

Rating The Packers : Week 14 at Lionss

By Bob McGinn Posted: Dec 15, 2020

The Packers have moved to the top of the NFC playoff picture for many reasons, not the least of which is their return to good health.

Through nine games the Packers had played without 38 starters due to injury and COVID-19, the same number as their opponents. In the last four games, the Packers have been without six starters compared to 21 for the opposition.

On Sunday, the Packers were missing center Corey Linsley and guard Lane Taylor whereas the Lions were down six starters. The last time the Packers were missing more starters than their foe was Game 7, a 28-22 loss to the Vikings at Lambeau Field.

Unlike last season, when the Packers led an extremely charmed existence when it came to injury differential, second-year coach Matt LaFleur has had to deal with a shortened deck at times. After a relatively injury-free training camp, the loss of nose tackle Kenny Clark early in the opener was the start of a rough month and a half. The Packers were missing a season-high total of seven starters on Oct. 25 at Houston.

Some of the team's most indispensable players spent time on the sidelines.

On offense, wide receiver Davante Adams missed 2 ½ games, tackle David Bakhtiari missed 3 ½ games and running back Aaron Jones missed two games.

On defense, Clark missed 3 ½ games, cornerback Kevin King missed 5 ½ and cornerback Jaire Alexander missed 1 ½ games.

None of those six players, however, had to be placed on injured reserve. Clark and Adams returned in Game 5, Jones in Game 8, Bakhtiari in Game 9 and both King and Alexander in Game 10.

Fortunately for the Packers, their most serious injuries were suffered by players at or near the bottom half of their roster. Of the 11 players currently on injured reserve, the only starters are Taylor, who suffered a major knee injury in the opener, and Linsley. It's possible Linsley will be back before too long from the sprained knee that he suffered in Game 11.

On Nov. 18, the only players besides Taylor on injured reserve were cornerback Kabion Ento, fullback Josiah Deguara and cornerback Parry Nickerson. In the last month major injuries have struck six situational substitutes, sending them to injured reserve: fullback John Lovett, defensive tackle Montravius Adams, linebacker James Burgess, gadget guy Tyler Ervin, safety-linebacker Raven Greene and defensive tackle Billy Winn. The Packers have not had a starter spend any time on the Reserve/COVID-19 list; they have no players in that category now. The only player to opt out of the season was wide receiver Devin Funchess.

The Packers played like a healthy, vibrant team at Ford Field on Sunday against the equally-spirited Lions in their 31-24 victory. The Lions simply couldn't overcome the absence of wide receiver Kenny Golladay, two starting offensive linemen, two of their three best defensive ends and two of their three best cornerbacks.

The victory gave the Packers their first back-to-back NFC North Division championships since 2011-14, when they won four in a row. Their three remaining opponents have a combined record of 19-20, which still is much better than the combined record of their first 13 opponents (73-95-1).

“There’s a lot out in front of us,” LaFleur said Sunday. “We know the work that it’s taken to get to this point. Nothing changes in our mind.”

Here is a rating of the Packers (10-3) against the Lions (5-8). Five footballs are the maximum, one-half football is the minimum.

The three stars of the game were: **1. Aaron Rodgers. 2. Kenny Clark. 3. Mason Crosby.** As a team, the Packers received 3 ½ footballs.

Receivers (4)

With the score tied, 14-14, at halftime, Aaron Rodgers’ long pass to Marquez Valdes-Scantling on third and 7 sailed incomplete. It appeared as if the upset-minded Lions had forced a three and out to open the third quarter. But, no, MVS had drawn a holding penalty because of his crisp double move on CB Amani Oruwariye. The Packers went on to complete a 75-yard drive for a lead they would never relinquish. Later on the possession, MVS beat nickel back Justin Coleman on a 14-yard out. Then, on third and 14, he found a void in zone coverage and made a reception for 21 despite heavy traffic. In the second quarter, MVS looked back at Rodgers from the 7-yard line to the 1 where he caught a back-shoulder dart for a 14-yard TD. He demonstrated surprising overall power, strong hands and an awareness that he had seldom before exhibited. Davante Adams played 62 of the 67 possible snaps on offense compared to 47 for MVS, 46 for Allen Lazard, 17 for Equanimeous St. Brown, four for Tavon Austin and one for Juwann Winfree. Cory Undlin, the Lions’ defensive coordinator, concentrated coverage against Adams. His only long-ball chance was underthrown and knocked away by Mike Ford, who replaced injured starter Darryl Roberts for the final 24 snaps. Detroit already was without Desmond Trufant (hamstring) and Jeff Okudah (groin). So Adams did his damage after the catch, burning Oruwariye and FS Duron Harmon on a 14-yard back-shoulder pass that ruptured into a 56-yard TD, and Oruwariye on a run-pass hitch for 29. Adams lacks instant acceleration, but once in top gear, few can overhaul him. As a blocker, Adams flits around looking not to hurt anyone or hurt himself. With No. 3 TE Jace Sternberger (concussion) out, Matt LaFleur used Lazard from a location in or adjacent to the box and took advantage of his eagerness to block. Sternberger’s role as a key bootleg receiver fell to Robert Tonyan (41), who caught the 6-yard clincher on third and 5 and scored his ninth TD on a beautifully schemed 4-yard toss. Mercedes Lewis logged a season-high 38 snaps and blocked consistently. One of LaFleur’s attributes is his willingness to give a chance to just about everyone in the program. Austin, who was signed Dec. 1 after a long layoff, was welcomed with two designed plays for him to get the ball in space. The only exposure for Winfree, another free agent, had been seven snaps in Game 9. Having summoned Winfree on Saturday from the practice squad, LaFleur had him go in jet-sweep motion on the Packers’ eighth play.

Offensive Line (3 ½)

The Lions were without RE Trey Flowers (undisclosed injury), backup RE Everson Griffen (COVID-19) and NT Danny Shelton (knee). Given his depleted secondary, coordinator Cory Undlin decided he really didn’t dare blitz (13.5 percent). It meant he would have to live or die with his replacement-level front four. Actually, the Lions’ front played hard, as did the Vikings’ decimated interior against Green Bay on Nov. 1 Aaron Rodgers wasn’t sacked but he was down twice and pressured three other times. RT Rick Wagner had the toughest matchup, facing old teammate Romeo Okwara. Okwara kept trying to power rush Wagner, who generally fought him off and ended up allowing two pressures. Wagner has played better in the last two games than earlier in the season. At times, David Bakhtiari almost looked to be toying with Christian Jones, a seventh-year ILB pressed into a start at RE, and little-used Austin Bryant. Bakhtiari had a couple of minus plays, including a false-start penalty for backing out early preparing for a rush from Okwara. One reason for the mediocre run game was the inability of Lucas Patrick, Elgton Jenkins and Billy Turner to displace rookie DT John Penisini, an impressive sixth-round draft choice, and ex-Bear DT Nick Williams. Jenkins’ command of the shotgun snap since his move from LG has been remarkable. Unlike Patrick and Turner, Jenkins doesn’t play with any bravado or overt aggressiveness. He is light on his feet for a big man and almost always gets his guy.

Quarterbacks (4 ½)

Given their full complement of skill-position players and the effectiveness of the offensive line despite the pair of missing starters, Aaron Rodgers is going to stress contending teams. When an opponent shows up like the Lions with minimal rush, flawed coverage and an empty-domed stadium, Matt LaFleur and his quarterback must want to call everything on that play-sheet and wristband at once. Once again, Rodgers was in 95-percent command from start to finish. His arm strength makes foes defend the entire field. His rapid release demoralizes pass rushers. He has had nothing but praise for what LaFleur is asking him to do. With receivers often wide open due largely to scheme, and with the protection eminently reliable, it has become a shooting gallery reminiscent in a way of 2011. If not for wind or bad weather, Rodgers is going to put the ball on open receivers. He isn't a fan of 50-50 balls because of the threat of interception, but he trusted Marquez Valdes-Scantling and the result was a phenomenal opening TD. His receivers didn't drop any of his 31 passes that were thrown to a target. The Lions might have more big, slow linebackers than any other defense in the league, and Rodgers made them pay. He even scrambled for 5 on third and 4 and for a 6-yard TD on third and goal. One sign of LaFleur's confidence in his quarterback and offense is the Packers' philosophy on a kickoff return. The instructions are to take the touchback if possible. The decision Sunday to use Jamaal Williams deep eliminated almost any chance for a return of more than 30 yards. He doesn't have the speed to break away. But he won't fumble, either, and as long as the Packers have the ball they know they're in business. It's worth noting two plays early in the fourth quarter and what they might indicate about the dynamic between quarterback and coach. Williams ran inside for two, setting up third and 1 at the Detroit 8. Almost immediately, Rodgers raised his hand toward the distant sideline as if to tell LaFleur, "Don't make a call. I got this." Having just watched the run by Williams, Rodgers wanted this personnel grouping against that group of defensive players. Quickly lining people up so the Lions couldn't substitute, he waited before calling for the snap in the shotgun and handing to Williams on almost the same play that was just run. Williams plowed for 4 and the first down, and the Packers scored a TD on the next play to take an insurmountable lead.

Running Backs (3 ½)

The 27-snap difference between Aaron Jones (47) and Jamaal Williams (20) was the largest of the season. It had been 19 against the Eagles. Jones is No. 1, and Matt LaFleur apparently sees the time as right to utilize him even more. LaFleur cares about the ground game, and the pair did combine for 25 carries and 107 yards (4.3 avg.). It's just that the passing yards have become almost automatic for this offense, and with the jacked-up Lions better equipped to stop the run LaFleur emphasized pass. There's no denying the second effort and talent of the two four-year veterans. They never take a down off, let alone a carry. They pick up the blitz, no questions asked. Both players were getting what was blocked and more on almost every run. In the fourth quarter, nothing was doing for Jones up the gut. Rather than accept no gain, he bounced wide left where CB Mike Ford was waiting because Davante Adams didn't think it was necessary to block him. Ford had his hands on Jones but he escaped and picked up 7 along the sideline. Williams was 2 for 2 on third and 1, giving him six in a row and 8 for 9 this season. He's also 2 for 2 on fourth and 1. In those two down and distances, Jones is 0 for 2. After giving FB Dominique Dafney a six-snap debut last Sunday, LaFleur played the rookie from Indiana State nine more plays this time. Dafney missed a cut-off block on DE Austin Bryant that ruined a run, but showed some thrust and burst lining up all over the formation.

Defensive Line (4)

In the first meeting, Keny Clark sat out with a groin injury. Interim coach Darrell Bevell, who was the coordinator at the time, ran his backs 14 times in the first 25 plays to force Mike Pettine into playing eight-man fronts. On Sunday, the play-calling Bevell started Adrian Peterson and probed the Packers' normally suspect middle. In the first two series, Peterson carried for gains of 1, 3, 0 and 3 yards. Peterson played 17 snaps but never rushed again. Clark shed RG Oday Aboushi, an eight-year veteran with his sixth team, on the opening snap and grabbed Peterson for the gain of 1. Clark had a day, mostly at the expense of Aboushi and rookie LG Jonah Jackson. He wrecked a flea-flicker by shouldering past Jackson and forcing Matthew Stafford to ground the ball. Pettine ran a

series of overload pressures, and on one in the first half, Clark charged over C Frank Ragnow for a sack. Ragnow returned the favor by displacing Clark on the goal line for a 3-yard TD run. In all, Clark had a team-high 4 ½ pressures. When Stafford courageously ran into a crowd for 6 on third and 4 from the Green Bay 9, Clark gave chase while Preston Smith loafed. Clark's tackle was clean, but Stafford suffered a rib injury and missed the final 7 minutes. His availability for the next game was uncertain Monday. Clark played 56 of the 68 possible snaps on defense compared to 36 for Kingsley Keke, 34 for Dean Lowry and 19 for Tyler Lancaster. Mountainous Anthony Rush was in uniform but didn't get in. Keke collected two pressures against Jackson and batted down a pass. Lowry went up the field against Aboushi for a sack in 2.6 seconds and showed big hustle on a screen. Lancaster stuffed Aboushi on a 1-yard run.

Linebackers (2 ½)

This was the first time since Game 3 that high-priced veteran Christian Kirksey and rookie free agent Krys Barnes both were ready to play defense. Kirksey had been on the field for every snap of the 6 ½ games that he played. Kirksey, Barnes and Kamal Martin played in a rotational plan depending on the defensive package until late in the first half when the only linebacker against the Lions' two-minute offense was Barnes. In the first 12 plays of the second half, Barnes logged all 12 whereas Kirksey had two. Pettine didn't go back to Kirksey as his lone linebacker until the Lions' last seven snaps. Other than experience, there's little reason to continue with Kirksey (46). He's done more guessing than leading, offers little horsepower against the run and has become an increasing liability in coverage. Barnes (40), who hadn't played from scrimmage since Game 8 because of COVID-19, is green as grass and not overly dependable at this point. But the coaches have praised his classroom study habits, plus he offers more knockback and ballast than Kirksey in the run game. Martin (12) obviously isn't as far along as Barnes on assignments but deserves to keep playing in situations. On the outside, it was a disappointing day for Za'Darius Smith (59), Preston Smith (56) and Rashan Gary (19), who exited after one snap in the third quarter because of an apparent injury. Randy Ramsey (nine) played in the first possession for the first time in his seven games from scrimmage. Za'Darius spent most of the day trying to beat Matt Nelson, a converted defensive lineman making the first start of his two-year career. Nelson just blocked him; the Lions double-teamed Za'Darius on only one-third of his individual rushes. Za'Darius' highlight was drawing holding penalties with theatrical dives against TE T.J. Hockenson and Nelson. Preston was back on the field for the first six snaps after beginning the past two games on the sidelines. LT Taylor Decker held him without a pressure. Gary outran Nelson for a sack in 4.0 seconds. When Gary didn't recognize a wide screen pass going over his head, it turned into a 23-yard gain for Peterson.

Defensive Backs (3)

Kenny Golladay (hip) is the latest in a lengthy list of top receivers that wasn't able to play against Green Bay. Partly as a result of not having his premier deep threat, Matthew Stafford's longest completion was just 23 yards. He and Chase Daniel, who replaced the injured starter in the last 3 ½ minutes, still found ways to throw for 273 yards. Like many opponents, the Lions generally stayed away from Jaire Alexander (66). Instead, they picked on Kevin King (66) and found considerable success. The damage report against King would have been much longer if Stafford hadn't overthrown Marvin Jones early and replay had found Jones was in-bounds on a 34-yard go pattern. King's tackling had been good until Sunday when he started ducking his head and missed twice. That's a good way to get hurt. Chandon Sullivan (33), the season-long nickel back, gave up too many completions. Also, he was run over on the goal line after gesturing to a teammate as the ball was being snapped. Sullivan suffered a non-contact hip injury on the punt-return team in the second half and gave way to Will Redmond (44), who did a better job in the slot against veteran Danny Amendola. Redmond, a cornerback at Mississippi State, has quick feet and is reckless with his body. He's just small. Taking Redmond's berth as the dime safety was rookie Vernon Scott (16), who slammed into T.J. Hockenson from behind to deny the emerging tight end a 29-yard reception. Darnell Savage (68) continued his solid play. His best moment came on an overload blitz for a sack in 2.6 seconds. Kingsley Keke wound up in the A gap forcing Savage to redirect into the B gap, a maneuver that he executed seamlessly. After the sack, there was no need for the second-year man to linger and bump Stafford. Adrian Amos (68) played more in the box than he has in recent weeks and was up and

down. After a shaky first quarter and a holding penalty against Hockenson on third and 7, Amos registered the team's only tackle for loss with a punishing hit in the flat and broke up a goal-line pass to D'Andre Swift.

Kickers (4 ½)

It's probably safe to say that no stadium holds more sour memories for Mason Crosby than Ford Field. Missed field goals, missed extra points, balls caroming off uprights. The Packers have been so prolific scoring touchdowns that Crosby had merely seven field-goal attempts in the previous nine games. He made them all but also missed three PATs in that span. This time, his team needed him, and he delivered. His 57-yard make, one yard short of his club record, extended the Packers' lead to 10 points with 3 ½ minutes remaining. Hunter Bradley's snap wasn't ideal, requiring holder JK Scott to make a quarter spin to get the laces facing the goalpost. Crosby also made all four extra points and averaged 71.3 yards and 3.93 seconds of hang time on six kickoffs, four of which were touchbacks. Crosby, 36, also demonstrated to Scott what it means to give up one's body for the team and save a touchdown. His cross-body block of Jamal Agnew put an end to his kickoff return after 71 yards. Scott took advantage of his last regular-season game in ideal conditions with two-punt averages of 50.5 (gross), 40.5 (net) and 5.32 hang time

Special Teams (1)

The Packers, 32nd in opponent's punt-return average, sunk to 24th in kickoff-return average when Jamal Agnew raced 71 yards late in the fourth quarter of a close game. It's inexcusable. Equanimeous St. Brown was too passive and didn't squeeze the running lane, Will Redmond was a step late, Henry Black got blocked, Ty Summers failed to get off a double-team and Josh Jackson was too slow. Only Mason Crosby did his job and made the tackle. On the previous play, Elgton Jenkins false-started on a field-goal attempt of 52 yards. It's inexcusable. Crosby got Jenkins off the hook with his make from 57. Later, the Lions' unsuccessful attempt to recover an onside kick was too close for comfort. Brayden Coombs, an assistant for 10 years in Cincinnati under Darrin Simmons, has done a tremendous job in his first season as the Lions' coordinator. If Coombs, 34, becomes available after the season, he'll probably have his pick of jobs. He's someone the Packers have to consider. Tavon Austin, debuting on punt returns, performed like a solid pro. Low-risk, low-reward Jamaal Williams was back returning kickoffs for the first time. The snap leaders, each with 20, were Oren Burks, Redmond and Summers.