

Pittsburgh Steelers

Media Conference

Tuesday, September 23, 2025
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA

Coach Mike Tomlin

Weekday Press Conference



MIKE TOMLIN: Good afternoon. Really excited for this week's work, certainly getting an opportunity to play internationally is a big honor, something that I've been a part of a couple times.

Doesn't get old representing our game of American football on the international stage. It's a really cool thing.

So excited about being a component of that, but as we sit here today, it's more about the preparation that tees up performance, and that's what really has our attention.

Before I get into some of those things I will give you a quick review of last week's performance. As we talked after the game, good to win, good to win in a hostile environment. Had some really positive things. Thought we did a nice job of working our turnover culture, pursuing and getting the football. Certainly needed all of those turnovers. Can't say enough about the ones that kind of bookended halftime.

That red zone takeaway by Brandin Echols at the end of first half, and then the caused fumble and fumble recovery there early in the third quarter.

When you can get those type of point swings in that space you got a chance to win football games certainly, but we're not always going to be able to take the ball away from people. I thought we could have been better in our possession down play defensively, particularly in the short yardage component of possession down play.

I thought quarterback mobility was a component of their success in that space. Thought we did a really good job minimizing the quarterback mobility and drop-back passing circumstances via scramble and things of that nature.

.but I thought the quarterback mobility of Drake Maye was significant in some third and shorts and fourth and shorts, which kept us on the field an extended period of time.

New England was very aggressive in terms of their fourth down play, and we weren't successful. We had an

opportunity to really seize control of the game had we won some more of those, particularly the one that was on the long field.

But it kept some drives alive. They possessed the ball. They minimized our opportunity to possess the ball in doing so, and I think that made sledding tough for us at different times of the game, particularly in the second half offensively.

We stalled ourselves out some. We threw an interception I think on the third play of the second half. We went three and out after that. On the next possession, I think we got a holding call on possession and ten, and when first and ten goes to first and 20 there is a high likelihood for three and out football.

So some of that popcorn, lack of execution, or lack of detail and execution along with their willingness to go for it on possession down moments really altered the time of possession. I think it kind of affected us at times in terms of the way we like to play.

I thought we initially were running the ball very well at the early stages of the game for example. Thought we had a tough time regaining our rhythm because of some of the sequences and things that I mentioned just a second ago.

But you live and you learn. We made the necessary plays to win. Certainly I love the way we're operating in the red area offensively. We got to be one of the top teams in the league in terms of red zone efficiency. You need that.

You need to kick extra points as opposed to field goals, and like the overall trajectory of that. We are spreading the ball around to a lot of people. Starting to really establish some personality things, but I think a lot of people are.

As you move from Game 3 to Game 4 you're starting to see some things and getting a feel of how to best divide the labor up in different circumstances, some general collective growth in all three phases.

Thought we took a step forward in our kicking game. Our kickoff team in particular I thought was better than it has been. We were consistently making stops inside the 30

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and making them play on a longer field and winning the battle of real estate in that space.

And we're getting some play from some young people. I would be remiss if I didn't mention Jack Sawyer, a guy that hadn't played a lot of special teams prior to the National Football League. He was a defensive end, if you will, at Ohio State. I think he had three tackles in special teams last week.

So we are getting some collective growth, some individual growth, such is life this type of year. It's good to do so and win at the same time.

So certainly we hope to continue to do that this week.

From a health perspective, just give you an update on some guys. You can characterize Alex Highsmith as out this week with his ankle.

DeShon Elliott and Joey Porter certainly have a chance. I just saw DeShon working out just a few minutes ago.

We'll work those guys this week and let the amount of their participation and the quality of their participation be our guide in terms of their participation in game, and also the amount of participation.

We were in a similar situation last week with Derrick Harmon for example. He was deemed healthy enough to play, got him in uniform, but we were certainly cognizant of the number of snaps he played.

Health and football readiness and conditioning at times can be different things, so we'll watch those guys close and can make appropriate decisions at the latter part of the week.

We had some bumps and bruises associated with plays that might limit a few people in the early portions of week. Certainly probably doesn't make the availability a question mark. For example, Slay was in and out of the game a few times with a leg contusion. May slow him early in the week, but certainly expect him to be available for us as we push forward to our game time.

On to the Vikings. Start first with the Vikings offense. I think they made the announcement that Carson Wentz is their starting quarterback this week. That certainly has our attention. He's a grisly veteran. Oftentimes, particularly when you have a young inexperienced quarterback, there is some big time benefits of playing with a vet backup.

The veteran guy oftentimes does the intangible components of the job very well. They communicate and articulate the schematics and the plans to others. They

uplift guys and get people lined up. They oftentimes are able to carry more schematic responsibility and so forth at the line of scrimmage.

So I don't necessarily view it as a negative thing for the Minnesota Vikings, at least in the short-term, that Carson is playing for them. We were in a similar situation a year ago. We were playing in Indianapolis and I commented to the guys that, you know, keep Richardson upright. Don't put Flacco in the game, and Flacco ended up in the game.

I think that's oftentimes some of the things that you can run into when you run into a veteran guy, at least from a short term perspective. And so we got a lot of respect for Carson and his journey, his experience, what he's capable of providing his team this week. We are preparing with that understanding and that edge.

He certainly has a full repertoire of targets available to him.

The return of Jordan Addison is big. Watched him a lot when he was in Pittsburgh. He is a talented receiver and capable of taking the top off the coverage. He has very good body control and hand-to-eye coordination and fine motor skills. He's good after the catch.

Certainly Jefferson is a man to be reckoned with. Good 50/50 ball guy, tough, good after the catch as well.

TJ at tight end is a challenge.

So Carson has a nice arsenal of people to throw the ball to. Joe, the running back is down, but they have Mason. He's a guy that distinguished himself in the league last year in San Fran playing in place of McCaffrey. He's a downhill runner. His power always follows in the right direction. Really good game last week.

So we know there are a lot of things that have our attention.

The return of their left tackle is a major component not only of their run game, but also protecting Carson's blindside. We got a lot to be concerned about and prepare for on that side of the ball.

On the defensive side of the ball, certainly highly familiar with Coach Flores and his schematic approach to football. Certainly doesn't make the preparation process or the playing against it in any less difficult. He's very multiple in his schemes and thoughtful. He attacks protections from a pass game perspective and does so very well.

He plays in an aggressive up posture. Structured defensively. Doesn't always mean that he blitzes a lot. Sometimes he can fall out of that into a variety of bogus

zones. More than anything he carries a big menu. He challenges you individually and collectively from a football intellect perspective.

I think the veteran laden secondary really allows a lot of those things to happen. The return of Harrison Smith is significant on the back end, tying all those things together. Got a nice veteran group at corner. Rodgers had a big game last week, and certainly Murphy has been around.

When you got veterans like that it allows you to carry a big menu and do some of the things they do pre-snap from a look perspective that's really challenging to protection schemes.

Up front, Javon Hargraves is significant in terms of their rush. He's been a significant player at every stop. He is good against the run. He is good against the pass.

Got to talk about their edge people. That edge tandem is really impressive. Make a lot of splash plays. Very versatile. They rush versus tackles. They drop in a myriad of schemes that Coach Flores deploys.

We got a lot to get prepared for there. More than anything, it's about us continuing to grow. I'm sure the same thing could be said from their perspective. I think a lot of teams at this juncture of the journey that's really focused on the individual, collective improvement and the consistency of play, and so those are things that have our attention as we lean in on our work week.

The physical work on this side of the trip is important for us. We are doing some things to acclimate ourselves to the trip. We are working early this week to start the body clock transition process. We certainly have some best practices in terms of acclimating ourselves once we begin the journey. Nothing unique there.

A lot of organizations have been traveling internationally now for a number of years so some of those procedural things that put you in position to best perform are less mystical and really more best practices. The hydration and sleep factor and all those things.

We had a good admin meeting yesterday regarding some of that stuff so that we can get singularly focused on the football work, the prep work that's going to be required to position ourselves to play winning football.

I'll pause and open up for questions.

Q. Mike, what did you learn about the travel? You've been overseas one time. Have you learned anything you can take?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, it's been a long time for me individually and that's kind of what I was referring to. There's been a lot of organizations since then that travel. I just think procedurally it's less mystical. Procedures are more global. There is more shared information about how to best pull off these trips.

We have that information. The Vikings have that information. I think it's less of a discussion topic in today's game as it was maybe in 2014 or whatever year that was that we went to London.

Q. How do some of the injury recoveries work with the international travel and playing on a different...

MIKE TOMLIN: I don't expect it to be significant in any of those discussions.

Q. What about having your secondary intact against such an explosive passing, group of receivers at least? Are there things you've been holding back because of these injuries?

MIKE TOMLIN: Certainly, but it's not just the injuries. You know, if you're coaching and you're seeing around corners, certainly one injury doesn't get you off your game and two better not, but it's the injuries coupled with the fact that players themselves are new in general.

As I mentioned last week, all four of the secondary guys in that second ballgame for us were new to the Pittsburgh Steelers. So we got some new people. We got some attrition. Certainly doing what's appropriate when you take the game schematically to those that are playing.

But I imagine the more we play, the more stadiums we step into, the less that discussion is significant. The more we are going to be able to expand our menu and do more things. They will be able to communicate and communicate with great fluidity and understand how we go about our business.

Q. Did Peppers show you in anything last week that makes you want to include him in this group?

MIKE TOMLIN: He certainly did. I thought he played with really good energy. He was productive. He made some tackles. He caused and recovered a fumble. Above all that, I thought his experience showed. Although he was new to us, he was a really good communicator, particularly for a first in-game experience from a defensive unit perspective.

And oftentimes levels of communication is an indication of



understanding, so the way he communicated certainly displayed a high level of understanding and that makes us all really comfortable.

Q. How would you assess how the offense is three weeks in now?

MIKE TOMLIN: I think we're moving good and moving in the right direction. Certainly there are areas of get-better in all areas: run game, pass game, protection, division of labor, personality.

But I like the general trajectory of all these things that I mentioned.

Q. What's keeping the run game from being more consistent?

MIKE TOMLIN: I think sometimes it's game circumstances. We're not getting off the field a lot or frequently enough on defense.

I think it's altering our time of possession, and oftentimes that dictates how the game is played in some instances. You know, Calvin Austin for example. I don't know that Calvin has had a punt return, so that's an indication of the possession component of play and how oftentimes that can affect other phases of the game, not just the unit that might be struggling in a certain area.

Certainly we hadn't got off on possession downs defensively the way we like, and there a trickle-down effect of that.

Q. Now that you've seen three games worth of sample size for DK and how teams are guarding against him, what ways can you be creative and attempt to get him the ball like in week one?

MIKE TOMLIN: I don't have any reservations about our ability to get DK the ball. If people want to allocate schematics to multiple people to him, that's why it's a team game. He's doing a lot of things well. Really comfortable with the division of labor in that space. Guys like Calvin Austin are going to have opportunities to make plays, and you have seen that already in a short period of time.

It's about the general collective growth and development needs to continue.

Q. How do you assess Derrick Harmon's play?

MIKE TOMLIN: I thought he did a nice job for a first time out. Certainly think he needs to continue to work and develop from a conditioning perspective, but that was

anticipated and that's why we were so sensitive to his snap count.

Q. Can the same be said, talking about Tim's question, the way defenses guard Metcalf?

MIKE TOMLIN: No question.

Q. What did Cole Holcomb show you by the way he was able to battle back from the injury and become such an impactful contributor on Sunday?

MIKE TOMLIN: We can't say enough about his mental toughs. It has nothing to do with what he's doing right now from a playing perspective, but there is a loneliness that comes with rehabilitation, and to see his commitment through the process, unwavering commitment, his display of mental toughs, general attitude, I think those are the things that are really significant and why we're looking at the contributions he's able to make now.

Really a mentally tough guy. Awesome relationship with football. He appreciates what others might view as drudgery he enjoys, and I think that helps him in a big way.

Q. What does he add in terms of the run defense when he is out there?

MIKE TOMLIN: He's a downhill thumper.

Q. Some guys have been on international trips before; some of them haven't. How do you instill in them how to balance any unique experience like this with it still being a business trip?

MIKE TOMLIN: I don't necessarily view it as a balance. This is a business trip.

Q. What do you point to for the reasons for the improvement in the red zone offense this year?

MIKE TOMLIN: I think it's year two systematically. Obviously Aaron being the veteran that he is and is an asset there. We have some new unique tools. DK is a matchup issue in one-on-one circumstances. You've seen evidence of that. Jonnu is a guy we like to get the ball to, et cetera.

I just think it's year two of the system and is we got some new tools at our disposal that have assets, or, you know, some experience in some of those spaces.

Q. Troy Fautanu last week, he was talking about the run game. He said that a lot of times it feels like they're one block away from getting runs to explode a

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little bit more frequently. Do you see something similar?

MIKE TOMLIN: I addressed that last week when I described it as popcorn, block here, block there. That is often the case. It's never gross negligence, particularly at this level of play. What we're talking about when we're talking about the difference between success and failure is minutiae, minor things. That's what makes this game so competitive at this level.

Q. Aaron Rodgers said he didn't play well. Through the first three games is he what you expected?

MIKE TOMLIN: He certainly has been, and not only in terms of his play, but in terms of his relationship with the game, how he interacts with teammates, how he loves the preparation process. All those things have been double thumbs up, so it's reasonable to expect the in-stadium performance to mirror that.

So he may be disappointed with how he played last week, but we had an opportunity this week to do something about it. Just watching him day to day there is not a high level of concern in terms of outcome being what we and he desire.

Q. How much is having him in the huddle help with that improved red zone...

MIKE TOMLIN: As I mentioned, he's a component of it. He's played a lot of football.

Q. What's the key to try to minimize some of the different looks you'll get from Flores and avoid confusion?

MIKE TOMLIN: I think the key -- a key component of it is staying on schedule. When he gets you behind the sticks, oftentimes he'll play second down like third down, second and long. So being in second and manageable is a major component of that.

Q. When you were asked earlier if the secondary issues were maybe holding back some of the things you could do on defense, are you at all being forced to hold back some things you might be able to do with offense because of pass protection concerns?

MIKE TOMLIN: Yep.

Q. (Regarding Herbig) what steps have you seen from last year to this year?

MIKE TOMLIN: I think he's still writing that. He's only played in two games. Certainly he has the potential for

splash. That has been a component of his game since day zero. You know, he's good in passing circumstances. He has a feel for the game. He's ball aware.

So I don't believe any of us are surprised by his ability to produce sack fumbles or come up with the football. He's done that since day zero he got here.

Q. He's not the biggest guy in the world. TJ and Alex are both much larger framed. What makes him successful?

MIKE TOMLIN: I think that's probably why we got him in round four. He doesn't necessarily look like an outside linebacker, but he has an outside linebacker's game and he plays like one. That's why you're able to get people sometimes a little bit later in the draft than maybe their tape would indicate, because they don't fit the quote/unquote cookie cutter of it.

We've never had any reservations about his game or what he's capable of; his stature is his stature.

Q. You mentioned the need to improve on the short yardage defense. What can you do?

MIKE TOMLIN: Quarterback mobility being a component of it. Oftentimes you got to be willing to take the guy out of the middle of the field and play 11-on-11 football. We were less willing to do it a week ago. I been in a lot of stadiums with Josh McDaniels, man, and he's willing to play beyond the sticks in short yardage, and so made it more problematic to minimize the mobility of Drake Maye without being willing to do that.

But those are the decisions that you make week in and week out, down in and down out, not only based on the talents of the people you play, but the play callers as well. Certainly we been in a lot of situations in stadiums against Josh, so that was a component of the decision making.

Q. You used to work with Brian Flores. Now he's obviously had success as a coordinator in Minnesota. What about him just that you learned tells you he can be a head coach again in this league?

MIKE TOMLIN: I thought he did a successful job of it the first time around, to be quite honest with you. His willingness to learn is a really attractive component of Coach Flores. We had some awesome discussions during our time together. He certainly has opinions: Schematic opinions, strategic opinions, personnel opinions. But his openness to differing thoughts or viewpoints I think is a weapon for him as a coach.

And so I think that's why you oftentimes see them do a wide variety of things schematically. First starts with an attitude or openness to new things or to learning and discovery.

Q. You mentioned Jordan Addison's personal attributes earlier. With him being injected into the lineup, can you see like their passing game concepts changing at all with how they...

MIKE TOMLIN: I hadn't seen a lot of significant differences in their concepts between the first three games and what they were say maybe doing a year ago, so I don't know that that changes.

Certainly the Jimmies and Joes component of it is a factor. I imagine they'll be glad to have him back.

Q. What did you see from (indiscernible), and do you think he is earning more opportunities?

MIKE TOMLIN: He is, but oftentimes, the rep totality has a lot to do with opportunity. We weren't getting off on third down. We end up playing a lot of snaps.

So you can view it as an uptick in someone's participation. If we are getting off on third down, there might be less snaps and you might be asking me why we're not playing him.

And so I'd much rather you ask me that. My interest is getting off on possession downs.

Q. But is he someone that's part of that mix?

MIKE TOMLIN: Certainly. He's been in uniform every game. His level of participation has been dictated at times by the snap totality.

Q. I know this is a big trip for you. What are you most looking forward to about this game coming up?

MIKE TOMLIN: I think a lot about the late Ambassador Rooney and how fired up he would be about this trip and how important the development of this trip was for him.

So I've been thinking a lot about it. I'm sure I'll be thinking a lot about it this week. I certainly will be thinking a lot about him when we're there.

You talk about a guy that certainly had a lot of passion for ire lapped and obviously the Steelers and serving as ambassador to Ireland. I'm sure he'll be smiling down at us this weekend.

Q. When you play a defense like that, what's the benefit of having a veteran quarterback like Aaron Rodgers who can make changes at the line of scrimmage?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, it's an asset if you make it one. I don't want to make too much out of it. They played the Jets last year. They got off the Jets pretty good. I think Aaron had 20 years of experience then.

So we got some work ahead of us this week.

Q. Does the organization educate the younger players about Mr. Rooney? It's been a while since he passed.

MIKE TOMLIN: All the time. Doesn't take a drip like this for those conversations to happen. You know, those of us that knew him certainly educate the younger players. New Steelers, not necessarily the young player, but the new Steeler about his mode of operation, how he cared about this football team, and what he thought this football team meant not only to the National Football League, but our fans, this community, the responsibility that comes with being a Steeler.

The education is continual.

Q. Mike, what have been some of the issues on third and 7 Patriots converted three...(indiscernible.)

MIKE TOMLIN: They had a really good plan as I mentioned earlier in a myriad of ways. We were somewhat limited with some of our schematics due to obvious circumstances. I expect us to continue to work and get better in some of those spaces.

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