

Rating The Packers : Week 9 at 49ers

By Bob McGinn Nov 7, 2020

From a viewership enjoyment standpoint, what was billed Thursday night as one of the premier games on the NFL regular-season schedule turned into a big dud.

Two teams weakened by injury and COVID-19 played on a short week in an empty stadium. On paper, it was a rematch of the NFC Championship Game in January. In actuality, it was similar to one of those dreadful Week 17 games matching a team sitting most of its starters preparing for the playoffs against another team giving time to rookies and just playing out the string.

Just because millions of viewers either changed the channel or turned their television sets off early during the one-sided affair didn't bother the Packers. Revenge for their 37-20 loss in the title game wasn't possible because these 49ers weren't those 49ers. Nevertheless, the Packers had reason to be delighted after making the long trip to the West Coast and coming home with a 34-17 victory.

"Obviously, they got hit by the injury bug more than you usually see, but it's still football," quarterback Aaron Rodgers said. "It still feels great to win. It feels good to be 6-2 at the halfway point and first in the division."

Mike McCarthy was fond of saying coaches in the NFL often get what they emphasize. In the case of his successor, Matt LaFleur, his battle cry called for increased fire and fight against the 49ers after the lethargic Packers were upset by the Vikings on Sunday.

"I thought the energy was there," LaFleur said afterward. "That was something we were looking for, and I thought really, all three phases came to play."

The Packers played without five starters and three important backups due to injury and COVID-19. Three more starters were injured in the first half and didn't play in the second half.

The 49ers were missing 10 starters and seven important backups due to injury and COVID-19. One starter and their nickel back were injured in the first half and didn't play in the second half.

San Francisco didn't have a player in uniform that touched the ball in the title game whereas the Packers had six players active that had 32 touches. At the six so-called skill positions on offense, the Packers had eight players in uniform that played 220 snaps in the title game compared to three players with 53 snaps for the 49ers.

The 49ers couldn't move the ball, at least until garbage time, without quarterback Jimmy Garoppolo (high ankle sprain), tight end George Kittle (broken foot), running back Raheem Mostert (high ankle

sprain) and wide receivers Deebo Samuel (high ankle sprain) and Brandon Aiyuk (COVID-19). On defense, they couldn't inconvenience Rodgers without defensive end Nick Bosa (reconstructive knee surgery), or even begin to cover Davante Adams without cornerback Richard Sherman (calf). Unlike the 49ers, the Packers received an enormous boost on the injury front when running back Aaron Jones was able to play at full throttle after missing two games with a calf injury.

"I feel like we could have got after those guys and done some good things," 49ers coach Kyle Shanahan maintained. "That's on the players, and you just hope to get out there and do your best. We didn't do that tonight."

Here is a rating of the Packers (6-2) against the 49ers (4-5). Five footballs are the maximum, one-half football is the minimum.

The three stars of the game were: **1. Davante Adams. 2. Aaron Rodgers. 3. Elgton Jenkins.** As a team, the Packers received four footballs.

Receivers (3 ½)

For the sake of argument, let's say the top 10 wide receivers in the NFL, in alphabetical order, are Davante Adams, Keenan Allen, Stefon Diggs, Mike Evans, Tyreek Hill, DeAndre Hopkins, Julio Jones, Tyler Lockett, DK Metcalf and Michael Thomas. After burning the 49ers for 173 yards in 10 receptions (12 targets), Adams was asked if he was the best wideout in football. His reply: "Yeah, I think that's fair to say. I think that's not being conceited; that's just being confident. I think obviously what I've done and what I'm going to continue to do is going to prove that to anybody who isn't on board with that."

Adams' first of three catches for more than 30 yards was his best. On a simple go route, Adams wasn't able to blow past CB Emmanuel Moseley, who had bailed at the snap. But when the ball arrived over his outside shoulder Adams twisted his body to make the catch, then had such sideline awareness and body control that he was able to land just inside the end zone for a 36-yard touchdown. Later, he beat CB Jason Verrett on a stutter-and-go for 49 yards, reserve nickel back Jamar Taylor on a vertical route from the slot for 34 and Verrett on a pass-interference penalty in the end zone with another double move. On fourth and 1, Taylor couldn't have covered Adams any more closely but he made the catch anyway on a quick out for 4 yards. The 49ers looked so petrified that on a third and 3 in the fourth quarter Moseley stayed near Adams and just gave the adjacent receiver, Tyler Ervin, an easy 6-yard out. Adams played 50 of the 66 possible snaps on offense compared to 59 for Marquez Valdes-Scantling, 26 for Malik Taylor, 23 for Darrius Shepherd and four for Equanimeous St. Brown. According to Matt LaFleur, both Shepherd and St. Brown were bothered by injuries during the game. MVS increased his drop total to six in eight games on a third-and-4 shallow crosser. Two series late, he made amends by destroying SS Marcell Harris, who replaced injured Jaquiski Tartt (turf toe) in the second quarter. With the other safety leaving the middle to double Adams, MVS used his blazing speed to burn Harris by five yards on a 52-yard TD. Even more impressive was the veteran move MVS put on Verrett, a first-round draft choice seven years ago. Smothered at the end line, MVS broke back to the corner just where the scrambling Aaron Rodgers needed him to be. Despite their size differential, Taylor and Shepherd have been effective blockers. Mercedes Lewis (32) carried out his deceptive blocker-turned-receiver role to beat Tartt by 10 yards on his 1-yard TD catch. Neither Robert Tonyan (41) nor Jace Sternberger (18) were a big part of the game plan. Tonyan blocked aggressively at the point of attack. Sternberger was manhandled on one point-of-attack block by DE Kerry Hyder. On Sternberger's lone reception, he lost yardage by rounding his cut away from the goal line rather than going toward it.

Offensive line (4)

This unit was awful in the regular-season rout at Levi's Stadium a year ago before at least holding its own in the title game. With DE Nick Bosa on injured reserve and DT DeForest Buckner in Indianapolis, this 49ers' front was tame by comparison. Holdover DE Arik Armstead had three pressures in the second half. The only time Aaron Rodgers went down came when he held the ball a little long enabling DE Jordan Willis to circle Billy Turner for a sack in 3.5 seconds. The only pressure by Kerry Hyder, the team's sack leader, came on a stunt that partially caused Rodgers to take too much time on the sack. In the first half, Elgton Jenkins did a good job against rookie Javon Kinlaw, the 14th player drafted in April. Kinlaw has a long way to go. At times, Jenkins can get lazy with his hands, gets into bear-hugging positions and opens himself to holding penalties. Rick Wagner departed at halftime with a knee injury. He looked even stiffer than usual, allowing 1 ½ pressures. With Wagner down, the coaches moved Jenkins to LT, Turner to RT and inserted rookie Jon Runyan at Jenkins' LG spot. When the Packers removed C Corey Linsley for the final four plays, Jenkins moved inside to his primary position at Mississippi State and fared just fine. Possibly in an attempt to curb the penetrating style of play favored by Kris Kocurek, the 49ers' defensive line coach, the Packers pulled a guard on five of their 28 carries by running backs. Their previous high in a game was two. Those five gap-scheme rushes gained 21 yards. Lucas Patrick executed well on two of his three pulls but didn't get either defender in his path on the third. Linsley had one of the worst run-blocking halves of his career last November against 49ers NT D.J. Jones. On Thursday, Linsley was at least partly responsible for two "bad" runs but neither involved Jones. Runyan, whose only significant playing time came in the opener, was OK. On the Packers' four completions for more than 30 yards, the pass wasn't delivered until 2.4, 3.4, 3.0 and 2.2 seconds had elapsed. There were no breakdowns upfront on those plays. Massive LT Yosh Nijman, a second-year man, took the last four snaps and looked like the project scouts figured he'd be after a career at Virginia Tech.

Quarterbacks (4 ½)

In the two meetings with the 49ers last season, Aaron Rodgers could hardly have played worse. The ferocious nature of the pass rush appeared to mess him up, he turned the ball over four times, his long passes sailed all over the place and he made almost nothing happen. If the 49ers would have had defensive linemen Nick Bosa, Dee Ford, Solomon Thomas, Ronald Blair and Ziggy Ansah all playing instead of rehabilitating from an injury, it would have been fascinating to see how Rodgers might have fared in his second season with Matt LaFleur directing the offense. The fill-ins for coordinator Robert Saleh's unit did play hard; they're just not very good. Saleh ended up blitzing on 35.3 percent of passes because his heretofore vaunted four-man rushes didn't shake Rodgers in the least. The main takeaway for Rodgers on this night was his exceptional accuracy on the deep ball. Those air-mail specials of last season have become lasers. He missed the wide-open Davante Adams 30 yards downfield on one scramble. He also underthrew Marquez Valdes-Scantling on the sideline. Otherwise, his passing was razor-sharp. Two of Rodgers' best throws came back-to-back in the second quarter. With the rush closing in on third and 8 he moved hard right before slinging a sideline dart to Tyler Ervin for 7. On fourth and 1, he moved left on the snap, squared his shoulders and hit Adams with a defender all over him. One reason Rodgers hasn't missed a snap all season and someone like Jimmy Garoppolo can't stay on the field is his ability to go down safely. When Jordan Willis sacked him hard from behind, Rodgers

secured the football first before extending his right elbow to the ground to cushion his fall. He's a hard man to get off the field, let alone stop right now.

Running Backs (4)

It's easy sometimes to forget just how important a player is when extended injury strikes. Following the return of Aaron Jones (40) from a calf injury, it can safely be said that he was sorely missed. His impact was very real on the offense and the game. It was rather obvious that Jones was fresher than everybody else, and the short week exaggerated the difference. Matt LaFleur gave him two carries and two catches on the first four plays of the game, and the net was 37 yards. On his first rush, he broke two tackles. He was hurtling forward into a mean, heavy-hitting defense led by MLB Fred Warner and the safety tandem of Jimmie Ward and Jaquiski Tartt. They delivered some wicked shots. Warner appeared to take the return by Jones personally. In all, he gained 79 yards in 20 touches. A few times, Jones had clear sailing ahead but was surprisingly cut down on an unassisted tackle. Given a few more practices, he might break a few against Jacksonville. Dexter Williams flashed some talent in two carries for 8 yards before he jogged off with a knee injury and didn't return. That put the onus on Tyler Ervin (22), and just as he has done since arriving Dec. 3 on waivers from the Jaguars he again came through. His 12 touches were worth 72 yards. He got north-south on a screen for 24 yards, ran through an attempted tackle by Tartt on a play that ended the safety's day with a turf toe injury and looked confident in everything that he was asked to do. FB John Lovett showed negligible tools as a ball carrier in three late carries.

Defensive Line (3)

It is difficult to ascertain much of anything from this game. LT Trent Williams, probably the 49ers' best offensive lineman, found out late Wednesday he couldn't play because of COVID-19 tracing. Already without centers Weston Richburg and Ben Garland and less than satisfied with third-stringer Hroniss Grasu, coach Kyle Shanahan decided to give RG Daniel Brunskill his first start at center. That left veteran Tom Compton, on his sixth team, to make his first 49ers' start for Brunskill. Also missing his top three running backs, Shanahan had the undersized tandem of Jerick McKinnon and JaMycal Hasty in the backfield. He had no power back. Thus, Shanahan didn't even try to challenge Kenny Clark inside. Almost all the runs were to the perimeter, the runs that the 49ers annihilated the Packers with in January. All five big men were adequate. With the emphasis on rushing the passer for almost the entire second half, the snaps counts were 33 for Kingsley Keke, 31 for Clark, 26 for Montravius Adams, 25 for Dean Lowry and 22 for Tyler Lancaster. Adams was the only player with a tackle for a loss but others, especially Lancaster and Lowry, shed blocks and made more than one tackle for gains of 3 or less. Lowry wasn't credited with a pressure but did have several effective bull rushes that collapsed the pocket. Keke registered all three of the unit's pressures. His hustle downfield also stood out. On the 49ers' 11-play touchdown drive in the last 2 ½ minutes, Keke played all 11 snaps. It has been years since any Packers' defensive lineman was asked to play that many in a row. Adams lined up for the first six, looked gassed and was relieved by Lancaster for the last five.

Linebackers (3)

Kamal Martin didn't play because of COVID-19 tracing. When Krys Barnes departed after 23 snaps with a calf injury, Oren Burks started playing more. Burks' 34 snaps from scrimmage were six more than his career-high total of 28 from October 2018. Mike Pettine utilized Burks' speed and athletic ability in a

variety of coverage roles. On nine occasions, Burks played on the line of scrimmage in a six-man front designed to stop the run. Burks isn't a big hitter. On one pass, he hit TE Ross Dwelley from the side and was dragged five yards before getting him down. He's a low tackler, and he did make a few plays. Barnes bit on play-action fakes twice leading to substantial completions behind him. Ty Summers (34) actually replaced Barnes as the lone linebacker in dime and handled himself well. You could see his speed as he chased downfield. When QB Nick Mullens ran a quick-snap sneak on fourth and 1, Summers came over the top and was chiefly responsible for stopping him. Cut on a screen pass, Summers bounced right up and made the tackle. When the 49ers rushed effectively, it was outside at the expense of Za'Darius Smith (32), Preston Smith (35) and Rashan Gary (24). Za'Darius was in a position to tackle Ja'Mycal Hasty for minus-4 but didn't exert himself and the play gained 4 instead. As usual, he loafed in pursuit. Za'Darius caught a break when LT Trent Williams had to be replaced by Justin Skule, a sixth-round draft choice in 2019. He posted a strip-sack, a knockdown and a flush, all at Skule's expense. Sack hunting with the score 34-3, he was penalized for jumping offsides. Preston struggled on wide plays toward him. In the second quarter, he beat Skule and slammed into Mullens to cause an interception. Gary ran by Za'Darius in pursuit of a bubble screen and saved a touchdown with a tackle inside the 5. He did have one pressure. A year and a half into his conversion from playing down at Michigan to up in Green Bay, Gary exhibits little feel for the position. He was slow reacting on a screen, was fooled when Jerick McKinnon reversed his field and gets cut in the open field. He has always looked great coming off the ball, but after that generally little that's productive happens. Neither Randy Ramsey (16) nor Jonathan Garvin (14) impressed in sizeable stints.

Defensive Backs (2 ½)

In 32 games over 2 ½ seasons with San Francisco, Richie James had caught 14 passes for 291 yards and two TDs. On Thursday, he caught nine for 184 and one TD. It was the most receiving yards against the Packers since Game 15 of 2016 when Minnesota's Adam Thielen went 12-202-2. In that game, Thielen got after CBs Quinten Rollins and LaDarius Gunter. In this game, James did damage against almost everyone in the secondary. His 41-yard TD came when Ka'dar Hollman (26) blew a coverage. Hollman, a sixth-round pick from Toledo in 2019, saw the most extensive action of his career after the coaches waved him in to replace Jaire Alexander, who suffered a head injury on his 18th snap. Hollman competed. He didn't look scared. Josh Jackson (56) has played 3 ½ games at RC for injured Kevin King (quadriceps). He drew two more penalties, giving him five that were accepted and one that wasn't. Three were for pass interference, one for holding. He lacks some of the confidence and athleticism necessary to cover good wideouts, and thus resorts to grabbing. Neither Darnell Savage (44) nor Jackson did the job on a bubble screen to James for 47. Savage stayed inside rather than moving to the outside and forcing James into the pursuit. Nick Mullens threw a ball down the middle without even seeing Savage, who was lurking in the coverage. Rather than running through the catch for the interception, he left his feet unnecessarily and dropped the ball. He did make a fast, hard run force to beat the block of ex-Bear WR Kevin White and record a tackle for a loss. The tackling was vastly improved; the only misses were by Adrian Amos (46) and Henry Black (13). Black's whiff came in an unenviable open-field situation against James after the blow by Hollman. Raven Greene (27) caught Mullens' flutterball for the Packers' first interception since Game 2 and then broke two tackles on a 17-yard return. CB Stanford Samuels, a rookie free agent from Florida State, came off the practice squad and debuted with 13 snaps. His

helmet-to-helmet blow to Mullens might cost him a fine. Aside from that penalty, his aggressiveness did stand out. Chandon Sullivan (35) continued as the nickel back.

Kickers (3 ½)

The struggles of JK Scott on kickoffs was a reminder of just how consistently good Mason Crosby has been for 14 seasons. Of six kickoffs, Scott appeared to boot for distance and hang time, three were solid and three looked like mishits. He squibbed the seventh. His six-kickoff averages were 58.5 yards and 3.14 seconds of hang time. Playing for the second time in five days since dealing with a left calf injury, Crosby connected on field goals of 53 and 19 yards and four extra points. Most of his balls were moving slightly right to left. Scott's three-punt averages were 51.3 (gross), 40.3 (net) and 4.91 hang time.

Special Teams (2)

Long snapper Hunter Bradley had a rough outing. At least three of his placement snaps required holder JK Scott to spin the laces to suit Mason Crosby. On one of the punts, Scott caught the ball on the ground and then almost had it blocked. John Lovett and Henry Black led mediocre coverage on kickoffs. The 49ers had returns of 39 and 30 yards, and their average starting point was the best against the Packers all season. On the 49ers' final extra-point attempt the coaches had to call a timeout to get a 12th player off the field. Darrius Shepherd took a chance not fielding a punt at the 10 but caught a break when it bounced into the end zone. Oren Burks' 18 snaps led in the kicking game.