

Rodgers stunk, but he had plenty of help

BY PAUL ZEISE
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (TNS)

PITTSBURGH — If there is any silver lining from the Steelers’ Sunday night disaster in Los Angeles, it is that they are still in first place in the AFC North.

They won’t be for much longer, though, if they don’t fix the offense, and there doesn’t seem like it will be easy to do so. The offense is a compilation of misfit parts that all seemingly have flaws and also don’t seem to fit together very well.

There are no explosive players on offense except for DK Metcalf, and he has become the easiest man in the NFL to scheme out of games. Teams can bracket him, double-team him, roll safeties to him — whatever it takes — because they have no real fear of the other skill position players to make big plays.

Arthur Smith’s archaic offense is also a part of the problem and maybe is the biggest part of the problem. I am glad he “does more with tight

ends than any other coach,” but what the heck does that mean?

The tight ends only had six targets on Sunday night, which is head scratching because they are supposed to be the focal point of the offense. But let’s be honest, unless your tight ends are named Gronk and Kelce, building an offense around tight ends is losing football in today’s NFL.

Jaylen Warren is probably the second-best weapon behind Metcalf on the offense and, once again, Smith and Co. acted like they didn’t know he was on the team until late in the game when it was already decided. He carried the ball only 14 times, which is actually about two more than his average number of carries.

Make no mistake, Aaron Rodgers stunk the joint out on Sunday night and was a major reason the Steelers got blown out by the Chargers.

Rodgers looked a lot more like a man who should be getting on with his life’s work than a man who should be contemplating playing an-

other season. He looked like he had happy feet, he made bad decisions, he was off target too many times, and he tried to jam too many passes into places that weren’t open.

It was by far his worst night as a Steelers quarterback, and the worst part about it is Rodgers at times looked disinterested, as if he were saying to himself, “Why the heck am I not on a beach somewhere enjoying life?”

There are a lot of people who want to blame Rodgers solely for the Steelers’ woes against the Chargers, but that is way too lazy of a critique of this game. He was bad, for sure, but he had plenty of friends in that department.

The offensive line had been showing improvement but took a big step back Sunday. Troy Fautanu should have been credited with a strip sack of Rodgers on the play that led to a safety for the Chargers. He also got a bad holding penalty, and Broderick Jones wasn’t much better.

Rodgers got hit too many times

and outside of an “oh by the way” touchdown reception by Roman Wilson, the receivers didn’t do a good job of getting open or catching the ball. I keep hearing people try to tell me that the Steelers have a legitimate second receiving threat in Calvin Austin III, and it makes me wonder what games they are watching.

As I have written many times, the Steelers’ receiving corps is DK Metcalf and five guys named Mo, and I’m not sure that Mo isn’t the best of that group. Austin is a nice complementary third or fourth receiver, but he is miscast as a legitimate second option.

That’s part of the problem with the Steelers offense, and it shows up in a big way on nights when Rodgers is a little bit off or just isn’t playing well for whatever reason.

Defensively, the Steelers played well enough to win in some regards — they did have five sacks and 11 tackles for loss — but the reality is they allowed too many chunk plays. They didn’t do a good

job of stopping the Chargers at too many critical moments, and they couldn’t get off the field enough on big third downs.

They also didn’t force any turnovers, and that once again shows they may be too reliant on turnovers and can’t get enough stops to win without them. I don’t know if that is a fair criticism, but there is plenty of evidence that suggests it is true.

Take all of these things and wrap them all together, and the result is a 25-10 loss that felt more like 45-10 given how bad the offense was playing.

It is absolutely true that Rodgers needs to bounce back and play much better than he did Sunday for the Steelers to have any prayer to beat any team, much less a team that is currently on a path to be in the playoffs.

But Rodgers isn’t the only one that needs to be evaluated harshly during film sessions this week, as there is plenty of blame to go around — and that includes the coaching staff — as to why this game was such an epic failure.

► Steelers

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All three times, they’ve failed. The defense came up empty against Joe Flacco and the Bengals, the entire team turtled in the second half of a loss to Green Bay, and the offense disappeared in the mid-autumn Southern California twilight.

Yes, the Steelers have wins over division leaders Indianapolis and New England. Both of those victories, however, came under a very specific set of circumstances. The defense kept forcing turnovers (11 combined), and Rodgers and the offense converted most of those mistakes into touchdowns.

That didn’t happen against the Chargers. In fact, not much happened at all for an offense that hasn’t

topped 300 yards in a game in going on a month.

Just before the end of his post-game media session Sunday, Rodgers — who lives in Malibu, California — was asked about it being perhaps his final game in the Golden State. Rodgers pointed out that it could be his final game in Southern California, a nod to the Super Bowl being in Northern California in February.

The Steelers have shown the briefest of flashes of being able to make a run at it. To those flashes into something more, all involved need to be better.

The quarterback who didn’t look like the Rodgers of old, but merely an old Rodgers on Sunday night, perhaps most of all.

What’s working

Getting Jaylen Warren the ball.
Two months after signing a con-

tract extension, Warren has more than upheld his end of the bargain. After a sluggish start, Warren is averaging 4.2 yards per carry on the season, including nearly 5.0 yards per carry over his last four games.

The issue might be that Warren isn’t getting the ball enough. He’s had 20 touches or more just twice this season.

What needs help

Play execution on first and second down. One of the main reasons the Steelers are 26th in the league in third-down conversion rate (36%) has been their inability get in manageable third-down situations. Only one of Pittsburgh’s first nine third-down attempts — all of which failed — was less than 4 yards.

Stock up

When outside linebacker Nick

Herbig thrived while subbing for an injured Alex Highsmith earlier this season, it was fair to wonder if Highsmith’s days as Robin to T.J. Watt’s Batman were numbered.

Obviously not. Highsmith has four sacks, a pass defended and a forced fumble over his last two games.

Stock down

The Steelers opted not to search for an upgrade at wide receiver at the trade deadline, choosing to hold on to one of the higher-round draft picks (third or better) they would have had to part with to land one.

While it was a sound business decision — and the club did sign two-time Super Bowl winner Marquez Valdes-Scantling to the practice squad last week — the play of Calvin Austin III (who had a pass smack off his hands for an interception) and

the rest of the group behind Metcalf did little to provide confidence this year’s team can get by without another playmaker.

Injuries

CB Darius Slay exited with a concussion, adding the six-time Pro Bowler to a lengthy injury list for the secondary that includes S DeShon Elliott, S Jabrill Peppers, and S Chuck Clark. Veteran LG Isaac Seumalo sat out with a pectoral injury.

Key number

21 — The percentage of third downs the Steelers have converted (7 of 33) over the last three games.

Next steps

Hope for a rebound this weekend when the well-rested Bengals visit Acrisure Stadium.

NFL STANDINGS						
AMERICAN CONFERENCE						
East						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
New England	8	2	0	.800	265	192
Buffalo	6	3	0	.667	248	197
Miami	3	7	0	.300	210	256
N.Y. Jets	2	7	0	.222	195	241
South						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Indianapolis	8	2	0	.800	321	206
Jacksonville	5	4	0	.556	205	220
Houston	4	5	0	.444	204	150
Tennessee	1	8	0	.111	130	257
North						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Pittsburgh	5	4	0	.556	212	220
Baltimore	4	5	0	.444	229	235
Cincinnati	3	6	0	.333	216	300
Cleveland	2	7	0	.222	146	211
West						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Denver	8	2	0	.800	235	173
L.A. Chargers	7	3	0	.700	240	203
Kansas City	5	4	0	.556	235	159
Las Vegas	2	7	0	.222	139	220
NATIONAL CONFERENCE						
East						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Phila.	6	2	0	.750	208	185
Dallas	3	5	1	.389	263	277
Washington	3	7	0	.300	223	280
N.Y. Giants	2	8	0	.200	217	273
South						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Tampa Bay	6	3	0	.667	220	206
Carolina	5	5	0	.500	177	222
Atlanta	3	6	0	.333	168	209
New Orleans	2	8	0	.200	155	250
North						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Green Bay	5	2	1	.688	206	166
Detroit	6	3	0	.667	283	200
Chicago	6	3	0	.667	239	247
Minnesota	4	5	0	.444	201	213
West						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Seattle	7	2	0	.778	275	172
L.A. Rams	7	2	0	.778	251	153
San Francisco	6	4	0	.600	220	230
Arizona	3	6	0	.333	202	215

Thursday’s Games
Denver 10, Las Vegas 7
Sunday’s Games
Indianapolis 31, Atlanta 25, OT, Berlin, DEU
Baltimore 27, Minnesota 19
Chicago 24, N.Y. Giants 20
Houston 36, Jacksonville 29
Miami 30, Buffalo 13
N.Y. Jets 27, Cleveland 20
New England 28, Tampa Bay 23
New Orleans 17, Carolina 7
Seattle 44, Arizona 22
Detroit 44, Washington 22
L.A. Rams 42, San Francisco 16
L.A. Chargers 25, Pittsburgh 10
Open: Cincinnati, Kansas City, Tennessee, Dallas
Monday’s Games
Philadelphia at Green Bay, 8:15 p.m.
Thursday, Nov. 13
N.Y. Jets at New England, 8:15 p.m.
Sunday, Nov. 16
Washington vs Miami at Madrid, ESP, 9:30 a.m.
Carolina at Atlanta, 1 p.m.
Chicago at Minnesota, 1 p.m.
Cincinnati at Pittsburgh, 1 p.m.
Green Bay at N.Y. Giants, 1 p.m.
Houston at Tennessee, 1 p.m.
L.A. Chargers at Jacksonville, 1 p.m.
Tampa Bay at Buffalo, 1 p.m.
San Francisco at Arizona, 4:05 p.m.
Seattle at L.A. Rams, 4:05 p.m.
Baltimore at Cleveland, 4:25 p.m.
Kansas City at Denver, 4:25 p.m.
Detroit at Phila., 8:20 p.m.
Open: Indianapolis, New Orleans
Monday, Nov. 17
Dallas at Las Vegas, 8:15 p.m.

STEELERS SUMMARY

L.A. Chargers 25, Pittsburgh 10

Pittsburgh	3	0	0	7	—	10
L.A. Chargers	2	10	3	10	—	25

First Quarter

Pit—FG Boswell 59, 10:25.
LAC—safety, 5:09.

Second Quarter

LAC—FG Dicker 32, 7:32.
LAC—McConkey 15 pass from Herbert (Dicker kick), :12.

Third Quarter

LAC—FG Dicker 59, 6:07.

Fourth Quarter

LAC—Vidal 2 run (Dicker kick), 9:26.
LAC—FG Dicker 42, 4:54.
Pit—R. Wilson 27 pass from Rodgers (Boswell kick), 2:57.
A—72, 174.

INDIVIDUAL STATISTICS

Running—Pittsburgh, Warren 14-70, Johnson 2-3.
L.A. Chargers, Vidal 25-95, Herbert 5-19, Patterson 1-1.
Passing—Pittsburgh, Rodgers 16-31-2-161. L.A. Chargers, Herbert 20-33-0-220.
Receiving—Pittsburgh, Metcalf 3-35, Freiermuth 3-33, R. Wilson 2-35, Warren 2-21, Austin 2-14, Gainwell 2-4, Washington 1-15, Smith 1-4. L.A. Chargers, Johnston 5-42, McConkey 4-107, Gadsden 3-13, Allen 2-19, T. Harris 2-4, Vidal 1-13, Conklin 1-12, Fisk 1-7, Davis 1-3.
Missed Field Goals—Pittsburgh, Boswell 45. L.A. Chargers, Dicker 55.



The Victory Elementary fourth and fifth grade girls basketball team finished its season on Saturday with a perfect 6-0 record. Members of the team were (back, from left): coach Chelsea Hanna, Maisy Hoover, Kerraline Hartsfield, Adelyn Jacobson, Madelyn Moon, Kinley Buchanan, Lyla Milliron and coach Haley Winger; middle, Hadley McKinley, Arianna Manski, Brooklynn Hill, Eden Nischik and Chelseigh Sherman; front, Cheyenne Byler, Alexis Stebbins and McKenna Cole.

NHL GLANCE

Sunday's Games

Chicago 5, Detroit 1
Los Angeles 3, Pittsburgh 2
Dallas 2, Seattle 1
Ottawa 4, Utah 2
Carolina 5, Toronto 4
Minnesota 2, Calgary 0
Anaheim 4, Winnipeg 1
Calgary 5, Vancouver 4, OT

Monday's Games

N.Y. Islanders 3, New Jersey 2, OT
N.Y. Rangers 6, Nashville 3
Columbus at Edmonton, late
Florida at Vegas, late

Tuesday's Games

Dallas at Ottawa, 7 p.m.
Los Angeles at Montreal, 7 p.m.
Toronto at Boston, 7 p.m.
Washington at Carolina, 7 p.m.
Calgary at St. Louis, 8 p.m.
San Jose at Minnesota, 8 p.m.
Anaheim at Colorado, 9:30 p.m.
Columbus at Seattle, 10 p.m.
Winnipeg at Vancouver, 10 p.m.

Wednesday's Games

N.Y. Rangers at Tampa Bay, 7 p.m.
Edmonton at Philadelphia, 7:30 p.m.
Buffalo at Utah, 9 p.m.
New Jersey at Chicago, 9:30 p.m.

Thursday's Games

Anaheim at Detroit, 7 p.m.
Boston at Ottawa, 7 p.m.
Dallas at Montreal, 7 p.m.
Los Angeles at Toronto, 7 p.m.
Washington at Florida, 7 p.m.
Edmonton at Columbus, 7:30 p.m.
Buffalo at Colorado, 9 p.m.
San Jose at Calgary, 9 p.m.
N.Y. Islanders at Vegas, 10 p.m.
Winnipeg at Seattle, 10 p.m.