

Pittsburgh Steelers

Media Conference

Thursday, September 4, 2025
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA

Teryl Austin

Weekday Press Conference



Q. You guys played really well for most of last year, struggled down the stretch. Is there anything about this year that gives you confidence you can really get it to the finish line?

TERYL AUSTIN: I think so. I think, like always, you go back, and you look at what you did last year, what was good, what was bad. So we'll probably try to change some of the things we were doing to keep our guys fresh and keep them ready to go for the entirety of the season, but that's way down the road.

Right now we'd really like to try to focus and win this game.

Q. I think this came up in the Super Bowl when Gruden coached against his old team. Does it help the coach more to know the quarterback, having played against him, practiced with him, or does it help the quarterback more to know your defense?

TERYL AUSTIN: I'm not sure. I know for me the nice thing is I got to see Justin all last year, so you know you don't have any question about, hey, what's his arm strength? What's his speed? You know, those type of things. But there's always the unknown of how they're going to utilize him and what's their passing game going to be, how are they going to utilize him in the run game.

I think we'll know him physically and those things, but in terms of how they're going to use him, we don't. So I don't know if there's a real big advantage one way or the other.

Q. Do you anticipate having Cam Heyward out there on Sunday, and how does it affect preparation?

TERYL AUSTIN: Absolutely. He's been practicing, so I anticipate him playing.

Q. He says he's not sure he's going to play?

TERYL AUSTIN: That's what he says. I just know what I see. He's out there practicing, so I anticipate him playing.

Q. Is he doing everything he would do in previous years to this point?

TERYL AUSTIN: Yes.

Q. This might be building off of what Mike asked before a little bit. Killebrew described himself as a serial optimist, always looking toward the optimistic side. I don't know if that applies to your point of view as well, but if you had a tentpole you put down that would make you most optimistic that this year's team could go a step further or two than last year's, what would it be?

TERYL AUSTIN: I'm always optimistic, like Miles. We put a lot of work in the off-season and leading up to this. Our guys have been working hard. I like the attitude of them. I know they have talent. I feel good going into the season. We'll see how it plays out. Maybe next year I'll have a different story for you at the end.

Like always, you start the season, and your goal is to be a champion. If you're thinking of anything less than that or less optimistic, like we'll just hope to get over the hump or hope to make it to this, I don't know. You start it every year, and your goal is to win a championship. I think, if you come in any less than that, you're selling yourself short, you're selling your players short.

Q. You guys drafted Derrick Harmon with the hope of upgrading your run defense. With him absent or injured right now, what else is going to have to go right for you guys to move up against the run, especially against a Jets team that wants to be physical and wants to run the ball?

TERYL AUSTIN: Obviously we're fortunate it's a short term injury, he'll be back. I think we have quality dudes and quality backups in there, guys that -- you know, you have a veteran guy like Milk and a young guy like Yahya, I think we have some good quality guys that are going to fill that role until he's back.

We have some young guys that are filling that role, they're going to have to fill roles all year because, as you know,

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you don't go through a season unscathed. There's going to be times where those guys miss, and those guys will have to step up and do a really good job. I think we've addressed our depth. We've addressed it with some young talent, some big bodies.

So I'm not really worried about it at this time. If we were to have a whole bunch of injuries, then there might be a different story, but not right now.

Q. With the Jets having Justin Fields and Breece Hall, do you see the option of possible handoff to the running back threat that you guys have to account for? And that was something that the Ravens did well against you guys and a few other teams did last year. How have you guys improved against that specifically as far as how you can take that on better to not let teams be better?

TERYL AUSTIN: Well, we won't know until Sunday. I know we worked at it, we practiced with it. Obviously you're working on it, you're looking at what you're doing scheme-wise. Was the scheme bad? Was the player bad? Was the coach bad? Whatever it was. You look at that, you try to make the changes, and then we'll find out on Sunday if we did a good enough job or if we still need more work.

Q. Do you start with the player or the scheme last year --

TERYL AUSTIN: Obviously I'm starting with me. Until I got to get our guys in the right position to make plays and do that, and then we work down from there.

Q. Why has Yahya had early success, and what's the jump going to be like for him going from what he did there to Sunday?

TERYL AUSTIN: I think he's had some early success because he's a huge individual and he's strong and he uses his hands. I think, when you're an interior guy that has that type of size and length that, when you use your hands and you're powerful, you can get rid of blocks, but off of blocks, you make yourself available to make plays.

So we're just looking for his growth and continued development. I think, as a young guy, the biggest thing that a lot of those guys face is what kind of blocking schemes and how they're getting blocked and recognizing things because the minute they learn those things and understand them with their strength and power, they're able to play and play well.

Cam Heyward is a fine example of that. You're talking

about a big, strong guy who can use his hands and get off blocks, and he understands blocking schemes. So there's times he just shows up and makes plays all over the place because he understands it's not always brute force, but he has that in him.

I think that's what Yahya has. When you're looking at him as an early, developing player, you see some of those traits -- big, strong, with hands and has the ability to develop. I think he's going to be really, really fine run player in this league for a long time.

Q. Patrick talked a lot last year about the adjustment of having the green dot, learning the defense and everything and having that entire -- how have you seen him -- are you seeing him being more comfortable being in that role this year and just playing a little more free?

TERYL AUSTIN: Yeah, I think he's a lot more comfortable because I know it seems easy, just hey, you're just hearing the guy talk to you, but sometimes you don't want to hear my voice and I'm talking to him. Sometimes you're giving guys, hey, here's the call, but hey, alert to this, make sure you relay this, do this. There's a lot of things that are really going on on that mic.

At first it can be unsettling. You're talking about a guy in a new city learning new stuff, all kind of learning his teammates, and there's a comfort level there. So I think he can take that information in a lot more smoothly than he did last year and give it out a lot more smoothly. So I think he's been really, really good in terms of that this year. I think how we communicate is a lot easier and better this year.

Q. Now that you've worked with Yahya, what have you learned about him personality-wise? It seems like he has a dry sense of humor, he likes to wear the crop top jerseys, things like that.

TERYL AUSTIN: He's sexy. He's a big sexy. He's a great personality kid -- loves ball, engaged, active. He's got all the right things. We had him in on a visit, a draft visit, and he was the same guy then that he is now. So it's not a surprise what he is for us.

Q. You've got a lot of new guys on the back end, a lot of big personalities in there too. What's the challenge in navigating that part of it and then sort of making sure that obviously communication is key, but especially week 1, that they're all sort of on the same page? Because they all were the guy at some point in their career, most of those guys.

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TERYL AUSTIN: I coached that position for a lot of years in this league, and you're always managing personalities in that room. It's nothing. Our guys will do a good job of it. Those guys will do a good job of it themselves because they love football.

Again, the communication, we work on that in practice and doing that. They've had a lot of time together in practice settings. Obviously the game is a little bit different as they get used to each other, but I don't worry about that too much with them because I think we got veteran guys, we got sharp guys, and they'll be dialed in, and they'll be fine.

Q. With the amount of talent you have added to the secondary, as a play caller, does that sort of shift things for you from what can these guys do to what I want to do? On paper it doesn't look like there's anything you shouldn't be able to give them based on whatever matchup you think is best. Does that open up what you're able to do a little bit because so many guys can do so many different things?

TERYL AUSTIN: I think so. When you have that versatility and you have the ability that we think we'll be able to match up with with most people that we're going to play pretty solidly, you're not worried about covering a guy up. You're not worried about if you have a mismatch somewhere along the line, obviously that always frees up your playbook a little bit.

I think the big thing is, if we all play together, we try to play to our guys' strengths and what they do, and that will help us win more than anything, than any scheme I'm drawing up or anything like that. If we can play to our guys' strengths and get them in positions to make plays, I think that helps us.

We know those guys. They all come in with really good resumes and all that stuff. We've just got to get them together and hope those resumes live up to what we think they are.

Q. Does strength in the secondary provide flexibility up front too? Do you feel like, hey, we can blitz more because we can play more man or we can spot a quarterback because we don't need clean cover? Things that you can do that aren't necessarily secondary specific because of the strength you have there?

TERYL AUSTIN: Yeah, I just think it does. It enhances your coverage package. It enhances your rush package.

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