

Rating The Packers : Championship Week vs Buccaneers

By Bob McGinn Posted: Jan. 26, 2020

Coach Matt LaFleur. Defensive coordinator Mike Pettine.

Kevin King. Aaron Jones. Za'Darius Smith, Preston Smith and Rashan Gary. Rick Wagner and Billy Turner.

The blame game as practiced by Packers fans has been scalding them and others in the wake of the fifth-seeded Buccaneers' 31-26 victory Sunday in the NFC Championship Game at Lambeau Field.

Mother Nature has taken her share of grief, too. The snow stopped about three hours too soon, the sun came out as the teams lined up for the 2:05 p.m. (CT) kickoff and temperatures in the high 20s with moderate wind weren't nearly enough to congeal the Floridians.

As most understand, no one position in team sports is more responsible for the outcome of a game than the quarterback in football. Green Bay's Aaron Rodgers is expected to receive the NFL Most Valuable Player award Feb. 6 at the Super Bowl but for the 10th straight year, he won't be playing in it.

At least four times Sunday Rodgers had receivers open for touchdowns but either didn't see them or misfired on the throw. Had he come through on just one, it would be the top-seeded Packers playing the Chiefs in Tampa. The ball was in his hands, and the degree of difficulty for a player of his caliber on several of those passes was minimal. He came up short.

Everything was made to order for Rodgers to reach a second Super Bowl. His Holy Grail, an NFC title game in Green Bay, finally had arrived. The mid-January opponent was from the Sunshine State. Even at 37, he acknowledged that his health had never been better this late in a season. His team was red-hot, having won seven games in a row. All season, Rodgers, his teammates and coaches had spoken of a team awash with unity and unselfishness.

As much as everyone in the organization wanted a ring for himself, some seemed to want another for No. 12 just as badly.

"You look at Tom Brady, and everybody wants to make that comparison forever, but it's basically turned into a quarterback stat – Super Bowls," wide receiver Davante Adams said Wednesday. "If that's what it's going to be, then we're going to put as much as we can on ourselves to try to help him get there and, ultimately, relieve him of the Super Bowls being a thing that hinders him from being the GOAT.

"In my mind, he's the GOAT, regardless of how many Super Bowls are won."

With or without a berth in the 55th Super Bowl, Rodgers didn't deserve even to be in the same conversation with Brady. Given dramatic rules changes making it a passing league and protecting

quarterbacks, passer ratings are almost meaningless in trying to rate quarterbacks from one decade to another. Rodgers' arm talent stands out regardless of his generation, but how that translates to winning has and should matter the most.

Discounting Otto Graham, whom I never saw play, my list of the top-10 quarterbacks certainly wouldn't include Rodgers. He'd be among my top 20, and possibly among the top 15.

Yes, Rodgers will always have his sensational performance in the Packers' victory over the Steelers a decade ago in the Super Bowl. But can you imagine if he didn't have that game on his résumé?

His record in the NFC Championship Game is now 1-4. After each of those games, I spent hours reviewing the game and then writing a summation. Using the same grading scale that I've employed for almost 35 years covering the Packers, Rodgers received 4 footballs at Chicago in 2010, 2 ½ at Seattle in 2014, 1 ½ at Atlanta in 2016, one-half at San Francisco in 2019 and 1 ½ Sunday.

You can blame coaches, the general manager, defense, special teams, injuries, misfortune and anything else under the sun for why the Packers almost always have come up empty in these monumental moments. The common denominator is the fact that Rodgers, the man with the ball, hasn't done the job.

Last week, Rodgers described his future as a "beautiful mystery." On Sunday, he reiterated that he wasn't sure where his future would lie.

When LaFleur was asked if he hoped to work with Rodgers in 2021, he exclaimed, "I sure as hell hope so. The guy's the MVP of this league. He's the heart and soul of our football team. So, hell yeah, he better be back here."

The Packers traded up to draft Utah State quarterback Jordan Love with the 26th selection in April but he didn't look even close to being ready. He's a project. Tim Boyle, who was No. 2 all season, is next in line, and as promising as the former free agent is the Packers clearly aren't eager to start over with either one under center.

Rodgers knows this better than anyone. Yet, despite widespread adulation, he has always appeared somewhat insecure and always wanting the highest praise. By portraying his future as uncertain, he opens the door for Packers fans to once again salute his accomplishments and possibly deluge the front office with entreaties that he positively must remain in Green Bay. Rodgers needs to be told over and over by those within the organization that he's the greatest quarterback ever.

On Thursday, tight end Marcedes Lewis said, "It's a legacy game. Being your best when best is needed, and you'll always remember that."

The Bucs' Brady, who improved his record in conference title games to 10-4, put it like this a week before the start of the playoffs: "To do anything now, you've got to earn it. That's what it comes down to – who earns it, who puts the preparation in and who goes out and executes when the pressure is on."

Some now will say that Rodgers can't win the big ones, and rightly so. A decade is an eternity in the NFL. What happens next likely will be up to him.

Here is a rating of the Packers (14-4) against the Bucs (14-5). Five footballs are the maximum, one-half football is the minimum.

The three stars of the game were: **1. Marquez Valdes-Scantling. 2. Kenny Clark. 3. Christian Kirksey.** As a team, the Packers received two footballs.

Receivers (2)

Carlton Davis, Sean Murphy-Bunting and Jamel Dean are long, physical cornerbacks that weren't afraid to press the Packers' wideouts. For the second time this season, they earned the decision. Once again, the Bucs put a defender head-up on Davante Adams and a safety hovering over the top. Of the 15 balls thrown his way, Adams caught nine for 67 yards. His longest catch point was merely 6 yards downfield. The ability of the Bucs' three corners, the ability of their front to stop the run with a reduced box and the success of their four-man rushes (all five sacks came with four rushers) all combined to minimize Adams' impact. He caught one short TD pass and dropped another. The ball should have been thrown more to Marquez Valdes-Scantling, who hauled in four of his six targets for 115 yards against man coverage in what was a banner day. He ran past Davis for a 50-yard TD, had Dean beat for what would have been a 76-yard TD and ran a strong vertical route against tight press coverage from Murphy-Bunting for 29. Other than two missed blocks, one for a pass and one for a run, MVS couldn't have been more impressive. The snap counts were 68 (of a possible 71 on offense) for Adams, 58 for Allen Lazard, 46 for MVS and 17 for Equanimeous St. Brown. Lazard, who during the week called himself the best blocking wideout in the NFL, backed it up with excellent work on two toss plays worth 12 yards each that were directed to his side. On the downside, he struggled to release from press coverage by Murphy-Bunting. On the interception, he must flatten his route to prevent Murphy-Bunting from getting the ball. Yes, DT Ndamukong Suh ticked the two-point pass. Still, the ball hit St. Brown between the numbers, a ball he has to catch. Tavon Austin didn't play; Matt LaFleur ordered jet-sweep action on just nine plays. Robert Tonyan (47) closed with another solid showing. His fumble recovery along the sideline was richly deserved because he upended Dean with a superb block seconds before. He caught his 12th TD, sitting down smartly after clearing the linebackers. Mercedes Lewis (29) offered nothing in the open field after his three receptions, a season-high. However, he made his bid for block of the season on a toss for 12 by driving DE Jason Pierre-Paul seven yards off the line before tossing him aside in a heap. Dominique Dafney (17) also played.

Offensive Line (½)

David Bakhtiari played the first 40 snaps of the 63-snap first game against the Bucs before being injured, and this unit still was overrun. Without him, the group unsurprisingly was overmatched again. The Packers got a lot of mileage from Rick Wagner, Billy Turner and Lucas Patrick, but the rubber met the road against the Bucs' elite front that has outstanding depth and no weak links. The pressure totals were five for Wagner, three for Turner, 2 ½ for Patrick, two for Elgton Jenkins and one-half for Corey Linsley. The "bad" run numbers were one for Linsley, Patrick and Wagner, one-half for Turner and none for Jenkins. DE Shaq Barrett, who had eight sacks in 17 games, tormented Wagner for three in 4.7, 3.3 and 2.3 seconds. Wagner's 65-pound weight advantage helped in the run game but hurt blocking for the pass. Barrett used speed, power and a spin move to account for 4 ½ of the five pressures against Wagner. Pierre-Paul had abused Wagner after he replaced Bakhtiari on Oct. 18. This time, he got after Turner for sacks in 3.0 and 2.3 seconds. On the first sack, Turner had inside help waiting from Jenkins but wasn't skilled enough to prevent Pierre-Paul from circling his outside. When Jenkins overset to protect the outside, Pierre-Paul converted speed to power and whipped him inside. It has been a long time since the Packers endured worse play from their tackles. Patrick wasn't bad in his bout with DT Ndamukong Suh. On the first play, a

3-yard rush, he muscled into Suh and finished the block by lying on his face. DT Vita Vea, a talented 347-pounder back from a fractured ankle, returned the favor for the Bucs by depositing Patrick on his back with an awesome pass-rush charge. Linsley did some good things in the run game locking up with ILB Devin White, a budding star in his second season.

Quarterbacks (1 ½)

First and goal from the 6 in the second quarter. First and goal from the 8 in the last 2 ½ minutes. The Packers, the NFL's best in the red zone, came up empty each time. The first sortie should have ended with a TD pass from Aaron Rodgers to Davante Adams but the ball was dropped. Adams has made countless plays for Rodgers, too. On third down, Rodgers threw late to Adams beyond the end line when Allen Lazard was wide open in front of him after CB Jamel Dean slipped in coverage. In the fourth quarter, Rodgers should have handed the ball to AJ Dillon, who easily would have gained to the 5 and might have scored against a defense that had been on the field a very long time. Instead, he threw to Lazard, who was so intent on blocking the safety that he wasn't looking as the ball whizzed over his head. On second down, Rodgers had no reason to break the pocket but did anyway, and his pass to Adams sailed high. On third down, Rodgers probably gains at least 5 yards and maybe scores if he tucks it and goes on his scramble to the right. Instead, he threw incomplete across his body to the double-covered Adams. In the third quarter, Adams was by himself deep down the left side on a free play for what would have been a 68-yard TD but Rodgers appeared to panic and went to Dominique Dafney, who failed to make a difficult catch 30 yards downfield. Early in the fourth quarter, Marquez Valdes-Scantling burned Dean deep for what probably would have been a 76-yard TD but Rodgers threw a bad ball that fell incomplete. This series of botched decisions and throws proved too much to overcome. Rodgers did perform better than he had in the debacle at Tampa on Oct. 18 but defensive coordinator Todd Bowles again won the day. Rodgers, who has benefited from impeccable protection almost all season, could do nothing about the five sacks. Bowles affected Rodgers a few times by blitzing the player who was lined up in press coverage against Adams in the slot. That's an unusual pressure. Bowles blitzed on 34 percent of pass plays, down from 45.2 percent in the first meeting. Rodgers' best moments came in the second possession with a third-and-15 bullet on the run for 23 yards followed shortly by a rainbow lob to MVS for a 50-yard TD. The Bucs absorbed a big hit when Antoine Winfield, their heady rookie free safety, apparently suffered an ankle injury Thursday in practice and was inactive. Then SS Jordan Whitehead missed the last 36 snaps with a shoulder injury. Still, Rodgers was able to exploit their backups only once: a 24-yard shot to MVS in the sideline Cover 2 hole in front of SS Andrew Adams. On Rodgers' interception, he took a shot on second and 17 late in the first half even though Lazard never was really open. The Bucs turned that error into a TD. Rodgers was in shotgun on 81.7 percent of the snaps, by far his highest rate of the season.

Running Backs (½)

The Packers benefited from one of the NFL's softest schedules and a who's who list of standout players sidelined by injury. Still, it was remarkable that so many position groups almost failed even to compete against Tampa Bay in either meeting. This was a nightmare of colossal proportions for Aaron Jones (22). His afternoon ended on the third play of the third quarter with a chest injury. Flanked wide right in one of the Packers' eight empty formations, Jones flew across the field on a third-and-5 shallow crosser. He made the catch three yards short of the marker, turned up the field and was leveled by SS Jordan Whitehead. The ball, tucked under his left arm, flew backward and was scooped up by ILB Devin White, who returned 21 yards to set up a TD on the next play. It was Jones' first lost fumble since Game 15 of 2019. The injured Jones never returned. In the first half, Jones was a little careless running near the sideline on a bubble screen and fumbled after another withering hit from Whitehead, who had just one forced fumble in the first 18 games. This one was recovered by Robert Tonyan. Jones also dropped a checkdown besides making a poor cut on a carry for 1. His 10 touches were worth merely 34 yards. Jones has to hope interested parties in free agency don't put too much emphasis on his final game. Jamaal Williams (35) and AJ Dillon (16) took over in the second half. For both Williams, whose 11 touches gained 45 yards, and Jones, they met their match when it came to being physical. All season they made a living lunging and twisting for the extra yard. With the explosive White making 15 tackles, the Packers' stalwarts found out what it was like to get knocked back

consistently. On the other hand, Dillon made the Bucs pay. He carried backup SS Andrew Adams on his back for five yards. When Mercedes Lewis got beat inside, Dillon made a neat cut, jumped outside and picked up five. On a pass in the flat, he made a difficult adjustment on a chilly day and turned the pass into a 13-yard gain. His four touches were worth 30 yards. Matt LaFleur blamed himself after both games for not calling more running plays. Dillon might have been the difference given more opportunity.

Defensive Line (4)

This group was embarrassed in the 88-degree weather at Raymond James Stadium in Week 6. RB Ronald Jones ran wild (23 carries, 113 yards), and the pass rush was non-existent. This time, Leonard Fournette and Jones rushed 22 times for 71 yards, a 3.2-yard average. Coordinator Byron Leftwich, who calls plays for coach Bruce Arians, ran his backs 16 times on first down and settled for 51 yards. Fournette's touchdown run accounted for 20 yards of that total. Twelve of the 16 first-down runs were for three or fewer yards. Unlike Matt LaFleur, the Bucs exercised patience with the run even as unproductive as it was; in the end, it paid off in the play-action pass game. Kenny Clark, who played 60 of the 65 defensive snaps, probably was the best performer but Dean Lowry (49) had a terrific outing, too, and Tyler Lancaster (12) made plays before departing with an ankle injury. Clark demonstrated superb leverage and strength, four times coming off blocks by C Ryan Jensen and RG Aaron Stinnie to make the tackle for a short gain. The Packers' only sack came from Clark on a bull rush in 3.3 seconds against Stinnie, a free agent who was making the second start of his three-year career for injured Alex Cappa (broken ankle). Lowry stayed square, held his ground and found the ball. A consistent hustler, Lowry was a step away from overhauling TE Rob Gronkowski on the 29-yard "gotcha" screen pass. Lancaster made tackles after shedding LT Donovan Smith and another splitting a double-team. On Fournette's TD, he did his job penetrating the backfield where the back had to step over his prone body. Damon Harrison played 16 snaps largely because Lancaster went down. There's a reason "Snacks" was cut by the Seahawks. Although he was better than the previous game, he still was on the ground too much. With the outside linebackers having a dreadful afternoon, the Packers could have used DT Kingsley Keke's pass rush. He missed his third straight game with a concussion. Brian Price had two snaps.

Linebackers (1)

What an awful way to go out. Based on the last 10 weeks or so, the best bet regarding the Packers' defense was that Za'Darius Smith (57), Preston Smith (50) and Rashan Gary (42) would make life very miserable for a 43-year-old stationary quarterback named Tom Brady. The success of the defensive effort depended on it. When the three outside linebackers each registered just one pressure apiece, the Packers ended up allowing 31 points, the most since their last defeat in Indianapolis (34-31, Nov. 22). The three combined for merely two pressures in the Oct. 18 meeting. It suggests that when the competition stiffened these guys shrunk. Bruce Arians double-teamed Za'Darius on 25% of his individual rushes three months ago. On Sunday, Arians was correct in assuming his offensive line would dominate. In 23 non-stunt rushes, Za'Darius was doubled only once. No opponent this season came close to paying him so little attention. RT Tristan Wirfs, the rookie from Iowa, looks like the next big thing at the position. The only pressure against Wirfs was a knockdown by Gary in the last 2 minutes. Gary took himself out of the play on Leonard Fournette's 20-yard TD run and got sealed off from a 9-yard carry. When the Bucs did double, it went on Gary, and the extra attention perhaps threw him off his game. Za'Darius stalked around looking menacing but nothing happened. His best work came on two runs against TE Rob Gronkowski. LT Donovan Smith has had his share of rough days in protection but the only pressure that he allowed was by Preston on an inside charge. The best of the four inside players was Christian Kirksey (29). He closed quickly in the flat to tackle Fournette after a 1-yard reception, made a strong tackle charging through the B gap and beat Wirfs to the spot on a one-man screen to tackle Fournette for a 1-yard loss. Playing with a club protecting his left thumb, Krys Barnes (37) retired early in the fourth quarter after being in and out with knee and arm injuries. So Ty Summers, who had played six snaps in the last nine games, took over as defensive signal-caller for 28 snaps. Summers showed his exceptional straight-line speed chasing down

WR Chris Godwin and his power jarring Fournette for a 1-yard loss. Other times, he hesitated and didn't attack. Kamal Martin (14) played on some run plays.

Defensive Backs (2 ½)

The Packers posted three interceptions, their highest total of the season. Nevertheless, the grade must be tempered because the unit was responsible for three passes of more than 25 yards and two touchdown passes. For more than a month the Packers had been remarkably stingy preventing the big play. Given too much time, Tom Brady changed that. Kevin King (63) hurt his market value in Green Bay or elsewhere with an inept performance. On third and 7, the game swung Tampa Bay's direction when Mike Evans beat King on a 15-yard fade for an opening TD from the slot. King, a frequent guesser, was hunting an interception and, as a result, lost contact, jumped prematurely and got beat on a perfect throw. With 8 seconds left in the first half, the Packers appeared to be in "bail thirds" coverage. The idea is for the cornerback to show a little resistance upfront to prevent a quick throw. On the other side, Jaire Alexander (65) flew deep after the snap so Evans couldn't draw abreast of him. If King read the scouting report, he'd know Scotty Miller ran 4.39 coming out of Bowling Green in 2019. That's a heck of a lot faster than he can run. Plus, Miller ran by Josh Jackson in the first game to draw a 40-yard penalty for pass interference. Yet, instead of high-tailing it immediately to his third of the field alongside Will Redmond, the middle safety, King hesitated. Just like that, Miller zipped past him for the 39-yard TD. In the final 2 minutes, King was late lining up on third and 4 as the Packers' season hung in the balance. Alexander gestured instructions to him. Then King allowed rookie WR Tyler Johnson to cross his face. With a clear field ahead, King grabbed Johnson's jersey so a full yard of white was exposed. With coverage that awful and his grab so egregious, it deserved to be a penalty. King did make two strong open-field tackles. He also caught a break when Evans dropped a 30-yard pass behind him. It was a mixed day for Alexander. He made a brilliant change of direction to snare an interception that was thrown a little too high for Evans at the 7. Later, when Darnell Savage forced Brady into a bad throw, Alexander tracked the wounded duck beautifully for a second pick. He also covered well when challenged on the sideline. Leonard Fournette got outside on his 20-yard TD because Alexander lost leverage and missed the tackle. It's his job to force him inside where the pursuit was coming. The Bucs also designed plays to exploit Alexander's bad habits. On third and 2, Godwin got behind Alexander off play-action for an easy 19-yard lob when he was just starting to blitz thinking his side of the field was secure. From the 8, the Bucs put a tight end, Cameron Brate, on the right side rather than a wide receiver to minimize attention. When Alexander and Adrian Amos (65) bit on Brady's play fake, Brate had an easy TD behind them. In the slot, Chandon Sullivan (47) played one of his worst games. He was victimized for 41 yards in two receptions on the first two third downs. Later, he was saved two more long gainers when Brady overthrew Evans and Johnson dropped a pass. The Bucs faced third and 9 when Brady wound up and took a shot to Godwin 50 yards downfield. Because he had time to scan the field, Brady saw that Savage was the defender. The scouting report on Savage is that he's a liability in the middle of the field. Brady remembered, and Godwin took the ball away from the smaller man for a 52-yard pickup. Amos missed the tackle on Fournette's TD. Later, Amos refused to be looked off by Brady, showed great range to the boundary and made a superlative interception. Two plays before the first-half ending TD to Miller, Redmond (14) dropped what should have been a routine sideline interception of a lollypop from Brady. Tramon Williams, who was re-signed at mid-week, never got in, a bit of a surprise given the performance of Sullivan in the slot and Redmond deep.

Kickers (4)

When the Packers went three and out on successive series in the fourth quarter, guess who bailed them out? JK Scott, the low-ranked punter, that's who. He nailed two towering punts that resulted in a pair of 48-yard nets. His three-punt averages were 48 (gross), 44.7 (net) and 4.35 seconds of hang time. Mason Crosby polished off a perfect season on field goals, connecting from 24 and 26 yards. He finished 20 of 20 in 18 games. His two extra-point attempts were good.

Special Teams (2 ½)

It remains to be seen if Matt LaFleur will fire coordinator Shawn Mennenga after a second brutal season in the kicking game. On Sunday, the Bucs returned kickoffs for 43 and 34 yards; their long return in 18 games had been 34. Oren Burks missed the tackle on the 43-yarder while Equanimeous St. Brown and Henry Black failed to get off blocks. Malik Taylor allowed Jaydon Mickens to get outside on the opening kickoff. Jamaal Williams took over for Taylor returning kickoffs and brought a squib boot back for 30. It was four yards longer than the Packers' best in 17 games. Burks and St. Brown each had two tackles. The snap leaders were Will Redmond, Ty Summers and Burks, each with 22.