

Bettis doubtful for Sunday

By Alan Robinson
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

PITTSBURGH — Jerome Bettis, the NFL's rushing leader, likely will default from the Pittsburgh Steelers' matchup Sunday against the second-leading rusher, Curtis Martin of the New York Jets.

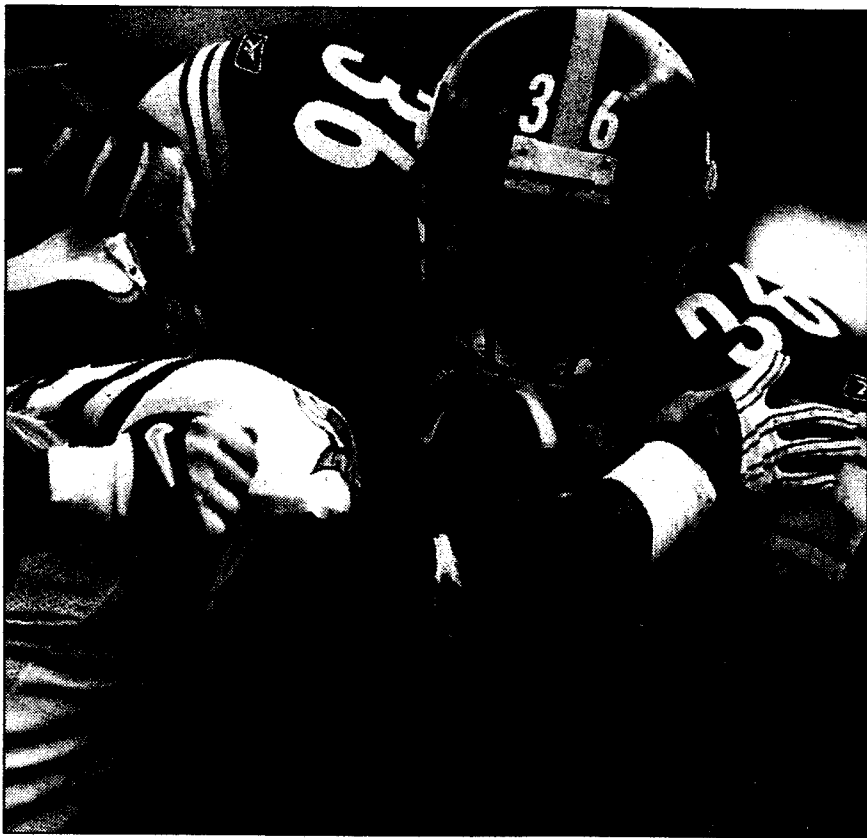
Bettis is listed as doubtful with hip and groin injuries, but Steelers coach Bill Cowher said even that might be overestimating his chances.

"We'll see how he is by the end of the week but, by listing him as doubtful, you can see where I'm heading," Cowher said yesterday.

An MRI test on Bettis' hip showed no serious injury, and surgery is not necessary. He also was bothered by a sore groin and abdomen before coming out of a 21-16 victory Sunday over Minnesota after gaining 81 yards in three quarters.

Bettis, who went over the 1,000-mark for the sixth consecutive season Sunday, has 1,072 yards to Martin's 1,070 yards. Martin is a former star at Pitt and Allerdice High School in Pittsburgh. Bettis has some internal bleeding, but said it is not serious. He wants to play Sunday, but realizes it might be better to miss a regular-season game for only the fourth time in his nine NFL seasons.

"I want to make sure I'm healthy for



Gene J. Puskar/Associated Press
Pittsburgh Steelers' Jerome Bettis (36) plows through Minnesota Vikings defender Tyrone Carter in the first quarter in Pittsburgh. The 9-2 Steelers won 21-16 Sunday.

the rest of the season because we've got a lot of games to go," said Bettis, who initially hurt the hip Nov. 25 against Tennessee.

Cowher also suggested he doesn't want to risk sidelining Bettis for a significant period just as the Steelers (9-2) are closing in on their first trip to the playoffs since 1997.

With Bettis leading the NFL's top-ranked rushing offense, the Steelers are tied for the NFL's best record and own the AFC's best record. The confer-

ence team with the best record at the end of the season will have home-field advantage throughout the playoffs.

"I'm going to look at the big picture," Cowher said. "It's not a playoff game. It might have playoff implications, but it's not a playoff game, and I'll keep that in mind."

If Bettis can't play, he would be replaced by Chris Fuamatu-Ma'afala, who at 255 pounds is the same weight as Bettis, and Amos Zereoue, who is usually Bettis' backup.

Edwards: Testaverde not goat in Jets loss to New England

By Barry Wilner
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

HEMPSTEAD, N.Y. (AP) — Anyone who wants to come down on Vinny Testaverde as the main reason for the New York Jets' sputtering offense is out of line.

That's the opinion of Jets coach Herman Edwards. Does any other viewpoint matter?

"There ain't no way losing the game is on Vinny Testaverde," Edwards said of Sunday's 17-16 loss to New England in which Testaverde struggled in the second half. "He is still the starting quarterback and he is going to make good throws. We didn't lose the game because he didn't make a couple throws. We've got to block better and tackle better."

Testaverde's decision-making, generally strong as the Jets have gone 7-4, was questioned after Sunday's defeat. Specifically, his throw to double-covered Anthony Becht on fourth-and-5 with just over two minutes remaining, a pass that was intercepted by Terrell Buckley. On the play, Curtis Martin was the primary receiver in the flat and, according to Edwards and several others, Martin was open with plenty of room to run.

"It was a poor throw, and the film confirmed that," said Testaverde, who usually has managed games well for an offense built around Martin's running.

"Had I hit Curtis and we got to kick the field goal and win the game, we're in here smiling about going to Pittsburgh for possibly the No. 1 seed in the

AFC, instead of talking about how miserable it is to lose a game."

Testaverde said he could not see the wide-open Martin because right tackle Ryan Young carried his block into the quarterback's line of vision. He thought he saw Becht coming open.

"I wish I had that play again," Testaverde admitted.

This has not been a stellar passing year for Testaverde, who just turned 38. He ranks only 10th in the AFC and has just 10 touchdown passes with eight interceptions. Of course, with Martin near the top of the league in rushing and the defense coming around, the Jets haven't asked Testaverde to win many games.

He would like the opportunity. Few quarterbacks wouldn't chafe under the restrained play-calling of offensive coordinator Paul Hackett.

Does the strong-armed Testaverde expect things to open up — as they did in the first half vs. the Patriots? Especially if the weather remains temperate?

"That's going to be a coaching decision," he said. "Part of being a leader is being able to listen to authority, such as Herm and Coach Hackett and what they're telling you to do."

"In the first half, I felt good, had a nice rhythm throwing the football and got a feel for their pass coverages and where to throw the ball. It was one of our most consistent halves."

"It's concerning that we're not able to put together back-to-back games, or even halves. It would be more troubling if we were not trying to improve on that, but we work hard on that."

Eagles control 'own destiny' to win first division title since 1988

By Rob Maaddi
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — Seven winning seasons. Six postseason appearances. Three playoff victories. Zero division titles.

Despite having varied success in the last 12 seasons, the Philadelphia Eagles haven't won the NFC East since 1988. But with five games left this year, the Eagles are 7-4 and have a two-game lead in the division.

"We control our own destiny," fullback Cecil Martin said. "We can't rely on

other people. It's good to be two games ahead, but if we want this, we have to take it. We have to rely on our game, and the games that we have to play."

The Eagles play the San Diego Chargers (5-7) at Veterans Stadium on Sunday. San Diego is 1-5 on the road, but the Eagles are just 2-4 at the Vet.

Games at Washington and San Francisco follow, then a home game against the Giants and the regular season finale at Tampa Bay. The Redskins, Giants and Arizona Cardinals are all tied for second place at 5-6.

"Right now, we're just concentrating

on San Diego," cornerback Troy Vincent said. "We're not that good to look ahead. We're just not that good. We have some things that we need to shore up defensively. Offensively, we still have some things we need to do."

"Right now, we're in the driver's seat, and we have to continue to play good defense each week. The offense has to continue to score points and the special teams has to continue to do what they're doing for us to have success."

Coach Andy Reid is careful not to look too far ahead.

"I think 'the driver's seat' is danger-

ous wording," he said. "Everyone understands that you're in first place, but the guys behind you know that, too. You better put on a set of blinders and worry about each game and putting the maximum effort forward, especially in the last quarter of this season. You better focus and keep your urgency level up."

The Eagles would be in position to get a first-round bye if they did a better a job focusing against lesser opponents. Two of their four losses were to the Cardinals and Redskins. Both teams were underdogs by more than a touchdown.

Chicago, St. Louis and San Francisco each are 9-2, and Green Bay is 8-3. Philadelphia most likely would get the No. 3 seed in the NFC if it wins the division, allowing one playoff home game.

"We have to worry about us. We can't worry about them," running back Brian Mitchell said. "We have to make it into a five-game season."

Since the Eagles last won the NFC East — on a tiebreaker over the Giants — every team in the NFL has won at least one division title except Arizona and Baltimore, last year's Super Bowl champs.

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