

Pittsburgh Steelers

Media Conference

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Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA

Coach Mike McCarthy

Weekday Press Conference



MIKE McCARTHY: Good afternoon. First, I'd just like to start off speaking on the off-season program. I think we're in a really good spot. We're two and a half weeks in. I've been very pleased with the participation.

I first want to acknowledge the coaching staff. Between preparing for the draft and just really crushing it, pulling the playbooks together, offense, defense, special teams, game management and those things, and just making everything readily available for our players, because we believe it's a player-first teaching environment. I thought our coaching staff has done an excellent job, and the support staff has done an incredible job supporting us, getting ready.

We've been able to really, for two and a half weeks, push a high volume of information to our players. The players have been outstanding. Really, at the end of the day, the goal is by June 12 to make sure every one of our players has what they need schematically, the communication, the details of each and every one of their roles and responsibilities.

I think we're off to an excellent start, and I've been very impressed and appreciative of the time spent by our players connecting with the new coaching staff.

With that, I'll take your questions.

Q. Is it unusual to have this much participation this early in the process?

MIKE McCARTHY: I'd say no. This is what I'm accustomed to. I think this lines up with my other opportunities.

But our league changes. You've got rules are changing, and the makeup of your roster is never the same. I think with just all those attributes of our roster, I think we're in a really good place after two and a half weeks.

Q. As far as new coaches, new players, relatively how long do you think it will take for everything to kind of

gel to get to a place where you feel comfortable moving forward with this event?

MIKE McCARTHY: Well, I think the reality of it is we're creating a teaching environment for us to be able to communicate with a common language. Football will always be football, but everybody looks at things a little differently, emphasizes them a little different way. That's why all 32 teams are different in how they approach the game. Everybody still has the same fundamentals, but the teams really don't come together until training camp. Let's just be real; that's our first opportunity for real football.

Right now it's just a lot of listening. A lot of listening, a lot of learning, a lot of interaction, and just really -- this used to be called this and now we're calling it that; this is the technique that goes with this particular and this is how this fits together.

I think when you have the opportunity to install a system of offense, defense or special teams, I've always felt, and this is purely from a quarterback's perspective, you teach everything conceptually, and when you do that, it slows everything down, and it gives you the opportunity to teach things in buckets.

Like the passing game, for instance, will be taught in 14 buckets, so it'll take 14 opportunities with the perimeter guys to put that in. The run game will be taught in seven buckets.

It's harder to learn that way because -- not harder. It's easier to learn that way, but the application to how it's really going to be utilized is over a big-picture focus. What I'm saying is when you put a protection in and then you challenge it versus every defense, that's not really realistic because that protection particularly may not be ran in 3rd down.

But it's a great exercise for our players to learn from the core, from the foundation of what that particular concept is.

So when you do it this way, it'll take a good six weeks, and then when we get to the OTAs, now we'll go play, hey, let's install and play like a normal -- but we're still in helmets and shorts. So you do what you can there and you lean on



the things that you're able to practice.

That's the process. I've done it a long time that way. It works. But we're really, really just making sure everybody is truly ready for when we get off that bus; when we arrive in Latrobe, it's all ball. We've got the acclimation period, but then we get that first padded practice on August 3rd, if you're wondering, so then we get to go out there and play football.

Q. When you talk about the communication and learning from the guys, are you having sit-down meetings to absorb that information from guys, the veterans here, and moving forward, or does that just come during practice, learning things like that?

MIKE McCARTHY: Well, the starting point of that, we're kind of past that. We had an opportunity to meet with a number of players, particularly January, February, March. But I call it scheme implementation is the phase that we're in right now, so the scheme development was really what we were going through as a staff the last three months.

But as you implement, the conversations we have with our players are so valuable because this is where things get tweaked and changed and adjusted, and then a final product will be ready on June 12th. That's the outlook. That's how you want to do it. That's how I've done it. It works very well.

So the input from the players is the process we're in right now.

Q. How have you found the buy-in from the players, especially the veterans, to the changes?

MIKE McCARTHY: Yeah, buy-in is excellent, and I think it's just like anything. There's three things that happen in these situations, and it's a yearly focus of mine. You have to make changes. There's things you're going to adjust. Then there's things you're going to emphasize.

The fortunate part for this program that's being established, there's a lot of positives to emphasize and build off of. There's things you clearly adjust; that's normal. Then there's things that you change. That'll always be my approach. Yearly basis, but yeah, I think the buy-in has been excellent.

Q. A lot of these guys have only known one coach; they only know a world with Tomlinisms. Have there been any funny anecdotes or stories with T.J. or Cam or some of the other guys adjusting to hearing your voice out there on the field instead of the same one they've had for so long?

MIKE McCARTHY: I would say this: This is the first time I've called the plays in the quarterback's helmet, so I need to work on my "punch" and "bunch" enunciation. They keep telling me to go "dahntahn." I said, we'll get to that.

But we'll work through those things. I don't have any great stories for you yet.

Q. With some level of uncertainty or indecision surrounding Aaron, at what point in the process do you need him to be here?

MIKE McCARTHY: Well, I like the way you asked that question. I appreciate your preparation, better than mine walking in here, but I think the fact of the matter is nothing has changed. I'm going to answer the question the same way I always have; I think Aaron is probably more in tune than we would realize, but I have confidence in where he would be the day he would arrive, if that's his decision.

But what I've learned through instituting an off-season program, there are benefits of periods where your veterans aren't here. We're talking about the quarterback position. So this is very beneficial time for Will and Mason right now. They split all the reps today and the last two days, and that's just great work.

When you see it improve from one day to the next, that's what you're looking for.

So all those things factor. But I'm comfortable where we are and giving him the space to make this decision.

Q. What has Will and Mason's demeanor been like the last two days?

MIKE McCARTHY: I mean, all football. I think it's just like anything; you play quarterback in this league, the opportunity to command a huddle and be the guy is -- those reps are so valuable.

I think they both clearly had a better day today than they did yesterday, and that's the norm. That's how these things go.

Q. I know you watched a lot of Will's practice tape, and it's only been two days. Is there anything you saw about him when you see a guy on the field and you go, whoa, looks a little different?

MIKE McCARTHY: I think he's done a really good job, which most rookies go through it. They go to pro football and they say, okay, I played at Ohio State or I played at a big-time place, won a National Championship, and I think

you realize that everybody in the locker room has a level of physical gifts. They're special individuals.

I think the level of conditioning and preparation -- I know just meeting with him in January compared to today, he's had a really good off-season before the off-season. He's in much better shape. Obviously I've been very impressed with his movement skills.

We're just two days into the footwork drills which we've been allowed to do the last two days, and I've been impressed.

Q. You call yourself a quarterback coach, obviously the offense surrounding the quarterback and everything, and even the combine prospects talked about you meeting with them and kind of quizzing them. Do you do that with wide receivers, too, or is it just a quarterback thing, or maybe other positions but most of the wide receivers know and offenses know when people answer you that way?

MIKE McCARTHY: I mean, the combine exercise, I did it with every position. I was the lead interviewer, which I really enjoyed. I've never been in that spot. I've been in other programs that everybody gets a couple -- you get a couple questions or a couple minutes, so to be able to sit there and go 20 minutes with a quarterback in that spot, maybe 10, 15 minutes with a D-lineman, I enjoy that. That's part of who I am professionally. Just the opportunity to talk football and really hear their stories.

To be honest with you, the schematic part of it, I'm just checking to see where he is, but I enjoy hearing their personal stories and their past more than anything. But yeah, that's definitely something I enjoy.

Q. You structured the off-season program with this voluntary mini-camps and OTAs and then mandatory and then OTAs afterward. How did you come up with that formula, specifically having mini-camp when there's still voluntary sessions afterward?

MIKE McCARTHY: Just really what I've been talking about, just the young players. I'm going to make sure -- I've done it different ways, but in my opinion, you can really install everything you need in eight installations. We'll take the first eight installation opportunities and we'll squeeze a trip to Kennywood in there. A little goal there for you.

But we'll get the first eight installations in there, and it gives me a chance to reassess, a chance to see exactly where we are, because I always like to have that window at the end, and particularly if I -- at some level, how much am I going to focus on the younger players because they're the

ones that you have to bridge the gap between your veterans and your first-year players.

The design of the mini-camp before the last two OTAs is part of the thinking there so when we come out of that mini-camp, I'll know exactly where we are. So like everything, like right now, we're working on the first eight OTAs because we try to stay a month, month and a half ahead. But we won't work on those last four until we see where we are. So that's the design of it.

Q. You've spoken a few times conceptually about how you view the wide receiver positions. Not just sinking your teeth into it, getting to know the guys, getting to know the tape. How do you view D.K. within that construct, and have you worked with a guy that you can draw a comp to, if it's CeeDee or Adams? Those guys aren't quite as big.

MIKE McCARTHY: CeeDee is obviously a gifted player. He's dynamic. He's a dawg. He's so gifted, and he's got an incredible personality. But I've been so fortunate. Just go through the whole Green Bay crew; those guys are all exceptional players and people.

I don't really like to get into comparables because I've been so blessed to work with so many great players, but also just about D.K., D.K., his skill set is top-notch. When you can take slants and different vertical routes to the house, he's so powerful and he's so strong, so just trying to get to know his strengths and how we can utilize him. We'll try to build a route menu for him particularly, not different than many of the conversations we've had about receivers because I think it's critical that they play the 1 position, the 2 position or the 3 position. So we'll continue to look at that for D.K.

Q. You get extra workouts, an extra couple weeks because you have to catch up. You're talking about language and all that. At the same time, do you like that you have extra time? Do coaches like extra workouts, extra weeks? Can that be an advantage? Can you use it to your advantage?

MIKE McCARTHY: I think, honestly, if you talk to any coach that coached in the National Football League before the CBA in 2011, I think we all appreciate an extra couple days with our players, so yes, I think this is awesome that they give you the extra two weeks.

Q. This organization has made a lot of recent investments in the offensive line. What have you seen from them in the early days of learning the verbiage and going over things that either impressed you or just thoughts you have?

MIKE McCARTHY: Obviously it's a very important group. There's responsibility. The offensive line is a huge part of how I view the game of football, and I've been extremely impressed with the group. You've got a great bunch of veteran guys that I didn't know much about, and you're really looking forward to the pads, but position flexibility is essential in today's game.

I think the 17th game, when it went from 14 to 16, you see it heightened each and every year, and in my personal experience, offensive line availability, corners availability, those were really the positions I've seen the biggest challenge in probably the last five to six years from my personal experience.

But boy, we've got a heck of a group. We've got a heck of a group to build on.

Q. Along the same lines of position versatility, you've talked about that with your receivers and secondary, but interested to see what you think about Yahya Black, who slotted in as a 4i last year. Do you like bigger noses? They viewed Benton as a nose. Do you view him as a 3? What are your thoughts?

MIKE McCARTHY: I think those guys just, right off what we talked about with the O-line, they have position flex. This is the biggest defensive line I've ever coached, and I think they look exactly how you're supposed to look.

The O-line and the D-line will be the first group off the bus. I'm very impressed with the D-line group. But yes, position flex -- the reality of it is when you build your roster profiles, you talk about a 3-4 defense and you go through the profiles of a nose, a 4i, the length and the body comps that you're looking for, but the game is still 75 percent sub, sub defense. So the ability for those guys to play a 1 out to a 4i is important inside, even out to a 5 preferably, and I think we've got an excellent group to do that.

Q. You mentioned O-line flexibility a couple times now. Have you made any changes of the guys from where they played the last week?

MIKE McCARTHY: No, we're really just trying to teach concepts and making sure our terminology and our language is tightened up, buttoned up, make sure we've got our calls right.

But yeah, we've had guys work left and right side. We've only been at it two weeks. We've only been on the field two days.

Q. Someone like Will, a younger guy, does he need

more reps now? Is there a competition at all, or is it too early?

MIKE McCARTHY: Yeah, we're just trying to get him as many reps as possible. Just the drill work is critical because the drill work leads into the routes on air and the individual routes. Yeah, we're competing to get better. That's really what the competition is right now.

Q. You said before, talking about getting back to playing outdoors in cold weather and that kind of thing, is there something about the AFC North that you've noticed that you decided you need to tailor your approach to?

MIKE McCARTHY: Yeah, definitely. I think you just look at the profile of the teams. Look at the profile of Baltimore; it's been in place there for a long time. With Cleveland, their emphasis on defensive personnel.

Definitely we're going to start actually -- during the draft is always a pretty interesting time for assistants because you're there throughout the evening and the responsibility is limited. So our assistant coaches are going to start looking at division opponents and start talking and making sure our in-season responsibilities, rules and things of that nature, get the ball rolling on that, and then we'll spend some time on that in June to make sure when we do go to camp, because we don't just -- we don't want to run out there and have 100 plays of everything. We know the six teams that we need to beat, and we're going to make sure that we're set to go against those three teams, the six games that we need to beat.

Q. What did you like about Rico's game and how do you see that --

MIKE McCARTHY: Four-down player, Rico, watched him grow up as a young guy, went through some injury challenges his first couple years. I was fortunate to watch him grow up as a man and his family, but always loved the way he played the game. Former quarterback, so he has some skills that may surprise some.

But his play style, his running style is the first thing, but he's wicked smart, protections -- he's an excellent 3rd down back, and first time he touched the ball, he went 65 yards on a kickoff. He's a really good player, and I think he's a great -- him and Jalen are a great combination.

Q. Obviously you guys are using this time to get on the same page from a football perspective, and you talked about enjoying hearing guys' personal stories. How big of a deal is this time when you're implementing a staff-wide change like this, getting to

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

know these guys on a personal level and start building those relationships?

MIKE McCARTHY: It's important, but we need a couple more hours in the day right now. Looking forward to the draft. It's incredible from every angle. But I'll be excited when we have our players from the draft and we can just focus on our 90-man roster.

For every first year staff, it's a challenge. Coaches are trying to get homes and families and all that.

We're doing the best we can, but yes, I'm looking forward to when the players get back here, especially we get past the off-season program, phase 2, and get into OTAs.

Q. How do you go about as a coach deciding which cultural things with certain practices that you keep versus things you want to change, like for example, the turnover culture and the celebration of turnovers they had, they always talked about they did shirts or seven shots when you guys do practice and the emphasis behind that. How do you decide what you like to keep and change?

MIKE McCARTHY: Well, A, I always ask what was done. B, if I think it fits, then I'll utilize it. I have to believe in it. Fortunately I've done this for 18 years already, so I've tried some things that I won't do again and have had some things that worked very well. I think you just put that all together, and you have -- you're fortunate enough that those are good challenges to have to make those decisions, especially the success that Mike Tomlin has had here.

Yeah, we're very blessed to follow that.

Q. When you have potentially a 42-year-old quarterback, is having veteran backup a luxury or a necessity in your eyes?

MIKE McCARTHY: It's the quarterback room. I really enjoy working with Mason and Will. However it shakes out, I believe in having three. I've been two just a few times in my life, but it was Brett Favre and Aaron Rodgers, so that's a luxury to be in that spot. But I believe in having three. Potentially we'd love to have four if we can make one work on the practice squad.

I've always done it this way. We're developing the whole room because when we get started, the lead guy, he has his specific roles and responsibilities, but all the other guys, too, have responsibilities in that room. That's why you've got to develop all of them.