

Rating The Packers : Week 13 at Eagles

By Bob McGinn Posted: Dec 08, 2020

The fourth quarter of the final game in the third quarter of the season Sunday against the Eagles in Green Bay served to underscore the Packers' considerable strengths and probably their most glaring weakness.

Three weeks ago, Green Bay's four-minute offense went three and out but the pass rush rose to shut the door on the Jaguars, 24-20, at Lambeau Field. A 91-yard punt return for a touchdown had enabled the Jaguars (1-11) to make it too close for comfort.

On Sunday, the Packers were cruising midway through the fourth quarter when a long touchdown pass followed almost immediately by a 73-yard punt return for another touchdown made it a seven-point game.

When the offense pulled another three and out, the pass rush again carried the day. On the Eagles' final two possessions, the Packers allowed two first downs, registered two sacks and a few other pressures, and took the ball away once to win going away, 30-16.

Given a second chance with 2 minutes, 57 seconds remaining, the offense produced the magnificent 77-yard touchdown run by Aaron Jones.

Four-minute offense. Late pass rush. The best teams, those that win Super Bowls, usually have demonstrated capability in each area.

"You could feel the pass rush getting after the quarterback," Packers coach Matt LaFleur said. "The thing I love about our team is when it did get a little bit rough for us, there was no panic, nobody blinked, we stuck together and we were able to finish the game."

Entering Monday's play, the Packers ranked second in total yards on offense and 11th in total yards allowed on defense. Only one NFL team, the Rams, have a better combined rank than the Packers' 13. They sit at five, third on offense and second on defense. The Saints, 12th on offense and first on defense, are tied with the Packers for the second-best mark in the NFL.

The Saints (10-2), the only team in the NFC with a better record than the Packers (9-3), have had to play 3 ½ games without Drew Brees, their 41-year-old quarterback. LaFleur has had Aaron Rodgers, 37, available for every snap in the 30 games he has coached, including playoffs. He has thrown 66 touchdown passes and 10 interceptions in those 30 games. How the Packers would fare without Rodgers is a question they would prefer not having to answer.

On defense, the Packers have won games without nose tackle Kenny Clark and cornerbacks Jaire Alexander and Kevin King. As was evidenced Sunday, the three-pronged pass rush of outside linebackers Za'Darius Smith, Preston Smith and Rashan Gary remains critically important to the Packers' championship hopes.

The Smiths each have played all 30 games under LaFleur whereas Gary has missed one game because of injury. Za'Darius has 26 sacks as a Packer, Preston has 17 and Gary has six. Free-agent Randy Ramsey is No. 4 on the depth chart.

Special teams, the often neglected third phase of pro football, is where the Packers fail to measure up to New Orleans and, in fact, most teams in the league. Their return game is a mess, their punt coverage team is worse, JK Scott ranks next to last in net punting average (35.6) and Mason Crosby, though a perfect 14 of 14 on field goals, has missed extra-point attempts in the last two games.

Just how unusual is it to allow two punt returns for touchdowns in a season? The last time it happened to the Packers was 1964. In the 55 seasons from 1965-2019, they gave up 11.

"I mean, we can't have that happen," LaFleur said. "That can get you beat."

Here is a rating of the Packers against the Eagles (3-8-1). Five footballs are the maximum, one-half football is the minimum.

The three stars of the game were: **1. Aaron Rodgers. 2. Dean Lowry. 3. Elgton Jenkins.** As a team, the Packers received 3 ½ footballs.

Receivers (3 ½)

When the Packers are confronted by the best defenses in the playoffs, they're going to need Marquez Valdes-Scantling. Since his game-losing fumble in overtime Nov. 22 against the Colts, MVS has had two targets and no receptions. One wonders where his confidence level is at after he dropped a 54-yard bomb at the Eagles 12. It was his seventh drop of the season but the first of a home-run ball since Game 1. His blocking continues to improve. This is his 10th straight game without a penalty. He has five receptions for 40 yards or more, one more than Davante Adams. His average per catch is 20.7. The Packers must ask what MVS can do, not what he cannot do. MVS played 46 of the 61 possible snaps on offense compared to 54 for Adams, 42 for Allen Lazard, 11 for Equanimeous St. Brown, five for Malik Taylor and four for Tyler Ervin. Adams remains a touchdown machine, adding two more to give him 11 in the last seven games. His 2-yard catch just short of the goal line with FS Jalen Mills' hand on the ball was remarkable. His 42-yard catch of a go route was even more remarkable because first he had to beat CB Darius Slay and then muscle the ball away from CB Avonte Maddox. He couldn't beat Slay on a third-down slant from the 1 but got the better of the ex-Lion on the other side of the field a play later for the TD. Later, he powered through Slay, who departed after 40 snaps with a lingering calf injury, on a 9-yard hitch for another score. Given his circus catches, charge Adams with a drop on what would have been a 22-yard TD against Maddox. When No. 3 TE Jace Sternberger exited after three snaps with a concussion, Matt LaFleur often motioned Lazard into the box and gave him big-boy blocking duty. Lazard surprisingly ran past Maddox on a fade for 31; he also dropped an 11-yard out. St. Brown also left with a concussion. He dropped a 28-yard pass tight to the sideline. The punt return for a TD came on the next play. An ankle injury ended Ervin's night. Robert Tonyan (38) is the first TE since Cincinnati's Rodney Holman in 1986-87 to post a TD reception of 25 yards or more in three straight games. Once again, Tonyan just sort of meanders in the middle, heads to the least defended part of the field and Aaron Rodgers shoots him the ball. He changes speeds on his routes, fakes well with his head and shoulders and catches everything. Teams pay even less attention to Mercedes Lewis (35). Linebackers T.J. Edwards and Alex Singleton jumped Tonyan on a keep pass leaving Lewis to roam

alone behind them for a 14-pass that ruptured into a gain of 36. As a blocker, Lewis remains inconsistent. Watch him pancake OLB Duke Riley on the 77-yard TD run. In pass pro, he almost jammed DE Brandon Graham off his feet. Then he gets beat by Graham at the point of attack on a carry for 1 and can't prevent Graham from flushing the quarterback. LaFleur is confident asking Lewis to block defensive ends one on one even though he has to take the good with the not so good. Sternberger was kicked in the head by DE Derek Barnett after coming across the formation and missing the block.

Offensive Line (4 ½)

Not only was Elgton Jenkins the only blocker not charged with a pressure, but he also was the only one without a "bad" run. Because of Jenkins' talent and versatility, the Packers found life without Corey Linsley (knee) to be OK. In pass protection, Jenkins spent much of the game sliding toward DT Fletcher Cox. When matched against Cox one-on-one, he held up just fine. His efficiency on shotgun snaps has been a surprise. Billy Turner started his first game at RG since the NFC Championship Game. His opponent, Cox, still is a great player in his ninth season but was limited to 62 percent playing time because of a neck injury. Cox outmuscled Turner on a pair of "bad" runs but never beat him in pass pro. Turner's ability to think on his feet was mentioned by Aaron Jones. When Turner made a call just before the ball was snapped alerting others that the Eagles were bringing a weak safety blitz, Jones took heed and cut the run back away from the blitz and to daylight for a 77-yard TD. Lucas Patrick hadn't played a single snap at LG since the opener. He also is playing with a toe injury that has limited his range. The coaches decided that moving Patrick from RG to LG, Turner from RT to RG and starting Rick Wagner at RT was better than going with rookie Jon Runyan at LG. This unit has been so sturdy all season that it was rather shocking to see Patrick get beat by DT Javon Hargrave for a sack in 2.7 seconds on the Packers' second play. Other than that and 1 ½ "bad" runs, Patrick's day was clean. Opponents probably don't like Patrick's gung-ho approach but they have to respect it. David Bakhtiari had another strong performance, yielding one-half pressure and one "bad" run. In an unconventional move, Bakhtiari and Patrick traded positions on the last two kneel-downs.

Quarterbacks (4 ½)

Aaron Rodgers is in sync with Matt LaFleur just as LaFleur is in sync with him. There's no need for Rodgers to hold the ball, hunt off-script throws and risk sacks and negative plays in the process. That was last season, and for a few years before that. Now LaFleur's scheme often is creating wide-open targets for Rodgers, and he's only too happy to take them. His progressions go off like clockwork. One, two, three, throw. Or one, two, three, extend. In the first half alone, the wide-open receivers included Davante Adams for 24, Mercedes Lewis for 36, Malik Taylor for 14 and Robert Tonyan for 25. Of course, it's never as easy as all that. On the TD to Tonyan, DT Malik Jackson grabbed Rodgers' foot at about 3.5 seconds. After pulling it away, Rodgers trusted his protection, hung in the pocket another 2 seconds and delivered the strike at the goal line. LaFleur used boots, jet sweeps and other ploys to prevent the Eagles' front four from having too many clear looks. Rodgers' ballhandling and faking were just superb. Coordinator Jim Schwartz blitzed on a mere 5.9 percent of passes, the least against the Packers this season. Just 25 of the 61 snaps came in shotgun formation. Rodgers made some questionable decisions on run-pass options. He also was charged with a delay penalty. Schwartz wanted a penalty for intentional grounding on a long throwaway. During the week, LaFleur said he would put a stop to cheating-type kneel-downs in which Rodgers and Tim Boyle had been moving forward to avoid the minus-1. This time, Rodgers took the minus-1 three straight times.

Running Backs (4 ½)

With all the passing in the red zone, Aaron Jones (40) had scored just one touchdown since returning from injury in Game 8. His number of carries had declined and he wasn't featured nearly as much in the passing game. His playing time (109 snaps) compared to Jamaal Williams' snap count (94) in the last three games might have been disconcerting as well. Ever the good teammate, Jones just keeps playing hard. This was the day he had been waiting on. If not for the pitchout that Jones fumbled on the first play, Jones might well have been the team's best player. In 18 touches he broke 10 tackles, four more than his season-high against the Vikings in Game 1. FS Jalen Mills and OLB Alex Singleton each missed twice. On one run, he met a stone wall of resistance, bounced wide and picked up 5. When Mercedes Lewis let DE Derek Barnett slip past him inside, Jones ricocheted wide to turn minus-2 into plus-3. On the memorable 77-yard TD run, he made Singleton miss five yards downfield, FS K'Von Wallace miss 17 yards downfield and SS Rodney McLeod miss 57 yards downfield. Williams (21) didn't see the field until the 18th play. He made a nice cut on an 18-yard burst. There are occasions when Williams doesn't make the best decisions on where to run, something that's rare with Jones. With AJ Dillon missing a fifth straight game because of COVID-19, Tyler Ervin leaving the game with an ankle injury and FBs Josiah Deguara and John Lovett on injured reserve, Matt LaFleur gave free agent Dominique Dafney (6 foot 2, 243 pounds) three snaps at fullback and three on kneel-downs. The rookie played two years at Iowa and 2019 at Indiana State, often in the Wildcat.

Defensive Line (4 ½)

Dean Lowry, who played 31 of the 62 possible snaps on defense, might have played his finest game. His one sack was of the hustle variety as he spun off a block and into Jalen Hurts' escape route. That was the last of the seven sacks; a series earlier, he set up the sixth sack by flushing Hurts toward the Smith's. Lowry had two other pressures for a share of the team lead with four. All season, Mike Pettine has used either Kenny Clark (44) or Kingsley Keke (24) as the lone 300-pounder on a four-man rush line with the three outside linebackers in third-and-long situations. On Sunday, Lowry was playing so well that Pettine had him in that role on the final series. On the first of Keke's two sacks, he actually ran into Rashan Gary, picked himself up next to RG Jason Peters and trapped Carson Wentz in 4.8 seconds. Later, he beat Peters, a nine-time Pro Bowl left tackle now playing inside, with a tremendous move and engulfed Wentz in 2.7. Keke finished with 2 ½ pressures compared to 1 ½ for Clark, who had the toughest matchup in Pro Bowl center Jason Kelce. Clark contributed to a solid performance against the interior run. The quarterbacks, however, scrambled for 47, and Clark lost containment against Wentz on an 11-yard gain. Tyler Lancaster (14) didn't play much largely because there was a season-low seven snaps with three bigs on the field. Already without Montravius Adams due to injury, the Packers lost deep reserve Billy Winn with a left triceps injury on his third snap.

Linebackers (4)

The Eagles played without RT Lane Johnson and RG Brandon Brooks, a pair of three-time Pro Bowl selections, and LT Andre Dillard, their first-round draft choice in 2019. Aging RG Jason Peters, a possible Hall of Fame left tackle, left after 36 snaps with a foot injury. The Packers' last six opponents all have been missing at least one starting offensive lineman. Combine the Eagles' weak replacements with an offense forced to play catchup for the entire second half and it's little surprise this group accounted for 3 ½ sacks among their 8 ½ pressures. Coach Doug Pederson did everything he could to prevent Za'Darius Smith (52) from dominating. The Eagles double-teamed Za'Darius on 55.6 percent of his individual rushes, the most he has encountered as a Packers player other than the Seattle divisional

playoff game (61.3 percent). Za'Darius lulls opponents into a false sense of security. He'll look old and slow and tired for two or three snaps, then switch into high gear and blow up the protection. About once a month Mike Pettine will have Za'Darius drop off into coverage. He looked lost as a 20-yard pass was completed near where he was grazing. Rashan Gary (36) has just one speed: fast. Whereas Za'Darius posted four pressures Gary had three and Preston Smith (47) had 1 ½. Carson Wentz is a big man (6-5, 237) but Gary tossed him about twice. Jalen Hurts had time to break the pocket and throw his long TD pass on fourth and 18 because Gary's rush was too deep. Since losing his starting berth in Game 11, Preston might be playing with more fire. He didn't see the field until the sixth snap Sunday. He played a role in two tackles for a loss but also got beat on an end-around for 11 and on a scramble by Hurts for 13. Christian Kirksey (62) had another hum-drum showing as an every-down player. He has had some issues with alignment, late reactions and taking chances. He made a terrific play defending a 20-yard pass to RB Boston Scott on a leak-out. Although Scott's 28-yard run was called back, Kirksey was way late getting over. Kamal Martin (16) goes a mile a minute, which is sometimes good and sometimes bad. He went hard on the first play but missed Miles Sanders in the backfield on what became a 6-yard run. Ten plays later, he helped halt the drive with a tackle for a loss on a similar charge. There are times Martin's speed and energy enable him to outrun his inexperience and mistakes. Back after a three-game absence due to COVID-19, Krys Barnes played only on special teams.

Defensive Backs (2 ½)

With deep threat DeSean Jackson on injured reserve and Alshon Jeffery looking washed up, the Eagles have next to nothing at wide receiver. The return of TE Zach Ertz from the ankle injury that knocked him out of Games 7-11 gave Doug Pederson hope that double-tight sets with Dallas Goedert might inject some pizzazz into his 27th-ranked passing game. Although they did combine for seven receptions for 97 yards, the one-two punch couldn't compensate for the voids outside. The Packers minimized the tight ends' impact by covering them with cornerbacks in some of their combination zone coverages. With Carson Wentz and Jalen Hurts short of time and weapons, Adrian Amos (62) and others had a fairly easy afternoon. Darnell Savage (62) closed the game out with a wonderful, stretched-out interception in which he had to stop on a dime and react to the ball. That partially atoned for the 41-yard bomb to Goedert in which he guessed wrong, planted on the wrong foot and slipped, which often happens in those situations. Switching Savage's deep role with Amos' box role has helped Savage. Raven Greene (32) appeared to suffer a shoulder injury late. Greene would be missed both as a rugged though undersized run player and Mike Pettine's favorite blitz. Pettine sent Greene six times. He responded with 1 ½ pressures, including a partial sack in which he beat LG Isaac Seumalo, couldn't get Wentz down, lost his footing, scrambled up and nailed him the second time. Will Redmond (nine), who is even smaller than Greene, replaced him. Jaire Alexander (61) was going along great, having played the run tough and breaking up three passes. Then on fourth and 18, he reacted to Hurts' advance through the pocket toward him, didn't get deep enough and watched Greg Ward catch a 32-yard TD behind him. Neither Kevin King (59) nor Chandon Sullivan (60) did much business. When King didn't get his long arms on rookie Jalen Reagor and opened his hips anyway, he couldn't quite keep up and the completion was for 34 yards.

Kickers (½)

The lack of courage that JK Scott has demonstrated not once but twice in the past four games has to jeopardize his position in the locker room. How can anyone respect him after he was afraid to tackle Jacksonville's Keelan Cole and now Philadelphia's Jalen Reagor as they returned his lousy punts for touchdowns? Scott (6-5 ½, 208) isn't a terrible athlete. In 2018, he ran the 40 in 4.84, went 30 ½ in the vertical jump and did 9-6 in the broad jump. But every punter faces that moment of truth when he has to hit somebody or it's a touchdown. For the second time, Scott took the cowardly way out, pulling up and away from contact as the returner ran free down the sideline. If he had just made an aggressive move to cut off the sideline with his long body, the pursuit might have arrived in time. The coaches must have gotten after him for not doing that against the Jaguars. Now the identical thing happened. Scott dropping his chin as Reagor was safely past might be too much for even the people that drafted him in the fifth round. The problem with Scott's punt wasn't the 52-yard distance. The hang time of 4.53 might have been acceptable as well but the ball was hit into the center of the field, giving Reagor the ability to go anywhere. Two of his other three punts hung for more than 5 seconds and brought fair catches. His four-punt averages were 48.5 (gross), 30.3 (net) and 4.73 hang time. Mason Crosby made a 40-yard field goal and three of four extra points. His miss caromed off the left upright. Crosby's poor hang time (3.58) led to a long return on his final kickoff. His six-boot averages were 65.7 yards and 3.73 hang time.

Special teams (½)

The 73-yard punt return by Jalen Reagor began with a muff. He fumbled the ball, yet still scored. Can coordinator Shawn Mennenga survive two long TD returns in a month? Reagor had time to pick the ball up and select a hole partially because gunners Will Redmond and Ka'dar Hollman were late arriving. Their job was made more difficult because the Eagles double-teamed them. Redmond took himself away from his half of the field by getting caught up in the middle trying to flee from the blockers. He was flattened. Kamal Martin had Reagor dead to rights but made the mistake of leaving his feet and missed the tackle. Raven Greene hustled across, wasn't quite fast enough to get there and landed on his shoulder. Then came the shameful dance of JK Scott. A few minutes later, the Packers gave up a 46-yard kickoff return by Boston Scott. On the play, Redmond picked up his second penalty. Getting Tyler Ervin back as the two-way return specialist brightened the generally dismal picture, especially his 33-yard kickoff return. Then the fragile Ervin went down again (ankle), with reliable Chandon Sullivan taking over on punts and Malik Taylor on kickoffs. With blocking virtually non-existent, Taylor was leveled on two returns. Now the drumbeat will be for diminutive but quick Tavon Austin to take over. He hasn't averaged more than 7.8 on punt returns since 2014; the last time he returned more than three kickoffs in a season was 2013. Austin scored 7 on the 12-minute, 50-question Wonderlic test coming out of West Virginia seven years ago. He also has fumbled 22 times. Decision-making and ball security have been issues with him. The snap leaders, all with 21, were Oren Burks, Randy Ramsey and Ty Summers.