

# Rating The Packers : Divisional Week vs Rams

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*By Bob McGinn Posted: Jan. 18, 2020*

The Rams weren't going to win the divisional playoff game Saturday at Lambeau Field without winning the turnover differential, and with the Packers having led the NFL in fewest giveaways with 11 that probably wasn't in the cards.

Nor could the Rams harbor realistic hopes of winning a shootout without their No.1 receiver, Cooper Kupp, and with quarterback Jared Goff less than three weeks removed from thumb surgery on his throwing hand.

What the Rams did have was Aaron Donald, the irrepressible defensive tackle whom they knew had the capability of turning that Packers-by-seven point spread on its ear. Barring an avalanche of good fortune, a dominating performance by Donald was their one legitimate path to the NFC Championship Game.

The Packers will be playing in that game next Sunday thanks to their 32-18 victory over the Rams. On a day when both the offense and defense deserved plaudits, Green Bay never trailed as the fresher, tougher team.

"Our guys went out there with the mentality that we were going to be physical and I think that showed through, really in all three phases," coach Matt LaFleur said. "I loved just the physicality that our group brought. Obviously, it's never perfect ... but I thought our guys' mentality was spot on."

Playing to form, the Packers didn't turn the ball over. Given his post-operative right thumb and inauspicious performance in the second half of the season, Goff engineered an effective albeit conservative game plan that contributed to a passer rating of 105.9, his best since Oct. 26.

If the Rams indeed had a fighting chance, it was ruined by the ribs injury that Donald suffered a week earlier during their 30-20 triumph in Seattle. An imposter wearing No. 99 might have given the Rams as much Saturday as they got from their reduced superstar.

With Donald just kind of out there for 40 of the 75 snaps (53.3 percent), the Rams' top-ranked defense was chopped up by the prolific Packers. Green Bay's total yardage (484), rushing yardage (188), passing yardage (296) and first downs (28) were more than Los Angeles had allowed all season. The 32 points tied the most allowed by L.A.

"That's a great football team," Rams coach Sean McVay said. "You can see why they were the No. 1 seed. The game sometimes feels like it's in slow motion with him (Aaron Rodgers). They're physical upfront. They've got (Jamaal) Williams, and (Aaron) Jones did an excellent job churning out tough yards. But then you get some isolations outside or you get a favorable box count or something that you like where you (are), and you're just whipping it out and it's like he's throwing darts."

On Wednesday, Donald told reporters it was the first “real” injury that he had ever suffered playing football. “My side is just sore,” he said. “I’m good, though.”

Listed as questionable after not practicing all week, Donald started at 3-technique and played the first five downs. The opening snap foreshadowed what was to come. Guard Elgton Jenkins knocked Donald to the ground, and as Donald went down he reached back and grabbed his side.

An ultimate competitor, Donald certainly wanted to be the force he almost always is. His body and undoubtedly the pain betrayed him.

On running plays, he would come off the ball and meekly accept a stalemate. On the 19 running plays for which he was on the field, his only tackle was an assist on a 3-yard gain. On the 21 pass plays, Donald’s only productive snap was the pressure that was more the result of Rodgers scrambling toward him.

Usually, Donald plays with extreme effort, splitting double-team blocks with quick hands and strength against the run and besieging the passer with superlative takeoff, moves and closing burst.

At halftime of the Rams-Seahawks game, Hall of Fame defensive end Howie Long said on Fox that Donald would one day be recognized as the greatest defensive tackle ever to play. That list would include Joe Greene, Bob Lilly and Merlin Olsen. Troy Aikman, Long’s colleague at Fox and another Hall of Famer, called Donald the finest defensive player he had ever seen.

Asked why his Seahawks had averaged just 17.3 points and 301 yards in three games against the Rams, coach Pete Carroll said after the wild-card defeat, “There is one factor in the whole thing since we’ve been playing these guys, and that’s No. 99. He hasn’t just torn us up, he’s torn everybody up ... what happens is when you pay as much attention to him as you have to, other guys can factor in, as their guys have over the years. So many things feed off that.”

Donald logged 84.5 percent playing time in the regular season, but in 2018, the Rams’ last playoff season, he played 192 of 197 defensive snaps in the three postseason games. But pain wasn’t the only reason he didn’t play a lot more Saturday. Since he wasn’t able to run around and hit people, the Rams probably were better off with healthy backups in the lineup.

As the final two minutes ticked by, cameras caught Donald tearing up on the sidelines. His day of what must have been intolerable frustration reached a crescendo when he got into an altercation with Jenkins in the second quarter, lost his cool and was hit with an unnecessary roughness penalty. The Packers, who were without All-Pro left tackle David Bakhtiari, carried the day with a revamped offensive line that turned aside everything the Rams could offer.

Here is a rating of the Packers (14-3) against the Rams (11-7). Five footballs are the maximum, one-half football is the minimum.

The three stars of the game were: **1. Aaron Jones. 2. Rick Wagner. 3. Preston Smith.** As a team, the Packers received four footballs.

## **Receivers (3 ½)**

The Rams didn't change their use of All-Pro CB Jalen Ramsey despite the presence of Davante Adams, who played 62 of the possible 75 snaps on offense. When Adams lined up outside, Ramsey would travel to that side and generally press him. However, when Adams lined up inside or went in motion, Ramsey seldom was in coverage. Maybe the Rams and Packers will conduct joint practices this summer and fans could see them compete one-on-one. When the playoffs arrive, snaps for the developing backups tend to disappear. Take Malik Taylor, who has played at least one snap in 13 of his 15 games. He didn't see the field, and Tavon Austin got just one after averaging 7.5 in his first four games. Austin's role as the motion man generally fell to Adams, which enabled him to get away from Ramsey and permit Equanimeous St. Brown (32), a far better player than Austin, to play his most snaps in six weeks. Only one of Adams' nine receptions was beyond 10 yards downfield. His three catches against Ramsey included a neat 1-yard TD off return motion, a slant for 7 and a hitch for 8. Marquez Valdes-Scantling (36) is reading coverage much better and feeling more confident using his size on short passes. Behind a good block by Adams on CB Troy Hill, MVS gained 4 on a crucial third and 3. He showed nice feet on a stop-and-go route that had Hill burned but the ball sailed far overhead. A tough grader would give MVS a drop in the end zone despite the pass being high. It appeared he saved an interception in the end zone by grabbing FS John Johnson. Allen Lazard (54) sold one of his run blocks before taking off behind the unsuspecting SS Jordan Fuller and Hill for a 58-yard touchdown. He also ran an impressive dig against Ramsey for 21. On the debit side, he took his eyes off the ball and dropped a takeoff route. St. Brown is becoming a more rugged blocker. On a free play, he got vertical in a hurry, caught the ball in traffic and broke Johnson's tackle for the final seven of the 27-yard gain. Yes, another pass was somewhat behind St. Brown, but that crossing route is one he must catch. Robert Tonyan (48) runs effective bootlegs, gets just about everything that's there and then some after the catch and has a knack for finding voids downfield. Mercedes Lewis (38) does what he always does.

## **Offensive Line (4 ½)**

DT Aaron Donald's 40 snaps saw him aligned across from Elgton Jenkins on 20, Lucas Patrick on 17, Rick Wagner on two and Billy Turner on one. On 21 passes, he was double-teamed 16 times. The doubles involved a guard with Corey Linsley 10 times, a guard and tackle five times and Turner together with Aaron Jones once. With Donald at about 50 percent effectiveness due to a ribs injury, the Packers felt safe allowing Patrick to block him one-on-one twice in the fourth quarter. In the run game, the Packers were far more confident about their matchup with the undersized Donald. Jenkins blocked him by himself on three runs in the first five plays. As the game progressed, it was obvious that Donald wasn't capable of mixing it up. Several times, he would move into his blocker and give himself up, almost as though it were a "thud" practice in training camp. Respectful of Donald, seven times a Pro Bowl selection in his seven-year career, the Packers decided to lock up with him rather than trying to dish out undue punishment. They're well aware of how tough rib injuries can be. Donald's ribs probably felt worse after the halftime break, and so the Rams limited his second-half snap total to 13. In October 2015, Donald's first appearance against Green Bay, Josh Sitton solidified his standing as a premier guard by shutting him down. When the other guard, T.J. Lang, left with a knee injury on his 24th snap, Don Barclay and Josh Walker filled in. Barclay wasn't very good but Walker played well against Donald in what was by far the pinnacle of his 13-game career with the Packers. In October 2018, the only other time Donald faced Green Bay, he had two sacks and three other pressures; Lane Taylor yielded 4 ½ of the five. Even with Donald just a shell of himself, defensive coordinator Brandon Staley introduced a fifth rusher on just 16.7 percent of dropbacks. The Rams had no sacks, two knockdowns and seven

pressures. Rick Wagner did superb work against OLB Leonard Floyd, who might have had his best season after four with the Bears. Wagner could qualify as a mauler, but he also understands angles in pass protection and, at 31, still can move his feet sufficiently. DT Michael Brockers, the Rams' second-best defensive lineman, disengaged from Wagner three times on runs totaling 8 yards. However, like the other starters, Wagner didn't have a complete whiff so the running backs almost always at least reached the line of scrimmage. When the Packers plucked left tackle Jared Veldheer off the Colts' practice squad early in the week, indications were that they probably were going to start him at left tackle and shift Turner to right guard. Veldheer played well last weekend for the Colts, who allowed no sacks and one quarterback hit in a wild-card defeat in Buffalo. Those plans never went anywhere when Veldheer was lost to COVID-19. Turner was sharp against Floyd and DE Morgan Fox, another active rusher. On the inside, Linsley kept getting leverage on NT Sebastian Joseph-Day. It was a key to the predominantly inside zone ground game, as were his precise blocks against MLB Troy Reeder. An underappreciated part of Linsley's game is his mastery of the shotgun snap. Like Wagner, Jenkins yielded just one-half pressure and moved people consistently for the run. Because he's a limited athlete, Patrick will lose his balance and fall off run blocks. He's strong, nasty and assertive, however, and those kinds of guys tend to play.

### **Quarterbacks (4)**

My favorite moment was second and 17 from the 8 in the third quarter. From the shotgun, Rodgers went back two yards deep in the end zone and worked his progression. The Rams were running a twist upfront, and Leonard Floyd was beginning to edge by Corey Linsley. With Floyd menacing, Rodgers refused to panic. He stepped to his right where OLB Justin Hollins was entering his space as well. With Allen Lazard having cleared from Jalen Ramsey across the middle, Rodgers delivered a bullet that resulted in a 21-yard gain. With all of Matt LaFleur's play-action and misdirection, Rodgers isn't deep in the pocket that often anymore. Another exceptional play was the 1-yard TD to Davante Adams. With an unblocked edge rusher due in no time, Rodgers had to grab Linsley's shotgun snap and, laces or no laces, hurl it to the speeding Adams about 20 yards away in 1 second or less. Rodgers was less accurate on some other throws. He missed the wide-open Marquez Valdes-Scantling on a deep double move. In the final minute of the first half he forced two balls into the end zone, one of which should have been intercepted by CB Troy Hill and the other could have been picked by FS John Johnson. On another third and goal from the 1, Rodgers pump-faked OLB Leonard Floyd into the air permitting him to scoot past to the right pylon for the TD. If Floyd had run in with his hands up, it's a major loss/collision and probable field-goal attempt. Old-school football people might maintain that Rodgers should have just gone fetal on AJ Dillon's fumble. By scooping, Rodgers risked losing the recovery and perhaps an injury-causing pileup. He trusted his hands, advanced the ball 3 yards and set up an easier third-down situation that was converted by MVS.

### **Running Backs (4 ½)**

Five-football awards always have been a rarity. This would have qualified had it not been for AJ Dillon's fumble. Dillon had eight fumbles in three seasons and 866 touches at Boston College. Earlier, he had been carrying the ball somewhat low rather than tucked high and tight. It probably wasn't a wise decision to cut that run back. When he did, MLB Troy Reeder delivered a stiff frontal shot before DT A'Shawn Robinson finished him off. The ball went flying back to Aaron Rodgers, and Dillon left with a quadriceps injury. Playing three running backs sounds like a wonderful idea, but of course, all three would be better with more carries and are more apt to fumble coming in cold off the bench. One thing

is for sure: as big and as straight-line as Dillon is, he's going to take a fearful pounding for as long as he plays. The snaps counts were 47 for Aaron Jones, 28 for Jamaal Williams and nine for Dillon. Jones and Williams were absolutely sensational. Jones, with 113 yards in 15 touches, broke seven tackles, his second-highest total of the season. On the 60-yard burst, he got north-south in an instant, broke free and then gained 35 more yards after Reeder initially grabbed him at the 50. On the last play of the first quarter, Jones was crushed by OLB Leonard Floyd and SS Jordan Fuller just past the line but wouldn't go down and turned it into a gain of 8. By running so much inside, Matt LaFleur neutralized the strength of the Rams' run defense: the terrific lateral speed of LBs Kenny Young, Justin Hollins and Reeder. It worked because Jones and Williams wouldn't be denied in the A gaps. Reeder found a gap to shoot on the goal line but Jones instantly jumped away and scored from a yard out. Despite all the twisting and fighting for that extra yard, Jones will not fumble. His 14-yard gain on a perimeter checkdown is another weapon the Packers seldom utilize but is always there. Breaking a season-high five tackles, Williams rushed 12 times for 65. He lost a 19-yard gain when Rick Wagner was penalized for holding. Opponents have a major macho problem with Williams. If you don't bring the thump, he'll own you. All of Dominique Dafney's 20 snaps came at tight end, where his blocking and special-teams value has given him a uniform rather than Jace Sternberger, who was inactive again.

#### **Defensive Line (4)**

Rookie RB Cam Akers carried 18 times for 90 yards, several times taking advantage of a defense that was late lining up against first-sound snaps. All five who played had occasions where they were ridden out of their gap. The Packers were stouter than the Rams' defense was, and therein laid control of the game. After a promising 12-snap debut in Chicago, Damon Harrison turned in a forgettable three-snap sequence midway in the second quarter and never got another look. On the first play, he was driven out of the hole on a 6-yard rush. On the second, he offered little resistance as he was being sealed off by RT Rob Havenstein on a carry for 10. On the third, he was OK on a 4-yard gain away from him. Those three plays were the start of a 75-yard TD drive. When the need arose for a fresh big man as the second half wore on, position coach Jerry Montgomery waved in journeyman Brian Price, who was just up from the practice squad. Price beat LG Bobby Evans, the replacement for starter David Edwards (Achilles tendinitis), on a run for no gain. Perhaps too fired up, Price jumped offside on the next play to sustain another TD drive and wasn't heard from again. Kenny Clark, who was semi-unblockable with five pressures against the Rams at the Coliseum in 2018, was good again but not quite that good. His 1 ½ pressures all were in the form of sacks. When Mike Pettine rushed only three men five times, his highest total since the New Orleans game, Clark looked good one time backing out and bludgeoning poor rookie WR Van Jefferson to the ground at the five-yard line. By taking a side and penetrating against C Austin Blythe, Clark left open the other A gap for Akers to charge through for a 7-yard TD from the Wildcat formation. Clark played 46 of the 53 possible defensive snaps compared to 47 for Dean Lowry and 20 for Tyler Lancaster. Kingsley Keke missed a second straight game with a concussion. Lowry's lone pressure, a bull rush against Evans, set the table for Clark's full sack. Lowry has become more of a rush threat since mid-season.

## **Linebackers (4)**

Preston Smith (41) continued his upward progression with a pair of batted balls, one knockdown and some consistent, timely work against the run. On the Rams' third play, Robert Woods beat Jaire Alexander badly on a slant and could have been off to the races. Instead, Preston stood stationary at the line, using his 34-inch arms and 10 5/8-inch hands to knock down the pass by Jared Goff, who stands 6 foot 4. On third and 2 at the Green Bay 15, Preston beat the cutoff block by TE Gerald Everett, flattened inside and stopped Cam Akers after a gain of 1. That Rams' drive ended with a field goal. On the other side, Za'Darius Smith (45) ran a tight stunt inside when the Rams fanned LG Bobby Evans to the other side in an unconventional protection. His lightning close produced a sack in 2.1 seconds. Presumably, in an attempt to shut down the run, Mike Pettine used Za'Darius in the standup rover role over center on the first eight plays of the second half. The Rams' adjustment was to start throwing, and so Pettine went back to using Za'Darius outside. In the fourth quarter, Za'Darius suffered acute embarrassment when Akers knocked him down with a stiff-arm to the face. His containment has been inconsistent all season. Rashan Gary (33) had some struggles early against wide runs but came through with 4 ½ pressures, 2 ½ more than Za'Darius. The Rams double-teamed Za'Darius on 26.1 percent of his individual rushes. At some point, more of those doubles will go to Gary. Randy Ramsey played at least three snaps in the last seven games. Saturday? He had zero. That's the playoffs. Inside linebacker remains the Packers' weakest position on defense. The snap counts were 48 for Krys Barnes, 14 for Christian Kirksey and four for Kamal Martin. On a three-man rush, Barnes bit on a play fake to open a window for a 28-yard completion to Josh Reynolds. On the next play, he got exposed again on a 19-yard reception. The Rams' quick counts played a role in Barnes' struggles. As a rookie calling the defense, there's certainly a lot on his mind. In the first half, he suffered a left thumb injury only to return a short time later with a black club protecting it. It was with the club that Barnes got run over by Akers on a 7-yard TD up the gut and dropped an interception after a nice break on the ball. Kirksey was too up and down. You don't know what you're getting with him. Multiply that by five for Martin, who will jump at anything and therefore often takes himself clear out of plays.

## **Defensive Backs (4)**

This was the seventh of 17 games in which the secondary didn't have the challenge of taking on the opponent's No. 1 wide receiver. On Saturday, Cooper Kupp (knee) couldn't go. Kupp has made a ton of plays from the slot during his four seasons. His difficult catch for 44 yards far downfield was significant in the Rams' victory over the Seahawks. Kupp would have been a stern assignment for Chandon Sullivan (49). Limited by speed on the flanks and the inability to protect Jared Goff for more than 2 seconds, Sean McVay felt compelled to dink and dunk. McVay-Goff seldom went near Jaire Alexander (53), who caught a big break when Preston Smith batted down a slant for Robert Woods, who was his man. Despite playing 10 yards off, Alexander ate up that ground and upended a hitch for minus-3. It was the Packers' only tackle for a loss. When the Rams needed chain-moving completions they got them at the expense of Kevin King (53), Sullivan and the linebackers. The secondary tackled well; the only miss was by King, who once again preferred to throw a shoulder rather than execute a wrap-up tackle. Goff had success throwing at Adrian Amos (53), who couldn't stay with Josh Reynolds on an out for 16 and didn't press Van Jefferson on his 4-yard TD. Darnell Savage (53) and dime safety Will Redmond (18) were adequate.

## **Kickers (4)**

Thanks to a lousy snap, Mason Crosby couldn't even attempt an extra point. After fielding a pitch from the holder, JK Scott, Crosby suffered an injury to his left shoulder when DT Michael Brockers landed on him. Crosby's kickoffs indicated he was hurting. On three before the injury, his hang time was 4.10 seconds. On the three post-injury, his hang was 3.64. With his left arm sort of just hanging by his side, Crosby made a field goal from 39 and two extra points. Earlier, he hit a chippie from 24. His six-kickoff averages were 63.8 yards and 3.87 hang time. Two were touchbacks. Two weeks after averaging 5.27 hang time in two punts at Soldier Field, Scott averaged 5.13 here. His gross and net averages were 39.

## **Special Teams (1 ½)**

Hunter Bradley, the third-year long snapper, needs to improve and fast. His snap on the second extra point was so far behind JK Scott that there wasn't time to spot the ball. Then, on Scott's final punt, Bradley's snap was low. Scott did well to get the ball off before OLB Samson Ekubam, who was working against LB Ty Summers, could make the block. The return game is far from a thing of beauty. Tavon Austin returned two punts for 17 yards before misjudging one and surrendering 11 yards of roll. On kickoffs, there were small victories as Malik Taylor recorded his longest return in 11 attempts. It was all of 26 yards. Taylor's decision to bring out a punt from one yard deep backfired when he was smeared at the 16. He's basically just trying not to fumble. Coordinator Shawn Mennenga made a major move, benching CB Ka'dar Hollman and promoting CB KeiVarae Russell from the practice squad to replace him. Hollman had been a primary gunner and hold-up man most of the season; he was inactive Saturday. Russell, whose only action was seven snaps against Jacksonville in Game 9, could hardly have been more impressive. He sustained blocks against CB David Long on both of Austin's successful returns and also downed a punt at the 6. Russell was the Chiefs' third-round draft choice in 2016 after attending Notre Dame. Taylor, the other hold-up, also made a big play, shoving WR Nsimba Webster out of bounds. When Webster foolishly didn't return to the field fast enough, the Rams were tagged with a 15-yard penalty. S Henry Black tackled Webster three times on kickoff returns. Webster's final return was for 38. The snaps leaders, all with 18, were Oren Burks, Black and Summers.