

Pittsburgh Steelers

Media Conference

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Mike Tomlin

Weekday Press Conference

MIKE TOMLIN: Good afternoon. Really champing at the bit to get going this week, to lean into our next opportunity coming off of that losing performance that we had last week. We got started appropriately yesterday.

We took a hard-core look at the video and acknowledged some areas certainly that needed to be addressed in terms of improvement. Win or lose, at this juncture of the season we're all combing through the tape in that way.

We did similar things Week 1. Certainly there are some things. I often say two is a pattern, and we have two games under our belt. I see some things certainly that need our attention, so I'm excited about getting to work.

As far as the game and how it unfolded, it was less than stellar in a lot of areas, but we certainly had an opportunity to win until the deep punt moments of the game. Certainly I thought there were some significant plays that really shaped how that game unfolded down the stretch.

Offensively after that big play to Jaylen we turned the ball over in the tight red. We spent a lot of time working in the tight red as an offensive unit because we realize how significant that space is in terms of determining unit performance and, thus, the outcome of games.

We oftentimes talk about it searching for the four-point swing. We don't want to settle for field goals as an offense. We certainly want to make our opponent settle for field goals as a defense in that space, but as you know, we turned the ball over. I thought that was really significant in terms of how the game unfolded.

On the special teams, certainly the lack of judgment by a young return man was a significant play in the game, as I mentioned after the game. A lot of times, man, when you're in close ball games, particularly early in the year, there's a play in that space, in that special teams space, that often shapes or turns a game. It helped us in a positive way with the play by Kenny Gainwell with the Jets and certainly the game the other day was a negative



outcome.

I thought our defense wore down some, particularly as the game went on. We had the desire to improve our run defense. I thought particularly initially we did, but there was an attrition component to the game, and our lines got a little thin at various points of the game. I thought we felt the effects of that. I know certainly we were somewhat limited with some of the schematics that we would like to deploy, because we had some new people in there, and we're relatively new to this season.

We weren't as good as I would like for us to be in terms of our midstream adjusting in terms of some of those things, so I'm excited about getting the collective back to work here with a six-day preparation cycle in effort to address some of those things.

From a health standpoint I'll give you a quick outline of some of these things. First, the guys that have been out. D. Elliott is improving, but I would characterize his availability as questionable at best this week. Derrick Harmon, same thing. His work is improving. His health is improving, but he would best be described as questionable, along with Joey Porter, who continues to work. I just saw him back there a few moments ago.

The same three guys that were out a week ago could best be described as questionable, but we'll watch them throughout the week. We'll certainly gauge their participation and the quality of participation, and particularly the younger the player, the more significant that is.

Harmon obviously would be stepping into his first regular season action, so there's a higher standard in terms of his availability. I think that's appropriate in terms of putting him in a position to perform and to perform well.

Some in-game things that happened to us, just giving you an update there. Loudermilk will be out. He has a high ankle sprain. That could be described as weeks. Alex Highsmith, he has a lesser significant, but at the same time he has an ankle sprain as well. He could be characterized as out as well.

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We had some guys that got banged up in-game that may limit them at the early portions of the week, but should not eliminate them from participation. Some of those guys include Patrick Queen with an oblique and Slay with a shoulder.

As you can see, a lot of those guys are and have been defensive players, but oftentimes it happens like that in football. It is our job and their job to adapt and adjust to put together the appropriate formula in terms of mixes of people, how we divide the labor up, and what we do schematically.

So really excited about it. That was one of the things that I was referring to when I was talking about the level of excitement in terms of leaning in on this opportunity this week. As a coach, you got to love those challenges. It's our job to put the ones that are available in position to be successful. So we're excited about that.

Now, on to New England. They're a new staff certainly, but there are a lot of things that are familiar. We've competed against Mike over the years, and certainly I see some characteristics in all three phases of the game that look highly familiar.

Obviously on offense, and I'll start there first, their play caller is Josh McDaniels. We've competed against him quite a bit over the years.

Offensively the running backs are a talented and deep group. Stevenson has been around for a number of years now, has been consistently productive in that time. They drafted Henderson out of Ohio State. He's a very good top-end speed guy and perimeter guy. You see them getting him the ball in spaces and in the screen game.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention Gibson, who is also a very talented member of the back field as well. That showed in the kick return game last week, but he's been a very good contributor to them. So they've got three really capable backs and guys that we need to work to minimize.

They got quarterback mobility in the form of Drake Maye. He does a really good job of extending plays and making plays with his legs. So the weeks where quarterback mobility are a factor, that usually has your attention from a rush and coverage perspective. You have to be real solid in the rush to eliminate downhill escape lanes, et cetera. You got to be ready to cover, extend it as they utilize their legs to extend plays. That's certainly been an asset of his game since he's been in the league.

They use multiple tight ends at times. Henry is a security blanket for Drake, if you will. They've got an awesome

rapport. You see it. You saw it play out over the latter half of last year and certainly through the early stages of this year.

They got a deep wide receiver group. They spread the ball around to a lot of guys. A significant acquisition in the offseason is Diggs, and certainly he's getting himself up to speed coming off the injury. You see that uptick in that from Week 1 to Week 2, and I would imagine that's going to continue. They move him around some. He's a big possession down target for them.

So there's a lot of people that have our attention on offense. Josh always does a nice job of working to keep you off balance. He'll get you in big personnel groups and spread you out, but as I mentioned, we've competed against him a lot over the years. There's some familiarity there, but I also imagine he's saying similar things.

On the defensive side of the ball, they really did a nice job of acquiring some top-end talent up front, and I think it's been reflected in the production thus far. They got to be one of the top teams in the league in terms of sacking the quarterback. They picked up Williams from Philadelphia on the inside, and they have Harold Landry on the edge. Mike obviously is familiar with Landry. They drafted him in Tennessee. He's been highly productive since he's been in the league, and he's off to a really good start for them as well this year.

They acquired Robert Spillane from Vegas. We're familiar with Robert certainly, him being a former Steeler, but they're also familiar with Robert. Robert was a Tennessee Titan before he was a Steeler. I think he was on their practice squad at one point. He's evolved and evolved in a big way over the course of his career. I got a lot of respect for him and his talents. He's an every-down situational player. He's a good communicator. He's a really good quarterback keyer, and he's really kind of the hub of communication and the center of all of the things that they do schematically.

They play a lot of people in the secondary. They'll package you. They have big nickel. They have pass down situational nickel. They'll dime you at times. They have Mapu as a linebacker that plays some in passing circumstances and is really good in coverage. I thought it was a really big play he made last week versus the Dolphins in the passing circumstances as an underneath defender with a big-time interception.

They turned over some people at the safety position, but they're not lacking talent there. They play as many as four guys in various circumstances. So they do a really good job of making you get prepared for package football, of

dividing their labor up, and using a lot of people in an effort to secure a victory.

Special teams has been a splash unit for them. They made a big play last week certainly, but they've made big plays throughout. The rookie talented runner had a big kickoff return I think in the first preseason game, and I think that has all of our attentions, that special teams space. The newness of the dynamic kickoff and the adjustments being made. I know I'm personally looking at a lot of global tape looking at schematics and how people are deploying people. The sizes of people at times are changing in that space because of the vertical grass that's been covered.

Those are just a lot of interesting things going on in the kickoff and kickoff return game that could have an impact certainly in the splash plays at the early portions of the season. I think their tape reflects that to this point.

So we have a lot of irons in the fire, but such is life. It's that time of week. Certainly there needs to be a lot of irons in the fire as we work to get that taste out of our mouth from a negative performance and secure victory this week.

I'll pause and open it up for questions.

Q. When you mentioned that the schemes are limited up front, is that because of your young guys, Yahya Black and Logan Lee? How do you overcome that when you have that situation?

MIKE TOMLIN: I think in general we continue to work. It's not only their youth. It's our collective youth in this season that is 2025.

Injuries are a part of the game. Certainly you adapt and you move on, but it certainly probably comes with more talent at the early portion of the year. I think we've kind of felt the effects of that.

I certainly feel confident that we're going to experience the benefit of that. We got some young people gaining some really in-game experiences, and we're being challenged as strategists to adapt and bring the game to them. I think in the big scheme of things all of those things are positive.

Q. Do you continue with the rotation at that defensive line spot, or do you put one person in there?

MIKE TOMLIN: Certainly I think in the early stages of the year, particularly with the attrition that we have, we are open to playing a lot of people. I think the strength is in numbers with your defensive bigs at the early portions of the year.

Q. When you say the Patriots are one of the top teams in the league in terms of sacking the quarterback, how do you feel about this offensive line going in there?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, I feel great about it, to be honest with you. I like our group. We're going to continue to get better. We have to work in that spirit.

Certainly we could have been better in some areas last week, but that's life. I like the overall trajectory of the group as a collective and as individuals. I'm excited about getting them back in the next stadium.

Q. In terms of coverage having guys like Ramsey and Slay, even without Porter in there, how do you balance trying to put them schematically in advantageous situations versus calling something and letting them go out there and make a play?

MIKE TOMLIN: I think what you're referring to is the communication component of it, and certainly like last week, for example, the four starters in our secondary were all new to us. So it's probably most of my concerns are centered around that level of cohesion and communication given the fact that so many guys are new to us.

Q. You've given up the most plays of 15 yards or more in the NFL. What do you attribute that to through two games, and how do you fix that as a team?

MIKE TOMLIN: Again, when I've kind of been talking about. We've got to be better. We have to strategize better. We have to play better. We have to divide the labor up a little better.

Some of that's been challenging with some of the attrition, but that's what we're with paid to do. I'm excited about addressing it this week.

Q. Specifically with middle linebackers, how do you feel like they've played? Are you going to work Holcomb more into that mix?

MIKE TOMLIN: I think he played some last week, but we're certainly going to play viable and capable of people. PQ got banged up in game. Payton Wilson I think was experiencing some sickness at points in game. So certainly we played some more, and I would imagine we'll continue to do that as we prepare for this week.

Q. Will you have Kaleb Johnson return kickoffs again?

MIKE TOMLIN: Probably not in the short-term. I'm certainly going to give him an opportunity to work his way back from that error. I believe in his talent. He's a sharp,



young man. He's a hard worker.

So you leave the light on for him. You give him an opportunity to move on from it, but he has to do that. He has to display that with his daily work, and he's got to earn himself back in the position to be a participant. So.

We'll see where the roads lead us. I'm open to it certainly.

Q. How do you coach a rookie to learn from that mistake and to be able to move on from it?

MIKE TOMLIN: Just as I described. You got to man up. You got to acknowledge your shortcomings, and then you have to work to move beyond it, and it's my job as a leader to provide that opportunity.

Q. How was his response so far?

MIKE TOMLIN: He hasn't had an opportunity to physically respond. Forget what you say. It's about how you move forward in terms of your work, the level of detail, and the consistency of it. We certainly will be watching that closely as we push into this week.

Q. What did you see as being some of the candidates to kind of fill that spot?

MIKE TOMLIN: I haven't even begun to address it yet.

Q. Seattle converted a lot of third downs, like third and nine, third and 12, third and 14. Even if they didn't convert them, they got to fourth-and-one situations, and it was all over the middle. What did you see, whether they were attacking you or just breakdowns on your side?

MIKE TOMLIN: I just thought in general we could have been tighter in coverage and more solid in terms of some of our communication, and oftentimes the tightness of coverages was oftentimes a reflection of understanding and fluid communication, and so we have to get better in some of those areas.

Q. How about stuffing the run? Where do you feel like some of the biggest shortcomings have been in that area?

MIKE TOMLIN: I thought we did a better job in Week 2 certainly than Week 1. I thought it got away from us down the stretch as we wore down. I think they maybe had 50 yards or so in the last scoring drive, for example. So we're just simply going to get back to work.

Q. Did you have any questions about whether the

Seattle players remained inbounds before going out on that fumble recovery? Did you get any clarification?

MIKE TOMLIN: I didn't. They ruled it a touchdown on the field, and so that provided an opportunity for it to be reviewed. I assume that they did that, so I moved on.

Q. Looking at your own team's run game, where do you feel like you guys took a step forward with Jaylen Warren last week?

MIKE TOMLIN: I thought Jaylen came to play. I thought he won one-on-ones. He oftentimes made the first tackler miss. He had a good pad level in downhill finish in his play.

I thought as a collective we still lack a little cohesion at times that is slowing us down. A missed combination there, a missed identification there. There's not one particular person, and that's why I'm just talking more broadly about us just needing to continue to work and solidify all of those things so we don't leave quite as much meat on the bone.

Q. You mentioned two is a trend for this year's team. Are you noticing any trends that have continued from last week in terms of how your opponents are attacking you on defense regardless of what personnel changes you may have made?

MIKE TOMLIN: No, I have not.

Q. You mentioned that lack of cohesion. What do you think is behind that? What needs to happen for there to gain more cohesion?

MIKE TOMLIN: Just collective working work. Just collective cohesion. We all better get better. Not only us, but everybody in the National Football League. I see a lot of that on a lot of our tapes. Not to seek or to provide comfort. It's just the reality of why get better and physical work is so important, particularly at the early stages of the season.

Q. You said you felt like Aaron was hit too much after Week 1. I think there was one more hit on him Week 2. Is that a concerning trend for you?

MIKE TOMLIN: No. Less so this week, because of the nature of how it happened. Week 1 it was first and second down play passes and things of that nature. It was more circumstantial and reasonable circumstances in terms of in-game play, possession down football, two-minute and so forth in this game. So it's less alarming than it was in Week 1.

Q. How was Sawyer do you think this past week?

MIKE TOMLIN: I thought it was a significant improvement in the quality of his play on defense and in teams, but I think that's a reasonable expectation for a lot of young people.

He had been in the stadium, so I thought he played with more emotion. I thought he was more vocal. I thought he was more productive probably because of that comfort. So I'm excited about the extended opportunities that he's going to continue to get, particularly like with Highsmith being out new.

Oftentimes one man's misfortune is another man's opportunity. He's gotten some opportunity because of Herbig's lack of availability. Now that Herbig is back, he will continue to get some more opportunities because of Highsmith's lack of availability.

Q. Aaron talked about limiting crossing routes from what you guys were trying to do, because the Seahawks were using more backed off two-high zone, zone defenses. How do you counter that better moving forward if other teams use that approach against what you guys try to do?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, it's week to week, because it's not only about the structure. It's about the people. So, you know, last week's solutions might be a little bit different than this week's solutions.

Q. I know you haven't used him a lot in offense, but when you make a move like that with Kaleb Johnson, taking him off kick returns, do you have to be cautious about maybe mentally that affecting his other role?

MIKE TOMLIN: Certainly, but you know, I don't think you get to the National Football League without having faced some adversity as a player and responding appropriately. He's a young guy, and so certainly I'm going to watch him closely, but I expect him to rebound. I expect him to roll his sleeves up and go to work and to wait for his next opportunity.

Q. You used less play action this last week than in Week 1. Was that matchup-specific or...

MIKE TOMLIN: Game plan-related certainly.

Q. What have you seen from your offense through these first two weeks here?

MIKE TOMLIN: I thought, largely, we've been really good

in the red area. Obviously until that turnover and being good in the red area is a major component of good offensive football.

I think you seek and desire to put points on the board and to score points. We did a lot of it in Week 1. I thought we supported our defense appropriately, so after the big interception by Herbig in the first half and punched that in.

So I like the overall trajectory of us performing in situational moments. We've been good before halftime I think in both games in terms of moving and putting points on the board. I like the overall trajectory of situational play.

I think we're gaining some traction in terms of consistency in our run game, but we just have to continue to have all those arrows moving upward and onward. Obviously the agenda is to produce a winning victory.

Q. What do you view your offensive identity as, and how close are you guys to achieving that?

MIKE TOMLIN: It's the early stages of the year. We're just trying to win football games. We're trying to distribute the ball to capable people in their areas of strength. I think that will be revealed as we all get a larger body of work. Not only for us, but for those that we compete against. I think a two-game body of work is a small, small sample size.

Q. You talked about the tush push and as a member of the competition committee, but while it's still a rule, have you thought at all about using it?

MIKE TOMLIN: Yes.

Q. Would you use it with a player other than a quarterback?

MIKE TOMLIN: I'm not going to get into strategy detail. You guys come to practice. You see what we do. You guys just trying to get me on record. Next.

Q. Somewhat related, the punt from your 48 on fourth and one, would you be okay with Aaron absorbing that kind of hit in a sneak at this point in his career?

MIKE TOMLIN: Yeah, yeah. Aaron is a very, very durable and tough and tough-minded guy. I don't worry about him uniquely per his position.

Q. (Indiscernible) took accountability for his performance in Week 1, talking to us last week. How did you feel he responded with his Week 2 play?

MIKE TOMLIN: I thought it was significantly better.



Q. With a week under his belt do you feel like you can use Jabrill Peppers a little bit more, and does his familiarity with New England play into that it this week?

MIKE TOMLIN: I haven't delved into his specific familiarity with New England, but certainly being his second week here, I'm hoping to expanding the utilization of him not only as a teamer, but as a defender.

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