

Rating The Packers : Week 1 at Vikings

U.S. Bank Stadium in Minneapolis has never been Aaron Rodgers' favorite venue just like Mike Zimmer isn't a defensive play-caller he enjoys seeing with the headset on across the field.

All those bad memories vanished Sunday when Rodgers turned in an exceptional performance as the Packers dispatched the Vikings, 43-34, in the season opener for both teams.

Rodgers received five footballs for his exploits, a far cry from his previous six appearances against Zimmer in Minnesota (football totals are for Rodgers).

2014: At TCF Bank Stadium. Packers win, 24-21. Three and one-half footballs.

2015: At TCF Bank Stadium. Packers win, 30-13. Three footballs.

2016: The first regular-season game at U.S. Bank Stadium. Packers lose, 17-14. One football.

2017: At U.S. Bank Stadium. Packers lose, 23-10. Rodgers' suffers a broken collarbone on his eighth play. He and replacement Brett Hundley combined for one football.

2018: At U.S. Bank Stadium. Packers lose, 24-17. One and one-half footballs.

2019: At U.S. Bank Stadium. Packers win, 23-10. Two and one-half footballs.

This was the 102nd game that Zimmer has coached the Vikings. It was the most points any of his teams have allowed.

"In the second half, we didn't challenge them," Zimmer said Sunday. "We didn't rush the quarterback. They blocked us pretty well."

On Monday, Zimmer said, "I tried to explain to them (the team's youthful cornerbacks) that with this quarterback, that if they're not tight in coverage they're gonna watch the ball get caught. ... Rodgers made some great throws. We let him out of the pocket a few times. We didn't get much pressure on him. ... Part of it is he got the ball out a lot. Most of the time the ball was out in 2.5 seconds."

Other than Zimmer, safety Harrison Smith, linebackers Anthony Barr and Eric Kendricks and a few others, the Packers were facing almost an entirely new defense. Old standbys like Everson Griffen and Linval Joseph upfront and cornerbacks Xavier Rhodes, Trae Waynes and Mackensie Alexander were gone from a year ago, as were useful spares Stephen Weatherly at end and Andrew Sendejo and Jayron Kearsae at safety.

Defensive end Danielle Hunter (neck), the Vikings' elite pass rusher, went on injured reserve last week. Nose tackle Michael Pierce, signed from Baltimore to replace Joseph and stuff the run, opted out of 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Vikings almost always had an interior pass rush from defensive tackles such as Sheldon Richardson and Tom Johnson. On Sunday, they had none.

"Typically, when you look at what Minnesota's been able to do throughout the years, this is a tough defense to go against," coach Matt LaFleur said Monday. "There were some things that they did that we felt we could potentially take advantage of.

"To our guys' credit, there were some bang-bang plays. The off-schedule touchdown pass to Davante (Adams) that got reviewed. The long ball to Davante late in the fourth quarter that he made an unbelievable catch. ... if our guys don't make those then I think we might be singing a different tune today."

The fact there were no fans in attendance made Rodgers' afternoon much more pleasant. Yet, it should be remembered that he turned in some superlative showings in the cauldron of the Hubert Humphrey Metrodome, which was the Vikings' home from 1982-2015 (football totals for Rodgers).

2008: Packers lose, 28-27. One and one-half footballs.

2009: Packers lose, 30-23. Three footballs.

2010: Packers win, 31-3. Five footballs.

2011: Packers win, 33-27. Four and one-half footballs.

2012: Packers lose, 37-34. Four footballs.

2013: Packers win, 44-31. Five footballs.

Rodgers' production in his six starts at the Metrodome went considerably better than his first six starts against Zimmer in Minnesota. The Vikings had three defensive coordinators from 2008-13: Leslie Frazier, Fred Pagac and Alan Williams.

Rodgers improved his record as a starter against the Vikings in Minnesota to 7-6. He is 7-2-1 against them at Lambeau Field.

The Packers, with their 522 yards and 31 first downs, weren't the only prolific offense Sunday. The Vikings outgained the Packers on an average per-play basis, 7.8 to 6.9 yards.

That was the highest average for Minnesota against Green Bay regardless of the site since Dec. 24, 2004, when the Vikings averaged 8.9 behind Daunte Culpepper. In October 1998, they averaged 8.3 on a night when Randy Moss lit up Lambeau Field with five receptions for 190 yards.

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 four footballs.

The three stars of the game were: 1. Aaron Rodgers. 2. Elgton Jenkins. 3. Davante Adams.

Receivers (4)

The Vikings added a fifth rusher on about half of the Packers' pass plays until backing off the blitz late in the first half. That left their youthful cornerbacks – Mike Hughes (first round, 2018), Holton Hill (free agent, 2018), Cameron Dantzler (third round, 2020) and Jeff Gladney (first round, 2020) – on islands too often. Hughes and Hill combined for nine starts and 1,266 snaps in their first two seasons. Without a rush, Davante Adams (played 70 of the 78 possible snaps on offense) dominated with 14 receptions for 156 yards. The 14 receptions tied the club record set by Don Hutson in November 1942 against the New York Giants. Adams had five receptions for 78 against Hill alone. In all, Adams caught five outbreaking routes for 31 yards, three in-breaking routes for 39, three bubble screens for 14, a takeoff against Dantzler for 40, an adjusted route against FS Anthony Harris for 24 and a stop route for eight. He should have had a third touchdown but dropped a 1-yard slant in the end zone with Hill behind him. He also will be charged with a drop on his sideline bobble. Allen Lazard (68) only saw the ball four times but caught them all, as usual. He dropped just three of 56 targets last season. He's a determined runner and blocker. Check his two fourth-quarter blocks against Harris. One reason the Packers didn't force a wide receiver in the draft was the promise they see in Marquez Valdes-Scantling (42). When Dantzler, who crashed in the draft after running the 40 in 4.60, made rookie alignment-technique mistakes late in the first half, MVS ran by him for a 45-yard TD as Dantzler was grabbing his left arm. Later, he burned Hughes deep for 39. In between those gems were a pair of duds: a dropped shallow crosser in the clear on third and 6 and a dropped 50-yard bomb behind Harris. It was noteworthy to see Malik Taylor, the sturdy free agent from Ferris State, on the 48-man active roster and not Equanimeous St. Brown, the sixth-round pick in 2018 back from injury. Taylor, who played 14 snaps on special teams, was used by LaFleur to crack back on a jet sweep that gained 19. It was his only snap from scrimmage. The Vikings' youthful corps of corners played passively for 60 minutes; its only coverage penalty was a hold on Hill when it took 7.8 seconds for the pass to be released. Last season, in the 13 games that both Marcedes Lewis and Robert Tonyan played, Lewis had more snaps in all but two of the games. In what appeared to be a changing of the guard, Tonyan has a leg up as the No. 1 tight end based on playing time. Tonyan led with 48 snaps (13 with his hand down) compared to 32 for Lewis (17 with his hand down) and 12 for Jace Sternberger (three with his hand down). For this review, Josiah Deguara will be included with the running backs. Sternberger was the only man of the three to be targeted; he failed to gain any separation on a take-off route against Harris that fell incomplete. As blockers, LaFleur seems to view Lewis as the point-of-attack man, Tonyan as the most versatile and Sternberger as a project.

Offensive Line (4 ½)

Mike Zimmer built his defenses around formidable front fours. Minus the injured Hunter, and with ex-Jaguar Yannick Ngakoue just 10 days into his new place of employment, the Vikings failed to sack Rodgers, knocked him down just twice and pressured him only one other time. Time will tell if the Vikings' rush is that awful or the Packers' protection is that good. The key figure was Elgton Jenkins, who played all 1,091 of his snaps as a rookie at LG. Of his 34 starts for MS State from 2015-18, just one was at RT and five were at LT. Yet, with RT-RG Billy Turner (knee) out, LaFleur went with Jenkins at RT rather than Rick Wagner, a starter the past six seasons for the Ravens and Lions. As expected, Jenkins found himself in some awkward positions. He tends to bear hug defenders but is savvy enough to release and not draw penalties. Lucas Patrick, his replacement at LG, was adequate until bowing out with a shoulder injury after 32 snaps. Jenkins moved back inside, finishing the day with one-half "bad" run and no pressures. Without Linval Joseph around to ruin his day, Corey Linsley pitched a shutout in protection and gained consistent movement against NT Shamar Stephen in the run game. It was obvious that Lane Taylor had done extensive work with his body during his year-long rehabilitation from the torn biceps that ended his 2019 season after two games. His physique looked better defined. Then, on his 63rd snap, he got tied up with DT Jaleel Johnson on an outside zone run to the right and reportedly blew out his right knee. Thrust in to replace Taylor was rookie Jon Runyan, a sixth-round pick who made all 25 of his starts for Michigan at tackle. Runyan played within himself, didn't jump the cadence and made a clean 15-play debut. Wagner, 30, is something of a waist-bender at this point. There are reasons why the coaches didn't go with him immediately at RT. Ngakoue spent much of the second half trying to get around Wagner but couldn't do it. The veteran's kick step and overall poise saw him through a blemish-free 46 snaps. In the first half David Bakhtiari generally locked up Ngakoue, the Vikings' only pass-rush threat, although he did get beat by the ex-Jaguar for a knockdown off the edge.

Quarterbacks (5)

Other than the Seattle playoff game, Rodgers wasn't a very good player in the final month of last season. For some reason, it was as if he had begun to disregard some of the fundamentals that are essential for sound quarterback play and vital in his development as a franchise player. On Sunday, Rodgers showed improvement in many facets. Rather than hang on downfield availability, he was getting the ball out immediately to the check-down receiver in the flat. Instead of just flicking passes off his back foot, he was setting his feet and stepping into his throws. His arm alone is powerful enough. When Rodgers brings his legs to the party he's even more accurate and more dangerous anywhere on the field. He spun some tremendous passes. Granted, there was little or no pressure, and there was no hostile crowd. The Vikings' defense was dead in the water, but Rodgers played an instrumental role in its collapse. His hard count generally has been more effective early in the season before defenses begin to hold their water later on. On Sunday, he coaxed the Vikings into going offsides three times, twice on third down for first-down yardage. Last season, his cadence caused the opponent to jump seven times as opposed to 22 times by his teammates. His superb skills as a ball-handler lend themselves to LaFleur's jet-sweep game. Tyler Ervin never knows if he's going to get the ball or not. Rodgers reads the defense's reaction to Ervin's motion and seamlessly executes what appeared to be wise decisions. The cluster of wasted timeouts must be worked out between coach and quarterback. Possibly Rodgers' only blemish was the penalty for intentional grounding that was the result of him not recognizing an overload pressure. Tim Boyle was No. 2 ahead of rookie Jordan Love.

Running Backs (4 ½)

All five players were impressive in their distinct way. This has the makings of the best backfield in Green Bay in years. Aaron Jones (42) did what he must do in his bid for a contract extension: play well. Swift to the hole, he generally ran to the first sign of daylight. However, Jones does have the patience to read the wide-zone scheme and feel cutback opportunities. He broke six tackles, a total that he exceeded in only one game last season. Tacklers appeared to make contact with the ball half a dozen times but Jones showed excellent ball security other than a harmless fumble as he was headed out of bounds. You could ding him for running into a pile on third and goal from the 1. Jamaal Williams (31) remains the same rugged, valuable, inspirational player. He picks up the blitz (Barr twice), he surges forward on his carries and he seems ready for an increased role as a receiver. Barring injury, rookie AJ Dillon (five) probably won't play much until he becomes better versed in the passing game. His two carries were worth 14 yards. Tyler Ervin (14) looks like a natural on the jet sweep. Even though he's small and fast, what must appeal to LaFleur is his no-nonsense approach with the ball. He goes north-south in a hurry. The Packers will take 6-yard gains on those end-arounds, but Ervin averaged more than twice that (12.7) on his three carries. He's a gadget guy, and the smart teams seek them out. Josiah Deguara (24) is listed as a tight end but 16 of his snaps came from the backfield, including 10 as the up-back in an I formation. LaFleur must have a fullback for his scheme, and that's why they drafted Deguara higher (third round) than some teams projected him. The first thing you notice is his solid, balanced three-point stance. He looks like a fullback. At 6-foot-2 1/2, he's taller than John Kuhn and Danny Vitale, but he seems thick enough to bang in the outside zone. Judged by Sunday, the coaches trust Deguara as a receiver as well as a blocker. LaFleur even found one snap for FB John Lovett, who drove WLB Eric Wilson out of the frame on a sweep.

Defensive Line (1)

Last season, 2nd-year man Tyler Lancaster, a free agent from Northwestern, started alongside Kenny Clark and Dean Lowry. Rookie Kingsley Keke, a 5th-round draft choice, had to be content with scraps (108 snaps). Even inconsistent Montravius Adams, who was inactive Sunday with a toe injury, played 206. Lancaster wasn't as effective in his 442 snaps as the year before. Keke isn't as heavy as Lancaster but the coaches clearly can see his pass-rush potential surpasses that of Lancaster. Thus, they gave him the opening-day start, but Keke didn't exactly run with it. Nobody in this group did. Dalvin Cook and Alexander Mattison were every bit as impressive as Green Bay's running backs. In a different type of game, the Vikings' ground game could have made the difference. In his 29 snaps, Keke showed modest explosiveness and athleticism but not much run stop at the point. Lancaster is an underrated athlete but his pass rush is negligible. The Packers need better. Lowry (39) didn't get off blocks, either. Clark departed after 15 snaps with a groin injury, and core muscle injuries have bothered him before. Even before his departure, Clark wasn't playing to his standards. On the same field in December, he destroyed C Garrett Bradbury, the Vikings' first-round pick in 2019. This time, Bradbury was sealing off and moving Clark at least some of the time. Next Sunday, the Lions will try to win at Lambeau Field behind the running of Adrian Peterson and Kerryon Johnson together with Matthew Stafford's play-action passing.

Linebackers (1 ½)

Christian Kirksey, one of two players on defense to play all 52 snaps, is in Green Bay because the organization was convinced he was a better player than Blake Martinez. Kirksey should be a step faster and more athletic than his predecessor. In the third quarter, however, he was outflanked twice on scrambles by Kirk Cousins that totaled 30 yards. On the 16-yard run, Kirksey couldn't run down Cousins from behind. Cousins ran 4.84 eight years ago out of Michigan State; in 2014, Kirksey clocked 4.57 out of Iowa. Kirksey still has a ton to learn after having had minimal time on the field to learn it. His performance showed instances of taking false steps, missing reads and indecision. Kirksey did make some low, secure wrap tackles. He also led the team in missed tackles with two. Krys Barnes (15), a rookie free agent from UCLA, was the choice to start at WILB in the 3-4 opposite Kirksey over Oren Burks, whose three snaps came in the final two minutes, and Ty Summers, a second-year player who was used on special teams only. The Packers gave Barnes a \$7,000 signing bonus after the draft. He was a three-year starter for the Bruins, including the last two as the MLB in a 3-4 defense. He never ran a 40 for scouts, a few of whom estimated his speed between 4.75 and 4.8. Barnes made the most of his shot Sunday. The Packers had only two tackles for a loss, and he was involved in each. On a promising screen to Dalvin Cook, he triggered quickly to beat a pair of blockers and make the tackle. On another route, he blanketed Cook in the flat. He was active, looked confident and made plays. It was a disappointing afternoon on the outside where Za'Darius Smith (43) and Rashan Gary (32) each had 1 ½ pressures whereas Preston Smith (43) didn't have any. Even with a big lead and the chance to tee off, they couldn't prevent Cousins from posting a passer rating of 118.6. Gary Kubiak, the Vikings' offensive coordinator, double-teamed Za'Darius on just 15.6 percent of dropbacks. Besides playing both sides in the base defense, he put his hand down over a guard on 11 snaps and stood up in a rover-type role over center on 12 snaps. Bradbury and others shoved Za'Darius out of the middle on some successful draw plays. Gary shows hustle chasing to help downfield, something Za'Darius is loathing to do. Gary had a few solid rushes against RT Brian O'Neill, and when he didn't get there raised his arms in the passing lane. Preston was stymied by Riley Reiff, the Vikings' aging left tackle. He was no more effective against the run, either. Youngsters Tipa Galeai (nine) and Jonathan Garvin (six) made inauspicious debuts.

Defensive Backs (1 ½)

The Packers had reason to expect a secondary with four returning starters to fare better than it did Sunday. Minus Stefon Diggs, the Vikings' still came up with six plays worth 20 yards or more, all at the expense of the secondary. The second-quarter interception by Jaire Alexander (49) was the most skilled play from the group. Cousins threw too far inside and Alexander tipped the ball to himself and away from Adam Thielen for the pick. Earlier in the quarter, Alexander decided to play a hunch that the Vikings would run from their 4. Gary was rushing outside unaware his teammate was coming, and Alexander nearly ran into him on the way to Cousins for a safety. That's a dead-to-rights tackle that cornerbacks still often miss. If, however, Cousins had seen Alexander sooner, the Vikings could have exploited the void in the secondary for an enormous play. How common is a blitz by Alexander? In 18 games last season defensive coordinator Mike Pettine rushed him twice. Alexander is a good corner, but to be great he must become a better technician. When Cousins scrambled on the second play, Alexander lost sight of Thielen and the result was 25 yards. In the fourth quarter, Alexander opened his hips prematurely rather than staying square and as a result, Thielen found a lane to beat him for a 19-yard TD. On the other side, Kevin King (51) had a rocky performance as well. He charged up on a run by

Alexander Mattison, gave away the sideline and watched him race away for 21. Bisi Johnson turned a short pass against King into a gain of 29 after his missed tackle. Johnson also beat King on a comeback for 22. Thielen eluded his grabby coverage on a conversion pass. Nickel back Chandon Sullivan (36) and Will Redmond (24), the sixth defensive back, were OK. Rookie SS Vernon Scott (three) and CB Josh Jackson (two) also played. CB Ka'dar Hollman didn't. Some of the same coverage and tackling issues that beset Darnell Savage (46) as a rookie were evident Sunday. His willingness to collide with people is appealing but at this point, he's more of a hitter than a tackler, and the first job for a safety is to secure the tackle. He'll probably be fined by the league for leaving his feet and launching at TE Kyle Rudolph, who had slipped inside Sullivan for a 22-yard reception. Later, Savage got caught looking in the backfield and guessing a post pattern just as Thielen instead went to the corner for a 37-yard TD behind him. It's plays like this that drives coaches mad. Adrian Amos (52) had an uneventful afternoon.

Kickers (4)

Mason Crosby hit field goals from 31 and 43 yards and made all five of his extra-point attempts. Several of his boots moved from left to right. Six of his eight kickoffs were touchbacks. His averages were 70.3 yards and 3.88 seconds of hang time. JK Scott's lone punt went out of bounds 40 yards downfield after a hang time of 4.89.

Special Teams (3)

When the Vikings attempted an onside kick late, coordinator Shawn Mennenga played it well. From an 8-2-1 formation, he stationed four tough guys left of center to block in front of Davante Adams, the designated catcher on that side. They were Josiah Deguara, Jamaal Williams, Adrian Amos and Chandon Sullivan. Dan Bailey's boot bounded toward Adams, who made the recovery behind a wall of blockers. Reliable Tyler Ervin was back returning kickoffs and punts. Josh Jackson was one of the gunners on the punt team and one of the holdup blockers on the punt-return team. Ty Summers led in snaps with 19. Hunter Bradley's snaps for placement were split between perfect laces and partial spins by holder JK Scott.