Steelers' offense reminiscent of '05 season

Tuesday, October 07, 2008
By Ed Bouchette, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. -- Coordinator Bruce Arians could not hide his plan for the Steelers' offense in the days leading to their game Sunday night.

Santonio Holmes said it four days before kickoff: "Shoot, when you lose your starting running back, you lose your first-round running back, you lose your starting fullback/running back? I mean, what else is there for you to do? You can only throw the ball and hope someone comes in and fills in, like Mewelde did."

Mewelde Moore, who has taken care of the necessary ground yards to keep things honest in the past two games and Ben Roethlisberger, his receivers and, yes, his blockers did the rest in their 26-21 upset victory against the Jacksonville Jaguars in a game they dominated more than that score showed.

It was the kind of offensive display under trying circumstances both in loss of personnel and in game situations on the road that should put the rest of the AFC on notice that the Steelers are Super Bowl contenders again at 4-1.

The Steelers long have touted a balanced offense as the key to success, and Sunday they added a few weights on the passing end to even things out.

If the Jaguars and a national TV audience were surprised that Roethlisberger could throw 41 times, amass 309 yards passing and hit three receivers for touchdowns, they then already forgot that highlight film from the Steelers' 2005 Super Bowl season.

That year, the Steelers used the pass to get ahead and the run to stay ahead, and when they needed to, they used the pass to come from behind.

That's precisely what happened Sunday night in Jacksonville Memorial Stadium. Roethlisberger and his offense showed again that they have the ability to win games with the pass. The Jaguars knew the Steelers had to pass but were unable to stop them. Roethlisberger had 239 yards passing in the first half.

"There was no secret we had to do a little of that," Steelers coach Mike Tomlin said. "We had to find some running game alternative, if you will. We got the ball out of the hands quick some, threw some screens and check-downs and things of that..."
nature.

"We were thin at running back. We started a third-down back [Moore] and had a practice squad guy backing him up in Gary Russell. We had a guy who didn't play football in a long time, didn't go to training camp with anybody, in Najeh Davenport.

"Guys didn't look to it as an excuse."

An opportunity, perhaps. At least that's how the wide receivers saw it.

"We have playmakers on this team," said Hines Ward, who caught seven passes for 90 yards, including the winner for 8 yards with 1:53 left. "I know I left some plays out there but in the fourth quarter, we have guys who want the ball and we pride ourselves on that."

Roethlisberger also did a good job of distribution. Nate Washington caught six passes for 94 yards, including a 48-yard touchdown in which he beat backup cornerback Will James badly. Tight end Heath Miller caught five passes for 45 yards, including a diving 1-yard touchdown reception in the end zone. Santonio Holmes caught four passes for 65 yards, and Moore added another three for 17 yards.

"We're in position right now that maybe somebody's thinking it's a fluke," Washington said of his passing offense. "We just have to come out every night and play the same way we did tonight and let them know it's not a fluke, this will happen every night."

Said Ward: "We have quality guys and weapons down the field. It's just a matter of getting opportunities. When it counted, we stepped up big."

Ward and Roethlisberger practiced what would be their winning, 8-yard hookup in pregame warm-ups.

"I pride myself on making that play," Ward said. "It was zero coverage, I was man-to-man with Brian Williams. He threw it up and I caught it."

Roethlisberger did not practice Wednesday or Thursday and did not go through a full practice Friday as he continues to try to overcome the sore shoulder injured in the opener.

"Ben played a hell of a game considering he did not practice all week and us not even catching from him all week," Ward said. "He came out and showed what kind of ballplayer he is."

The Steelers will practice at least today and tomorrow. They do not play this weekend and resume playing Oct. 19 in Cincinnati.

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

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Mewelde Moore did a perfect imitation of Willie Parker

Tuesday, October 07, 2008
By Ron Cook, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Peter Diana/Post-Gazette
Mewelde Moore ran for 99 yards in his first game as a starter for the Steelers Sunday.

Willie Parker loved the comparison.

"Mewelde Moore," someone said to Parker in the happy Steelers' locker room as Sunday night turned into Monday morning, "looked just like you out there."

"Now that's high praise," Parker said, grinning.

Deserved praise, too.

There are a lot of reasons the Steelers are 4-1 and boss of the AFC North Division despite a frightful string of injuries that easily could have sabotaged their season. Moore is high on the list. He didn't beat the Jacksonville Jaguars by himself Sunday night or the Baltimore Ravens the weekend before. But the Steelers wouldn't have won either game without him.

"He probably endeared himself to some guys in there," coach Mike Tomlin said after Moore played a huge part in the 26-21 victory against the Jaguars. "You know how it is for a new guy. He's got to earn his stripes with his teammates. I'm sure he's got some new friends in there."

Would you believe 52 new pals?

"I'm not surprised by what he did," quarterback Ben Roethlisberger said. "I knew, he knew, we all knew he could do it. Everyone worried about a drop-off with our running backs by committee, but we all knew he'd be just fine."

Tomlin always preaches about "team football."

"The level of expectations won't change," he said after injuries to running backs Parker, Rashard Mendenhall and Carey Davis, leaving Moore as The Man in overtime against the Ravens and the unlikely starter against the Jaguars. But not even Tomlin could have imagined that Moore -- a player he pursued and signed as a free agent in the offseason -- would do such a fine Fast Willie imitation. If he had, Moore would have had more than just one touch -- a carry for 6 yards against the Philadelphia Eagles Sept. 21 -- in the first three games.

Where has this guy been?

"He definitely stepped up," Parker said. "He brings it in practice so we know what he can do. But you're still kind of a little shocked after a game like this because we only saw it from him on third down."

Quick Start

Here's a quick glance at the NFL's best defenses through the first three weeks of the season:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Opponent</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Carries/Yds</th>
<th>TD</th>
<th>Rec./Yds</th>
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<tr>
<td>Parker</td>
<td>vs. Titans</td>
<td>9/11/08</td>
<td>22/161</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1/48</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moore</td>
<td>@ Jaguars</td>
<td>10/5/08</td>
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</table>
Moore ran for 19 yards on the first play against the Jaguars. He had a run of 8 yards and a catch for 13 on a first-quarter touchdown drive. He had three carries for 18 yards on a second-quarter field-goal drive. And, on the winning touchdown drive late in the game, he had a 27-yard run that gave Roethlisberger a chance to pull out the improbable victory with two of the prettiest passes you'll ever see to wide receiver Hines Ward.

"That long run was sweet," Parker said.

Fast Willie-like, indeed.

"I believe in myself," Moore said. "It all starts from there."

"A talented guy," Tomlin called him. "He can do a lot of things well. He can run it and he can catch it."

Moore caught it in overtime against the Ravens, converting a third-and-8 with a 24-yard grab-and-go before getting kicker Jeff Reed just close enough for the deciding 46-yard field goal with another 7-yard reception. He mostly toted it against the Jaguars, rushing 17 times for ...

"Yeah, I know, 99 yards," Moore said, sighing. "I need to find 1 more yard somewhere."

You have to think Moore would have gotten an 18th carry and that precious extra yard if his helmet strap hadn't broken on the winning drive. Backup Gary Russell -- on the team only because of the injuries -- had a carry right before Roethlisberger broke a lot of hearts at Jacksonville Municipal Stadium by throwing a perfect 8-yard touchdown fade pass to Ward.

Not that Moore was complaining about being stuck on 99.

"We got the win. I'll take that any day."

It was a win that sent the Steelers into their desperately needed off week in the highest of spirits. They would have signed in blood to be 4-1 if you had told them they would lose all of those running backs plus nose tackle Casey Hampton, defensive end Brett Keisel, cornerback Deshea Townsend and guard Kendall Simmons. Now, they get the better part of two weeks to heal before they play the 0-5 Cincinnati Bengals Oct. 19.

Parker, who injured his knee against the Eagles, should be ready for the Cincinnati game. Although he has tortured a lot of teams, he has been especially effective against the Bengals. In his past four games against them, he rushed for 87, 126, 134 and 133 yards and a total of five touchdowns.

Moore willingly will check his ego at the locker-room door and step aside for Parker.

Of course, he'll also be ready to go, if needed.

"Team football," Tomlin said again.

Mewelde Moore.

You think of one, you can't help but think of the other.
Steelers Notebook: Harrison: Referees should be fined for bad calls

Tuesday, October 07, 2008
By Ed Bouchette, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. -- Linebacker James Harrison hails from Kent State, the same college as Jack Lambert, and the two share the same view of quarterbacks -- and perhaps referees.

The Steelers received a 15-yard penalty at a crucial time in the fourth quarter when Harrison was called for roughing Jacksonville quarterback David Garrard Sunday night. The Jaguars led, 21-20, at the time and the penalty occurred as Garrard threw a 5-yard completion on third-and-7 at his 17.

Harrison said he disagreed with the official's call because Garrard was in the process of throwing when he hit him, and he pulled back as the two hit the ground so not as to drive the quarterback into the grass.

"It was the most unbelievable penalty I've ever seen in my life," Harrison said. "If they're going to go and send me a letter saying they're going to fine me for unnecessary-whatever he called, I believe that is not a penalty. And when it comes down to it these refs should start getting fined for making bad calls."

The 15-yard penalty gave the Jaguars a first down at their 37, but the Steelers' defense held, forced a punt and their offense mounted what would be the winning drive from its 20 with 6:33 left.

"I pulled off of him, I held myself from hitting the ground on top of him and this dude threw a flag," Harrison said. "Right as he was releasing the ball, I was hitting him. I don't see how he could call a flag on that, man, it's ridiculous."

"I didn't even take a step. As far as I'm concerned, he could have pumped the ball and if I'd have stopped and not continued through I would have looked like a fool."

Reed injured

As the Steelers drove toward what might have been the winning field goal in the closing minutes of Sunday night's game, it started to become apparent on their sideline that they could not try a field goal with Jeff Reed. His left calf, his plant leg, was injured at some point in the game and he was unavailable. Punter Mitch Berger was practicing kicking into the net as the Steelers drew within field-goal range -- but whose range?

Jacksonville coach Jack Del Rio said he expected the Steelers to run when they had third down at the Jaguars' 31, trailing by a point with 2:57 left in the game. Pick up a few more yards and let Reed try a field goal of 46-49 yards. Reed's injury was unbeknownst to Del Rio, though, until after the game.

Instead, Ben Roethlisberger dropped back and scrambled to his left with a defender hanging on him on that third down. He threw an 18-yard pass completion to Hines Ward that set up the winning touchdown pass with 1:53 left.

The Steelers went for two points, unsuccessfully, and then Berger kicked off.

Reed is expected to be OK in time for their next game Oct. 19.

No injury updates

The Steelers provided no injury updates yesterday and indicated coach Mike Tomlin will issue them today, including new injuries to Reed and tackle Marvel Smith, who left the game in the fourth quarter with what were described as cramps.

Ed Bouchette can be reached at ebouchette@post-gazette.com.
An unapologetic Plaxico Burress rejoined the Giants yesterday, noting he didn't lose any sleep after the Super Bowl champions suspended him for a game.

The former Steelers wide receiver missed a team meeting two weeks ago without bothering to telephone the Giants.

Burress attributed his absence on Sept. 22 to a family emergency, which he described as having to take his son to school.

"It was just a situation I had to deal with that morning, and I made the right decision," Burress said during a conference call that lasted about 20 minutes. "I don't have any regrets about the decision I made at all."

Burress said family would still come first next time, but that he would make sure he made a telephone call to let the Giants know about the problem.

Along with the suspension, Burress was fined one week's pay, or roughly $117,500.

Bills

Quarterback Trent Edwards was described as alert but still experiencing post-concussion symptoms leaving his status uncertain as the team enters its open week. Coach Dick Jauron sidestepped questions regarding the quarterback's health, except to say that Edwards showed up at the Bills' headquarters a day after being slammed to the ground on the third play from scrimmage in a 41-17 loss at Arizona.

Jets

Safety Eric Smith appealed his one-game suspension and $50,000 fine by the NFL for his helmet-to-helmet hit last week on Arizona receiver Anquan Boldin. The league suspended Smith for committing a flagrant violation of player safety rules in New York's 56-35 win Sept. 28. The NFL said Boldin was in a defenseless position when contact was made.

Packers

Quarterback Aaron Rodgers will miss some practice again this week but is expected to play next Sunday at Seattle. Rodgers played against Atlanta despite spraining his right shoulder in the previous week's game at Tampa Bay.

Eagles

All-Pro running back Brian Westbrook broke two ribs in the Eagles' 23-17 loss Sunday to Washington, though he stayed in and finished the game. Westbrook missed one game with an ankle injury, but it's too early to know if his latest injury will keep him out of Sunday's game at San Francisco. He leads the Eagles with 194 yards rushing and has six touchdowns.
Steelers ready for bye week healing

By Scott Brown
TRIBUNE-REVIEW
Tuesday, October 7, 2008

The look of exuberance on Nate Washington's face after a 26-21 win over the Jacksonville Jaguars may have been the result of the major contributions he made in the victory. Or maybe the Steelers wide receiver simply felt like a school-aged kid does right before embarking on Christmas break.

"In my four years with the Steelers," Washington said, "I've never been more ready for a bye than this one."

If Washington is ready for a little downtime, imagine how Ben Roethlisberger feels.

The Steelers quarterback has been battered through the first quarter of the season though unbowed, and he has played with a bad throwing shoulder since the season opener Sept. 7.

His shoulder bothered him so much last week that, as late as Sunday morning, Roethlisberger said he wasn't sure if he would be able to play against the Jaguars. The 6-foot-5, 241-pounder not only played against the rival that had become the Steelers' nemesis in recent years, he turned in a virtuoso performance at Jacksonville Municipal Stadium.

After leading his team to a come-from-behind win, Roethlisberger said the week off the Steelers get before resuming play should be enough time for his shoulder to heal completely.

"I really think this two weeks will help heal it up, and it will feel as good as new," said Roethlisberger, who has been playing with a sprained joint in his right shoulder.

The bigger question regarding Roethlisberger, who threw for 309 yards and three touchdowns in helping the Steelers snap a four-game losing streak against the Jaguars, may be this: how much punishment can his body withstand over the course of the season given his playing style?

On the pivotal play of the game-winning drive he engineered -- an 18-yard completion to wide receiver Hines Ward on third-and-8 from Jacksonville's 31 - Roethlisberger threw the pass right before he was slammed to the ground.

No other play showed the essence of Roethlisberger and the risk he incurs every game by frequently holding onto the ball until the last possible second.
"When you're watching tape, he's taking some shots and he's somehow finding a way to shrug (off) the guy, fight through it and still get the ball off," Jaguars coach Jack Del Rio said. "It's part of what he does. His body is going to take a beating. I don't know how long he's going to be able to do it, but he's got the ability, kind of a horse back there, and he doesn't go down easy."

Indeed, even when the pocket has collapsed around him and 300-pound linemen are draped all over him, Roethlisberger has repeatedly shown that a play isn't over until he is on the ground.

"We've got to remember you can't stop with him," said Washington, who caught six passes for 94 yards and a touchdown against Jacksonville. "He's not a guy that's going to go down with one tackle."

That quality, as well as his reluctance to throw the ball away, puts pressure on the Steelers' offensive line. Steelers coach Mike Tomlin made that clear after Sunday's game.

The maligned line, Tomlin said, doesn't deserve all of the criticism it gets for not adequately protecting Roethlisberger, who has been sacked 18 times through the Steelers' five games.

"Get off the offensive line," Tomlin said. "Sometimes he holds the ball too long, and the offensive line catches a bad rap for it, but you take the good with the bad. That's how (Roethlisberger) plays football. He's one of the best in the world at what he does."

Scott Brown can be reached at sbrown@tribweb.com or 412-481-5432.
Up to the challenge

By John Harris

Steelers' Pro Bowl linebacker James Harrison sat in front of his locker late Sunday night, tugging off his soiled uniform and looking anything but pleased following a hard-fought 26-21 win against Jacksonville.

Harrison had other things on his mind; namely, if he would be fined by the league for a roughing the passer penalty called against him in the fourth quarter.

"Coach, I need your help," said Harrison, motioning toward coach Mike Tomlin.

Tomlin, believing that Harrison was referring to a problem with his uniform, said he couldn't help. But when Harrison told Tomlin he was concerned about the penalty, Tomlin said not to worry.

"Don't question the call," Tomlin said. "Don't worry about the call."

It was a different Tomlin who strode around happily in the visiting locker room after the Steelers improved to 4-1 and snapped a four-game losing streak against the Jaguars.

As usual, Tomlin attempted to shield his true feelings from reporters in the postgame news conference, booming one cliche after another about this being just another game.

Nobody believed him.

Normally, Tomlin already has spoken with players individually at their lockers before reporters are permitted to enter the locker room following a game. However, Tomlin's upbeat demeanor Sunday night was a clear departure from his normal behavior.

Clearly, this was a special win.

"Man, I love them all, truth be known. This is the most satisfying win because this is the one you are feeling right now," Tomlin said. "This is a great team win."

Because of injuries to starters Casey Hampton and Brett Keisel on defense and Willie Parker and Kendall Simmons on offense, along with other key...
contributors not being healthy enough to play, Tomlin challenged his players as they practiced for Jacksonville, a team that defeated the Steelers twice last season.

Tomlin reminded them that a 4-1 record going into their bye week would feel much better than a 3-2 record.

"We had a statement, 'The more you can do,' and we called on a lot of people to do that," Tomlin said. "Guys stepped outside their lines and delivered, delivered big."

Tomlin also spoke about the Steelers being underdogs against an opponent they hadn't defeated since 2004. Nose tackle Chris Hoke said the players took Tomlin's words seriously and accepted them as their own.

"We talked about it. This is a big win going into the bye week," Hoke said. "We get two weeks now to rest and heal up.

"They put us as underdogs," said Hoke, Hampton's replacement, who was part of a defense that limited Jacksonville to 38 yards rushing. "We feel like we're a pretty good team. To come down here and be an underdog fired us up."

"Nobody believed in us," said receiver Nate Washington, who had his best game of the season with six receptions for 94 yards and a 48-yard touchdown catch from Ben Roethlisbeger in the second quarter. "But we believed in ourselves."

*John Harris can be reached at jharris@tribweb.com or 412-481-5432.*
Harrison faces fine for post-game comments

By Scott Brown
TRIBUNE-REVIEW
Tuesday, October 7, 2008

â€¢ James Harrison added to his sack total in Jacksonville. The outside linebacker likely subtracted from his bank account for comments he made after the Steelers' 26-21 win. Still steaming after a roughing the passer penalty he got in the fourth quarter, Harrison said, "You don't make a call like that in a situation like that, c'mon. Unless (the referee) might have money on it, I don't know." The penalty came after the Steelers had stopped the Jaguars, who were leading 21-20 at the time, on third down. Harrison said he never took an extra step before hitting David Garrard. He said he actually tried to help break the fall of the Jaguars quarterback. "As he was releasing the ball, I was making simultaneous contact with him," said Harrison whose 6.5 sacks lead the AFC. "I put my hands out to stop all of my weight from falling on top of him. Maybe (the referee) was just trying to give them a first down." Harrison faces a fine by the NFL for criticizing the officiating.

â€¢ After giving up 404 rushing yards in two losses to Jacksonville last season, the Steelers limited the Jaguars to 38 yards on the ground Sunday night. The Jaguars were missing several starting offensive linemen because of injuries. The Steelers, however, were without starting nose tackle Casey Hampton (groin), starting defensive end Brett Keisel (calf) and reserve defensive end Nick Eason (groin). "They whipped blocks and made plays," Jaguars coach Jack Del Rio said. "They won the line of scrimmage. I didn't see many missed tackles on their defensive unit, particularly with their run defense."

â€¢ No rest for the weary just yet. The Steelers will practice today even though they have a bye this week. ... Harrison and LaMarr Woodley have 12 sacks between them. The Steelers had 36 sacks all of last season. ... Mewelde Moore came up a yard short against the Jaguars of posting his first 100-yard rushing game since 2005.

Digits

18 -- Combined penalties in the Steelers' 26-21 win over the Jaguars.

218 -- Combined penalty yards assessed in the game.

Scott Brown can be reached at sbrown@tribweb.com or 412-481-5432.
Big Ben's escape was magic for Steelers

By Mike Bires, Times Sports Staff

JACKSONVILLE, Fla.

In a classic victory that could not have been possible without contributions from a cast of unlikely heroes, it was the face of the franchise whose play mattered most.

Not that anyone is surprised.

Ben Roethlisberger, clearly the No. 1 star in Sunday night's 26-21 thriller in Jacksonville, is accustomed to taking the game into his own hands.

He had thrown for over 300 yards five times already in his career. He had thrown three touchdown passes in a game nine times before. He had engineered game-winning drives in the fourth quarter or overtime 14 times before. He had compiled passer ratings of at least 100.0 28 times before.

But this time, Roethlisberger added to his legend by refusing to be sacked on the game's pivotal play.

"That was a heck of a football play," Jaguars coach Jack Del Rio said. "Guys were draped on him and somehow he got his arm out of the way and got the ball completed. That's special."

Let's set the scene: There's 2:57 left to play. The Steelers trail 21-20 on a night in which several role players elevated their games in place of injured starters. But now, the Steelers face a critical third-and-8 from the Jaguars' 31-yard line.

Under normal conditions, the Steelers were close enough for kicker Jeff Reed to try a game-winning field goal. But in the second half, Reed was hobbling with a calf injury on his left plant leg. Reed was available only if absolutely necessary.

On the play, it appeared that at least two Jaguar pass rushers would sack Roethlisberger and maybe even push the Steelers out of field goal range.

Roethlisberger, though, refused to go down. He managed to throw a short toss to wide receiver Hines Ward, who gained 18 yards. Two plays later, Roethlisberger threw the game-winning 5-yard TD pass to Ward.

"There's nothing you can say about that but look at it in amazement. It was a truly amazing play," Jaguars quarterback David Garrard said. "Guys were pulling him down to the ground and he threw it 20 yards downfield and on the money."

Roethlisberger's improvisational skills while he's on the run have always been one of his strong suits. But his willingness to hold onto the ball for so long often comes under scrutiny. It's been argued that he's to blame for many of the sacks the offensive line has given up. It's argued that some could have been avoided if he just threw the ball away.

"That's Ben," coach Mike Tomlin said. "Sometimes, he holds the ball too long and the O-line catches a bad rap for it. But you take the good with the bad. He's capable of making plays like that."
Notes from the Steelers beat

By Mike Bires, Times Sports Staff

D-Line shines

For the past two games, the Steelers have started one of the NFL’s oldest defensive lines. But that hasn’t been a problem. Those three veterans keep playing like young bucks.

If you’re looking for reasons why the Jaguars rushed for only 38 yards Sunday after rushing for 224 and 180 in two wins over the Steelers last year, start with the play of left DE Aaron Smith (32), NT Chris Hoke (30) and right DE Travis Kirschke (34). They clogged up running lanes at the line of scrimmage.

Smith, who missed five games with knee and arm injuries last year, is playing at a level like he did in 2004 when he went to the Pro Bowl.

Hoke, subbing for the injured Casey Hampton, must be a good luck charm. He’s started 14 games as an occasional sub over the years, and the Steelers have won 13 of them.

Kirschke, who pondered retirement during the off-season but got into the lineup when Brett Keisel got hurt, is playing better than anyone could have expected.

SACKER TWO

The dynamic duo of James Harrison and LaMarr Woodley continued their relentless play at outside linebacker. The Steelers sacked David Garrard three times. Woodley had two of them, Harrison had the other.

John Abraham, a defensive end for the Falcons, leads the NFL with seven sacks. Harrison is right behind at 6.5.

Tied for third with 5.5 sacks are Woodley and former Steelers linebacker Joey Porter, who’s now playing for the Dolphins.

FIXING FOR A FINE

Speaking of Harrison, don’t be surprised if he’s fined by the NFL if the league finds out what he said after a roughing-the-passer penalty called against him.

Harrison was penalized 15 yards for what an official thought was a late hit on Jaguars quarterback David Garrard.

“Ridiculous call,” Harrison told a reporter after the game. “You don’t make a call like that ... unless (you) might have money on it.”
The NFL frowns on players ripping the refs, especially when there’s a suggestion a fix is on.

MOORE IS MORE

Based on how well Mewelde Moore played in his first start with the Steelers, there’s no rush to get Willie Parker back on the field.

Parker has missed the past two games with a sprained knee, and combined with this week’s bye, it’s been assumed that he’s had enough time to heal. He may play on Oct. 19 in Cincinnati.

But if there’s any doubt about Parker not being 100 percent, he shouldn’t play against the Bengals. Moore proved that’s he’s more than capable of carrying the load.

Moore rushed for 99 yards and caught three passes for 17 yards against the Jaguars.

He adds an exciting dimension to the offense.

WHERE’S MAX?

Surely Tomlin will have an answer today when he meets with the media. But why did Trai Essex step in at left tackle in the fourth quarter when Marvel Smith left with cramps?

Why not Max Starks, the $7 million man?

It’s not that Essex didn’t hold his own. But after all, Starks is the Steelers’ highest paid lineman. With Essex playing ahead of him, it means that Starks is in essence only the team’s fourth-best tackle.

WHERE’S JEFF

On Monday, the Steelers didn’t provide any updates on Jeff Reed, who suffered some kind of calf injury in Jacksonville. Obviously, the Steelers hope it’s not serious. Reed is Mr. Automatic. He’s a perfect 10-of-10 so far in field goal tries. He’s as good as any kicker in the league.
Banged-up Steelers get needed bye week

By F. Dale Lolley, Staff writer

dolley@observer-reporter.com

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. - If the NFL allowed teams to choose their bye week when they most needed it, this week would be the one the Steelers would choose.

Coming off of a physical Monday night overtime victory at home against Baltimore, the Steelers traveled to Jacksonville Sunday night for an equally physical contest in which they pulled out a 26-21 win.

And with an injury list that seems to stretch longer than I-95, the Steelers will get some much needed rest before suiting up again in two weeks at Cincinnati.

"It couldn't come at a better time," said wide receiver Hines Ward, whose eight-yard touchdown catch with 1:53 left in the game lifted the Steelers over the Jaguars. "We knew it was going to be tough, playing Baltimore on a Monday night on a short week and then coming down here to Jacksonville, our nemesis. We knew it was going to be a tough game and we treated it like a playoff game.

"It got a little physical, but that's what it's going to take to beat Jacksonville. ... Beating them like we did without some key guys on our team, enough can't be said about some guys who filled in."

The Steelers (4-1) entered Sunday night's game without defensive linemen Brett Keisel, Casey Hampton and Nick Eason, running backs Willie Parker, Carey Davis and Rashard Mendenhall, and guard Kendall Simmons. Mendenhall and Simmons were lost for the season in the win over Baltimore.

Compounding those injury problems were the ones suffered by left tackle Marvel Smith and placekicker Jeff Reed against the Jaguars. Smith and Reed both went down in the second half, Smith with cramping problems, Reed with a strained calf in his left (non-kicking) leg.

"Our injury situation was well-documented," said Steelers head coach Mike Tomlin. "The guys didn't look to it as a potential excuse, they embraced the challenge. We had a theme this week, 'the more you can do' and we called on a lot of people to do that. Guys stepped outside their lanes, if you will, and delivered, delivered big."

With the exception of Hampton, who has a groin pull, the Steelers expect to have most of their injured players back on the field when they travel to Cincinnati Oct. 19.

They also expect quarterback Ben Roethlisberger's should sprain, which he suffered in the opening week of the season, to have some time to heal.

The shoulder injury didn't appear to both Roethlisberger too much against the Jaguars. He completed 26 of 41 passes for 309 yards and three touchdowns despite not practicing at all last week.

"It's going to be a good time this week, not just for me, but for a lot of the guys," said Roethlisberger, who had his sixth career 300-yard game. "A lot of guys got beat up, but we kind of knew that was going to happen. So the bye comes at a good time for us to get some rest."
The injuries also gave the Steelers an opportunity to take a look at some players on their roster in more featured roles than the coaching staff had imagined for them.

Defensive linemen Chris Hoke and Travis Kirschke started again in place of Hampton and Keisel and helped anchor a defense that gave up just 38 yards on 19 rushing attempts to a Jacksonville team that had rushed for over 400 yards in two games against the Steelers last season.

The Steelers are allowing just 2.8 yards per carry, nearly half a yard better than the best average against in team history.

Meanwhile, Steelers running back Mewelde Moore, who was signed in the offseason to be the team's return man and third-down back, rushed for 99 yards on 17 attempts after not having had a carry in the team's first three games.

"He really looked good," said linebacker Larry Foote. "I told him he looked better carrying the ball than he does on punt returns. He really gave us a spark, but all the guys did who filled in. That's what team football is about. One guy goes down and the next guy steps in to fill the void."

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Harrison rips officials

By F. Dale Lolley, Staff writer
dolley@observer-reporter.com

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. - James Harrison is piling up sacks at an amazing rate this season, with an AFC-high 61/2 in the Steelers' first five games.

But it will likely be one he didn't get in Sunday night's 26-21 victory over Jacksonville that will be costly to the Steelers linebacker.

Harrison was penalized 15 yards for roughing Jaguars quarterback David Garrard in the fourth quarter for hitting him just after Garrard released a pass.

The 15-yard penalty gave the Jaguars a first down at their own 37, but the Steelers forced a punt to get the ball back with 6:33 remaining in the game to set up the game-winning touchdown drive.

"It was the most unbelievable penalty I've ever seen in my life," said Harrison. "If they're going to go and send me a letter saying they're going to fine me for unnecessary-whatever he called, I believe that is not a penalty. And when it comes down to it, these refs should start getting fined for making bad calls."

Harrison appeared to take just one step before hitting Garrard and even released the quarterback before hitting the ground instead of wrapping him up and driving him to the turf.

Moore the merrier

With Willie Parker and Rashard Mendenhall out, Mewelde Moore got his first start as a member of the Steelers and nearly had the first 100-yard rushing game since he had 122 yards against Green Bay in 2005 as a member of the Minnesota Vikings.

Moore likely would have had 100 yards, but had to leave the game with 3:43 remaining after his final carry because of a helmet problem.

Gary Russell got the Steelers' final rushing attempt, a five-yard gain just before the two-minute warning.

"I had one more run in me, but the strap on my helmet broke," said Moore. "It's all right, I'll take it. I just can't post it up on my charts, though."

Ben's big pass

With placekicker Jeff Reed nursing a strained left (non-kicking) calf, the Steelers faced a third-and-eight play from the Jacksonville 31 with just under three minutes to play.

It's unlikely Reed would have been able to attempt a possible game-winning field goal from that far out given his injury.

But Roethlisberger took care of that by stepping up to avoid the Jacksonville pass rush and completing a 13-yard pass to Hines Ward with a pair of Jaguars draped around his legs.
"The guy's great," said Jacksonville head coach Jack Rio. "Somehow he got his arm out of the way and got the ball completely out of there. That was a heck of a football play. That's special."

Odds and end zones

The Steelers are allowing 66.8 yards rushing per game. Only Baltimore is giving up less. ... The Steelers' 18 sacks are tied with Philadelphia for the most in the NFL. ... After picking up 10 penalties against the Jaguars, the Steelers have 38 this season. Only Atlanta and San Francisco have been penalized more. ... While Harrison leads the AFC in sacks, linebacker LaMarr Woodley is tied with former Steelers star Joey Porter for second with 51/2.

Copyright Observer Publishing Co.
Roethlisberger's play harkens back to the days of Bradshaw
By Alan Robinson, AP Sports Writer

PITTSBURGH - Never before had the Pittsburgh Steelers done this: ask Ben Roethlisberger to win a game virtually by himself. They always had Jerome Bettis, Willie Parker or Hines Ward, a line led by All-Pro guard Alan Faneca, and one of the NFL's best defenses to take the pressure off their quarterback. Win the game? No, Big Ben, just don't lose it.

Not any longer.

Down to their No. 4 running back, and playing a rival that had beaten them four consecutive times, the Steelers put this one squarely on Roethlisberger's shoulders - a major gamble given his right shoulder is so sore he can barely raise his throwing arm.

Roethlisberger responded with the kind of game rarely seen by a Steelers quarterback since the days of Terry Bradshaw, one in which resilience and ruggedness, leadership and a determination to win were as important as an accurate throwing arm.

Roethlisberger picked himself up off the Jacksonville stadium turf nearly a dozen times, and seemed to pick up his team nearly that many times, too, in leading the 26-21 comeback victory over the Jaguars. That Sunday night victory gave the Steelers a 4-1 record going into their bye week.

It wasn't the best game of his career statistically, or the biggest - he won a Super Bowl in his second season, after all - but Roethlisberger may never play so important a role in the eyes of his teammates.

This is the very reason why, for the first time in his five-season career, Roethlisberger was chosen as a Steelers captain.

"Ben played a hell of a game, considering not practicing all week and I couldn't catch from him all week," Ward said. "He showed what kind of ballplayer he is."

This one was all set up for the Steelers to lose. They were without injured running backs Parker, Rashard Mendenhall and Carey Davis, their line was allowing Roethlisberger to get sacked at an alarming rate, and the Jaguars had beaten them four consecutive times.

Roethlisberger threw an interception Rashean Mathis returned for a touchdown on Pittsburgh's opening possession, then responded by going 26-of-41 for 309 yards and three touchdowns - the last a winning throw to Ward in the final two minutes. That finished off an 80-yard, 11-play drive that became longer because of a 15-yard taunting penalty on wide receiver Nate Washington.

Twice during the drive, Roethlisberger appeared ready to be sacked - once by defensive end Reggie Hayward, the other by defensive tackle John Henderson - yet he broke free to complete key passes.

There was added pressure on Roethlisberger, too, on a possession that began with the Steelers down 21-20. Kicker Jeff Reed injured his groin, and it's uncertain whether he could have attempted a winning field goal or how close he would have needed to be to try one.

Set up to lose? Roethlisberger wasn't about to let the Steelers do that, despite a sprained right shoulder that left him so uncomfortable following a 23-20 overtime win over Baltimore on Sept. 29 that he practiced only a few minutes last week.

It was the kind of performance that can convince teammates they can go a long way with this guy at quarterback, although Roethlisberger's 43-17 regular-season record should tell them that.

"Ben is an amazing player," Mathis said. "He makes plays that other quarterbacks probably wouldn't and, in that last drive, he definitely made some great plays."

Parker, who has rushed for 1,200 or more yards the last three seasons, is expected to return from a two-game layoff with a sprained knee to play at Cincinnati on Oct. 19. But the Steelers got 99 yards rushing from third-down back Mewelde Moore in his first NFL start since 2005.

Still, their fans likely will remember this one as the game Roethlisberger refused to lose.

"(There's) guys around him with guys hitting on him, and he finds a way to get the ball out," Jaguars defensive end Paul Spicer said.
Not a surprise there. Roethlisberger has been sacked 18 times, second most in the NFL to J.T. O'Sullivan's 20 for San Francisco, yet he is 23-of-38 for 324 yards when he gets the ball off while facing full-scale blitzing, according to STATS Inc.

"It's going to be a good time this week (with a bye), not just for me but for a lot of the guys," Roethlisberger said. "A lot of guys got beat up, but we kind of knew that was going to happen. The bye comes at a good time for us to get some rest."

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Road warriors: Steelers, Big Ben battle injuries to 4-1 start
By Skip Wood, USA TODAY

JACKSONVILLE — For visiting teams in the NFL, there are two types of postgame rituals that deal with the mind-set of getting showered, dressed and out as quickly as possible for the bus ride to the airport.

One type is the morose hurry-up drill born of disgust. Invariably, of course, these players just lost a game.

The other type was on full display late Sunday night in the Pittsburgh Steelers locker room at steamy Jacksonville Municipal Stadium. It was the happy hustle.

PHOTOS: NFL Week 5

Not only had the Steelers used a fourth-quarter comeback to beat the Jacksonville Jaguars, capped by Ben Roethlisberger's 8-yard toss to Hines Ward, they did so against a team that had beaten them the last four meetings, including the first round of last season's AFC playoffs.

But they did what they had to do, and they did it successfully, and they knew it.

"Oh, yeah," a smiling Ward said. "We knew what it was going to take."

With their top two running backs missing (Willie Parker has a sprained knee, and rookie Rashard Mendenhall is out for the season with a broken shoulder), the Steelers came up with a pretty nifty version of the spread offense for which the Jaguars usually had no answer.

Ward has long said the Steelers (4-1) have the talent to be more of an air-it-out team, and this time they really had no choice.

"We've got playmakers," he said. "We've got a lot of people who can contribute, and we needed every one of them tonight."

For example, Roethlisberger. He completed 26 of 41 for 309 yards. He threw for three touchdowns. He scrambled. He waited for anything pass-worthy before finally releasing the ball. This against a team that had sacked him 11 times in last season's two losses.

"It's that double-edged sword," Roethlisberger said. "You live by it and die by it. Sometimes it helps you, and other times it hurts you. Tonight it helped in the time that we needed it."

He was still sacked three times. But he also avoided several others that seemed imminent.

"That's Ben," coach Mike Tomlin said. "Sometimes he holds the ball too long and the offensive line catches a bad rap for it. But you take the good with the bad."

Almost to a man, the players said they will welcome the coming bye week more so than most. This team needs to heal, because the schedule appears to be unforgiving save an Oct. 19 trip against the struggling Cincinnati Bengals.
After that, the Steelers play, in order, at home against the New York Giants, at the Washington Redskins, at home against the Indianapolis Colts and then at home against the San Diego Chargers.

Jacksonville, on the other hand, finds itself 2-3. A 0-2 start had been tempered by two consecutive wins, including one at NFC South rival Indianapolis. But now the Jaguars are below .500 once more and have to travel to face a rejuvenated Denver Broncos team this weekend.

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Economic Downturn Isn’t Slowing Luxury Box Sales

By KATIE THOMAS and RICHARD SANDOMIR

With the economy in crisis and Wall Street in turmoil, will local sports teams be forced to place vacancy signs on the scores of luxury suites being built in their new stadiums?

Don’t expect a stampede for the bleachers just yet, several team executives and industry observers said recently. They noted that the concentration of corporate headquarters in New York — combined with the marquee appeal of locations like Yankee Stadium — meant that demand for luxury suites was not likely to fade anytime soon. At some of the new stadiums, the suites are already sold out.

“New York is going to get hit harder by financial sectors than other cities will, but New York’s also got a lot of other stuff going on,” said Jim Grinstead, the editor and publisher of Revenues from Sports Venues, a weekly newsletter that chronicles the luxury-suite industry. “I’m not hearing anything where people are panicking.”

New York is in the midst of a great stadium-building boom, with plans for at least five under way in the metropolitan area. The Yankees and the Mets will begin playing in new ballparks in the spring. In New Jersey, the Jets and the Giants are planning a football stadium that is scheduled to open in 2010. Construction has begun on the Red Bulls’ soccer stadium in Harrison, N.J. In Brooklyn, the developer Bruce C. Ratner is planning a $950 million arena for the Nets. Madison Square Garden is planning major renovations.

Taken together, the venues will add at least 250 luxury boxes to the New York market, which has 426 boxes, according to Grinstead’s count. With its array of new luxury suites, New York is catching up with a decades-long trend toward offering deluxe entertainment areas that are as much about deal making and networking as they are about watching the game. Still, given the economic crisis, companies are certain to be taking a closer look at spending on amenities like luxury suites.

“I definitely think everybody’s taking more of a wait-and-see approach,” said Todd Parker, the vice president of Premier Partnerships, a sports marketing firm that deals in sponsorships and luxury suites. “Obviously, there’s more to unfold here.”

The luxury-suite market is intensively secretive. Teams are reticent to comment about sales for fear of tipping off their competition. Corporate executives are wary of criticism from investors, who may balk at the idea of spending money on luxury boxes during lean times.

After layoffs, entertainment expenses are among the first trims to be made in an economic downturn, said Jeffrey Vanderbeek, the owner of the Devils and a former investment banker at Lehman Brothers, which declared bankruptcy Sept. 15.
Nearly a year ago, Vanderbeek opened the Prudential Center, the Devils’ new arena, and quickly sold nearly all of its 76 suites; six are rented on a day-by-day basis. Because the suites are leased on five- to seven-year contracts, Vanderbeek said, he did not anticipate being affected by the immediate crisis.

Executives at Yankee Stadium are monitoring the economic situation but have not seen any effect, said Alice McGillion, a spokeswoman. She did not provide specific sales figures, but the luxury suites are nearly sold out, according to news reports. The same is true at the Mets’ Citi Field, said Dave Howard, the team’s executive vice president for business operations.

“Timing is a part of this,” he said. “The firms we’ve sold to haven’t had any major issues, and the people who have them realize they’ve got great value for the quality of what we’re offering here.”

Teams whose stadiums are further from completion face more uncertainty, Grinstead said. In particular, he said the Nets’ project faced competition from arenas like Madison Square Garden. “That’s where the sales challenge is,” he said.

But Barry Baum, a Ratner spokesman, said that about 30 percent of the 128 planned suites were leased. Once ground is broken for the arena next year, “we expect to have a flurry of interest,” Baum said.

Grinstead and others said the concentration of corporate headquarters — 89 Fortune 500 companies are based in the tristate area — contributed to the high demand for suites. New York also has a smaller supply than other cities, like Dallas, which has 852 suites, Grinstead said.

Finally, there is the cost. At prices that range from $200,000 to as much as $800,000 a year, the rent can seem stratospheric to the typical fan. But the cost to major corporations seems to be weighed by another measure.

“At the end of the day,” Vanderbeek said, “if your competition is going to do it and you’re going to have clients going there on behalf of your competition, you tend to want to keep up with the Joneses.”
Travis Henry in court, held on $400K bail
DENVER (AP) — A year ago, Travis Henry was the NFL's leading rusher. On Monday he was in court, handcuffed and in prison yellow clothes for a hearing stemming from his arrest last week on an alleged cocaine deal.

A judge set bail at $400,000 and ordered the case moved to Montana, where authorities say they discovered a car with six pounds of marijuana and three kilograms of cocaine that was supplied by Henry and another defendant.

Henry, of Frostproof, Fla., and James Mack, of Bow Mar, remain in federal custody on suspicion of knowingly and intentionally conspiring to distribute and possess with intent to distribute cocaine. Henry has not entered a plea.

If released on bail, Henry will be electronically monitored, must submit to urinalysis, maintain employment, and have no contact with his co-defendant and witnesses.

If convicted, both could face a minimum of 10 years in a federal prison and up to life, plus a $4 million fine.

Mack pleaded not guilty to the charges and the judge set bail at $10,000. A status hearing was scheduled for Wednesday at 10:30 a.m.

Henry and Mack were arrested after the two met to buy cocaine from a person who was cooperating with authorities, according to an arrest warrant affidavit.

Details in the arrest warrant say the drug buy was set up after a Montana trooper and Drug Enforcement Administration agent discovered the drugs in a car on Sept. 16.

A passenger in the car, whose name was not revealed in the affidavit, told authorities that Henry and Mack had supplied him with the drugs, which he was supposed to deliver to customers in Billings.

The affidavit indicated that separately, the passenger and another customer in Billings already owed Henry about $40,000 in drug proceeds. The passenger told authorities Henry had threatened him and his family over the debt.

The passenger agreed to assist authorities and set up a drug deal Sept. 30 with Henry and Mack at a residence, the affidavit said.

According to the affidavit, after Henry and Mack walked out of the residence, officers tried to place them under arrest, but Henry took off running, only to be caught a few houses away after a short pursuit.

Henry signed a five-year, $22.5 million deal with Denver in 2007, but fell out of favor over what coach Mike Shanahan said was Henry's lack of commitment. He was released by the Broncos on June 2.

Henry led the league with 433 yards and one touchdown after the first month of the season.

The 29-year-old rushed for 691 yards and four touchdowns in one season with Denver that was marred by a left knee injury and a successful appeal of a one-year NFL suspension over a failed drug test. Shanahan publicly backed Henry as he fought with the league, contending the running back was innocent. Still, the issue hung over the team for much of the season and the Broncos finished 7-9.
"When a guy gets an opportunity, you're hoping that he is going to take advantage of it from a football side," Shanahan said Friday. "But for him to experience what he's experienced right now, I wouldn't wish that on anybody and it's really a shame."

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Monday, October 6, 2008

**Warner plans to take closest look at retirement after season ends**

Associated Press

TEMPE, Ariz. -- Arizona Cardinals quarterback Kurt Warner says that after this season he will take his closest look yet at retiring from the NFL.

The scary injury to teammate Anquan Boldin, combined with other factors, has led him to give more serious consideration to leaving the game.

"I'm definitely considering retirement more than I ever have before," the 37-year-old quarterback said Monday, "but that doesn't mean it's more than 50 percent or anything like that. I'm just going to consider it."

The comments came after Yahoo.com reported that Warner text messaged his wife Brenda shortly after Boldin's injury on Sept. 28 against the New York Jets, saying he'd decided it was time to retire. She said he meant immediately, but Warner said that wasn't the case.

"There's no question that I texted her and said that I was contemplating and thinking about it because she's wanted me to retire for a couple of years now," Warner said. "... It wasn't I was going to retire last week. It was more I'm just really trying to keep this thing in perspective moving forward."

Warner has acknowledged the fierce helmet-to-helmet hit on Boldin as the receiver went up for Warner's pass in the waning seconds of Arizona's 56-35 loss to the Jets was the worst he had seen in his 12 NFL seasons. After lying on the ground for many minutes, Boldin was taken off the field on a stretcher. He remains sidelined with a fractured sinus.

Warner has taken countless hard hits in his rags-to-riches pro career that includes MVP awards in the regular season and Super Bowl, as well as a Super Bowl championship. He doesn't want to be around to take one too many.

"It's a great game and it's done great things for me and my family," Warner said, "but the bottom line is when I'm done I want to be able to walk away and be everything I need to be for my family."

He listed other factors that could lead to his retirement, including the burden of having to live up to expectations and worry about being benched when he doesn't perform.

"When I'm out there between the lines, not one of those things cross my mind," Warner said. "It's just over the five or six days leading up to that. ... Week in and week out, that can weigh heavy on you."

He noted that over the last few years, he's had to be concerned about losing his job to a younger quarterback: Marc Bulger in St. Louis, Eli Manning with the New York Giants and now Matt Leinart in Arizona.

Cardinals coach Ken Whisenhunt chose Warner over Leinart as the starter this season. But Warner is in
the final year of his contract and Whisenhunt has repeatedly said Leinart is the franchise's quarterback of the future.

Even if Warner takes the team to the playoffs, the Cardinals may decide it's time to turn things over to Leinart.

"If I'm going to play, I want to play here," Warner said. "If there was no contract done, then I think it would lend myself to even taking a bigger look at it [retirement] instead of moving everything and trying to re-establish myself."

Warner had an awful outing against the Jets, throwing three interceptions and fumbling the ball away three times. But he responded Sunday with a strong performance in Arizona's 41-17 home victory over the Buffalo Bills, completing 33 of 42 passes for 250 yards and two touchdowns with no interceptions or lost fumbles.

Afterward, Warner said, "My wife said 'You're never going to retire now, are you?"

"Games like that make you want to play forever."