

Pittsburgh Steelers

Media Conference

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Mike Tomlin

Weekday Press Conference



MIKE TOMLIN: Good afternoon. Really excited about getting started this week. We had a bonus-like day today with our players and really focused on ourselves and a couple areas of play that we feel like we need to shore up, particularly red zone offense and some red zone defense.

As a matter of fact, we treated the last several days like a mini bye from a staff perspective and took a deep dive on some schematics in those areas and then turned our attention towards Cincinnati and what they do in those areas -- all in an effort to make the engineering of victory more fluid.

We've looked at the last collection of games, and we feel like there's more meat on that bone offensively and defensively. So with the extra couple of days, we thought it was appropriate to focus on ourselves in that space. Then we focused on the application of that research today in terms of delivering that to the players and working those spaces a little bit.

We'll proceed with the remainder of our week tomorrow. It will be a normally scheduled Wednesday, and we'll lock in and lean in on the Bengals.

Before I get into all of that, we'll do a quick review or an assessment of our last performance. As I said after the game, I just thought that we warmed up to it. By warming up to it, I mean we didn't take control of the game at the early juncture.

They made some splash plays. Particularly Myles Garrett, I thought, made some splash plays. We did our due diligence schematically in terms of working to minimize them, but like a lot of great players, he overcame some of those things and some instances that I thought he just provided splash for them, not only in terms of playmaking, but the energy, the wave that he provided that the rest of them rode, not only the players, but I thought environmentally.

When he made those splash plays early in the game, it

made it a tougher environment and thus tougher for us to navigate. I thought we smiled in the face of that adversity, and we fought our way back into the football game and made some plays of our own.

Then in the waning moments of the game, I thought they simply made more plays than we did. I thought we had some moments, but I thought they made more plays than we did, and oftentimes when you're in tight ball games, it comes down to that weighty playmaking in the latter moments of games.

They made a couple of fourth down plays. I thought the Winston touchdown run on fourth down and 2 obviously was a significant example of that. We had an opportunity to get into our four-minute offense and maybe close the game out. We were unsuccessful in that endeavor, and we coupled that with a less than ideal punt.

We've got to get back to weighty playmaking, particularly in the waning moments of games. That's life in the NFL. There's a fine line between drinking wine and squashing grapes. We know that. We live that.

When you take a step back and watch a ball at a distance like we were this week, it kind of verifies that sentiment if you didn't know it. We're excited about getting back to work this week. We know we've got a big game this week in some AFC North competition. So we're prepared with an edge from that understanding.

From a health standpoint, we've got Alex Highsmith leaning in on the return. We'll let his participation and the quality of that participation be our guide in terms of whether he gets back in or to what degree he gets back in.

We've got some other guys who are working their way back to us, like Cory Trice and Mont Adams, who may have an opportunity this week as well. Again, we'll leave the door drawn for those guys. There's strength in numbers, and obviously we need all the expertise that we can get as the road gets narrow and this competition gets thick as we move into December.

Now talk Cincinnati Bengals. Obviously you can't talk these guys without talking Joe Burrow. If you look at the



tape, man, he's MVP caliber in terms of what he's doing for them.

I started first with the two Baltimore games because of the intimacy of divisional play. Man, I don't know how many touchdowns he threw in those two football games. I know Chase himself had five. It's just kind of reflective of what he and they are capable of.

We've got to do a really good job. We've got to carry enough defense schematically, but within that, we'd better perform at a high enough level because it's not just schematics that beats them. You'd better have enough schematics. You'd better perform it or execute it at a really high level. You'd better do a good job of providing presnap looks. You'd better blitz some. You'd better play coverage some. You'd better do a lot of things.

I think that is reflective of a quarterback in his position. I say the same thing when we play guys like Matt Stafford and so forth. Guys that are anticipatory passers, guys that are in complete command of their system of offense, guys that know where all the eligibles are. Oftentimes that's illustrated by his ability to throw no look check-downs and things of that nature. He just knows where all his people are.

When you're playing quarterbacks like that, man, you'd better carry enough defense. You might be able to trick them or stay ahead of them for 20 or 30 minutes, but you'd better have enough defense. It's a 60-minute game. I think that's reflected in watching them play. I think oftentimes you see teams are capable of slowing him or slowing them down at the early portions of the game, but in the fourth quarter, he and they are coming on like gangbusters.

I've been around long enough to have an appreciation for that. I know how and why that happens. You'd better carry enough defense. They get comfortable as the game goes on with what it is that you're doing, what it is they need to do to be successful, and they adjust, they adapt, both the individuals and the collective.

For those reasons, man, we're obviously preparing with an edge, man. He's got some topnotch eligibles to throw the ball to, starting with No. 1, Chase, he's probably tops in the league in every wide receiver statistical category. He's got topnotch talent. They do an awesome job of moving him around within their system of offense.

They've got some continuity there obviously between he and Joe, who have been in that system for a number of years now. I think it's reflected in the many things that they ask him to do. You turn on 2024 tape, there's more

presnap movement from him, there's more positional variation from him, making him a more difficult guy to minimize.

Obviously Tee Higgins is a matchup issue. He's big. He's strong. He's got really good run after. He got the speed on us last year and had a big play and kind of got them back in that football game. But again, when you talk about Tee, you're talking about a guy who is combative, who doesn't die easy, particularly after the catch. We've got to tackle. We've got to wrap.

They've got some new additions to their group. Gesicki at tight end, man, is a vertical threat. He's often a matchup issue, too big for defensive backs, too athletic for linebackers, and so we're being thoughtful about how we're formulating a plan to minimize him. He's got some talented new young receivers that are emerging because Tyler Boyd obviously is no longer there.

Burton is one dimension who's had a hat in recent weeks and appears to be a downfield guy for him. I was at his Pro Day in Tuscaloosa last year, man. He's really talented, has got a well-rounded game. He's got some awesome receiver skills.

Then they've got a turnover in the backfield with Brown. Obviously we're used to facing Mixon over the years from them, but Brown is not new to them. He's a second year player. He's got a well-rounded skill set for the running back position. He's good in interior runs. He's good on perimeter runs. He's got good burst, pick, and vision. He's an asset to them in the passing game, particularly in the screen game.

Screens have been a challenge for us against them in recent years. I looked at the screen reel this morning, I think they've run 23 screens of some description against us in the last six games, to put some perspective on how big that component of play is. So we've got our hands full in terms of some of those things.

On the defensive side of the ball, 91 is setting an awesome pace on the perimeter in terms of getting after the quarterback. He is an all day job. You can allocate two people in bodies, positions and things of that nature, but you can't find comfort in it because he sees those schematics week in and week out and still finds ways to impact the game in a big way.

His partner Sam Hubbard is versatile and talented. Sam's so versatile, I saw him on offense yesterday. Man, he's playing some situational tight end for them as well, and I just think that speaks to his football intellect and versatility.

Their second level defenders, Wilson and company, are homegrown products and have grown up in that system of defense, and I think it's reflected in not only the many things that they're capable of doing but how they communicate, how they're coordinated. Wilson, man, every year it seems like he adds a new trick to his bag. This year oftentimes he's a component of their rush.

They get in some subpackages, some dime 32, some nickel 33, and oftentimes he's the fourth and fifth rusher. He does a really good job in that area picking offensive linemen and things of that nature. He's an asset versus quarterback mobility. I've seen him in some of those quarterback mobility games, Washington and Baltimore, where he matches athleticism against the opposing quarterbacks. So he's got big time versatility there.

They've got a lot of quality players in the secondary. Taylor-Britt, man, is an aggressive guy, very ball aware, a sound run support guy and tackler, as is Mike Hilton, and I think that's why, one of the reasons why they're completely comfortable playing subpackage football. When you've got a nickel like Mike, who's a good blitz, a good run game tackler, is very good on the perimeter, I think they're comfortable standing up in a lot of circumstances in that personnel group, and the tape reflects that.

Got some top quality players at safety. Geno Stone's a new acquisition. Obviously Geno is not new to us, being a former Raven, and I'd imagine that's why they were attracted to him. He had an awesome interception against them a year ago as a raven. He's doing quality work for them as a centerfielder and central communicator on the back end and tying all those things together.

Darrin in special teams, man, has been there a long time. He's probably been there as long as I've been here, and I think that's reflected in the cohesion in which they operate in that phase of the game and the playmaking that happens in that game.

We're highly familiar with these guys, but I'm sure they're highly familiar with us as well, and I just think that's a component of AFC North football that makes it exciting and interesting this time of year.

I know we have big time urgency as we formulate our plans, and I'm excited about putting the group to work in preparation for this opportunity the remainder of the week.

Q. Does it say anything to you or is it an indicator of anything that you haven't lost to a team with a winning record? I think you're the only team with a 5-0 record. In those big moments you play well?

MIKE TOMLIN: I haven't overanalyzed it in that way. Really we're just trying to win week in and week out. Whoever it is we're trying to play, we try to formulate a schematic plan and divide the labor up that strengthens our talents and minimizes our weaknesses.

Really it's just kind of a week to week mentality more than anything else. Do we have belief in ourselves? Certainly. We won't back down from any challenge, but I haven't thought about it really. That's the first I've heard of that.

Q. Why haven't you guys gotten as many sacks collectively this year?

MIKE TOMLIN: Probably a lot of reasons, to be honest with you. We've had people missing at times, and oftentimes the strength of the pack is the pack.

For a large portion, early portion of the season, we were without Alex and Herbig, for example. Obviously when you're minus guys like that, people can focus their energies on T.J. and things of that nature, but also just the nature in which people play us, particularly in one-dimensional passing moments, they're aware of our reputation and the reputation of individuals within our group.

Oftentimes we see max protection, particularly when it's possession down and distance. Obviously that minimizes your capabilities in terms of getting home. It makes it easier to cover people on the back end, but it does make it more difficult to get home.

For us, we're just trying to be successful in those moments. We don't have control of all the variables in those moments. If people choose to protect, then we'd better win on the back end. If people have five eligible out, we'd better win in terms of the rush. I think that's probably the spirit in which we operate and how a lot of these things have kind of unfolded.

Q. You guys moved T.J. Watt to the other side of the formation that he normally lines up four times against the Giants. Since then you guys really haven't done that as well. Is that more so about game planning, or has that been more about the personnel that have been available?

MIKE TOMLIN: It's probably a little bit of both. I think we were working with a deficit at the Giants game in terms of our edge people. As we get everybody back, we're more inclined to play from their home spots.

Q. Is moving him around more something you guys want to do, or do you want guys to have more home spots with your defense?



MIKE TOMLIN: It's week to week, to be honest with you. Some of those discussions are matchup based about the people we face, so they're relative to particular weeks.

Q. What did you study in the mini bye to tell you about your short yardage offense?

MIKE TOMLIN: We need to get better is a component of it. Also, there were some game circumstances. We as a coaching staff need to adapt and adjust to replay assist. Sometimes we make decisions at speed and a spot of the ball might be different or a circumstance might be different based on replay assist, and I think that's happened two or three times in the last two or three weeks. That's been a component of performance for us.

Some of the things have got nothing to do specifically with the schematic that's we call or the utilization of people. It's just those moments administratively and logistically how things go. We looked at all components of it, but obviously we need to be better than we've been, particularly of late.

Q. How much time do you have from replay assist to making that call? Do they give you any extra time when they do that?

MIKE TOMLIN: It really depends on the speed with which they administer replay assist. That's subject to vary.

Q. Similar to the self-scouting on short yardage situations, did that study reveal any common thread into some of the red zone struggles that have happened lately?

MIKE TOMLIN: No doubt, on both sides of the ball. That's why we're excited about getting back to work today and the application component. Identification is just one component. Application is probably more significant in terms of what are we going to do to rectify it, both in schematics and with manpower.

Q. As far as red zone offense goes, is it a personnel thing, a play calling thing, a mix of the two?

MIKE TOMLIN: I think, when you're not getting the desired result, it's always a combination of all of the above. I think, if it was really simple and in one area, we wouldn't be having this discussion. There were multiple components to the discussion certainly.

Q. What have you guys learned about having the subpackage where Justin comes in for Russ for a couple weeks? When you evaluate the production there, what's the benefit of having him come in

mid-series as opposed to on first down?

MIKE TOMLIN: It's a component of what we do. I've been pretty clear about that. Once Justin got healthy, he's a viable and capable dude, and it's something that our opponents have to be aware of. When we use it and how much we utilize it will be dependent on plans week to week.

Q. What's the benefit -- usually when something like that happens, it's at the start of a series. You guys are doing it like on second down, on third down. What's the benefit from the coaching staff's viewpoint?

MIKE TOMLIN: There's a strategic component that I won't get into detail, but certainly we feel comfortable about how we infuse it and when we infuse it certainly.

Q. There's no concern about disrupting the rhythm of the offense or anything like that?

MIKE TOMLIN: Certainly there's a potential of that, but we're more excited about the challenges that it presents the opposing unit. I think that's reflective of our general attitude. We live in our hope as opposed to our fears.

Q. How does that work with you and Arthur? Is it kind of like you go to him and Justin say it might be a good time to make a switch?

MIKE TOMLIN: It could happen from either party and has certainly.

Q. Justin said he felt like it was maybe kind of random or on feel when he goes in. Is that the case, or is it a down and distance situation?

MIKE TOMLIN: Again, as I mentioned, those plans are formulated week to week based on the opponent. I don't know if this week will be reflective of what you saw last week to be quite honest with you. Just know that it is certainly a component of what we do and a component of every plan.

Q. Is there a particular challenge to having four division games in a row?

MIKE TOMLIN: I hadn't thought about it in that way. I know we play six every year, and that's kind of my mindset. When they occur, I'm less concerned about because we don't have control over that.

I love them, to be quite honest with you, in the latter part of the year as the road gets narrow because there's weight on it. As a competitor, you like to be in big moments and big

games, and so that's exciting.

Q. You were 1 for 3 on fourth down. When you go back and look at those missed opportunities, do you see we didn't execute this, or do you say, oh, man, maybe I shouldn't have gone for it after going back and looking at it?

MIKE TOMLIN: It's probably a little bit of both in terms of analysis on when you look back at it, but that's the benefit of hindsight. We're going to be aggressive in terms of the pursuit of victory. So most of the time, I'm comfortable with the decision to go, and it's more focused on what we're doing schematically or the quality of that execution.

Q. You guys have now had Mike Williams about three weeks. Just how has he done jumping on this moving train? What more can he do to gain a larger target share?

MIKE TOMLIN: He's done a nice job just fitting in, learning our football, and how we go about our business and getting himself ready for what we're asking him to do week in and week out. It's reasonable to expect that to continue and grow the longer he's here.

Q. George was involved in what looked like a post-game scuffle in the hail Mary attempt. What happened on that play? What was he supposed to be doing?

MIKE TOMLIN: I didn't see the video. I heard about it. Certainly he was involved in the hail Mary as a point man.

Q. Did you hear from the league or anything about them looking into that?

MIKE TOMLIN: I did not.

Q. Who was the point man on hail Mary?

MIKE TOMLIN: The guy that high points the football.

Q. Was he in position to do that?

MIKE TOMLIN: I think their actions had something to do with him not being in position to do that.

Q. Broderick says that he appreciates you having faith in him, pat on the back. How do you determine which guys need a pat on the back or a kick in the butt?

MIKE TOMLIN: The things that I do with them in the privacy of our space, I'll leave between us. The things I tell you guys often is not necessarily how I handle them, and

I'll leave it at that.

Q. How much is there learning versus growth with not only Broderick but Mason next to him, being that they're both first and second year players?

MIKE TOMLIN: They're talented young people. Obviously that's why they're playing. But at the same time, I own the responsibility of their growth and development as a coach and leader. So I like working with young players, I like to be a component of their growth and development, but all in the midst of that, they have to play winning football for us.

I certainly think they're capable, and I certainly think they understand the responsibility. In the midst of that, we're working to get better.

Q. Minkah hasn't produced as far as turnovers, but you guys are giving up the fewest production in the middle part of the field. What does he do that might be overlooked by people who don't see what he's doing on the back end of the defense?

MIKE TOMLIN: People don't throw the ball in that space, but I think that's what happens when you've got quality players. People show their respect to quality players by being cautious about how they go about playing.

We played Atlanta Falcons week 1, we threw zero balls in the middle of the field because of Jessie Bates. We're familiar with Jessie Bates. We know what Jessie Bates is capable of. A few weeks after we played them, somebody threw the ball in the middle of the field, and he won the game for the Atlanta Falcons.

That's just football in the NFL. You'd better be cognizant of the personnel and unique skill sets, and you show respect to those talents by being thoughtful about how you attack him.

Q. Is it typical for you guys to self-evaluate during the mini bye week. Is that something you've always done?

MIKE TOMLIN: Yes.

Q. What do you look for when you're going in there? Is it something specific or whatever jumps out at you?

MIKE TOMLIN: Usually it's pointed and specific on areas that we identified that need improvement, like red zone offense, red zone defense in recent weeks.

Q. As far as rearranging the practice schedule to have that additional time to self-scout the coaching staff yesterday, is any part of that also extra rest knowing

that coming up there's three games in ten days?

MIKE TOMLIN: No.

Q. Like Ja'Marr Chase, you mentioned where he's tops in a lot of different categories. Yards after catch is one of them, touchdowns is another. How do you try to contain him in those two areas in particular? And they may be combined.

MIKE TOMLIN: We'd better be close to him, and then we'd better tackle the catch. It's as simple as that. If you're not close to him and he gets the speed, he's a problem.

Obviously like I mentioned at the beginning, we'd better carry a full menu, some zone, some man. Regardless of whether zone or man, you'd better have people close to him, you'd better pass them through zones, you'd better be thoughtful about the man component, all in an effort to challenge him at the catch point, and if you're unsuccessful in that endeavor, you'd better get him on the ground sooner rather than later. The longer he's on his feet, the more likelihood he's going to ring the scoreboard up, and that's what the tape tells us.

Q. You guys moved Joey a little bit lining up in the slot a few times against the Browns. How did you assess him moving around your defense? It appeared like he did that more often in that game than he had in a lot of other games.

MIKE TOMLIN: Got no issue with that. Joey is always game. He's always looking for the matchup in action. I like how that unfolded.

Q. Broderick said he needs to be focused more at times. To you what does that mean being focused?

MIKE TOMLIN: Again, I don't know the context of the discussion you had with Broderick, so I'm going to be slow to add any color to it. Broderick is a talented young player. He's working every day to get better. He cares. I like the overall trajectory of it.

Q. When you say he cares, where do you see that manifest itself?

MIKE TOMLIN: In everything that he does.

Q. Jaylen got a little bigger piece of the pie in terms of workload from running backs last game. Was that just game plan specific, or were there other external factors like the short week and things of that nature?

MIKE TOMLIN: It was a short week. We wanted to utilize

all our healthy people in an effort to get the best product out there. Not only at the running back position, but we're in an inclusive mentality about the participation of all people in helmets.

Q. Najee had three straight games over 5 yards a carry, over 100 yards, and then the last three have been almost half that. Is that a reflection to you of lack of performance of your team in the rushing game or a change in the way teams have been trying to defend you?

MIKE TOMLIN: Probably a little bit of both, to be honest with you. We'll see what this week holds.

Q. On the third and 4, Justin said it was basically pick a side of the field. He was going to go for one-on-one. Was there anything else built in there where you had an intermediate route to get the first down?

MIKE TOMLIN: No, we felt quite good about it, to be honest with you. It was a weighty moment. It was third and medium. They had 11 guys within five yards of the line of scrimmage. We had GP matched up on the corner not named Denzel Ward. That feels like more than a 50-50 ball to me. So we were comfortable with that decision.

Q. Even though Justin hadn't thrown a pass in a game in a month?

MIKE TOMLIN: Even though, certainly.

Q. George also said after the game he didn't think the Browns were a very good team, conditions kind of saved them. Are you all right with guys putting that out there, or do you wish he'd keep that frustration?

MIKE TOMLIN: I'm not going to add color to people's comments. There are thoughts and feelings are their own. I don't want them to be robots. I don't tell them what to think or say.

I've just learned over the years not to add color to what people say or their comments. Those are their comments and thoughts. If you want additional information or perspective on it, ask them.

Q. It looked like there was a lot of stuff going on on the end of that third and 4 pass down the field. How was the throw? Was it executed?

MIKE TOMLIN: Which play are you talking about?

Q. The third down that Fields threw to Pickens?

MIKE TOMLIN: What was your question?

Q. It looked like there was a lot of fighting going on at the end of it, but how was the throw, the accuracy?

MIKE TOMLIN: I don't know that I had a real good judgment of the throw because of the interaction you mentioned.

Q. Not how much you haven't experienced in your career, but the Hard Knocks cameras being on a show in season, what are your thoughts on that? Have you told the guys much about how to handle it?

MIKE TOMLIN: To me, it's something to conquer, to be quite honest with you. We have to deal with it better than the other three teams. That's how I view a lot of things that come across my plate, particularly when others have to deal with it.

I'm less concerned about the inconvenience of it and more concerned about are we positioning ourselves to perform under those conditions better than those that we compete against? So it's something that everyone in the AFC North has to deal with, so it's our agenda to do so better than the other three teams.

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