

# Pittsburgh Steelers

## Media Conference

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Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA

## Mike Tomlin

### Weekday Press Conference



MIKE TOMLIN: Good afternoon. Certainly was a good bye week for us on a lot of fronts. First and foremost, from a health standpoint, I feel really encouraged about the return of some people who have been out, guys like Alex Highsmith and Joey Porter Jr., for example, worked yesterday on our bonus day, and the arrows pointed up on their participation. We'll follow them throughout the week to make sure it continues to move in the appropriate direction.

I think the same thing could be said for Jaylen Warren. Obviously he missed the last game but looked really good yesterday. So I'm excited about those guys.

Two guys that we're watching very closely that certainly are going to be limited at the front part of the week but may perk up and be included toward the latter part of the week is Calvin Austin with his shoulder and Jalen Ramsey with his hamstring. Both have been aggressive from a rehabilitation standpoint during the bye week. Really encouraged about the potential of those guys, but we'll take it certainly day to day.

The bye week is also an opportunity for us to sit back and take a look at some of the things we've done schematically, adaptations we've made to circumstance, whether it's matchup related or player availability related, to look at the overall trajectory of our units -- offensively, defensively, and special teams -- relative to our vision.

Also to look around at some of the things that are trending in the game, how people are producing or preventing big plays, whether it's run or pass, the turnover game, gadget plays, et cetera, possession down play, fourth down appetites. We looked at a lot of things going on globally, and I think oftentimes you do that.

But I think that's one of the advantages of maybe having an early bye, just to get a sample size of how the ball is being rolled out globally in 2025 at the early stages of it, and we did some of that. It was a good experience for us. It's also really good to get back into the world of competition this

week. We had a really good bonus day yesterday, putting an emphasis on physical conditioning and running and playing football that way, as we get back and warm back up to it. So excited about continuing that during the week.

I'll talk briefly about Cleveland, some things going on with those guys. First on offense, obviously last week they went to Dillon Gabriel. This guy is a unique rookie. First of all, he's 25 years old, Hawaii native. He's a year older than Herbig, to put perspective on it. He's a six-year college player. He threw for over 18,000 yards in college, 155 touchdowns, 32 interceptions in terms of TD-to-interception ratio. I think that in-helmet perspective you can't put a price tag on. He also threw for 10,000-plus yards in high school.

So he is a rookie, new to the National Football League, but this guy has thrown the football around a lot. He's older and more experienced than most rookies. I think timely processing is a super power, and I think his experience in that super power has been on display. I think those are one of the central reasons why they went to him. He's able to function and function with fluidity in an effort to minimize negativity when passing.

They play a lot through their running back and their running game anyway. So we've got a big challenge dealing with him and dealing with them this week.

I mentioned their running game. I can't say enough about what I'm seeing from Judkins. This guy has played in four games, he started three. He had absolutely no training camp to speak of, and that really highlights what it is that we're looking at. Kudos to him and kudos to them for what he and they are able to produce.

He's a tough runner. He's good inside. He's got good patience and picking vision on interior running. He finishes off his runs with violence. He's underrated in terms of his ability to bounce it to the perimeter and pop long ones. He had a 60-yarder or so that got called back in London last week that kind of highlights that.

I've seen this guy live. Obviously we've got a couple of his teammates from Ohio State. I've seen his video. He's a complete back. He's the type of guy that can wear a

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defensive unit down. Certainly fits their mold. He's an awesome replacement, if you will, for Nick Chubb, and I think it's going to do nothing but get better with him and them.

When speaking about their run game, certainly offensively they've got a lot of young people playing. I mentioned Dillon and Judkins as rookie, but Isaiah Bond and Fannin are also rookies. So they have a lot of young guys at the eligibles, but what they don't have is inexperience up front.

Their three interior people -- Teller, Pocic, Bitonio -- man, they've been doing it a long time. I think Bitonio has 166 starts. The other guys have around 90 apiece in the National Football League. They've probably got 50 or so together, that collective, and I think that interior group up front really sets the pace for them, down in and down out from a protection standpoint and running the ball.

I don't think enough is written and said about that collective and how critical that collective is to their offensive output and stability. Got a lot of respect for those guys. Man, we've got a full day's work ahead of us trying to minimize their run game with that runner and those three interior people up front.

In the passing game, certainly as I mentioned, Gabriel's super power is his process and his timely processing. I think that's on display in his utilization of tight ends. Then Njoku is a guy we've been dealing with for a long time, really talented, really good after the catch, can turn screens and checkdowns into big games, has got a highlight reel full of plays of dragging defenders and things of that nature under those circumstances.

Fannin is an oversized athlete. I think you box him in when you view him as a tight end. There's been some of those athletes in recent years. I think Brock Bowers reflects that in Vegas, for example. He's a prototype of those young guys in that mold. I think that's one of the reasons we were excited about acquiring Jonnu. He fits into that category. These guys are unique athletes. They're matchup problems for linebackers. They're oftentimes too big and strong for secondary people.

I see all of that in Fannin's play. I saw a lot of his Bowling Green tape. He's a talented guy. They do an awesome job utilizing him, and on the outside with Jeudy and Bond, they've got some guys with big-time athleticism, capable of producing big plays.

They do an awesome job taking care of the football. They don't have anybody with ball security negligence in their group. Judkins was very good in terms of protecting the ball at O State. As I mentioned, Dillon Gabriel has been

really good through his college experiences in terms of protecting the ball. We've got to be ready to win possession downs.

They do an awesome job of staying in manageable possession downs, third and short and things of that nature. They play behind their run game in that way. So, man, we've got a really challenging game ahead of us from that perspective.

On the other side of the ball, they've got great players. They've got great schematics. They've got an experienced coordinator in Jim Schwartz. I think they're probably one of the top defenses in football. Statistically it doesn't matter how you describe it or shape it, they're good against the run, they're good against the pass, they're good in situations, sudden change, tight red zone, et cetera.

Obviously if you're starting up front, and that's what you do, it starts with Myles Garrett. He's a game wrecker. We're highly familiar with him. But everyone in the division is, yet and still I think he had two-plus sacks versus Baltimore, two-plus sacks versus Cincinnati this year. We'll take our shot at working to minimize him.

A component of that is staying out of one-dimensional passing circumstances. We'd better do a good job of that. Certainly we're going to deploy all the schematics that most people do trying to minimize a guy like him. We'll use tight end body position. We'll use chip help. We'll slide the line that way, but everybody does. This guy has 100 or so career sacks with people doing that, and yet he still gets home. That's why he is who he is.

We have that to contend with, but I would be remiss if I didn't mention the other guys. The rest of the guys are doing great, man. Mason, the draft pick out of Michigan, is a plug and play type, is highly disruptive, and the rest of their group is as well. They do a nice job deploying schematics. As you work to do some of the things that people do to minimize Myles, the other three guys work in tandem. They have awesome three-man games versus four linemen and things of that nature that really wreak havoc on pass protection.

They have a strong secondary led by Denzel Ward and Delpit. Those guys have been back there a long time and play smart. They do a great job of communicating. They're multiple, as I mentioned.

Schwartz has been around a long time, and that guy does a great job of working to play to their strengths and to cover up potential weaknesses that all units have. You see that in his schematics. He's thoughtfully aggressive. You feel game planning. He caters his plan week to week

based on the things that opponents do.

He's capable of going big in five defensive linemen versus run games and so forth that he respects. I saw a lot of that versus Baltimore. He's multiple in terms of dime packages and so forth against teams that throw the ball around a lot. I saw a lot of that in Cincinnati, for example.

We've got a lot of work in front of us. We've got a long week. We're highly familiar with those guys, but they're highly familiar with us. I just think that's the fun and excitement of divisional play, that intimacy, those relationships.

Certainly we have some new guys to us that need to establish themselves in the North. They have some new guys that we need to familiarize ourselves with. Looking forward to an action-packed game. More importantly than that, we've got a solid week of work in front of us in preparation.

**Q. You mentioned looking at what's going on around the league in terms of, you said, preventing big plays. What are you seeing in general? What are you seeing teams do against you in that regard?**

MIKE TOMLIN: Specifically us or globally?

**Q. Maybe you guys first.**

MIKE TOMLIN: Oftentimes big plays are self-inflicted wounds, particularly some of the ones that we've given up, and it can occur from a myriad of things: Lack of cohesion due to newness or lack of player availability and losing some communication skills because of those things, or it could just be failure.

Oftentimes, when you see highlight reels of big plays, oftentimes it's defensive negligence, and certainly at times that's been the case with us.

**Q. What are you seeing from your opponent in terms of defending you guys, trying to prevent big plays?**

MIKE TOMLIN: Well, just identifying people that get down the field and utilizing schematics to minimize that, but that's nothing new. Everybody knows that DK Metcalf is a one-on-one challenge down the field, so he doesn't get many one-on-one opportunities down the field. We experience that life with George Pickens as well. I think any time you have somebody that's a down the field matchup issue, particularly when you're competing against a coordinator as experienced and savvy as Jim Schwartz, they're going to minimize those things first and foremost.

I think a lot of big play prevention, first and foremost, is identifying those that produce them and then deploying schematics that make the ball go elsewhere.

**Q. In terms of communication and cohesion defensively, what does having DeShon Elliott back do to help that secondary?**

MIKE TOMLIN: He's been here and he's been in the National Football League, and the position he plays is a hub of communication, so we're happy to have him back. But that's just a component of play.

I'd be remiss if I didn't mention his play making as well. He's a good blitzter. Last week he had an interception and a sac fumble, and I think I'm more excited about having those tangible things back than some of the things we're discussing.

**Q. Does the play require where maybe you shift to divisional labor a bit even if Alex is able to play this week?**

MIKE TOMLIN: That's something we ponder once we see that Alex is available and to what degree he is in football shape. He's been out a number of weeks. So there are a lot of variables in terms of that discussion in terms of how we divide the labor up, and only time and the week's work will tell.

**Q. The Browns are the fewest guards on the ground. They run a lot of one high and stack the box a lot. What do you guys have to do after having your best run game yet this season when you guys were in Ireland?**

MIKE TOMLIN: Well, we'd better block them. We'd better run hard, finish off runs, better have a finisher's attitude in terms of which direction the power falls. As you mentioned, they're elite in terms of run stopping. So what does that mean? That means we've got to be solid. We can't have unblocked people. But beyond that, we've got to play well as a collective. We've got to play physical, and we've got to finish.

We've got to understand that a successful day might be three or four-yard runs at times, and we've got to take what we can get sometimes from that regard.

**Q. How much of what you did and did well against Minnesota with the tight end heavier sets that you had is applicable moving forward, whether it's against Cleveland or anybody else? Or was that just kind of a Minnesota specific thing?**

MIKE TOMLIN: We have a certain personality, particularly when we play 4-3 teams. I haven't been bashful about that. That's why we drafted Darnell Washington. You can't play 4-3 teams with 250-pound tight ends. You can't. There are weight classes in combat sport for a reason. When the people are 300 pounds, you'd better have somebody out there that looks like that animal. That was our intention in Minnesota.

Certainly as we move into divisional play in the next couple weeks and we're playing two 4-3 teams, certainly you're going to see more of that. It's unfair at times to ask guys like Pat Freiermuth and Connor to block 4-3 ends. That's not realistic if you want to have a real good run game day.

**Q. I was going to ask you, would that help explain why Pat has played so few snaps?**

MIKE TOMLIN: Well, I'm not talking about the totality of four games, but certainly last week the matchup component has a lot to do with how we distribute snaps at that position. When you're looking at 4-3 units, as I mentioned, you'd better have some big people in that C and D-gap area.

**Q. You mentioned Harold Fannin. We're seeing a reinvention of the tight end in college now in the NFL. How much do you think that's still untapped?**

MIKE TOMLIN: I don't know that's new, to be quite honest with you. There have been a lot of dynamic tight ends, it seems like, over the years in college ball, and it usually translates guys that display big time run after, guys that are tough matchup problems for linebackers and oftentimes too athletic for DBs.

In general over the last ten years or so, those are the tight ends that go in round 1, those unique animals, and the good players generally go in like round 3. That's just my perspective on it. I think the only reason he sat on the board as long as he did was because he was an MAC player, but when matched up against Power 5 opponents -- I think maybe Texas A&M or somebody I saw last year -- he was not out of place by any stretch. He's a big time player.

**Q. Who do you look at as options if Calvin can't go?**

MIKE TOMLIN: It's not necessarily about pulling from people that aren't here. It's about the elevational roles of guys like Roman Wilson and Scotty Miller, for example. Excited about watching those guys work and maybe get some elevated participation.

I think that's one of the beautiful things of the journey that

is a season. You're going to get faced with some challenges as a collective. One man's misfortune is another man's opportunity.

Case in point, Jaylen Warren wasn't able to go in Dublin, and I think a lot of people had an opportunity to appreciate Kenny Gainwell, something that we already appreciated, something that we've been watching day to day during the course of team development.

So hopefully a week from now, if Calvin is unavailable, we're saying the same things about some others.

**Q. Roman hasn't been utilized much, if at all, the last month or so. Is that more about the guys ahead of him?**

MIKE TOMLIN: Or it might just be our selection of personnel groups. We've been talking a lot about multiple tight ends, Spencer Anderson reporting as eligible, the utilization of multiple tight end groups. His lack of participation might not mean anything relative to his performance or even what's going on at his position, it might just be how we choose to deploy our personnel groups the first month of the season.

It's still very early in this process. We've got 13 straight games ahead of us, so keep watching.

**Q. What kind of challenge, or is it even a challenge to recapture some of the momentum you guys had before the bye in Ireland and translate it back?**

MIKE TOMLIN: I'm not worried about momentum. I'm just worried about getting better. I think that's the spirit with which we should move. At the early stages of the year, it's about getting better week in and week out. Momentum is secondary.

**Q. Speaking of getting better week in and week out, I know you don't want to look too far ahead --**

MIKE TOMLIN: As we start to look ahead. Go ahead.

(Laughter).

**Q. Preparation-wise this week, knowing you have two divisional games in five days over the course of the next two weeks, how do you take that into consideration in your preparation?**

MIKE TOMLIN: I'm just locked into this week.

**Q. You guys are starting on your own 35, which is one of the best in the league, and you guys are converting**

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**a lot of red zone trips into touchdowns. What's the next step for you guys to get into the red zone more often?**

MIKE TOMLIN: Keep playing, keep getting better. As I mentioned, it was like the momentum question, at this stage of the game, it's about getting better. It's about continuing to find rhythm in terms of how we divide the labor up, what schematics work for us, how we function with efficiency in all three phases.

**Q. You talked about getting help for Myles Garrett. What do you do from a coaching perspective with Broderick Jones maybe just sort of mentally? Do you challenge him? How do you talk to a guy facing that matchup for the first time?**

MIKE TOMLIN: I don't know that it requires conversation. I think Broderick is not a dummy. I think he appreciates who he's working with this week, and he's a competitor and a professional. I haven't spent any time thinking about how I'm going to talk to or motivate Broderick this week.

**Q. You guys use a lot of sets, so do the Browns. They run a lot of 12 personnel. How do you guys counter that with the way they're using Njoku and they mix up their game? Does you guys using 12 personnel a lot help you in defensive preparation?**

MIKE TOMLIN: I think oftentimes unit personalities are formulated through competition against your team. Certainly we deploy a lot of multiple tight end personnel groups, so we have experience defensively in terms of being diverse, in terms of some of the things we can do to attack the personnel group. I'm sure they've seen a lot of it because, as you mention, they use a lot of tight end groups as well.

Largely, though, I just think that general discussion falls more into the category that the visual relationships are intimate. We know them; they know us. So it's game on.

**Q. When you got Kenny Gainwell, was part of the thinking to get another back in here that had replicable skill sets to what Jaylen provides so in case of injury, you guys can do a lot of the same things?**

MIKE TOMLIN: No, we just thought he was a good player who was underutilized in the system he was in because Saquon was just so talented. We played against him a year ago, and he made some critical plays against us in the running game, in the passing game. He covered kicks. I think he had eight tackles last year for Philadelphia on kickoff. He returns kicks.

So we just looked at a player that had a versatile skill set in a lot of areas and that we thought was capable of more than what we were looking at on tape due to circumstance.

**Q. How different is it or what challenges, I guess, does it maybe present to try to prepare for a rookie quarterback who maybe doesn't have a whole lot of film up there?**

MIKE TOMLIN: I don't necessarily view it as a challenge. I just think we're faced with these type processes every week. Sometimes you have a large body of work to study; sometimes you don't. Particularly early stages of the season, you don't have a large body of work to look at anyway. So we've kind of been in that mode through the month of September, so it doesn't feel irregular to look at preseason snaps in an effort to gain a larger body of work in terms of getting a feel for his skill set.

I imagine, if it was later in the year, it would feel a little different, but we have -- we've been kind of in that mode. Everyone's been in that mode as you push through September. There's just not a lot of tape to look at relative to 2025 for anyone.

**Q. I know they just switched to Gabriel, but you mentioned a couple weeks ago that last year maybe not wanting Flacco to get in the game. Is that something that's on your mind again this time out?**

MIKE TOMLIN: I mentioned that last year, a few weeks ago specifically because of the dramatic difference between Flacco's skill set and Richardson's skill set. I don't know that they're doing things dramatically different in Cleveland whether it's Dillon in there or Joe. So it might be less significant this week than it was when I cited that example.

**Q. Talking about how much you played Spencer Anderson, it's one thing to say maybe six offensive line is a good idea. It's another to have six offensive linemen that you want to get in the game. What has he done to earn that opportunity and -- not every sixth offensive lineman is someone the head coach wants to put out there.**

MIKE TOMLIN: He's a capable guy. He's played some starting football for us in the past. He's a versatile athlete. I think he's a former high school tight end at one point in his life. If you give him a minute, he'll tell you about his AAU basketball resume.

I don't want to make more out of it than what it was, to be quite honest with you. He's the man that's up in that regard.



**Q. Knowing that it is a small sample size, when you looked back at what you've seen from your offense the first four weeks, what was your biggest takeaway in terms of areas you want to see them improve?**

MIKE TOMLIN: All areas, to be quite honest with you. That's the nature of this thing. Particularly when you have a young front, individually and collectively. I just think the only way to get better and gain experience is through playing. We've had some good moments. We've had some moments that aren't good. We've got to keep pushing, and we'd better win along the way. That's been my general mindset regarding the subject.

**Q. What did you see that you liked about Kaleb Johnson, and was it important to him to have him kind of get back immersed in the offense?**

MIKE TOMLIN: I think that he's going to continue to get better with opportunity. He doesn't have control over when those opportunities occur. So when he gets them, he'd better make the best of them. I love the way that he's working during the course of the work week from a practice perspective.

As I mentioned, we've got 13 straight games ahead of us. I'm sure he's going to get more opportunities to let his talent show. More importantly, to develop talent and experience.

He's a third year junior. I don't view that as a negative. I love to be a part of people's growth and development, but at the same time, I don't get amnesia. I don't like that in the spring and then hate that in the fall. So as a leader, man, I embrace the get better component of his profile, and sometimes that's going to require work. Sometimes it's not always going to be pleasant moments, but that's what they pay me for.

**Q. What might you guys do better against the run against Minnesota. With the way the Browns they run into a lot of stacked boxes, you're not afraid to run (indiscernible). What do you guys continue to have to do better against them?**

MIKE TOMLIN: Just the collective growth I've been talking about a lot, but also I think I'd be remiss if I didn't talk about the presence of DeShon Elliott being a major component. I thought his presence was significant in that game last week, being a down safety, a guy that plays in and around the line of scrimmage.

**Q. What have you learned about your secondary in the last few weeks because of the injuries? With Joey**

**coming back, does everyone slide into those roles from Game 1?**

MIKE TOMLIN: I mentioned earlier in team development that I liked our depth particularly at the quarterback position. Certainly that depth has been tested. Talked a lot about BE and how excited we are to have him. He's done a nice job. James Pierre has done a nice job and playing more as well. It's good to have veteran backups, man, guys that have played in the National Football League and started some and some of that. Certainly those things have been tested. To have a full complement of players is not something that I view as a problem.

We'll go through the week. We'll keep pushing in terms of evaluating people's availability and levels of conditioning, and then we'll kind of divide the labor up appropriately so based on that information at the end of the week.

**Q. Echols hadn't played a lot in the slot before you got him. Is that something you always thought he would be able to do or maybe you learned about him through the process?**

MIKE TOMLIN: He played some in New York in the slot. As a matter of fact, I think he played over 100 snaps or so inside for the Jets.

**Q. DK's had three really big home run, run after catch plays, two against New York and the one in Ireland, they're all three pretty astute moments of recognition from Aaron, when he motioned somebody away, had lots of space in the deep end, and he took it 81 yards for a touchdown. How much can Aaron highlight that for DK kind of in the moment at the line of scrimmage when he sees there's something available for him?**

MIKE TOMLIN: Boy, you're reaching there. Aaron's an experienced quarterback, man. He makes good and timely decisions. We get the ball to big people with top end speed. That's what happens when you do it on time. His ability to operate on time creates run after opportunities not only for DK but for everyone.

Certainly, DK has a skill set that's capable of producing the plays that you mentioned.

**Q. What do you love most about the environment of a home AFC North game?**

MIKE TOMLIN: I just love being in big time competition. I'm a competition junkie. I just think the divisional component of how our schedules are aligned in today's game, the intimacies specifically of the AFC North, the stability within the programs -- Kevin's been in Cleveland



for a number of years, I've known Jim Schwartz for a long time. I think that intimacy, that knowledge creates competition. I think the geographic proximity creates a cool environment.

There's a lot to be excited about relative to this game this weekend and AFC North football.

**Q. When you had to face a guy like Aaron Rodgers who's so good at the line of scrimmage in the past, what are you seeing now that he's your quarterback, how do they react to this guy because they know what he's like at the line of scrimmage?**

MIKE TOMLIN: Sometimes the things that you do have nothing to do with who you're competing against. Your ability to disguise and time blitzes and things of that nature oftentimes depends on the collective experience of your group. I think generally that's where defensive architects start, and certainly Jim Schwartz has the players and the experience within his group to play that cat and mouse game with Aaron, with guys like Denzel Ward and Delpit back there and Newsome that have been back there for a long time.

They have the collective experience to hold disguises, to get in and out of calls, and to do the things to match wits with a guy like Aaron. I think, first and foremost, it starts with yourselves, and that's why I mentioned the experience, the collective experience that they have.

**Q. With these division games coming up, obviously all three other team lost this weekend, how do you feel about where you guys sit in the division right now?**

MIKE TOMLIN: I don't care what happened with other people, particularly last weekend. It's about us coming off the bye and getting ready for our game this week. I'm not a big picture guy.

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