

Sports

Oilers out of 'elbow room'

HOUSTON — Head coach Bum Phillips says all he can do is offer words of warning — he knows of no other cure for the Houston Oilers' rash of turnovers and slow starts in games.

Talk, however, has turned out to be enough to resolve another matter that was getting him down, namely the inconsistent placekicking of Toni Fritsch.

Phillips had thought Fritsch was hiding the pain from an injured right thigh muscle following a loss to the Cleveland Browns Sunday, but he learned otherwise Monday.

"He's all right," Phillips said. "I thought he really might have had something wrong. But I went up to him and said, 'Toni, how is your leg? And don't give me any bull.' He said, 'I'm all right.'"

As a result, Phillips has those intangible problems remaining to be fixed in a short work week leading to Thursday night's game with the Pittsburgh Steelers.

Resolutions are critical because the Oilers and Steelers, both 8-5, have run out of elbow room this season.

Phillips said he didn't "consider it a problem" that his team had scored only 16 total points in the first quarters of the 13 games this season.

"Every time we go on the field, we tell them we've got to start the ballgame off like it's the fourth quarter," he said. "Every practice we have, we say we've got to start it off like we want to finish the thing. But other than talk about it, there's not a heck of a lot you can do."

Three turnovers in the first quarter Sunday caused the Oilers to fall behind the Browns 14-0 in the first 17 minutes, and they never recovered.

Quarterback Kenny Stabler threw two interceptions, giving him 24 for the season.

But Phillips said he wasn't making any changes as a result.

"There's not a football player on the field who didn't make a mistake," he said. "An offensive tackle who slips off a block is making just as big a mistake as a receiver dropping a pass or a kicker missing a field goal. There's a jillion mistakes in a football game."

Important to him was his players' effort.

"I don't think the mistakes are on purpose," Phillips told reporters at his weekly news conference. "They're trying to do the best they can. It means a whole lot more to them than it does to y'all."

Because of the 17-14 loss to Cleveland and the 31-28 overtime loss to the New York Jets Nov. 23, the Oilers' playoff position is perilous.

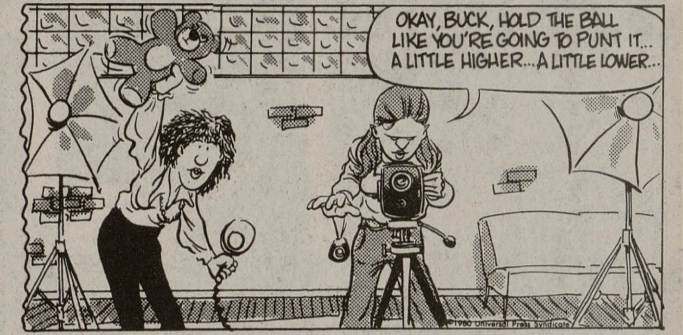
Phillips said he felt "in all probability" the Oilers had to win their three remaining games to gain a wild card playoff berth. Houston can still win the AFC Central Division title, even though the Browns lead, 9-4.



Houston Oilers Head Coach Bum Phillips watches the action on the field. The Oilers, who lost to the Cleveland Browns last Sunday 17-14 in a fight for the American Conference Central Division lead, play the Pittsburgh Steelers Thursday night.

TANK MCNAMARA

by Jeff Millar & Bill Hinds



Howe is NL Rookie of Year

LOS ANGELES — Steve Howe didn't think he would even make the team, but Monday he became the second Los Angeles Dodgers' pitcher in two years to win the National League's Rookie of the Year award.

"I can't believe it," Howe said after receiving the award. "I really didn't expect it. I competed against some really fine baseball players."

Howe got 12 first-place votes and 80 points from the 24 members of the

Baseball Writers Association of America — two from each National League city — to easily beat out

pitcher Bill Gullickson of Montreal and outfielder Lonnie Smith of Philadelphia.

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Cowboys face tough final stretch

DALLAS — Dallas Cowboys coach Tom Landry, whose club is on the verge of clinching yet another playoff spot, said Tuesday that going into the season he felt anything over the break-even mark in 1980 would have been considered a successful year.

The Cowboys, however, have put together a 10-3 record with three of the toughest games on their schedule yet to play.

Landry, for the first time this year, indicated what type of season he thought his team might be in for because of the many changes affecting the club.

"I thought that anything over .500 would have been a good year, what with the quarterback change and..." Landry said. "But anytime a team is over .500 it is a good football team. They are only a player away or two close games away from being in the playoffs."

And now that Dallas is all but in

the playoffs Landry has turned his attention to a tough season ending stretch against Oakland, Los Angeles and Philadelphia — games that will determine how much of a run the Cowboys might be able to make at the Super Bowl.

"I would say we will have to play as well as we have all year in each of these games," Landry said. "We will be playing three teams that could be in the Super Bowl. They have good enough defensive teams to get to the Super Bowl."

And how does he rank his major competition in the NFC?

"Well, I think the most solid team in the league right now is Philadelphia," he said. "Week in and week out they seem to be the most solid. That doesn't necessarily mean they are going to win it, but they are very solid."

"The most explosive team is Los Angeles. They can do things quickly and with more explosion than any

other team. Atlanta is solid and they are a hungry football team."

"Atlanta is doing a lot of things well because they have a better record than Los Angeles does right now. I haven't really seen them that much to be able to evaluate them, but obviously they are back where they were a few years ago and I thought they had a good team when

we beat them in the playoffs (in the 1978 season)."

And where does Dallas fit in?

"We're somewhere around," Landry said. "Anyplace you want to stick us. Obviously we are not playing as solid a defense week in and week out as I would like for us to, although I think we are gaining confidence every week."

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