

Pittsburgh Steelers

Media Conference

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Mike Tomlin

Weekday Press Conference



MIKE TOMLIN: Good afternoon. It's really exciting to kind of get back and be in the grind that is the football season. Yesterday was a really good day. Today is a good day. Man, just feeling the rhythm of the process, reviewing performance, learning from those reviews, and plotting, of course, for the next sequence, the planning, the prep, and then ultimately, the play.

Yesterday we met a team and looked at the Jet game. Certainly was a lot to learn from that performance. It's really good to learn while winning, so I'm thankful that we did enough to win the game, but certainly there were some things that were indicative of Week 1-like football.

I thought in some instances we lacked in some fundamentals, some communication, and other things that can cause you to play less than stellar, particularly early in the season. I thought a real positive note was we weren't highly penalized. I think we had four penalties in the game, and we really wanted to respect that component of it last week.

We have prepared with an officiating crew at all of our practices. I think we benefitted from that. I think we were one of the least penalized groups in the NFL last week.

There were certainly some Week 1 things. We absorbed some attrition in the midst of play that kind of created more challenges. DeShon Elliott being central there. DeShon being an experienced member of our secondary in terms of being experienced in Pittsburgh, you know, we had some big plans in terms of his usage and his role as a communicator. Certainly was not displeased with the efforts of Chuck Clark, but was highly concerned with a number of new Steelers in an in-stadium circumstance on the back end having to communicate and some of those things.

Offensively, I would like to see us do a better job of protecting Aaron, particularly on play pass, as I mentioned after the game. You absorb certain risk executing play pass in an effort to get yards in chunks, but that risk

shouldn't manifest itself in the form of multiple sacks like it did when you're prepared and in good. As a staff and as a collective, we have to be a little bit better in that space.

Certainly would like to run the ball more. We had zero explosion runs, runs of 10 yards or more. Didn't have enough runs in totality. The Jets had a lot to do with that. They possessed the ball. I think we had 25 minutes of time of possession, and so it affected us in those areas. I look forward to getting back to work in that space.

On the defensive side of the ball I didn't think we whipped enough blocks and made enough tackles specifically. So, you know, those are fundamental things. We certainly will work to continue to get better there. I thought that was just kind of the story of it.

We certainly can do some more things schematically to help the guys and will, but that's an easier endeavor once we gain more experience collectively and some continuity in that space.

I did like, as I mentioned after the game, the ability to stay the course, man, and have the emotions and the continuity to make the necessary plays down the stretch. The three and out prior to the last possession might have been the biggest possession. We went on the three and out on offense just prior to that. We had to punt the ball away, and our ability to go three and out right there particularly with a third down-design quarterback run to win that sequence and give our offense the ball back was as big as the final, final drive.

I like the ability to stay the course and deliver in the weighty moments. You're not going to have a good team and certainly not going to have a good defense if they can't do so. I thought all three phases displayed that over the course of the game in a variety of ways. Our ability to move the ball offensively on the front side at halftime I thought was critical. Certainly our ability to stop them at the end was critical, and certainly we had some timely plays on special teams, first and foremost, with Bos doing what it is that he does.

There's a lot to learn from that. We better learn quickly, as does everyone else, because Week 2 is fast upon us.



Excited about leaning in on prep for Seattle.

I'll quickly give you an injury report. Derrick Harmon is anticipated to continue to be out this week with his knee. DeShon Elliott, the same with his knee. Malik Harrison, the same with his knee. Those are three guys that are potentially scheduled to be out as I sit here today.

Joey Porter wasn't able to finish the game with a hamstring. Optimistic about his availability, but I'll let the quality of his work and the amount of his work during the week be our guide there, and really optimistic and hopeful about Nick Herbig being available for us this week.

As is always the case in ball, you step into a stadium, you lose some capable men, but we also are going to get some capable men back. So we'll put together a collective that positions us to be at our best.

As I'm sure you guys have mentioned, we have Jabrill Peppers in the building. We'll be signing Jabrill today and get him up to speed about what it is we would ask him to do. Highly familiar with him, not only from his time as a Cleveland Brown, but scouted him heavily when he came out of Michigan.

He is a football player first, positional player second. He's displayed position flexibility over the course of his career at either safety position, at run down nickel. He's been a capable guy in the special teams space over the course of his career, recovering kicks, returning punts. He's just a good, well-rounded football player. So glad to add and have him in the fold.

We'll see how we divide the labor up as we get into the week. The ability to communicate and execute obviously will be a major component of how we divide that labor up and go from there.

I'll start on Seattle a little bit. Defensively they're a challenge. They got some talented people on all levels. I'll start first, uniquely, with their secondary. I think not only is their secondary the strongest position on the unit, but probably the strongest position on the team. They just have a very talented and deep group. I think that was on display last weekend.

They play a lot of people. They played as many as seven defensive backs in the game. There are several that make that a reality. First and foremost is Witherspoon. He plays outside at a high level. He plays nickel at a high level. You could say the same thing about Love at safety. He'll play on the back end at a high level. He's got really good instincts and ball skills. You'll see him down in and around the line of scrimmage. He had a sack this past weekend.

Particularly some of the sub work when they get in dime, he's very capable around the line of scrimmage.

Coby Bryant is his safety partner back there. He was a Thorpe Award Winner as a corner at University of Cincinnati. He's made a nice transition to safety, and they form a really rock-solid tandem. Woolen at the other corner opposite of Witherspoon is a height-weight speed guy with some excellent ball skills. He played wide receiver for a couple of years at UTSA prior to coming into the league, and I think his interception production and ball skills really kind of give you an illustration of that history.

At the linebacker level 1-3 Jones, man, is their defensive play caller. Been really solid for them. They acquired him I think at the deadline last year from Tennessee. Got really good instincts, gets from A to B. Had an awesome interception in that game last week, is a really good blitz, has a real good well-rounded game, and is a nice hub of communication in terms of tying all of those things together.

Up front Byron Murphy is a high-round draft pick out of Texas. He's in his second year. Scouted him a lot. He is really talented.

The acquisition of Leonard Williams a year and a half ago at the trade deadline was a significant acquisition for them. Man, he's super talented. He's good versus the run. He's good versus the pass. They move him around. He'll rush centers, guards, and tackles. They play him on the edge at times even in one-dimensional passing moments. Lawrence is a big-time acquisition in free agency for them who will also play on the edge and has a very, very formidable résumé in that space.

So, man, they got a good defense. Coach Macdonald has been around, former Baltimore Raven, man. He's familiar with us. We're somewhat familiar with him.

I see some of the parallels when I watched them play. When I watch Witherspoon play inside and out, it reminds me a lot of Marlin in Baltimore, for example. So there's a lot of those parallels that you can make schematically as you lean in on this preparation, and we certainly do, but I also see contribution from others.

Leslie Frazier is a savvy veteran coach in this game on the defensive side, and he's been out there with Coach Macdonald as well. You see some of Leslie's background from a schematic standpoint on their video as well.

They have a well-rounded group. They have some really capable coaches. They're doing a nice job of mixing and



expanding some schematics to create issues, and certainly at this early stage of the season this is a concern from a strategy perspective on the other side, because there's always the element of the unknown.

We'll be in that mindset for a few more weeks, as will everyone else, until there's enough video evidence out there for people's comfort. That's just a component of September ball in this league.

So on the offensive side of the ball, they got a group that's really committed to running the ball. Coach Kubiak is a coordinator. Dennison is the line coach and kind of run game coordinator. They certainly have a history together. Although they're new to Seattle, they've been together. They were together in New Orleans last year. I think they were together in Minnesota. It was in 2021.

But Dennison certainly has a mode of operations. He and Kubiak work well together. There's a commitment to running the ball. They got two really good, capable runners. I think that was on display a week ago, but you know, there's more evidence of that.

Can't say enough about Walker and his pad level, his ability to finish. He's got a real good run posture and run demeanor.

As I mentioned earlier, they certainly have a mode of operation. They're very good zone scheme blockers. They have guys up front that are really capable of moving well laterally, individually and collectively. They can capture gaps. They can cut off back-side defenders. Their tackle tandem in particular is very talented. Their right tackle, they just redid on extension of left tackle. Was a first-rounder a couple of years ago from Mississippi State. Zabel, a highly-regarded rookie guard, probably the best guard in the draft. He's a plug-and-play type.

They got a real good group up front. They got a mode of operation. They got two really good, capable runners. We certainly have some video on tape from last week that should excite them and create urgency in us as we prepare.

In the passing game obviously they acquired Sam Darnold, man, and this guy is just battle-tested. He's been in a lot of systems, in the midst of it all, moving around. He's continually improved over the course of his career. He makes quick and fluid decisions. He's good with the ball. He takes care of the ball. He moves his unit, and that's why they have the type of success that they had with him in Minnesota a year ago and why they won as a football team. He certainly has our attention, his eligibles.

Smith-Njigba was targeted quite a bit last week. Not surprised. He's been developing and emerging since he's been in the league, and it's time for him to be that, and certainly the acquisition of Cooper Kupp helps. You talk about a savvy route runner, a guy that's really experienced and savvy at finding spaces versus zone and showing patience and losing people at the top of the route and winning versus leverage and man. He's made a career of that.

There's a lot of things that have our attention, but more importantly than anything else it's Week 2, and it's our first time in that seven-day cycle, and I'm excited about doing it at home at Acrisure in front of Steeler Nation.

I'll pause and open it up for questions.

Q. Did you go into the Jets game with an aggressive game plan wanting to use your new toys, or did the game flow kind of dictate?

MIKE TOMLIN: A little bit of both. Certainly when you acquire talent, it's our job to utilize that talent, and particularly utilize that talent in spaces where it's in their wheelhouse. Certainly that was the goal last week, and that's the goal every week, to be quite honest with you.

Then, secondarily, we've always got to be willing to adapt and adjust based on how games are unfolding and how matchups may dictate that. Sometimes you might have a mindset about approaching the game a certain way, and a counterstrategy might alter that. We weren't certain whether Sauce Gardner was going to travel with DK, for example. It didn't take long to realize that he did.

You make plans whether he does or he doesn't. You see what is going to happen, and then you go down the line accordingly.

Q. Specifically about DK, you guys got a couple of run-after-catch explosions from him throughout the course of the day. Was that designed thinking going in, or is that just kind of the nature of how those plays manifested?

MIKE TOMLIN: Both, again. DK is big and fast. You certainly want to get the ball in his hands. He is certainly capable of being a tough tackle in the secondary once he does. It's our job to get him the ball in spaces where those talents show.

Sometimes it's quick-hitting passes, particularly early in the game. I think it was the first third down of the season. They pressured us. We were able to distribute the ball to him quickly. He was able to make a would-be tackler miss



and go down the sideline for roughly 25 yards. I think those are indications of why we acquired him.

Q. Just sticking with DK, everyone knows he's big, physical, and fast, but what have you learned or what's impressed you about his practice habits and the way that he works during the week?

MIKE TOMLIN: Man, he is a professional, but I can't say that I was surprised by it. You do your research. This is a small league in the big scheme of things. Certainly you know about the significant players, not only their talents, but their relationship with their game, their lifestyle, if you will. All of those things were really positive components of his profile and one of the reasons why we were really excited about acquiring him.

Q. Mike, how would you evaluate Broderick's performance?

MIKE TOMLIN: Certainly it could be better, but certainly all of our performances could be better. As I mentioned, our quarterback got hit too much, and he was a component of that.

Q. Do you worry about confidence with him at all?

MIKE TOMLIN: I don't.

Q. Why not?

MIKE TOMLIN: Because it's football, you know? You don't get to the National Football League by being fragile emotionally. There's a lot of confident guys that I work with. You win some battles. You lose some battles. You come back fighting. That's just the nature of the men that play this game at this level.

Q. How do you evaluate Troy Fautanu's first game action?

MIKE TOMLIN: Just like Broderick. I thought he had some good moments. I thought he certainly could be better, as I mentioned. As a collective, we had a quarterback hit too often for my liking. We're back to the lab.

Q. What happened with Cole Holcomb not getting any snaps on defense?

MIKE TOMLIN: We're just playing to win the game. Certainly if opportunity presents itself from a matchup standpoint, we're open to it, but we don't feel obligated for participation. This is not Little League Football. We're going to assimilate a group that we think is capable of win certain matchups in certain moments, and certainly Cole

has had a good process. We're happy to have him back from injury, and I'm sure he'll get an opportunity in the not too distant future.

Q. What does Keanu have to do to do better at the nose tackle position? Is there any consideration of shifting around roles as far as lines of over B gap versus A gap...

MIKE TOMLIN: No, there's no real strong consideration at moving people around at this juncture. Keanu is expected to get better from Game 1 to Game 2 like everyone else. I think it's a reasonable expectation. At least it is for me.

I think once you've been in the stadium and you've played 60 minutes of football, you know something about yourselves that you didn't prior to going into it, and I think that knowledge, that experience individually and collectively, is a catalyst for improvement between Game 1 and Game 2.

Q. How do you assess how Aaron played with the game and how you assess how he did?

MIKE TOMLIN: I thought he was really good. I thought he was what we needed to be. Again, as I mentioned, not surprised by that. I expressed my levels of confidence, if you will, leading into the game based on what I saw from him in preparation.

Q. Are either Harrison or Elliott candidates for injured reserve?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, I haven't even begun to think about that. They're in the building right now getting treatment. We'll make some of those type of decisions later on today or tomorrow, if you will. It's just normal business procedure at the top of the week.

Q. Was the Jabrill Peppers signing a byproduct of DeShon's injury?

MIKE TOMLIN: Yes.

Q. You talk about running the ball better. Do you feel like it was problems with blocking, schematically, your running back? Where is the biggest area of opportunity there?

MIKE TOMLIN: I would be remiss if I didn't compliment the Jets, and their players and their schematics had a lot to do with it. As I mentioned, sometimes it's none of the above. Sometimes it's just lack of opportunity on how a game unfolds.

We didn't possess the ball enough. I think we had 25 minutes of time of possession, and some of that time was done in a catchup-like capacity, which changes your run-pass ratio, if you will.

Q. Jabrill Peppers has made a lot of plays against you guys over the years. Which one stands out to you?

MIKE TOMLIN: Man, you know, I don't know, to be quite honest with you. I did so much work on him in the draft. I think maybe his Michigan plays probably stand out more than his professional plays.

He was just used a real unique way in Michigan that really highlighted his talents. I think he was even a two-way player at one point. He played linebacker like in some of their Bear-structured fronts. He returned kicks. He was just a well-rounded football player in all areas of the game.

Q. You talked about protecting Aaron Rodgers. How is Seattle a different challenge with some of their simulated pressures versus a team like the Jets that's more blitz-centric?

MIKE TOMLIN: I don't know that they are. I think everyone is still kind of defining who they are at this juncture.

You know, the game unfolded uniquely last week in terms of Seattle and San Fran. It became Rock 'Em Sock 'Em Robots and heavy run games and things of that nature. I'm sure they had some things from a blitz perspective that they didn't have an opportunity to get off. I'll reserve judgment on some of that.

Q. What specifically are you looking for from your run defense coming up?

MIKE TOMLIN: I want us to be stouter.

Q. You mentioned some of the physical elements of that in your opening, trying to get off blocks better and make tackles better. Are there some pre-snap schematic assignment duties that need to be sharpened up as well? Like, for instance, the fields run in the goal line situation.

MIKE TOMLIN: I don't know if the schematic duties, per se, has to do with recognition or anticipation. I just think there's an element of the unknown early in the season that slows you down from a collective play speed perspective, from a communication perspective, and I think it's reasonable to expect all those things to improve.

Q. You've talked a lot about whipping blocks, the importance of that. As far as sometimes the block, a double-team amidst keeping other guys clean, what do you guys have to do better at that to help?

MIKE TOMLIN: It's all wrapped up in the same discussion.

Q. Would you have drafted Peppers?

MIKE TOMLIN: I don't want to take picks that high. That requires you to lose a lot of games.

Q. He was picked 25th, wasn't he?

MIKE TOMLIN: I just assumed it was earlier than that. I don't know (laughing). Okay.

Q. Roman had a big preseason. Only ten snaps on Sunday. Is that a byproduct of what you guys were just...

MIKE TOMLIN: And lack of possession of the football and agenda relative to that day. As I mentioned after the game, I got no intentions of explaining the minutia of rep distribution week in and week out. We got a really good collective.

In some instances highly specialized skill sets. In some weeks those skill sets are going to be highlighted and utilized. Some weeks they're going to be minimized. There's just a component of winning football games in today's NFL and really don't require a whole lot of explanation.

Q. Kyle Dunbar talked about this on draft day. He really thought Yahya could do well over guards and tackles as opposed to nose. What is it about his game? Why is it that way, and can you envision him someday taking on snaps?

MIKE TOMLIN: Certainly. He could play snaps at nose because he's a big man. He's able to absorb double teams and not be moved. He's capable of playing at further distances, greater from -- at greater distance from the ball because of his length and his ability to cover spaces with that length and keep people off of his body and play the back side of runs and things of that nature.

So that's what Dunbar was talking about when he highlighted his levels of excitement.

Q. Do you have a sense that this game has any other extra significance for DK going against his former team?

MIKE TOMLIN: I haven't talked to him about it whatsoever. I don't know that I've seen him since we got off the airplane and got back here in a one-on-one-like capacity.

Commonsense would tell you that it certainly does. They drafted him. He played there a number of years. Whether or not he will acknowledge it is up to him.

Q. This season opener is one thing. The home opener is different. What are your thoughts on Steeler Nation being able to first see this offense for the first time this season?

MIKE TOMLIN: I'm always excited to play within the comforts of Acrisure in front of our fans. They're a source of inspiration for us. They're certainly a source of challenges for those that we compete against, but we also respect the challenge that it creates for us.

From a defensive perspective we have to work with crowd noise this week to make sure that our communication and so forth is on point as they create a hostile environment for our opposing offense.

Q. You talked about the length of Yahya Black, but what can Broderick Jones do to better use his length? He is one of the longer armed, bigger body guys on your offensive line, especially when it comes to pass protection.

MIKE TOMLIN: I don't think that lift is an issue in terms of his game, in terms of areas of "get better". It is an asset.

Q. I want to get a better understanding of that rule that Ramsey got flagged for. In theory, is a player in open space like that supposed to be able to go through a blocker to get to a ball carrier? Is he allowed to do that, or is it incumbent on him to avoid?

MIKE TOMLIN: If we're talking about the rule, the rule is obviously you can't cut in open grass. In regards specifically to the play, I've had zero communication with the NFL office in terms of their interpretation of the rule. I understand the rule. I just simply didn't think it applied to him in that circumstance.

I thought he stepped around it, that would-be blocker, and skinned himself and went in for a low tackle. That's why I disagree with the call. I've had zero conversations with the league office regarding their interpretations of the play.

Q. There are so many first-year acquisitions making a huge impact in the game against the Jets. What were your conversations like with Omar after the game, and was there a little bit of extra chest pump because of

these new guys playing such a --

MIKE TOMLIN: I'll keep communication between Omar and myself between us. I don't know that it helps us to be transparent in that way, but our communication was normal... assessing what transpired in the game, particularly from an injury and player availability standpoint and making some initial decisions about how to move forward for this week's challenge.

Q. Calvin Austin had a touchdown, also a combat catch. Obviously dealt with injury for some of the preseason. Where have you seen him grow into where he is now?

MIKE TOMLIN: He's grown in all areas, to be honest with you. He's a guy that was really limited in his rookie year due to injury, and in spite of that saw dramatic improvement between Year 1 and Year 2. He's such a good professional, has such a good relationship with the game, it was reasonable to expect that to continue.

DK gets a lot of attention, schematic attention, personnel decision. So it created some real opportunities for Calvin, and I know he's game and ready for that.

Q. What was the thought process behind the competition on the kickers or manipulate the kicking ball beforehand, and do you think that will help or has helped Bos?

MIKE TOMLIN: I have zero idea, to be quite honest with you. I'm certainly not a kicking specialist. I'm certainly not a ball treatment specialist. I leave that between Bos and our equipment personnel.

I'm aware of the rule that you mentioned, but I've been in this league long enough that I've seen it evolve and come back. When I first got into the league, the guys used to handle and treat the balls and so forth, and then we kind of moved away from it. Now we've kind of moved back to it.

I think that's with a lot of discussions in the National Football League having been in the league a long time, things happen in cycles. You know, schematic concepts, you know, get really trendy, and then they go away. Then they come back. Same thing with the points of emphasis and rules at times, and that's just the lens through which I see it because I've been on the committee a long time and certainly have been in the league a long time.

Q. (Indiscernible). Did you envision him being a big part of your offense, and why is he such a good fit for what you've done?



MIKE TOMLIN: We did, and we did because we had real evidence. We've played against him, and he's made some plays against us. We played him in Philly a year ago, man.

Those third-down conversions that he made were a significant component of the game. They were. They threw the ball to him on swings with very little risk. He won some one-on-one circumstances and converted, allowed drives to stay alive, put points on the board. He was also a very viable special teams player for them. A year ago I think he had six or so tackles on their kickoff unit. I wasn't surprised by that play-making component of his game.

You know, maybe his talents were minimized because of the talents of those around him. I mean, he did play with Saquon. So those are some of the things that went into the excitement around his acquisition.

Q. When it comes to you guys' run game, you didn't get to test it out too much in the full first team in preseason and then, as you said, circumstances kind of limited what you could do in Week 1. How do you chart as a coach the path forward for this group to find its footing in the run game?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, it's business as usual. It is. We look at the teams that we play against. We see what they do well individually, what they do well schematically. We formulate a base plan and build from there. Nothing changes.

Certainly in Week 2 there's less speculation than some of that, but we have a process, but everybody has a process that leads from planning to preparation to play.

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