

Pittsburgh Steelers

Media Conference

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Mike Tomlin

Weekday Press Conference



MIKE TOMLIN: Good afternoon. As always, I'll start with a quick assessment of our last performance. I just thought as the game went on, our fight was evident. We made more plays in all three phases the deeper we got into the game, and that's what you want to see and feel from a group that's fighting, and I felt it.

Certainly I thought it was significant. There was less speculation from a defensive perspective of what we might get from Flacco and company. The first time we played those guys we had a one-week body of work to study, and it wasn't a complete week, and so there was more speculation about how Joe would alter their attack, the lens through which he would see it, the things that they would do to get the ball obviously to their two top play makers.

And as we stood in here last week, we said there was less speculation there. Although they had been highly successful, I think Joe had thrown for over 400 yards the week prior to our game, there was less speculation there. We could anchor down and make some hard-core decisions about how to allocate our schematic resources and our talent. I thought the guys did a nice job of absorbing the plan and executing the plan.

In game certainly we had some challenges and guys continually step up for us. Two guys in the secondary certainly worth mentioning are Kyle Dugger and James Pierre. But I think we also talked about those guys a week ago.

From an offensive perspective, it's good when you absorb some attrition and the ball keeps rolling. Can't say enough about Mason Rudolph. Although we're used to it, it's still appreciated. He's proven over his time here that he's capable of coming in and playing winning football for us, and that's no small task.

When you're preparing during the course of the week as a backup, you have limited number of reps. Usually the guts of the plan are geared toward the specific talents of the starters. And so you may get some reps, but it might not

be, quote/unquote, plays that are perfectly in your wheelhouse. He's always found a way to manage those challenges, to remain confident, for that confidence to ooze out of him and be a catalyst for a collective performance. And we got that.

We certainly got quality efforts from Kenny Gainwell as well. Once Jaylen was limited in the game, can't say enough about Kenny. Kenny does a lot of things well for us. I always refer to him as a football player first and a running back second. He's good in the running game. He's good in the passing game. He returns kicks for us. He covers kicks. He had a kickoff tackle, I think, on Sunday as a reflection of that versatility.

And so excited about our ability to secure that very important AFC North win, but it's equally important that we build upon that this week and stack wins.

It's November. Teams are revealing themselves this time of year. You're consistently improving or you're consistently not. Certainly we desire to be in the first group. We'll get an opportunity to display that on weekends.

In the meanwhile, man, we gotta work with an edge from a prep standpoint to assure that happens.

As you get into the guts of this thing, some of your physical preparation gets somewhat limited due to the attrition component of this journey or just simply the nature in which we practice.

And so how do you get better, man, it's attention to detail. It's classroom work. It's additional informal work. It's really pointed on-field work. And so excited about this week from that standpoint.

From a health standpoint, I'll talk about some things. First, Aaron. Aaron has got a fracture in his wrist. It does not require surgery. Really it's just about bracing it and securing it for his comfort and safety, and then it's about how functional he is.

And so we don't have the answers to that as we stand here today, but certainly I would imagine we will get some clarity

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as we push through the week. I think his experience really kind of aids in that. He's the type of guy and has the type of profile that doesn't require a lot of physical work and an effort to be ready to play. And that's helpful.

In the meanwhile, certainly it'll provide opportunities for Mason and Will to get quality work as we start the week, and I think that's the posture that we're in.

A little later in the week we'll take a look at Aaron. And, again, as I mentioned the variables are stabilizing it and making sure that he's safe and he can protect himself, brace himself as he falls, et cetera. Pain tolerance, but that doesn't seem to be an issue with Aaron. He wanted to go back in the game on Sunday. And then, lastly, obviously, how effective he can be.

And so, you know, Friday is probably a big day in terms of some of those things. I know he's working his tail off to be a component of this this week.

He and I talked yesterday. He expressed that directly. I'm of the mindset of supporting that, while at the same time I got a healthy collective of guys as a team and as a unit to ready.

In the meanwhile, that will be our mindset. We'll have a great week's work tomorrow centered around Mason Rudolph and what he does. And we'll see where the week leads us, and we'll take it day by day.

Alex Highsmith is still limited with his pec. He'll be limited at the early portions of the week. If there's an uptick in his participation and certainly good quality work, we'll consider him.

Ke'Shawn Williams is in the protocol. We'll let the protocol speak for itself. I would imagine Slay is on the other side of the protocol. So we should be able to have him back this week.

Similarly, optimistic with Cole Holcomb, Jaylen Warren had an ankle injury in game. It certainly will limit him at the early portions of this week, but I think we're all optimistic about his inclusion as we push through the week. And then we got some other bumps and bruises associated with play.

Guys came back like Isaac Seumalo, man, doesn't appear to have any negative effects of his participation. Certainly might limit him at the top of the week, but it's not going to affect his availability as we push forward toward game time.

Now onto the Bears. Really excited about this one. I love

the challenge of seeing a new collective, someone that we don't see quite often, and certainly they fit that description. But they're also a new collective from a schematics perspective.

I'll start first on defense. They have Dennis Allen as their coordinator. He's been around. He has a mode of operation, if you will. And you see it in their video. They covet taking the ball away. They lead the league in takeaways. I think they got 22 on the season. D.A. also prides himself in good possession down defense. I think they're second in the league in terms of third down success rate. And I think those two statistics are the catalyst for why they're playing really good defense, and they're a 7 and 3 football team.

They're taking the ball away from people. They're playing really good on possession downs. Offensive units are at about 33.7, I think, percent conversion rates. Couple that with what's going on on the offensive side of the ball, you certainly have your challenges.

They got quality players at all levels. They picked up Sweat a couple of years ago from Washington. He's the signature of their front and edge rush. He's a challenge certainly to deal with and has been.

At the linebacker level, Edmunds, man, is a sideline-to-sideline tackler, big-time athlete. He's a good blitz. I think he's got four interceptions on the season.

They got some guys in the secondary that are really taking advantage of some circumstances, man, and getting people in one-dimensional moments. People have to absorb risk to keep pace with them, come back in football games, et cetera.

And they're getting a lot of turnovers. Kevin has done it a long time at the safety position. He's been a ball guy. I was just talking to someone this morning, man, he picked off balls as a member of the Tennessee Titans. He picked off balls at Middle Tennessee State. Guys that have a knack for securing the ball, generally they do it regardless of environment, and it certainly continues in Chicago for him. I think he leads them with five interceptions. They're getting some quality play outside at corner as well.

Man, Gardner-Johnson is a recent acquisition for them, and boy, he has really got to the moving train in a really impressive fashion. He plays the nickel for 'em. He blitzes quite a bit. He's really good in underneath defense and man-to-man circumstances. I think he's got three sacks.

As I mentioned, their third down posture is an aggressive one. They're in an up posture a lot. They blitz and bring a



lot of people, Gardner-Johnson being one of them, but I'd be remiss if I didn't mention Brisker as well. He's a down safety that's in and around the line of scrimmage quite a bit. I've known that young man a long time and got respect for his talents and his relationship with the game and the energy that he plays with as well.

And then on the offensive side of the ball, certainly Ben Johnson challenges you schematically with his approach the ball is somewhat unique, but it is a mode of operation. They run the ball. They have a commitment. They have a two-back system similar to what they had in Detroit. They have some highly successful perimeter runs like they also did in Detroit. They got some third down runs that they'll push away.

They're gadget oriented. The reverse game is a big component of it as well, all things that we saw from him in Detroit.

They're doing a real good job of taking care of the ball on that side as well. We got a defense that's got 22 takeaways, and I think you've only turned it over six times on offense. You're going to be 7 and 3 or something of that nature, you're going to win a lot of football games, and they have. They do a great job of preserving the ball and protecting it.

I can't say enough about what I've seen from Caleb Williams. Certainly I hadn't studied him a lot, being a young guy in this league and an NFC guy, but just really impressed with his physical talents. His ability to throw the football, his accuracy, his arm strength, his ability to extend, his ability to see the full field while doing so, minimizing negativity, the creativity associated with his escapability and play extension is really challenging. It's not only challenging in stadium, but to be quite honest with you, it's challenging to duplicate in the process of prep. I doubt Will Howard is going to give us a quality look at some of that stuff I've been looking at on tape, for example.

He's got a full complement of eligibles to work with, D.J. Moore and others, man, are really impressive. But he's also got some emerging young people, and you feel the emergence of some of the young talent. Loveland obviously had a big game the other week against the Bengals. He's on the come. And so is Luther, their young receiver from Missouri.

It's just particularly as you get to this stage of the season, some of these young talented people that people have a lot of draft capital invested in usually captures my attention. They're usually finding their footing in this thing and their talents are starting to show up more consistently. And so those are two lesser known guys that really have my

attention as I study and watch tape and we're at the early stages of formulating a plan.

Can't say enough about their commitment to the run game, though. They're No. 2 in the league in rushing, and you can't underscore that. But that's something that was very evident. That commitment was very evident from his time in Detroit as well.

And so we're working with an edge. Man, we're excited about going into a hostile venue, playing against a really good team. If you're a competitor, if you're looking to get better, if you're looking to improve yourself continually, those are some variables that are really attractive.

But, again, we show our excitement by being locked in and having good preparation days, and I'm looking forward to that over the course of this week.

I'll pause and open it up for questions.

Q. Just to be clear, so you're not ruling out Aaron as a possibility. He could play?

MIKE TOMLIN: No, I'm not.

Q. Will Friday be the first day he'll be tested?

MIKE TOMLIN: That's just what I have in my mind. There hadn't been anything -- I know he's not working tomorrow. But certainly I assume it's going to be a little later in the week. And in the meanwhile it'll give us an opportunity to really get solid with a plan and physical preparation around the two other.

Q. Would you like to see him practice at all? Is he going to have to practice a little bit to be available?

MIKE TOMLIN: Yeah. Functionality is a component of it. I don't need it for my comfort, but I certainly need it for functionality, and functionality is a major component of whether or not he gets an opportunity this week.

Q. How do you balance game planning with the quarterback up in the air tailoring it to Mason or to Aaron?

MIKE TOMLIN: It's not anything to balance. We've gone through nine or so games catering it to Aaron and his talents and gaining certain traction there about the schematics, and all the while we've been gaining some perspective about what's best for Mason.

As a matter of fact, each and every week, you know, he kind of goes through things within the plan that are really



comfortable for him. And so it won't be our first week at it. Certainly will be our first week operationally. But the process, you go through that just about every week as you prepare a starter and a potential backup in terms of how to best highlight their talents and so that the unit can move regardless of who's playing, particularly when they have different skill sets.

Q. Have doctors cleared Aaron to play?

MIKE TOMLIN: Again, we're not going to get to that until we know that we can stabilize it. And so they're probably looking at some devices that do that and things of that nature. I haven't asked specifically that question, but I've given you the line of communication and conversation that we have. It's about stabilizing it. It's about making sure that he can manage the pain. That doesn't appear to be an issue, again, having been around him. And then functionality. So those are the variables.

Q. How much input is he going to have versus you versus the doctors on decision wise?

MIKE TOMLIN: It's his body, so certainly he's going to be a component of the discussion.

Q. Following up on the point that you made about getting the backup ready and knowing what they want should they get in there, Mason made the point in post-game comments about how valuable the time was the Bengals' first drive when they go at the field goal, the real time was a lot longer than the time off the clock, what they used, the time that he had with Arthur to get those plays in there. Can you kind of take us through how those conversations worked in halftime knowing he was going in, how that led to getting those plays put together?

MIKE TOMLIN: Again, those conversations happen before we get in stadium. They generally happen weekly. Toward the latter part of the week Friday and Saturday, he'll get time with Arthur and highlight some things within the plan that best suit his skill set, the things that he sees with great clarity relative to who we're competing against.

And so when you get in game and you're faced with elevating him, it's simply a continuation of some of those things with a focus on what's transpiring in game. And so that's the nature of the conversation. It transpired at halftime. It transpired continually once they got to the sideline. It's ongoing in between series once you get in game.

He only had two real series because how the second half unfolded, but that's the nature of the conversation and the

flow of information and our general approach to it.

Q. Mike, if Slay is healthy, does he step back in as a starter or will you stick with Pierre?

MIKE TOMLIN: Yeah. He steps back in and plays. Certainly we're certainly going to continue to play James. He's deserving of that, but if healthy, Slay is going to play.

Q. Was Jaylen Warren cleared to return to Sunday?

MIKE TOMLIN: He was.

Q. There was a sequence there right at the end of the quarter where he was on field and then you guys called timeout and he came off the field and he didn't come back on the field. Was that a coaching decision?

MIKE TOMLIN: Yes.

Q. Was it protecting or feeling that --

MIKE TOMLIN: He was cleared to play. He was willing to play. We just thought Kenny was doing a good job. Those are decisions that we make in game sometimes. It's not totally up to the player's will or the expert medical device. It's about who gives us the best chance to win, and certainly at that point in the game, based on what we've seen, things were going well with Kenny. Things were less than ideal with Jaylen, and so we stuck with the hot hand.

Q. During that final sequence before the half, Aaron did take a couple of hits. Just to clarify, was he injured on the second down throw and threw it out of bounds or do you have any idea?

MIKE TOMLIN: I don't know specifically when the injury occurred, no.

Q. With Will Howard now potentially closer to playing time, will he get any reps with the first team this week in practice?

MIKE TOMLIN: We'll see. We'll see where the week goes.

Q. Only been a couple of weeks from him. What have you noticed from him?

MIKE TOMLIN: He's been with us the whole time. He's a sharp guy. Like the general trajectory of his work. He's certainly in the position that he's in, doesn't get a lot of, quote/unquote, Steeler reps, but the reps that he does get he has taken advantage of, and I'm sure there will be an uptick in those opportunities this week.

Q. Mike, James Pierre leads you guys tied with most passes broken up right now despite not seeing the field as much as other DBs. What does he have to do to be more of a consistent presence for you guys over a guy like Darius Slay?

MIKE TOMLIN: He's done a nice job, but again, usually when you're a backup man, you get targets, and so when you get targets, you generally get breakups.

We have not been displeased with his efforts. We've been quite pleased with his efforts. We're certainly interested in continuing to use him as we move forward.

Q. Roman is getting more and more opportunities. What are you seeing from the snaps he's getting? Roman Wilson?

MIKE TOMLIN: Same thing. He's a guy that's getting better with exposure. But that's a reasonable expectation. He's a second-year player. He's getting more comfortable within the framework of what we ask him to do. I think the game is slowing down for him. I certainly don't want to speak for him. But it's evident in watching him play.

Q. How does Malik Harrison fit in once Holcomb comes back and what do you think of his play so far?

MIKE TOMLIN: We'll determine that. You know, he's done a nice job in the interim.

You know, I don't view these juggling things as issues, to be quite honest with you. Not having options is an issue. And so if Cole is cleared to play, man, we'll have an issue in terms of how we divide the labor up between those two, just like if Slay is cleared to play, we'll have an issue of deciding how to divide the labor up. But from my perspective, none of that is a problem. A problem is when you don't have healthy, capable guys available to you.

Q. Coach, talking about Caleb Williams' escapability, is your experience with all these matchups for someone like Lamar Jackson applicable for someone like Caleb, even though they're very different players?

MIKE TOMLIN: In some ways, yes. In some ways, no. Certainly most of us have a knee-jerk reaction or a schematic response to quarterback mobility, but as you mentioned, they're all unique and individual people. And so really right now, man, we're just getting really familiar with what makes Caleb Caleb.

Q. Mike, the three outside linebacker look certainly influenced the Dugger pick six. Nick had a real good rush on that. Are you finding that package to become

more useful, especially as Sawyer has gotten more used to NFL action?

MIKE TOMLIN: Yeah, but we were in that game even prior to Sawyer. You know, it's really about Herbig and Highsmith and Watt, obviously. Sawyer has done a nice job of filling in when guys have been missing. But it's about getting people in one-dimensional pass and circumstances and getting our very best rush men on the field regardless of position.

Q. Mike, what do you guys have to do to be more consistent on third down, particularly on third and long?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, the first thing you need to do is stay out of third and long, you know. I don't know many times in the National Football League that are highly effective in those circumstances.

Q. Sorry, on defense.

MIKE TOMLIN: Oh, defensively? You know, it's rushing coverage. It is. And it's a play here, a play there. Not overly concerned about it. You hate when you lose those downs, but not overly concerned about it.

Q. Mike, do you get a sense that Aaron especially wants to play this week given who the opponent is and his familiarity?

MIKE TOMLIN: Are Aaron always wants to play. Opponent has nothing to do with it. It's his love affair with the game of football.

Q. Was there a reason or explanation why he didn't come back on the field after halftime?

MIKE TOMLIN: As I mentioned, they were trying to assess the extent of his injury, and that takes time. And then certainly they want to stabilize it before they allow him to participate, even if he's willing.

And so I imagine that those are the variables that played into him not returning to the sideline. And as I mentioned, the way that the game unfolded, we only had two possessions in the second half, I think, offensively anyway.

Q. Mike, I know some of the play calling can change from one quarterback to the other based on what they like or maybe don't like. Does the overall game plan change between the two quarterbacks?

MIKE TOMLIN: Not necessarily the game plan or your unit personality, but certainly, you know, the things within it.

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You know, everyone is different, particularly at the quarterback position.

We certainly, if Mason is our guy this week, we want to work within his comfort zone the things that he sees and does well that might differ from Aaron. And so -- but, again, it's all within the framework of what it is that we do.

Q. Mike, how has Darnell gotten better as a receiver, as an option passing game, especially this season?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, I don't know that he's physically gotten better. We might just be discovering him. Some of the freakish things that you see him do in stadium I saw him do on Georgia tape. Some of the freakish things that I've seen him do this year I saw him do last year.

He had a unique run after, certainly, the other day that kind of ignited our collective offensively and defensively. But he had a similar type play, I remember, in Indianapolis last year when we were kind of, you know, running in place offensively and he made a play and it kind of ignited us.

He's a special athlete. He has unique talents. He's certainly a tough guy to deal with in one-on-one tackle circumstances, and it makes him a force to be reckoned with.

Q. Jake Brown had two explosive runs against you guys. Otherwise bottled up. But now you're facing a team that has like one of the highest explosive run rates in the NFL. What do you guys have to do in particular to stop how Chicago breaks their big runs?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, it's about us. It's not about our opponent. It's not. Respectfully. It's about being in our gaps and communicating and adjusting and being solid that way.

Q. Mike, were you aware at the time that Jalen Ramsey said that Chase spit on him, and what are your thoughts on how the NFL handled that yesterday?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, I was aware. I certainly talked to Jalen in game. It's an unfortunate incident. It's not an act that's common to the game of football. It's nothing to do with football. And so I'm not going to comment on it. The NFL office rendered their judgment, and so we're moving on.

Q. Is one thing you've noticed about Mason in your time being around him since he got here as a rookie how much better he's gotten at playing at tempo, getting in and out of the huddle, making the offense move with pace?

MIKE TOMLIN: Yeah. And that was a component of his game in Stillwater. And I think that's one of the subtle things that you talk about or think about when you're bringing the game to the quarterback. It's not only plays, but pace, personnel groups, relationships with eligibles. There are a lot of variables that come into consideration when you're talking about teeing things up for specifics of no collar.

Q. Mike, the turnover battle is always big for you guys. Obviously in LA not so great, and forced two for points this time. What was different this time?

MIKE TOMLIN: We caught 'em, you know. Sometimes it's subtle. As I mentioned, we're not reactionary in our commitment to our turnover culture, whether it's getting the ball or safeguarding it. Sometimes the results may differ, but the spirit and the commitment is unchanged.

And so I don't know that anything was different in terms of our commitment or our approach or our process leading up to play. Certainly the results were different. But the results are going to be different every week. I think that's why this game is so exciting and people enjoy it.

Q. Mike, what have you seen from your offensive line the past couple of weeks as far as the run game? Seems like it's been kind of sporadic with the big plays.

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, I just think in general we're growing as individuals and as a collective and growing in the right ways.

But, again, it's the same discussion when I was talking about Roman earlier. That's a reasonable expectation. We're a young group, man, with exposure. Should come in increased play. And whether that's an individual or whether that's a collective, that's just a general mindset.

Q. Mike, Ramsey plays with an edge. He has his whole career. When something like that happens on Sunday, because the play before they had to be separated. Was your message to him to try to simply remove himself from that stuff, and as a competitor, how do you sort of keep him from sort of -- you know.

MIKE TOMLIN: I have no message if someone spits in your face. Do what comes natural.

Q. How do you balance playing experience versus playing hot players in the case of Pierre and Slay where Pierre is breaking up a lot of passes, and I know it's because he's getting those targets, but overall he is



playing at a high level, balancing, using that hot hand versus bringing in the experience.

MIKE TOMLIN: What's your question?

Q. How do you balance that as a coach making that decision as far as who to use?

MIKE TOMLIN: Thoughtfully.

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