

Pittsburgh Steelers

Media Conference

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Coach Mike Tomlin

Weekday Press Conference



MIKE TOMLIN: Good afternoon. Excited about a new week and the challenges that it presents. I just think that's one of the things that's awesome about our game and our business at this level. The variables are different week in and week out. And I'm excited about turning the page with this group and getting hyper focused on the things that are going to be really relevant in terms of us securing victory this week.

Before I get to that, I'll quickly review our last performance and talk about some of the things that we thought were significant in that match-up.

As we stood in here last week and talked, styles make fights. We knew it would be an entertaining game, a competitive game, some similarities between the two teams, I really thought was significant.

Defenses were led by edge rush tandems. They had a chance to change the trajectory of the game. I'm glad it was ours. Both teams got a commitment to running the football. I thought we did a nice job of minimizing theirs.

I thought ours kind of revealed itself as the game wore on. Obviously it was tough sledding early. We anticipated that. They got a really good defense.

But I thought that four-minute possession at the end was kind of indicative of our commitment to pounding away at it until we had a breakthrough. And I thought there in the waning moments of the game we found our breakthrough.

But there was a lot to be excited about in the game. There's also a lot to work on.

In the special teams game, I can't say enough about Corliss Waitman at punter for us. This guy has gotten on the moving train. And I thought he did a nice job of flipping the field and upholding his end of the bargain.

We've had some turnover in some of that space. I thought we had two or three new guys on punt team. I'd be remiss

if I didn't acknowledge those contributions. From a coach's perspective as you check all the boxes in preparation when you've got new people on your punt team that has a lot of your attention. It might not get a lot of attention, but as a coach it has yours.

And I just thought some of those guys that were new contributors to special teams, Rodney Williams got elevated, for example, had a tackle on kickoff. Was very reliable in the punt game -- as an example of what I'm talking about in those spaces.

Offensively, we didn't start with the level of fluidity that I would like. We gotta get that solved and get it solved quickly. I think particularly in the early stages of the season, as you pursue and attain victory, you better quickly work on things that could be troublesome for you as you continue through the journey.

And lack of fluidity in our starts, three-and-outs and things of that nature just doesn't tee us up to play the type of ball that we desire to play.

Thankfully, we were in our home venue and our defense was playing really good there at the early stages of the game to minimize some of that.

We're not assured of those things, particularly as we get into a hostile environment this week in Indy.

So that has our attention in terms of areas of needing improvement or work.

Defensively, great defenses communicate. Great defenses specialize in terms of variety of personnel groups and schematics within those variety of personnel groups. And we just gotta continue to work in those spaces.

We've had some success but we've also had some real JV moments, if you will. The longest run of the day was 13 yards. That happened when we had 10 guys on the field because of our inability to exchange people appropriately and handle some of those things that really tee up good defenses, as I mentioned.

So although we're playing good ball, it's still about us. It's



still about how we function. It's still about utilizing the players that are available to us and their talents and formulating a plan that allows us to do the desired job.

From a health standpoint, I'll hit on a few things. Pruitt will probably still be out this week with his knee injury. Cory Trice looks to be out with the hamstring injury that he sustained in-game. Alex Highsmith looks to be out with a groin injury he sustained in-game.

Some guys whose participation is in question, and we'll let their participation, the quality of that participation and when that participation ticks up be our guide in terms of planning with these people. Jaylen Warren and Isaac. Isaac is working his way back into the offensive line. We'll see what his participation looks like this week and let the quality and the amount of that participation be our guide in terms of his participation.

And in the meanwhile, when he's not participating, we'll continue to do some of the things that we did at left guard last week in terms of Spencer and Mason both getting work and watching those guys throughout the week to kind of decide how we divvy up the labor based on that performance. And obviously that discussion is exclusive or aside from Isaac's availability.

Still very much in the same place with Russ this week as we were last week, at least at the beginning of the week. I just met with him and the athletic trainer talked about what tomorrow looks like.

Tomorrow is a limited participation day from a scheduling perspective. He had a good workout today. We'll see how he feels in the morning, but I'm not expecting him to be a full participant tomorrow.

As we walk in the building tomorrow I want Justin singularly focused on starting for us and doing what's required to be ready to do that.

Although I'm sure you'll have questions, I probably will have similar answers I had a week ago but we'll see where the week leads us.

If his availability or the quality of his practice participation picks up, maybe we'll consider that later in the week. If it doesn't, then it won't be a consideration and we will just continue with where we are right now.

That's just the status of not only him but our intentions regarding Justin as I stand here today in preparation for this game.

As I mentioned, very similar to last week, very similar to the

week before.

Now I turn my attention towards the Indianapolis Colts. They're a team coming off a big victory last week. If you look at their offensive team, first and foremost we've got to deal with Jonathan Taylor. He is super talented.

But we've seen some talented backs. Bijan is super talented. JK is super talented. That just goes to show you how competitive this league is week in, week out.

Man, we've got a big challenge in Jonathan Taylor. I think that challenge is intensified because of Richardson's mobility and their willingness to use schematics regarding Richardson's mobility. So, man, it is a big run-game emphasis for us as I sit here right now at the early outset of the week, looking at things that they do well and the things that we need to do well.

Obviously, man, they've got a talented receiving corps that supplements that run game. Pierce, man, is getting behind secondaries. He's always done it.

He did it at the University of Cincinnati. I was at his pro day and studied him. They drafted him to do it. He's been behind defenses the whole time in the league. I think he leads the NFL in plus-40-yard plays at this juncture, in a short period of time.

Man, Richardson has the arm strength to really highlight that component of his game. We've got to keep a lid on it. If you don't keep a lid on it you're going to have major problems playing anyone, but particularly a group like this in their venue.

You've got to make them earn it. Can't allow yards in chunks. Michael Pittman is a high volume catch guy, a front-side route runner, good versus zone, good versus man. Good in weighty moments, in chain-moving circumstances.

They've got some talented young people like Downs and others that supplement those two. They just do a really good job with their eligible, spreading the ball around. They've got a diverse group with various kinds of talent that you have to plan for, not only in terms of personnel match-ups but the schematic component.

They've got a really diverse offense in terms of RPO football and run-pass options. They don't allow you to stack the box in an effort to minimize Taylor. You've got to play the cat-and-mouse game with them in terms of some of those things. So I respect the schematic component of the match-up as well.

On the defensive side of the ball, it's Gus Bradley, man. He's a been there, done that guy. Been in circumstances against him. Got a lot of respect for his approach to ball and how he works.

Obviously they've had some issues in terms of stopping the run. But when you watch the tape, you really see Gus's intentions in terms of rectifying that.

Man, they were really sound last week. They were in gaps. They were aggressive. I think that that's indicative of his defenses.

I've got a lot of respect for a lot of the people. Up front Kwity Paye and Grover, I think, provide the standard for them on the edge and on the inside, but they play a lot of people. They run waves of D linemen and rush men at you. That's one of the signatures of their attack.

At the linebacker level, Franklin, I've just got a lot of respect for them. That's a homegrown talent. They took him late in the draft in 2018. Just to watch his role evolve over his time there. Sixth-round pick that became a core teamer, that became a situational defender, that became a green dot defender.

He's a high-volume tackler -- 160 tackles, 170 tackles in the last two years specifically. He's a really good blitzer. He's just good in space -- vertical space, horizontal space. They employ the Tampa 2 that requires him to run down the middle of the field. He's good at that. He's good in three-deep and underneath coverage.

He's just a well-rounded player that's a big-time catalyst for a lot of what goes on with them.

Kenny Moore, an outside corner and nickel, is another guy that's homegrown, that's played a lot of quality football there, that's a splash playmaker. He controls the perimeter play -- wide receiver screens, bubble screens and things of that nature that goes out in that nickel space. His talents and his experience make that very difficult.

He's very good in terms of fitting in the run game and blitzing. They ask him to blitz quite a bit. He's got a well-rounded game. He's a veteran guy. He's got good vision. He turns up in a lot of circumstances.

Really enjoyed watching the safety tandem, although I've been watching them for a couple of years, young guys. I see their evolution. Both guys are high-volume tacklers and making a bunch of splash plays. Both guys had major interceptions against us when we played in Indy last year, respect that component of the match-up, but they're not the same players they were. They're evolving. I see it.

Nick Cross in particular is making a bunch of plays. In the run game he's a high-volume tackler. He's a good cover man. He's oftentimes down covering tight ends and things of that nature and one-dimensional pass circumstances.

They've got a well-balanced group on both sides of the ball. They're coming off a victory. We're playing them in their venue. They've got quarterback mobility and a top-notch runner. There's a lot of things that have our attentions and appropriately so at the beginning of the week as we begin to lay a foundational plan and ready our guys for the challenges of the week.

As I mentioned at the beginning, though, it's the National Football League. I wouldn't expect anything else. I'm excited about readying this group and growing in all the appropriate ways as we get ready for this action.

Q. (Indiscernible) what did you see from Broderick? Did he bounce back in suitable fashion?

MIKE TOMLIN: He did, but I'm not surprised by that. Broderick has a great deal of confidence in himself, particularly for a young guy. The performance was what it was. At Denver, he didn't make excuses or seek comfort. He simply acknowledged it and went back to work. I think when you take that approach, you really tee yourself up for the appropriate bounceback, and he did.

Q. Is Jaylen's injury related to the hamstring issue he had earlier?

MIKE TOMLIN: No, it's not. He was limping in game. In the latter part of the game I kind of noticed it, and I pulled him from the game because I know Jaylen's tough. He's just going to go. And so we'll see where his availability is as we work this week.

I'd imagine he would be somewhat limited tomorrow. And we'll see the trajectory of it in terms of including him or no in planning.

Q. Now that you're three games in, what more do you need to see from Justin? Why not name him the starting quarterback going forward?

MIKE TOMLIN: Because there's no need. I explained to you the variables of the week. It has not changed. He's going to walk in this building with that mindset tomorrow. So really there's no need to.

Sometimes in this business there's a myriad of complex decisions that need to be made. I've learned to make them when it's appropriate. And it's not necessary as we sit here

right now.

When Russ gets to an appropriate point of health and we have a decision to make, I'll make it and I'll announce it and I'll be really transparent about it. But until then, I don't care how many ways you guys ask me, you know, I got no intentions of making the decision that's unnecessary at this juncture.

Q. Related to that, what is that appropriate point of health or healthy that Russell has to hit for you to make that decision?

MIKE TOMLIN: We'll know when we get there. He'll not only be healthy in terms of keeping himself safe but be healthy in terms of being productive and doing the things he needs to do and we need him to do.

Q. Has Justin showed you some things that changed that point for you, if he had struggled compared to playing pretty well?

MIKE TOMLIN: No question Justin has played well. And that's exciting for him and for us. But I'm not surprised by that. And I hadn't looked at it in terms of the decision-making because it's not time yet.

Q. (Indiscernible) that you liked most about Justin?

MIKE TOMLIN: As I mentioned here repeatedly, I like his steady demeanor. I like that in a leader. He doesn't ride the emotional roller coaster when things are going good or things are going bad. Guys can rally around that.

He's steady. He's a competitor. He likes to compete. He doesn't turn down things. He's aggressive in play, scrambling and so forth.

It's just been fun to get to know him and not only know him as a guy but know him as a competitor.

Q. What you said in your opening statements about hoping to be more fluid earlier than you were against the Chargers, how much is that maybe more looking for more chunk plays early and trusting Justin more?

MIKE TOMLIN: You're a lot more optimistic than I am. I'm just talking about converting the first third down or two. We started the game with two three-and-outs. I'm interested in converting more third downs when I talk about more fluidity.

Q. But does knowing Justin more and seeing good results so far lend you to attacking down field more or looking for big chunk plays more?

MIKE TOMLIN: Again, I understand your question, but when I made that statement I was thinking specifically about converting third downs and not warming up to that component of the game. Three-and-outs are not good for field positioning and establishing the right kind of mojo early in games.

Q. You often talk about positionless football. Typically that's seen more on the defensive side of things than offensive. You had some injuries in-game Sunday. You were able to use Cordarrelle Patterson out wide as a receiver, in the backfield. That flexibility that he gives you, is that kind of unique for an offensive skill player?

MIKE TOMLIN: It is unique, but it's something we covet all the time. And I have a lot of respect for CP and his talents. We had intended to utilize him in both. It wasn't a reactionary plan.

We only went into the game with four receivers because we had a plan for him to play both positions in-game. That speaks to his talents. Not only his talents but football intellect to be able to carry a menu like that.

He's exciting in that way, but Connor Heyward is another offensive guy that plays tight end and running back-like things. I think anytime you've got guys with position flexibility with fluidity in terms of the things they can do, it makes it challenging to defend. So hopefully that keeps growing.

Q. Your defensive line has been winning especially a lot this past Sunday. But how much have your cornerbacks played a role in keeping the run game and forcing guys back to the inside?

MIKE TOMLIN: They've done the job, but it's week-to-week at corner. I'm going to keep challenging those two. One's young and the other one is little. I like challenging them.

But make no mistake, they're riding the wave that the front has provided but we've invested a lot in resources and time into that group. So we're not surprised by their effectiveness.

Q. The decision to rotate Spencer and Mason, was that a pregame decision or was that performance-based in game?

MIKE TOMLIN: It was all done last week in preparation.

Q. When you sent Boswell out to try the 62-yarder with



6 seconds left, did you think the time would run out?

MIKE TOMLIN: I didn't care. I sent him out there because I thought he was going to make it, to be quite honest with you.

Most times field goals usually take anywhere from 3 to 5 seconds, but I was less concerned about that component of it. I was more concerned about potentially getting three points because I just got that level of confidence in Chris Boswell.

Q. With Highsmith likely out, what have you seen from Leal out at the edge? And will he be the third option out there?

MIKE TOMLIN: He's been working both spots anyway. Speaking of positional flexibility, Leal, throughout team development, has been playing outside linebacker and defensive line. He did some last year so it's not anything new for him.

Really I don't view that as a significant issue in terms of him elevating and getting more opportunity. It's more of the same really. It's probably more of what he desires to do because he definitively wants to play. This guy's had a good team development process. And I'm excited about what he's going to do with increased opportunities just as much as I am that Herbig did with his.

Q. (Indiscernible) how much have you seen Nick Herbig kind of grow since he got in the building, especially the more time he spends around T.J.?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, that's been really consistent since he's been here. He's hardworking and humble, and I really think that tees up performance for him. But he also has ridiculous belief in self. And that's attractive to coaches. That's attractive to older players. He's not a guy that's ever scared.

Q. The couple of throws that Justin made on Sunday, the touchdown throw and the one on the left sideline that picked up the big first down to Miller, they had to be very precise to work as they did. Was that something you saw evaluating him out of college, while you were evaluating him to bring him in or is that something he's improved, that precision he's improved since he got here?

MIKE TOMLIN: Very much so, is something that we saw in draft prep dating back to his days in Columbus. That's often the case with us. Our interest in people in terms of pro personnel oftentimes can be traced back to draft evals. And that was a component of his game that was really

impressive in Columbus, certainly.

Q. What's Roman Wilson have to show in order to get a helmet --

MIKE TOMLIN: He has to keep working. It's very difficult to get on a moving train. All you have to do is look at Dean Lowry, for example. There's a veteran guy that missed a substantial amount of training camp and it was a third game before he got a hat. Although he's been healthy for three weeks.

So that gets multiplied when you're talking about a guy that has no NFL experience like Roman. So my advice to Roman is to keep working and take that opportunity when that door is left ajar and be ready when it is.

Q. What has Mason shown you to garner those rotational snaps at left guard?

MIKE TOMLIN: He's a talented young guy. He's done a nice job in team development. He's had a lot of success in college. No stage is too big for him. He's not a blinker. He runs to the action.

I like the finish mentality in his play. I think it's contagious. I think all of our guys, young guys, have that finish trait. I think that's why we were so excited about that collective, talking about he and Troy and Zach Frazier. They've got that finishing trait that's able to form the makeup of the personality of the collective as they grow older together.

Q. You brought up (indiscernible) Taylor and Bijan and J.K. Dobbins. What do you see in his skill set as opposed to those guys? And how do the Colts sort of block it up in the run game as opposed to what you just saw from the Chargers?

MIKE TOMLIN: Man, he's got really good pick and vision. His burst is spectacular. His long speed is underrated. His ability to produce big plays with that is a major component of what he does, but the patience initially is Bijan-like.

His burst is awesome. He's just got a well-rounded game. He needs no endorsement from me. He's been doing it at this level. He did it at Madison, Wisconsin. I imagine he did it on high school and Little League fields as well.

Q. You mentioned it was tough sledding early on. Where would you like to see improvements to increase efficiency on the ground?

MIKE TOMLIN: I don't know that I'm necessarily looking for that. When you play good defenses, particularly the early stages of the game, it's going to be tough. When

they've got guys like Derwin James spinning down into the box and blitzing off the edge and so forth, it's going to be tough.

The key is to not absorb negativity where you're behind the chains where it affects the next down. You better maintain your commitment to it and the effort to win the war of attrition. And so that was our mindset.

You're not always going to have efficient runs early on, particularly when you're playing good people. They've got scholarships, too, as we say in this business.

Q. On Troy's injury, how long will he be out?

MIKE TOMLIN: He's out this week. I hadn't looked at the clarity component of it. I meet with the docs tomorrow afternoon post-practice.

Q. You had the middle part of the field twice as much as you had the previous two games combined. Was that more about the match-ups and the things you guys saw in their defense or more about Justin's growth in the offense?

MIKE TOMLIN: As I mentioned repeatedly in this process, early portions of the year when you have a small sample size you can always have questions and perspectives like that, but we're just doing what's required to win games. So sometimes there can be an appearance of personality that's inappropriate. Week one, we were playing in Atlanta, playing Jessie Bates and Simmons, two top-notch safeties. We didn't want to throw the ball to them. When we threw the ball, we threw it outside there on the grass, for example.

This past week, the Chargers play a bunch of split safety coverage. So it's middle of the field open. So you have opportunities to attack the ball in the middle of the field.

My answer to that is keep watching. We're just trying to do what needs to be done to position ourselves for victory every week. It better require a skill set, a well-rounded skill set from everyone involved, and it better require some open-minded coaching.

That's just our general approach. Our personality will be revealed the more we play. But as we stand right now, we're just not overly concerned with establishing personality.

Sometimes you could be so fixated on that that you're not doing what's required to win games, and from a coaching perspective, that's stupid.

Q. From what you liked and from what you've seen from Justin up to this point, what areas do you want to see him improve in?

MIKE TOMLIN: I want to see him improve in all areas, to be quite honest with you. Knowing what those areas of needing improvement are, are difficult sometimes when you don't have a shared experience.

So a component of me getting to know him is just maintaining that posture, challenging him to improve in all areas, and as we gain more experience together, I'll be able to narrow that focus on things that become repetitive or trending.

Q. We saw, you needed a new player such as a Patrick Queen, green dot guy. Is there an adjustment in terms of not so much assimilating it to the defense but with the players around him, and what are you seeing?

MIKE TOMLIN: No question. Pat Queen is our defensive quarterback. Man, he has just as much of my energy as Justin and Russ.

It was a challenge in the offseason from a coach's perspective getting quarterbacks solid on both sides of the ball. But the men that they are has made it a fun and rewarding process too. They love football. They're articulate. They can speak it. They think fast on their feet. They're adaptable. They can adjust. I'm talking about the quarterbacks and Pat. It's been really fun. I'm excited about having him.

Q. In Indy late last season, but how much does Richardson change the whole approach to needing to defend their offense with his mobility?

MIKE TOMLIN: I don't necessarily have the answer to that. As I stand here right now, I have so much prep in front of me this week, and he has a small sample size to study. I think this weekend would be his eighth start.

So I don't know that I'm positioned to answer the significance of his presence or not -- I'm just really focused on what his presence means.

Q. Are there any limitations on Najee, and what did you see from Aaron and from Ward in training camp that you like?

MIKE TOMLIN: I thought you were asking about practice squad and running backs.

Q. With injuries, obviously.

MIKE TOMLIN: No limitations in Naj. Naj will be ready to rock and roll. Probably makes the second part of the question less relevant.

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Q. Obviously the organization has made a commitment to Cam Heyward with the contract. But is a game like he had Sunday indicative of why he can age well playing up front?

MIKE TOMLIN: I don't think anybody is surprised by what Cam did last Sunday or what Cam has done. His talents are his talents. His commitment and approach to work are equally as impressive. His leadership is as well in this building, in the community. He's a Walter Payton Man of the Year. I mean, it's Cam Heyward.

Q. You guys played as many tight games as anybody in the league, maybe more than anybody. Does having success in those games, when it's tight, does that have a, create a vibe on the sideline level of confidence that you guys will find a way to get it done?

MIKE TOMLIN: I think you grow from the journey. Our business is to win games. So we better win while we learn. I think you learn every week. You better. You better be in position to do so. We better work to keep the lights on and winning does that.

Q. I know you hate using the word "comfort." Is there a level of confidence, when it's tight, because you play or in that situation so often, it maybe gives you an advantage?

MIKE TOMLIN: You're right, I hate to use the word "comfortable." We come out of those circumstances because of what we do, not some mystical thing. And so we don't have rabbit's foots in our pocket. There's work to be done. I like the way that the guys do it. And that's just how we live.

Q. You talked about, when you talked about Roman, you said it's hard for a guy to get on a moving train. You talked about Lowry (phonetic), a veteran guy. In relation to the quarterback position, is Russ' resumé such that those concerns aren't as heightened because (indiscernible) first year in a new system?

MIKE TOMLIN: Yes.

Q. At one point does the train get moving too fast for a guy like that to catch up?

MIKE TOMLIN: I don't know. We'll know when we get there.

