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Why the Pittsburgh Steelers Aren’t Super Bowl Contenders

The Pittsburgh Steelers are a 7-2 football team. That’s a fact. What’s also undisputable is that Russell Wilson has played better than any quarterback since the Ben Roethlisberger era.

Pittsburgh’s defense has stepped up their efforts and it’s only getting healthier. Despite all that, the Steelers aren’t yet a lock to be dubbed a true “Super Bowl contender.”

Defining a Super Bowl contender is cloudy. In my eyes, there are three characteristics that define Super Bowl-caliber teams.

One, it has to be a roster with few, if any, glaring holes. Two, it needs to have a proven head coach capable of guiding a team through a postseason. Lastly, the team needs to be completely bought into both a team’s vision and culture.

The Steelers very clearly fit the third criteria, as evidenced by the team’s celebration after the win in Washington. The other two, not so much.

There are three pretty obvious holes that come to mind with this Steelers roster. The first is the one that Pittsburgh can get away with the most, in the right tackle position.

Broderick Jones, a first round pick at last year’s NFL draft, has been underwhelming. He’s been plagued by costly holding calls, which is not something any team wants in crunch time of a postseason contest.

While Jones’s blocking hasn’t cost the Steelers a game yet, his inconsistencies are worth monitoring as the season progresses.

The second has been a point of contention since the Diontae Johnson trade this offseason, that being a second wide receiver.

Trading for Mike Williams was the result of several failed attempts by general manager Omar Khan over the past eight months. That most notably includes months-long interest in San Francisco 49ers wide receiver Brandon Aiyuk.

The 49ers wideout may or may not have worked out in Pittsburgh, but instead of looking for other options, Khan seemingly spent the entire offseason pursuing Aiyuk, instead of pivoting to more affordable options. Williams himself was available in free agency before signing with the New York Jets.

Even at the trade deadline, Williams was seemingly a last-ditch effort to fill the position. DeAndre Hopkins, an All-Pro pass-catcher, was acquired by the Kansas City Chiefs for a conditional fourth round pick, which could be a fifth round pick if the Chiefs miss out on the Super Bowl.

Regardless, at its highest point, the pick is just one round better than what the Steelers gave up. For a wide receiver that went over a thousand yards last year as opposed to a guy who hasn’t done it in three and is coming off an ACL injury. Yes, please.

Behind George Pickens and Williams, the depth remains concerning.

Calvin Austin had two good games against two poor defenses, and he’s not the answer at punt returner either, despite a return for a touchdown.

Take away the touchdown and Austin has 8.5 yards per return. He goes from top 10 returner to fringe top 20.

Van Jefferson, Ben Skowronek, Brandon Johnson, and Scotty Miller don’t move the needle one bit.

The other hole the Steelers face is at the position they attempted to fill with the Diontae Johnson trade, that being cornerback.

Joey Porter Jr. has held his own, and it’s important for his performance against the Washington Commanders to never happen again.

Donte Jackson, who a bad Carolina team was willing to trade away, has been inconsistent at best. His team-high three interceptions couldn’t be any more misleading.

He’s noticeably been slow when tasked with guarding top receivers, and has been over-aggressive in certain situations.

The Steelers have also not faced a team with two legitimate threats. The closest to that was the Atlanta Falcons in week one, when Kirk Cousins was still getting settled into a brand-new offense.

Pittsburgh faces several high-powered offenses like the Ravens (twice), Chiefs, Bengals, and Eagles in the back half of the year, which could expose the weakness of the CBs on the roster. Especially Philadelphia, when AJ Brown or Devonta Smith will be lined up against Jackson.

Beanie Bishop, Corey Trice, and James Pierre haven’t proven they can fill that role yet either. Even Cam Sutton, who just came off an eight game suspension and is familiar with the defense from his previous stint, can’t take on that job.

While Mike Tomlin is widely regarded as one of the NFL’s top coaches, it’s quite difficult to ignore the obvious.

In a league that’s dictated so much by success (as all professional ones are), Tomlin hasn’t had much of it. It’s been almost 3,000 days since Pittsburgh’s last playoff win.

But they’ve had eighteen straight winning seasons, isn’t that great?

Great coaches like Andy Reid and Bill Belichick have built their reputations on postseason success. Tomlin’s reputation for building good teams in the regular season may be warranted, but his three postseason victories in the last decade can’t be overlooked.

The pure fact Tomlin’s teams could not reach a Super Bowl with “The Killer B’s” nor beat a Jacksonville Jaguars team that had Blake Bortles under center is a prime example of his downfalls.

Coming into last week, the Steelers had a top three easiest schedule by the SoS (Strength of schedule) metric in the NFL. For the remainder of the year, they have the third hardest road.

All six divisional games lie ahead, and even though the Cleveland Browns and Cincinnati Bengals have noticeably struggled, AFC North matchups are always close.

Of the last 16 matchups against the division, 11 of them have been by one score. This includes a loss to the Dorian Thompson-Robinson led Browns last year.

Two non-divisional games are against aforementioned threats in the Eagles and Chiefs. The Kansas City game on Christmas Day is the true litmus test.

The Steelers have miraculously avoided them since the 36-10 thumping in the wild card round back in 2021. Patrick Mahomes obviously hasn’t slowed down, coming off back-to-back Super Bowls and a perfect 9-0 start.

In the AFC, the Chiefs are the best test to tell if a team is legit. It matters even more when the playoffs come around. Baltimore, Denver, Atlanta, Cincinnati, and the LA Chargers have played good games against Kansas City so far.

Pittsburgh is not comparable to the Chiefs in any form or fashion. The biggest gap is at QB, where Mahomes can outduel the veteran in Wilson or Justin Fields, should that be the case for whatever reason.

Only three teams can comfortably compete with Kansas City in the playoffs: Buffalo, Baltimore, and Detroit.

And Baltimore has their issues. The Ravens’ pass defense has been putrid, while their offense has been formidable with the addition of Derrick Henry.

Another angle is that the KC game for Pittsburgh caps off three games in 10 days. The Ravens and Eagles are the other two teams.

If we’re talking about pure Super Bowl contenders, there are four. Kansas City, Buffalo, Baltimore, and Detroit. Sound familiar at all? Teams that can realistically beat the Chiefs are good enough to make it all the way.

Pittsburgh hasn’t yet proven it has the consistency or overall talent to be considered a true Super Bowl contender.

However, the remaining eight games will reveal a whole lot more. It all starts with Baltimore this coming Sunday, their second true test of the year outside of last week.

If the players the Steelers currently have rostered can magically rise above anything they’ve previously put on tape, then a conversation can be had. Until then, expect a playoff berth and a first round exit.

The standard is the standard, after all.