

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 the last performance. Unfortunately, the tape didn't show anything dramatically different than what we saw in stadium. We played 30 minutes of acceptable football, and then we didn't do what we needed to do in the third quarter in any of the phases of play.

Certainly that put us behind the gun, and we were running uphill from there. I think frustration became a component of it, which is a natural thing. We've got a lot of guys that work extremely hard and put a lot into prep.

We want to win. We want to do what's required to win, but we didn't necessarily express that want to appropriately. We kind of talked about that some yesterday as a collective. I own the responsibility of making sure that these guys understand a component of being a tough team to beat is not beating ourselves.

We had some penalties. Certainly you're going to have penalties when you play, but penalties of the 15-yard variety, loss of composure and things of that nature hadn't been us. So that needs to be corrected immediately. We talked about that. When it's from some of our guys like captains and so forth, guys that represent us at the coin toss, it certainly merits a discussion and analysis. So we went through that, and we look forward to moving on from that.

Now, a component of moving on from that is executing better. When you execute better, you make more plays, frustration becomes less of an issue. So certainly first and foremost, as we lean in on this week, man, our focus is performing at a high level, doing a better job strategically, doing a better job of dividing the labor up, and then ultimately letting that lead to doing a better job of play.

Really there's a rhythm to it in recent weeks, particularly in Chicago and last week, but it doesn't make it any easier, obviously, to identify and move on from. Certainly when you have the lead at halftime and you're getting the ball to come out to start the second half, there's generally a good

feel there, but we haven't done enough with the football to start second halves, and we haven't done enough to defend the grass once we turn the ball over.

That could be descriptive of how things unfolded in Chicago, and it certainly is a description of how things unfolded last week. We talk about it, we learn from it, but equally as important, we roll our sleeves up and go to work.

How do you get that synergy? How do you get the confidence? How do you get the cohesion required to win? You tighten up your plan. You delve into things that you've spent more time in and things that you hadn't. You make sure that guys are in position to work in a coordinated fashion in all three phases.

So we're making some very pointed decisions as we lay the foundation for this plan this week, but I imagine Baltimore is doing similar things. We both sit at 6-6. Both of those positions come with some scars certainly, but they need to come with some lessons learned as well. I think the team that displays the ability to apply those lessons best is going to be the team that's going to be in position to control this game and thus be in control of the North.

Before I get specifically into Baltimore and talking about their personnel and so forth, just let me say this. I really enjoy the structure that is today's NFL scheduling. The excitement associated around these division games, the weight on them, not only for us and Baltimore, but just globally speaking. We felt it a year ago. We had some big games against them in the latter part of the year as well.

I think it's good for football. It's good for our fan base. It's good for their fan base. It's an honor to be a part of it. Certainly it provides an edge for us, an urgency for us as we prepare. We've been in hotly contested battles with this group in the past, and I see no reason why this weekend won't be the same. There's certainly a lot at stake.

From an injury perspective, I'll cover a few things. Derrick Harmon can be characterized as out again this week with his knee injury. Everyone else could be characterized as questionable. When I characterize people as questionable, oftentimes it means limited participation at the early part of



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the week and then increased participation as the week goes on and the quality and quantity of that participation being our guide towards availability.

The guys that fall into that category, Patrick Queen with his glute injury, and some other guys with bumps and bruises associated with play. James Pierre is in the concussion protocol, and I never really try to provide too much color regarding that. The medical experts make that determination, but he's in the protocol and could be listed as questionable as we sit here today.

I would imagine we've got some other guys that lack availability associated with bumps and bruises, associated with play this time of year that could be limited in the top part of the week, but we expect those guys to pick up as the week goes on. You can characterize Aaron Rodgers within that group as well.

Now onto Baltimore. As I mentioned earlier, man, they're familiar with us, we're familiar with them. It creates excitement. It creates excitement around the strategic planning. It's fun to have knowledge of this group but watch how they've evolved over the course of the journey. We all evolve for a variety of reasons. The elevation of individual players, the emergence of individual players, the attrition component of the game as you miss people and adapt schematically, and from a division of labor standpoint to make up for that.

The return of players and that impact that it has. For instance, on offense I'll start with Baltimore's offense in the early portions of the year, they were without Ricard and Likely, two major components, if you're familiar with Baltimore, that play major roles in how they function.

Likely is an awesome second tight end to partner with Andrews. They play a lot out of two tight end personnel groups, and they're able to get a lot done in the running game and in the passing game. I think you feel with each passing week the impact of his return and presence, and certainly the same thing with Ricard, man. We've dealt with him over the years. You get that guy on the field in front of Derrick Henry, and you've got an all day job ahead of you in terms of minimizing what they're capable of in the running game.

Certainly as we lean in on this week, that's where our attentions lie from a defensive perspective. No disrespect to their passing game, and certainly they've got a lot of capable guys there, but we're talking about a legendary runner of this generation in Derrick Henry. We're talking about some schematics and some personnel that really highlight that agenda.

Coupling with our present state with the performance we just came off of regarding the run, I believe that focus is justified and appropriate.

But they do have some dangerous people on the perimeter. I like their division of labor from a receiver standpoint. Zay Flowers obviously is a good receiver. He's dangerous off the catch. He's going to make you miss. Bateman and D are veteran guys who know what they're doing. D-Hop, can't say enough about him in terms of 50-50 matchups and the things he provided from a one-on-one perspective.

The tight ends and the running game, Mark Andrews, him and Lamar have been partners in this thing since they got drafted in the same draft class. I think he's Baltimore's all time leading receiving touchdown guy. He's certainly still a major component of what they do in the red area. I think he's got five or so touchdowns this year.

But the ball goes to and through Lamar. His ability to extend and make plays, his ability to run, particularly in situational moments, is and always has been a challenge. We failed some at that challenge a week ago against Josh Allen. So for those reasons, we're really working with an edge in preparation for this one.

Certainly we have a lot of experience in defending them and going against them, but I'm sure they say similar things regarding us. So with that understanding, we proceed.

On the defensive side of the ball, they really did some things to stabilize themselves kind of at the trade deadline. A couple quality acquisitions, one at the safety spot and one at the edge spot to round out some areas where they were really thin.

The safety acquisition has really allowed Kyle Hamilton to do what Kyle Hamilton does, which is to play big nickel on first and second round and play the line of scrimmage and blitz and defend the run and set edges. You get in sub packet situations and more passing circumstances on third down, he essentially plays a dime linebacker spot, and you have to deal with he and Roquan, and they're both formidable certainly. They're very good underneath defenders and blitzers, and they've got very good schematics that highlight those talents.

Another versatile guy obviously worth mentioning is Marlon Humphrey, man. He plays outside when Kyle Hamilton plays nickel. When Kyle Hamilton moves to dime linebacker, he plays inside. He's a very versatile guy. He's the poster boy for their turnover culture. I think he's got 17 career forced fumbles and counting now. So ball security is going to be a major component of it. We've got to be

really fundamentally sound there. Again, he leads that charge.

Again, I would be remiss if I didn't mention Malaki Starks, their first rounder. He's a center fielder and is doing a really good job patrolling that area of the field. Particularly of late, as I mentioned, with that acquisition and they're able to solidify some division of labor, he's been a mainstay in the middle of the field for them and doing a nice job of solidifying that space.

You see growth and development in Nate Wiggins in year 2. I think he's playing really good football. He's a tough cover man. I know he went out of the last football game, but as we sit here and prepare today, we certainly anticipate seeing him in a matchup like this and ready to deal with his talents.

They do a lot of things up front, man. They use a variety of packages and personnel groups. They've had some attrition up front in their defensive line, in edge people. So they get into some dime 41. They also get into some dime 32. Young draftee out of Clemson, Simpson, is versatile. You'll see him in some dime 32. He'll rush off the edge. He'll act as a hover rusher at times in a hybrid four-man rush. He drops some.

It gives them really good schematic variation when you've got he and Roquan and Kyle Hamilton down around the box. Some guys blitz. Some guys cover. They do a nice job week in and week out of kind of changing those things up.

Then certainly when we play these guys, special teams is always a major component of how games unfold. They're a really good special teams unit. It's a value system of theirs. Certainly it's a value system of ours. We'll be fighting for every blade of grass in all three phases. Oftentimes they come in more chunks in this phase because of the vertical and horizontal grass associated with these plays.

Our return games have got to provide a leg up, our coverage game has to be excellent, and certainly our specialists have to be on it.

Excited about the prep in terms of what lies ahead this week. I'm excited about getting in front of our guys starting tomorrow morning and laying out a plan and working that plan and taking it to Baltimore AFC North football with a division lead on the line.

Q. When you talk about the frustration, where do you see it manifested? In their play? In their body language? In their behavior? What?

MIKE TOMLIN: A little bit of both really in all areas. Certainly I never want people to apologize for caring, and I view the frustration displayed last week in that way. Guys were in fight mode. They care. The game wasn't unfolding the way that we desire. They didn't necessarily express it appropriately. So as a leader, it's about redirecting that and making sure it's channeled in the right ways.

Also, how do we move on from that? The source of that frustration is not playing the way that we would like to play. So certainly, putting together a good plan and putting them in position to play well is a component of moving on from it.

Q. What did you learn from the captains in talking to them about what they feel like needs to change?

MIKE TOMLIN: We have a lot of discussions week in and week out. I usually generally leave those discussions between us, but certainly I'm open to insight from those guys and assistance from those guys. A lot of those guys have been around a lot of football. When you're in the position that I'm in, you don't care where good advice comes from, you don't care where good ideas come from. That's just the spirit in which I move and I've moved for a very long time.

I think the longer you're in this business, you understand that. Forget authorship or ownership, it's about being right and being ready. So certainly those opinions are valued.

Q. You said after the game on Sunday that the answers were in the building, but a lot of the issues that you guys had on Sunday have been the issues all season. Why have the answers to those issues been so elusive?

MIKE TOMLIN: Because those same ingredients have produced six wins as well as six losses. So it's about how we cook it this week.

Q. One of the things that Aaron mentioned after the game was he felt like practice wasn't good last week, and that's kind of been a common theme. Is that something that needs to change with practice, or is that feedback he's given you that you can take into account?

MIKE TOMLIN: I'm open to doing whatever it is we need to do obviously to make practice better. Sometimes practice gets challenging, particularly in the early portions of the week this time of year, because of lack of significant player availability, and certainly felt that last week. Not making that as an excuse, that's just the reality of our business.



I'm sure people that we compete against miss significant players as well. How we navigate that oftentimes during the week is an example of how we might navigate it during the course of the weekend. Certainly last week, based on the results were not good enough, and particularly from a defensive perspective when we lost Patrick Queen, we didn't do a good enough job of managing that component of it.

Q. He also mentioned he thought maybe the cold weather was impacting the quality of practice. Do you consider moving more practices inside?

MIKE TOMLIN: We generally play outside. If the surface is safe, I like to practice in the environment that we play in. But if you lose productivity because of the windage, et cetera, et cetera, those are just general decisions that you make that's best appropriate for the group. In spirit you like the group to practice in the environment that they play in, but if it's counterproductive, if it's survival, then certainly you make adaptation.

Q. When you have the run defense problem that you guys had Sunday, and you're going against another big run opponent, where's the line between focusing on the minutia and the smaller details versus looking at a more global approach from a coaching standpoint how to fix those problems?

MIKE TOMLIN: I think you approach it from both perspectives. You've got to put a lot of lines in the water. Certainly we're looking at strategic, global things from a strategy or schematic standpoint, but we're also looking at the division of labor and the positions we put players in, how we adjust, adapt, and communicate, particularly when that gets strained due to player availability or lack thereof.

So some of those things, and all of those things are a component of the decision-making process.

Q. T.J. Watt was pretty frustrated that they seemed to run the same play or similar concept over and over with success. Where were the shortcomings in that particular play or that situation?

MIKE TOMLIN: It was really good execution by them. Oftentimes it was a final look, but there was pre-snap movement and changes in offensive personnel that disguised it. So sometimes a play would hit in a particular space, but they would change offensive personnel, requiring us to change defensive personnel, and the person might be different the second time.

So that's just a strategic component of football. They did an awesome job. I don't want to take anything away from

them, and we certainly have to be better.

Q. Aside from Harmon itself that has been a variable, and you mentioned it will be again this week with his injury, why have you found the run game has been very good on defense at times like against Chicago and Jonathan Taylor, and why has it struggled as mightily as it has in other weeks?

MIKE TOMLIN: I think you have to look at each one of those things individually -- the plans, the players available to us, the schematics of those that we compete against. I think that's the challenge and the beautiful thing about this league is that week in and week out you start anew.

Certainly, particularly at this point in the year, some evidence of who you are and evidence of who your opponents are, but from a strategy standpoint, you'd better start at ground zero. You'd better build, and that's what we're in the process of doing today and this week in an effort to put out a better performance this week.

Q. You talked about trying to learn some things about the last week with the way Allen ran as opposed to getting Lamar this week. Is there a transferable thing in the way they approach it with those two quarterbacks?

MIKE TOMLIN: There certainly is, but they're certainly very different guys. They both have designed quarterback runs as a component of their attack. Lamar is more on the perimeter because of his talents, his elusiveness, his speed. Josh Allen is more downhill because of his talents. He's big. He's strong. He's competitive and combative.

But either way you slice it, it's 11-on-11 football. Certainly they have different approaches to that 11-on-11 football. The differences in the backs have a lot to do with it.

Cook is an elusive and perimeter capable and things of that nature, and certainly although Derrick has great speed, but when he gets into the secondary is a problem and you want to work hard to minimize his downhill because, man, when he gets downhill on you, you really feel it. That's when he starts bumper carrying and bouncing off of people. You want to eliminate that component of his game.

There's certainly are some similarities and some dramatic differences as well. We'll lean on the similarities. We have experience competing against Baltimore, so we certainly understand the differences.

Q. When Baltimore ran it against you last year in December, did you learn anything what not to do to try



to defend that?

MIKE TOMLIN: Certainly.

Q. Such as?

MIKE TOMLIN: Just how you play apex players. The guys that are halfway between the corridor defense and the perimeter. Some of the things you do around secondary rotation and so forth. I think any time you play there's an educational process.

I think one of the first things that we do on Monday morning or on Sunday night, most of the time for me it's Sunday, is jot down some just quick initial notes while it's fresh to capture that, that learning, the adaptation that happens in game, the adjustments, the conversations had formally and informally.

I think it's just good business and protocol to formally document that, to collect it and store it because certainly, if you've been in this business any length of time, you know you'll double back to it sooner, probably more so than later.

Q. When you're having trouble generating offense, why does it make sense to have Pat Freiermuth on the bench?

MIKE TOMLIN: We have a bunch of guys who are capable. I think we've been through some of these questions before. We have a lot of guys on the bench we have confidence in. Pat is certainly one of them. The ball didn't bounce his way a week ago, but certainly he's a viable option for us and one to strongly consider as we work this week.

Q. You talk a lot about frustration, and you have said you understand the fans' frustration. What is it like for you personally when they're calling for to you go?

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, in general I agree with them from this perspective. Football is our game. We're in the sport and entertainment business. If you root for the Steelers, entertaining them is winning. So when you're not winning, it's not entertaining. If you've been in this business, you understand that.

So I respect it. I share frustrations. I understand what makes this thing go, and winning is what makes this thing go.

Q. Will you make any adjustments to the responsibilities of your coaching staff?

MIKE TOMLIN: Not anything that merits discussion in this

setting, no.

Q. During the draft and free agency, you talked about wanting to be more physical across the board. How do you feel like your team it kind of fulfilling or not fulfilling that goal?

MIKE TOMLIN: As we stand here today based on the last performance, not so good, but certainly at different times in this journey, I've felt really good about it. I think I can describe a lot of conversations, as I mentioned earlier, when you're sitting at 6-6.

For us it's about absorbing that and understanding that and plotting a course to move forward, but also understanding that the things that happen to us are not vacuum related. It's happening to those that we compete against as well. I would imagine that Baltimore has got similar challenges and issues because they're sitting at 6-6 as well.

So the team that can manage those things and summons up the good in a more really consistent way is the team that's going to have a chance to control this game this weekend.

Q. Two things about Aaron, just first of all simply, how did his wrist come out of that game? How did he respond to playing the full game? Secondly, did you see anything during the game that was cause for alarm that you need to see get better in practice in terms of the ball handling duties, things like that, before you feel better about what you can do offensively this week?

MIKE TOMLIN: I feel good about what we can do offensively. I don't think we're limited in any way. Certainly we're going to do some things a little bit different to accommodate present circumstances, like we worked almost exclusively out of gun or pistol a week ago to minimize some of that. There will probably be less of a discussion this week. We'll see as the week wears on.

Certainly I think he came out of the game, at least physically from a wrist injury perspective, in a good place.

Q. You mentioned frustrations. I want to talk about from the player perspective. Would you prefer them flush those frustrations and that passion here and get back to practice and move on, or carry that and use that as a tool throughout the week?

MIKE TOMLIN: Both.

Q. Where do you lean as a coach when you look at the problems in the run offense game, your guys couldn't



get that going against a Bills team that largely struggled against the run?

MIKE TOMLIN: We've got to roll up our sleeves and get back to work, man. Our process for us is a thing for me. Oftentimes I get asked, I think Brooky always asks what gives you confidence? Sometimes I answer it in a colorful way, but it's what we do. It's no different than what you guys do. You guys might write a bad article or a couple of bad articles. Does it lessen your confidence in your ability to write articles the next time? I imagine it doesn't because you've been doing it all of your adult lives.

It's the same for us as individuals or collective in this business. Certainly our last performance wasn't up to snuff, but I don't know that it lessens our belief in self or ability to deliver individually and collectively moving forward.

Q. At the same time, though, does it force you to re-evaluate the way you go about your job?

MIKE TOMLIN: Does it make you when you write a bad article?

Q. No. I've got more confidence in you.

MIKE TOMLIN: It certainly does because, if you've got a desire to be great, you'd better analyze things in a really critical way, you know what I mean? I think that's what you're asking. Certainly if winning is our agenda, and it is, we're not going to be hypersensitive to that.

Q. When you have a stretch where you guys have not played really consistent football or going on two months, do you have to -- do you accentuate the bad, or do you say like, when I asked you earlier about, well, these answers also produced six wins. Do you have to remind these guys, hey, we played good football?

MIKE TOMLIN: I think it depends on the situation, what topic is being discussed, and who you're dealing with. I think at times you deal with both.

Q. How do you channel the confidence? Is it more about we're confident to come up with different ways to, as you often say, skin the cat, or is it more about confidence that we just need to do what we do better?

MIKE TOMLIN: It's both. It's both. I think, if you're in one lane exclusively, you're not providing enough irons in the fire to produce victory.

Q. How much have you changed your approach

during the season this year?

MIKE TOMLIN: As compared to what?

Q. As compared to what you normally do. You said, when we write bad articles, what do we do? Sometimes I transcribe differently.

MIKE TOMLIN: I think the tools that are available oftentimes dictate the change. Certainly this week's plan is going to be different than last week's plan. The opponent is different. The players available to us, anticipated available to us may be different. That's what I mean when I ask how do you change? You change because of necessity. You change because of the challenges are different week in and week out. The materials available to you, whether it's manpower or what have you change based on player availability and so forth. Conditions change. The environmental component of the game changes.

Certainly we're going to be in Baltimore, Maryland. So that creates a hostile environment on possession downs for our offense, for example.

So you change out of necessity. You're not resistant to change. I don't know that you spend a lot of time quantifying the amount of that change. You just know that change is required.

Q. Do you have an identity as a team yet?

MIKE TOMLIN: Yeah, it's 6-6, and I don't like it.

Q. You talked openly about building your team in the off-season to deal with the AFC North a lot of times. How did what happened at the end of last season in Baltimore impact the way you went about constructing this team this year?

MIKE TOMLIN: The acquisition of bigs. You saw an emphasis in the Draft around big people, fortifying our depth in that area. Certainly it's been required. We certainly had some attrition in that area. Dean Lowry, Loudermilk, and Derrick Harmon has missed a couple of stretches. So that depth with young people like Yahya and O and others is significant. You can't run out of bigs. If you run out of bigs in AFC North ball, you're running on the beach certainly.

Q. Going back to offensive identity, what have you identified on offense and defense as things you guys do well that you can rely on when things are going off the rails?



MIKE TOMLIN: I'm sorry?

Q. What have you identified on offense that as a team you do well that you can fall back on, that you can rely on?

MIKE TOMLIN: We're very good at third and manageable. I think we may be tops in the league. I don't check on those statistics. I generally focus on the things we need to improve upon. We've been really good at third and manageable, so if we work to stay in those down and distances, we give ourselves a chance to possess the ball more than we have as an example.

Defensively we certainly have done a nice job in general at taking the ball away. Culturally we know what a big component of the game that is, so what can we do to fortify the game this week to make sure that's an aspect of our portfolio to engineer victory, just to name a few.

Again, when you're trying to be great, when you're trying to win games this week, you'd better be focused on things you need to fix first and foremost and not seeking comfort relative to the things that you do well or you've done well.

Q. Slay was a healthy scratch on Sunday. Does he have the ability to earn his way back on the field?

MIKE TOMLIN: Really it was less about Slay and more about getting an opportunity to see Asante Samuel. He's a global NFL starter type who's been on our practice squad. This time of year as attrition sets in, you step into stadiums week in and week out, things happen, and we certainly want to have an opportunity to see him in stadium before we maybe had to make a decision on him, before someone else forced our hand regarding decisions.

So it was about that for us. Slay has missed some time due to a variety of injuries and so forth. It was about getting a look at that guy that started a lot of games in this league, and we did. We liked some of the things that we saw and will make decisions about how we divide the labor up a little later in the week.

Q. You said Rodgers is questionable. Who do you call on if he's out? Is it Rudolph?

MIKE TOMLIN: I didn't say he was questionable, but I said you could describe him as questionable at this point in the week. By that I mean, his participation might be limited in the early portions of the week. I really hadn't pondered not having them at this juncture.

Q. There's a number of players that you said players need to look in the mirror. Do you feel like you have a

group of guys that will look in the mirror, that will take ownership?

MIKE TOMLIN: I do. Because I think the basic premise that we start with in terms of assembling a group, and whether it's draft or free agency, is we like good men who happen to be good at football. Secondly, we like men who absolutely love football, and we believe that those two attributes really lend itself to the discussion that you asked about, the ability to assess, the ability to absorb, the ability to dig in when things get difficult, I think are a little bit easier when you've got good people and we've got people that love what it is they do.

Q. The other guys on your roster that fall into that category?

MIKE TOMLIN: Most of them.

Q. Broderick Jones and how do you feel he played? And will he start again?

MIKE TOMLIN: He was solid, and he will.

Q. Roberts?

MIKE TOMLIN: He's on IR. He's out for this week.

Q. What did you find out about Broderick's injury? This time last week, it was still a week to week thing?

MIKE TOMLIN: It still can be characterized as week to week. I don't know that I have definitive information on the extent or the length of the timeout. I don't want to give you guys misinformation. I'll give it to you when I have it. I would classify him as out because he's on IR.

Q. When the negativity presents itself in the stadium as it did on Sunday, your players are not immune to it. As a coach, do you want them to lean into it a little bit, or do you want them to block it out?

MIKE TOMLIN: I don't know that you have meetings about it. I don't think any of us prepare for failure. Sometimes you're faced with it and you deal with it, but I don't know that we strategically plan for negativity in the ways that you ask.

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