

Rating The Packers : Week 11 at Colts

By Bob McGinn Nov 24, 2020

Neither the Packers nor Colts were that much better than each other on offense or defense Sunday. Special teams were another story.

Last Wednesday, coach Matt LaFleur labeled the Colts' kicking game as the best in ball. On Thursday, Shawn Mennenga, the special-teams coordinator, said the Colts had the most complete units among the Packers' first 10 opponents and would provide "a great challenge for us."

Anyone watching could see that the Colts' special teams played faster, tougher and with more fire. After an adequate start to the season, this was the fifth consecutive game in which the Packers were awful on special teams.

For the better part of 13 years, coach Mike McCarthy paid lip service to special teams. Now his successor is off to a similar start.

It's possible this was a preview of the 55th Super Bowl in Tampa, Fla. Generally speaking, it requires a fully-dimensional team to win it all. The Packers certainly have a vulnerable run defense, but that defense has some areas of strength as well. Other than Mason Crosby, the special teams have been a keen disappointment once again.

The Colts' 34-31 overtime victory at Lucas Oil Stadium exemplified what is necessary to win a close game between contending teams. No team can afford to think that special teams aren't an integral part of the game. On Sunday, they were the edge that put the Colts over the top.

McCarthy kept firing coaches and talking tough, but over his tenure, the Packers ranked a composite 31st in special teams. Last season, the Packers ranked 26th in the definitive rankings of Rick Gosselin, and in a 10-category statistical breakdown of special-teams performance through games of Sunday they ranked 26th again. LaFleur, an offensive-minded coach with a background coaching quarterbacks, seldom brings up special teams in his media briefings.

"In all three phases, we played well," Colts coach Frank Reich said Monday. "We did what we needed to do to beat a really good football team."

On Sunday, LaFleur said: "Obviously, the kickoff return where we fumbled the football was a big point in the game. You just can't do that stuff against a good team."

Indianapolis took its first lead early in the fourth quarter when Darrius Shepherd fumbled on a kickoff return. The Colts had so much confidence in their cover team and so little respect for Shepherd and his blockers that they instructed Rigoberto Sanchez to kick short.

Shepherd was absolutely belted on his first four returns. The speed and spirit of the Colts resembled a swarm of wasps attacking their target. Surprisingly, Shepherd wasn't hit all that hard on the fumble. After being struck from the side by Tremon Smith, who beat a block from Vernon Scott, Shepherd was stripped by Cassius Marsh. Malik Taylor failed to sustain his block on Marsh.

At the start of overtime, Sanchez's boot carried only to the 8, but Shepherd made it back just to the 22 before being crunched by E.J. Speed and George Odum. Ty Summers and Jace Sternberger got Shepherd smeared by failing to sustain their blocks.

"We have to execute better so we can get that ball back out to at least the 25," LaFleur said Monday.

In the four previous games, the Packers had a punt blocked, botched an onside-kick recovery, missed a flurry of tackles and gave up a 91-yard punt return for a touchdown.

The punting of JK Scott is the other big problem. This is the third straight year in which Scott's performance began to deteriorate as the season wore on. On Sunday, all three of his attempts enabled him to kick away, but the best he could muster was a 36-yard net. Two of his inauspicious punts led to short fields and set up 11 points for the Colts. His net has fallen to 35.6, which ranks 26th.

It should be pointed out that Tyler Ervin, the Packers' top return man, was out with wrist and ribs injuries. In fairness, the Colts were without return man Isaiah Rodgers (knee), the NFL's second-ranked kickoff returner with a 29.8 average.

Smith, the replacement for Rodgers, ran faster, much harder and with more decisiveness than Shepherd on his three kickoff returns for a 24.3 average. He showed speed and power in a seven-game stint for Green Bay last season before being cut Dec. 2. That's when Ervin took over and immediately began producing.

It also should be pointed out that the Packers now are among the healthiest teams in the NFL. On Sunday, guard Lane Taylor was their only missing starter.

In February 2019, shortly after Mennenga was hired by LaFleur, I asked three established coordinators to rank the league's 10 new coordinators. Mennenga finished ninth in that poll.

"He's a nice man, a very nice man," one AFC coordinator said. "He could be fantastic or he could ... you just don't know. You've got to lead all the meetings now."

Mennenga had been an NFL assistant for seven years in Cleveland under Chris Tabor, but the Browns ranked 29th in that span. He coordinated in the college ranks at Vanderbilt in 2018 before ending up in Green Bay.

According to one source, LaFleur called Danny Crossman, a 13-year NFL coordinator who was available. A close friend of Crossman's said he would have taken the job in Green Bay, but when LaFleur took his time, Crossman signed with Miami. The Dolphins rank No. 1 this season after finishing 24th last year.

LaFleur interviewed Darren Rizzi, an eight-year NFL coordinator who had a great run in Miami. When it took the Packers a long time to increase their offer monetarily and from two to three years, the Saints swooped in, fired their coordinator and landed Rizzi. Under Rizzi, the Saints ranked No. 1 in 2019 and are tied for ninth this season.

"What does he know about it?" a veteran NFL coordinator said in early 2019, referring to LaFleur. "He's coached the quarterbacks. He's not ever involved. He's not around to see the meetings because the quarterbacks are meeting when the special teams are meeting. That guy is as far removed from the kicking game as anybody in the building."

In LaFleur's 10 seasons as an NFL assistant coach, the teams he worked for logged just one top-10 finish in special teams.

Colts coordinator Bubba Ventrone has Indianapolis ranked No. 5 in his third season. He played primarily special teams for eight years in the NFL before becoming the Patriots' assistant special-teams coach in 2015.

"I can't imagine a better special teams coach," Reich said last week. "He personally has so much juice about practicing and playing, it's infectious. He could still go out there and do it. When he gets in a special-teams meeting, I really don't think he has to sell anything. I think he is the product."

Ventrone, 38, wasn't allowed to coach Sunday because of COVID protocols. His assistant, Franky Ross, replaced him.

Some scouts said Michigan's Jordan Glasgow was the best special-teams player in the 2020 draft but worried that he might not have a true position on defense. The Colts drafted both Glasgow and Rodgers in the sixth round.

It's interesting to note that the Cowboys rank 11th in special teams. Obviously, that isn't because McCarthy acquired sudden interest or expertise in special teams. It's because he had the wisdom to hire Jon Fassel, who had a great eight-year run with the Rams.

It's not that LaFleur and the 49-year-old Mennenga inherited much. Under McCarthy and coordinator Ron Zook, the Packers ranked 32nd in 2018. They haven't had a top-10 finish since 2007 (tied for seventh).

When the Packers won the Super Bowl after the 2010 season their special teams under Shawn Slocum ranked 29th. Since Gosselin began his rankings in 1985, those Packers ranked the lowest of any Super Bowl champion.

So, a team doesn't necessarily need top-flight special teams to win it all, but only a fool would minimize their importance and not do everything in his power to make them a positive rather than a negative.

Here is a rating of the Packers (7-3) against the Colts (7-3). Five footballs are the maximum, one-half football is the minimum.

The three stars of the game were: **1. Kenny Clark. 2. Elgton Jenkins. 3. Rashan Gary.** As a team, the Packers received 2 ½ footballs.

Receivers (3)

Coming off a career game against Jacksonville, Marquez Valdes-Scantling had hurt the Colts through four quarters. Late in the first half, he blasted by CB Rock Ya-Sin to pick up 51 yards from a pass-interference penalty. That set up a touchdown before his 47-yard reception on another bomb into the middle of the field led to the tying field goal. He even made strong blocks on two successful bubble screens. Then came overtime. On the second play, he was shifting the ball to the most secure position when FS Julian Blackmon split blockers Robert Tonyan and Allen Lazard and knocked the ball out. It was his first fumble in three seasons. It also cannot be excused. Four snaps later, the Packers lost on Rodrigo Blankenship's 39-yard field goal. Earlier, MVS needs to break off his vertical route given the position of the defender and come back for the back-shoulder ball that was thrown. MVS played 51 of the 60 possible snaps on offense compared to 57 for Davante Adams, 36 for Lazard, 15 for Equanimeous St. Brown and two for Darrius Shepherd. Adams' most dangerous play is becoming a vertical route from the slot. He burned Ya-Sin for 33 to open the game. He caught the ball beautifully and was aggressive after the catch. Back after missing six games following core surgery, Lazard looked like he's lost some weight. He didn't seem to be a large part of the game plan. On the fumble, the primary responsibility for Blackmon must be Tonyan's because Lazard has to get off the double-team block and onto CB Xavier Rhodes. Lazard probably left the block too early, and then Tonyan was late getting to the spot. St. Brown gained 23 on a double motion almost identical to the play MVS ran when he fumbled. Maybe the coaches should have gone back to St. Brown. He stiff-armed Rhodes and looked imposing vaulting over SS Khari Willis inside the 5. His confidence appears to be growing. Tonyan, the former wide receiver at Indiana State, went to the post just after Jace Sternberger cut to the corner on a "snake" route. Sternberger, the faster of the two, cleared out the safety and Tonyan used his reliable hands for the 25-yard TD. Tonyan's only drop of the season came in Game 2. Besides the missed block on the fumble, Tonyan also overshot Willis on a "bad" run. He played 44 snaps compared to 19 for Mercedes Lewis and 16 for Sternberger. Lewis' holding penalty against DE Al-Quadin Muhammad wiped out a 14-yard run and aborted a drive. Sternberger has been effective coming across the formation to the wide side of the field, feigning a block and outrunning linebackers to the flat on bootlegs. Defensive ends watching closely might start jamming him before too long. Minus Josiah Deguara and John Lovett, the coaches decided to give Sternberger one snap at fullback. He didn't get another after bouncing backward off DT DeForest Buckner.

Offensive Line (3 ½)

Elgton Jenkins bailed out the offense at RT in Game 1, LT in Game 8 and C Sunday. Anyone with a history of back problems could feel for Corey Linsley as he gingerly walked to the locker room escorted by Kurt Fielding, the team's longtime assistant trainer. Linsley lasted 10 snaps. On his third snap, he was involved in a fumbled exchange that was recovered by the Colts. Jenkins, a center his last two seasons at Mississippi State, played remarkably well. He didn't have a single errant shotgun snap. He appeared to be quicker afoot than Linsley run blocking at the linebacker level. Opposed by the formidable defensive-tackle tandem of DeForest Buckner and Grover Stewart, he didn't allow a "bad" run and yielded just one pressure. Alas, that pressure couldn't have been more costly. On fourth and 1 late in regulation, Stewart shouldered by Jenkins off a play-action pass set and hurried Aaron Rodgers into an incompleteness. The transition from Jenkins to rookie backup Jon Runyan at LG didn't go as smoothly, but by no means was it a disaster. Runyan gave up two pressures and 1 ½ "bad" runs. He is a good athlete. His future might be depend on how much grit he has. Two of the five "bad" runs as well as one hurry were at least the partial responsibility of Lucas Patrick. Given what Buckner did to the Packers as a 49er last season, the coaches probably were thrilled with Patrick's showing. Tackles David Bakhtiari and Billy Turner caught a break when DE Denico Autry, the Colts' leading sacker with six, was placed on the Reserve/COVID-19 List. DE Justin Houston, 31, has lost his fastball but still provides veteran savvy. Turner's 2 ½ pressures included a partial sack to Houston, but he was clean in the run game. Other than a holding penalty and one hurry, Bakhtiari was in control.

Quarterbacks (3)

On the road against exceptional defenses, Aaron Rodgers had two forgettable performances late last season in San Francisco and another last month in Tampa. This wasn't one of those dreadful affairs. Rodgers competed hard, moved the team and helped generate 31 points. He also made just enough mistakes that his team couldn't afford. His deep-ball accuracy is approaching the sensational. The 33-yard lob to Davante Adams. The penalty-drawing bazooka shot that carried 64 yards. The rainbow of 47 to Marquez Valdes-Scantling. The Packers aren't even in the game without those plays. At the same time, Colts defensive coordinator Matt Eberflus won the battle with a steady four-man rush that included just 12.5 percent blitzing on passes. He was counting on Rodgers making some errors along the way and that the Colts then would prevail in a close game. On the third play, Rodgers fumbled away a center exchange just as did in the NFC Championship Game in Santa Clara, Calif. As aware as Rodgers is, he would have recovered but WLB Darius Leonard was coming on a run blitz and beat him to it. On the interception by Rock Ya-Sin, Rodgers had Davante Adams open underneath on first and 20 but went to MVS in the Cover 2 sideline hole. It was a tremendous play by Ya-Sin. Late in the game, he had Robert Tonyan standing open on the sideline beyond the sticks but his pass was up the field to create the fateful fourth and 1. When Adams was double covered, a faster-reacting Rodgers could have outrun the onrushing Grover Stewart and probably gained the first down. Instead, he hesitated, then threw a floater over the head of Jamaal Williams. A series later, he opted for a second spike on first down, a down that the Packers could have used for a game-winning throw into the end zone. On second down, he thought of cutting it loose to Adams for the game-winning TD but took Robert Tonyan underneath instead for 7.

Running Backs (2)

Aaron Jones has played in six of the last eight games. Not since Game 2, however, has he produced a gain of more than 25 yards. Puzzling might best describe not having Jones on the field for the last 15 snaps of the fourth quarter. On the nine-play drive to the tying field goal, there were numerous stoppages in which he could have been subbed for Jamaal Williams. He wasn't, Williams' long gain in his six touches was 4 yards and the Packers came up short. Their snap counts were 30 apiece. In his 14 touches for 71 yards, Jones broke three tackles. He lowered his head and ran through SS Khari Willis at the 2 for a TD. For the second consecutive week, Williams converted on a third and 1 that was poorly blocked. This time, the culprits were Jon Runyan and Lucas Patrick, but Williams muscled his way to the line. When Williams got to the flat in a hurry on a wobble for a 4-yard score, WLB Darius Leonard said it was the first time he had allowed a TD pass in man coverage during his exceptional three-year career. Minus AJ Dillon (COVID-19) and Tyler Ervin (wrist and ribs), the Packers survived with just two running backs. Free-agent Mike Weber was active for the first time but didn't play.

Defensive Line (3)

What a struggle it was between Kenny Clark and LG Quenton Nelson. Such sheer power, strength and desire ... it was all on display. You saw plays in which Clark stuffed Nelson and made a tackle for a 1-yard gain and in which Nelson pancaked Clark on a 7-yard gain. Clark was walked back by double-team blocks on runs for 7 and 8 yards. He also drew three of the Colts' inconceivable total of nine holding penalties, including one on Nelson. Clark was better as a pass rusher, piling up a season-high total of five pressures. Ryan Kelly, an outstanding center, couldn't cope with Clark's bull rushes several times. The Packers' lone sack came when Clark power-rushed Kelly and down went Philip Rivers in 3.4 seconds. Clark played a season-high 57 of the 84 possible defensive snaps. The tenor of the game changed when the Colts rushed on the first eight plays of the second half for 55 yards. Mike Pettine played Raven Greene alongside Christian Kirksey on six of the first seven snaps. The Packers aren't good enough upfront to allow Pettine that luxury. Apparently dictating run direction at the line, Rivers kept running at Kingsley Keke (31) when he was on the field. He was trapped and moved, and when he did get off a block, missed the tackle and Jonathan Taylor was off for 14. Taylor went 22-90 after going 11-22, 6-27 and 7-12 the past three games. The Colts' 140 yards on the ground was their highest total since Game 2. Too many opponents have gotten well at Green Bay's expense. Dean Lowry (44) penetrated against TE Mo Alie-Cox to foil a third and 2, stalemated Nelson on a carry for no gain and shed RT Chaz Green on a short gain. He also was displaced on a carry for 18. Tyler Lancaster (38) was up and down, as they all were. On his first of seven snaps, Billy Winn tipped a pass that was intercepted by Kirksey. The entire group was much more aware of the screen game this week.

Linebackers (3)

Coach Frank Reich and offensive coordinator Matt Sirianni were determined not to let Za'Darius Smith (75) ruin their plans. Without Braden Smith (thumb), their fine RT, the Colts alternated journeymen Le'Raven Clark and Chaz Green. Za'Darius drew a holding penalty on each tackle and finished with three pressures. On Za'Darius' 28 non-stunt rushes, the Colts doubled him on 46.4 percent. It was the most attention he has encountered this season. It also was one of the reasons Kenny Clark had a big day inside. It was impressive to see Za'Darius show extra effort by bouncing back up from a pair of cut blocks and making the tackle on runs. Generally, he makes the business decision not to throw his body around

in high-collision areas. As usual, Za'Darius was fooled a few times, and he jumped offsides twice. Preston Smith (67) managed just one pressure when the right tackles were there to be exploited. He made a nice read on a bubble screen for no gain. He was penalized twice for offsides. Minus better drops by the linebackers, Preston looked miscast trying to carry TE Trey Burton deep on his 17-yard TD catch. After having a good five-minute rest, Preston was on the field for the first play of a series when Jonathan Taylor burst through the middle for 14. To the side, Preston pulled up thinking Taylor was going down. When he didn't, Preston sped up only to miss the tackle. Surely you noticed the inside-out hustle of DeForest Buckner and DE Al-Quadin Muhammad on Marquez Valdes-Scantling's fumble. Otherwise, MVS would have recovered, not Buckner. Would the Smiths have done the same? Rashan Gary (35) sustained his momentum with a three-pressure day. He also batted a pass and blew up Clark at the point of attack for minus-3. For the first time, Pettine employed Gary at DT in a four-man front on first down. It happened just once. Juggled or not, Christian Kirksey (84) caught the tipped pass for an interception. He was late covering TE Jack Doyle on a 6-yard TD. Kirksey spends as much time as anyone on defense attempting to strip the ball loose. At times, it affects his ability to prevent the ball carrier from bleeding the run. Kamal Martin (22) ran through and nailed Taylor for no gain. His hesitation enabled Nyheim Hines to outrun him on the two-point play. Ty Summers (three) and Randy Ramsey (three) also got in.

Defensive Backs (2)

Elite cornerbacks pick the ball off and make game-deciding plays. Counting playoffs, Jaire Alexander (84) played his 40th game Sunday and is still looking for his fifth interception. With 2 minutes remaining, the Colts had poor spacing on a two-man route short on the right side. Philip Rivers threw to TE Jack Doyle in the flat although Alexander was lurking. The ball was there to be had. The great cornerbacks accelerate in front of a slow tight end, take the ball and high-step it to the house. Alexander went for the breakup, which he got. Mike Pettine's reaction? He covered his bald pate with his play sheet almost in disbelief. Alexander was more effective than Kevin King (84), who does hunt interceptions. It cost him with a missed tackle on a 20-yard dig to Zach Pascal. At least King went the distance after sitting the last 5 ½ games with a quadriceps injury. T.Y. Hilton beat Chandon Sullivan (73) on a corner route from the slot for 23. Whatever Pettine was playing on the pair of shallow crossers to Michael Pittman for 61 yards either wasn't communicated properly or defenders blew their assignments. Raven Greene (42), the nickel LB in many situations, made a great play jarring the ball loose from TE Mo Alie-Cox. He's a good tackler but just so-so in any type of coverage. Pettine continued to use Darnell Savage (84), the faster but smaller of the two safeties, in the box and Adrian Amos (84) deep. Savage played well. He likes flying around and running into people, and his coverage mistakes in close aren't as magnified as they are deep. Amos often arrives just a little late in coverage. He certainly is a tough guy. Back from a 2 ½-game absence (shoulder), Will Redmond saw one snap.

Kickers (1 ½)

Other than a visit to Ford Field on Dec. 13, JK Scott knows he must brace for bad weather in five of the last six games. It's one reason why the comforting conditions of Lucas Oil Stadium must have soothed him this week. After rejoining the team Saturday after an unknown absence, Scott had a lousy day. On his three punts, with the line of scrimmage at the Green Bay 25, 20 and 26, the Packers needed him to change field position with long, towering punts. That's why they used a fifth-round draft choice in 2018

to secure him. What they got was one high punt that didn't go anywhere and two low punts that produced nets of 35 and 38 yards. His three-punt averages were 39 (gross), 36 (net) and 4.60 seconds of hang time. Mason Crosby relinquished his kickoff duties to Scott for three games because of a calf injury. His five-kickoff averages were 69.4 and 3.78 and included three touchbacks. His 26-yard field goal with 3 seconds left forced overtime.

Special Teams (½)

Under Shawn Mennenga, the second-year coordinator, the Packers play a disciplined, almost emotionless style. Last year, they had just 14 penalties in 18 games, the team's fewest since 2011. Randy Ramsey's false start on the punt team Sunday was just the Packers' fourth this season, and one was an intentional delay of game. Mennenga should be credited with organizational skills. Few things are worse than holding penalties in the return game. On the other hand, the Colts' rip-snorting, hit-anything-that-moves approach to the kicking game overwhelmed Green Bay. Poor Darius Shepherd. The Colts ordered their kicker to make Shepherd run back the kickoffs, and the four times that he did the contact was brutal. The Packers' blockers simply were overrun by a faster, more inspired foe. Shepherd made a nice cut to the outside for a 30-yard return. Otherwise, he just got crushed with seven runbacks for a 19.7 average. As the game wore on, Shepherd started to look terrified. He caught a massive break when replay reversed a kickoff that he returned to the 4. Then came the fumble, a situation in which Shepherd for once wasn't smashed but the ball was jarred from his grasp, anyway. FB John Lovett looked like a player in the kicking game, but his season ended in practice on Nov. 12 with a blown knee. The return of injured starters enabled Josh Jackson to resume his role as a gunner and hold-up man. Will Redmond's return also helped. None of it mattered against Bubba Ventrone's players, who were performing at a different level than what Mennenga sent on the field. The kick coverage was OK. Four players shared the snap lead with 26: Oren Burks, Ty Summers, Ramsey and Redmond