

Rating The Packers : Week 3 at Saints

By Bob McGinn Sep 29, 2020

Without Davante Adams, it figured that the Packers would have at least some trouble moving the ball Sunday night against the Saints at the Superdome.

After the Packers scored on five of their six possessions through three quarters, defensive coordinator Dennis Allen threw caution to the wind and just came after Aaron Rodgers.

Of the Packers' 33 gradable passing plays, the Saints rushed four men 18 times, five eight times, six six times and seven once. Their blitz rate of five men or more was 42.4 percent, but more telling was their blitz rate involving six or more.

It was 21.2 percent. How extreme was that? The Packers haven't encountered that much all-out pressure since the opener in 2011 when the defending Super Bowl champions defeated the Saints at Lambeau Field.

The New Orleans defense on that night was coordinated by Gregg Williams, whose reputation as a riverboat blitzer rivals that of Jerry Glanville from the previous generation.

Williams rushed six or more on 32.5 percent of Rodgers' dropbacks. In December 2017 at FirstEnergy Stadium, Williams was coordinating the Browns' defense that sent six or more 20.4 percent against Green Bay. Interesting, isn't it, that Williams was one of Allen's chief mentors. Allen coached the Saints' secondary in 2009, their Super Bowl season, and again in 2010 before Williams' three-year tenure as coordinator ended after the 2011 season with his suspension from the bounty scandal.

"I learned a lot of how we go about doing things defensively from Gregg," Allen said in 2016 after taking the coordinator's job in New Orleans. "I think Gregg's a really good defensive coach. I've taken parts of that and incorporated that into my personality."

In the last decade, just two other opponents blitzed six or more against the Packers at least 20 percent. In October 2012 at Reliant Stadium, Wade Phillips was coordinating the Texans' defense that rushed six or more 20 percent. Allen's first job in the NFL was defensive quality control for the Falcons in 2002-03 when Phillips was the defensive coordinator. The other was the Buccaneers' defense as called by coach Raheem Morris that also sent six or more 20 percent in November 2011 at Lambeau Field.

"I have a ton of respect for their coordinator (Allen) and their personnel," Rodgers said last Wednesday. "It's a really good defense and will be a good test for us."

The Packers won Sunday night, 37-30, just as they won those other four big blitz games. Those scores were, 42-34, over the Saints in 2011; 35-26 over the Bucs in '11; 42-24 over the Texans in '12; and 27-21 over the Browns in '17.

On Monday, Saints coach Sean Payton was asked about a pass rush that sacked Rodgers once and knocked him down just one other time.

“Look, Aaron’s a tough sack,” Payton said. “I mean, the ball’s coming out. I just finished watching a full blitz ‘cover zero’ (by the Saints). He comes off a play-action and retreats and throws a touchdown pass off a naked fake.”

In other words, the big blitz made little impact against Rodgers, who has been sharp in the Packers’ turnover-free, 3-0 start.

“Aaron’s the catalyst for everything,” coach Matt LaFleur said Monday. “He has the ability to process all the information and then think outside the box at times when maybe there’s an unscouted look we haven’t seen. His ability to get us out of some bad plays puts our offense in a much better position.”

The offensive emphasis entering the season, according to LaFleur, was third-down conversion rate. The Packers presently rank sixth at 50 percent after a 23rd-place finish in 2019 at 36 percent.

“The frustrating thing is we got ‘em in some long-yardage situations and they convert or come up with a big touchdown pass,” Payton said.

The Saints looked confused by the Packers’ short passing attack off bootleg action. Rodgers completed five for 99 yards.

“There were four or five of those naked where there’s someone open in the flat right now,” Payton said. “The communication, being able to pass off and understand the motion and who’s got the flat, that’s the one thing we’ve got to get cleaned up.”

On defense, the Packers’ bend-but-don’t-break plan of coordinator Mike Pettine might have easily carried the day if his players had tackled better. By my count, the defense missed a total of 17 tackles, four more than LaFleur and his people charged.

“Look, they (the Packers) are playing a real good complementary game right now,” Payton said. “A little bit of rope-a-dope on defense where they’re going to keep the ball in front of them. You’re going to have to be patient and execute the underneath passing game.”

Here is a rating of the Packers against the Saints. 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. Mason Crosby. 3. David Bakhtiari.

Receivers (4)

With Davante Adams (hamstring) out, Allen Lazard moved up to No. 1 at wide receiver, Marquez Valdes-Scantling was No. 2 and Tyler Ervin was No. 3. Lazard had a career day against a talented secondary that has been beset by assignments errors in Games 1-3. Two home-run balls accounted for 120 of Lazard's 146 yards. On the first, CB Marshon Lattimore didn't appear to respect Lazard until it was too late and his sprawling catch behind him went for 48. On third and 10, the Saints were in a four-deep secondary when Lazard ran through P.J. Williams' area of responsibility and over behind FS Marcus Williams, who had bit on an underneath receiver. Again, Lazard used his long stride to make the Saints pay and it was worth 72 yards. After dropping seven passes against the Lions, the team's only drop Sunday was by Lazard. Matt LaFleur also relied on Lazard for heavy-duty, in-the-box blocking assignments. On third and 1, he shifted down just before the snap and handled ILB Alex Anzalone at the point of attack on a 4-yard carry. In the fourth quarter, Lazard didn't do the job on consecutive running plays. If he had gotten CB Janoris Jenkins blocked, Jamaal Williams surely would have picked up the first down on a third-and-5 rush. On fourth and 1, Lazard missed SS Malcolm Jenkins and Aaron Jones failed to gain. Lazard made amends against Janoris Jenkins on a third-down free play. In the end zone, Lazard boxed out his adversary and the result was a 14-yard defensive pass interference penalty. Lazard played 59 of the possible 62 snaps on offense, two more than Valdes-Scantling. Given his superior speed, the Saints rolled coverage toward him and he was a nonfactor. MVS didn't look equipped to handle the extra attention. All but one of Ervin's snaps came as a wide receiver. He served as a decoy most of the night. Darrius Shepherd (23), who was promoted from the practice squad Saturday, and Malik Taylor (four) also played. Neither saw the ball. With every game, Robert Tonyan expands his status as the favored tight end. He had 39 snaps compared to 20 each for Mercedes Lewis and Jace Sternberger. Tonyan weighed 231 pounds in March 2017 after a career at FCS Indiana State. At a workout, he stood 6 foot 5, ran a blistering 40 of 4.58 seconds, bench-pressed 16 times and scored 21 on the Wonderlic test. Listed now at 237, Tonyan looks to be more in the 245-pound range. He was the drive starter, turning short passes on the first play of possessions into gains of 10, 16 and 14 yards. His five receptions were a career-high. Tonyan, a shifty type of athlete, rapidly has developed considerable chemistry with Aaron Rodgers. Whether it's on bootlegs, leaks or intermediate inside patterns, he has made strides as a route runner. His blocking, however, is so-so. On the goal line, two carries failed to gain because he couldn't get DE Cameron Jordan blocked. One would think that Lewis would have handled those challenging blocking assignments. However, he wasn't on the field for any of the final 14 plays. Earlier, Lewis got beat by Jordan on a second-and-goal running play only to get the better of him on a fourth-and-goal TD run. Lewis appeared to push off nickel back C.J. Gardner-Johnson on an incomplete pass in the end zone. Later, he was held by Malcolm Jenkins early on his route for an 18-yard TD catch. If Lewis did push off Jenkins near the sideline, it was fair that no penalty was called. Sternberger, one week after dropping a pair, recovered with a three-catch fourth quarter.

Offensive line (4 ½)

Certainly, the task for this unit was made less onerous by the Saints' two missing starters and the minimal crowd noise. It could be argued that DE Marcus Davenport (elbow) and DT David Onyemata (calf) are the Saints' second- and third-best defensive linemen. Having a crowd of 748 compared to 73,000 enabled the Packers to use cadence rather than silent count. Nevertheless, the Saints still had a capable front so the Packers' third straight strong outing remained highly impressive. The only sack and

the only other knockdown probably should be charged to Aaron Rodgers. In terms of hurries, the only two on the line went to David Bakhtiari and Elgton Jenkins. Bakhtiari, a slow starter last season, has picked up where he left off in the second half of 2019. Whether it's run or pass, he's just so hard to beat. Ditto for Corey Linsley, who has been highly consistent in the wide-zone run game and was creating piles helping the guards in pass protection. He might be playing with slightly more nastiness, too, in this, his seventh season. Jenkins went the distance after being listed as questionable with a back-rib problem that popped up late in the week. He turned in a winning performance other than misses against DT Sheldon Rankins and WLB Demario Davis on a pair of failed goal-line runs. In a key decision, the Packers stayed with Lucas Patrick at RG and went with Billy Turner rather than Rick Wagner at RT. All 1,203 of Turner's line-high snap total last season came at RG. He sat out the first two games with a knee injury, and Wagner filled in admirably. Just four of Turner's 43 career starts for three teams had come at RT. Matt LaFleur helped Turner with chip blocks on some passes that required extra time. Other than getting stuffed by Jordan on a first-series run, he pitched a shutout. Patrick is a fun player to watch. He'll pancake an opponent on one play, then get tipped onto his back on the next. Because he tries to finish most blocks, foes become instant enemies. But after putting down Rankins on one play he offered him his hand and pulled him off the ground. He was the only lineman not charged with a pressure or "bad" run.

Quarterbacks (4 ½)

The ability of Aaron Rodgers to control the offense and the game might be greater this season than ever before. Without fans, players are looking for energy and inspiration. They get it for 60 minutes from Rodgers, whose intensity can be extra important during a pandemic. The non-emotional settings are perfect for Rodgers. He's the professor in a university lecture hall, controlling the ebb and flow of information, offering praise when warranted and always keeping his audience on its toes. No Davante Adams? Win with the young players. Rodgers had 11 incompletions but it never seemed like he was leaving yards on the field. The wide receivers must love the way he's throwing moon balls because they have the chance to run under them. He's always been special throwing on the move to the left. With the runs designed to look just like passes, his ballhandling has become even more valuable. One reason why Rodgers hasn't had his world rocked in the three games is his willingness (could we say happiness?) to release the ball too early open receivers. Absorbing fewer shots might be the key to playing into his 40s. Against the complex, voluminous scheme of defensive coordinator Dennis Allen, he parried the heavy blitzing with relative ease. His clever cadence prompted the Saints to jump offside twice. A back-breaking play for Allen was watching Rodgers take off for 13 yards on third and 12 when the Saints were in man coverage with their backs to him. With the September schedule in the books, he hasn't even been close to an interception.

Running Backs (4)

Matt LaFleur is taking the long, January-style approach. That is, he will take pains not to overwork Aaron Jones (44). Minus Davante Adams, it seemed possible if not likely that Jones would pick up a fairly significant share of the load at wide receiver. His skills on the perimeter were evident for all to see a week ago. However, LaFleur placed Jones out wide on just four snaps. Instead, he went with Tyler Ervin, a much less skilled split receiver, and didn't play Jones much more than normal. Partly as a result, Jones' 86 yards from scrimmage were dwarfed by Alvin Kamara's 197. Kamara is better than Jones, but that

doesn't mean Jones isn't a top-10 or 15 back. Unlike Kamara, Jones refuses to run out of bounds. WLB Demario Davis drilled Jones hard by the boundary but Jones kept trying to dish out punishment, too. On his fourth-and-1 TD, the hole was left. Sensing the linebackers flowing hard that way, Jones stuck his foot in the ground, redirected his path more to the middle and surged into the end zone. On another run, Jones creased into the back of Lucas Patrick, who was stalemated in the hole. So he bounced wide left and the gain was 13. Jones didn't break any tackles but picked up blitzers at least five times, including three against hard-charging Malcolm Jenkins. Jamaal Williams (19) is so good that LaFleur didn't even use his second-round draft choice, rookie AJ Dillon, from scrimmage. That's the way it goes in a tight game with home-field playoff advantage possibly at stake. With FB Josiah Deguara (ankle) sidelined for a second straight game, LaFleur made do without a lead blocker other than John Lovett for one play.

Defensive Line (3 ½)

Last season, Kenny Clark was the only defensive lineman to post as many as two sacks in a game. He had two in Game 14 against the Bears. With Clark (groin) sitting out another week, the chance of anyone doing that Sunday had to be considered remote. Entering the game, Dean Lowry, Tyler Lancaster, Kingsley Keke, Montravius Adams and Billy Winn had combined for 13 ½ career sacks. Keke, the only one still looking for a sack, became the man of the hour with a pair. His first, in 3.2 seconds, came on a stunt with Rashan Gary against LT Terron Armstead and LG Andrus Peat. His second, in 3.7 seconds, came when he used his hands to jerk past Peat on the inside. The Saints double-teamed Za'Darius Smith and Preston Smith on the second sack, and Keke beat the one-on-one matchup. The coaches seemed to make an effort to keep Keke, who played 28 of the possible 61 snaps on defense, fresh for rush situations. The only two tackles missed by a lineman were by Keke. His burst to Drew Brees was impressive. Lowry (32) and Lancaster (29) handled most of the 17 snaps in the 3-4 front. They did respectable jobs staying square against the run. On Alvin Kamara's 52-yard TD, Lancaster tackled Kamara as he crossed the goal line after a long chase. The Smiths and Lowry, who had rushed on the play with Lancaster, didn't show that type of effort. Adams (11) aggressively shed rookie RG Cesar Ruiz and stopped a draw play. He was active this week, but his undisciplined approach and lack of body control might make him a liability when it comes to rush lane integrity. Winn, 30, was the Browns' sixth-round pick in 2012. He's 6-3 ½ and 305 with short arms (32 ½ inches) and small hands (9 inches). The Packers, his fourth team in a 24-game career, signed him to the practice squad Sept. 16 and gave him a uniform Sunday. Winn's highlight in six snaps was batting down a pass.

Linebackers (2)

All things considered, it was an adequate regular-season debut from scrimmage for Ty Summers, the seventh-round draft choice from TCU in 2019. Summers played the final 44 snaps as the play-calling middle linebacker after Christian Kirksey left after 17 snaps with a shoulder injury. Rookie Kamal Martin, who has been on injured reserve since Sept. 7 following meniscus surgery, appeared to have won the No. 2 berth behind Kirksey. Summers has size (6-1 ½, 241) and excellent speed (4.54), plus his score of 27 on the Wonderlic indicates he has a grasp of the defense. Let's face it. Having to face Alvin Kamara without much practice time was a nightmare. Summers, who also had arthroscopic surgery for a meniscus repair in late April, made some crisp tackles in the check-down game but also missed three. On the weak side, Krys Barnes (17) got beat by Kamara on an option route for an 11-yard TD. That's a

mismatch the coaches can't allow to happen. Oren Burks, who's farther down the line at inside linebacker, played most of his 13 at a brand-new position, outside linebacker, in the fourth quarter after Rashan Gary (18) departed. Gary's right foot was taped during the game. Most of the time Burks stood up in the rover role and dropped into coverage. It was one of his few positive showings in two-plus years. Za'Darius Smith (56) made only one play all night but it was the most significant on defense by either team. On a zone read, neither LT Terron Armstead nor TE Josh Hill bothered to block Za'Darius. Handyman Taysom Hill was just tucking the ball away and launching into his rush when Za'Darius jarred the ball out and made the recovery. Seven plays later the Packers scored a go-ahead field goal. Otherwise, Za'Darius didn't have a pressure in 56 snaps. He couldn't get a sniff against Armstead or the interior in his 17 snaps standing up as a rover. For the first time, defensive coordinator Mike Pettine used Za'Darius in the rover role on the opening play. The Saints rushed three times for 14 times with Za'Darius standing up. He gets pushed around from a two-point stance. On the outside, he continues to hurt the run defense by drifting inside. If Za'Darius hasn't made the play after three or four seconds, you won't get any chase out of him. Preston Smith (58) was shut out on the other side by Ryan Ramczyk, the Saints' other prized tackle. Preston's speed and inside counter moves haven't been working, and it's unclear how confident he is bull rushing.

Defensive Backs (1)

Michael Thomas (ankle), the other half of the Saints' offense, was sidelined. Aging Drew Brees, limited to checkdowns against primarily a two-safety look, compiled a passer rating of 127.8 because ordinary receivers got open and the secondary missed eight tackles. Many of the biggest plays were the responsibility of Will Redmond (32), the nickel linebacker/dime back. On Alvin Kamara's 49-yard run, he jumped outside when he must play it inside-out. On a 21-yard flat pass to Kamara on third and 15, Redmond missed the tackle four yards downfield. On the 10-yard TD pass to Emmanuel Sanders, Redmond was too shallow for quarters coverage. On Kamara's 52-yard TD catch, Redmond waited too long before going for the tackle if not the interception. His missed tackle was the first of four on the play. Redmond (5-11, 186) is small but he is tough and usually aware. He missed too many tackles last season and therefore played much less down the stretch. Raven Greene (six) and rookie SS Vernon Scott are candidates to replace Redmond. Adrian Amos (61) and Darnell Savage (61) each missed a tackle. Both players were helpful in the box against the run and containing short passes. It remains to be seen if good quarterbacks not missing their No. 1 wideout can do damage against the safeties in coverage. When Kamara broke loose off left tackle, Amos was slow to react and then took an awful angle. Mike Pettine used Savage on some run blitzes, a part of the game that fits his reckless nature. Jaire Alexander (61), Kevin King (61) and Chandon Sullivan (44) didn't have to worry about the vertical game with Brees and without Thomas. Alexander charged up to make two sharp tackles on short passes. He also missed two tackles by trying to bump ball carriers off their feet rather than wrapping them up. He had a pick-6 in his hands at the 2-minute mark but dropped the ball. After an uneventful first half, King had a rough second half.

Kickers (4 ½)

Mason Crosby is on fire. Given two domed venues and a sunny Lambeau Field, he is 20 of 20 on all kicks to go with 18 touchbacks in 24 kickoffs. On Sunday, he hit field goals from 52, 33 and 49 yards. His eight-kickoff averages were 71.8 yards and 3.98 seconds of hang time. JK Scott looked slow on his only punt, and a Saint player rolled into him on the attempted block. The boot had a gross of 38 yards, a net of 24 and 4.05 hang time.

Special Teams (4)

Oren Burks, an almost-forgotten third-round pick from Vanderbilt in 2018, came to play. On the opening kickoff, he fought off a block and assisted on the tackle. On the second kickoff, he swatted the ball from the hands of diminutive but courageous Deonte Harris but the Saints recovered. It was the first time the Packers forced a fumble on a kickoff since Raven Greene stripped the 49ers' D.J. Reed in Game 6 of 2018. Tyler Ervin has been a reliable return specialist. On two of his three fair catches, he ran up amid traffic to secure high, short punts. The Saints didn't show much respect for Ervin as a kickoff returner when Wil Lutz appeared to intentionally kick short and force him to run with it. Although Jamaal Williams came uncomfortably close to the bouncing ball, the Packers survived a late onside kick by patiently watching it roll out of bounds after eight or nine yards. Hunter Bradley didn't have a great day snapping perfect laces on placements. Will Redmond and Burks led the kicking game in participation with 24 snaps.