CLEVELAND -- A loss that would have typified a season gone sour turned instead into a 24-20 Steelers victory against the Cleveland Browns in which, for one quarter on one rainy afternoon anyway, they looked Super again.

Ben Roethlisberger, who threw three interceptions in the first half and had one returned for a touchdown, showed up in the fourth quarter wearing a red cape and blue tights.

He threw for 229 yards and two touchdowns in the final quarter, his last toss an improvised, backhanded shovel pass to Willie Parker for the 4-yard winning touchdown with 32 seconds to go. It capped a three-touchdown flourish by the Steelers in the fourth quarter, two by Parker and one by rookie Santonio Holmes.

The Steelers drove 73 yards on 10 plays and had second down when Roethlisberger dropped back to pass to Hines Ward from the 4 on their final series.

"I was pretty much looking at Hines all the way as the go-to guy," Roethlisberger said. But linebacker Kamerion Wimbley, a pain in the Steelers' neck much...
of the day, got a hand on the quarterback.

"I started to my left," Roethlisberger said. "I was going to run it. When I saw Willie, I thought I'd try it."

Before the Steelers (4-6) could stake claim to their first road win in five tries, the Browns (3-7) rushed back. Charlie Frye's Hail Mary pass from the 22 into a crowd of players in the end zone on the final play was tipped into the air but fell to the ground out of bounds. It gave the Steelers their first two-game winning streak of the season.

"It was one of those games we knew if we could get it going, we'd pull it out," linebacker Joey Porter said, "because we didn't feel like they were doing anything on offense."

Cleveland hasn't won two in a row since 2003 and lost to the Steelers for the 12th time in the past 13 meetings.

"I could care less about the Steelers," said Cleveland receiver Braylon Edwards, who caught seven passes for 137 yards after saying last week that his team was coming after the Steelers. "I don't care about us getting their respect or whatever. The Steelers are the Steelers and we're the Browns. I've never been hurt after a loss and this hurts."

The Browns, who produced 302 yards, scored their two touchdowns on returns -- a 57-yard interception by Clairton native Daven Holly in the second quarter and a 92-yard kickoff return by Joshua Cribbs in the fourth quarter. Phil Dawson kicked field goals of 23 and 35 yards.

Cribbs' touchdown looked as if it might put an end to any hopes the Steelers have for the playoffs. It came right after Holmes scored his first NFL touchdown when he caught a 20-yard pass from Roethlisberger for the Steelers' first touchdown of the game.

"You have to come back and match them," coach Bill Cowher said.

There was little evidence the Steelers' offense was capable of doing that on a cold, rainy day in Cleveland. Their running game was going nowhere -- Willie Parker finished with 46 yards on 16 tries. Their passing game had been a disaster -- Roethlisberger
threw three interceptions (two by Holly), all on tipped or dropped balls in the first half, when he had 36 yards passing and a passer rating of 6.4.

Entering the fourth quarter, Roethlisberger had just 48 yards passing and the Steelers' only score was a 43-yard Jeff Reed field goal. Roethlisberger finished 25 of 44 for 272 yards.

"In the first half, our offense couldn't get going. It was my fault," Roethlisberger said. "The ball was just bouncing all over the place."

Holly's touchdown interception was a high throw that Holmes stretched just enough to get his right hand on for a tip. The second was drilled into Ward's belly inside the Browns' 5, but safety Sean Jones ripped the ball out and into the air and linebacker Willie McGinest came down with it.

The third occurred when Cedrick Wilson slid and the ball bounced off his helmet and into Holly's hands near midfield.

"There's a tipped pass here and it bounces off somebody's foot and off the scoreboard; they just came up with freakish turnovers," linebacker Clark Haggans said. "The ball hasn't bounced our way a lot."

That was about to change after they fell behind, 20-10, on Cribbs' big kickoff return. The Steelers responded with a 79-yard drive on 16 plays. Roethlisberger converted three third-down passes before Parker ran in from the 1 to make it a three-point deficit.

Frye, who completed 17 of 27 passes for 224 yards, was sacked by Troy Polamalu on the Browns' first play after that -- the fifth sack of Cleveland's quarterback. Polamalu then tackled Jason Wright after a 2-yard gain and on third down batted down Frye's pass attempt.

The Browns punted and the Steelers began their winning drive at their 23 with 3:06 to go. Ward made a marvelous 21-yard catch to Cleveland's 43 and was drilled by Jones, a shot that had him hobbling after the game with a bruised knee. Holmes snapped up the next two completions, one for 6 yards on third-and-6. Nate Washington caught a Roethlisberger pass for 11 yards to the 5, and two plays later, Parker caught his quarterback's improvised pitch for the winner.

"I can't say enough about our football team with the resiliency they displayed today," Cowher said.

(Ed Bouchette can be reached at ebouchette@post-gazette.com.)
CLEVELAND - The Steelers' season looked like it would die on a soggy, dreary day in Cleveland.

But fourth-quarter deficits and his own ineffectiveness hardly qualify as adversity for the player that has endured so much since becoming the youngest quarterback to win a Super Bowl.

Not surprisingly, Ben Roethlisberger shook off some early struggles and calmly directed three long touchdown drives in the fourth quarter Sunday afternoon at Cleveland Browns Stadium.

His transcendent, not to mention timely, play in the final 15 minutes lifted the Steelers to a 24-20 win over their rival and gave them a victory they had to have if they want to have any chance of defending their title.

Not that the game was over after Roethlisberger flipped the ball to Willie Parker for a 4-yard touchdown pass with 32 seconds remaining.

The Browns marched inside the Steelers' 25-yard line. On the final play, Browns wide receiver Braylon Edwards twice got his hands on a Charlie Frye pass in the end zone.

But Edwards couldn't hang onto the ball, the Steelers improved to 4-6 and the Browns dropped to 3-7.

"We've had a lot of bad breaks this year," Steelers nose tackle Casey Hampton said, "so it's about time some things started going our way."

The Steelers will try to improve on their modest two-game winning streak next Sunday, when they visit the Baltimore Ravens for a 1 p.m. game.

Against the Browns, the Steelers overcame a 13-3 second-half deficit but didn't earn many style points in recording their first road win of the season.

"The way we've come on strong the last two games speaks volumes about the character of our team," said wide receiver Hines Ward, who had a big catch on the Steelers' final scoring drive. "We get into close ballgames, and we have the confidence we can come back and make plays."
Roethlisberger made his share of them after doing very little for much of the game.

In the second quarter, Roethlisberger had more interceptions (three) than completions (two). At halftime, his passer rating (6.4) didn't come close to measuring up to his shoe size.

The Steelers offense, which had been shut out in the first half, managed just a field goal in the third quarter, and that was set up by a Browns fumble that gave them prime field position.

Somewhere between the end of the third and start of the fourth quarter, Roethlisberger morphed from Tim Couch into John Elway.

At least that's what Browns fans might have been thinking after Roethlisberger and the Steelers converted 6-of-6 third-down conversions in the fourth quarter.

His flip to Parker was vintage Roethlisberger -- he got the ball to one of his last options on the play as he was getting spun around by a Browns defender. So was the 20-yard touchdown pass to Santonio Holmes early in the fourth quarter.

That came after Roethlisberger shed a Browns pass rusher and threw across his body to the rookie, who scored his first NFL touchdown.

Roethlisberger finished with 272 yards passing and the two touchdowns, which were the result of his improvisation as much as anything.

There was a question of whether he would even finish what now stands as the most important drive of the season.

After completing a 15-yard pass to Holmes right before the two-minute warning, Roethlisberger took such a hard hit that Cowher asked him about his throwing shoulder.

Their conversation went something like this:

Cowher: "Can you throw?"

Roethlisberger: "What if I can't?"

Cowher: "Well, I guess I'll put Charlie (Batch) in."

Roethlisberger: "I'm fine."

The Steelers were fine a couple of minutes and one flip pass later.

"He was a very determined young man," Cowher said, "We had some tipped balls that went the other way. I liked the way he kept playing."
Roethlisberger threw a second-quarter interception that was returned for a
touchdown by Clairton High School graduate Daven Holly.

His two other interceptions weren't really his fault, including the one that
caromed off Cedric Wilson's facemask and into Holly's arms.

"I'll tell you what: First half, offensively we just couldn't get going,"
Roethlisberger said. "It was my fault, turning the ball over and the ball bouncing
in the air a couple of times. The second half, there was no quit in anybody,
offensively or defensively."

Parker said of Roethlisberger: "He was the leader out there."

And one when the Steelers needed him most.

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CLEVELAND - Steelers coach Bill Cowher wanted to savor the moment.

Thus, when asked if quarterback Ben Roethlisberger's game-winning 4-yard touchdown pass to running back Willie Parker with 32 seconds left in the fourth quarter was copied from offensive coordinator Ken Whisenhunt's playbook, Cowher delivered the best line of his news conference.

"All the way," Cowher said, with a smile, his eyes twinkling.

Translation: "Are you kidding me?"

Roethlisberger's improvisational touchdown pass was the schoolyard equivalent of drawing up a play in the dirt.

"I was looking at Hines (Ward) pretty much the whole way. He's the go-to guy down there," said Roethlisberger, who orchestrated two touchdown drives in the closing minutes.

The second -- and final -- drive consisted of Roethlisberger marching the Steelers from their 23 to the Cleveland 4, with the Steelers covering 73 yards in 10 plays and taking 2 minutes, 27 seconds off the clock.

The combination of the spread offense and no-huddle set put the Browns on their heels and opened the field for Roethlisberger.

"We threw the ball around. The line gave the receivers time to get open and for me to throw the ball," said Roethlisberger, who was 6-of-8 passing for 72 yards on the final drive.

Faced with second-and-goal and only 39 seconds remaining, Roethlisberger, not operating from the shotgun for only the second time in the drive, took the snap and looked quickly for Ward.

But there was a problem with Ward being the intended receiver on the play.

"The guy tackled him out of bounds," Roethlisberger said.

Roethlisberger's mindset shifted immediately from passer to runner.
"I was getting ready to run it," he said.

Just about that time, Parker, whose assignment called for him to remain in the backfield as a blocker, realized Roethlisberger was in trouble.

Parker also realized that he could leak out of the backfield as a receiver. That's because one of his teammates was helping out against a Cleveland defender Parker was supposed to block.

"There's probably zero chance I was going to get the ball," Parker said.

Those odds improved in a hurry.

When Roethlisberger scrambled around in the backfield, Parker said his eyes "started getting bigger."

With Parker now in his line of vision, Roethlisberger became a passer again.

"I just kind of flipped it to him," Roethlisberger said.

The play caught Cleveland off guard. Poised to stop the pass, and then forced to treat Roethlisberger as an emergency running back, the Browns had no one assigned to cover Parker out of the backfield.

Parker was wide open.

Ward said the touchdown pass worked to perfection.

"Great call. It was going to me, and they bracketed me," Ward said. "I can't say enough about Ben. He rose to the occasion and made a big play when it counted."

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CLEVELAND -- In one marvelous three-play sequence late in the fourth quarter yesterday that went a long way toward determining a winner in the Steelers-Cleveland Browns game, Steelers safety Troy Polamalu showed why he's the NFL's best defensive player.

Or, as teammate Larry Foote put it, "He showed the little something extra he has inside him that the rest of us don't."

There was Polamalu's closing speed -- unmatched in the league -- that enabled him to run down Browns quarterback Charlie Frye for a sack and no gain on the Steelers' sideline.

There was Polamalu's extraordinary instinct to get to the football -- honed by hours of film study -- that enabled him to slice through the left side of the Browns' offensive line to tackle running back Jason Wright for a 2-yard gain.

And there was Polamalu's fabulous athletic ability that enabled him to pull up on a blitz and time a leap just right to bat down Frye's pass for tight end Kellen Winslow.

Three plays and out for the Browns when a first down or two could have meant the game.

The Steelers took over and scored the touchdown that gave them a 24-20 win and delayed the removal of life support on their teetering season for at least another week.

"I've been playing football a long time and I've never seen anyone make plays like he makes," Foote said of Polamalu. "I'm seeing plays that I'll never see again."

Here's the best part of Polamalu's day:

His three plays came at the most crucial time, but he made others that also amazed. After Steelers cornerback Ike Taylor gambled and lost trying to break up a Frye sideline pass for wide receiver Braylon Edwards in the second quarter, Polamalu ran down Edwards after a 63-
yard gain to save a touchdown and, ultimately, four points that would have been huge at the end. But his best play might have been the way he closed to the sideline to tackle tight end Steve Heiden after a 6-yard gain on a third-and-7 play early in the third quarter. No other NFL player could have prevented that first down.

"I don't know if even Michael Johnson or some of the other great sprinters in the world have Troy's speed for 10 yards," Foote said. "There's nobody else as fast as he is for those first 10 yards."

Foote grinned and shook his head, then said something so quietly it almost was if he didn't want anyone to hear, like he feared he would be giving the rest of the NFL some sort of advantage with knowledge of his little nugget.

"Troy gets even faster on game day ..."

"That's his will, his want-to."

Polamalu's performance was all the more remarkable because it came a week after he was concussed early in the game against New Orleans. That injury didn't draw quite the same attention that Ben Roethlisberger's concussion did a few weeks earlier, but it probably should have. Polamalu is as valuable to the Steelers' defense as Big Ben is to the offense.

"We've got the best doctor in the country, maybe in the world," Steelers coach Bill Cowher said of team neurological surgeon, Dr. Joseph Maroon. "If he says a player is not at risk, that doesn't just put my mind to rest. It puts Troy's to rest."

Polamalu said he never considered not playing yesterday. "That was my mind-set the whole time. You've got to approach it that way or you'd never be prepared to play at the end of the week."

The Browns certainly wish Polamalu had taken the day off. Winslow said as much before the game when he called him "phenomenal."

"He's the best player I've ever seen at safety. He's on a different level."

It was just that way until the final play of the game when Polamalu leaped higher than a man 5 feet 10 has a right to leap to get a hand on Frye's desperation pass in the end zone. It was just enough of a deflection to keep Edwards from making a miraculous catch.

"He's just one of those few guys in the league who's special," Steelers defensive end Aaron Smith would say moments later.

"I'm talking about guys like Randy Moss, Reggie Bush, Troy ... You see them, you see they have something special. They have a little different
speed, a little different talent, a little different something.

"A gift from God. That's what it is. A gift from God."

Amen.

(Ron Cook can be reached at rcook@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1525.)
Another happy ending for Holmes

Former Ohio State star came up big for the Steelers in the 4th quarter

Monday, November 20, 2006

By Gerry Dulac, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

CLEVELAND -- When they played the song "Hang On Sloopy" at various times yesterday at Cleveland Browns Stadium, prompting the crowd to stand and spell "O-H-I-O" with their arms, Santonio Holmes felt like he was back in Columbus, Ohio.

When he caught his first National Football League touchdown on a 20-yard catch to start the Steelers' 21-point fourth-quarter comeback, Holmes looked as though he were back playing at Ohio State.

And when he watched Browns receiver Braylon Edwards go up and narrowly miss catching a Hail Mary pass at the end of each half, including the final heave into the end zone that almost gave the Cleveland Browns a pulsating victory, well, he really felt like he was back with the Buckeyes.

"Man, I was scared, because I know what type of player he is," Holmes said. "I played against him for three years and I know what kind of talent he has. Both of those plays just came up short and I was so happy he wasn't able to hold on to the ball."

In the end, Ohio State beat Michigan again.

Edwards, who played at Michigan, had seven catches for 137 yards, but he didn't catch either of Charlie Frye's desperation passes that could have provided a different outcome for the Browns.

Holmes, who played at Ohio State, dropped the first pass thrown his way
-- his first drop this season -- and had another skip off his outstretched right hand that was returned 57 yards for a touchdown. But he atoned with his first NFL touchdown on a broken play and also added a big catch to convert a third-and-20, helping the Steelers rally three times from 10-point deficits to post an unlikely 24-20 victory against the Browns.

"It felt great to come back to Ohio and get my first touchdown and play well for the team and make big plays," Holmes said.

It was something of a homecoming for Holmes, playing in the state where he starred as a collegian and became the first receiver selected in the NFL draft. Sure, he will be closer to the Ohio State campus when the Steelers play in Cincinnati on New Year's Eve, but the big plays he made against the Browns felt just as sweet as if he made them 2 1/2 hours away in Columbus.

Maybe because the crowd kept getting serenaded yesterday with "Hang on Sloopy" -- Ohio State's trademark theme song -- a tribute to the Buckeyes' 42-39 victory against No. 2 Michigan a day earlier.

"I was right with those guys every time they were going O-H-I-O," Holmes said. "Oh, man, I was pumped up the whole game. When I got a chance to go out for warmups and the fans behind us were doing 'O-H,' I was hitting them with 'I-O.'"

Maybe it was the excitement that caused Holmes to drop his first pass -- though he hasn't been so lucky with punts and kickoffs -- since the preseason.

Maybe it was the reason he had a high pass on second down from the Browns' 47 skip off his right hand and get returned 57 yards for a touchdown by cornerback Daven Holly ("Just a misread between me and Ben," Holmes said.)

After that, though, Holmes made the kind of plays he made at Ohio State, catching four of his five passes in the fourth quarter, including the one to jump-start the comeback. When it was all over, he stood at his stall in the locker room, seemingly enjoying the events of the weekend.

"It was a little exciting to be on the sideline and be back in the state of Ohio," Holmes said.

It was Holmes who probably kept the Steelers on life-support and gave them their first back-to-back victories of the season when he caught a 21-yard pass on third-and-20 early in the fourth quarter. The Steelers were backed to their 19 after an offensive pass interference penalty against Cedrick Wilson, but Ben Roethlisberger found Holmes in the middle of the field to keep the drive alive.
"Huge," said offensive coordinator Ken Whisenhunt. "It got us going."

"We had to get past the stick and I was able to break free and scramble for the quarterback," Holmes said. "It was an all-over-the-field, running-deep-to-get-to-the-sticks route."

Five plays later, Roethlisberger improvised again, and so did Holmes.

On third-and-6 at the Cleveland 20, trailing 13-3, Roethlisberger rolled right, stepped back left to avoid pressure and started running right again, this time toward the Browns sideline. Holmes, who had run a short route in the right flat, took off to the left, then ran to his right when he saw his quarterback on the move.

Roethlisberger saw Holmes come open and threw across his body on the run, hitting him at the 3 and producing a 20-yard touchdown. It was the final play of an 87-yard drive, but it was the first of many produced by Roethlisberger in a 21-point fourth quarter.

"I saw Ben get flushed out of the pocket and I had to continue to keep moving and fighting for a big play," Holmes said. "I ran around about three or four times trying to get open.

"It's the same thing I had to do on third-and-long -- I had to scramble just like he did to make a big play. I got the defender going one way and with Ben, we were on the same page. I cut back and made a great catch and had a chance to get in the end zone."

Holmes put his arms in the air after reaching the end zone. He wasn't spelling O-H-I-O.

Just TD.
Heinz Field turned into one big lost and found department yesterday for the Steelers.

For a change, the Steelers lost nothing: No turnovers and not even a game. And they found the football on three occasions when the Saints fumbled it, along with the kind of feeling that was lost a long time ago, the one that comes after a victory. Oh, and their running game returned as well.

The Steelers held a morning Kumbaya-like meeting at their hotel in which tears flowed, and then went out and converted them into points.

Willie Parker rushed for 213 yards and two fourth-quarter touchdowns, Ben Roethlisberger.

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- After weeks giving up turnovers,
threw for three scores and the Steelers came back from two blown leads to topple the surprising New Orleans Saints, 38-31, and celebrate their first victory in a month.

"It's been a long time, but we still know how to do it," linebacker James Farrior said as the Steelers ended a three-game losing streak to climb to 3-6. "We had to knock the dust off, but we got a win today."

The victory wasn't secured until Saints receiver Terrance Copper fumbled at the Steelers' 25 with 39 seconds left. Copper caught a 30-yard pass but gave up the ball when safety Tyrone Carter slammed into him so hard that Carter stayed on the ground for a minute. Safety Ryan Clark recovered the ball.

It was the third lost fumble of the day for the Saints, and the kind of play the Steelers' defense had become accustomed to making the past two years. They entered the game with just one fumble recovery in the first half of the season.

"It's about guys making plays," Clark said. "Guys like Tyrone Carter making hits, James Farrior, Larry Foote. I think it was a blessing and our offense did not turn it over."

The Steelers had no turnovers in a game for the first time this season after committing an ungodly 24 in the first half of the season. The Saints outgained them, 517-467, a sweet turn of events as far as coach Bill Cowher was concerned. His team had

Steelers use three fumble recoveries to pick up a win

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outgained opponents four times in four losses this season.

"I'd rather give up 500 yards of offense and win than give up 98 yards and lose," he said.

Drew Brees completed 31 of 47 passes for 398 yards for New Orleans as rookie Marques Colston burned the depleted Steelers secondary for 169 yards on 10 catches. Ben Roethlisberger threw fewer passes, completing 17 of 28 for 264 yards, but threw three for strikes in the end zone: 37 yards to Hines Ward, 2 yards to Heath Miller and one of 38 yards to Cedrick Wilson.

Part of the problem for the Steelers' defense may have been the loss of strong safety Troy Polamalu and cornerback Deshea Townsend to concussions.

Twice the Steelers built 14-point leads, once in the first quarter and once in the fourth. They blew the first and fell behind, 24-17, entering the third quarter, and after going back up by 14, they found a way to stave off the Saints on Carter's hit at the end.

"We had no turnovers, we got three turnovers," guard Alan Faneca said. "That's big. That's a big turnaround from the way we've been playing lately."

No one had a bigger turnaround than Parker. Only one Steelers running back ever had a bigger game -- Frenchy Fuqua, who ran for 218 yards in 1970 against the Eagles. Parker topped 100 yards three times this season but none in the previous three games. Last Sunday, he started the ball rolling by proclaiming his team did not have the hunger this season that it had on its way to a Super Bowl victory. He also said there was not as much trust in teammates.

Parker said players came up to him last week and told him, "Willie, you were kind of right."
Those words and the Steelers' horrendous record may have prompted a meeting yesterday that normally coaches conduct. Cowher turned it over to the players, and at least seven stood up and talked. One, Aaron Smith, had tears in his eyes as he spoke and Tyrone Carter admitted it brought tears to his eyes as well.

"I love this team," Smith said. "If I can do something to help us win, share my mind and how I feel about the guys in this locker room, that's what I'm going to do. I just wanted to tell everybody to come together and believe in each other, never quit, believe you're going to win this game no matter what, fight for each other."

The game was atypical in many ways of the Steelers this season, but typical in others -- it was close to the end, and they could not hold a lead.

Roethlisberger threw touchdown passes on his first two series, one to Ward for 37 yards, and the other a 2-yard pitch to Miller after Farrior forced tight end Billy Miller to fumble and defensive end Brett Keisel recovered at the Saints' 32.

The Saints scored to make the score 14-7 when Brees completed a third-down, 3-yard pass to Cooper over a familiar victim, cornerback Ike Taylor.

John Carney kicked a 20-yard field goal for the Saints, who then took their first lead when Reggie Bush scored his first NFL touchdown on offense, a double-reverse in which he dived over Clark into the end zone to complete a 15-yard run and put New Orleans in front, 17-14.

Jeff Reed tied the score with a 32-yard field goal with 1:20 left, but the Saints zipped 72 yards in one minute to go back on top, 24-17, on Deuce McAllister's 4-yard touchdown run.

The Saints discovered how the Steelers have lived much of this season when linebacker Larry Foote stripped Bush of the ball in the third quarter and Clark recovered at the 38. On the next play, Roethlisberger pumped once as Wilson blew past cornerback Jason Craft and was wide open in the end zone to catch the 38-yard touchdown pass to give the Steelers' a 24-24 tie.

Then it was Fast Willie Time. Parker ran 72 yards to the Saints' 14, and scored from the 3 to give the Steelers a 31-24 lead. He did it again on the next series when he bounced an inside call around right end and took it 76 yards to the 4, where he was caught from...
After a timeout, Parker scooted around left end for a 4-yard touchdown that put the Steelers' ahead by two touchdowns. It was a big day for Parker, and his teammates would not let him forget it.

"You can't call him Fast Willie if he keeps getting caught from behind," Farrior said. "Fast Willie's fast, he just gets slow inside the 5," Faneca said.

The Saints, though, weren't through. They moved 64 yards on four plays and scored on a trick -- or broken -- play. Center Jeff Faine snapped the ball past Brees -- on a bounce -- to halfback Deuce McAllister, who ran 4 yards for a touchdown that made the score, 38-31, Steelers.

"I lost the ball," Cowher said. "I thought it was a fumble-rooskie."

Next came the fumble losekie, at least for the Saints, when Carter separated the ball from Copper. It sent the Saints to 6-3 and the Steelers to Cleveland next Sunday with a chance to win two in a row.

"Until someone says we're eliminated," Cowher said, "we're going to keep playing."

(Ed Bouchette can be reached at ebouchette@post-gazette.com.)
Bill Cowher had admittedly run out of things to say, so he let his players do the talking.

What resulted was as rare as the 2-6 hole the Steelers confronted Sunday morning was foreboding. And what transpired was a 38-31 triumph over the New Orleans Saints that was as emotional as it was reassuring to a Steelers' team that has yet to give up on itself.

Perhaps even Cowher was beginning to wonder in the wake of a first half of the season that had degenerated from disappointing to potentially embarrassing for a defending Super Bowl champion.

Perhaps he was still applying a form of damage control to running back Willie Parker publicly questioning the Steelers' desire and trust among teammates the previous week.

Perhaps Cowher just wanted the players to reaffirm how they felt about one another.

Guard Alan Faneca recalled something similar happening before the AFC championship game in January, when Jerome Bettis and Kimo von Oelhoffen took the floor in Denver.

Before that?

"In that meeting? Maybe not ever," said Faneca, a nine-year veteran. "Maybe (it's happened) before, but it's been few and far between on that day."

The final pregame meeting is normally Cowher's domain.

It's held the night before a 1 p.m. kickoff and on the day of the game when the Steelers play at 4:05 p.m., 4:15 or at night.

"It's him all the way, kind of a 'This is what I think it's going to take' from him and his point of view," Faneca said.

This time, Faneca did some of the talking.

Quarterback Ben Roethlisberger and wide receiver Hines Ward also spoke on
behalf of the offense.

Linebacker Joey Porter, cornerback Deshea Townsend and defensive end Aaron Smith represented the defense as orators.

Wide receiver Sean Morey voiced what the special teams players were feeling.

"Coach told us earlier (last week) that he wanted a couple of us to get up and speak," Roethlisberger said. "I don't know what he was expecting us to do, but the guys got up.

"We didn't talk about X's and O's."

Parker said Porter "kind of pointed all the players out.

"He said stuff we normally wouldn't say," Parker said. "He was probably talking to me."

Parker also said Smith was moved to tears.

"I love this team," Smith said.

The recurring themes, Faneca said, were trust and a belief in one another.

That they came from the heart rather than the head man meant everything.

"You get a guy up there that opens his heart up in front of your teammates and your peers, it's gonna get emotional, it's gonna get to you a little bit," Faneca said. "A message delivered by a guy you're out there fighting with is a little bit different than coming from the head coach. It's from a guy that's down there in the trenches with you."

Together, those guys in the trenches survived a 517-yard New Orleans onslaught, a blown 14-0 lead and enough injuries in the secondary to force Anthony Madison into the game for extended stretches on something other than special teams.

Through it all, one fan among the 61,911 clung to a placard that read "We Steel Believe."

At 3-6, the Steelers do, too.

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Turnovers stopping Steelers from turning season around

By John Harris
TRIBUNE-REVIEW
Monday, November 6, 2006

Sunday's 31-20 Steelers' loss to the Broncos at Heinz Field was the latest in a series of unfortunate events that begs the question: If the defending Super Bowl champions lose six of their first eight games, including three consecutive, do they make a sound, or do they go quietly into the night?

It was Groundhog Day all over again for Bill Cowher's Steelers, who aren't trying to save their season as much as they're trying to save face.

"I feel like I'm saying the same thing every week," Cowher said. "I'm at a loss for words."

The Steelers are at a loss, period. Losing is their middle name.

They've lost to good teams -- Denver, San Diego, Atlanta and Cincinnati -- and to a bad team -- Oakland.

They've lost at home -- Cincinnati and Denver -- and on the road -- Jacksonville, San Diego, Atlanta and Oakland.

They've lost playing exceptional defense -- Jacksonville and Oakland -- and good offense -- Atlanta and Denver).

But the big reason the Steelers are 2-6, when they could just as easily be 6-2, is turnovers. The Steelers have turned the ball over a whopping 13 times in consecutive losses to Atlanta, Oakland and Denver.

Quarterback Ben Roethlisberger has thrown seven interceptions during the past two weeks. Two were returned for touchdowns, two occurred in the red zone -- negating potential Steelers scores -- and a couple of the throws were just plain mind-boggling.

Roethlisberger has passed for nearly 750 yards during the past two games, but more than 350 yards came in the fourth quarter, when the Steelers were playing from behind and throwing on nearly every down against prevent defenses. He tossed one touchdown pass and three interceptions in the fourth quarter of those games.

"I agree that, when you have to throw the ball every play because we're down, then obviously, something's wrong," Roethlisberger said.
The Steelers are the best 2-6 team in the league because, even though they have enough talented players to beat most teams, not enough of their top players are playing dominating football.

And when the Steelers' role players fail to perform their roles, they really struggle.

Rookie Santonio Holmes has performed so poorly as a kick returner, he makes early-season scapegoat Ricardo Colclough look almost spectacular by comparison. Holmes fumbled a total of four punts against Kansas City, Atlanta and Denver, losing one against the Falcons that led directly to a touchdown. He fumbled a kickoff against Denver that also was converted into a touchdown.

"I saw the look in his eyes and got him out of there," said Cowher, who replaced Holmes with veteran Cedrick Wilson.

Wilson, of course, lost a fumble yesterday after making a big 35-yard catch on fourth-and-2 in the first quarter.

"We're just not protecting the ball," Wilson said.

Why not?

"Everybody's trying too hard to make a play," said running back Willie Parker, who caught a touchdown pass for the second consecutive week.

It's those kind of plays that are driving some of the players batty.

"It's hard to click when you are turning the ball over," said wide receiver Hines Ward, who was spectacular with seven catches for 127 yards, but lost a fumble after going airborne at the goal line late in the game. "That's really been the case all year.

"(At) 2-6, you have to audition for next year. We'll see who wants it and who's doing the taking."

For the Steelers, whose collective pride is on the line, the choice is simple: Get busy playing or get busy losing.

*John Harris can be reached at jharris@tribweb.com or 412-481-5432.*
Steelers super slide continues as Big Ben throws 4 interceptions

Monday, October 30, 2006

By Ed Bouchette, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

OAKLAND, Calif. -- Those headaches quarterback Ben Roethlisberger felt after his concussion last week spread to the rest of the Steelers as they continued their pratfall through the National Football League less than nine months after winning the Super Bowl.

Roethlisberger, knocked out of the game last week in Atlanta with a concussion, returned to have the worst game of his three-year NFL career yesterday. He threw a career-high four interceptions, two of them returned for Oakland's only touchdowns, as the underdog Raiders stunned the Steelers, 20-13, and left their season in shambles.

Their fifth loss in six games left the reigning NFL champions 2-5 and tied for last in the AFC North Division with the Cleveland Browns, a stunning turnaround from their past two seasons. No more surprising was the play of their quarterback, who refused to use the head injury of last week as an excuse.

"I'm embarrassed by the way I played," Roethlisberger said.

Cornerback Nnamdi Asomugha returned the first interception 24 yards for a touchdown in the first quarter, and corner Chris Carr returned the last one 100 yards for another.

Hines Ward, who led the Steelers' receivers with eight receptions for 81 yards, could not say what was going on with the quarterback who threw seven touchdowns and no interceptions in his preview two games.

"I can't tell you why he threw certain balls," Ward said.

Peter Diana, Post-Gazette

Hines Ward shows his frustration with the referees yesterday in the fourth quarter at McAfee Coliseum in Oakland, Calif.

Click photo for larger image.

Listen In:

Hines Ward: Turnovers cost the Steelers the game.

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Steelers' running game goes in reverse, fails to convert in critical situations

Steeler Notebook: Haynes, linebacker lost for season
said. "You'll have to ask Ben on that."

For the third time in five losses, the Steelers dominated the opposition but lost the game because of turnovers. They outgained Oakland (2-5) by a whopping 360 yards to 98 and allowed the Raiders just one third-down conversion on 11 tries.

But the interceptions, and failure to score on first down at Oakland's 1 at the end of the game, doomed the Steelers to one of the worst seven-game starts for a defending Super Bowl champion in history.

"It is kind of shocking," defensive end Brett Keisel said. "I never thought we'd be in this position."

"This is frustrating," said receiver Cedrick Wilson.

Coach Bill Cowher did not say much, but said Roethlisberger's interceptions were the difference.

"There's not a whole lot to say," said Cowher, who decided to start Roethlisberger after he received midweek medical clearance and the quarterback told him he was fine. "We had four interceptions, two interceptions for touchdowns. It was hard to overcome, yet we still had some opportunities at the end of the game and we couldn't put it in."

The Steelers of the past few years thrived on having first down at the opponent's 1, and that's just where they found themselves, down by seven and three minutes left. They had just sliced a 14-point gap in half when a hurry-up series ended with Willie Parker's 25-yard touchdown run on a screen pass with 7:41 to go.

But, with the ball on the 1 and a tie score luring them, Parker lost a yard and a second run by Najeh Davenport lost 3 more. Davenport jumped for a false start on

Steelers head coach Bill Cowher argues a fourth quarter call with Field Judge Craig Wrolstad as they
the next play, and it was third down at the 10. Ward caught a 7-yard pass to the 3 which brought up fourth down. **Watch the replay on the scoreboard.**

**Listen In:**

**Audio:** [Cowher: Roethlisberger needs to get over the loss, bounce back.](#)

Roethlisberger's pass to Santonio Holmes was broken up by linebacker Kirk Morrison with 1:38 left.

It was over, just about: The Steelers' defense, as it did virtually all day, stopped the Raiders, and, with 36 seconds left, their offense came alive again. A 49-yard desperation pass on the final play to Nate Washington ended when he was tackled at Oakland's 4.

Perhaps the Steelers miss the retired Jerome Bettis, who had an uncanny knack for scoring in goal-line situations the past two seasons. It's an area they owned since 2004, but they were shoved back by the Raiders yesterday.

"We were going backward instead of forward," guard Alan Faneca said. "That's not what you want down there."

It reflected a daylong malaise in their ground game, which has been inconsistent through the first half of the season. Parker managed only 83 yards on 22 carries, and the Steelers finished with 89 yards rushing and a 3.2-yard average against the NFL's 26th-ranked run defense.

"We take pride as an offensive line being able to get that yard, being in that root-hog situation, and today we didn't get it," tackle Max Starks said.

Even with its running game grounded, the Steelers easily would have won without the four interceptions.

Two of the Steelers' first three drives ended when Roethlisberger threw an interception. The second was intended for Wilson from the Steelers' 10. Linebacker Thomas Howard tipped it, and Asomugha picked it off. He returned it untouched 24 yards for a touchdown that put Oakland ahead, 7-0, with 6:12 left in the first quarter.

Jeff Reed kicked field goals of 29 and 39 yards in the second quarter to cut into the lead. But, after his second kick, the coverage teams collapsed again when Chris Carr returned the kickoff 50 yards.

That helped the Raiders set up Sebastian Janikowski for a 19-yard field goal with four seconds left in the
half that extended their lead to four points.

Oakland went up, 13-6, when Janikowski kicked a 41-yard field goal in the third quarter. The Raiders were aided on that drive by 30 yards in penalties on consecutive plays. Linebacker Larry Foote was flagged for a personal foul, and the defense was called for another unsportsmanlike-conduct penalty.

Roethlisberger's third interception on the first play of the fourth quarter killed a Steelers drive in Oakland territory.

On fourth-and-1 at the Raiders' 37, Roethlisberger dropped back into the shotgun formation, threw toward Ward, and Morrison intercepted it.

"I was throwing to Hines, and the guy jumps out of nowhere and picks it off," Roethlisberger said.

That was nothing compared to Roethlisberger's fourth interception.

Parker had just run 39 yards off right tackle on third-and-1 to give the Steelers a first down at Oakland's 10. But Roethlisberger's high, hard throw glanced off the outstretched hands of Heath Miller in the end zone on second down.

On third down, Roethlisberger threw into triple coverage for Nate Washington. Carr intercepted on the goal line and sprinted 100 yards for a touchdown that put the Raiders in front, 20-6, with 9:32 left.

That they surged at the end to nearly tie it was of little comfort to a team bewildered by where it stands today.

"We know we're a good football team," Keisel said. "But the bottom line is we've lost five games. Close games or not close games, we still lost. We're sitting here at 2-5. We have to do something about it."

(Ed Bouchette can be reached at ebouchette@post-gazette.com.)
Four turnovers set stage for Steelers' 41-38 overtime loss

Monday, October 23, 2006

BY ED BOUCHETTE, PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE

ATLANTA -- The Steelers played another game for the ages yesterday. Only to them, it's getting old. They let a double-digit lead slip away for the second time this season under a mound of turnovers, lost quarterback Ben Roethlisberger to a mild head injury and lost to the Atlanta Falcons, 41-38, in overtime.

Morten Andersen, a 46-year-old kicker who came out of retirement earlier this year, kicked a 32-yard field goal to win it after the Falcons won the coin toss to begin overtime, took the ball and never gave it up.

The Steelers' 2-4 record left at least one starter pessimistic about their chances to make it to the Super Bowl again, and an official's disputed call at the end of regulation that cost them a chance at a victory left their owner fuming.

"It's going to be tough after today's loss, going back to the Super Bowl," defensive end Brett Keisel said. "I'm not saying we can't do it, obviously, but we're making it that much harder on ourselves."

Hines Ward, returning to his home state, had the most productive game of his NFL career with three touchdowns, but in the end the loss on Morten Andersen's 32-yard field goal in overtime was difficult to accept.

Hines Ward enjoyed a career day with 171 yards receiving and three touchdowns, but in the end the loss on Morten Andersen's 32-yard field goal in overtime was difficult to accept.
touchdown receptions and 171 yards receiving. But his Steelers teammates gave the ball away almost as often as Ward caught it and wasted that effort.

Falcons tight end Alge Crumpler caught three of Michael Vick's four touchdown passes, two of them after Steelers turnovers. Atlanta scored its first 28 points after three Steelers fumbles and one onside kick. Still, the Steelers were prepared to line up for a field goal to win it at the end of regulation.

With 25 seconds left, quarterback Charlie Batch completed a 25-yard pass to Ward to Atlanta's 33. The Steelers, with no timeouts left, quickly lined up and Batch spiked the ball with eight seconds to go. Time enough for Jeff Reed to try a 51-yard field goal in the Georgia Dome to win it. But the officials called a 5-yard penalty on Nate Washington for a false start -- they said he flinched at the line -- and by rule 10 seconds were run off to end regulation.

"These officials should be ashamed of themselves," Steelers chairman Dan Rooney said. "That last call, you don't call that kind of call."

Rooney did not limit his criticism of referee Ron Winter's crew to that one call, either. He made reference to "ridiculous calls," including one in which Reed was penalized for tripping Falcons return man Allen Rossum near the end of the first half.

"They said he tripped him," Rooney said. "He got beat out, the guy dodged him, he got faked. He didn't trip him, he [Rossum] ran over him and fell."

Coach Bill Cowher said he did not want to say anything about the flinch call because "I don't feel like giving [the NFL] any more money."

Rooney, though, said, "I don't care. They need to know."

For the second time this season, the Steelers lost a game in which they outgained their opponents. They piled up 473 yards to Atlanta's 399.

They also wasted one of their best passing games in history. Roethlisberger completed 16 of 22 passes for 238 yards, no interceptions and three touchdowns.
-- one to Ward for 11 yards, one to Heath Miller for a yard and one to Washington for 10. Roethlisberger, though, left midway through the third quarter when he was smacked to the ground after an incompletion by defensive end Chauncey Davis on what appeared to be an illegal helmet-to-helmet hit.

"The league will handle that," Cowher said.

Roethlisberger, who returned to the sideline in the fourth quarter, appeared to be OK after the game, although Cowher said he had no update on the injury.

Batch came on and completed 8 of 13 for 195 yards, two touchdowns of 70 and 17 yards to Ward, the latter with 3:19 left to tie the score. Batch also threw no interceptions, and the quarterbacks combined for 433 yards passing.

But turnovers, Vick and Crumpler killed them. The Steelers contained Vick's passing and running most of the day, but they kept giving him the ball in their zone, and he took advantage of it.

Santonio Holmes fumbled the game's first punt at his 22, and, on the next play, Vick gave Atlanta a 7-0 lead when he passed 22 yards to Crumpler for a touchdown.

After Reed kicked a 28-yard field goal and Roethlisberger threw two touchdown passes to vault the Steelers ahead, 17-7, in the second quarter, Roethlisberger fumbled a snap from Jeff Hartings at his 25. Vick made them pay again when he threw a 3-yard touchdown pass to Crumpler.

Atlanta then pulled an onside kick that went off Steelers safety Tyrone Carter's hands when he was hit by Jimmy Williams. Jerious Norwood recovered for Atlanta at his 49. Vick completed that mission by tossing a 17-yard touchdown pass to Michael Jenkins.

"It happened so fast," Carter said. "I couldn't fair catch it because it hit the ground first. They caught us by surprise. I saw it, but, by the time I got to it, they were all there."

The Steelers completed their grand slam when Willie Parker, who was bottled up all game and managed only 47 yards on 20 carries, lost a fumble midway through the third quarter at his 26. The Falcons made it four Steelers bumbles, four touchdowns when Warrick Dunn ran up the middle for a 1-yard touchdown to end that short series.

"It was a crazy game," Steelers linebacker James Farrior said. "A little bit of everything that could possibly happen happened in that game."
Nevertheless, things looked up for the Steelers, when Batch and Ward struck back immediately. Ward caught a Batch pass at the Falcons' 40 and somehow eluded three defenders the rest of the way to complete a 70-yard score to put the Steelers back in front, 31-28.

But Atlanta answered with a 75-yard drive on six plays with Vick hitting Crumpler for a 31-yard score to go back ahead, and Andersen's 25-yard field goal extended the lead to 38-31.

But the Steelers tied it up, 38-38, quickly on their next series. Batch completed a 44-yard pass to Washington and followed that with a 17-yard touchdown pass to Ward with 3:19 to go.

That set up some final theatrics on a game that will teeter by going down in either infamy or ignominy. The Falcons' Michael Koenen kicked a 56-yard field goal near the end to seemingly win it. But that was waived off because the Steelers had called a time out. Koenen tried it again and missed, but safety Troy Polamalu was penalized for running into the kicker.

Koenen was injured on the play, so Andersen came out and missed, barely, from 52 yards, which set up the final, controversial Steelers plays of overtime.

"I'd have liked to see Jeff get a shot in regulation," guard Alan Faneca said.

It didn't happen, just as much of what they want to accomplish in 2006 is not happening.

(Ed Bouchette can be reached at ebouchette@post-gazette.com.)
Steelers, Roethlisberger snap out of their three-game funk in 45-7 win

Monday, October 16, 2006

By Ed Bouchette, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The Steelers put the brakes on a three-game losing streak and quarterback Ben Roethlisberger emerged from the haze that has enveloped him since the Super Bowl as they hammered Kansas City, 45-7, at Heinz Field yesterday.

Their victory carried a bonus as both teams above them in the AFC North Division lost, drawing the Steelers (2-3) back into the thick of things with Baltimore (4-2) and Cincinnati (3-2).

"We knew we needed this win," said halfback Willie Parker, who ran for 109 yards and two touchdowns. "We knew we needed to get back in the race. Everybody else lost, but we can't count on what they do, we can only count on what we do."

They did virtually anything they wanted to do against the Chiefs (2-3). They led, 14-0, after the first quarter and, 31-0, at halftime, using big plays to strike quickly.

Roethlisberger, riding his first three-game losing streak in the NFL and languishing next to the bottom of the league in passer rating, completed 16 of 19 passes for 238 yards and a near-perfect 153.8 passer rating. After throwing seven interceptions and no touchdowns in his first three games of the season, he had no interceptions and two touchdowns against the Chiefs before he gave way to backup Charlie Batch with 8:29 left in the game.

"It was good to see him have some success," coach Bill Cowher said. "He's worked through it. He's taken a lot of criticism in the last couple of weeks. I'm very proud of him being accountable; he stood up to it all."

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Related articles

- [Steelers Notebook: Parker, Davenport run up a storm](http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/pp/06289/730404.stm)
- [Big Playmaker: Holmes comes](http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/pp/06289/730404.stm)
Roethlisberger explained the difference in his play as, "being smart, throwing to the guys in the black jerseys, not the white jerseys. We did a good job of not turning the ball over. I found the guys that were open.

"The pocket today was big. I had lots of time to sit in there. I don't think I had to get out of the pocket at any time. The line did a phenomenal job."

Parker ran for touchdowns of 3 and 8 yards, and Roethlisberger threw his first two touchdown passes of the season, of 47 yards to Nate Washington and 13 yards to Hines Ward. Najeh Davenport scored his first touchdown with the Steelers, from 1 yard in the fourth quarter. Backup linebacker Rian Wallace intercepted rookie Brodie Croyle, Kansas City's backup quarterback, and returned it 30 yards for a touchdown with 3:31 left.

Jeff Reed kicked a 32-yard field goal and missed one from 28.

Kansas City scored its only points in the third quarter on Larry Johnson's 3-yard run, capping an 80-yard drive.

Parker ran 21 times for his third 100-yard game this season, and Davenport added 78 yards rushing on 12 carries in his most prominent role since the Steelers signed him after their opener.

"We knew this season wasn't over," defensive end Brett Keisel said. "We just needed to win one game. Then we could focus on winning two games and then three games. To get this game and win it the way we did is huge for the confidence of this football team.

"It was good to get back to Steelers football."

Kansas City managed just 213 yards in total offense compared to the Steelers' 457 yards. They limited Croyle and starting quarterback Damon Huard to 19 completions in 39 pass attempts for 185 yards passing with three interceptions. The Steelers held Johnson to 26 yards on 15 carries, his lowest total in 14 games since he became a starter midway through last season.

"Any time they come in with a running game that's their strength, it's a challenge for us and a challenge we love," linebacker Larry Foote said.

The Steelers set the tone on the first series of the game when Parker scored from 3 yards.
Santonio Holmes' biggest play of his young pro career made the touchdown possible. The Steelers had third-and-11 from their 26 when Roethlisberger completed a pass to Holmes in front of the sticks on the right side. Holmes put a move on cornerback Ty Law, who slipped and Holmes ran free until he himself slipped and fell at the Chiefs' 24 -- a 50-yard gain.

That was Roethlisberger's longest completion of the year, and he would follow with his second longest on his third series.

Holmes returned a punt 24 yards to the Steelers' 42, and Parker ran 11 yards on first down. Roethlisberger, on the second play, pumped right, faked a handoff to Parker and threw to Washington, who was open on the left. The second-year receiver caught the ball at the 15 and safety Jarrad Page, trying to make the tackle, bounced off him like a rubber ball as Washington sped into the end zone for a 47-yard touchdown.

"I knew when I let go of the ball he was probably going to get hit," Roethlisberger said. "I was just hoping that the ball was going to get there before the safety got there. Nate hung onto it, took the shot and scored."

Parker made the score, 21-0, in the second quarter when he ran 8 yards for a touchdown, breaking one tackle inside the 5. He also started that drive by running 25 yards around left end. Roethlisberger completed a third-and-15 pass to Ward over the middle for 28 yards to keep things moving.

Ward then caught his second touchdown pass of the season on a drive that lasted just three plays. Najeh Davenport, who ran 32 yards on a swing pass Monday in San Diego, ran 48 yards the first time he touched the ball against Kansas City on the first play of the quick series.

"It was important for us to come out and really get it going early," Roethlisberger said. "We did a good job of that."

Cowher told his team yesterday morning that by the time they were finished for the day, they had a chance to reverse the early trend in the AFC North. The Ravens and Bengals each lost for the second consecutive time just about the time the Steelers kicked off.

"I told them to go out there and play and win this game and you may end up one game out at the end of the night," Cowher said. "There's so much football left to be played."

(Ed Bouchette can be reached at ebouchette@post-gazette.com.)
Big Playmaker: Holmes comes alive to spark the Steelers' offense

Averaged 20 yards every time he touched the ball vs. the Chiefs

Monday, October 16, 2006

By Gerry Dulac, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Santonio Holmes has had a pain his back since he leaped in the air and fell backward to the turf in San Diego, trying to catch a deep pass from Ben Roethlisberger.

One week later, he was a bigger pain to the Kansas City Chiefs.

In a game in which the big play finally re-emerged for the Steelers, it was Holmes who finally emerged as a big-play threat. And it didn't matter if he was making plays on offense or special teams.

Not coincidentally, Holmes came alive in the same game the Steelers breathed some life back into their season, and his production on offense and special teams was largely responsible for a 45-7 victory against the Chiefs.

"It felt real good," Holmes said. "I told coach during the week I wasn't feeling real good, but I fought through it and continued to go through practice and I told him if I got the opportunity to make those plays then I'm going to go forward."

Holmes, the first wide receiver selected in the NFL draft, did more than just go forward. He went left, right, even went backward to give ground on a 50-yard catch and run that set up the first touchdown.

When it was over, Holmes had accumulated 180 all-purpose yards for the Steelers, a breakout performance for a team that has been struggling to find breakout players.

"I like Santonio, I said that from Day 1," coach Bill Cowher said. "He's just got to play. He made some plays. He's getting a good feel for returning kicks and punts."

Matt Freed, Post-Gazette

Listen In

Postgame thoughts on the breakout performance of Steelers rookie receiver Santonio Holmes:

Bill Cowher
"The look in his eyes ..."

Ben Roethlisberger
"He's so dangerous ..."
Holmes averaged 20 yards every time he touched the ball against the Chiefs, and the breakdown went like this:

- Two catches for 58 yards, including the 50-yarder on third-and-11 on the third play from scrimmage, a play in which Holmes slipped near the sideline trying to cut inside cornerback Lenny Walls, the last defender. "I had 6 [points] on that," Holmes said. The play set up Willie Parker's first touchdown.

- A 13-yard run from a direct snap on third-and-4 that set up a Jeff Reed field goal at the end of the first half.

- Punt returns of 24, 21 and 11 yards.

- Kickoff returns of 28 and 26 yards.

In the end, the only player who accounted for more yardage was quarterback Ben Roethlisberger, who passed for 238 yards in his best performance since the AFC championship game.

"Santonio is one of those dangerous guys," Roethlisberger said. "You get him the ball in the open field, and normally he scores. He's making plays, and that's why they call him a playmaker. That's what he can do, and that's why he's so dangerous."

Holmes had not been much of a factor in the offense. After four games, he had caught just seven passes for 73 yards, returned three punts for 17 yards and did not have a run from scrimmage. His biggest contribution was as a kick returner, gaining 182 yards on eight returns.

But that all changed against the Chiefs.

With Willie Reid out with a mild foot sprain, Holmes finally got a chance to return punts. But he was not without mistakes. He muffed one punt that was recovered by Ike Taylor and fumbled another during a return that was recovered by Bryant McFadden.

Still, he gave the return teams a boost, showcasing an ability to become a big-play threat who could replace Antwaan Randle El. And he made the longest play for an offense that had five plays of 25 yards or longer -- nearly matching their total from the first four games (6).

"It was a lot of fun," Holmes said. "I told coach [Kevin] Spencer that if I get the opportunity to get a punt return, I'm going to make a big play out of it. And I think through the end of game I was able to make big plays on the punt return."

This could just be the beginning of Holmes' contribution to the offense. His role already was expanded a week ago in San Diego when he began rotating with split-end Cedrick Wilson with the first-team offense. Holmes plays every third series with the No. 1 unit, a move designed to take advantage of his big-play ability.

For now, he will remain the fourth receiver. But, eventually, Holmes will be worked into the first unit on a permanent basis, alongside Hines Ward. And it could be sooner than later.
"It kind of helped Ben get his confidence back," Holmes said about all the big plays. "And he's been telling us, 'Just make plays for me and that's all you have to do.' We knew all along we could make big plays, it's just the opportunities we had. We didn't have very many. But we took advantage of the ones we did have tonight."

(Gerry Dulac can be reached at gdulac@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1466.)
Steelers fall to 1-3 after 23-13 loss

Roethlisberger struggles in the second half, throwing two INTs, while the Chargers' Rivers picks apart the defense to propel a comeback victory that drops the Steelers to 1-3

Monday, October 09, 2006

By Ed Bouchette, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

SAN DIEGO -- The Steelers' Super Bowl headache turned into a pounding migraine last night when they lost their third game in a row.

The San Diego Chargers avenged a last-second loss to the Steelers at Qualcomm Stadium a year ago by coming back in the second half for a 23-13 victory.

The setback was the second in which the Steelers lost a lead and dropped the defending Super Bowl champs to 1-3.

"To start the season off 1-3 coming off the Super Bowl? I don't think anyone would have thought of that," receiver Hines Ward said.

"We just have to regroup right now," coach Bill Cowher said. "Obviously, it makes our next few games very important."

The Steelers lost a 10-0 second-quarter lead as quarterback Philip Rivers and halfback LaDainian Tomlinson breathed life into San Diego's offense in the second half.

Rivers threw touchdown passes of 9 yards to Malcom Floyd in the second quarter and 22 yards to Antonio Gates in the third quarter, when the Chargers (3-1) grabbed the lead. Rivers completed 24 of 37 passes for 242 yards and one interception.

Nate Kaeding kicked three field goals for the Chargers.

Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger followed a
good first half with two costly interceptions in the second half. He was 20 of 31 for 220 yards, two interceptions and five sacks. He now has no touchdown passes and seven interceptions in his three games.

"I'm not going to point fingers," said Roethlisberger, who experienced his first three-game losing streak in the pros. "I'm going to point a thumb; that goes right at me."

Willie Parker scored in the first quarter on a 9-yard run and Jeff Reed kicked his first of two field goals, from 39 yards, as the Steelers jumped on top, 10-0. But the Chargers scored twice in the third quarter to take a 17-13 lead.

San Diego's running game, held to 8 yards in the first half, sprouted in the third quarter when the Chargers gained 52 yards rushing -- and finished with 119 -- to go with some slick passing by Rivers.

"He made some very accurate throws out there," Cowher said.

The Steelers ran the ball only four times in the second half and finished with just 68 yards rushing on 18 carries. Parker had 57 yards on just 14 carries.

The Steelers led, 13-7, at the half and Roethlisberger looked as if he were over his early season slump. He completed 13 of 20 passes for 169 yards in the first half, including one spike to kill the clock, one that slipped out of his hands and two dropped passes. His three completions in the final minute helped move the Steelers into position for Reed's 44-yard field goal with nine seconds left.

But the momentum changed in the second half.

"It was a tale of two halves and they won the most important one," Cowher said.

The Chargers scored with 8:59 left in the game when Kaeding kicked a 33-yard field goal to give San Diego a 20-13 lead. Linebacker Larry Foote sacked Rivers on third down at the 7.

Roethlisberger followed the field goal by moving the Steelers to their 46 when, on second down and under a heavy rush by linebacker Shaun Phillip, he threw a pass up for grabs over the middle and free safety Mario McCree grabbed it. It was Roethlisberger's second
interception of the half.

"In the first half, we looked like we were in control," said Ward, who led the Steelers with four receptions for 49 yards. "In the second half, we didn't do what we had to do. We can't do that on the road -- two turnovers and a punt on three possessions."

Halfback Najeh Davenport, making his first appearance in a game in a Steelers uniform, helped set up Parker's early score when he caught a pass on a slip screen and ran 32 yards to San Diego's 28. Two plays later, Parker picked up 15 to the 9 and followed with his 9-yard scoring run on the next play, with 35 seconds left in the quarter.

Reed boosted that lead to 10-0 when he kicked a 39-yard field goal with 4:55 left in the second quarter.

The Chargers scored a touchdown with 1:11 left in the first half when Malcom Floyd, a 6-foot-5 wide receiver, caught a high fade pass from Rivers from 9 yards on third down. Cornerback Deshea Townsend was in good position on Floyd, but, at 5-10, he could not leap high enough to stop it.

"It was a great pass and catch," Townsend said. "He put the ball in a spot where only his receiver could catch it."

Rivers completed three third-down passes to keep the 80-yard scoring drive going that shaved the Steelers' lead to 10-7 before Reed's second field goal put the Steelers ahead, 13-7.

San Diego's Michael Turner returned the kickoff to open the second half 51 yards and it seemed to ignite the Chargers. They made it count when Kaeding kicked a 28-yard field goal to close within 13-10.

"I always said the first series of each half is the most important of the game," Cowher said.

Roethlisberger followed by throwing an interception on a flea-flicker pass. He handed off to Parker, who flipped it back to the quarterback, who threw deep into double-coverage to Santonio Holmes. Cornerback Drayton Florence easily intercepted at the 9.

San Diego then drove 91 yards on 11 plays to take a 17-13 lead when Gates caught a 22-yard scoring pass from Rivers. Townsend again was in position to make a play on the ball inside the 10 but came up empty.

The Steelers had a promising drive moving after that when Ward caught a 24-yard pass from Roethlisberger for a first down at the Steelers' 47. But Roethlisberger was spilled on two consecutive sacks for 7 yards in losses and a screen pass to Verron Haynes on third down lost 4 yards.

"I made a huge catch and we go backwards," a dejected Ward said. "We can't do that."

(Ed Bouchette can be reached at ebouchette@post-gazette.com or 412-263-3878.)
Steelers fall to 1-3 after 23-13 loss
Bengals cash in Steelers' gifts for 28-20 victory

A muffed punt, fumbles, interceptions and a lack of judgment all help to give Bengals a nice parting gift -- a 28-20 win -- and drop the Steelers into a two-game hole in the North

Monday, September 25, 2006

The defending champions moved to 3-0 -- that's the defending AFC North Division champion Bengals. The Steelers slipped two games behind at 1-2 and appear to have another long climb the rest of the season to try to catch up with them.

"It's no time to panic right now," receiver Cedrick Wilson said.
They might want to consider pushing some other buttons, though, because the ones they pressed yesterday blew up on them.

Even though Willie Parker ran for 133 yards and two touchdowns, though they outgained the Bengals, though the Steelers held leads in the first, third and fourth quarters, the team and the lead disintegrated from a series of mental and physical errors that prompted coach Bill Cowher to use the word "stupid."

"It's going to eat at you for a couple weeks because there were a lot of self-inflicted plays out there," Cowher said.

Now they know how the Bengals felt in their AFC playoff loss to the Steelers in January.

Cincinnati's Carson Palmer, carted off with a knee injury the previous time they played, threw four touchdown passes -- two on the first play after a Steelers' turnover -- while Ben Roethlisberger threw three interceptions. But the biggest turnover came when the Steelers' coaching staff inserted Ricardo Colclough to return a punt in the fourth quarter.

Colclough, a cornerback who has had trouble handling the football on returns in his three seasons as a pro, nevertheless replaced rookie Santonio Holmes in the fourth quarter. Leading 17-14, the Steelers' defense snuffed the Bengals on four plays and Colclough went back to field the punt. He promptly fumbled, the Bengals recovered at the 9 and Palmer came out firing on first down.

He found T.J. Houshmandzadeh wide open in the middle of the end zone for the score that put the Bengals in front for good, 21-17 with 7:59 left in the game.

Two plays later, Verron Haynes fumbled at the Steelers' 30. On the next play, Palmer hit Houshmandzadeh in the left corner of the end zone for a 28-17 Bengals lead.

Among the other plays Cowher cited as "stupid" was a 15-yard celebration penalty on Verron Haynes and Parker, and a 10-yard taunting penalty on safety Mike Logan, both in the second half.
"There is no reason for those things," Cowher said. "... It will not happen again."

The Steelers made it interesting at the end when Jeff Reed kicked his second field goal, from 36 yards, and they got the ball back with 2:42 to go. But safety Kevin Kaesviharn intercepted a Roethlisberger pass in the end zone with 10 seconds left.

"It's frustrating because we felt we were in control of it," Steelers receiver Hines Ward said. "We came out in the second half and we went right down and scored some points and continued doing that."

They also wasted a decent effort by the defense, which held Rudi Johnson to 47 yards rushing on 19 carries and forced three turnovers.

The Steelers scored first when Parker ran 3 yards for a touchdown on their opening drive. They were in position to make it 14-0 but Roethlisberger's pass on first down at Cincinnati's 6, intended for tight end Heath Miller, was intercepted by Madieu Williams in the end zone.

"It was almost like they knew it was coming," said Roethlisberger, who threw it into a crowd. "... I didn't see the guy coming the other direction."

Roethlisberger completed 18 of 39 for 208 yards with no touchdowns, three sacks and a poor 30.7 passer rating, his second consecutive game in the 30s.

That interception by Williams started a run for the Bengals that gave them a 14-7 lead. They completed a 97-yard drive to score on Palmer's 16-yard pass to Chris Henry, his first of two to the former West Virginia University receiver. They connected again from 3 yards just before the half.

"That was a big drive," coach Marvin Lewis said of his Bengals' first score. "At that point, we hadn't had a lot of success moving the football."

The Steelers turned things around in the third quarter to reclaim the lead, 17-14. Reed kicked a 37-yard field goal -- his first of the season -- on the opening series to close the Bengals' lead to 14-10.

Ike Taylor then intercepted a Palmer pass when safety Tyrone Carter smacked into Henry and the ball popped into the air. Taylor returned it 34 yards to Cincinnati's 7.

Parker then scored from the 1 on fourth down to put the Steelers back on top, 17-14. After
three quarters, Parker had 123 yards rushing. The Steelers ended up outgaining the Bengals, 365-246.

"Could they stop us?" Parker wondered. "I ask you the question. I don't think they could, but so be it."

Palmer was not as dominant as his four touchdowns made it appear. Taylor and cornerback Deshea Townsend each intercepted passes, and the Steelers sacked him six times, causing fumbles on three of them, one of which they recovered. Palmer was 18 of 26 for 193 yards.

Linebacker Clark Haggans had two of those sacks and a fumble recovery, but he took no solace in the way he or his defense played.

"We lost, point blank. We just didn't make the plays when we needed to make them. You can look at it that way. Hindsight is 20-20, but we came out with a loss and we're 1-2."

(Ed Bouchette can be reached at ebouchette@post-gazette.com or 412-263-3878.)
Steelers get stuffed by Jaguars, 9-0

Tuesday, September 19, 2006

By Ed Bouchette, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. -- Ben Roethlisberger returned to play quarterback for the Steelers last night and his offense celebrated by laying a jumbo egg.

It wasn't all Roethlisberger's fault that the Steelers failed to score a point as the Jacksonville Jaguars hung a 9-0 loss on them, their first setback since Dec. 4 and first shutout in three seasons.

But the young quarterback, who missed the opener after an appendectomy Sept. 3, looked anything but sharp in his first pro shutout. He played with a slight fever, but coach Bill Cowher said he was OK to play.

"We never got into any kind of rhythm," said Cowher, whose team slipped to 1-1.

Roethlisberger had two passes intercepted in the final five minutes by Rashean Mathis -- the cornerback who beat the Steelers last season when he returned a Tommy Maddox interception for a touchdown in overtime.

"This is the type of game we expected because the Steelers have a great defense and we have a great defense," Mathis said.

One Mathis interception set up a 42-yard field goal by Josh Scobee, who had three field goals and accounted for every point last night. All came after a scoreless first half.

Roethlisberger also got little help from his receivers and running game. Several of his passes were dropped in the first half and the Jaguars (2-0) extinguished the Steelers' ground game. The Steelers managed only 26 yards rushing. Willie Parker had
20 yards on 11 carries.

Roethlisberger completed 17 of 32 passes for 141 yards.

Cowher said he thought Roethlisberger looked good early in the game, but his receivers let him down.

"I thought we dropped balls early that if we catch then we could get into a rhythm," Cowher said.

The Steelers' offense crossed the 50 just once and got no closer than Jacksonville's 46.

"I went out there and did not play very well tonight," Roethlisberger said. "Not only did I let my offense down, but I let my defense down as well."

The Steelers previously were shut out Dec. 14, 2003 by the New York Jets, 6-0, in a snowstorm. The previous time a defending Super Bowl champ was shut out was in 1981 when the Raiders were blanked.

"We weren't able to do anything," receiver Cedrick Wilson said.

Jacksonville quarterback Byron Leftwich had more success than his counterpart. He completed 26 of 39 passes for 260 yards and was intercepted once. Reggie Williams caught eight passes for 95 yards for the Jaguars. Fred Taylor ran 22 times for 92 yards as the Jaguars more than doubled the Steelers in total yardage, 362-153.

"We couldn't get off the field," Steelers linebacker Joey Porter said. "We could not make them one-dimensional, either the run or pass. Normally, we take away one."

It was only the third scoreless first half in the NFL since 2003. The previous time the Steelers were involved in a 0-0 first half came in 1980 against the old Houston Oilers.

The most exciting moment of the half occurred on its final play. Leftwich dropped back from the Steelers' 45 and heaved a deep pass into the end zone. Matt Jones, a 6-foot-6 receiver, had his hands on the ball but defensive backs Tyrone Carter and Ike Taylor teamed to make sure he did not come down with it.

Jacksonville drove into Steelers territory on its first series but was stopped by good defensive plays -- a sack by Larry Foote, a tackle by cornerback Deshea Townsend to end a 3-yard pass play and Clark Haggans' first NFL interception.

The Steelers also made it into Jacksonville territory for the only time in the game on their second series -- but Hines Ward dropped a third-down pass to end the possession.

http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/PP/06262/723075.stm

9/19/2006
Both quarterbacks were plagued by dropped passes in the first half. Roethlisberger completed 8 of 13 for 60 yards. Leftwich completed 13 of 18 for 112 yards. Nine penalties were marked off in the first half, six against the Jaguars.

"I thought he threw the ball really well," Cowher said of Roethlisberger's first half.

No field goal was tried by either team in the first half.

Cowher lost a challenge and a time out with 6:54 left in the third quarter when he requested a review of a catch by Matt Jones along the sideline. The referee upheld the third-down, 13-yard catch that gave the Jaguars a first down at the Steelers' 19.

The drive stalled at the 13 when a blitzing Foote forced Leftwich to get rid of the ball on third down.

Scobee came on to kick a 31-yard field goal for the game's first points with 5:24 left in the third quarter, giving Jacksonville a 3-0 lead. The drive carried 60 yards on 11 plays over 5 1/2 minutes.

At the end of three quarters, the Steelers were lucky to be trailing by just three points. They had 91 total yards to 265 for the Jaguars. They were 2 of 9 on third downs when they failed to convert on third-and-2 from their 42 early in the fourth quarter. They made 3 of 13 for the game.

"It was just all Jacksonville," Wilson said.

Scobee gave Jacksonville a 6-0 lead when he kicked a 32-yard field goal with 6:15 left in the game. Williams put that drive in gear when he turned a 15-yard pass into a 48-yard gain to the Steelers' 23. The Jaguars converted 6 of 18 third downs.

"We couldn't get off the field on third down," Cowher said.

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**Shutting out Cowher**

Since becoming the Steelers' coach in 1992, Bill Cowher has been held scoreless only three times before last night. Here's a look at the losses:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Skinny</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>at New York Jets</td>
<td>6-0</td>
<td>The loss in a heavy snowstorm eliminated the Steelers from the playoffs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dec. 14, 2003</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>at Miami Dolphins</td>
<td>21-0</td>
<td>The offense produced just 200 total yards in Cowher's second shutout.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sept. 20, 1998</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>at Los Angeles Rams</td>
<td>27-0</td>
<td>Rookie Jerome Bettis closed the scoring for the Rams with a 29-yard TD run.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sept. 12, 1993</td>
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</tbody>
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**Postgame audio**

Head coach Bill Cowher and quarterback Ben Roethlisberger discuss the Steelers' performance following the 9-0 loss to Jacksonville:

- [The running game](#) was at the top of Coach Cowher's list of things that need to get fixed.
- [Tackling and field position](#) also drew some comments from the coach.
- "It's my fault", the quarterback said.
- Big Ben says he's confident that the offense's problems can be repaired.
Steelers get stuffed by Jaguars, 9-0

(Ed Bouchette can be reached at ebouchette@post-gazette.com.)

Back

Copyright © PG Publishing Co., Inc. All Rights Reserved.
As they did so often on their run to a Super Bowl championship last season, the Steelers emerged from beneath the rubble to pull out a win to open the NFL season last night in Heinz Field.

Quarterback Charlie Batch overcame a costly fumble at the Miami 1 in the fourth quarter and threw an 87-yard touchdown pass to tight end Heath Miller to lift the Steelers to a 28-17 victory against the Miami Dolphins.

"Panic never set in on our football team," coach Bill Cowher said. "It was a good start."

Linebacker Joey Porter sealed the win when he intercepted a Daunte Culpepper pass and returned it 42 yards for a touchdown with 2:59 left.

The touchdown to Miller was the third scoring pass of the night for Batch, playing four days after starter Ben Roethlisberger had his appendix removed. The electrifying connection with Miller turned into the longest touchdown pass in Heinz Field history and came with 6:11 to go.

Offensive coordinator Ken Whisenhunt presented Batch with some options during a break just before the play, and the quarterback chose the pass to Miller. As he barked out signals, he noticed the cornerback and safety moving to cover Hines Ward and virtually ignoring Miller.

"I stared down Hines, hit Heath over the top and the rest is history," Batch said.

Safety Troy Polamalu intercepted a Culpepper pass with 5:51 left, but Jeff Reed missed a 44-yard field-goal attempt. Porter took care of matters by himself a few minutes later with his interception return for a
touchdown.

It looked as if Batch, a 31-year-old quarterback from Homestead, would be a goat, but instead he turned in one of the game's best performances. He completed 15 of 25 passes for 209 yards, three touchdowns and no interceptions.

"I thought Charlie played very well, played very efficient," Cowher said.

Batch also threw touchdown passes to Nate Washington and Ward in the second quarter as the Steelers took a 14-10 halftime lead.

His fumble came with 11:58 to go and the Steelers down by three.

"You never want to be the guy who is going to take a step back," Batch said.

Miami's Ronnie Brown ran for two touchdowns of 2 and 5 yards, and Olindo Mare kicked a 26-yard field goal for the Dolphins. But the Steelers slammed the Dolphins' ground game, holding them to 38 yards rushing on 18 carries. Culpepper was 18 of 37 for 262 yards, but
no touchdowns, two interceptions and three sacks.

Willie Parker ran a career-high 29 times for yards for 115 yards for the Steelers, the seventh 100-yard game of his three-year NFL career.

Miller caught three passes for 102 yards, a career high.

He caught the touchdown pass from Batch at the 30 and outran linebacker Zach Thomas and cornerback Will Allen.

"I knew he could run that far, I didn't know he could run that fast," Cowher said. "He looked good running by me, but he still had a long way to go."

A sluggish game broke open in the second quarter when the Steelers took a 7-0 lead on Batch's 27-yard touchdown pass to Washington.

Washington, inside the 5, aggressively went for the ball and beat strong safety Travares Tillman for it. Washington landed in the end zone for his first regular-season NFL catch and first touchdown.

"He did a really good job of going up and making a play," Batch said. "That's what Nate does."

Miami's tedious offense received a boost when Wes Welker returned a Chris Gardocki punt 47 yards to the Steelers' 15. Culpepper threw a 13-yard pass to Brown on first down, then Brown ran up the middle for a 2-yard touchdown and a 7-7 tie with 5:14 left in the first half.

The Steelers reclaimed the lead, 14-7, on Ward's 7-yard touchdown catch of a pass from Batch in the back of the end zone. It came with 1:49 left in the half.

Parker fuel-injected that seven-play, 77-yard drive with a 32-yard run off right tackle, running through the arms of Thomas. On third down, cornerback Andre Goodman was penalized 23 yards for interference on a deep pass to Cedrick Wilson.

It was Goodman again who failed to cover Ward for the touchdown in the end zone. It was Ward's first catch of the game.

The Dolphins salvaged three points before the half ended, when Mare kicked a 26-yard field goal with 32 seconds left. That score was made possible by Welker's two pass receptions, covering 51 yards.

Marty Booker helped to put the Dolphins on top for the first time when he caught a short pass and turned it into a 52-yard gain when safety Tyrone Carter slipped to the ground.

Cornerback Ike Taylor then did something all too
familiar and frustrating to his coaches. From the Steelers' 5, Culpepper threw too far for his receiver right into the arms of Taylor in the end zone. But Taylor, who admitted to dropping at least 10 interceptions last season, dropped this one too. On the next play, Brown ran 5 yards for his second touchdown and a 17-14 Miami lead.

Then came Batch's fumble at the 1.

"You don't worry about Charlie Batch," Cowher said of his reaction at that point. "He's a very confident guy. Those things happen; they happen, and you move on."

After the Steelers' defense finally forced a Miami punt, Batch requested the play to Miller from Whisenhunt. Replays showed Miller was knocked out of bounds at the 1, but the officials ruled a touchdown.

When Miami coach Nick Saban threw the red flag to challenge the call, the officials did not see it as Reed kicked the extra point, and no challenge was accepted.

Polamalu and Porter then snuffed out the Dolphins' last two tries to pull it out.

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