

SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS

TRANSCRIPTIONS



**Defensive Coordinator Robert Saleh
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San Francisco 49ers
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This scout team quarterback you guys have, is he giving your defense a good look?

“Yeah. He does. He’s been professional about it, too. The way they’ve been working him in and giving him his opportunities, I really don’t pay too much attention to what the offense is doing, but he’s been working it in scout team for sure.”

With DL Solomon Thomas working his way back in, if and when he does come back you’re going to have a rookie at every level of the defense. Do you have a philosophy as a coach as to just how you incorporate them into these starting roles? Particularly late in the season, they’ll be playing a longer season than they have before.

“You can never be afraid to play a young guy. Ever. Never be afraid to play a young guy. Will you have lumps with them learning along the way? I do believe so. For us, and the way we operate, the veteran has the ability to recognize and diagnose and play a much smarter brand of football and because of it they can play with a little bit of speed because they can anticipate what’s happening to them. A young guy might not be as on it, but he can make up for that lack of knowledge with speed. So, how can you get that young guy to play like a veteran? He has to play. The more they play, the quicker as a staff we can get those guys to play like veterans while they’re youthful. With all that speed and juice that they just got out of college, that’s how you get those fast, explosive defenses that you’ve seen in this scheme.”

What did you see from DB Adrian Colbert early on to, I know you’ve got a necessity at safety, but to switch him from cornerback, what did you like about his skill set there?

“He’s got great range in the middle of the field. He’s got what I’ll call professional. He’s a professional safety, he’s a professional football player in that he can go red line to red line and cover you. You saw the go-ball that they had to our defensive right. He was on the other hash and took up all that space. Which is really, really cool for a rookie to be able to do that. It just shows that he is an NFL-caliber safety. His tracking angles in space when that ball does reach that second level, we call him the eraser, to erase all the issues that might happen in the run game. He has the ability to track in space which makes him a really good special teams player. Now, the last part that we’re trying to get

to is mental. If he can get to that mental speed we feel like he might be able to be a pretty good safety. That's the last part of it."

A guy being drafted in the seventh round, it sounds like you're talking about quality. If those are recognized in college that maybe he would be picked higher. Were those qualities that you learned when you got him in the building, as opposed to scouting him in college?

"We knew the speed, we knew the physicality. We knew that he was a really good tackler and all that stuff. So, we did have him at corner initially just because of the way the roster had panned out when we first got him. When he had his opportunity to go play safety we were able to see some of the things that he was able to do, some of the things that we like out of a free safety. Leaving him in that spot and giving him a chance to go play, I guess you could say it evolved."

He seems to have a bit of a chip on his shoulder. Is that something that he's shown since he got here?

"Yeah. He's relentless in his work ethic and his preparation. I love the way he hits. He's a very physical football player. It's very important to him. I don't know if it's a chip as much as it is important, where every play, every rep, every meeting is very, very important. He's very into it. He has something to prove for sure."

You mentioned he is a physical football player. The last two guys you had at free safety broke their forearms a routine-type of hit. Is there anything wrong with the way they came in to those hits? Can you coach around what happened?

"I still think they're freak accidents. We teach head out of the game, leverage side, shoulder tackling. If you watch real closely what happened to [S Jaquiski] Tartt, he was coming in for that tackle and he had a shin to a forearm. I'm guessing the impact is what caused the break. They're freak accidents when you get something like that. I don't know if there is anything, teaching. We once had a free safety, a while back ago. We teach getting the ball out and he went for a rip attempt and he broke his wrist. [LB] Malcolm Smith tore his pec on a rip attempt, something that is just fundamental teaching. So, they're freak accidents and you wish they don't happen, but it did."

With Tartt, you obviously didn't get the sample size that you wanted for the season, but you got to see him at both safety spots. Moving forward, can you evaluate where you think he fits better or where you would like to see him long-term?

"I think Tartt's good at both. I really do. I know it's not the answer you're looking for, but he is. He's got great instincts in the backend to play the middle of the field. He takes great angles. He's very physical back there and he's got great range. In the box, he's a very physical football player. He's a hell of a man-to-man matchup on tight ends. You feel very comfortable against any tight end in the league with him. He's a physical tackler, and he's smart. He's very smart. He's a luxury in the sense that you don't have to pigeonhole him, so to speak. He can do both and you can just continue to work at adding people and know that he can be a plug and play type player."

How was LB Reuben Foster's game?

"Reuben did well. Like all rookies, there's a couple that I'm sure he wishes he had back. He showcased the playmaking ability that we all recognized in college. He played fast, he's physical. He had a couple of really great tackles out in the open field on [Arizona Cardinals RB Adrian Peterson] AP, some great tracking angles. Did a great job communicating with [S] Eric Reid and [LB] Brock [Coyle] in the box. He showed a lot of his skill set. For him to get through the game was awesome. He's always going to have a little flare up on the high ankle sprain. That's natural with the high ankle sprain. But, for him to come back in the game and play the way he did, excited for him moving forward to see if we can continue to grow from it."

I have a couple of basic questions about DL DeForest Buckner. He is recognized as one of the best interior defensive linemen in the league. How would you describe his job in the defense and what is he good at?

"He's a, obviously he's a three-technique. First and foremost he's a dominant three-technique in the run game. That's his first job is to make sure that he gets great penetration, sets edges and just wreaks havoc in the backfield as much as possible. Obviously in the pass game, same thing, from a three-technique spot, to be able to win one on ones and get to the quarterback. He's done an unbelievable job at doing exactly what we ask him to do. There is an art to being able to penetrate and maintain your gap, and I believe that he's mastered that. He can penetrate and create knock-back, still maintaining his gap, and he wins constantly. He constantly wins one on ones. His sack total is not where he wants it to be, and teams are sliding protections toward him, completely eliminating it from the game. Now as a D-Line, we've all got to step up. All of us. If you get a one on one you have to win, otherwise teams will find a way to continue to neutralize him in the pass game. That's the stuff that we're trying to work through, to see if we can find more opportunities for him to get one on ones. Because when he is one on one he's winning. That's why his pressure rate is so high. Because even when they slide to him he's still finishing the down off of blocks. That's what makes him unique, that's what makes him special."

What are the tendencies, best way to beat New York Giants QB Eli Manning?

"He's still a Hall of Fame quarterback. I don't understand the New York media, no disrespect. He's good man. He can make every throw. He's accurate. He stands in there and will take a beating and still get up and still make unbelievable throws. Like every quarterback, you've got to make him uncomfortable. That's the challenge for us up front is to find a way to make him uncomfortable, like it is every week."

To fall back on DeForest, what's his next step in his evolution? I know you talked about getting the one-on-one matchups and making sure you have that, but for him as a player and his skill set?

"The one thing that I would encourage, and it's something we're still trying to work on, is for him to find that extra step, that one more step. Because when he does win, we saw it, he had a hit on the quarterback, I think it probably would've been a sack-fumble. We ended up getting a PI or a holding penalty so it negated it. But, when you look at it, it looked like it was going to be a sack-fumble. That step that we're working on, bending

the corner to be able to, so that when he does win that it's that half a step. That's what makes players elite. A lot of players can win. Not very many can win at the rate he does. The elite ones have that two-yard burst to the quarterback to create that sack production, for lack of a better word. That would be one thing if there's something that he needs to improve in his game and the one thing that we're continuing with him is to find that extra step, find that extra bend, find the lean that when he does win to be able to get the hit on the quarterback and bring him down with the ball."

How do you find that extra step?

"[Defensive line coach Jeff] Zgonina does a great job drilling it. There's a bunch of different drills to help him with his lean, his pad level, helping him stay low to the ground where when he does win to be able to instead of having a long hoop to run, it's a tighter hoop. And so, those things you just continue to drill it and drill it and drill it. That's the best you can do with him, for sure."

You guys struggled a little bit in the run game the past few games. Earlier in the year when DL Tank Carradine was playing he looked like he didn't miss any assignments, played sound football, really set the edge. You talk about being a dominant edge setter. He was a dominant edge setter in the run game. How much of a lift is having him back in the fold?

"It'll be a great lift getting him back because I do think he is a very dominant football player. I will challenge you on the run game part, though. We are only giving up 3.9 a carry and any time you can give up less than four yards a carry in the run game is pretty good. When you get 35 carries thrown on you, I'd like to think I could run for a hundred. You're going to have a lot of yards run on you. From an efficiency standpoint, when we look at it from efficiency in the run game, we feel like we've been much improved. We are performing in the run game much better. The yards don't show it, but from an efficiency standpoint when you break down play to play it's much improved. It can get a lot better and with a guy like Tank it'll improve."

I know this was a couple weeks ago, but was DB Jimmie Ward's injury also kind of a freak thing?

"It was. It came on a tackle. I couldn't exactly see how it broke in the pile, but anytime you break something, especially in this league, I think it's kind of a freak accident, in my opinion. By the way you get rolled up on, these players are so strong. To break something, something goofy has to happen."

To follow up on that, and with Adrian, you've got at that free safety position now, those are two guys with a lot of cornerback experience in the past. Is there anything in particular that a cornerback might bring to that spot that you might like that translates into something positive?

"Good foot speed. Usually, the corners, what they add to it I guess would be more speed. You'd love to say that they have a little more instincts and all that, but really when it comes to the back-end play, just being able to read the quarterback and all that. From our system, I don't know how much that would really translate to be honest with you, from corner to safety, except for the range and the speed."

Why move Reuben to WILL in base downs?

“For the defense overall, in general. Like we’ve talked about before, we think Brock Coyle is one of the better communicators on this defense. Being able to get the closed call and all that. When you have a guy who can command the huddle, set the closed call, make all the checks, that puts 10 other people at ease. Not to say Reuben can’t do it, because he does a great job with it. But, having him and Reuben on the field at the same time being able to talk to the people around them and also allowing Reuben to focus on just being a football player was the main deciding factor.”

So Coyle gets the Green dot then?

“Yeah.”

When Reuben is in the game in sub, do you have to signal?

“We have to signal, yeah.”

Is that problematic in any way? Can that slow you down?

“No. We have Eric also in there. They know when dime comes in everyone is looking to me on the sideline to make sure that communication goes as smooth as possible.”

Would you like to get Reuben to the point where he can have the green dot in the future?

“Yeah. That’s still the belief of the organization and myself too that he’s going to be our future MIKE. He has no issue communicating. He has no issue making calls. It was just, how can we get a bunch of people able to communicate and give him, just take a load off. He’s a rookie. He’s been hurt. He’s got a lot of stuff going on in his world. Just to let him just go line up and play football. That was really the main deciding factor.”

CB Ahkello Witherspoon gave up two notable plays, but how did he play overall on Sunday?

“He played well. One thing I’m really pumped up about Ahkello, the big knock on him was not his coverage ability. The big knock on him was not his footwork and all that stuff. It was his ability to tackle and play physical. There’s a play, they ran power right at Ahkello. AP tried to bounce it and he hit the daylights out of him and flipped AP head first. And so, his ability in the run game, crack-replace, his physicality and the way he’s been playing, he still can go further, but that is a non-issue. We always felt like if he showed physicality in college, he was a first or second-round talent. He’s showing it now, along with all that footwork and all that. The two plays he gave up were great learning lessons for him, from just a football-awareness standpoint, one that he recognized right away. That’s the part I’m most pumped about is the physicality he’s been showing.”

Was that specific play the best example of him showing better physicality?

“Oh yeah. For sure. That one’s going to be on teach-tape for a long time on crack-replace.”

Did that play get a nice rise from his teammates in film review?

“It got a rise from the guys on the field and when it actually happened E-Reid was pumped up for him. He hit the heck out of him. Go look at it. We’re in the red zone at that point. Just pull it up if you guys want to go watch it again. That was a pretty cool play.”