

# Rating The Packers : Week 8 vs Vikings

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By Bob McGinn Nov 3, 2020

Effort is and always will be a touchy subject when it comes to pro football.

Reporters often question coaches about effort, or lack thereof, following a loss. The vast majority of coaches will admit to poor execution and other sins. But because the effort of their players reflects on them, and knowing criticism in that direction might cause problems in the locker room, precious few coaches will concede their players didn't try hard or, heaven forbid, quit.

Thus, it was both noteworthy and refreshing Sunday and Monday to hear coach Matt LaFleur's take on the Packers' 28-22 defeat at the hands of the Vikings at Lambeau Field.

After the game, LaFleur said: "I do think the juice, if you will, of our football team isn't where it needed to be. ... Guys have to dig deep sometimes to bring that out, and if you feel like somebody else doesn't have it, you have to bring them along with you. We need to find the guys that are going to step up and be the leaders who are going to bring that positive energy. Because, if you don't have it, you just aren't going to be at your best."

After studying the film, LaFleur said this: "We had too many missed tackles. We have to make sure we have 11 hats rolling to the football, playing relentlessly with that intent on every play. We just have to make sure we're giving our best effort every play."

By my count, the Packers missed four tackles on special teams, one more than they missed in the first six games. On defense, the Packers missed 14 tackles, their second-highest total of the season. Their average in the first six games was 9.3.

The Packers weren't playing with emotion on defense. Gang-tackling was minimal. Pursuit was haphazard.

"We need more guys getting off of blocks and more guys running to the ball," safety Adrian Amos said. "More hats to the ball makes tackling a lot easier."

The fact that the Packers played before some fans the last two games in Tampa and Atlanta might have been a factor, according to quarterback Aaron Rodgers, who added, "I didn't feel like we played with a lot of energy." There were no fans in the stands Sunday.

All of that was in direct contrast to the Vikings and their coach, Mike Zimmer, who ranks as one of the NFL's most outspoken coaches even when it comes to pointing out the shortcomings of his players.

“I was proud of the way the guys came out and fought,” Zimmer said Monday. “I thought they competed well, played with a lot of energy. I think it showed.”

On Sunday, the Packers went off as a six-point favorite. In the 31 meetings between the two teams from 2005-19, the Packers were favored by more than six points eight times: at home in 2016, '14, '12 (twice) and '11, and at the Metrodome in '14, '13 and '11. Green Bay won each of the eight games with an average margin of 16 points.

The last time the Packers lost to the Vikings when favored by six points or more was the NFC wild-card playoff game at Lambeau Field in January 2005. The spread was Green Bay minus-6 ½, and the one common denominator with Sunday was the lack of fire on the part of the Packers.

The Vikings limped into the playoffs with an 8-8 record after losing seven of their last 10 games. No NFL team had ever qualified for the postseason after a 3-7 finish.

Minnesota dominated from start to finish, winning, 31-17, against its listless rival. Brett Favre threw four interceptions. Later that month, coach Mike Sherman was stripped of his general manager duties by team president Bob Harlan, and GM Ted Thompson was hired. Defensive coordinator Bob Slowik was canned as well.

It also will be remembered as the game in which wide receiver Randy Moss pretended to pull down his pants and moon the Packers' fans in the south end zone after he caught his second touchdown pass.

“They came in and played with more of a sense of urgency than we did,” Packers safety Darren Sharper said. “It seems like they were more excited about coming here and playing than we were excited.”

Judging by point spreads, Sunday was the worst defeat for LaFleur in his 25-game career, including playoffs. His previous low was the 26-11 loss to the Los Angeles Chargers last November when Green Bay was favored by four points.

Here is a rating of the Packers (5-2) against the Vikings (2-5). Five footballs are the maximum, one-half football is the minimum.

The three stars of the game were: **1. Jace Sternberger, 2. Robert Tonyan, 3. Corey Linsley**. As a team, the Packers received 1 ½ footballs.

### **Receivers (3 ½)**

Jace Sternberger, a third-round draft choice in 2019 as the sixth tight end selected, is starting to show evidence why he was picked there. His two-drop debacle in Game 2 against the Lions has become a distant memory. Not that the uber-confident Sternberger ever let that performance get him down. On Sunday, he made two big plays and was in a position to make a third. In the first quarter, he read the flow of the defense, sat down in a window, made himself an inviting target for the bootlegging Aaron Rodgers and came up with a leaping catch for 13 yards on fourth and 1. In the third quarter, he ran free

for what would have been about a 40-yard gain but the ball was overthrown. In the fourth quarter, he hauled in a corner route against Cover 2 for 27. Sternberger, who played 28 of the possible 75 snaps on offense, looked fast and fluid. He caught the ball effortlessly using his hands, not his body. Future opponents now will be forced to pay more attention to Sternberger, and that should open things for other receivers. The 45-yard diving catch made by Robert Tonyan (46) was his fifth reception for at least 20 yards in the last four games. Last season, all of the Packers' tight ends combined for 13 in 18 games. Tonyan drew a penalty for holding DE Ifeadi Odenigbo in one-on-one pass protection. He also cost the offense about 16 seconds by failing to get out of bounds after a 17-yard reception. Mercedes Lewis (20) hurt the operation with a pair of penalties for holding on bootlegs. Anybody with 15 years of experience ought to know when he has to let go of his man. Mike Zimmer was bound and determined that Davante Adams (71) wouldn't duplicate his 14 catches, 156 yards performance on opening day. Despite playing with a rag-tag group of rookies and reserves at cornerback, the Vikings limited Adams to 7-53 generally by keeping both safeties back. Adams did score three touchdowns, two on short outbreaking routes against Jeff Gladney and another against strong safety Josh Metellus. Adams' blocking is becoming an issue. Jamaal Williams was stopped a yard short on a third-and-2 flat pass when Adams made no effort to block either of the two players who made the tackle. MLB Eric Kendricks matched Adams stride for stride on a deep vertical route that fell incomplete. With Allen Lazard (core surgery) missing a fourth straight game, the other wideouts were Marquez Valdes-Scantling (62), Equanimeous St. Brown (22), Darrius Shepherd (19) and Malik Taylor (13). St. Brown was targeted three times, the others once. MVS made a sharp cut in the end zone to draw a pass-interference penalty on Gladney and caught a 19-yard out from the slot against Gladney. St. Brown played extensively in the second half but sat out the final 10 plays; he was listed as limited Monday with a knee injury. Against a seven-man pressure, St. Brown stretched out beautifully but dropped a 16-yard pass on third and 10. St. Brown, whose vertical jump was merely 34 ½ inches, was unable to use his 2 ½-inch height advantage on SS Harrison Smith to snare a 37-yard bomb in the end zone. Taylor made a 26-yard gain inside when CB Kris Boyd fell off tight coverage due to a knee injury.

## **Offensive Line (2)**

Intensity sometimes doesn't show up in the lines but it certainly did Sunday. After trading DE Yannick Ngakoue last month, the Vikings were left with journeyman NT Shamar Stephen as the headliner of their once formidable front. In the first half, the Packers had their way with position coach Andre Patterson's unheralded eight-man rotation. But, the longer the second half dragged on, the more the Vikings' four-man rushes bothered Aaron Rodgers. They showed the Packers' linemen what outright hustle and grit can produce. Elgton Jenkins and Rick Wagner were the main weaknesses. Jenkins allowed three hurries in the second half besides being nailed twice for holding. On the second, DE Jalyln Holmes beat him with a spin move on a rush. Jenkins is becoming a solid starter, but the problems that he's encountered in the last few games suggest he still needs considerable development. Wagner might have started running out of gas in the fourth quarter when Hercules Mata'afa, an inside player just off the practice squad, went out to left end and whipped for a pair of flushes. Corey Linsley, Lucas Patrick and Billy Turner all were at least adequate, combining for two pressures and 2 ½ "bad" runs. On fourth and 1 at the Minnesota 8, what happened to Turner gets back to the question of energy. DE Ifeadi Odenigbo immediately tossed Turner to the ground as he slammed into Jamaal Williams, who barely made the marker. It was an embarrassing whiff, one that just cannot happen in a short-yardage situation. Turner

played LT because David Bakhtiari (chest) sat out a second game in a row. The entire unit either lacked the quickness or cohesion on their combination blocks to neutralize speedy and undersized MLB Eric Kendricks. He made tackle after tackle either slipping blocks or reacting quickly before a blocker could reach him.

### **Quarterbacks (3)**

Mike Zimmer pressured 17.4 percent, half as much as he did in the Vikings' 43-34 defeat seven weeks ago at U.S. Bank Stadium. His secondary that day couldn't hold up in tough coverage assignments. For the record, let's identify what Minnesota had for cornerbacks Sunday. Two of their top three corners, Mike Hughes and Holton Hill, were injured and didn't play. The other, rookie Cameron Dantzler, started without the benefit of practice all week (COVID-19) but departed after 14 of the 75 snaps with a neck injury and possible concussion. Rookie Jeff Gladney went the distance while another rookie, Harrison Hand, played 29 snaps after having played 37 all season. Kris Boyd, who had played 41 snaps from scrimmage in the first six games, replaced Dantzler and played until 3 ½ minutes remained when he exited with a knee injury. Mark Fields, just up from the practice squad, played 21 snaps before suffering a punctured lung late in the third quarter as he tackled Equanimeous St. Brown. As the Packers drove for a winning TD, the Vikings had Gladney and Hand outside, FS Anthony Harris as the nickel and rookie Josh Metellus, who had played three snaps all season, at free safety. Perhaps Aaron Rodgers' finest throw was the 7-yard TD to Adams in which Matt LaFleur aligned Adams in the No. 3 position to set up a near-impossible matchup for Metellus against Adams in the slot. Given a temperate early November day, Rodgers could have been expected to have another field day as he did against the same opponent on Sept. 13. Conspiring against him was the windy, wintry weather, with winds of 25 mph blowing every which way. Rodgers played just OK. Given his personnel, Zimmer's only chance was to fire up the troops, play soft zones and make his respected adversary go the distance time after time. Rodgers did it thrice on TD drives of 75, 72 and 74 yards, but the inability to score on four of five second-half possessions enabled Zimmer to prevail after three straight defeats in the series. Rodgers' misfire to the wide-open Jace Sternberger deep loomed large. A better ball to Robert Tonyan might have turned a diving 45-yard reception into 60 or 65. In the first half, he overthrew Davante Adams in the end zone on a slant-and-go. Rodgers managed the game well, catching the opponent on a 12-man penalty for the first time this season. It just wasn't enough to avoid an upset defeat.

### **Running Backs (3)**

Jamaal Williams (64) might have had a considerably bigger day than 16 carries for 75 yards (4.7 avg.) had it not been for MLB Eric Kendricks. Most of his 12 tackles were at Williams' expense. The performance of Kendricks, an extremely active but also highly disciplined six-year veteran, was in direct contrast to the rookies playing inside linebacker for Green Bay. Williams, who has been battling a knee injury, wasn't able to break a tackle by Kendricks all day. In fact, in his 22 touches, the only tackle that he broke was by CB Jeff Gladney. Elusiveness and home-run speed are what separate Williams from Aaron Jones, who missed a second straight game (calf). If by sheer will and nothing else, Williams barely converted on fourth and 1 and a two-point conversion. AJ Dillon (10) was on the field for seven straight plays in the first half and then only three more in the second half. It was his best performance. On a 7-yard gain, he showed some weave. On a carry for 8, he stuck his foot in the ground and packed a punch on contact. He dropped an outlet pass tight to the right sideline but bounced back two plays later on a swing pass to

the left. He made CB Kris Boyd miss, turning a gain of 1 into a gain of 16. Whereas Vikings offensive coordinator Gary Kubiak got considerable impact from lead-blocking FB C.J. Ham in 22 snaps, Matt LaFleur elected to use FB John Lovett only on special teams. Back from a two-game absence (wrist), Tyler Ervin (20) went in jet-sweep motion as a wideout on 14 of his snaps. His drop of a gentle push pass cost him the chance for the easiest reception he'll ever have.

## **Defensive Line (1)**

In Mike Pettine's scheme, the 300-pounders are programmed to hold gaps and occupy blockers so the linebackers can flow to the football. Usually, just one of them is on the field in obvious passing downs, so rush chances are limited. So, basically, that's the job description. As they carry out their duties, however, one would think someone would occasionally shed or slip a blocker and make a tackle in the backfield. That shouldn't be too much to ask, right? In the Packers' case, it apparently is, because seven games in and the defensive line has accounted for two tackles for a loss. Montravius Adams had one against Tampa Bay and a half against Houston, and Kenny Clark had a half against Houston. With the howling wind handicapping the passing game, it was an afternoon for the old-fashioned ground game. As a result, the Packers played three big-boy fronts far more often than in any other game. They had three 300-pounders in for 37 of the gradable 52 snaps on defense compared to six plays with two and nine with one. The Vikings' game plan was appropriate for the weather. Rushing on 34 of their official 49 plays, they gained 173 yards and averaged 5.1. Mission accomplished. Clark (46) won some and lost some against C Garrett Bradbury, like Clark a first-round draft choice. The Packers expect and need much more than that from Clark. He wasn't good enough. Neither were the rest, including starters Dean Lowry (37) and Kingsley Keke (16) and backups Tyler Lancaster (27) and Adams (six). The Vikings are anything but good at guard with Dakota Dozier, a backup for six years before this season, and rookie Ezra Cleveland, a tackle by body type who became a starter in Game 6 only after Dru Samia demonstrated he couldn't play. Nevertheless, those guards plus the undersized Bradbury not only cut off all penetration by the defensive line but also moved people where they wanted them to go on a steady basis. Lancaster made the tackle on three 2-yard gains but also was on the ground too much. Lowry recorded a sack in 2.2 seconds when unblocked but was displaced too often against the run. Keke, who looks like a player fixated on sacks, had Dalvin Cook almost in his grasp three yards behind the line but blew it, and so the great back could set forth on a 37-yard jaunt. Why Adams played fewer snaps than he has all season was unclear. Maybe the coaches didn't think his style of play would hold up in a ground-and-pound contest.

## **Linebackers ( ½ )**

Krys Barnes (49) and Kamal Martin (42) had disappointing performances. With his eyes up, Dalvin Cook made big gains by cutting back when he sensed the rookies were out of their gaps. Their false steps and guessing led to being out of position; offensive linemen then had angles to seal them away from Cook. Barnes and Martin each missed one tackle. Given Cook's abundant talent, the coaches could live with that. They can't live with undisciplined play. Martin looked like a bull in a china shop. Smashing into gaps, he ran pell-mell into some plays and flat out of some others. One time, he surprised C Garrett Bradbury with a back-door charge in which he drilled Cook for no gain. Other times, he left his gap and Cook made him pay. Martin's best moment came on a throwback screen when he split three offensive linemen and struck WR Adam Thielen, forcing an incompleteness. Barnes was more under control than the

supercharged Martin but wasn't any more effective. On one play, he ran through a gap hoping to dump Cook for a loss, missed and watched as he surged into his abandoned area for a gain of 9. FB C.J. Ham lit up Barnes several times on lead blocks. As the game progressed Barnes did get better. On a third and 1, he beat LG Dakota Dozier so fast that Cook had to bounce outside, where Adrian Amos recorded the tackle for a loss. Ty Summers didn't play. On the outside, Preston Smith (41) and Za'Darius Smith (47) were two of the worst offenders when it came to effort. On Cook's 50-yard touchdown on a screen pass, Preston decided to break stride and let up in pursuit when S Vernon Scott seemed poised to make the tackle. Only Scott missed, and so when Preston sped up he came up a foot short of making the tackle. Preston didn't squeeze the backside against the block of TE Kyle Rudolph on Cook's 21-yard TD and was late to the flat on a bootleg. Za'Darius hasn't hustled since arriving in Green Bay, at least when it comes to downfield pursuit. Hats to the ball? That's for somebody else. Za'Darius also didn't have a pressure in 12 individual rushes. That was bad enough, but even worse was his senseless penalty for encroachment. He was standing up right over the ball and just decided to go. No one else budged. It was wacky. On the long screen, it's the job of the down linemen to that side, in this case, Za'Darius and Rashan Gary (28), to recognize and abort it. They were oblivious. Desperate to halt the run, Mike Pettine tried late line shifts, eight-man fronts and even seven snaps in the Bear front. Well into the second half, he tried putting Za'Darius in his standup rover role over center on early downs. The Vikings just kept running their stuff. Now Gary is gung-ho when it comes to hustle and chase. He just can't get home on the rush and was very inconsistent against the run, both setting the edge and at the point in goal line. Oren Burks (nine) also participated.

## **Defensive Backs (1)**

Adrian Amos (52) played hard. He's unselfish. He hits. He provides stability to a secondary that needs it badly. Last week, it was beating a tight end for a sack. Sunday, it was slicing in from the side to wrap up Dalvin Cook on a failed third and 1. Amos did have two of the secondary's seven missed tackles. The Packers have now gone five games without an interception. It's the main reason why the opponents' passer rating is an astronomical 109.8. Last season, the Packers traded up in the first round for speedy Darnell Savage envisioning him as a play-making, hard-hitting free safety. Savage (52) returned from a quadriceps injury but provided nothing that free agent Will Redmond didn't the week before. With his eyes elsewhere, Savage allowed TE Irv Smith to run past him on a leakout for an easy 16-yard gain. On Cook's 37-yard run, Savage couldn't get off Adam Thielen's block. He also missed two tackles. With Raven Greene (oblique) out, Redmond played nickel linebacker. After one missed tackle in four snaps, he exited with a shoulder injury. Mike Pettine waved in rookie Vernon Scott (four), who had the best shot to tackle Cook on the 50-yard screen but missed 16 yards downfield. Another rookie, free agent Henry Black (four), also played there. Minus Kevin King (quadriceps) now for 3 ½ games, it was Josh Jackson (45) filling in again. Pettine has gotten away with Jackson for the most part in coverage by employing more zones, but the Vikings got him for a grab of Thielen in the end zone that drew a flag for pass interference. Neither Jackson nor Jaire Alexander (49) contributed much when it came to being physical against Cook. The coaches had Alexander cover rookie Justin Jefferson when he was outside rather than Thielen. Kirk Cousins didn't much try to challenge downfield, but on one, Alexander needlessly grabbed Jefferson and drew a 20-yard pass interference penalty to set up a TD. Nickel back Chandon Sullivan (13) didn't play much because it was a base defense kind of day. On third and 8, he misplayed a shallow crosser and Chad Beebe zipped away from him for 16.

## **Kickers (2 ½)**

Nursing a calf injury on his plant leg and battling nasty wind gusts, Mason Crosby probably was thankful not to have a long field-goal attempt. He hit two extra-points and turned over the kickoff chores to JK Scott. His three boots for distance averaged 47 yards and 2.64 seconds of hang time. He squibbed another. Scott's only punt was a beauty, traveling 38 yards to the 6 with 4.44 seconds of hang time.

## **Special Teams (1 ½)**

The vast majority of Mason Crosby's kickoffs have been for touchbacks. The Vikings returned all four of JK Scott's boots for a 16.5 average. The tackling was poor. Of the four misses, Oren Burks had two. Tyler Ervin was back returning punts but Darrius Shepherd remained the No. 1 kickoff returner. When the Packers elected not to rush hard off the edge on an extra point, Dan Bailey was able to gather himself and make the kick off a wayward snap. CB Ka'dar Hollman rarely plays from scrimmage but has been the most used player as a gunner on the punt team and hold-up man on the punt-return team. Ty Summers and Burks shared the snap lead in the kicking game with 17.