

TRANSCRIPTIONS



**Defensive Coordinator Robert Saleh
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San Francisco 49ers**

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Is there any kind of bug going on around the team? Sounds like maybe the Chiefs are having a little bit of that?

“I think they quarantined a few of the coaches, but I think the players are doing all right.”

Your first year at Seattle in 2011, it’s the same time CB Richard Sherman arrived there. I’m curious as to sort of your perspective on the Sherman you saw then as he was making his way through the league and as a fifth-round draft pick and the guy you saw when he arrived last year?

“Much wiser. Much better with his words. A tremendously strong leader, at least here. Not to say that he wasn’t a good leader in Seattle. But Sherm, having gone through, this is his third Super Bowl now, and being the All-Pro that he is and all that, he’s been nothing but, he has met and exceeded every mark that you could possibly imagine from a player.”

Why do you think he relishes the verbal tussles he seems to always get in?

“He’s a competitor. His whole life he’s been told he can’t. And he’s always trying to prove that he can. And that’s him. He’s always got that chip on his shoulder. You always have to have a “why” as a human being. And he always has a “why” for why he needs to be better than he is today. That’s what makes him special.”

Last year you went up against Kansas City Chiefs QB Patrick Mahomes and the Chiefs. They put up a lot of points in the first half. Second half, things slowed down. Is this a similar challenge or are they pretty similar to what you saw back then?

“They’re similar. They’re very explosive. Mahomes has gotten better. They’re, at every position, it almost looks like they got their roster from the Olympic relay team and threw them all on the football field. Not to say they can’t run routes and catch either, because they can do that. They’re a special group and you can see why they’re there.”

They scored a lot of points, but you didn’t really give up too many explosives, maybe the one to Kansas City Chiefs WR Tyreek Hill. Was that the game plan was to try to keep things in front of your guys?

“Always. One of the founding principles of our defense is to eliminate explosives. I think we’ve done a good job this year doing it. But, it got a little sideways in that first half, the first game around. We had a third-and-15 that gave up a screen play to create a fourth-and-one, which they converted, which led to a touchdown. Then the very next drive, I’ll argue it was a phantom P.I., that led to first-and-goal from the one-yard line that should

have been held to a field goal. But, Mahomes made some unbelievable plays in the two-minute drive to get another touchdown in there. So, we're a little bit better than we were a year ago and we're excited for the challenge.”

How do you assess what makes Mahomes unique at his position?

“One, his mobility is unique. His arm strength is ridiculous. He's very, very accurate. But, what I don't think people give him enough credit for is that he actually plays quarterback. There's a lot of people, there's a lot of quarterbacks in this league that will say no to number one and then it just becomes street ball. He gets rid of the ball on time. He puts it where it needs to be. He hits a lot of throws in rhythm. And when he needs to take his shot, he knows how to buy time in the pocket and do it. So, he's a superstar in every way you can possibly imagine and he's going to be tough to deal with.”

When you're preparing and you have this much time, how do you balance the paralysis by overanalysis? How far back do you go? I know you're mentioning this game you guys played last year, but how far back do you go in terms of studying Kansas City Chiefs head coach Andy Reid and his offenses and things like that?

“For us you go as far as you can. It's our job as coaches to try to make it, you're always just trying to tell them a story and you're trying to make it as easy as possible. But, you're 100-percent right. You don't want to show them every play that coach Reid has run in the history of his system. You'd die, I think. But, at the same time you do have to, coach Reid has a philosophy and we have to find a way to pull that out so the players can understand it.”

With the pass rush, obviously it's significantly improved, but is it as simple as just beating the guy in front of you, or how much do you have to focus on those guys pass rushing as a unit to get home effectively, maybe prevent Mahomes from leaking out?

“Every week, whether you're playing a guy like Mahomes or a statue, it doesn't matter. You have to have respect for where he is in the pocket. And your pass rush has to tie in with one another so that way you're just not carelessly rushing the passer to where even a statue can buy time and escape the pocket and create an explosive play through an off-schedule play. But, that goes every single week. You're always rushing in unison, you're always paying respect to the quarterback in the pocket and you're always trying to keep him in there.”

What is it that makes defensive line coach Kris Kocurek so effective with the unit that he coaches?

“So Kocurek, it's our philosophy in this system to eliminate gray area from players, as much as you can. Gray area always creates hesitation. You want these players playing in a world of black and white so they know what's expected of them so they can go as fast as humanly possible. Kocurek is the definition of black and white. He's very clear and cut with what he's asking of the players. He's very clear and cut with his techniques. Nothing changes. Just because a player's movement doesn't change you, your technique, your effort level, your aiming points, everything is very, very clear for those players. And

because of it they can go fast because they know what's being asked of them. Hopefully that answers your question.”

You said you were a little better than you were a year ago. You have DL Nick Bosa and DL Dee Ford now on your defense. What does that addition of those two guys do to the ability to corral Mahomes?

“One, the speed that they bring to be able to run with a guy like Mahomes. But, when you have edge rushers it speeds up the process of the quarterback, and, not that he needs speeding up, he already gets rid of it pretty quick. But, it changes the game. Like I talked about last week, it unlocks the offensive line so it creates a little bit more space and it gives the guys inside more space to operate. So, having those guys out there, having them at full speed, will do nothing but help.”

Your defense doesn't have much Super Bowl experience. How might your Super Bowl experience help?

“Well, Sherm's been there. But, you're right, it felt so long ago that we were in the Super Bowl. But, you just try to keep guys in the moment. We've been playing, I argue we've been playing championship games every single game, every single week has been a championship game. Today is a championship day. If you approach your life in that regard and you stay in the championship moment, every single moment of your life, then leading up to the game, the days leading up to the game and the game itself will just become normal. Not to say that it's a normal football game. But, you have to play it in your mind over and over and over again. You do that through practice and you do that through your day-to-day operations. Try to keep the players in that mindset and when the game comes you don't create anything new, you do what you've done every single day, treat it like a championship moment and just go play.”

Where do you keep your Super Bowl ring and do you ever break it out and wear it?

“It's hiding somewhere in a safe. I'm not going to tell anyone where. I don't wear it. It's a Seahawk ring, so I don't get a chance.”

How does that speed that you mentioned there, how does that stack up with other teams that you've seen in terms of the Kansas City skill position guys? And what are the ways that stresses your defense?

“They're the fastest team by far. To try to compare it to another team would not do them justice, to be honest with you. But, anytime you have speed like that it naturally will stress the defense.”

Richard moved to the right side a couple times last game. He was saying maybe just kind of to mess with them. I'm not going to ask whether you're going to do it in the Super Bowl, but was that the thinking, was to mess around with them? And has he moved very much in the last few years here?

“He hasn't. It was just to throw a wrench, whatever wrench that we could create early in the game. We were trying to find ways that they could attack us and we thought maybe they would come out and just try to throw a go-ball early. So, just put him out there to the

boundary and really get [Green Bay Packers head coach Matt] Matty [LaFleur] thinking a little bit. So, that was about it.”

Where do you think LB Kwon Alexander is compared to where he was preinjury, and where can he be in another 10 days?

“He's getting better and better. He's getting healthier and he's getting his feet back underneath him. So, I'd imagine in the next 10 days he'd get even closer.”

General manager John Lynch, when he first got here, he said even he had questions about head coach Kyle Shanahan's leadership skills. Not that he didn't think he could do it, but he knew he could X and O. He had to wait and see how he would be as a leader. You obviously knew him before he got here, but did you have any of the same questions? If so, how has he answered them and grown since he got here?

“The most underrated thing that I think is misunderstood about Kyle is his humility to know when he doesn't have the answer. A lot of people might look at Kyle as somebody who is, ‘This is my way, it's, I already know. You don't need to tell me.’ But when you actually sit down and talk with him, if you can present a case, he just wants, he wants answers that are right for the organization. He's not looking to force his opinion just because it's his opinion. So, he's got a tremendous amount of humility to be able to listen to everyone's opinion so that the right decisions are made for the organization so it can continue to move forward. So, the combination of him and John's humility, I really, really believe is why this organization is where it is today.”

You mentioned that Kansas City has the most team speed of anyone. Where would you rank your own team defense's speed? And you talked about gray area and taking that away. How do you take away that gray area from coverage guys when they're dealing with so much speed on the other side?

“You take away, to answer the second part, you take away the gray by being very definitive in what the responsibility is coverage-wise, so that way they can utilize all their speed. To answer the speed question, I do think we're pretty fast. I don't get a chance to watch many defenses out there other than ours and I'll get a chance during the offseason to kind of do some self-scout and studying of other people, but I'd like to think we're up there.”

Would you say their past experiences from just this season alone against mobile quarterbacks, Seattle Seahawks QB Russell Wilson, Arizona Cardinals QB Kyler Murray, Baltimore Ravens QB Lamar Jackson, do you think those experiences are going to help you when preparing against Patrick Mahomes in the Super Bowl?

“It always does. The more experiences you get at dealing with quarterbacks of his style can only help you.”

Obviously so much attention is on the big four defensive linemen, but I guess, how important has it been to have competent or even better guys behind them who, I think it was against the Rams you took out all four and all four reserves were in there, just having that type of depth?

“We have a philosophy to roll with eight on defense on the defensive line. You want to come at them at waves. You want to stay fresh. You want to keep going. All gas, keep them rolling, so they don't pace themselves. A lot of times you get so stuck with playing your best four all the time that those guys understand they're going to be out there for a while so they pace themselves. We don't want them pacing themselves. We want them rolling. So, those next four are every bit as important as the first four. And, one, we've still got to play great football when they're on the football field. And, two, it allows those guys a break so when you get to those critical situations of two minute and third down your four horses can be out there and be fresh so they can go get the quarterback.”

What's the process behind the rotation to keep them fresh? Do you have a process behind it?

“We try to keep their snaps down. So, picking and choosing. Kocurek does a great job in that regard, making sure that those guys are fresh, keeping their snaps as low as possible. So, you may see where [DL DeForest Buckner] Buck, [DL Arik] Armstead and Bosa are off the field to start a drive, just to, we feel good about where we're at, get a couple of stops, third down, get them out there. So, we're trying to steal, on average, about 20 to 25 snaps a game from those front four, the first four, throughout the game. And you're just trying to feel out the game and how it's going and try to steal as many snaps as you can.”

I've heard so much about Kocurek's intensity. Do you have a good story about that with you or where you've seen it?

“God, it seems like every day. But coach [former NFL coach Jim] Washburn, when we first hired him, I think he, in an article, said it best, he's a raccoon on meth, if you guys can imagine what that might look like.”

You said you were trying to tell your players a story, I'm assuming in the prep week, is it like, Kyle said, 30 carries a couple weeks ago? Is it something like that or is it if you stop the run it's going to be fine? What's generally the story you tell them?

“Well, you're trying to tell them a story of what we need to do and what they're trying to do. So, it's what is this offense really trying to accomplish? What do they look like when they, what are they trying to accomplish when they look like this or versus a whole other formation or whatever it might be? So, you're just trying to tell a story so they don't get lost in the volume of personnels, the volume of formations, motions, shifts, routes, and the more you can peel the onion back, the more they'll see that it's really not that hard. And so, the goal is by Sunday, next Sunday, it's to make this thing as easy for them as possible.”

There were a few games where Nick Bosa was out there for an extended amount of plays. Was that not feeling comfortable, what happened?

“When he was out there a lot? We got into a rut, like I just talked about, of wanting to play our best guys all the time, and that's not fair to the players. And so, we got into this, because it was going with Buck and Armstead also, and we had to check ourselves as coaches to make sure that we were putting guys out there to go play football and trusting that they'll get better and they'll get the job that we need done to get done. And so, we

got into a two- or three-game stretch there where those guys were taking on a lot of reps. And it was just on us as coaches, and really as players also, to pull back, get off the field, get 20, find 20, 25 reps so that way on those critical situations we could be fresh. And I think the Atlanta game was the last time that happened.”