

Pittsburgh Steelers

Media Conference

Tuesday, December 28, 2021
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA

Coach Mike Tomlin

Weekday Press Conference



MIKE TOMLIN: Like I said after the game, this was a tough and disappointing loss for us. We weren't able to get the things accomplished that we knew were significant, that we identified were going to be a significant component in terms of us engineering victory. The turnover component was going to be significant, and we didn't get that done. We didn't take care of the ball. We lost three turnovers. We didn't get any on defense. Those turnovers resulted in 17 points, and so we didn't back up those turnovers with stout enough supportive defense.

When you're playing the likes of Mahomes and the Kansas City Chiefs, the game is going to unfold that way. Obviously there were a lot of other variables at play, but that component of it was significant. We had to play a possession game. We had to gain some possessions. We had to minimize the damage that he and they could produce, and we weren't able to do it. We had to win the weighty downs, some of the possession downs.

I thought a significant down early in the game was the interception we were able to get on 3rd down and 11 but they utilized cadence as a weapon and got a free five and a free down that negated that turnover that we produced. It just wasn't our day largely.

For us, it's about how we transition, and I'm so glad that we have an additional week's preparation this week. Obviously this is a big game. We've got to shake that baggage or residue off of us, as do everybody that's in a similar circumstance that we're in, as we're getting in the waning moments of this 2021 regular season and we're losing opportunities to state a case for ourselves.

The Cleveland Browns are very much in a similar circumstance, and so from that standpoint, we're going to a stadium that has a very level playing field. Both teams are fighting tooth and nail for positioning. Both teams have absorbed some negativity, particularly of late in terms of significant games, and our ability to shake that off -- specifically speaking about us, our ability to shake that off and get singly professionally focused and have good

preparation days is a component for us.

We've got an additional day to work with this week. We're pushing our week back in an effort to be inclusive. Some of the guys are working their way back from injury and COVID will be given an additional day when we approach it that way.

Oftentimes when we play on Monday night early in the season, we'll extend the latter part of our work where we get two days of work at situational ball, 3rd down, red zone, short yardage and otherwise, but given our current state with people working their way back from COVID, people potentially working their way back from injury, we thought it was appropriate. It also gives our staff an additional day to address the planning component of preparation and look at division of labor that will best put us in position to do the things that we need to do to secure victory this week.

Along the lines of division of labor, we released a statement yesterday regarding Adrian Klemm and his departure to go to Oregon. Let me start by saying I'm so appreciative of his efforts. The landscape that is coaching is changing each and every year. We see it; decisions are being made earlier in the processes. Colleges, the processes are happening faster, people are making hires and so forth. The financial component in our business is making college football much more competitive. So we're all getting faced with challenges that we really weren't faced with in the past.

We made the decision, I made the decision to allow Klemm to move on to Oregon. It provides tremendous clarity for us as we zero in on the last component of this season. It also gives me an opportunity to evaluate C-Mo, who will get an opportunity to be elevated in his role. C-Mo is very credible. He was a lead line coach of the Atlanta Falcons for a number of years before he got here. He's also had the unique perspective of being in a support capacity throughout the 2021 season but also having an intimate enough relationships with what's going on among the staff and among the players.

I'm really excited about his elevation and the component that it could bring to us.



Also I think the move also eliminates the potential of any questions regarding distractions and so forth, and let me be clear. I had no reservations about Klemm's commitment and his willingness to work in detail, but it's the potential perception that you want to combat, whether it's inside or outside. We want to eliminate any potential questions that may occur in that regard, even before they develop.

This is a critical stage of the season for us. This is a critical week. The road is extremely narrow. So we're circling the wagons, and that's just one of the ways I thought it would be appropriate to do so in an effort to engineer victory this week and get singly collectively professionally focused and from a perception standpoint, as well.

From an injury standpoint, again, like I mentioned, we've got an additional day we're attaching to the front side of the week. Hopefully that lets guys who have missed some time and who are working their way back to us, like Freiermuth, like Dotson and others, some guys that sustained injuries in game, KG, Trai Turner and others, to have an opportunity to work their way back to us, some COVID guys potentially, and you guys have that list, Devin Bush and others. Hopefully that means they get back to us sooner rather than later, and having an opportunity to be active participants in the development of the plan and work in terms of some physical readiness for play.

Now let's talk about the Cleveland Browns. We know them. They know us. It's getting tight.

For us, starting on the defensive side of the ball, you'd better start with Myles Garrett. We can't allow this guy to wreck the game. It's a big game. It's Monday Night Football. You should anticipate him being a catalyst for their defense, so we understand and respect that and what he's capable of. You saw it a couple of weeks back with a sack fumble, fumble recovery, score. When this guy does that, the climate that's within the stadium changes.

It starts there for us.

I think also a significant addition that wasn't available to them last time we played is their young talented inside linebacker Jeremiah out of Notre Dame, No. 28. He's a sideline-to-sideline guy. He's highly instinctual. He's a very good cover guy. He's good versus tight ends. He provides quality depth for them in terms of some sub packaging. They don't always have to go dime in an effort to cover quality people down. This guy's coverage ability allows them to stay nickel and thus scout or versus potential 3rd down runs and so forth.

He's a challenging addition that wasn't there the first time we played them.

They're a fundamentalist group. I've got so much respect for Joe Woods, their coordinator, and how they go about business. They specialize in minimizing big plays in both the run and the pass. They try to capitalize on turnovers. They've got some ball aware guys I'm sure that you guys are all highly familiar with.

I can't say enough about Denzel Ward at corner. This guy has been a ball guy since day zero. He's always tough and competitive against us.

On the offensive side of the ball, man, we've got to stop the run. Nick Chubb, Hunt, and what they're able to do in the run game provides a catalyst for some other things that they do extremely. I think Baker's play action passing game and rhythm passing is always challenging. If we want to minimize some of that stuff, it starts first and foremost with working to minimize the run.

Man, Nick Chubb is awesome. He's got great vision, contact balance and patience as a runner. He's a tough tackle. He's not given enough credit for his second and third level running. Oftentimes when he gets in those spaces, man, it's KD bar the door. Very rarely do you see him get run down, but you don't ever hear him mentioned in terms of breakaway speed, but his video is his calling card. We understand that.

We understood that last time. We were able to put together a solid game at least in terms of minimizing that component of it. It's going to be critical this time around, probably doubly so, and so we're preparing with an edge. We expect those guys to be preparing with an edge.

It's all roads lead to Heinz Field this weekend, and we're honored and excited to be in this game.

I'll pause and open it up for questions.

Q. I was just curious if Adrian Klemm approached you or when he approached you with this Oregon job, and did you call him to the office Monday and say, hey, let's just do this now?

MIKE TOMLIN: He and I have been in conversation dating back to last week or so regarding the potential of that. He did an awesome job of being professional and communicating. But at the same time he also displayed unwavering commitment, so I didn't have any concerns as it pertains to Adrian. It's really as I outlined. I think it's a real good opportunity for me to gain some exposure and the potential of C-Mo because he'll be a candidate for the

job, and what better way to see what he's capable of than to allow him to do the job for the remaining portions of the season.

I wanted to potentially alleviate any questions, whether inside or outside, about whether we're circling the wagons and everybody is zeroed in on this opportunity, and again, I'll state I had no reservations about that, and that's why I said perceptions.

Q. Last time you did a good job of minimizing their running game. Do you expect or would you expect the Browns to change what they do a little bit to combat what you guys did?

MIKE TOMLIN: Why don't you ask them, man. That would help. When you get an opportunity to talk to Stefanski, ask him that.

The road is getting narrow for us and for them, and I think that's a component of this that I'm going to keep talking about with our guys during the course of the workweek. We've absorbed some negativity. They've absorbed some negativity. It's about getting the best out of ourselves, and I'm sure it's the same for them.

You know, they're making some decisions about how they want to play ball this week, what best engineers victory for them, and so all we have is our in-stadium experience against them on what's on tape, and our in-stadium experience plus what's on tape tells us that we'd better work our tails off to minimize their run game and Nick Chubb and we'd better not let Myles Garrett wreck it.

Q. With Chris Morgan taking over now on an interim basis, is there anything different he can do or is it too late in the season to try to change things with the offensive line group?

MIKE TOMLIN: No, I'm excited about the spin that his perspective will bring us. We also have an additional day in terms of preparation, as I mentioned at the opening. I simply gave that additional day or 24 hours to the front side of the week, and so there's an increased opportunity there from a schematic and planning standpoint to have his presence felt. So I'm excited and optimistic about that.

Q. One thing that Diontae Johnson mentioned yesterday talking with him is he said the team, some of the guys need to have better energy getting off the bus, things like that, some of these intangibles. When it comes to messaging, it seems like some weeks it works and it gets through and some weeks maybe it's not all there. Do you change, or how do you change the message or who's giving it or the content of it

going into this week and next week when you're still in the hunt for the playoffs?

MIKE TOMLIN: Certainly I'm willing to change it and I'm open to changing it. I think that's a component of being consistently good, having a hard core plan, but also being willing to change based on current circumstances. So that's a blueprint that I follow largely regardless of the discussion.

But at the same time, I don't want to lack an anchor and be a moving target, if you will. I don't think that's good to search for consistently good performances. Some of the negativity that you mentioned we've all absorbed, and that's why we don't have secure playoff positioning, that's why Cleveland doesn't have secure playoff positioning. That's why Baltimore, Miami and others like us don't have secure playoff positioning as we sit here today.

Our ability like their ability to get singularly focused this week and bring the best out in ourselves and show up in the stadium not carrying the negativity that's associated with the seven or so losses that we've had but the positivity that comes with some of the good experiences that we've had, and so that's the messaging, that's the approach, and I'm excited about delivering it this week.

Q. I remember when we talked to you earlier in the year we were asking about defensive play calling and you joked that you weren't joking that you more than suggested play calling. Does that hold true for the offensive side of the ball and what can you do to help Matt get his group off to a better start in games?

MIKE TOMLIN: Yes, it does reflect offense, and I displayed and reiterated that at the time that I made the initial statement. I'm fully engaged in preparation in all three phases of the game and have been, and I absorbed responsibility of what we put out there. That comes with what I do. I don't run away from it. I run to it. So that's my statement regarding that subject.

Q. There are more and more college coaches coming into the NFL now. When you interview these guys, do you ask if the NFL is their destination job? As you mentioned there are some negative perceptions if they leave in the middle of your season.

MIKE TOMLIN: What was your original question? I'm sorry.

Q. Do you specifically ask these college coaches who are coming into the NFL for the first time if the NFL is their destination job? Like you mentioned earlier this season --



MIKE TOMLIN: I don't. I don't ask them if it's their destination job. Most of the guys, their destination job centers around head coaching at some level, so that's assumed in this business.

More than anything, I talk about an honest day's work for an honest day's pay. That's what's expected from me. I expect to give those guys an honest and fair wage, and I expect to get all of them professionally. So it really requires no additional discussions other than that.

There's change; that's a component of our vocation. Those changes happen year in and year out. I don't fear those changes. It's just a function of what it is that we do at the highest level, and it is what it is.

Q. When you were talking earlier about the way that games start, getting off the bus, whatever, it's now been five weeks since you've scored a first-half touchdown. What specifically can you do to stop that trend? What needs to change? Please don't tell me execute better.

MIKE TOMLIN: We can score in the first half. That's what our intentions are.

That's our intentions every week. But we've come up short. I'm not going to run away from that. It is what it is. I'm not going to try to explain it away. We can sit in settings like this and talk about it all day and you can walk away about feeling good my answer and write a story, but that doesn't solve the problem. Actions does.

So we have an additional 24 hours of prep. We plan to use it from a schematic standpoint. We have a number of guys like I mentioned in the opening statement who are working their way back to us either from COVID or injury. How we divide that labor up and highlight their positive attributes and work to minimize our collective negative attributes are going to be a component of that discussion.

Q. Do you get a sense that this is Ben's last home game, and would that impact anything?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, I don't know that it's going to impact anything relative to what we intend to do or what he intends to do. Like I've mentioned several times, when that subject is broached in these settings, Ben has really done a nice job of setting the pace regarding that throughout the season. He's been singularly focused on the next challenge in where we are in terms of the here and now, so it's been easy to follow his lead in that regard, and I'm sure we all will do the same as we press forward toward Monday Night Football.

Q. When it comes to scoring in the first half or at all in the game, collectively as a core or individuals within the group, the wide receivers, what specific areas of improvement do they need to show you over these last two weeks to help the cause?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, I really think largely they've done a nice job of winning one-on-one battles and making splash plays. To be quite honest with you, when we've had our struggles running the football, people have been able to play cover two and roll corners up and do some things to minimize their impact on the game.

That's probably really been the challenge in terms of producing splash with those guys. In one-on-one circumstances, those guys have made their share of plays and have done a good job in terms of producing splash, whether it's chunks of real estate or scores.

Q. Matt Canada has never really called plays in the NFL before this year. Is there a learning curve associated with that from the college to the pro ranks, and are you happy with that portion of his job so far this year?

MIKE TOMLIN: I have no reservations about the play calling component of his job and what he's done, but I also will acknowledge there's probably a learning curve at every job that pertains to the National Football League. Equipment man, a college equipment man that becomes a pro equipment man, his job is somewhat different, and I'm sure someone that covers college football in your space, it becomes significantly different when they cover professional football.

I think that's a reasonable discussion regardless of what we're talking about in our ecosystem that is football.

Q. Kind of building a little bit off of that, you and Ben Roethlisberger have been through so much together. Knowing that obviously he still has more to write to his legacy, how do you sum up at least I guess part of what he's done at Heinz Field from the beginning of his career up to this point?

MIKE TOMLIN: To be honest with you, we don't have enough time. I mean, I've experienced 15 years of Hall of Fame caliber play as it pertains to Ben. My focus and his focus this week is this game and preparing for this game and performing well in this game.

I'm sure there will be an appropriate time in the future where I'll get an opportunity to sing his praises, and I will gladly do so. It just doesn't feel like the appropriate time as

we zero in on this opportunity that is Monday Night Football this week.

Q. Sticking with the Ben angle here, in an effort to really switch things up at the beginning of the game, and this is maybe a bit of a flippant suggestion, I don't think it is, though, what about just turning it over to Ben, and saying, here you go, get together with Matt Canada, basically give Ben the keys?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, I'm not opposed to that. Ben is always a component of planning, particularly as it pertains to starts. He's a guy that's been on the job 18 years at the quarterback position. You know, it would be foolish for us not to include him in the process, so I'm not going to pretend like that has not been a component or a part of the discussions as it pertains to the development of plans to this point in the season.

Q. The last time that you guys held a team to under 100 yards rushing was the Cleveland Browns. You have a lot of young guys up front this year that have been rushed into action and they're facing challenges. How do you see them or what do you think the biggest part of the challenges they face specifically this week to prepare for such a big game against an opponent that you guys have had success against before?

MIKE TOMLIN: When you're talking about young players that you've mentioned, it's less about the opponent and it's more about their growth from game to game and the things that they can do to get better. You'd better focus on the you. They're just writing the beginnings of their professional football story. For example, last week was Loudermilk's first start and he had some quality experiences in game. How does he build upon that? The nameless gray faces that we play are secondary as it relates to some of the things that you suggest regarding young people and establishing themselves as consistent varsity players.

Q. Do you expect to have Pressley Harvin back this week?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, I know the services for his father are at some point this week. It's our intention to be extremely supportive of him. We've been in communication with him. We'll see where the roads lead. Meanwhile I'll say that I'm really pleased and appreciative of Corliss and glad that we were able to reacquire him.

Our previous past shared experiences I think really provided a lot of comfort for us going into the stadium in Kansas City, and if we need to use him again, I'm sure, particularly with an additional week's work, we'll have an

increased level of comfort this week.

Q. There was a report that Stephon Tuitt won't return this year. I just want to see if you had any clarity on his situation and maybe the rest of the guys on the injured reserve that have not begun to practice?

MIKE TOMLIN: I have nothing to add regarding anyone that's on injured reserve that I didn't mention in my opening. Thank you.

Q. Whether in the last meeting or whether it was the play call or the formations or the sets, your rookie left tackle was left one-on-one with Myles Garrett a few times. Is that something you need to be more aware of or want to make sure you address this time?

MIKE TOMLIN: We're highly aware of it. We're aware of when he's in the game and when he's not, but there's also some challenges because they play him on the left side, they play him on the right side. It depends on whether he's in conjunction -- the last time with Clowney or with Takk or others. Certainly we're highly cognizant of where he is.

In my opening I talked about the fact that he's a game wrecker and we've got to work to minimize that. I'm sure I said similar things in the opening the first time we played them, but that's why they play the game and that's why they move him around and that's why he is the challenge that he is.

So we've got some work to do there, but also from time to time when you play a 65-, 70- to 75-snap game, someone is going to have to block him one-on-one from time to time, and who better to do it than your left tackle. I'm not running away from that, and Dan Moore is not running away from that, either. That's just a component of ball. I was just looking at tape this morning, and I saw Villanueva got put into one-on-one circumstances a few weeks -- on a play action pass against him a few weeks ago and it was a sack fumble.

That's just the challenge that is Myles Garrett. It's week in and week out. It's not one snap, it's 75 or so snaps, and so there's some urgency there that's required.

Q. Why is the gap between the quality of play and the results been so stark between home and road, and does the fact that you're home this week maybe give you a little bit more confidence of these issues you guys are facing can be solved on Monday?

MIKE TOMLIN: Let me say this: I hope it does. I'm not going to paint with a broad brush and assume that it does.

We've talked about some of the reasons why we start slow on the road. We've got a bunch of new components on offense, players and so forth, whether it's new to the NFL or new to us, and some of the communication things and things that get increasingly difficult in those environments you simply don't deal with at home.

Not a lot has changed in terms of that narrative and that discussion, and so understanding that component of the game is going to have our attention.

DraftScripts by ASAP Sports

On the converse side, our opponent offense has to function in the environment that is Heinz Field, and man, we have one of the best environments in the National Football League. Steeler Nation does a heck of a job of making it a miserable place for our opponents, and I'm looking forward to them doing so for the Cleveland Browns this week.

Q. If I can go back to the Cleveland Browns and their secondary, you mentioned Denzel Ward, but when you think about ward and Newsome and Williams and Johnson and what they are doing, what about that secondary stands out to you, and what challenge do they offer that's perhaps different than anybody else?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, I think schematically they play vision to break coverages. What I mean is the vast majority of their snaps you have eyes on the quarterback. They play three deep zones. They play quarters.

I really think when you've got eyes on the quarterback, it really gives you an opportunity to secure takeaways and tipped passes don't fall innocently to the ground. One of Denzel Ward's recent interceptions, it was a ball that ricocheted off two different people, the intended receiver, a defender, and then he caught it.

You know, that's a challenge. The fact that they have multiple eyes on the quarterback and it really increases their opportunity to secure the football. In particular you've got guys like Denzel Ward who are good hand-eye guys is challenging.

Q. What were the specific aspects of your rush defense that were sharp and were particularly good against the Browns the last time out that maybe haven't been replicated as often since and you'd like to see this time around?

MIKE TOMLIN: If I had the answer to that, and I may, I wouldn't tell you because I'd be telling them. We'd better just do a good job of reproducing it. We had big time urgency the last time we played these guys. We understood how significant the game was. It was a significant game for us where we were in our season.

We understood that Nick Chubb was a catalyst for them, and if we didn't minimize that component of play, it was going to make it difficult, particularly in their environment.

