Turning points: Steelers win in OT, 23-20
Holmes’ 38-yard TD reception, a fumble returned by Woodley for a score 15 seconds later spark Steelers to OT victory

Tuesday, September 30, 2008
By Ed Bouchette, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

A burst of anger at halftime from quarterback Ben Roethlisberger at his teammates was followed by a burst of scoring late in the third quarter that boosted the Steelers from behind, and they beat the surprising Baltimore Ravens, 23-20, on Jeff Reed's third field goal of the game, from 46 yards in overtime last night.

Baltimore players celebrated because they thought Reed's field goal went wide, but it hooked just inside the left upright for the seventh winning field goal of his career.

"Oh, yeah, there was doubt," Reed said as he watched the ball hook to the left.

The Ravens had tied the score with four minutes left when Le'Ron McClain ran 2 yards for their only score in the second half that sent it into overtime.

The Steelers were left with one running back, Mewelde Moore, for most of the fourth quarter and overtime after Rashard Mendenhall fractured his shoulder and Carey Davis sprained his ankle. Mendenhall, making his first pro start, will miss the rest of the season.

Moore did not let them down. He turned a short pass into a 24-yard gain to Baltimore's 31 on third down, keeping their winning drive alive. He then caught a crucial 7-yard pass on third down to put Reed in better range from 46 yards.

"To make a play to help my team out ... I can't explain it," Moore said. "That [24-yarder] was the biggest play in my life."

The victory boosted the Steelers back atop the AFC North Division at 3-1. Baltimore fell to 2-1.

"We're never going to quit," Roethlisberger said after the game.

He said something entirely different at halftime. The Steelers trailed, 13-3, and they were booed as they left the field.

Roethlisberger shouted at his offensive teammates in the locker room.

"I was tired of being booed," he said. "I was tired of being embarrassed."

Tackle Willie Colon said: "He's just being a leader. He said you either step up or die, and everyone got it in their minds they were going to fight."
Whether it was those fighting words or something else, the Steelers stunning turnaround late in the third quarter occurred within 15 seconds when it appeared nothing could go right for their offense.

Then something did go right.

"We knew we had to get jump-started with a big play or a turnover," linebacker Larry Foote said.

They got both. On third down, Roethlisberger threw a pass over the middle to Santonio Holmes for a 38-yard touchdown. On the next play, James Harrison sacked Ravens rookie quarterback Joe Flacco, who fumbled. Linebacker LaMarr Woodley recovered and took it 7 yards for a touchdown.

"I'd rather take the sack-fumble all day," Harrison said about Woodley's touchdown off his effort. "He can score all he wants."

Those two scores not only breathed life into the Steelers, but they also gave them a 17-13 lead in a game in which they looked ripe for an upset loss to their bitter rivals from Baltimore.

Roethlisberger had a rough time of it until then. He was sacked three times in the first half and threw an interception that helped the Ravens turn an early tide and their first score, the ball slipping out of his hand.

Reed kicked his second field goal of the game, from 19 yards, with 9:19 left for the 20-13 Steelers advantage, but the Ravens drove 76 yards to tie the score with 4:02 left.

The Steelers got to Flacco for five sacks with Harrison leading the way with 2 1/2.

The Steelers grabbed a 3-0 lead on Reed's 49-yard field goal to end their first drive of the game.

Halotti Ngata's interception of Roethlisberger on the Steelers' second possession of the game changed its complexion. Instead of the Steelers having the lead and the ball near midfield, the Ravens took over at the Steelers' 48 and tied the score on Matt Stover's 33-yard field goal.

Stover put the Ravens in front, 6-3, when he kicked a 20-yard field goal with 3:48 left in the half. The Ravens took over at the 50 after a poor punt, and the Steelers defense made them pay for their three points by driving 48 yards on 11 plays.

Roethlisberger then had a Philadelphia moment -- he was sacked twice on three plays and fumbled on the final one. Colon recovered the fumble at the 9, but Mitch Berger managed to punt only 35 yards and the Ravens took over at the Steelers' 44 with 1:52 left in the first half.

The Ravens seemed content to settle for a field goal and a 9-3 halftime lead when Flacco dumped a short pass over the middle on third down to McClain. The fullback eluded a few defenders, most notably James Farrior and Ryan Clark, and made it 25 yards to the 3.

A few plays later, Flacco threw a fade in the left rear corner of the end zone, where tight end Daniel Wilcox caught it for a 4-yard score and a 13-3 Baltimore halftime lead that left Heinz Field in stunned silence.

It did not silence Roethlisberger, though, either in the locker room at halftime or back out on the field. He was not sacked in the second half and, using the no-huddle, found Holmes streaking across the middle on third down. He caught it behind diving cornerback Fabian Washington, then cornerback Chris McAlister missed a tackle and Holmes completed a 38-yard touchdown.

The Steelers trailed, 13-10, with 4:09 left in the third quarter.

One play and 15 seconds later, they took the lead at 17-13.

On first down, Harrison hit Flacco from behind and fumbled. Woodley fell on it at the 7, got up and ran into the end zone for a touchdown with 3:54 to go.

Their next drive came up 1 yard short for a touchdown, Reed instead kicking from 19 yards for a 20-13 lead. One play put them in scoring position. The Ravens blitzed six men on second down and Roethlisberger escaped it, shaking off linebacker Bart Scott to throw deep to Hines Ward, who was wide open for a 49-yard gain to the 10.

Baltimore, though, tied it, 20-20, when McClain ran 2 yards for a touchdown with 4:02 left. Regulation ended, and then Baltimore won the coin toss and elected to receive. A holding penalty on the kickoff gave Baltimore the ball on its 15.
Lawrence Timmons ended that series with a sack of Flacco back to the 12.

The Steelers took over after the punt at their 43 to open the winning drive. They moved 29 yards on seven plays to set up Reed's winner.

"I knew we were going to get in my range," Reed said.

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The Steelers' 23-20 overtime victory over the Ravens Monday night did not come without serious cost.

A handful of players were lost to injury. Starting guard Kendall Simmons (foot) and running back Rashard Mendenhall (shoulder) are out for the season.

The victory, which came after the Steelers scored 17 unanswered points and squandered a late lead, wasn't sealed until Jeff Reed snuck a 46-yard field goal attempt just inside the left goal post at 8:55 of overtime.

It gave the Steelers a 3-1 record as well as first place in the AFC North. It may also have represented another stage in the maturation of quarterback Ben Roethlisberger.

Roethlisberger threw for 191 yards and the touchdown that jump-started the Steelers' offense in the third quarter. In truth, he may have provided the jolt his team needed earlier.

So frustrated by the Steelers play through the first two quarters Roethlisberger said he "screamed" at his teammates at halftime.

"Very unusual," wide receiver Santonio Holmes said of Roethlisberger's outburst, "but being a captain, that's what we expect from him." He came in and stated his claim.

"I was tired of being booed," Roethlisberger said, "I was tired of being embarrassed on offense. I told the guys that. I said, 'There's no need for it.' "

The Steelers had gone eight consecutive quarters without a touchdown before Roethlisberger and Holmes hooked up on a 38-yard scoring strike late in the third quarter.

On the Ravens' next play from scrimmage, James Harrison sacked quarterback Joe Flacco. That caused a fumble that LaMarr Woodley scooped up and returned 7 yards for a touchdown.

Just like that, a 13-3 deficit turned into a 17-13 Steelers lead.

The Steelers added a field goal in the fourth quarter to extend their lead but
they needed one more Reed kick to finish the Ravens, who marched 76 yards late in regulation to tie the score.

It came less than four minutes into overtime and was set up by two Roethlisberger completions to third-down back Mewelde Moore.

The two hooked up for a 24-yard gain on third-and-8 from the Steelers’ 45-yard line. Moore scampered 7 more yards on another pass reception to set up Reed's game-winning field goal.

In Moore, who hadn't played much before Monday night, the Steelers were down to their final running back.

Mendenhall will be put on injured reserve today and Carey Davis left the game with a sprained ankle. Willie Parker, who missed the Ravens game with a sprained knee, said he does not know if he will play Sunday when the Steelers visit the Jaguars.

Tomlin said the injuries the Steelers sustained -- linebacker Andre Frazier and Keyaron Fox also left the contest -- did not put a damper on the victory. He said the Steelers would look at options outside the organization at running back.

On a positive note, Frazier, who was taken off the field in a headboard after the first play of the game, did not suffer a serious spinal injury, Tomlin said. In fact, he had returned to the Steelers' sideline before the end of the game.

Of how beat up the Steelers are Tomlin said, "It's only devastating if you allow it to be. We are not concerned with our problems. They are probably happy we have them. We will address them and we will get ready to play."

The Steelers put forth another inspired defensive effort. Harrison led the way with 2 1/2 sacks.

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Roethlisberger is blitzed, bothered and battered by Philadelphia's hungry defense

Monday, September 22, 2008
By Ed Bouchette, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger is sacked by Eagles linebacker Trent Cole yesterday at Lincoln Financial Field in Philadelphia.

PHILADELPHIA -- Ben Roethlisberger turned slowly around from his locker, his right hand wrapped with a white bandage but otherwise surprisingly unbloodied, and asked for a little room to operate.

The gaggle of reporters complied. Too bad the Philadelphia Eagles did not.

Roethlisberger came under as heavy a pass rush as he has experienced in five NFL seasons as the rampaging Eagles defense sacked him eight times, injured his right hand and sent the Steelers home with their first loss of the season, 15-6.

"We came out here and got the dog kicked out of us," offensive tackle Willie Colon said.

That Roethlisberger was able to walk under his own power out of this city was a small victory in itself. X-rays showed no broken bones although his hand, which was stepped on, will be examined further today. Those eight sacks easily could have been a dozen if it weren't for penalties and a yard gain on several plays that negated more. Relief quarterback Byron Leftwich was sacked once to make it nine officially.

Philadelphia's pressure defense was the overwhelming difference in a close game. It was more than sacks. That pressure helped create two lost fumbles by Roethlisberger, an interception, a safety and a meager 33 yards rushing, including just 20 by the NFL's third-leading rusher entering the weekend, Willie Parker.

"They took it to us tonight, no doubt," Steelers coach Mike Tomlin said. "They got after us. That's the story of this football game. They applied pressure on our quarterback, particularly on third downs, made splash plays."

Tomlin said as the game wore on and the Steelers (2-1) could not solve the problem, the Eagles (2-1) picked up steam.

"There was blood in the water at that point," he said as the Steelers' second-half adjustments dissolved like papier-mâché in a rainstorm. "They pinned their ears back."

"I want to thank our defense," Roethlisberger said. "They gave us many chances to win that game. They were the reason we were able to stay close and have an opportunity to win the game."

Roethlisberger completed just 13 of 25 passes for 131 yards and threw his first interception of the season. Parker ran 13 times for 20 yards. The Eagles threw a lot with Donovan McNabb completing 24 of 35 passes but just for 196 yards. The game's only touchdown came on a 20-yard toss to Correll Buckhalter.

Sad Sacks

The Steelers are 1-4 when Ben Roethlisberger is sacked six or more times:

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* overtime ** playoffs

Steelers Troy Polamalu and Bryant McFadden each had interceptions and McFadden recovered a Tony Hunt fumble. Tomlin was in no mood for moral victories on one side of the ball.

"I'm not worried about wasting efforts," he said of his defense.

At one point in the first half, the Eagles sacked Roethlisberger five times on seven plays and he lost a fumble on one of them. On the eighth play, Asante Samuel intercepted Roethlisberger's deep pass.

That's eight offensive plays, five sacks, two turnovers.

"We got our butt kicked, plain and simple," Colon said. "No other way to put it. Obviously, we didn't do the job we wanted to come out here and do. We got lit up."

The Eagles moved readily on their opening drive to a first down at the Steelers' 25 when linebacker James Farrior stripped the ball from Hill after a short reception. McFadden recovered at the Steelers' 20.

That led to the first scoring drive of the game, a 12-play effort in which Roethlisberger completed 5 of 7 passes and Reed kicked a 37-yard field goal. It was the only score of the first quarter and it was their only competent drive of the game until the end.

The Eagles claimed a 7-3 lead on a 13-play drive that ended when Buckhalter caught a short pass from McNabb, beat linebacker James Harrison around the left corner and leaped over cornerback Ike Taylor from the 3 and into the end zone to complete a 20-yard touchdown reception.

The Eagles blitzed Roethlisberger hard and often and it paid off in the second quarter when they sacked him three times in five plays, two of them by end Juqua Parker. Roethlisberger fumbled on the last one and Eagles tackle Brodrick Bunkley recovered at the Steelers' 45.

That fumble led to a David Akers' 31-yard field goal and a 10-3 Eagles lead with 2:36 left in the second quarter.

Reed made the longest field goal of his career from 53 yards after McFadden's interception near midfield. That left the Eagles with a 10-6 halftime lead.

Nothing happened to change that until the Eagles recorded a safety in the fourth quarter when, under pressure and going down in his end zone, Roethlisberger tried to flip a pass to Mewele Moore and was penalized for intentional grounding. Because the penalty occurred in the end zone, it was ruled a safety and upped Philadelphia's lead to 12-6 with eight minutes left.

A leaping sack of Roethlisberger on the next series by safety Brian Dawkins knocked the ball out of his hands. Dawkins recovered and Akers eventually kicked another 31-yard field goal for a 15-6 lead.

Leftwich came on and, against no blitz, guided the Steelers to the Eagles' 22 where the drive ended on fourth down.

The problem for the Steelers now is not so much what the Eagles did, but what every other defense will try to do, starting with Baltimore Monday night.

"It has to be correctable," Colon said. "Any team that watches this tape right now is going to understand we're suffering with the blitz coming at us and if we don't get it done, they're going to blitz the hell out of us."

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9/22/2008
Steelers take early division advantage

High wind, rain keep both teams from effectively moving ball, but win puts Steelers atop AFC North

Monday, September 15, 2008
By Ed Bouchette, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Steelers linebackers James Farrior and Larry Foote stuff Browns running back Jamal Lewis last night at Cleveland Browns Stadium.

CLEVELAND -- Some things never change. Autumn follows summer, the Allegheny River flows into the Ohio, and the Browns lose to the Steelers.

The Steelers won their 10th in a row against their longtime and close rivals, made it 16 out of 17, and nine out of 10 here since the new Browns returned to play in new Cleveland Browns Stadium.

By doing so, 10-6, last night, the Steelers took early command of the AFC North Division at 2-0 while Cleveland fell to 0-2.

"For whatever reasons, we feel confident playing here," said receiver Hines Ward, who scored the game's only touchdown on an 11-yard pass from Ben Roethlisberger in the second quarter. "Overall, we like playing in Pitt ... Cleveland."

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The Steelers beat the Browns in high wind -- gusts were reported at 60 mph -- rain and, on occasion, comedy.

Cleveland blew a prime scoring chance at the end of the first half and then made a questionable decision in the closing minutes when Browns coach Romeo Crennel opted for a field goal instead of trying for the tying touchdown. The Steelers weren't without mistakes of their own, muffing a kickoff return almost as badly as it can be done.

But Roethlisberger (12 of 19, 186 yards) and Ward hooked up for their third touchdown pass of the season, and Jeff Reed kicked a 48-yard field goal to offset Phil Dawson's two field goals for Cleveland.

Willie Parker also made it two games, two 100-yard rushing efforts. He ran 28 times for 105 yards last night. Rookie Rashard Mendenhall did not play on offense.

The Browns were supposed to challenge for the division title this season but have lost their first two games, both at home, after they went 10-6 last season.

"We're 2-0," Ward said. "Cincinnati and Cleveland are 0-2. They have to catch up to us. It is big. Everybody picked Cleveland as the team to beat. We came on the road and won up here, it speaks volumes for our team. ... We are the division champions from last year."
It was such a game that the home fans booed when the Browns scored for the second time. It came when Crennel, on fourth-and-7 at the Steelers' 20, opted to kick a field goal with 3:21 left and the Browns trailing, 10-3. Dawson kicked it and the fans cut loose with their displeasure.

The Browns still needed a touchdown to avoid losing, just as they did before the kick. But the Steelers used up all but 26 seconds on a long drive that ended at the Browns' 26 and Cleveland ended feebly when Aaron Smith sacked Derrick Anderson for the second time.

The Steelers did not fault Crennel for kicking rather than trying to tie it with just over three minutes left.

"I think it was a smart choice," Smith said.

"I think we would have made a play," safety Ryan Clark said of the Browns' choice not to run a play on fourth down. "That's what our defense did all night."

Roethlisberger and Ward hooked up for the game's only touchdown in the second quarter, and it came on third down and ended what was becoming a monotonous game between the longtime rivals in difficult weather.

The game was scoreless after the first quarter. Then Bryant McFadden intercepted his first pass of the season at the Cleveland 30 early in the second when Anderson badly underthrew Braylon Edwards with the strong wind to his back. The Steelers drove to the Cleveland 40 after the interception and faced a fourth-and-1 there. Parker picked up 12 around right end. Santonio Holmes (five catches, 94 yards) caught a 1-yard pass to the 12.

Ward then dropped a pass in the end zone on second down from the 11. Roethlisberger went right back to his veteran receiver on third down and Ward beat cornerback Terry Cousins badly, broke wide open into the end zone and hung on this time for the score, his third touchdown catch of the season.

"To have that drop, to come back on the next play and call my number again, shows the confidence they have in me," Ward said.

The Browns strung together a nice drive at the end of the half, but in true Browns recent tradition, they muffed it. With a third down at the 12, Anderson sneaked 1 yard for the first down.

There were eight seconds left and Crennel opted to try one pass into the end zone figuring if it failed, he would still have time to kick a short field goal.

Troy Polamalu upset those plans when he made a diving interception at the 3 on a low Anderson pass intended for Syndirc Steptoe as time ran out.

"It sucks the wind out of them a little bit," Smith said of that play.

Browns fans loudly booed their team as it left the field at halftime. It wasn't so bad, taking one shot at the end one, but Anderson did not even do that, throwing it short. Had Steptoe caught it and been tackled before the goal line, the half would have ended, too, because the Browns had no timeouts left.

The Steelers scored for the second time when Reed kicked his 48-yard field goal midway through the third quarter for a 10-0 lead. That was not a gimme field goal, either, with the wind gusts at Cleveland Browns Stadium.

The Steelers moved into field-goal position based solely on one play. Holmes caught a 48-yard pass that Roethlisberger threw from the 16. Holmes had to fight off cornerback Brandon McDonald to catch the high and deep pass.

As the game wore on, it became quite evident that Steelers coach Mike Tomlin was reluctant to use Mendenhall. He did not play other than to return kickoffs as the Steelers used a steady diet of Willie Parker. And the rookie even had trouble returning kickoffs.

He stumbled trying to field one in the third quarter and fell down when he was bumped by teammate Carey Davis. By the time the Browns missed two good attempts to cover the ball, it rolled out of bounds at the Steelers' 2. It was the worst kickoff return by a Steelers rookie since Barry Foster let the ball bounce as if it were a punt in San Francisco in 1990 and the 49ers recovered deep in Steelers territory.

Cleveland finally scored with the help of two personal fouls on the Steelers defense. Linebacker LaMarr Woodley was called for roughing the passer when he slammed into Anderson and drove him into the ground just after he released a pass that Braylon Edwards caught. The penalty and catch made it a 25-yard play to the Steelers' 34.
Later in the drive, linebacker James Farrior was penalized for taunting, moving the ball 10 yards to the Steelers’ 11.

Dawson ended the drive by kicking his 31-yard field goal to put the Browns within a touchdown of the lead. They would get no closer.

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Steelers maintain dominance over Browns

By Scott Brown
TRIBUNE-REVIEW
Monday, September 15, 2008

CLEVELAND -- Winds that were as strong as 40 mph Sunday night had the goal posts dancing to the pregame music that blared at Cleveland Browns Stadium.

They whipped so ferociously before kickoff that the people who tried to unfurl a large, rectangular Browns banner were instead hurried off the field when it came apparent they had no chance of completing their task.

The Browns fared better amid the gusting winds and, at times, swirling rains, but their performance wasn't enough for them to interrupt the Steelers' recent dominance of the bitter rivalry.

Stout defense, a steady Ben Roethlisberger and a couple of fortuitous bounces were enough for the Steelers to hold off the Browns, 10-6, in front of an announced crowd of 73,048 and a national TV audience.

The Steelers (2-0) beat the Browns (0-2) for the 10th consecutive time.

The last time the Browns beat the Steelers was October 2003 -- when Roethlisberger was a junior at Miami (Ohio).

"It's best to win this way," said safety Troy Polamalu, whose second quarter interception was one of the key plays of the game. "It's Steelers football to run the rock, to burn the clock that way and for the defense to play really good."

Roethlisberger, playing with a slightly separated right shoulder, completed 12 of 19 passes for 186 yards and a touchdown.

His 11-yard touchdown pass to Hines Ward in the second quarter broke a scoreless tie and gave the Steelers a lead they would never relinquish.

No completion may have been more significant than Roethlisberger's 31-yard hook-up with Ward near the end of the third quarter.

It came after the Steelers nearly lost a fumble on a kickoff return following a Phil Dawson field goal that cut their lead to 10-3. Cleveland's Jerome Harrison had several chances to recover the fumble deep in Steelers' territory but the ball went out of bounds at the 2-yard line. Roethlisberger got the Steelers out of the shadow of their own end zone with his strike to Ward.
The defense bent a little in the fourth quarter but did not allow the Browns' offense to find the end zone. After driving deep into Steelers territory late in the fourth quarter, Cleveland coach Romeo Crennel opted for a 38-yard Dawson field goal with 3:21 left in the game.

That cut the Steelers' lead to four points, but the Browns could get no closer.

Willie Parker, who rushed for 105 yards on 28 carries, picked up a key first down on the Steelers' final possession. That allowed the Steelers to run the clock down to 30 seconds before relinquishing possession.

"I think (Parker) ran hard," said Steelers coach Mike Tomlin, whose team visits Philadelphia next Sunday. "I liked the resiliency of the men."

The Steelers contained return specialist Josh Cribbs and twice picked off Browns quarterback Derek Anderson on a blustery night.

One of the interceptions led to a touchdown, and another thwarted a rare Cleveland scoring opportunity.

Points in what turned into a defensive struggle and battle for field position weren't produced until more than halfway through the second quarter.

Taking advantage of a Bryant McFadden interception, Roethlisberger engineered a 12-play, 70-yard drive that culminated in his 11-yard touchdown pass to Ward.

The Browns responded with their only drive of the first half and looked like they were at least going to come away from it with three points after moving inside the Steelers' 15-yard line.

Suspect clock management, however, led to a forced Anderson throw on the 15th play of the drive. Polamalu intercepted the pass near the goal line on the final play of the second quarter, allowing the Steelers to take a seven-point lead into intermission.

"I think the most critical play (defensively) was by Troy right before the half," Tomlin said. "To get out of that position, giving up no points -- that is what makes Troy who he is."

The Steelers extended their lead to 10-0 early in the third quarter when a 48-yard reception by Santonio Holmes set up Jeff Reed's 48-yard field goal.

The Browns made it close with the Dawson field goals, but they could not break through in what has become a recurring theme over the past five years.

"It's Cleveland, and you know how much we love to beat them," Parker said. "We're going to build off this game going into Philly."

*Scott Brown can be reached at sbrown@tribweb.com or 412-481-5432.*
For openers, it was a dominating outing, but the players aren't overly excited by the win

Monday, September 08, 2008
By Ed Bouchette, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The Steelers have become accustomed to winning season openers, yet rarely have they been so dominant in claiming their sixth consecutive opener by clubbing the Houston Texans, 38-17, at Heinz Field.

They weren't perfect -- Ben Roethlisberger did throw one incompletion in his 14 pass attempts -- but their play yesterday rivaled the gorgeous weather that greeted their first game of the season.

"A beautiful day," Steelers coach Mike Tomlin said, describing the weather and his team's play.

"We're a good team, you know?" defensive end Brett Keisel said. "But I don't think anyone in here is going, 'Oh, yeah, we're so great, we got this big win!' All of us understand the schedule this year and all of us understand after each game we have another tough opponent ahead."

That would be the Browns in Cleveland Sunday night, but for now the Steelers should feel good about reveling a little in the game they played to open the season.

Willie Parker, whose last season ended with a broken leg in game 15, showed off his renewed health and old form by rushing for 138 yards and three touchdowns on runs of 7, 13 and 4 yards, the most in his career and one more score than he had all of last year.

Roethlisberger tossed touchdown passes to Hines Ward of 13 and 16 yards. Linebacker James Harrison got a jump on another Pro Bowl season with three sacks, and his new colleague on the other side, LaMarr Woodley, had a sack, an interception and a fumble recovery.

The Steelers led, 35-3, into the fourth quarter. Neither Roethlisberger nor Parker played in the final quarter.

"We're not going to overreact," said Ward, who led the Steelers with six receptions for 76 yards and had a long reception taken away by a penalty. "It's one game. We have a big game in Cleveland, prime time. We'll enjoy this, look at it and get ready for Cleveland next week."

After Keisel and Casey Hampton stopped Houston quarterback Matt Schaub's sneak on fourth-and-1 at the Steelers' 48 on the game's first series, it was virtually all the home team until the fourth quarter.
The Steelers scored touchdowns on their first three series: Parker scored twice and a Roethlisberger-to-Ward pass made it 21-0 after Woodley one-handed an interception and returned it 6 yards to the Houston 32.

It was Woodley's first interception -- pro, college, high school, midget -- in his first NFL start.

"So far, so good," said the new left outside linebacker. "You have to bring the same attitude every week."

The only trouble Roethlisberger had on a day in which he posted his best completion percentage and a 147 passer rating came from Houston defensive end Mario Williams, who sacked him twice. The first came in the second quarter from the Houston 32 after Troy Polamalu's interception.

Williams, second in the AFC with 13 sacks in 2007, hit Roethlisberger from behind and stripped the ball. Linebacker DeMeco Ryans returned the fumble to the Steelers' 12, counting the 12 yards tacked on because Parker tackled him by the facemask.

Such was the play of the Steelers' defense yesterday, though, that the line of scrimmage moved back to the 16 by the time Kris Brown kicked a 34-yard field goal.

"We really didn't stop ourselves," Roethlisberger said. "We had two sacks, small things, a little thing here, a little there. Nothing big. I don't think we made a lot of mistakes and we didn't kill ourselves."

Schaub completed a high percentage of his passes, going 25 of 33 for 202 yards. But he was sacked five times for 43 yards in losses and threw two interceptions. He threw a touchdown pass in the fourth quarter to Kevin Walter and ran for another.

Rookie Steve Slaton from West Virginia University led a pitiful Texans ground game (75 yards) with 43 yards on 13 carries.

Even the Steelers infamous coverage teams contained Andre Davis, who returned three kickoffs for touchdowns last season. Davis averaged only 18.7 yards on six kickoff returns and Jacoby Jones returned two punts for 5 yards.

"I think that we played a good game in virtually all three phases," Tomlin said. "It was not perfect, but I liked the energy and enthusiasm from the people who went out and made plays for this football team."

Parker ran inside and out, with a long run of 32 yards. He showed he had returned to form this summer, but there's nothing like doing it when they unveil a new season officially.

"I just wanted to get back out there and just play," Parker said. "It seems like it's been a long time coming. It seems like I've been waiting forever."

His 22nd 100-yard game was worth it.

"It was fun to watch him run," Roethlisberger said. "I get caught sometimes not carrying out my fakes because I want to turn around and see him make guys miss. He had a great one along the sideline today. It's fun to watch Willie Parker be Willie Parker."

Roethlisberger and Parker got to watch in the fourth quarter when Byron Leftwich finished up at quarterback and Rashard Mendenhall at halfback. Leftwich was 0 for 4 passing but Nate Washington nearly came down with one on-target deep toss before dropping it. Mendenhall ran 10 times for 28 yards.

"I'm happy with the way we played but I'm not too excited," said Keisel, expressing the general consensus among his teammates. "I thought we should have won this game before we started."

They practically did.

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He took the handoff with about four minutes to go in the third quarter and encountered a Houston Texans player at the line of scrimmage.

Willie Parker, looking spry as ever, did a couple of jukes and left Fred Bennett standing flat-footed as he flashed past the Texans' cornerback on the way to a 32-yard run.

No play better summed up how bad the Steelers made the Texans look on a resplendent day at Heinz Field.

Parker rushed for 138 yards and a career-high three touchdowns, and a suffocating defense powered them to a 38-17 win in front of an announced crowd of 64,001.

The Steelers were so dominant in winning their sixth consecutive season opener that quarterback Ben Roethlisberger traded in his football helmet for a baseball cap prior to the start of the fourth quarter.

Roethlisberger completed 13-of-14 passes for 137 yards and two touchdowns before giving way to backup Byron Leftwich. Among the many positives to come out of the game for the Steelers: they didn't delve too deeply into their playbook and didn't show much to the rival Browns, whom they play next Sunday in Cleveland.

"We still have a lot of things we could have used," Roethlisberger said.

The play-calling may have been the only area in which the Steelers held back Sunday.

They sacked Matt Schaub five times and intercepted the Texans' quarterback twice. Pro Bowl linebacker James Harrison sacked Schaub three times, and LaMarr Woodley, who lines up opposite Harrison, had a unique hat trick.

Making his first career start, Woodley recorded a sack, recovered a fumble and made an interception that set up a Steelers' touchdown in the second quarter.

Woodley, a converted defensive end, knocked down a Schaub pass with his left forearm and then caught the ball and returned it 6 yards.
He had good reason to keep the ball -- it was his first interception at any level.

It was the kind of day for the Steelers -- and for the Texans, who left Heinz Field in a daze.

"Any time you lose and the other team is taking out their starters in the fourth quarter, it's embarrassing," Texans defensive tackle Travis Johnson said.

The turning point in the game came early enough that late-arriving fans may have missed it.

After Houston opened the game by stringing together a couple of first downs, Texans coach Gary Kubiak opted to go for it on fourth down and less than a yard from the Steelers' 48.

The Steelers stopped Schaub inches short of the first-down marker on a quarterback sneak. Eight plays later, Parker scored the Steelers' first touchdown of the season on a 7-yard scamper.

"After that, it just snowballed," defensive end Aaron Smith said. "This is a game of momentum."

The Steelers held an emotional tribute to Myron Cope, Ernie Holmes and Dwight White before the game, and it included fans holding up Terrible Towels during a moment of silence for the two former players and iconic broadcaster.

The Steelers gave fans plenty of reasons to wave their towels during the game, as they dominated the Texans in every phase and were anything but overmatched along the offensive line.

The line allowed Parker, who showed no lingering effects from the broken leg that ended his 2007 season, to gash the Texans for 5.5 yards a carry and for Roethlisberger to turn in a passer rating that exceeded 100 for the 25th time in his career.

"The only team that can beat us is us, and that's how we feel. It's the confidence we have in our offense," said wide receiver Hines Ward, who caught both of Roethlisberger's touchdown passes. "If we get all 11 guys on the same page, we feel like we can go out there and play with anybody."

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