

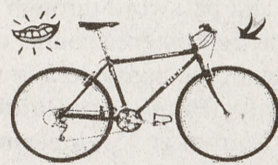


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# Cowboys rain on Stewart's debut, romp Steelers 37-7

PITTSBURGH (AP) — They spent last year in controversy and courtrooms, sometimes even in handcuffs. If a player wasn't in trouble, the coach was. Everyone said the Dallas Cowboys weren't what they used to be.

They were right. The Cowboys might be even better. The Cowboys made all their troubles — the videotaped cocaine buys, the dormitory trashing and Barry Switzer's handgun charge — go away by doing what they do best: Playing football better than almost anyone.

Troy Aikman, making his 126th NFL start, gave Pittsburgh's Kordell Stewart, making his first, a lesson in the art of big-play quarterbacking by throwing four touchdown passes as Dallas routed the Steelers 37-7 Sunday.

So much for the rematch of the Cowboys' 27-17 victory over Pittsburgh in the January 1996 Super Bowl. The Steelers (0-1) were overwhelmed offensively and defensively in their worst defeat in Bill Cowher's six seasons as coach.

"With all of the emphasis put on things in the offseason, it was quite a road for us mentally and physically," receiver Michael Irvin said. "The whole object is to get back to having fun and playing football."

Irvin, suspended for last year's opener and a magnet for all of the Cowboys' off-field problems, picked on each of the Steelers' new cornerbacks, rookie Chad Scott and Donnell Woolford, for TD catches among his seven interceptions for 153 yards.

"It's been quite a while since I had this much fun. I think you can start not loving what you do, and that's what happened," said Irvin, who considered retiring after pleading no contest to a cocaine charge.

Aikman, admittedly embarrassed by the Cowboys' numerous mental breakdowns last season as they were held to one touchdown or less in seven games, looked Super Bowl-ready by finishing 19 of 30 for 295 yards and no interceptions. It was his most proficient game since he threw for four touchdowns against the Bills in the January 1993 Super Bowl against the Bills.

A year ago, Aikman threw only 12 touchdown passes all season.

"And Troy is going to have even better days than this," Switzer said. "Once he and our receivers get in sync, who knows what kind of day Troy can have?"

The Steelers have replaced more than half of their starting defense, including key starters Rod Woodson, Chad Brown and Willie Williams, and they looked it by giving up 380 yards and failing to sack Aikman even once. Greg Lloyd, back after a year's injury layoff, wasn't a factor at linebacker despite making nine tackles, and the retooled secondary was repeatedly a step or two behind any Cowboys receiver.

"We had a lot of breakdowns in pass coverage," safety Darren Perry said.

The Cowboys almost didn't notice that Emmitt Smith,

who ran for 171 yards in a season-opening 26-9 victory in Pittsburgh three years ago, was held to 69 yards on 22 carries as they outgained the Steelers 380-174.

"I watched the first game last year (a 22-6 loss to Chicago that led to a 1-3 Cowboys' start), and that first game is important for the way you feel about your team," Irvin said. "You set a tone. You either go home feeling good about your team or you say, 'Oh, my God, it's going to be a long season.'"

The loss was the Steelers' worst since a club-record 50-0 defeat to Cleveland in the 1989 season opener, and was especially unexpected after their 5-0 preseason.

"Certainly, in my worst nightmare, I didn't imagine a day like today," offensive coordinator Chan Gailey said.

The Steelers have been outscored 65-10 in their last two games, including a 28-3 playoff loss to New England. "But if any team can fight through this, we can," linebacker Levon Kirkland said. "I still think we're a special team."

Stewart was near-perfect in the exhibitions, leading scoring drives on all but two of his possessions. But he never got into a rhythm against a Cowboys defense that consistently altered its coverages and blitz schemes, going 13-of-28 for only 104 yards.

"Kordell Stewart was introduced to the NFL today," Cowher said.

The Cowboys, three-time Super Bowl champions in the 1990s but second-round playoff losers last season, struggled at the start by losing three yards on their first three possessions.

They wanted to get All-Pro cornerback Deion Sanders on the field as much as possible after he missed the entire rare preseason, but certainly not when he was flagged for a 15-yard unsportsmanlike conduct penalty for leaving the bench on the Cowboys' opening drive. The penalty, the waning season negated Aikman's 15-yard completion to Anthony Miller. "All I saw was but Sanders later had a 38-yard punt return that set up a Dallas' final TD."

Sanders, playing with a damaged disk in his back, supplanting for a split one scary moment by laying on the turf for several seconds after slamming headfirst as he tried to break up the left and a pass. But the fans booed him once they realized he was leading by OK, angering the Cowboys.

"I said to myself, 'Golly, I didn't expect that from the right flank of Steelers' fans,'" lineman Nate Newton said. "That kind of defense. That shook me there. We got a little more motivated from that, we were slow in."

Dallas went on to score on its next six possessions. Among which all thony Miller, cut by Denver, made a 31-yard catch against to make a nickel back Randy Fuller to set up his own 12-yard scores into the peing catch at 13:25 of the second quarter. Irvin then out where So faked Woolford, the former Bears corner, with a stop-and-start Whatley kept go move for a 42-yard TD catch at 5:12 of the second. "Our goalkeeper make it 14-0, and the rout was on."

Aikman later found Irvin again for 15 yards and full the net, "A&M co back Daryl Johnston for 13 yards, one of his five recep ability, with a c tions for 65 yards.

The Steelers didn't score until Stewart's 4-yard pass to tight end Mark Bruener with 3:04 to play and the Cowe speaking crowd the first ever nig Aggie Soccer con "It's fun to play



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