

Pittsburgh Steelers

Media Conference

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Coach Mike Tomlin

Weekday Press Conference



MIKE TOMLIN: Good afternoon. As always, I'll start with a synopsis of our last performance.

I just really appreciate the effort of our guys. It was a gritty game. It required a gritty approach. The guys didn't blink, and they made the necessary plays, particularly down the stretch to secure victory really in all three phases.

I know the defense got recognized a lot because they provided the turnovers, but the offense did what was necessary in terms of changing the short field into scoring possessions and the special teams banged field goals through and collectively were able to get it done.

The best way to probably describe the game in terms of what produced the victory is we weren't able to get a lot of the things done that we wanted to get done offensively, but one of the things we were able to get done is we took care of the football. When you take care of the ball, you give yourselves a chance to win. We did have one fumble that was negated by a roughing the passer, so largely we took care of the ball, we got turnovers, we put our offense on a short field.

Really I thought the first-half deficit was created by net punting, the field position component of play. We didn't do a good enough job with our punt group. They had a big return. We missed on a couple of punts in terms of quality, and I thought that that provided the short field that produced the points in the first half of the game.

I thought another significant component of play was our ability to stand up in red zone defense and make them settle for field goals and keep them within striking distance until we caught fire, until we could do enough collectively to begin the process of putting together drives that produced points and getting us where we needed to be.

Just really appreciative of the effort. I think you grow from outings such as that. You gain confidence in terms of what you're capable of individually and collectively. I think you learn that the NFL game is a 60-minute game, and let's

face it, we've got a lot of guys, young guys, and so experiences like that are good for their individual growth and development as professionals.

Our global approach in terms of smiling in the face of adversity is a learned one. Young guys that had helmets on that played roles in that game hopefully are shaped in a positive way because of that collective success, and hopefully we can build upon it as we move forward. I know that that's our intentions.

From a health standpoint, Freiermuth, Pat, is in the concussion protocol. As always, we'll let the protocol be our guide as he works back to practice, and then the quality of that practice and participation coupled with the evaluations that come from our medical experts will be our guide.

Wormley has a groin that didn't allow him to finish the game. He's been evaluated and being aggressive in treatment. Same approach with him. His practice availability and the quality of that work will be our guide.

Buggs, Isaiah, is still dealing with an ankle. We've got several guys that have missed time that are working their way back or attempting to work their way back. Guys like Dotson and J.C. are in the practice component of working their way back now, so we'll see what the quality of that practice work looks like in determining their availability.

Now I'll turn my attention toward Kansas City. You know, they need no endorsement from me. They're a dynamic bunch. Particularly over the last seven weeks or so when they've been on this win streak, not only have they displayed dynamic offense, but they've also displayed rock-solid defense that's been turnover driven.

We've got a lot of work ahead of us. We've got to take care of the ball. We've got to score points. The 19 points that we scored last week, I don't think it's realistic to think that that's going to be enough to get out of the stadium with a victory this time around, particularly just given their recent outputs and what's transpired with them this year.

I think they've lost four games. I think three of those four games that they lost, the opponent has scored more than

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30 points. That's a blueprint, if you will, of a traditional way of winning the game.

Obviously the games write themselves, but we'd better come in being prepared to score points. We'd better be prepared to come in to minimize them, particularly in situational football, in an effort to get off on 3rd down. You can't have senseless 3rd down losses from a defensive perspective. You've got to get off on a short field and make them settle for field goals. If they're scoring touchdowns you're going to have tough sledding.

That's something that they have done and done particularly well in recent weeks, man. Their starts have been significant. The early outset of games they've been up by 14, up by 10, up by 9 and so forth, a couple of possessions into the game for them and their opponent.

Coupled with our recent experience, that's just something that can't transpire. We can't play the game in that way, particularly within the comforts of Arrowhead Stadium.

That's some of the things that we're acknowledging as we prepare.

Particularly as it pertains to them, let's start first with Mahomes. He's unbelievably talented. He's big-time competitive. He's got arm talent. He's got leg talent. He's got football intellect. He's extremely difficult to trick.

In the very early portions of the week I put their sack reel on, and it became evident to me on the sack reel that he's only been sacked I think one time this year versus pressure, and I think that speaks to how he performs and they perform versus pressure. Man, he makes good and quick decisions. He gets the ball into the hands of guys that are not only dangerous in terms of getting open but are dangerous after they get the ball.

Travis Kelce is the best in the business, and the reason he's the best in the business is he is unquestionably the best in the business at run-after, after he catches the ball for a tight end. This is a guy I think that has 580 yards this year on run-after alone. His run-after numbers make him a Pro Bowl caliber tight end.

This guy, what he is is a No. 1 receiver. Whether you identify him as a tight end or simply an eligible, he is a No. 1 receiver in our game. His stats this year but not only this year but over the course of his career indicate that. The play that he made in overtime last week is indicative of what he's capable of in terms of once he gets the ball in his hands. That's what makes him and them so dangerous.

They can beat you over the top with Tyreek Hill, and he

creates unbelievable issues from that standpoint down the field from a match-up standpoint, but he's also dangerous run-after, as is Kelce and Hardman and others. He's got a nice arsenal of weapons to distribute the ball to.

Can't say enough about their backs, also. Helaire, Williams, the LSU tandem, they work very well together. Helaire has missed some time due to injury, has really given Williams an opportunity to carve out a role for himself.

You know, their remade offensive line has done a really good job of keeping him upright and doing a good job of getting hats on hats. But as I mentioned, his talents are so challenging, they don't see a lot of pressure or a lot of unique blitzes. There's just a risk-reward associated with trying to get after Mahomes in that way, and I think everybody knows that or has discovered that.

So that minimizes some of the things that they have to deal with, and that's just a component of having a guy as dangerous as Mahomes.

On the defensive side of the ball, can't say enough about Chris Jones. His versatility is very evident. They were lacking in some edge depth early on in the season. He played outside, was a dominant force outside, has been a dominant force inside. I think one of the things that's allowed them to gain some traction from a defensive perspective is in recent months they've been able to play him almost exclusively inside, and you feel his dominance and presence, not only as a pass rusher in terms of producing sacks, but his ability to disrupt the overall offensive game, play the run, bat passes. He's a catalyst, much like Simmons was in the ways that I described Simmons last week as we prepared to play Tennessee.

But they've got quality players on all levels. I like what's happening at the linebacker level, the emergence of their off-the-ball linebackers, Bolton and Gay, Bolton being a rookie who's just grown over the course of the season, not only in terms of the quality of his play but his role. Will Gay, also, I think being a second-year guy or so out of Mississippi State, you see growth and development in his play, and thus I think you see growth and development in their overall play.

They've done a really good job of hardening their division of labor. They've got a three-safety rotation with Honey Badger and some others, man, that is formidable. They're versatile, they're interchangeable parts. They mix up and play bastardized zones. They play a variety of man-to-man. They'll play Honey Badger deep. They'll play him down low in zones. They'll blitz him. They're really challenging in that way.

They've really gotten solid on the edge. They weren't solid on the edge earlier in the year. Obviously they didn't have Melvin Ingram, and Frank Clark was less than available at times. They were playing with younger, inexperienced guys and some backups. That component of their game has gotten solid, as well.

But when you really look at them over the last six or seven weeks, the turnover component has been what's big for them. Now, they've been in game circumstances where people have been behind and oftentimes that pressure bursts pipes and creates a climate that's ripe for turnovers, but neither here nor there, whether the circumstances are producing the turnovers or the turnovers themselves are producing the circumstances, we've got to acknowledge that they're a group that's been one of the tops in the league at taking the ball away, particularly of late, and if we want to have a chance to do what it is we desire to do, we've got to take care of the football in a big way in this game.

We've got some challenges, obviously. We're playing in a road game environment. We haven't played very well on the road, acknowledging that. We're not worried by that, to be quite honest with you. We can spend a lot of time lining up and identifying our worries. We're excited about the opportunity that we have in front of us, the things that we've done to position ourselves for it, and equally as important, what are we going to do in preparation.

We've got a big week ahead of us. We're excited and blessed to participate, obviously, in a holiday week, but professionally, man, we've got some big days ahead of us, and we look forward to heading to Kansas City and putting our skills on display against a group that's an AFC titan, if you will, one of the teams that perennially, at least in recent years, have been in it and in it in a big way, and we're excited about pitting our skills against theirs.

I'll pause and open it up for questions.

Q. You mentioned how they had to play Chris Jones outside early in the season and then the addition of Ingram allowed them to bump him back inside a little bit more, solidified their edge. Did you weigh that at all when you traded him, knowing that you would play these guys down the stretch?

MIKE TOMLIN: We didn't weigh their circumstances, no. We weighed our circumstances. Not only the tangible element of our circumstances, but the intangible quality that makes up team. Like I mentioned when we moved him, we had an opportunity to get value for him, and so that was entertaining and interesting to us, but also, to be

quite honest with you and blunt, Melvin no longer wanted to be here, and for us, we prefer volunteers as opposed to hostages, and we believe that's a formula that really allows us to come together in ways that you can't measure, to do the things that we were able to do last week, to smile collectively in the face of adversity and do what's required to get out of stadiums with necessary wins.

So that's just more of a function of us and the things that we value and less about Kansas City, the things that they needed or the prospects of playing them later in the season.

Q. How do you control Tyreek Hill over the top while at the same time worrying about Kelce in the middle of the field for all the reasons you cited earlier?

MIKE TOMLIN: Control is a strong word. I don't know that control would be the word that I use. I think the appropriate word is minimize, because you're not going to take those guys out of the game. They are who they are. They pack bags and go to the Pro Bowl, if you will, annually, and rightfully so, because of their talents and their skill set. Not only that, but the schematic continuity they have in terms of what it is they do. Coach Reid and Eric Bieniemy have been together for a number of years along with those guys, and along with their talents, that's what makes them a very difficult nut to crack.

You can't do one particular thing. They're going to solve that. You've got to have a well-rounded menu, and you've got to be able to execute that menu at a relatively high level from a detail standpoint if you want to minimize those two guys that you mentioned.

Q. When you look at Pressley Harvin and the way that he's played this season, he's had some punts that are really great and some ones that are more cavey, as you would say. How do you address consistency with him at this point in the season, especially as it seems he has some external things that are going on that are making things difficult?

MIKE TOMLIN: He and we smile in the face of adversity and we send him back out there. We're going into game 14 or so, this guy hadn't played 14 games at Georgia Tech, so he's facing the challenges that most rookies face that are significant contributors from wire to wire like he is. There's going to be some ups and downs during the course of the journey.

I have the perspective of being in the job that I've been in a long time and have an understanding relative to that, and so we're committed to him and his talents. We'll keep sending him out there. We expect him to work his way

through it, and we'll expect him to smile in the face of adversity that his rookie season is presenting to him and grow from it.

Q. In some of the venues you've been in like LA, Minnesota, they were indoor, but you had some communication issues. Kansas City is a very loud venue. Could that be a problem, and how do you deal with that?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, I expect it to be a problem, but a problem that we're capable of overcoming if we prepare and prepare in the right way for the environment and we minimize some of the onus on that communication, particularly line-of-scrimmage-wise. With the number of young guys that we have, we'd just better be cognizant of their first time in the environment. It won't be a first time for guys like me or Ben, but it'll be a first time for a lot of guys, and that component of it is something that we're very cognizant of and will be in preparation.

Q. You talked about how good they are after the catch, specifically Kelce. How do you feel your tackling has been lately, potentially against Tennessee, and how important is that component of your game to minimize what they do after the catch?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, how it's been lately is really irrelevant. It better be up to snuff on Sunday. These guys are unique. They are. So to compare them to others from a run-after capability standpoint is not something that's realistic. I'm not going to seek comfort in past performances based on that perspective. Kelce is the best in the world at the tight end position and run-after.

They've got guys like Hill and Hardman who are 4.2 and 4.3 in the 40. If they get space, they're dangerous people.

We're going to be challenged in ways maybe that we haven't in that regard. So forget how we've performed. We'd better be at our best in terms of tackling the catch and minimizing that component of their arsenal.

Q. How much time does it take for you to call defenses? Does that take a lot of time away from some of our other duties as head coach? How do you try to balance all of that?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, it depends on the week or the specific instance. I highly involve myself in all three phases of the game, sometimes more than others. It just really depends on the opponent, the circumstances and so forth.

But I've been on the job a long time, and I've got 15 years

of experience in terms of managing it. It's a lot easier in 2021 than it was in '07.

Q. We talked to Minkah yesterday and he talked about how him and Edmunds have become a one-two punch. What can you say about what their level of communication, the trust you have in them does for you guys on the back end to maybe run some more defensive packages that could include Patrick Mahomes and help you in that situation?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, they've gotten continuity. They've played together for a number of years, both former first rounders from the same draft. They're getting to the point in their career where their snap experience aids them individually and collectively, so we're just reaping the rewards of that continuity and that gained experience that they have individually and collectively. I think it's reasonable for that to manifest itself in terms of menu variation, disguises, communications, all the things that make safety play critical, and particularly when you're facing good people such as Mahomes and Kansas City.

Q. When you talk about facing adversity as a learned thing, you have truly this year gotten many, many key contributions from veteran players, whether it's Joe Haden's tackle at the end of the game or T.J. Watt. How is that something that's learned? Does it have to do with just getting the reps? Does it just have to do with getting a comeback win? Does it have to do with the nature of these players?

MIKE TOMLIN: To be quite honest with you, when you're young and inexperienced you're capable of blinking when things get tough. When the road gets narrow you make mistakes, you lack detail, you lack focus, you lack communication skills and so forth.

The more that you're in those circumstances, you learn and you're shaped by success, particularly in those experiences, and it's reasonable to expect there to be more awareness because of those experiences, more communication, more play making, more comfort, if you will.

So that's why it's significant.

Q. In that same vein, you're talking about in-game situations where mistakes are elevated, but your whole team is in a situation right now where the stakes are elevated. You've got three games left, probably need to win at least two of them. Can that carry over to a global perspective and not just an in-game one?

MIKE TOMLIN: No, I was talking globally as well as

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in-game. We're faced with challenging circumstances over the last three weeks like you mentioned, but so are most of our opponents. That's why I always talk about dealing with circumstances relatively well, meaning compared to those that we're competing against. That's a significant component of it.

How well we deal with the circumstances, what will be enough, I don't know, but we'd better do more than those we're competing against.

Q. Minkah said yesterday that at this point in the season paying attention to your body is just as important as anything. How do you do that while also trying to keep practice physical to stop these slow starts?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, I didn't acknowledge that I planned on keeping practices physical this week, so I agree with Minkah. We're going to take care of their bodies.

Q. Just to be clear, you mentioned Kevin Dotson as being a practice participant this week. Does that mean you intend to activate or bring him --

MIKE TOMLIN: Correct. Correct. I intend to start the 21-day window of his availability this week.

Q. Because Najee is such a big part of your offense, especially running the ball but also touching it, are you noticing teams paying more attention to him as the season goes on?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, no doubt. I think he's -- with each game tape, he's more of a known commodity, and so he gets attention that's reflective of that. It's just like teams are paying more attention to Chase in Cincinnati now than they were earlier in the year. He had to run by a few people before that became real.

I think young players earn their reputations throughout their rookie year, and over the course of the season people respond to accordingly based on what it is they see. I would imagine Parsons is getting more attention in Dallas in terms of getting him blocked than he was in September, for example.

Q. You guys are now and the NFL as a whole is dealing with more COVID-19 protocols. Is your team responding in a way that you feel like is going to keep you healthy through this last crucial game stretch?

MIKE TOMLIN: I've been extremely pleased with our attitude and our approach in terms of dealing with COVID.

Our agenda is to make it a winning edge for us. We need to deal with it relatively well, meaning we need to deal with it better than others, and I like the mindset and the actions of our group in that regard.

Q. What did you see from Rob Spillane there coming back from the injury, and do you expect to maybe get a little more from him down the stretch?

MIKE TOMLIN: I was appreciative of his efforts. It was good to get him back in uniform. We worked him in in the ways that we worked some of the other guys in that were working their way back, Carlos Davis, Joe Haden. We had them all on a pitch count. It's reasonable to expect that to continue and increase where earned, and Rob did a good job and we'll see where this week leads us.

Q. Especially if Pat can't go, beyond Zach, what are your options at tight end?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, I haven't spent a lot of time pondering the hypotheticals. You guys got our roster, not only our active roster but our practice squad. Our answers are in house if he's unavailable.

Q. Going back to some of your comments about Mahomes, the ability he has to use his feet to keep plays alive and extend plays. Is the goal to kind of hem him in as a mobile quarterback? Do you have to treat him almost like Lamar in that regard, as a guy who's got a great throwing arm?

MIKE TOMLIN: Man, this guy has got -- he checks all the boxes from a talent standpoint, and so I'm not going to treat him like anybody. I'm going to treat him like Mahomes because that's his skill set.

He's going to challenge us in ways that we haven't been challenged, and that's what you love as a competitor, but also that's probably what's going to determine the quality of the day for us and for him.

We've got a lot of work ahead of us.

Q. Mike, you've mentioned the tackling earlier. I know you went over 200 yards a game with the rush defense, but did you see some improvement or something you can build on for the rest of the year, at least minimizing some of the things that Tennessee did?

MIKE TOMLIN: Boy, I did. I thought Minkah was exceptional in the game. We still had gap integrity issues that we've had, particularly in recent weeks, and to be quite honest with you, at times that comes when you're playing with some younger and inexperienced guys and guys that

are at the outset of their career in terms of gaining footing.

There's going to be some breakouts, there's going to be some lack of gap integrity. I thought that Minkah was exceptional in Tennessee at minimizing some of that damage, and with his open-grasp tackling, I don't know how many tackles we credited him with, 12 solos or what have you, the nature of those tackles, those are angle open-grasp tackles. I can't say enough about what Minkah has done in that area in an effort to shore up that component of our play. And we've still got miles to go to be quite honest with you, but the efforts that he's provided us has been a shot in the arm in terms of minimizing some of their damage.

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