

Pittsburgh Steelers

Media Conference

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Coach Mike Tomlin

Weekday Press Conference



MIKE TOMLIN: Good afternoon. I guess as always, or as customary, I'll start with a quick assessment of our last performance. Wrapping a bow around yesterday.

As I said after the game, and I was just really appreciative of the group's ability to focus and perform and deliver. Sometimes the last week of the season presents some challenges, some distractions and things, things going on inside your stadium, things going on outside your stadium, and I just thought largely, our group did a really good job of kind of managing the speculation and all of those things, those variables, some within our control, some outside of our control all week in prep and even in play leading up to the game and doing what was required to secure victory.

In terms of the game, I thought it was important that we win the line of scrimmage, that we work to minimize their run game and how they control games through their run game. I thought largely we were able to do that.

I thought a component of doing that was being able to do it ourselves and possessing the ball and playing behind our run game and Najee and so forth and I thought we were largely able to do that. Making some splash plays obviously was required.

I thought some of the 3rd down conversions offensively, particularly late, were significant.

We took the ball away some on defense, also significant.

I thought we were able to stay after Watson, and he is a big challenge in terms of his mobility and how he extends plays and the things he's able to do. Being in the stadium against a divisional team against them for the first time, I thought that was going to be a big component of play.

We were able to get some things done and secure victory, and I'm thankful for that.

Larger picture, obviously, man, it comes to a screeching halt. It does for us. It does for a lot of others.

I asked my team to be singularly focused, and I'm willing to live that out. I stand before you today with kind of a lack of preparedness for this. To be quite honest with you, I was preparing to prepare to play a game.

I'll acknowledge a couple things that has gone on this week, things that needs to transpire, necessary business this time of year and so forth and tee it up and open some questions up.

We'll meet this afternoon with our team at 2:00, talk about some end-of-the-year things and acknowledge some calendar related things moving forward. Exit interviews and exit physicals are a component of those things.

It's important that we do a really good job of wrapping a bow around what is the 2022 season. There's some physical work to be done. There's some planning to be done.

Individually, collectively, players need to meet with positional coaches, coordinators, myself, strength coaches, trainers. There's a process.

The attention that we give the journey, we need to give the exit process. In a lot of ways, it tees up the beginning of 2023, particularly if someone needs some medical work done, it's better to sooner address that than later, to do a good job of making sure that we're addressing any ongoing medical issues that people might be dealing with.

It's important to get a snapshot evaluation of what's transpired with them, give them a window of maybe what might lie ahead and the work that might be required of them in an effort to get better.

Those are some of the things that will be going on. We'll be doing some of the things as a staff. I'll always put the players in front of the staffing in terms of meetings and evaluations.

But there are a lot of ongoing necessary business things this time of year. I'm really just starting to sink my teeth into it, as again, as I mentioned, we're singularly focused. We don't prepare for failure.

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We'll proceed methodically through this. We'll probably move a little slower than most of our peers, but we don't worry about the Joneses. We've got a business model, one that we believe in, and we'll be thorough in doing so and in assessing what transpired in an effort to tee up our next opportunity, and at the appropriate time we'll start work in that area.

I'll pause and open it up for questions.

Q. When you look at the Baltimore game, the Cleveland game, you minimized their rush and you out-rushed them. What does that say about your desire for how you want to play?

MIKE TOMLIN: I just think that's kind of a snapshot of NFL football, particularly in the waning weeks of the season. Weather becomes a factor and things of that nature. But it's also got something to do with the match-ups of the teams and how the teams come together and their agenda relative to our agenda. Those two teams that you mentioned, they play behind their run game, so if you want to beat them the latter portions of the year, you'd better minimize it, and a major component of minimizing it is possessing it yourself.

It's very true in those instances, but it's also true in a larger sense in terms of time of year and playing to our strengths and our makeups and our makeup at that particular time.

Q. Philosophically were you guys a little conservative by design due to relative uncertainty with your skill position people, and would the next step to more splash be to put the pedal down?

MIKE TOMLIN: Succinctly, yes. You guys know that I'm a fundamentalist; when I've got red paints, I paint my barn red, is a coach cliché.

What you saw from us was what was appropriate, particularly over the second half of the year in an effort to engineer victory.

As we move forward, man, we're continually trying to get better and get better in all areas, and how does that shape and affect your personality? It does. It does in all three phases. It does individually and in totality.

But it's our job as coaches to do what's required to engineer victory, particularly over the latter half of the year, and we did what we did to engineer victory.

Q. How would you evaluate the job Matt Canada did and do you expect him to be back next year?

MIKE TOMLIN: I thought he got better, just like our team got better. I'm not going to speculate about him or anyone as I stand here today. Just as I mentioned, we fight, and that fight has come to an end. I'm just beginning the process of transitioning in terms of wrapping a bow around it and looking and seeing what 2023 looks like.

I'm just not there. We've got some work to do.

But largely, I thought he got better in the ways that we got better, so it was encouraging.

Q. As you go into these off-season evaluations and exit meetings and you're talking to Kenny Pickett, how much of his experience do you expect to factor into decisions with coaching staff like Matt Canada?

MIKE TOMLIN: I'm not going to delve into the dynamics of my decision making. It doesn't serve me or us in any way to peel back that curtain.

I have intimate conversations with everyone. Obviously Kenny being our quarterback, that's going to happen. But the nature and the details of those conversations and how that leads to decision making will never be discussed in a forum like this.

Q. You just mentioned in your opening comments about the business model that you guys believe in. The guys that you're doing business with have changed. It's your first full off-season without Kevin, with Omar, with Sheldon and with Andy. When it comes to a lot of the guys that you've got that are in their late 20s that are kind of getting to the end of their deals, are you looking to keep as many of those guys as possible and build on the last nine games, or is that an opportunity to reface the roster, so to speak?

MIKE TOMLIN: Again, we've had zero conversations about how we move forward. We acknowledge that those conversations will be transpiring and some of them rather quickly because some of them are time sensitive. But to this point, zero conversations in that regard have been had, and that's a signature of how we do business, and that's probably why we're able to have the type of focus that's necessary to finish the way we finished this year, because we are not distracted by BS that lies ahead.

We are singularly focused about opponents that we're dealing with in the games that are in front of us, and now we transition to some of those discussions, but I don't have enough information or clarity in any of those discussions to kind of provide the answers that you're looking for.

Q. Anecdotally, when you have a season that's there's such a split in terms of results from the first half to the second half, when you're evaluating the season, do you place more weight on what happens at the end regardless of whether it's good or bad?

MIKE TOMLIN: I evaluate everything. You know, I just think that there's going to be a start to next season, and so if the start was not what you liked or wanted, you'd better evaluate that.

I'll evaluate the season in totality. I'll evaluate components of the season, team development, how we manage the team through the season from a physical work standpoint, from an intellectual work standpoint, the rate at which we introduce schematic things, growth and development.

There's just a lot of discussions to be had. Just rest assured that it will be evaluated in totality, but it will also be broken down into smaller pieces and evaluated in that way because that is equally necessary.

Q. You said last off-season you were excited about having some uncertainty at the quarterback position. Seems like you found some certainty. What are you looking forward to about the next step in that process?

MIKE TOMLIN: Growth. You guys know, here in Pittsburgh, we value the growth that has the potential to happen between year one and year two. It's natural. They're no longer speculating about what this is. They've had a lap around the track. They've been in some hot situations. They've had some positive results. They've had some negative results. They understand the totality of this in terms of the total that it takes on them, mentally, physically, emotionally.

I think all of those things that encompass the experience that is a rookie season is a good springboard to get better and to obviously do it with a quarterback, I'm really excited about that.

Q. From a big-picture perspective, how do you evaluate your rookie class as a whole and how strong are those building blocks that they've set to go into the off season and next year?

MIKE TOMLIN: A lot of guys had an opportunity to have roles and increasingly significant roles, and I'm thankful for their contributions, but I'm just beginning the process of going through it with a fine-tooth comb and assessing it in that way in terms of building their challenges individually for year two for them.

But I will acknowledge, man, we've got some quality play

from some young guys, which is exciting, but boy, there's a lot of meat on the bone, and we're excited about being a part of their process, too. That's another component of our business model that we don't run away from, we run to, the development of players. To be a component of their growth and development is significant for us and for them.

Q. How important is this first off-season that all of your rookies will have?

MIKE TOMLIN: Huge. Huge. But that's not the first time you guys have heard me say that.

Q. Pat Freiermuth, I know it's been a day. Is there any update or clarity?

MIKE TOMLIN: I think it can be characterized as an MCL sprain, non-surgical, so that's exciting for him.

Q. Did you guys become more opponent specific with the defensive game plans? If so, how much was Flores a part of that, and how did that go with him this year?

MIKE TOMLIN: You're talking about over the course of the year?

Q. Yeah.

MIKE TOMLIN: I think it's a natural thing that you're more specific, opponent specific, division of labor specific as the season goes on. I just think with each passing week, you have more information, you have more information about yourselves and what you're capable of. You have more tangible information and less speculation about the personnel and the other people that you face and how they're utilizing it.

I just think that that's in general something that happens in all three phases over the course of the season.

In terms of Brian's contributions, man, it was significant throughout. But we get significant contributions from a lot of assistants. Pat Meyer's contributions were significant throughout in terms of offensive game planning.

I don't know what you mean by that.

Q. Moving forward, do you feel like Kenny Pickett is the franchise quarterback?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, I don't know what you guys mean by franchise quarterback. Is he our QB1? Yes. But there's a lot of silly responsibility that comes with that term. Everybody thinks they've got one, but not everybody has



one and all of that. He's our starting quarterback.

I'm not going to saddle him with that cliché that's overused in our game, in our business too much these days.

Q. You've been bullish on Devin most of the year. His participation dropped significantly the last couple weeks. Was any of that health-related, or were you rewarding the other guys, or did Devin maybe not meet the standard you were looking for?

MIKE TOMLIN: Not health related, really game specific related. As we were talking about earlier the nature of play of those two teams that we played down the stretch specifically, it warranted us to do some things in terms of division of labor that minimized some of his opportunities to contribute.

But we make those decisions week in and week out in a lot of areas. It's just football. It's trying to engineer victory.

Q. How do you anticipate the quarterback room shaping up behind Kenny given that Mitch and Mason are two relatively young guys who still want a chance to be starters in this league?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, Mitch is under contract. Rudolph is scheduled for free agency. We'll see what happens.

Q. You know you said you'll do your evaluation of things. But as far as you know has anybody indicated that they are retiring or leaving or not coming back, anything like that?

MIKE TOMLIN: I've already received a request for Brian Flores, but there have not been any significant conversations among the staff about that. As I mentioned, we're singularly professionally focused. We acknowledge where we are this morning, but prior to this morning, we're trying to win football games and maybe prepare for another one.

Q. Who was the request from?

MIKE TOMLIN: I'm not going to get into that. I'm sure you guys will have that information sooner rather than later. It's on the street.

Q. Can you specify whether that's for a head coaching job --

MIKE TOMLIN: No, no, coordinator position.

Q. Obviously we saw the skill of George Pickens';

where did you see him from a maturity, character development standpoint as the season went on?

MIKE TOMLIN: I think he progressed in ways that most of the rookies progress. I just think it's a natural thing when you're a young guy and you get put into a professional environment around grown men that you grow and grow at a rapid rate.

I saw that from him. I thought the consistency of his play and his productivity kind of represented that growth.

But it's a really natural thing.

I sometimes get resistant when I get asked about his maturity and character-related things because oftentimes I believe he got mischaracterized pre-draft. So that's why I'm combative at times and defensive when it comes to him. He's a quality young man. He is. He's professional. He's been really consistent in his work throughout. He loves football. He likes to work.

We haven't seen a lot of things that we hear rumors regarding in terms of him, and that's why we defend him.

Q. I asked that because he mentioned that yesterday after the game, being mischaracterized, how he feels he was affected by that.

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, and that's business, unfortunately, particularly at this level.

But sometimes, particularly when they're young, they don't do a good job of managing it, and it can affect their growth and development, and when you're in my position, you'd better fight to defend that. That's why I do.

Thankfully he's got a thick skin and he's a tough-minded kid, and it had very little bearing on his day-to-day and the spirit in which he played, all those sort of things.

Q. Outside of quarterback, are there any positions based off of performance over the course of the season that you feel like is a strength going into next season?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, I'm not going to get into that, bold predictions that guys got to wear months from now. I'm just appreciative of the efforts of our guys. I'm disappointed that we're not working this week, and I'm committed to being better moving forward.

Q. How do you assess Najee's performance, and do you feel like the injury maybe in camp slowed him down early in the season, or was it just a progression

with the limelight?

MIKE TOMLIN: Certainly the missed time and team development slowed him down. I don't know that he played in any preseason games and things of that nature. He's a young guy. The skill relative to his position needs to be developed and honed in an effort to be game ready.

He got on a moving train. That was well documented. I thought he got better with each passing day. He's a mentally tough guy. He's a competitor.

So I just thought his play got consistently better throughout, but also kind of expected it to be based on those reasonable variables and circumstances.

Q. Did William Jackson have an injury after he got here? Is it the same injury he had before, and will he have a place going forward?

MIKE TOMLIN: To be honest, I don't have a lot of detail. I think he was on the field one day. There was a lot going on that day. I don't know how much direct eyes I laid on him. I don't have a lot of information in that regard. I don't.

Q. After the game Cam Heyward said something quizzical about if they want me back. Is there any reason we should be concerned or think that you would not?

MIKE TOMLIN: Cam is the same type of guy that will put a tape job with his last name on the front of his helmet in a training camp-like setting. That's what makes him who he is. He takes none of this for granted, and that's just an expression of that. Just like when he puts his last name on his helmet in a training camp-like setting.

He is special because he has a special approach, because he is legitimately humble and hardworking, and he takes none of this for granted, so that's probably what that was.

Q. When it comes to Najee's leadership, everything off the field, how did you see him grow in those types of areas?

MIKE TOMLIN: In natural ways in all areas, but that's a reasonable expectation of a guy from year one to year two, but it also speaks to who he is that he got elected captain in year two, and I think that with each passing day, he wore that in a more natural way.

I think he always had a desire to do that and be what his team and his teammates needed him to be, but I think with each passing day, I think he just wore it the more natural way, and I think it's reasonable to expect it to continue.

Q. With Diontae, how did you see him grow and respond to some of the adversity that came his way throughout the season?

MIKE TOMLIN: In the same ways that he's done throughout his time here, and that's what I mean when I'm talking about that we have a desire to be a part of the growth and development of players. We draft guys. We research guys, we draft guys. They play for us. They develop how they play for us. Guys like Diontae, Alex Highsmith and others are kind of examples of that. They've continually gotten better.

Q. What did Pat Meyer bring to your offensive line?

MIKE TOMLIN: He's a good communicator, good teacher. He challenges the guys. He does all the things that you want a guy in that space to do, formally and informally in terms of the growth and development of an individual and a collective. He's been really solid.

I'll tell you this: Probably the most significant thing about the development of our offensive line is the availability of that group, the continuity required to grow is a major component of it, and we're thankful that not only do we have really good consistent in game performance with that group, but just good practice ability and consistency in that area from that group.

It starts first with availability and then the work, and he did a good job shepherding that work.

Q. You mentioned earlier how you ran your offense was appropriate because of the young personnel. Is it tricky to evaluate a coordinator when maybe his offense looked one way and he wasn't comfortable doing it another way. How do you evaluate that?

MIKE TOMLIN: I'm paid to do tricky. It's all tricky. It's all layers to this. It's not checkers, it's chess. So it's just life in our business.

Q. The O-line starting every single game together this year, does that make it easier to evaluate their work, or does it make it more difficult because you didn't see it with different pieces in there for next season?

MIKE TOMLIN: Again, I'm not going to hate the fact that we had consistent availability in the offensive line. I think they grew individually and collectively at an increased rate because of that.

So where that leads us moving forward, hopefully it is a springboard in terms of what transpires.

The negative consequences are maybe some of the backups that you have you didn't get an in-game evaluation on, but you do have an evaluation of the day-to-day, their preparedness, their professionalism. So that's just life in the business.

Q. Last year you talked about enjoying being uncomfortable in the off-season, about how different it was. How different is the feeling going into this one knowing that there's more continuity maybe than losing a GM, the long-term quarterback --

MIKE TOMLIN: I'm only a couple hours into it. I have no idea. Like I said when I got out of bed this morning, I just had to come to grips with the fact that I wasn't preparing a game plan today.

Those things will kind of be revealed to me in a more tangible way probably over the next couple of days as I start to look at calendars and begin the exit interview process and those type of things that kind of encompass this time of year.

Q. What is this day like for you? Are you down a little? You prepare for 12 months and all of a sudden it's over?

MIKE TOMLIN: I don't spend any time focusing on what it's like for me. There's so many people that need things from me on a day like today. A rookie needs some clarity about what happens next, a free agent needs some clarity, the medical clarity that needs to transpire. Dominos fall in the coaching profession.

There's a lot that's needed from guys like me on a day like today. I don't spend a lot of time worrying about my issues.

Q. You've touched on this before, but when we would ask you about turning around a season like 2-6, you would say, that's my experience; it's not necessarily theirs. Now it is their experience after doing it. What do you think the benefit is going to be for a young core moving forward the way that they finished the season?

MIKE TOMLIN: Hopefully the benefit is not to get yourself in those circumstances, but again, those are things to be pondered as we wrap a bow around it and things of that nature and start our planning. Just haven't given it a lot of thought.

Obviously there's some benefit to being a part of something, smiling in the face of adversity and growing and pushing through some difficult times and having your back against the wall professionally. There's growth there for

sure.

What it means and all of that, we'll get to it.

Q. There's more that needs to be pondered and I know this year is different because of coaching changes, front office changes, quarterback changes. Does that prevent you from having a through line to see what has prevented you guys from being at a point where you are still working deep into January?

MIKE TOMLIN: What are you asking?

Q. I'm asking if this year gets in the way of that evaluation because there were so many changes.

MIKE TOMLIN: There are changes and complexities to the evaluation process every year. There really is. It just is. There's big-time urgency every year. This is a now business. There's changes every year, players, coaches, et cetera. Nothing stays the same. Even those that remain, their roles change. They evolve. People ascend, people descend. It's always different.

Q. What do you tell your guys about what they need to do in the off-season to come back ready and kind of build?

MIKE TOMLIN: Do it in a really individual way, based on a lot of variables and circumstances, experience or lack thereof, how much they played. You can go as specific as to how many snaps they played being in the framework of how much rest they get before they get back to training, for example.

If you're a practice squadder, you're right back after it probably next week. If you played 1,000 snaps, obviously you're not. So it's a very individual thing.

It should be. This is professional football.

Q. I don't know that we asked you much about Boswell this year. Kind of a down year for him? Was some of it situational? Any concern with him?

MIKE TOMLIN: I haven't begun to assess it in that way yet. I'm sure that I will and he will. We acknowledge and I acknowledge that the ball didn't go through the upright at times and largely as much as we would like it do.

Q. I think last month I thought you called it a little silly sidebar about the non-losing season streak that you've had, that you've never had a losing season. Does it mean something now that you've done it, you expanded on it more? Your players seemed to be real

open that they wanted to keep that going for you.

MIKE TOMLIN: More so. Increasingly so.

MIKE TOMLIN: It was probably more important to them as a subject matter, obviously, than it was to me. I'm appreciative of that, the relationship that I have with them that makes it important to them.

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But my agenda is getting in the single elimination tournament and pursuing the confetti game and winning it. That agenda will never change. The totality of past experiences and stuff, man, I just -- I'm a competitor. I like to compete continually. I love the challenge that this game and this job provides, so I'm wired in that way.

I've spent little time assessing the totality of things, particularly if it doesn't light a fire under me, if I can't utilize it as fuel in an effort to be ready for the adversity that awaits. So talking about accolades and trivial things and streaks and things of that nature, if it's not useful to me in terms of assessing our next battles, then I don't spend a lot of time thinking about it or focusing on it.

Q. When you saw the way Pickett played the rest of the season, I know you probably don't want to look back, but would he have maybe been able to play at the beginning of the season? Do you wish he had the extra four games of experience?

MIKE TOMLIN: I think his development is a process, and we've said throughout, I've thought his development took off once he started getting into stadiums in the preseason, so there was a process there. He was playing in the third groups. He was playing in the second groups. We gave him some first-group exposure. Preseason football is different than regular season football; let's be honest. So he bided his time and worked in a regular football season environment, and when he had an opportunity, when it presented itself, he showed that he belonged, and he continued to get better in that space.

As I look back at it, I don't know that I have any second thoughts or regrets about the process or how it transpired as I sit here right now.

Maybe I'll think differently as I analyze it in an end-of-season kind of way in the upcoming weeks, but knee-jerk reaction to your question, no, I don't have any regrets about it as I stand here this morning.

Q. You just talked about competition and all that lighting a fire under you to keep going. Do you still feel that same competitive fire and everything going into this off-season? Do you still feel that same motivation and fire?

