

COMMENTARY

# Steelers are staring at ghosts of collapses past

BY GERRY DULAC  
*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

PITTSBURGH

These were not the holiday plans the Steelers had in mind shortly before Thanksgiving.

This is not what they were thinking – maybe even hoping – this stretch of three games in 11 days would transpire.

One thing is certain, though: What was looking like a promising season in which they even had visions of the top seed dancing in their heads, the Steelers are spiraling into a familiar and disturbing pattern.

At this point, it doesn't even seem like much consolation they are in the postseason, not after another blowout to one of the top teams in the league. This one was to the Kansas City Chiefs and quarterback Patrick Mahomes, who toyed with them like kids on Christmas morning in a 29-10 defeat at Acrisure Stadium.

"That sucked, to be blunt," coach Mike Tomlin said. "It's not the type of ball we want to play, and really kind of eerily similar to our last performance."

The last three, actually. The Steelers have been outscored 90-40 in losses to the Chiefs, Philadelphia Eagles and Baltimore Ravens and have lost control of the position they held not that long ago in the AFC North.

The loss dropped them

to 10-6 and put a division title in jeopardy after the Baltimore Ravens (11-5) pounded the Houston Texans later Wednesday evening. The Steelers now have to win the season finale at home against the Cincinnati Bengals and hope the Ravens lose at home to the Cleveland Browns if they want to win the division.

Otherwise, it's time to go on the road to play a wild-card playoff game.

It might be too late, but Tomlin said he needs to make changes to get the Steelers back on track. After all, it doesn't look good, and those are his words.

"We're not going to continue to do the same things and hope for a different result," Tomlin said. "That doesn't seem sharp to me. We're going to take a look at it and make whatever necessary changes we need to make in the totality of this thing because that doesn't feel good. It doesn't look good. That's just the truth and reality of it."

This has been a recurring theme for Tomlin's team.

It was the fourth time in the past six years the Steelers have lost three consecutive games in December and the fifth time in the past seven years they have lost three in a row after Thanksgiving.

"It does suck these last three games," outside linebacker Alex Highsmith said. "We've just

got to do what we can to end the season strong and get hot going into the playoffs."

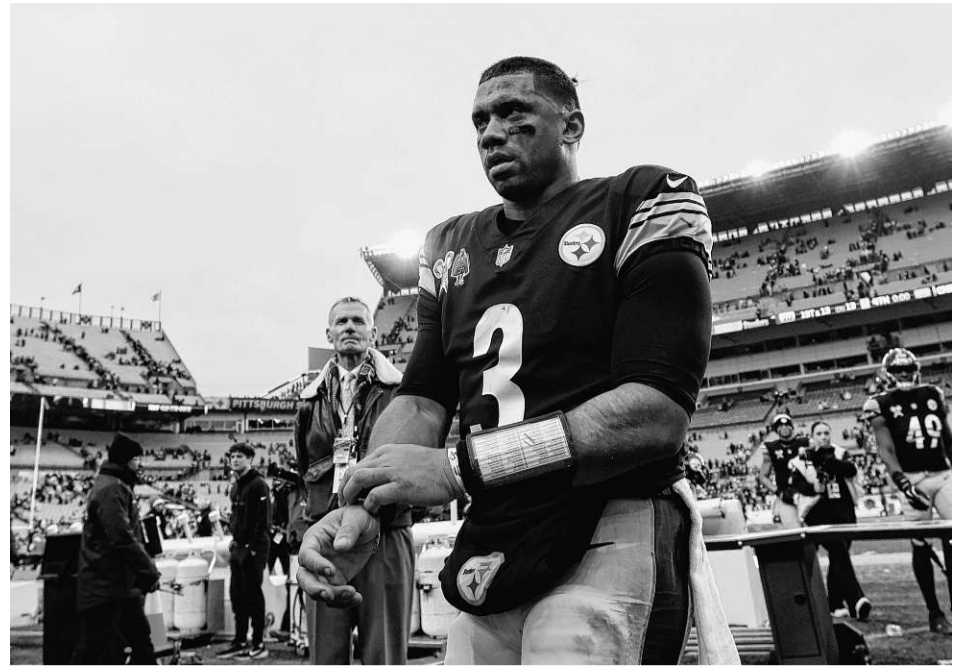
The Chiefs, meantime, didn't even need another one-possession game to clinch the No. 1 seed in the AFC. It was their largest margin victory of the season and, surprisingly, second-highest point production.

"At the end of the day, when you look back at it all and when we get the chance to play in the playoffs, it becomes 0-0," said quarterback Russell Wilson, who was held without a touchdown pass for only the second time in 10 starts but produced the only touchdown on a 1-yard run. "Before we get there, though, our belief can't waver. As a matter of fact, if anything, we've got to turn it up even more on our belief."

That might be hard to do after the way they were manhandled by three of the top teams in the league.

The offense has produced just four touchdowns in three games, and the defense has shown it can't control any of the top quarterbacks in the league.

Mahomes is now 3-0 lifetime with 12 touchdowns and no interceptions against the Steelers after completing 29 of 38 attempts for 320 yards and three touchdowns Wednesday. It makes it even more difficult when the Steelers failed to sack the two-time league MVP and hit him only twice



JUSTIN K. ALLER Getty Images/TNS

Steelers quarterback Russell Wilson walks off the field after a game against the Kansas City Chiefs on Wednesday at Acrisure Stadium in Pittsburgh.

the entire game.

It didn't even matter that Najee Harris (74) and Jaylen Warren (71) each rushed for more yards than the entire Chiefs team (69).

"It's no secret he's a hell of a player," outside linebacker T.J. Watt said. "He has great weapons. They have a good scheme. You can't afford to spot them points and allow him to scramble around in the pocket and have time. We didn't have any success on any of the things I just said."

Mahomes started fast, leading the Chiefs on touchdown drives on the first two possessions. And he kept his foot on their neck in the second half when the Chiefs scored on their first three possessions.

The killer was an 11-play, 77-yard drive in which Mahomes completed 8 of 8 passes for 82 yards to set up Kareem Hunt's 2-yard touchdown for a 22-10 lead. The air went out of the crowd of

67,311 – and the Steelers – right after that.

Maybe a Taylor Swift sighting would have kept them interested. But, alas, there were none of those, either.

"These last three weeks, we haven't played our best ball," defensive end Cam Heyward said. "We've got to get better. When you can rely on your fundamentals and rely on what got you there, that's what makes you really successful."

It did not start out well for the Steelers.

They got behind 13-0 on the Chiefs' first two possessions, with Mahomes throwing a pair of touchdowns of 7 yards to receiver Xavier Worthy and 11 yards to receiver Justin Watson.

And just when it looked like the Steelers would quickly answer with a nice bounce-back touchdown, Wilson threw a bad interception in the end zone one play after Jaylen Warren's 8-yard touchdown run was wiped out

by a holding penalty against tight end Darnell Washington.

To their credit, they came right back on the next possession to put together an 11-play, 72-yard drive in which Wilson completed 4 of 5 for 45 yards and scored on a 1-yard run at the pylon to make it 13-7.

The Steelers actually had more yards (181-175) and first downs (12-8) than the Chiefs in the first half, even though they trailed at the half, 13-7. In the end, that didn't matter.

Neither did Najee Harris (74) and Warren (71) each rushing for more yards than the entire Chiefs team (69).

"I think that there are highs and lows in every season, and we've got to make sure that we end this last game on the right footing and right belief," Wilson said. "And that's going to be really key to how we go about it and how we respond."

Q&A

## Dickerson on Barkley, record: 'I don't think he'll break it'

BY SAM FARMER  
*Los Angeles Times, The Tribune Content Agency*

LOS ANGELES

The NFL single-season rushing record has stood for 40 years, far longer than Saquon Barkley has been on this planet.

But now, with two games to play, the Philadelphia Eagles running back is 268 yards from eclipsing the mark of Hall of Famer Eric Dickerson, who set the league record of 2,105 with the Rams in 1984.

Barkley, 27, who signed with the Eagles last off-season after spending the first part of his career with the rival New York Giants, is also 162 yards from becoming the ninth player to run for 2,000 yards in a season.

The other seven are Adrian Peterson (2,097 with Minnesota in 2012), Jamal Lewis (2,066 with Baltimore in 2003), Barry Sanders (2,053 with Detroit in 1997), Derrick Henry (2027 with Tennessee in 2020), Terrell Davis (2,008 with Denver in 1998), Chris Johnson (2,006 with Tennessee in 2009) and O.J. Simpson (2,003 with Buffalo in 1973).

The Eagles finish the regular season with home games against the Dallas Cowboys and the Giants.

Dickerson spoke to The Los Angeles Times about Barkley, running backs in general, the Rams and the thought of his long-standing record going away:

**How do you feel about the possibility of Barkley breaking your single-season rushing record?**

I don't think he'll break it. But if he breaks it, he



YONG KIM The Philadelphia Inquirer/TNS

Going into Sunday, Eagles running back Saquon Barkley is 268 yards from eclipsing the mark of Hall of Famer Eric Dickerson, who set the league record of 2,105 with the Rams in 1984.

breaks it. Do I want him to break it? Absolutely not. I don't pull no punches on that. But I'm not whining about it. He had 17 games to do it? Hey, football is football. That's the way I look at it. If he's fortunate to get over 2,000 yards and get the record, it's a great record to have.

**Do the 17 games part doesn't bother you, even though you set it with 16 games?**

O.J. Simpson was my favorite player. He went over 2,000 yards in 14 games. It took me 15 games to get to 2,000. I had one extra game to play. Getting to 2,000 is an accomplishment in itself. I got close to that three other times.

**Do you look at it from the perspective that the record is eventually going to fall?**

I've always said that the one that's going to last the longest is me setting the rookie record with 1,808. Because you only get one shot at that. You're only a rookie once.

**What do you think of Barkley as a back?**

I like him. But I tend to

like big backs. He's not a big back like I was. He's elusive, he's tough, he runs hard, he can catch the ball out of the backfield. I think he's a great player.

I always felt like he'd never reach his potential when he was in New York. You could take Emmitt Smith and put him in Cleveland, and he'd have never been the Emmitt Smith we know now.

**So it's location, location, location?**

Yes. Even myself. If you'd have put me in Cincinnati on a bad team, I'd have never been that guy. Because these bad football teams with no blocking, I don't care how great you are. If you don't have the guys in front of you, you can't do it.

**And that's why you go to those lengths to thank your blockers?**

I saw what [San Francisco quarterback] Brock Purdy did with his offensive line, buying them those Tundras. I got a text from Jackie [Slater, Hall of Fame Rams tackle], "Hey, man, where's my Tundra?" I told him I

was making \$175,000 at the time. I could afford about two Tundras and be broke.

**Will you be tuned in to watch Barkley?**

I don't sit down and watch games, except the Rams, and I work for the team. But I'll have no choice but to keep up with it because I get so many text messages. People blowing up my phone like, "Man, it's not fair. He gets 17 games," or, "We're going to put a hex on him."

**Any thoughts on Rams running back Kyren Williams?**

I like him as a back. He's able to carry the ball 29, 28, 27 times. That takes a toll on you. I was able to do it, but there's very few backs that are able to do that. He's not a real big guy, so that says a lot about him as a player, and what Sean McVay thinks of him. I look at McVay and think he's done a fantastic job of coaching this team.

**Do you think McVay should be in the Coach of the Year conversation?**

Of course he does. He probably won't get it because they're going to give it to a coach who's 15-2 or 14-3. But McVay has a young team, a team that at one point was decimated by injuries. They lost [four of five] and weren't looking good. And right now they're in position to win the NFC West. What else does it take [to win Coach of the Year]?

**Back to Barkley, are you surprised the Giants let him go?**

Let me tell you something. When you look at certain people who run these teams, some of these guys have as much sense as me being the president of the United States. That's about how much they should be running a football team.

In my contract, when the Rams traded me to the Colts, did you know I couldn't come back to the

NFC for five years? They put that clause in there.

**The Eagles finish the regular season against the Giants. If the record is up for grabs ...**

A real team would be like, "Oh no, you ain't

gonna get that record on us." But how ironic would it be for him to break the record on them, the team that let him go. A true slap in the face.

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