

**INSIDE:** Skipper and Barron's inspiring journeys • Steelers at 7-5 and in playoff hunt

VOLUME 32 • NUMBER 9  
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# Steelers

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE PITTSBURGH STEELERS

**DIGEST**



## COMING UP BIG

Washington's TD catch helps spark win over Browns







**THICK  
RICH  
DELICIOUS**

**NOTHING ELSE TASTES LIKE**



# Washington, Snell stepping up

It is 12 games into the 2019 regular season, and as improbable as it is, the Steelers are in the AFC playoff picture. They are in the playoff picture despite having played all but six quarters of said regular season without Ben Roethlisberger but with offensive personnel and a scheme crafted specifically to maximize his skill set. They have had to adapt on the fly, without a training camp to formulate a new plan and without a preseason to serve as a proving ground both for that plan and for the players to be charged with implementing it.

On Dec. 1 at Heinz Field, the Steelers took care of some important items of business, chief among those being their 20-13 victory against the Cleveland Browns. That was Job 1 because the business of professional football is winning, and this particular win preserved their spot as the current sixth seed in the AFC and all but eliminated their vanquished division rivals from the competition. The sweetener was that the victory sent a message to the team from Northeast Ohio that there is a significant difference between being favored to beat the Steelers at Heinz Field and actually defeating the Steelers at Heinz Field.

But beyond the mathematics of being 7-5 because of the victory, a couple of things happened over the course of that game to advance the Steelers further along in the process of being what they're going to need to be to continue their quest for a spot in the postseason. Among those things were finding a go-to receiver and a No. 1 running back, and by the end of their win against the Browns, James Washington and Benny Snell had stated rather compelling cases to have their names attached to those roles.

At different times so far this season, the receivers who may have been doing enough to be open had Roethlisberger still been the starting quarterback have had trouble creating the kind of separation necessary for the passing game to be successful with Mason Rudolph or Devlin Hodges at the position instead. JuJu Smith-Schuster is a proven commodity at wide receiver, but the combination of a concussion and a knee injury sustained against the Browns has removed him from the picture for the last couple of weeks, and the same goes for running back James Conner and the injured shoulder that has sidelined him for four of the last five games.

Both Pro Bowl players with Roethlisberger



healthy, Smith-Schuster and Conner have had some difficulty re-establishing themselves as that with him on injured reserve.

Just like the Steelers needed someone to step in for Roethlisberger, they needed guys to take over for Smith-Schuster and Conner, at least in the short term, because there are only a limited number of NFL games that can be won without a professional-caliber offense. Enter Washington and Snell. And what adds more credence to their claims on those important roles is that against the Browns wasn't the first time they performed to the level of those job descriptions.

In Cincinnati the previous week, Washington made a big play almost immediately after Coach Mike Tomlin made the switch from Rudolph to Hodges early in the third quarter. He caught a pass over the middle in stride, used a stiff-arm to plant B.W. Webb on the turf and completed the 79-yard catch-and-run for the touchdown that gave the Steelers a lead three plays after a change at quarterback and a burst of confidence that it was the right move at the correct time.

In that same game, Snell had 98 yards on 21

**Rookie Benny Snell's emergence provided a big boost in the absence of running back James Conner.**

Digest Photo/REBECCA MEHLING

carries, with a 21-yard burst setting up a Chris Boswell field goal, and then a 13-yard gain inside the two-minute warning in which he had the presence of mind to stay in bounds and give himself up before crossing the goal line to keep the clock running and send the Steelers into victory formation.

Against the Browns, both players built upon their resumes.

Washington made a 31-yard combat catch down the left sideline early in the second quarter that converted a third-and-9 and sent the Steelers toward their first score of the game — a 39-yard field goal by Chris Boswell that cut the Browns' lead to 10-3. And then on the Steelers' next possession, Washington made another combat catch in the end zone for the tying touchdown despite pass interference by cornerback T.J. Carrie.

Snell's contributions were 63 yards rushing on 16 carries, a 1-yard touchdown that came on the heels of

Washington's catch to give the Steelers a lead they would not surrender, and to help make sure it was a lead they would not surrender he got the team out of a deep hole with an 11-yard run on first-and-10 from its own 1-yard line with 5:35 remaining in the game.

Over the last two weeks, the contributions by Washington and Snell have given the offense some traction as it continues to search for ways to complement a defense that is championship-caliber. And to use numbers to support that statement, in the first 10 full games the team has had to play this season without Roethlisberger, the unit was first in the NFL in takeaways with 28; first in hits on the quarterback with 78; first in passes defended with 65; first in forced fumbles with 17; first in fumble recoveries with 13; second in interceptions with 15; second in sacks with 38; and tied for third in defensive touchdowns with three.

Clearly, the defense is able to hold up its end. And based on the last two games, strides are being made toward finding answers to the issues at wide receiver and running back, too.



# INSIDE

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**DEVOTED TO DUCK:** Quarterback Devlin “Duck” Hodges clearly had his share of supporters at Heinz Field when the Steelers faced the Cleveland Browns in Week 13.

Digest Photo/ARRON ANASTASIA

## ON THE COVER

Wide receiver James Washington’s touchdown catch started the Steelers’ comeback from a 10-0 deficit and helped them to a critical victory against the AFC North rival Cleveland Browns.

Cover Photo/KARL ROSER

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## NEXT ISSUE

The next issue of *Steelers Digest* will be printed and mailed in mid-December. It will include a complete recap of the Steelers’ games against the Arizona Cardinals and Buffalo Bills, as well as analysis on all the latest developments involving the Steelers.



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# Breaking down the big victory against Cleveland, the performance of Hodges, and the work of Snell

It feels good to win always, but it definitely feels good to win when you are faced with adversity in terms of people available to you. There's just less margin for error. Not that we feel like we are incapable, we just realize we have to play closer to optimum level. They did what they needed to do tonight.

I thought particularly in the second half at half-time, we didn't want to talk too much specifics. We felt like we needed to minimize their run in the second half more than we did in the first half and we needed to run it better than we did in the first half. We felt like even though it was 10-10 at the half, they had won the line of scrimmage. They had more significant run plays, they had control of the time of possession. We needed to flip that. We felt like if we could flip that, we could stay away from negativity on offense, and we could create some negativity for them on defense and really that is what transpired.

The guys deserve the credit. They made the necessary plays. Can't say enough about the efforts of a lot of people, but that is team. We are looking to strike a blow for team in these circumstances to stand up for the game of football and team and prove that guys can make plays when given an opportunity. One man's misfortune is another man's opportunity. The standard is the standard. And they made all those clichés, if you will, true. So, I am appreciative of that. It is good to get a win in AFC North ball. Excited about it.

## Q. What did you think of your defense and making the big play when it mattered most?

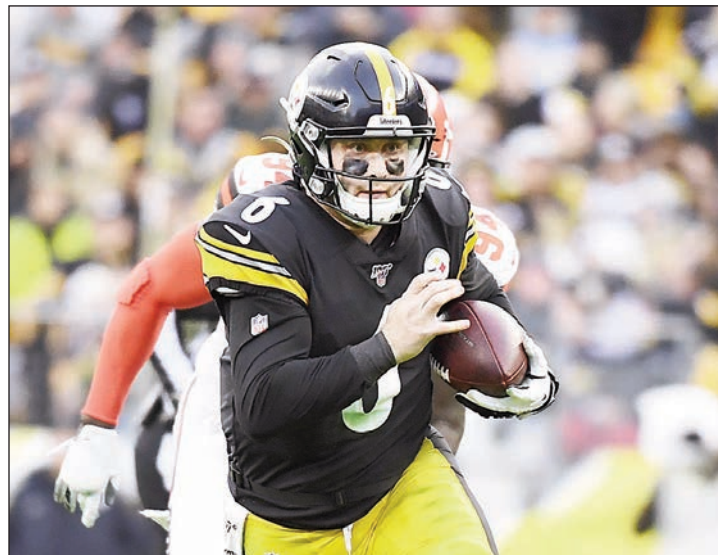
They had to. They were aware that it was going to come down to those moments for us this week, and they had to deliver it. So, they went about preparing with that in mind and they were able to do it.

## Q. Was it satisfying that Cleveland had almost all of their starters and you had some injuries, yet you still won?

It is not about what Cleveland had. I am proud because of the circumstances that we were under. This time of year, forget the opponent. They are nameless, gray faces. It is about you being able to execute your plan to a level that allows you to win games. I want to keep the focus on our guys and what they did.

## Q. How did you think Devlin Hodges played?

He didn't kill us.



Quarterback Devlin Hodges turned in a gutsy performance against Cleveland.

Digest Photo/REBECCA MEHLING

## Q. That completion to James Washington at midfield seemed to be what settled him down?

Yeah, it takes a splash play to create that rhythm, if you will. And not only for the offense, I thought that play meant something for the defense. When you are on the sideline supporting your teammates and you see they are capable of moving the ball, that inspires you. I thought it uplifted all of us.

## Q. What have you seen from Benny Snell?

He is a guy who gets better as the game goes on. He has the mentality of a featured runner. He likes the grit associated with the volume of carries. I think he gets better as the game goes on. None of that is surprising to us. We saw it on Kentucky tape, but it is good that he can take it to Sunday stadiums.

## Q. Devlin Hodges lived a little dangerously at times; what did you think of his performance?

I thought he played his tail off. Without over-analyzing it, just a general synopsis, I thought he played his tail off.

## Q. Did you spend a lot of time with him this week getting him ready?

I did not. I wanted him to know I had confidence in him, and I thought extra time and extra points of emphasis and more dialogue than normal would

prove to him that I didn't. I was very conscious of my interactions with him. It was no more than normal because I wanted him to know that we had real confidence in him.

## Q. Where did you have more confidence in Devlin Hodges this week than the game against the Chargers?

I had more confidence in him today than I did against the Chargers because our relationship is born out of our shared experiences. We had the experience of what he did in the Chargers game in our back pocket, and that probably produced (what happened) today. And that is not only for him but for anybody. The more shared experiences you have, the more level of confidence in terms of what you can anticipate getting. And that is just football. It is reasonable to expect all these guys to evolve, to continually get better and to continually provide a more consistent above-the-line effort, and I thought that is what he is doing, but it is just on a small body of work. There is not a lot of space for comfort there, but we are not seeking it.

## Q. Do you think you did a good job of controlling the emotions of what happened at the end of the last game against these guys?

We weren't concerned about it, to be quite honest with you. We were about beating them today. That is how you deal with some of that stuff. You beat them.





# HERE'S THE PLAN

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**BAKER BEAR HUG:** The Steelers defense once again came up big in the rematch with the Cleveland Browns, and this sack of quarterback Baker Mayfield by linebacker Bud Dupree was just one example.

Digest Photo/DAVE ARRIGO



**1:17 p.m. – What Went Wrong:** Yes, the Steelers forced the Browns to settle for a red zone field goal after initially having a first-and-5 at the 6-yard line, but along the way Cleveland converted two separate third-and-long situations. The first of those was a third-and-7 when Baker Mayfield completed a 19-yard pass to Jarvis Landry, and the second came on a third-and-14 when Mayfield completed a 15-yard pass to Landry that initially was ruled incomplete before being overturned on replay. Austin Seibert's 31-yard field goal gave the Browns a 3-0 lead with 7:31 remaining in the first period.

**1:23 p.m. – What Went Wrong:** The Steelers offense was only on the field for three plays, and none of them were particularly impressive. After a 34-yard kickoff return by Kerrith Whyte, Jaylen Samuels gained 3 yards on a first-down run, and Benny Snell gained a yard on second down. On third-and-7, Chad Thomas beat RT Matt Feiler to the outside and sacked Devlin Hodges for a 13-yard loss. After Jordan Berry's punt, the Browns' second possession began at their 26-yard line.

**1:30 p.m. – What Went Right:** The Browns converted a third-and-1 on a quarterback sneak, but when they faced a third-and-3, an attempted shovel pass to Kareem Hunt was stuffed by Vince Williams for a 2-yard loss. After Jamie Gillan's punt, the Steelers took possession at their 15-yard line with 57 seconds left in the first quarter.

**1:52 p.m. – What Went Wrong:** Cleveland extended its lead to 0-0 with 7:40 remaining in the

first half when a 15-yard pass to Kareem Hunt capped a 10-play, 70-yard touchdown drive. On the 15-yard pass to Kareem Hunt for the touchdown, Mark Barron vacated the middle of the field to cover Nick Chubb out of the backfield and that was where Hunt caught the pass before running the rest of the way into the end zone.

**2:07 p.m. – What Went Right:** The Steelers cut into the Browns lead with a 39-yard field goal from Chris Boswell, but it seemed as though the possession could have been more. Devlin Hodges got Sheldon Richardson to jump into the neutral zone at the start of a play that ended up being a 31-yard pass to James Washington down the sideline. Diontae Johnson gained 17 yards on a reverse, and Jaylen Samuels gained 12 yards on two carries out of the Wildcat. But after a bad call on a false start on Devlin Hodges, the Steelers eventually faced a third-and-9 from the 21-yard line. Benny Snell failed to pick up a blitz, and Hodges threw the ball out of bounds to prevent a loss. It was 10-3 with 2:56 left in the first half.

**2:20 p.m. – What Went Right:** It started with the defense recording a three-and-out following Chris Boswell's field goal, and then Devlin Hodges completed 4-of-5 for 69 yards and a 30-yard touchdown to James Washington that tied the game, 10-10, with one minute left in the first half. A 28-yard pitch-and-catch from Hodges to Tevin Jones was a pretty play, and Hodges pass to Washington was a great catch despite interference from T.J. Carrie.

**2:54 p.m. – What Went Right:** The Steelers

took their first lead of the game when Devlin Hodges directed a seven-play, 69-yard drive that ended with a 1-yard run by Benny Snell for the touchdown that made the score 17-10 with 10:36 remaining in the third quarter. Hodges completed passes of 15 yards to Jaylen Samuels and 44 yards to James Washington. A pass in the end zone for Deon Cain ended with a pass interference call on Denzel Ward that put the ball on the 1-yard line.

**3:07 p.m. – What Went Right:** The Steelers defense recorded its first takeaway of the afternoon on a second-and-10 with about five minutes left in the third quarter. Bud Dupree sacked Baker Mayfield for a 6-yard loss and forced a fumble that Cam Heyward recovered to give the Steelers possession at the Cleveland 46-yard line.

**3:19 p.m. – What Went Right:** The Steelers used a 10-play drive that consumed 6:01 of game time to extend their lead to 20-10 on a 29-yard field goal by Chris Boswell, but because they had a first-and-goal at the 9-yard line there was a sense it could have yielded more. On the first play after Cam Heyward's fumble recovery, Benny Snell ran for 14 yards, and Devlin Hodges later converted a third down with a 9-yard scramble. But on third-and-goal from the 3-yard line, Hodges lost 8 yards on what appeared to be a designed run around left end.

**3:38 p.m. – What Went Wrong:** The Browns needed only 2:48 of game time to cut the Steelers lead to 20-13 with 7:30 remaining in the fourth quarter as the result of a 34-yard field goal by Austin Seibert. On the seven-play, 61-yard drive,

Benny Snell's 1-yard touchdown run in the third quarter gave the Steelers a lead they would never relinquish.

Digest Photo/ARRON ANASTASIA





Baker Mayfield completed pass of 13 yards to Odell Beckham, 21 yards to Nick Chubb, and 23 yards to Demetrius Harris. Cam Heyward and Bud Dupree shared a sack on third down to force the field goal.

**3:43 p.m. – What Went Wrong:** On the Steelers’ first play following the field goal, Devlin Hodges overthrew Diontae Johnson down the left sideline, and he just stopped running. The ball was intercepted by Terrence Mitchell and returned 28 yards to the Pittsburgh 30-yard line.

**3:47 – What Went Right:** The Steelers defense rose up and kept the Browns off the scoreboard following the interception by Terrence Mitchell. After an incomplete pass, and a completed pass to Kareem Hunt for no gain, Javon Hargrave sacked Baker Mayfield for an 8-yard loss. The Browns lined up as if to attempt a field goal but punted the ball instead. The ball was downed at the 1-yard line with 5:35 remaining.

**4:10 p.m. – What Went Right:** On second-and-5 from the 40-yard line with 1:17 left and the Browns out of timeouts, Baker Mayfield’s pass for Jarvis Landry was high and wide, and Joe Haden made the interception. Ballgame.

Linebacker Bud Dupree forced a fumble when he sacked Baker Mayfield in the third quarter, and Cam Heyward recovered the loose ball to end a Cleveland threat.

Digest Photo/DAVE ARRIGO



## STEELERS DIGEST | PLAYER OF THE WEEK



Digest Photo/REBECCA MEHLING

### vs. Cleveland

#### DEVLIN HODGES QUARTERBACK

The Steelers needed a victory against the Browns at Heinz Field, and they got it. What they also got was the kind of performance from their quarterback they were going to need to achieve the day’s goal.

Devlin Hodges made his second career start, and against a Browns team that had defeated the Steelers 17 days ago in Cleveland by intercepting four passes, he completed 14 of 21 (67 percent) for 212 yards, with one touchdown, one interception, and a rating of 95.7. He also had a 9-yard run that converted a critical third down in the second half. Hodges is the *Steelers Digest* Player of the Week.



# Haden helps finish the Browns

By JIM WEXELL

Associate Editor

Pittsburgh finished it.

An even better T-shirt might say something like this:

Joe Haden finished it.

The former Browns cornerback finished the Cleveland Browns, so it was only fitting.

The Steelers rallied to beat the Browns, 20-13, in what loomed as a potentially volatile rematch of a game in Cleveland two weeks ago that ended in an ugly melee.

The Browns won, and for some odd reason wanted to blame the loss of their madman defensive end, Myles Garrett, on Mason Rudolph, and thus the "Pittsburgh started it" T-shirt worn in public by Browns coach Freddie Kitchens.

The Browns jumped out to a 10-0 lead, while the Steelers and their practice squad offense had gained 18 yards.

They were facing a third-and-9 from their own 18 on their third possession and looked dead in the water. But Duck Hodges took advantage of an off-sides Browns defender and heaved the ball to James Washington for a 31-yard gain.

All of the sudden, the Steelers were showing life, and the Steelers were back to life.

"It sparked the offense," said Washington. "It got us all going. Then after that we got Diontae (Johnson) with the run he had. From there on we were just hitting on all cylinders."

The Steelers scored the game's next 20 points as the defense held Baker Mayfield and the explosive Browns playmakers to three points.

"We just wanted to hang in there," said Bud Dupree. "Don't blink, keep going. Coach Tomlin always tells us not to blink. We knew what we were messing up on. It would have been different if we just couldn't stop them at all, but we knew what we were messing up on. We were out of place in the gaps and letting people run free, communication issues, all the stuff we shouldn't have been doing."

By not blinking, and trusting in Hodges, the Steelers held a 20-13 lead when Jordan Berry punted into the end zone. It gave the Browns the ball at their 20 with 1:45 remaining, more than enough time for a team with such an expensive offense.

Here's how the final series broke down:

- On the first play, Mayfield threw over the middle to Jarvis Landry. It was a bit behind Landry and Minkah Fitzpatrick broke it up. But he knew he could have — should have — intercepted the pass.
- On second down, Dupree came roaring around the blind side. "I got outside and came

**Cornerback Joe Haden clinched a key victory against his former team, but he was only worried about the significance of the game for his current team.**

Digest Photo/DAVE ARRIGO



free," Dupree said. "Mayfield still had the ball, so I sped up and hit him to the side. I thought it was a clean hit."

It was.

But then it wasn't.

Referee Clay Martin continued his poor day by flagging Dupree for roughing the passer. Did he explain to Dupree what he had done wrong?

"I didn't even ask," Dupree said. "I put my head on the side, so I don't even know why they called it."

"I think he just hit him too hard," said Vince Williams. "Really."

Dupree said he wasn't concerned about the Browns being gifted a first down at the 35, "because I was going to try to do the same thing next play."

The next play was a quick 5-yard completion to the Cleveland 40, and the Browns had 1:17 left.

- On the third key defensive play of the final Browns possession, Mayfield evaded pressure but overthrew Landry.

Haden, playing as a pseudo safety in a cover-3, dove for the interception to seal the win that virtually knocked one of the most publicized teams of

the offseason, a team that thought it was finally a winning team, to 5-7 and into the back end of the chase for the final AFC playoff spot.

Haden, who was released by the Browns prior to the 2017 season, couldn't think of a better ending to the script.

"No, I honestly couldn't," he said. "I'm very excited about it."

The previous week, Haden missed two chances for interceptions to close out the win over the Cincinnati Bengals, so he stayed late after practices to work on the JUGS machine, so that "if the ball came to me, I was going to be able to catch it."

And he did.

Was it sweeter being able to all but mathematically put an end the Browns' playoff chances?

"I was there for a while, so you want to get back at them," Haden said. "But for the bigger picture, I'm just excited for my team, for my guys. We went down to Cleveland and they got us out of the way, and when you're playing against division opponents you always want to get those wins. I'm just very, very excited I was able to catch the ball."

And finish the Browns.



21

Times in the 21 seasons since the Browns returned to the NFL in 1999 that the Steelers won at least one game against Cleveland. The Browns' last season sweep against the Steelers came in 1988.

12 Consecutive victories for the Steelers at home when facing a starting QB drafted No. 1 overall.

32 Years since an undrafted rookie quarterback had won his first two starts before Delvin Hodges did it. The last to do it was Washington's Ed Rubbert, who won two strike-replacement games in 1987.

111 Receiving yards for James Washington, who recorded his first career 100-yard game.

34 Length of Kerrith Whyte Jr.'s first kickoff return of the game. It was the longest of the season for the Steelers, topping the 26-yard return by Ryan Switzer at New England in the season opener.



Digest Photo/REBECCA MEHLING

6

Consecutive games with at least one full sack for **T.J. Watt**.

5

Sacks for the Steelers, who had four or more sacks in eight of their first 12 games.

58

Rushing yards for Cleveland running back Nick Chubb, a total that represented his lowest output of the season. His previous low was 62 against the New York Jets in Week 2.

96

Total net yards allowed by the Steelers in the second half, 61 of which came on Cleveland's field goal drive in the fourth quarter. The Browns' other four second-half possessions netted 35 yards.

8

Steelers players on the receiving end of

Devlin Hodges' 14 completions: James Washington (4), Vance McDonald (3), Jaylen Samuels (2), Tevin Jones (1), Diontae Johnson (1), Nick Vannett (1), Deon Cain (1) and Benny Snell (1).



 PNC PRESENTS

# HOUSE RULES

## #33:

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

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**DUPREE, SET, MATCH:** Linebacker Bud Dupree clinched the victory against the Cincinnati Bengals when he came up with a strip-sack of quarterback Ryan Finley and recovered the fumble.

Digest Photo/KARL ROSER



**1:09 p.m. – What Went Wrong:** After giving up one first down on Cincinnati's opening possession, the Steelers defense forced a Kevin Huber punt. The kick traveled 52 yards and bounced sideways out of bounds at the Pittsburgh 2-yard line, where the offense began its first possession.

**1:14 p.m. – What Went Right:** The Steelers offense went three-and-out, but the punt team stepped up and made a play. Punting out of his own end zone, Jordan Berry boomed a 60-yard punt, and gunner Justin Layne defeated the guy blocking him and made the tackle on the return for no gain.

**1:31 p.m. – What Went Wrong:** There were a lot of good things that came from a drive that began at the Steelers 25-yard line and moved to a first-and-goal at the 9-yard line, but it ended in a disaster. On third down from that point, the pass protection allowed Carlos Dunlap to penetrate to the point where he was able to hit Mason Rudolph's arm as he was delivering a pass, and the flutterball was intercepted by Shawn Williams inside the 5-yard line and returned to the Bengals 15-yard line. Two plays later, the first quarter ended in a 0-0 tie.

**1:39 p.m. – What Went Right:** The Steelers defense rose up and stuffed the Bengals offense following the interception. The Bengals netting one first down, aided by a pass interference penalty, but on the ensuing three plays, Joe Mixon was dumped for a 2-yard loss, T.J. Watt batted down an attempted screen pass, and Cam Heyward sacked Ryan Finley for a 9-yard loss. Diontae Johnson returned Kevin Huber's 52-yard punt for 7 yards, and the Steelers took over at their 40-yard line with 13:16 left in the second quarter.

**1:48 p.m. – What Went Right:** Jordan Berry's 41-yard punt with no return had the Bengals start at their own 10-yard line. On the first play, Mark Barron sacked Ryan Finley for a loss of 9, and two plays later the Bengals were punting from their own 9-yard line. After the punt and a 4-yard return by Diontae Johnson, the Steelers took over at the Bengals 48-yard line with 8:33 left in the second quarter.

**1:58 p.m. – What Went Right:** The Steelers got on the scoreboard when a 26-yard field goal by Chris Boswell gave them a 3-0 lead with 3:21 remaining in the second quarter. The big plays on the nine-play, 40-yard drive were a 35-yard catch by Deon Cain, who went up over B.W. Webb to make the catch that erased the hole created by a holding penalty on Nick Vannett. Benny Snell helped the cause with a 4-yard run that converted a third-and-3.

**2:07 p.m. – What Went Wrong:** The Bengals struck back with a three-play, 69-yard touchdown drive that was a Tyler Boyd showcase. Boyd first went up over Terrell Edmunds for a 47-yard catch



Wide receiver James Washington scored the only touchdown the Steelers would need when he went 79 yards with a pass from Devlin Hodges.

Digest Photos/KARL ROSER

down to the Steelers 15-yard line, and then on the next play he went up over Joe Haden for the touchdown in the right side of the end zone. The Bengals had a 7-3 lead with 1:55 left in the first half.

**2:25 p.m. – What Went Right:** The Bengals actually were threatening to extend their 7-3 lead after poor pass protection led to Mason Rudolph getting flagged for intentional grounding on a third-and-2. It all boiled down to a third-and-2 for the Bengals at their 42-yard line with 27 seconds left in the first half. Ryan Finley faked a handoff into the line and tried to escape around left end, but Steven Nelson came up and made a crisp tackle in the open field for only a 1-yard gain. The Bengals punted.

**2:41 p.m. – What Went Wrong:** The Steelers took the second half kickoff at their 25-yard line, but things went south immediately when defensive tackle Andrew Billings bulled his way into the backfield and sacked Mason Rudolph for a loss of 13 yards. An incomplete pass on third-and-13 brought on Jordan Berry, and after his 41-yard punt was fair caught, the Bengals started at their 39-yard line.

**2:53 p.m. – What Went Right:** In a decision by Coach Mike Tomlin that paid quick dividends, Devlin Hodges took over at quarterback with 12:36 left in the third quarter, and 86 seconds later, the Steelers led, 10-7. The key play was an on-the-button pass deep over the middle to James Washington, who stiff-armed B.W. Webb to the ground at the 25-yard line and completed the play for a 79-yard touchdown. The Steelers took the lead with 11:10 left in the third quarter.

**3:07 p.m. – What Went Wrong:** The Bengals answered the Steelers touchdown with a 27-yard field goal that tied the game, 10-10, with 5:07 left in the third quarter. It started off with three runs by Joe Mixon that gained 27 yards, and then the Steelers were flagged twice — once for pass interference on Joe Haden and once for illegal hands to the face by Devin Bush.

**3:33 p.m. – What Went Right:** The Steelers took a 13-10 lead with 11:59 left in the fourth quarter on a 47-yard field goal by Chris Boswell that made him 26-for-26 against the Bengals for his career. The big plays on the drive came when cor-



nerback B.W. Webb was called for back-to-back pass interference penalties that gained a total of 34 yards for the Steelers.

**3:43 p.m. – What Went Right:** The play began as a completed pass to Tyler Boyd that was going to move the Bengals inside the Steelers 10-yard line, but Devin Bush punched the ball out, and Minkah Fitzpatrick picked it up just before the ball went out of bounds. Fitzpatrick then tip-toed down the sideline for a 36-yard return that gave the ball to the offense at the 42-yard line.

**4:01 p.m. – What Went Right:** The Steelers extended their lead to 16-10 with a 26-yard field goal by Chris Boswell with 3:18 remaining in the fourth quarter. The key play on the seven-play, 35-yard drive was a 21-yard run by Benny Snell on a third-and-1. The Bengals started at their 21-yard line with one timeout and 3:0 on the clock after the ensuing kickoff.

**4:04 p.m. – What Went Right:** It was a second-and-2 from the Bengals 29-yard line, and Bud Dupree beat his man around the edge and executed a strip-sack on Ryan Finley and he recovered the fumble at the 21-yard line. The Bengals were out of timeouts.

Chris Boswell's two fourth-quarter field goals provided the winning margin for the Steelers.



# STEELERS DIGEST | PLAYER OF THE WEEK

## at Cincinnati

### BENNY SNELL RUNNING BACK

The Steelers came to Cincinnati without having had a 100-yard rusher in quite some time this season, but by the time their 16-10 victory over the Bengals was in the history books, that fact was just a statistical detail. In his first game back after needing surgery to repair a torn meniscus in his knee, Benny Snell carried 21 times for 98 yards, a 4.7 average, and he broke off a couple of critical runs.

One of those was for 21 yards and led to a Chris Boswell field goal that extended the Steelers lead to 16-10, and the second was for 13 yards on a second-and-6 to give the team a first down inside the two-minute warning and sent the offense into victory formation. Snell is the *Steelers Digest* Player of the Week.







79

**Devlin Hodges'** touchdown pass to James Washington was the longest by a Steelers quarterback other than Ben Roethlisberger since Oct. 18, 2015 when Landry Jones had an 88-yard connection with Martavis Bryant.

**160** Rushing yards for the Steelers, their highest total since Oct. 28, 2018 when they had 168 yards against Cleveland.

**38** Rushing attempts for the Steelers, their highest total since Oct. 22, 2017 when they had 43 yards against the Bengals.

**35** Rushing yards for Bennie Snell Jr. on the Steelers' 35-yard field goal drive that made it 16-10 in the fourth quarter. The only other offensive play on the drive was an incomplection.

**21** Yards gained by Kerrith Whyte on his first NFL carry, tying for longest run by a Steelers player in his first career game. The record first was set by quarterback Devlin Hodges earlier this season against the Baltimore Ravens at Heinz Field.

6

Times the Steelers have held Cincinnati under 17 points during their current 10-game winning streak against the Bengals.

18

Career games with three or more field goals for Chris Boswell after he went 3-for-3 against the Bengals.

48.15

Combined completion percentage for Steelers quarterbacks Mason Rudolph and Devlin Hodges, the first time the Steelers were under 50 percent in a game since Nov. 18, 2012 when they completed 46.15 percent (18-of-39) against Baltimore.

7

Games since 2012 where the Steelers have recovered two opponent fumbles in the fourth quarter after Minkah Fitzpatrick and Bud Dupree did it against the Bengals.

10

Third-down stops by the Steelers defense against the Bengals (2-for-12 on third down). It was the third consecutive game the Steelers had 10 or more third-down stops.



# Newcomers make instant impact

By JIM WEXELL  
Associate Editor

Custer could have used this kind of cavalry.

The Steelers made a couple of midseason plucks off opposing practice squads and, at the risk of having to keep them on the 53-man roster for three weeks, Kerrith Whyte and Deon Cain appear to have a chance to become long-term finds.

Both Whyte and Cain played well in minimal playing time against the Cincinnati Bengals after one week of cramming with the Steelers.

They didn't just play well; they made critical plays, starting with Whyte, the speedy rookie running back the Steelers took from the Chicago Bears.

Blocked from the Chicago roster by the NFL's No. 1 kickoff returner (Cordarrelle Patterson), the NFC's No. 1 punt returner (Tarik Cohen) and the NFC's top rookie rusher (David Montgomery), among others, Whyte was grabbed by a Steelers team without James Conner and with Benny Snell coming off an injury.

The Steelers needed more than a body. They needed game-day help.

Whyte, who ran a 4.36 at his Florida Atlantic University pro day, had been brought in for a pre-draft visit by the Steelers, but was drafted in the seventh round by the Bears. When the Steelers claimed Whyte, the Bears attempted to coax him into staying.

"They did," said Whyte. "I just feel this is a great opportunity for me."

Whyte opened eyes on the practice field and was given "a handful of plays" for the Bengals. On his first carry, a play designed to go outside, Whyte turned up the middle and gained 21 yards.

His next carry did go outside behind pulling guard David DeCastro, this time for 16 yards to the Cincinnati 9 in a scoreless game.

Whyte was stopped (by the facemask) for a loss on his next carry, but the penalty wasn't called and two plays later Mason Rudolph was intercepted at the goal line.

Whyte carried three more times and finished with 43 yards on six carries. He also returned a kick-off 15 yards, probably a mistake, but the 5-10, 204-pounder hoped to impress with the speed that gave him a 28.7 average his senior season at FAU and a 27.6 this preseason (103-yarder called back).

"I wouldn't say the transition was hard," Whyte said. "Just something different, something new I haven't done, so it took a little adjustment. I just had to come in and learn the playbook."

Whyte was a backup in college behind Buffalo



Wide receiver Deon Cain (17) and running back Kerrith Whyte (40) made significant contributions in the victory against Cincinnati.

Digest Photos/REBECCA MEHLING

Bills star rookie Devin Singletary and had grown up a Steelers fan in West Palm Beach, Florida. Whyte was excited to learn that one of his favorite players, Willie Parker, also was a college backup.

Parker's Super Bowl-record 75-yard run was made in the first pro game young Whyte ever watched.

"I'm loving Pittsburgh," he said. "The organization is great. Everyone is showing love and good feelings, so I can't complain. I'm happy."

Cain feels the same. The 6-2, 202-pounder was plucked off the Indianapolis Colts' practice squad, and the Colts promised Cain a call-up the following week. But, "when (the Steelers) called I was like, 'Whoa, I'm going to take my chances there.'"

Cain had been the Colts' sixth-round draft pick out of Clemson in 2018. He ran a 4.43 combine 40 and showed the vertical skills necessary to become a deep threat. After an impressive first spring and summer, Cain tore an ACL in his first preseason game and missed his rookie season. He came back this year to make four catches for 52 yards in three starts, but was dropped to the practice squad due to an injury emergency at

another position. The Steelers signed him five days later.

In his first game, at Cincinnati, Cain twisted up and back to snare a deep ball from Rudolph for a 35-yard gain. It set up the Steelers' first points, a field goal, for an early lead. It was the only pass thrown to Cain in his 10 snaps.

"I had another one intended for me, but there was a (pass interference) and I didn't really have anything else," Cain said. "I was open on a lot of plays, but other guys were, too, and you see how we did with that."

Was it a difficult transition?

"Nah, not really," Cain said. "When you really want to be that guy on the team, you want to use that as your motivation because you want the team to know you can pick up something and grasp it as fast as they need. The Steelers didn't throw a lot of stuff at me. They're telling me what I need to learn and I study it overnight. Those are the things I need to know before the next practice, or just in the game plan period."

"They're making it easy for me, transition-wise. That's really good for me. Now I just have to go out there and execute it."





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# Washington, Hodges, Tomlin

From the notebook of a sportswriter who found Sunday's game so fascinating the officiating couldn't even ruin it:

- Well, barely. Can we have another 10-minute committee meeting about an offsides/illegal procedure call?

- The league apparently sent its heavy-handed crew in anticipation of a classless performance by unruly thugs. But, as the Steelers tried to convince reporters all week, the game was too important for either side to devolve into ugliness. It was only the officiating that tried to do that.

- One of the more humorous concerns after the game was from players who refuse to change their superstitions. David DeCastro was asked if he knew all the players on offense. "No. No," he said. "And I'm sticking with my superstitions. I learned them before the last time we lost, so ..."

- So he wasn't going to learn numbers 17, 40, 14 and the rest of those who have been promoted from practice squads of late.

- James Washington was asked if he was going deer hunting this week with Duck Hodges. "Nope. Still duck hunting," Washington said of his new-found Tuesday ritual.

- Washington got the offense rolling with a 31-yard catch on third-and-9 with the Steelers trailing 10-0. With JuJu Smith-Schuster out, Washington has been emerging these last few practice weeks as a legitimate No. 1 receiver. He entered this game off an impressive three-game stretch, and against the Browns his stats line of 4-111-1 drove his month-long numbers up to 16-348-3.

Is he feeling like a true No. 1?

"Honestly, I haven't really thought about it that way," Washington said. "I just try to go out there and do what I can do. I never really think of myself as the 1 guy. We've got guys on this team. Everyone can make a play."

- While Washington made the play that kick-started the offense, and made a 30-yard combat catch between two safeties for the tying touchdown, and beat Denzel Ward for 44 yards to set up the go-ahead touchdown, Washington has yet to show the acrobatic play that's marked his practices of late. Trust that there is more and better to come from him.

- Washington's hunting partner, Hodges, was the other half of the Steelers' passing show that rocked the Browns for 15.1 yards per catch. The undrafted rookie from Samford beat the more cel-



James Washington has really emerged in recent weeks, and he came up with some big plays against the Browns.

Digest Photo/KARL ROSER

See WEXELL, page 20





**Mike Tomlin is in the midst of one of his best coaching jobs since he was hired by the Steelers.**

Digest Photo/REBECCA MEHLING

## WEXELL | FROM PAGE 19

celebrated No. 6, Baker Mayfield, the No. 1 pick of the 2018 draft, on the scoreboard (20-13) and on the stat sheet (95.7 passer rating to 71.9).

- Hodges is often compared by fans to Bubba Brister, who wore No. 6 about 30 years ago and is the same height and carries the same demeanor. But the comp for Hodges that I want to present to you youngsters is Billy Kilmer. It has to do with the wobbly passes and winning with grit. Brister had a much stronger arm than Hodges, but not the easygoing and fun demeanor.

- Kilmer won. And give Hodges another six, seven years and he'll no doubt have the paunch that made Kilmer a working-class hero.

- Hodges is already that in Pittsburgh. Washington was asked if he feels bad about the guy — Mason Rudolph — Hodges has replaced.

"Oh, for sure," Washington said. "It's a tough deal, everything that's happened to him. But he's a tough guy. He's kept his head up. He's been confident. He's right there with Duck. He's helping him

out, and he's helping all of us out. He's a great team player and guy."

- DeCastro may not know all of the new offensive players running in and out of the huddle, but the other guard, Ramon Foster, has kept up.

"I've got to learn more about (Hodges)," Foster admitted. "But I do know the others NOW. I can tell you all the numbers. I know No. 17 is (Deon) Cain, but I've got to learn his first name, and I know 40 is K-Whyte."

- Foster was also asked about the T-shirt worn in public by Browns Coach Freddie Kitchens that said "Pittsburgh started it."

"It was interesting," Foster said. "You just don't see that from upper management. We all gotta grow as professionals in some sense. I'm glad Coach T doesn't do anything like that."

- The brouhaha in Cleveland cost the Steelers their offensive captain the past two weeks, but on one of the bigger plays of the game, Benny Snell ran through a big hole opened up by Pouncey's replacement, B.J. Finney, for an 11-yard run off the

Pittsburgh 1-yard line late in the fourth quarter. It was a critical play, but Finney wouldn't take credit. "The O-line did it," was all he wanted to say about the hole.

- DeCastro helped open the hole. He was asked to help describe the season thus far. "It's been a weird year," he said. "Somehow we're 7-5."

- Yep. Somehow. Aside from winning a Super Bowl with a patchwork offensive line about a decade ago, this is Mike Tomlin's best coaching job. Yet, the complaints continued on social media for: A.) the Steelers not playing hard enough in the first quarter; B.) misuse of timeouts in the first half; and, C.) throwing on the Steelers' final third down instead of running another 40 seconds off the clock.

- But, A.) slow stars are not flat starts; B.) the QB finished the final 1:06 of the half with an abrupt 30-yard TD pass after using two timeouts; and, C.) no one was complaining when the Steelers converted the other two third-down plays on their final drive with passes.

- Face it, Mike Tomlin can coach a bit.



# STEELERS ROSTER

(Listed numerically by position; as of Dec. 2)

## QUARTERBACKS

NO.	NAME	HT.	WT.	EXP.	COLLEGE
2	Mason Rudolph	6-5	235	2	Oklahoma State
5	Paxton Lynch	6-7	244	3	Memphis
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
33	Trey Edmunds	6-2	223	2	Maryland
38	Jaylen Samuels	6-0	225	2	N.C. State
40	Kerrith Whyte	5-10	204	R	Florida Atlantic

## WIDE RECEIVERS

13	James Washington	5-11	213	2	Oklahoma State
14	Tevin Jones	6-2	225	1	Memphis
17	Deon Cain	6-2	202	2	Clemson
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

62	Patrick Morris	6-3	300	1	TCU
66	David DeCastro	6-5	316	8	Stanford
67	B.J. Finney	6-4	318	4	Kansas State
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
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
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
41	Robert Spillane	6-1	229	1	Western Michigan
44	Tyler Matakevich	6-1	235	4	Temple
48	Bud Dupree	6-4	269	5	Kentucky
51	Tuzar Skipper	6-3	246	R	Toledo
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

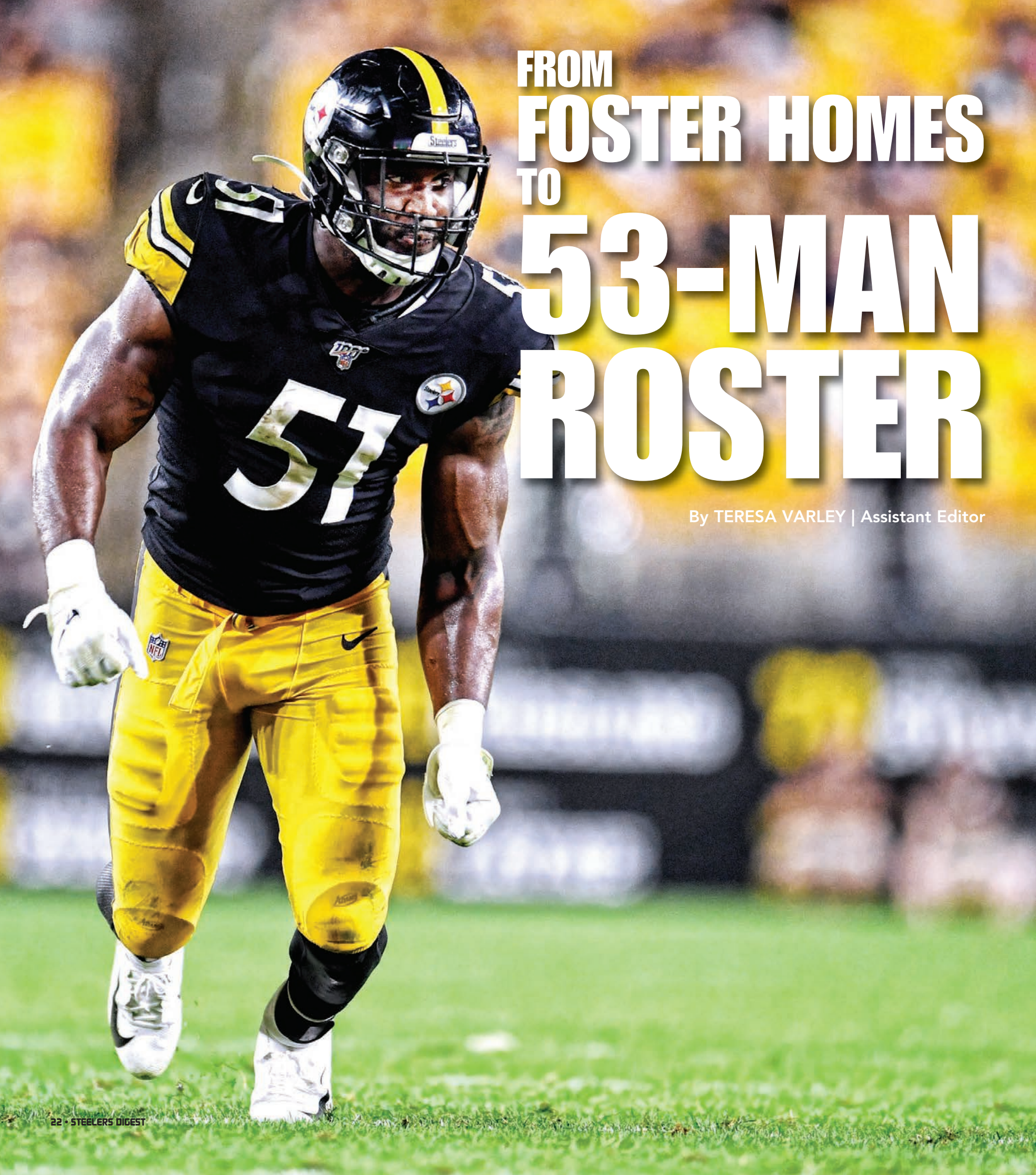
7	QB Ben Roethlisberger (IR)	6-5	240	16	Miami (Ohio)
10	WR Ryan Switzer (IR)	5-8	185	3	North Carolina
21	S Sean Davis (IR)	6-1	202	4	Maryland
45	FB Roosevelt Nix (IR)	5-11	248	5	Kent State
50	LB Ryan Shazier (PUP)	6-1	230	5	Ohio State
53	Maurkice Pouncey (Susp.)	6-4	304	10	Florida
54	LB Ulysees Gilbert III (IR)	6-0	230	R	Akron
91	DL Stephon Tuitt (IR)	6-6	303	6	Notre Dame
95	DL L.T. Walton (IR)	6-5	305	6	Central Michigan

## STEELERS COACHING STAFF

Mike Tomlin .....Head coach  
John Mitchell .....Assistant head coach  
Randy Fichtner .....Offensive coordinator/quarterbacks  
Keith Butler .....Defensive coordinator  
Danny Smith .....Special teams coordinator  
James Daniel .....Tight ends  
Eddie Faulkner .....Running backs  
Adrian Klemm .....Assistant offensive line  
Shaun Sarrett .....Offensive line  
Ray Sherman.....Interim wide receivers

Tom Bradley .....Defensive backs  
Karl Dunbar .....Defensive line  
Jerry Olsavsky .....Inside linebackers  
Teryl Austin .....Senior defensive assistant/secondary  
Garrett Giemont .....Strength and conditioning  
Denzel Martin .....Coaching assistant  
Blaine Stewart.....Coaching assistant  
Matt Symmes .....Coaching assistant  
William Gay .....Coaching intern





FROM  
FOSTER HOMES  
TO  
**53-MAN  
ROSTER**

By TERESA VARLEY | Assistant Editor



Tuzar Skipper came into the small area where team photographer Karl Roser was taking head shots of players during the Steelers rookie minicamp in May.

He extended his hand, and in his deep voice, introduced himself.

"Skipper, correct," Roser repeated.

The rookie there on a tryout basis smiled and nodded his head.

"Yep, like the Skipper of the ship," Skipper said with a smile, which made all of those in the room smile, myself included.

It was that day, that moment when Skipper spoke with confidence in his voice and a strong presence that you had a feeling this guy could be something special, despite the fact that the odds were fully stacked against him.

First, this is a guy who saw player after player selected in the NFL draft while he never heard his name called. Then he saw the names of players who were signed as undrafted free agents. While all he could do was sit, wait and hope. It wasn't easy not being drafted, and not having a team even sign you after the draft was even worse.

"I was very disappointed," said Skipper. "What kid is not disappointed? I would be standing here telling you a fib if I said I wasn't disappointed. I was really disappointed. I didn't let that moment become my future. I said, you have been down before, you have to continue to work. It's all work. It's your mind-set. Are you willing to work? If Plan A isn't going to work out, are you still going to achieve your goals going to Plan B and C?"

With Plan B facing him, he knew he couldn't fail.

He had a few days to compete for his football life, trying to catch the attention of Steelers coaches and scouts during the three-day minicamp while they were also watching players who were either drafted or signed as rookie free agents after the draft.

And he was doing it without a lot of rest. Skipper had a tryout just days earlier with the Kansas City Chiefs, with barely a minute to recover.

"It was a big turnaround, instant," said Skipper. "Kansas City Chiefs rookie minicamp was over Tuesday. I got a call coming out of practice and my agent said, 'Call me ASAP, I want to talk to you.' Then I had a message from (Steelers scout) Dan



Tuzar Skipper went to  
three different elementary schools,  
three middle schools,  
and three high schools.

Colbert. I left Kansas City on Tuesday and was here on Thursday. I didn't have any time to rest. Coming to the Steelers was my third camp in a week. It was getting tiring, but I really wanted it. I didn't care. I was like I am going to do what I can do."

This is a guy who is driven. Driven to make it. Driven to not let this opportunity slip away. He knew failure wasn't an option, despite life setting him up to do just that.

And he didn't fail, instead quite the opposite. Skipper was signed right after rookie minicamp to the team's 90-man roster. And that's where the real work began. The outside linebacker had an uphill

battle in his fight to make the 53-man roster. But he didn't back down. He had a strong training camp, even stronger preseason, and quickly became that player everyone was predicting could beat the odds and make the team.

He, though, was cautious and nervous, especially in the days leading up to the roster cuts.

"It was crazy. Just praying that you make the team," said Skipper. "Praying that you don't get a phone call in that 48-hour period. How ironic is that? The time you don't want to hear anything that is good news. When you do hear something it's bad news."

Skipper got a few calls, but they were from friends, not the dreaded call so many others got. And the silence meant he made the 53-man roster.

"I got a lot of calls," said Skipper. "Especially because I turned my ringer on. And I have a duck ringer, so the duck went off and I was like, oh man. And it was a friend calling. I told him, you can't call me.

"By not having a phone call I knew I made it. At 4 p.m. Saturday I saw my name on the roster, so I knew I made it.

"It's a dream come true. Something you dream about since you are a young kid. In middle school I was saying I am going to play in the NFL. In high school I said I am going to play in the NFL. Not really knowing that it was going to happen. Now it's happened so it's a dream come true."

Sometimes, though, the dream can take a detour. Just a week after making the roster, Skipper was waived because the team wanted to add a receiver to the roster. The plan was to sign him back to the practice squad, but just before the paperwork was signed, he

was claimed by the New York Giants, making their 53-man roster. Skipper was eventually waived by the Giants and re-signed to their practice squad. And that is when his life came full circle. On Nov. 19, Skipper was claimed off the Giants practice squad and signed to the Steelers 53-man roster.

"It's like a dream coming back here," said Skipper. "Happy, happy, happy."

If there is anyone deserving of that dream, of deserving to be happy, it's Skipper.

**See SKIPPER, page 25**





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His childhood was one filled with uncertainty and upheaval, a child constantly on the move, never having the ability to fully feel like he had a home until his senior year of high school.

"It was rough," admitted Skipper. "Foster home to foster home. Group home to group home. It was rough."

"One of my memories that I remember to this day is coming back from two-a-days in high school, and we all know how hard two-a-days are, and it's 9 p.m. and I am going back to a group home to look for some dinner. And all we had was hot dogs and beans. I am grateful for something to eat. But after a long day of work I don't think hot dogs and beans are giving me the recovery I need to get back out there and do the same thing over again tomorrow. It was hard."

It was a life many would have just given up on, figuring the fight wasn't worth it. He went to three different elementary schools, three middle schools, and three high schools. His parents, who are now deceased, were unable to retain custody of him. He remembers living with his grandmother. But foster homes and groups homes were more the norm.

"I just remember being 3 years old and being taken for the first time," said Skipper. "Then I went back and lived with my grandmother until I was 7. They I got taken again. I was with one family from 7 until 15. Then it was time to split ways. I went to South Carolina with my twin brother when I was 16. Then I went back up to Connecticut and Meriden at the end of July, early August and started paying football in 10th grade (at Maloney High School). I liked it and ended up moving to Norwich Free Academy later that year. I got the season done and then moved to Norwich the second semester."

It was while he was at Norwich Free Academy that he met two people who helped change his life, Tim and Kathy Duggan. The Duggans learned of his situation after watching him play high school football, learned he lived in a group home, and they wanted to help. It wasn't easy, but they worked with the Department of Children and Families and with Skipper feeling comfortable with them, they became more than a place to live, they became a family for him his senior year of high school and beyond.

"The last six months of high school I was living with them," said Skipper. "They helped me graduate high school. They have been with me on this journey ever since."

They were with him during his college years as well, from Monroe Junior College to the University of Toledo, where they were regulars at his games. They were among the first people Skipper called when he found out he made the team.

"They deserved it," said Skipper. "They were with me through the ups and downs. I remember going to the Department of Children and Families and they were telling me I couldn't go to college. Now look, I graduated high school, college and am in the NFL."

"It wasn't easy, but we all say God gives his toughest battles to his toughest soldiers. I just think of myself as one of God's toughest soldiers," said Skipper. "It could have been easy. I could have given up. That is not the case. I kept going. I know what I wanted. I know how I want my future to go. I think we are on the right track."

You would expect nothing less from the Skipper of his own ship.



"It wasn't easy, but we all say God gives his toughest battles to his toughest soldiers. I just think of myself as one of God's toughest soldiers."





Growing up in Prichard, Alabama, Mark Barron didn't have someone to look to as an example, someone who could be the person he aspired to be one day.

It didn't deter him from having a dream. And in his mind, a dream that would be a reality one day. The dream was to play football, not just high school or college but in the National Football League.

But where he grew up, in the Bessemer projects, that dream was far from the reality he saw daily.

"Nobody around me ever had made it," said Barron. "Nobody from those projects made it."

"When I was growing up there were a few guys who almost made it but didn't. The one guy I did see, he got kicked out of college. He went to Auburn and got kicked out. That was it."

Barron knew he could have taken the "easy" way out. He knew he didn't have to work at his dream.

That he could have gone down the same path so many of his friends and those he knew took.

"Everybody that I possibly could have looked up to sold drugs," said Barron. "Cousins, even my friends. It doesn't mean they were bad people, but that was the only option they felt like they had."

"All the people I could possibly look up to, nobody did what I was trying to do. I had to go my own way. It was different. Sometimes people didn't understand it. They thought it was weird. That is what I did."

Barron fell in love with football as a kid, playing in the front yard of his grandmother's house, a place he spent a lot of his time while his mother, Michelle Barron, worked to raise four kids.

"My mom raised me. I grew up in a house with two older sisters and a younger brother," said Barron. "We didn't have a lot. She worked hard. She tried. She was just a young girl from the proj-

ects trying to find a way to make it work. She worked her tail off.

"I was with my grandma every day. My mom went to work, we went there."

He would play with whoever was around, all the kids who lived in the projects. The games would normally start in the yard, then spill out on the street, even tackling on the concrete. But he was doing what he loved, so it didn't matter.

The more he played, the more he fell in love with the game. And the more he wanted to live out his dream, to make playing in the NFL a reality.

"I always wanted better for myself and my family," said Barron. "I don't know how that got into me, or where it came from. I thank God for it. I look around at the circumstances and I wanted more for myself and my family."

Knowing he needed more, knowing he needed a place where he could work on the dream, Barron





# BARRON wants to be a LIGHT for others

By TERESA VARLEY | Assistant Editor

went to St. Paul's Episcopal High School where life was far different from the projects.

"You know the movie 'The Blind Side,' where they took the kid to go live with the family. It was similar to that, but I went back to the hood every day," said Barron. "It was like that. I would be at the school practicing all day and separated from my friends. I was there most of the day and then came home. While my friends were doing what they were doing, I was over there working hard and trying to get where I am today."

Barron, who was classmates with A.J. McCarron at St. Paul's, admitted it wasn't easy to see how others lived, what they had that he didn't, but it was a life changer.

"It was tough to see the different side, but it was one of the best things that could have happened to me," said Barron. "My circumstances growing up, I didn't see a lot of success, a lot of hope. I always

believed in myself, but there weren't a lot of things around me to make me feel that way. I just did.

"When I went and saw a different way of living, that was motivation for me. I was like these kids are going to college. I started going to school with kids that knew they were going to college, as opposed to coming from somewhere that I didn't know anyone who went to college.

"It motivated me. I saw a different way of life. They lived in big houses. I was like, is this real? I didn't know people lived like this. It was a motivator for me. Sometimes it got rough, thinking, why didn't we have this or that? But it was a motivator for me."

While it truly was a motivator, something gives you the feeling that Barron didn't need much to motivate him. He always had a strong belief inside that he was going to be the one who made it out of his neighborhood to the NFL. He never doubted

himself. He got a scholarship to Alabama, where he quickly emerged as not just an NFL prospect but a star in the making as a two-time All-American and three-time All-SEC selection.

The dream was becoming reality.

"It was always real to me," said Barron. "It was always the grinding. It was always real. This is what I was always working toward. In my mind it was always real to me. But when I first started, my sophomore year in college, after playing my freshman year, that is when I started to feel like I was getting close to where I wanted to be. I had seven interceptions my sophomore year. I was like I have to keep it going, keep it going."

The dream came to true when he was selected by the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in the first round of

**See BARRON, page 29**





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the 2012 NFL draft, the seventh pick overall. It was more than he could have possibly dreamt about.

But the road wasn't an easy one. Barron was traded by the Buccaneers to the Rams during the 2014 season, something that was unexpected.

He doesn't harbor any ill will, but instead continued to move forward with the right attitude.

"It wasn't easy," said Barron. "In Tampa I had two head coaches in two and a half years. As soon as I got comfortable with one scheme, he got fired. I had to deal with another scheme. I still don't know what happened, why I got traded. It is in the past now. I used to worry about it, because I didn't know why it happened. I thought it was disrespectful the way they made it happen. It wasn't disclosed to me. I didn't know what was going on. I don't know why I got traded. I was always one of the most productive players on the defense.

"Then I went to the Rams. They liked me. They wanted me to play safety, they ended up creating packages for me to get on the field. I got on the field that way. We get into the offseason and I was supposed to compete for the safety job. I end up hurt. We go into the season and they had packages to get me on the field. Then Alec Ogletree got hurt and that is why I play linebacker now. They were already trying to find ways to get me on the field. Someone was down, they thought I was physical enough to do it, so they threw me in there. Ever since then I have been playing linebacker."

Another twist in what the business of football can bring happened after the 2018 season. The Rams released Barron, making him an unrestricted free agent.

"I had been there for a while," said Barron. "I know it's a business and I had been injured a lot. I believe they still wanted me, they thought I would fall back into their hands. I had been injured, I had three surgeries, couldn't practice during the week, just play on Sundays. They felt like they couldn't trust my availability. I understand that. I have no hard feelings.

"I am happy where I am."

In the world of things happened for a reason, Barron signing with the Steelers this offseason as an unrestricted free agent perfectly fit the bill. For the Steelers, they got the player they needed to help solidify the inside linebacker position, a spot where they also drafted Devin Bush in the first round. For Barron it was the opportunity to come to a team that holds the same values he holds close to his heart ... family, faith and football.

"I guess it's meant to be," said Barron. "Those things are what has gotten me to this point. The game of football I love. My family has been one of my biggest motivators. And faith, believing in what God had planned for me and set out for me, and continuing to believe in him, in any tough situation I always fall back on that.



"I could have easily said nobody did this before me, but I found a way. I want to be that face that they know it's possible. Don't give up on yourself. Go find a way. Make it happen. That is a big part of why I do that."

— MARK BARRON ON HIS ANNUAL THANKSGIVING TURKEY GIVEAWAY IN HIS HOMETOWN OF PRICHARD, ALABAMA

"The crazy thing is the first team I ever played football on was the Steelers. I started in black and yellow and I am back in black and yellow."

It's for the kids who now play on that Steelers team, and teams like it, back in Prichard, Alabama that Barron wants to make a difference. He will never forget that he didn't have that person to look up to, so he takes his place in life as a role model seriously. Barron hosts an annual football camp in Mobile, which neighbors Prichard, where kids can attend for free to learn about the game, or simply have fun. It's just part of his mission to give back to his hometown, which also includes an annual turkey giveaway at Thanksgiving, and become a beacon for youth there.

"I know how hard it is coming from those environments where you don't see anybody around you that has had any success," said Barron. "Sometimes it's hard for those kids to believe in themselves. If you don't believe in yourself it's over before you start. Believing in yourself and thinking you can get something done is one of the biggest parts of getting something done. If you don't believe in yourself, you are shooting yourself

before getting something done and you might go do something stupid instead of believing you can do what you want. You might be limited in the resources you have, but you have to believe and go make it happen.

"I could have easily said nobody did this before me, but I found a way. I want to be that face that they know it's possible. Don't give up on yourself. Go find a way. Make it happen. That is a big part of why I do that.

"I wish I had that as a kid, to go see someone who is actually in the NFL. They think it is cool. They are having fun. They are just out there running around. Sometimes they don't even know what is going on, they are just out there having fun. It's just the tip of the iceberg. There is so much more stuff I want to do. I just have to figure out how I want to do it. I want to be that guy. I want to be that face. I want to be the motivator for those inner city kids that might not see the things around them, might not see any glimmer of light around them. Everything around them might be messed up.

"I want to be that light for them."





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# Three Steelers HOF semifinalists

By **TERESA VARLEY**  
Assistant Editor

Three former Steelers took the next step toward football immortality when the Pro Football Hall of Fame announced the Gold Jacket semifinalists for the Class of 2020.

Safety Troy Polamalu, guard Alan Faneca and receiver Hines Ward are among the 25 Modern Era semifinalists for the Pro Football Hall of Fame Class of 2020.

Polamalu, who is in his first year of eligibility, was drafted by the Steelers in the first round of the 2003 NFL draft, the 16th pick overall. He played 12 seasons, redefining the way the safety position was played. A two-time Super Bowl champion, Polamalu was a four-time first team All-Pro selection, two-time second team All-Pro selection, NFL Defensive Player of the Year (2010), eight-time Pro Bowler and a member of the NFL 2000s All-Decade Team and Steelers All-Time Team.

Faneca, a finalist the last four years and semifinalist five times, was the Steelers first-round draft pick in 1998 and played 10 seasons for the black and gold, and 13 overall in the NFL. He was a mem-

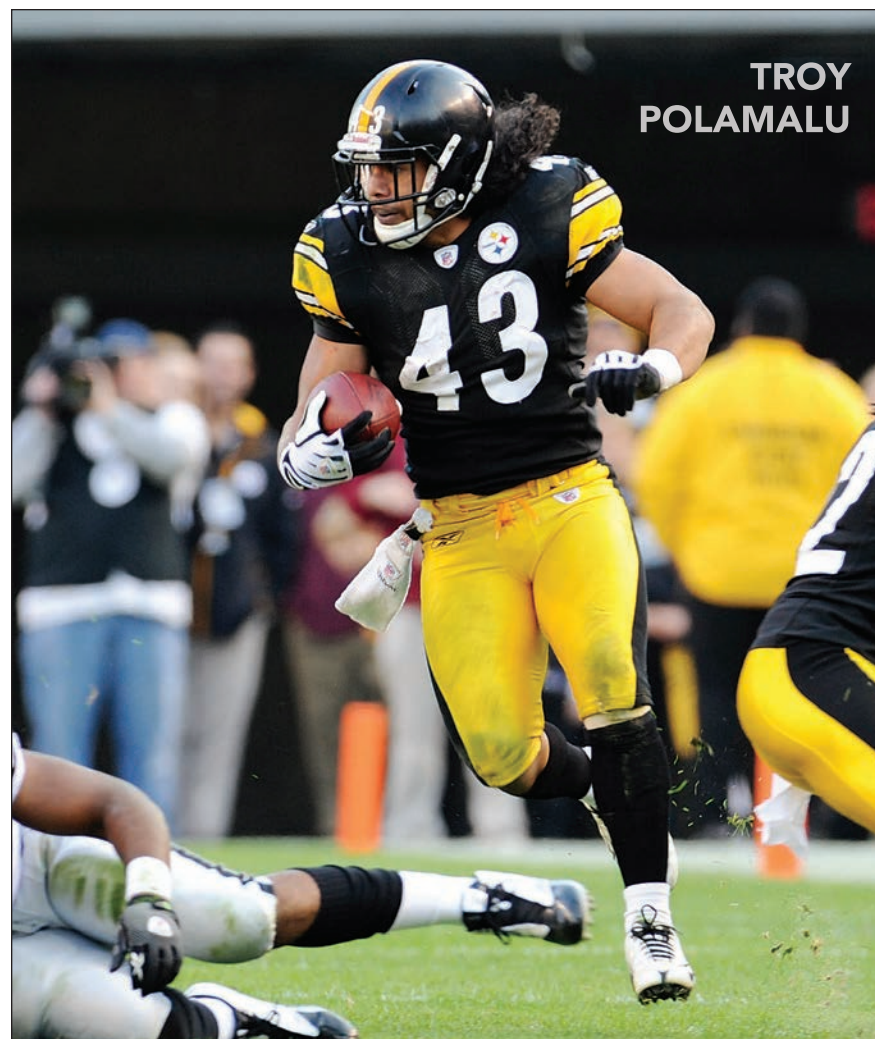
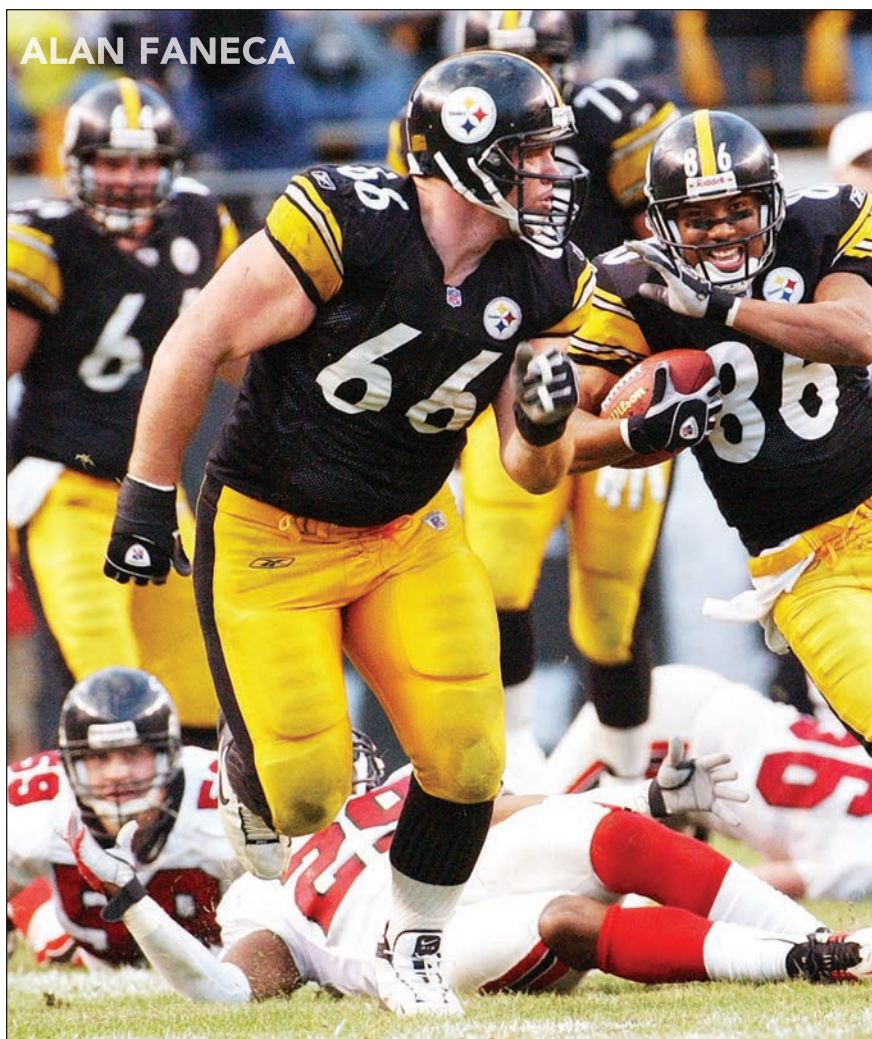
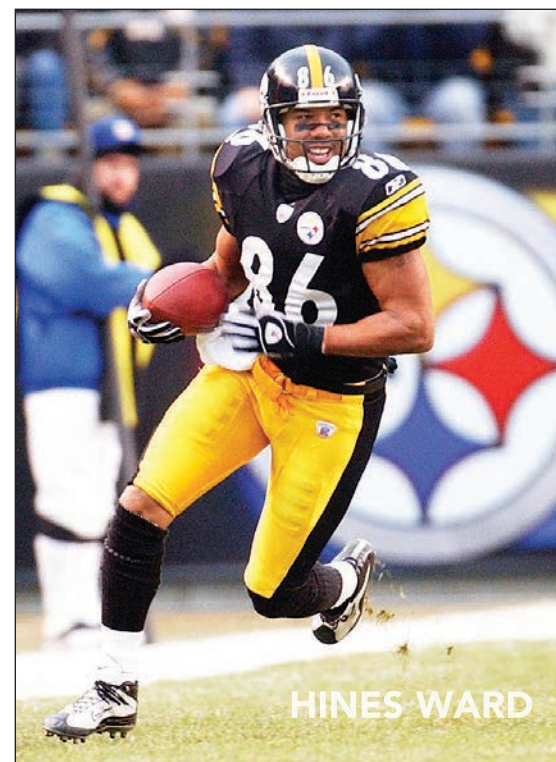
ber of the Super Bowl XL championship team and was selected to nine Pro Bowls. Faneca was a six-time All-Pro selection and was named to the Steelers All-Time Team in 2007 and the NFL 2000's All-Decade Team. He is also a member of the Steelers Hall of Honor.

Ward, a semifinalist for the fourth straight year, played 14 seasons for the Steelers after being selected in the third round of the 1998 NFL draft. He played on two Super Bowl teams and was the MVP of Super Bowl XL. He had 1,000 career receptions for 12,083 yards and 85 touchdowns. His versatility was always on display with his blocking ability a shining example of that. Ward is a member of the Steelers Hall of Honor.

The Modern Era semifinalists will be trimmed to 15 finalists Jan. 2.

The Hall of Fame Selection Committee will hold their annual meeting Saturday, Feb. 1, 2020. The finalists will go from 15 to 10, and then down to five. The Class of 2020 will be announced during the "NFL Honors" show that evening.

The 2020 Hall of Fame Enshrinement Ceremony will be held next August in Canton, Ohio.





# Giving back for Thanksgiving

This time of year, there are plenty of families who don't have the means to put dinner on the table. They don't have the luxuries many are blessed with, the luxury of enough food to eat.

And that is why Maurkice Pouncey and Mark Barron stepped up once again, both giving back to make the holiday season better for those in need.

As he has done for many years, Pouncey worked in conjunction with the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank to provide a complete Thanksgiving dinner for over 200 families in the Braddock area.

"We really appreciate Maurkice doing this every year. It does mean a lot to our families," said

Charlese Hayden McKinney, Network Development Director for the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank. "This is a time when we embrace one another as families and as a community. It's not always easy for some of the families we serve. With Maurkice stepping in and helping to relieve the burden, it's something we are all grateful for.

"The need is fairly high. We probably see over 30,000 families a month throughout our service area. That number doesn't change, but different people coming to us is what is changing. But we always have folks coming to us needing some help."

Pouncey, who was joined by his teammates, including the entire offensive line, Mason Rudolph and Steelers alumni Charlie Batch, said giving back is something that is important to him, especially at a time when the need is high.

"This is awesome. To be able to give back like this during the Thanksgiving time, it truly means something to me," said Pouncey. "You guys know I give back to the communities I play in and back home. There is great support from them like always.

"Just giving back means so much to me. When I was growing up, I was not as fortunate as I am now. I think it's important to give back to families who are in need at this time. It's Thanksgiving, it's for





giving back and being thankful for things. I am just appreciative I am in this position to do these types of things."

Barron will never forget where he is from. He is proud of his hometown of Prichard, Alabama, a small town close to Birmingham.

And giving back to his hometown, that is something that will always be in his heart.

That's why a few days before Thanksgiving he hosted the Mark Barron 4th Annual Turkey Giveaway. While he couldn't be there because he was in Cincinnati for the Steelers-Bengals game, Barron sponsored the distribution, which provided 1,500 turkeys to families in need of a boost at the holidays.

"More than anything, when we do it, I sit back and soak in my own blessings, that I am now in a position to bless other people and help them out," said Barron. "It's a reflection time for me. I wasn't able to be there, but I look at the video, the pictures, and I feel blessed and honored to be able to do that for a lot of people."

"People are hurting. People are going through all kinds of situations. Sometimes they can't afford a turkey, sometimes they can't afford canned goods. When I was in elementary school, we used to do a canned goods drive. It shows you the position people are in, that they can't always afford things."

The turkeys were distributed at the Prichard City

Hall and Figures Community Center. Barron's mom, Michelle Barron, helped to oversee it along with Together Assisting People Inc., who partnered with Barron for the distribution and brought in volunteers to help unload the turkeys from trucks.

"When the kids were younger, we had to go to the Catholic Social Services or the Salvation Army," Michelle Barron told *AI.com*. "When we first started, I was like, 'Mark, do you think a turkey's going to be enough?' He said, 'Yeah, Mama, when I was small, I was looking for that turkey.'"

"I think it's a real privilege for him, and I think a lot of my son for doing this, because he doesn't have to, so it's a real privilege."





# COMING UP

Sunday, Dec. 8

## PITTSBURGH AT ARIZONA

**Time:** 4:25 p.m.

**Site:** State Farm Stadium

**Television:** CBS

**Series record:** Steelers 34-23-3 (including play-offs)

**Last meeting:** 2015 at Pittsburgh; Steelers 25, Cardinals 13.

**Series trend:** The Steelers have won five of the past six meetings, including their 27-23 victory in Super Bowl XLIII.

**Scouting report:** The Cardinals are headed for another season out of the playoffs in Kliff Kingsbury's first year as head coach, but the performance of first overall pick Kyler Murray has been a positive development. Murray had 14 touchdown passes and only five interceptions when Arizona reached its bye after 11 games and he had helped the Cardinals put up 25 and 26 points against the vaunted San Francisco defense. This could be the last time the Steelers face legendary former Pitt star **Larry Fitzgerald**, who led Arizona in receptions through 11 games and was tied for the team lead in touchdown catches.

**Worth noting:** This will be the first time in 14 meetings the teams face each other in the month of December. Of the previous 13 games, seven took place in October.



Sunday, Dec. 15

## BUFFALO AT PITTSBURGH

**Time:** 8:20 p.m.

**Site:** Heinz Field

**Television:** NBC

**Series record:** Steelers lead 16-9 (including playoffs)

**Last meeting:** 2016 at Buffalo; Steelers 27, Bills 20

**Series trend:** The Steelers have won the past six meetings and 10 of the past 11. Only three of those 10 victories were by less than 13 points.

**Scouting report:** The Bills used a strong start to put themselves in prime position to earn a playoff spot for the second time in three years. Quarterback Josh Allen has made clear strides in his second season after being a first-round pick in 2018, earning AFC Offensive Player of the Week honors for his performance against Miami in Week 11. The defense features recent first-round picks at all three levels — rookie defensive tackle Ed Oliver, cornerback Tre'Davious White and linebacker **Tremaine Edmunds**, the brother of Steelers safety Terrell Edmunds and Steelers running back Trey Edmunds. Wide receiver John Brown was on pace to reach 1,000 receiving yards in his first season with the Bills after coming over from Baltimore.

**Worth noting:** This will be the first time the teams face each other at Heinz Field in December since 1985 when the Steelers recorded a 30-24 victory.

## 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	L, 23-26 (OT)
Oct. 13	at L.A. Chargers	W, 24-17
Oct. 20	Bye week	
Oct. 28	MIAMI (Mon.)	W, 27-14
Nov. 3	INDIANAPOLIS	W, 26-24
Nov. 10	L.A. RAMS	W, 17-12
Nov. 14	at Cleveland (Thu.)	L, 7-21
Nov. 24	at Cincinnati	W, 16-10
Dec. 1	CLEVELAND	W, 20-13
Dec. 8	at Arizona	4:25 p.m.
Dec. 15	BUFFALO	8:20 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



**NEW YORK STATE OF MIND** — The Steelers will play their first of two road games to close out their 2019 regular season Dec. 22 when they face the Jets at MetLife Stadium. The game, of course, will mark a reunion with former Steelers running back **Le'Veon Bell**. It's been a tough year, though, for Bell and the Jets under first-year head coach Adam Gase, who was hired after being let go by the Miami Dolphins.



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