

Pittsburgh Steelers

Media Conference

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Mike Tomlin

Weekday Press Conference



MIKE TOMLIN: Good afternoon. Certainly disappointing to be conducting this business today, but I don't view it as misfortune to be quite honest with you, particularly at this level in this business and game. There's football justice. You get what you deserve. We're here and we're here for really tangible reasons. Man, we didn't evolve in the right ways. We didn't strike the right chords at the right time particularly down the stretch so we've been eliminated from the single-elimination tournament.

For us, it's about assessing the reasons why, doing an assessment of every component of what it is we do here in the manner in which we do it, but we're at the very infancy of that. It comes to a screeching halt in this business and those of us that have been in it for a long time kind of understand that, but we also understand that moving forward happens pretty quickly. Since Saturday night, that's what's been going on behind the scenes here. The very beginning stages of assessing what transpired and why. Certainly there's disappointment in that but there's also lessons in information in that so we're going through some procedural things that allow that information to come to rise to the surface and to be hopefully utilized for the foundations of 2025. We had a team meeting yesterday at 2:00 and we outlined some of those things, some of those initiatives. We talked about exiting the season appropriately, professionally, whether it's health-related or meeting-related. Whether it's positional coaches, unit coaches, myself, those things are just beginning here today for individual players. For me as a collective or us as a collective, there's a lot that happens this time of year. There will be some questions that you have that I won't necessarily have the answer for and that's just a component of this time of year.

Certainly there's change that comes with this time of year. Certainly there's change that comes when we don't have the desired outcome and those are just the realities of the business. I would imagine there's going to be some things that change around here on a lot of levels but that's just this game, as I mentioned. I understand that. I'm open to that... really just beginning some of the processes of some

of the decision-making that has to transpire. I met with Art Rooney yesterday. I met with Omar yesterday, and those are just the very beginning of multiple conversations in terms of how we wrap a bow around some of the lessons learned, analyze some of the decisions made, personnel, strategy, etc., and those type of discussions are going on on a lot of levels. How can we keep our team healthier? That was a discussion that happened yesterday, for example. We experienced a rash of soft issue injuries that was impactful, and that's just an example of many of the things and subjects that we have covered and will continue to cover as we assess what transpired and quickly transition ourselves and bill for the future at the same time.

There's a lot of unanswered questions regarding the direction this could go, free agency and so forth. I don't have a lot of answers there, but certainly happy to field around address questions along those lines to the best of my ability.

Again, just assessing what transpired specifically in the stadium, you know, I believe what I said to you after the game that they were the better team on Saturday night. I thought that was displayed and that is not comfortable to say but it is truth. For us and for me, moving forward is having sober conversations such as that and then beginning the process of unearthing why. When I originally opened, I talked about the level of disappointment going through this today and certainly that is the days, but a component of that disappointment is I thought this collective was better positioned, maybe more so than in recent years to not be in this similar place, but we are. There's obviously a lot of work to do to be quiet honest with you. I'm energized in terms of beginning the process in doing it because I'm a competitor. I love this game and this business, even when it's miserable, to be quite honest with you. I've seen so much in it and been through so much in it, very rarely do I respond to present circumstance, whether it's positive or negative, because of the depths of the relationship that I have with the game. I expressed that to the team yesterday, because it's not only my job to, you know, obviously lead the group and strategize and so forth, but also to provide perspective. We got a lot of young guys who played major roles, who evolved in a lot of ways. I'm excited about them continuing their individual journeys and enhancing those and getting better and better positioning

themselves to be significant as we move forward. There's a lot of successes within the story, certainly I don't feel like it's time to highlight for those or search for those but I certainly acknowledge that it exists. It's important that we recognize that although we have some ills and certainly a lot of things to address, we do have some really solid foundational things to build upon and to enhance and so a component of moving forward not only is acknowledging that which stinks, quite honestly, but also acknowledging the things that are moving in the right direction and the things that are really assets to us and figuring out ways that we can continue that or enhance that, and so there's complexities to the next few days and weeks for us and for me, but it's what comes with this thing at the highest level. Certainly there's going to be pain in terms of watching the rest of the tournament from the outside, but, again, as I mentioned at the outset, there's not a lot of misfortune in this business. Ultimately, you get what you got coming to you. Certainly as uncomfortable as it is, there better be growth in it for us individually and collectively and the effort to make sure 2025 doesn't end in a similar way.

Don't have a lot of updates in terms of the general medical component. A lot of these exit physicals and examinations and decision-making regarding those things are still ongoing but certainly if you got a question about an individual, I'll do the best of my ability to answer it. I'll pause and open it up for questions.

Q. Mike, you said you imagine there will be changes on a lot of levels. Does that start with your coaching staff?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, I think change in coaching staffs are a component of our business. I certainly don't think all of our coaches are under contract, and so change is a component of it and I acknowledge it, but we're at the very early stages of making those type of decisions and discussions.

Q. Does the franchise feel stuck right now?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, I don't know that I've looked at it from that perspective. I'm certainly disappointed that I'm not working to prepare to play this week and I certainly felt that in recent years, but stuck is kind of a helpless feeling and I don't know that I feel helpless.

Q. What gives you -- where does that optimism that you guys can emerge from this sort of place you've been in?

MIKE TOMLIN: I don't know that I'm ready to be overly optimistic or sell optimism to you, either. I'm just acknowledging what transpired and what has to happen

and what is beginning to happen and acknowledging the complexity and the amount of work that's ahead of us. Certainly feel capable, but, you know, definitely doesn't feel in the mood for optimism or the selling of optimism. I don't know that that's appropriate. It's disappointing not to be working and so that's where we are.

Q. Do you have a plan for quarterback?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, obviously, we don't have a quarterback under contract and so we got some major discussions there. It was a really good experience with the three quarterbacks that were on our roster this year individually and collectively. We are certainly open to considering those guys, but there's a lot of work ahead of us. The major work, obviously, starts first and foremost just understanding what our options are... what the field looks like in terms of free agency, what the draft pool looks like and then beginning the process in terms of decision-making based on known variables and so Omar and I have got half a day carved out here this week just to begin that component of the discussion.

Q. (Inaudible) time in the last four years, I think -- I'm sorry. This will be the third time in the last four years you go in with some uncertainty or maybe instability at quarterback. I mean, is that itself disconcerting to you moving forward?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, it's also been, I guess, three times out of the last four years we've taken a quick exit in the tournament, and so we're having all those discussions and acknowledge that these similarities exist and obviously that's going to be a component of us in terms of our decision-making this time around relative to the subject.

Q. What have you seen from Russ and/or Justin that makes you think they can take it to the next step or where you need to get to?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, just their professionalism and approach to business. Their relationship to the game was an encouragement in that regard certainly.

Q. Mike, you said that you thought this collective was better positioned than you were a year ago but as this season ends, how do you feel like you guys are positioned to close the gap from where you are to where you want to be?

MIKE TOMLIN: I think I'm just at the very early stages of unearthing that, to be quite honest with you. I acknowledge we have some things to unearth but these exit interviews and things of that nature will be the very beginnings of that and that's something that's going to be

asked and discovered over the upcoming days and weeks and months even as we prepare for the draft and free agency because obviously talent acquisition is a major component of it and obviously the strategic component of it in terms of the schematics, and so those are questions that will be addressed and subject to be addressed over the course of the next days, weeks, months.

Q. If for whatever reason Russ should move on, be it your choice or his, did Justin show you enough that you think he could be a starter for you guys and enter next year in the pole position that Russ did this year?

MIKE TOMLIN: Certainly.

Q. And what more steps would he need to take, then, to perhaps be a 17-game starter for you?

MIKE TOMLIN: I think he took them. I thought that the way that he managed his professional circumstance was really impressive. I thought he brought an urgency in his day-to-day work regardless of his role. I thought he got continually better within our system of ball throughout the process. I thought the way he conducted himself makes that a legitimate thought or idea at this juncture.

Q. Mike, you mentioned potential coaching changes are a component of this. Last eight times you guys haven't been able to make it, a win in the playoffs, a lot of fans have questioning coaching at the top, starting be you, if you are still the right guy for this job. What's your message to them?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, I have no response to that. I understand the nature of what it is that we do, the attention and criticism that comes with it. As a matter of fact, I embrace it, to be quite honest with you. I enjoy the urgency that comes with what I do and what we do. I don't make excuses for failure. I own it, but I also feel like I'm capable. As long as I'm afforded an opportunity to do that, I will continue. I certainly understand their frustrations and probably more importantly than that, I share it because that's how I'm wired, and so I'm not a big-time comfort seeker. Particularly in circumstances such as this, I don't view myself as a comfort provider because there's -- words are hollow, to be quite honest with you. It's about what we do and less about what we say and so I've learned to say very little when things are going good and I learn to say less when they aren't.

Q. Mike, whenever you have had several seasons that have ended in similar ways, does that make you re-think the way that you go about your job or the way that you go about just handling --

MIKE TOMLIN: Tern certainly. Certainly. I have a cliché that the guys oftentimes throw back to me in jest but it's true. Two is a pattern. I say that because there's an expiration on adjusting adapting. So I use that phrase to reflect urgency, to reflect how quickly it is that we need to adapt and adjust and move. Although, as you mentioned, we have had similar results, rest assured that we're not doing the same things hoping for a different result. We have adapted. We have altered our approach and we will continue because we're not getting what we seek and that's the confetti game. It's to be world champs. Our goals are really clear. It's also really clear that we're falling short of it and falling short of it in a consistent way so we're still going to continue to be open to adapting our behavior, our program, the structure of what it is that we do to turn over every stone in an effort to get what we desire. That's the just the appropriate and mature way to approach it.

Q. It seems it's been a calling card of your teams over the last few years, the ability to absorb some negativity and then respond and rally. Why do you think that wasn't able to happen this year? Why did three losses turn into four and five at the end of the year?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, I'm unearthing that. I guess that's the spirit with which I opened this because I know you got questions but the answers to some of those questions would be speculative from my perspective at this point. I would be making something up, and I'm not going to do that. Make no mistake, man. That's what the upcoming days and weeks and even months are about for under the circumstances as we begin the process of laying a foundation for 2025.

Q. In the same vein to the previous question, it's been eight years since this team has won a playoff game. What about your approach do you feel needs to change?

MIKE TOMLIN: No, that's what I was talking directly regarding when I answered that question. Certainly I'm open to adaptation and change and have been so it's not a new discussion. It's not like I've been doing the same things over that stretch that you mentioned.

Q. Mike, you said you met with Art. What was his message to you?

MIKE TOMLIN: I think we share the same sentiment, to be quite honest with you. We're really disappointed that we're not working this week and we have a real commitment to making sure that we're not in that same space 12 months from now, but that's cool in spirit, but what's transpiring in a tangible way in terms of how we construct these upcoming days and weeks and months is going to be critical to

making sure there's teeth to that and that's what I was talking about when I was saying word don't weigh a lot. It's about what we do and particularly what we do in the upcoming days and weeks.

Q. Mike when you say that words don't mean a lot, it's what you do, what about the way the season has ended this year and recently tells you that your message is still resonating in this locker room?

MIKE TOMLIN: I don't worry about messaging resonating. I speak with great clarity and transparency. I learned that over a long time at this level. I know what works and what doesn't. That component of it is probably less of a concern of more strategic things and other discussions that dictate outcome. Messaging is such a small component of what it is that we do. It just really is. There's complexities to it.

Q. Mike, you guys have employed the NFL's highest paid defense in the last three years and what of the way that defense has performed in the post-season you have to reevaluate the way you guys structure the contract... the roster in a cap league?

MIKE TOMLIN: Certainly everything is up to discussions, but things don't happen in a vacuum so there's certainly components of what we do that you can isolate and analyze, but every component that you isolate and analyze is affected by others and that's just the makeup of what we do. I would be remiss if I said it's not as black and white as you present it.

Q. Mike, it seemed like the offensive line early in the season when you were going through injury issues there was still performing above the line and that didn't seem to be quite the case at the end of the season when you had more continuity. Was there something going on with that unit there? Were you happy with that unit?

MIKE TOMLIN: Certainly it didn't end the way we would like as a collective and as a smaller collective that you mentioned. We absorbed a lot of attrition during the course of the journey. We ended up playing a lot of young people. They responded in a real positive way, but maybe they fatigued, mentally and physically. Those are things that we're unearthing as we begin this information-gathering process. I haven't had a lot of individual meetings to this point. I'm half a day into my exit interviews and so those are some hardcore questions that I have and things to unearth and we'll see where it leads us in terms of ascertaining the reasons why.

Q. Accountability was a big talking point towards the end of the season. I'm curious to know, do you feel --

you mentioned your conversation with Art. Do you feel that he's holding you and your coaching staff accountable enough?

MIKE TOMLIN: I'll leave that up to him. I don't know if that's appropriate for me to assess from his perspective. I know he'll get an opportunity to visit with you all at some point and so I'll leave that up to him.

Q. ...your guys' defense has been the ability to stop the run. You guys weren't able to do it a few times late in the season, especially in the playoffs. What has to change from your guys' approach to be that kind of consistent team, especially late in the season?

MIKE TOMLIN: Again, as I mentioned, those are questions that are going to be answered over the course of a longer period of time as we study not only our personnel but our schematics and the combinations of both and also look at trends in the game. The quarterback mobility component, the design quarterback run component is a component of discussion as well and making sure we're in the light lanes in that regard schematically, so there's a lot of complex discussions to be had and things to analyze in that regard, but I'm excited about embarking on it.

Q. Is it an offseason priority of the franchise to get George Pickens a contract extension?

MIKE TOMLIN: We haven't had any conversations and pecking orders or priorities regarding any individuals contractually. It just -- we're not there yet and I don't know that that's going to transpire this week. We're just still assessing what transpired in 2024. Those are more 2025 things.

Q. How would you assess George in the season, then, particularly not the production but maybe some of the other stuff. He got a lot of letters from the league, got a lot of...

MIKE TOMLIN: Certainly there's a lot of room for growth there. I think he covered some ground in 2024 but there's certainly a heck of a lot more ground to be covered and we'll see where it leads us.

Q. Are you concerned three years in? He's a veteran now and you're still sort of seeing problems pop up.

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, I'm always concerned about the growth and development of individuals, whether it's skill relative to the positions that they hold, professionalism, maturity or combinations of all of the above.

Q. You talked about how you manage different players

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to us specifically but with a now veteran three years in, do you consider changing your philosophy when it comes to coaching guys like that?

MIKE TOMLIN: I think I'm always in consideration of changing my approach to get a desired result, particularly when it gets repetitive.

Q. You talked about he needs to be open to moving around more in your defense late in the year --

MIKE TOMLIN: I'm sorry, I missed the front part of it.

Q. T.J. Watt said he would be more open to moving around to where he lines up in your defense. I think during the season there were a couple of game where is he did move around but through that five-game stretch he stayed on the left side. What in your approach do you have to change to open up what has been your best defense I have play-maker on this team?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, I don't know that a lot of dramatic changes need to be made regarding T.J. Watt to be quite honest with you. I think his resume and production speaks for itself. He's been ridiculously consistent over his stay here and even in the midst of the 2024 season, that didn't unfold in the way any of us would like. I got a lot of things that have my attention before I start getting into T.J. Watt-like production in terms of my to-do list.

Q. You said you neither seek comfort nor offer it. How much do you weigh, maybe balance longing for answers from talking to players, talking to coaches, talking to staff versus just trusting your gut and saying this is what I felt like went wrong and am I just -- are you seeking --

MIKE TOMLIN: It's all interrelated. Somewhere in there lies the truth. Everyone has a perspective. It's my job to absorb that information and discern reality and so that's just a part of this process.

Q. Mike, how would you describe Russell and Arthur Smith's relationship, working relationship this year?

MIKE TOMLIN: I thought it was pretty good and fluid. I know they do an awesome time of spending time together and communicating formally and informally. We're not paid by the hour in this business and I think their willingness to work and work together is kind of a reflection of that sentiment.

Q. Mike, beyond schematics or personnel, what is

your opinion of your defense against the Ravens, the engagement level, bringing what needed to be brought to the fight?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, the Ravens present a unique challenge in terms of their run game. You got to play 11-on-11 football and at times we could have performed better schematically. At times we could have performed better as individuals, particularly the last two games that we played them, we didn't do a good enough job of controlling that component of the game and that leads to possession down play and situational play and we didn't have them in enough one-dimensional circumstances to create the type of negativity that's been a calling card of us winning those games with consistency.

Q. Mike, understanding that you're still unearthing things, as far as the offense goes, to compete in the NFL at this -- to get to where you want to go, does the offense need to be constructed in a way that it can score more points and be involved in shoot-outs and is this offense capable of that?

MIKE TOMLIN: It certainly needs to score more points. In whatever way that happens is whatever way that happens. It doesn't necessarily mean construction but we certainly got to score more points. You're not going to score 14 points a week in January and be very successful.

Q. Mike, when you look around at the quarterbacks who are still alive and then you have those discussions with Omar about that position, how important is quarterback mobility to you going forward?

MIKE TOMLIN: Very, but that's not a new discussion. I've expressed that in this setting and settings like these for years. The X factor that quarterback mobility is in our game and is trending and been trending. That is not a new discussion.

MIKE TOMLIN: Mike, you guys have had a lot of turnovers on offense over the past several years. What do you guys have to do as a coaching staff to cultivate a nucleus that can bring forward a more consistent unit going on?

MIKE TOMLIN: I'm not overly concerned about turnover. Turnover is a component of this thing. If you look at the course of a 12-month calendar, there's enough opportunity to develop the cohesion that you mentioned. I'm not going to allow that to be a place of comfort or an excuse. Everyone goes through turnover in this game at this level and any phase of the game, so for us, it's about getting better and not making continuity or some of those discussions a component of it, just simply how do we get



better.

Q. With understanding that not everything happens in a vacuum, of course, but Russell's -- husband first six or seven starts and his last few starts. He's 36 years old. Is that a factor in it? And when you look at quarterback, is it something that you prefer not to have somebody in their late 30s?

MIKE TOMLIN: I'm certain that will be a component of the discussion but those discussions haven't been had to this point.

Q. Mike, I'm sure you heard by now, on the broadcast over the weekend, one of the broadcasters mentioned it seemed like there's a lack of fight in this team. Lack of fight from the outside, potentially a lack of discipline, lack of winning the last few years and that's not really consistent with the culture that we've all grown to see over the last decade with the Steelers. Why the shift that we're seeing from the outside?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, I just think everyone's entitled to your opinions. It sounds like what you outlined is an opinion. I'm not going to spend a whole lot of time addressing or disputing opinions. I respect opinions but opinions aren't often reality for me and so I tend to focus my energies on things that I have control over. How we're constructed, the manner which we work, our preparedness, the outcomes which you mentioned and I worry less about opinions.

Q. In your opinion, has the culture changed since you started here?

MIKE TOMLIN: The fact that we're communicating today in the manner in which we're communicating is bothersome to me and so I'm open to addressing any component of it.

Q. You talk about a lot about the second-year jump as being the biggest jump. Did you see that from whether it be Joey, Keanu, Darnell, that group collectively?

MIKE TOMLIN: I haven't thought a lot about it, to be honest with you. Certainly I felt it at different times from all the individuals that you mentioned, but I hadn't analyzed it more broadly to this point but that is a reasonable expectation certainly.

Q. When you look at the teams that are still playing, a lot of these quarterbacks are taken way at the top of the draft. You guys very rarely pick there. How do you see a way forward? Russ is 36, obviously, not a long-term plan to getting back to elite play at the quarterback position and is potentially having a

season where you have to take a step back part of that equation?

MIKE TOMLIN: Lamar wasn't taken at the top of the draft. Hurts wasn't taken in the first round. So I don't know that I necessarily agree with the question.

Q. Mike, last year when you were talking to us you said I understand I have more football behind me than in front of you, talked about urgency. Do you feel like your players share that same urgency? PQ mentioned after the game he thought guys got comfortable.

MIKE TOMLIN: Again, you mentioned an opinion. You know, based on circumstance and oftentimes our emotions control our opinions and I just don't feel the need to respond to some of those things.

Q. Do you feel your players got comfortable?

MIKE TOMLIN: I do not.

Q. How do you evaluate Arthur's first season with you guys?

MIKE TOMLIN: I thought we had a good experience in a lot of areas. Certainly the fact that we're talking here today is reflective of it's not always been good. That could be any component of this thing, man. We're so interdependent in this business around that's why it's the ultimate team game. I get asked often how Russ performed or how Arthur performed or how the defense performed. These lines get blurred because of the interdependency in this game and that's just a component of it, so certainly there's impact from outside forces on evaluations but that's why what we're doing right now is so significant. We got to comb through it and get to the guts of the matters and so that's why the exit interviews and the analysis of what transpired is so important, because I need to have a better understanding of evaluation components such as that because from my perspective and particularly as you stand here at the end of it, we win together, we lose together and there's complexities in all those discussions.

Q. You acknowledge that bickering, the defense, late games there looking back, did that become more of a problem?

MIKE TOMLIN: I've never been around a prideful unit that doesn't bicker when things aren't going well. Bickering is not always a negative thing. Bickering is a cleansing. Bickering is a gaining of understanding, but sometimes, particularly in today's sport culture it's presented as somewhat of a negative thing. It's not. These guys play hard. They live hard. They love hard. They talk hard.

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They communicate hard. That's the world we live in. And so what is viewed from the outside as potentially a negative isn't always a negative from those that are involved. It's very necessary in an effort to gain clarity or cleansing or an understanding sometimes.

Q. Mike, at least one team has reached out to inquire about your availability. Understanding you have a no trade clause in your contract, what's your message to any team that may reach out to the Steelers to gain interest or availability in your services?

MIKE TOMLIN: I have no message. Save your time.

Q. ...on the running game --

MIKE TOMLIN: I'm sorry. I missed the very beginning.

Q. Your thoughts on the running game, even Najee Harris and how his '24 went and the fact that he, too, is going to become a free agent.

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, we like to ride the wave that our running game provides and produce chunks in the play-passing game off of it and some of these things and control games and minimize the potential of negativity in terms of turning the ball over. At different times we had really good traction and success in that area. It didn't feel that way in the end, but we need to go back and comb through with it in totality and understand why Naj has had an awesome four years here. I understand that he is a free agent. Again, it's at the very beginnings of that process in terms of us assessing what we're capable of doing or what we desire today and I'd imagine it's the same thing from a player's perspective awe rest assured we've had a good experience with him and obviously the ridiculous consistency in his performance in his performance in terms of producing four straight thousand-yard seasons speaks for itself.

MODERATOR: A few more.

Q. You've done a lot in the offensive run game to improve it over the past few years. What hasn't clicked to make it a more consistent unit, especially in the big games like this past week?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, there's a lot of things, like the attrition that I mentioned in the offensive line at the early stages and the elevation of a lot of young guys and what that might mean over the course of the journey is one example of it, but there's a lot of things to analyze and we'll certainly do so.

Q. Mike, you mentioned before the game and after the

game the playoff baggage is something you tote alone. Is it getting heavier? And how do you bear the weight?

MIKE TOMLIN: I got big shoulders.

MODERATOR: Last one.

Q. Mike, is there any accuracy to the report that Pickens was late on Christmas day to the game against the Chiefs?

MIKE TOMLIN: Man, that's a few days back. I really don't know I have the answer to that to be quite honest with you. I got a lot going on in pre-game. I can't answer that definitively. Thanks, guys.

