

INSIDE: Win over Ravens sealed AFC North • Boswell keeps getting it done • Heyward honored

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Steelers

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE PITTSBURGH STEELERS

DIGEST



A CRUCIAL TIME

So much still within reach despite loss to Patriots





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Classic was all about three passes

It was billed as the regular season game of the year, and in terms of back-and-forth sustained action, it lived up to that billing. There were 119 snaps of the ball during almost three full hours of suspense, and there was plenty riding on the outcome, maybe most importantly the site of a rematch in the postseason that today seems inevitable.

Months of work went into getting to the point where this game would mean what it did, and then once it began there was a lot of blood and sweat invested in achieving the desired outcome. There can be many interpretations of why the game ended the way it did, why the final score was 27-24 and the Patriots won and the Steelers lost, but here it will say it all came down to three passes.

One that should have been caught. One that was caught, only we were told it wasn't. And one that never should have been thrown.

That each of those came in the game's final 126 seconds simply serves to heighten their significance.

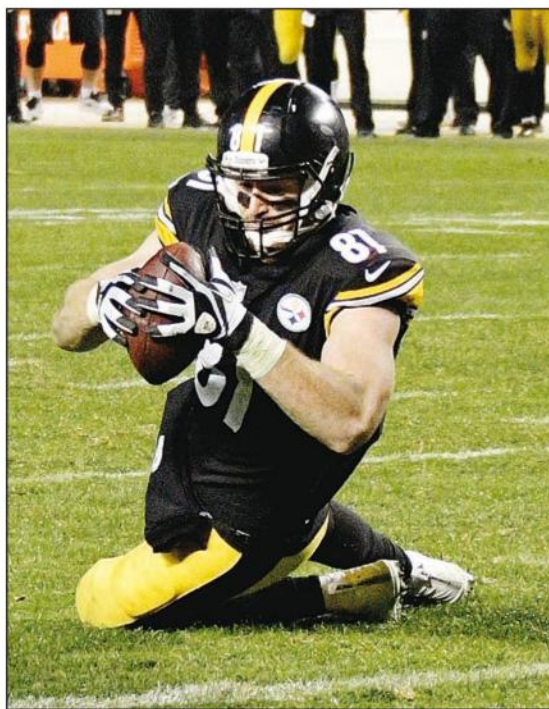
The first of the three, the pass that should have been caught, came with 2:06 remaining and the Steelers trying to protect a 24-19 lead. It was a first-and-10 from the Patriots 23-yard line, and Tom Brady's pass for Rob Gronkowski over the middle was tipped by Cam Heyward at the line of scrimmage, and the way the tip altered the speed and the course of the ball put it directly in the catch radius of safety Sean Davis.

It's easy to declare from the climate-controlled quiet of a stadium's press box that a pass should have been intercepted, but in a game like this against an opponent like this, that pass has to be intercepted if you expect to win the game. Because when a defense has a chance to make that play against Tom Brady and fails to do so, he will make you pay for your failure.

Which is exactly what happened, because on the next three snaps, Brady completed passes of 26, 26 and 17 yards, respectively, to Gronkowski, and the Patriots went from second-and-10 at their 23-yard line to first-and-goal at the Steelers 8-yard line. An 8-yard run by Dion Lewis and a successful 2-point conversion pass to Gronkowski gave the Patriots a 27-24 lead.

The resiliency the Steelers have shown throughout this regular season showed up once again. After the ensuing kickoff, on first down from their own 21-yard line with 52 seconds and one timeout remaining, JuJu Smith-Schuster authored a big-time play in a critical moment.

Taking a short pass over the middle from Ben Roethlisberger, Smith-Schuster turned it into a 69-



Tight end Jesse James prepares to try to reach for the end zone at the end of a play that will be talked about for a long time.

AP Photo/DON WRIGHT

Packers. It was a mistake to overturn that catch and instead of admitting it was a mistake, the NFL instead created an alternate reality to justify the call and now the absurdity of subsequent interpretations has grown exponentially until "surviving the ground" is presented as a valid explanation for yet another overturned touchdown.

Sure, by rule, and when viewed in high-definition and super slow-motion, visual evidence can be "found" to justify any call you want to make, but in real time when viewed by people in the football business, that's a catch and a touchdown. If the game was played the way kids play on the playground — where you call your own fouls if it's basketball, or penalties if it's football, or balls and strikes if it's baseball — that's a catch and a touchdown because kids know it when they see it.

Except when it's the NFL and then it's not, which meant the Steelers had a second-and-goal with 28 seconds remaining. Roethlisberger's pass to Darrius Heyward-Bey gained 3 yards, and the clock was running. The offense rushed to the line of scrimmage, and Roethlisberger attempted a fake spike followed by a quick slant pass to Eli Rogers.

Immediately after the game, details were hazy about who was responsible for what, but one explanation was that coordinator Todd Haley was in favor of spiking the ball to stop the clock, while Tomlin wanted to go for the win. Regardless of who ordered what, the ball never should have been thrown. Rogers wasn't open, and he wasn't coming open, and he's not Antonio Brown where that doesn't necessarily matter. Because the resulting interception in the end zone left five seconds on the clock is proof there would have been time for another snap, which makes the decision to force it into traffic reckless at best.

And so the Steelers lost the game, another game to the Patriots, and with it a chance to clinch a bye in the playoffs and set themselves up for home-field advantage. They still can earn a bye, but it seems certain their path to the Super Bowl will have to go through Foxborough.

If that's the way it unfolds and they get a rematch in the AFC Championship Game, for the outcome to be different they will have to make the kinds of plays they didn't on those three snaps in the final 126 seconds yesterday.

yard gain by out-running some Patriots defenders and out-smarting some others who expected him to hug the sideline on his way to getting as much as he could before stepping out of bounds to stop the clock. Instead, he cut back across the grain into the middle of the field, and when he was finally tackled, the Steelers had the ball at the Patriots 10-yard line with 34 seconds left after using their final timeout.

On the next play, Roethlisberger found Jesse James lurking over the middle inside the 5-yard line, and he delivered the ball accurately and on time. James turned and took a couple of steps without being touched and then dove across the goal line. The on-field officials immediately signaled touchdown, and the Heinz Field record crowd of 68,574 lost their collective minds as the Patriots pondered the likelihood of a comeback with 28 seconds remaining.

But then came a review. The CBS crew of Jim Nantz and Tony Romo couldn't figure out what was taking so long to confirm the touchdown, and after the game Bill Belichick admitted he didn't notice anything untoward about the play until referee Tony Corrente announced that James "didn't survive the ground" in overturning the call on the field and ruling the pass incomplete.

The definition of a catch in the NFL these days has been perverted by that stupid ruling on the Dez Bryant "catch" in the 2014 NFC Divisional Round Game between the Cowboys and the

INSIDE

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THAT CHAMPIONSHIP FEELING: The Steelers celebrated their second consecutive AFC North title after their 39-38 victory against Baltimore in a Sunday night thriller at Heinz Field.

Digest Photos/RYAN MEYER



ON THE COVER

Tight end Jesse James appeared to give the Steelers a go-ahead touchdown in the final minute of the game against New England before the play was overturned by instant replay. Cover Photo/DAVE ARRIGO

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NEXT ISSUE

The next issue will be the post-season issue and will cover the final two regular season games and playoff games. The staff of *Steelers Digest* wishes all of our subscribers a happy holiday season.



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Breaking down the New England game and always playing with an aggressive mind-set



It was a tough, hard-fought game. We came up short. I appreciate the efforts of the guys. Obviously, New England is a good group. You know, we've got to be better in an effort to finish it. But a lot of good effort (and) things there.

On the injury front, Antonio Brown is getting his lower leg injury evaluated. I don't have a lot of information there. James Conner has an MCL injury on his left knee. Other than that, bumps and bruises associated with playing. But I thought the guys played hard. I thought they made plays, obviously, in all three phases, just not quite enough to finish it.

Such is life sometimes in the NFL. It's been awhile since we've been unsuccessful when we've stepped into a stadium. It's important that we absorb what happened, we make necessary responses as we move forward and get back into our winning ways. And that's going to be our challenge in response to what transpired. But we'll start on that as we get into next week. Today, we played. We played to win. We came up short. We accept responsibility for that.

Q. How did the game plan change without Brown in there?

You know, it changes. AB is significant, but I thought that the guys did a nice job of adjusting and making plays largely. (When) you lose somebody like AB, there is an adjustment.

Q. How did you view the touchdown that was called back?

I don't have HD and all of that stuff. So, it's really irrelevant how I feel about it, to be honest with you. It's not going to change the outcome of the game. I'm not going to cry over spilled milk and all of that crap and talk about replay. I ain't doing it.

Q. Do you have a problem with Ben (Roethlisberger) going for it in that situation?

No. No, man. We play and play to win. That's what we do.

Q. I'd like to take you back to a situation in the fourth quarter against the Ravens. It was second-and-8 from the Ravens 28-yard line, there were 56 seconds left, and they had just called their second timeout. You needed a field goal to win. Instead of making them use their last timeout and run-



ning the clock down for a walk-off field goal attempt, there were two pass attempts, both incomplete, and the Ravens got the ball back with 42 seconds and a timeout after Chris Boswell's 46-yard field goal. What was your thinking there?

The critical element is what you said at the end — a 46-yard field goal was no given. We knew they would be packing the line of scrimmage in an effort to maybe make the 46-yard field goal a 47-yard field goal or a 48-yard field goal if you maybe get dropped for some minus-yardage plays. We'd had a lot of success throwing the ball that night. We weren't going to get scared and change our personality and succumb to convention. We stayed in the mode that we were in, because we had a lot of success doing it. Unfortunately, in those two instances we had two incomplete passes, but the thought process, the means in which we approached the situation I'm unashamed of and would do it again based on the circumstances I just described for you.

Q. Is that a decision that's made in that moment?

Absolutely. Particularly when I acknowledge I'm going outside of convention, it's a feel, it's a gut, it's the flow of the game.

Wide receiver Eli Rogers could only watch as New England safety Duron Harmon made his game-clinching interception in the end zone.

AP Photo/DON WRIGHT

Q. You mentioned that it's important to talk openly about things with the players. At your news conference, you were asked in connection to Ryan Shazier's injury, "How do you motivate the team after they see a teammate injured severely?" You said, "We don't wait for something to happen to talk about those things." How do you talk about that?

Again, during the process of a season — training camp, the preseason, the regular season, and so forth — people get injured every day. Obviously, not to the level Ryan was injured or the severity to which Ryan was injured, but the reality is injury is injury and these guys care about one another. They don't like to see each other in pain and in discomfort, and when those things happen you just remind guys: unless you're a medical expert, unless you're a doctor or a trainer, you can't help that person. There are people who are trained specifically to handle those tasks, and the best thing we can do is allow those people to do what they do and be there in a support capacity.

Whether it's emotional support, whether it's deeds or tasks in terms of making life easy for the person who is down — or if not easy, then easier — those are the things we should do as good teammates, and so we openly talk about those things. Again, none of those things that lead those discussions are to the seriousness of what happened to Ryan, but you can draw parallels. The reality is unless any of us went to medical school, we don't need to be standing over a guy who's down on the field. We need to give the trained professionals space in which to do what it is they do, and we're there for encouragement and support.

And support is just that — whatever the injured person needs. I remind our guys of that. I know a lot of our guys are hurting for Ryan, want to see him, want to get comfort in terms of where he is, in terms of his process, but the reality is that anything we do needs to be done in the spirit of aiding Ryan in his recovery.

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Patriots 27, Steelers 24



MARTAVIS MAGIC: Wide receiver Martavis Bryant needed just one hand to catch Ben Roethlisberger's touchdown pass while being held by New England cornerback Stephon Gilmore.

AP Photo/JIM MAHONEY



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WHAT WENT RIGHT

- It took the Steelers just 3:28 of clock time to tie the game after New England scored on its opening possession. Ben Roethlisberger completed 5 of 7 for 68 yards on the drive, including the touchdown that came on an 18-yard pass to Eli Rogers. Roethlisberger converted a third-and-4 with a 19-yard pass to Antonio Brown, and a third-and-10 with a 13-yard touch pass to JuJu Smith-Schuster.

- A sack by Cam Heyward for a loss of 8 yards ruined New England's second possession, and New England was forced to punt on a fourth-and-9 from their own 36-yard line.

- On the possession that ended with a field goal that allowed New England to tie the game, 10-10, the Steelers defense stiffened in the red zone, and the big play of the sequence was Mike Hilton breaking up a pass in the end zone for James Develin. The scoring drive was 61 yards in nine plays, and Stephen Gostkowski's field goal was a 32-yarder. There was 9:04 left in the second quarter.

- The Steelers took a 17-10 lead with a 15-play, 78-yard drive that ended with a 4-yard pass to Martavis Bryant that he caught one-handed in the end zone while being held by Patriots cornerback Stephon Gilmore. On the drive, Ben Roethlisberger completed 5 of 5 for 49 yards, including the touchdown to Bryant, and Le'Veon Bell rushed seven times for 34 yards and caught a pass for 13 more. The drive ate up 8:39 of the second quarter and left the Patriots with just 25 seconds following the touchdown. New England took a knee following the kickoff, and the Steelers led, 17-10 at halftime.

- Vince Williams came up with an interception with 4:31 remaining in the third quarter. It was a third-and-2 from the New England 33-yard line, and as Tom Brady was trying to get the ball to running back James White, Javon Hargrave applied pressure up the middle. Williams intercepted the pass and returned it 12 yards to the Patriots 22-yard line.

- The Steelers offense needed five plays to cover the 22 yards and score the touchdown that extended their lead to 24-16. Le'Veon Bell carried four times for 14 yards, including the 3-yard touchdown, and Ben Roethlisberger converted a third-and-1 with an 8-yard pass to Xavier Grimble.

- The Patriots drove to the Steelers 21-yard line where they faced a third-and-10 with 4:36 left in the fourth quarter. Bud Dupree beat right tackle Cameron Fleming and sacked Tom Brady for a 7-yard loss that had Stephen Gostkowski come on to kick a 46-yard field goal that cut the Steelers lead to 24-19.



Linebacker Vince Williams set up the touchdown that gave the Steelers a 24-16 lead when he picked off a Tom Brady pass in New England territory.

Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

WHAT WENT WRONG

- The Steelers received the opening kickoff after the Patriots won the toss and elected to defer. Le'Veon Bell touched the ball on each of the first four plays, but a holding penalty on David DeCastro on the game's third snap set up a second-and-15. On that play, Bell took a handoff and started to run over the left side when a big hole opened up. But Bell tripped without being touched, and his gain was only 7 yards. An incomplete pass on third down, and the Steelers had to punt.

- It was a third-and-1 for the Patriots at their own 45-yard line on their opening possession. When Tom Brady attempted a quick pass to Danny Amendola just behind the line of scrimmage, T.J. Watt came across quickly and batted it down, but Cam Heyward was offside on the play. With a fresh set of downs, Brady hit Brandin Cooks on the next play for a 43-yard gain to the Pittsburgh 7-yard line. Two plays later, Rex Burkhead plunged across the goal line from 1 yard out and the Patriots had a 7-0 lead with nine minutes left in the first quarter.

- The Steelers took a 10-7 lead on a 51-yard field goal by Chris Boswell with 12:15 remaining in the second quarter, but it was a costly three points. After Martavis Bryant made a diving catch down

the right sideline for a 39-yard gain to the New England 17-yard line to convert a third-and-8, Antonio Brown injured his left calf on a pass in the middle of the end zone two plays later.

- The Patriots took the second-half kickoff and drove 75 yards in 12 plays, with the drive capped by a 4-yard touchdown pass from Tom Brady to Brandin Cooks. On the drive, Brady completed 6 of 7 for 58 yards, including the touchdown. He also completed a 10-yard pass to Rob Gronkowski to convert a fourth-and-1 from the Steelers 16-yard line. Stephen Gostkowski was wide left on the extra point attempt, and the Steelers still led, 17-16.

- The Steelers' first possession of the fourth quarter was off to a nice start before it was ruined by a holding penalty on Al Villanueva. And it also cost the Steelers another offensive player when James Conner sustained what appeared to be an injury to his left knee. The Patriots took the ball with 7:38 left in the fourth quarter and the Steelers holding a 24-16 lead.

- The Patriots took a 27-24 lead on a five-play 77-yard drive, with 69 of those yards coming on three completions to Rob Gronkowski. The touchdown was scored on a short run by Dion Lewis, and then the 2-point conversion play was another pass to Gronkowski. The Steelers got the ball following the ensuing kickoff with 52 seconds left in the game.



vs. New England

LE'VEON BELL RUNNING BACK

In the absence of wide receiver Antonio Brown, there were a few guys who stepped up, but maybe none more than Le'Veon Bell, who ended up as the game's leading rusher with 117 yards on 24 carries (4.9 average) and a 3-yard touchdown run, and he also was the No. 2 receiver with five catches for another 48 yards.

Bell ended up with 29 touches for 165 yards from scrimmage and one of the Steelers' three touchdowns. Bell is the Steelers Digest Player of the Week.



Digest Photo/KARL ROSER



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10

Sacks on the season for **Cameron Heyward**, who became the first Steelers player since 2010 to reach double digits.

168 Receiving yards for Rob Gronkowski, the most allowed to a tight end by the Steelers since 2002 when Baltimore's Todd Heap had 197.

69 Yards gained by JuJu Smith-Schuster on his late reception; it was the longest non-touchdown reception by the Steelers since 2007 when Santonio Holmes had an 83-yard catch against the St. Louis Rams.

Digest Photo/DAVE ARRIGO

9

Consecutive home victories in December for the Steelers before the loss against New England.

3

Steelers players with 1,200 rushing yards in consecutive seasons after Le'Veon Bell joined Willie Parker and Jerome Bettis.

6 Consecutive games where the Steelers had failed to intercept Tom Brady before linebacker Vince Williams picked him off in the third quarter.

80

Career games with a passer rating of 100.0 or better for Ben Roethlisberger, who is 71-9 in those games after the loss against New England.

62.5 Third-down conversion percentage for the Steelers, the third time in four games they topped 60 percent after not doing it in any of the first 10 games.

33

Field goals on the season for Chris Boswell, who moved within one of the franchise record set by Norm Johnson in 1995.

7:24

Time of a Steelers possession that began late in the third quarter and ended with them punting from their own 34.

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JuJu steps up in Brown's absence

By JIM WEXELL
Associate Editor

JuJu Smith-Schuster might be the youngest player in the NFL, but for at least the next two games he's the new leader of the Steelers wideouts.

Antonio Brown had made NFL history with his first catch of the game, but after making one more catch Brown was helped from the field with an injured calf muscle.

Brown, with his 101 catches, is the first NFL receiver to catch 100 passes in five consecutive seasons, but his regular season most likely ended after reportedly tearing the muscle.

Brown might return for the playoffs, and the Steelers hope a bye week will guarantee his return, but to secure that bye the Steelers are going to need Smith-Schuster to continue making the type of plays he made against New England.

"He stepped up," said slot receiver Eli Rogers. "He's always stepping up. He's always making plays. It wasn't a surprise."

Smith-Schuster, the Steelers' second-round pick out of USC, caught six passes for 114 yards to give him 43 catches for 699 yards and five touchdowns this season.

But it was his 69-yarder in the final minute that gave the Steelers hope, and should have at least resulted in the tying field goal.

But a couple of miscues cost the Steelers the game.

Starting at the Pittsburgh 21, with 52 seconds left, following a touchdown and two-point conversion by the Patriots to take a 27-24 lead, Ben Roethlisberger dropped back and looked deep, but checked down to Smith-Schuster, who was running a shallow cross.

Smith-Schuster took the pass and outran Eric Rowe, broke a tackle to run down the sideline, cut across the field, and was tackled at the New England 10 by Duron Harmon.

In a three-point game, Smith-Schuster's catch and run put the Steelers in position to tie or even win with 34 seconds remaining.

On the next play, the Steelers seemed to have won, but the apparent touchdown pass to tight end Jesse James was overturned by replay, and two plays later Roethlisberger was intercepted on a deflected pass. The Steelers never got the chance to kick the tying field goal.

The turn of events left Smith-Schuster steaming. He cursed the replay verdict before settling down and saying, "We've got to live with it. We'll come back and see them again. Got to keep moving forward."



Rookie JuJu Smith-Schuster put the Steelers in position to pull out a late victory against New England when he caught a pass on a short crossing route and turned it into a 69-yard gain.

Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

Did he feel the urgency to step forward as Roethlisberger's go-to receiver with Brown down?

"Yeah, I think we all did," Smith-Schuster said. "What we did, we took AB's plate and we shared it. We all took part of it."

While Smith-Schuster didn't quite match Rob Gronkowski's nine-catch, 168-yard performance, he did lead a Steelers receiving corps that helped Roethlisberger complete 22 of 30 for 281 yards and a passer rating of 110.6, his third game over 110 this season and first without Brown.

"When a guy of that caliber, the best wide receiver in the world, goes out, you have to step up as a receiving corps," said Rogers.

And there was one among the corps who stepped up in particular.

"How awesome at the end was JuJu?" Roethlisberger asked rhetorically. "He gave us a chance down there. Guys just stepping up and doing great things, I'm proud of that."

It's something the Steelers can rally around. Something they need to rally around.

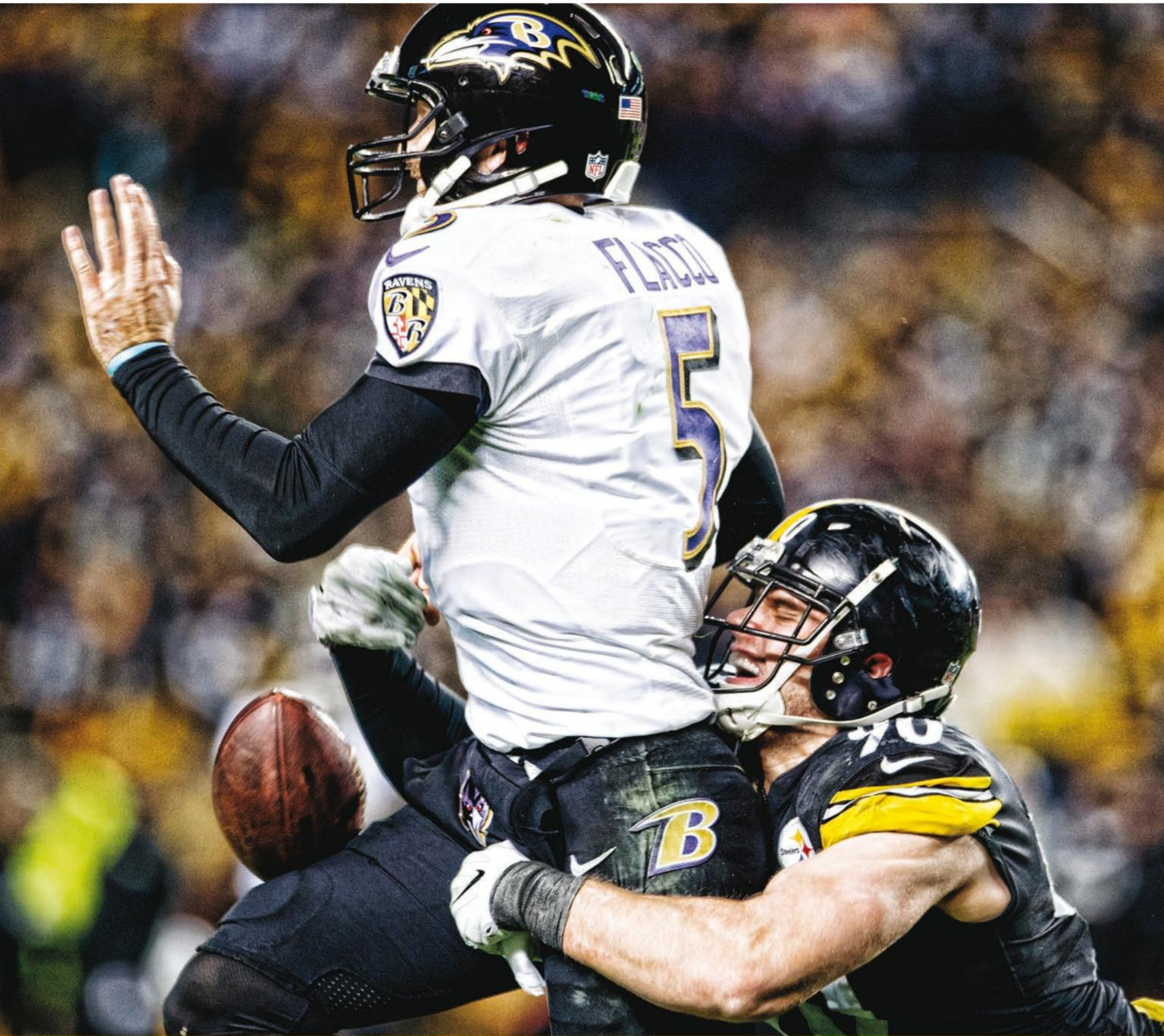
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Steelers 39, Ravens 38



WATT A WAY TO END IT! In a game that featured a lot of offense, rookie linebacker T.J. Watt sealed the Steelers' come-from-behind victory against Baltimore with a sack on the final play.

Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

WHAT WENT RIGHT

- It was third-and-4 at the Pittsburgh 30 for the Ravens, who had taken the opening kickoff and marched 50 yards to get to that spot. Joe Flacco tried to go deep down the middle to wide receiver Jeremy Maclin. Sean Davis undercut the route, made the interception at the 6-yard line and returned it 35 yards to the Pittsburgh 41-yard line.

- It took the Steelers eight plays and 3:25 of game time to capitalize on the takeaway, with the touchdown coming on a 20-yard pass to Le'Veon Bell, who beat safety Tony Jefferson on the play. Ben Roethlisberger completed 4 of 5 for 48 yards plus the touchdown on the drive, and Jesse James caught two of those passes for 20 yards. The Steelers had a 7-0 lead with 6:59 remaining in the first period.

- By the time there was 13:11 left in the second quarter, the Steelers had doubled their lead to 14-0 after a 12-play, 90-yard drive that ended with Le'Veon Bell scoring his second touchdown, this one a 1-yard run. On the drive, Ben Roethlisberger completed 6 of 7 for 66 yards, and he also ran for 5 yards to convert a third-and-2.

- Chris Boswell added another 50-plus-yard field goal to his resume when he connected from 52 yards out to extend the Steelers lead to 17-7 with 4:14 remaining in the second quarter. The big play on the nine-play, 54-yard drive was a 43-yard pass to Antonio Brown.

- Boswell's second field goal of the half — this one from 43 yards out — gave the Steelers a 20-14 lead at halftime. On the drive, Ben Roethlisberger completed 5 of 7 for 55 yards, and he also spiked the ball twice so he officially was 5 for 9. The key play was a 16-yard pass to Eli Rogers that converted a third-and-15. The scoring drive was 50 yards in 11 plays.

- When in doubt, get the ball to Antonio Brown. That's what Ben Roethlisberger did on a third-and-10 from the Steelers 33-yard line, and the play was good for a 57-yard gain that moved the ball to the Ravens 10-yard line. A pass interference penalty on Brandon Carr in the end zone on second down set up a 1-yard touchdown pass to Roosevelt Nix that made it 31-29. After another pass interference penalty in the end zone on Chuck Clark, who was trying to guard Le'Veon Bell, gave the Steelers a second chance at the two-point conversion, Bell was dumped for a loss when the Steelers tried to run it on their second attempt.

WHAT WENT WRONG

- The Ravens cut their deficit to 14-7 with a nine-play, 78-yard drive that included 28 yards rushing on five plays and another 20 yards on a swing pass to running back Alex Collins. The touchdown came on a 30-yard pass from Joe Flacco to Chris Moore with 9:07 left in the second quarter.



Le'Veon Bell's three touchdowns helped the Steelers outlast the Ravens in a Sunday night shootout at Heinz Field.

Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

- In 2:21 of game time, the Ravens drove 85 yards in five plays to cut the Steelers lead to 17-14, and missed tackles played a large role on that drive. Alex Collins took a short pass and turned it into a 37-yard gain following missed tackles by Arthur Moats and Sean Davis, and then Collins went 18 yards for the touchdown after Davis missed another tackle close to the line of scrimmage. There was 1:53 remaining in the second quarter when the Steelers got possession following the touchback.

- After forcing the Steelers to punt on the opening series of the second half, the Ravens sliced their deficit in half, to 20-17, with a six-play, 46-yard drive that ended with a 47-yard field goal by Justin Tucker. The big play on the drive was a 40-yard pass to Mike Wallace.

- The Ravens took their first lead of the night with a 60-yard march to a touchdown that took seven plays and gave them a 24-20 lead with 5:20 remaining in the third period. Joe Flacco completed 2 of 3 for 31 yards, and Alex Collins burst up the

middle for a 17-yard run to the Steelers 1-yard line. Javorius Allen plunged into the end zone from there for the touchdown.

- With 2:43 left in the third quarter, the Steelers had punted on each of their second-half possessions, and the Ravens had scored on each of theirs, and as a result Baltimore had a 31-20 lead at that point in the game. Alex Collins started it off with a 21-yard run that became a 36-yard gain after Sean Davis was flagged for a hit out of bounds. Then came a 31-yard pass interference penalty, and then a 6-yard touchdown pass to fullback Patrick Ricard.

- A 24-yard field goal by Chris Boswell cut the Ravens lead to 31-23 with 12:16 remaining, but it seemed as though the Steelers could have and should have gotten more points from a possession that lasted 15 plays and covered 80 yards. Antonio Brown was flagged for a personal foul on a play where CB Marlon Humphrey came at him first, and then C.J. Mosley wasn't flagged for holding Le'Veon Bell in the end zone on an incomplete pass that forced the field goal.



Linebacker Ryan Shazier was on the minds of Steelers fans, players and coaches before, during and after the thrilling victory against the Baltimore Ravens that clinched the AFC North title for a second consecutive season.

Digest Photos/ARRON ANASTASIA, MIKE DRAZDZINSKI, TAYLOR OLLASON and KARL ROSER





vs. Baltimore

BEN ROETHLISBERGER QUARTERBACK

The Baltimore Ravens defense came into this game at Heinz Field ranked in the top 10 in the NFL in 10 different categories, including No. 3 in points allowed, No. 7 in total yards allowed per game, No. 1 in takeaways, and No. 1 in interceptions. What Ben Roethlisberger did against this defense was complete 44 of 66 (67 percent) for 506 yards, with two touchdowns, no interceptions, and a rating of 99.7.

With him operating as the triggerman of the offense, the Steelers converted 12 of 18 on third downs (67 percent) and 3 of 4 in the red zone (75 percent). With him handling the ball on every one of the Steelers' 62 offensive players, the team had no turnovers. And, most important, the offense accounted for 39 points and needed every one of those in what ended up being a 39-38 victory.

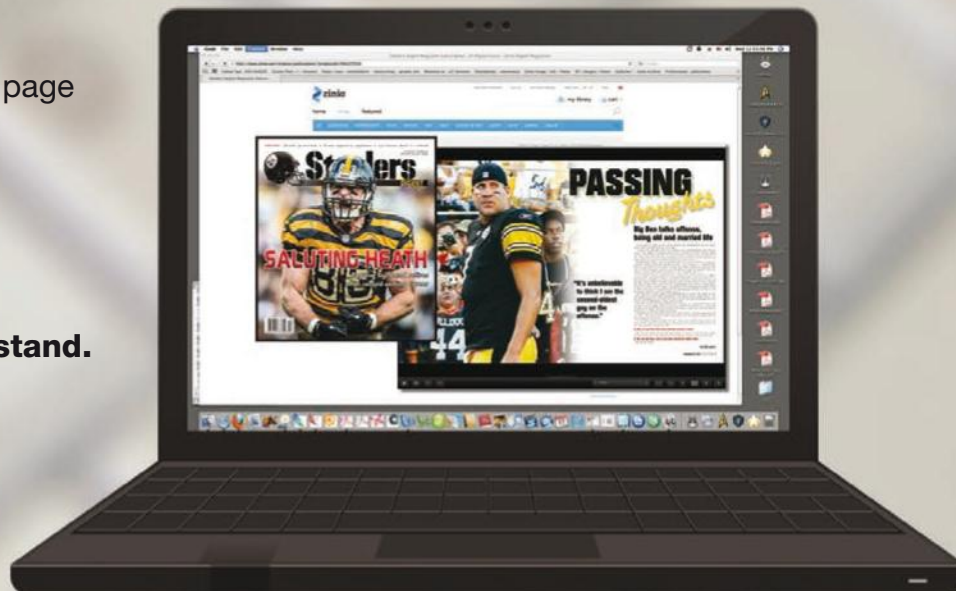


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44,666 Ben Roethlisberger's completions and attempts, both of which set franchise single-game records.

3 Career games with 500 yards passing for Ben Roethlisberger, who is the only player in NFL history with that distinction.

10 Receptions for tight end Jesse James, who set a new career high in this game.

232 Offensive yards for the Steelers in the fourth quarter.



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16 Career games with at least 10 catches and 100 receiving yards for **Antonio Brown**, who passed Brandon Marshall for first place on the NFL's all-time list for a player's first eight seasons.

136 Receiving yards for Antonio Brown in the fourth quarter. It was the highest fourth-quarter total in the NFL since 2013 and tied for eighth-highest since 1991.

3 Career games with at least three touchdowns for Le'Veon Bell, who tied the franchise record previously shared by Jerome Bettis and Antonio Brown.

12 Third-down conversions for the Steelers, their highest total since 2010 when they had 12 against Buffalo.

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Davis, James, Tuitt, Big Ben

From the notebook of a sportswriter who likes to consider himself the voice of reason after difficult losses:

- But I'm not sure I see a way for the Steelers to recover from this one.

- Right. It's shallow and silly. And I even realize the overturned touchdown call was the correct call. I just felt this was the chance to deliver at least a standing eight count to the Patriots, if not a knock-out.

- They still would have been alive with a loss, but the Patriots would likely have been the No. 3 seed and would have had to do things the hard way, like the Steelers did last year.

- Stephon Tuitt was choked up in the locker room and could barely tell me that "I never heard a call like that."

- In commiseration, I told Stephon that I felt like puking and I'm not even a player, that I can't imagine how a player must feel. "Let's puke together," Tuitt said. "Let's go in the back and just start throwing up, because that just kicked me in the gut."

- Tuitt did pick his head back up when I asked how the team would regain its confidence.

"We're on fire," he said. "I think all my teammates feel the same way. We're on fire. We've played so many close games and we've always overcome them. So we take this to heart and we'll be ready to go into work this week. We're going to be ready to work and get ready for the next team."

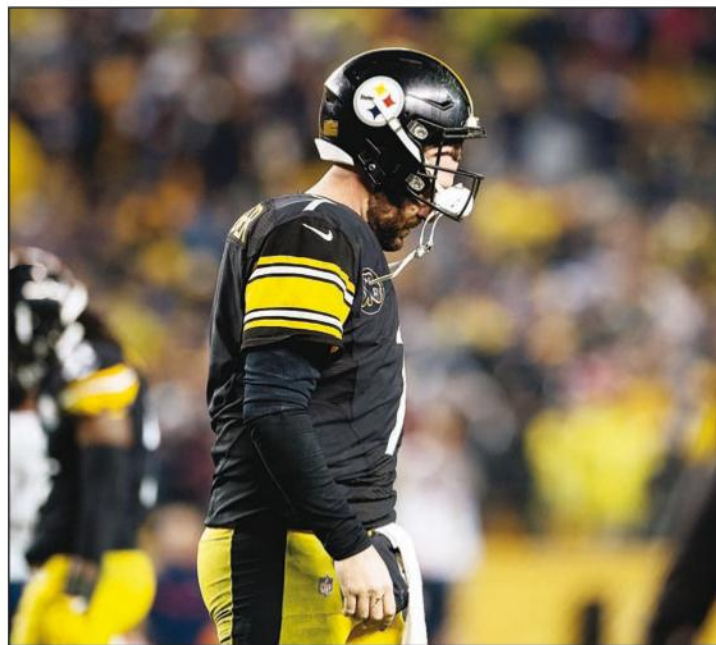
- "It's caused more than fire," he continued. "We've been fighting adversity all year. We lost one of our top receivers today but we still fought to the end. I love this group. I love this team. We'll go out and fight. I'm not worried whether we have confidence or not, whether we can come back from this, because we believe in ourselves. We fight for each other. We'll be all right."

- Brett Keisel and Aaron Smith, the great defensive ends from the last Super Bowl era, were on hand to lead the Terrible Towel twirl. They would have certainly nodded in agreement.

- Anyone left out there who doesn't think Rob Gronkowski should have been suspended two games? He caught nine passes for 168 yards, and the biggest two-point conversion of the Patriots' season, to continue his never-ending rampage against the Steelers.

- Don't kill me for this but I felt Sean Davis played well in coverage on Gronkowski much of the game. But it didn't matter.

- "He's just a big dude," said Davis. "I don't know how you can really challenge him more than that. I played to my leverage for the most part the



Ben Roethlisberger obviously was frustrated after the Steelers' decision to go for the win in the final seconds didn't provide the desired result.

Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

whole game. He just kept running away from me with those over routes."

- The Patriots' game-winning drive could have been halted by Davis at the start. On first down from the New England 23, a Tom Brady pass was deflected at the line and just behind Davis, who turned, reached, and dropped what would have been the game-sealing interception. On the next play, Gronkowski beat Davis for 26 yards, then again for 26 yards, and then made a shoestring catch for 17 to set up Dion Lewis' touchdown run for a 25-24 lead.

- Gronkowski lined up wide for what turned out to be a critical conversion. Davis followed him out in press man coverage.

"They motioned a dude down," Davis said. "I was playing outside the whole game and (Gronkowski) was running away from me the whole game, running across the middle of the field, so I figured they moved that guy to give (Gronkowski) more space inside. I was going to play that slant hard. They ran the fade on me."

- And the dropped interception?

"I'm a playmaker," Davis said. "I want to make plays and that would have been a great play to seal the game. Man, I wish I could have gotten hit in the face with it the way they did on the last play of the game."

- As bad as the series went, Davis offers the hope of future effectiveness with the way he challenged Gronkowski throughout the game. And the entire secondary — including rookie Cam Sutton — offers hope of being able to do a much better job in Foxboro, if they get another chance.

- Throw Joe Haden back in there and you have to begin feeling a little better.

- Now that we're done puking.

- Make all the robbery jokes you want, but Jesse James didn't complete the catch. Call it a bad rule, but don't call what he did a catch.

- "I'm sick about it," said James. "I'll be thinking about this the rest of the night. I probably won't get much sleep. The flip of catching the ball and putting it in the end zone versus it being a drop, that's a 360 in the way you feel."

- Nor can I disagree with Ben Roethlisberger's fake spike and throw to Eli Rogers. Obviously it wasn't an all-or-nothing scenario because the Patriots had five seconds left after the pick. The Steelers went for the kill at what seemed to be the right time. Bad luck just happened.

- Perhaps in the end, this loss won't hurt them. Maybe the Steelers do have the resolve to do what it takes in Foxborough. Maybe all this did was cost Roethlisberger the MVP, because beating the Patriots without Antonio Brown would have sent an MVP type of message.

- Don't get me wrong. I respect what Brown has done this year and wouldn't begrudge him winning the MVP award, but the quarterback has been the driving force behind Brown's season. The flurry of flukes at the end of this game may have cost Roethlisberger that acknowledgment.

- And he would be deliriously happy if that's all this loss cost the Steelers.

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COOL KICKER



Boswell keeps coming through in the clutch

By **JIM WEXELL**
Associate Editor

Le'Veon Bell was asked following the 39-38 win over Baltimore whether game-winning kicker Chris Boswell could now be called a "Killer B."

"Man, Boswell IS a Killer B," said Bell. "If anybody says different, they are tripping."

Here's to tripping because the easy nickname for Boswell can be shortened to "Killer."

It describes the guy. He's an assassin. Tell him what you want, at what distance, in any weather, and the guy with the icy composure does the job. And then he's gone, never to discuss the mission again.



"You again?" Boswell asked as I approached three days after he had expired the Cincinnati Bengals.

A day earlier, Boswell got caught up in an early-

morning media mob. He talked. But, did I have to come back the next day for a follow-up?

"He doesn't like talking about kicking," said Darrell Patterson. "That's why you called me, isn't it?"

Patterson was Boswell's coach at Rice University, back when Boswell was climbing to second as the school's second all-time scorer.

The oddity, though, is that Boswell made only 74 percent of his college field goals. Heading into the New England game with the Steelers, Boswell had converted a franchise-record 89 percent late into his third NFL season.

"He changed his mechanics a little bit," Patterson said. "You can't afford to over-rotate your hips. You've got to come through the ball and follow through to the uprights more. You can't over-rotate because of smaller targets, so I think that was the one thing that might have taken him a

little bit of time to get comfortable. But he seems to be very comfortable now."

Boswell came out of Fort Worth's Fossil Ridge High as first-team All-State kicker. Highly recruited, Boswell went to Rice to study Sports Medicine. Patterson oversaw Boswell's college career that spanned from 2010-13, and the key word was "oversaw."

"You never had to say anything to him, other than some of the smallest things, because he came through high school self-taught," Patterson said. "He was so competitive with himself, so hard on himself, all you had to say was, 'Hey boss you might want to check your plan,' or, 'You might want to change your approach, make sure you got your line.' That's it. You never overcoach that rascal."

See **BOSWELL**, page 25



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Boswell's first college field goal gave Rice a 3-0 lead over Texas. His longest field goal was a 57-yarder against Louisiana Tech. His most voluminous display was five field goals (three 50-plus-yarders) against SMU. His most critically wounded opponent was Kansas, which Boswell beat once with a 46-yarder and the following year with a 56-yarder.

Did Patterson realize Boswell had ice water in his veins back then?

"Oh, yeah, you could tell real quickly," Patterson said. "He's got a goldfish mentality, so if something did go wrong, with the protection or anything like that, he didn't pay any attention. 'Next time we're going to kick it and it's just gonna go, and that's it.' He's got confidence in his holder, confidence in his snapper, he's got confidence in the entire protection in front of him, and his job is to put the ball through the upright. 'You put it down, I kick it.' And he doesn't think about it. He lines up and kicks the thing."

Patterson, being a native of Canonsburg, Pa., roots for the Steelers.

"I heard a rumor that Roethlisberger asked him where he wanted the ball and he said, 'You worry about scoring. Wherever you leave it, just leave it there and I'll go kick it,'" Patterson said. "I heard the story and thought that's Boz. 'I'm just Boz. Put the ball down and I'll kick it.' "



Just put the ball down and kick it. Boswell has been saying that since the first day he showed up in the Steelers' locker room and was asked about his range.

"Wherever they put me out on the field," he said.

Sure enough, the guy who had never kicked in a regular season NFL game made his first seven field goals, 91 percent for the season, and went 7-for-7 in the postseason, including a 35-yard game-winner to beat the Bengals. But Boswell was ready for anything after his first practice, when James Harrison lined up nearby and growled while Boswell kicked.

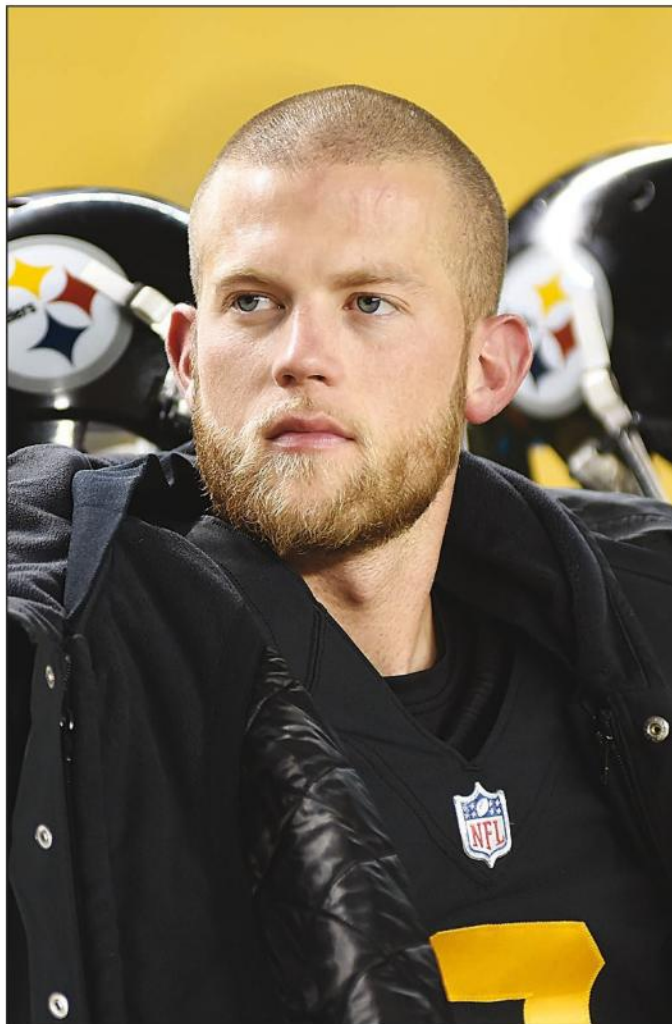
"I was trying not to think, man," Boswell said. "All the kickers that I've ever been around, we've all been put in situations like that. But, yeah, that was my first day, my first practice here. It was a fun experience, I guess."

How close was Harrison?

"As I was holding," said Jordan Berry, "he was standing on top of me."

Boswell passed the test and within two years went on to one of the greatest exhibitions of clutch kicking the league has seen.

Remember George Blanda? Well, that legendary run in 1970 was akin to Boswell's this season, but



"If we need a walk-off, we need it. Hopefully we don't need field goals ever because I'm fine with kicking just extra points, too."

different, though, in that Blanda's five-game stretch, at age 43, included both placekicking and quarterbacking.

Blanda beat the Steelers in relief as a quarterback, the next week beat the Chiefs with a 48-yard kick at 0:03, followed that with a late TD pass and 53-yard kick at 0:03 to beat the Browns, followed by another fourth-quarter touchdown pass to beat the Broncos, before finishing the five-week run with a 16-yard kick at 0:08 to beat the Chargers.

Here's Boswell's stretch: kicked a 33-yarder at 0:00 to beat the Colts, tied a Heinz Field-record with a 53-yarder at 0:00 to beat the Packers, kicked a 38-yarder at 0:00 to beat the Bengals, and kicked 46-yarder at 0:42 to beat the Ravens.

It was the second time since the merger that a player made three "walk-off" kicks in a season. Ryan Longwell of the Packers did the same in 2004.

Boswell's string of four game-winners occurred during a five-week stretch, which may have been continued this past Sunday against the Patriots.

Going into that game, Boswell had made 32 of 35 field goal attempts this season, scored 122 points, and was the most accurate kicker in team history, making 89.1 percent of his career kicks.

At press time, Boswell was bearing down on team records for most points in a season (141, Norm Johnson, 1995) and most field goals in a season (34, Johnson, 1995).

Pretty exciting stuff, right?

"A game-winner, he just treats it like a regular kick," said Berry. "You see him in the celebration (how) he doesn't even really get too amped up. Obviously we had that real long one against Green Bay, so he was pretty psyched for that kick, given the wind and all that. But, yeah, these other ones, in the mid-30s and 40s, he just kicks it and goes on about his business. Business as usual."

How does "The Boz" keep so cool?

"He finds ways to distract himself from the game and the kick so that it's just kind of there and he just does it," Berry said. "He's always finding something small, like the nets are a little off. He's just trying to find something. I don't know if he even does it intentionally but he's always distracting himself, so when we go out there to kick the field goal, he's not all 'Oh, I got the kick, I got the kick.' When it comes time to kick, he just kicks it and goes back to whatever he was doing."



Whatever Boswell was doing on this day was getting to his locker immediately after practice, grabbing a few belongings, and getting the heck out of there.

But he was stopped by that confounding reporter who now wanted the kicker to name his favorite walk-off of the three this season.

"I don't really like one more than the other," he said. "They all won a game. They all put points on the board."

What about the 53-yarder that beat the Packers? "Yeah, I liked it," he said. "But, I mean, after that kick it was on to the next one."

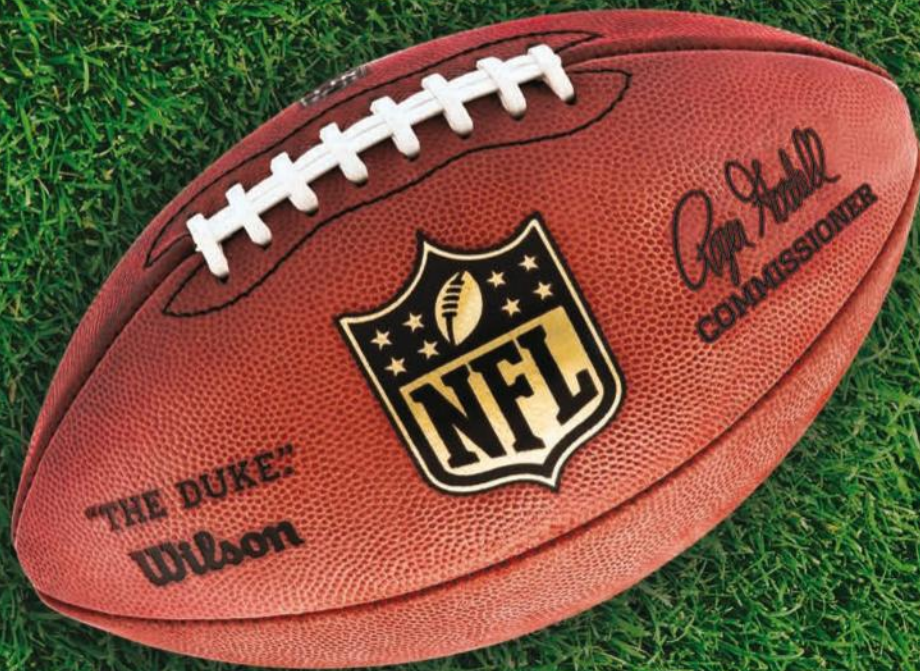
Another game-winner perhaps?

"I have no idea," he said as he started for the exit. "If we need a walk-off, we need it. Hopefully we don't need field goals ever because I'm fine with kicking just extra points, too."

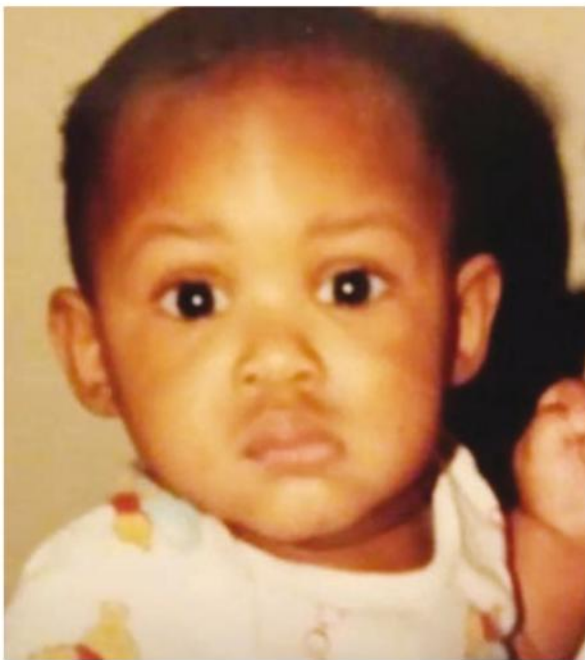


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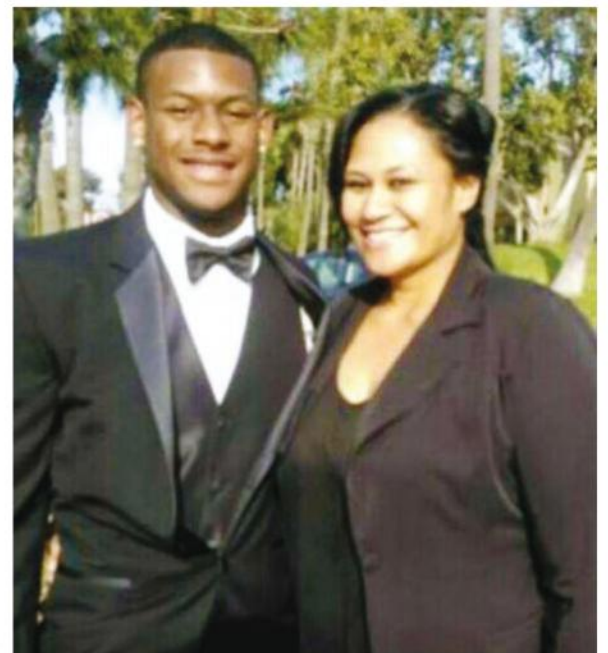


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By **TERESA VARLEY**
Assistant Editor

Sammy Schuster laughed when she thought back to the day she made her son, Steelers rookie receiver JuJu Smith-Schuster, a promise.

He was just 8 years old, and playing football for the first time. He already had big dreams of playing in the NFL, but he didn't want to do it alone. He wanted his mom to be there with him, just like any young kid would wish for.

JuJu asked his mom to promise him that when he made it to the NFL she would move with him to whatever city he played in. And, of course, she agreed.

"It is a promise I made to him then. But I don't know," said Sammy. "I have been going out there

See MOM, page 28

and loving it. I told him it would be nice if we raised the younger kids there. JuJu wants to retire as a Steeler. But we can't control these things. I am going to sit back and wait it out for now.

"He did say it, 'Are you moving to Pittsburgh?' I told him not now, we are fine over here."

The promise was made long before the family had grown from JuJu, now 20, and his older sister, So'omalo, 22. Smith-Schuster now has five younger siblings — Lawson, 12; Oilau, 10; Salaia, 9; Pua, 7; and Teuila, 5. That makes moving from their home in Southern California to Pittsburgh a much greater challenge, one that despite the love mom has for her son, he knows isn't a reality.

"Being a kid, me saying that I didn't know she was going to have more kids," said JuJu. "That changes things. But she loves it here. Hopefully she will get the chance to move here one day. But I think she will stay where she is with all of the kids."



While she might not be able to make the move to Pittsburgh, Sammy is always there for JuJu, always supporting him, just like she has done from the time he started to play football. Whether it was youth football, high school, or college, being at his games was a priority.

"I missed one game in college. That was the Boston College game," Sammy said of going to all of JuJu's games while he was at USC. "We had a huge tailgate at home, invited everybody over. He got injured in the game and my heart dropped. I don't like to not be there. My nephew was there and I got on the phone to see if he was OK. He told me he was jogging and dancing on the sideline. They weren't telling us that on television. I was so happy and told everyone."

With JuJu now in the NFL, playing home games some 3,000 miles away from his family, it's not so easy to get to every game anymore. There are five younger kids whose lives they have to balance, and it's not easy for Sammy to be there, as well as not be there, for every game. But when she heard from JuJu that he wanted her and his father, Lawrence Shuster, who met Sammy when JuJu was 4 and they married two years later, at the Vikings game, she had to go.

"It is hard," she said. "I have to pick and choose what games to go to. His dad and I weren't going to go to the home opener because we went to the first game of the season, the away game. We told him we won't be there, but we were going to have his sister come to it. So we were going to have some family fly out.

"Then he texted me that Wednesday and said, 'Mom, I really want you to be there. I feel like I am going to score my first touchdown, I want you and dad to be there for my first touchdown.' He asked us to please find a babysitter. That is hard. We have



"It is hard. I have to pick and choose what games to go to."



an awesome family and they said if he wants you there, you need to be there. I was at every first touchdown he scored in his football career at each level. I had to be there."

JuJu knew what he was talking about. With mom and dad in the stands, he scored his first NFL touchdown on a 4-yard pass from Ben Roethlisberger in a win over Minnesota.

"The day I knew I was getting more playing time, I knew I was going to score," said JuJu. "I wanted to make it special. My mom came and it just made life easier. It's hard they can't always be there for games. It's the way it is. But she has other kids she has to take care of the way she took care of me when I was a little kid.

"But for my mom and dad to come, see me score my first touchdown, they were there for all my firsts, first high school game, first college game, first NFL touchdown. That was special."

While JuJu celebrated the touchdown on the field with a role of the dice, mom celebrated in the stands like only a mom can.

"When he scored the touchdown I was going nuts in the stands," said Sammy. "I was screaming like I had the Holy Ghost in me. Somebody tapped my sister-in-law on the shoulder and asked if I was OK. She told her, yes, that's her baby that just scored. Then all of the fans were like you are JuJu's mom. That is awesome.

"I was so happy to experience his first NFL touchdown. That was a moment, he called it. He didn't know if it was going to happen, but it happened right in front of me and that was amazing."

She stopped for a minute, thinking about how much it meant that JuJu wanted her to be there, didn't want her to miss what was going to be a huge moment for him.

"I don't think a mom in my situation can ever put it into the perfect words," said Sammy. "It's a moment you want to cherish forever and never let go. You raised this kid, have seen his passion for football. JuJu was never a kid I had to wake up and get him going to play football. He was always the first one there and the last one to leave. For a mom, those type of moments are precious and you want to cherish them forever."



Letting go. It's never easy for a mom, and never something they will fully do. Sure, JuJu can move across the country, but he will never be far from his mom.

"In the beginning, when he left the day of the draft, my heart dropped," said Sammy. "I didn't know what to expect. He is going to be so far away, the first time in his life he will be away from us. When he came back he was so excited. Then when he left for rookie camp, and when he came back, he loved it there in Pittsburgh. There was nothing in his voice, nothing in his actions that told me otherwise.

"When I finally went out there to visit Pittsburgh for the first time I knew why he loved it. I love it there. Whenever I come there I tell him how much I love it there. It's so different from California where it's so fast-paced. I understand why he adjusted well there. I felt like he needed that peace and quiet, that slower environment for him to focus on his career."

Family is an important aspect for JuJu. All you have to do is follow him on social media to see that. You see pictures of him from the draft, surrounded by "Team JuJu," which encompasses immediate and extended family. You see pictures of him with his siblings at Universal Studios theme park, where

it's hard to tell who is having more fun, JuJu or his younger siblings.

"It is tough," said JuJu. "I do miss my family and my siblings. It is the life you live with."

When he can't see them, though, they are just a phone call away.

"We always talk to him before and after the games," said Sammy. "We had a ritual in our family when he was in high school where we do a family prayer before the game. I try to keep that going. I know there are times now that we have to do it when JuJu is on the team bus headed to the game, so it is tougher. Our prayers used to be about 15 minutes long, now it's quicker. I make sure he calls me in the morning. We make sure we are all up waiting for his phone call. When he calls, I three-way my family and my sister does the family prayer and then we let him go.

"It means a lot. It plays a huge part in where he is now. It's a true testament to where he is now. Without God he wouldn't be where he is. The strength, knowledge and courage he has, everybody tells me we did a good job as parents and should be happy. Yes we raised him, but all praise goes to God. There are so many kids in JuJu's situation who have gone a different route. I believe his faith in God is why he is where he is now."



There is another way Sammy keeps an eye on JuJu. Social media. If you follow him on Twitter, Instagram or Snapchat, you see the fun he has and are entertained by his youthful exuberance with everything he does. And, of course, there was the adventure of the stolen bike.

"He is so funny," said Sammy. "And people have responded to him in an amazing manner. It's incredible. He has fun, and people have fun with him.

"He is now sharing his cooking adventures on there. I am happy he is cooking. He never cooked at home. He would only make a sandwich or cereal. I am happy he is learning how to cook. When I do come out there I go buy stuff to cook for him. He never had food in his refrigerator. He only has breakfast food. He is a breakfast guy. But I am glad to see he is doing more."

She isn't the only one using social media to keep an eye on family. JuJu does the same thing.

"I think it's funny that moms are catching up to us on social media," said JuJu. "I think it's cool. I don't talk to her as much as I want to, but social media keeps us connected. We see what each other are doing when we aren't talking."

Mom is enjoying all of his social media exploits and adventures just as much as you do. Well, most of the time that is.

"He was never into social media," said Sammy. "He wondered what the point was. He would ask why people use social media. When he got into



"We have a close relationship. I want to say I am like that with all of my kids; it's just a different relationship with each of them."

USC it was like you have to get a social media account, get yourself out there and interact with your fans.

"I followed him on everything. I always make sure he does the right thing. There were a few things he put up that I called him and told him take it down right now. And he did. He did some kind of dance, and I made him take it down. He has an image he has to portray. It's his sense of humor, he has always been a clown, but I still didn't want him doing that."

JuJu knows there isn't anything he can hide from his mom, nor has he ever tried. He has always been open and honest with her, sharing more than most kids do with their parents.

"We have a close relationship," said Sammy. "I want to say I am like that with all of my kids; it's just a different relationship with each of them. We are very close. He is very open and honest with me, which sometimes I like and sometimes I don't. Sometimes he gives me too much information. That is the innocence in him. That is something I cherish now because I know once he gets a little bit older, I don't know if it's ever going to go away. I don't want it to go away.

"That has been our relationship. He has been very open and honest. Even if he is going to do something bad, I know it before he does it. He tells me before he does it. He has been that way his entire life.

"In high school every school has a senior ditch day. My daughter did her senior ditch day and didn't tell

me. When JuJu was a senior I was dropping him off for school and he told me it's senior ditch day and I am going to ditch school. I couldn't help but say OK. He told me they were going to the beach and going to be fine. To this day we still joke about it. Who tells their mom they are going to ditch school?"

The answer, a son who trusts his mom, values her, and cherishes the relationship and the bond they have.

"She is the person I can always go to, talk to about personal stuff on and off the field," said JuJu. "She has always been the heart of our family. I try not to use her too much now because she has the other kids back home who are a lot younger and need that attention.

"Me being how young I am, and she has been through it all, I can always open up to her and talk to her about anything. That is how it is with my mom. I tell her everything. If it has to do with a female, with football, anything personal I can tell her.

"I remember when I was a kid and I would be so excited to go to practice. I would be ready an hour before practice, finish my homework. She would always take me. She was my No. 1 supporter. She came to all my little league games, high school games, college games, and now she is making trips to come out here.

"She means everything to me. She means the world to me. Without her I wouldn't be where I am today. Without my father too. She is the rock of our family. She keeps us strong, keeps us together."

Nix having fun in background

By TERESA VARLEY | Assistant Editor



Digest Photo/TAYLOR OLLASON

As Roosevelt Nix stood by his locker, he joked with all the media surrounding him.

"Dang, this is probably the only time you guys will talk to me all season," quipped Nix.

JuJu Smith-Schuster, whose locker is close by, pulled out his phone and started recording the interview for his social media channels, making sure he captured the rare moment.

Then he gave a plug for Nix.

"Without this man ... he makes those blocks," said Smith-Schuster. "That is why I am going to vote for him for the Pro Bowl."

While Smith-Schuster might not be able to vote for his teammate on the official ballot, like many of his teammates he is on the "Nix for the Pro Bowl" bandwagon.

"Easily," said Ramon Foster. "Easily. Not enough credit. He is so much a part of our offensive line that he is on our Christmas gift list."

And the man who benefits the most from Nix's explosive blocks at fullback, well, let's just say he jumped at the chance to talk about his teammate.

"He needs to be in there," said Le'Veon Bell, who voluntarily jumped into an interview with Foster to talk about Nix. "He needs to be in there. He doesn't get enough credit. All the things he does for this football team goes unseen. Rosie is the guy. He gets nowhere near enough credit. He does everything he can for me. He puts his health on line for me. Not only that, he is the first guy there to help me up off the ground."

If you look at the Steelers' offensive stat sheet, you will see one great stat, one that makes everyone in the Steelers locker room happy. Nix scored his first career touchdown against the Ravens, a 1-yard touchdown catch.

But look at the game film, look at Bell's runs, and that is where you see the impact he makes.

"Rosie is unbelievable," said Alejandro Villanueva. "Watching his play is gory because of the nature of what he does, but he is surprisingly consistent."

"What he brings to the run game is he takes a linebacker on consistently, and does it a manner to allow Le'Veon to run the ball the way he does, very patiently. He has plenty of time. The guy Rosie is blocking is already on the ground. He is that type of guy. He does his job every single time."

Nix has no fear in taking on a linebacker, because he knows that mind-set. He played defensive end at Kent State, and when he originally signed a reserve/futures contract with the Steelers in 2015, it was to play linebacker.

"He doesn't care," Foster said. "To be one of the best, that is how you to treat it. It's all for the greater good."

Before Nix had a chance to get comfortable at linebacker, another position change came about. The Steelers needed a fullback in his rookie minicamp, and Nix made the change. After only doing it for a short stint when he first came into the league with Atlanta, and it not working out, he was



"His play, his professional approach is something we appreciate. What makes it more special is his personality, the way he fits in with the group. Now he is such a presence in the locker room."

Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

a bit concerned but he never hesitated. He just kept that same mind-set, and still has it today.

"It's football, everybody hits," said Nix. "Everybody gets ready in their own way. I play a position where I hit people or they hit me. I don't want to get hit, so I bring it before they do."

Nix has taken his hits during his NFL career, as his path wasn't an easy one. In 2014 he was a rookie free agent trying to catch on with the Falcons as a fullback, a position he never played before. The Falcons were the team featured that season on HBO's "Hard Knocks," following every step of what a team goes through. That included being there when Nix went into Coach Mike Smith's office and was told he was being waived.

Getting released left Nix in doubt of what his future would be. Nix looked at options outside of football. First was the Columbus Police Academy, something he thought might provide a solid future, but wasn't the right path. He was close to playing in the Arena League with the Cleveland Gladiators, but never did. He spent time as a teaching assistant at his alma mater, Reynoldsburg High School, keeping students on the right path while he, too, stayed on it.

"His background, a defensive player, he spent a year substitute teacher," said Villanueva. "Then he is playing fullback for the Pittsburgh Steelers, that is very special. Then he makes the roster the first year, and we started putting in plays for him."

"His play, his professional approach is something we appreciate. What makes it more special is his personality, the way he fits in with the group. Now he is such a presence in the locker room. He jokes nonstop. He is an overall great guy."

Nix is one of those players that when you are around him, his energy and enthusiasm is contagious. His personality, it's unique, entertaining, and something that has endeared him to all. But it's his play, his consistent blocking, him doing everything he can for his team, that has truly made an impact.

"He is special," said Maurkice Pouncey. "He plays his butt off. He goes out there and makes a lot of plays on special teams and offense. When a guy does that, you respect the heck out of him. He played D-line in college, so he really is a lineman. Don't let the fullback skill thing fool you."

"It's unbelievable. The guy blocks on punts, makes tackles on the kickoff team and the punt team, comes in there and blocks the Mike linebacker. He is a real key part of our offense. We can't say enough about him."

Well, maybe there is one more thing that can be said, and it's truly the ultimate compliment.

"He is the best," said Villanueva. "If somebody was going to embody what it's like to be a Steelers player, the quiet, professional, gets his job done approach, and has fun doing it, it's Roosevelt Nix."

Heyward honored for off-the-field work



By **TERESA VARLEY**
Assistant Editor

Giving back. It's something Cameron Heyward never had to be told to do, but rather something he has always wanted to do because it was in his heart. It's something he is passionate about, and he is tireless in his efforts, championing his own community outreach, while also never saying no when asked by others to support community events and causes.

While he doesn't do anything for recognition, it's hard not to notice the work he does, and it comes as no surprise that he is the Steelers nominee for the Walter Payton NFL Man of the Year, the second time in his career he has been selected as a nominee.

"To even be mentioned with a name like Walter Payton is an awesome thing," said Heyward. "He

was one of my dad's heroes and he is one of mine. He was a great person off the field as well.

"He was a humanitarian. You don't do it for the award. You do it because you love giving back. That is something I just want to consistently try to do because I am in a fortunate situation."

Every NFL team names a winner, and they are all eligible to be the NFL's Walter Payton Man of the Year, presented by Nationwide. Three finalists will be selected and the winner announced the night before Super Bowl LIII during the "NFL Honors" awards show.

The award recognizes a player's off-the-field community service, as well as his playing excellence. And Heyward, who will wear a special decal on his helmet for the rest of the season designating him as a nominee for the award, definitely is a standout in both areas.

He established the Heyward House Foundation in 2015, and kicked it off with a birthday party, not for himself but for those served by KidsVoice, an agency that represents abused and neglected kids who are in foster or group homes. He has made the birthday celebration an annual event, and supplements it with the Cameron Heyward Birthday Club where he provides gift cards with a personal birthday card to over 200 foster children per year, oftentimes the only gift the kids receive.

"These are kids who are coming from group homes, from foster homes that don't get remembered on their birthday," said Scott Hollander, Executive Director of KidsVoice. "For Cam, his family, his teammates to come out and make them feel like the most special kids in Steelers Nation and host a birthday party for all of them, it's phenomenal."

It doesn't stop there. He provides those who are a part of KidsVoice with school backpacks, shoes and supplies to nearly 50 children, takes them shopping for winter coat and boots, has them as his guest at Steelers Training Camp and has established a city-wide matching donation program for November and December.

"When he got here he saw some of the older players give back," said assistant head coach John Mitchell. "The smart ones pick up on that. Cam is tireless. The money, the time he gives, you can't say enough good things about the guy. I love being around the guy. Not because he is a good football player, but because he is a good person."

Heyward also has taken the Boys & Girls Club of Western Pennsylvania under his wing. His late father, Craig Heyward, went to his local Boys & Girls Club growing up, and Heyward knew it was an organization he had to align with. His foundation supports their "Triple Play" program, which emphasizes academic performance and physical fitness, as well as provides leadership and mentorship to the children. Heyward is also running a pledge campaign, Sacks for Kids, to benefit them.

This year Heyward joined forces with Blessings in a Backpack, providing backpacks filled with healthy food each weekend of the school year to children on the free or reduced government lunch programs.

He is a force behind a T-shirt campaign to promote breast cancer awareness, and the "Pittsburgh is Stronger than Cancer," and "Crush Cancer," shirts raise funds to help with research and aid families dealing with the hardships treatment can create. His father died of brain cancer, and it's something that touches him deeply.

He partnered with UPMC on a living donor awareness and sign up campaign this year. The Heyward House also supports local youth football teams, allowing kids from financially challenged backgrounds to play. He partnered with a local furniture store to completely refurbish a home of a local woman who has been struck with housing issues and financial hardships.

This year he is helping lead an initiative with local police officers in an effort to work together to make an impact in and around Pittsburgh. The first project was a Thanksgiving turkey distribution, with his teammates and police officers working together to distribute to local families.

Later this month he will host the Cystic Fibrosis 65 Roses Sports Auction, and will launch an asthma awareness campaign, something he battles himself and wants to help children with severe asthma.

"You never know how you are going to affect kids' lives, but the more opportunities you provide, the more you get involved in, you can really hit home," said Heyward. "You never know what someone's situation is, but if you continue to care and give back, you can change a life."

While community involvement is the main driv-



"You never know how you are going to affect kids' lives, but the more opportunities you provide, the more you get involved in, you can really hit home."

Digest Photos/TAYLOR OLLASON

ing force for the award, on-field contributions are also taken into account, and Heyward's are many, as he is having a Pro Bowl season, leading the Steelers in sacks.

"Cam came from a football family. He understood what his dad, Craig Heyward, did as a college player at Pitt and as a professional football player," said assistant head coach John Mitchell. "He has been around football. He knows what it takes to be a good football player. He knows what hard work is. He isn't selfish. The thing I like about Cam since he has been here, he came with an attitude of whatever it takes I am going to be a good football player."

"I can remember sitting in the meeting room one day when he first got here and telling him I have Aaron Smith, Brett Keisel and Casey Hampton, those guys are my playmakers. You other guys better be worried about playing on special teams. I think that got under his skin. He walked

out of here thinking I can show him I can be a good football player, which I knew he would be. But I wanted him to go through the pain just like the rest of the players."

Heyward went through a lot of pain last year when his season ended in mid-November because of a torn pectoral injury. He fought back, never taking a day off in the offseason, and came back this year stronger than ever.

"Cam is a guy that embraces all this game and business has to offer, and the many challenges that it presents," said Coach Mike Tomlin. "He works off the field the way he works on the field. I have seen him grow and develop as a man and person in the same ways I have seen him grow and develop as a player. He just has a respect for the moments and the opportunities to grow and get better. He shares that growth with his teammates. He is the quintessential Steelers player and that honor is well deserved."



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STEELERS ROSTER

(Listed numerically by position; as of Dec. 18)

QUARTERBACKS

NO.	NAME	HT.	WT.	EXP.	COLLEGE
3	Landry Jones	6-4	225	5	Oklahoma
5	Joshua Dobbs	6-3	216	R	Tennessee
7	Ben Roethlisberger	6-5	240	14	Miami (Ohio)

RUNNING BACKS

26	Le'Veon Bell	6-1	225	5	Michigan State
30	James Conner	6-1	233	R	Pittsburgh
33	Fitzgerald Toussaint	5-9	204	4	Michigan
45	Roosevelt Nix	5-11	248	3	Kent State

WIDE RECEIVERS

10	Martavis Bryant	6-4	211	3	Clemson
11	Justin Hunter	6-4	203	5	Tennessee
17	Eli Rogers	5-10	187	3	Louisville
19	JuJu Smith-Schuster	6-1	215	R	USC
84	Antonio Brown	5-10	181	8	Central Michigan
88	Darius Heyward-Bey	6-2	210	9	Maryland

TIGHT ENDS

81	Jesse James	6-7	261	3	Penn State
85	Xavier Grimble	6-4	261	2	USC
89	Vance McDonald	6-4	267	5	Rice

OFFENSIVE LINEMEN

53	Maurkice Pouncey	6-4	304	8	Florida
65	Jerald Hawkins	6-6	305	2	LSU
66	David DeCastro	6-5	316	6	Stanford
67	B.J. Finney	6-4	318	2	Kansas State
71	Matt Feiler	6-6	330	1	Bloomsburg (Pa.)
73	Ramon Foster	6-5	328	9	Tennessee
74	Chris Hubbard	6-4	295	4	UAB
77	Marcus Gilbert	6-6	330	7	Florida
78	Alejandro Villanueva	6-9	320	3	Army

DEFENSIVE LINEMEN

NO.	NAME	HT.	WT.	EXP.	COLLEGE
79	Javon Hargrave	6-2	305	2	South Carolina State
91	Stephon Tuitt	6-6	303	4	Notre Dame
93	Daniel McCullers	6-7	352	4	Tennessee
94	Tyson Alualu	6-3	304	8	California
96	L.T. Walton	6-5	305	3	Central Michigan
97	Cameron Heyward	6-5	295	7	Ohio State

LINEBACKERS

44	Tyler Matakevich	6-1	235	2	Temple
48	Bud Dupree	6-4	269	3	Kentucky
51	Sean Spence	5-11	231	5	Miami (Fla.)
54	L.J. Fort	6-0	232	3	Northern Iowa
55	Arthur Moats	6-0	246	8	James Madison
56	Anthony Chickillo	6-3	255	3	Miami (Fla.)
90	T.J. Watt	6-4	252	R	Wisconsin
92	James Harrison	6-0	242	15	Kent State
98	Vince Williams	6-1	233	5	Florida State

DEFENSIVE BACKS

21	Joe Haden	5-11	195	8	Florida
22	William Gay	5-10	187	11	Louisville
23	Mike Mitchell	6-1	221	9	Ohio
24	Coty Sensabaugh	5-11	187	6	Clemson
25	Artie Burns	6-0	197	2	Miami (Fla.)
27	J.J. Wilcox	6-0	212	5	Georgia Southern
28	Sean Davis	6-1	202	2	Maryland
29	Brian Allen	6-3	215	R	Utah
31	Mike Hilton	5-9	184	1	Mississippi

SPECIALISTS

4	P Jordan Berry	6-5	195	3	Eastern Kentucky
9	K Chris Boswell	6-2	185	3	Rice
57	LS Kameron Canaday	6-4	245	1	Portland State

INJURED RESERVE

LB	Keion Adams	6-2	245	R	Western Michigan
CB	Antonio Crawford	5-10	184	R	West Virginia
CB	Greg Ducre	5-10	183	3	Washington
C	Mike Matthews	6-2	300	1	Texas A&M
LB	Ryan Shazier	6-1	230	4	Ohio State
CB	Cameron Sutton	5-11	188	R	Tennessee



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Shazier saga timeline

During the first quarter of the Monday night game against the Cincinnati Bengals on Dec. 4 at Paul Brown Stadium, Ryan Shazier sustained what later would be diagnosed as an injury to his spine. The following is a chronicle of what followed:

Dec. 5: Statement from General Manager Kevin Colbert:

"Ryan Shazier suffered a back injury and was taken to the University of Cincinnati Medical Center where he had a CT scan and an MRI to evaluate the condition of his back. Ryan's injury will not require surgery at this time, and he continues to improve. He will stay overnight to continue evaluations with the hopes of returning to Pittsburgh. We will provide further updates at the appropriate time."

Later that same day, David Okonkwo, MD, PHD, and Joseph Cheng, MD, issued this statement:

"Ryan Shazier continues to be hospitalized at UC Health's University of Cincinnati Medical Center and has undergone a series of tests to evaluate his spine injury. He will continue to be monitored and treated by the neurosurgery experts at UC Medical Center until he has been cleared to return to Pittsburgh. It is expected that Ryan will undergo additional testing and evaluation over the next 24 to 48 hours, and he will then return to Pittsburgh to receive further evaluation and care at UPMC."

David Okonkwo, MD, PHD, is the Director of Neurotrauma at UPMC and is a neurosurgeon on the medical staff of the Pittsburgh Steelers. Joseph Cheng, MD, is Chief of Neurosurgery for UC Health, and the Frank H. Mayfield Chair of Neurological Surgery at the University of Cincinnati.

Sean Spence returns

On Dec. 6, after learning that JuJu Smith-Schuster was being suspended by the NFL for one game for a hit on Bengals linebacker Vontaze Burfict, the Steelers signed Sean Spence to help fill the void at inside linebacker.

Spence was selected by the Steelers in the third round of the 2012 NFL draft, but a severe knee injury during the preseason sidetracked his career early on. Spence missed the entire 2012 season and part of the 2013 season with the knee injury. After he was finally cleared to return to practice



mid-season in 2013, he suffered a finger injury that required surgery and he finished out his second season on injured reserve.

Spence returned to the field and played two seasons for the Steelers before signing with the Tennessee Titans as an unrestricted free agent in 2016. He was signed by the Colts in 2017, but was released in October.

Spence has played in 49 regular season games, with 19 starts, and has 134 tackles (93 solo), five sacks, nine tackles for losses, eight quarterback hits, three passes defensed, a forced fumble and a fumble recovery.

Dec. 6: Statement from Director of Communications Burt Lauten:

"Ryan Shazier has returned to Pittsburgh and is now receiving medical attention at a UPMC facility. He will continue tests and evaluations before his medical team provides any further updates on his condition. We again want to thank the doctors and staff at UC Health's University of Cincinnati Medical Center for the excellent care Ryan received while at that facility."

Dec. 7: Statement by UPMC Neurosurgeons and Pittsburgh Steelers Team Physicians on Ryan Shazier:

"Last night, UPMC neurosurgeons and Pittsburgh Steelers team physicians Drs. David Okonkwo and Joseph Maroon performed spinal

stabilization surgery on Ryan Shazier to address his spinal injury."

Dec. 10: "Win it for Shay"

Steelers players have been showing their love and support for Shazier in many ways, from having his jersey with them on the field for the win over the Ravens, to wearing custom cleats and number 50 T-shirts before the game.

After the Steelers defeated the Ravens, a game that clinched the AFC North title, the players had Shazier on FaceTime to share the locker room celebration with them.

"I'm glad we could get the win for Shay," Ben Roethlisberger said after the game. "It was really tough. I went and saw Shay Thursday after practice. Guys are starting to go visit him. When you walk in and see him and give him a hug, it makes you breathe a little easier. We love our brother and we are glad we got this win for him."

Dec. 12: Shazier to IR

The Steelers placed Ryan Shazier on the team's Reserve/Injured List following his spine injury.

"Unfortunately Ryan will not be able to contribute on the field during the remainder of this season," said Steelers President Art Rooney II. "However, even off the field Ryan will continue to be one of our team leaders. We know his spirit and positive outlook will help him to continue in his recovery, as well as serve as an inspiration to our team."

COMING UP

Monday, Dec. 25

PITTSBURGH AT HOUSTON

Time: 4:30 p.m.

Site: NRG Stadium

Television: NBC/NFL Network

Series record: Steelers lead 3-2

Last meeting: 2014 at Pittsburgh; Steelers 30, Texans 23

Series trend: The last two games were decided by seven points after the first three were decided by 18, 20 and 21 points.

Scouting report: The Texans' quest for a third consecutive playoff appearance in 2017 has been derailed by a couple of key injuries, first to three-time NFL Defensive Player of the Year J.J. Watt and later to quarterback DeShaun Watson, who threw 16 touchdown passes in his last four starts before sustaining a torn ACL in practice. The offense has struggled since Watson's injury, even though wide receiver **DeAndre Hopkins** is putting together another sensational season. Hopkins was second in the NFL behind Antonio Brown through Week 14 in both receptions and receiving yards. Former first overall pick Jadeveon Clowney has enjoyed a breakout season; he led the team with nine sacks through 13 games.

Worth noting: The teams have met every three years since the Texans entered the league as an expansion franchise in 2002.



Sunday, Dec. 31

CLEVELAND AT PITTSBURGH

Time: 1 p.m.

Site: Heinz Field

Television: CBS

Series record: Steelers lead 73-58 (including playoffs)

Last meeting: 2017 at Cleveland; Steelers 21, Browns 18

Series trend: The Steelers have won the last five meetings and nine of the past 10. The last two games were decided by three points.

Scouting report: It has been another disappointing season for the Browns, who will fail to win more than three games for a third consecutive year. After a disappointing 27-21 overtime loss against the Green Bay Packers, the Browns found themselves still winless with three games left. The only bright spot late in the season has been the return of wide receiver **Josh Gordon**, who in that Green Bay game scored his first touchdown since 2013. The Browns have used three quarterbacks this season, with rookie DeShone Kizer getting the call in the final weeks of the season. Defensive end Myles Garrett, the first overall pick in the 2017 NFL draft, battled injuries early in the season but led the Browns in sacks through Week 14 with five.

Worth noting: This will mark the third consecutive season the Steelers face the Browns in the finale.

2017 REGULAR SEASON SCHEDULE

Sept. 10	at Cleveland	W, 21-18
Sept. 17	Minnesota	W, 27-9
Sept. 24	at Chicago	L, 17-23 (OT)
Oct. 1	at Baltimore	W, 27-9
Oct. 8	Jacksonville	L, 9-30
Oct. 15	at Kansas City	W, 19-13
Oct. 22	Cincinnati	W, 29-14
Oct. 29	at Detroit	W, 20-15
Nov. 5	Bye week	
Nov. 12	at Indianapolis	W, 20-17
Nov. 16	Tennessee (Thur.)	W, 40-17
Nov. 26	Green Bay	W, 31-28
Dec. 4	at Cincinnati (Mon.)	W, 23-20
Dec. 10	Baltimore	W, 39-38
Dec. 17	New England	L, 24-27
Dec. 25	at Houston (Mon.)	4:30 p.m.
Dec. 31	Cleveland	1 p.m.*

*-Game subject to flex scheduling

2018 OPPONENTS

HOME

Baltimore

Cincinnati

Cleveland

Kansas City

L.A. Chargers

Atlanta

Carolina

New England

AWAY

Baltimore

Cincinnati

Cleveland

Denver

Oakland

New Orleans

Tampa Bay

AFC South champion (Jacksonville or Tennessee)

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