

Rating The Packers : Week 3 at Saints

By Bob McGinn Oct 7, 2020

As the Packers head into their bye week, those within the organization and the fans ought to be thinking of winning the Super Bowl for the first time in 10 years.

Any way you slice it, the Packers have played so well in the first quarter of this strange season that winning their 14th NFL championship has to be regarded as a most realistic possibility.

“Win the Super Bowl, get us a ring,” running back Jamaal Williams told reporters Tuesday. “Our expectation is Super Bowl. We need to make sure we make the playoffs and make sure we go to the Super Bowl. We’re really not worried about anybody except ourselves. Our expectations are high for ourselves, and we just want more.”

Williams has been one of many exceptional performers for the NFL’s second-ranked offense. The Packers’ defense is tied for 12th. With that combined ranking total of 14 in two time-honored categories, Green Bay shares the top rung in the league with the 49ers, who also have a total rank of 14 (11th offense, third defense).

The Packers, one of six unbeaten teams, lead the NFL in point differential at plus-51. Baltimore is plus-49, Kansas City and Indianapolis are plus-47, Seattle is plus-33 and Tampa Bay is plus-28.

Last season, the Packers tied for the NFL’s second-best record in the regular season at 13-3 but ranked a modest ninth in point differential at plus-63. That team ranked 18th on both offense and defense.

The Packers’ level of performance is better than in 2019 even though they’ve had to deal with a much worse hand when it comes to injuries. Nose tackle Kenny Clark, perhaps their second-best player on defense, has played only 15 of 242 snaps (6.2 percent) because of the groin injury he suffered in Game 1. Wide receiver Davante Adams, one of the elite players on offense, has played just 108 of 276 snaps (39.1 percent) due to a hamstring injury.

Aaron Rodgers is off to a stellar start, the Packers are the only team in the NFL without a turnover and they’ve punted a league-low seven times. Za’Darius Smith is tied for the league in sacks with five, Aaron Jones is second in the league in rushing with 374 yards and Mason Crosby has made all eight of his field-goal attempts.

“I think one thing that has really afforded us the ability to go out there and play consistent football is we haven’t had many mistakes,” coach Matt LaFleur said Sunday. “That needs to continue in order for us to get to where we want to go.”

Green Bay is the first team in NFL history to score at least 150 points and not suffer a turnover in the first four games.

The Packers' last two championship teams were 3-1 at the quarter pole. The dominating team of 1996, the last in the NFL to lead the league in most points scored and fewest points allowed, had a point differential of plus-80. The championship squad of 2010 was plus-33 after four games.

The Packers already have won two games in the NFC North Division and four in the NFC, including a victory over New Orleans that would force the Saints to play at frosty Lambeau Field in January if those were the last teams standing in the NFC playoffs.

According to odds provided Tuesday by BetOnline, the top four teams to win the Super Bowl are Kansas City at 7-2, Baltimore at 6-1, Seattle at 15-2 and Green Bay at 17-2. At 3-1, Rodgers is behind only Seattle's Russell Wilson (2-1) in the MVP race.

Here is a rating of the Packers in their 30-16 victory over the Falcons on Monday night at Lambeau Field. 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. Robert Tonyan. 2. Corey Linsley. 3. Za'Darius Smith.

Receivers (3 ½)

It could be argued that the Packers were without four of their projected top-five wideouts: Davante Adams (hamstring), Allen Lazard (core), Devin Funchess (COVID-19 opt out) and Equanimeous St. Brown (knee). Thus, they lined up with Marquez Valdes-Scantling, who played 61 of the 63 possible snaps on offense, free agent Malik Taylor (45), free agent Darrius Shepherd (36), converted RB Tyler Ervin (23) and CFL refugee Reggie Begelton (two), who was waived Tuesday. Their top RBs, Aaron Jones and Jamaal Williams, each lined up about four times as split receivers. TE Robert Tonyan was detached from the box 17 times. The wideouts were targeted just 14 times. Falcons CB Kendall Sheffield, who didn't play in the first three games with a foot injury, traveled with MVS and held him in check. He needs to do a better job getting off the jam. Taylor, a product of NCAA Division II football at Ferris State, was used to block. He cracked back inside, he blocked for bubble screens and he stayed in front of defensive backs on passes in the flats. Taylor usually got his man, but with his size (6-foot-1 ½, 220 pounds) he could in time become downright menacing to defensive backs. On Taylor's only target, he got lost on fourth and 2 and, with his 4.46 speed, turned a short return route into a gain of 20. Shepherd was OK. On an 18-yard in-breaking route, the North Dakota State product knew he was going to get crushed by the safety but didn't flinch. On third and goal from the 3, he made a youthful mistake by running his route one-half yard short of the end zone. Ervin isn't a skilled wideout; he busies himself as a decoy off jet-sweep action. Atlanta's patchwork secondary was a match for Green Bay's corps of wide receivers. CBs A.J. Terrell (COVID-19 list) and Darqueze Dennard (hamstring) were out, as was SS Keanu Neal (hamstring) and nickel safety Ricardo Allen (elbow). Then FS Damontae Kazee suffered a season-ending Achilles' injury on his 21st snap and Jaylinn Hawkins, who started for Neal, left with a concussion on his 26th snap. Thus, the unit coached by Joe Whitt was hanging on by a thread. Robert Tonyan (42) capitalized

with six catches for 98 yards and three touchdowns. He beat Hawkins off a play-action fake for 27 yards, LB Foye Oluokun for an easy 19-yard TD when the former Raven got tangled up with a teammate, man coverage by MLB Deion Jones for an 8-yard TD and SS Jamal Carter for a 21-yard TD after somersaulting to his feet when Carter was penalized for holding him. Tonyan was stealth on a 20-yard reception, hiding in the line before running away from Jones' late coverage. If opponents have been semi-ignoring him they can't any longer. Minus Mercedes Lewis (knee), Jace Sternberger (14) and Josiah Deguara (seven, including six at TE) filled in. So, too, did RT Rick Wagner, who for the first time served as the blocking tight end on seven snaps. Deguara, a third-round draft choice from Cincinnati, suffered a serious injury in the last two minutes blocking for a punt when long snapper Hunter Bradley fell into his left knee.

Offensive Line (3 ½)

Corey Linsley wasn't able to practice Saturday because of a groin injury and was listed as questionable. He went the distance, the only starter without a pressure or "bad" run. Raheem Morris, who blitzed the Packers unmercifully in November 2011 when he was coaching the Buccaneers' defense, did it again with a blitz rate of 36.8 percent on passing downs. Morris unleashed some exotic pressure combinations of players and rush/coverage concepts. "(Linsley) is the guy that controls all the communication and really gets us going up front," coach Matt LaFleur said Monday. "I thought he had his best game. There were a lot of different looks that we didn't anticipate. Thankfully, we have a guy like Corey that it's never too big for him and he never blinks." DT Grady Jarrett, probably the Falcons' best player on defense, had a relatively quiet day (one pressure, two "bad" runs) due in large part to Linsley's level head. Generally speaking, Linsley doesn't look to deal out punishment. He plays a game of body positioning and balance, often willing to absorb a stiff shot if it means his man is removing himself from the play. His ability to execute the difficult reach block seems to improve each season. The other top performer was David Bakhtiari, who other than a couple of blemishes early in the second half was outstanding. The unit was responsible for a season-high 7 ½ "bad" runs. Part of it was due to Morris' quirky scheme. All that blitzing and slanting is designed to confuse blockers. Part of it also was due to the pad-popping intensity of Atlanta's defenders even after the game was out of reach. Elgton Jenkins had the most breakdowns with three "bad" runs and one pressure. He had problems with DE Steven Means, missing him twice on runs that went nowhere. Jenkins is athletic and powerful, but for him to become an honors candidate he must smooth out the rough edges of his game. Billy Turner was partially responsible for the lone sack after getting beat inside by DE Dante Fowler. Turner's 2 ½ "bad" runs all came in the first half. Turner settled in after that, but there's an out-of-control aspect to his game that more talented opponents will be able to exploit. Bury 'em one play, get buried the next. That's the roller-coaster Lucas Patrick has been riding and probably will continue to ride. At the last second, he spotted SS Jaylinn Hawkins charging through the middle and alertly knocked him haywire with his left arm. He also boomed WLB Foye Oluokun downfield on a screen. Other times, on a night in which Patrick yielded a team-high two pressures and two "bad" runs, he'd be tardy getting off a combo block or would be shoved backward into the feet of Aaron Rodgers as if he were on roller skates. Even without injury, the right side of the line could see changes in personnel at any time.

Quarterbacks (4)

The depleted Falcons and their 31st-ranked defense truly fought their rear ends off. The effort of coach Dan Quinn's defenders was exceptional, especially for an 0-4 team. Nevertheless, the Falcons left too many receivers open, and with the confidence and accuracy that has marked Aaron Rodgers' first quarter of the season, it made for a one-sided affair. When the Packers needed a solid gain on first down, Matt LaFleur would flood a side of the field and Rodgers would deliver the ball to one of his gifted running backs. With Atlanta having no answer for Robert Tonyan, Rodgers kept pumping him the ball on time and in stride. Raheem Morris' pressure packages made Rodgers think right along with him. Danger lurked on every snap. Yet, Rodgers seldom bolted the pocket. He seems to trust his linemen to block the right people, his running backs to bow their necks against blitzers and his receivers to get free downfield. The only time Rodgers was down in the pocket was the lone sack that was scored partially his fault for running into DE Charles Harris. On two scrambles, he tried to assist the refereeing crew. On the first, he pointed to his helmet hoping the official would flag MLB Deion Jones for a blow to the head. On the second, he pointed just beyond the first-down marker as the official was marking the start of his slide a yard short. His finest throws were electrifying sideline shots between defenders in Cover 2. Perhaps hoping to stay clear of marauding blitzers, Rodgers was in shotgun 47 times compared to 15 under center. After four games, perhaps the closest Rodgers has come to an interception was what he called a long "flutter" on his last play of the night.

Running Backs (4)

One of the best staff additions ever made by Mike McCarthy was his decision to hire Ben Sirmans as RB coach in 2016 not long after Jeff Fisher fired Sirmans in St. Louis. Matt LaFleur retained Sirmans after his three years with McCarthy, and his developmental work over four years with Aaron Jones and Jamaal Williams has been remarkable. These guys weren't top-notch receivers in college; Jones had 71 receptions at Texas-El Paso compared to 60 for Williams at Brigham Young, and each played extensively for four seasons. Just look at them now. If the Packers lose any more wideouts Jones could go out there and start. Jones progressed faster than Williams (36), who is playing 10 pounds lighter in his crusade to catch up and become a complete back. In the first quarter, Williams flanked wide right and hauled in the classic Cover 2-beater between corner and safety along the sideline for 29 yards. Catching all eight of his targets for a career-best 95 yards, Williams was terrific. Jones (33) caught his five targets for 40 while also averaging 4.7 on the ground (15-71). He broke five tackles. On his long rush of 23, the Packers folded Lucas Patrick but the Falcons had a run blitz on and Patrick had no chance to reach MLB Deion Jones. Seeing it, Jones accelerated by both Patrick and Jones and onto the third level. On another play, DE Dante Fowler tossed Billy Turner aside and hungrily turned toward the pocket and Aaron Rodgers. Jones stepped right up into Fowler, leading with his chin. Fowler delivered a withering blow, knocking Jones onto his knees, but his courageous act enabled the pass to be completed. Jones knows no fear. He got totally rocked two or three times slashing inside but never seemed the worse for wear. On his only carry, AJ Dillon (three) bounced wide when there appeared to be room for him to thunder off tackle. With Josiah Deguara (knee) probably headed to injured reserve, John Lovett (six) becomes the fullback that LaFleur likes to have at his disposal. Lovett hasn't played enough to evaluate though.

Defensive Line (3 ½)

In the 17 snaps, the Packers were in their base 3-4 defense Tyler Lancaster was at nose tackle. It's his best position. Kenny Clark (groin) will be back before long and Lancaster probably will have to play 3-technique. On Monday, Lancaster turned in his second strong outing in a row. His opponent, 12-year veteran Alex Mack, has been voted to the Pro Bowl five times, most recently in 2018. Twice Lancaster shed Mack on carries for no gain. Lancaster, who played 35 of the 70 possible snaps on defense, and Dean Lowry (43) didn't generate any pressure but had mostly stay-square snaps against the Todd Gurley-led ground game. He averaged just 3.6 yards on 16 rushes; his better advances came when the middle was sealed off and he bounced to the perimeter. Unlike Lancaster, there were occasions when Lowry's pad level was up and he got rolled out of there. Kingsley Keke (35), the other starter, has improved taking on double-team blocks. More importantly, he might have a better nose for the ball than either Lancaster or Lowry. He's seeing it and finding it. Mack, of course, studied Keke's two-sack performance against the Saints and frequently offered the guard blocking him help in pass pro. Newcomer Billy Winn (11) and Montravius Adams (10) held their own, too.

Linebackers (4)

Defensive coordinator Mike Pettine has been able to play coverage in the first month largely because his four-man rushes have been adequate and the offense has been prolific. His blitz rate of 15.2 percent on Monday night was preceded by 15.6 percent against Minnesota, 26.3 percent against Detroit and 12.5 percent against New Orleans. Playing without Rashan Gary (ankle) for the first time, Pettine plugged in rookie Jonathan Garvin (24) and watched as Randy Ramsey, a free agent from Arkansas in 2019, made his NFL debut of eight snaps. Garvin registered one hurry; Ramsey didn't flash. Preston Smith (67) went another game without making a play. His first month has been quiet, to say the least. Of the 11 pressures by the entire defense, Za'Darius Smith (64) was responsible for seven. In many ways, he had an up-and-down night, but the three sacks and lack of rush from anyone else accentuated his importance in keeping Matt Ryan in check (passer rating of 92.4). What made the three sacks interesting was the fact he was single-blocked each time. On the first, in 2.6 seconds, he bowled over RG Chris Lindstrom as the Falcons doubled Kingsley Keke. On the second, in 2.0, he beat rookie LG Matt Hennessy, a third-round draft choice, with an inside move after Keke was doubled again. On the third, in 3.6, he beat LG James Carpenter up the field when the interior double-team went to Dean Lowry. Each of the sacks also took place with Za'Darius standing up over a guard in Pettine's "rover" look out of a four-man front. Za'Darius was the rover on 14 snaps. His reduced anchor from a two-point stance has hurt the run defense at times, but the Falcons trailed badly so the run wasn't much of a factor. On the other hand, Za'Darius was tagged with the only two penalties by the defense, giving him four of the unit's total of 10 in four games. His roughing-the-passer penalty came on a fourth-and-6 incomplete pass and led to a TD. It must be hard for offenses to predict how Za'Darius will play certain looks. An unconventional player, he'll wreck a play deep behind the line before taking himself out of something to his side by drifting inside. There are some plays each week in which he's simply content to stay blocked. On Monday night, it even happened on the goal line against a tight end, Luke Stocker. In all, the Falcons doubled him on 20 percent of passes. Without Christian Kirksey (pectoral), Ty Summers (52) and Krys Barnes (38) worked inside. Summers tackled better this game but his failure to tackle Todd Gurley at the 3 on his TD run was hideous. Barnes doesn't have anywhere near the timed speed of Summers but makes up for it by diagnosing plays quickly, especially for a rookie. Barnes has nice size, seems to have a

feel for zone coverage and shows signs of being a fairly heavy hitter. Mike Pettine rushed Barnes only twice, but on the first he flushed Matt Ryan with a power move against RB Brian Hill and Raven Greene collected the sack. Oren Burks (two) made another appearance.

Defensive Backs (4)

After injuries kept Detroit's Kenny Golladay and New Orleans' Michael Thomas from suiting up against the Packers, this unit earned another reprieve when the great Julio Jones managed to drag his tight hamstring around for 15 plays before shutting it down before halftime. He wasn't a factor. The Packers probably could see that in pre-game warmups. Jaire Alexander (70) generally went wherever Calvin Ridley lined up. Ridley had three or four opportunities downfield against Alexander but Matt Ryan failed to get him the ball. Alexander didn't break up any passes just as Ridley didn't catch any of his five targeted throws. Kevin King (30) had a ton of open-field contact in the first half and then sat out the second half with a quadriceps injury. After missing the tackle of Jones on a hitch, King sold out against rampaging offensive linemen on two plays shortly thereafter. Later, he blew up FB Keith Smith on a tackle for a loss. With King done, the coaches went with Josh Jackson. His 28 snaps couldn't have gone worse. He didn't challenge Olamide Zaccheaus on a third-and-5 slant for 6. Beat deep, he was called for pass interference. He had Todd Gurley dead to rights at the Packers 5 but missed the tackle on what became a TD. He played soft on another slant to Zaccheaus that went for 17. He didn't get enough depth and Ryan hit a corner route behind him for 19. The defense missed 11 tackles, and Jackson led with three. With four minutes left, the coaches obviously had seen too much and benched him in the middle of a drive. They waved in Ka'dar Hollman, the sixth-round pick from Toledo in 2019. In his 12 snaps, 11 of them hurry-up passes, Hollman broke up 1 ½ sideline passes. Chandon Sullivan, the nickel back, departed after three snaps with a concussion. Will Redmond (39) replaced Sullivan, with Raven Greene (50) then operating both as the dime back and nickel LB. Redmond limped off late with an unspecified injury. Greene wants in on the action wherever it might lead. When Greene saw his man, RB Brian Hill, blocking, he charged forward and hog-tied Ryan for a sack. Later, Greene tried it again and Ryan passed to his man for 11. Rookie Vernon Scott (11) could be in line for a prominent role. Darnell Savage (67) was rolled up by cut-blocking TE Luke Stocker and left with an apparent ankle injury but returned after missing just three snaps. His best work has been done in the box against the run. Adrian Amos (70) beat LT Jake Matthews for a knockdown on one of his two rushes and in the end zone broke up what would have been a 26-yard TD pass to Ridley.

Kickers (1)

Mason Crosby has been kicking mostly screwballs (left to right) or straight balls. In the second quarter, he hooked an extra point that missed to the left. His only field-goal attempt, from 48 yards, was successful despite a low snap. His five kickoffs for distance, including four touchbacks, averaged 72 yards and 3.92 seconds of hang time. JK Scott clearly needs work. One of his punts went out of bounds left, the other landed at the 1 and was a touchback. His averages were 40.5 yards (gross), 30.5 (net) and 4.08 hang time.

Special Teams (3)

Tyler Ervin had a season-best punt return of 11 yards to midfield, setting up a TD drive. His 34-yard kickoff return also was a season long. Hunter Bradley delivered a low snap on the lone field-goal try that JK Scott did good work to get down safely. Scott must spin the ball at least slightly on the majority of Bradley's short snaps. He needs more perfect laces. The tackling was precise and it was hard on the Falcons' two kickoff returns. Oren Burks and Ty Summers had the most snaps in the kicking game with 18.