

Pittsburgh Steelers

Media Conference

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Mike Tomlin

Weekday Press Conference



MIKE TOMLIN: Good afternoon. Really excited about getting our season started against the New York Jets. Before I get into those guys, I'll give a quick injury update. Thankful as we sit here today and based on the structure of the preseason and how it's set up, it's done so that we all get an opportunity to move into the season as healthy as possible.

Not having a game last week obviously, last weekend, helps that. Derrick Harmon is the only guy at this juncture that I would characterize as out. I would characterize Herbig as questionable. He had a really good day yesterday, so we'll leave the door ajar for him and see where work leads us during the course of the week.

Certainly his participation and the quality of his participation will be the key variable in terms of our decision making, whether or not we choose to use him or not. Other than those two instances, man, we're largely a healthy group. Certainly had some bumps and bruises associated with preseason work and some people have been nonparticipants in games, some due to injury and some due to precaution.

Some of those guys been working their way back. Alex Highsmith for example and others. We don't anticipate any of those guy's availability being in any way questionable.

You can include Calvin Austin for example in that discussion. And so we got a relatively healthy group. Excited about that. We had some really good quality work yesterday getting the weekend off of us, working on some football conditioning, some base football things, things that are us, some things that are base New York.

So with that, I'll get into talking about New York.

Certainly there is some challenges in week one when speculating. Schematic personality, division of labor, agenda if you will. I think it gets magnified sometimes when you have a new staff, and particularly a new staff with first-time coordinators like on the offensive side of the

ball for them.

To be honest with you, if been in this business any length time, it's almost commonplace this time of year. We were very much in the same circumstance 12 months ago leading into week one getting ready to play the Falcons. They had a new staff, a first-time offensive playcaller, so we had to do so the speculating there.

It's a challenge, but not one that's unfamiliar with this time of year. There is enough obviously for us to work on. The component of week one football is not necessarily about who you play but how you play, the quality of our play, the cleanliness, technical expertise, minimizing the penalties. The minimizing of penalties and things of that nature oftentimes determine quality performance in week one.

Make no mistake, we got a lot of respect for the challenges of preparing for and ultimately playing the Jets, but like most people in week one, our focus is on the quality of our work, the quality of our play, our division of labor, our ability to display situational knowledge and execute and make quality plays within them circumstances, et cetera.

That being said, I'll start talking about the Jets offense. Man, you got to start first with their running game. Man, they got a deep and talented backfield led by Hall and Allen. If you look at the history of their staff, those two kind of represent maybe what Gibbs and Montgomery represent to the Detroit Lions.

So we been looking at it through that lens. Make no mistake, they're both very capable. Allen really burst on to the scene I thought a year ago as a rookie out of Wisconsin. He's got a downhill run demeanor and style. The pile always seems to fall in the direction that he desires it to.

Breece Hall is multiple talented. He can run inside, outside. He had a lot of explosion plays a year ago on the perimeter. He's good out of the backfield in the passing game. Check downs, but beyond check downs in one-on-one matchups and so forth aligned outside of the backfield, he's displayed that skillset.

So we certainly got to be ready for that component of play.

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He broke a check down for 57 or so yards on us last year that really changed the complexion of that game early on, when we had already had an anticipation of his talents in that area and he was still able to deliver.

Their running backs and commitment to the running game, I think Coach Glenn has been very transparent about their desire to run the football and their commitment to doing so, and so that has our attention as we prepare.

You can't talk about the run game without talking about Justin's physical abilities in that area and the challenges it may present to us. Certainly he didn't do a lot of running by design and so forth in the preseason, but it's reasonable to expect there to be some design running game. He had it in Chicago and he had it with us.

I think if it you got a guy had with his talents it's commonsense to have some designed running game for the quarterback position to make people play 11-on-11 football.

So certainly his unique running ability and skills in that area has our attention, whether it's design runs or ad lib, if you will. You can't talk about the run game without including his unique talents in that area.

In the passing game, Garrett Wilson is a talented and emerging player, one that has an extended relationship with Justin going back to college. So we have respect for not only his talents, but their relationship that extends beyond the current team development.

I imagine that a lot of the passing offense and so forth will go through him. I've heard a lot of quality reports about Mason Taylor, guy at the tight end position I think they took in the second round. He was highly regarded in the draft as a capable vertical threat, a major component probably to any passing game, and certainly have heard really good things about his development in the team development process.

So we got to be cognizant of what he's capable of for sure, but they got a collection of other guys, Lazard and others that have been around; Reynolds who got NFL experience, and certainly are to be respected in terms of the schematic component of playing matchup football and minimizing that component of play for them.

They are in their venue, and so we got some things to manage in terms of that. The ability to communicate at the line of scrimmage and make checks and us being in position to do similar things if they get into some check football. Venue is a component this time of year, and certainly have that at their disposal if they want to get in

and out of stuff at the line. And so even though it's week one, we better carry enough schematics to match that strategy from a defensive perspective.

Looking at the Jets defense, first of all, Steve Wilks has been around a long time. I've competed against him a lot, Arthur Smith has competed against him a lot. When he was in Carolina Arthur was in Atlanta for example I think in 2022.

Steve has been in the north, I think in Cleveland in '19. He has a mode of operation, one that's highly respected. He's an experienced guy. He's going to be aggressive and fundamentally sound. He'll do a nice job of utilizing the players' individual talents and putting them in position to win and being multiple.

Taking a step back from all that, just looking at their people, man, they've invested a lot in their men up front. Certainly Quinnen Williams is a top-tier talent on the inside, former first rounder. But you can say that also about their edge people. Will McDonald, a highly regarded first rounder; Jermaine Johnson was a highly regarded first rounder.

So you've seen the draft investment from the organization's perspective in terms of producing a quality front. More recently they added Harrison in team development via a trade from Minnesota.

So you see they've made a commitment to providing a quality level of talent up front that others play behind. I think a great deal about their linebacker tandem Sherwood and Williams. Man, they're a talented and emerging homegrown group, particularly as it pertains to Sherwood. I think he is a former fifth round pick that's evolved over his time in New York and been rewarded for that evolution with a big contract.

That linebacker tandem, that second level linebacker tandem has played a lot of ball together. They both were highly productive a year ago. I would imagine that to continue to grow and prosper. In the secondary obviously Sauce Gardner is a top flight bump corner, a first round acquisition, top draft pick, if you will.

They've acquitted Stephens who we're familiar with from his time in Baltimore to play opposite of him, so they got a quality veteran corner tandem. They got Cisco, who is new at safety.

So they got some high quality talent at all three levels. Got a coordinator in Steve Wilks that's been doing it a long time and at a high level. Couple that with the fact that Coach Glenn has a defensive background, and I'm certain he'll

have some involvement and create some speculation issues for us. Particularly in week one as I mentioned at the beginning, there is some speculation associated with this time of year.

The things he might bring to what they do defensively is something that is a topic of discussion, and so we got a lot to talk about. We have some planning of our own. We got some physical work ahead to ready our guys and further divide our labor up, particularly situationally. So we got a bunch of decisions to make.

Such is life this time of year, particularly on a Tuesday. We love all that. It's awesome to be here. Awesome to get this season started. With that, I'll pause and open up to your questions.

Q. Mike, are you expecting Cam to play and because of how limited he made himself in the preseason, is he ready to play?

MIKE TOMLIN: I'm certainly expecting Cam to play. Cam doesn't play a lot in team development over the last several years. My job is to get him in ask out of Latrobe, and I've done my job. There are no reservations about his participation or readiness. I'm sure he's champing at the bit.

Q. Without Harmon, who is going to take his place?

MIKE TOMLIN: It's going to be a committee of people, but I imagine I would have been a committee of people if he were available. We generally play a lot of D-linemen early in the season due to lack of conditioning and potential heat and so forth.

So not only us, but I just think globally speaking this time of year most teams play a lot of bigs up front defensively so that fatigue doesn't become a factor, particularly down the stretch in the football game.

Q. Mike, Justin Fields and Breece Hall, two talented runners. (Regarding QB option run.) What do you got to do better if the Jets bring that out that you're better equipped this time?

MIKE TOMLIN: Yeah, you know, I don't tote last year's bags. That's an agenda that needs to be addressed this year in 2025. Quarterback mobility and the designed run game component is a component of today's game. We've done things at a lot of levels to further strengthen ourselves.

The acquisition of Derrick Harmon and Yahya Black being two components of it. But others, and we certainly have

some schematic things up our sleeve that I won't disclose in this setting.

I just think each and every year, particularly in today's game the way it's trending, quarterback mobility, the design run game, the situational designed run game associated with it is something that 31 other defenses better be ready to address and planning for as well.

Q. What's unique about the way Fields does it compared to others?

MIKE TOMLIN: Compared to who? He's unique because he is who he is. You know, he's stronger than most mobile quarterbacks. That's a component of his game that I think is unique. He's a really talented guy physically. He's not easy to bring down. He's got a real solid base about him. He's big.

And so when I think about what might be different, I think about his unique physical skillset.

But in terms of schematics, I don't know that the things they do are going to be uniquely different from others. I think there are some global things people do in that area.

Q. Any different preparing, game planning for a guy that started games for you last season?

MIKE TOMLIN: Not really. To be quite honest with you, I just think it's a lot of that in today's game. People move around. I would imagine they're pondering similar things on the other side; from that perspective it'll be fair.

Q. You're going into the season relatively healthy; only two guys you mentioned today. A lot of these starters not playing in the preseason, how challenging is it, obviously to have them healthy, but how challenging is it for them to go into the season ready to go without -- having lack of reps?

MIKE TOMLIN: It's not challenging. I base my decisions basically off shared experiences in a lot of ways. Cam, for example. He and I've been together a lot of years. He's logged a bunch of snaps, so his runway required to take off is short relative to others.

TJ had that big game in the opener in '21 in Buffalo when he had a hold out and he had two sacks, sack fumble, and things of that nature. So you go through things with people and you learn what they can manage in terms of readiness.

So my job is to be fair to everyone, not treat everyone the same, and that's why the schedule of work is different for different people in team development, so that your

question is somewhat mute.

Based on my shared experiences, I have a great deal of comfort in the prescribed plan for each individual guy whether they participated or didn't in game in the team development process.

Q. You guys announced your captains for the season yesterday. What does it say about Aaron Rodgers and the way he's acclimated that he was the one selected for the offense?

MIKE TOMLIN: I don't think anybody is surprised by that, not only because of his resume and experience, but what he's displayed since he's been here in terms of being the great team guy and communicating and leading and sharing his experience and the lens through which he sees the game with others. It's just been a good process.

So I don't think that was earth shattering in any way within our collective.

Q. You mentioned the speculation you have this time of year. In your experience, how quickly does that speculation go away?

MIKE TOMLIN: Sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes you play not only week one, but in some instances week two and week three. I think really until people get a big enough body of work on tape where you can see some things, trends if you will, and have a large enough sample size that you can speak with great certainty, speculation is going to exist. Speculation in a lot of ways exists through September.

Q. ...the new guys you have, because of that, all you've brought in, do you have a good handle in your mind what you have to put out there against the Jets?

MIKE TOMLIN: I do.

Q. Looks like Calvin Austin is filling that wide receiver two role. How confident are you in him?

MIKE TOMLIN: I'm extremely confident in him and also equally confident in Roman Wilson and Jonnu and Freiermuth. I think there is a lot of speculations and narratives about a quote/unquote No. 2. I think in today's game it comes at you in this a lot of ways.

We certainly have unique depth and talent at the tight end position, and particularly in reference to new acquisitions. Jonnu is somewhat of a positional player; Calvin is growing and had grown and made big strides a year ago; we been really excited about Roman Wilson in team development.

So I'm less concerned about who occupies the No. 2 position. It could be a variety of people depending on circumstances. One thing for certain, a talent like DK, you know, dictates a lot of schematics. So his presences is going to provide opportunities for others, whether it's Calvin, Roman, Jonnu, Freiermuth. It's not a big issue for me or for us.

Q. With the absence of preseason game reps, especially for the new players, the team building aspect you have starting in March, do you have a sense that the vision of what that roster, what those Xs and Os, schematics are supposed to look like can come together?

MIKE TOMLIN: For us?

Q. Yeah.

MIKE TOMLIN: Yeah, I'm completely comfortable. We do a lot of work not only in stadium. In team development, I'm comfortable with what I've seen and how we divide the labor up and our plans in that area certainly.

Q. ... had to face each of the last five seasons, bringing in a new quarterback.

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, I don't know that I've wasted any time looking at it from that perspective. There is challenges that come with my role each and every year, and I get hyper focused on those challenges and I don't know that I compare it to a larger discussion, if you will.

There are certainly challenges when you got new people at that position being on the same page, supporting and developing leadership, depending on where you are with it.

You support a guy with Aaron's experience from a leadership perspective. You develop leadership with a guy like Will Howard for example.

I'm more focused on those things than I am the larger discussion that has been four, five years of it. Hadn't looked at it through that lens.

Q. (Indiscernible.)

MIKE TOMLIN: Again, I hadn't looked at it from that perspective.

Q. Understanding that it's week one, what are you expecting to see from your offense this week?

MIKE TOMLIN: I'd like to see a lot of points and a W, you know. Sincerely. But what produces that: minimizing

negative plays, minimizing self-inflicted wounds, penalties, things that get you off schedule, winning possession-down football.

I'm sure I'm looking for the same thing that 31 other head coaches are looking for from their offensive units in week one.

Q. Jaylen yesterday signed a contract extension. What stands out from the way he's worked to get from UDFA to now running back 1, and how do you imagine you'll divide the labor within that room?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, his progress has very evident and he's to be congratulated. That guy has gone from an undrafted, as you mentioned, to getting second contract business, and certainly he's been deserving of that. Certainly be our featured runner, but we're not opposed to utilizing Kenny G and Kaleb. I'm sure you'll see them. At what time and to what degree will be determined how the game unfolds and probably somewhat week to week based on a myriad of variables.

Certainly proud and happy for Jaylen and excited that we going to do extended business with him.

Q. Do you have a sense for what this game means for Aaron to start out going back into Met-Life and playing his old team?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, I don't because he's just been doing it so long. I'm sure he's capable of compartmentalizing that. If it means anything to him more than a normal game, probably wouldn't tell you. We going to go play football.

Q. ...scouting report on his physical prowess.

MIKE TOMLIN: Aaron's?

Q. Yeah, nobody's seen him in public yet.

MIKE TOMLIN: His arm talent is unbelievable, not only in terms of arm strengths and accuracy but his ability to release the ball from a variety of places.

You know, his game management expertise and experience is very evident.

His line of scrimmage play, weaponizing of cadences, et cetera.

His above-the-neck game is very unique.

It's been a good process. But the proof is in the pudding.

I'm sure he's excited to get into a stadium with us and quarterbacking for us, and I know I'm excited about seeing it.

Q. How do you measure progress for that group when they're not on the field in a game situation?

MIKE TOMLIN: You don't.

Q. The confidence that they're going to be able to hit the ground running, where does that...

MIKE TOMLIN: I'm generally a confident person anyway, and I see them work every day. That daily work leads to in-stadium performance. Do I have confidence about what they're capable of in-stadium, I would be making it up. None of us have seen our guys in-stadium. So I think that's something that we all manage this time of year.

So I might not be answering your question there, but that's just a reality of this business. I think there is some speculation and not knowing this time of year. You can hide under your desk or be confident. I choose to base my posture on what I've seen from a prep standpoint, and I've been really comfortable with what I've seen.

Q. Second straight year you've faced a new coaching staff in the opener. Can you look at the lines last year in the preseason and think you're pretty confident about the way they're going to look schematically, or do you have to assume some curve balls are coming and be on your feet?

MIKE TOMLIN: I think it's appropriate to assume there is some unforeseen things certainly.

Q. What's the specific challenges of preparing that way?

MIKE TOMLIN: To be honest with you, it's not overly unique. That was the point I was making in the opening. It occurs quite a bit this time of year. There are new staffs every year. They play somebody week one. Just happens to be us. There are several new staffs this year, just so happens we've seen to two years in a row. If you've been in this business any period of time, it's a component of week one football.

Q. (Regarding secondary.) How set are you on the way those players will rotate, or how much will that work itself out throughout the first couple days?

MIKE TOMLIN: Pretty set.

Q. You mentioned Cam's state of readiness physically.

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From a mental standpoint is he locked in and have everything else compartmentalized?

MIKE TOMLIN: I'll let him speak for himself in that regard.

Q. Cam played about 800 snaps last year. If possible, would you like to pull back on some of those knowing he's 36 now?

MIKE TOMLIN: I think sometimes when you are sitting in comfortable seats and you're undefeated and it's week zero, you can talk about those things. Sometimes participation is dictated by necessity, who else is available and so forth, and that's just a reality of this business. I've been in it long enough to see it with those sober eyes.

Sometimes it might not have anything to do with Cam. It's about others. Derrick Harmon's lack of availability. For example, if was extended that oftentimes would bleed over into Cam's participation or increased participation.

That's the reality kind of this business. When you talk about dividing the labor up, none of these things happen in a vacuum. Sometimes it's what's going on around people that dictates their amount of participation, whether it's increased or decreased.

Q. How hard was it to walk away from the idea of Justin Fields as the quarterback this year?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, it's free agency. It was not only our decision. It was his decision. It was mutual. There are a lot of moving parts in free agency. I wouldn't present it in the manner in which you asked it.

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