

Rating The Packers : Week 15 vs Panthers

By Bob McGinn Posted: Dec 21, 2020

Just how good are the Packers, anyway?

Their 11-3 record is the best in the NFC. With the Saints having lost two games in a row, the Packers can wrap up the lone bye in the expanded NFC playoff field with victories against Tennessee and at Chicago.

Nevertheless, questions continue to surround the Packers, especially after [their too-close-for-comfort 24-16 triumph](#) Saturday night over the Panthers at Lambeau Field.

“We know we need to play our best football when the playoffs come around,” head coach Matt LaFleur said. “You know, we’re so far from that right now.”

In truth, the Packers haven’t played a great game all season. Quarterback Aaron Rodgers said the team has yet to put together a complete, four-quarter effort.

My “Rating the Packers” series began in 1987, and for 34 years I’ve strived to use the same criteria in my grading. Five footballs always has been the maximum grade for the team as a whole as well as the position groups.

How the Packers performed is the most significant factor in the team grade, but the caliber of the opposition also plays a role.

This season, the Packers’ highest team award was four footballs, which they received seven times: at Minnesota in Game 1, Detroit in Game 2, at New Orleans in Game 3, Atlanta in Game 4, at Houston in Game 6, at San Francisco in Game 8 and against Chicago in Game 11. They have yet to receive 4 ½ or five footballs.

In 1996, the Packers’ first Super Bowl championship season in the span of my series, they had five 4 ½ - or five-football awards in the first 14 games. In 2010, their other title season, they had two in the first 14 games. In 2011, when they were 13-1 after 14 games, they had three. In 2014, when they were 10-4 and headed for a date with the Seahawks in the NFC Championship Game, they had five.

After starting 4-0 this season against the spread, Green Bay went 2-2 in Games 5-8 and is 2-4 in Games 9-14.

Part of the problem is the Packers’ schedule. All they can do is play whoever comes next, but through 14 games their list of opponents has to rank as one of the softest in franchise history.

The first 14 foes are a combined 80-115-1 (counting the Vikings and Lions twice each), a winning percentage of .411. Just three of the 14 currently have winning records; 10 have losing records.

The Packers have dealt with injury issues, and some of their best players missed games. But almost all the key players were back by Game 11. In the last five games, their only missing starters were right guard Lane Taylor, who might have been supplanted by now anyway, and center Corey Linsley.

In contrast, the number of difference-making players that sat out against Green Bay is extensive.

Carolina's entire franchise revolves around running back Christian McCaffrey. He didn't play against the Packers, nor did running back Raheem Mostert of San Francisco.

The No. 1 wide receivers that missed the game against Green Bay were Detroit's Kenny Golladay (twice), New Orleans' Michael Thomas, San Francisco's Deebo Samuel and Philadelphia's DeSean Jackson. Atlanta's Julio Jones limped around on a bad hamstring for 15 plays before calling it a night. The 49ers also didn't have tight end George Kittle.

Jacksonville and San Francisco were without their respective starting quarterbacks, Gardner Minshew and Jimmy Garoppolo.

The Packers didn't have to worry about defensive linemen Nick Bosa of the 49ers, Akiem Hicks of the Bears and Danielle Hunter of the Vikings (twice). Cornerback Richard Sherman didn't play for San Francisco, either.

With these players on the field, the Packers would have been able to test their mettle against the elite. In all likelihood, they would have benefited considerably and entered the playoffs as a more hardened entity.

Facing all these reduced opponents has the Packers in prime position to secure the No. 1 seed, but it also could breed a sense of superiority that might be evidenced by record but not by overall level of play.

The Titans improved to 10-4 Sunday with a 46-25 rout of the Lions in Nashville. It's the first time since 2008 they've posted a double-digit win total. The Titans, who enter this week ranked second in total yards on offense, 27th on defense and near the bottom on special teams, basically escaped injury-free Sunday.

"We've got a great, great Tennessee Titans team coming in, one that I'm very, very familiar with," said LaFleur, who was the Titans' offensive coordinator in 2018. "I know what brand of ball they play. They are going to play smash-mouth, physical football."

Here is a rating of the Packers (11-3) against the Panthers (4-10). Five footballs is the maximum, one-half football is the minimum.

The three stars of the game were: 1. Krys Barnes. 2. Aaron Jones. 3. Adrian Amos. As a team, the Packers received three footballs.

Receivers (½)

When the Packers start running into teams their own caliber, they'll find it hard to win if this unit doesn't play better. Davante Adams, who played 60 of the 62 possible snaps on offense, has had outstanding showings mixed with poor performances (Jacksonville, Chicago, Carolina) in the second half of the season. He dropped two more passes Saturday, drew a 15-yard penalty for unnecessary roughness and couldn't break tackles in the quick game. His first drop came on a bootleg pass 20 yards downfield; his second came on a slant as he ventured into the lair of MLB Jermaine Carter. Adams apparently was penalized for jumping to his feet after taking a hard hit and bumping or kneeling defenders. There's no reason for him to act high and mighty in these situations. All it does is put a target on his back and encourage opponents to play even harder against him. On Sunday, Panthers coach Matt Rhule praised CB Rasul Douglas for setting the tone with his reckless tackling and CB Donte Jackson for being physical and playing his best game of the season. Allen Lazard (48 snaps) had the longest reception of 22 yards but 17 came after the catch on a wide-open pick play. When tacklers finally showed up, Lazard tried to hurdle one. He has done that before, so opponents are well aware of it. That's a good way to suffer a knee injury. Lazard dropped a 25-yard throw tight to the sideline. He also was on the wrong end of a run-pass option, leaving to block rather than coming back toward the quarterback for a short pass. Third-year players Marquez Valdes-Scantling (40) and Equanimeous St. Brown (11) were invisible. MVS had a chance to beat rookie free

agent Myles Hartsfield, subbing at nickel back when CB Troy Pride left after 18 snaps with a hip injury. Surprisingly, MVS failed to separate from Hartsfield deep and the pass fell incomplete. LaFleur used jet motion on just three snaps, a season-low, and Tavon Austin (four) was the jet man twice. Robert Tonyan (39) beat speedy Jeremy Chinn to the pylon for a 1-yard touchdown, his 10th of the season, but his blocking was subpar. His illegal-block-in-the-back foul was foolish, he missed Hartsfield on a bubble screen that went nowhere and he failed to cut off DE Brian Burns on the only rush for minus yardage. Mercedes Lewis (30) also played.

Offensive Line (3 ½)

Lucas Patrick practiced on a limited basis all week with a lingering toe injury that caused him to exit Game 11 early. Patrick isn't limping as he did against the Bears on Nov. 29, but his pass blocking has slipped of late. Patrick allowed 4 ½ of the 8 ½ pressures charged to the line. Panthers rookie DT Derrick Brown, the seventh player drafted in April, was having a disappointing season as a pass rusher with no sacks. Able to gain an edge against Patrick, Brown beat him up the field for a sack in 3.0 seconds and then on a power rush in 3.3 for a half-sack. DE Efe Obada beat Patrick off his left side for another full sack in 3.0. Four of the pressures were credited to Brian Burns. The Packers selected Rashan Gary at No. 12 in 2019 before Burns went No. 16 to the Panthers. Burns is undersized playing defensive end in a 4-3. His blazing speed would fit better at outside linebacker in the Packers' 3-4. Burns collected one clean-up sack after Brown beat Billy Turner, registered a full sack on a naked bootleg late in the game and beat David Bakhtiari to set up Obada's sack. Bakhtiari was charged with a half-sack when Burns beat him outside. Burns, who seems to have considerable strength to go with the speed, was one of the few rushers all year to give Bakhtiari trouble. The leading pass blockers were Elgton Jenkins (no pressures) and Rick Wagner (one-half). Although the pass blocking was suspect, the run blocking was terrific. Just one of the 22 carries by the running backs failed to gain at least two yards. That's remarkable. The combination blocks were heavy and well-timed. LaFleur opened up the playbook, using Turner as a pulling guard on five runs. He hadn't pulled a lineman in the last two games. With Turner moving from right to left, the five carries gained 27 yards. Turner's seal block on DT Bravvion Roy got Aaron Jones started on his early jaunt for 46 yards.

Quarterbacks (2)

Aaron Rodgers has had a wonderful go of it in 2020. Given what turned out to be a most benign schedule, he has seen few heavy pass rushes and not many high-caliber defensive backfields. He has been available to take every snap, his synergy with LaFleur appears good and his mood during weekly interviews has seemed upbeat. Three possessions, three lengthy touchdown drives to start Saturday night represented more of the same. Then came the last seven possessions, six of which ended in punts and one with a long field goal. Rodgers didn't look pleased. Sacked merely 13 times in the first 13 games, Rodgers had to absorb five sacks from the Panthers. For someone not used to getting knocked around this season, it wasn't ideal. His teammates dropped four passes. He certainly didn't appreciate some missed assignments, either, especially in light of the fact LaFleur said during the week that MAs had been in steady decline. Phil Snow, a first-time NFL coordinator after 35 years of coaching in college, puzzled the Packers with unconventional fronts and coverages. Rodgers held the ball at times against the Panthers' heretofore docile (28th-ranked) pass rush, and 1 ½ of the sacks were placed on him. With Adams often double-covered, Rodgers went overboard trying to get him untracked. There were too many occasions when he let the run go in favor of flips to the perimeter. The Panthers caught on after a while, and began tattooing Adams in his tracks. Jones averaged 7.3 yards per carry, but Rodgers and LaFleur had other ideas in the second half and emphasized the pass. Rodgers ran effectively, especially a TD on third down from the 6-yard line. The fact his longest completion was 22 yards against a team that gave up 280 yards and four TD passes to Denver's Drew Lock in the previous game might have affected his MVP hopes. Rodgers couldn't even generate one first down in the final two minutes to close out Carolina.

Running Backs (4 ½)

After a mid-season lull, the Packers have averaged 161.5 yards rushing in the last four games, including 195 Saturday for a 7.2 per-carry average. Jamaal Williams took a jarring hit from Pride on his fourth snap, suffered a quadriceps injury and didn't return. Jones logged 56 snaps, a season-high and the third-highest total of his four-year career. His first attempt came on third-and-1, a down usually reserved for the hard-charging Williams. Headed straight ahead on an inside zone, Jones found LB Shaq Thompson in the backfield right in the hole. He veered one gap to the right, running to daylight. The rookie Chinn, who ran the 40 in 4.41 seconds at the combine, ran him down after a gain of 46. Jones was on point all day, pressing the line, following his blockers and almost never going down on first contact. Without Chinn, who almost seemed to be mirroring Jones, he would have gained substantially more than 145. Jones' displays of sportsmanship shouldn't go unnoticed, either. After FS Tre Boston smashed him down out of bounds, Jones extended his hand and pulled him to his feet. Jones dropped a pass in the flat but picked up the blitz well. Minus Williams, it was surprising that LaFleur used rookie AJ Dillon on just one four-snap sequence and the late kneel-down. On his only carry, he broke tackles by Carter and Douglas, two heavy hitters, but then went down rather easily after a gain of 18. Before the draft, Dillon was compared by some scouts to Derrick Henry, so with the Titans in town next Sunday night, maybe Dillon will get a longer look. This should be his time of year. Dominique Dafney (11 snaps) played some fullback and some tight end.

Defensive Line (4)

Kenny Clark is the absolute anchor of the Packers' run defense. He has put the groin injury behind him and is playing as well if not better than ever before. Undersized C Matt Paradis, the ex-Bronco, gave it his all against Clark but kept getting outmuscled. Some nose men can hold the fort against double teams but can't find the ball. What makes Clark special is the ability to stuff blockers and make the tackle. Amos got credit for a sack by tackling Teddy Bridgewater for no gain but it was Clark's pressure against Paradis that made Bridgewater flee the pocket. He had another hurry on a stunt involving Paradis. Clark's effort in long pursuit must be used as an example in the D-line room. He's also recognizing screen passes better than in the past. Clark played 50 of the 69 possible snaps on defense compared to 44 for Dean Lowry, 24 for Kingsley Keke, 21 for Tyler Lancaster and one for Anthony Rush. Lowry has been affecting the passer in the past month or so like he was in 2018. He can move a guard back with one arm and is becoming more of a threat using his hands to win on an edge. He batted down another pass, too. With Lowry playing well and Lancaster serving as a reliable fire hydrant, the coaches don't need to wear out Keke playing run downs. The best part of his game always has been rushing the passer, anyway, and playing just 24 snaps kept him fresh. RG John Miller, a former Bill and Bengal, is in his sixth season as a starter. Of Keke's three pressures against Miller, one precipitated a holding penalty that wiped out a Panthers TD. On the other hand, Keke rushed seven yards deep in the pocket giving Bridgewater too-easy entrance downfield for a 13-yard TD scramble. With the Packers sucking air on a 16-play drive, the coaches waved in Rush for his first snap as a Packer.

Linebackers (4)

Rhule scolded Bridgewater for his game-changing fumble, saying leaping on sneaks is acceptable on fourth down but never on first down. Still, Bridgewater might have scored from the half-yard line if not for Za'Darius Smith (60 snaps) and Barnes (31). Smith, who played with his left thumb in a cast, was standing up over guard in a strange goal-line look brought about by the Packers' inability to substitute. Timing the snap, he leaped first and crashed into Bridgewater's hip, limiting his explosion upward. Then Barnes jumped at Bridgewater from the front, knocking the ball straight back and out of his grasp. It might be the Packers' red-letter defensive play of

the season. There was more on which to commend Barnes. He wrecked an end-around with a read no doubt stemming from intensive classroom study, and tackled a screen for minus-6 by beating Paradis to the spot. Barnes' night ended early with an eye injury that LaFleur said on Sunday wasn't a concern. Christian Kirksey (49) picked up the lion's share of Barnes' snaps and played a little bit better than he has been. He eluded some linemen and made a few tackles after short gains. In coverage, he didn't react well to a tight-end crosser and failed to wrap up WR D.J. Moore on a 9-yard in-breaking route that ruptured into 40. When Bridgewater broke the pocket on his 13-yard TD run, there was only RB Rodney Smith between Kirksey and the quarterback. Take a shot. Trash Smith. Make Bridgewater change course and maybe the cavalry will show up. Kirksey did little more than bump the quarterback as he was crossing the goal line. Kamal Martin (22) has to calm down. It's like he's chasing ghosts. On two occasions he made hits for no gain. Other times, he took himself out of plays or wound up on the ground. Za'Darius Smith, Preston Smith (52) and Gary (35) each settled for just two pressures even though LT Russell Okung (calf) didn't play and replacement Trent Scott was vulnerable. Every now and then Za'Darius notches a sack or makes a play against the run. On his sack Saturday, he was getting close to a delay-of-game penalty as he crawled on his belly. Why? Another of Za'Darius' senseless plays was his decision to jump the count as the play clock wound down to zero. Just 24 seconds remained. The game remained at hand. Stunts like that will get you beat. Preston Smith beat RT Taylor Moton, probably the Panthers' best blocker, up the field for a sack in 3.2 seconds. Gary rushed adequately but also yielded a 10-yard scramble to Bridgewater with poor rush awareness. Randy Ramsey (4) stayed home on an end-around pass.

Defensive Backs (3)

Amos' role has become even more prominent with the loss of Raven Greene, a player the Packers regarded as vitally important. It might have been his best game in Green Bay. He broke up three passes, including one in the end-zone corner. He tackled Moore in the flat for a 2-yard gain. He brought down Bridgewater for a sack by not falling for his jukes. He stripped Mike Davis, but the running back was ruled down. When Davis burst toward the goal line, it was Amos (69 snaps) who attacked and brought him down at the 1 after a 12-yard gain. Without that tackle, Bridgewater's fumble on the next play never happens. The only negative was Amos' inability to break up the 37-yard sideline take-off to Moore. Darnell Savage (69) has been more free-wheeling and effective now that the coaches have reduced his number of more difficult coverage assignments. He's free now to play the passer's eyes and accelerate into contact. Will Redmond (22) and Vernon Scott (10) contributed as well because Mike Pettine believes in playing most of his people. Bridgewater obviously targeted Kevin King (69), and King's struggles continued. On the bomb to Moore, King opened his hips early and lost separation, only to recover at the ball but fail to dislodge it. He gave up a 20-yard corner route and drew a holding penalty on third-and-9. Last week, King lowered his helmet and missed some tackles. This week, he lowered his helmet and was penalized 15 yards. He also missed two tackles. King did show great reactions with his scoop-and-return of 48 yards at the goal line. Jaire Alexander (69) had more business than usual. He broke up a third-down pass and didn't fall for a double move into the end zone by Robby Anderson. A player with better ball skills might have intercepted Bridgewater's errant pass. The only other time Alexander blitzed all season was the opener, and the result was a safety. That was three months ago against Minnesota. This time, Alexander decided to try it again, but when the Panthers had a bootleg on, Bridgewater lobbed the ball to Moore over Alexander's head for 18 ridiculously easy yards. Chandon Sullivan got beat twice inside by Curtis Samuel for 29 yards. He retaliated by smelling out an end-around, breaking up a pass, forcing a fumble that he lost to penalty and intercepting a pass that he lost to penalty. Josh Jackson wasn't on the injury report but for the first time this season was a healthy scratch. Instead, Ka'dar Hollman was in uniform.

Kickers (4 ½)

Out jogs Mason Crosby as the offense slinks off the field. This is in the wake of two, 2-yard hitches to Adams and an 8-yard sack. OK, Mason, save us. And the 36-year-old did, sending a 51-yard attempt through the uprights. Crosby also went 3-for-3 on extra points and averaged 66.2 yards and 4.0 seconds of hang time on five kickoffs (two touchbacks). JK Scott had a positive showing on a windless night with six-punt averages of 45.8 (gross), 42.5 (net) and 4.69 seconds of hang time.

Special Teams (2)

Panthers rookie P Joseph Charlton had hang time to match Scott, which made it tough on Tavon Austin. The most impressive thing about Austin is he's a clean catcher. He made a fair catch on a punt with 5.33 hang time, and another with 4.78. He returned one that hung 5.48 and got five yards. Calamity was averted when Malik Taylor was nearly struck by a wayward punt that would have gone for a Carolina TD. Calamity also was averted when Scott's punt with one minute left was inches away from being blocked by S Kenny Robinson because Oren Burks was out of position. Randy Ramsey cost Scott eight yards of roll by allowing a bouncing punt to touch his leg. Carolina WR Pharoh Cooper made a mistake fielding a punt at the 1, but when four Packers missed the tackle, he got it out to the 20. Ty Summers and Ramsey each had two tackles. The snap leaders, each with 22, were Burks and Summers.