

Pittsburgh Steelers

Media Conference

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Mike Tomlin

Weekday Press Conference

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

As I said after the game, it's just really gratifying to go on the road in week 1 and secure victory. You have the natural things that come with week 1, all teams deal with that -- the unknown, the 60 minutes of football from a conditioning perspective, the attempt to make routine plays routinely when we know in week 1 sometimes it can be anything but routine.

Couple that with quarterback instability that popped up during the week, man, I just thought our guys handled a lot of the circumstances very well, and to secure a victory under those circumstances, I think, is not only the necessary win of the week, but there's growth in that. There's individual and collective growth in dealing with variables and challenges in this journey and overcoming them.

So it's good to get some of that done. I thought specifically about the game, I just liked the energy and enthusiasm of the guys. In week 1 you worry about that football conditioning component. Will guys play with great energy and finish throughout? I thought in all three phases our guys did that. They played hard. They played together. I thought we complemented one another in a lot of ways.

You can't say enough about Bos's kicking, obviously. But I thought the offensive sequence before the half was significant, in terms of answering that score and bringing up the field goal before the half and putting us to within one point of those guys. I thought the defense stood up a lot in the game. The turnovers, I thought, were big, the plays down the stretch.

I just thought, as the game wore on too, our defensive front, our rushers in particular, really controlled the game. What can you say about T.J. Watt that hasn't been said in terms of his quality of play? We expect it, but we appreciate it.



So, man, we got a lot of good things done. There were some things that obviously need to be improved. Low hanging fruit is the penalties. I thought penalties were catastrophic to our efforts. We had some big plays and field flipping scenarios negated by penalty, so we've got to grow there, and we'll put our focus appropriately there and improving in those areas.

It happened in a variety of ways. We had penalties in the kicking game, in the return game, blocking people in the back. As I told the team yesterday, you've got no chance for splash in the kicking game with penalties. So it starts there for us.

Before we can talk about the exploits of guys like Calvin Austin or CP or Jaylen, man, it starts with us being good, fundamental blockers and positioning ourselves to get and maintain blocks in a legal way. The field position component of that is catastrophic, and we felt the result of that in game.

We had some presnap penalties offensively and defensively that we need to continually clean up. Those procedural things. It's kind of reflective at times of September ball, but at the same time, you acknowledge that it's JV. If we're going to be the type of team we need to be, we can't lose downs presnap on either side of the ball. So there was some of that in play, and it needs to be addressed.

Then obviously on the defensive side of the ball, I thought we warmed up to it initially, that opening drive with Bijan and company, I thought they controlled it. So we've got to start fast. We're not afforded an opportunity to warm up to it from time to time, and I thought the same could be said offensively. We had a fumbled C-Q exchange on the first snap of the game. We missed some opportunities there early. I thought we were warming up to it.

We've just got to be ready to play 60 minutes. We've got to burst open the locker room doors and go to it. I just think that's reflective of the mentality and the readiness you've got to display in this league.

From the injury perspective, Cam Johnston obviously has a major knee injury. I would imagine he has a surgery

scheduled here in the upcoming days, so he's lost for the year. I'm really disappointed for him. This guy's been spectacular for us. He's punted the ball extremely well in the short time he's been here. But as impressive as his punting is his professionalism and approach to business. He's an awesome teammate. He's a hard worker. He quickly earned the respect of the guys because of that.

So our heart aches for him, but we acknowledge it's part of our game, just like challenges are a part of life. It will create an opportunity for us to do business with Corliss again. We're familiar with Corliss, excited about him. He was on our expanded practice squad, I think, in '21 during those COVID years and really had an opportunity to develop while here. He developed his holding while here.

He didn't have a lot of holding experience in college, so Bos and company were a component of his development in that area. He left here in '22. He was a punter in Denver. So specifically as it pertains to this weekend, he's really familiar with the environment that we're going into. So those are some of the reasons why we're really excited about Corliss and bringing him into the fold.

Darius Rush is in the concussion protocol. I don't know what stage of the protocol he's in, but there's a level of anticipation in terms of him getting out of it. We'll take it day by day.

Dan Moore had an ankle that swelled up on him yesterday that may limit him in the early portions of the week. We'll see where that leads us. Expect an uptick in the participation of guys like Roman Wilson, who's working his way back to us, who's a partial participant at times and so forth, man. We're excited about getting him in the fold and seeing him maybe take a step.

We'll see where Isaac is tomorrow as we go through the week and measure his participation, if any, and let that be our guide in terms of his inclusion.

And the same really for Russ. I just visited with him. He feels better today than he did over the weekend. What that means, I don't know as we sit here today. I know that we're going to take the same approach that we take with a lot of people in terms of injury. We'll first start with his participation and his level of participation, his quality of participation. Over the course of the week, we'll be analyzing whether he's capable of protecting himself, whether he's capable of being productive.

When we get to those points, that's when we'll ponder his inclusion or not, and when that happens, we'll probably be a component of that equation. But as I sit here today, we're preparing as if Justin is going to be our quarterback.

I think that the appropriate way to do it. Speculation is a waste of time. Russell's hurt. He's not available to us.

So as you guys know as a general practice, I focus my energy on those that are available and their readiness. Just saw Justin. He just finished a good workout here today. Excited about maybe going through a complete week with him in terms of the preparation process.

But, again, we'll take it day by day. Russ is not scheduled to work in totality tomorrow. To what degree, I do not know. Then we'll play it by ear from there based on the results and the things that we see in terms of whether or not we consider him and to what degree we consider him.

Now onto Denver. The first thing that I think about when I think about going to Denver is the environment, particularly at this portion of the season. It is a hostile and challenging environment in a lot of ways -- from a crowd noise perspective, from a conditioning perspective. So we can't run from that. We've got to run to that. We need to prepare with those things in mind this week to get ourselves in the very best position to perform from a conditioning perspective, to work with crowd noise, particularly on offense and in those weighty moments.

We did similar things last week in terms of preparation for Atlanta. So it's helpful to us to have that experience under our belt this week as we prepare with those things in mind.

If you look at some of the things that they're going to do on offense, it starts first and foremost with Coach Payton and how he draws up the schemes to highlight the strength of his people. I see it, and I see it very clearly. Man, he did some really awesome things in terms of bringing the game to his young signal caller last week.

He threw a lot of passes, but he threw a lot of quick passes. He threw some misdirection passes. He changed the launch point. He threw some RPO passes that included bubble screens to put him in good run/pass scenarios, some things that Bo was familiar with that you saw him do on college tape at multiple locations.

I thought he did a really good job of incorporating the screen game as well, staying on schedule. Got a nice division of labor with his backs. Williams is a downhill guy. 38 is a really good perimeter guy. Utilization of personnel. He's got a couple of fullbacks and H-back type people they utilize, multiple tight ends, complementary receivers.

Obviously, this is not Coach Payton's first rodeo. He'll do a really good job of working to keep us off balance, changing the pace of action, making us look at different things formationally and structurally. He does a good job of

hiding offensive concepts within some of those presnap shifts and motions, particularly in situational moments. He doesn't give you a lot of time to digest what it is you're looking at. He builds to formation structure, and then the ball snaps.

So it's really challenging from a communication and ball readiness perspective. We've got to prepare with an edge on defense under those scenarios.

And again, as I mentioned, just really familiarizing myself with Bo. Somewhat surprised by his level of quarterback mobility and his impact on the game. I thought he was highly effective by design or by ad lib last week. He scored a touchdown late in that game with his legs. He extended some plays and made some plays.

Again, as I said, they changed the launch point some with some misdirection passing that's challenging. We didn't have to deal with a whole bunch of launch point challenges and quarterback mobility last week, so this is a new challenge for us in terms of the regular season this year. So we'd better respect that and prep to position ourself to play.

Then when you look at them on the defensive side of the ball, they've got another veteran architect in Vance Joseph, man. He's aggressive schematically. He does an awesome job of changing up personnel, specifically the situations. He plays some nickel 4-2, some nickel 5-1, some dime 4-1 given circumstances. He's multiple with his fronts. He gives you some awesome blitz structure on possession downs with the backers walked up. He's got a full complement or menu out of those structures. He's got some real good players that he calls upon, man.

They've got a nice outside linebacker, edge group, Cooper and company, man, Browning, Bonitto. Those guys are talented. They're a young group. They play them all. I think all four guys on the outside are edge category, played over 20 snaps last week, and that makes them difficult to deal with as multiple people. They're fresh. They're different skill sets and so forth. So that's challenging.

In the secondary, they turned the safety position over, but they have Pat Surtain back, and to be quite honest with you, he's as good as there is in the game. His pedigree is extremely high, as are his fundamentals. He's technically as sound as they come. I was at his Pro Day, man, he was just as impressive and as game ready as any corner that I can remember in recent years, and his tape is kind of reflective of that. Their newly renewed commitment to him in terms of long term business is kind of reflective of that.

They'll do a nice job of changing things up. They'll play to

their environment. We'd better stay on schedule. If we get behind the chains in that environment versus a guy like Vance, it's going to be some challenges for us. So we'd better do whatever's required to do that, to stay on schedule, to keep ourselves in manageable possession down circumstances.

I thought that was key to possessing the ball for us last week. We stayed in manageable third down circumstances, a lot of short yardage ones. You're going to win your share of those. So that was helpful to the outcome of last week's game as well, and I failed to mention that earlier. Manageable third downs being a catalyst for winning it, winning those downs, and then thus possessing the ball.

That's enough from me. I'll pause and open it up to the floor for questions.

Q. You said that Russ would practice tomorrow, I think you said. Do you expect him or think he might be able to restart on Thursday?

MIKE TOMLIN: I don't know. We've got a battery of movement scheduled for him tomorrow, and then as is our usual practice, we'll meet with Docs after tomorrow's practice, and we'll probably have some more clarity then about what the rest of the week looks like.

Q. If he's healthy, will he start on Sunday?

MIKE TOMLIN: That's a big if. I'm not into the hypotheticals. As I mentioned, right now he's not healthy, so my time and attention is focusing on the readiness of Justin.

Q. What did Justin show you exactly in the off-season, when Russ started with the C-Q exchanges, but he seemed to kind of settle in as the game progressed. What did you see from him?

MIKE TOMLIN: I thought it was just that. I thought he settled in at the game went on. I thought he had clear eyes in weighty moments. I thought he was a good communicator in some of those moments where we had some discussions. We had a big third down play late in the game, third and seven, we had a timeout. We came to the sideline. We talked about leaving the ball in his hands. We bounced around some suggestions. He was a major component of that discussion.

We went out. We left the ball in his hands. We had a designed quarterback run. He moved the chains in those circumstances.



There was a lot of good. It's just good to be in a stadium with a guy. You're speculating until you are. And I just know a heck of a lot about him because of that experience, and I'm sure he knows more about himself in this environment and us. So it's just really good things to build upon.

Q. How much were you able to get -- how much contribution were you able to get from Russell Wilson while he was on the sideline in Atlanta? What did he kind of add and help address throughout the game?

MIKE TOMLIN: Justin is probably better positioned to talk about those things. I'm managing the game and the people on the field, and some of those sideline discussions and so forth happen among others.

Q. How much of an asset can he be in Denver even if he's on the sideline, knowing that he has experience with this team?

MIKE TOMLIN: Sometimes that's overblown. If he's on the sideline, he's not making plays. The guys that's on the field is the guys that's got to make the plays. That's generally our mentality.

We're not resistant to help, but we're not going to put it on a pedestal and make it appear more than what it is.

Q. Justin mentioned that Russ was the one who told him he was going to get the start. Was that something that Russ wanted to do or you wanted to do?

MIKE TOMLIN: I'm not overly concerned with that cute minutia to be honest with you, as long as the information gets passed and we ready ourselves for the work.

Q. That timeout play you were referencing, was that on the final last series? About two minutes or so?

MIKE TOMLIN: Yes.

Q. From a play calling perspective, what did you think about the balance between shorter, more convertible throws, and also picking your spots when to go deep?

MIKE TOMLIN: We were thoughtfully non-rhythmic in that area, and those were our intentions. We need to continue to do so in an effort to stay a step ahead of the posse, if you will. Rhythm passing quells blitzing and rush, and obviously field flipping plays minimizes execution. I learned a long time ago a 50-yard touchdown eliminates a lot of execution. So we're going to aggressively pursue that as well.

I think we can do both. That's why I described it the way I did. We're thoughtfully non-rhythmic in those areas.

Q. You're getting to know Justin and how he runs, when he decides to run. Are you finding that he's proven when it comes to getting out of bounds, when to slide? How is he in that component versus running quarterbacks?

MIKE TOMLIN: I have no issue with how he managed that component of it Sunday in Atlanta, but it's a small sample size. I just think that's always something that's going to have my attention because the quarterback's health is usually centered around that judgment and possession of the ball is usually centered around that judgment. So we'll keep progressing.

Q. What did you learn about your new defensive additions like DeShon Elliott and Donte Jackson once you got in the stadium with them?

MIKE TOMLIN: Their veteran presence was evident. They're new to us, but they're not new to the NFL. So I love their game day demeanor. They were communicative. They played with great energy. They were helpful to each other and others. That's just stuff that you get from veteran players.

New to us, but not new to the game. They weren't wide-eyed, and I didn't expect them to be. That's one of the reasons why we were really excited about acquiring those men that you mentioned.

Q. When Troy Fautanu was injured, he was in the position competing for a starting job. Now that he's back, but the season has started, how difficult is it to continue that process?

MIKE TOMLIN: It's more difficult, but we have a commitment to continue it because we liked what we saw from him during team development. He's deserving of that. His talents are deserving of that. We'll balance that the best we can.

Q. Is he back to being full ready to go with no restrictions?

MIKE TOMLIN: I don't know what that means, but he's practising.

Q. What was the thinking behind bringing back Terrell Edmunds?

MIKE TOMLIN: It's a guy that knows us, a guy that we know. During the course of this thing, particularly at this

stage of the journey, you can't have enough of those scenarios. It might not be a significant need now, but it might be a different scenario a few weeks from now, and that's really the same spirit that we did business with Cam Sutton, if you will.

When we've got guys that we know fit, that understand this environment, that we know are capable of helping us and we have an opportunity to do business, whether there's a tremendous need or not, we have an interest.

Q. What can you say about your tight end room's versatility, what you guys were able to ask of them and how he delivered? Particularly in the ways they blocked in the run game?

MIKE TOMLIN: I've been pleased with that collective during team development. It is a diverse group as you mentioned. We do a nice job of managing that group and highlighting what it is they do well, while at the same time not becoming so compartmental they're predictable. That's something to balance as well, but I just think the coaches and players alike all manage that very well. I just think the versatility of the players make that a realistic discussion.

Q. Can you evaluate Arthur Smith's first official game?

MIKE TOMLIN: 1-0.

Q. In the first quarter, when everybody thought it was fourth down and it turned out to be a first down, did you know at that time that they might change that to a first down?

MIKE TOMLIN: I knew it was first down. I wasn't aware that the sticks were saying fourth down because we have good communication with the officiating crew in game. I knew it was an earned first down. I didn't realize the sticks were showing fourth down until after the down and I saw the reaction -- felt the reaction from the crowd and so forth.

We were operating under the premise that that was first down.

Q. Payton Wilson played about half the snaps. What have you seen from him, and how have you seen him continue to grow?

MIKE TOMLIN: I thought it wasn't too big for him, which I thought was a good start for a young guy. We divvied up the labor between him and Elandon Roberts to the skill set in that game. It might be different this week, to be quite honest with you.

It's a specialization game at this point in the NFL,

particularly at the linebacker spot. He has a nice skill set. He can run and cover. Obviously you know what Elandon brings, man. He's a tooth chipper and always has been in the run game. So we've got some guys that can help us there. We'll continue to work that balance.

Just in general, liked what he saw from Payton in terms of production and demeanor.

Q. Back to Joe's question, the play on the first down, were you guys rushing to try to get the play off because the play was close before that? I think George got the first down and it was a close spot. Was there a sense of urgency to get that play off?

MIKE TOMLIN: I don't know that there was a sense of urgency. The officials communicated with us that it was a first down. So we moved on. It wasn't like we were trying to beat a challenge flag or something to that nature. We weren't in that mentality, no.

Q. Is Jaylen Warren fully healthy?

MIKE TOMLIN: Again, that's a slippery slope in the football world. He's healthy enough certainly.

Q. Have you learned anything or taken anything away about preparing for the altitude in Denver after half a dozen trips there?

MIKE TOMLIN: Nothing earth shattering, to be quite honest with you. Nothing that anybody else that goes there doesn't attempt to do or a stone that everyone else in our business turns over. So nothing new or groundbreaking, no.

Q. There were a couple instances where you had three outside linebackers on the field at the same time. What benefits do you have with that package?

MIKE TOMLIN: It's just a one-dimensional passing moment where size in the front is less relevant, so getting some quality rushes on the field.

Q. I think you guys ran the second most read option plays in the first week of the NFL season. What does Justin Fields add, even just when he has to force the points on his ability to run the ball?

MIKE TOMLIN: To be quite honest with you, we didn't run that many read option plays. They may appear to be read option plays because of the follow through. That's why I laugh at the Next Gen stats and things of that nature sometimes. Sometimes it's just a quarterback following through with a play fake after handing the ball off.

Q. What did you see from Cam in his first game? It looked like he was out on third downs.

MIKE TOMLIN: As he mentioned, we were playing some outside linebackers in one-dimensional moments. So if you put someone on the field, you take someone off. I like what he brought. He played about 35 snaps, and that's moving in the direction of participation that we're comfortable with for the totality of this thing, but it was business as usual for Cam.

Q. How would you evaluate the play of your offensive line especially Spencer having to go in, make his rookie start?

MIKE TOMLIN: I'm appreciative of the efforts and demeanor of a guy like Spencer, of a guy like Zach Frazier in stadiums with a starting capacity for the first time. There's definitely a lot of positive things to build on. I like their attitude and demeanor and finish. We'll keep working on the fine details.

Q. Your quarterback is a national topic. When healthy, is Russell still your QB-1?

MIKE TOMLIN: Again, I'm not going to soothe you with hypothetical scenarios. It is my general practice to not. You guys that know me know I do not, so why start today because it's the quarterback position or because it's a national story?

I am unmoved by some of those narratives, to be quite honest with you. We've got an approach to business. I always stand in front of you guys, when people are somewhat limited, I say we'll push through the work week and let their participation be our guide in terms of whether to include them, and then the quality of that participation.

This scenario is no different for me, respectfully. I understand that you have to ask that question, but it doesn't mean that we need to change our position or do things that are abnormal in an effort to answer it. We're just simply going to proceed with what we normally do. Our energies and attention are on those that are available and are scheduled to play. They are deserving of that. When those that are not healthy, we'll ponder it at that time.

Q. Mike, is it still your policy the players have to practice fully on Friday to participate?

MIKE TOMLIN: That has never been my policy. Young players have to practice on Friday. The older you are, the less significant that is. I treat everybody fair. I don't treat

everybody the same.

Q. How did Scotty Wilson end up being the emergency holder? I guess he only had a couple of days?

MIKE TOMLIN: Scotty Miller?

Q. Yes.

MIKE TOMLIN: I did a straw poll and asked, did anybody hold in high school? Scotty said, yes, I held in high school. But this was Thursday. He got a little bit after practice, man. Flexibility is awesome. It's an asset to you. It's an asset to us. He has in his wheelhouse. He put it on display on Thursday, and he went out and put it on display on Sunday.

It's a pretty cool thing, man. But you get a lot of that around a professional football team. These are multi-talented guys. You'll be surprised, that's why I routinely ask do you have any hidden tricks I need to know about? Particularly when I acquire a new guy. I need to know all I can get about unique talents. Obviously that was helpful to us. Man, his contributions in that area.

Q. When our guys didn't cross the end zone and you rank fourth in time of possession, how much does that play into the identity that you guys want to play to keep your defense fresh for guys like T.J. watts?

MIKE TOMLIN: We just want to control the game, whatever that entails. We're not cutting it too fine at this juncture. You are what you become. You are what you emphasize certainly.

But it's just early stages. We're just trying to put together winning formulas at this point and get out of the gate with necessary wins, particularly because we've been in hostile environments and the challenges that's associated with that in week 1 and week 2.

Q. Heyward said after the game that Ogunjobi was an unsung hero. How does a healthy Ogunjobi affect defense play?

MIKE TOMLIN: He's got a chance to be big time disruptive, and he displayed some of that. I'm excited about watching that continue. He and I had a lot of discussions. This has been an awesome off-season for him. He was healthy all off-season. He went into training camp and team development healthy and allowed him to participate fully in the process. Really that's the first time he's been able to do that since he's been here.

It's reasonable to expect the play to reflect that. I know

he's excited about that component of it. I don't think any of us are surprised that he's a positive asset to us. As a matter of fact, I can't wait to watch it continue because he's teed up for it.

Q. How do you think Morgan did? He talked about the size matchup, the physical matchup, how that might have played in the same relationship, playing someone of like size. How does that translate to a Denver team that has size in the position?

MIKE TOMLIN: He knows the job description. He wants the assignment of matching up with people week in and week out. Got a lot of respect for Drake London and his talents and the way they utilize him schematically.

I thought Joey did a nice job. It's week to week in this business, and particularly in the quarterback position, because I'm sure there's a gentleman named Cortland Sutton that's waiting on him in Denver, for example.

That's the battle of playing corner in this league, but again he loves it, and I'm glad that he does.

Q. How do you think Bishop handled his talent in the first game?

MIKE TOMLIN: I thought it was a great start for him. I thought the things that attracted us to him were on display. He played hard. He tackled well. He had a couple possession downs, stop tackles. I think he had a tackle on special teams. Really good start for an undrafted rookie certainly.

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