



REPEAT MATCHUP RETURNS



San Francisco 49ers quarterback Brock Purdy, above, and Kanas City Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes, right, will face off in Super Bowl LVIII on Feb. 11.

GREG MELLIS | GREEN & GOLD EXPRESS

49ers looking for a better outcome in Super Bowl LVIII

By ROB MAADDI
AP Pro Football Writer

Patrick Mahomes, Travis Kelce and the Kansas City Chiefs are heading to Las Vegas with a chance for a rare repeat while facing the San Francisco 49ers in a Super Bowl rematch from four years ago.

The Chiefs beat Lamar Jackson and the No. 1-seeded Baltimore Ravens 17-10 in the AFC championship game Jan. 28 to advance to the Super Bowl for the fourth time in five years. A few hours later, Brock Purdy rallied the No. 1-seeded 49ers to a 34-31 victory over the Detroit Lions in the NFC title game.

The Chiefs (14-6) are aiming to become the first back-to-back champions since Tom Brady and the New England Patriots did it following the 2003-04 seasons.

Purdy — who was still two years away from being the last pick of the 2022 NFL draft the last time the teams played in the Super Bowl — will try to lead the 49ers (14-5) to a record-tying sixth title in their eighth appearance.

The teams meet at Allegiant Stadium on Feb. 11. Mahomes and the Chiefs overcame a 20-10 fourth-quarter deficit and beat the 49ers 31-20 to give coach Andy Reid his first Super Bowl victory on Feb. 2, 2020. Brady and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers spoiled Kansas City's repeat bid the following year.

The Chiefs will become just the third team to play in four Super Bowls over a five-year span. Only the Pittsburgh Steelers in the 1970s, the Dallas Cowboys in the 1990s and the Patriots in the 2000s



REMATCH, CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Love leads the Packers to playoffs

Strong first season as starting QB ends with disappointing loss to 49ers

By JOSH DUBOW
AP Pro Football Writer

For all that went well in Jordan Love's first season as the starting quarterback for the Green Bay Packers, the end proved disappointing.

The Packers went home after a crushing playoff loss.

Love threw his second interception of the game with Green Bay trying to mount a late-game drive to prolong its season, and the Packers blew a fourth-quarter lead, falling 24-21 to the San Francisco 49ers in the divisional round on Jan. 27.

"I think it'll sting for a while," Love said. "Watching all the games going forward it will sting just knowing that we had an opportunity to win, and we dropped the ball on that one. It'll sting for a while, but we'll be able to look back on it and see some good things we did."

Love accomplished plenty in his first season in place of Aaron Rodgers. He helped the Packers (10-9) overcome a 2-5 start to the season to make the playoffs. He followed that up with a three-touchdown performance in a wild-card win at Dallas land had Green Bay in position to knock off the top-seeded 49ers.

Love threw TD passes on back-to-back drives to open the second half to put the Packers in the lead.

That gave Love 23 touchdown passes and only one interception in nine-plus games, but his run of protecting the ball ended at the worst possible time.

He threw his first interception since Dec. 11 to set up a field goal by the 49ers.

Green Bay's defense then let the Niners drive for the go-ahead score with 1:07 left, and Love was unable to lead the comeback, ending any chance with his second interception.



Quarterback Jordan Love, running back Aaron Jones and teammates celebrate a touchdown during the 2023 season. Unfortunately, the season ended in the NFC Divisional Round with loss to the San Francisco 49ers.

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SUPER BOWL LVIII MATCHUP

REMATCH, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

and 2010s won three Super Bowls in a five-year span.

Mahomes rallied the Chiefs for a 38-35 comeback win over the Philadelphia Eagles in the Super Bowl last year. They beat Miami 26-7 in the wild-card round and defeated the Bills 27-24 in Buffalo the next week in Mahomes' first career play-off game on the road besides Super Bowls.

The 49ers were dominated by the Eagles in the NFC title game last year in a game that saw Purdy suffer a significant elbow injury that required surgery. He returned for the season opener and helped them earn a first-round bye. Purdy led a 24-21 comeback win over Green Bay in January and brought the Niners back from a 17-point deficit against the Lions.

Only New England and Pittsburgh have more Super Bowl wins than San Fran-

cisco, which last won it following the 1994 season.

Reid will lead a team in the Super Bowl for the fifth time, moving into a tie with Tom Landry for third most behind Bill Belichick's nine and Don Shula's six. Reid coached the Eagles when the Patriots beat them to repeat 19 years ago.

Niners coach Kyle Shanahan returns to the Super Bowl after losing to Reid in his first crack at it. Shanahan was Atlanta's offensive coordinator when the Falcons blew a 28-3 lead against Brady and the Patriots in Super Bowl LI.

Mahomes, a two-time NFL and Super Bowl MVP, will start in his fourth Super Bowl, tied with Joe Montana, Terry Bradshaw, Peyton Manning, Roger Staubach and Jim Kelly for third-most behind Brady's 10 and John Elway's five.



San Francisco running back Christian McCaffrey (23), left, and Kansas City tight end Travis Kelce (87), above, do their best to outrun Green Bay's defense. The Chiefs are aiming to become the first back-to-back champions since Tom Brady and the New England Patriots did it following the 2003-04 seasons. They will meet the 49ers at Allegiant Stadium on Feb. 11.

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Love grows to become undisputed leader of the Pack

By JACOB WESTENDORF
Green & Gold Express

The Green Bay Packers' 2024 season was always going to be defined pretty simply.

Do they have a long-term quarterback? If they don't, are they in a position in the draft to grab a guy like USC's Caleb Williams or North Carolina's Drake Maye?

After Aaron Rodgers was traded to the New York Jets in April 2023, all eyes were focused on Jordan Love.

Love was drafted following Green Bay's 37-20 loss to the San Francisco 49ers in the NFC Championship game in January 2020.

Instead of a receiver or something to help the team get over the hump and into the Super Bowl, Brian Gutekunst infamously looked toward the future.

After two MVP seasons, and a disappointing finale, Aaron Rodgers was gone, and Gutekunst was going to get a chance to see his legacy pick in action for the first time.

Love's security beyond 2023 was far from a guarantee. Gutekunst said himself they envisioned the contract extension they gave Rodgers after the 2021 season to be a multi-year commitment.

Had Rodgers returned for 2023, Love would have never taken a snap as the preferred starter in Green Bay. That's something that Gutekunst had presumably made peace with.

If he was willing to punt entirely on the pick, surely he'd be willing to move on if Love were to struggle badly enough to put the Packers in the top five of April's draft.

After a clunky stretch in October saw the Packers drop to 2-5, it looked like the Packers were headed down the path of a full scale rebuild, including at the quarterback position, rather than a quick reset and launching back into playoff contention.

Love's season, which started off hot, leading the league in touchdown passes after his first two starts of the season, had fizzled.

Love was now at the top of the league in another category, interceptions.

That wasn't all on Love. The Packers fielded the youngest team in the league. His oldest receivers were in their second year in the league.

The offensive line, which was built around All-Pro left tackle David Bakhtiari, was in shambles with Bakhtiari being placed on injured reserve before a Week 4 tilt against the Detroit Lions.

Love saw the calendar turn to November with a lot at stake. Gutekunst gave a lukewarm, at best, endorsement of Love after seven games.

"We've got 10 games left," Gutekunst said during his midseason availability. "These are going to be very important 10 games. I think he's done a lot of really good things."

He said he liked the way Love responded to the adversity, how he led the team.

"Again, we've got to be better as a unit, and I expect that to happen over the next 10 games," Gutekunst said. "And I think that we're going through some things that we knew we would go through. We haven't had the results that we want, but I do like the way guys are responding to things."

Love and the offense had a simple choice from there. Shape up, or ship out.

The offense, and Love specifically, dazzled from there.

The turning point in the season was after the Packers split two games to the Los Angeles Rams and Pittsburgh Steelers to get to 3-6. They were facing a talented



The turning point in the season was after the Packers split two games to the Los Angeles Rams and Pittsburgh Steelers to get to 3-6. They were facing a talented Los Angeles Chargers team at Lambeau Field and trailing when Jordan Love and the offense took flight. Love led a game-winning drive where he hit Romeo Doubs for a go-ahead touchdown that would hold up in a 23-20 victory. Love was just getting warmed up. His best two-game stretch of the season came in two nationally televised games, Detroit on Thanksgiving Day and at home against Kansas City. Matt LaFleur allowed his growing quarterback to throw the ball all over the lot. Love responded with six touchdown passes, zero interceptions, and most importantly, two wins over teams that ended up playing on championship Sunday.

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Los Angeles Chargers team at Lambeau Field and trailing when Love and the offense took flight.

Love led a game-winning drive where he hit Romeo Doubs for a go-ahead touchdown that would hold up in a 23-20 victory.

Love threw for more than 300 yards, which made him the team's first 300-yard passer since Rodgers carved up the Baltimore Ravens in December 2021.

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Matt LaFleur allowed his growing quarterback to throw the ball all over the lot. Love responded with six touchdown passes, zero interceptions, and most importantly, two wins over teams that ended up playing on championship Sunday.

The Packers and their offense were rolling.

That was not the end of the adversity for the season. Back-to-back poor performances by Green Bay's defense led to disappointing losses to the New York Giants and Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

The Packers were faced with a pretty simple scenario. Win their last three games, or sit at home and watch the playoffs that felt like destiny after their two wins against Detroit and Kansas City.

Love turned in three great performances against Carolina, Minnesota and Chicago.

Love did not turn the ball over in these three games, and was dynamite late in the game when the team needed a big play.

Romeo Doubs made a big play down the sideline against Carolina to set up a game-winning field goal in the Packers' 33-30 victory against the Panthers.

Love would hit Jayden Reed and Tucker Kraft for two big completions against Chicago to seal the season finale and catapult the Packers into the playoffs.

Getting into the postseason earned Love an extra \$500,000 from a contract extension he signed in May in lieu of the Packers exercising his fifth-year option.

He'd earn more money a week later as he carved up Dan Quinn's stingy Dallas Cowboys defense.

Love threw three touchdown passes from three different arm angles, and the Packers piled up 48 points en route to a

48-32 victory that earned them another trip to San Francisco.

The clock would strike midnight on Green Bay's Cinderella season in San Francisco. Love threw two interceptions in the fourth quarter that will serve as a learning experience for him moving forward.

Unfortunately, those learning experiences came at the expense of winning a playoff game and having a chance to play for the conference title.

The Packers lost 24-21. While the season came to a bitter end, there is no way to categorize the 2023 season other than a massive success.

Love grew from someone who could have been one-and-done as the team's starting quarterback to the unquestioned leader and quarterback of the future for the Green Bay Packers.

In the NFL, you either have a quarterback or you have nothing. The Packers have rarely known the situation of not having a quarterback in their illustrious existence.

That is a trend that will continue moving forward thanks to Love's MVP-level play to end the 2023 season.



Green Bay's offense as a whole took its biggest failure of the season in the Denver game. Just four games prior, Denver had given up 70 points to the Miami Dolphins. This really felt like a get-right game for the Packers offense, but it once again was unable to score in the first half and found itself down 16-3 midway through the third quarter. Green Bay was able to make somewhat of a comeback, as the final score landed at 19-17, but the problem with the lack of offense still existed.

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Packers open with a 3-6 record

Early season struggles created many questions in Green Bay

By **LUKE REIMER**
GREEN & GOLD EXPRESS

Coming into the 2023-24 season, no one really knew what to expect out of the Green Bay Packers. Jordan Love took the reins from Aaron Rodgers, Matt LaFleur was finally getting an opportunity to display his full offensive game plan, and no wide receiver on the offense had more than one year of experience.

With general manager Brian Gutekunst

assembling the youngest roster in NFL history, hard times were to be expected. While that turbulence did hit, it really didn't come until the end of Week 2. Green Bay opened its season against its storied and longest rival, the Chicago Bears. The Bears were once again in a spot where media members and fans hyped up the Justin Fields offense, and many had predicted them to win this game. Instead, Love put together an incred-

ible first start this season, as he finished with 245 yards and three touchdowns. With Romeo Doubs and Aaron Jones scoring offensive touchdowns, it looked like this season was going to be relied on by players who have experience in the system. More than just offense though, Green Bay's defense did its part in this game, holding Fields to 216 yards passing and one touchdown. Quay Walker also returned an interception for a touch-down.

"I couldn't be more proud of (Love's) performance, his poise," said Packers coach Matt LaFleur. "There's a big time belief in that locker room for Jordan Love, and I think the guys are going to rally around him. They're excited for him. They love him. They respect him." While the offense and specifically the quarterback were the big story in the offseason, the defense was quietly talked about as being one of the best units in the

QUESTIONS, CONTINUED ON PAGE 5





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QUESTIONS, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

NFL. Those projections looked true, as it held the up-and-coming Bears offense to 20 points in a Week 1 win.

Both the offense and defense carried that momentum into the Week 2 matchup against the Atlanta Falcons. Green Bay opened the game with a 24-12 lead through three quarters. The only difference in this game, though, was that rookies Jayden Reed and Dontayvion Wicks were at the forefront of the offense, scoring three combined touchdowns.

That is when the vaunted defense took a step back, however. Green Bay gave up 13 points in the final 15 minutes of the game and took its first loss of the season. On top of that, it looked like the defense had some vulnerabilities, as Falcons rookie running back Bijan Robinson gashed the Packers' defense for 124 yards on 19 carries.

While it was easy to chalk that loss up to a few mistakes from a young team that could be easily fixed, it showed two major problems for the Packers moving forward – the run defense and the offensive play calling. Now knowing what we do about Love and the offense, it seems kind of silly that he completed only 14 passes in this game.

Luckily for Green Bay, its next game was against a New Orleans Saints team that seemed to be in limbo all season long. With a mix of rookies and vets and no real identity, the Saints majorly underperformed this season.

In this game though, the Saints ripped off 17 straight points to shut Green Bay out in the first half. In what was almost a reverse of the previous game against Atlanta, Green Bay shut out the Saints in the second half, scoring 18 points (with Saints kicker Blake Grupe missing the game-winning field goal) to go up 2-1 on the season.

In the face of adversity, Green Bay was able to respond and take down a team that, at the time, appeared to have a better shot at making the playoffs than the Packers.

The underperforming play calling and first-half struggles then persisted through the next month, as Green Bay dropped four straight games.

Through the four-game losing streak, Green Bay was only able to muster nine first-half points. Instead of utilizing the middle of the field, Love's first looks were more often than not behind the line of scrimmage, as it became obvious that LaFleur wanted to get the screen game going. With Jones being hurt and A.J. Dillon's inconsistent play, those screens seemed to be a substitute for the run game. The only problem was, without exposing the middle of the field, it became really easy for opposing defenses to key on the boundaries.

"It's frustrating, man," said Love. "I'm frustrated. Everybody in that locker room is frustrated. Plain and simple, we're not winning. We're losing games, and it's games we should be winning, I think that we are right there."

A loss to the Lions during that losing streak was to be expected, but after losing to the Broncos and the Raiders in back-to-back games, it became very evident that if Green Bay wanted a shot at the playoffs, something drastic was going to need to change.

Along with the inconsistencies on offense, Green Bay was also suffering numerous back-breaking penalties. With such a young team, those penalties were to be expected and more often than not hurt Green Bay in big spots.

The offense as a whole took its biggest failure of the season in that Denver game. Just four games prior, Denver had given up 70 points to the Miami Dolphins. This really felt like a get-right game for the Packers offense, but it once again was unable to score in the first half and found itself down 16-3 midway through the third quarter. Green Bay was able to make somewhat of a comeback, as the final score landed at 19-17, but the problem with the lack of offense still existed.

While Reed and Doubs both caught touchdown passes, it was actually Dillon

who led the team in receiving the game with 34 yards on two receptions.

At this point in the season, many were questioning LaFleur's ability to call a game and Love's ability to win games. Rightfully so, whether it was inexperience, injuries or poor coaching, Green Bay was underperforming and after the past few offseasons of drama surrounding Aaron Rodgers and Gutekunst, many were calling for the jobs of multiple coaches.

Now sitting at 2-5, Green Bay hosted the Minnesota Vikings with Kirk Cousins playing the best season of his career. Even though Cousins went out with an injury in this game, Green Bay as a whole continued to struggle.

Scoring its only touchdown late in the third quarter, the Packers' offense once again underperformed. While the defense had played better in previous games, it was still obvious that it was far from what the expectations were at the beginning of the year.

This game though exposed another big problem for Green Bay that reared its head in the playoffs. The Packers' last three drives of the game ended with turnovers on downs, and two of those came in the red zone. Not converting in the red zone kills teams, especially teams that are struggling on offense and looking for points in any capacity. With Love leading the team in rushing, picking up 34 yards and four carries, the noise surrounding Green Bay became louder and louder.

Green Bay was finally able to break that losing streak as the Los Angeles Rams came to town, down Matthew Stafford.

After a scoreless first quarter, Green Bay finally broke out of its slump of touchdown-less first halves and scored a three-yard Jones rushing touchdown early in the second quarter. After a Rams field goal late in the half, the Packers defense pitched a shutout the rest of the way to come away with a 20-3 victory.

Along with the win, what was encouraging about this victory was that the offense finally looked like it clicked. Love completed 20-of-26 for 228 yards and one touchdown, while Jones rushed for 73 yards and touchdown on 20 carries. What also was encouraging was that the veterans and the best players on this Packers team seemed to step up and take the game into their own hands.

Keisean Nixon had a 51-yard kick return, Jones carried the offense, and Jaire Alexander finished with seven tackles and two pass deflections. He also consistently shut down two of the best wide receivers in the game in Cooper Kupp and Puka Nacua.

As is usually the case with such young teams though, Green Bay almost immediately gave up the momentum that it had against the Steelers the next week. Pittsburgh's offense was struggling just as much as Green Bay's through the first half of the season, so it seemed like the Packers could steal a victory on the road. Once again, it was the run defense that struggled in this game, as Steelers running backs Jaylen Warren and Najee Harris combined for 183 yards and two touchdowns.

Love put together another good game, as he finished with 289 yards and two touchdowns but added two interceptions. With this loss, it pushed the team to 3-6. Despite the poor record, many in the clubhouse knew that the Packers were on the edge of winning, if only they could fix those costly mistakes.

"You can see how close we are, a play here or a play there," said Jones after the game. "I feel like we just keep pushing at it. If we keep putting in the work, it'll go in our favor."

The story of the first half for the Packers' season was inexperienced play, costly penalties and play calling from LaFleur. Instead of opening the middle of the field, LaFleur opted to try and get the outside pass game going, oftentimes electing to run bubble screens and tosses. That severely limited Love's strengths of finding open receivers between the numbers and put a stronger reliance on the rookie receivers to make the plays.



Above, Matt LaFleur's underperforming play calling and the team's first half struggles persisted through the first half of the season, as Green Bay dropped four straight games. Through the four-game losing streak, Green Bay was only able to muster nine first half points. Wide receiver Christian Watson, below, suffered injuries and dropped balls as Green Bay couldn't maintain a strong offense or defense for an entire game.

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Strong second half propels Green Bay to unlikely playoff push

Love, LaFleur, Jones, provide strong answers to critics

By LUKE REIMER
GREEN & GOLD EXPRESS

While it looked like the season was going to be a wash and fans could expect to come away with a top-10 draft pick, Jordan Love, Matt LaFleur and company had different plans.

After the 3-6 start to the season, it appeared that it was only going to get more difficult for Green Bay moving forward. With the Los Angeles Chargers, Detroit Lions and Kansas City Chiefs in each of the next three games, Green Bay was going to need to find a way to subdue some of the best offenses in the NFL. That all started against the Chargers.

The Packers once again got off to a slow start, as the team was unable to put up any points in the first quarter. Following that though, Jayden Reed, who was in the midst of his breakout, sparked the offense early in the second quarter with a 32-yard rushing touchdown. With Aaron Jones injured, Reed's emergence was really a spark plug for the Green Bay offense, as he brought another rushing threat and helped to take some pressure off A.J. Dillon.

After the Chargers went up 13-10, Love connected with Christian Watson to take a lead. From there, Chargers superstar quarterback Justin Herbert connected with superstar receiver Keenan Allen to regain the lead, before Romeo Doubs found the end zone in what turned out to be the game-clinching touchdown.

While Doubs' touchdown late in the fourth quarter put Green Bay up three, it

was actually a drop from Chargers rookie receiver Quinton Johnston, which would have been a walk-in touchdown, that actually won the game. With hindsight, Johnston's dropping that sure touchdown, much like Saints kicker Blake Grupe missing a game-winning field goal, proved to be the biggest play for Green Bay all season, as the Packers barely snuck into the playoffs.

From there, though, it looked like something changed in the offense. Not only was there an emergence of Reed, but other players whom the average fan may have never heard of started to stake their claim as household names.

Green Bay's next matchup came on Thanksgiving Day in Detroit, as the Packers took on the new and improved Detroit Lions. Led by Jared Goff, David Montgomery, Amon-Ra St. Brown and Sam LaPorta, the Lions were one of the highest scoring teams in the NFL. With the inconsistent play of the Green Bay Packers' defense, many Packers fans thought that this game could get out of hand quickly.

Not only did the game not get out of hand, but it was dominated by Green Bay. On the back of the newly found weapon in Reed, Green Bay scored immediately on a 10-yard pass from Love. While the Lions matched with a LaPorta touchdown, Green Bay finished the first quarter off with a nine-yard touchdown reception from Tucker Kraft and a 27-yard fumble return for a touchdown by safety Jonathan Owens. Before anyone knew it, Green Bay was up 20-6.

The defense then continued its masterclass of a game, as it held Detroit scoreless for the rest of the first half to take a 23-6 lead into halftime. Both teams added a touchdown in the third quarter and entered the fourth quarter with a 29-14 Green Bay lead. Detroit made the game close, but it came in garbage time, as Josh Reynolds found the end zone and, after



After a roller coaster of a season to begin the 2023 campaign, running back Aaron Jones would top the century mark in each of the Packers' final five games, including the postseason. In his final game of the season, he became the first 100-yard rusher against the San Francisco 49ers in 51 games. Jones is the heart and soul of this team, even in his advanced age.

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a two-point conversion, put the score at 29-22.

If you had to point to one game that turned the season around for Green Bay, it might be this victory over the Detroit

ANSWERS, CONTINUED ON PAGE 7



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ANSWERS, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6

Detroit Lions. The questions surrounding Love and LaFleur seemed to finally be somewhat answered, as Love tied his career high in touchdown passes with three, adding 268 yards through the air. As had been the story all season long, there wasn't just one dominant receiver, though. At this point in the season, Reed, Watson, Doubs, Luke Musgrave and Kraft all had been on the receiving ends of touchdowns.

What added to the emergence of the offense was a spark from the defense. In the two team's previous matchup, Montgomery gashed the Green Bay defense for three rushing touchdowns. In this matchup, the Iowa State alum was held to just 71 yards, and with the lack of production in the run game, Goff was under constant pressure. That started to become a theme for the defense moving forward.

Working off the momentum of upsetting both the Chargers and the Lions, the Packers faced its toughest test of the season, as the Kansas City Chiefs came to Lambeau Field. While the Chiefs were dealing with a decline on the offensive side of the ball, its defense was quietly performing as one of the best units in the NFL.

With Taylor Swift in the building, all eyes were on how Love could improve upon his previous career performance. He did not disappoint. Love finished the game with 267 passing yards and three touchdowns. Two of those touchdowns went to Watson. To continue the trend of getting everyone on the offense involved, rookie tight end Ben Sims found the end zone.

While Love continued to display his ability to be the franchise quarterback for the Packers, what was more impressive was that Green Bay never trailed in this game. Patrick Mahomes was held to just 210 yards and one touchdown, with the defense also forcing an interception. For the most part, too, Travis Kelce was held in check, as the future first ballot Hall of Famer was held to 81 yards on four receptions.

For the second game in a row, it looked like the Green Bay Packers played a full game. With the exception of a few plays here and there, all three phases of the team seemed to be at the tops of their games.

Dillon also registered a great game with 73 yards on 18 rushes, which really helped to compliment the passing attack. As for the defense, it was certainly a group effort, as Rashan Gary, Devonte Wyatt, Kenny Clark and Preston Smith all recorded half a sack, while Quay Walker and Carrington Valentine racked up 10 or more tackles, and Keisean Nixon came away with an interception.

"They're coming together," said LaFleur, after this win. "They're working. They're getting better. They're playing faster, more confident."

The play of the defense against Mahomes was kind of a microcosm of the Packers on this three-game winning streak. Everybody was playing together, while nobody was trying to do too much. It became very obvious that if Green Bay actually wanted to make a run at the playoffs that this would have to be the way to attack games. There was no Aaron Rodgers or Davante Adams to bail the team out. If it wanted to move on and build success, it would have to be as one complete unit.

While the three-game win streak was certainly fun for Packers fans, things quickly turned dark, as Green Bay dropped its next two games to the New York Giants and Tampa Bay Buccaneers. In those losses, it looked like for whatever reason the defense took a major step back.

As a whole, the Packer gave up a total of 58 points in the losses. This brought into question if defensive coordinator Joe Barry was the right man to lead this defense. Especially against the Buccaneers, there seemed to be a shift. The Packers' pass defense, which had been playing extraordinarily all year, seemed to take a step back. Now the injury to Jaire Alexander may have been a factor, but

the coverage from linebackers De'Vondre Campbell and Walker had obviously been diminished.

"Now's not the time for that," said LaFleur, after being asked if the team was going to move on from Barry, showing that even through struggles, LaFleur still had faith in the team's defensive coordinator.

Sitting at 6-8 on the season, all of the momentum that Green Bay garnered over the past three weeks was all but lost. It looked like the team was heading for a top-10 pick in the draft, and much of the fan base was asking that the Packers tank the remainder of the season.

The Packers now faced a scenario where it basically needed to win the rest of its games if it even wanted a chance at making the postseason. Luckily for the team, that meant just beating the Carolina Panthers, Minnesota Vikings and Chicago Bears. With the Panthers and Bears playing as two of the worst teams in the league and Minnesota playing without Kirk Cousins, it seemed likely that Green Bay could turn its season around together.

Over the next two games, the offense got back to the form of what it was during that three-game win streak. Love and company scored 66 points and, as a whole, outscored the Panthers and Vikings by 26 points. From mediocrity to overachieving, the Packers all of a sudden found themselves in a win-and-you-are-in game, similar to the previous season. Green Bay was able to pull out the victory and reach the playoffs as the seventh seed in the NFC.

"At the beginning of the season, everybody tried counting us out," said Jones. "In the middle of the season, everybody tried to count us out. I think that speaks to a lot of the guys in this locker room, tuning out the noise and just getting to work."

With a first-round matchup against the Dallas Cowboys — who employed one of the best, if not the very best, offenses in the NFL all season long — almost nobody thought Green Bay had a fighting chance.

That didn't deter the Packers, though. In the best game of the season for the team, Green Bay came out of the gates hot and smacked Dallas in the face. Scoring early and playing fast, the Packers raced out to a 27-0 lead. At this point in the season, it really seemed like the Packers should not have been there. But because they were, they were basically playing with house money. The team was fast and loose and became the first No. 7 seed in NFL history to win a playoff game.

After beating the Cowboys in the first round of the playoffs, the Packers built upon that momentum and gave the San Francisco 49ers everything it could handle. Green Bay hung around with the best team in the NFC for the majority of the game, playing close to 58 minutes of winning football. It eventually ran out of steam though, and the Green Bay Packers' season was once again ended by the 49ers. While the loss was certainly painful, as the team was playing with as much confidence as it had all season, the season was not a disappointment by any means.

"For us to lose this game certainly stings, and I'm sure it's going to sting for a long time," said LaFleur. "But I was proud of the effort of our guys, our ability to weather some real adversity throughout the course of the season and stick together."

If anything at all, Green Bay learned that it likely had its next franchise quarterback in Love. Outside of that, it looked like there was an influx of young talent to surround Love. On top of all of that, Jones continued to come up in big moments like he has done his whole career.

The theme of the second half of the season for Green Bay was resiliency. After getting punched in the mouth to open the season, it seemed likely that a team as young as the Packers could just lay down and die. That certainly wasn't the case, though. For a team full of twenty-somethings, the fight was never lost. Everyone on the team believed in each other, and that's all LaFleur was asking for.



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Second-year linebacker Kingsley Enagbare (55) and rookie linebacker Lukas Van Ness (90) celebrate a turnover during Week 15 vs. Tampa Bay. GREG MELLIS | GREEN & GOLD EXPRESS

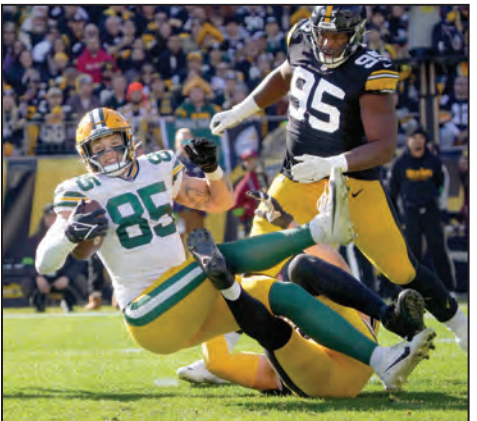
Young players show their stuff



Jayden Reed (11) and Dontayvion Wicks (13) celebrate a Week 15 touchdown by Reed. Wicks led the receivers with six receptions and 97 yards against Tampa Bay. GREG MELLIS | GREEN & GOLD EXPRESS



Rookie tight end Luke Musgrave (88) pulled down two catches for 64 yards in Week 10 in Pittsburgh. GREG MELLIS | GREEN & GOLD EXPRESS



Rookie tight end Tucker Kraft is tackled vs. Pittsburgh in Week 10. GREG MELLIS | GREEN & GOLD EXPRESS



Above, rookie Jayden Reed snags a diving catch, during his Lambeau Field debut against the Saints in Week 3. The catch was part of the fourth-quarter winning drive during the Packers' 17-point, fourth-quarter come-from-behind victory. At left, rookie kicker Anders Carlson eyes the task prior to his fourth-quarter missed kick during the Divisional Round playoff game at San Francisco. GREG MELLIS | GREEN & GOLD EXPRESS



At far left, rookie Malik Heath celebrates a first down catch on Thanksgiving Day against the Lions. At left, rookie cornerback Carrington Valentine chases down running back Dalvin Cook during the Vikings game in October.
GREG MELLIS | GREEN & GOLD EXPRESS



Second-year receiver Romeo Doubs celebrates with teammates during the Packers Week 1 victory over the Chicago Bears.

GREG MELLIS | GREEN & GOLD EXPRESS

Packers fielded youngest roster in NFL



At left, second-year linebacker Quay Walker scored a defensive touchdown against the Chicago Bears in the season opener in Chicago. At right, first-year player Bo Melton led receivers with six catches for 105 yards in Week 17 at Minnesota. The victory helped position the Packers to earn the seventh seed in the NFC Playoffs.

GREG MELLIS | GREEN & GOLD EXPRESS



Christian Watson, left, Romeo Doubs, center, and Jayden Reed each had their moments in 2023. The array of first- and second-year reviving corps members allowed Jordan Love to throw the ball to any of them with expectations they would make the play. With no dominant playmaker week in and week out, the receivers and tight ends were more elusive to guard against.

GREG MELLIS | GREEN & GOLD EXPRESS

Receivers, tight ends prove their worth

By JACOB WESTENDORF
Green & Gold Express

The Green Bay Packers' receiving corps might be the most scrutinized position in the NFL.

Since the Packers drafted Jordan Love in the first round of the 2020 NFL Draft, one tidbit of information seems to surface.

The last time the Green Bay Packers took a wide receiver in the first round, it was Javon Walker in the 2002 iteration of the NFL Draft.

Of course, they famously passed on several receivers to take Love after playing for the NFC championship following the 2019 regular season.

Instead, the Packers have done what they usually do.

In their last two draft classes, all of their second and third round picks have been used on offense.

Christian Watson, Sean Rhyan, Luke Musgrave, Jayden Reed and Tucker Kraft all were selected each of the last two

years.

All of them contributed as well.

The discourse surrounding what round each receiver was picked in was always silly to begin with. The infamous Sports Illustrated cover with Aaron Rodgers and all of his weapons from the 2011 Packers included one first round pick. That was Rodgers.

Despite that, the discourse remained this offseason, and chaos ensued when the Packers selected Lukas Van Ness in the first round instead of Ohio State's Jaxon Smith-Njigba.

More discourse emerged when the Packers did not bring in a single veteran receiver to help guide what turned out to be a historically young receiving corps.

Sammy Watkins, Allen Lazard and Randall Cobb were all on the 2022 team. None of them returned for 2023. Instead, the oldest receiver on the Packers' roster were second year guys.

Watson and Romeo Doubs were being asked to lead a receiver room full of rook-

ies.

There was optimism surrounding both of those players. Doubs spent his offseason working out with Love and helping build chemistry that at times rivaled that of Rodgers and Jordy Nelson.

Watson shook off early season struggles as a rookie to become the team's best receiver by the end of the year.

He had a 100-yard receiving game in the team's 20-16 loss to the Detroit Lions but looked to have finally earned the trust of Rodgers as the season ended.

Watson was a touchdown machine to finish 2022 and was trying to carry that over into 2023.

Unfortunately for Watson, his body betrayed him at two specific points during the year.

Watson would miss the first three games of the season with a hamstring injury that he suffered after the preseason ended.

It took him awhile to get back on track but looked to finally start resembling the player that took the league by storm in the second half of the 2022 season.

Watson had big games against Detroit and Kansas City, including a statement 53-yard reception to open their game against the Lions on Thanksgiving Day.

He scored two touchdowns on Sunday Night Football against the Kansas City Chiefs in the team's signature victory of the 2023 season.

Unfortunately, Watson's hamstring gave out on him again, and he'd miss the rest of the regular season.

He returned for both postseason games but was limited in snaps and production.

Doubs had an up-and-down season as well. He finished tied for the team lead in touchdowns but would occasionally struggle with drops and overall ineffectiveness.

When the playoffs started, however, Doubs was Love's go-to guy.

He had more than 150 yards receiving in the team's 48-32 win over the Dallas Cowboys.

Doubs didn't have as big of a game against the San Francisco 49ers, but he was the team's leading receiver with 83 yards on the night.

Doubs and Watson both will be looking for big seasons as they enter their third year in 2024.

The biggest story from the 2023 season were the two rookies that emerged as arguably the team's two best receivers by the time the regular season ended.

Reed was the team's highest draft choice at receiver when he was picked 50th overall.

Reed was the team's best slot receiver since the days of Cobb roaming the middle of the field in his prime.

Reed had an instant connection with Love and had a speed and shiftiness that was evident from the day he stepped foot on the field.

Reed battled injuries throughout the year, but he displayed a toughness and game-breaking ability with the ball in his hands.

He led the team in receiving yards

and tied with Doubs for touchdowns. In addition, he helped rewrite a record book that held the name of Sterling Sharpe in it before he got to Green Bay.

Reed is a versatile offensive chess piece that should be a big part of the offense in 2024.

The same is true for Dontayvion Wicks. Wicks and Reed are connected in that the Packers initially traded out of the 45th spot twice to get to pick 50 where they chose Reed. In the process, they acquired a draft choice that would help them select Wicks.

Wicks missed most of training camp with an injury, but it was clear he was someone the Packers liked immediately.

In the second game of the season, the Packers ran a flea-flicker to start the game. The target on the play was Wicks. They could have drawn that up for any receiver on the team but they chose Wicks.

Wicks would reward their faith down the stretch. He was always open.

He made what was perhaps play of the year in Green Bay's Wild Card win over the Cowboys. His finger tip grab after shaking Stephon Gilmore was one where his diverse skillset was on full display.

Wicks and Reed were the top two rookies, but they also got contributions from Malik Heath and Bo Melton. Melton was the team's first 100-yard receiver on the season.

The receiving corps creates a diverse set of skills. It'd be foolish to compare them to the group from 2011, but it's hard not to dream of what this group could accomplish together.

That's before we even get to the tight ends.

Musgrave and Kraft both represent the biggest investment the Packers have made at the tight end position since the picking Bubba Franks in the first round more than 20 years ago.

Musgrave and Kraft both had high moments of the season. Musgrave started immediately. He looked to be a focal point of the offense from the day he came into camp.

It took a little more time for Kraft, but by the end of the season, both guys were playing regularly.

Musgrave and Kraft's skillsets complement each other well. Musgrave can run like a deer and helps stretch the seam. He challenges defenses vertically.

Kraft is a violent blocker that can make plays after the ball is in his hands.

The Packers used a ton of two tight end sets in their dominant 48-32 win over the Dallas Cowboys in the postseason.

Matt LaFleur has never had a tight end group that did not give away their preference on offense. When Marcedes Lewis was in the game, they were predominantly a running team. When Robert Tonyan was on the field, they tended to throw more.

The truth now is, both tight ends are good enough blockers to keep the defense guessing.

Expect a lot of two tight end sets to be part of Green Bay's offense in 2024.



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Despite issues, offensive line pulled together in 2023

By JACOB WESTENDORF
Green & Gold Express

Green Bay's offensive line was supposed to finally have some stability. After two seasons of battling a knee injury, David Bakhtiari was supposed to be back and better than ever. In fact, the team even had a plan in place to ensure that he'd be ready on Sundays.

Maybe the team wouldn't see him on the practice field a bunch during the year, but when the lights were on, Bakhtiari would be good to go.

"And then, like I've said, finally having an offseason of not having surgeries, the ability to let everything kind of calm down, settle in, train, put on muscle, protect the knee," Bakhtiari said. "I'm very grateful and thankful for where I'm at, and I'm just kind of excited to see what happens. Football is football. It's not the healthiest thing in the world, so we'll see when we get out there."

Bakhtiari felt good about where he was. The team felt good about everything.

They probably felt emboldened when Bakhtiari played his first game in the season opener against Chicago.

Bakhtiari looked like his usual All-Pro self.

Any defensive lineman that lined up across from Bakhtiari was shut out.

Unfortunately, that was the final game Bakhtiari would play in 2023.

Bakhtiari missed the next two games, leading to speculation that the team would not have him play on turf.

As it turned out, that speculation was erroneous. Bakhtiari was placed on injured reserve before the team's 34-20 loss to Detroit in late September.

Bakhtiari's renaissance lasted all of one game.

He gave way to a former seventh-round pick. Rasheed Walker won the job as the team's swing tackle out of training camp, where he usurped Yosh Njiman.

Of all the players on the offensive line, it's hard to imagine a player that had a tougher season than Njiman.

Yes, he was given the second-round tender in the offseason, which would ensure he was paid more than \$4 million.

Njiman was likely the favorite to at least be the swing tackle, if not the right tackle.

He was in a battle with Zach Tom to be the starter at right tackle, but that was not much of a battle at all.

Tom spent one day with the starters at center, giving way for Njiman to play right tackle, but that was the only indication throughout training camp that Tom would not play right tackle.

He won that training camp battle in knockout fashion.

From there, Njiman would lose his swing tackle job to Walker and never really gained any footing as a starter. He would rotate with Walker in the middle of the season as Walker began to struggle but lost that competition as well.

By the end of the season, Njiman was no longer rotating with Walker and was relegated to spot duty.

The rest of the offensive line was a work in progress.

Early in the year, you could tell they were going through growing pains. Walker struggled. Elton Jenkins had some rust to knock off.

Josh Myers and Jon Runyan Jr. were inconsistent. Tom was brilliant but struggled with injuries early in the season.

The Packers' renaissance offensively can almost be directly attributed to the improvement of the players up front.

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Green Bay's special teams squad leaves much to be desired in 2023-24

Rookie kicker at the front of criticism

By LUKE REIMER
GREEN & GOLD EXPRESS

After moving on from Maurice Drayton in 2021, the Green Bay Packers made a splash by hiring Las Vegas Raiders interim head coach Rich Bisaccia to lead special teams.

That hiring immediately paid off, as after Green Bay lost in the 2022 NFC Divisional Round to the San Francisco 49ers due in part to major special teams mistakes, the Packers' special teams unit took a major step forward.

Keisean Nixon was awarded with a First-Team All-Pro selection in 2022-23 as a kick returner after leading the NFL in return yards. Green Bay improved on blocking mistakes and coverage mistakes.

Something changed this season though. Through the first four games of the 2023-24 season, the Packers' special teams unit had racked up 10 penalties, which was by far the most in the NFL through four games. Those 10 penalties accounted for a loss of 96 yards.

Penalties at any level hurt teams, but when a team is able to start with the ball 10-15 yards ahead of where the play ends, it becomes a major problem for a defense looking to make a stop. On the other hand, giving your offense the ball backed up into your own red zone severely limits the team's ability to score points as a whole.

That comes with the philosophy of Bisaccia, though. The former Raiders coach is known for his hard, old-fashioned



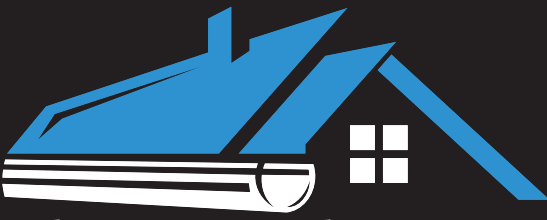
Kicker Anders Carlson, above, made 27 of 33 field goals with a 53-yarder against the Carolina Panthers on Dec. 24 his longest. He connected on 34 of 39 extra points. Punter Daniel Whelan, left, averaged 46.2 yards per punt in the regular season, which ranked him 25th out of 39 punters in 2023.

GREG MELLIS | GREEN & GOLD EXPRESS

style, which can account for the over-aggressiveness and penalties as a result. The penalties could also be a result of the inexperience and youth of the team. Green Bay often struggles to put players on the team who specialize in special teams. With Bisaccia on the coaching staff, that seemed to change as players like Nixon, Dallin Leavitt and Zayne Anderson became household names through special

teams. Another major change that Green Bay featured this season was moving on from the franchise's all-time leading scorer in Mason Crosby. Crosby, who had made numerous huge kicks in his tenure, was losing power in his kicks, and the team as whole decided it was best to move on. That in turn led the team to draft Auburn kicker Anders Carlson, with whom Bisaccia had familiarity after coaching his brother Daniel in Las Vegas. Even though Anders Carlson was just a 71.8% kicker in college, Gutekunst and his staff saw enough out of him to make him the next guy in Green Bay. "He was a kicker that Rich has extensive experience with. You know, he had his brother and knew him for quite a while," said Gutekunst, after Carlson was drafted. "We felt really good about where he was headed, and again, I think the relationship there that Rich has with him is a positive factor for us picking him." As has been the philosophy since Gutekunst and LaFleur took over in Green Bay, personal relationships seem to trump prior experience, and that appears to be the case with Carlson. In Carlson's rookie year, he converted 34 of 39 extra points and 27 field goals on 33 attempts. While those numbers aren't terrible from a rookie kicker, the inconsistency from Carlson is what was the most troubling this season. Through Green Bay's last

11 games of the season, Carlson missed a field goal or an extra point in nine of them. The most troubling came in Green Bay's divisional round matchup against the San Francisco 49ers. With Green Bay up 21-17, Carlson was asked to enter the game on fourth down and convert a field goal to put the team up seven points. The kick missed, and the 49ers took advantage of the situation, scoring on their next drive. While it is easy to say that missing the kick was the reason that Green Bay lost, it really never comes down to one play. With that being said though, kicking is a part of the game, and teams need to take advantage of every opportunity to put points on the board. "I don't think the kicks have been the same miss every time. So each kick is different, and as coach has talked about, each kick is its own story," said Carlson, regarding his inconsistency in games. "I think that there is a lot to learn, and as for me, it's tough to see these guys, because I know how much work they put in, and I just want to put them in the best position possible." Due to Carlson's inconsistencies and missing in big spots, Green Bay signed Georgia free agent Jake Podlesny after the season. That signals that even though the team spent draft capital on Carlson, it needs to see more out of him come next season. With Podlesny in town, that should be a kick in the butt for Carlson.



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LaFleur finally gets a chance to showcase his offense

By LUKE REIMER
GREEN & GOLD EXPRESS

In his first season without Aaron Rodgers, Packers head coach Matt LaFleur was finally able to showcase his skills as a coach and an offensive developer.

With Jordan Love, Green Bay finally had a quarterback who seemed to use the play that was called. Not that it was the fault of Rodgers — who is considered to be one of the smartest players in the history of the league — but to have a quarterback run the called play gives the head coach a little more stability and predictability to better understand the game.

LaFleur is by no means a veteran head coach and still has a lot to learn, but now that he has a player like Love to work with, it almost seems like the two can grow and learn the game together. That should only benefit them both.

One would have to imagine that this will be a season that LaFleur is going to remember for the rest of his life. Caught in the power struggle between Rodgers and Brian Gutekunst throughout the last few seasons, LaFleur finally rid himself of the drama and was able to call the game he wanted to see.

That was a struggle to start the season, though. After a great first showing against the Chicago Bears, things quickly soured, as it seemed that LaFleur's offense was seriously limiting Love's ability on the field.

That wasn't all the fault of the coach. With an injury to Aaron Jones, LaFleur was forced to get creative. That creativity included working the boundaries of the field with slip screens and bubbles screens and not exposing the middle of the field. Once again, that severely limited Green Bay's offense and resulted in a long streak of games where the team was unable to score points in the first half.

Later, LaFleur changed and seemed to let Love and the offense off a leash. Love



Green Bay Packers coach Matt LaFleur's 2023 season was the epitome of how he described each year in the NFL — a long journey, a lot of ups and downs, trials and tribulations, a lot of adversity. But, he believed the team at the beginning of the year was not the team as at the end of the year.

GREG MELLIS | GREEN & GOLD EXPRESS

hit his stride, and with LaFleur including players like Jayden Reed, Bo Melton and Tucker Kraft, Green Bay's offense started to click. In what was supposed to be a rebuilding season, LaFleur's continued growth with Love and the offense should be a positive sign for Packer fans for years to come.

"Every year is such a long journey, and there are a lot of ups and downs, trials and tribulations throughout it, a lot of adversity," said LaFleur, in his season recap press conference. "But, I was so proud of how these guys hung and continued to fight and battle. I thought the team that we were at the beginning of the year was certainly not the team that we were at the end of the year."

To have a strong opinion on whether LaFleur is a good coach probably cannot be had yet. Rodgers did so much for the offense, so to base LaFleur's coaching prowess off basically one season would

be foolish. What can be seen about LaFleur though is his leadership ability.

Throughout the season when the Packers underperformed, LaFleur was the first person to take responsibility, saying that everything starts with him. He is not one who will ever throw a player under the bus, which, as a coach, is the right move.

"What we are calling, what we are asking guys to do, you are always going to look at yourself first and be critical of yourself and make sure that you have the right plays dialed up for the guys," said LaFleur. "Making sure you have that communication where everybody is on the same page."

That is something that is very interesting about LaFleur. As what seems to be the common theme with young coaches in the NFL, there is a level of respect between the coach and the media. Unlike Bill Belichick, who more often

than not is blunt with reporters and gives one-word answers, LaFleur often talks each reporter through each question to fully explain what he is thinking.

Now as any coach in the NFL, LaFleur has his moments where emotions get the best of him, and that is fair. Football is an emotional game, and after a team goes on a four-game losing streak, nobody wants to talk to the media. LaFleur is the same way, but he still faces the media to fulfill his job requirements, and as a media member, that is all you can really ask for.

A major downfall for LaFleur through his tenure has been his strong commitment to his friends.

That was most obvious with the hiring of Joe Barry for the defensive coordinator position a few years back. LaFleur has been on record saying that he struggles to coach against other coaches with whom he is friends.

Going back to his time in Washington, many of his counterparts have now found themselves in head coaching positions in the league today. Sean McVay, Kyle Shanahan, Mike McDaniels and Bobby Slowik are just a few of the names that LaFleur was with in 2013 in Washington. With those names now holding high positions in this league, LaFleur will need to figure out a way to get over his struggles coaching against his friends to continue to succeed.

To put a bow on the 2023-24 season, LaFleur talked all season about the strong resiliency that this team had. From first-half blunders to a strong push to the playoffs to a victory over the Dallas Cowboys in the Wild Card round, it seems that that message of resiliency wore off on his team.

"I was just really proud about the resiliency of the group; I have said that many times," said LaFleur. "The willingness to work and come together and continue to fight for one another — I think that is absolutely imperative."

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The inconsistencies on the defensive side of the ball quickly shifted to fans blaming Joe Barry, above. When Barry was hired, many raised eyebrows, as his career stops were less than ideal. His inconsistencies were a major reason that Green Bay eventually relieved him of his duties, later hiring Boston College head coach Jeff Hafley, below. ASSOCIATED PRESS



Barry's last stand with Pack provides mixed results

Green Bay hires Boston College's Hafley after defensive coordinator's dismissal

By **LUKE REIMER**
GREEN & GOLD EXPRESS

Coming into the season, the story surrounding the Green Bay Packers was whether Jordan Love could be the next franchise quarterback. While that was the biggest topic of discussion, what flew under the radar was that Green Bay had put together one of the most intriguing groups of defensive players in the NFL.

A good mix of young talent with Quay Walker, Lukas Van Ness and Devonte Wyatt partnered with a strong veteran core of De'Vondre Campbell, Jaire Alexander and Kenny Clark gave many fans and writers optimism that this Packers' defense could be one of the best units in the entire league.

The most exciting player out of the bunch though had to have been Van Ness. The Packers spent major draft capital on Van Ness, making the Iowa alum a first-round pick in the 2023 NFL Draft. While a pass rusher was probably not the number one need in the draft last season, it was hard for Brian Gutekunst to pass up on such raw talent. Adding Van Ness to a passing rushing core of Rashan Gary, Preston Smith and Kingsley Enagbare had the opportunity to vault the Packers defensive line into a very formidable unit. With Gary coming off his ACL tear in the year prior, it was expected that Van Ness was going to play big minutes early.

"Big man. Powerful. Fast. Explosive," said Gutekunst, after drafting Van Ness. "Really big upside, and we were really excited to get him." As a whole in his rookie season, Van Ness finished with 32 combined tackles and four sacks. With Green Bay's approach to consistently rotate its outside linebackers, those numbers are not bad by any means, and it is certainly a bright sight for Packers fans.

As for Gary, in limited action this season, he still proved to be one of the most impactful players on the defense. Registering 44 combined tackles and leading the Packers in sacks with nine, Green Bay rewarded the Michigan product with a four-year, \$107 million contract in the middle of the season.

"It is great to see somebody get paid, especially somebody that you have seen from their rookie year to now," said Smith, about his reaction to Gary's contract extension. "Seeing the progression he has made and the leaps and jumps he had, even coming back from injury and with the attitude and mindset he has, I am just always proud. I feel like I am a proud big brother. It is like watching your little brother walk across the stage and graduating to a payday."

While Clark continued his prolific career in green and gold, it was actually Wyatt who was the breakout star for the Packers' defensive line and team as a whole. Wyatt upped his stats from the 2022-23 season from 15 to 36 total tackles. His sack numbers also increased from 1.5 to 5.5.

While the defensive line and pass rushers proved to be the strongest part of the Packers' defense this season, the secondary also had quite a showing. Starting the season with Jaire Alexander, Rasul Douglas and Keisean Nixon slotted in, Joe Barry and the rest of the coaching staff was very

confident about the secondary's ability to limit opposing offenses. Rightfully so, as throughout the first six games of the season, the defense did not allow more than 230 passing yards to any quarterback.

That all changed though right before the trade deadline. After starting 2-5,

Green Bay looked like it was going to be sellers at the deadline. That rang true, as when the Buffalo Bills came calling about Rasul Douglas, Gutekunst orchestrated a trade that involved moving Douglas and a 2024 fifth-round pick for a 2024 third-round pick.

Things drastically changed in the Packers secondary, as with an injury to Alexander and a continued injury to Eric Stokes, Green Bay was all of a sudden reliant on Carrington Valentine and Corey Ballentine to anchor the secondary.

More than a loss in play on the field, losing

Douglas also caused Green Bay to lose a leader in the locker room. That loss proved to play a major factor for a defense that was quickly unraveling. Even though Green Bay went on a three-game win streak, by taking down the Los Angeles Chargers, Detroit Lions and Kansas City Chiefs, there was a problem arising with Barry and the linebackers.

Even though Walker seemed to improve, there were still obvious areas for growth. While the Packers drafted Walker for his speed and ability to fly around the field, he had still yet to fully diagnose plays on the run, which certainly can and probably will improve. Adding to that, there was an obvious drop in play from Campbell. Campbell still continues to be one of the better linebackers in the NFL, but this season was a far cry from his All-Pro season in 2021. Something that surprised many though from Campbell was a cryptic tweet late in the season.

In the midst of Green Bay's playoff run, Campbell was battling injuries and sent a tweet saying, "Not going out of my way anymore and I'm not playing through injuries anymore cause when (expletive) goes wrong they always use it against you. I'm treating everyone accordingly and giving them the same energy they giving me. Focus on yourself and your mental 59 you owe it to yourself."

Whether this comment was directed at players, fans or coaches, it was obvious that Campbell was upset about how he was being treated or how he was being viewed. For a Packers fan, to see someone who was perceived as a leader say this was certainly worrisome. Even more worrisome, when asked about the tweet, Campbell refused to talk about the situation.

"I'm not talking about nothing that happened on the internet," said Campbell. "If y'all want to talk about the Panthers, we can, but I ain't answering no questions about nothing on no internet."

While these comments were alarming, Campbell did come back when needed and helped Green Bay to make the final push for its playoff run.

The inconsistencies on the defensive side of the ball quickly shifted to fans blaming Barry. When Barry was hired, many raised eyebrows, as his career stops were less than ideal. His inconsistencies were a major reason that Green Bay eventually relieved him of his duties, later hiring Boston College head coach Jeff Hafley.



Packers GM Brian Gutekunst talks about the 2023 team at hi season-ending press conference. GREG MELLIS | GREEN & GOLD EXPRESS



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