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COMMENTARY

Tearing up for the right reasons

LaFleur lets emotions run as Packers end five-game losing skid

GREEN BAY — Who would have thought the coach in tears Sunday at Lambeau Field would be Matt LaFleur and not Mike McCarthy?

It figured to be an emotional day for McCarthy in his return to a place where he won a Super Bowl while coaching the Green Bay Packers from 2006 until getting fired 12 games

into the 2018 season. The main emotion McCarthy was feeling by the end of a 31-28 overtime loss for his Dallas Cowboys was frustration.



JIM POLZIN

Asked about the experience of coming back to Titledown at the end of his postgame news conference, McCarthy said, "I'm not trying to be rude. I'm just humble pried out, OK?"

Taking questions one floor down a little while later was LaFleur, who alluded to the difficulty of not getting too

emotional after the victory. Asked what that looked like — and what it felt like — LaFleur tried to explain but had to stop multiple times while getting choked



LaFleur

up. "I apologize," he said. "But ... it means a lot to us. And to be down and fight and continue to fight, that's what you want to see. I don't mean to make this awkward. I apologize."

There was no need to apologize. If anything, that moment showed a human side we rarely get to see in coaches.

If fans think they care a lot about whether the Packers win or lose on Sunday, imagine being the man in charge of it all. Or the coaches and support staff around him. Or the players.

A five-game losing streak had weighed heavily on all of them, even the franchise quarterback. Aaron Rodgers admitted a 15-9 loss at Detroit last week — his poor play contributed heavily to a defeat that extended the Packers' skid to five games — was "rock bottom-ish."

"Not in a depressive, isolationism way, but more disappointment," Rodgers added. "And I felt like that was the bottom and it was only up from there. I think a lot of the battles that we face are between I and I, between the person that can go out there and dominate and

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PACKERS

A breakout performance

Watson delivers big performance when Packers needed it

JASON WILDE
For Lee Newspapers

GREEN BAY — Christian Watson contemplated all he'd been through to arrive at the postgame moment he was basking in Sunday evening.

The Green Bay Packers rookie wide receiver had absolutely tilted the field in his team's fa-

vor during its 31-28 overtime victory over the Dallas Cowboys at Lambeau Field, catching four passes for 107 yards, including three touchdowns — a 58-yard bomb in the second quarter for the Packers' first points, a fourth-down 39-yarder in the third quarter to ignite their comeback from a 28-14 deficit, and a 7-yarder to tie the game and



Watson



Rodgers

ultimately set up Mason Crosby's game-winning field goal in OT.

But it was everything he'd been through since the receiver-desperate team had traded as another concussion. A hard hit last week in Detroit that was initially misdiagnosed as another concussion.

The offseason knee surgery that cost him a chunk of train-

ing camp. Dropping what should have been a 75-yard touchdown on the first play of the season (and his first game snap as an NFL player) in Minnesota. A hamstring injury that sidelined him for three games. A concussion that cost him another.

And then, on Sunday, he dropped a pair of passes on the Packers' opening possession, in

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BRENT MOSS | JAN. 30, 1972-NOV. 13, 2022



ASSOCIATED PRESS FILE PHOTO

Brent Moss rushed for 158 yards and two touchdowns to lead the Badgers to a 21-16 win over UCLA in the 1994 Rose Bowl.

A mountain of memories

Moss, sparkplug for champion Park and Wisconsin football teams, dies at 50

If memory serves me correctly, it was in August 2007 and Brent Moss was trying to make a comeback with the Racine Raiders. Wearing the No. 31 he made famous at Park High School two decades earlier,

Moss showed a few flashes of the greatness he used to have — and on that same Horlick Field turf that he used to own.

As someone who used to be thrilled by Moss' football exploits, I was hoping that

he might have a little more left that night as I watched Moss warm up with his teammates. But it was not to be. There were a few hints of what he used to be both as a young man at Park and the University of Wis-

Funeral

The funeral of Brent Moss will be coordinated by Draeger-Langendorf Funeral Home and Crematory, 4600 County Line Road, Mount Pleasant. For more information about arrangements as they are announced, go to draeger-langendorf.com or check the obituary section of The Journal Times.

consin-Madison, but then the 35-year-old Moss faded after that one game.

It was a sad end to such a glorious career.

His story became even sadder early Sunday afternoon when he died at the age of 50 of kidney failure at Ascension All Saints Hospital in Racine. Moss has been undergoing dialysis

for the last several years.

His death was 34 years and two days after Moss led Park to the WIAA Division 1 championship with a 34-14 over Superior at Camp Randall Stadium in Madison. Five years later, Moss would own that same house when he led Wisconsin to its first Rose Bowl championship.

"I've been aware of his situation with the kidney failure for several years," former Park coach Phil Dobbs said when reached Monday morning at his Clermont, Fla., home. "Back when (Park's 1988 state championship team) was honored by the Racine County Hall of Fame, Brent sat with our family and that's when he told us he was Stage 4, I believe it was at that time.

"He was doing all you had to do with that, but, eventually,

that's an awful thing with kidney failure. I talked with Dennis Thompson (an assistant under Dobbs at Park) and he told me he was not going to make it."

But there was a time when Moss was a 15-year-old bundle of energy who was promoted to Park's varsity team as a sophomore in 1987. Such promotions were far more rare back in those days, but the kid quickly proved that he belonged with one of the most respected football programs in the state.

He served notice of what was to come during the final

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PETER JACKEL

SEE: Scan this QR code to view photographs of the football career of Racine native Brent Moss.

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Packers

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what seemed like a bad omen — except it was anything but.

And so, he was asked, was it worth the wait?

“I would definitely say it is,” Watson replied. “I mean, obviously it didn’t go the way I wanted, but like I kind of just said, ‘I’ve got to control what I can control.’ So obviously be able to just go out there and do my thing today was obviously well worth it.”

Watson joked about not remembering the drop against the Vikings — “I don’t even know what play you’re talking about,” he said — but it was quarterback Aaron Rodgers’ and head coach Matt LaFleur’s willingness to forget his early-game miscues that meant the most on Sunday.

“It’s been kind of a rollercoaster ride for him,” said LaFleur, who also signed

off on Watson’s backflip touchdown celebration on his first score. “Just to see him respond like that, I told the guys after the game — and it’s not just him — but this is kind of like a microcosm of how I feel about the team, the resiliency that he showed, and his ability to bounce back.

“It started off rough again, having two drops, and to finish the game with three touchdowns ... I did tell him after the second drop on the third down, I said, ‘Hey, we’re coming back to you. We’re coming back to you.’ And he responded.”

Said Rodgers, when asked why he kept going back to Watson: “We had a lot of plays designed for him, so I don’t think there was any other option. I think that (first touchdown) probably on the atomic level shifted a lot of different things for him, exorcising some energetic demons. I’m proud of him. He made some plays.”

Heated exchange

Rodgers made no bones about being unhappy with LaFleur’s conservative approach to the Packers’ final possession of regulation, when the Packers took over at their own 33-yard line with 1 minute, 38 seconds left and two timeouts to work with.

After Rodgers’ incomplete pass on third down, FOX Sports’ cameras caught him barking at LaFleur as he came to the sideline as the punting unit came onto the field with 22 seconds to go.

Asked what he was unhappy about at the end of regulation, Rodgers replied, “Just every single play call.”

Later, Rodgers added, “I’m not exactly sure what the mindset was. I get running the ball on first down. But not second and not third. Not the third-down call. I wanted to be aggressive and let’s go get ‘em.”

For his part, LaFleur acknowledged that he mishandled the possession and

explained that “indecision came into my mind, probably, way too much.”

But LaFleur credited his players for saving the day in OT.

“(I) wasn’t real happy with the way the fourth quarter, the 2-minute situation, ended,” LaFleur said. “But our guys bailed me out, so I appreciate that from them.”

Ru-dy! Ru-dy!

Safety Rudy Ford was signed shortly before the regular season kicked off to provide special teams help. He wound up helping the Packers win the game Sunday with a pair of interceptions, both of which led to touchdowns.

Ford played safety in the Packers’ nickel and dime sub defenses, as safety Darnell Savage moved into a coverage role in the slot in such situations. There was thought going into the game that newly added Johnathan Abram might handle those

safety snaps to free up Savage to spend more time in coverage, but it was Ford who got the call — and delivered.



Ford



Rodgers

His teammates were so excited for him that they were chanting “Ru-dy! Ru-dy! Ru-dy!” in the locker room as he tried to conduct an interview.

“That feels amazing. I’m just very thankful that I have great teammates,” Ford said. “It takes all of us to win a football game. Everybody contributed — offense, defense, special teams. It was good to see different teammates contribute!”

Rodgers benched

After his fourth fumble of the season on a punt return, second-year returner Amari Rodgers finally landed on the bench, ceding the return job to Keisean Nixon

after losing a fumble at the end of an 11-yard third-quarter return, leading to the Cowboys’ go-ahead

touchdown. Rodgers also mishandled an early punt, failing to catch the ball cleanly before securing it.

“It sucks for Amari. I feel for him, obviously. Because he’s a guy that works his butt off on a daily basis, and I know he wants to go out there and excel,” LaFleur said. “(But) it was a critical turnover that we can’t have, that’s something we talk about all the time: Obviously, the ball is everything, and when you have it in your hands, you hold it for everybody in this organization. And we can’t put it on the ground, especially when we’re in a situation in a tight ballgame.”

Jackel

From B1

game that season, when he cut loose for 168 yards and five touchdowns in just 13 carries in Park’s 46-30 victory over Milwaukee Hamilton at Horlick Field.

Moss may never have been the fastest player on the team, but he was always able to outrun pretty much anybody. And toughness? No one wanted to get hit by Moss, even when he was that 15-year-old trying to make a name for himself.

“Brent was an individual who woke up a lot of people when you went against him in a game or in practice,” said Geoff Schick, a starting senior linebacker on Park’s 1988 championship team. “He made you realize that it’s a special person who is a Division I athlete and you felt that through every fiber of your body when you tried to tackle him.

“Real quickly, did you re-evaluate your perspective in terms of what your opportunities were after high school might be because he was just different than anyone else on that field. You felt that every time you tried to go up against him.”

Jim Winters, Park’s offensive line coach at the time, singles out another of Moss’ skills.

“He had instincts,” Winters said. “He basically seemed to sense where the defense was coming from. He had basic instinct and he had the drive. He ... had ... no ... fear.”

By that time of that memorably hot summer of 1988, Moss was a junior who had come of age. In one of the most memorable stories of my 43-year career at The Journal Times, Moss was the focal point on a talented team that went on to win the WIAA Division I championship.

Park, just 5-4 in 1987, went 12-1 and outscored its four post-season opponents 139-36. All Moss did in those four games was rush for 687 yards and 10 touchdowns on 88 carries.

That was the Moss I remember. Back then, it was grab some popcorn, sit back and just watch the show, because you knew it



SCOTT ANDERSON, JOURNAL TIMES FILE PHOTO

Brent Moss is pictured in 2009, on the sidelines as coach of the Racine Threat, a semi-pro football team.

was just a matter of time before Moss did something spectacular.

Take Oct. 29, 1988, when Park was leading just 7-0 against Milwaukee Tech in a second-round playoff game at Horlick Field. Things were a bit tense for the Panthers, who were spinning their wheels in the first half.

But all that did was set up another classic Moss Moment going into the second half. “He said to me, ‘Hey, get ‘em going,’” Winters said, referring to Park’s offensive linemen. “And then he broke one for 55 yards and we won 35-8.”

Moss always stepped up when it mattered most. On Nov. 11, he earned MVP honors in the state championship game by rushing for 202 yards and three touchdowns on 18 carries against Superior.

“He was so hard to tackle,” Dobbs said. “I remember after the Superior game, the Superior coach said, ‘We just tackled ter-



Winters



Dobbs

ribly. We never tackled that badly! That’s because they were trying to tackle Brent Moss. You just couldn’t wrap him up. He was just a bundle of power. He also could see daylight.

“I’ve just never seen anyone who could break so many tackles. He’d prefer to run you over.”

As a senior in 1989, Moss and the Panthers returned to the state semifinals and came agonizingly close to making it back to Camp Randall Stadium. But the Panthers lost to Waukesha South 34-31 in overtime at Horlick Field.

Moss was at his best in his final high school game, rushing for 171 yards and two touchdowns on 32 carries.

During his three-year varsity career, Moss rushed for 4,683 yards and 72 touchdowns on 554 carries. He averaged 141.9 yards per game and 8.5 yards per carry.

But while he earned first-team Associated Press All-State hon-

ors as a junior and senior, he was never named the state’s Player of the Year. That never sat right with me.

By the time Moss graduated from Park in 1990, a 43-year-old mover and shaker named Barry Alvarez was poised to take over Wisconsin’s long-struggling program. Alvarez prioritized players from within Wisconsin and his first order of business was securing the services of that dynamic running back from Park.

“Park High School was the first school that Barry visited after he got the job,” Dobbs said. “He came down and he was interested in both Brent and (wide receiver) J.C. Dawkins. When he saw Brent on film, he knew right away that this guy was going to contribute.

“Barry always gave him credit for not just having the talent, but being the spark plug of that offense.”

After overcoming some academic setbacks, Moss slowly became a mainstay for the Badgers. When the Badgers went 10-1-1 and defeated UCLA 21-16 in the

Polzin

From B1

knows that they can and the little voice in your head that tries to knock you out of that confident perch around you. I’m happy that I knocked that voice back into hell and had a good performance today.”

Did he ever. Rodgers went 14 of 20 for 224 yards with three touchdowns, all to rookie wide receiver Christian Watson. An offense that has been struggling for most of the season finally came to life, particularly with the game on the line.

A pair of fourth-quarter touchdowns helped the Packers erase a 14-point deficit, and a 36-yard connection between Rodgers to Allen Lazard on third-and-1 set up Mason Crosby’s game-winning field goal.

What emerged from this victory was a blueprint for this offense to be successful: Feed running back Aaron Jones as much as possible, take some chances downfield with Watson and hope that it’s this Rodgers — the MVP-level quarterback and not one whose age has

shown at times this season — orchestrating it all.

One other thing emerged from this win: a glimmer of hope for the Packers, at least for four days.

They need to follow up this win with another one on Thursday night against Tennessee. Win that to get to 5-6 and the path to an NFC wild card berth at least becomes worthy of discussion. Lose to the Titans and this win over the Cowboys goes for naught.

“You hope it propels you and gives you some confidence, because I do think it’s tough anytime you go through a stretch like that,” LaFleur said. “It’s hard to shut out the negativity.”

It had to be difficult to block out that noise when the third quarter ended with Dallas leading 28-14. The Packers hadn’t lost six consecutive games in a season since a seven-game skid in 1988, but this team seemed headed in the same direction as Lindy Infante’s first team did 34 years ago.

Rodgers finding Watson for a 39-yard score on fourth-and-7 four plays into the fourth quarter gave Green Bay a chance. After a stop by the defense, Rodgers led a

10-play, 89-yard drive that ended with him hitting Watson for a 7-yard score to tie it.

LaFleur wasted a chance to win the game in regulation by being too conservative in the final 2 minutes, but it didn’t cost him because the defense came up with a big fourth-down stop. McCarthy, perhaps feeling this homecoming slipping away, threw his headset in anger.

Rodgers did the rest, leading the offense into field-goal range. Crosby clinched the Packers’ first victory since Oct. 2, a 42-day wait that felt longer than that to LaFleur.

“Man,” he said, “it’s been a long time to stand up here and have a smile.”

He’d gone into the staff locker room to collect himself prior to addressing the team after the win. Did he hold it together? “Tried to,” LaFleur said. “Tried.”

Awkward? Not at all. Just a team that badly needed to win and was experiencing the release of what it felt like to finally get one.

Jim Polzin is a columnist for Lee Newspapers.

Grading the Packers

Offense: A-

Aaron Rodgers looked like his old self, and he may have found a new favorite target in Christian Watson. The rookie wide receiver, who has teased his potential, finally put it all together during a 107-yard, three-touchdown performance. The Packers fed Aaron Jones a lot, and he finished with 138 yards and a score. None of this would have been possible without a solid performance from the offensive line.

Defense: C

The Packers continue to have trouble stopping the run and gave up 159 yards on the ground to Tony Pollard and Co. Rudy Ford was a pleasant surprise with two interceptions, both of which were followed by long returns. CeeDee Lamb gave Green Bay fits all day, but the pass defense came up with a stop on fourth-and-3 with the Cowboys

on the edge of field-goal range in overtime.

Special teams: C-

We may have seen the last of Amari Rodgers as a returner after his fifth lost fumble of the season. The Packers also gave up a long kickoff return, and Mason Crosby wasn’t even close on a 54-yard field goal attempt.

Coaching: B+

Matt LaFleur was too passive with his approach to the end of regulation. But he deserves credit for a good offensive game plan and keeping this slumping team from mailing it in despite trailing by 14 points entering the fourth quarter.

Overall: B

The must-win description gets used too much in sports, but this one was about as close as it gets. We’ll find out if LaFleur’s team can build on this, and we won’t have to wait long with a Thursday game against Tennessee next up on the schedule.