker and one for 11 came against a six-man front.

By subjective judgment, three of the 11 were aimed at Za'Darius Smith, three at Preston Smith, 2 ½ at Kyler Fackrell, two at Dean Lowry and one-half at Montravius Adams.

In the end, the Packers, in all three phases, didn't look like they belonged. Maybe they didn't. Their 14-4 season included a point differential of a mere plus-51; the 49ers were plus-203 in their 15-3 season. "You felt like it was something special because it just didn't make sense," Aaron Rodgers said. "We weren't picked by most people to win our division, and we found a way to not only do that but win a home playoff game and get to this spot. Just felt like it was meant to be."

There are a few secrets in NFL coaching circles. It wasn't a coincidence that Pettine was out of a job in 2016 and '17. No one wanted him.

Losing is one thing. Failing even to compete, both physically and schematically, is another.

Here is a rating of the Packers in their 37-20 loss to the 49ers. Five footballs are the maximum, one-half football is the minimum. As a team, the Packers received one-half football.

The three stars of the game were: 1. Aaron Jones. 2. Allen Lazard. 3. Bryan Bulaga.

Receivers (3)

Allen Lazard played 58 of the 63 possible snaps on offense one week after being knocked out midway through the Seattle game with an ankle injury. This was an impressive ending to the free agent's impressive season. Each of his three receptions was for first downs, and two came in the first half when 49ers coordinator Robert Saleh was still contesting every pass. Lazard worked behind MLB Fred Warner on an over route off bootleg action for 13 yards, ran an in-breaking route for 19 and a slant against nickel back K'Waun Williams for 4 on fourth and 2. You've also got to like how Lazard cut CB Richard Sherman off his feet on a bubble screen to Davante Adams for 14 and sacrificed himself to get in front of DE Nick Bosa on a 1-yard TD run. He also might have saved a touchdown return of 39 yards by tackling Emmanuel Moseley after 8. Adams (61) ran harder than usual and caught nine of 11 targets. Eight of his nine receptions came in the loosely played second half. Sherman moved to the right side a couple of times to cover Adams. For the most part, it was Moseley on Adams, and that was a matchup the Packers needed to dominate and didn't. The Packers didn't go near Sherman until the fourth quarter when Adams released inside and beat him on a 65-yard bomb. Nobody for the Packers dropped a pass. Geronimo Allison (34) and Jake Kumerow (19) didn't seem to be in Aaron Rodgers' game plan. Marquez Valdes-Scantling received one snap. The mishmash at tight end included Jimmy Graham (27), Robert Tonyan (18), Marcedes Lewis (14) and Jace Sternberger, whose 11 snaps included three at fullback for injured Danny Vitale (knee). Graham came out of a three-point stance to haul in a 42-yard seam route that the Packers have been looking for him to execute for two years. It was splendid. Sternberger showed alertness and sudden change of direction, breaking off an end-line route against Warner for a 9-yard TD.

Offensive Line (3 ½)

Robert Saleh rushed four players on 38 of 45 rushes, an 84.4 percent rate that was up from 71.4 percent in the first meeting. The pressure was sufficient for Saleh, whose unit spent the second half playing soft coverage just to get the game over. Still, this unit deserved some plaudits for not being overrun. The five linemen yielded just 4 ½ pressures compared to 14 ½ on Nov. 24. It should be noted, however, that 7 ½ of that total was charged to RT Alex Light after he replaced Bryan Bulaga due to injury. Three of the four pressures happened to be sacks, and two were charged to Billy Turner. He handled twists much better than against the Seahawks but once again had a few awful plays. Turner's two fumble recoveries were vital. Nick Bosa was credited with the first sack but the blame fell on Elgton Jenkins, not David Bakhtiari. Hard-charging DeForest Buckner slashed past Jenkins up the field and flushed Aaron Rodgers, who spun left and into Bosa. Bakhtiari went one-on-one with the rampaging rookie most of the game and lived to tell about it. Bosa barged around badgering Rodgers. Sometimes the ball was out, saving Bakhtiari. Other times, he got his anchor down and kept Bosa at bay. The run blocking was solid. Of the two "bad" runs, one went to Bakhtiari

for missing Bosa and the other went to Jenkins for not sustaining against DT Solomon Thomas. Other than a false-start penalty, Bulaga took the measure of DE Dee Ford. Buckner, DE Arik Armstead, NT Sheldon Day and Thomas kept flying out of their stances at the inside triangle that also included Corey Linsley. It was quite a show, a show that this unit could feel relatively good about entering the off-season.

Quarterbacks (½)

Matt LaFleur cited run defense and three giveaways as most instrumental in the defeat. Uncharacteristically, Aaron Rodgers was the culprit on all three. His bad night would have been even worse if Billy Turner hadn't recovered his two other fumbles. On the first fumble, Rodgers never saw K'Waun Williams racing at him to his right on the only six-man blitz that Robert Saleh sent all night. It's an inexcusable mistake, one a quarterback of Rodgers' stature simply cannot make. It also was reminiscent of overtime in the 2009 NFC wild-card game at Arizona when little Michael Adams blitzed off the right slot and caused Rodgers to fumble the game away. One series later, Rodgers fumbled away the center exchange with Corey Linsley. Incredibly, it was just the sixth time in his career as a starter that Rodgers fumbled on a center exchange. Three were with center Jason Spitz, one apiece in the first three games of 2008. The others, both with Linsley, came in Game 2 of 2014 and Game 12 of 2016. On the exchange in '14, Linsley was shifting left to block Jets NT Damon Harrison just as on Sunday he was shifting left to block DT DeForest Buckner. We'll probably never know for sure what happened. Generally, however, it's the quarterback's responsibility to ride the center in the direction that he's headed. In both the Jets game and Sunday, it appeared Rodgers pulled straight back. His third fumble came on a sack by Buckner. In the November game, Rodgers lost one fumble on a sack and was belted loose from the football on two other sacks but was ruled down by contact. This marked only the third time in Rodgers' 192 starts that he was charged with three fumbles. The others were at Minnesota in September 2016 and at Arizona in December 2015. His first of two interceptions occurred as the Packers came out of their end with 1:08 left in the second quarter. In another uncharacteristic mistake, he threw to a spot rather than to a man but the ball was behind Geronimo Allison and picked by Emmanuel Moseley. The second one was a 66-yard rainbow shot in the final 2 minutes that Richard Sherman tracked down. With ball security coached with more emphasis and turnovers becoming harder to come by each season, three giveaways trump almost everything else about a quarterback's performance. Mistakes by Rodgers effectively ruined the Packers' first five possessions. On third and 3, he locked in on Jamaal Williams when Jimmy Graham was open on a Y stick. On third and 7, he held the ball for 4.5 seconds before taking a 13-yard sack when Aaron Jones and Jake Kumerow were open and the middle was there for him to extend the play. On third and 6, he was oblivious to the onrushing Williams and the ball was jarred from his grasp. On second and 5 at the Niners 25, the snafu on the center exchange occurred. On second and 15, he threw the 50-50 ball that was picked. In the second half, Saleh played it safe knowing the Packers couldn't stop his team's ground game and that Green Bay wouldn't have enough possessions to overcome a 27-0 deficit. Besides taking the short stuff underneath, Rodgers delivered tremendous long balls for gains of 65 and 42. He beat the rush to the right and drilled Jace Sternberger in the end zone. For Rodgers, who ran just once for a legitimate gain in the last four games, this was his first TD pass from out of the pocket since Dec. 1. Rodgers left Santa Clara knowing he had fallen to 0-3 in the postseason against the 49ers, his boyhood team that he hoped would select him atop the 2005 draft, and with the understanding that the 49ers would be going to their second Super Bowl compared to one for the Packers in his 15-year career.

Running Backs (3 ½)

Unlike Kyle Shanahan, who trusted his running backs and blockers to win the game, Matt LaFleur wouldn't go that far. Aaron Jones (41) certainly was the Packers' most valuable player on offense this season. His offensive line was consistently effective, too, and the coaches often praised the blocking of several wide receivers and TE Marcedes Lewis. Jones finished with 17 touches for 83 yards, including 12 carries for 56 yards on the ground. He received 13 carries in the Game 11 meeting. Would the outcome have been different if Jones had been the center of the attack? Probably not. But given how many mistakes Aaron Rodgers was making it stands to reason it would have been a more competitive game. Jones was Jones, bursting into lanes and tacklers with resolve and resourcefulness. On the three occasions LaFleur gave Jones at least two carries in a row he made WLB Dre Greenlaw miss twice in a row and the gains were 11 and 7 yards. He split wide six times as a receiver, the same number as eight weeks earlier. Jones made a nice catch of a low ball and showed guts staying square and picking up SS Jaquiski Tartt on a second-quarter blitz that resulted in a 23-yard completion to Jake Kumerow. Jamaal Williams (20) and Tyler Ervin (11) backed up. Williams had no chance against Greenlaw on the early flat pass on third and 3.

Defensive Line (½)

If the 49ers had a weakness on offense it figured to be center. Weston Richburg, a six-year starter for the Giants and the 49ers (since 2018), went on injured reserve after 13 games. His replacement, 31-year-old Ben Garland, spent most of his career as a backup guard for Atlanta. Kenny Clark had a chance to dominate Garland, who at 6 foot 5 was expected to have a leverage problem. That didn't happen. Clark started fast, blowing up Garland to grab Tevin Coleman's legs on a failed third and 1. Early in the second quarter, Clark displaced Garland on a carry for no gain. Clark also wheeled around Garland and struck Jimmy Garoppolo on his post-operative left knee for his only pressure, drawing a 15-yard penalty. Other than that, Clark was just OK, and the Packers needed much more than that from one of their difference-makers. Clark played 50 of the 55 possible snaps on defense compared to 49 for Dean Lowry, 35 for Tyler Lancaster, 11 for Kingsley Keke and six for Montravius Adams. The 49ers seemed to run where Clark wasn't. The others offered little assistance. On too many occasions the 49ers were able to combo block off a lineman to reach the second level and take out a linebacker. Other times, a lineman was sealed or moved out of a gap by a one-on-one block. The 49ers were rolling off the line in unison and the Packers struggled to keep up. They were on the defensive, catching blocks instead of playing across the line. Keke closed with one of his better showings, recording the unit's only tackle for loss after shedding RT Mike McGlinchey. Even after three seasons the coaches still can't trust Adams to hold the point.

Linebackers (½)

The Smiths, Preston and Za'Darius, could not have played worse in the biggest games of their careers. Their pathetic play against the outside run drew these words in the bench area from defensive line coach Jerry Montgomery after TE Levine Toilolo owned Preston on a run for 7: "Set the edge! Let's go!" On Raheem Mostert's first TD (36 yards), Preston had a chance to make the tackle in the backfield with a little faster reaction. He didn't, and with Kyler Fackrell trapped in the hole, off went Mostert. On the few occasions when Preston had a chance to rush, he was handled. Za'Darius's play was even more disappointing. As the running plays mounted and the pass rushes didn't, he shut it down. Front-runners kind of go through the motions when adversity strikes and things don't go their way. Several times Za'Darius didn't even resist run blocks.

When the ball was past him, he offered nothing extra. Dean Lowry made a tackle more than 32 yards downfield. Za'Darius doesn't pursue. In contrast, check Nick Bosa charging out of the pack to lay a lick on Jimmy Graham 10 yards downfield. If Za'Darius wasn't being outflanked, he looked confused and had no idea where the ball was. He helped Kenny Clark make the third-and-1 stop and later tossed aside TE George Kittle to tackle Mostert for no gain in the third quarter. That was all she wrote. After stopping Mostert, Za'Darius appeared hurt and out hustled the medical staff. One play later he was back on the field, the seventh time this season that drama played out. Twice Kittle pass-blocked Za'Darius without help. Fackrell (20) registered the only sack on sheer hustle after splitting a double-team by LT Joe Staley and LG Laken Tomlinson, who is vastly improved from his pedestrian years for the Lions (2015-16). Even though Mostert got outside Fackrell twice for touchdowns and the Smiths were awful, the coaches still didn't think Rashan Gary was worth playing. They finally waved him out for the three kneel-downs at the end. What an indictment that was of Gary's development as a rookie. If this turns out to be the final game as a Packer for Blake Martinez (52) it will be a moment to forget. He posted a team-high total of "bad" runs with two, both hard hits on Mostert. In each case, he was unblocked. There were other examples in which Martinez assumed the risk of running through the line and then didn't make the tackle, overran plays, was slow to the edge and got engulfed by one-on-one blocks. The 49ers may have three inside linebackers better than Martinez. B.J. Goodson (39) had a tackle for a loss and filled hard three times. Oren Burks (three) joined Gary as a stalwart in the kneel-down defense.

Secondary (½)

The defense missed 14 tackles, including 11 by the defensive backs. Darnell Savage (55) probably was the worst offender. He took a poor angle on Raheem Mostert's 36-yard TD, was run over by Deebo Samuel, allowed an extra 22 yards on another bad-angle miss and took himself out of another TD. He did make a terrific tackle for a loss on a clever screen pass. Adrian Amos lasted just 31 snaps before departing with a reported pectoral injury. He also missed three tackles in an ugly showing. Will Redmond (24) replaced Amos and missed two tackles, was beat by George Kittle in man coverage for 19 and was flagged for pass interference on a third-and-3 out route by Kittle. The Packers activated Raven Greene from injured reserve on Saturday but then didn't give him a uniform on Sunday. Thus, the nickel LB remained Ibraheim Campbell (five), who didn't have enough game for what the 49ers were bringing. The safety play could hardly have been worse. On the outside, Jaire Alexander (34) departed early in the third quarter with a thumb injury. He also took a poor angle on Mostert's opening TD before missing Mostert in the backfield to ignite another substantial gain. After an opening three and out, the 49ers got moving when a swing pass to Samuel ruptured from a gain of 7 to a gain of 19 because Kevin King (53) missed the tackle. He missed another tackle and, as the second half wore on, didn't give much effort trying to get off blocks. He made terrific breakups of a crossing route and a slant, but then turned around and crawled all over Samuel for a pass-interference penalty. He's a hard player to figure out. Tramon Williams (24) was bounced around in the run game. Chandon Sullivan (eight) also appeared.

Kickers (½)

JK Scott was lousy in 63-degree weather at this stadium in November and he was lousy in 58-degree weather Sunday. With the offense in reverse and his team needing a lift, two of his four first-half punts were deficient. He outkicked his coverage in the first quarter, banging a 48-yarder with just 4.35 seconds of hang time that was returned 26 yards. Punting from inside the Packers 5, he parked a 23-yarder out of bounds to the right. His average was helped immensely by 16 yards of roll on a punt of 62 yards when the 49ers didn't field a return man as time expired in the first half. His averages were 43.9 yards (gross), 36.5 (net) and 3.99 hang time. Mason Crosby hit two extra points, averaged 64.0 and 4.04 on two kickoffs for distance and didn't succeed on onside and pooch kickoffs.

Special Teams (½)

The Packers finished 26th in Rick Gosselin's annual statistical rankings of NFL special teams under rookie coach Shawn Mennenga. Tyler Ervin made a gutsy and successful decision to run wide and make a fair catch on the first punt. Later in the half, he muffed a routine catch on a kickoff and was promptly smeared at the 8. Richie James returned a punt 26 yards when tackles were missed by Will Redmond and Oren Burks before Jamaal Williams lost containment. The snap leader was Burks with 23.