

# Pittsburgh Steelers

## Media Conference

Monday, October 13, 2025

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA

## Coach Mike Tomlin

### Weekday Press Conference



MIKE TOMLIN: Good afternoon. I'll reiterate some of the points that I made last night. After quickly reviewing the tape, some of the thoughts and feelings that I had immediately after the game probably rung true. Starting first with our defense, we felt like minimizing their running game was a major component to the game being played on our terms. Last week we talked about not only the new featured runner but also Teller, Bitonio and Pocic, their veteran interior group, and we just felt that that was the nuts and bolts of the group.

So we challenged our guys in a big way to stand up versus those three interior veteran guys. Those guys coupled with the runner I thought was a major component of us having the type of day we needed to have. We did what we needed to do in that area, and so it produced opportunities in other areas. They ended up dropping back and throwing the ball, I think, 50 plus times, and when you do that, man, and you've got a good rush group and some one-dimensional circumstances, you have an opportunity to have the type of day that we had.

Certainly it could have been better. We left some turnovers out there. We had the ball in our hands a couple of times, and we usually secure those, particularly if someone is dropping back and throwing that many times it gets us under the level of duress that we were able to create. Generally turnovers come with that.

But we weren't able to get it, and so that's something to work on as we transition this week.

It's one thing to get the game played on your terms. It's another level of effectiveness when you get the fruit of that labor, and certainly I thought we were missing a turnover or two based on the circumstantial environment that we created in play.

On the offensive side of the ball it was a similar discussion just from the flipside. We needed to stay on schedule. A component of staying on schedule is running the ball effectively to minimize one-dimensional passing moments

against the likes of Myles Garrett and so forth. I thought we were largely effective at doing so.

I thought we mixed in some changes of launch points with some misdirection and some play action pass to add to the run game. All done in an effort to reduce our exposure to Myles in those circumstances.

I think we were effective at that. There certainly was some one-dimensional circumstances where we had to deal with him and others, and we passed that test. We kept our quarterback upright.

I'd like to see us finish some drives earlier in the game. We were settling for field goals there early on, but oftentimes that just speaks to the quality of your performance, and as we sat in here last week and talked about leaning in on this game, we acknowledged what a quality unit the Cleveland Browns defense is, and they certainly are.

So they created some challenging times for us, particularly weighty moments as the field got short. In the first half we were settling for field goals, and you just can't do that consistently and expect a fluidly produced victory. So we've got some work ahead of us there.

Probably our biggest failure as I mentioned after the game was the penalty component. We scout crews just like we scout teams. That crew is consistently active in terms of their number of penalties that they throw. I think they were second in the league this year. They were second in the league in 2024. We placed an emphasis on it leading up to the game. We brought in officials for our practices.

But with all of that, we still had a collective failure in that area. That's the most penalties that we've had by far all year, and so I'm looking for a quick rebound in that area as we lean in on this week's work. You can't step into rogue AFC north stadiums and be highly penalized and think that you're going to fluidly engineer victory. It's just not realistic.

We've got to get better. We've got to get better in a hurry from that perspective.

But largely, I liked the energy and wish the collective play --

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I thought we generally played complementary football in all three phases, supporting one another. We had some examples of people stepping up and getting opportunity. We had some guys coming back from injury and so forth.

Can't say enough about young Ke as a punt returner getting his first NFL action in place of Calvin. For example, I thought he made good decisions. I thought he was mechanically solid, fundamentally solid. But there's a lot of examples of that, and that's just the nature of this journey.

I don't think that there's been a game this year where we haven't elevated someone from our practice squad in some form or fashion in an effort to participate. I just think it's a function of the game and player availability, and that's why we've got to train all our people. We've got to harden the collective. We've got to develop skill and know-how in all areas, just knowing that at some point in time everyone is going to get an opportunity to show their readiness and their capabilities.

So particularly on a short week, man, we're going to be urgent in that regard. A couple injury notes: Calvin missed the last game. We'll see what this week looks like. It's a short week. But we do have a good workday tomorrow. We'll see what that holds.

There were no ill effects of Jalen Ramsey's return to action. Joey Porter Jr.'s return to action. There were some bumps and bruises associated with play in game, but nothing that would raise our antennas regarding player availability on Thursday night as I sit here right now.

Obviously Miles Killebrew's injury is significant and he could be described as out.

Now I'll transition and talk about the Bengals. First, their defense. They have a new defensive coordinator in Al Golden. That certainly has our attention. There's intimacy in these divisional relationships. Most cases, man, you know them, they know you, and it creates an awesome chess match that's competitive and challenging and fun. They probably have a better handle on what we're capable of in this component of the match-up. Not highly familiar with Coach Golden's schematics. Just getting a first look at it.

They're doing some things differently than they have done in the past, and that's reasonable to expect when you have a new coordinator. Because it is a short week, that really has our attention. We're really working with some urgency there.

We've got to be good. We can't be surprised by any schematics, obviously. So we'll be working around the

clock to level the playing field in terms of familiarity in that area.

On to the people, Trey is a game wrecker up front. It starts there for us. I think the last time we were in stadium with him, he got two and a half or three sacks or so. He was a critical component of the game.

He's one of the best in the business. He needs no endorsement from me. He's got 35 sacks or so in the last two years. He had 17 and a half in '23. He had 17 and a half in '24. He's been ridiculously consistent. They move him around. He plays primarily on their right edge, but he will get some left edge work.

Both tackles have to be ready to block him. If we are interested in assistance and one-dimensional circumstance, we'd better be prepared for his movement and it had better be pliable in terms of body positioning and chips and so forth. He's just a real challenge.

He's got some help up front in the form of Slayton, an acquisition from Green Bay. He's an interior big that really controls the run game climate. If we want to have a good day running the football, it kind of starts there. These intimate divisional relationships can often be described in that way. We've got young players like Zach Frazier and Mason McCormick. They've got new players like slate on, young players like 90 from Michigan. You're going to establish a rapport, if you will, and to do so on a short week is a big-time challenge, but we'd better do it. We'd be stay on schedule. We'd better minimize our one-dimensional passing circumstances if we want to reduce our exposure to Trey.

They've got a secondary that's been together now for a while. They went through a transition there with the loss of some significant players a couple of years ago, but guys like DJ Turner and Dax Hill and Geno Stone have been together for multiple years now. You feel that cohesion, the things that they're able to do in the secondary to move people around, to get in complex schematics and check systems of coverage. You see it. They do an awesome job on possession downplay, getting sub package people in there and really matching up with whatever you put on the field.

So we've got a full week ahead of us from a prep standpoint, getting familiar with Coach Golden and some of the new pieces and even some of the old pieces in terms of how they're deploy them this week.

On the offensive side, certainly the story is Joe Flacco. It's reasonable to expect him to be significantly better in week 2. He's been in the stadium with them. They've been in



the stadium with him. They understand his demeanor, how he deals with circumstances. I would imagine they worked hard a week ago on developing timing and cohesion. I would imagine it's taken a significant step after having done so under some live football circumstances.

I saw him make some anticipatory throws even last week, and so I thought he was significantly better as the game wore on, and so certainly we've got a full week's work ahead of us in terms of minimizing a veteran, savvy, talented thrower like him coupled with the eligibles that they have.

That certainly has our attention. How they're choosing to deploy their backs in the run game also has our attention. Brown obviously is the featured runner. He's very good on the perimeter and in the screen game. They run a lot of tosses and so forth. They use a nice arsenal of tight ends, Sample, Gesicki, Fant. They do a nice job of mixing up the schematics when they go to those guys in a variety of ways so you don't get a beat on their usage.

Zach has called it for a long time. He's familiar with our defensive schematics. We're in for a long day's work with that collective as well.

I would imagine there would be a certain level of excitement, those guys having Joe Flacco in a home venue on a Thursday night and some primetime ball. We covet that, as well. We love going into hostile environments. We love divisional play. We certainly love and respect and appreciate being a component of primetime football and being able to put our talents on display for the football world.

To appreciate that and respect that is one thing. To be prepared for it and to bring it to fruition is another. I'll be quiet and answer your questions so I can get to work.

**Q. When you see a veteran like Jalen Ramsey preparing himself go out on the field and play, what kind of impact does that have on the rest of the guys?**

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, it's certainly a shining example of what professional football is about. But I doubt that any of us are surprised by it. Just having been around him since he's gotten here, that's very consistent behavior with what he's displayed throughout, and personally for a guy like me who has scouted him since he was at Florida State, I certainly know that's a component of his football character, so I'm certainly not surprised by it, but it doesn't mean that we don't appreciate it.

Not only do we appreciate his willingness to play, we appreciate his play making, and you need both in order for

it to be real. He's certainly provided both.

**Q. What were your thoughts on the field conditions yesterday, and are you concerned going forward?**

MIKE TOMLIN: I thought it was poor yesterday. I'm not concerned going forward. It's my understanding that that turf is going to be swapped out. But I certainly acknowledge it was a concern yesterday.

**Q. Do you have any idea -- it had been a month since you guys played there. Did you have any idea that it was going to be bad?**

MIKE TOMLIN: No, I don't work over there, I work over here.

**Q. When you guys decided to pursue Aaron, get the contract done, six weeks in now, the way the passing game looks, is it looking the way you had a vision of, and if not, where might it be different, better, worse, however you see it?**

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, I certainly had an overall vision of what it could look like, but it wasn't so detailed that I could compare it to our present state. I think sometimes when you're inflexible from a planning perspective in that way, you're not adaptable enough to be what you need to be.

A lot of ideas certainly that we had about what it would look like have been confirmed, but you really don't know what you've got until you get it. Being around him day-to-day and that component of it, his experience, what's natural and fluid for him, the relationships that he's able to develop with others, all of that's a component of the equation that could alter the vision component.

I'm never too married to a vision. It's certainly moving in the general direction that I anticipated it doing, but it's also reasonable to expect that to continue as we push forward.

**Q. As a follow-up, when you used the word flexibility there, until Calvin does some back, how would you like to see the ball distributed when it's not going to DK?**

MIKE TOMLIN: To open people.

**Q. On the field conditions, was the playing surface a factor in Miles Killebrew's injury?**

MIKE TOMLIN: I have no idea.

**Q. Can you talk about what he means to your special teams and how do you go about replacing him?**



MIKE TOMLIN: He's our captain, but you guys know the motto that we live by: We can certainly hurt for him as a man and as a teammate and a brother and an individual, but from a football perspective, one man's misfortune is another man's opportunity, and we certainly have some capable people, and there's an expectation that others step up and fill in the gaps.

**Q. You've coached in the AFC longer than anybody. What did you make of the rare divisional trade of an experienced quarterback inside the division?**

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, to be honest, it was shocking to me. Andrew Berry must be a lot smarter than me or us because it doesn't make sense to me to trade a quarterback that you think enough of to make your opening day starter to a division opponent that's hurting in that area. But that's just my personal feelings.

**Q. When the Bengals acquired him, knowing what you know about Zach and how he likes to run his offense, from Cincinnati's perspective, did it make sense --**

MIKE TOMLIN: It certainly made sense from Cincinnati's perspective.

**Q. Does Flacco play the way Zach likes to run his offense, basically?**

MIKE TOMLIN: He can throw the football, and he's always been able to throw the football, arm strength, arm accuracy, anticipatory passer, fluid movement through progressions. That's always been his game.

**Q. How about some of the snap counts; did the short week influence any of that decision making at all?**

MIKE TOMLIN: There was a lot of variables in the play time, and I have no intentions of getting into the details of it because it may alter the competitive component moving forward.

**Q. What is it about Joe Flacco that he's had the longevity that he's had and is still playing at this high level?**

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, I don't know. I'm not around him day-to-day. I think oftentimes those questions are better answered by those that are around him day-to-day. But generally in this business when somebody is able to compete and compete at a high level for a long time, it's because there's some real tangible day-to-day habits and relationships with the game that make all of that possible.

**Q. How have you seen the offensive line kind of develop through these first five games, specifically Broderick Jones?**

MIKE TOMLIN: I think the collective has gotten consistently better, but I just think that's a reasonable expectations. They're young as individuals. They're young as a collective, and with experience comes execution and precision, and that's been the overall trajectory of it.

I've probably answered that question every week over the last three weeks, and my answer is still the same: It's moving in the direction in which we would like it, certainly, whether it's an individual within the group or whether it's the group as a whole.

**Q. You've cultivated successful offensive lines. What do you as a coaching staff have to do to build that path to success for a young group?**

MIKE TOMLIN: I think the more you have a better understanding of what you're doing as an individual and to trust that you're a component of a collective, I think it allows you to play harder and to play with emotion and for your talents to show more consistently, more fluidly. I just think that that's just a verbal explanation of what you're looking at.

**Q. What did you say to Kaleb Johnson specifically maybe bouncing back on a confidence level?**

MIKE TOMLIN: What do you mean?

**Q. I mean after the muffed kick return there --**

MIKE TOMLIN: That has nothing to do with his ball carrying. He's never lacked confidence as a ball carrier. He's been continually growing and developing in that area when given an opportunity to get some reps, he's been good, and we expect that to continue.

He hasn't been given an opportunity to bounce back from the kick return, so it's a separate discussion for me.

**Q. How rare is it or how hard is it to -- Nick Herbig comes in and plays well and finding a role for him once Alex came back. You kind of had to change your schematics --**

MIKE TOMLIN: That's a good problem. Having too many good players and trying to figure out how to distribute reps among capable guys is a good problem. I welcome that problem.

**Q. What kind of advantage do you think your tight end**





**room is, and do you think there's still a lot more there?**

MIKE TOMLIN: I think it's certainly an advantage for us. We've got a diversity of skill set and talent in that room. We've got a big one that's capable of matching up against 4-3 ends, particularly in the run game. We have one that's an oversized athlete with excellent run-after in Jonnu. We've got a zone killer in Freiermuth. We've got a versatile guy in Connor.

So the diversity of talent is a component that makes that room as competitive as it is, and so helpful to us as a collective.

**Q. On that note, one of the guys were talking about how you teed up Darnell for that week against the Browns. How fun was it to watch him follow through and embrace that and play like that?**

MIKE TOMLIN: I'll keep our in-house business in house.

**Q. Was that intentional, some of the guys with different skill sets like that?**

MIKE TOMLIN: Very much so. Very much so.

**Q. When you talked last week about the reason you drafted Darnell was you had the thought process in mind of 4-3 teams within the division, similarly when you put together the secondary, were you thinking in some ways about the jump to the division, the Bengals and --**

MIKE TOMLIN: Absolutely. Absolutely. You'd better have some corners taller than me if you're dealing with the likes of Tee Higgins and people like that. So certainly -- that's something that we talk about as a collective, the intimacy of divisional relationships.

It's just a component of the game. You'd better stack up good against those that you compete against in a lot of ways, so I'm sure people acquire secondary people to match up with that collective. Baltimore took a first-round corner in Nate Wiggins the other year, I'm sure, with that group in mind. The Bengals have taken right tackles in recent years, I'm sure, to minimize T.J.'s impact in that relationship. That's divisional play. That's what makes it so challenging and so exciting.

**Q. You guys paid Pat a significant chunk of money a couple of summers ago. Production in relation to the numbers hasn't been there -- like he's not getting --**

MIKE TOMLIN: Who?

**Q. Freiermuth. He's not getting a lot of targets right now because of the way the scheme is and the games are unfolding, but he's also not out there complaining about it. He told me yesterday, look, my time is going to come. Do you find that that mindset, which hasn't necessarily been the way it's been here for a while, is maybe pervasive throughout the offensive unit as a whole and how much of it is Aaron's influence in that?**

MIKE TOMLIN: I think that is very reflective of the environment here. I disagree with you. He's a good teammate. We're winning games. We're gaining cohesion. He's certainly capable. He knows his time is going to come to ante up and kick in. He'd better be ready. I'm sure he will be. That's just how we go about our business.

**Q. What have you learned about Jonnu off the field and the way that he's kind of engrained himself in the tight ends group, took a bunch of them to the prison to visit his brother last week? What have you learned about the man that he is?**

MIKE TOMLIN: He's a good guy, man, but again, we didn't get into this relationship blind. Arthur Smith had worked with him in different locations, and so there was nothing mystical about who he is. It doesn't mean that we don't appreciate it. He's a good teammate. He's got a great relationship with football. He's a good man.

**Q. What are some of the most specific challenges of playing on a short week like this and just using that experience that you've had over the years?**

MIKE TOMLIN: I don't worry about it, to be quite honest with you. It's a challenge for us but it's also a challenge for those that we compete against. I like to spend my time and set a mindset within our group that we do a better job navigating it than those that we compete against.

That's often the case, whether short weeks, whether it's long weeks, whether it's international games. It's my job and our job to make the irregular regular and to deal with it relatively well, and that term relative oftentimes means those better than those that you're competing against.

**Q. At the same time, you guys have struggled on Thursday nights recently, particularly on the road. Is there anything you can put your finger on?**

MIKE TOMLIN: I'm only concerned about 2025. I got my ass kicked in a lot of ways over the last 19 years.

**Q. Joey Porter, Jr., came back from several weeks off of injury. Seemed like he had a pretty strong detailed work. How did you appreciate his effort on Sunday?**



MIKE TOMLIN: I thought it was a good game, first game back. I look forward to him continuing to get better. Certainly got a big test coming on Thursday night.

**Q. Two straight games under 70 yards rushing, three straight over 100. What do you feel like is working better on defense?**

MIKE TOMLIN: We're just gaining cohesion, we're getting better, and a component of that is getting some of our significant pieces back, guys like DeShon Elliott who's been back for those two games that you mentioned and who is very active in that component of play.

**Q. How much has Harmon impacted the run defense?**

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, we made him an opening day starter as a rookie for a reason. He's a talented guy but he's missed some time, as well, and now that we have him back and he's rounding out into form, I'd imagine that you're going to feel more of his impact as well.

**Q. A lot of players credited Arthur Smith with calling plays that helped them play fast on Sunday. What has gone into the game plan to get them to play that fast?**

MIKE TOMLIN: That's just regular business. It's our job to do things in their wheelhouse to have enough ball so that we're not predictable but not have too much so we don't paralyze the group individually or collectively. I'm certainly not going to make more out of that than what it is.

**Q. Has Darnell shown you the past two weeks that he deserved more time than just the four-man punt or is that just his sweet spot do you think?**

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, we're going to divide the labor up week in and week out to suit the immediate needs of the competition, and so the last couple of weeks has been significant for obvious reasons, reasons that we've discussed. He's certainly probably going to be in a similar position this week in terms of role because, again, it's another 4-3 team. We'll worry about some of the other stuff when we get to it.

**Q. As the run game has heated up for you guys, you've opened up the downfield passing game a little bit. How have you seen defenses react to the running game heating up and how has that opened up the passing game?**

MIKE TOMLIN: I just think that's a natural football thing when you're effectively running the football. People have to deploy more people in the box. The people they deploy

need to play with a certain edge, and it creates more space. It challenges their discipline and their eyes, but that's not exclusive to us, that's just football, and not only NFL football but every level of football.

**Q. What have you learned from Patrick Queen the whole season?**

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, he looks like a guy in his second year. I challenge second year guys, whether it's second year in the National Football League or second year with the Steelers. Last year was his first year as a defensive quarterback, and so it was reasonable to expect him to be better, and he certainly has been, and I'm excited about where that's going to go.

I know particularly in the last couple of weeks, man, he has been a big impact in our unit.

**Q. Have you installed a new special teams captain while Miles is out?**

MIKE TOMLIN: I haven't thought about it. I'm sure we'll think about it a little later in the week after we get some of this heavy lifting out of the way.

**Q. Does it have to be more than one person to replace him with his heavy role?**

MIKE TOMLIN: We're going to divide the labor up based on the skill set in a certain space. One guy might be similar to him in punt team, another guy might be similar to him in terms of what he does on the kickoff team. We'll deal with those individually per space.

**Q. A quarterback coming within eight days of showing up to start two games for a new team, can you speak to how hard that is?**

MIKE TOMLIN: It doesn't appear to be hard for Joe Flacco.

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