

Pittsburgh Steelers

Media Conference

Thursday, October 17, 2024
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA

Arthur Smith

Weekday Press Conference



Q. What can Russ do for your offense that you feel that he can do that maybe make you guys better?

ARTHUR SMITH: Well, I don't know if that's necessarily the perspective. I understand the question. Obviously with both those guys being here, Mike talked earlier in the week, we have to ramp his reps up.

So he has a decision to make that ends by the end of the week. Unfortunately, Russ missed a lot of time, so we've never really gotten to see him. I think Justin has done a good job. By no means has anybody been perfect around here, but it's about winning.

We wish we were 6-0. We're not. You are what your record says you are, so we're 4-2. I think we've made progress in certain areas some weeks. Other weeks depending on the plan or how they attacked us, there are always things we've got to fix. Constant improvement.

Q. We just said with Justin. He said that he hasn't been good enough and that if he was good enough, there wouldn't be a conversation about who should start? How do you view his first six starts?

ARTHUR SMITH: I understand, and that's why you never speak for somebody else. I think that's why it's important, players or coaches speak for themselves. We have daily conversations. I think sometimes some guys are too hard on themselves.

It's a big part of -- you appreciate that about him. That's why he works so hard. Nobody wants to be a martyr, but I mean, I am even guilty of it at times. We're all messed up in the head a little bit. I can't sleep on Sunday night, win or lose. I wish I hadn't called this, should have done this, whatever it is. We can play that game all day.

There needs to be that element of your game, always looking to be better. It's not ever as bad as you think. Sometimes you think you played well, and you go back and say, Hey, we have to work on a few things.

I think that's why you love working with Justin. That's real. That's not just some cliché that some QB guru or somebody along the way told him to say.

All these guys are hard on themselves, and there's so much that goes into playing quarterback. Obviously the physical tools or he wouldn't be at this level, but the mental component to me is what separates the great ones from the other starters in this league. That's what he is pushing himself to be.

Q. When we asked Mike Tomlin about Justin Fields. He said he has been really good at times but not to be confused with great. Where does this offense need to continue to evolve in order to become great?

ARTHUR SMITH: There's just a lot of work ahead of us. I said it a couple of weeks ago. As we're building this thing out, every week is a new challenge. It's a little bit why in training camp we try to work all the contingency plans with the O-line.

Obviously it's been one of those years, and we'll have to figure it out this week too with Frazier, but that's what we get paid to do.

Nobody cares. The ball is going to get kicked off at 8:20 give or take, not a lightning delay, Sunday night. We have to be ready to roll against a really good defense.

I think there's a lot of areas. Like I said, some weeks you feel like you're making progress in the run game or things you're doing on third down or whatever it is, and then a new challenge comes up, and you've got to problem-solve.

A lot of it is the first goal is always going to be to win. Then you're going to objectively look at every area. What needs to improve? There are all those things we need to do. As I said, the challenges we had last week in Vegas are going to be different than what we're going to face Sunday night.

A big part of that game plan was a credit to Vegas, and they had multiple looks and multiple pressure packages. These guys are really damn good up front. They've got a style of play. I got a lot of respect. I feel like I know these

guys really well. Played them in '21 in London and practiced with them in '22 and played them in the preseason and played them again last year.

Jeff Ulbrich and Saleh and that group started up there, and I have a lot of respect for Jeff. It's going to be a big boy fight Sunday night on the line of scrimmage. They play hard; we play hard. It's going to be a physical game.

Different challenge certainly Sunday night. That goes into game plan. That's week-to-week, though.

Q. Along those lines given what you are about to face with the Jets, their good pass defense, is that part of the calculus in making a decision this week, the variable being the health of your offensive line with maybe Russ not being quite as mobile as Justin? Do those components come into making a decision this week?

ARTHUR SMITH: Again, I don't want to speak for Mike. Obviously that's the job as a head coach, and that's where in my perspective it's shifted coming back into this role.

You talk, and ultimately you get paid to make decisions. Just like I get paid to make decisions offensively. You know, those are important decision and not to be taken lightly. Nobody around here does.

Sometimes there are a lot of different opinions for what you are trying to do, especially at that position. A lot goes into it, but I don't think it's necessarily just that. I mean, you are being bluntly honest. You can look this one up. I think the Jets the last 40 games since '22, I think they have one 300-yard passing game against them, and it was last year in Cleveland with Flacco.

It wasn't some great air assault. These guys are pretty damn good in their pass defense. They do a great job rushing the passer. They take the air out of the coverage. Great man-to-man. They have to change-up to some of their zones. A lot of respect.

So obviously we're going to do everything in our power to win every rep, and we've got to make plays in the passing game. Don't get me wrong there. That's what I'm talking about week-to-week challenges.

I wouldn't necessarily fit just this week. There might be other issues or other things you want to see and then ultimately could come down to making a final decision. Whether it's unconventional, everybody has opinions. I've got my opinions, and ultimately our job is whatever the decision is made, you go forward. We've got to go win this game.

Q. If Russ is the starter, would you like to get Justin in the game in certain situations?

ARTHUR SMITH: Now you're talking about strategy. Whatever decision Mike makes, we'll let the Jets figure that out Sunday night. I appreciate the question. I really do.

I joke, but it's real. Everybody has analysts, whether this is live or you are live-Tweeting. I'm sure you're probably TikToking, aren't you (laughing)? They do. Everybody has people.

It's not just smart strategy. I understand the fans want to know, and that's why you ask the questions. Let them figure that out Sunday night.

Q. Do you ever formulate your plan based on the other team's offense?

ARTHUR SMITH: Some games you get into that depending who is on the other side. That's real. That's what to me great football teams do, championship football teams. Sometimes you're going to sacrifice some things.

Again, we all want to be top of the league in every category. You want to be the most efficient, prolific offense you can, and that's what you strive for. Sometimes you have big-picture strategies. You're going to sacrifice certain things.

It usually evens out in the end, but we've had a couple of red zone situations earlier this year in Atlanta. Didn't want to pick the ball off. Felt that we played the clock. Obviously we want to score a touchdown, but if you pick that ball up, you kind of knew what they were in.

You are playing a couple of situational games too, and some people call it too conservative, whatever, but it worked for us. We didn't give any time back, and that's one strategy.

Obviously at the end of the Chargers game, Naj pops that run into the one. We're not going to put the defense out there. I don't think that's smart. Great if your points per game goes up, but that's dumb football.

Go back and look at the history of the league, and some of the stuff to try to play unnecessary snaps to pad stats, that's not -- to me I have too much respect for the game. There's different situations.

Or you are backed up at the end of the half against Indy. They have a few time-outs. We're getting the ball at the half. Do you really want to be that aggressive?

Those are all situational things. You get in certain games depending on how the game is flowing or who is on the other side, and that's why the things that usually say now week-to-week, those turnover margins are real. Obviously you need to score points more than them.

Mike and I were talking about this yesterday. The turnover margin on the craziest stats of all time, and I remember Joe Gibbs told me this. They were plus 43 in the turnover margin in 1983. Just historically you look at the turnover margin. That usually tells you the story of the game.

Q. You talked a lot about what this offense could gain with Russ on the field, but when you maybe remove Justin Fields' mobility, what do you lose as an offense when the quarterback doesn't necessarily have the same mobility?

ARTHUR SMITH: There's give and take. They're at different points in their career. No two players are ever the same. You have some guys that maybe remind you of certain guys or strengths or this and that, but they're at completely different points of their career. I would argue different players. That's the give and take.

Obviously everybody has seen it. It's been a weapon for us certainly. Especially in situational football. That's fine. You just pivot, and you lean into something else, and that's what you do. That's our job.

Q. What did you see the biggest improvement with the running game?

ARTHUR SMITH: I think certainly earlier just being in sync. A lot of times it's the tracks, the combinations all fitting together. A lot of times you look at it. It may be a one-yard gain or you may have missed assignment, which can lead to some ugly runs or negative runs, but it's usually what you build is that trust. It is all 11.

Certain things the way we package, the quarterback has involvement in it, the tracks, setting at the blocks, and the line obviously clearly blocking their guy. Then we try to pride ourselves on the finish. You take some four-yard runs. You saw that on Sunday. Just old-school.

Same thing holds true with Pee Wee Football. That effort and finish can make some of the four and five-yard runs become 15. Those are things that were exciting to see.

I thought Naj obviously played really well, and that was a plus for us, especially early on. Then getting the big run. That was at a big point in the game. Fraz goes out. You put a new center in. I told McCollum that was pretty good

offensive efficiency. One play, 36-yard touchdown. That certainly helped in that kind of game.

Q. How do you deal with the emotions of potentially making a quarterback change?

ARTHUR SMITH: Yeah, there's obviously a human side to it, but we also know our job. So you try to be as transparent as you can be.

Everybody wants to know why, and it obviously starts with Mike. Certainly in my job description. Yeah, there's always going to be emotion because you care about these guys. If you don't, then to me you're not a very good coach. We spend so much time together.

Whatever decision is made, you need to explain it how you see fit. Then at times you have to make tough decisions, and that's okay if somebody doesn't agree with you. I've done that plenty. I always want to be transparent with why something is going on. Whether somebody chooses to agree with it, I've dealt with plenty before too.

That's kind of how I've always tried to handle it. Yeah, there's emotions. This situation is completely different to me than other quarterback situations I've been in. When you've had to go to another guy and there's been different reasons -- this happened to me the last couple of years.

I'll just speak on the one with Marcus from '22. Obviously that was a pretty emotional decision. A lot of things going on at the time. Things that clearly Marcus and I have talked about, but yeah, it can strain some relationships personally, but that's not this situation.

The things that Marcus and I talked about with the timing and things when that happened, there were other things going on. You try to be as transparent as you can, but some things, maybe I'm old-school, I don't think need to be out there. Certainly you talk about it later on. You may regret both sides of it, but this one is completely different.

This isn't, Hey, is somebody getting pinched, or is this guy not ever going to be able to play, whatever the role is. I understand the other opinions about it, but yeah, you should never take that out, the human side of it.

Q. Are you concerned about this affecting Justin's confidence going forward if Russ starts?

ARTHUR SMITH: If you make a change like that, I mean, I think you look at everything. You try to look at it from every vantage point, but that's why you have to have conversations. No decision is ever easy. That's what I said. When you become callous or not, you should

probably get out of this thing.

I think his confidence should be high. He's 4-2. He's been pretty productive. So whatever Mike tells us to do, like I said, I have it ready either way. That's my job.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

