

INSIDE: All-Pro selections • Coaching changes • Tomlin's take



Steelers

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THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION

DIGEST



UNHAPPY ENDING

After playoff loss to Jaguars, Ben says he'll be back





MEET THE KETCHUPS



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Steelers simply come up short

It was the story of this game, and because this game came in the divisional round of the playoffs, it will be the one that defines their season. And so it will be that the 2017 Steelers will be remembered as a team that failed to deliver.

They failed to deliver on both their promise and their promises, and because of that it all came to an end Jan. 14 at Heinz Field. The season of DMR and “Shalieve,” the season that was finally supposed to mark the occasion of the slaying of the New England dragon, all of it came to a crashing halt by virtue of a 45-42 defeat by the Jacksonville Jaguars the never really seemed as close as that final score might indicate.

Right up until the moment the ball went on the tee for the 1:05 p.m. opening kickoff, it seemed inconceivable that the Steelers would score six touchdowns against the Jaguars and still lose, but then over the course of the next three hours and 22 minutes, inconceivable would become the theme of the afternoon.

It seemed inconceivable that the Steelers would have 28 first downs, convert 50 percent on possession downs, put up 545 total net yards, be penalized only four times, be perfect in the red zone, be perfect in goal-to-go situations, own the edge in time of possession ... and yet need a garbage-time touchdown with 1 second remaining to get themselves close enough to lose only by three points.

But that’s exactly what happened.

“They won the moments ... They made the significant plays in the moments and that is what you have to do in order to advance,” said Mike Tomlin.

Indeed the Jaguars did. It can be characterized as the Jaguars winning the moments, those critical plays in crucial situations that ultimately separate winning and losing games in the NFL. But in most of those same instances, it also can be characterized as the Steelers losing those moments.

Right from the start — after the Steelers won the toss and elected to defer to force the Jaguars to begin the game with their offense on the field — the Steelers failed to handle the moment. After Jacksonville’s first offensive play was the expected run by Leonard Fournette that gained 5 yards, the Jaguars put the ball in quarterback Blake Bortles’ hands, and he completed three successive short passes resulting in a combined gain of 53 yards that moved the ball from their own 39-yard line to the Steelers 8-yard line, from where Fournette took over to give the Jaguars a 7-0 lead.

The Jaguars were carrying the baggage of a 1-9 record in their last 10 postseason games played in frigid temperatures with them on their charter



The Steelers defense couldn’t find a way to make plays at key moments against Blake Bortles and the Jacksonville offense in the disappointing playoff loss.

Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

flight to Pittsburgh, and the Steelers failed in an early moment to use the 18-degree temperatures and an energetic home crowd to put the opponent on its heels. And that failure was just the beginning of what would become a disturbing and costly trend.

Despite all of the gaudy numbers the offense produced, it failed on a couple of fourth-and-short situations where the choice of plays was curious. With one of the best offensive lines in football and with the option of fullback Rosie Nix in front of Le’Veon Bell, the Steelers eschewed power running plays in favor of a toss sweep on the first fourth-and-1 and a pass down the field on the second fourth-and-1.

Not to be left out, the defense failed to capitalize on several of the moments it was presented, mostly in situations where it needed stops or takeaways. The Jaguars ran 61 offensive plays, and the Steelers defense finished with no sacks, no takeaways, only one tackle for loss when defending Jacksonville’s 35 running plays, and only four hits on Bortles. To pick a play that summed up how easy the Steelers defense made it for the Jaguars throughout much of the game, I offer a third-and-5 from the Jacksonville 30-yard line with 7:49 remaining in a game the Steelers trailed by 35-28.

Get a stop there, maybe force a turnover, and there would be plenty of time left for the offense to come back to tie the game. Instead, Bortles threw a simple swing pass into the left flat for running back T.J. Yeldon, who caught the ball and ran

straight down the sideline for 40 yards to the Steelers 30-yard line. That might have been the easiest 40 yards of the season for Jacksonville.

Mike Tomlin failed in a moment that came up with 2:01 remaining. The Steelers had just scored their fifth touchdown to cut the Jaguars lead to 42-35, and there was 2:01 on the clock and they had two timeouts remaining. A kickoff out of the end zone would have given the Steelers three chances to stop the clock — the two-minute warning and their two timeouts — but instead Tomlin ordered an onside kick attempt. Even as porous as the defense had been, a successful onside kick is a longer shot than forcing the Jaguars to punt after a three-and-out. When the onside kick attempt failed even to travel the required 10 yards to have a chance to be recovered, the resulting field position was good enough to set up an easy field goal that put the game out of reach.

During that well-publicized “elephant in the room” interview with Tony Dungy that aired on NBC back in November, Tomlin said this Steelers team was good enough to win a championship this year, and that it should win a championship this year.

This loss to the Jaguars made sure that won’t happen, and that’s disappointing. But that this loss to the Jaguars resulted from a complete failure to come up big in any of the key moments that determine the outcome in a game of this magnitude is as disappointing as the outcome itself.

Maybe more disappointing.

INSIDE

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TOWEL TIME: The Terrible Towels were out in full force at Heinz Field before the start of the playoff game against the Jacksonville Jaguars, but it turned out to be a disappointing afternoon for the Steelers and their fans. Digest Photos/DAN KUBUS

ON THE COVER

The Steelers' 2017 season ended in disappointment with the playoff loss against Jacksonville, and Ben Roethlisberger already is looking forward to taking the next step in 2018. Cover Photo/KARL ROSER

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NEXT ISSUE

The next issue of *Steelers Digest* will be the pre-draft issue and will be printed in early April. It will include a comprehensive preview of the 2018 NFL draft as well as analysis on all the latest developments.



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Breaking down the playoff loss against Jacksonville and other assorted issues

We met as a football team (the day after the playoff game) and basically the outline of that meeting was it was a very disappointing end to an outstanding season. We talked about that some. We talked about the game. We talked about how we move forward individually and collectively. We also talked about the appreciation for the journey that we were able to walk. I probably like to just start with that.

I am extremely appreciative of these players and coaches of their efforts. It was a wild, challenging and fun ride as it always is. I am appreciative of the support we get from our fans and this city. I am appreciative of those things. We had a wild ride. We were able to accomplish a lot of things. Some things that we set out to do. We realize that our ball goes through the AFC North. We met the charge in that regard. We wanted to position ourselves as strongly as we could in playoff football to make the ball go through Pittsburgh, Pa. We were able to get a bye. It ended the way it ended and looking back at it there is nothing that we can do about that but learn from the experience.

We didn't play winning football against Jacksonville and there are consequences of that. We understand that. Oftentimes the people that care about us talk about putting perspective on it. It not being the most important thing in the world and so forth. I get that, they get that, but it doesn't lessen the will that we have. The commitment that we have toward and that is a blessing, and for that I am thankful. They are thankful, but it also doesn't lessen the hurt that comes with it when you are not successful and we've learned to embrace that element of it, too, because it is real. So, at the appropriate time they will all process it in their own ways. We will, too. Hopefully that strengthens us for our next journey.

We understand that some of us will be on this journey and some of us will not. That is the nature of it. That's why we have the type of urgency that we have. That is why we have the type of appreciation for what one another is willing to do in the midst of the journey.

Q. What criteria do you use when evaluating a coaching staff?

We are all a product of the end result. It starts there, whether it is players or coaches. We are what the record says we are, so it starts there, but then it's also your will. Players and coaches, what are you willing to do? I know what you are capable of or I have a pretty good assessment of what men are



Running back Le'Veon Bell had 155 all-purpose yards and two touchdowns in the playoff game against Jacksonville, but it mattered little in the end.

Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

capable of, but what you are capable of very rarely defines you in this business whether you are a player or coach. What you are willing to do is what defines you and what you are willing to do on a consistent basis. How selfless are you? How willing are you to put our goals and agenda in front of anything that might be on your checklist of to-do list? So those are general things that assess of all people that put their hand into the pile with. Whether it is player, coach, support personnel, training staff, equipment staff, medical staff, I take really generally the same approach to evaluate all people.

Q. Why have you guys gone away from the quarterback sneak?

I don't know that we have. Whether or not we choose to call it in a specific moment is up for debate, but to suggest that there's a resistance to it in concept, I'm not willing to say that.

Q. Would you like the players to be less active on social media or talking before games?

I have teenage kids who are 16 and 17, so I understand that that's a part of this world. It's not the world I grew up in. I'm 45, so I'm learning to understand it, learning to do it in the appropriate ways. I think that's the discussion. I think that's the realistic discussion, whether we're talking about young players or we're just talking about young people. Social media and the things that come with it aren't going anywhere, and 45-year-olds like myself that work to understand it and understand the positive aspects of it and work to train younger people to utilize it and utilize it for good. I think that's the discussion.

See TOMLIN, page 7

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Q. What goes into the thinking of some of the fourth-and-1 calls and the onside kick?

I know analytically they probably fall into the lower percentages and things of that nature, but if I err, I'm always going to err on the side of taking action to win. I think my guys know that about me. I think more importantly than knowing that about me, they expect that from me. I don't fear failure. I'm going to do what's required to pursue victory, even if it comes across as unconventional. I'm certainly not going to steer away from decision-making for fear of ridicule. Those guys put a lot on the line when we step in stadiums to play. I, in turn, am responsible to put a lot on the line and embrace doing so. So, I understand when things don't work out, there's criticisms that are associated with it. I embrace that, but I go to work every day with men who lay a lot on the line when they step in stadiums as well. And I'm just going to provide the same efforts that they provide me.

Q. What do you say to the perception that you were looking ahead to opponents this year?

I can't worry about those things, guys. One of the things that's changing in our business is the attention, the media attention, and part of it is the development of social media and things of that nature. So, I'm fortunate enough and I've been in it long enough that I realize that it's changing in some ways and some of the norms are changing, and we've got to change with it. And so, I'm less resistant to old norms. I'm not worried about those type of things because they're irrelevant. The amount of attention that we all get is tenfold what it was 10, 15 years ago. To try to keep that Jell-o in the box is a waste of time, and really kind of fruitless. We don't spend a lot of time worrying what's said about us or misinterpretations of what we say. We simply go about our work, and what's important is what we say to one another. If it doesn't come from one man to another, we don't give it much thought or attention. We don't. We realize oftentimes it may create a storm around us, but that's not us. We don't care. We can't care. We can't control it anyway. It's an impossibility in today's professional sports climate. So that's my soapbox.

Q. How do you change with the times?

I care less. We focus on what we do in preparation and ultimately our play, and we understand it as such. Some of it quite frankly is just, you know, a joke. I could get asked about something in here and I could say I have no comment, and then it's like, well, I denied something. No, I just didn't



Cam Heyward said the playoff loss was particularly disappointing because he wanted to win the Super Bowl while wearing the patch honoring Dan Rooney.

Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

have a comment. I can't dance that dance. I can't waste time in my day worried about that. There's too much real stuff going on, tangible things, preparation things, role things, workplace things that are real as opposed to perceived or interpreted or potential. That's just how it is. I'm sure we're not different from anybody else in that light. We're probably more upfront in talking about it than the others, but that's just how we chose to deal with it. People have different modes of operation in terms of dealing with the things that they deal with in this business, things that are part of this business. That's just our developing mentality. We're just not overly concerned with things that you might think we would be because it's a waste of our time.

Q. Cam Heyward said he was disappointed that the team didn't go further this year while wearing their patches in honor of Dan Rooney. Do you feel the same way?

We cannot win enough games to pay tribute to that man. We can't stack enough Lombardi trophies in there to adequately pay tribute to that man. So, I share his sentiments, but if the confetti would have rained on us and we would have walked off with the Lombardi, it still probably doesn't express my appreciation for all that he's given me. Everybody has an opinion, everybody has a perception, and I

respect that. But what he's provided me personally, I can't win enough games, I can't win enough championships. That was just a symbol of our appreciation for the standard he's provided us, the legacy he's provided us, the leadership, friendship, whatever he's provided us. It was a token of our appreciation. The outcome of games and stuff are not going to meet the standard.

Q. Mike Mitchell, according to the Jaguars, was yelling stuff outside their locker room. Is that something that shouldn't happen?

I'm not commenting on stuff like that. That's part of what I was talking about in today's climate that's really kind of irrelevant to me. I'd imagine Jacksonville isn't concerned about it as they prepare to play New England, so what are we talking about?

Q. Do you have any more information on Ryan Shazier?

Nothing has changed there. He's fighting, and fighting every day. We're probably going to have more time to support him, and I'm sure guys are doing that. It's less formal and just more appropriate right now. He's a teammate and a brother. Guys have acted appropriately so. The 2017 season is over, but obviously he's in the midst of a fight, and we're going to continue to support him daily in that.



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Jaguars 45, Steelers 42

GETTING THE STEELERS STARTED: The Steelers' valiant, but ultimately unsuccessful, attempt at coming back from a 21-0 deficit began when Antonio Brown scored his first of two touchdowns with a 23-yard catch in the second quarter.

Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

WHAT WENT RIGHT

- Three minutes and 11 seconds after the Jaguars took a 21-0 lead, the Steelers offense woke up. A six-play, 64-yard drive was capped by a 23-yard touchdown pass to Antonio Brown, who made a one-handed catch in the back of the end zone even while being blanketed by A.J. Bouye. Eli Rogers caught two passes for 17 yards on the drive, and Le'Veon Bell had a 21-yard run.

- To cap off an unbelievable first half — both unbelievable in a bad way for the Steelers and unbelievable in a good way for the Steelers — Ben Roethlisberger completed a 36-yard pass for a touchdown to Martavis Bryant on a fourth-and-11 with 32 seconds left in the first half. That capped a seven-play, 51-yard drive that cut the Steelers' deficit to 28-14 at halftime.

- The Steelers ended the first half with a touchdown and opened the second half with another, which came on a 10-play, 77-yard drive that narrowed their deficit to 28-21 with 9:09 left in the third quarter. Ben Roethlisberger was 6-for-6 for 59 yards on the drive, including a 19-yard touchdown pass to Le'Veon Bell on a third-and-9.

- Special teams came up with a big play early in the fourth quarter when Rob Golden broke in over the left side and deflected a punt by Josh Lambo. The kick traveled only 15 yards and gave the Steelers the ball at the Jacksonville 48-yard line with 14:45 remaining in the fourth quarter.

- Fourth down. Five yards to go, from the Jacksonville 43-yard line. Just over nine minutes to go in a game the Steelers trailed by two touchdowns, 35-21. One more failure on fourth down by the Steelers and the game would seem to be over. Ben Roethlisberger got flushed out of the pocket, and it almost seemed as though he just chucked it down the field toward Antonio Brown. But even as he was being held by A.J. Bouye, Brown made the catch for the touchdown, and it was 35-28.

WHAT WENT WRONG

- The game didn't start the way most expected the game to start. The Jaguars took the opening kickoff and marched 66 yards on eight plays with Leonard Fournette vaulting over the top on fourth-and-goal from the 1-yard line for the touchdown. On the drive, Blake Bortles completed three straight passes to three different receivers for 53 yards. Jacksonville had a 7-0 lead with 10:40 remaining in the first quarter.

- Three plays. Three plays from an empty-set formation. Three passes. Eight yards gained. Punt. That was the Steelers' opening offensive possession, and the Jaguars got the ball back with nine minutes left in the first quarter and holding a 7-0 lead.



The Steelers' difficult start included this fumble return for a touchdown by linebacker Telvin Smith that gave Jacksonville a 28-7 lead (top); Le'Veon Bell had the only score of the third quarter when he caught a 19-yard pass in the corner of the end zone.

Digest Photos/KARL ROSER



- Bad to worse. On the Steelers' second possession, two runs by Le'Veon Bell netted a 1-yard loss, and then on third-and-11, Ben Roethlisberger's attempted sideline pass for Vance McDonald was intercepted by Myles Jack at the Pittsburgh 18-yard line. On the next play, Leonard Fournette ran 18 yards for the touchdown that upped the Jaguars lead to 14-0 with 5:26 remaining in the first quarter.

- The Steelers finally started moving the ball on their third possession, and after stringing together three first downs, they came to face a third-and-2 at the Jaguars 22-yard line. On the next play, a toss sweep to Le'Veon Ball gained 1 yards, and the Steelers opted to go for it on fourth-and-short. But then another toss sweep to Bell lost 4 yards, and the Jaguars took over on downs on their own 25-yard line.

- The Jaguars offense continued to slice through the Steelers defense like a hot knife through butter. The third touchdown drive covered 75 yards in 11 plays and was capped by a 4-yard touchdown run by T.J. Yeldon that upped Jacksonville's lead to 21-0 with 11:31 remaining in the second quarter. In the game's opening 18½ minutes, the Jaguars had 105 yards rushing and three touchdowns.

- The Steelers had the ball after their defense forced a punt, and it was second-and-10 at the Jacksonville 47-yard line. Back to pass and trying to cut into the Jaguars' 21-7 lead, Ben Roethlisberger was sacked and stripped by Yannick Ngakoue. Telvin Smith recovered the fumble and returned it 50 yards for the touchdown that restored Jacksonville's lead to 21 points, 28-7, with 2:20 remaining in the first half.

- Another fourth-and-1. Another failure by the Steelers offense. This one came three plays after Rob Golden deflected a Josh Lambo punt, and the Jaguars took over at their own 39-yard line with 12:44 remaining after Ben Roethlisberger's pass for JuJu Smith-Schuster was incomplete.

- Five plays after the Steelers' failure to convert a fourth-and-short for the second time, the Jaguars restored their lead to two touchdowns with a five-play, 61-yard drive that ended with Leonard Fournette's third rushing touchdown of the afternoon. The big play on the drive was a 45-yard pass to Keelan Cole, who caught the ball between Artie Burns and Joe Haden at the Steelers 3-yard line.

- The Steelers defense needed a stop. Preferably a takeaway. And it was a third-and-5 at the Jaguars 30-yard line. But instead of a stop or a takeaway, the Steelers defense gave up a 40-yard swing pass to T.J. Yeldon that moved the ball to the Pittsburgh 30-yard line. A few plays later, off a play-action fake, Blake Bortles found a wide open Tommy Bohanon in the middle of the field, and he waltzed in for the touchdown that made it 42-28.



Antonio Brown led all players with 132 receiving yards (top); Robert Golden's partial block of a punt gave the Steelers the ball in Jacksonville territory in the fourth quarter, but they were not able to capitalize on his big play.



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6 Consecutive home victories for the Steelers coming off a bye before the loss against Jacksonville. The only other time the Steelers lost their first game after a bye was in 1992 against Buffalo.

61 The game against Jacksonville was the Steelers' 61st in the playoffs, tying the Dallas Cowboys for most in NFL history.

0 Steelers tight ends with 100-yard receiving games in the playoffs before **Vance McDonald** did it against Jacksonville. The previous high for a Steelers tight end was 85 yards by Heath Miller against the Jaguars in the 2007 season.

3 Antonio Brown (132) and Vance McDonald (112) became the third Steelers teammates to both reach 100 receiving yards in a playoff game. They joined Hines Ward and Plaxico Burress (2002 playoffs against Cleveland, and Lynn Swann and John Stallworth (Super Bowl XIII against Dallas).

10 Yards gained by the Steelers on seven offensive plays in Jacksonville territory after they had cut their 28-7 deficit to 28-21.

10

Vance McDonald's reception total was the highest for a tight end in an NFL playoff game since the 2011 season when New England's Rob Gronkowski had 10 catches against Denver.

469 Ben Roethlisberger's passing yardage against Jacksonville was the highest for a losing quarterback in NFL playoff history. The previous high was 462 yards by New Orleans' Drew Brees against San Francisco in the 2011 season.

545 Total yards for the Steelers, which set a franchise playoff record and was the most ever by a losing team in a playoff game.

45 Jacksonville's point total tied for highest against the Steelers in a playoff game. The Steelers also gave up 45 in a 45-28 loss against the Miami Dolphins in the 1984 AFC Championship Game.

38

Combined points for the Steelers and Jaguars when they set an NFL playoff record for highest-scoring fourth quarter.

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vs. Jacksonville

LE'VEON BELL RUNNING BACK

There was a lot of offense produced by the Steelers during their divisional round game vs. the Jaguars at Heinz Field. A lot of yards. A lot of points. But ultimately, not enough of either, which meant there also was a lot of disappointment produced.

Le'Veon Bell led the team in rushing with 67 yards on 16 carries (4.2 average) and he scored on an 8-yard run in the fourth quarter after taking a lateral from Ben Roethlisberger. Bell also caught nine passes for another 88 yards, and his receiving touchdown came on a 19-yard one-handed catch that converted a third-and-9



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Ben looking ahead to 2018

By JIM WEXELL
Associate Editor

Joe Haden was a bright light in a dim locker room.

After the Steelers were abruptly eliminated by the Jacksonville Jaguars, the cornerback who had languished for seven years with the Cleveland Browns, was thankful, even after a loss, because of the Steelers' quarterback.

"It's been amazing playing with a dude like that, with a leader, one of the best quarterbacks in the game," Haden said of Ben Roethlisberger. "When you always know you have to try, no matter what, down 21-0, we never wavered. We never thought we weren't going to win the game. You see how he did. He got us right back into it, but we weren't able to pull it out.

"Playing with him is amazing. You always know you have a shot no matter what."

The Steelers will continue to "have a shot no matter what" because Roethlisberger confirmed what he had said earlier in the week, that he's returning to play at least one more season.

"I definitely have a desire to play football," said Roethlisberger. "I love this game. I love these guys. Like I said, it's tough. It stings. You hate to lose. You hate to lose at home. I feel bad because I feel like I let the fans down, my teammates down. You know, the fans, we gave them so much to enjoy and cheer for this year, but to lose this at home ... a lot of them are disappointed like we are. It wasn't enough. And I feel bad for that. I feel like I let a lot of people down and I'll take it all on myself. That's fine. I have no problem with that. I don't know about contracts and who's coming back, but I know the guys up front are. That makes it good for me. So, I look forward to next year with those guys."

Roethlisberger has two years left on his contract, which might even be extended to lower his 2018 cap number and allow the team to fit more talent onto its roster.

So, save all of the draft talk because the Steelers should have Roethlisberger, experienced backup Landry Jones and last year's rookie project, Josh Dobbs, on their 2018 roster.

It's not as if Roethlisberger even needs much backup. The 35-year-old stayed healthy throughout his 14th season and played in 15 games. He missed the 16th due to a coaching decision in the finale.

In fact, Roethlisberger has been healthy enough to play in all but five games the last five seasons. If we are allowed to judge by statistics, his performance has been healthy, too.



**"I definitely have a
desire to play football.
I love this game. I love
these guys."**

Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

Against the Jaguars, Roethlisberger completed 37 of 58 passes for 469 yards and five touchdowns.

For the season, Roethlisberger had a passer rating of 93.4, just under his career average of 94.0.

Actually, most of his stats followed along his career numbers and indicated no fall-off in performance:

- 4 game-winning drives, his most since 2010.
- 3.6 sack percentage was the second-best of his career, just higher than the 3.2 percent in 2016.
- 64.2 completion percentage, a shade better than his career 64.1.
- 2.5 interception percentage, better than his career 2.7.
- 5.0 touchdown percentage, a shade worse than his career 5.1.

Roethlisberger has a 135-63 career won-loss record, giving him the third-most wins among active QBs (Tom Brady 196, Drew Brees 142) and his .6818 winning percentage is third to Brady (.781) and Russell Wilson (.6822).

With his 13 career postseason wins, Roethlisberger's 148 total wins rank seventh all time. He's also sixth in fourth-quarter comebacks, and eighth in touchdown passes, passes completed

and passing yardage behind former quarterbacks such as Peyton Manning, Brett Favre, Dan Marino, Johnny Unitas and John Elway.

Roethlisberger stands alongside those legends and will continue to climb as the Steelers come together in 2018 to make another run at a seventh Lombardi Trophy.

Of course, Roethlisberger wasn't in the mood to celebrate any of that after the loss.

"Obviously, if you don't win the Super Bowl, you've underachieved, right? Because that is always our goal" he said. "It wasn't our day. It wasn't our year. I will give praise to the man upstairs, to God, not only in victory, but in defeat, because what an awesome season it has been. We fell short, obviously, because we didn't win it all but it's been a lot of fun with these guys.

"The way I look at it is that nobody quit. And literally until the last second of the game, nobody stopped, nobody quit, nobody gave up. That's what makes me proud of this team. And young guys and the linemen, having to block over and over and over and working down the field, knowing that if you score a touchdown there at the end it's basically irrelevant. But nobody quit. I think that speaks volumes for who this team is."

Fichtner now in charge of offense

By TERESA VARLEY
Assistant Editor

The Steelers didn't have to look far to find their new offensive coordinator, promoting Randy Fichtner from quarterbacks coach to offensive coordinator/quarterbacks coach.

"I want to thank Coach (Mike) Tomlin and Art Rooney II for giving me this opportunity to be the offensive coordinator for this organization," Fichtner said. "We have a tremendous roster, and it will be my charge to continue putting our offensive players in position to succeed and score points. We have the nucleus to be successful, and I am thrilled about the chance to lead the offense as we have already started preparing for the 2018 season."

Fichtner will take over an offense that was ranked third overall in the NFL, second in the AFC, as well as third in passing in 2017.

Fichtner spent the last eight seasons coaching the Steelers' quarterbacks, and has played a key role in the continued development of Ben Roethlisberger. Roethlisberger is coming off a strong season, completing 360 passes for 4,251 yards and 28 touchdowns, while leading the Steelers to a 13-3 regular season record.

In eight seasons under Fichtner, Roethlisberger has completed 2,638 passes (64.6 percent) for 31,763 yards and 202 touchdowns, with a passer rating of 95.4. He also was selected to the Pro Bowl five times during that span, including the last four seasons.

Fichtner is a member of Coach Mike Tomlin's original staff, joining the team Jan. 29, 2007 as the team's receivers coach. He spent three years in that role before becoming the quarterbacks coach. In his final year as the receivers coach (2009), the team had two 1,000-yard receivers, Hines Ward and Santonio Holmes. Holmes also was named the MVP of Super Bowl XLIII following the 2008 season.

Fichtner began his coaching career as a graduate assistant, and he served in that capacity with Michigan, USC, UNLV and Memphis from 1986 through 1993. He earned the position of wide receivers coach and recruiting director at Purdue in 1994, where he served for two years before moving to Arkansas State to become the offensive coordinator from 1997-2001.

Under Fichtner's tutelage, former CFL quarterback Cleo Lemon flourished, setting numerous school records for passing and total offense. Fichtner returned to Memphis in 2001 to serve as offensive coordinator and quarterbacks coach, where he instituted a new, highly effective spread

Randy Fichtner has been with the Steelers since 2007 when he was hired as the team's receivers coach.

Digest Photo/KARL ROSER



offense that set school records for total offense. The new system allowed the teams to amass prolific offensive statistics, including over 5,000 yards in both 2003 and 2004 to rank in the top 10 for both yardage and scoring, as well as supporting the development of quarterback Danny Wimprine and running back DeAngelo Williams.

Fichtner's familiarity with Williams was a contributing factor in the Steelers signing the veteran running back to be Le'Veon Bell's backup in 2015.

It was while he was working at Arkansas State the Fichtner and Tomlin first worked together. Tomlin was the receivers coach (1997) and defensive backs coach (1998) at Arkansas State.

Even though the Steelers have been a part of the National Football League since 1933, there haven't been that many men who held the job of offensive coordinator. In fact, the franchise didn't have an offensive coordinator until Chuck Noll appointed Tom Moore to the job in the late 1970s.

In fact, Fichtner is the 11th man to hold that job description.

The men who followed Moore as Steelers offen-

sive coordinators were: Joe Walton (1990-91), Ron Erhardt (1992-95), Chan Gailey (1996-97), Ray Sherman (1998), Kevin Gilbride (1999-2000), Mike Mularkey (2001-03), Ken Whisenhunt (2004-06), Bruce Arians (2007-11), Todd Haley (2012-17), and now Fichtner.

Randy Fichtner is a native of Cleveland, Ohio, and played football at Meadville (Pa.) Area Senior High School and Purdue University.

Fichtner's father, Ross, was born in McKeesport — a suburb of Pittsburgh — and starred on the McKeesport High School football team. He then attended Purdue University where he played quarterback, before becoming a third-round pick of the Cleveland Browns in the 1960 NFL draft.

Ross Fichtner played eight years with the Browns and one with the New Orleans Saints as a defensive back, and he finished his NFL career with 27 interceptions that he returned for 581 yards and three touchdowns. He started eight games in 1964 for the Browns, who went on to win the NFL championship.

Randy Fichtner and his wife, Jennifer, have three children.

Haley leaving after six seasons

Todd Haley's six seasons as the Steelers' offensive coordinator ended Jan. 17 with an announcement that his contract would not be renewed.

"I have made the decision to not renew the contract for offensive coordinator Todd Haley," Coach Mike Tomlin said. "I would like to thank Todd for his contributions to our offense the past six years, and we wish him the best in his coaching future."

Haley joined the Steelers in 2012 after they did not renew the contract of Bruce Arians, who was promoted from receivers coach when Tomlin was hired in 2007.

Speculation was that Tomlin will hire Randy Fichtner to replace Haley. Also a part of Tomlin's inaugural staff of assistants, Fichtner first coached wide receivers and then quarterbacks during his time here. He was the offensive coordinator at the University of Memphis prior to coming to the NFL.

Haley was hired by the Steelers and charged with doing a better job of protecting Roethlisberger, who was typically among the most sacked quarterbacks during Arians' tenure. The Steelers wanted to preserve Roethlisberger as he

entered his 30s, but Arians said publicly he would not ask the quarterback to alter his style to achieve that goal, which was laid out publicly by Art Rooney II.

Haley worked with the quarterback to get rid of the ball more quickly, and Roethlisberger's sacks total dipped from a consistent high in the 40s and even 50 to 20 in 2015, 17 in 2016, and 21 in 2017.

The Steelers offense did improve under Haley, but it took a few years, and he also had more talent to work with all the way around — in the line (where there were three Pro Bowlers in 2017), at wide receiver headlined by Brown, and with Le'Veon Bell in the backfield.

The offense struggled his first two seasons with rankings of 21 and 20 in the NFL. Then it hit stride with ranks at No. 2, 3, 7 and 3 the past four seasons. Much of that was fueled by the passing game behind Roethlisberger; the run game remained mediocre with rankings near the bottom of the NFL in Haley's first two seasons to middle of the pack the past four, sinking to No. 20 in 2017.



Todd Haley's offenses finished seventh or higher in the NFL rankings each of the past four seasons.

Mann announces his retirement

Following his 33rd season as an assistant coach in the National Football League, and his fifth as the Steelers' wide receivers coach, Richard Mann announced his retirement.

"I really appreciate the Steelers organization, the entire Rooney family, and Coach Tomlin for getting me out of retirement to finish up here," Mann said. "I felt like maybe if I stuck it out one more year (2017) I would have an opportunity to get a Super Bowl ring here. That didn't happen, we came up a little bit short, but what a great run for me. I was able to finish my career right where I started. I started in Aliquippa and I was able to finish here with the Pittsburgh Steelers. We have a good receivers room. We have a good football team here. I have been around a few situations where it was hard to win a game, much less 13. I talked to my family and the ultimate thing is I decided at some point you have to let it go, so that is what I decided to do. I think being around the players I will miss. I coached hard and have been around it a long time. I will wrap myself around my family and my grandkids and we will find some other things to do."



Mann reunited with Coach Mike Tomlin when he joined Pittsburgh's staff on Feb. 13, 2013, after the two were on the Tampa Bay Buccaneers staff.

"He will be missed every day, but he will be felt every day too in the careers and the lives of the guys that he touched," Tomlin said. "I worked with him over the years. Obviously we will miss him day to day, miss the man. But his impact on us will be continually felt. He's coached a bunch of top-notch players at stops along the way. I think

that frame of reference is good. I think his experience shows up in countless ways in terms of the things that he provided us formally and informally. Expertise, schematics, technical teaching, or just dealing with the natural adversity that the game presents. He's been a tremendous asset to us in all of those areas."

Mann served as the wide receivers coach for the Washington Redskins, the Kansas City Chiefs, and the Baltimore Ravens before his stint in Tampa Bay. He also was an assistant with the New York Jets and the Cleveland Browns. Prior to joining the NFL, Mann served as an assistant at the University of Louisville and at his alma mater, Arizona State University. He was a three-year starter for the Sun Devils from 1966-68.

Mann, a native of Aliquippa, Pa., attended Aliquippa High School and was part of the team's 1964 WPIAL championship team. Mann coached at Aliquippa from 1970-1973, starting out at the junior high level and then working his way to the high school level, where he coached wide receivers. Mann is a member of the Aliquippa and the Beaver County (Pa.) Halls of Fame.

Shazier spends week with teammates

By TERESA VARLEY
Assistant Editor

Ryan Shazier was all smiles ahead of the Jacksonville game, as were his teammates, when he attended practice the entire week, the first time he had done so since suffering a spinal injury Dec. 4 against Cincinnati.

"It means a lot. He's so special to us," Anthony Chickillo said. "He is our brother, he is our friend. We love that guy to death. It's motivating to have him out there. He has been through a lot, going through a lot. He wants to be out there with us. That is all that is on his mind. When you see him, you know how much he loves football and wants to be out there for us. You just want to go hard for him. You just want to win for him."

Shazier shared an image of himself and a message of hope for his progress, as well as thanks to all who have been keeping him in their prayers.

"I am just happy for him," Vince Williams said. "It's the next step for him. He came a long way. I am happy to see the improvement, seeing him get back around football. It's good to get those breaks and be around familiar faces again."

"He is just getting stronger. Every time I see him

he gets stronger and stronger. His spirit is definitely starting to pick up more and more."

That was evident by the smile that was a constant from the moment he arrived at practice the first day.

"He was happy. He was smiling," said Bud Dupree. "Shay loves the game. He misses it. Anytime he comes around it puts a smile on his face and seeing him smiling is always a positive for us. Every time he smiles, every time he is around, we get a feeling. It's good to know we help brighten his day."

Shazier referred to coming to practice as a "first down," and that the "touchdown" is going to come in time.

"He said that on the sideline," said Dupree. "He said each step is a first down and he is going to keep getting first downs until he gets in the end zone. We are going to be with him along the whole way. It's great to know we are making a difference to him too."

"Just being here. He was smiling as soon as we saw him rolling in. We were chatting with him on the sideline. He is still the same guy, the person we know him as. He is still one of the best people in the world."



Digest Photo/DAN KUBUS

TOMLIN TALKS SHAZIER

MIKE TOMLIN RECENTLY ADDRESSED A FEW QUESTIONS ABOUT RYAN SHAZIER

Q. During the week leading up to this game, Ryan Shazier attended a couple of practices. How did that come about?

A. It's just part of where he is in terms of progressing. He's been working extremely hard and experiencing some gains. He wants to get back to normalcy, if there's such a thing, getting around his teammates. Just getting back to doing things outside of the rehabilitation and things that have dominated his focus over the last month or so.

Q. What did that mean to the team to see him and be around him?

A. I think it's uplifting every time we have interactions with him, because everyone is rooting for him. And when you see him, you see progress. You see the strength in his spirit, and I think all of that is uplifting to us.

Q. When you have some time with Ryan, are you still coaching him, but maybe in a different way?

A. Very much. I work to make a conscious effort to challenge him in ways I've always challenged him. I think he needs that. I think he wants that. I'm sure there are a lot of people coddling him right now and feeling sorry for him, and so forth, and he's not cut like that. Those of us who know him love and appreciate that about him, and that's why we're all committed to treating him like we've always treated him.



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Ben, Watt, McDonald, Dupree

From the notebook of a sportswriter whose only words of advice to a coach who's going to take abuse until, or if, the memory of this last loss can be overcome by a win, is to just keep quiet:

- Take it. Own it. Overcome it.
- There are no acceptable explanations, even though there are acceptable explanations.
- The myths will swallow you whole. You can only overcome them by winning, and with a quarterback who's already proven his championship timber, that win has to occur in February.
- Otherwise, you will always fail in this town, because, frankly, the majority here does not like you.

• It's as sad a commentary as what Joe Greene said many years ago after winning one of his four rings: "Winning doesn't feel as good as losing feels bad."

• Winning will not transform your life, but losing will get you fired. And that's sad.

- That's sports.
- Mike Tomlin's talking was, in my opinion, his only sin in this latest loss. Talking about playing an opponent not on the schedule was a flat-out mistake. It was poor top-down messaging, and as silly as that sounds that's a huge part of being the head man. It, of course, opened the door for Mike Mitchell to talk out of turn, even if it was a month ago and in the context of Ryan Shazier.

• Silly, yes, but did you see the Jaguars move those piles 10 or so extra yards on their first drive? They had the underdog's adrenaline, sure, but they were also fueled by anger. That played well against a team that was not fueled by anger, much less an underdog's adrenaline.

• And, my, this Jaguars team has some blue-chip talent. That hit me when the Steelers tried to run wide on fourth-and-1 with their magnificent pulling linemen. But blue-chippers such as Calais Campbell, Malik Jackson and Jalen Ramsey overwhelmed the play. That's what blue-chip talent does.

• Was it a poor call? Well, it didn't work, so, yeah, it was poor. That's how sports works. That's why records are attached to coaches' names. But a fullback was going to root out Campbell, Jackson or Marcell Dareus? The best reserve defensive lineman the Steelers ever had, in my opinion, was sent away by Jacksonville.

• Their offensive line was extremely physical, too. Last time the Steelers played the Jaguars, we marveled at the physicality of left tackle Cam Robinson, the only guy I watched last season who gave Auburn pass rusher Carl Lawson consistent



Ben Roethlisberger put up big numbers against Jacksonville, but two key turnovers were damaging.

Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

trouble. The rest of that anonymous line played like Robinson, too.

• They were ripping asunder the nose and therefore easily able to handle the Steelers' two inside linebackers, each of whom are considered backups by the Steelers' front office.

• Is this apologizing for the Steelers? Or is this just recognizing that the Jaguars have some blue-chip butt-kickers on a team that's drafted in the top 5 six consecutive years?

• The Jaguars have drafted in the top 10 of the league for 10 consecutive years. The Steelers haven't made a top 10 pick in 18 years.

• No, no one wants to hear from a Tomlin apologist. In fact, it's probably best that not only Tomlin shut his mouth for the next 11 and a half months, so should those who believe he's a good coach.

• But I can't. I must plod through with my excuses.

• So, why is Roethlisberger turning it over? Didn't he learn from his previous game against the Jaguars? And why aren't the Steelers slamming it up the middle with their three tackles, their two tight ends and Rosie Nix? There's no need for Martavis Bryant and/or JuJu Smith-Schuster to be on the field when Chris Hubbard and Jesse James represent Steelers football, right?

• I thought Smith-Schuster was going to have a

big day rolling through the middle of the field with short passes. I was wrong. Todd Haley attempted to get him rolling early but Telvin Smith said no.

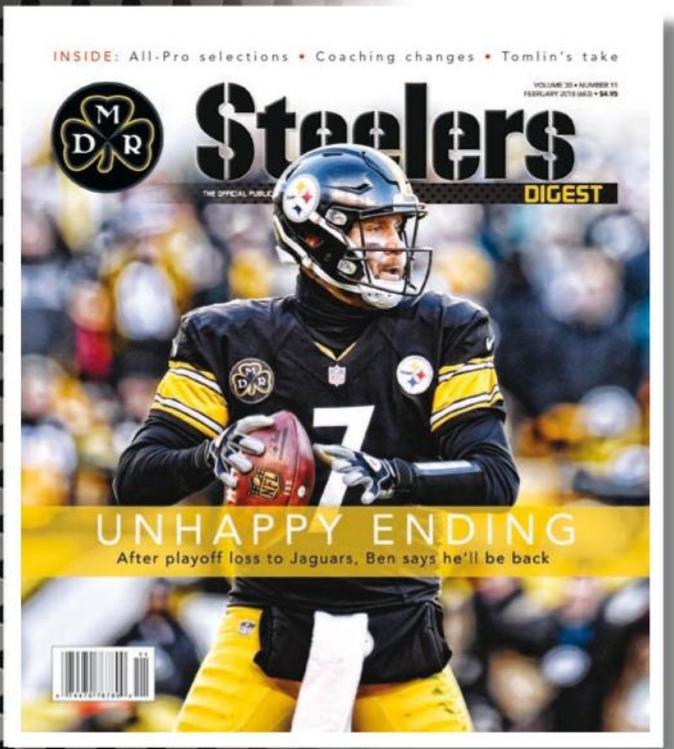
• You probably remember me writing about Telvin when he was coming out for the 2014 draft, how tough he was against the run for a coverage backer out of Florida State. Didn't I just read that Tomlin drafted Vince Williams simply because he liked Florida State linebackers? Yeah, another myth from crappy national reporting, I know, but I think we all liked Telvin coming out. In fact, when Tomlin said a few weeks ago that players look like the animal they hunt, I thought of how Telvin and Le'Veon Bell look so much alike. Well, Telvin made 16 tackles against the Steelers but his brilliant coverage on Bell's touchdown catch couldn't stop Bell from winning on that down.

• The Steelers would fall over themselves getting to the podium to draft a tough coverage inside backer like Telvin Smith this coming April.

• But getting back to Ben's turnovers, I was only being sarcastic, because the interception he threw was more about the great play made by Myles Jack. Remember him coming out? Yes, he was the

See WEXELL, page 23

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dual RB/LB at UCLA who was considered a top-5 talent. But the Jags were able to get him 36th two years ago because of medical concerns. The Steelers would have been fools to have drafted him with their late first-round pick instead of a healthy cornerback, but the Jaguars were willing to take the risk after drafting Ramsey in the first round. Jack has recovered from his injury and the gamble has paid off. So they now they have ANOTHER top-5 talent. Brilliant player who made a brilliant play to pick off Roethlisberger.

- The fumble by Roethlisberger that was returned 50 yards for a touchdown by Smith? I don't think that had much to do with Roethlisberger saying he wanted the Jaguars the previous week. In fact, had the Steelers gotten a break and maybe Maurkice Pouncey had been able to come up with that deflected pass on the previous play, we wouldn't be talking about our former draft crush on Telvin Smith today.

- The blue-chip edge in talent for Jacksonville was evident all over the field, except in the passing game, where the fourth-year, former No. 3 overall pick, Blake Bortles, was a decided underdog against Roethlisberger and his receivers. But if Roethlisberger is such an advantage, why didn't he see that the Jaguars had only 10 defenders on the field when he stood under center on the first fourth-and-1? Why did Roethlisberger back away from the line and give the Jaguars 12 full seconds to realize their deficiency and call a timeout? May as well ask Roethlisberger why he wanted to spike the ball on third down at the goal line without trying to win the Patriots game. I don't know. He's not perfect is my guess.

- Point is, Roethlisberger doesn't give the Steelers that big, fat edge everyone seems to think is enough to have won all the Super Bowls Tomlin has allegedly blown "with Bill Cowher's talent."

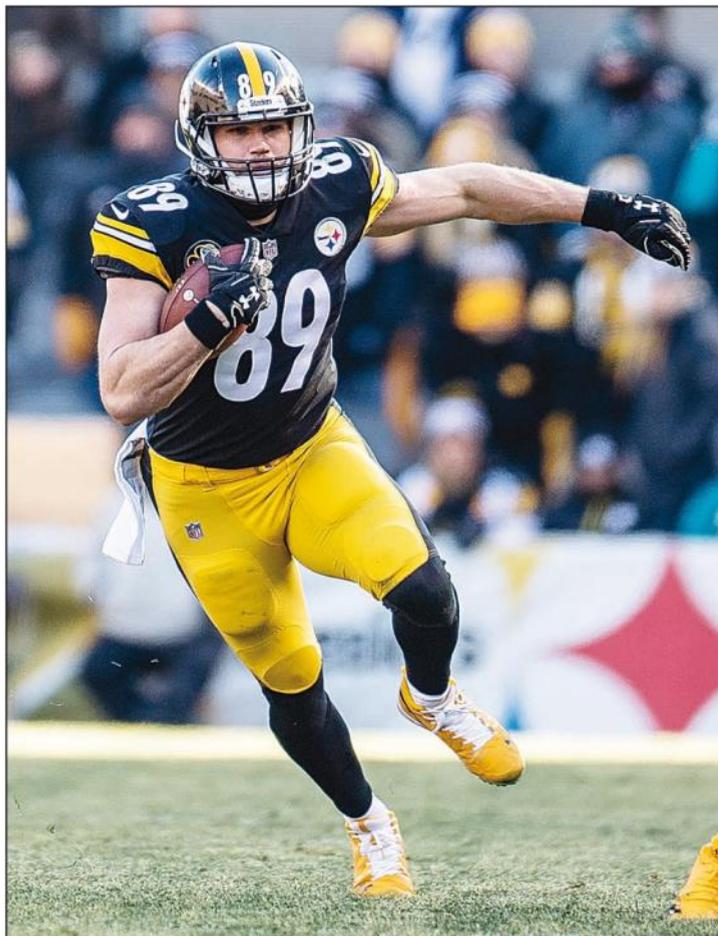
- Yeah, or something like that.

- The Steelers just didn't look as unprepared in film review as they looked overwhelmed by bigger, faster, better, angrier, hungrier athletes.

- Yet, even at that, I counted three instances in which T.J. Watt came within a step of wrecking any one of three big plays that could have turned the score around.

- As for the onside kick, I've never liked them, even when they were popular. But if arguably the best kicker in team history executes, and the ball is recovered 5 yards farther up the field, without an additional 5-yard penalty, that non-gimme of a 45-yarder is an even further kick. But it isn't and it wasn't. That's sports.

- But, yes, there is hope. This is not just another post-season lament that's become rote. This team was better than last year's team. Bryant and Smith-Schuster came so far at the end of the season that



Tight end Vance McDonald's emergence down the stretch and strong playoff performance bode well for the passing game next season.

Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

it's exciting to see how this three-receiver group will perform next season.

- Throw in Vance McDonald, a tight end with playmaking skills who's also an excellent move blocker. He said it took until Week 18 to make a real connection with Roethlisberger. Ten catches for 112 yards worth of a connection.

- The question on offense is whether Bell can be afforded. He sounds like — after making his initial stance against a franchise tag — he's amenable to getting a contract worked out. Throw in a better plan for short yardage, perhaps with a healthy James Conner, and I see no other problems on that side of the ball.

- The defense needs help. And I'm not firing the coordinator for calling the plays of the head coach's scheme. This is Tomlin's baby, and he doesn't strike me as sacrificing someone just to mollify the angry masses. As for position coaches, only Tomlin knows who's doing the job and who's not.

- Basing Bud Dupree's lack of progress on an assistant coach is unfair, because everyone knew Dupree lacked any bend whatsoever coming out. That's why a top-10 athlete dropped the way he did.

- Unfortunately, a three-down guy is needed at inside backer. He should be complemented in the draft by a young safety who can learn his craft as a dime backer.

- The addition of Joe Haden helped turn the

secondary into a unit capable of man coverage. That's a big jump on the patching that needs to happen on the defensive side of the ball. You also have the development of impressive rookie cornerback Cameron Sutton and 6-3 rookie Brian Allen to consider.

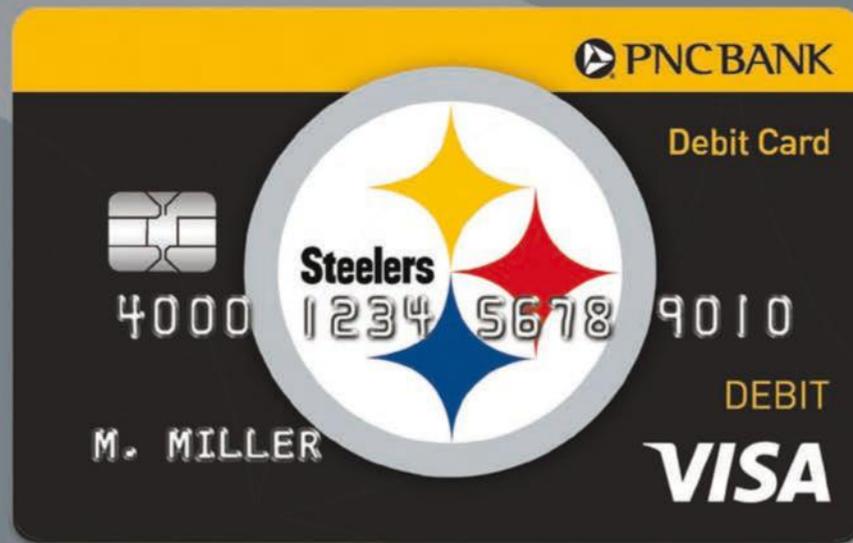
- This is simply not a case of the same players only getting older and me re-writing my end-of-year obit. No, that's when a group becomes hopeless.

- No, this group continues to make progress. It just needs to shut its mouth and keep working, because there's nothing anyone can say for the next 11 and a half months that will change anyone's mind anyway, even if they're overwhelmingly wrong. The L just doesn't allow for it.

- I heard this comment the day after the game from a sportswriter I generally respect, Bill Plaschke, but with which I disagree: "The play-calling was bad, the clock management at the end of the first half was bad, the onside kick was bad, and then the previous week his players were all spouting off. You don't see the New England Patriots spouting off before a game like that. Mike Tomlin seems to have lost control of this whole thing."

- There's not much in there with which I agree. And the whole "lost control" part comes up every time they lose. But at this point there's no fighting the myths. Just keep quiet.

- And win, baby, because you can. The arrow is still pointing up for the Pittsburgh Steelers.



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Four Steelers named All-Pro

NFL insiders know that the Pro Bowl is a chance for a nice trip for a player and his family, but it's The Associated Press All-Pro team that's the most prestigious honor, with first-team All-Pro being a de facto designation as the best in the league at a particular position.

The AP All-Pro team is made up of 11 players on offense, 12 on defense (an extra defensive back), and five on special teams (punter, placekicker, punt returner, kickoff returner, and coverage guy).

The Steelers were well represented on the AP All-Pro team with four first-team selections, including Antonio Brown, who was the only unanimous selection.

Joining Brown on the prestigious team were Le'Veon Bell (flex), David DeCastro (guard) and Cameron Heyward (interior lineman).

This is the fourth consecutive year Brown was named first-team AP All-Pro. Brown finished the regular season with 101 receptions for 1,533 yards, a 15.2-yard average, and nine touchdowns. He averaged 109.5 yards per game through the first 14 games of the season, missing the final two due to injury.

Bell, who was a first-team selection in 2014 and second-team choice in 2016, finished the season as the NFL's third-leading rusher with 1,291 yards on 321 carries with nine touchdowns. Bell added 85 receptions for 655 yards and two receiving touchdowns to his totals, finishing second in the NFL, and first in the AFC, in yards from scrimmage with 1,946 yards. He was selected as the flex for the first team (there is no fullback selected) and second-team running back.

"It's huge. It means a lot," Bell said. "That is the only kind of honor I look forward to each and every year. It says at your position you are the best in the world. I take that to heart. I can't do it without the guys up front, Ben (Roethlisberger) throwing me the ball and giving me opportunities to make some plays. I am glad I made it and it's a great honor."

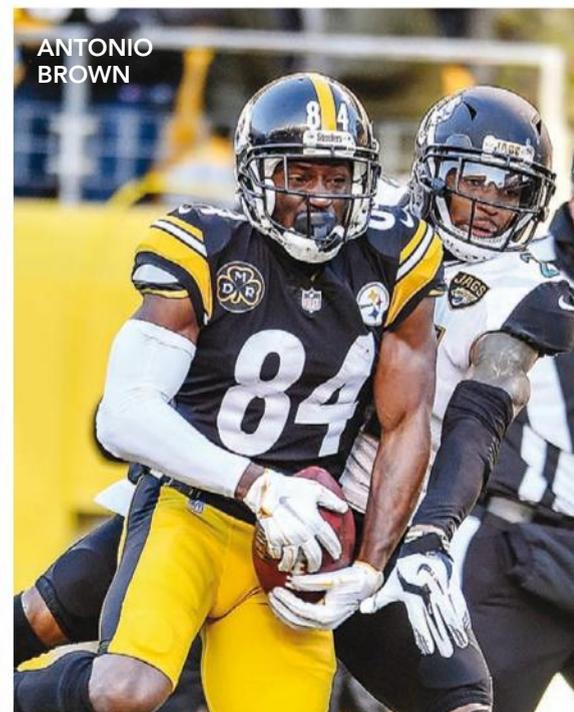
DeCastro, a first-team AP All-Pro selection in 2015 and second-team choice in 2016, is part of a stellar offensive line that has led the way for Bell all season, and he was voted to the Pro Bowl for the third time this year.

Heyward, who many felt was a Pro Bowl snub, finished the regular season with a career-high 12 sacks, adding 45 tackles, three pass defenses, two forced fumbles and a fumble recovery. He was named AFC Defensive Player of the Week twice this season, for his performance against the Ravens in Week 4 and the Packers in Week 12, and is the Steelers' Walter Payton Man of the Year.

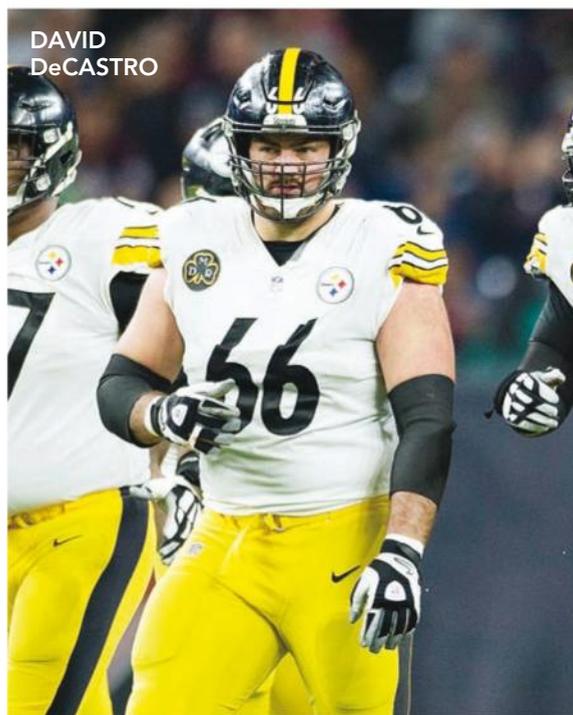
"I was not expecting that," said Heyward. "I am very humbled and grateful to get it. I can't do it without the teammates I have. It's an extreme



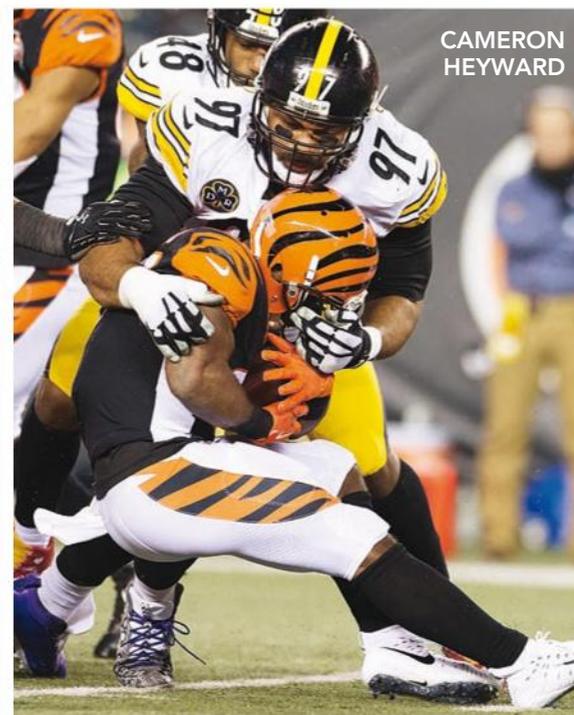
LE'VEON
BELL



ANTONIO
BROWN



DAVID
DeCASTRO



CAMERON
HEYWARD

Digest Photos/KARL ROSER

honor, but it's the guys around me that make me good. I was a little bit shocked. Coach (Tomlin) was announcing them. I didn't think I was going to get recognized, but it's awesome."

Three Steelers were named to the Pro Football Writers of America All-NFL team, including Bell, Brown and DeCastro. The three players also was named to the PFWA All-AFC team, along with Maurkice Pouncey and Alejandro Villanueva on the offensive line, and linebacker Ryan Shazier. The

Steelers led all AFC teams with six all-conference selections.

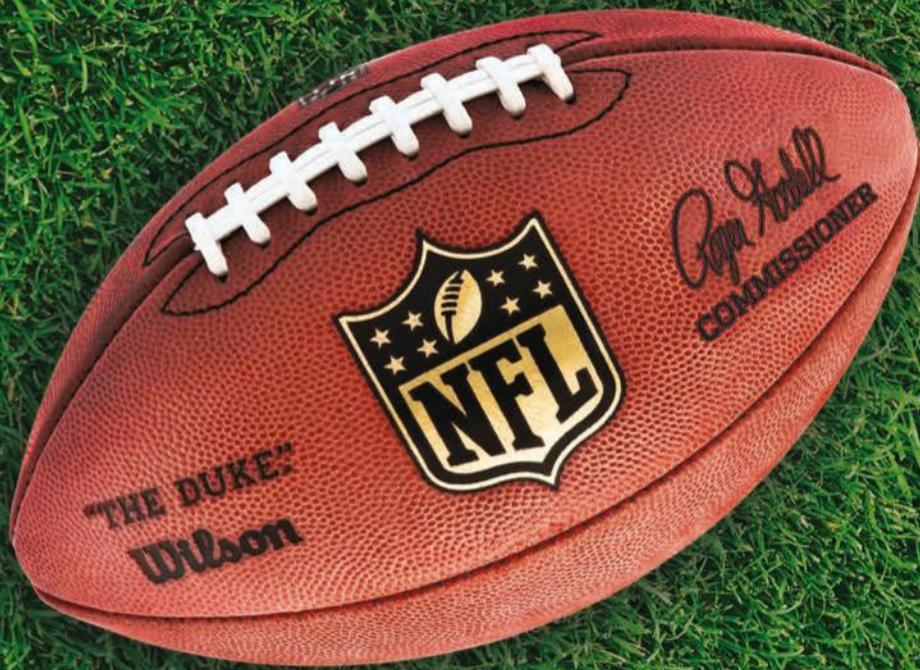
Brown also was named the 2017 AFC Offensive Player of the Year by the NFL 101 Awards, an honor he will receive at their annual event in Kansas City on Feb. 24.

This is the second time that Brown is being honored by the organization. Brown and Bell were named co-AFC Offensive Players of the Year in 2014, the first time there were co-winners.

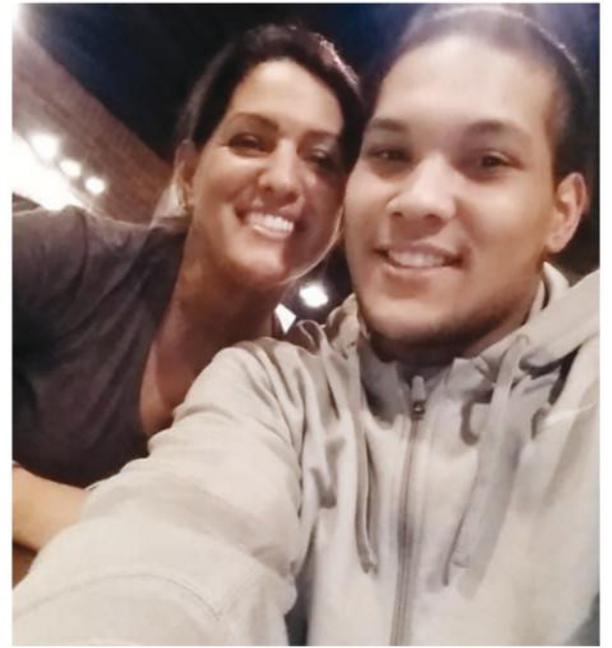
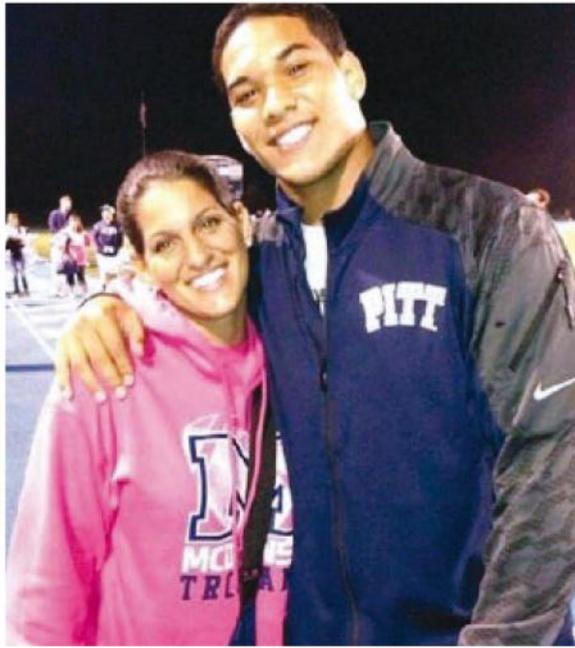
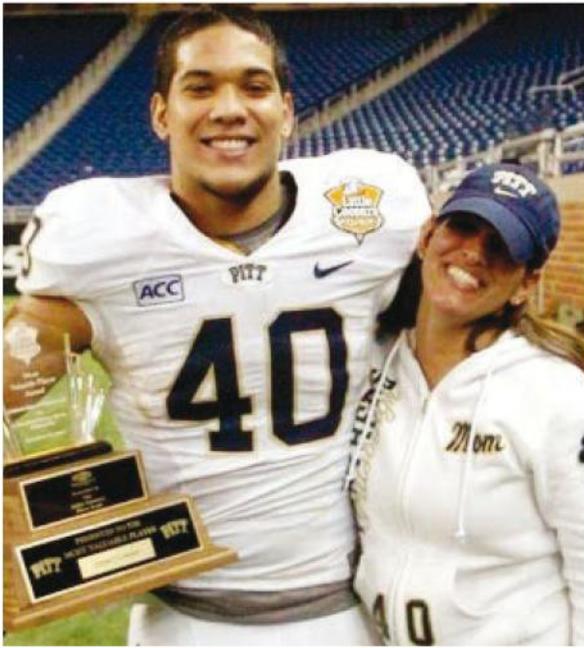


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Steelers MOMs k e l l y PATTERSON



By **TERESA VARLEY**
Assistant Editor

For Kelly Patterson, Sept. 3, 2016 is a day she will never forget. Yes, there are other dates that will always bring back memories, both good and bad. But this date signified triumph over what easily could have been tragedy.

That September day, which appropriately was filled with blue skies and brilliant sunshine, is the day that her youngest son, her baby boy, resumed the path to his dream.

It was the day James Conner played in his first game for the University of Pittsburgh since being diagnosed with Hodgkin lymphoma less than 10 months earlier.

While television cameras followed his every move, and photographers snapped pictures from every angle, Patterson sat in the stands, wearing

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her Conner jersey, the tears in her eyes blocked behind sunglasses.

"When James took the field for the first time in that game, the first game he played after being declared cancer-free, it was amazing," Patterson said. "Just seeing him being able to fulfill his dream, that was the best feeling in the world, the best feeling ever."



Like every mother, Patterson was always protective of her kids growing up. But Conner was the youngest of her four sons, so she always was a little more protective.

"We have a very good relationship," said Patterson. "He is my baby. You have a different relationship with each child. I am close with all of my boys, but there is something for the last one; he is my baby."

"He was definitely more spoiled and sheltered, according to his brothers."

Patterson was divorced from Conner's father, and later his stepfather, so she always made sure she spent as much time with her kids as possible, especially him.

"We were really close," Patterson said. "Him being the youngest, I wanted to hang on to that. He would go to my hair appointments with me because they had cookies there and he didn't mind that. That was my little guy. Everywhere I went, he went."

When it came time for him to play football, Patterson was there, at games, at practices when she wasn't working, always supporting him, always showing her love.

"I wanted him to know he had a cheerleader and a support system," said Patterson. "I wanted him to know how proud I am of him. When he did something good I wanted him to be able to look up into the stands and see me going crazy."

For a kid, and even for an NFL player, that meant a lot.

"She was always taking me to football practice ever since fifth grade when I first started playing," Conner said. "She has been to almost every single game. She would be there as a kid, high school, college, and now."

As a kid, Conner always had a dream of playing football at a major college, and in the NFL. That meant sending him to every football camp Patterson could, something that wasn't always easy as money was tight.

"My mom and I would make wreaths and sell them, fundraisers to earn money to get him to camps," Patterson said. "That was his dream. The other boys were worried about girls, he was playing football. I knew it was important and I wanted to nurture that love. Sports kept them out of trouble, focused, they had teamwork. That was always important to me."

"That brought us closer together. Lots of road

"I wanted to be at every appointment. There were some follow-ups at the end that I was like, I am still coming. It was enough for him to go through the treatment, I didn't want him to have to manage all of the other things."



trips. One Friday after work we left, drove to New Jersey to a mini-combine, and back the next day to get there for his high school football banquet."

There was only one time, though, that Patterson wasn't able to make it with Conner when he went to a football camp. It was one held at the University of Pittsburgh that he attended after his junior year of high school, and it's one that changed his life. He was offered a scholarship at the camp, to play defensive end for the Panthers, a position he played at McDowell High in Erie, Pa., in an effort to try to catch the attention of schools, because as a blocking back he wasn't getting much notice. Pitt took notice at the camp right away, and he committed to the school. It wasn't until his senior year at McDowell that he switched to tailback, and, well, let's just say Pitt took notice again.

"He was my baby because he was at home with me the longest, so any type of camp I would take him there," Patterson said. "The only camp I didn't take him to was the Pitt camp where he got his scholarship offer. That is my biggest regret. I was so proud of him, though. He wanted it so bad. And his ultimate goal was to be a running back. He wanted to be the one scoring the points."



Conner was living the dream at Pitt. He was on a path that was leading to the future he dreamt about.

Until it all hit a bump in the road. A major bump. When they say life comes at you fast, they really mean it. Because for Conner, life came at him faster than he ever could have imagined.

His junior year at Pitt had just started. He already was being talked about as a Heisman Trophy candidate, and in his mind he knew this could be his last season of college football, with his dream of the NFL not that far off.

In the season opener against Youngstown State, that dream came to a crashing halt. Conner suf-

fered a torn MCL. He would have to undergo surgery and was out for the season.

"It was devastating. We thought the knee injury was the worst thing that could happen, and we were later proven wrong on that," Patterson said. "My heart just ached because I knew how hard he was trying. And how much he wanted to prove himself. I felt so awful for him. It was so hard to see it. My heart broke for him."

"He didn't want to blow his chance. He felt like this was his responsibility, that failure wasn't the option. He never said it, but I felt like he put pressure on himself to get us out of our situation. I didn't like that."

"He said it won't stop my dream, just prolong it."

The knee injury, it would just be the tip of the iceberg. While Conner was going through rehab, he started to struggle with fatigue, swelling in his face, and night sweats. The doctors thought it might be the flu, but sent him for a chest X-ray, then a PET scan. The results were not what he expected.

On Thanksgiving Day, Conner got a jolting phone call. He was diagnosed with Hodgkin lymphoma. Conner shared the news with only one person, his mom.

"It was the worst feeling ever," Patterson said. "This was the worst heartache you could feel. He called me on Thanksgiving Day. They had a game that weekend, so he wasn't home the past couple of years. He called me on Thanksgiving Day. He hadn't been feeling well. I thought it was a cold. He called me and said, 'Mom, I think I have lymphoma.' I was like, 'Are you sure it wasn't some other word with the letter L?' He was like, 'Isn't that cancer?' I told him, 'Just hang on, let's get through the weekend and make sure of everything,' because they wanted to see him on Monday."

"We got off the phone and my chest hurt. I cried so hard. I thought they wouldn't call him on Thanksgiving Day if it isn't real and that serious. Getting that call and trying to stay strong for him

and not let him think it's much too worry about, it was devastating. It's the worst news you can get ever. I went down there with him and we went through all of the tests and found out it was, in fact, Hodgkin lymphoma."

The two met with doctors that Monday after Thanksgiving, beginning what would be a long journey, but one that she would endure every minute with him.

Patterson took family medical leave at her job so that she could come and go and be there for him for his treatment, and just whenever he needed her to be there.

"There was nobody else I was leaving any responsibility to," Patterson said. "At the end of the day you are mine and there is no way I wouldn't be there for him. That wasn't happening. I wanted to be at every appointment. There were some follow-ups at the end that I was like, I am still coming. It was enough for him to go through the treatment, I didn't want him to have to manage all of the other things.

"They were long days, but not as long for me as him. That love of your child, it was nothing really for me to do that. I wouldn't have it any other way."

From the get-go, Conner needed her there. When you hear the word "cancer," your mind shuts off. He needed his mother to listen to the doctors when he struggled to.

"She was always at the treatments, at every one of them being so supportive," Conner said. "She would get the information, talk to the doctors, and oversee everything.

"I could talk to her when times are tough. I am a tough guy."

When Conner shared his news publicly at a press conference, he told everyone, "Fear is a choice. I chose not to fear cancer." It wasn't so easy for Mom, though.

"Watching him go through the first couple of chemotherapy treatments, it was hard," Patterson said. "Just to see the process, I was like, how do they come up with the process? It was just so much. I was very protective and tried to do what I could. The first few he was strong, but getting to the middle he was feeling like he was going to be sick. He was so strong through it."



College students and their cell phones don't spend much time apart, but when you are waiting for a phone call, a call that you are praying will bring good news, you keep it just a little closer, hold on to it a little tighter.

Conner did just that May 23 as he walked out of his PET scan. After what seemed like hours, but was



"She has always been there. She is our rock. I have a great relationship with her. She is my No. 1 fan, No. 1 supporter."

only about 15 minutes, the phone rang. He answered immediately. And the news was what they had prayed for. He was cancer-free.

"I think I cried harder that day than the day he was diagnosed," Patterson said. "Just the joy and thanking God and the doctors. It was such a relief. They called it complete remission. Not needing radiation or more treatment, that was a double bonus."

The two embraced. The battle was over. And Conner won.

"That was one of the best moments of her life hearing that news," Conner said. "I know she cherished being there. She is the one who brought me into this world. She is going through everything with me in life, all the ups and downs she has been there with me. I am always thankful for her."

There was another phone call that left the two equally happy. It would come almost a year later, and this time it wasn't from a doctor. This time it was about football, it was about the NFL draft, and it was from Mike Tomlin telling Conner he was the newest Steelers running back.

"It could not have been any better news," Patterson said. "I was like God, you are making up for all we have been through. We would have been thrilled anywhere, but this is fantastic. He has so much support, he is familiar. It's an easy transition. Seeing him in a Steelers uniform is just surreal. The city loves him, he loves the city, and it's just too perfect.

"It was so special. I was so happy because he was happy. That is all you want, your kids to be happy. He was beside himself. There is no describing how happy and full my heart felt. He is living his dream. I am so thankful for it all."



Conner has a tattoo that most have seen, stretched across his arms that says, "Conner Strong."

But there is one many might not have seen. It's on his chest, and it simply says "Kelly," to show his love for his mom.

"It's in her handwriting," Conner said. "I had her write her name and I took it to the tattoo artist and had him do it.

"She has always been there. She is our rock. I have a great relationship with her. She is my No. 1 fan, No. 1 supporter. I love her, she loves me. We know the love we have for each other is unbreakable."

Patterson can't help but smile and feel emotional when she hears those words from him.

"He knows that no matter what he did in life, it doesn't matter," Patterson said. "My biggest goal was for him to have a better life than I had or I could provide for them. I want them to be able to do that for their children. It stunk not being able to get them the latest and greatest sneakers. They never complained.

"He has such a sweet soul. He never lied that I caught him in as a kid. If he did something, he would fess up. If something was bothering him, he would tell me about it and say, 'It will be OK mommy, I will pray about it.'

"What you see is what you get with James. He is very humble, genuine and honest. He is a great person. He is the sweetest kid ever. I just love him to pieces."

And you know the feeling is mutual. When asked what his mother means to him, it took only one word for Conner to answer.

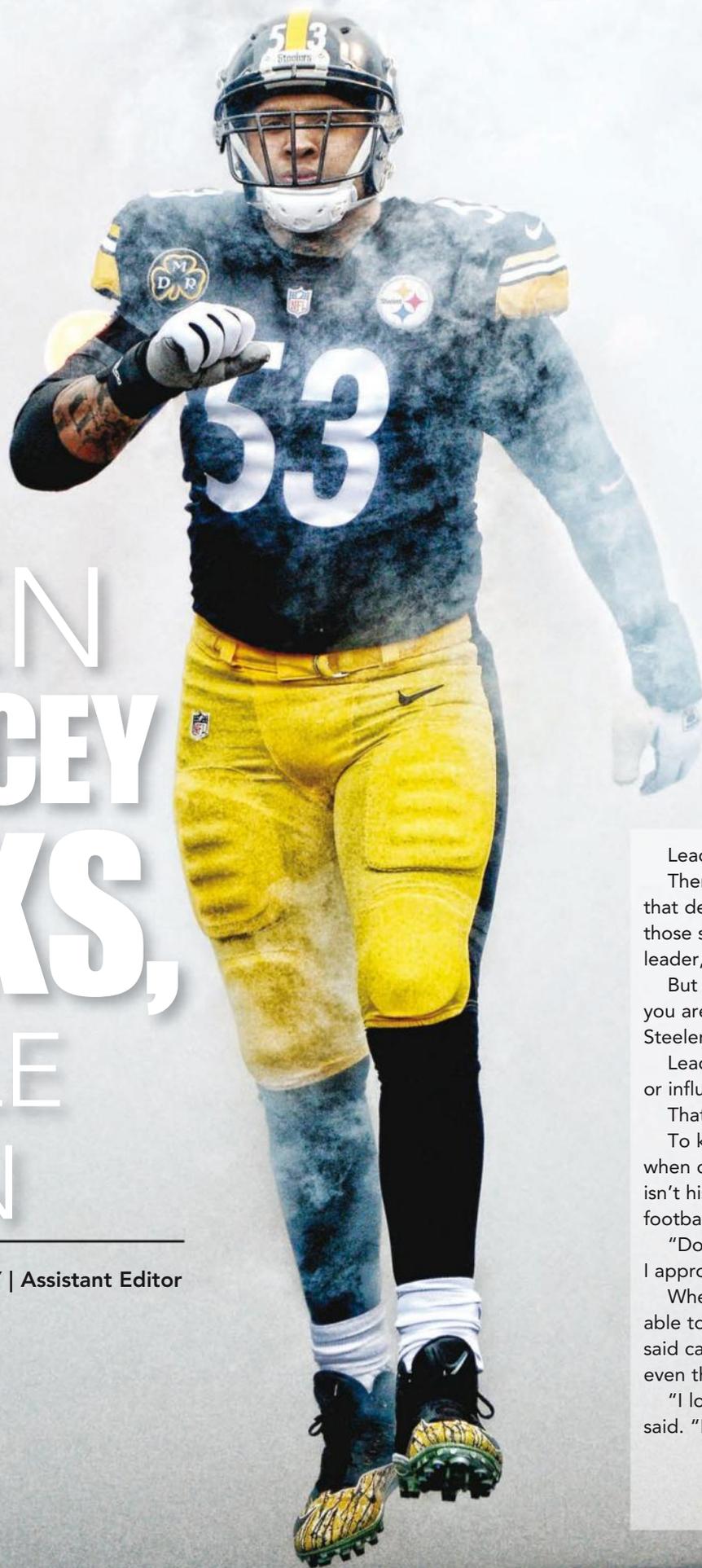
"Everything," Conner said. "You can put everything with a period and they will understand."



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WHEN POUNCEY TALKS, PEOPLE LISTEN

By TERESA VARLEY | Assistant Editor

Leader.

There are many ways to define it, so many words that describe it, and so many ways to manipulate those simple six letters by those who claim to be a leader, but really aren't.

But there is one definition that seems to fit when you are talking about one of the leaders in the Steelers locker room.

Leader: "A person who has commanding authority or influence."

That, in a nutshell, is Maurkice Pouncey.

To know Pouncey is to know he doesn't like it when cameras and microphones are in his face. That isn't his style. He is content to just go out and play football, and leave the talking to others.

"Don't ask me about me," Pouncey laughed when I approached him in the locker room.

When he realized I wasn't going to give up, I was able to pry a little bit out of him. But read what he said carefully. He doesn't really talk about himself, even though I asked him to.

"I look at myself as just loving my job," Pouncey said. "Being upbeat and positive all of the time, that

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makes football easy for me. Building a relationship with these guys is so special. It's bigger than football. These guys are brothers to me. When I am coming in to work, it's like hanging with my family all day. That is how I look at it."

But when something needs to be said, when a message needs to be delivered, you can be sure pouncey is the one who will do so. And that is when he won't shy away from the cameras and microphones.

"When you hear him speak, you take heed to what he says," said Chris Hubbard. "His voice is heard. He is genuine. He has been there, done it. you look up to a guy like that who is vocal but has been down that path. He knows when someone needs to speak out. When you hear that, that command that he has, you want to listen to him. I listen to him every time he talks. He says what is on his mind and it's from the heart."

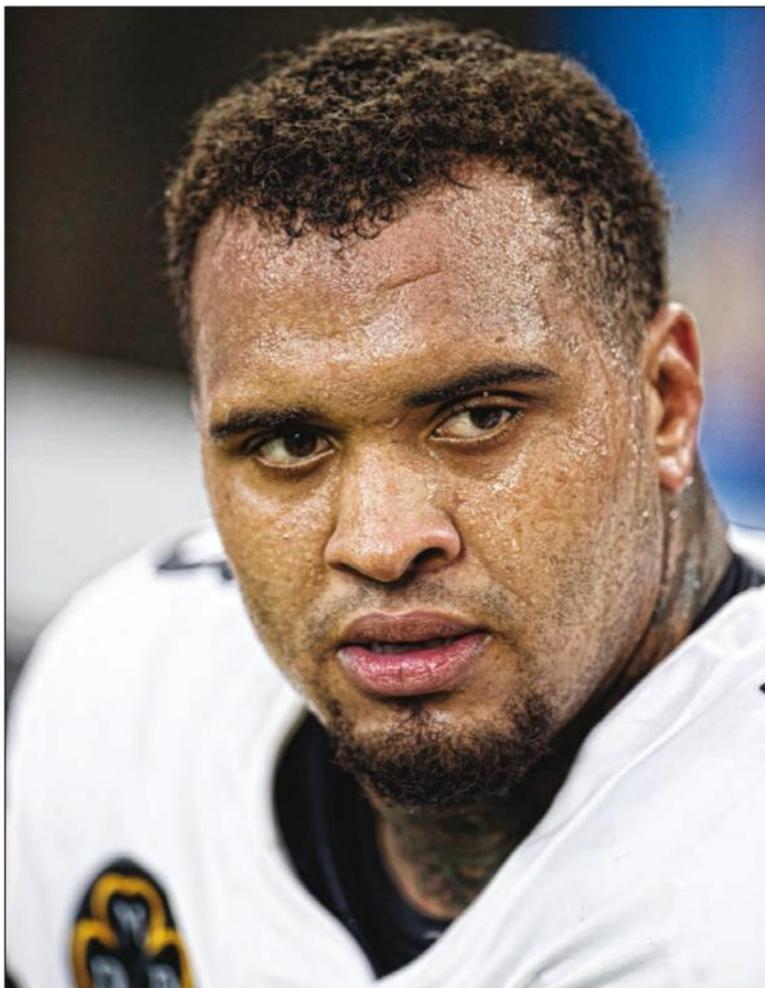
When the Steelers were being criticized for standing in the tunnel during the national anthem in Chicago, pouncey responded the following week.

"I promise you one thing, this week we'll all be standing out there for the national anthem, trust me," pouncey said at the time.

And, like the case has always been, every player stood on the sideline for the anthem the remainder of the season.

And pouncey didn't stop there. He used it as an opportunity to work with the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police, teaming with them on his annual Thanksgiving food distribution as well as a ticket giveaway. pouncey provided tickets to Steelers home games this season to the police department, 25 per game for a total of six games, with each of the city's police zones all getting tickets. The tickets were used by the police to take local youth to the games, and enjoy a tailgate buffet he provided, in an effort to build a relationship with them.

"At the end of the day something good came out of the anthem issue because we are giving back to the community," pouncey said. "Seeing the lives we are changing, even if it is just coming to a football game and hanging out with each other for three hours, one day that might help guys out and change things. I just look at it as it's a blessing. As long as they are having a good time



Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

"I look at myself as just loving my job. Being upbeat and positive all of the time, that makes football easy for me."

and enjoying it, I am happy. The police are in it with us, getting everyone to the game. It's unique. For it to happen, to work with the community and the police, it's special."

When Martavis Bryant trade rumors surfaced, pouncey again was a voice to be heard, brushing it off as nothing more than that, rumors that they ignore.

And most recently, when James Harrison was released and the Steelers were taking heat for cutting the fan favorite, pouncey went to bat for the team.

"He wanted that," said pouncey. "It wasn't like the team said, 'We're going to let go of James Harrison.' James Harrison wanted that. Trust me, if I wanted out I wouldn't have let the team take the blame for it. I'm glad the team is being respectful, but we're going to speak the truth."

pouncey isn't trying to earn brownie points with management with his comments. He isn't trying to earn brownie points with his teammates.

"I don't like to be the guy that is the company guy, the guy that is out there saying stuff," pouncey said. "But when things happen, I am going to speak the truth about it. I am going to tell you exactly how I feel about it."

That is exactly why pouncey is so respected by the others in the Steelers locker room. Because what he does is speak the truth.

"He is a guy I listen to," said Mike Mitchell. "The way he plays, he is a great player. When someone works hard and is a great player, then that gets your attention. Just the way he carries himself, he is a no b.s. guy. There are multiple leaders in our locker room, but he is a guy the guys listen to."

He is just being himself when he speaks, and being himself, well, that means being a dang good guy. pouncey is loved not just by those in the locker room but by the entire Steelers staff. And not just for a recent gesture that he made; instead he made that gesture because he is so loved. He purchased number 53 pouncey jerseys for all of the Steelers' staff at the uPMC Rooney Sports complex, something that touched the hearts of people, myself included, like you can't even imagine.

"It's something small just to put a smile on their face to let them know this organization is the tops," said pouncey.

It was another example of him being a leader, being someone who loves what he does, and loves the people he does it with.

"He is an incredible leader," said Le'Veon Bell. "He is not necessarily vocal and loud, but his presence is felt in the huddle. Guys watch him. He is a guy who leads by example. That is the type of guy you want. you don't want a guy trying to point a finger, demanding attention. you want a guy doing the right thing.

"That is the crazy part, he doesn't have to say a lot. you have a lot of guys that say a lot of little things that mean a whole lot of nothing. you have guys that say very little, but when they say something, it means a lot. pouncey is one of those guys."

yes, he is "one of those guys."

And in this case, one of those guys is, plain and simple, a leader.

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Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

Williams proves doubters wrong

By **TERESA VARLEY**
Assistant Editor

Vince Williams sat at his locker during the play-off bye week, unusually quiet. As you looked around, though, it made sense as there wasn't anybody there for him to talk to.

On one side was Antonio Brown's locker, empty as he was rehabbing away from the UPMC Rooney Sports Complex in an effort to be ready for the team's AFC divisional round game. On the other side, the locker that once belonged to James Harrison sat empty. And just around the corner, Ryan Shazier's locker was unoccupied as he continued to recover from a spinal injury suffered Dec. 4 against the Cincinnati Bengals.

"It was terrible," said Williams. "I didn't have

Ryan. AB was out. Deebo left us. I was over here by myself. It was terrible. It was no fun."

What was fun this past year was watching Williams. During OTAs in the spring, Williams said he was "humbled" that the Steelers believed in him enough to not draft another inside linebacker, or sign one in free agency, instead letting him be the one to step up and replace Lawrence Timmons, who had left via free agency. It showed him the organization had confidence in him, the first time he felt that way. And that belief has benefited him every day.

"When you don't get to play a lot, every time you are out there you are critical of yourself," said

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williams. "You don't really give yourself a chance to let loose and play freely. You are worried, is this the last time i am going to get to play linebacker? am i going to be back on special teams? will i get another opportunity?"

"Now, just having a decent amount of reps out there to just play free and loose and know this is your job, it gives you more confidence. i now have more confidence and i think you can tell in my play, too."

Don't think for a minute that williams doesn't have confidence in himself. That is certainly not the case. after all, he did change his Twitter handle from Vince to "Bince" to get in on the Killer B's action, although he has since gone back to Vince for the offseason.

"it's not so much the confidence in your ability; you know you are good enough to play," williams said. "it's just, are you going to be able to go out there and execute? and if you make a mistake, how is that going to affect you? Now when i make a mistake i am not looking over my shoulder worrying, is this going to be my last opportunity to play? i know i am going to have other opportunities to make up for those plays. But when you are in a fragile situation that mistake is way more critical than it is now."

williams is making the steelers' confidence in

him pay off. He finished the regular season third on the team in tackles with 88, and his eight sacks were second behind only Cameron Heyward, who had 12.

"i am just thankful for the opportunity," said williams. "i don't look at statistics and things like that. i just know that i set some personal goals and i was able to achieve a lot of those. and i was able to play good football for my team and that was the most important part."

williams plays the game with passion, due in part to the chip that sits firmly on his shoulder and likely will never move. He came into the NFL as a sixth-round draft pick, a player who was never guaranteed a roster spot, let alone a starting spot, and did nothing but earn everything along the way with hard work, determination and talent despite many doubting him, especially on social media.

"People didn't want me to be in this position," said williams. "Everybody doubted me. Nobody thought i could contribute. They wanted to bring somebody else in. They said i couldn't fill Lawrence's shoes. i wasn't a three-down linebacker. i wouldn't be able to be productive enough. i was too slow."

"i love proving people wrong. i feel like proving the haters wrong is actually more appealing to me

than showing people that believed in me that i could do it. it shouldn't be that way. You should want to appease the people that love and care about you. it's so much more gratifying to prove and shut people up. i will always keep that in the forefront of my mind. i will never let the fake love get to me. i know who is here for me."

and for williams, when it comes to real love, there are two people on his mind these days, his close friend and teammate Ryan shazier and late steelers Chairman Dan Rooney.

"i just feel like those guys are such major contributors to what we are doing here," said williams. "You have to keep them on your mind when you are going through this."

shazier was on williams' mind every time he walked into the practice facility, every time he as on the field and, honestly, all of the time. williams wore shazier's number 50 in practice, and has number 50 on the back of his helmet.

"i just wanted to remind everybody of Ryan," said williams. "i wanted to keep him fresh in their mind. what everybody was out here going through. what we are thinking of. what the game of football means to us individually and collectively."

"i missed him more as a friend and a locker room teammate than i do number 50 on the field."

"It's so much more gratifying to prove and shut people up. I will always keep that in the forefront of my mind. I will never let the fake love get to me. I know who is here for me."



Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

COMING UP

ROSTER MOVES BEGIN

The offseason is just under way, but the Steelers already have gotten to work.

The team signed tight end Xavier Grimble, long-snapper Kameron Canaday and cornerback **Mike Hilton** to one-year contract extensions. All three were scheduled to be exclusive-rights free agents.

The team also signed five players to reserve/future contacts, something that normally happens this time of year. Those signed are all familiar faces who spent time on the team's practice squad this year. They include cornerback Dashaun Phillips, linebacker Farrington Huguenin, safety Jordan Dangerfield and tight end Jake McGee, who all were on the practice squad when the season ended, as well as Matt Galambos, who finished out the season on the practice squad/injured list.



DRAFT SELECTIONS

With their playoff loss against the Jacksonville Jaguars, the Steelers will have the 28th overall selection in the 2018 NFL draft.

The Steelers have the lowest of the four losing teams in the divisional round of the playoffs by virtue of their 13-3 record, the best among those four teams (the others were Tennessee, Atlanta and New Orleans).

The Steelers' own selection will be the 28th in every round.

For historical perspective, the last five 28th overall selections in the draft were DE Taco Charlton (Dallas), G Joshua Garnett (San Francisco), G Laken Tomlinson (Detroit), WR Kelvin Benjamin (Carolina) and DT Sylvester Williams (Denver).

KEY DATES

Some offseason dates to remember

Feb. 4 – Super Bowl LII, U.S. Bank Stadium, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Feb. 20 – First day for clubs to designate Franchise or Transition Players

Feb. 27-March 5 – Combine Timing and Testing, Lucas Oil Stadium, Indianapolis, Indiana

March 6 – Prior to 4 p.m., New York time, deadline for clubs to designate Franchise or Transition Players

March 12 — Teams are permitted to talk to and conduct contract negotiations with players scheduled to become unrestricted free agents
March 14

March 14 – The 2018 League Year and Free Agency period begin at 4 p.m., New York time

March 25-28 – Annual League Meeting, Orlando, Florida

April 26-28 – NFL Draft, AT&T Stadium, Arlington, Texas

May 2 — Deadline for teams to exercise the fifth-year option on 2015 first-round picks

Aug. 2 — Hall of Fame Game, Canton, Ohio
Sept. 1 — Roster cutdown from a maximum of 90 to 53 players

Sept. 2 — Teams can assemble a practice squad up to 10 players

Sept. 6 — 2018 regular season begins

2017 RESULTS

REGULAR SEASON

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. 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.)	W, 34-6
Dec. 31	Cleveland	W, 28-24

PLAYOFFS

Jan. 14	Jacksonville	L, 42-45
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2018 OPPONENTS

HOME	AWAY
RAVENS	RAVENS
BENGALS	BENGALS
CLEVELAND BROWNS	CLEVELAND BROWNS
CHIEFS	BRONCOS
CHARGERS	RAIDERS
FALCONS	SAINTS
CAROLINA PANTHERS	BUCCANEERS
Patriots	JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS

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