

Inside Tomlin's style: Humility, words matter for Steelers coach

By Jarrett Bell, USA TODAY

TAMPA — *Iron sharpens iron.*

That's shop talk, courtesy of Pittsburgh Steelers coach Mike Tomlin, who has stretched much mileage from a few choice words on his rapid ascent up the coaching ladder.

"I've probably heard that one at least 150 times — *this year*," Steelers defensive end Brett Keisel says. "It's kind of monotonous, but we get the point."

There is serious brainwashing at work. Like advertising executives on Madison Avenue whose memorable jingles are hammered home on a campaign, Tomlin embraces verbal repetition. A wide swath of material is fair game. He quotes from books, movies and even Robert Frost poems. He sprinkles in pop-culture buzzwords and clichés alike when speaking in team meetings and on the practice field.

More grounded, more humble, more selfless makes us more opportunistic.

Steelers players have heard that mantra throughout the postseason, and some might utter it reflexively, summoned from their unconscious mind as if they were oversized parrots. It can be like whistling a song suddenly stuck on the brain.

"You'll catch yourself, like, 'Why did I just say that?'" quarterback Ben Roethlisberger says.

The man has options.

"If he were not a football coach," defensive tackle Chris Hoke says, "he'd be a shrink."

Tomlin, 36, isn't sure what he'd do for a living if a whistle weren't dangling from his neck. In lieu of psychology, he knows exactly what he is at the moment: In his second year at the helm, he is the youngest coach to guide a team to the Super Bowl.

It seems fitting that Tomlin — a married father of three who played receiver at William and Mary — can make history at Raymond James Stadium. He got his first NFL job in 2001 on Tony Dungy's staff as the Tampa Bay Buccaneers defensive backs coach.

Yet this isn't a sentimental journey, even though his wife, Kiya, with a circle of friends in the area, came to town two days before the Steelers arrived Monday.

"I'm not one," Tomlin says, "that buys into the notion that it's destiny."

It also is compelling that former Steelers assistants Ken Whisenhunt and Russ Grimm — who also were in the running to succeed Bill Cowher as Steelers coach in 2007 — will be on the opposite sideline Sunday.

Tomlin downplays this juicy subplot, although he acknowledges that Whisenhunt has insight on how the Steelers were built and the subtleties of their players.

"This game," Tomlin says, "is going to be decided by those who play it on the field."

Favorite phrases

The time's coming when we're going to have to ante up and kick in like men.

That's a memorable line from *Glory*, the 1989 film about an all-black Civil War infantry. That *Glory* ranks among Tomlin's favorites — he estimates that he has seen it 25 times — flows with his appreciation for history and other forms of non-fiction.

A favorite book is the best-seller *Flags of Our Fathers* by James Bradley, the son of one of the World War II soldiers who raised the U.S. flag at Iwo Jima.

"Now I don't try to draw parallels between military combat and football," Tomlin says. "But it was an awesome learning experience from a leadership standpoint."

Tomlin also loves a good biography. "I'm not a fiction reader by any stretch," he said. "I read for information."

And insightful catchphrases.

It's a 5-Star Game, because we're in it.

Tomlin began to incorporate verbal bouquets into his coaching philosophy four jobs ago, when he coached defensive backs at Arkansas State in 1998. He felt he needed to find a way to get his coaching points to resonate with players.

"People aren't very good listeners, by nature," he says. "Part of being a good communicator is recognizing and understanding that and trying to make the complex simple. I try to capture a concept, an idea or a moment in a few words. If they remember it, job done."

I'll tolerate you until I can replace you.

Jermaine Phillips remembers this one. Phillips, a Buccaneers safety, was one of Tomlin's first NFL pupils. Earlier this week, it was the first Tomlin quote that popped into Phillips' mind when asked about his former position coach.

"It's simple, but it has so much meaning," Phillips said. "It's the essence of the NFL."

The Steelers got a whiff of Tomlin's straight talk from Day One. In his first team meeting as coach, he addressed Grimm, telling players he understood the former assistant had popular locker room support to land the job.

At the same time, Tomlin established himself as the new boss — with methods that did not exactly endear him to his players.

Last season, Tomlin had his team practicing in pads in December. When the Steelers folded with a playoff-opening loss to the Jacksonville Jaguars, some pointed to the physical demands down the stretch as draining.

This season, Tomlin backed off on the padded practices late in the season and has helped some veterans, including Hines Ward and Troy Polamalu, stay fresh with off days from Wednesday practices.

He slacked only so much.

In training camp, Tomlin put Casey Hampton on the physically unable to perform list until the overweight defensive tackle got in shape.

After rookie wide receiver Limas Sweed dropped a sure touchdown pass in the AFC title game, then flopped to the turf with a bruised ego — costing the team a timeout as he lay on the turf until trainers arrived — Tomlin instantly chastised him on the sideline.

Willie Parker, the running back who battled through injuries this season, drew Tomlin's public wrath after criticizing running back strategies.

"Every morning when I come to work," Tomlin said at a mid-December news conference, "I walk past five Lombardis, not five rushing titles."

Ward says it was immediately obvious that a confident Tomlin was intent on being his own man. Never mind that several of Cowher's assistants, including defensive coordinator Dick LeBeau, remained under Tomlin.

Says linebacker Larry Foote: "He ruffled a lot of feathers. He still does. But he doesn't blink. That's his way."

Tomlin also couldn't care less about glowing praises from his players. He snapped during a recent news conference, when a reporter brought up as much.

"I'm not interested in evaluating my performance, and particularly I'm not interested in my players' evaluations of my performance," Tomlin said. "I'm paid to evaluate *them*. How's your editor?"

Newport News roots

Tomlin grew up in Newport News, Va., where he attended Denbigh High School. He and his brother were raised for several years by a divorced mother, Julia, who married Leslie Copeland, a stepfather Tomlin refers to as "an all-pro dad."

In Tomlin's office at Steelers headquarters, there's an aerial photo of downtown Newport News, which reminds him of the place where his mother, grandfather and uncles all retired from the shipyards.

"I used to pick my mom up from work," Tomlin recalled. "I'd watch everybody spill out of those gates, trying to get on those buses and get out of there. It's a very blue-collar town. But being from there, you have a great amount of pride in it. We are hardened when we come from there."

Perhaps that's why Tomlin has been such a good fit in Pittsburgh, with its deep blue-collar roots.

Yet Tomlin, who accents his coaching attire with designer shades and keeps his thin sideburns trimmed, is considered extremely cool for an NFL coach.

Foote says, "He drives an Escalade, but I can see him in a Lamborghini or Bentley."

Tomlin is not too cool, though, for Kiya's honey-do list.

"Are you kidding?" he says. "She says she can always tell when it's a big game, because I'll forget to put the trash out on Tuesday morning, on the way to work. ... She'll leave me a message: 'Must be a big game. The trash is by the garage instead of on the street corner.' "

Steelers president Art Rooney alludes to Tomlin's "presence" as a swing factor during the interview process. But this was not without impressive substance. Tomlin, hired after one season as Minnesota Vikings defensive coordinator, brought a half-dozen binders to his Steelers interviews.

They were filled with detailed plans for how he would handle a role with a franchise that had two coaches — Chuck Noll and Cowher — in the previous 38 years.

The first binder outlined core beliefs and philosophies.

Another dealt with training camp.

Another addressed news media relations, the training room and travel.

A plan that covered essentials for the chance of making the Super Bowl?

"*When we made the Super Bowl,*" Tomlin asserted.

Yes, there's a binder for that.

"I don't know if we got to that in the interview, though," Tomlin recalls. "I had a lot of things that we didn't get to."

That binder might fetch a good price on eBay.

"It's not for sale," Tomlin shot back. "I've got to compete."