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Big Ben's concussion impact unknown

By [Scott Brown](#)

TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Wednesday, October 25, 2006

Ben Roethlisberger suffered a concussion in Sunday's game against the Atlanta Falcons.

Bill Cowher offered that and not much more about his starting quarterback during the Steelers coach's weekly news conference Tuesday.

It is too early to tell whether Roethlisberger will play against the Raiders this Sunday in Oakland, Cowher said, and he is listed as questionable.

Roethlisberger, who underwent a series of tests Monday at UPMC and will be examined again later this week, may practice today, Cowher said.

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emphasize that we are very encouraged by where he is," Cowher said.

Steelers fans may be encouraged by what an expert on

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Cowher
Chaz Palla/TRIBUNE-REVIEW

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concussions said yesterday.

Dr. Julian Bailes, who worked as a neurosurgeon for the Steelers from 1988-97, said any lingering effects Roethlisberger had from the mild concussion he suffered in an offseason motorcycle accident are long gone by now.

Thus, Bailes said, there shouldn't be any link between that concussion and the one Roethlisberger incurred after absorbing a helmet-to-helmet hit from Falcons defensive end Chauncey Davis.

Questions have been raised about the legality of Davis' hit, and Cowher said he has no doubt it will be reviewed by the NFL.

What kind of shape it has left Roethlisberger in will be answered in the coming days.

Roethlisberger was motionless on the Georgia Dome turf for several minutes after Davis' hit in the third quarter, and he eventually left for the Steelers' locker room on a cart.

He returned to the sideline wearing street clothes in the fourth quarter and flew back with the team to Pittsburgh after the Steelers' 41-38 overtime loss.

Cowher declined to discuss the level of Roethlisberger's concussion -- they are generally classified as mild, medium or severe -- and said the Steelers are "taking every precaution."

One reason the Steelers have to take a wait-and-see approach with Roethlisberger is because the seriousness of it may not be fully known, Bailes said.

In the past when an athlete was knocked unconscious, Bailes said, it was assumed that he or she had suffered a severe concussion. Now, Bailes said, post-injury symptoms such as dizziness, nausea and memory loss -- or lack of them -- are a better indicator of how serious the concussion is.

"The full extent of any concussion is better appreciated with time," said Bailes, chairman of the department of neurosurgery at West Virginia University.

Cowher said he would let the Steelers' medical personnel make the decision on whether Roethlisberger is healthy enough to play against the Raiders.

If Roethlisberger is unable, veteran Charlie Batch would start at quarterback for the Steelers.

Batch has played well in relief of Roethlisberger this season, throwing for 410 yards and five touchdowns in two games.

"I don't take (head injuries) lightly, and I don't think anybody should," Cowher said. "I think as coaches we have to know what our boundaries are. If they are not cleared (medically), they are

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not going to play."

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

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Point, counterpoint: Roethlisberger's concussion

By John Harris and Scott Brown
TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Saturday, October 28, 2006

Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger is questionable for this week's game in Oakland because of a concussion he suffered Sunday against the Atlanta Falcons.

Tribune-Review columnist John Harris and Steelers beat writer Scott Brown debate whether or not Roethlisberger should play against the Raiders.



Brown: If the Steelers medical staff clears him to play then by all means he should play against the Raiders. They are professionals, just like the players, and there is no way they will give Big Ben the OK to play if he is not ready. Their background and training would make them err on the side of caution and the Steelers won't rush him back since he is not only the present but also the future.



Harris: I think you played

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quarterback for the Steelers on Sunday, and suffered a concussion. You're concerned about Ben's value to the Steelers this week and this season. But what about his value to the Steelers beyond this season? He's a franchise quarterback, and that's a rare commodity in the NFL. Sitting Ben for one game isn't the end of the world,. It could be the best thing for everyone in the long run.



Brown: You are not the first person to say I am not right in the head and probably won't be the last. However, I meant future to mean in the coming years not just what remains of this one. You know Ben will want to play and if medical experts are OK with it then why would you have a problem with it? Correct me if I am wrong but weren't you an English, not pre-med, major at Mansfield University?



Harris: I learned enough English at the old alma mater to know how to spell concussion. It's P-A-I-N. All football players deal with pain, but concussions are different because they involve the head, the most vulnerable part of the body. I felt the hit that Ben took Sunday against the Falcons way up in the press box. That now makes two concussions for Ben since June. Ding! Ding! Ding! Scott, wake up and smell the coffee. One concussion isn't to be taken lightly. Two concussions in four months are scary.



Brown: John, what is scary is us having to go to Oakland this weekend. You want to talk about people not right in the head? I will say this for Raiders fans: at least they don't dress up in dog masks and eat cans of Alpo, though that might be considered a delicatessen in Cleveland. Seriously, I'm not making light of concussions or saying they aren't serious. My basic point is let the medical experts, e-x-p-e-r-t-s, decide if Roethlisberger can play. Why are you so anxious to keep him on the bench this week, is he playing against your fantasy squad?



Harris: Oh ye of little faith. Come on, Scott, the Steelers have a pretty good backup quarterback. You may have heard of him. Hometown favorite Charlie Batch is 24 of 39 for 410 yards with five touchdowns and no interceptions this season. That's not chopped liver. On the other hand, the Raiders are chopped liver. Steelers coach Bill Cowher can kill two birds with one stone by giving Charlie some much-deserved playing time while giving Ben some much-needed rest.



Brown: OK, I'm confused. Are you Ben Roethlisberger's mother or Charlie Batch's promoter? If he is able, and we know he'll be willing, Roethlisberger gives this team the best chance to win Sunday. And don't assume the Steelers are going to beat the Raiders no matter how bad they are. The Jaguars lost by 20 points to the Texans last week and da mighty Bears should have lost to the Cardinals, which lost to the Raiders last week.



Harris: I'm the proud father of three children and a frustrated wanna-be agent, but don't try to change the subject. Focus, Scott, focus. What gives? It's one game. Take a deep breath and repeat after me: It's just one

[Shariff Harris](#)

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game. There are 10 games left. It's a long season, a marathon and not a sprint. I'm more concerned with Ben enjoying a long and healthy NFL career than having him miss one game against the sorry Raiders for precautionary reasons.



Brown: I hope Al Davis reads that remark about his beloved Raiders and bars you from the press box. Maybe then you could stand guard over the bubble that you obviously think Ben should be living in. Look, football's a violent game and blows to the head, unfortunately, are a part of it. We should defer to the medical experts, just as Bill Cowher will do, and have enough trust that the Steelers will do the right thing when it comes to Big Ben.



Harris: Scott, in case you stayed out in the sun too long while you were still living in Florida, Ben didn't have a typical offseason. He was involved in a terrible motorcycle accident in which he nearly died. He had an emergency appendectomy that caused him to miss the opener. He was tossed around like a rag doll in the Falcons game. I'd say that's a good enough reason to give Ben the week off. Better safe than sorry.

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Brown: Big Ben shakes off poor showing

By **Scott Brown**

TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Thursday, November 2, 2006

He won't ditch the gunslinger mentality that may be a contributing factor to the 11 interceptions he has thrown. Nor has his confidence wavered, Ben Roethlisberger said Wednesday, despite having a season that would make a root canal seem enjoyable by comparison.

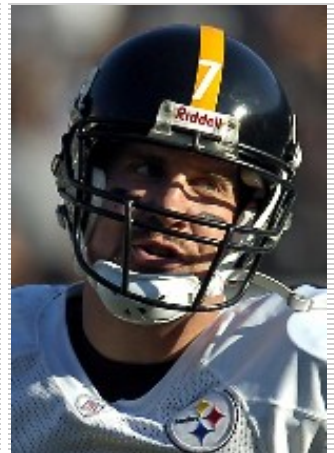
And maybe, just maybe, the self-assuredness that allowed him to win 27 of his first 31 NFL starts and a Super Bowl at the tender age of 23 is also why Roethlisberger said he would have accepted a benching during a 20-13 loss last Sunday to the Oakland Raiders.

The Raiders intercepted Roethlisberger four times and returned two of them for touchdowns. Steelers coach Bill Cowher said he didn't consider pulling Roethlisberger for Charlie Batch, if only temporarily, although Roethlisberger indicated he would have been OK with such a move.

"I want what's best for this team, and if that's Charlie Batch being in there, then that's Charlie Batch being in there," said Roethlisberger, who will try to lead the Steelers past the visiting Denver Broncos on Sunday. "I'm not going to be one that's going to cry or complain about 'Why did I get pulled?' or something like that. My job is to go out and play good football so there isn't a decision to be made."

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Roethlisberger
Christopher Horner/TRIBUNE-REVIEW

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Roethlisberger has played good football at times this season but hasn't done it nearly enough to satisfy members of the Steeler Nation.

Or himself, for that matter.

Roethlisberger had never thrown four interceptions in a game as a professional before the game in Oakland. His struggles led to the inevitable questions of whether Cowher should have started him a week after he sustained his second concussion since June.

"If he passed all of the (medical) tests," ESPN analyst Merrill Hoge said, "what is the excuse for sitting him?"

However, "Monday Night Football" analyst and former Super Bowl-winning quarterback Joe Theismann questions whether Roethlisberger should be playing.

"Ben has not been right," Theismann said earlier this week on ESPN's "Mike & Mike in the Morning." "I go all the way back to the Philadelphia-Pittsburgh preseason game when I saw him play. He didn't look right then. He hasn't looked comfortable, and part of it is because he's been hurt and in and out so much. I admire Bill Cowher for staying with the young man, but Ben almost needs to step away, get himself completely healthy again and basically restart the season."

Hoge said he did notice while watching film of the Raiders game that Roethlisberger seemed a little hesitant about getting hit -- something the former Steelers running back didn't see earlier in the season.

That, Hoge added, is natural because Roethlisberger's latest concussion, unlike the one he got from a motorcycle accident, came on the football field.

"That may take a couple of weeks to get out of his head," said Hoge, whose career ended prematurely because of concussions.

Roethlisberger insisted that his poor showing in Oakland -- and ones that preceded it -- has not gotten into his head. He admitted that he sometimes takes risks in the passing game but is "not going to change how I play" for a simple reason: it worked well his first two seasons.

"He's a good quarterback, and he will learn," Cowher said of the mistakes Roethlisberger has made this season. "Those things will make him a stronger player and a stronger person through

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the course of time."

Time is something Roethlisberger and the Steelers don't have.

The team is 2-5 and essentially in a must-win situation the rest of the season.

"We feel like we're a good team with a bad record," Roethlisberger said. "We feel that we still have time to turn it around and play good football."

And, Roethlisberger knows, it all starts with him.

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

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Prisuta: Worth the wait

By [Mike Prisuta](#)
TRIBUNE-REVIEW
Thursday, November 2, 2006

He's thrown nearly twice as many interceptions (11) as touchdown passes (six). He's lost five of his last six starts. And he absolutely bottomed out last Sunday in Oakland (four interceptions, two of which were returned for touchdowns).

The fallout has been as irrational as it was predictable.

They're calling quarterback Ben Roethlisberger overrated on cable TV and calling for his head in Western Pennsylvania, or at least for the Steelers to play backup Charlie Batch.

Fortunately for the Steelers, Bill Cowher will not be deterred.

Roethlisberger will start this Sunday against the Denver Broncos.

As for what happened in Oakland, "Those things will make him a stronger player and a stronger person through the course of time," Cowher insisted.

Actually, they already have.

If you didn't fire a brick through the TV as cornerback Chris Carr was returning Roethlisberger's fourth interception 100 yards for the apparent game-clinching touchdown Sunday, you may have noticed a late-game metamorphosis taking place at the McAfee Coliseum.

Running a no-huddle attack with four wide receivers at his disposal and 9:32 remaining with which to eat into a 14-point deficit, Roethlisberger suddenly found a rhythm.

He hit his next nine passes in succession, the fifth of which got the Steelers into the end zone (a 25-yard screen to Willie

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Parker) and the eighth of which set the Steelers up inside the Oakland 1.

Had running back Najeh Davenport not false-started on third-and-goal from the 5 just after the two-minute warning, he may well have been on the receiving end of the TD pass that would have tied the game.

Had running back Verron Haynes not been injured, necessitating the need for Davenport in that situation against the Raiders, Steeler Nation might be hailing Roethlisberger today as the greatest comeback artist since John Elway.

Instead, it's "Ben shouldn't have played" and "Batch ought to be playing."

At his weekly media briefing Wednesday, Roethlisberger accepted the criticisms as part of the deal.

In a more private moment a couple of weeks back, when the cameras weren't rolling and the questions weren't coming at him faster than Derrick Burgess, Roethlisberger admitted such critiques can sting.

"I would love to play in this league for 10 or 15 years," he said. "But if I'm blessed enough to do that, there's probably going to be a losing season in there somewhere; it's going to happen in the NFL.

"And sometimes it gets to you. It's a little frustrating knowing that the last two years, looking at what we've done, getting to the AFC Championship Game and then winning a Super Bowl, and then all of a sudden you lose a couple of games early and it's almost like they almost forget everything you did.

"You can say as many times as you want that it doesn't matter what people think. I care about my teammates and my family, what those people think. But, still, subconsciously you care; if people come up and call you names, it's going to affect you.

"On the other hand, I know it's going to be OK. In this locker room, the team, we're all behind each other."

Roethlisberger is as confident in that as he is with an individual approach that was almost perfect for six quarters prior to Oakland.

"Charlie (Batch) and those guys laugh sometimes when I come to the sideline," Roethlisberger said Wednesday. "They're like, 'We can tell you're feeling it out there because you're just making throws that most people don't throw.'

"I felt that good against Kansas City and Atlanta."

That's Roethlisberger at his best.

The Steelers have no choice but to endure a slew of

Shariff Harris

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interceptions if necessary until that Roethlisberger re-emerges.

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Mike Prisuta is a columnist for the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review.

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Big Ben off the bike, wants back on his game

By The Associated Press

Thursday, November 2, 2006

Ben Roethlisberger looks at what has occurred in his life since winning the AFC championship game in Denver and almost can't believe it's been less than 10 months.

Becoming the youngest quarterback to win the Super Bowl. The motorcycle accident that left him with a surgically repaired face. The two concussions. The emergency appendectomy that kept him out of the Pittsburgh Steelers' opener. His five losses in six starts this season — or one more loss than in his first two NFL seasons combined.

"It's tough because you set the bar so high the first two years that you'll forget you won the Super Bowl last season," Roethlisberger said as he looked to Sunday's rematch in Pittsburgh with the Broncos. "But, hey, that's the way it goes. You've got to start playing better. I've got to start playing better."

He also needs to stay healthy, and he knows it. Maybe that's why he disclosed Wednesday for the first time that he's not riding a motorcycle any longer. Previously, he said only that he would put on a helmet when doing so.

Roethlisberger's motorcycle crash June 12 left him with the first of two concussions he's had this year, a battered face that required seven hours of surgery and other more minor injuries. He returned for training camp, but his season has been disrupted by the appendicitis attack and a second concussion, this one on the field, Oct. 22 in Atlanta.

Asked if he wishes he hadn't gotten on a motorcycle, especially without a helmet, the 24-year-old said, "Not at all. I'm not going to sit there and regret things that I've done. That was a decision I made and I'm not going to look back and regret it."

Roethlisberger was cleared to play last weekend in Oakland, but responded by throwing four interceptions — two for touchdowns — in a 20-13 loss to a team widely considered the AFC's worst. It also was the worst game of his three-season

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career, and coach Bill Cowher said Tuesday that three interceptions were preventable.

Roethlisberger agreed he must make better decisions, but doesn't sound like someone who regrets taking some risks on the field, either.

"You just go out there and play the game the way you know how to play it," he said. "That's how I play and I'm not going to change. That's how I play football. It's worked for me and hopefully we'll turn it around."

Roethlisberger is going against a Denver defense that allowed only two touchdowns in six games before giving up three, all by Colts receiver Reggie Wayne, in a 34-31 loss Sunday to Indianapolis.

That Denver defense has undergone some schematic adjustments since losing 34-17 in the AFC championship game, when Roethlisberger threw two touchdowns passes while leading Pittsburgh to a 24-3 halftime lead. He was 21-of-29 for 275 yards, the kind of accuracy and production a quarterback needs to win a big game.

The Steelers (2-5) might need a similar game Sunday by Roethlisberger to turn around a season that couldn't have gone much worse so far, either for the team or the quarterback.

"Teams are kind of gunning for you a little harder because you are the champs," Roethlisberger said. "And so we are definitely getting everybody's best shot, and I think that we definitely need to step up and start playing better football."

Following his eventful offseason, Roethlisberger looked rusty in losing his first three starts. But he was 32-of-41 for 476 yards, five touchdowns and no interceptions in seven quarters against the Chiefs and Falcons until receiving his latest concussion.

Since then, Roethlisberger has talked to several former quarterbacks who offered advice on how to deal with his uneven play. He didn't reveal any names, though he has spoken frequently in the past with NFL career passing leader Dan Marino.

"You're always going to go through these stretches," Roethlisberger said. "I've talked to so many great quarterbacks the last couple of weeks, and they say you're going to have these stretches — and it isn't going to be the last time you have a stretch like this."

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Steelers notebook

By The Tribune-Review

Thursday, November 2, 2006

Becoming the Steelers' third-down back would get him on the field more. And, as reserve running back Najeh Davenport sees it, taking over for Verron Haynes might afford him more chances to make up for a costly mistake he made in Sunday's 20-13 loss in Oakland.

"Get my name in the paper for something good," Davenport said Wednesday after practice, "rather than a (false start) penalty."

Davenport and as many as three other backs could be in the running for the role that Haynes, who suffered a season-ending knee injury against the Raiders, has filled so capably the last couple of years. Duce Staley, who has been inactive for all but one game this season, is also an option to replace Haynes. So is starting running back Willie Parker, with John Kuhn a long shot to take over for Haynes, who was scheduled to have knee surgery yesterday. Parker scored the Steelers' only touchdown last Sunday, scampering 25 yards on a screen pass. Steelers coach Bill Cowher has been wary of Parker taking too much of a pounding, which may be why the third-year pro said he doesn't expect to become an every-down back, even with the loss of Haynes.

"If it happens, it happens," Parker said. "I'm not going to politic. It's not my call."

- Nose tackle Casey Hampton and outside linebacker Clark Haggans practiced yesterday at the team's South Side facility. Hampton, who missed the Raiders game with a bad hamstring, is still listed as questionable for Sunday. Haggans (ankle) has been upgraded to probable. Four Steelers are already out for the 4:15 p.m. game against the visiting Denver Broncos, including starting center Jeff Hartings (knee).

- None of the players on the Broncos' active roster missed practice yesterday. Among the players listed as probable for Sunday are cornerback Champ Bailey (ankle), running back

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Steelers lose, 20-13

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Tatum Bell (toe) and linebackers D.J. Williams (foot) and Al Wilson (thumb).

- After starting every game at right guard for the Steelers last season, Kendall Simmons is now trying to reclaim his job. Chris Kemoeatu played in place of Simmons in Oakland, and Cowher has not said which one of them will start Sunday.

"The reps that I get, I'm taking full advantage of and showing them what I can," Simmons said.

- Steelers guard Alan Faneca dismissed any notion that Cowher's uncertain status - it is anything but a given that he will return as coach next season -- has been a distraction.

"I've always said since the whole thing came up, 'How does it affect us?'" Faneca said. "It doesn't affect us 'til and when and if it does happen. How does that affect us getting ready for Denver this week?"

Digits

33 - Total points the Steelers have been outscored by in the first half this season.

92.3 - Rushing yards per game the Steelers are giving up.

155.3 - Rushing yards the Broncos are averaging a game.

- *Scott Brown*

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Brown: Tense Cowher taking blame for team's woes

By **Scott Brown**
TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Wednesday, November 1, 2006

Is the uncertainty that has swirled around Bill Cowher affecting his players? Have Ben Roethlisberger's medical issues cut into his preparation? Did Cowher consider using Charlie Batch at all during the Oakland game, and might Batch play Sunday against the Denver Broncos if Roethlisberger struggles?

No, no and no.

Those were Cowher's answers, literally, to questions posed at a weekly news conference in which the Steelers coach alternated between tense and terse.

Cowher did elaborate on a number of things involving the Steelers and took the blame for the sorry state of the defending Super Bowl champions.

"I accept full responsibility for that," Cowher said. "Each one of us has to do more, and it starts with me."

Less certain is how the Steelers, who are coming off a 20-13 loss to lowly Oakland, pull themselves out of the funk that has left them at 2-5 and in the same company as the Cleveland Browns.

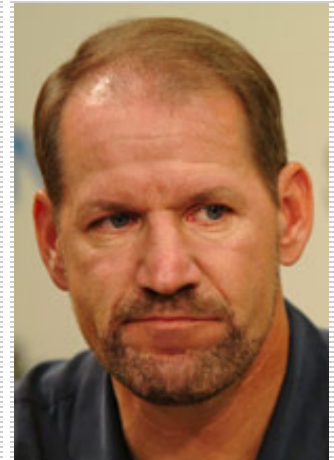
Cowher stood squarely behind his quarterback, though he did say Roethlisberger is trying to do too much at times and faulted him for three of the four interceptions the third-year pro threw against the Raiders.

He also said he is disappointed in the inconsistent play of his veteran offensive line, and as for his kick coverage team, well, don't even go there.

He didn't indicate that a major shakeup is coming, and Cowher made it clear the eight-game winning streak that catapulted the

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Cowher
Chaz Palla/TRIBUNE-REVIEW

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Steelers last season will be of little help as they try to put together a similar run starting Sunday against the visiting Denver Broncos.

"I don't have any magic formula to go back to," Cowher said. "I don't care what people have done in the past or their potential for the future. What I want to see is who we are right now."

The Steelers have been a turnover-plagued team that also has been prone to physical and mental breakdowns at inopportune times.

"There has been a lot of frustration that has taken place through the course of these games in terms of the different ways we have found to lose them," Cowher said, "and the bottom line is that we have lost."

The collection of losses has left the Steelers in last place with the Browns in the AFC North and almost out of the playoff race before it even starts.

Speculation is rampant that the inconsistent play and concentration lapses are symptoms of larger problems, such as Cowher's murky future with the team -- his contract expires after next season and it is far from certain that he will return in 2007 -- and Roethlisberger's medical travails.

"What happens when you lose is a lot of things come under the microscope, like they should," Cowher said. "All the speculation about (Roethlisberger) and me, you have to deal with it. We're in the public eye, and we've had a few bad days at the office.

"All I can tell you is I'm going to deal with it and hopefully, with the quality of the people we have, they will make the same decision."

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

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Steelers test new career paths

By **John Harris**

TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Wednesday, November 1, 2006

Super Bowl XL MVP Hines Ward had some words of advice for Steelers teammate and fellow Pro Bowler Troy Polamalu.

"Don't cut your hair, buddy," Ward said.

The place was the locker room at the Steelers' South Side training facility. The occasion was Ward seeking material for one of his weekly media ventures, the PNC Hines Ward Show on KDKA-TV.

Ward decided to ask some of his teammates about Polamalu's flowing mane, and how Kansas City Chiefs running back Larry Johnson tackled Polamalu by tugging hard on his Samson-like locks and pulling him down.

First, Ward wanted to know if any of the Steelers players thought Johnson's tackle was dirty. Then, he asked if Polamalu should cut his hair.

Safety Tyrone Carter said no. "Oh, boy, he would look crazy," Carter said.

Ward, of course, had the final word, telling Polamalu to keep his long locks.

Trailed by a camera crew on his way around the locker room, Ward walked past a group of reporters and teased, "I'm just trying to steal your jobs."

Ward and other Steelers are among a number of professional athletes who have parlayed their on-field fame into off-field job opportunities in radio and television.

One of the most popular Steelers players, Ward has his TV show, which appears at 11:30 Saturday nights with co-host Bob Pompeani. He also does a radio talk show Tuesday night during

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Steelers on the air

Those with TV shows

1. Hines Ward
"The PNC Hines Ward Show"
KDKA-2, 11:30 p.m.
Saturday

2. Bryant McFadden
"Hometowne Sports B-Mac Corner"
WPMY-22, 11:30 a.m.
Saturday

Those with radio shows

1. Clark Haggans with Ellis Cannon
WPGF-FM (104.7),

the season on WDVE-FM (102.5) with teammate Deshea Townsend and host (and former Steelers tackle) Tunch Ilkin.

Other Steelers taking the media plunge include linebacker Clark Haggans, who does a Monday night talk show on WPGF-FM (104.7) with Ellis Cannon; second-year cornerback Bryant McFadden, who has a Tuesday night talk show on WEAE-AM (1250) with host Mark Madden (teammate Verron Haynes fills in when McFadden can't make it) along with a Saturday morning TV show on WPMY-22; and starting tackle Max Starks, who has a Tuesday night radio show on WBGG-AM (970) with host Joe Bendel.

It's good business to have Steelers players do radio and television shows because they attract more listeners and viewers. Steelers players are supremely popular in the Western Pennsylvania market, and they help spike the all-powerful ratings that allow stations to charge sponsors more to advertise on radio and TV.

"There's definitely a high level of interest with the Steelers. I can't tell you having a Steelers player on a show increases ratings, but I do know we get very good ratings for Hines' and Deshea's show," said John Moschitta, operations manager at WDVE-FM (102.5).

Not all of the players knew what to expect upon replacing their helmets and shoulder pads with microphones and cameras. Although part of their job description as football players includes regular interaction with reporters, some Steelers players felt like they were entering unknown territory, at least initially.

"It's something I was unsure about," said Ward, who has had his radio show for several years but wasn't ashamed to admit he was a relative TV novice.

After speaking with Jerome Bettis, Ward agreed to replace the former Steelers running back on the KDKA airwaves after Bettis' retirement and subsequent move to become a co-host on NBC's Sunday night pregame show. Bettis still maintains his local television venture, although it has switched to NBC's WPXI-11.

"It's just a different avenue that I want to try to do," Ward said. "Maybe one day I can do what Jerome's doing. I can't play football forever, but I can use football to help jump-start or kick off other career moves and opportunities. It gives people a chance to know my personality, just know me outside of football."

Said Starks, who is in his first season on radio: "At this level, you have to plan for when you retire now. You don't know if it's going to be tomorrow, or 10 years from now. You have to have something to fall back on."

Ward and McFadden invite teammates on their TV shows, which are taped in front of a studio audience. Ward believes that being a pro athlete gives him an insight into what makes his

Monday

2. Bryant McFadden with Mark Madden
WEAE-AM (1250)
(Verron Haynes fills in when McFadden can't make it), 7:30 p.m.
Monday

3. Max Starks with Joe Bendel
WBGG-AM (970), 6 p.m.
Monday

4. Deshea Townsend/Hines Ward with Tunch Ilkin
WDVE-FM (102.5), 7 p.m. Tuesday

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teammates tick and what questions he can and cannot ask.

"I've got the advantage over most media guys," Ward said. "They won't answer that question if it's a regular media guy. I give insight outside of football, give people a chance to know who these guys are. I think that's what appeals to most fans, for them to get a chance to know who I am, what a big prankster I am."

While people know all about Ward, lesser-known Steelers such as Haynes, a reserve running back, are taking advantage of the Steelers' large fan base and attempting to build their own followings.

Haynes, who suffered a season-ending knee injury last Sunday against Oakland, said he waited a long time for an opportunity to appear regularly on radio.

"I'm one of the guys who's been around here for a while," said Haynes, a five-year veteran. "But I've been in a backup role, so a lot of people don't know who No. 34 is. I really wanted to get out there and let people see there's more to Verron than just a running back."

McFadden has grown in his role in front of the camera. He's now comfortable enough to not only interview quarterback Charlie Batch about his foundation, but also branch out into segments like "Dancing with the Pros," a spin-off on the popular "Dancing with the Stars."

McFadden is surprised at how well his TV show has been received.

"I'm not a starter. I didn't think people would watch," McFadden said. "It's going pretty well. I'm getting more camera friendly. We do a little entertaining, something you can laugh about."

If people don't watch, Ward is out of a TV gig. So he feels good when he talks with pride about the ratings from one of his recent TV shows.

"I heard we're getting some high ratings," Ward said. "I think one of our shows beat out 'Saturday Night Live.'"

John Harris can be reached at jharris@tribweb.com or 412-481-5432.

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