

Pittsburgh Steelers

Media Conference

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Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA

Art Rooney II

Weekday Press Conference



ART ROONEY II: Well, good afternoon, everyone. I wish I could see you all, but I see little pictures on a computer screen. Not sure who all is there. I wish we could be in person again, but we'll make the best of it.

Let me just start with a few comments here. Number one, I'd like to take the opportunity to publicly thank Ben Roethlisberger again, congratulate him on his retirement, and appreciate 18 great years, and wish he and his family all the best in his retirement.

Same goes for coach Keith Butler. Coach Butler has been with us many years, and just a great coach who's been through some great years for us, and so appreciate everything Keith has done for us and appreciate him and wish him all the best, he and his family, in his retirement.

Then I want to mention that it's been discussed, but Kevin Colbert is stepping down as our GM after the draft this year. We have left the door open, Kevin and I, to possibly have him fill a role, an ongoing role after the draft, but we will be conducting a search for a new GM starting immediately and probably won't make a hire until after the draft, but we will be interviewing people.

We've already interviewed two of our in-house candidates, Omar Khan and Brandon Hunt.

One more sort of opening comment on the season. It was an up-and-down season. Certainly appreciate the fact that our players and coaches kept fighting through the end, and it was a crazy last day of the season, obviously, but like I said, appreciate that we kept fighting through the end. I'm never going to complain about making the playoffs, but obviously we didn't reach our goal where we ultimately want to get to, so we know we have a lot of work to do.

I'll be happy to answer some questions.

Q. I know it just happened officially, but you have had time to think about it. What is your plan going forward without Ben Roethlisberger, with what you have in

house, the draft, free agency, what?

ART ROONEY II: Well, we certainly won't close any doors at this point. It's still early in the process, and there will be a lot of doors to open and look through. Certainly we have Mason Rudolph and Haskins on the roster, and those two will be able to compete for the position, but we'll be looking at the other options like any position, to put the best roster on the field and the best person at quarterback for us next year.

Q. Question about Kevin stepping down: You said you interviewed Omar and Brandon so far. Would you like to have somebody in place before that so they could help out with the draft, or this draft and this session over the next three months all still status quo with Kevin?

ART ROONEY II: No, Kevin will fill his normal role through this year's draft. I don't see it as something critical that we have somebody on board before the draft, even though we'll be doing some interviews prior to the draft. But more than likely we'll fill the position after the draft.

Q. I'm wondering, how involved do you expect to be in finding the next quarterback after Ben Roethlisberger? It's been a while since you have had to do this or the organization has had to do this. Do you think you'll be more involved than you normally would in the search for a new player? How do you view your role in this going forward?

ART ROONEY II: Well, I'm not a scout, and I don't pretend to be. Certainly I'll pay attention like I do every year to the draft and free agency and be involved in all of our discussions with the coaches and the scouts and Kevin and Coach. I think it'll be interesting to see what the opportunities are.

I think in terms of my role, it'll be pretty much business as usual.

Q. In terms of replacing Kevin, I know he has the GM title. He told us why he had the GM title; it involved some things with press boxes and things of that nature. Do you foresee hiring somebody who's a GM

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who has more GM-like duties, or are you looking for somebody who is really the head of your scouting department?

ART ROONEY II: Well, look, I think a GM has a lot of responsibilities these days. We'll be hiring somebody that can fill all those responsibilities, which include obviously, number one, being a talent evaluator in putting our draft together. But everything else that goes with working as a GM in the NFL today. Having said that, we're looking for somebody that fits with the way we're structured and our culture, and we're not really planning to change our own structure here, so it would have to be somebody that we feel can fit that culture and that role.

Q. Could you just talk a little bit about your thoughts on the offense this year and the job that specifically that Matt Canada did with it?

ART ROONEY II: Well, you know, we had a number of young players, rookie players playing on offense this year. Look, we didn't achieve the kind of offense that we would like to have, but we had some good moments. They kept us in a lot of games.

We needed to be more consistent probably more than anything else. We had a lot of games where we were good for a quarter or a half but not really for four quarters. I think that's something that Matt is going to want to address this off-season.

Having so many young players, different pieces coming together, including a new coordinator, there were some challenges there that I think we tried to make the best of it, but again, we didn't meet all of our goals for sure.

Q. How close do you feel you are to being a Super Bowl contender?

ART ROONEY II: You know, I would never sit here and say that we're going to change our goal of trying to win a Super Bowl. Every season that's got to be the goal as far as I'm concerned. We certainly have work to do with an opening at our quarterback position. You could say it's a new chapter, so we'll be doing everything we can to make sure that position is -- we have the best person we can probably have in that position.

As we all know, that's a key position, so it's going to be a transition getting there and having a new quarterback this year. I'm excited about the challenge, and I know Coach Tomlin and everybody else here is excited by that challenge.

Q. Staying with the quarterback theme, you mentioned

you're not a scout but you've been around the game a long time. Do you have a vision in mind as opposed to a specific guy, what you want at that position? And could you also just clarify for me what your business-as-usual role involves in finding that guy?

ART ROONEY II: Well, in terms of what does the quarterback look like, I think that you have to take advantage of whatever opportunity you have to get the best quarterback you can find. You don't always have the luxury of saying I want A, B and C, go to the grocery store and order a quarterback.

We'll evaluate all the options we have. Certainly mobile quarterbacks are the wave of the future, so to speak, and having mobility at that position is something that would be desirable; let's put it that way.

But the other thing just as desirable is somebody that can read a defense and complete a pass downfield.

There are a lot of pieces to the puzzle that you have to put together. Like I said, you don't always get someone that meets every criteria you might want, and so you just have to get the best player, plug him in and put the best players around him and try and put everybody in position to be successful.

My role, I try to pay attention to the draft and be able to have enough knowledge about what we're trying to do to be in discussions and participate intelligently, but like I said, I'm not a talent evaluator. I don't pretend to be. That's what we pay our scouts and coaches to figure out this time of year.

Q. You said last year that you wanted to focus on improving the running game and you mentioned a lot of those changes that you made last off-season, a new offensive coordinator, some young players on offense, on the offensive line and at running back. You still ended up near the bottom of the league in most rushing categories. Do you feel like those changes that you made last off-season will pay off over time, or do you feel like more change is necessary to improve in that area? And does that become more important when you're going through a transition at quarterback, as well?

ART ROONEY II: Well, I'll say this: I think I would say I feel better about our ability to run the football maybe today than I did this time last year. I think we have some pieces in place, obviously Najee and some young offensive linemen that we hope are going to come in next year and take another step.

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But we didn't perform the way we'd like to, so there's definitely room for improvement. We'll be trying to figure out how to get that improvement in this off-season.

Q. A lot of the coaching hires, the coordinator positions that Mike T has made, even some front office staff, have been just guys that got here and rose through the ranks from Keith to Randy to Canada. As you go out replacing somebody like Kevin, as you go out looking for a new defensive coordinator, how do you weigh sticking with what you guys have done in the past, when we make internal hires it's guys we already know fit, versus we haven't been to a Super Bowl in over 10 years now, maybe it's time to bring somebody in who is unfamiliar with us but can bring some fresh ideas to the table?

ART ROONEY II: Well, look, we are going to be talking to outside candidates, and so we're going to fill these positions with the best people we can find for the job, whether they're internal or external. We're certainly not afraid to bring somebody in from the outside if need be, and as you know, when we hired Coach Tomlin we had some good internal candidates in that round and wound up hiring somebody from the outside.

We just don't try to narrow -- too much of a narrow focus and really try to get the best person for the job, wherever they're coming from.

Q. Could you clarify, is Kevin going to step down and not be done after the draft? Will he hang around and stay around in a reduced capacity? And does this mean -- how does it affect Mike Tomlin? Does it give him any more say-so or power, if you will?

ART ROONEY II: I would say Mike's role in all this will most likely stay the same, and the new GM will step into Kevin's role and fill that role in a similar way, in a similar set of responsibilities as Kevin has had. I don't expect to make dramatic changes in terms of those responsibilities, coach versus GM. I think it's worked well, and we're not really trying to make a big change there.

Kevin is interested in potentially having a role, obviously a reduced role, and if that's something that we can all figure out how it works, he'd probably rather describe it as something more than hanging around, but I think we can probably figure something out if it makes sense for everybody.

Q. Looking at the internal candidates that you've already interviewed for the job, I know Omar -- both Brandon and Omar have been around for a while, Omar has had multiple GM interviews with other

teams, but what is it about Brandon Hunt that you guys have seen over the years that he's developed that could make him a good future general manager, whether it's with you guys or elsewhere in the league?

ART ROONEY II: You know, Brandon, number one, started out with us, and so we sort of trained him, Kevin trained him, and so he knows the Steeler way, you will. He also spent some time, as you know, at Houston, so it's not as though he's never been outside these walls, and I think that was good experience for him.

As he's moved through the years, he has taken on additional responsibilities and handled them well. I think Brandon is somebody that has the kind of experience we'll be looking for and is a good candidate.

Q. Over the course of this season I think everybody who's on this Zoom call has been asked at one time or another or multiple times about the status of Stephon Tuitt. What's the organizational stance on Stephon? I know he's under contract for next season. Do you anticipate him playing in 2022?

ART ROONEY II: I wish I had an answer for you there. All I can say is that we'll be evaluating that situation and having a discussion with Stephon here in the next few weeks and hopefully be able to say something more definitively in the near future.

Q. Just general what areas would you like to see this team improve on going into 2022?

ART ROONEY II: Well, I think we had our ups and downs, as I said, and at times we showed promise and showed an ability to run the football on offense, and so on offense we need to continue to be able to run the ball. Obviously bringing in a new quarterback, we'll see what dimensions that new quarterback can bring to us.

On defense, just the same. I think the foundation has to be that you can run the football and stop the run, and at times we weren't able to stop the run on defense the way you need to to be successful.

Those sort of basics are things that we need to get right going into next season, and I know we'll be working toward that. I do think we have core players on both sides of the ball that can help. On offense maybe they're a little younger than on defense, but we do have core players that I think we can build around.

Q. What are your thoughts on your head coach also calling plays?

ART ROONEY II: You know, I think that Coach Tomlin inserts himself where he needs to, and I think that the role between him and his coordinators is something that they have to work out the best way for plays to be called and the most effective way. I think that's really something that is mostly between Coach and his coordinators.

As we change defensive coordinators now, there may be some changes in how Coach Tomlin handles that.

Q. For the first time in quite a while you have money to spend in free agency. You mentioned that you're not a scout but you're the guy whose name is on the check. I'm curious, do you anticipate you guys being more active in free agency than you have typically, and because of that, does that give you optimism that the needs that you see addressed can maybe be fixed in a shorter time period than it would if you were trying to build traditionally through the draft?

ART ROONEY II: Well, I think I do like the fact that maybe we have a little more room to work with going into this free agent period, and it may allow us to be more aggressive in certain situations. We have some holes to fill, and hopefully having some cap space is going to allow us to do some of those things, as well as in the draft.

Q. You ended up with the lowest average attendance in almost a decade. Local TV ratings were down, as well. Do you see that as a sign of waning enthusiasm from the fan base about your team or maybe just a reaction to people changing the way they are fans coming out of a pandemic and look to maybe change some business practices to capture them in different ways?

ART ROONEY II: You know, certainly from an attendance point of view, we don't like having that many no-shows, and we've done some research on it, and I do think that the pandemic played a role in that. Certainly it was an unusual season in that our highest attended games were actually the night games.

There's some different things going on that we've got to study and understand. I think the bottom line is from what we've seen across the board, there's still strong demand for our tickets. I think if we can get back closer to normal, I think we'll see that attendance go back up.

I think all in all, our fan enthusiasm is strong, and I think people are looking forward to kind of seeing what's next.

Q. You referenced some of the challenges with the offense, first year coordinator, first year coach, bunch of new linemen, rookie running back, rookie tight end,

aging quarterback. With the benefit of hindsight, how realistic was it that all that was going to fall into place, and were you guys in a position where you kind of had to lump it a little bit in a transition year?

ART ROONEY II: Well, there's no question that if you can not have that much change in one season, you'd rather not. But that's the way it goes. There are going to be years where you're going to have different combinations of players moving in, and so I thought the good news was that our younger guys continued to improve as the season went on, and I think that's something that hopefully we can build on and build around as we go forward here.

Q. You mentioned about wanting a mobile quarterback or that's the wave of the future here, mobile quarterback. I'm just wondering what the organizational definition is of mobile quarterback. Is it somebody buying time or is it somebody taking it and just running with the ball? What's the thought?

ART ROONEY II: Well, I mean, certainly you start with somebody that can buy some time is very desirable. I would say in terms of having a quarterback that's actually consistently a threat to be part of your rushing attack, I'm not sure that that's something that I want to rely on and that you can rely on let's say game in, game out, season in, season out.

I think having some mobility is important, but I think the days of having quarterbacks that their biggest threat is running is probably not exactly what we're looking for.

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