

SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS

TRANSCRIPTIONS



**Defensive Coordinator Robert Saleh
Press Conference – October 19, 2017
San Francisco 49ers
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How is LB Reuben Foster moving around compared to last week?

“He’s moving around good. A high ankle sprain you’re always going to have little things here and there that pop up. But, he’s one tough son of a gun. I’m excited to see if he can get through the week so we can get him back in action.”

I know those positions are kind of similar, but him playing the MIKE, what kind of adjustment is that for him?

“Communication, getting people lined up, controlling the huddle. There’s 10 other guys relying on him to make sure that he’s getting the call out of his mouth in the huddle, getting the close calls. He doesn’t have to align everybody, but they need to hear his voice. That’s the only thing. He’s no longer a listener, he’s a communicator.”

Is that all about that position?

“For the MIKE linebacker?”

Yes.

“For sure. Everything else, our techniques and our fundamental, they transfer from position to position. So, there should be a lot of recall.”

I know he’s early in his career here, but I would assume there’s kind of an inherent element of leadership that goes with that position. Do you feel like that’s a role that he can step into now with LB NaVorro Bowman gone?

“I mentioned it to you all a while ago. I believe everyone can be a leader. Servant leadership is the ultimate form of leadership. It doesn’t matter how long you’ve been in the league or how young you are, everyone can serve one another to help everyone around them get better. The MIKE linebacker, I get it, he’s look at like he’s a leader. But, everyone can lead on this football team. Everyone can lead in life. It just depends on what you view as leadership. For me, if you’re helping the people around you get better in any form or fashion, that to me is leadership. To answer your question, yes, I think he can. Just like everybody else can.”

Head coach Kyle Shanahan the other day said that DL Solomon Thomas took a step back in Indianapolis, but played a lot better in Washington. What did he do that was better specifically this past Sunday?

“For Solomon, I don’t want to say that every day’s a new day, but there’s always learning. There’s always something that he’s going to learn. With us having so many injuries on the defensive line, having to move people around, there’s a learning curve for him to go from one position to the next. But, for him to settle into a position and do the same thing two weeks in a row, is a perfect example of where you see a guy like Solomon who you give him something to do and he’s going to get better because of the way he works and the way he approaches the game. The effort was the same. The intensity was the same. But, his ability to react quicker was probably a little bit better just because he was comfortable with what he was being asked to do for the second week in a row.”

Is he going to continue to have that role even when DL Arik Armstead and--?

“We’re going to do everything we can to make sure that we keep him exactly where he is so we don’t keep moving him. That’s going to be on us as coaches to make sure that happens.”

Just real quick, the two guys who were added, DL Leger Douzable is going to play the three-technique and the other guy is the end?

“We’re working through that. It’s like I said, I don’t want to call them plug and play, but they’re going to be put in position where we feel like they can help us based on the team we’re playing. They’re both capable of playing three-technique. They’re both capable of playing the big end. Between the two of them, along with DL [Xavier] Cooper, and the other guys that we have, [DL] D.J. [Jones], [NT] Earl Mitchell getting some three-technique work. As a group, an entire defensive line, we all need to step up and help one another out.

Solomon Thomas crashes down very hard on zone read plays and outside zone plays when he’s the unblocked backside defensive end. Is that how you coach him?

“It’s by design. We’re tied in, backers and D-Line are always tied in together. I’m sure you’re referring to the touchdown.”

There was a play in the first quarter too where it was outside zone to the right, he came down very hard. I’m just wondering--?

“Was he also to the right? Was he play side?”

To the right of the defense flowing toward the right.

“So he was backside?”

Yes.

“Yeah, so he’s a chase flat player. So, the way we coach it, for sure, that’s exactly the way it’s taught.”

He’s not taught to also look at the quarterback?

“No. When you’re in his position, you get play away like that. If you start working on that, they’re looking. We recognize that we’re giving up boot. We’ve got stuff for boot

answers. We've got all that stuff already built in. But, if he hesitates at any point, especially versus zone teams, they can roll it back into that B-gap. If he hesitates for a second that B-gap gets really, really big. Our ends, we have them moving and if the offense wants to make it a boot game, we have an answer for their boot game."

So what was the breakdown on that touchdown run by Washington Redskins QB Kirk Cousins? Did Thomas do the right thing on that play?

"He did. Their tackle captured our linebacker."

What was the objective for you guys against the Indianapolis Colts when you decided to use that three cornerback rotation?

"With [CB Ahkello] Witherspoon? We've talked about it. He's earned the right to play. He works his tail off in practice. He's so deliberate in his approach. Whether it was scout team, whether it was team reps, whether it was walk-through, it didn't matter. When you have people in this organization, and Kyle will always talk about it and we always talk about it as a defense, the people, the men who deserve the right to play will play. The men who exemplify what we're trying to accomplish on defense. The style, the preparation, the effort, all of those different things, those are the ones who are going to get on the football field. It's not an indictment on what [CB] Dontae Johnson and [CB] Rashard Robinson have done and more of a testament to what he's been able to accomplish since he's been here and the deliberate practice at which he's approached. So, for Witherspoon, he's earned the right, and it has nothing to do with Rashard or Dontae, and everything to do with Witherspoon earning the right to get some reps."

You obviously didn't see him much in the Colts game. But, this last game he did play a lot.

"And he did very well. All three of them did."

Since he's been here, has he put on some muscle? To the naked eye it seems to me he's a lot stronger.

"We were joking about that the other day. He looks enormous for some reason. On tape he does. He looks like he's put on and he's gotten bigger and he's turning into a man. Sky is the limit. He's got immense potential. His mind is wired in the sense that I really believe he's going to attack it. He's only scratched the surface of what he's capable of."

A couple of the plays in particular, I remember he made a pretty physical stop and then also on run support. Just given how training camp went, the one play where he got run over, I feel there was tangible progress in this game in those physical spots in particular. I'm wondering if you think the same?

"We talked about it when those plays happen when we were here during training camp. We have a tackling style that we teach to every single player, especially the corners. When you're in camp, you can't tackle below the waist. You've got to keep it up high. We'll never teach a corner to go profile tackle, shoulder to the sternum. We'll never do that. You're asking him to get trucked. What he's worked on so hard since he's got here is our tackling style, shoulder though the thigh, keeping the head leverage side. You can play a very physical style of football, but he's really taken to it and because of it I think

what you saw in the game was his ability to go tackle. Which he's always been capable of. He just never had the opportunity to show it in a fashion that we've been trying to teach it."

The defense has struggled to get off the field on third down in particular. What have you seen to be some of the reasons why and what can you do as a defensive coordinator to fix the issue?

"Third down always comes down to one-on-ones. You've got to win your one-on-one battles. We've played zone. We've brought pressure. We've played man. We've tried all different variations. I want to give you what my answer is, but I want to hold it. I apologize. But, it is about winning one-on-ones. It really is. It always comes down to that on third down. Whether it's edge rushers getting home, whether it's defensive backs winning their one-on-ones, linebackers beating a back in coverage. Those always pop up on third down. Especially if you want to be a zone team. Being able to win your one on one up front is critical. Otherwise the quarterback is just going to sit back there, he'll find the whole and he'll dice you up. In man coverage it becomes, quarterback will hold the ball and wait for guys to get open, but now you've got to win those one-on-ones. Ball might come out a little bit quicker, however it comes out, it all comes out to one-on-ones. Especially when you bring pressure, your one-on-ones are all over the place."

You said you're going to hold your answer. Do you mean that you're going to show it on Sunday?

"Yeah. Hopefully."

In terms of facing the Cowboys, did you keep track of what was going on with Dallas Cowboys RB Ezekiel Elliott and the league and suspension stuff? What does he mean to their offense?

"Didn't keep track. I'm not going to lie to you. Their offensive line is special, and he's a great, great running back. He is. We prepared to play Ezekiel. That's always been our mindset. I never thought twice about it. He does mean a lot to their offense because of the style he brings. He is a very physical runner. He's a downhill runner. He's good out of the backfield. He's good in pass protection. You couple that with the physicality of their offensive line and their athleticism. That's why they're one of the best offenses in football, especially running the football. It's a great challenge. Can't wait for it. Can't wait for it. I feel like we're pretty good against the run, too. It's going to be fun. I can't wait."

With S Eric Reid playing 10 snaps on Sunday, going forward is he going to be in that similar role as the third safety or is he going to get ramped up and maybe reclaim that starting job as he gets healthier?

"Working through it for the week. We're still trying to make sure that he's completely healthy."

How do you think he played?

"He did good. For the first game back, for sure. When you get in there and it's sporadic the way it is, you can never get a true beat, but he's looked good in practice. We as

coaches have to find a way to get our best 11 on the football field. That's the challenge for the week."

Is DB Jimmie Ward your backup nickel right now?

"Right now, you would say he is. Yes."

With Arik out, does that make it more important for you guys to get LB Dekoda Watson hopefully back in the lineup here soon?

"It does. We need some reinforcements on the D-Line, for sure. With [LB] Aaron Lynch being out, Arik Armstead who for the last two weeks had been playing some very, very good football, he really was. I'm really hurting for him, I'm not going to lie to you. All the men in that room need to step up for one another so we can continue dominating the line of scrimmage the way we have from a run perspective and of course, Dekoda, the edge rush that he can provide for us to create space for those inside guys."

I saw Arik was taking some heat on social media for not putting a club on his hand and then he showed, 'If I could play with a club on my hand I would,' because he did in Oregon I guess. Was that just a situation where this injury wasn't--?

"It is. Arik played a quarter and a half with that broken hand. He's a tough son of a b. He is. He's tough. I will never question that man's toughness. If he could've played with a club, he would've played with a club. If he could play with one hand, he'll play with one hand. It's just unfortunate the injury, the location of where it was. But, he did play a quarter and a half with it and he actually dominated the man in front of him. It's just an unlucky break on his part."

Was it his right hand or his left?

"It was his left hand."