

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 preview of our last performance. As I mentioned after the game, certainly a tough game, a close game. Oftentimes when it's good-on-good, it comes down to a handful of potential plays, but how do you identify those plays as the singular significant ones?

Really, from a leader's perspective, you don't. You put a bunch of irons in the fire, and you understand that any of those plays in any of those areas could be the significant difference. I thought it was in specific areas in all three phases of the game that contributed to us not winning the game.

On special teams, as I mentioned after the game, got to give a lot of credit to their kicker in the kickoff game. He delivered some challenging, dirty balls in the kickoff game, balls that land just barely inside the landing zone and bounce around that are difficult to feel in advance. That's the new hang time and the new dynamic kickoff. As soon as that ball hits the ground, people can start covering. I thought it certainly challenged us from a field positioning standpoint. I think his first three were really, really successful in that space.

I thought in the latter part of the game we needed better timely punting, particularly in the waning moments of the game. I think our last punt was 33 yards. Certainly been pleased with Corliss' body of work over the greater portion of the season, but we needed a little bit more last Sunday. So I'm excited about him bouncing back from that as we lean in on this week's opportunity.

On offense we talked about a couple specific things. They were No. 2 in the league in third downs. So we talked about we had to be in very manageable third downs. I thought we were successful in doing so. I thought we ran the ball effectively, and I think that gave us like seven third down and three or less scenarios. We converted six of those. I just think that's the first way to negate a unit that has dynamic schematics and players in that space.

We stayed at less than third and five, didn't allow them to get to a lot of their schematics, turning the tables in our favor. To be quite honest with you, that's something we've excelled at this year. Third down and two or less, we've got to be one of the top units in football in terms of those conversions.

So oftentimes, the things that lead up to possession down play really determines how it unfolds, and I thought we did a really good job there.

We also talked about their defense thriving in the takeaway game. They had 22 or so going into the game. They were tops in football. We were certainly less successful there, and it was really impactful in terms of how the game unfolded. We turned the ball over at midfield early, and they were able to get seven. Then in the early portions of the second half, in the third quarter, we got sack fumble, put them on the short field again, and they were able to turn that also into a touchdown.

Really when you peel it all back, I think their ability to turn our turnovers into touchdowns and our inability to do so on the other side was really the difference in the game. Obviously we had one takeaway on defense that resulted in a touchdown. Man, that's been awesome. I think we've got three touchdowns over the last two weeks defensively. That's a good sign as the road gets narrow.

But the other turnover we got there midfield, Yahya Black in a short yardage circumstance, we lost that possession on a turnover on downs in a subsequent drive. So when it's good-on-good, that minutia is often the difference. As I mentioned, we were able to take the ball away from them, and that's something that they excelled on at offense. I think they'd had six turnovers over the course of the season. We got two big ones, but we also had an opportunity at some other ones that didn't come to fruition.

We had a turnover right before the half taken away because we were offsides. If you remember, they settled for a field goal on that drive, and the outcome of the game was three points.

So these are some of the things that I previously mentioned as what I mean when I talk about there's often a



lot of irons in the fire in terms of how games unfold, how you engineer victory. And that's why we talk about all three phases, putting together comprehensive plans and coordinating those efforts and the effort to find that type of synergy, that type of complementary football that allows those things to happen.

From an injury standpoint, we've got a couple things to talk about. Broderick Jones has a neck injury. He'll be classified as out this week. I'll have more information for you the next time we get together, but certainly he'll be classified as out this week.

Same thing goes for Derrick Harmon. He sustained a knee injury in play, was able to finish the game, but he'll be characterized as out this week.

Optimistic about a couple returns. Aaron, obviously man, worked his tail off to get to us last week, but as I mentioned, over the course of the weekend, it was a prudent and appropriate decision. We'll start this week with great optimism although we certainly will limit him at the early portions of the week, provide opportunities for the other quarterbacks while preserving him.

Again, we're comfortable with the general trajectory, but I'll keep you updated with his level of participation, and the quality of his participation over the course of the week will be the greatest indicator.

Same thing could be said for Alex Highsmith. He's been out the last couple of weeks, but we're optimistic as we start the week about his inclusion this week.

A couple of guys that are managing some in-game things from last week that may be limited to the early portions of the week, and we'll see where their participation leads. Joey Porter with a hip. DK Metcalf got his ankle rolled, but he was able to finish. Again, certainly we'll probably limit him in the early portions of the week. And the same thing for Ben Skowronek with a shoulder.

Now onto Buffalo. Really excited about this AFC matchup at Acrisure Stadium. Things are tight in the AFC. They're certainly a viable group. It's a big ball weekend here in Pittsburgh.

I'll start first with their offense. Josh Allen, man, what a competitor. We talk a lot about his talents, his legs, his arms, and things of that nature, but it's the intangible quality that really, really captures your attention as you study tape. His ability to rise up in the moment, his will, his competitive spirit, how he finishes plays, whether it's scramble plays to keep passes alive or when he chooses to pull the ball down and run.

You've got to be really conscious of what you do schematically in terms of how you rush him and how you support that rush with the coverage behind it because, again, his ability to extend plays without negativity, his ability to break you down with his legs certainly we've seen over the course of this season and certainly we've seen firsthand over the course of his career, some of the games that we've been in against him.

Man, they're running the ball extremely well. Certainly he's a component of that, but man, Cook is doing an awesome job. He's almost got 1,100 yards. I think he's No. 2 in the league in rushing. He averages 5.4 per carry. He's got eight touchdowns. He's a bell cow for them and really has been for a number of years now. I think he just got a big contract at the start of the season, and he and they are certainly reaping the rewards of that.

They've got an awesome fullback. We don't often mention the fullback in today's game, but Reggie Gilliam out of Toledo has been there, I think, since 2020. He's playing really good football for them. He's a major component of what they do in the running game oftentimes. Statistics don't bear that out, but guys like he and 85, Hawes, man, are significant contributors to the No. 2 rushing attack in football.

In terms of the passing game, Josh has certainly got a lot of eligibles to throw the ball to, receivers and tight ends. He distributes the ball to open people. The depth of their group is a challenge. They spread the ball around. They formation you. He works the interior portions of the field very well. Certainly that's been an area that's had our attention over the last several weeks.

Man, we've given some things up there. They've got talented tight ends in Kincaid and Knox that are capable of working that portion of the field. They've got solid receivers outside. Can't say enough about their slot receiver, his ability to win one-on-one matchups and break people down. He can turn short to long. They throw bubble screens and things of that nature. Jets, man, they got some people that can take minimal risk, schematic endeavors, and turn them into big plays.

As I mentioned earlier as I was talking about Josh, they're a great possession down group. We've got to have a heck of a third down plan. We've got to work to get off the field and get them off the field, but his talents are a major component of that. So we've got a lot of things to face on that side of the ball.

On defense they're a continuity group. Boy, they've had a collection of people there for some time, and even some of



them are doubling back for a second stint. Tre'Davious White and Poyer, for example, are two guys that spent a lot of time there that have gone on to other places and doubled back. I think they value that continuity. It allows them to do a lot of things schematically, particularly in the secondary. I think they're No. 1 in the league in terms of passing yards per game.

It speaks to that continuity, that collective. A lot of their talent is homegrown, drafted there, and spent a lot of time there. I can't say enough about their safety, 24 out of Utah.

He's doing a lot of really good things and contributing in a variety of ways. He may be their leading tackler. I think he's got three sacks. He's also got three interceptions. He's a good pressure man on first and second down in an effort to minimize your running game. He's a good pressure man on third down as well.

You know, it starts up front for them. They've always been a four down group, and they've always allocated a lot of resources there. It seems every year they're acquiring some really established rusher to round out their depth in that space. It's been Leonard Floyd over the years. It's been Von Miller. This year obviously it's Bosa.

They certainly already have enough talent in that space, but I think it just speaks to their commitment to fortifying their talent and depth up front. They play behind their rush.

Those guys wreak havoc, they do. They're challenging in the C and D-gap area in the run game because oftentimes those guys are a lot bigger than the tight ends and so forth that generally play in that space.

That's one of the reasons why we deploy some of the schematics we deploy out in that C and D-gap area with Darnell Washington and Spencer Anderson, for example, because guys like Rousseau are just oftentimes too big and long to block in the running game for, quote, unquote, normal tight ends.

Man, we've got a lot to be excited about. We've got a lot obviously from a challenge perspective. It's a big ball weekend. We show our respect to that with how we prepare. We're doing so right now as a staff and looking forward to continuing that with the players tomorrow as we lean in on prep.

I'll pause and open it up for questions.

Q. Was one extra week or the week off enough to alleviate any concerns/fears you might have had about Aaron with his wrist?

MIKE TOMLIN: I think time will tell. There were so many unknowns last week because it just is lack of work during

the course of the week. I think there will be less unknowns regarding that topic, and that's what makes this week an encouraging one. That's why we're hopeful.

Q. Is the determining factor there safety for him? Is that what the determining factor was in pulling him out?

MIKE TOMLIN: It was just the appropriate thing to do from my perspective.

Q. How much physical work does Aaron need to get to be able to play on Sunday?

MIKE TOMLIN: Again, what he needs and what others might need are certainly different topics of conversation, but we don't focus on bare minimum in terms of what he needs. Our goal is to proceed and proceed with caution appropriately while at the same time giving him all the work that we can afford to give him.

We're certainly going to live that day by day. He clocks in and visits with Gabe and the training staff every morning, and we kind of build a plan from there.

Q. Do you need to see him take more snaps under center to test that wrist?

MIKE TOMLIN: Again, we'll see where the week leads us.

Q. With Derrick Harmon, is this the same injury issue he dealt with in the preseason?

MIKE TOMLIN: No, it was something that happened in game on Sunday.

Q. Was it the same knee?

MIKE TOMLIN: To be honest with you, I'm not even certain. He was able to finish the game, so it wasn't on my radar when I visited with you guys post-game, but it certainly turned up on Monday morning. That's why I wanted to be transparent with you.

Q. How do you feel about your depth there specifically with Yahya and how he's grown?

MIKE TOMLIN: Really encouraged by his growth. I think his play time is kind of reflective of that. We like our young D-linemen, and we've acquired a new one in Brodrick. Sometimes guys will get an opportunity, one man's misfortune is another man or other men's opportunity. So we're encouraged by the depth that we have at that position.



We'll take the collective through the week. We can see who can execute, detail, and I'm sure it will be more than one person. It often is when we're talking about losing somebody that's starter caliber.

Q. How do you balance the competitive nature of a guy like Aaron who obviously really wants to be out there and play versus what you feel is right in terms of safety and the long-term benefit for the team?

MIKE TOMLIN: I think first and foremost you lean on the advice of the medical experts. I'm not going to take his competitive spirit and his will to compete as a negative. Those are positives. But certainly it's our job as leaders to exercise appropriate precaution, and first and foremost for me are the opinions of the medical staff.

Q. When you look back at it, where do you think you guys could have been better in your red zone defense against Chicago?

MIKE TOMLIN: There's a couple calls you'd like to have back certainly. There's some detail that you'd like to have back. But oftentimes, that's just the case. It's not one glaring thing. It's popcorn. It's minutia here, minutia there. Man, we'd like to be in a different call under this circumstance. We'd like to have someone better positioned in that circumstance. I think that's kind of reflective of the red zone output last week.

Q. Through 11 games, big picture, offense or defense, do you find that you are dealing most often with those popcorn elements, or do you find that you are coaching around or still trying to coach better with shortcomings?

MIKE TOMLIN: It depends on the circumstance, and what I mean by the circumstance is oftentimes who you compete against, the nature of that matchup, their schematics as a component of that discussion, player availability within the 11 weeks, who's available, who's not available, and how that might impact your strategy.

So it's difficult to paint with a broad brush, but I'll say largely, generally, it's a combination of all of the above.

Q. As you look for more chunk plays offensively, are there more opportunities in the middle of the field that you feel like you need to exploit?

MIKE TOMLIN: Maybe. Again, it's week to week, depending on the schematics that the team or the teams that we compete against choose to deploy. Certainly largely, if you look at the large body of work, there's probably some more opportunities for us on the interior

portions of the field.

Q. How did Calvin Anderson perform when he had to go in there, and who's going to be your swing tackle this week?

MIKE TOMLIN: Feel really confident with what Calvin has given us. He's been that guy that's a swing tackle for us, and he's shown really good capabilities in that area, but we're also extremely comfortable with Peat, and that's one of the reasons why we acquired Peat in the team development process. There's a guy that has a resume that started wire to wire that came into this league as a first rounder, and so certainly he has a different profile than Calvin.

We like both guys, both guys are veteran professionals who they have a certain level of preparedness and maturity that they bring to the work every day. So we're going to prepare both guys, and we'll have more clarity as we get close to the game time.

Q. Why has consistency been so recent particularly on defense?

MIKE TOMLIN: It always is. I think oftentimes your record reflects that. If we were sitting here at 9-2, we'd probably be having less of a discussion. At 6-5, I think 6-5 in general speaks to that.

Q. The Bears got a bunch of their chunk plays against you guys in Cover 3 zone defense. Seems like you guys were leaning away from that in recent weeks where you found more defensive success. Did you view that as maybe a schematic error in the alignment or more of an execution error that you've got to be better in those moments?

MIKE TOMLIN: Sometimes it's just decisions you make in an effort to fortify the matchup. As I mentioned, not only at the beginning of this, but the beginning of last week, we were playing the No. 2 rushing team in football. So that deploys -- that requires a certain deployment of schematics, and oftentimes the play action pass is a negative by-product of that.

I thought they executed their play action passing game with more fluidity and more consistently than they had leading up to our game. So I've got to give them credit for their planning and execution in that space.

Q. In the situation of the 25-yard Moore touchdown where he ran up the seam against you guys, trips right, four verticals, is that a situation where you have to check out of the Cover 3 zone?



MIKE TOMLIN: I'm not going to peel back the layers of how we function from a schematic point although I am impressed with the depths of your question.

Q. Mason has been successful converting third downs and extending some drives this last six quarters. Anything in particular he's doing or why he's been so successful?

MIKE TOMLIN: Mason?

Q. Yes.

MIKE TOMLIN: I think we've made a conscious effort to be on schedule. I think when you're on schedule, man, it provides you more options or more ways to skin the cat, if you will. The run game becomes a component of it.

As I mentioned, we're one of the elite teams in third down and two or less. As I mentioned in the last game, I think there were seven instances where it was third and three or less. That takes a lot of options and schematic options away from a defense and provides those for the offense.

Q. What are teams doing to limit Jonnu? What can you do to get him more opportunities?

MIKE TOMLIN: I don't know if they're doing anything specifically. Sometimes it's just our planning. Certainly Jonnu is a capable member of our unit, and it usually comes around. A couple weeks ago you were asking me about Muth, and I gave you a similar response, so keep watching.

Q. Do you have an outer limit in terms of yardage or seconds remaining on the clock in your head before you rush in the field goal unit?

MIKE TOMLIN: I do, but where the ball is located and things of that nature is a component of it.

Q. Why has it been a struggle to generate plays vertically in the passing game?

MIKE TOMLIN: A lot of us got to deal with schemes that people deploy, but we certainly could be better in that area. If you're speaking specifically to last Sunday, I thought the deep ball has always been a good aspect of Mason Rudolph's game, but it wasn't necessarily so last Sunday.

We had some plays to be made down the grass that we didn't take advantage of. Second play of the game, we left the ball a little bit short versus DK. We had Roman down the grass, and the ball sailed out of bounds, just as a

couple of examples of that. We acknowledge that, and we'll go back to work and keep pressing.

Q. When Troy was uncovered late in the game, is that on Mason to recognize that, or is that on the receivers to make sure?

MIKE TOMLIN: Are you talking about on the illegal formation? We own that as a collective. We didn't do a good enough job in that moment as a collective. It certainly was a significant play. Oftentimes you're defined by your ability to execute under those circumstances when time is of the essence, when you're working at pace.

Those of you that watch us practice, that's why we spend so much time working on that component of the game week in and week out. We start our Wednesdays with offense versus defense, working at pace. We finished Wednesday's practice and Thursday's practice under the same umbrella because we realize that you need reps in an effort to be clean there because that was a significant component of the game.

We fought our tails off and had a chance to have the ball and go back at 'em. We converted a third down and four, Mason did with his legs, went down the field, but certainly we were illegal there and deserving of that penalty.

Q. On that final play, did you consider a field goal? Did getting the K-ball in there factor in at all into the decision?

MIKE TOMLIN: I didn't. I didn't feel comfortable with the distance there. I wanted to convert and clock it and play from there, but obviously the fourth down play got batted down at the line of scrimmage. So the subsequent discussions became moot.

Q. You made the decision about Aaron on Saturday of last week. Do you anticipate a similar timeline for his availability this week?

MIKE TOMLIN: I have no idea. Stay tuned.

Q. You talked about how tight it was in the AFC. Does it feel like the playoffs start now for your group?

MIKE TOMLIN: I always feel that way. I've been in this league so long, man. We don't have an 80-plus game schedule or a 160-plus game schedule. You get 17 opportunities to state a case for yourself. So there's extreme urgency in our business, and those of us that have been in it for a long time, players and coaches, we understand that.



Q. How challenging is it for you guys as a staff preparing a team offensively when you throw more to the middle of the field when you have Aaron versus not as much when you don't, as far as getting that chemistry going during the week and you don't know who exactly will start?

MIKE TOMLIN: There's always challenges when you're missing significant players.

Q. Part of the reason you were in that time crunch is that rule that exists that even though the clock is stopped, it burns a timeout. During your time in the competition committee or what have you, have you ever been given a rationale as to why it's been found to be necessary?

MIKE TOMLIN: I'm sure I've been a component of that, but the details of it doesn't come to mind as I stand here today. It's certainly a more obscure rule, and certainly from a spirit perspective with the clock being stopped, it's a reasonable question, but I'm just not really familiar with the discussions that we've had along those lines as I stand here right now.

Q. How do you plan on using your corners with Slay? Can Slay potentially be back in the starting mix, or is Pierre?

MIKE TOMLIN: We feel really comfortable with his availability this week. We'll make that determination as we get closer to game time and really look at the schematic things we're dealing with. Certainly Joey being limited at the top part of the week could be a component of that discussion as well.

Q. Does that potentially open the door for Asante Samuel Jr. to get some looks for you this week?

MIKE TOMLIN: We're always looking at our practice guys to elevate, particularly those with a resume like Samuel's. He's been here for a short period of time. He's been working his tail off to not only get in football condition but learn what to do. It's been a good endeavor thus far, but it's too early in the week for me to speculate in that regard.

Q. What do you feel that your offensive line, especially the young guys, have found the most collective success as a group, whether it's run blocking in certain situations or pass protecting in others?

MIKE TOMLIN: I just think in general they've been on the upswing. The arrow's pointed up on that collective, as a collective and as individuals, so I'm encouraged by it. But I say that weekly, and oftentimes the statistics don't bear

that out, but that's just how games unfold.

I love the fact they're largely playing penalty free, to be honest with you. We don't talk about that enough. I think as a collective they've been penalized maybe eight times this season. With a young group playing as penalty free as they are, I'd be wrong if I didn't mention that as a component of their growth and development as well.

Q. Earlier today Hines Ward was named a semifinalist for the pro football Hall of Fame. What would be your pitch to the committee to try to get him into the hall?

MIKE TOMLIN: Hey, numbers do not tell his story although his numbers are special. They are. I think that's a guy with a thousand or so career catches.

But man, if you were around him, if you were in stadiums with him, if you were a member of his team or an opposing player, you understood what playing with and against Hines Ward was about. He was a football player first, a wide receiver second. To be quite honest with you, he was an offensive perimeter bully, and I say that in a complimentary way.

To me, he's a legendary player in his generation because of the way that he played, the amount of respect that he carried when he didn't have the ball in his hands, when it wasn't even a pass is stuff of legend.

Q. Is he an example you still use today with guys?

MIKE TOMLIN: Without question. Without question.

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