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Veteran quarterback Aaron Rodgers and the Steelers are off to a 6-2 start this season.

COMMENTARY

Steelers' first half is worthy of praise, not hyperbole

BY TIM BENZ
The Tribune-Review, Greensburg

In the days since the Pittsburgh Steelers' 27-6 victory over Cleveland, I've heard many people say, "You can't ask for more than 6-2 at the bye."

This is true. You can't.

At the Steelers' midway point with an off weekend looming, suggesting they should be anything more than 6-2 after their first eight games would be greedy.

Especially when you consider most folks around these parts had them slotted as a 10-win team at best anyway.

A good win over a tough Cincinnati team balanced out the annual disappointment of losing in Cleveland. And there's certainly no shame in dropping a game in Foxborough to the defending AFC champion New England Patriots.

So, yeah. You really can't say the Steelers should be anything better than 6-2.

But you certainly can say they are exactly where they should be.

That's an important differentiation to make. Indeed, demanding seven or eight wins over the first eight games would've been a fool's request.

However, looking at the schedule when it was released, and especially on a week-to-week basis, anything less than five or six wins would've been highly disappointing.

At the start of the year and on each game day, Steelers fans had every right to believe their team would beat Cleveland and Indianapolis at home and sweep all three teams from the putrid NFC South - New Orleans, Atlanta and Tampa Bay.

Then, honestly, going 1-2 against the Bengals, Patriots and the Browns in Cleveland tracks perfectly.

As a result, I'm very happy about the state of the Steelers. But let's save the ticker tape and some of the flowery praise. This club hasn't done anything superhuman. Nor has it secured even a wild card yet. And whatever it has accomplished has come against a pretty easy schedule.

The good news is the back half of the schedule isn't looking as difficult as it once did. Only three of their games are against opponents currently above .500.

Expecting another five wins before the regular season is over doesn't seem out of line. Even asking for another six doesn't seem excessive.

Anything less than that would be a disappointment. Going 4-5 down the stretch puts the club back in the dicey range for winning the AFC North, or even getting a wild-card slot.

As the Steelers well know, a 10-7 record is usually only good enough to get you a No. 7 seed and a ticket to Kansas City, Buffalo, New England or Denver.

Those are pretty lousy destinations to visit in the playoffs.

Or, at 10-7, you might win a soft AFC North - only to welcome an 11-or-12-win wild-card team in the first round of the playoffs. That's what happened when the 12-5 Houston Texans came to town to open postseason play in January.

How'd that turn out?

No, seriously. Remind me. The months of therapy I've endured since that game ended have forced the memories into the deep, dark recesses of my mind.

Another win or two, though, pushes the season total to 11 or 12. Now you're likely a division champ as a No. 2 or No. 3 seed, playing a home game against a lesser wild-card entry.

That's probably the formula this franchise needs to shake the frustration of nine years without a playoff win.

I'm not here to belittle the Steelers' first half. They've done just about everything they've needed to do, and they've done so in a manner befitting the franchise's reputation.

I'm certainly not here to rain on anyone's parade. But I am here to say it's far too early to start planning one.

Mirroring the last nine weeks with the first eight weeks by generating another six wins would certainly go a long way toward making that possibility a lot more realistic.

Again, that's not too much to ask.

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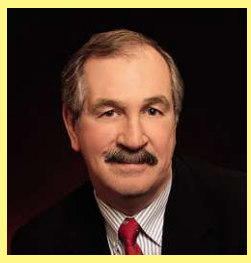
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