

THE BALLHAWK REPORT

NFL WEEK 3 — THURSDAY NIGHT FOOTBALL

ATLANTA FALCONS AT GREEN BAY PACKERS

Thursday, September 24, 2026 | 8:15 PM ET | Lambeau Field

1. HEAD COACH MATCHUP

ATLANTA — KEVIN STEFANSKI

Atlanta enters Week 3 at 0–2 and turns the offense back over to Michael Penix Jr., who makes his 2026 debut after returning from last season’s knee injury. Stefanski’s priority is to stabilize an offense that has averaged only eight points through two games and get Bijan Robinson, Drake London and Kyle Pitts involved without exposing Penix to unnecessary long-yardage situations.

GREEN BAY — MATT LaFLEUR

Green Bay is 1–1 and plays its first home game of the season after an overtime win over the Jets. LaFleur’s offense has been uneven through two weeks, with penalties, offensive-line injuries and a struggling rushing attack placing more responsibility on Jordan Love. At home, Green Bay should look to establish rhythm early and test an Atlanta secondary missing its top corner.

BALLHAWK COACHING KEY: Stefanski must give Penix defined reads and manageable down-and-distance situations. LaFleur should force Atlanta’s reshuffled secondary to communicate across formations and motion. The turnover battle may hinge on which quarterback is forced to hold the football and make late throws.

2. TEAM STATISTICAL PROJECTIONS

CATEGORY	FALCONS	PACKERS
Projected Points	20	27
Passing Yards	215–245	240–270
Rushing Yards	120–145	90–115
Total Yards	335–380	340–385
Turnovers	1–2	1–2
Sacks Allowed	2–4	2–3
Explosive Passes Allowed	3–5	2–4
Projected INT Opportunities	2–3	2–3

BALLHAWK GAME SCRIPT

Atlanta’s clearest path is to lean on Bijan Robinson, protect Penix from obvious passing downs and use play-action to create defined throws. Green Bay has allowed only 2.85 yards per rush through two games, so the Falcons may eventually have to challenge Xavier McKinney, Evan Williams and the Packers’ corners downfield. Green Bay should attack Atlanta’s cornerback depth after A.J. Terrell Jr. was placed on injured reserve.

3. ATLANTA FALCONS — DEFENSIVE BACK PROJECTIONS

PLAYER	POSITION	TACKLES	PD	INT CHANCE	BALLHAWK FOCUS
C.J. Henderson	CB	4–6	1	Moderate	Expanded outside role / Watson
Mike Hughes	CB	4–6	1–2	Moderate-High	Boundary routes / Love
Avieon Terrell	NB	5–7	1	Moderate	Slot leverage / Tucker Kraft
Jessie Bates III	S	6–8	1–2	High	Deep reads / Love’s eyes
Xavier Watts	S	5–7	1–2	High	Range / intermediate windows

PERSONNEL NOTE: A.J. Terrell Jr. was placed on injured reserve with a groin injury. Billy Bowman Jr. is questionable with an Achilles injury despite being listed as a full participant during the week.

HIGHEST INTERCEPTION OPPORTUNITY: JESSIE BATES III — S

Bates is the Falcons defender best positioned to punish an inaccurate or late Jordan Love throw. Atlanta’s cornerback injuries increase the importance of the safety structure, but Bates’ instincts and range still give him freedom to read route combinations and close on intermediate and deep throws. Love enters the game completing 52.1% of his passes through two weeks, creating opportunities if Atlanta can generate pressure without sacrificing its coverage shell.

SWOT ANALYSIS

STRENGTHS Elite route recognition, range and proven ball production. Bates can disguise his intentions from depth and has the experience to capitalize when quarterbacks become impatient.	WEAKNESSES Atlanta’s depleted cornerback room may force Bates into more protection responsibilities, limiting how aggressively he can hunt throws or rotate late.
OPPORTUNITIES Green Bay’s passing game has been inconsistent, and Love has completed only 52.1% of his passes. Pressure plus a disguised safety rotation can create an interception window.	THREATS Christian Watson, Matthew Golden and Tucker Kraft can stretch different levels of the defense. If Atlanta’s corners lose early, Bates may be forced into recovery mode rather than attacking the ball.

4. GREEN BAY PACKERS — DEFENSIVE BACK PROJECTIONS

PLAYER	POSITION	TACKLES	PD	INT CHANCE	BALLHAWK FOCUS
Keisean Nixon	CB	4–6	1–2	Moderate-High	Drake London / perimeter
Brandon Cisse	CB	3–5	1	Moderate	Outside vertical routes
Javon Bullard	NB	5–7	1	Moderate-High	Pitts / underneath reads
Xavier McKinney	S	5–7	1–2	High	Penix deep-ball decisions
Evan Williams	S	6–8	1	Moderate-High	Run fit / play-action

HIGHEST INTERCEPTION OPPORTUNITY: XAVIER McKINNEY — S

McKinney is the Packers’ most compelling interception candidate because Penix is making his first live start since last November and has historically pushed the ball downfield. Green Bay can use McKinney’s range and disguise to challenge Penix’s post-snap processing while the front attempts to create pressure. The Falcons need explosive plays, which should create opportunities for McKinney to work over the top of London and Pitts.

SWOT ANALYSIS

STRENGTHS Range, anticipation, versatility and proven ability to finish turnover opportunities. McKinney can disguise his alignment and close quickly from the deep middle.	WEAKNESSES Heavy involvement in Green Bay’s run support against Bijan Robinson can pull him closer to the line and reduce his freedom to patrol deep throwing lanes.
OPPORTUNITIES Penix returns after a long layoff and prefers to attack downfield. Green Bay’s pressure rate can force hurried decisions that allow McKinney to break on the football.	THREATS Bijan Robinson’s dual-threat ability and Atlanta’s play-action game can manipulate safety depth. Drake London can also win contested throws even when coverage is in position.

5. FALCONS DEFENSIVE KEY

PROTECT THE REPLACEMENT CORNERS.

With A.J. Terrell Jr. on injured reserve, Atlanta cannot allow Green Bay to isolate replacement personnel repeatedly without help. The Falcons need pressure from the front while Bates and Watts control explosive routes. Making Love work through his progression is preferable to giving him immediate one-on-one answers outside.

6. PACKERS DEFENSIVE KEY

MAKE PENIX PROVE IT FOR FOUR QUARTERS.

Penix gives Atlanta considerably more vertical ability, but this is his first game action since last November. Green Bay should change the post-snap picture, rally to Robinson underneath and force Penix to repeatedly diagnose coverage. The goal is not simply pressure; it is pressure paired with uncertainty.

7. BALLHAWK OF THE GAME PROJECTION

XAVIER McKINNEY — GREEN BAY PACKERS

PROJECTED IMPACT	PROJECTION
Tackles	6
Passes Defended	2
Interception Opportunity	1
Game-Changing Takeaway	Potential

McKinney’s combination of range, disguise and experience gives him the strongest BallHawk profile in this matchup. Penix’s return should improve Atlanta’s offense, but it also introduces a quarterback who has not faced live regular-season coverage since last year. If Green Bay forces a late middle-field throw, McKinney is the defender most likely to capitalize.

DARK HORSE BALLHAWK — JESSIE BATES III, ATLANTA FALCONS

Bates remains Atlanta’s best candidate to flip the game with one defensive play. Green Bay has struggled with offensive consistency and Love’s completion percentage is unusually low through two games. If the Falcons’ pass rush can create hesitation, Bates has the instincts to turn an overthrow or late intermediate pass into Atlanta’s best field-position opportunity of the night.

BALLHAWK MATCHUP TO WATCH

XAVIER McKINNEY vs. MICHAEL PENIX JR.

This is the defining BallHawk matchup. Penix wants to restore the vertical element Atlanta has lacked, while McKinney is the defender Green Bay can use to disguise the picture and close those windows. Penix’s willingness to attack downfield gives Atlanta needed upside, but it also creates the exact type of opportunity an instinctive safety can exploit.

BALLHAWK FINAL PROJECTION

CATEGORY	PROJECTION
Final Score	Green Bay Packers 27 — Atlanta Falcons 20
Projected Turnover Margin	Packers +1
Projected Defensive Takeaways	Falcons 1 Packers 2
Projected Game-Defining Defensive Play	Second-half safety interception opportunity
BallHawk of the Game	Xavier McKinney — Packers
Dark Horse	Jessie Bates III — Falcons

THE BALLHAWK VIEW

Atlanta gets an important offensive reset with Michael Penix Jr. back under center, but his return comes in one of the league’s most demanding road environments and against a Green Bay secondary built around experienced, interchangeable safeties. The Falcons can keep the game manageable through Bijan Robinson and a disciplined defensive plan, but the absence of A.J. Terrell Jr. creates a vulnerability Green Bay should test.

For BallHawk, the game centers on the two veteran safeties: Jessie Bates III trying to erase Green Bay’s explosive passing opportunities and Xavier McKinney attempting to make Penix pay for one aggressive throw. The defender who wins that battle may create the possession that decides Thursday night.