

Rating The Packers : Week 7 at Texans

By Bob McGinn Oct 27, 2020

By the time the Packers took the field in January against the 49ers in Santa Clara, Calif., for the NFC Championship Game, they had played four exhibition games, 16 regular-season games and a divisional playoff game.

The only preferred starter missing for Green Bay after 21 games due to injury was fullback Danny Vitale, who was playing only about 12 snaps a game, anyway.

That marked the 13th straight game in which the opposing team was missing more starters than the Packers due to injury. In the final accounting, the Packers had five starters miss a total of 10 games in the regular season and postseason compared to 69 games missed by starters for the opponent. My records date to the 2000 season, and the only season even close to 2019 in Green Bay in terms of injury avoidance was 2006 when six starters missed 12 games.

Injuries, of course, have a habit of evening out. So it has been this season for the Packers, who had seven starters sit out Sunday in Houston. The missing included left tackle David Bakhtiari, their best offensive lineman, and Aaron Jones, their best running back.

The replacements, Billy Turner and Jamaal Williams, responded as all coaches hope backups will but have reservations that they will not. Their contributions were essential in Green Bay's 35-20 rout of the Texans.

"Certainly, when you're talking about some pretty darn good players, you want those guys in the lineup," coach Matt LaFleur said Monday. "Whoever has to fill that void gets an opportunity to go showcase what they're able to do. I think that's how you build confidence throughout your team – to step up and play to the same level."

The Packers have 23 missed games by starters in six games. Their opponents have 17 missed games by starters.

"Injuries are part of the game," LaFleur said. "You have to have that next-man-up mentality. We had a lot of guys just step up. It's just awesome to see."

Here is a rating of the Packers (5-1) against the Texans (1-6). 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. Billy Turner. 3. Jamaal Williams.**

Receivers (4 ½)

As an interim head coach for Kansas City in December 2011, Romeo Crennel was at the helm for a shocking upset of the previously undefeated Packers. In that game, Crennel used Cover-2 man as his base defense and held the Packers to 14 points. On Sunday, the Texans planned to use Bradley Roby, their No. 1 cornerback, to shadow Davante Adams all over the field just as Roby had done against other No. 1 wide receivers this season. Roby was lost after three snaps with a knee-ankle injury; their other starter, Gareon Conley, had ankle surgery in the offseason and remains out. Crennel continued playing mostly man coverage with Phillip Gaines, who has played for four teams, on the left side, ex-Buccaneer Vernon Hargreaves on the right side and FS Eric Murray in the slot. Adams, who played 57 of the 62 possible snaps on offense, had a field day with 14 receptions in 16 targets for a career-high 196 yards and two touchdowns. In man coverage, he caught five for 66 against Hargreaves, four for 61 against Gaines and one for 45 against Murray. Ninety of his yards came after the catch. All seven of the Packers' third-down conversions were completions to Adams. One week after being outplayed by Tampa Bay's Carlton Davis, Adams feasted on the low-grade opposition. When Murray decided to press in the slot, Adams buzzed him at the line for the long TD. On third and goal at the 3, he had a zig-zag route against Gaines. He zagged, leaving the defender staggering in vain to prevent the easy TD. Picking the ball up late because of what he said were the stadium lights, Adams bear-hugged a 28-yard pass despite tight coverage by Hargreaves. Adams used his build-up type speed across the field to run away from Gaines on an over route for 36. When a third-and-10 bubble screen seemed to have little chance, he set up his blocks and found an alley along the sideline for 16. If one was to nitpick, there were at least two instances when Adams was flagging the football in one hand away from his body. That has turnover written all over it. Although Marquez Valdes-Scantling (51), Darrius Shepherd (29), Malik Taylor (10) and Equanimeous St. Brown (three) were quiet all day, Crennel and defensive coordinator Anthony Weaver stubbornly played man with their inferior personnel until it was too late. MVS dropped his fifth pass in six games and was shut out. It's understandable why wideouts get jumpy blocking downfield when they sense bodies behind them. Watch Adams. But MVS' fear about being rolled up on has started affecting his blocking because he is looking behind him prematurely. Though undersized, Shepherd is a pesky blocker. Robert Tonyan (ankle) certainly earned points with the coaches by playing hurt, then earned more by making an exceptional, sprawling catch for 31 when Hargreaves just let him run by. Jace Sternberger (20), the motion tight end, spent much of his day coming across the formation and delivering cut blocks on the backside defensive end. On his only target, he came across left to right as if to block and then brought in a 3-yard TD pass with one hand. Mercedes Lewis matched Tonyan's snap count of 31.

Offensive Line (4)

A three-year starter at LT at North Dakota State from 2011-13, Billy Turner started only one game at that position in his 7 ½-year NFL career. That was Game 5 for Miami in 2016. Until Turner was installed as the replacement for David Bakhtiari (chest), he had never played a snap for the Packers at the position. The strength of the Texans' porous defense probably is DE J.J. Watt and rush OLB Whitney Mercilus. Rick Wagner, who looked out of place in 23 snaps for an injured Bakhtiari in Tampa, made the start at his familiar position of RT. On routes requiring at least 2.5 seconds, Matt LaFleur usually gave help to whoever had Watt with a chip from the tight ends or by sliding the line toward him. Turner wasn't pretty. He wound up in some awkward situations. The final tally, however (two knockdowns, no "bad"

runs), undoubtedly was much appreciated by Aaron Rodgers and the coaches. Wagner wasn't as good, yielding 1 ½ pressures and playing a role in three "bad" runs. He also had Watt more than Turner. Corey Linsley, who was questionable with his chronic back issue, went the distance. The Texans had given up 263 rushing yards to Tennessee the previous week. Linsley didn't play as strong as usual, being stalemated by DTs P.J. Hall and Brandon Dunn. He was able to get more movement as the game went on. Lucas Patrick allowed one pressure and 1 1/2 "bad" runs in his typical scrappy performance. The top player inside was Elgton Jenkins, who didn't have a blatant miss and continued moving bodies.

Quarterbacks (4)

The degree of difficulty for the offense Sunday was low. The Texans' 30th-ranked defense was down three starters after three snaps, and their coaches came in with a puzzling game plan. Defensive coordinator Anthony Weaver blitzed extensively (33.3 percent) after seeing the success the Buccaneers had pressuring Green Bay, but the Texans' fifth rusher had little effect. On two occasions, Aaron Rodgers beat pressure with his legs. Having allowed a league-worst 177.5 yards per game on the ground, the Texans were worried about the run and often played with a safety in the box. The Packers rushed for just 96 yards, but with the Texans determined to play run it was more than enough to make the play-action passing game go. Rodgers, who wasn't sacked and knocked down only twice, spun some beautiful balls to the rampaging Davante Adams. His head was on a swivel this week. There was no need to stare down a receiver. He looked left and he looked right, and ultimately Adams accounted for 196 of his 283 passing yards. He showed off his skilled ballhandling and deft short passes on TD passes measuring 3, 3 and 1 yard. There were three occasions when he threw behind wide receivers; Adams saved one by turning back to make a tough, knee-high catch. Matt LaFleur credited Rodgers with making smart checks to Adams on two sizeable completions. Of Rodgers' 60 snaps, 37 came from shotgun and 23 from under center. Tim Boyle handled the two kneel-downs. All five of the Packers' victories ended with kneel-downs: in order, the count has been two, two, one, one and two.

Running Backs (4)

After playing all 18 games last season, Aaron Jones suffered a calf injury Thursday. Sitting out Friday, he made the trip but then missed his first game since December 2018. For some teams, losing a dual-threat such as Jones would be problematic. In Matt LaFleur's case, he plugged in Jamaal Williams, gave him his highest snap count (55) since the last time Jones was out and probably didn't give it a second thought. The way Williams has prepared and performed weekly for 3 ½ seasons makes him a coach's dream. He didn't disappoint as the starter, finishing with 114 yards from scrimmage in 23 touches. On the first of his eight snaps as a split receiver, he beat speedy ILB Zach Cunningham on a shallow crosser, caught the ball easily in stride and gained 17. SS Justin Reid was penalized for a blow to Williams' head that sent his headgear flying. Williams' reaction was to leap to his feet and begin dancing. It should be obvious by now that teammates love playing with him. He's fun and filled with charisma, but keeps the team first. On one inside run, OLB Jacob Martin beat Billy Turner inside. What would have been a loss became a gain of 5 when Williams changed direction and veered to the outside. On a 13-yard rush, he caught J.J. Watt napping on the backside with an unexpected cutback. Williams, however, broke just one tackle, dropped a wide-receiver screen pass and missed the blitzing Cunningham for a pressure. Even though the game was well in hand, AJ Dillon was given just 14 snaps. Until Dillon gets out of his two-arms-around-the-ball style of running, he won't be the back the Packers expected him to be. It's too

restricting. Despite his size, he was knocked back on two of five carries. On a rush for no gain, Corey Linsley was driven back by DT P.J. Hall into Dillon's path. He planted his foot to cut quickly, stumbled and went down. The Packers still haven't thrown him a pass. If Dillon still weighs the 247 pounds that he did at the combine, it might be best for him to drop 10 to 15 pounds. Defenders in the NFL smash anything that moves, 247 or 232 or 182. The game for running backs is explosion, speed, making people miss and then power, not bulk and charging into people. Jumbo backs can have a greater impact in colder weather, but they still must get to the hole in a timely fashion. John Lovett (nine) is versatile, logging snaps at fullback, tight end, split receiver and on the wing.

Defensive Line (4)

Tyler Lancaster (shoulder) is out indefinitely but the five-man rotation had a rather impressive day. David Johnson tried the middle 14 times, and other than a run for 13 yards his longest gain was 4. The Texans' starting offensive line was intact; it just couldn't get anything done. The leader was Kenny Clark, who is nearing his familiar form after missing all but 15 snaps of Games 1-4 with a groin injury. On a tone-setting third and 1, Clark shoved C Nick Martin back so far that pulling RG Zach Fulton couldn't get to his man and Johnson lost 1. He was equally impressive as a rusher, registering three pressures with improved hand usage and strength. Clark played 43 of the 68 possible snaps on defense. Clark's return makes the Packers' four-man rush line in third-and-long situations hard to handle. Kingsley Keke (30) beat LG Senio Kelemete to set up Za'Darius Smith's sack. It was Keke's rapid diagnosis of a screen that led Deshaun Watson to bolt the pocket and into the arms of Krys Barnes for another sack. Dean Lowry (29) was steady in Lancaster's role as the traffic cop in the middle. Montravius Adams (23) is playing more because he deserves it. He manhandled Fulton on a carry by Johnson for 1 and stuffed Martin on the goal line for a rush that lost a yard. Journeyman Billy Winn, who was promoted from the practice squad Saturday, wasn't buckled by a double-team block and moves better than a slug.

Linebackers (3 ½)

Are rookies Krys Barnes (27) and Kamal Martin (29) better than Christian Kirksey, who has been out since early in Game 3 with a pectoral injury? Neither Barnes and Martin possess all that seasoning but they're bigger bodies with probably more knockback ability and comparable speed. Barnes has a good blend of thickness and athleticism. He isn't a gazelle in the open field but he comes to balance in the open field and gets people down. When Randall Cobb sat down inside and then took off, Barnes overcommitted and the cost was a 12-yard reception. Barnes exited after reinjuring a shoulder on the first snap of the second half. Martin started alongside Barnes but his playing rate increased with the injury. The rookie from Minnesota played hard and with emotion, delivered some stiff hits and was eager for action. He wasn't moving as fluidly in coverage as Barnes but it also was his first game back from an August knee injury. Ty Summers (18), who is faster than both rookies, was used in passing situations. However, Summers was at least partly responsible on TD passes of 3 and 6 yards. The lone missed tackle by an inside linebacker was by Summers. Mike Pettine had his biggest blitz day of the season (34.6 percent). He kept adding a fifth rusher in the second half to augment his average four-man rushes and take away one more gap through which Deshaun Watson could scramble. Za'Darius Smith (50) led the way with 4 ½ pressures while Preston Smith (49) had two and Rashan Gary (44) had one. On passing downs, Za'Darius stood up eight times in the middle and put his hand down over a guard six times. The Texans double-teamed him on just 16 percent of his non-stunt rushes. One of his pressures

came against LT Laremy Tunsil, a top-notch player. Twice in the second half, Za'Darius was down with injuries. Yet, amid the hunt for sacks in the last four minutes, the coaches had him on the field for seven of the last 10 snaps. Preston's best play in weeks came on a fourth-and-1 option when he made an instantaneous decision to attack Watson and forget the pitch. Obviously, he had done his homework during the week and was able to act on what he had seen. Swallowed by Preston, Watson lost a yard. Gary lost contain on Watson's first TD pass. He continues being around the quarterback. Jonathan Garvin (seven) and Oren Burks (five) played, but Randy Ramsey did not.

Secondary (4)

Playing without Kevin King (quadriceps) for a second straight game, Mike Pettine did whatever he could to prevent Josh Jackson (68) from getting beat deep. Will Fuller, Kenny Stills and Brandin Cooks all are much too fast for Jackson. So the Packers played mostly zones with Jackson, Jaire Alexander (68) and nickel back Chandon Sullivan (63) set up well off the line of scrimmage. The longest completion to a wide receiver was Randall Cobb's 28-yard corner route behind Raven Greene (34). Cobb, the ex-Packers slot, had a fine day. Deshaun Watson took underneath routes against Greene and the linebackers rather than force throws against Jackson's soft coverage. Jackson made a miscue jumping at Watson on a third-and-3 scramble, but otherwise supported the run well and didn't make a critical error in coverage. Alexander broke up an end-zone pass to Fuller, got caught inside on an option pass for 30 and stayed with the plan. Sullivan registered a pass breakup on third and 4. Of the 17 rushes by defensive backs and inside linebackers, Sullivan received eight. On two he was unblocked and in position for sacks, but missed Watson on the first and then foolishly leaped on the second to allow his prey to scurry away. Ka'dar Hollman didn't play on defense. Minus FS Darnell Savage (quadriceps), Will Redmond (68) went the distance and was adequate. His motor runs hot. He wants in on everything. An undersized former corner, he likes contact. He drew an unnecessary roughness penalty for hitting Stills. Adrian Amos (68) played deep most of the day. On his only pressure, he beat TE Pharaoh Brown off the edge for a sack in 2.9 seconds from a rare 7-man rush. With 1 ½ minutes left, rookie free agent Henry Black forced David Johnson to fumble and Amos made a sure recovery. It was the first fumble by an opponent since the Saints in Game 3. In a busy afternoon, Greene operated as a nickel linebacker and dime back. He delivered some crisp low, wrap-up tackles. He also missed a jam on Fuller in bump coverage that resulted in a 24-yard completion, dropped an interception and generally was picked on by Watson. When Greene (oblique) exited, rookie Vernon Scott (13) came through by tackling RB Duke Johnson in the flat for minus-3.

Kickers (4)

Mason Crosby made all five extra-point attempts. His six kickoffs, all touchbacks, averaged 71.2 yards and 4.12 seconds of hang time. JK Scott got off four punts and had another blocked. His averages were 51.8 (gross), 37.6 (net) and a phenomenal hang time of 4.99 seconds. His second punt hung 5.47, a remarkable boot.

Special Teams (½)

Up from the practice squad for the game, RB Dexter Williams might have cost himself a job with a missed block that resulted in a blocked punt. As the right wingback, Williams could well have been loafing in the fourth quarter with the Packers leading, 28-10. The snap by Hunter Bradley was high, forcing JK Scott to leave his feet. His catch-to-toe time of 1.3 seconds was about .15 slower than normal. One-on-one against Williams, RB Buddy Howell powered right by him and blocked the punt with ease. Williams, who logged 38 snaps in four games on special teams as a rookie, was regarded as unreliable by some scouts before the Packers drafted him in the sixth round from Notre Dame. On the final punt, Williams was benched in favor of Jamaal Williams. The Packers' other major blunder also occurred in the fourth quarter when Ka'imi Fairbairn's onside kickoff in the middle of the field was recovered by S Michael Thomas. The location of the kick certainly was surprising. Adrian Amos first misjudged the ball, then Chandon Sullivan whiffed with the ball in his grasp. The illegal-hands-to-the-face call against Ka'dar Hollman on a punt was the first penalty on special teams since Game 2. Hollman and Equanimeous St. Brown were the punt gunners while Josh Jackson and Hollman were the outside hold-up players on punt returns. Darrius Shepherd showed courage bringing back a kickoff but missed blocks by Dexter Williams and John Lovett that got him leveled. Shepherd's decision-making in the absence of Tyler Ervin (wrist) has been good. Kamal Martin was late getting on the field for a punt. Oren Burks' 25 snaps led the kicking game.