

TRANSCRIPTIONS



**Defensive Coordinator Robert Saleh
Press Conference – September 12, 2019
San Francisco 49ers**

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How's your experience been going?

"It's been going great. Haven't left the hotel much, but it's been great."

What's your takeaway of DB Tarvarius Moore and how he did on Sunday, his first start at safety?

"For his first start, I thought he did a nice job. There's still things that he's got to clean up being a young guy in his first true game at safety. Otherwise, I thought he did a good job, but there's a lot of things that he's got to be able to grow from."

Does this game in Cincinnati present problems particularly to the safety because of the speed they have and just the way that offense is run?

"You know, I think every game we play presents problems. But, when you talk about this system and the things they run, it is, they press you vertical, they stress you and they're going to take their shots down the field. It's an important game for both safeties and really our entire defense to make sure that we eliminate all those explosives."

Does it help to see that they went against a Seattle scheme that's not too dissimilar from yours to see how they attack it?

"You know, Seattle threw something different at them. So, they were anticipating a completely different game plan. You can see that he's got his wrinkles, but you can tell the base foundation of what they do is where he's come from."

What are the differences you've seen in CB Ahkello Witherspoon's mental approach this year and what's been your message to him just over these last few months?

"For Ahkello, it's mindset and never being satisfied with what he's accomplished the day before. It's all about the moment. He's starting to understand that. I think he's done a great job this offseason of attacking the weight room, which he hasn't really had coming through. With the new strength crew and all that, he's really attacked that. You can feel more strength when he's out there. He's stronger, the jump ball he had with [Tampa Bay Buccaneers WR] Mike Evans a year ago he would've just gotten nudged and launched out of there and Mike probably would've made a catch. This year, he's got a bigger body, he feels stronger, he's playing with good confidence, great technique and so he's pulling his game together. The big thing for him is going to be mindset and understating that what

you did yesterday won't matter because you're being judged on what you're doing in the moment."

How different is this week preparing for somebody like Cincinnati Bengals WR John Ross III, going against a bigger-bodied, more physical guy in Mike Evans?

"Thankfully, with our guys, you've got [WR] Marquise [Goodwin] out there and all that, so they get that work in. John Ross, obviously, is a very fast human being and he's more of a jitterbug, but we see it from our guys. We've gotten a chance to see it with [Kansas City Chiefs WR] Tyreek Hill in the preseason, so they've gotten work at it, so I don't think there will be an adjustment for it."

Obviously, we asked you a lot in the offseason about the turnovers, you had to hear about it for a long time. When you finally get some, like you did on Sunday, I know you've said a few times once you start getting them, they can come in bunches. Do you feel that? Do you feel like that makes a difference, getting them right off the bat and setting a tone that way?

"You know, I do feel that way. I believe you become what you talk about, you are what you talk about. If you're constantly talking about how you can't get takeaways, then you're probably not going to get takeaways just speaking it out there. For them to go out there and see they can get the ball, the pressure that was put on the quarterback, the rush and coverage is a very real thing and it doesn't get seen by the naked eye, but the faster the rush goes, the faster the coverage gets in terms of their drops and getting stickier. And so, that's what kind of happened in the Tampa game. You could see it as it evolved through the game that the underneath defenders were getting quicker and quicker with their spots. To be able to get them early, it's a good thing, but if we don't get any this weekend, it goes back to having none, so we've got to do it again."

Ahkello was talking yesterday about how when the sample size starts building of the pass rush working and working in combination with the coverage, they have to kind of start feeling it out of, "Okay, maybe we can start making plays here, this way." How do you coach them handling that in terms of maybe taking more chances knowing that maybe the pass rush is going to be there quicker?

"It's not necessarily taking more chances. I think I hit on this earlier in the offseason that we will know that we're applying pressure when offenses change the way they call games against us. A year ago, a lot of deeper developing concepts, a lot of seven-step drops with five-man protection, a lot of exotic things that expose holes in our zone that take time to develop. When those go away and they start running normal football plays, they're all normal, but when they've got to get the ball on time and in rhythm, they can count on those two hitches from the quarterback. Then you've been able to accomplish what you want from the pass rush standpoint. It may not be recognized to the naked eye, but they'll start to feel those concepts, they'll recognize them and they just start playing faster naturally. They don't have to jump into anything, they don't have to do anything out of the ordinary, it'll just happen naturally."

DL Nick Bosa kind of immediately after the game became retrospective in noticing what he needed to do to change his technique, a little less hesitation. Is that something you expected out of him?

“From Nick? Yeah, again with the rookies, that first game, there’s always going to be something to learn from. He’s going to go into this game with a whole new thought and he’s going to have a whole new thought of things he needs to work on. So, you’re never, especially as a rookie, you’re always evolving your game and trying to figure out how to best utilize your strengths and your skillset. For every rookie on the team, [LB Dre] Greenlaw, he’s going to have a lot of things that he can adjust from and learn from that game. I anticipate Nick, he’s a football junkie, so he’s going to look hard at the tape. I’m sure his pops looks at the tape and I’m sure his brother [Los Angeles Chargers DE Joey Bosa] will look at the tape. He’s getting a lot of football knowledge and he’s getting a lot of thoughts, so I’m not really worried about him being able to evolve as a football player.”

Health-wise, are you worried about him at all for Sunday?

“You know what, he’s working with the performance staff trying to get ready for Sunday and we’ll see.”

Does he need to practice this week to play? Does a rookie need to practice during the week to play on Sunday?

“I always think they do. This new day and age, right? They’re coming out and they’re playing without practicing, but I’d like to see him practice because I do think that there’s things that you want to try and work on as a football player in general. Even if you’re a 10-year vet, to me, I think practices are valuable. For [CB Richard Sherman] Sherm, it’s valuable. You ask Sherm, ‘Hey, do you want a vet day?’ ‘No, I need these looks.’ So, that’s Sherm speaking that he needs those looks, he wants to go through practice because they’re important. I would imagine it being the same thing for him.”

Yesterday, Ahkello said when he was exchanging jerseys with Mike Evans, Evans said hey did you guys know our offense. I don’t know if that got back to you, but as a defensive coordinator, does that make you feel good?

“You know what, you put in your game plan and you talk to your guys about the route distribution and you show them clips, but it still comes down to them executing and recognizing formation, recognizing releases. And so, it’s more credit to, I’ll always put it to the players, it always goes back to them being able to do a little bit of extra studying so they can play the game within the game. We always do our best to prepare, sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t. Credit to the guys, they worked their tails off and attacked Sunday.”

You talked about rush and coverage. Was Tampa Bay Buccaneers QB Jameis Winston’s final pick, Ahkello’s pick-six, was that the best example from that game of what can happen? I mean, there were three guys on Winston.

“There’s a lot of examples. I’ll give you one where we had a bust in coverage, where a year ago it was a touchdown and [DL] Dee Ford gets a pressure that [DL Nick] Bosa gets a sack on where the rush saved the coverage. The first third down, the coverage saved the rush. So, they’re hand-in-hand. Where the coverage glued up, if you look at that first

third down where body on a body, quarterback missed his first read, second read, third read, didn't have it and by then you expect sack, fumble or something. But, he had extra time to go through his progression, we still got off the field, but we made it a little bit harder on ourselves than we had to. They are always tied in together. Now, when coverage is perfect and rush is perfect, that's where you get your pressure, that's where you get the interception from Ahkello, even though that was a screen play. When it develops the way it did, where it took as long as it did, that usually happens when the quarterback's got stuff in his face and he's got to make a good decision, throw it away. But, when rush is covered, when rush is perfect and coverage is perfect, that's where you get all your opportunities."

As an outside observer, former 49ers DT Justin Smith and LB Patrick Willis are Hall of Fame nominees, it was just announced today. As an outside observer of those guys, what stood out to you about them?

"Justin Smith is pure strain and violence that he played with inside. I mean he was just a Brahma bull in there, just so strong. Then with Patrick Willis, the run and hit, I mean he was as fast and as hard of a hitter at linebacker when he played as anyone I can remember out there with the best of them. Well-deserved by those two for sure."

Was the plan on Sunday to play DL Solomon Thomas a little bit more?

"We have the rotation. A couple of times, if you recall, we had the really long drive when we got the turnover, offense goes on a long drive. The very next play we get the interception and we go into halftime and the very next series on the second play, we get another interception. There were rotations going on where they were robbed of series. And so, the plan is always to make sure that those guys are balanced as much as possible so that way they are all fresh throughout the game. At the same time, along with those reps, you take advantage of every rep you get and some reps don't work out because someone takes a knee or when someone fumbles a snap. You don't get to always get to put your best foot forward, but you always want to get those guys more reps for sure."

You talked earlier about how the players have to execute when they recognize formations, and Sherman said on that pick-six he recognized that they usually just throw to the running backs on certain formations and that was why he was able to kind of jump in there. Does he notice that over the years he's developed that veteran savviness or how much is he breaking down film and studying these guys and hearing what you're telling them about?

"He watches film all the time. I feel like he's been this way since he was a rookie, just understanding football. I always tell the guys that every game, all 11 on defense, whether it's [LB] Fred [Warner] by himself, individually, you're going to have six occasions where you just know what you're about to get. You have to trigger, you have to trigger and you have to trust what you know. If you know, you're going to create an explosive play for the defense and if everybody on the defense takes advantage of those opportunities, corner, safety, D-Line, linebacker, you're going to end up with a defense that creates a lot of explosive plays for yourself. Offense, they're still going to gain their yards, but it's going to be one of those games under 300, five-yards a play and you're going to have a lot of good things on defense happening to you."

When you're dealing with heat and humidity, people talk about how it takes mental toughness, but how do you coach mental toughness?

"You've got to grind. I go into a dark place personally, I know those guys do too. You don't have time to feel sorry for yourself because the other guys are going through the same thing. It's like two boxers standing in the ring in the 12th round and they're just throwing haymakers and the last one standing is going to win. You just keep fighting and you always talk, at least I do, about how the mind controls the body, period. I don't care how tired you are, I don't care what's happening to you, there's been unbelievable feats done by human beings just because of their mental make-up. You look up [former Navy SEAL David Goggins, who's one of the fiercest individuals I've ever met in my life and it's all about mental mind control and your mind controls your body. So, you just continue to preach that and you hope that they're built that way and you can see the ones that are and the ones that aren't."

Does Tarvarius' performance maybe make it easier to not have to rush DB Jimmie Ward back with that kind of club on his hand?

"It's a good problem. I think Jimmie is a really good football player. You guys know how we feel about Jimmie when he's out there. It's Tarvarius' job to continue to make it harder because one game doesn't do it, but his trajectory from the first day of training camp until now has been darn near vertical. He's got to keep that vertical growth and just continue to get better and make it hard on us to make decisions. The harder he makes it, the better the problem is for us because then it's time to find a way to get Jimmie on the field another way because Jimmie's going to play when he's healthy and it's our job to figure out how."