

Another case of costly mistakes and missed opportunities for the Packers

By Michael Cohen

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FOXBOROUGH, Mass. — Their weekly inquest about foolish penalties, blown assignments and general self-destruction took place in a long, rectangular locker room with low ceilings and lower expectations, down the hall from yet another opponent earmarked for the Super Bowl and another field awash with missed opportunities.

This time, on a crisp November evening at Gillette Stadium, the Green Bay Packers were felled by the New England Patriots, 31-17, in a matchup billed as the best quarterback ever (Tom Brady) against the most talented quarterback ever (Aaron Rodgers) in the twilight of their respective careers. Four years had passed since their last meeting — a narrow victory for the Packers at Lambeau Field — and once again, in 2018, football fans and television executives salivated with delight.

The pomp and circumstance did little more than shroud the only competition that matters whenever these Packers take the field, home or away, in the 13th season of the Mike McCarthy era. Be it in New England against the Patriots, where another late fumble and several lapses in concentration soiled an otherwise respectable performance; or in Los Angeles against the Rams, where a boneheaded decision by Ty Montgomery triggered both a loss and his eventual dismissal two days later; or in Detroit against the Lions, where Mason Crosby missed five kicks in a game decided by 8 points, the Packers' toughest opponent is themselves.

“I thought we played well,” cornerback Tramon Williams said, “just made too many mistakes, too many penalties at crucial times. ... I’m discouraged because of that. I felt we played well, got off the field a lot (on defense). The times that we did get off the field, we gave them more drives from penalties and we can’t have those things. That’s what’s hurting us right now. We need to get that out of our game.”

It was an evening of self-inflicted wounds for the Packers, whose 3-4-1 record places them third in the NFC North and on the absolute fringes of playoff scenarios. They had performed well against one of the best teams in the league — again — only to be undone by their own rashes of dysfunction at the most inopportune moments, with mind-twisting miscues plastering over glimpses of promise from the first three quarters.

This year, at least, nobody beats the Packers like the Packers.

Here’s how their latest demise unfolded:

1. Despite a rule change that prevents members of the kickoff coverage units from taking a running start, safety Josh Jones was flagged for offside on the opening kick. Return man Cordarrelle Patterson fielded the ball at the goal line and returned it 36 yards, which quickly became the 41-yard line after Jones' penalty. From there, Brady dissected the Packers on a 10-play, 59-yard drive blending a variety of tempos with beautiful play calling from offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels. He featured tailback James White with three carries for 18 yards and three catches for 26 more. White punctuated their short-field march with an 8-yard touchdown fewer than four minutes into the game.

“In all of the games at the beginning of the season, we didn't start well,” Jones said. “Then we started well and we didn't finish well (against the Rams). It's just putting it together. There's really no missing piece, man.”

2. The Packers answered with a 14-play, 62-yard march of their own that stalled inside the red zone. Rodgers told reporters he lost track of the play clock on second-and-goal from the 9-yard line and absorbed a penalty that crippled the drive. Two plays later, on third-and-goal from the 14-yard line, Rodgers fired a quick screen to wide receiver Randall Cobb that never came close to the end zone. It was a bizarre play call from McCarthy — or, perhaps, a bizarre decision by Rodgers at the line of scrimmage — and the Packers settled for a 29-yard field goal by Crosby.

“It's very frustrating because there's plays in every game that would put us in better situations,” Rodgers said. “If we can get that play off and maybe we get 7 (points) instead of 3, later in the game then it sets a different tone.”

3. A week ago, defensive coordinator Mike Pettine saturated the field with defensive backs to avoid compromising matchups against the Rams' skill players, especially tailback Todd Gurley, whose talents as both a runner and receiver complicate opposing game plans. This week, Pettine took a similar approach by relying again on Jermaine Whitehead and Jones in hybrid safety-linebacker roles alongside Blake Martinez. But Whitehead compromised that game plan in the second quarter after a 10-yard run by Patterson. Center David Andrews shoved Whitehead as the play concluded, and Whitehead retaliated by slapping Andrews across the face. The play resulted in ejection for Whitehead, who was escorted to the locker room by director of security Doug Collins, and altered Pettine's distribution of playing time. What began as a heavy dose of defensive backs ended with inside linebackers Antonio Morrison and Oren Burks playing far more snaps than Pettine intended.

“You don't want to see guys going down,” Jones said. “It just affects the flow of the game.”

4. The Packers dedicated a portion of their practice time to preparing for various trick plays McDaniels had called throughout his career, according to Williams, and they were still victimized several times. Early in the second quarter, McDaniels dialed up a flea flicker with White tossing back to Brady, who fired downfield to wide receiver Julian Edelman for 33 yards. The drive ended with a 28-yard field goal by Stephen Gostkowski. In the fourth quarter, with the score tied, the Patriots gashed the Packers again when Brady zipped a pass to Edelman, who threw back across the field to White for 37 yards. White punctuated the drive with a touchdown three plays later, and the Patriots led by 31-17. McDaniels also mixed in two jet reverses to

Edelman that gained 28 yards. Williams said the Packers had seen all of those plays on film during the week.

“That’s New England,” cornerback Bashaud Breeland said. “We knew we was going to get about three or four of them, maybe five of those in this game. They ran them at the right moment, you know what I mean? They did it with tempo. They didn’t really give us a chance to get settled as they was going. Those (plays) are one of the reasons why they got the biggest gains. The jet sweep, the reverse pass, the screen pass back to the running back, hats off to them. They did their thing. They came in and played sound football. They didn’t beat themselves.”

5. Those who have watched the Packers closely this season have probably realized Rodgers’ cadence at the line of scrimmage has generated fewer free plays than prior years, when it felt like a weekly occurrence. For whatever reason, though, opposing defensive linemen and linebackers are holding their ground with more discipline in 2018. Which is why the double penalty in the second quarter felt so noteworthy, as Rodgers generated a free play by catching the Patriots both offside and with 12 men on the field simultaneously. Rodgers quickly focused his attention downfield, toward tight end Lance Kendricks, on a vertical route to the end zone. The throw was excellent and hit Kendricks in the hands, but he failed to secure the catch as safety Patrick Chung slashed across his arms. While difficult, it was the type of play the Packers need to make. Kendricks’ reputation for dropping passes continues.

“We’re not hitting on all cylinders,” Rodgers said. “We’re hurting ourselves with negative-yardage plays and missed throws and turnovers at the wrong time and not being on the same page too many times, whether I’m missing a throw or we’re not in the spot I think we’re going to be at, it’s happening in the worst times. When we have to play our best in those crunch times, we haven’t been playing our best.”

6. After so many games and so many miscues, there is a kind of dark comedy associated with special teams coordinator Ron Zook, whose unit remains entirely unreliable. What began as a barrage of penalties through the first few weeks of the season gave way to horrendous execution against the Rams, when punter JK Scott shanked a crucial kick in the closing moments and Montgomery fumbled away the chance for victory shortly thereafter. This week, Zook brought pressure on punter Ryan Allen by twisting tight end Robert Tonyan from outside-in, thus creating a free rush up the middle on a smartly designed play. Tonyan was unblocked and dove for Allen, missing the ball but crashing into the punter with his shoulder. Flags flew for roughing the kicker: 15 yards and a first down to keep the Patriots’ drive alive. Though they did not score, the Patriots melted another 90 seconds off the clock late in the third quarter and flipped field position by downing a second punt at the Green Bay 7-yard line.

“It was a designed block, so it wasn’t just like going in there solo,” Tonyan said. “It was just trying to make a play in the moment. Just got it off quick and I’ve just got to kind of be aware of that.

“We’ve got a lot of guys who want to make plays and do what’s best for the team. Sometimes going that extra little bit just kind of gets you out of your zone and, you know, we beat ourselves or shoot ourselves in the foot. I don’t think it’s anything specific with (the special teams

penalties this season). I just think it's a lot of guys who care about the team and want to make plays for the team. Penalties happen, but it's not like we're going out there to try and make penalties happen. At the end of the day we're just trying to make plays and put the offense and defense in good situations."

7. After all of that, the Packers and Patriots were tied to start the fourth quarter. Rodgers had connected with wide receiver Marquez Valdes-Scantling for back-to-back gains of 24 yards and 26 yards to jolt the offense across midfield. But on first and 10 from the New England 34-yard line, with the Packers already in field goal range, Aaron Jones fumbled when defensive lineman Lawrence Guy smashed into him from the right side. Cornerback Stephon Gilmore recovered the ball from a massive pile to extinguish the Packers' best drive of the second half. The Patriots scored on the ensuing possession and added another touchdown fewer than three minutes later, after the Packers went three and out, to seal their seventh win of the season. Jones was left to ponder his mistake, just as Montgomery did the week before.

"Good defensive play looking at it on replay," Jones said. "Punched the ball out. It's my mistake. I'll correct it."

No matter. Someone else will handle the bungling next week.