

INSIDE: Analysis of trade for Minkah • Rudolph embracing this chance

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Steelers

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE PITTSBURGH STEELERS

DIGEST



BOUNCING BACK

Defense comes up big in win over Bengals





**THICK
RICH
DELICIOUS**

NOTHING ELSE TASTES LIKE



Steelers get complete effort

This is how they have to play. As a team, with each unit doing its part, and every player on each unit contributing something to the overall effort, even if that contribution is nothing more than not screwing up.

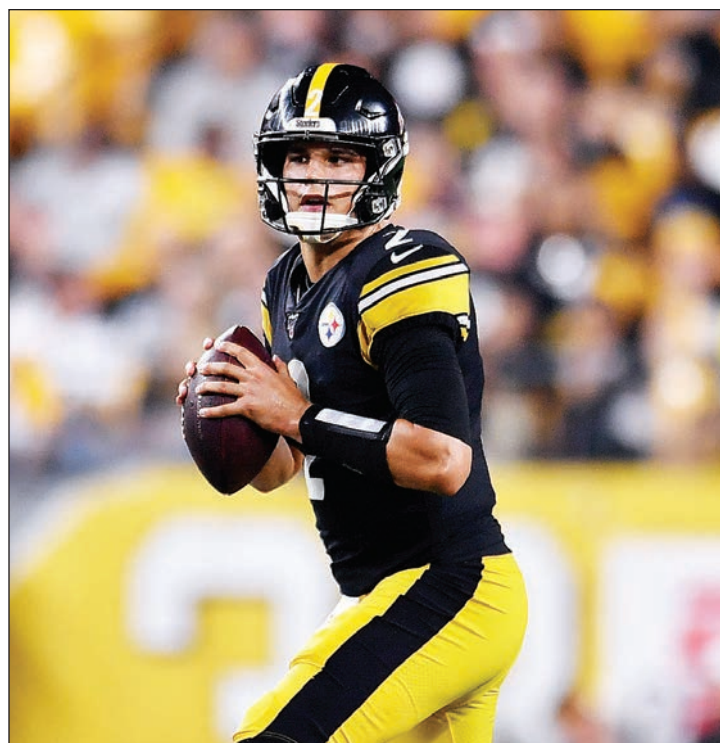
The game against the Cincinnati Bengals came on the fourth weekend of their regular season, at the end of the first quarter to keep it in the parlance of the sport, and the Pittsburgh Steelers finally put together a complete game. Not a complete game in the sense that each unit was perfect, but a complete game in the sense that each unit supported and complemented the others.

That it happened against a Bengals team that's still an 0-fer in the post-Marvin-Lewis era might mitigate the outcome for some, but getting the job done is getting the job done, and that's what the Steelers' 27-3 victory at Heinz Field represented. They got the job done, and it's just as legitimate to point out the overdue nature of the victory as it is heartening to emphasize some of the details of how it was achieved.

Coming into the game at 0-3 meant the Steelers were facing three whole months of NFL irrelevance should they fall to 0-4, and the reality of those numbers made a clear case for how bad it had been for them right up until the ball was placed on the tee on that Monday night. Pick one element of their play during those first three weeks, any one element, and listing the ways it had failed was a simple exercise. The Steelers never should have been in a situation of playing a virtual must-win game on the final day of September, but their reality was that they were.

Against this backdrop, the Steelers' evening's work began, and it was the defense that was tested initially. The Bengals ran seven plays and made a couple of first downs after receiving the opening kickoff, but a sack by Devin Bush created a third-and-long that quickly led to a punt. But two plays after getting off the field, the defense was sent right back out there when rookie receiver Diontae Johnson lost a fumble.

It was in this very kind of sudden-change situation in which the defense failed miserably in San Francisco, but this time the unit was up to the challenge and the Bengals attempted three passes and completed just one for 5 yards before settling for a red zone field goal. Just to make sure the defense was on its game, the Steelers offense got stuffed trying to convert a fourth-and-1 at the Cincinnati 42-yard line on its next possession and the fertilizer had been applied to allow that three-point deficit to grow roots.



Mason Rudolph was very efficient against Cincinnati, though he'll have to make more throws downfield as the season progresses.

Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

But again the defense responded, this time with a three-and-out, and the storm had been weathered. Now it was time for the offense to pick up the defense.

From the start of the second quarter through the end of the third, the Steelers offense had six possessions, and not only did the unit produce three touchdowns and a field goal, but it also made 15 first downs, with a one-play possession among those others being somewhat deceiving because that one play was a 43-yard touchdown pass from Mason Rudolph to the same Diontae Johnson whose lost fumble had set up the Bengals' only score.

Along the way, the offense showed signs of advancing through the process of finding an identity as it transitions from Ben Roethlisberger to Rudolph. The Steelers unveiled a wildcat package with Jaylen Samuels taking the direct snaps from center. They found some success running from that alignment, and they also used the wildcat and a conventional shotgun to stretch the Bengals defense horizontally with a series of jet sweeps, with either Samuels or Rudolph pitching the ball forward to either James Conner or Johnson for consistent hunks of yardage.

The offense still seems a bit too gimmicky for long-term success over the rest of the regular season as opponents are afforded the opportunity to

study what worked against Cincinnati and prepare specifically for it; Rudolph will have to make more plays down the field to stretch the defense vertically; and even taking into account the success the unit had on this night, the Bengals still ran more plays (64-56) and enjoyed a slight edge in time of possession (30:14-29:46). But in light of the distance covered from Rudolph's first NFL start to his second, it's conceivable there can be more improvement on the immediate horizon.

And that's going to be mandatory, because the Baltimore Ravens will be in town on Sunday, and one of the ramifications of 0-3 is that the Steelers cannot afford to be losing home games against division opponents if they plan on still being relevant come Halloween.

But after Monday night against the Bengals, after a game in which the offense shook off the cobwebs of a three-week slumber and the defense bared its teeth for a second consecutive week, after Chris Boswell was 2-for-2 in field goal attempts and continues to look like and perform as the 2017 version of himself, and after a performance that was the first true team effort (in a positive way) of this season, there can be some hope.

Because before that, well, the whole notion of climbing back into the AFC North race by virtue of these back-to-back home games against division rivals was nothing but a pipe dream.

INSIDE

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RECOGNIZING GREATNESS: The Steelers celebrated the Hall of Honor Class of 2019 the weekend of the Cincinnati game, paying tribute at Heinz Field to Larry Brown, Bill Cowher, Hines Ward and the late Elbie Nickel, who was represented for the occasion by his son Joe.

Digest Photos/KARL ROSER



ON THE COVER

Linebacker Bud Dupree's strip-sack of quarterback Andy Dalton in the first half was one of many big plays the Steelers produced in the convincing Monday night victory against the Cincinnati Bengals.

Cover Photo/DAVE ARRIGO

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NEXT ISSUE

The next issue of *Steelers Digest* will be printed and mailed in mid-October. It will include a complete recap of the Steelers' games against Baltimore and the L.A. Chargers, as well as analysis on all the latest developments involving the Steelers.



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Talking about the victory against Cincinnati, the tight ends' role in the run game, and more

Man, it feels really good to handle our business, and we did so tonight. Really just with outstanding effort in all three phases. It needs to be a springboard for us as we move forward. It was significant tonight on a lot of fronts, obviously. Particularly because it was AFC North football, but we don't have a lot of time to pat ourselves on the back. We've got another AFC North group coming in here in a short period of time. They've got a half a day or day or so on us. So, we respect that.

We'll rest up and look at some of the injuries. Cameron Heyward hurt his quad. He was able to go back into the game. James Conner hurt his left ankle. He was able to go back into the game. So, hopefully we're optimistic about those guys. The other guys who missed some time, maybe we'll get a couple of them back. Can't say enough about Mason (Rudolph). We gave him a game ball in there for his first start and win. So, I thought that was appropriate. We just need to learn from this. Learn from positive experiences like we have learned from some of the negative ones and keep getting better. I think that's just the nature of this thing.

Q. How much has the pass rush contributed to the identity of this defense?

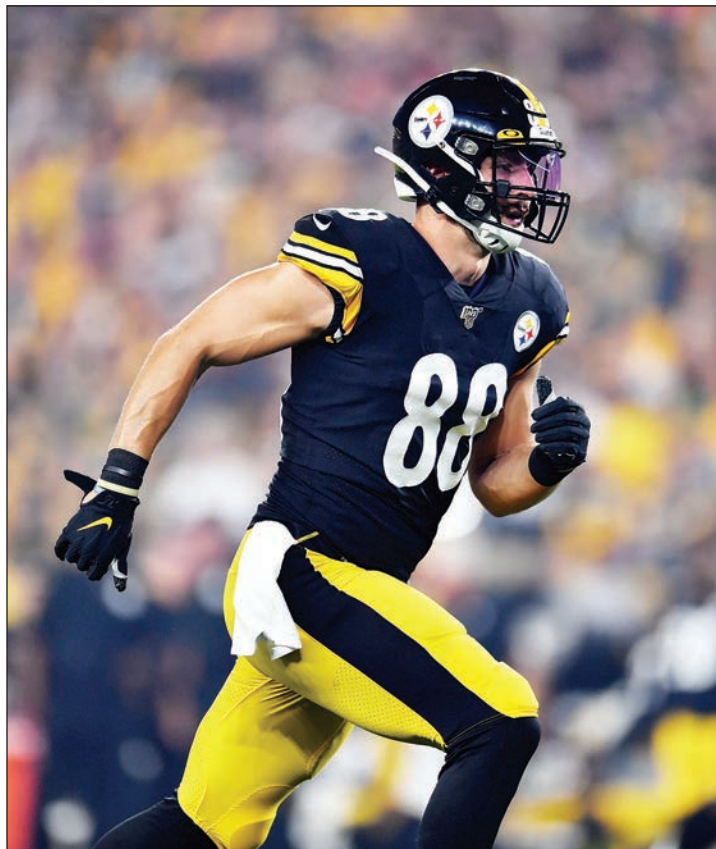
You know, we've just got to get things in situations where it shows up. You know, when you're not converting third downs or you're behind in a game, it's less impactful. I think it showed up tonight. It's been there all season, but it showed up tonight, because of the situations, because we were controlling the football game. So, it was able to be highlighted, and I think it's just a lesson for all of us. In an effort for us to be at our best, it takes collaborative work in all three phases to produce an environment where your strengths get an opportunity to show, and it was able to be shown tonight.

Q. Did Bud Dupree's strip-sack set the tone for the rest of the way?

Big time, but Bud's been rushing well all year, but he hadn't been alone.

Q. Was there anything learned or gained from 2013's 0-4 start to get through this rough patch?

I don't know how many guys were on that team that are on this team. We're singularly focused on this journey. There's enough adversity and lessons



Tight end Nick Vannett made significant contributions to the offense against Cincinnati, days after being acquired in a trade with the Seattle Seahawks.

Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

to be learned from this journey to reach back to 2013. Particularly, some of these guys were in high school in 2013.

Q. Anything you learned from San Francisco that lead to the offensive efficiency tonight?

You know, we're just adjusting to the cards that we're dealt. We went into this game knowing that we wouldn't have Vance McDonald, so you saw us redistribute some responsibilities. That wasn't the case in San Francisco. And oftentimes what we do is often reflected by the quality of players or players specifically that are available to us, just like any football team.

Q. How do you feel about Nick Vannett's performance stepping in on a short week?

You can ditto anything that I said about Minkah (Fitzpatrick) last week and apply it to Nick, and we talked about it on Tuesday at the press conference in that we were going to teach him what we needed him to do, and put him in a position to con-

tribute. And then we get a chance to double back and teach some broader principles in an effort to improve that quality of his play this week, but appreciate his efforts. Appreciate his contributions. It was a good week for him and us.

Q. Why are tight ends important to the offense's ability to run the football?

The end of the line. A lot of combat goes on at the end of the line. The war is waged there. With your pull schemes, when you get on the perimeter if a tight end is getting knocked back, then the pullers can't get around. The defensive end vs. tight end matchup is a critical element of running-down football, and it's going to be a critical element in this game when the Bengals have people like Carlos Dunlap over there. That's why you need big-bodied tight ends. That's why we always will have some guys who have a bigger stature, to be able to match up with some of those 4-3 ends. It's a very different matchup when you're blocking a 3-

See TOMLIN, page 6

4 outside linebacker who could be 240 pounds as opposed to blocking a 295-pound 4-3 defensive end. So, that's why tight ends look a little bit different in today's game. Some are 245 pounds, some of them are 6-foot-8 and weigh in the 260s, like young Zach Gentry who we have here. He's one of those guys who has the stature and the build to match up against 4-3 defensive ends.

Q. What does a tight end give the offense that cannot be replaced just by adding another offensive lineman at the end of the formation?

The threat of pass. The threat of five eligibles in the passing game, particularly in the vertical element of the passing game. You know what you're going to get defensively, certainly you gain some advantages in terms of using eligible offensive tackles at the position. We do it. Everybody kind of does it, but you do it in a small sampling size because you lose a lot of versatility particularly in the play-action passing game.

Q. In talking about passing offense, you might hear the terms "isolation routes" and "combination routes" used to describe what the wide receivers are doing. What do each of those terms mean?

With isolation routes, you're seeking one-on-one matchups, and those are often defined by spread formations, when guys spread out with great width creating opportunities for guys to win one-on-one battles. The concept element of it is usually done out of bunch, or stacks, or combinations, groups of two or three, where collectively through release or route combinations guys work to get themselves open. It's really just about a guy's ability to get himself open by himself, or within the framework of other routes.

Q. Under what conditions might an offense choose to employ one of those as opposed to the other?

Usually, you have components of both within each passing play. Some receivers have a skill set that lends itself to them winning in one-on-one circumstances. Some guys have a skill set that lends itself to them working in combination with others. That backside receiver in today's game, those backside X-receivers, the guys who have earned their money over the years being on the backside of three-receiver formations, those are your one-



The Steelers defense shut down the Cincinnati running game in the Monday night victory at Heinz Field.

Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

Q. When you employ a run blitz, do the blitzing players pick their own spot to attack, or is it assigned?

Absolutely it's assigned gaps, or a space.

Q. How are those gaps picked?

It's by the structure of the defense. And that's probably the best Football 101 way of explaining it. The gaps that are hit are based on the structure of the defense, and the naming of the particular blitzes usually is done to supplement some base defensive structure.

Q. When the defense is in man-to-man coverage and the offense has receivers run crossing routes, what are the defensive backs supposed to do in that situation?

Quite simply stay with their man.

Q. So the defenders just chase them?

There are some very technical ways in which you chase. We defend on different levels, depending on who people are, who we are, and who we are covering. And that's the first mode of keeping people clean as they track their guys. Some people are pursuing at or around the line of scrimmage. Some are pursuing at linebacker depth. Some are pursuing a little bit deeper than linebacker depth. And those depths of coverage allow you to keep lanes as you cross in traffic to track your people. Another means of doing it is to do what generally is referred to as jet-stream, which means run in the wake of the guy you're covering and as he looks to track the ball you're able to close the distance and make the ground up, because quite frankly people slow down when they look to track the ball. So those are the two primary means of staying clean and tracking your people in man-to-man. Most defenses at all levels of football play levels of defense and have people moving in prescribed planes. And another element of it is you can always fall in directly behind the guy you're covering, and when he tracks the ball he gives you an opportunity to close the distance and be in position to make the play once the ball gets there.

on-one winners. Usually those are the type of guys you're trying to isolate in one-on-one circumstances. People who play on the strong-side of the formation – the z-receivers who play in conjunction with tight ends and slot receivers – those are the more concept-oriented guys.

Q. What is a run blitz? What does it look like?

It's usually something that's structurally sound, where you're firing linebackers who make the double teams the offensive line usually employs in the running game happen quicker. And that's what it's about. It's not about trickery or an effort to get someone free like you're trying to do in the blitz game against the pass. It's usually to make the offensive blocking combination schemes happen at a different rate than the offense would like for it to occur. In its essence, effective run blitzing is just that. When that center and that guard are double-teaming up to that linebacker, and you start firing linebackers, that double-team happens a little bit differently. They have to have their eyes up, they have to be aware, and that provides an opportunity for that defensive lineman who's being double-teamed to be a player now. That's the essence of it.



JA. LEN JOGS IN: Running back Jaylen Samuels easily got into the end zone for a 2-yard touchdown run in the third quarter after taking a direct snap in the wildcat formation.

Digest Photo/REBECCA MEHLING

• **COIN TOSS:** Bengals call tails. It's heads. Steelers elect to defer. Cincinnati receives the opening kickoff.

8:21 p.m. – What Went Wrong: It will go down in the play-by-play as a defensive stop for the Steelers that was followed by a punt by the Bengals to give the ball to the Pittsburgh offense at its 12-yard line. But on the 3-yard screen pass to Joe Mixon that preceded the punt, Cam Heyward was injured and limped off the field. As the Steelers offense prepared to run its first play of the game, Heyward was being attended to on the sideline by head trainer John Norwig and then he headed into the locker room.

8:27 p.m. – What Went Right: It started poorly when Diontae Johnson caught a 3-yard pass and lost a fumble that was recovered by safety Jessie Bates to give the Bengals possession at the Steelers 15-yard line. But then on a third-and-5, Mark Barron broke up a pass in the end zone for tight end Tyler Eifert, and Cincinnati settled for a 28-yard field goal by Randy Bullock to take a 3-0 lead with 8:22 left in the first quarter.

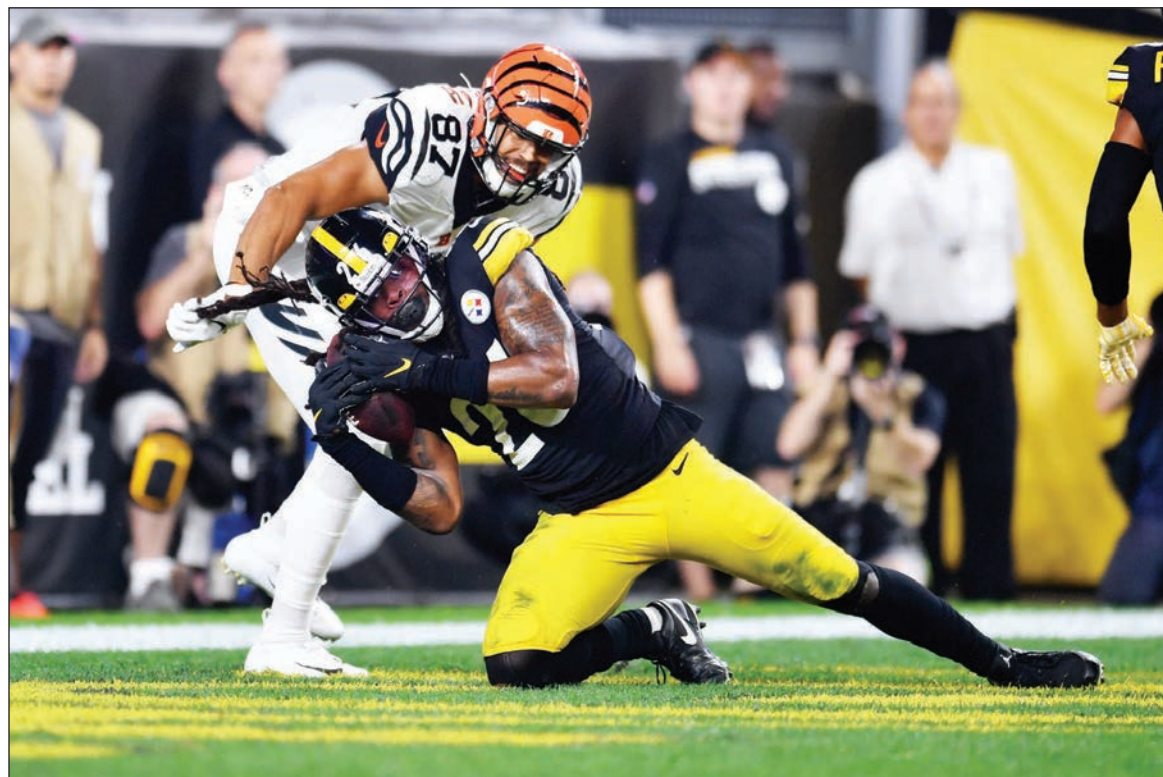
8:37 p.m. – What Went Wrong: The Steelers offense moved to a couple of first downs, but then it came to a third-and-1 from the Bengals 42-yard line. On third down, Benny Snell was stuffed for no gain, and then on fourth-and-1 James Conner was stuffed for no gain. Cincinnati took over on its 42-yard line with 4:02 left in the first quarter.

8:42 p.m. – What Went Right: With Cam Heyward out of the locker room and back on the field, the Steelers defense posted a three-and-out. After Devin Bush dropped Joe Mixon for a 1-yard loss, an incomplete pass set up a third-and-10. Under pressure from Stephon Tuitt, Andy Dalton's pass for John Ross was almost intercepted by Joe Haden. The Steelers took over at their 20-yard line following the touchback on the punt.

9:08 p.m. – What Went Right: Following an exchange of punts that was set up by the Steelers defense posting another three-and-out, the offense took over at the Cincinnati 41-yard line. In five plays, the Steelers moved 46 yards to take a 7-3 lead with 10:32 remaining in the first half with the touchdown coming on a 21-yard pass to James Conner. The scoring play came on a third-and-2, and it was the first third down the Steelers converted in the game.

9:20 p.m. – What Went Right: The Steelers needed someone on their defense to make a play, and Bud Dupree came through. On a first down at the Steelers 18-yard line, Dupree beat Andre Smith and strip-sacked Andy Dalton for an 8-yard loss, and T.J. Watt recovered the fumble at the Bengals' 29-yard line with 5:49 remaining in the first half.

9:34 p.m. – What Went Wrong: The drive did end with a 29-yard field goal by Chris Boswell that extended the Steelers lead to 10-3 with 58 seconds



Mark Barron ended a Cincinnati scoring threat when he came up with an interception on a fourth-and-goal early in the fourth quarter.

Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

left in the first half, but there was a palpable feeling there could have been more. After moving to a first-and-10 at the Bengals 14-yard line, the Steelers' next three plays included a pass to JuJu Smith-Schuster that lost 2 yards, a pass to Diontae Johnson that gained 9 yards, and then a run by Jaylen Samuels that lost 4 yards.

10 p.m. – What Went Right: The Steelers took the second-half kickoff and marched 75 yards in eight plays to take a 17-3 lead with 10:36 left in the third quarter. The Steelers converted a third-and-5 with an 18-yard pass to Jaylen Samuels, and then Nick Vannett caught a 17-yard pass from Mason Rudolph on a second-and-15. A 21-yard run by James Conner gave the Steelers a first down at the 2-yard line, and then on the next play Samuels ran it into the end zone out of the wildcat.

10:06 p.m. – What Went Right: After Chris Boswell's kickoff went into the end zone for a touchback, the Bengals went three-and-out with the big play being an 11-yard sack by Cam Heyward on second down. After Kevin Huber's 29-yard punt, the Steelers offense took possession for their second series of the second half at the Bengals 43-yard line.

10:11 p.m. – What Went Right: Two plays after Kevin Huber's punt, the Steelers lead had grown to 24-3 thanks to a 43-yard pass from Mason Rudolph to a wide open Diontae Johnson for the touchdown. The Steelers had a three-score lead with 9:24 left in the third quarter.

10:19 p.m. – What Went Right: After the Bengals went from their 25-yard line to the 41-yard line with three straight running plays, two sacks over the next three plays — one by T.J. Watt and the other by Javon Hargrave — forced the Bengals to punt. The Steelers began their next possession at their 31-yard line following a 42-yard punt.

10:44 p.m. – What Went Right: The Steelers defense bent but didn't break, and on a fourth-and-goal from the 13-yard line, Andy Dalton's pass went over the head of Tyler Eifert, and Mark Barron, who was covering C.J. Uzomah, was in position to make the interception in the end zone. With about 11 minutes left in the fourth quarter, the Steelers still led 24-3.

10:55 p.m. – What Went Right: Chris Boswell extended the Steelers lead to 27-3 with a 49-yard field goal with 5:11 remaining in the fourth quarter. The big plays on the drive were a 10-yard pass to Jaylen Samuels that converted a third-and-9, and then two separate personal foul penalties on the Bengals — one on B.W. Webb and the other on Andrew Billings.

11:09 p.m. – What Went Right: The final significant play of the game was fitting for the way events unfolded all night. On a fourth-and-10 with less than two minutes left, Tyson Alualu came up the middle to sack Andy Dalton and turn the ball over on downs. It was the Steelers' eighth sack of the night.

Running backs enjoy big role

By JIM WEXELL

Associate Editor

Early the previous week, Steelers quarterback Mason Rudolph talked about his excitement over the game plan.

After earning the game ball following a 27-3 win over the Cincinnati Bengals, he explained.

"One more week of Randy (Fichtner) molding the game plan to me and what I like," Rudolph said. "It's a big switch when you have a guy who's been here 16 years and likes what he likes and he kind of coaches one way, then you have a younger guy come in. He's been unbelievably open to suggestions on my end, so we're going to continue to work and continue to jell with this younger group."

So, that excitement didn't have anything to do with the unveiling of wildcat quarterback Jaylen Samuels?

"No," Rudolph said with a smile. "I wasn't excited about that, because I wasn't a part of it. Not that I wasn't excited about it. It was a great package that helped us out a lot."

Rudolph and the young skill players complemented a defense that sacked Bengals QB Andy Dalton eight times and forced two turnovers for what players on both sides of the ball exuberantly called a team win.

Rudolph completed 24 of 28 passes to tie Ben Roethlisberger for the franchise's third-best completion percentage in one game, but Rudolph brushed aside talk of record status because of his four "pop" passes.

Of course, Samuels completed all three of his pop passes to the jet-action receiver, usually Conner, as a wildcat quarterback. It gave the Steelers a completion percentage of 87.1, a team record.

"We weren't sure how they were going to handle that new package, that new look," Rudolph said. "Jaylen and James, when you've got a duo like that back there — they did a great job handling the cadence and all that. That's new for them and they did a great job. We adjusted once we found out what defense they were going to present to us in that package."

And the Steelers kept doing it.

"We weren't going to stop doing it until they stopped it," said Samuels. "And they didn't."

That was the thinking coming out of the locker room at halftime. The Steelers held a 10-3 halftime on the strength of a fake shovel pass to JuJu Smith-Schuster/21-yard touchdown throw to Conner early in the second quarter.

To open the second half, the Steelers relied pri-



James Conner's second-quarter touchdown was part of a big night for the Steelers running backs.

Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

marily on the running backs and tight ends to march down the field for a touchdown. Conner's 21-yard run and Nick Vannett's diving 17-yard reception put them in scoring position, and Samuels had a 14-yard reception while Conner was in the tent having his ankle checked.

He emerged from the tent in time to turn one of those short passes from Samuels into another 21-yard gain to the Cincinnati 1. From there, Samuels, out of the wildcat, ran behind a massive hole made by Vannett and Zach Banner for a 1-yard touchdown and 17-3 lead.

One possession later, after a three-and-out and shanked punt by the Bengals, Rudolph hit rookie Diontae Johnson for a 43-yard touchdown pass to virtually end the game early in the third quarter.

Johnson found himself open due to the Bengals safety fearing Smith-Schuster.

"Had unbelievable protection all night," Rudolph said. "I didn't get hit once that I can remember. ... We had our chances to take our shots but the backs were in their spots all week. James Conner, Jaylen Samuels did a great job running after the catch and making guys miss in space. That's helps a lot, helps your running game."

Conner led the Steelers with 42 yards on 10 carries. He also caught eight passes for a team-high 83 yards to give him 125 yards from scrimmage.

Samuels rushed 10 times for 26 yards and also caught eight passes for 57 yards, a total of 83 yards from scrimmage. He also completed three short passes for 31 yards — all of which occurred following a game in which he didn't touch the ball.

"We knew coming into the game we were a big part of the game plan," Samuels said. "So me and James knew we had to come out here and do our thing with the wildcat formation and then with the running back stuff, downhill runs. We had to make guys miss in open space. James had some good runs that bursted out. I had a couple great catches and runs. We're just feeding off each other. That's how we play. That's how it was."

Conner appears to have found his groove a week after his fumble set up the winning score by the 49ers.

"We were a team that was thirsty for a win, simple and plain," said Conner. "Like I said early in the week, less talk and more action, and our team played great tonight."



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24

Margin of victory for the Steelers, their biggest against the Bengals since Dec. 4, 2011 when they won 35-7.

87.1 Steelers completion percentage, which set a franchise record. The previous mark was 85.7 set against the Miami Dolphins in 2007, also in a Monday night game.

175 Yards allowed by the Steelers, the fewest they've allowed to the Bengals since 1993 when they had 170.

8 Career games with at least two sacks for Cam Heyward, who had 2.5 against the Bengals. The Steelers are 8-0 in those games.

17 Consecutive home victories for the Steelers in Monday night games.

124.9 Passer rating for Mason Rudolph, the highest for a Steelers quarterback other than Ben Roethlisberger and with at least 15 pass attempts since the 2006 season opener when Charlie Batch posted a 126.5 against Miami.



Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

10

Years since the Steelers had a running back with a completion, rushing attempt and reception in the same game before **Jaylen Samuels** did it against the Bengals. Mewelde Moore did it in 2009 against the San Diego Chargers.

8

Receptions for both James Conner and Jaylen Samuels, which tied for most ever for a Steelers running back not named Le'Veon Bell or Franco Harris.

8

Sacks for the Steelers, their highest total since they also had eight against the Cleveland Browns in 2016.

3

Red zone stops for the Steelers, who limited Cincinnati to a field goal along with a fumble recovery and an interception.

vs. Cincinnati

CAM HEYWARD
DEFENSIVE TACKLE

It was the most complete performance of the season for the Steelers, but special recognition goes to a defense that had eight sacks and two takeaways in the team’s 27-3 victory over the Cincinnati Bengals. Six different players accounted for the sacks, and the leader of that group was Cam Heyward.

Heyward finished with six tackles, including one for loss, and he led the team with 2.5 sacks while also forcing a fumble. He is the *Steelers Digest* Player of the Week.



Digest Photo/ARRON ANASTASIA

INSIDE THE GAME | STEELERS SNAPSHOT



Wide receiver Diontae Johnson made up for a first-quarter fumble when he scored a 43-yard touchdown midway through the third quarter to increase the Steelers lead to 24-3.

Digest Photo/ARRON ANASTASIA



PULLING AWAY: Wide receiver JuJu Smith-Schuster turned a short pass down the middle into a long touchdown when he outran the 49ers secondary to the outside and up the sideline.

Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

COIN TOSS: Steelers call tails. It's tails. Steelers defer. The 49ers will receive the opening kickoff.

4:30 p.m. – What Went Right: On the game's opening possession, the Steelers came up with their first interception of the season when a screen pass to Matt Breida was bobbled and T.J. Watt snatched the ball out of the air. After a 7-yard return, the Steelers started at the 49ers 33-yard line. After a pass to James Conner gained nothing and one to JuJu Smith-Schuster lost 2 yards, a third-down pass to Smith-Schuster gained enough for Chris Boswell to come on and attempt a 46-yard field goal. Boswell's kick was good, and the Steelers had a 3-0 lead with 11:47 left in the first quarter.

4:40 p.m. – What Went Right: The Steelers defense had a chance at a second takeaway, this time a fumble recovery, on the 49ers' second possession. A Stephon Tuitt sack on a first-down play eventually set up a third-and-14, but Jimmy Garoppolo converted with a 16-yard pass to Richie James. On the next play, Raheem Mostert fumbled but eventually recovered for an 18-yard loss. The 49ers were unable to convert the ensuing third-and-15, and Mitch Wishnowsky's punt went into the end zone for a touchback.

4:48 p.m. – What Went Right: It didn't take Minkah Fitzpatrick long to make an impact. Midway through the first quarter, Jimmy Garoppolo tried to fit a pass into a tight window, and when Joe Haden tipped the ball, Fitzpatrick was on the spot to make the interception, and his 8-yard return gave the Steelers the ball at the 49ers 24-yard line.

4:53 p.m. – What Went Wrong: Settling for field goals is not the way to beat a 2-0 team in its home opener. After Fitzpatrick's interception, the Steelers made one first down, but then the drive stalled when Mason Rudolph couldn't find an open receiver on third down and was forced to scramble for a 1-yard gain that wasn't good enough for a first down. Boswell's 26-yard field goal upped the Steelers lead to 6-0 with 2:04 remaining in the first period.

5:10 p.m. – What Went Right: Following the kickoff after Boswell's second field goal, the 49ers had moved the ball to the Steelers 15-yard line. Mostert took a pitch and as he began to work up the field, Fitzpatrick delivered a hit that forced a fumble that Devin Bush recovered at the Pittsburgh 9-yard line.

5:16 p.m. – What Went Right: After the Steelers went three-and-out following Devin Bush's fumble recovery, the 49ers moved the ball quickly to a first-and-goal at the Pittsburgh 7-yard line with a little help from the officials. Fitzpatrick was flagged for roughing the passer on a play in which he hit Jimmy Garoppolo neither in the head nor late, and then on the next play the Steelers were flagged for defensive holding on a running play. But then Garoppolo fumbled the exchange from center and Devin Bush recovered at the Steelers 6-yard line.

5:19 p.m. – What Went Wrong: Again after a



Linebacker T.J. Watt came up with the first of the Steelers' five takeaways against the 49ers.

Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

It was a third-and-4 from the Pittsburgh 24-yard line. Rudolph hit Smith-Schuster with a slant pass, and when safety Tarvarius Moore took a bad angle in pursuit, Smith-Schuster turned upfield and outran the rest of the pursuit for a 76-yard touchdown. The Steelers led 13-10 with 5:42 remaining in the third quarter.

6:31 p.m. – What Went Wrong: The 49ers offense score its second touchdown of the third quarter, both of which came on short runs by Jeff Wilson, to take a 17-13 lead with 56 seconds left in the third quarter. The 49ers marched 75 yards in nine plays, with Jimmy Garoppolo completing passes of 20 and 11 yards to Deebo Samuel.

6:41 p.m. – What Went Wrong: It was another three-and-out for the Steelers offense, with James Washington catching a short pass from Rudolph and gaining 6 yards and 6 inches on a third-and-7. After Berry's punt, the 49ers took possession at their 25-yard line.

6:52 p.m. – What Went Right: Big plays. That's how the Steelers reclaimed the lead with 10:22 remaining in the fourth quarter. After a 10-yard run from James Conner on first down, Rudolph went deep down the field to James Washington, who drew a pass interference penalty on Jason Verrett that was good for 32 yards. On the next play, Rudolph found Diontae Johnson behind the coverage for the 39-yard touchdown that gave the Steelers a 20-17 lead.

7:01 p.m. – What Went Right: Starting from their 25-yard line after a touchback on the kickoff, the 49ers offense started eating up yardage in chunks. On a third-and-goal from the 7-yard line, Richie James came in motion from his wide receiver position, and as he crossed between Garoppolo and center Weston Richburg, the shotgun snap hit him and the loose ball was recovered by T.J. Watt at the Pittsburgh 14-yard line.

7:04 p.m. – What Went Wrong: The football gods giveth, and the football gods taketh away. Three plays after T.J. Watt's fumble recovery, Conner lost a fumble that DeForest Buckner recovered at the Pittsburgh 24-yard line.

7:14 p.m. – What Went Wrong: The Steelers defense appeared to have kept the 49ers out of the end zone when a third-down pass fell incomplete in the end zone on a play that started from the Pittsburgh 14-yard line. But Mark Barron was flagged for holding, and that gave the 49ers a fresh set of downs. It all ended with a 5-yard touchdown pass to Dante Pettis that gave the 49ers a 24-20 lead with 75 seconds left in the fourth quarter.

takeaway deep in their own territory, the Steelers went three-and-out on offense. Following a 60-yard punt by Jordan Berry, and the return plus a 5-yard penalty for an illegal shift, the 49ers started at the Pittsburgh 49-yard line.

5:27 p.m. – What Went Right: The Steelers did to the 49ers what the 49ers had done to the Steelers, which was force them to settle for a field goal. After an 11-yard pass to George Kittle gave the 49ers a first down at the Pittsburgh 11-yard line, the Steelers defense stiffened, and with the help of a holding penalty, forced a short field goal by Robbie Gould. The Steelers led 6-3 with 6:45 remaining in the first half.

5:59 p.m. – What Went Wrong: The Steelers took the second-half kickoff, and after one first down the unit fell behind the chains when a penalty on Al Villanueva for being illegally downfield set up a first-and-15. After overthrowing Diontae Johnson on first down, Mason Rudolph was flushed out of the pocket and tried to get the ball to JuJu Smith-Schuster only to have the pass intercepted by K'Wuan Williams at the Steelers 38-yard line.

6:05 p.m. – What Went Wrong: It took eight plays, but the 49ers were able to turn the takeaway into the game's first touchdown, which came on a 1-yard run by Jeff Wilson. The big play on the drive was a 22-yard completion to Kendrick Bourne that gave the 49ers a first down at the Steelers 3-yard line. The 49ers led 10-6 with 9:17 left in the third quarter.

6:10 p.m. – What Went Wrong: After the 49ers took the lead with the game's first touchdown, the Steelers received the ensuing kickoff and went three-and-out again. Two incomplete passes sandwiched a 5-yard run by James Conner, and after Berry's punt the 49ers offense took over at their own 25-yard line.

6:22 p.m. – What Went Right: The Steelers converted a third down and did so in spectacular fashion.



2

Touchdown passes for **Mason Rudolph**, who tied the Steelers record for a quarterback making his first career start previously shared by Ron Smith in 1966, Rudy Bukich in 1960 and Scott Campbell in 1985.

180

Steelers' all-time winning percentage with a first-time starting quarterback after their record dropped to 4-20-1.

76

Yards on Mason Rudolph's touchdown pass to JuJu Smith-Schuster, making it the longest completion by a Steelers quarterback other than Ben Roethlisberger since Oct. 18, 2015 when Landry Jones had an 88-yard TD pass to Martavis Bryant.

66.1

Percentage of Mason Rudolph's passing yardage total (174) that came on his two touchdown passes — of 76 yards to JuJu Smith-Schuster and 39 yards to Diontae Johnson.

Digest Photo/KARL ROSER



Years since a Steelers player had an interception and a forced fumble in the first half of a game before Minkah Fitzpatrick did it against the 49ers. James Harrison had last done it Nov. 16, 2008 against the Chargers.

5

Consecutive victories by the home team in this series since the Steelers' 27-6 victory at San Francisco in 1999.

5

Takeaways for the Steelers, their highest total since Week 2 of the 2010 season when they also had five in a 19-11 victory against the Tennessee Titans.

8

Drives of 10 yards or less for the Steelers out of 13 possessions.

52.3

Jordan Berry's gross punting average, his highest since Sept. 25, 2016 when he averaged 55.0 on three punts against the Philadelphia Eagles.

4

Career touchdowns of 75 yards or longer for JuJu Smith-Schuster after his 76-yard TD reception.

at San Francisco

DEVIN BUSH

LINEBACKER

It was not going to be a showcase of offenses at Levi's Stadium, especially for a Steelers team playing without Ben Roethlisberger. It was going to be up to the defense, and even though the Steelers lost, 24-20, to fall to 0-3, their defense was productive in the area of recording takeaways.

The Steelers had two interceptions and three fumble recoveries, and the team finished plus-3 in turnover ratio. Devin Bush led the team with 11 tackles, and he recovered two fumbles. He is the Steelers Digest Player of the Week.



Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

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Breaking down series of moves

There was a whirlwind of roster moves heading into the Steelers-49ers game and even after, including the team placing starting quarterback Ben Roethlisberger on the reserve/injured list and trading for defensive back Minkah Fitzpatrick.

By TERESA VARLEY | Assistant Editor

Here is a rundown of what took place.

MONDAY, SEPT. 16

The Steelers placed quarterback Ben Roethlisberger on the reserve/injured list. Roethlisberger suffered an elbow injury against the Seattle Seahawks that required season-ending surgery for the 16-year veteran.

Roethlisberger promised he would be back in a statement he issued not long after the team announced the news.

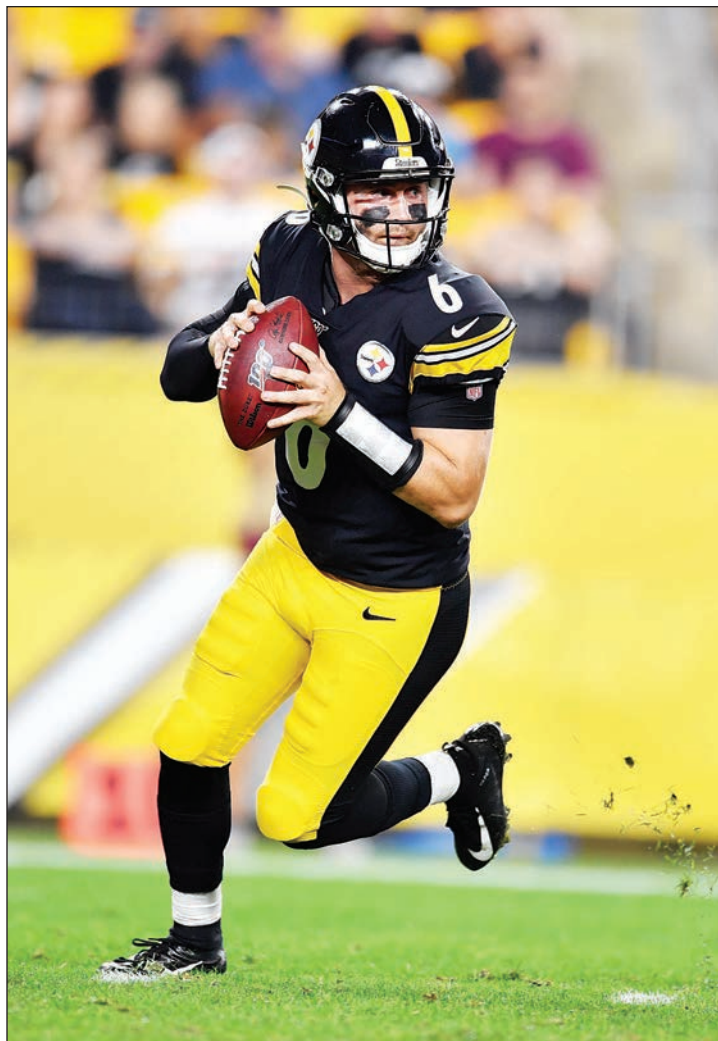
"I've been informed that I need season-ending surgery on my elbow to continue playing football at the level I expect," the statement reads. "This is shocking and heartbreaking for me, to miss this much of a season and feel like I am letting down so many people. I can only trust God's plan, but I am completely determined to battle through this challenge and come back stronger than ever next season. The Steelers committed three years to me this offseason and I fully intend to honor my contract and reward them with championship-level play. I will do all I can to support Mason (Rudolph) and the team this season to help win games. I love this game, my teammates, the Steelers organization and fans, and I feel in my heart I have a lot left to give."

The Steelers promoted rookie quarterback Devlin Hodges from the practice squad to the 53-man roster. Hodges said he is ready to do whatever is asked of him in his role as the team's No. 2 quarterback.

"That is something I have done every day since I have been here, compete and have fun and get better each and every day," said Hodges. "That is what I am going to continue to do."

Hodges, a rookie from Samford, completed 20 of 38 passes for 190 yards and two touchdowns in the preseason, with one interception.

Hodges originally signed with the Steelers as a rookie free agent after making an impression in rookie minicamp as a tryout player. At Samford he set a single-season school record with 4,283 yards passing last season, breaking his own record set in 2016. He won the Walter Payton Award, given annually to the top offensive player in FCS football. Hodges also won the SoCon Offensive Player of the Year for the third straight year.



Devlin Hodges was promoted from the practice squad to become the backup quarterback once Ben Roethlisberger was placed on IR and Mason Rudolph replaced him as the starter.

Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

Hodges finished his college career with 14,584 passing yards.

The Steelers released Hodges when the team made the cut down to the 53-man roster, but he was signed to the practice squad before the Seahawks game.

TUESDAY, SEPT. 17

The Steelers made a splash move, trading for Dolphins defensive back Minkah Fitzpatrick. In addition to Fitzpatrick, the Steelers get the Dolphins' fourth-round pick in 2020 NFL draft and

their seventh-round pick in 2021. The Steelers sent the Dolphins their first-round pick in the 2020 draft, as well their fifth-round pick in 2020 and sixth-round pick in the 2021 draft.

"We are very excited to add Minkah to our defense," said Steelers General Manager Kevin Colbert. "We had him rated very high during the 2018 NFL draft process and we thought that he could be an impact player in this league."

The 22-year-old Fitzpatrick was selected by the

See MOVES, page 19

 PNC PRESENTS

HOUSE RULES

#33:

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rivers will never
get between you
and Heinz Field.**

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Dolphins in the first round of the 2018 draft with the 11th pick overall. Fitzpatrick had five tackles in the Dolphins season opener against Baltimore and added six tackles against New England in Week 2 with a forced fumble and fumble recovery.

Fitzpatrick played in 16 games in 2018, starting 11. He had 79 tackles, 50 of them solo stops, two interceptions, and nine pass defenses. Fitzpatrick picked off Kirk Cousins in the Dec. 16 matchup against Minnesota and returned it 50 yards for a touchdown. Before joining the Steelers, Fitzpatrick had 90 career tackles, two interceptions, including one returned for a touchdown, one forced fumble, and one fumble recovery.

A three-year starter at Alabama, he played in 42 games, starting 38. He had 171 tackles, including 109 solo stops, 4.5 sacks, nine interceptions, 35 pass defenses and two forced fumbles. He won the Jim Thorpe Award as the nation's top defensive back his final season and became the third player in NCAA history to win both the Chuck Bednarik and Jim Thorpe Awards, joining Charles Woodson and Patrick Peterson with that honor. He was also a unanimous first-team All-American in 2017.

TUESDAY, SEPT. 17

The Steelers placed safety Sean Davis on the reserve/injured list after he suffered a shoulder injury in the team's loss to the Seahawks in Week 2.

Davis is in his fourth season after being selected in the second round of the 2016 NFL draft. Going into the season Davis had 238 total tackles, including 181 solo stops, 2.5 sacks, five interceptions, 20

passes defended, a forced fumble and a fumble return. Against the Seahawks he had five tackles while starting his 41st career game. He missed the Patriots game with an ankle injury.

The team also added quarterback Paxton Lynch, signing him to the practice squad.

Lynch was drafted by the Denver Broncos in the first round of the 2016 NFL draft, the 26th pick overall. Lynch played in five games with four starts and was waived shortly after making the initial 53-man roster in 2018.

He didn't play in the 2018 season and signed a futures contract with Seattle after the season. The Seahawks waived him this year when they had to get down to the 53-man roster.

TUESDAY, SEPT. 24

The Steelers made several practice squad moves, signing defensive back Alexander Myres and releasing cornerback Trevon Mathis. The team also added tight end Alizé Mack to the practice squad and released linebacker Robert Spillane.

WEDNESDAY, SEPT. 25

The Steelers completed their second trade in just over a week when they acquired tight end Nick Vannett from the Seattle Seahawks. The Steelers gave the Seahawks their fifth-round pick in the 2020 NFL draft in return.

"I am very familiar with him," said Coach Mike Tomlin. "Ohio State is one of the schools I am at annually and you get a good feel for those guys. I remember looking specifically at him his pro day.

"You couple that with we just played those guys a short number of weeks ago, so I familiarized myself with him in today's ball in terms of the things he provided against us. He made a few plays against us a week ago, vertical passing game and so forth that was consistent with what we expected and had seen from him. And also he was a handy (special) teamer. This is a guy that started on their punt team and kickoff return team against us just two weeks ago. Adding quality depth like Nick is significant."

Vannett, who is in his fourth season, had four receptions for 38 yards with Seattle this season. In three-plus seasons with the Seahawks, he had 48 receptions for 463 yards, an average of 9.95 yards per catch and four touchdowns. He had played in 42 games, starting 16.

Vannett had his best season in 2018 when he had 29 catches for 269 yards and three touchdowns while starting nine of the 15 games he played.

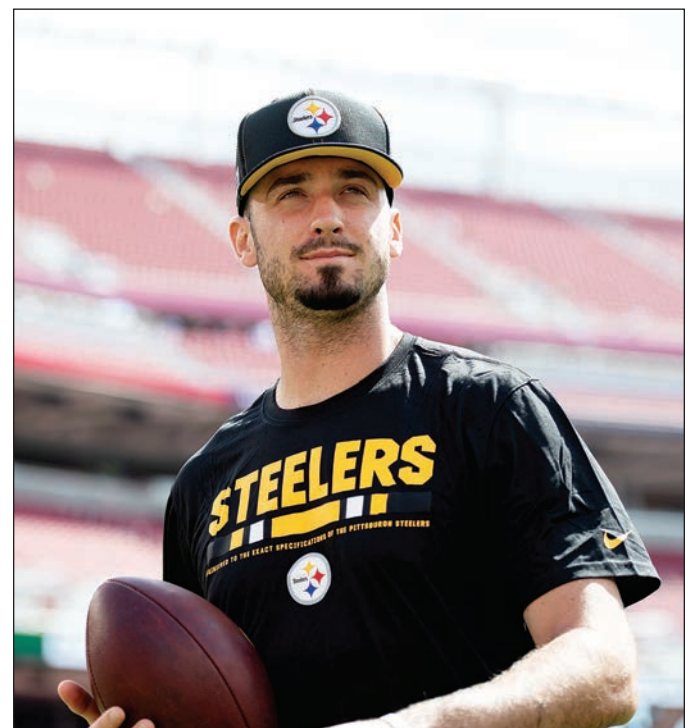
He was the Seahawks' third round pick, the 94th overall, in the 2016 NFL draft, out of Ohio State. While at Ohio State he had 55 receptions for 585 yards, 10.6 yards per catch, and six touchdowns. He finished his career ranked ninth all time among Ohio State tight ends for receptions and tied for 10th in touchdown receptions.

He started a total of 15 games, including 12 his senior season when he had 19 receptions for 162 yards. His junior year he had 19 receptions for 220 yards five touchdowns and scored a touchdown in the National Championship Game against Oregon.



Safety Sean Davis (21) ended up on IR after sustaining a shoulder injury against Seattle in Week 2, and the following week practice squad quarterback Paxton Lynch joined his new teammates in San Francisco.

Digest Photos/KARL ROSER



A trade too good to pass up

By BOB LABRIOLA

Editor

"Loves ball, lives ball."

That's the first sentence under the sub-head "Strengths" in the pre-draft analysis of him that appeared on NFL.com in the run-up to the 2018 NFL draft. That makes Minkah Fitzpatrick the kind of player this Steelers defense needs more than anything else. A deeper dive into the kind of person and professional he is makes the trade to acquire him a smart move.

ANALYSIS

To recap the action, the Steelers acquired defensive back Minkah Fitzpatrick from the Miami Dolphins in exchange for their first-round pick in the 2020 NFL draft, plus two other moves that essentially involved the teams swapping a couple of picks in similar areas of the draft. The Dolphins get the Steelers' fifth-round pick in 2020 and the Steelers get the Dolphins' fourth-round pick in 2020; and Miami gets the Steelers' sixth-round pick in 2021, and Pittsburgh gets Miami's seventh-round pick in 2021.

The historical significance of the deal is that a trade made by the Steelers leaves them without a first-round draft pick for the first time since 1967. Just to complete the historical circle, the Green Bay Packers used that pick, which was the ninth overall, to select Boston College center Bob Hyland, primarily a backup offensive lineman for five teams over 11 seasons in which the highlight was being a part of the Packers' Super Bowl II championship team as a rookie.

Anyway, the point is that was a long time ago, before Chuck Noll, before Bill Nunn, before Dan Rooney assumed control of the day-to-day football operations and decreed that such personnel moves would cease immediately because the way he saw it, the only way to build a championship team was through the draft.

Now, let's delve a bit into Minkah Fitzpatrick's history.

His high school coach told the story of winning a state championship, to which Fitzpatrick contributed significantly, and relatively early on the morning after the game the coach started calling players to thank them for their contributions and congratulate them again on their accomplishment.

He called Fitzpatrick first, and asked if his call woke him up. No, was the answer. But you sound out of breath, the coach said. That's because I'm on the track doing some speed work, Fitzpatrick answered.

Alabama doesn't often find the need to venture north of the Mason-Dixon Line in search of skill-



Minkah Fitzpatrick made an immediate impact for the Steelers defense when he came up with an interception and a forced fumble in his first game against the 49ers.

Digest Photos/KARL ROSER

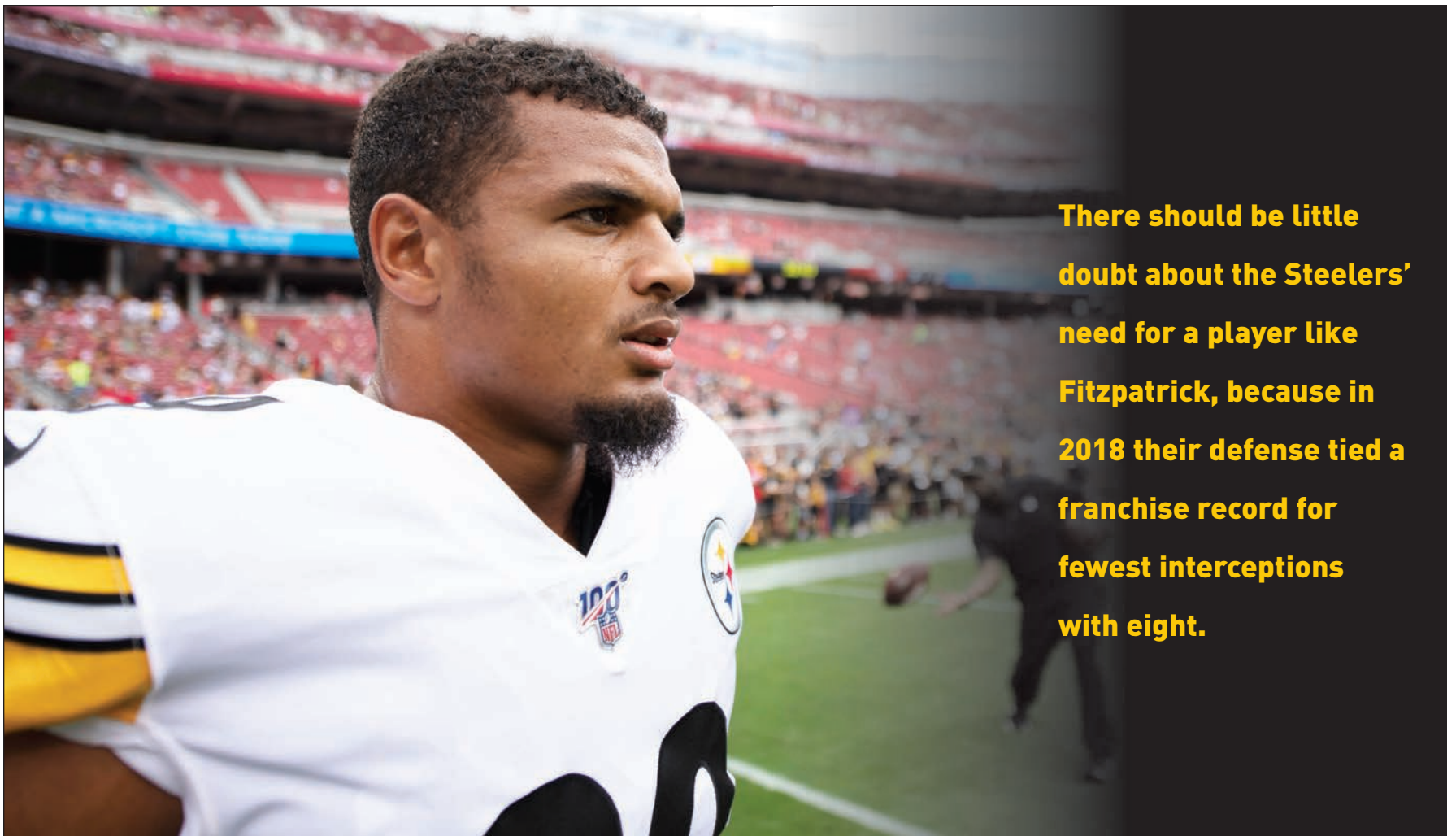
position players, but Nick Saban was willing to make an exception when it came to that wide receiver/defensive back from Saint Peter's Prep. Fitzpatrick not only was good enough to get an offer from Alabama, but he was good enough to win a starting job as a freshman at Alabama, and he was good enough to hold off the competition and keep that job for each of his three seasons there.

As a freshman, Fitzpatrick intercepted two passes and returned both for touchdowns to help the Crimson Tide finish 14-1 and win the National Championship Game over Clemson during which he contributed two passes defended. As a sophomore, Fitzpatrick intercepted six passes and returned two of those for touchdowns, but the 14-1 Crimson Tide lost to Clemson in the National Championship Game. By 2017, opponents got wise

and stayed away from his area of the secondary, and so he had just one interception and seven passes defended on the way to winning another championship ring with Alabama finishing the season at 13-1. And Fitzpatrick also played special teams for the Tide and had 22 career tackles in coverage.

That's two championships in three seasons, a 41-3 overall record, and recognition from Saban as "the best leader I ever coached."

Typically, a player with Fitzpatrick's skill set, which is to say a guy who is 6 feet, 204 pounds and runs a 4.46 in the 40-yard dash; a guy who can cover like a cornerback; who can track and make plays on the ball if lined up as a safety; who's extremely competitive and has a history of showing up big in the biggest games; who has awareness in



There should be little doubt about the Steelers' need for a player like Fitzpatrick, because in 2018 their defense tied a franchise record for fewest interceptions with eight.

zone coverage to make loads of plays; who's able to stick a foot in ground and drive to the ball; who attacks the line of scrimmage in run support and welcomes physical challenges; and who is a dangerous blitzer off the edge, would be a slam-dunk top-10 pick in whichever NFL draft he chose to enter.

But since Fitzpatrick lasted until the 11th overall pick in 2018, let's take a look at what happened with the 10 selections before him.

Four of the 10 choices were quarterbacks in what was supposed to be one of the best groups at the position since the 1983 group sent John Elway, Dan Marino, Jim Kelly first to the NFL via the first round and then to the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Another of the picks ahead of Fitzpatrick was a guard picked by the Colts in a too-little, too-late attempt to protect Andrew Luck. Another was a right tackle to pair with left tackle Joe Staley to protect Jimmy Garoppolo. Another was Saquon Barkley. Another was OLB Bradley Chubb. Another was three-down inside linebacker Roquan Smith. And the 10th was cover cornerback Denzel Ward.

There should be little doubt about the Steelers' need for a player like Fitzpatrick, because in 2018 their defense tied a franchise record for fewest interceptions in a season with eight, and beyond the interceptions it's the number of times the Steelers pass defenders don't make plays on the

football. Through the first two games this season, they had no interceptions and two passes defended on a combined 72 pass attempts.

The most oft-repeated objection to the trade for Fitzpatrick has to do with the surrender of a No. 1 pick in the 2020 NFL draft. The opposition points to Ben Roethlisberger being out for the rest of the season because of the need of surgery on his right elbow and automatically assume the Steelers will crater as a result and therefore be picking close to the top five in that upcoming draft, which would be a good position to consider adding their next franchise quarterback.

My contention is really twofold: While I absolutely respect what Roethlisberger brings to the table as a starting quarterback and acknowledge he is Hall of Fame caliber, I just don't believe these Steelers are a 5-11 team with Mason Rudolph as the starter in his place for the rest of the season. While it's premature to make any grand predictions about winning the AFC North or squeezing into the playoffs without Roethlisberger, I just don't see the bottom falling out as it would have to for the Steelers to finish with a pick in the top 10 of next year's draft.

And for argument's sake, let's say they did finish 5-11 and had the fifth overall pick, which was Tampa Bay's record as the owner of that pick last April. Picking fifth overall in 2018, in that supposedly great year to be needing a quarterback, the

choices were Josh Allen, Josh Rosen, Lamar Jackson, and Rudolph. In terms of talent and fit within this offensive scheme, I like Rudolph the best from that group of four. And the Steelers already have him.

Having Rudolph, and with Roethlisberger already saying he plans to attack his rehabilitation and return to play out the two years remaining on his contract, and with the Steelers likely knowing more about the specifics of his injury and the surgery that's going to be required to fix it, I think it's premature to assume the team would be in the market for a quarterback with a pick in the top 5-10 region of the 2020 NFL draft.

What they probably would be looking for instead would be a versatile defensive back who can make plays on the ball, who has a history of interceptions and returning those interceptions for significant yards and/or touchdowns, who is a hard worker and a leader, who approaches his business as a professional.

They would be looking for a guy exactly like Minkah Fitzpatrick. Who by the way is just 22 years old, who already has played 18 NFL games to give them a decent idea of what he might become, and who is under contract through the 2021 season at a total of \$5.645 million.

Where in the world could they find a deal like that?



RUDOLPH

ready to lead the way

By TERESA VARLEY | Assistant Editor

With Ben Roethlisberger out for the season, the starting job is in the hands of second-year quarterback Mason Rudolph.

Roethlisberger left the Steelers loss to the Seattle Seahawks at Heinz Field at halftime due to an elbow injury, which Coach Mike Tomlin confirmed in a statement will require season-ending surgery.

Rudolph came into the game in the second half, making his NFL debut, and completed 12 of 19 passes for 112 yards and two touchdowns.

"It's crazy, losing the leader of our team," Rudolph said the day after the Seattle game. "It's a crazy turn of events. I am excited to step up. That's what backups do. That is what I have done my entire career, whether it be high school, college or now. Nothing different for me. I am going to be the same person I am, continue to prepare. I try to prepare like I am the starter when I am not. I am going to continue to go through my weekly routine and put a good game plan together with the staff and go execute."

When he left Heinz Field on the Sunday after the game against Seattle, the only thing Rudolph knew was Roethlisberger was slated to have an MRI. He had no idea how serious the injury was at that point. But the potential of stepping in at quarterback for even the short or long term was something that was definitely on his mind.

"I thought about it," said Rudolph. "I was waiting on the word, but you have to react to adversity. I am getting to play football and fulfill a dream and continue this at this level and I am excited to do it."

"I am excited. It's a sucky circumstance with our leader and a good friend going down. He would want me to step up and lead to the best of my ability and that is what I have always believed in, that is what I am going to do. I am just excited to get more practice reps. It will be fun to go into a game and feel more rehearsed and prepared. I am excited and am going to do what I have always done and step up to the plate."

Rudolph said he plans on leaning on Roethlisberger as the season moves on as well.

"He is a legend. He is a future Hall of Famer," said Rudolph. "An unbelievable player. I truly learned something every week from him. He is a great player and I am going to continue to lean on him, meet with him as much as I can during the week."

Rudolph was selected by the Steelers in the third round of the 2018 NFL draft, the 76th pick overall. He spent the year as the team's No. 3 quarterback, not getting a single game snap as he was inactive all year.

To his credit, though, while he was idle he still approached every day as if he was the team's starter, and it could pay dividends now.

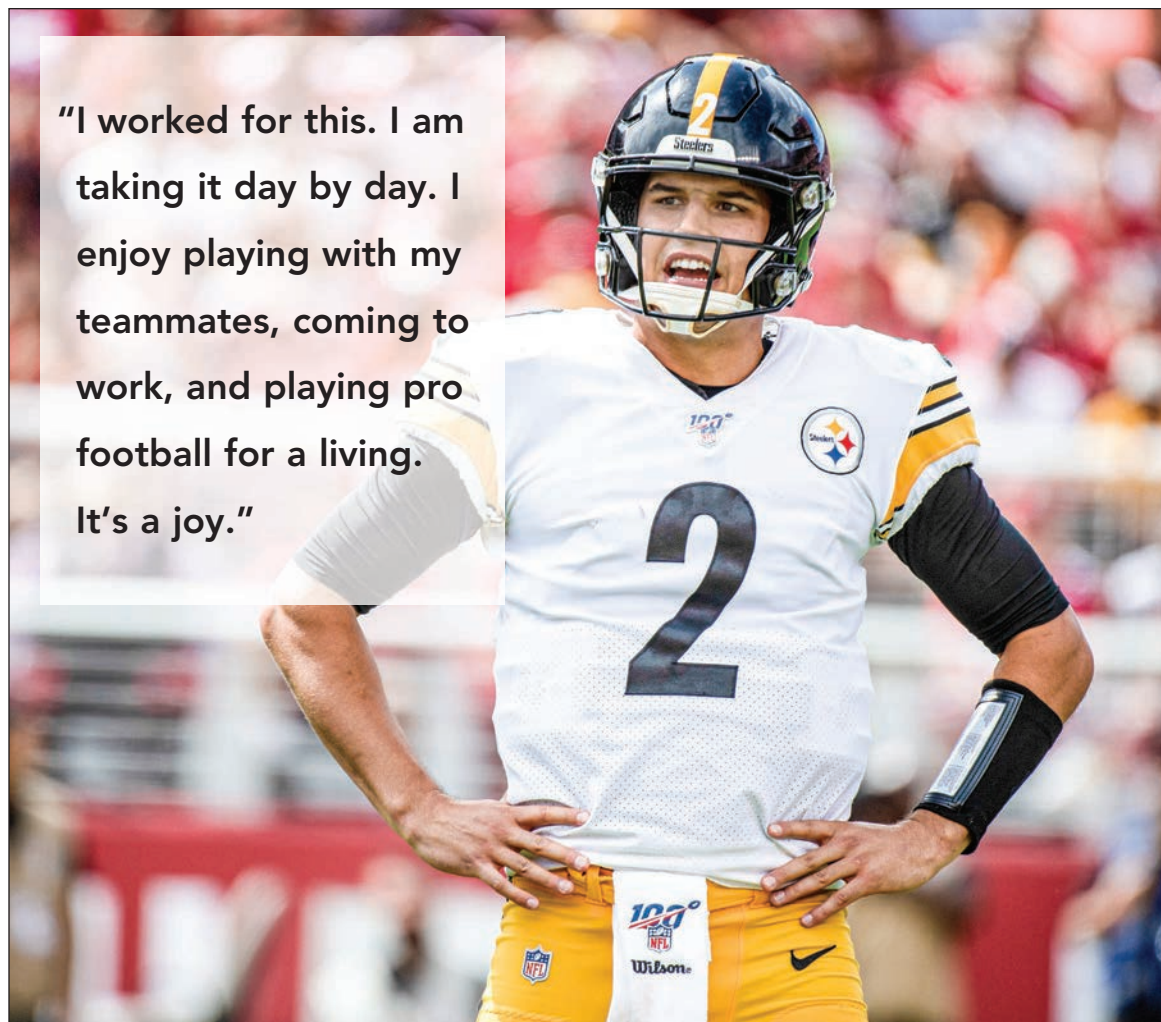
"You have to attack every day like it's your last, pour everything into it and prepare like you are the starter, and that is what I tried to do last year even though I was the No. 3 guy," said Rudolph. "As tough as that was, I tried to wake up and accomplish goals in practice and get the reps I could and make the most of them. I prepared myself to be ready to roll. As long as I am ready for my opportunity, that's all that matters."

Knowing his current role though is a huge asset for him a preparation is a big key for him.

"I am a big prep guy," said Rudolph. "Having a whole week of reps, it will be awesome. Any time you can get the muscle memory it's a huge part of it. I have never been a guy who can just go out and wing it. I have always been excited about the practice reps and going through the week. To have a chance to do it this week is good. I am looking forward to this week. It's going to be a fun week of reps.

"I worked for this. I am taking it day by day. I enjoy playing with my teammates, coming to work, and playing pro football for a living. It's a joy."

"I worked for this. I am taking it day by day. I enjoy playing with my teammates, coming to work, and playing pro football for a living. It's a joy."



In good hands with Mason

By **TERESA VARLEY**
Assistant Editor

Confidence.

It's something you must have in your quarterback and for years the Steelers have had that in Ben Roethlisberger.

But the team will be without Roethlisberger for the rest of the season after he was placed on the reserve/injured list with an elbow injury that will require surgery.

The starting job is now in the hands of Mason Rudolph, the second-year quarterback the team selected in the third round of the 2018 NFL draft.

And when it comes to having confidence in him ... the locker room has it.

"He is a great leader," said JuJu Smith-Schuster. "Someone we all trust."

"We have my guy Mason. We all believe in him, that he is going to step up and do the job. You saw a glimpse of him this past game."

Rudolph made his NFL debut against the Seahawks and his first NFL start against the San Francisco 49ers. His is young and doesn't have all

the experience Roethlisberger does, but he has the support of his teammates.

"Players have to step up. That is just point blank," said Jaylen Samuels. "We have to step up, make plays, help him, and help each other. Play together and execute. We saw a little glimpse of him (against Seattle). He showed what he can do."

"I saw toughness from him. He is poised. He doesn't get rattled. Playing that position, you have to be calm. You can't be in there nervous. You have to be calm and confident and I feel like that is what he is. He is going to grow. I feel like he is going to get better throughout the season."

Rudolph is stepping in to the spotlight in a similar way that Roethlisberger did 15 years ago, when he played in his first NFL game in Week 2 and started his first NFL game in Week 3 of the 2004 season, stepping in for an injured Tommy Maddox.

"He steps in and does what he is told. He puts in film work. When his number is called, he is ready to go," said James Washington, who was one of Rudolph's primary targets when the two played at Oklahoma State. "What he does in practice he

takes to the game. He watches film and studies and studies. What he sees from that week of preparation you see him doing that in the game."

"We all have faith in him. We are going to continue to make plays for him. He has to get in there and get comfortable. We have faith in him. We just have to make plays and help him feel comfortable in the pocket. We have the guys around here to do it. We will be all right."

It is going to be an adjustment, though. Roethlisberger is the longest-tenured player in Steelers history in his 16th season as the team's quarterback. He is a team captain because he is a leader and that will be missed on the field.

"It's unfortunate," said Smith-Schuster. "You have a quarterback like that, a Hall of Fame quarterback, a great leader, role model for our team. He taught me so much as a person on and off the field. He made me a better player."

"As a team we just have to play better. Yes, number 7 is a huge factor in our offense, he makes our offense go. But having number 2 back there it's not going to change. We are still going to play the way we play and go hard every day."



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STEELERS ROSTER

(Listed numerically by position; as of Oct. 1)

QUARTERBACKS

NO.	NAME	HT.	WT.	EXP.	COLLEGE
2	Mason Rudolph	6-5	235	2	Oklahoma State
6	Devlin Hodges	6-1	210	R	Samford

RUNNING BACKS

24	Benny Snell Jr.	5-10	224	R	Kentucky
30	James Conner	6-1	233	3	Pittsburgh
38	Jaylen Samuels	6-0	225	2	N.C. State
45	Roosevelt Nix	5-11	248	5	Kent State

WIDE RECEIVERS

10	Ryan Switzer	5-8	185	3	North Carolina
11	Donte Moncrief	6-2	216	6	Mississippi
13	James Washington	5-11	213	2	Oklahoma State
18	Diontae Johnson	5-10	183	R	Toledo
19	JuJu Smith-Schuster	6-1	215	3	USC
80	Johnny Holton	6-3	190	3	Cincinnati

TIGHT ENDS

81	Zach Gentry	6-8	265	R	Michigan
88	Nick Vannett	6-6	261	4	Ohio State
89	Vance McDonald	6-4	267	7	Rice

OFFENSIVE LINEMEN

53	Maurkice Pouncey	6-4	304	10	Florida
66	David DeCastro	6-5	316	8	Stanford
67	B.J. Finney	6-4	318	4	Kansas State
68	Garrett Brumfield	6-4	302	R	LSU
71	Matt Feiler	6-6	330	3	Bloomsburg (Pa.)
72	Zach Banner	6-8	360	2	USC
73	Ramon Foster	6-5	328	11	Tennessee
74	Fred Johnson	6-7	326	R	Florida
76	Chukwuma Okorafor	6-6	320	2	Western Michigan
78	Alejandro Villanueva	6-9	320	5	Army

DEFENSIVE LINEMEN

NO.	NAME	HT.	WT.	EXP.	COLLEGE
79	Javon Hargrave	6-2	305	4	South Carolina State
91	Stephon Tuitt	6-6	303	6	Notre Dame
93	Daniel McCullers	6-7	352	6	Tennessee
94	Tyson Alualu	6-3	304	10	California
96	Isaiah Buggs	6-3	295	R	Alabama
97	Cameron Heyward	6-5	295	9	Ohio State

LINEBACKERS

26	Mark Barron	6-2	230	8	Alabama
44	Tyler Matakevich	6-1	235	4	Temple
48	Bud Dupree	6-4	269	5	Kentucky
51	Jayrone Elliott	6-3	255	3	Toledo
54	Ulysees Gilbert III	6-0	230	R	Akron
55	Devin Bush	5-11	234	R	Michigan
56	Anthony Chickillo	6-3	255	5	Miami (Fla.)
90	T.J. Watt	6-4	252	3	Wisconsin
92	Olasunkanmi Adeniyi	6-1	248	1	Toledo
98	Vince Williams	6-1	233	7	Florida State

DEFENSIVE BACKS

20	Cameron Sutton	5-11	188	3	Tennessee
22	Steve Nelson	5-11	194	5	Oregon State
23	Joe Haden	5-11	195	10	Florida
25	Artie Burns	6-0	197	4	Miami (Fla.)
28	Mike Hilton	5-9	184	3	Mississippi
29	Kameron Kelly	6-2	205	1	San Diego State
31	Justin Layne	6-2	192	R	Michigan State
34	Terrell Edmunds	6-1	217	2	Virginia Tech
37	Jordan Dangerfield	5-11	199	3	Towson
39	Minkah Fitzpatrick	6-1	207	2	Alabama

SPECIALISTS

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

RESERVE LISTS

7	QB Ben Roethlisberger (IR)	6-5	240	16	Miami (Ohio)
21	S Sean Davis (IR)	6-1	202	4	Maryland
50	LB Ryan Shazier (PUP)	6-1	230	5	Ohio State

STEELERS COACHING STAFF

Mike TomlinHead coach
John MitchellAssistant head coach
Randy FichtnerOffensive coordinator/quarterbacks
Keith ButlerDefensive coordinator
Danny SmithSpecial teams coordinator
James DanielTight ends
Eddie FaulknerRunning backs
Adrian KlemmAssistant offensive line
Shaun SarrettOffensive line
Ray Sherman.....Interim wide receivers

Tom BradleyDefensive backs
Karl DunbarDefensive line
Jerry OlsavskyInside linebackers
Teryl AustinSenior defensive assistant/secondary
Garrett GiemontStrength and conditioning
Denzel MartinCoaching assistant
Blaine Stewart.....Coaching assistant
Matt SymmesCoaching assistant
William GayCoaching intern

Hall of Honor Class of

By JIM WEXELL | Associate Editor

There's really not the time or room for wordy introductions, so let's get right to the stories that make up the great men of the Pittsburgh Steelers' 2019 Hall of Honor class:

LARRY BROWN

Start with the biggest surprise. After all, the tight end-turned-right tackle for the 1970s Steelers dynasty was never an All-Pro. And the only time Pro Football Hall of Fame had ever been mentioned in conjunction with Brown is when his coach, Chuck Noll, said that's where Brown belongs.

"That is remarkable," said Brown. "That was probably good enough — in terms of having played for him and knowing what he was looking for in players — hearing that from him was quite an honor."

Brown had just left the funeral for former line-mate Sam Davis, so he reflected with a tinge of melancholy on what the honor meant.

"I didn't expect it. And I was very honored," Brown said. "It really kind of does make you think as you start to feel good and honored by it, just thinking, 'Oh, my, I know other people who were great players — as good as I've seen — who have not gotten the recognition.' I'm appreciative and honored by it, but I know some good teammates who certainly were incredible players and certainly deserve recognition."

Like Davis?

"No question," Brown said. "And not just Sam. But it was something that really had me thinking."

Brown spent 14 seasons with the Steelers after being drafted in the fifth round of the 1971 draft out of Kansas. He was a tight end who caught a 4-yard touchdown pass from Terry Bradshaw in Super Bowl IX. He caught 48 passes for 636 yards and 5 touchdowns in his career, but was moved to tackle prior to the 1977 season, and that's where he excelled. Brown was a dominant right tackle and was named to the Pro Bowl in 1977, 1978 and 1982. He retired following the 1984 season.

Why was he moved from tight end?

"Chuck called me into his office," Brown said. "I was rehabbing some knee issues and wasn't ready to go and participate in the rigors of running routes and doing the tight end requirements. So he said, 'What I want you to do is when you come to camp, I want you to start out with the tackles and learn their plays, get familiar with what they're doing. And then as you get healthy, we'll go from there.'"



2019

"So, that's what I did. I went with the tackles and for the first few weeks I was with the tackles learning what they were doing and going to the meetings. At a certain point, as I got healthy, I started to take some reps. They traded the starting tackle away. I fell into the position. And then I never went back to tight end."

As part of only the third class to enter the Hall of Honor, Brown already is the 14th player from those 1970s championship teams to be inducted.

Was it the greatest team of all time?

"Well, I'll tell you what," Brown said with a chuckle, "when you start crowning yourself, that's probably not a good thing to do. That's for somebody else to do. But what I can tell you, I don't know that I've seen a collection of better players, more skilled players, more talented players, more committed players, than the guys I played with. And I say that with all sincerity. I kind of have a sense of what's hype and what's reality, and the reality is I haven't seen a better collection of players on a team."

BILL COWHER

The unprecedented success of Noll and the 1970s Steelers teams surely didn't ease the pressure on Noll's successor.

But Bill Cowher immediately grabbed the game by the throat. He put the Steelers into the playoffs in 1992, into the AFC Championship Game in 1994, and into the Super Bowl in 1995.

And then, the city waited for its Lombardi through another three AFC Championship Games before that golden 2005 season when Cowher led the Steelers to the winner's circle.

Cowher retired after the following season with a career record of 149-90-1. His winning percentage of .623 ranks seventh all time among coaches with 200 or more games.

Is it too obvious to ask about his greatest moment?

"You can ask it," said Cowher, "but I'll give the obvious answer: Certainly that Sunday afternoon in Detroit, winning that. I think the one moment I will always remember is being able to hand that trophy to Dan Rooney. That really meant a lot to me. Through all the years, 14 years, of being there, the faith he had in me, the support I got from that organization, from top to bottom, will never be forgotten."

"And not just as a coach. He made me a better



Hall of Honor photos by REBECCA MEHLING and KARL ROSER



See HALL OF HONOR, page 29



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person, the values of family, just the legendary history of that organization, to be able to hand him that trophy that had been sought after for so long, the one for the thumb, to hand that to him, that meant a lot to me and I will always remember that moment."

Even with a young quarterback, Cowher coached only one more season before joining CBS as a game-day studio analyst.

Why?

"It just, for whatever reason, seemed appropriate for our family at the time, just to take a step back," he said. "I had done it for a long time. It totally occupied my life and I just think being able to step down and still have the platform I had at CBS was an opportunity to just sit back and reflect and, at that point, accept a new challenge.

"I didn't know what it was going to entail. I didn't go in there with any preconceived thoughts. But as I sit here 13 years later I have no regrets whatsoever. I've been able to do things that, had I stayed in coaching, I would not have been able to do — in terms of traveling and experiencing things that the

grind of being an NFL coach would not allow you to do, like having an offseason where you can travel and spend time with five grandkids that I'm so blessed to be able to enjoy. I got remarried after my wife passed away. She's a musician. It's really been a very wholesome life I'm living right now, a lot more balance than I've ever had before."

ELBIE NICKEL

The late Dan Rooney was proud of the "stitchery" he had placed on the wall visitors see as they ascend to the front offices of the Steelers' UPMC Rooney Sports Complex.

The building is new, but the play that's embroidered on the tapestry is almost as old as the Steelers themselves. It featured the late Elbie Nickel, considered the first great tight end in team history.

"We didn't know about it until my dad died (in 2007)," said Elbie's son, Joe Nickel. "I called the Steelers offices to tell them and whoever called back was telling me about that tapestry."

The embroidered play from 1954 occurred when the 3-1 Steelers met the undefeated Eagles. The Steelers held a 3-0 second-half lead on fourth-and-1 at the Philadelphia 40. Quarterback Jim Finks faked a handoff and hit Nickel downfield for a 40-yard touchdown pass. The Steelers won 17-7.

Was Nickel a favorite of Dan Rooney from the 1950s?

"I'm not sure," Joe Nickel said. "But I'm pretty sure he was a favorite of Art Rooney Sr. They used to go every year to Kentucky Derby. My dad would either drive down or pick him up at the airport. The Rooney family had a racehorse they named after my dad, too. My dad had the picture on the wall in his house."

Born in Fullerton, Kentucky, Elbie Nickel was drafted by the Steelers in the 15th round of the 1947 draft out of Cincinnati. He played end from 1947-57 and caught 329 passes for 5,131 yards and 37 touchdowns. He averaged 15.6 yards per catch. All of those numbers were huge for that era, and

See HALL OF HONOR, page 31



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T.J. WATT
LINEBACKER, 90

might explain why he's the first tight end to enter the Steelers Hall of Honor.

"I just assumed Heath Miller was an automatic shoe-in," said Elbie's flattered son Joe. "I saw my dad play, but he retired when I was 10. So I don't remember much from the games, but I've seen some of the tapes of him playing and I was proud to see how really good he was."

Joe Nickel retired in 2010 from his position as athletic director at a Cincinnati-area high school. He said he's most proud of the way his father raised him and his sister, Susan Dean.

"Those things quite often get missed," Nickel said. "He was gone for a while but when he was home he was a parent to us, and a good parent. I know that because I spent 41 years in education, so I know what's out there and what happens with a lot of young people. My sister and I, we're fortunate, so I guess that's what I would say: He was able to play football but still be a quality parent."

HINES WARD

The player Steelers fans are most naturally attracted to is a coach with the New York Jets.

Ward caught 1,000 career passes and won two Super Bowl rings. The fans remember all of that, as well as the ever-present smile behind the facemask.

"A lot of greats have left their marks with this organization and this prestigious honor is something I will always cherish," Ward wrote in an email. "It's very humbling."

Of course, Ward's most satisfying moments had to do with winning championships.

"Winning the Super Bowl (twice) was something I wanted to do for all of our great fans and the great city of Pittsburgh," he wrote. "Winning MVP of SB XL was extra special as it validated me as a player. I was always told what I can't do. That I was too small, not fast enough, not good enough. I am grateful that I was able to be a part of such a special team."

Ward was the second third-round pick by the Steelers in 1997. He came out of Georgia without a defined position, and had even played quarterback for the Bulldogs. But Ward also didn't have an ACL in one of his knees. The doctors learned that at the NFL combine and Ward's stock plummeted. Some chastised the Steelers for taking him as high as they did.

It only added to Ward's drive.

"I think my greatest accomplishment was a culmination of my 14 years as a Steeler," he wrote. "In this day and age, being fortunate to have played for only one organization in my entire NFL career is something I will always cherish. Winning was great. But being a part of a winning and supportive city and unbelievable fan base, an organization that cared for you, and being a part of a band of brothers in my teammates, that will last a lifetime. That's pretty special to me."



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Rudolph, Bush and Vannett

From the notebook of a sportswriter who was able to differentiate a pop pass from a jump pass from a shovel pass in the Monday night win over the Bengals:

- The young-ins in the press box brought up Tim Tebow's name after Mason Rudolph faked a shovel pass and threw a bit of a jump pass to James Conner for the game's first touchdown.
- I — old man — brought up Joe Kapp.
- Even 25 years ago, when I referenced Kapp, my editor cut it because he said no one would know who or what I'm talking about.
- Readers still don't know what I'm talking about, yet I plod onward.
- Age does have its pluses, and one is that I lived through the 1980s. It was mentioned to me the other day that my old editor — who shall remain nameless but who's considered a savant in local media circles — said from his retirement home down south that the Steelers are headed for a dark period.
- We all know that "dark period" is code for the '80s. But I just don't have that same feeling, and Rudolph is a big part of that.
- Rudolph has presence, poise, a strong and accurate arm, a clear vision of what leadership means, and is such a nice guy that we in the media are going to get awfully comfortable with him as Ben Roethlisberger mends.
- Rudolph is exactly the guy I would want waiting in the wings if I were a Steelers decision-maker. But my optimism about this rebuild includes the young defensive pillars at each level: Stephon Tuitt, T.J. Watt, Devin Bush and Minkah Fitzpatrick. The post-dynasty Steelers didn't begin adding those types until 1987 when they drafted Rod Woodson and Greg Lloyd, added Carnell Lake in 1989, and added Levon Kirkland and Joel Steed in 1992.
- Not that every team will have as porous an offensive line as the Bengals, but this defense finally flexed its immense potential. Bush got it rolling by sacking Andy Dalton when it was badly needed.
- The sack occurred after a third-down conversion by the Bengals was followed by a 15-yard completion to Tyler Boyd. It made the crowd so quiet someone said it felt like a Pitt game. But the sack by Bush re-ignited the place.
- Of course, a Steelers carry for no gain was followed by a fumbled 2-yard completion and all of that hot air escaped again. This was not the Monday Night Football of the Lloyd-Kevin Greene days, to be sure.



Rookie linebacker Devin Bush came up with some big plays against Cincinnati.

Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

four mainstays in the Steelers' nickel front are providing outstanding balance. Tuitt leads with 3.5 sacks, followed by Watt and Cameron Heyward with 2.5. Who would you double team?

- By this point, the offense was finding its sea legs. Jaylen Samuels ripped off a 13-yard run, JuJu Smith-Schuster caught an 8-yard pass, James Conner ran for 11 and Diontae Johnson caught a 10-yard pass. Steelers fans shaking their heads during an exasperating first quarter were beginning to think that Rudolph might actually have a few playmakers at his disposal.

- If we're to be patient with a defense that has so much youth at critical positions, the offensive playmakers deserve even more patience because Smith-Schuster is the tenured vet at age 22.

- While Nick Vannett wasn't the dynamic acquisition that Fitzpatrick had been a week earlier, Vannett's value became evident first while leading Conner into the end zone as a blocker and then on the first possession of the second half. Rudolph escaped a sack on second-and-15 and heaved one up for the new tight end. Vannett came back to make a diving catch for a key moment in his second win at Heinz Field in three weeks.

- "That's FUN. It's tough football. We ran the ball hard today," Vannett said with enthusiasm of that RB/TE-oriented drive. "We have to remember this feeling that we have right now, remember how good it is, and get back to work and keep stacking them each week. I remember you guys asking me earlier in the week if I'm worried about the 0-3 start. The team you saw tonight, I don't think you would have thought we were 0-3. We dominated on all sides of the ball tonight. I'm just excited to get back to work and get a little momentum going. I think we're still in the hunt."

- They are. In spite of the worst start imaginable, the Steelers are a game out of first place with a young and exciting set of playmakers on each side of the ball who'll no doubt get better each week.

- Dark times ahead? I just don't buy it. And it's not just a win over the hapless Bengals driving my optimism.

- But the Steelers held the Bengals to a field goal for another critical point in the game. The Steelers responded with 27 points that have yet to be answered.

- Can this defense carry this team? I'm not sure it's mature enough, yet, but I won't rule it out. Against some of the best QBs in the game, and two other solid veterans, the Steelers have 14 sacks, tied for fourth in the league. The Steelers have pass rushers coming from inside and outside, the middle level and the back end. And they have their best coverage group since the Polamalu days. That's exciting.

- Bush's first-series sack revived the stadium, but his first two snaps of the second quarter set up the Steelers' first touchdown. He made a first-down tackle for no gain at the Cincinnati 10 and then broke up a pass over the middle. The third-and-10 failed in two different ways and the Bengals punted from the back of their end zone. The Steelers touchdown came five plays later.

- Bud Dupree's strip-sack was recovered by Watt to set up the next points. Dupree, with two sacks, appears headed for his best season, while all

COMING UP

Sunday, Oct. 6

BALTIMORE AT PITTSBURGH

Time: 1 p.m. (subject to flex scheduling)
Site: Heinz Field
Television: CBS
Series record: Steelers lead 28-22 (including playoffs)
Last meeting: 2018 at Baltimore; Steelers 23, Ravens 16
Series trend: The Steelers have rebounded from a four-game losing streak in the series by winning four of the past five meetings.
Scouting report: Baltimore has looked impressive early in the 2019 season as it tries to repeat as AFC North champion, and a big reason has been the performance of quarterback Lamar Jackson. The Ravens lost some familiar faces on defense with the departures of Terrell Suggs and C.J. Mosley, but there's still plenty of talent on defense and they did add veteran safety Earl Thomas in the offseason. Running back **Mark Ingram** was brought in to help shore up the running game and first-round pick Marquise "Hollywood" Brown has brought some big-play ability at the wide receiver position.
Worth noting: Close games between these teams once again becoming the norm, with six of the past eight meetings decided by seven points or less.



Sunday, Oct. 13

PITTSBURGH AT L.A. CHARGERS

Time: 8:20 p.m. (subject to flex scheduling)
Site: Dignity Health Sports Park
Television: NBC
Series record: Steelers lead 23-10 (including playoffs)
Last meeting: 2018 at Pittsburgh; Chargers 33, Steelers 30
Series trend: The teams have alternated victories in their past four meetings, with the road team winning each of the past three games.
Scouting report: The Chargers came into the 2019 season with high hopes after tying the Patriots and Chiefs for best record in the AFC last year at 12-4, but things have gotten off to a sluggish start in part due to injuries and also due to an inability to hang on to double-digit second-half leads. Philip Rivers remains an effective quarterback and **Keenan Allen** has been one of the most productive wide receivers in the NFL in 2019, but the Chargers played the first month without holdout running back Melvin Gordon, and tight end Hunter Henry, left tackle Russell Okung and safety Derwin James were sidelined by injuries.
Worth noting: Since an 11-10 Steelers victory in 2008, each team has scored 28 points or more in three of the past five games and at least 20 points every time.

2019 REGULAR SEASON SCHEDULE

Sept. 8	at New England	L, 3-33
Sept. 15	SEATTLE	L, 26-28
Sept. 22	at San Francisco	L, 24-20
Sept. 30	CINCINNATI (Mon.)	W, 27-3
Oct. 6	BALTIMORE	1 p.m.*
Oct. 13	at L.A. Chargers	8:20 p.m.*
Oct. 20	Bye week	
Oct. 28	MIAMI (Mon.)	8:15 p.m.
Nov. 3	INDIANAPOLIS	1 p.m.*
Nov. 10	L.A. RAMS	4:25 p.m.*
Nov. 14	at Cleveland (Thu.)	8:20 p.m.
Nov. 24	at Cincinnati	1 p.m.*
Dec. 1	CLEVELAND	4:25 p.m.*
Dec. 8	at Arizona	4:25 p.m.*
Dec. 15	BUFFALO	1 p.m.*
Dec. 22	at N.Y. Jets	1 p.m.*
Dec. 29	at Baltimore	1 p.m.*

*-Game subject to flex scheduling

SNEAK PEEK



MONDAY NIGHT MATCHUP — The Steelers will return from their bye for their second Monday night game of the season when they play host to the Miami Dolphins on Oct. 28. The Dolphins, who clearly are in a rebuilding mode, turned to 2018 Arizona Cardinals first-round pick **Josh Rosen** at quarterback after an 0-2 start that included losses by scores of 59-10 and 43-0.

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