

# Rating The Packers : Week 16 vs Titans

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**By Bob McGinn Posted: Dec 29, 2020**

For Packers fans, Sunday night's game at Lambeau Field was short (2 hours, 46 minutes), sweet and utterly convincing.

In this space a week ago the question was asked: Just how good are the Packers, anyway?

The answer looked to be Super Bowl good as Green Bay dispatched the Titans, 40-14, in its most impressive performance of the season.

If an NFL team mirrors its coach, then the Titans are big and tough in the mold of their macho coach, Mike Vrabel, the former Pro Bowl linebacker who enjoyed a 14-year career because of his brawn and his brain.

With a few inches of snow falling until deep into the second half, the Packers were by far the more physical team under Matt LaFleur, an undersized quarterback at Saginaw Valley State in his playing days.

"That's what gets me so excited: when I see guys playing physical, when I see guys playing fast, when I see guys running to the football," LaFleur said Monday. "When guys are making plays, you definitely see more excitement out of our players. They're cheering for one another. That's what great defenses do. And we're going to continue to harp on that."

NFL rushing leader Derrick Henry has been attempting to become the eighth player in history to surpass 2,000 yards in a season. The Packers gang-tackled Henry all night, limiting him to 98 yards in 23 carries. His average per game had been 119.6.

Wide receiver Corey Davis, who was averaging five receptions for 78.8 yards, was shut out.

Quarterback Ryan Tannehill, whose passer rating had surpassed 100 in the previous five games, settled for 40.5. The Titans, the NFL's highest-scoring team with an average of 31.1, finished with their lowest point total of the season.

"That was a hell of a performance by our defense," LaFleur said.

On offense, the Packers rushed for 234 yards, their second-highest total under LaFleur. They scored six touchdowns while gaining 448 yards in just 63 plays (7.1 avg.).

"Weren't able to play physical enough and stop the run," Vrabel said. "None of it was good enough. The field conditions had no bearing on the game."

Not only didn't the Packers have to punt, but they also didn't have a penalty.

Right tackle Rick Wagner suffered a knee injury but LaFleur suggested Monday it wouldn't end his season.

One of the reasons for the Packers' five-game winning streak is the return of all their key starters from injury. Their only missing starter Sunday was guard Lane Taylor whereas the Titans were missing four, including their best offensive lineman (left tackle Taylor Lewan) and their best pass rusher (Jadeveon Clowney).

Unlike most of the teams in the NFL, the Packers enter the stretch run with little or no concerns on the injury front.

The Packers can clinch the lone bye in the NFC playoffs Sunday with a victory over the Bears at Soldier Field. In turn, the Bears can clinch a wild-card berth with a victory. Green Bay is 9-1 in the last 10 meetings against the Bears in Chicago, but only the 2014 game was decided by more than 10 points.

In the Nov. 29 meeting at Lambeau Field, the Packers led, 41-10, entering the fourth quarter before the Bears scored two consolation touchdowns for the 41-25 margin. Coach Matt Nagy called the performance of his team "flat-out embarrassing," adding that all hands needed to have a "freaking sense of urgency."

The Packers, a 5 ½-point favorite in the rematch, opened the first game with touchdown drives of 77, 75 and 80 yards. The Bears have won three games in a row under quarterback Mitchell Trubisky.

After recording another touchdown drive on their opening possession, the Packers now have scored eight TDs and four field goals to start games compared to two three-and-outs and a lost fumble.

Here is a rating of the Packers (12-3) against the Titans (10-5). Five footballs are the maximum, one-half football is the minimum.

The three stars of the game were: **1. Jaire Alexander. 2. Rashan Gary. 3. Kenny Clark.** As a team, the Packers received 4 ½ footballs.

## **Receivers (4 ½)**

Davante Adams bounced back from a subpar outing with another superlative one. Initially, he worked over Adoree' Jackson, who missed the first 13 games with a knee injury. When matched against Malcolm Butler, the 14th highest-paid cornerback in the league, Adams dominated as well on a hitch for 27 and a go route against a seven-man pressure for 32. Instead of turning back for the long ball, Butler grabbed Adams' right arm just after the ball arrived. Despite Butler's perfect timing, Adams secured the ball to his body with his left hand and completed the splendid reception. In one of the few instances when the Titans doubled-covered Adams, he didn't quit on his end-zone route. Instead, he left SS Kenny Vaccaro and Butler arguing with one another after breaking back and away from them for an 8-yard TD. Adams, who played 47 of the 66 possible offensive snaps, had 12 targets compared to five for the other five wide receivers. Marquez Valdes-Scantling played the most uneventful 41 snaps ever. In the first quarter, MVS played 12 of the 18 snaps. On the first play of the second quarter, a third and 1, Equanimeous St. Brown (18) was on the field instead of MVS. It was his first snap of the game. St. Brown promptly beat the press coverage of nickel back Desmond King on an over route from the slot by five yards and the result was an easy 21-yard TD. MVS probably would have beaten King even more badly. Allen Lazard (41), who caught two 7-yard sideline passes, helped the run game by cracking on safeties and linebackers. Matt LaFleur keeps showing the jet-sweep action, perhaps to occupy some of the next opponent's practice week. Tavon Austin was the only player used in jet motion this week, doing it on 13 of his 17 snaps. Austin is gaining the trust of the staff by catching the ball. It wouldn't be surprising in the playoffs to see LaFleur design some plays for him. Malik Taylor (four) also got in. Let's face it. Against the Titans' 29th-ranked pass defense and 32nd-ranked pass rush, Aaron Rodgers basically could go anywhere that he wanted with the ball. Robert Tonyan (39) caught one of his two targets, a 17-yard gain off on a bootleg. Mercedes Lewis (31) was working hard up to the second level in the run game.

## **Offensive Line (4)**

With Rick Wagner (knee) probably out for a while, the Packers are down to six offensive linemen who can play. Even if David Bakhtiari, their best blocker, were to go down, the unit has such remarkable versatility that there's no reason to think it would just fall apart. That type of protection enables Matt LaFleur to sleep well at night. Rookie Jon Runyan would move in at left guard and Elgton Jenkins could go to left tackle. On Sunday, they lost Wagner after 41 snaps so Billy Turner moved from right guard to right tackle and Lucas Patrick entered at right guard. Adam Stenavich, the second-year position coach, has mixed and matched beautifully. The key Sunday was the return of Corey Linsley after a 3 ½-game absence with a sprained knee. Linsley was the only player who wasn't charged with a pressure or "bad" run. He was stout against the excellent inside tandem of Jeffery Simmons and DaQuan Jones, and his timing leaving combo blocks to the second level was on point. Linsley isn't about self-promoting flourishes. He's about getting his man blocked. Bakhtiari's only pressure was the sack by free agent Wyatt Ray. On Aaron Jones' 59-yard run, Bakhtiari kept blocking DE Jack Crawford so Jones had an open lane outside. Neither Wagner nor Turner allowed a pressure. Of the 11 "bad" runs, Turner was charged with 4 ½. His angular build helps him in pass pro at tackle but hinders him in the run game. He tends to play high, anyway, and at his modest weight, he was getting displaced too much. It would be unfair to be too hard on Turner. He should be saluted for being able to make a position change on the fly. Jenkins and Simmons, his former teammate at Mississippi State, had a great battle. Simmons ranked second on the Titans in pressures with 17 but in this game was shut out in 50 snaps. Patrick (25) was deposited in a heap by Simmons after going overboard trying to finish a block. He came up limping on a toe injury that has lingered for weeks.

## **Quarterbacks (4 ½)**

Freshly fallen snow? Winds of 15 mph, wind chill of 16 degrees? Just another challenge to defeat for Aaron Rodgers, who far outpointed Ryan Tannehill on a difficult night for quarterbacks. Mike Vrabel went after Rodgers, sending five or more rushers on 41.4 percent of dropbacks and six or more on 13.8 percent. The Packers haven't seen those pressure numbers since the first month of the season. On the second snap, FS Kevin Byard was flying at Rodgers off the play side. He simply threw from a lower arm angle for a 7-yard completion. On the next series, OLB Harold Landry decided to take a chance with an inside pass rush against Rick Wagner. All that got the Titans was a 14-yard scramble by Rodgers around where Landry had been. On a six-man pressure in which Vrabel got the best of Rodgers, he cut his losses by safely lobbing the ball over everyone's head. With the Titans basically playing Davante Adams straight-up, Rodgers kept putting the ball on him for 11 receptions totaling 142 yards in 12 targets. The only miss was the fourth-quarter interception in which Rodgers, on the move to the right, inexplicably threw back into the middle and was picked by Malcolm Butler. That was a shocker. Two plays before that, Rodgers had to hop on a fumbled center exchange that lost six yards. On a seven-man blitz, Rodgers' pinpoint accuracy resulted in the 32-yard strike to Adams. His receivers caught every ball and the protection was strong against a defense with minimal pass rush. Tim Boyle closed it out with three kneel-downs, giving the Packers 22 for the season. All 12 of their victories have ended on kneel-downs; not once have they needed last-minute heroics.

## **Running Backs (4 ½)**

Rookie AJ Dillon missed Games 8-12 because of COVID-19. The Packers weren't sure if he'd play again this season. He returned on special teams in Game 13, played five snaps on offense last week and logged 38 Sunday, just 14 fewer than he had all season. His 124 yards were nine more than his season total. After a slow start, Dillon looked very much like the big back the Packers envisioned. His best moment was slipping past a pair of defensive backs on a 30-yard TD. In all, he broke seven tackles, and 90 of his yards came after contact. Three of four times, however, he ran into his blockers. He was running in a straight line into traffic. At this point, it's unclear if he has the ability to cut and make people miss. If Dillon doesn't have that, he's going to absorb an excessive amount of punishment and the length of his career could be short-lived. It's also unclear why Aaron Rodgers had to use hand signals and vocal commands instructing Dillon what to do post-huddle. Aaron Jones (25) suffered a hip injury early in the second quarter and was used judiciously by Matt LaFleur after that. Jones' 59-yard run should have been 23 because he stepped out of bounds but the Titans never saw a replay in time to

challenge. Side judge Clay Reynard missed the call on a play that was directly in front of him. On the play, Jones was going nowhere when NT DaQuan Jones drove Billy Turner into him. Refusing to accept a loss, he bounced left, gained the corner and was off to the races. Jones failed on a two-point conversion and a third and 1 partly because of poor blocks by Turner. With Jamaal Williams (quadriceps) out, perhaps Dillon would have been the better short-yardage choice than Jones. Dominique Dafney (26) played mostly as the No. 3 tight end but also took five snaps in the backfield. He blocked ILB Rashaan Evans on a 14-yard draw play.

## **Defensive Line (4 ½)**

When Derrick Henry was the talk of the NFL in January after rushing for 446 yards and a 5.4 average in three playoff games, the Titans had LT Taylor Lewan and RT Jack Conklin to go with the three interior players that started Sunday against Green Bay. With Lewan on injured reserve and Conklin in Cleveland, their line isn't nearly as good with career backups David Quessenberry and Dennis Kelly pressed into duty at tackle. The goal for the Packers' front was to hold the point, disengage and grab Henry before he could break into the clear. As always, the ringleader was Kenny Clark, who played 43 of the 55 possible snaps on defense. He beat C Ben Jones with back-door quickness and tackled Henry for minus-2, the Packers' only tackle for loss. He held up well against double-teams, hopped over trash to waylay Henry from the side and added 1 ½ pressures on the rush. Dean Lowry (35) and Tyler Lancaster (20) played unselfishly, keeping blockers off the linebackers. Kingsley Keke (25) was the least effective against the run and didn't get anything going in the rush, either. Brian Price, who played 10 snaps as a rookie free agent for the Packers in 2016, was signed to the practice squad Dec. 15 and played nine snaps Sunday. From 2017-18, he started two of 21 games for the Cowboys, Browns and Raiders. Price (6 foot 2 1/2, 322 pounds) has short arms (30 5/8 inches) and small hands (9 3/8 inches) but good speed (5.17). The Packers played Price over mammoth Anthony Rush as the No. 5 defensive lineman in place of injured Montravius Adams and Billy Winn. The Packers employed three of their bigs on 27 snaps; on two plays in the first series they used four 300-pounders.

## **Linebackers (4 ½)**

It took four games but the Packers finally showed their hand and in effect declared Krys Barnes, the rookie free agent from UCLA, as the No. 1 inside linebacker. Christian Kirksey, Kamal Martin and Barnes weren't all healthy until Game 12. The snap counts told everything: 52 for Barnes, 13 for Martin and 12 for Kirksey. Barnes is a heavier hitter than Kirksey and more reliable than Martin. Of the 11 missed tackles on defense, Barnes had just one. He did nice work either shedding or eluding veteran LG Rodger Saffold and making a pair of tackles. When LT David Quessenberry approached, Barnes jacked him backward with a firm shot to the chest. He was focused on just getting Derrick Henry down. When Martin was aligned in the wrong gap, Barnes appeared to get after him. Kirksey got more done in 13 snaps than he had averaging 60.5 in his eight full games. He intercepted a pass in the flat by drifting over and reading Ryan Tannehill's eyes. He also timed his only blitz perfectly despite Tannehill's advanced hard count and got the sack by staying after it. By taking a lot away from Kirksey defensive coordinator Mike Pettine might get more from him. It's hard to trust Martin at this point in his career because of all the chances that he takes. Rashan Gary (30) led the team with four pressures and did some outstanding work against the run. He and Za'Darius Smith (35) combined on a hurry that led to Darnell Savage's interception. RT Dennis Kelly has athletic limitations, and when he set soft Gary began taking him back into Tannehill. Against the run, Gary eluded Saffold and made a tackle. Gary looks as if he might have lost some weight. His quickness stood out, and he played with some emotion, too. Preston Smith (45) has elevated his play since being benched a month ago. Despite missing three tackles, this still ranks as one of his finest games for Green Bay. Kirksey's interception was the result of Preston's knockdown on an inside charge against Kelly. The Titans' tight ends are good blockers but Preston shed Jonnu Smith on two carries for 3 yards and Geoff Swain on a rush for 3. He also batted down a pass and looked fully engaged. Battling ankle, neck and thumb injuries during the week, Za'Darius had his lowest playing time since Game 8. His 2 ½ pressures included a sack in 3.2 seconds on a stunt. The rush line of Za'Darius, Preston and Gary is critically important to the Packers' championship chances. Randy Ramsey (six) and Oren Burks (three) filled in on the outside late, and ILB Ty Summers (three) broke up a pass at the end.

## **Defensive Backs (4 ½)**

Combative Jaire Alexander (52) hasn't had a lot of work this season. Most teams have thrown at Kevin King (52), but the Titans took a different approach. WR Corey Davis, a top-flight player, didn't catch a pass due in large part to Alexander. His best chance came late in the third quarter on a slant but Alexander broke it up and then chirped in his face. Jonnu Smith, an athletic tight end, had two targeted throws tipped away by Alexander. He's made major strides this season by learning how to play off coverage at a level now comparable to his bump-and-run skills. Ryan Tannehill was knocked down on a blitz by King. If Tannehill was caught off guard, he had good reason to be. It was King's first pressure in Mike Pettine's two years as coordinator. Recently, King's speed has looked questionable in long pursuit. That might be one reason he plays receivers with his hands so much. Nickel back Chandon Sullivan (31) got beat in man coverage by Smith for a 12-yard TD. Darnell Savage (52) missed too many tackles (three) but made some secure ones, too, in his more comfortable role closer to the line of scrimmage. His game has picked up since Pettine changed his duties. In the second quarter, Savage had man coverage on A.J. Brown as he crossed the field. He took a chance, undercut the route and made a terrific interception à la Charles Woodson. Later, Savage had a chance to pick a sideline pass and return it 49 yards for a TD. He jumped for no reason, then appeared unsure whether to make a body catch or a hands catch. His indecision led to a drop. Adrian Amos (52) really tackled well. On Tannehill's 45-yard TD run off a zone-read on third and 1, Amos was the one player that had clear vision of the play as it developed. He was so focused on Derrick Henry, however, that he never saw what was happening until it was too late. Minus No. 3 safety Will Redmond (concussion), Vernon Scott (26) filled in.

## **Kickers (2 ½)**

If Mason Crosby weren't disappointed by the Pro Bowl vote, he wouldn't be human. The NFC nod went to Atlanta's Younghoe Koo, a second-year kicker for a dome team who was 35 of 36 on field goals and 28 of 31 on extra points through 14 games. On Sunday, Koo missed from 39 in the final seconds and the Chiefs prevailed over the Falcons, 17-14. Crosby was 16 of 16 on field goals and 50 of 53 on extra points. In kickoffs, Crosby had 44 touchbacks compared to Koo's 26. Crosby, 36, has never been to a Pro Bowl. On Sunday, Crosby missed another extra point (wide left) and made four others. He also appeared to kick a field goal from 35 low that was blocked but brought back by penalty. His seven kickoffs averaged 60.6 yards and 3.77 seconds of hang time. JK Scott didn't have to punt, but he did tackle Amani Hooker after his 66-yard return on the blocked kick.

## **Special Teams (2 ½)**

Titans coach Mike Vrabel bemoaned the opening kickoff that Stephen Gostkowski hit out of bounds and the first punt by Brett Kern that went for a touchback and 12-yard net. Both helped the Packers, but those were unforced errors by Tennessee. Only a phantom offsides penalty on SS Joshua Kalu saved the Packers from another gaffe in the kicking game. DE Jack Crawford beat Rick Wagner to make the block, and Mason Crosby appeared to hit the kick low. It was returned all the way to the Green Bay 20. For the second consecutive week, WR Malik Taylor almost had punts bounce off him as he functioned as a hold-up man on the punt-return team. He and Tavon Austin must improve their communication. Austin got away with not fielding some punts because the game was lopsided, but he will need to be more decisive in the postseason. As the kickoff returner, Taylor is a big body so he might have less chance to fumble. The Packers are so prolific on offense that they don't want risk on kickoff returns. Henry Black and Ty Summers each delivered two hard tackles in kickoff coverage. The snap leaders, each with 15, were Oren Burks, Randy Ramsey, Black and Summers.