

# Pittsburgh Steelers

## Media Conference

Tuesday, January 6, 2026  
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA

## Coach Mike Tomlin

### Weekday Press Conference



MIKE TOMLIN: Good afternoon. Quickly, I'll give a quick assessment of our last performance. As I told the team yesterday at our 2:00 meeting, we did some things in-game that were really awesome, and we did some things that were JV to be quite honest with you. And not only from a playing perspective, but I thought from a strategic perspective there was growth opportunities there.

I thought that's why it was important that we get in here yesterday and analyze the tape and learn from it. It always provides a good foundation for the next plan. So that's what yesterday was about.

In review of the game, quickly I'll assess the phases. I thought in general in all three phases we had appropriate physicality. Certainly physicality is a component of the rivalry and I thought particularly as the game wore on we had the necessary physicality to produce victory.

In the special teams game I thought penalties slowed our efforts; in the kickoff return I thought we were really good from a field position perspective, but we had one ball out beyond the 40 that got negated by a penalty. We had a penalty on punt team as well.

Thankfully, on a re-kick Corliss did an awesome job on the re-kick. And that doesn't always occur, and so we're thankful for that. But if we're going continue on in this tournament as the road gets narrow, we certainly can't be penalized in that phase of the game, and particularly from a return perspective, negating the chance of any field flipping plays or any significant plays that way; we just can't run the risk of that.

I've been pleased with our punting and gunning in the punt phase. It's been minimal return yards. Really over the course of the season we've had minimal return yards. I think we got 170 return yards in the punt return game in 17 games. That's certainly solid. I think Sunday night was reflective of that as well.

On defense, I thought largely down in and down out we did

what we needed to do to minimize the impact of Derrick Henry. Certainly didn't start that way. He broke that big run early. That's a credit to him, a credit to them strategically in terms of identifying a schematic they wanted to assault us with.

I just thought down in and down out we did what we needed to do schematically in terms of allocating our guys and playing in an appropriate front structure. I think in turn our guys did what was required of them. We put a lot on our men up front. We create one-on-ones with our bigs up front. We require our bigs to win those battles.

I just thought guys like Benton and Heyward and Harmon did a real nice job of winning those one-on-ones shedding blocks, and getting in on tackles, not giving him clean access to the second and third level, which oftentimes is a recipe for disaster when facing a big runner.

We certainly took some schematic risk in an effort to minimize Lamar's talents in the game, and I think we suffered the consequences from that at times. We overplayed maybe some design runs and put ourselves in some thinned out coverage circumstances, but that's what you do when you're playing to win. In the analysis of it we would probably do it again to be quite honest with you. That's the type of challenges that guys like him put you in in terms of decision making.

But certainly we been in the stadium against those guys a bunch, and we just felt like we couldn't allow him to run wild. When do you that you got multiple problems. So we chose a hill to die on, if you will, and thankfully we didn't, although they did hit some big plays on us, particularly in possession down moments where we were allocating the appropriate number of people to minimize the design run component of his talents and their schematics.

Largely I thought our guys played really hard on defense, and particularly at the early stages of the game before we found our footing offensively, I thought our ability to get stout after those first two drives and gets stops and minimize them probably more than anything on possession downs was a significant component of the game.

On offense, I thought once we got our footing and got



going we stayed in that general direction. Can't say enough about the two running backs. They were impactful. They were impactful in the run, impactful in the check down game, winning one-on-one opportunities in the flat and so forth, turning short gains into longer ones. That quite frankly has been a recipe for how we functioned all year, those two guys and their ability to win in the flat and check down like circumstances.

I thought also as the game wore on our third down conversion rate and particularly our ability to win some longer ones, we converted a third and ten, third and nine, third and eight all in the second half. I thought those were building blocks of ball possession and scoring drives.

And certainly the efforts of Aaron Rodgers are always helpful. As we talked a lot in these environments and circumstances, he's just got a unique resume, a unique talent, a unique thirst for significant moments.

I'm never surprised when he smiles in the face of adversity and delivers for us, as he did on Sunday night. So thankful for that.

From an injury perspective, in-game, we got some bumps and bruises associated with play that may limit some people at the early portions of week. Thankfully we came out of it relatively well.

Everyone that returned to action last week from TJ to Isaac Seumalo to Calvin Austin, James Pierre, Brandin Echols all were able to participate without any steps backwards, so thankful for that. Relatively healthy group, you know, as we lean in on a single elimination tournament.

Now, turn my attention toward Houston. Man, they're a top notch group. They need no endorsement from me. They're winners of nine straight. When you win nine straight games there is usually a mode of operation, and it certainly is.

They're a group that takes very good care of the football as a collective. I think they have ten turnovers on the season. That's No. 1 in football. I think they're No. 3 with 27 takeaways on defense.

You talk about complementary football, they got an offense that is the best in the world at securing it. They got a defense that's third best at taking it away. And I think that's the building blocks of nine consecutive wins.

I'll start first on offense. I think the strength of the pack is the pack. They've displayed that in a lot of ways over the course of the journey. Certainly they went through an adjustment at the early stages of the season playing

without Joe Mixon, but they've certainly found a nice division of labor in Woody Marks and Mr. Chubb. Those guys have done an awesome job in terms of dividing the labor up and running the ball for those guys. As I mentioned, their ball security is top tier. Neither one of those guys or no one in their backfield has put the ball on the ground this season.

They got some quality young eligibles in Higgins ends and Noel from Iowa State. They've done a nice job of growing and evolving over the course of the season. They're certainly assets to their pass game and good supplements to Nico Collins. Collins a big time one-on-one playmaker. He is oftentimes on the backside of formations. You get in single high defensive structure, he's one-on-ones with corners and he wins a lot of them.

He makes the big boy catches. He can run through traffic and run the end breaking routes. He's good down the field on 50/50 balls. He certainly has our attention as we prepare.

I think they also displayed stability and depth at the quarterback position. Got a lot of respect for CJ Stroud and his body of work and what he's been able to do in this league over a short period of time; also very respectful of the veteran presence that Davis Mills provides.

I think he went 3-0 this year as a starter. He threw five touchdowns and one interception over the course of that span. I just think that when you're able to absorb the negativity of playing without your quarterback and maintain your offensive rhythm and take care of the football, I just think that's an asset to a collective.

To be quite honest with you, I think that three-game stretch that he had was really the catalyst for this nine-game stretch that they're on. And when they got CJ back they've just taken off from there.

So we certainly have some challenges in that phase. They do a nice job strategically, particularly in situations of attacking tendencies. We got to be thoughtful about repetitive calls and situational calls. They do a really good job of strategy in those kind of moments.

On the defensive side of the ball, they just got a kick-butt unit. They do. They got a top-flight edge tandem in Hunter and Anderson. They got a top-flight corner tandem on the outside, and so they rush very well. They cover very well.

They're not trying to split the atom schematically. They don't have to when you have corners and edge rushers like that. I'll start first with the edge rushers. Will Anderson and Hunter are simply the most dynamic edge rush tandem

in the National Football League in 2025. They got 27 sacks between them. I think it's 12 for Anderson, 15 for Hunter. They're a formidable group.

You can talk about the things that you need to do schematically to minimize them and all that. It's nothing that they haven't seen. We better stay out of a bunch of one-dimensional passing circumstances, because if we're in those circumstances we're going to be in trouble. That's just the reality of it.

They do a good job of being aggressive and combative in coverage. Got a really good secondary. Pitre, their safety/nickel is very versatile and he displays that versatility on the back end in safety circumstances, and also in his ability to cover and blitz as a nickel.

They got a real good linebacker tandem, man, that's highly active and productive. They minimize big plays. I was just looking at their statistical profile. They're Top 5 in most statistical categories. Points, think they're No. 1 in yards per game, in the Top 5 in rush defense and pass defense, scoring, yards.

And so certainly they been top tier and elite in just about all areas all year with that group. That group sets the pace for them. They play with great energy and emotion. They play well as a collective. They have an appetite for rising up in moments. It just seems like every week you're seeing a game-changing and game-deciding plays from their defense in terms of closing close ball games out.

They make the necessary plays in weighty moments really in all three phases. I think about a third and 14 I think versus Jacksonville where Davis Mills scrambles into the corner of the end zone to give them a late win at home versus those guys for example.

But you don't get in this tournament unless you had your moments. You certainly don't win nine straight unless you have continuity and complementary play. They're good in all three phases. I think about DeMeco Ryans when I watch their tape and how he played the game. Tip of the cap to him. I think the Houston Texans play collectively the way that he did. They're tough and smart. They play and play to win. They play with emotion as I mentioned.

So, man, really excited. We don't take home playoff games for granted. Certainly don't take home Monday night games for granted. It's an honor to be in this position. Excited about it.

But I and we show respect to that by training with an edge and preparing with great urgency. I'm looking forward to a full week of doing so with our collective.

Certainly awesome to have DK back. We're not going to exhale and think that DK automatically with his presence is going to be a difference or the difference. Football is the ultimate team game. It's going to require great efforts from all parties involved, but certainly excited about doing it with him.

I'll pause and open up for questions.

**Q. Mike, what did you learn about your offense, if anything, without DK?**

MIKE TOMLIN: I just think that sometimes when you're lacking significant players it's opportunities for others to show what they're capable of and to accelerate growth and development and cohesion in other areas. Adam Thielan for example is a new acquisition for us and he made some significant plays for us in recent weeks, and that cohesion has probably been accelerated.

Scotty Miller is a guy that's always ready to make plays for us. He is not always given an opportunity, but certainly in the two years he's been here, man, he's been a credible play maker when called upon. He's displayed some of that in some significant moments over the last several weeks as well.

Again, as I mentioned, our running backs have been a major component of our pass game in recent weeks. Maybe not down the field, but their ability to turn short into longer has bridged a gap for us in a lot of ways.

I think we lead the league in yards after catch as a collective for the season. I think the running backs are central to that.

And I think we all grow as strategists. I think as a collective, a coaching staff, when you're faced with adversity, it's important that you pivot.

There is an expiration date on adjustments and certainly we had to make some adjustments. We felt the effects of it in Cleveland, but as you mentioned in this setting, it was reasonable to expect us all to be better: the players themselves, us as strategists, and I think we displayed that.

So hopefully returning him to the fold we get the benefits of all the things that I've just discussed. Our adaptability, the growth of individuals, the growth of continuity in new individuals, and you couple that with his presence, hopefully we are all continually collectively better. I know it's going to be required.

**Q. How much of that is Aaron Rodgers trusting and believing in all the other guys?**

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, certainly relationships and trust and the ability to anticipate and work with others at the quarterback/receiver combination is significant. So it's not only DK missing games but he missed practices. Those balls go elsewhere in practice.

So certainly I'm sure there was some residual benefit in terms of him doing so not only in the two games but in the two weeks.

**Q. Mike, you guys -- the offensive struggled against the Browns. You guys were putting the effort in to stop Myles Garrett as a pass rusher, and now you're dealing with two elite edge rushing threats. How do you guys make the plan work in pass protection while avoiding the pitfalls hit you guys against the Browns in the offense?**

MIKE TOMLIN: Let me be clear. I mentioned this several times, but you guys don't seem to hear me. We didn't do anything uniquely against the Cleveland Browns from a protection standpoint that we don't always do when we play the Cleveland Browns. We did the same thing the first time we played Cleveland. Won the game; scored more points; he had zero sacks.

So there was no significant sea change. We certainly got a challenge this week because they have a formidable tandem. As I mentioned, we better do a really good job minimizing the amount we're in those one-dimensional circumstances.

**Q. Did they move those two guys around a lot, or they tend to be where they are?**

MIKE TOMLIN: They move them around, but, shoot, they move one to one side, they move the other one to the other side. Still big issues. (Smiling.)

**Q. Not just Cleveland, but also Minnesota and Detroit are two other teams that you played against that are two of the few that have a higher sack total than yourselves and Houston. How did you feel collectively that your pass protection held up against those teams?**

MIKE TOMLIN: I think there is no price you can put on rush. It's probably the most significant component of good defense. I think that's why the rushers make what they make globally. They might be the highest paid position in our sport outside of the quarterback. Any time you have a significant rush it is a challenge for the opposing offensive

unit.

That's why we value top in rush men and depth at that position. I'm sure that's why some of the teams that you mentioned do as well. So certainly is a challenge, but it's not a new challenge. Our unit and units face this week in and week out, because it is that significant in today's game. The weightiest downs are generally one-dimensional passing moments.

Those guys more than top-flight cover guys have an impact on what goes down in those moments, so we got our work cut out for us. It's certainly going to require some strategy. As I continually mention, minimizing those moments, being in manageable one-dimensional passing down moments where you can maybe throw the ball shorter and let legs do some of the work and things of that nature is a major component of minimizing their impact on the game.

**Q. What have you seen from your team in terms of how they have bounced back from adversity, whether in the middle of the game or week to week, especially down the stretch?**

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, we generally have, but we're not patting ourselves on the back for that. That is required in this game and particularly at the highest level, and doubly so as the roads gets narrow. You're certainly not getting into this tournament and certainly not going to be in this tournament long based on talent alone. There has to be some substance. There has to be an intangible quality, a display of individual and collective will.

And certainly we have a collective that's capable of doing that, but as I've mentioned many times, we not only work at developing that individually and collectively, but it's really the building block of team building for us.

We look for good men that love football that enjoy the process, that enjoy the drudgery that, got great relationships with the game. I think that aids us in doing so.

**Q. Mike, with the lack of playoff success over the last eight seasons what would a win on Monday mean to this organization?**

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, it's not about the organization. It's about this collective, and quite frankly most of these men don't care about the last whatever years that you mentioned. Most of them are new to us, and so that's where my focus is.

I'm certainly not going to unpack my bags on the collective's bed, if you will. I'm excited about doing it and



doing it this week with this collective.

**Q. One of the guys who has mentioned it means a lot him is Cam Heyward. That he wants to join Brett Keisel and Aaron Smith and make a run in the playoffs. What would it mean for a guy like him or the guys who have been around here for a long time to end that streak?**

MIKE TOMLIN: I'll let him and TJ speak for themselves in that regard. Most of the others, the other 51 it's less significant.

**Q. In recent playoff games, there has been first quarters been outscored by a lot. What have you learned looking back? Is there trend or anything?**

MIKE TOMLIN: I don't know that I've analyzed it in that way. As I mentioned, man, so many of these guys don't share that experience so it's less relevant. I'm really just trying to put together a good plan for this collective in an effort to combat what we anticipate getting from Houston this week.

**Q. Have you had a chance to talk to DK yet, and where do you see him at mentally right now?**

MIKE TOMLIN: I think he's in a great place. I am, I know that he's happy to be back. He's happy to be in this tournament. He's ready to go to work.

**Q. Mike, Cam said one of the things he really appreciate that you do is how you chose and pick what pots to stir, what bears to poke throughout the week to get the right responses out of guys. How do you go about finding that week to week with who you want to get on?**

MIKE TOMLIN: I think it's my job to provide individuals and the collective what it is they need. I don't know that I come in with a specific agenda. It's my job to listen and to watch and to do what's required for those people. I think that's the spirit in which I go about it.

**Q. You mentioned the play of the defensive line on Sunday. Where have you seen Keanu specifically really take a step this year?**

MIKE TOMLIN: I think he's whopping blocks and making tackles. There is a difference between being active and being productive. Certainly he's athletic and active. There is a lot about his profile that was really attractive, even dating back to draft evals. I love the heavyweight wrestler for example. He certainly was a formidable heavyweight wrestler in high school. Those guys generally are better

conditioned than most men their size. They have an appetite for working through fatigue that's a little bit different than others.

So certainly he brings some of those things. But I just think there has been an increase in productivity. Certainly we love activity, but productivity trumps activity, and I think he's taken a big step this year in productivity. Five and a half sacks, coming off blocks in the run game and winning; shedding and tackling is a major component of run productively. I think his arrow pointed up for him in just about all areas of his game, which leads to more productivity.

**Q. The cameras caught a cool moment between you and Aaron Rodgers midfield. What's the porch of the head coach/relationship and how has that relationship grown or evolved throughout this season?**

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, it's very important because they're unique jobs. I think we got to be connected. There is a loneliness with leadership, a responsibility with leadership. So I just learned over the years to embrace that component of it, that we got to spend time together, we got to have an understanding. Certainly that's been a fun process with Aaron. It's been really fun because he has an appetite for it. He loves the process as much as he loves competing. He's got an awesome relationship with football. He's at the point of his career where he's really reflective and excited about giving back to the game and the young people in the game.

So it's fun to do that with him and help young guys like Will Howard advance in his career, so it's been an enjoyable process. Certainly it's work. We respect it in that way. Certainly we respect the work that's in front of us this week in terms of leading this group.

**Q. When you look back and review the tape, what led to sort of Baltimore's ability to get behind you guys defensively?**

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, I think Lamar first and foremost on a lot of fronts. He makes you do some things schematically that could make you uncomfortable, but if you are trying to win moments in the game, you do what you have to do.

But also just his unique talents. One of those touchdowns we had, two of our most significant guys had him wrapped up in the backfield and somehow he came out of Benton and Highsmith and threw a long touchdown.

So his talents were directly impactful. His talents also dictate schematics at times. Succinctly I can just say

Lamar Jackson.

**Q. My thought was you view this more of a Lamar issue as opposed to sort of problems in the execution standpoint on the back end?**

MIKE TOMLIN: Certainly we can execute better and put them in better calls. That was all a component of my opening statement.

**Q. Herbig has been rushing, blitzing from the inside. Does it take a special skillset for a guy who can rush from the edge and jump inside and do the same thing?**

MIKE TOMLIN: It does. He was one of those interesting hybrid athletes, if you will. We studied him when he came out. We didn't know if he would be an inside backer or outside backer. He has that versatility.

So we put that versatility on display at times in an effort to get TJ and Highsmith and Herbig on the grass together. His versatility allows some of that to happen. We move all three of those guys around.

All three of those guys will play that hybrid position from time to time in an effort to get matched up on a running back. To be quite honest with you, if you get edge rush men on a running back you view that as a strategic advantage, and certainly he confirmed that when he got on the back on Sunday night.

**Q. You touched on it briefly in your opening statement, but what does it mean for this organization to finally have an home playoff game, home field advantage, your home fans here?**

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, I don't know that we're big picturing anything right now. Just got big week ahead of us, big days ahead of us. That's just kind of where we are. That reflective big picture stuff is not realistic as I stand here.

I understand why you ask the question, but when you're in it I just think your perspective is a lot different.

**Q. Mike, you guys went 9-16 on third down. A lot of those came in the second half, Aaron throwing -- being able to throw the ball downfield. What did you guys capture against the Ravens that you can replicate or need to replicate to continue that in the playoffs?**

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, we're never trying to replicate things. Variables are different week in and week out. What the Ravens did schematically in those circumstances might be dramatically different than what Houston might

do. Week in and week out you got to win the moments. Certainly we have a mode of operation in terms of winning the moments.

We won a bunch of third and longs in Detroit for example, but those were different types of third and longs that we won than we won third and ten, third and nine, third and eight versus Baltimore. It was about winning those moments and understanding what this week requires.

It's probably going to be different, and so it's not building upon. It's just simply readdressing the situation and the effort to highlight our talents, individuals, and keep the ball rolling.

**Q. What's special about Aaron to be able to win in all those different moments that you're talking about?**

MIKE TOMLIN: You know, we could talk all day about that, man. He's got a 20-, 21-year resume in that regard.

**Q. Mike, can you recall how long ago (indiscernible) started wearing the wrist, and is it impressive to you that Aaron doesn't need them or want them?**

MIKE TOMLIN: Man, I don't know. Man, that's been going on for generations. I remember my quarterback wearing them in this college in the '90s. You know, that's old news.

**Q. Not too many don't wear them.**

MIKE TOMLIN: Yeah, but I think, again, if you've been on the job 20 plus years, you know, you don't need the cheat sheet.

**Q. Was that issue just like an equipment issue when he didn't have communication? Was the mic shut off?**

MIKE TOMLIN: We had coach-to-player communication issues.

**Q. Aaron mentioned after the game that he was grateful that you and the organization let him be himself completely. Why is it important for you to let a player be themselves instead of trying to fit them into a role or a box?**

MIKE TOMLIN: I think if you're going to get the best out of someone, particularly in a leadership position, they got to do it in a natural way, in their voice, and so you are cutting their leadership legs out in under them when you're asking them to be somebody they're not or not do things in a natural or organic way.

I think it's negligent to ask him to be anything other than

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

himself.

**Q. Is that something when you're recruiting him in the free agency that you said to him that, hey, if you come here we're going to let you be you?**

MIKE TOMLIN: I think those -- a component of those questions were answered before we even talked. I think he wouldn't have been interested in us unless he knew that about us. We don't keep any secrets in that regard. It not only applies to him but it applies to everyone. As I mentioned, we value good men that have great relationships with football. When you value those things, why not let guys be themselves.

**Q. I know you weren't in a draftable position for CJ Stroud, but what did you remember about him coming out of Iowa State, development over the three years? Along the lines what you anticipated?**

MIKE TOMLIN: Again, I was a bystander because I wasn't in draft position. I remember specifically being at his pro day and around his pro day. It was just so much more work for me to do with the multitude of others that were coming out. I probably wouldn't give him a fair assessment.

And that happens sometimes when you're at a place like Ohio State. There is so much to comb through in terms of depth of the talent and the amount of talent.

I don't waste a lot of time on guys that I know realistically don't have a chance to come to our range, if you will.

**Q. Down 10-nothing, is getting off to -- conventional wisdom will say get off to a fast start is important in the playoff. You talk about winning moments more than that. How much is an emphasis that?**

MIKE TOMLIN: I'm not opposed to getting off to a fast start. A fast start or a slow start doesn't ensure us of anything positively or negatively. I just think we understand that, but you still don't want to minimize the importance of bursting out of the locker room in a single-elimination tournament.

**Q. How is it that Cam became the guy that (indiscernible) Pittsburgh Plunge, Tush Push, whatever you want to call it?**

MIKE TOMLIN: We had a big guy and so we needed a big guy, and very few come bigger than Cam.

**Q. Does that say something, though? You talk about leadership. Cam pretty much does whatever you guys**

**ask. Heck, first play gets dinged because he's 30 yards down field chasing the guy. What kind of example does that set for the rest of your group?**

MIKE TOMLIN: He's had a special career. It needs no endorsement from me. He displays why he's special not only every weekend but every day. He is a Steeler through and through. He just is. I just saw him a few minutes ago in there taking care of himself getting ready for the week. He cares hard. Got big shoulders. He wants the responsibility of leading.

He got trained by some awesome men of football a generation ago. I love having reunion weekends and seeing Cam's former teammates here. I love messing with him that way. But those guys, those guys -- those middle aged guys, guys like Casey Hampton and Brett Keisel and Aaron Smith, they view Cam's career with great pride because they were impactful in terms of his growth and development, and it's cool from their perspective to watch him do it with young guys like Derrick Harmon and Yahya Black for example.

**Q. You talked about your appreciation for brothers like TJ, JJ, and Derrick and the connection they have, how they push each other. What did you make of the first Tush Push? Connor kind of mad at Cam because he's like, got to me too early.**

MIKE TOMLIN: I'll leave that between them. Connor wasn't so strong in-game. He wanted me to relay the coaching point to his brother. That's the nature of their relationship. Cam is the big brother.

**Q. Mike, Jaylen Warren might not be a household name. I mean, even in the running back room Kenny won the MVP. What has he meant to this offense, Warren?**

MIKE TOMLIN: His contributions have been immense to be quite honest with you. He's highly competitive. He's tough. He's really consistent. As I mentioned he's good in the backfield, out of the backfield, in the passing game.

I don't think it's a knock against him that Kenny won MVP. I think it was the totality of Kenny's contributions. Kenny is a significant contributor to special teams. He's returned kicks all year, been on kickoff team and other components of the units.

And so it's more of a tip of cao to Kenny rather than a slight to Jaylen.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports