

TRANSCRIPTIONS



**Special Teams Coordinator Richard Hightower
Press Conference – August 2, 2019
San Francisco 49ers
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Opening comments:

“First of all, I want to start out by congratulating [former NFL K] Phil Dawson on a great career. I had the opportunity to work with him in 2015, just a pro’s pro. Learned a lot from him and I was just lucky to be around him. You guys all know Phil. He did a great job here as a Niner and I just want to congratulate him. I wouldn’t feel right and it wouldn’t feel appropriate if we didn’t send a congratulations to him in retiring in his career. So, with that we’ll open up questions.”

This offseason, did you ever worry or were ever concerned about where things were going with K Robbie Gould?

“Not really. I never worry about anything. I just try to do my job every day the best I can and focus on my craft and try to help the team get better. We were always in communication as much as we could be. I never really worried to be honest with you. We’re all happy that we got our kicker in here and he’s kicking well right now, so that’s a good thing.”

When you were in communication with him, how much were you talking business or were you just talking ball or just checking in?

“Really, I talk to all my players, I try to. And we kind of have an agreement about what we talk about, not for me to share with anyone because really that’s between me and those players and I respect those guys, but for the most part, most of that stuff is checking on their well-being.”

Head coach Kyle Shanahan often said after the draft that he couldn’t believe he spent so much time looking at punters, but that he could tell when you start pointing stuff out why P Mitch Wishnowsky separated himself from the field. Can you kind of go through what you saw on film from him in that lead up to the draft?

“Yeah, I mean I think Kyle and [general manger] John [Lynch] did a heck of a job studying tape and we all just went in there and studied tape together. It has always been a super collaborative effort around here to try to get the best player in to help us win games. It just goes to show you how much those guys work together and how much they value everyone’s opinion. And at the end of the day they make the call, but they empower us around here and they make sure that our voices are heard. And I just pointed out things I shared with you guys last time in terms of ways he catches the ball, the lines he takes,

the directions he punts the ball, the hangtime he has, the ability he has to get out of sticky situations, his 40 time, he can run, you guys all know that. So, we're excited to work with him, we're going to have some fun with him. We're excited."

How has it translated so far to the practice field?

"So far to the practice field, thus far, he's done a good job. He's working his tail off, he's done a really good job with Robbie as well, holding. So, that's been really good. Again, we haven't played a game yet so we've just got to continue to do what we're doing every day in practice and then hopefully that will translate to the game and help our football team on offense and on defense."

How much does it excite you just having an athletic punter knowing that if you want to get tricky you have that option?

"It fires me up to be honest with you. I'm very fired up about it and I think our team is fired up about it. But again, Mitch has to go and prove that he can do that. He hasn't punted in a game yet. He'll get some exposure and be able to punt against Dallas and that's the next game we have or the first game we have so we'll see what happens there. And until then we're working every day."

It seemed like yesterday some of the punt returners who were fielding his punts had a little bit of trouble. What do you attribute that to, just about the way he punts that makes him tough to catch?

"Yeah, you'll hear guys talk a lot about him having a lot of different clubs in his bag, and he does. Meaning that he has a lot of different balls that he can kick. I'm not going to get into the specifics of each ball that he has just because we'll let our opponents figure that out, but he has balls that he can kick that fall different ways that can give a returner the illusion that it's going one way and that it will go a different way. So, that's one thing he's worked on his whole life and hopefully that will continue to be something that can help us."

How unique is that when you're evaluating punter prospects, somebody that can do that because I think the novice would look at it and say what was his net yardage average or hangtime, things like that, but how rare is it to be able to have those different clubs in the bag?

"Yeah, I mean different punters have different things. All different punters have different things. He has, obviously he has more clubs in his bag than most but it's rare but it's not like other punters don't have different clubs, if that makes sense. But, he definitely has more than most but again he's got to prove it to us. Like, he's got to play in a game and he's got to show it to us and he wants to do that. That's all we're waiting on is for that and we're going to bust our tail every day in practice and work on fundamentals and technique and push these guys to be the best that they can be so that we can put the best product on the field."

Is that dictated by field position or do you say, "Hey Mitch, let's see a helicopter here" or "go with the rugby here." Is that on him? How does that work?

“Yeah that’s a collaborative effort between us. You know, I’ll always make the final call but I’ll always try to put the player in the best situation that we can put the player in while helping the team. So, it just depends on the situation that we have on the field. What are the wind conditions? What returner are we playing? What balls does he struggle to catch? Things like that are all the things that [assistant special teams coach Stan] Kwan and [assistant special teams coach Michael] Clay and I study on a daily basis going into the game plan.”

What have you seen from that return group, especially WR Dante Pettis, a role that he had a lot more in college?

“What I’ve seen from those guys is a fierce competition right now in terms of those guys going out there trying to get it. So, we’ve got [WR] Trent [Taylor], like I said we’ve got Dante, we’ve got [DB] D.J. [Reed Jr.], we’ve got [WR] Richie [James Jr.], we’ve got a lot of different guys in there and the fun thing about this is one day one guy does a good job and then the next day the other guy steps up and does the better job and then another guy steps up and does the job. I think, again, what I spoke to earlier about Kyle and John and the way they built this football team, it’s not just at that returner position, now it’s at other positions and we’ve just got to keep working. But, it’s fun to see, it’s fun to see. But again, we’ve just got to all keep working. There’s 31 other teams and we’ve just got to keep staying to the grind and keep working our tail off and see if we can’t put together some wins.”

Let’s go back on Mitch for a second. It seems like a lot of the guys that have all the clubs in the bag or many of them are those guys, the Aussie rules guys. How early did you start tracking the evolution of those guys trickling their way into college and now into the NFL?

“In terms of when do we start looking at them?”

When did you kind of become aware that hey, this is becoming kind of a pipeline for punters to make their way to the NFL and have different ideas of the way they punt?

“Yeah, I know you guys are all aware of the pipeline that they have coming now and what they’ve got going. Those guys have done a tremendous job helping guys like Mitch and [Seattle Seahawks P Michael] Dickson and all those guys there. Really, the scouts are the ones that do the work on the front end. We don’t really get a chance to look at those guys until it’s the upcoming Draft of that year. Those guys are working their tails off, guys like [former 49ers scout] Reggie Cobb, rest in peace, guys like him who was working his tail off. Guys like [49ers scout] Justin Chabot. All those different guys that work on the road, [49ers scout] Josh [Williams], we’ve got a ton of scouts that work on the road that go out and identify those prospects and then they bring them to us. Then we just sit in a room and we all just watch tape and we all just give each other’s opinion and it’s been great. The credit goes to them first, and then I kind of get them. I guess, to answer your question, the last 10 years or so.”

You keep tabs on, you see a guy like Dickson for instance in Seattle, and you say it would be great to get a guy like that. Then you talk to your scouts and they say here's a guy who might follow that. Is it that deep?

"Really, what it is, is they bring us a list and then we do our homework as well. We bring our list, they bring their list and then we just kind of put it together. But, obviously that kid has done a great job. I'm not going to compare Mitch to Dickson, because Dickson is a different player and Dickson is the first guy to make a Pro Bowl as a rookie in 33 years, it hadn't been done. He did a hell of a job in Seattle, and the good thing is we get a chance to play him twice a year, so I'm excited about that."

Dante was a fairly legendary punt returner in college. He didn't really bust loose in that role last year. He was injured, a lot of stuff went into it. In your estimation, why wasn't he as effective as a punt returner?

"I wouldn't say Dante wasn't effective as much as he didn't have as many opportunities that hopefully he'll have this year. We've just got to get in there, and like I said earlier, first we've got to catch the ball, that's number one, take care of the football and secure the football to give it back to the offense. That's our number one job. Then, we've got to do a better job blocking. If we can create more space up front, then you'll see Dante break free, just like you saw Trent do the year before when Trent was in the top 10, he did a heck of a job, too."

How does that work as far as, if Dante's an every down player, he's out there all the time, is Kyle going to pull him back away from you?

"Kyle's philosophy is put the best player out there that helps us win. I don't know of him to be any other way than wanting to win games. So, if Dante's the best, then he'll want Dante back there. If Trent's the best, if whoever's the best, D.J., Richie, we can go down the line, Kyle Shanahan is interested in one thing and that's winning football games. That goes with players and coaches. A lot of us have known Kyle a long time, only thing he worries about is football games and winning. That's his number one goal. I hope that answers your question."

On the kickoff side, RB Matt Breida's back there a little bit more this year whereas during the season, he was carrying a lot of the load running. What is it like to have him back and what kind of skills does he bring and potential to contribute as a kick returner this year?

"I like Breida as a kick returner. Obviously, we like Richie James, he sprang into action last year and made some great plays. I mean, that's the thing about this team where we're fortunate that we have guys that we can use different guys. It's a credit to the scout staff again to go out and be able to find those type of guys. So, I'm excited about it. What I'm focused on now is the front line and the blocking. I want to block, because I know we've got guys that can return. That's not a concern when I go to sleep at night."

How is Mitch on kickoffs?

"Mitch is doing well on kickoffs. Obviously, Mitch kicked off in college, but again, we're in a fortunate situation there because we've got two guys that can kickoff. Robbie can kick off and Mitch can kick off. Everyone else in the league is going to have to figure out who

that guy is going to be, but we know that Robbie is going to do a good job when he kicks off and we know that Mitch is going to do a good job when he kicks off. We're still working through that. Robbie's been great with Mitch, helping him on different things, and that relationship is awesome. Talking to him about different things that he did when he was kicking off, teaching him how he wants to hold, how he wants to lean. And right now, those guys are hitting the ball good, but again, we haven't played yet, so we've just got to continue to work every day. We've got a saying around here where we live in the future and say, 'The only easy day was yesterday.' That's what I told them in this meeting room today where you guys are sitting. This is where we have our special teams room. Basically, we've got to stack days. Yesterday's over. The only easy day was yesterday, and we've got to push forward today and make sure that we're better today than 31 other teams to make sure we get an edge. That's the way I approach it. That's the way I look at games."

What was the reaction of some of the people in that return group? Were they at all surprised by just the hangtime or some of the movements Mitch has?

"Yeah, a lot of "ohs" and "ahs" on some of that stuff. Again, he's got to do it in a football game. We haven't played a game and he's still a rookie, so he's doing well, and he's got some talent, obviously, or he wouldn't have been drafted where he was drafted. Again, he's got to put it on the field and we're excited to see him do that. We believe he will do that."

Is it safe to say that you guys will use both kickers in kickoffs, on an alternating or situationally?

"I'm not saying we're using both of them, I'm saying we can use both of them because we have two guys that can do it. That's just the thing. Robbie's always working on kickoffs. He's always done that in his career. He's always been a pro in everything he does. He wants to work at his craft, and it's just good that Mitch is around him. Those guys are working good together. We've got a good room right now and it's been awesome."

You mentioned earlier how they empower you guys to have a voice around here and be heard. I'm just curious, when you get to cutdown day, a lot of times those last few roster spots are generally your area. Can you kind of take us through what cutdown day is like for a special teams coach and giving an input on the final roster?

"Well, really this is my only experience as a cutdown day as a coordinator. I have other experience when I didn't have a say or anything like that, but really, we just give our opinions and we do that almost every day. So, there's really no surprises when you get down to cutdown day. The good thing is, we don't have guys on this team where we pin them in one area and say, 'He can play special teams only, or he can play offense only.' That's not really our philosophy. A guy's got to be able to do both. Fortunately, we have guys around here that can play on offense and they can play on special teams. They can play on defense and they can play on special teams. So, it's usually whoever's the best player for the team. I hope that answers what you're asking."

Yeah, I was just curious, because they always say it's like the last two roster spots, special teams can kind of be the tipping point, so I didn't know if your input might be the thing that pushes something over the edge.

“Yeah, I don't think of it like that. I think of it like not being the last thing, sometimes it's the first thing with a guy like, we all know [RB] Raheem Mostert's a good special teams player, so it's not necessarily special teams that pushes him over the top. He ran the ball well in the night games, too. Kyle wouldn't have had him around here if he didn't think he could run the football, too. That's just an added bonus on top of Raheem's resume that he's a really good special teams player, too. The more players we have like that, because guys are going to get hurt, they can play on special teams, they can play on offense, they can play on defense. That's how we try to do it.”