

TRANSCRIPTIONS



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

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What do you think of the other side of the ball, the new wide receiver?

“Just game planning against him in the past, [WR] Emmanuel [Sanders] is a hand-full. Great route runner, tremendous speed, great hands, violent at the catch point. I guess he’s really smart too, so it’s kind of been seamless for him. Hopefully I get a chance to be a fan this weekend and watch him.”

Has that been the scuttlebutt, that he’s smart, he’s picking stuff up?

“Yeah, you know just talking to coach [wide receivers coach Wes] Welker, seems like there is a lot of carryover from what they were doing in Denver, so he’s picking it up pretty quick. But, don’t take my word for it, you’ll have to talk to those guys.”

What kind of development have you seen from DL Nick Bosa as a run defender?

“You know what, he’s getting a lot better from a run defense perspective. He’s setting edges, he’s collapsing. If he’s on the open side, he’s really doing a good job collapsing that B-gap to make sure that there is nothing there on the flex-side run game. When he gets his opportunity on the tight end, he’s winning those one-on-ones also and constricting the C-gap while he can still maintain his D-gap. He’s getting better. Obviously, he still has a ways to go in all of that, but he is getting better. He’s been a pleasant surprise.”

In addition to being healthy, has that part of his game made it harder to take him off the field?

“It’s always going to be hard to take any of those guys off the field. Knock on wood, we’ve got a pretty good rotation going and [defensive line coach] Kris Kocurek does a great job rotating those guys and making sure that they are all fresh so they can give their 100-percent effort on every play instead of trying to save their energy for the next play.”

Bosa missed a lot of practice time earlier in the season. How much has he benefitted from practicing the past few weeks?

“To me, practice is always beneficial. For him to get those practice reps so he can feel things, so he can see how to play different blocking combinations, it doesn’t matter. Anytime you can work your craft, just like [DL] Dee Ford, he’s starting to pick up steam and he’s starting to look really, really good in practice and it’s showing up in the game.”

To me, practice is invaluable, so for him to get as many practice reps as he can will always help him.”

Why did you guys make the decision to move on from Carolina Panthers S Eric Reid when you did, when it seemed like he was playing well?

“For Eric Reid? You know what, tough decisions are always made. I’m not always a part of those, that would probably be more of a question for [general manager] John [Lynch] and [head coach] Kyle [Shanahan.] Just for me speaking as a person who got to coach him, he has tremendous versatility, very, very smart, loved having him around, tremendous leader. Can’t say enough good things about him. But, sometimes in this league you end up with whatever decisions have to be made.”

How difficult is it to force a player to switch positions in a contract year when you know probably what he’s going through just in his career at that particular point with his free agency?

“That part speaks more to the tremendous leadership of Eric, to be honest with you. For him to do that, we’ve always had the philosophy here to play our 11 best and Eric, obviously two years ago, was by far one of our 11 best players. He was coming off an injury and our safeties were also playing well and we were short at linebacker and he was the only one that had the versatility to be able to do that, and he still does. He can still go in there in the box and play linebacker. He can play safety, he can play a variety of different positions, which is why he’s still in the league and he’s smart enough to be able to handle all that information. Looking at him, to move him, very hard for the player, but at the same time I think it gave him a chance to show how versatile he was. That’s why he’s still in the league. He’s tremendously smart and versatile.”

What makes Carolina Panthers RB Christian McCaffrey so difficult to defend and game plan for?

“He’s not your typical scat back that you can blow on and he’ll fall. He runs through arm tackles, he’ll make you miss, he’ll run right through you, he’ll out-run you. He’s tremendous with the ball in his hands, he can catch it, he’s got tremendous vision as a runner. If you’re out of your gap just an inch, he’ll find it. And he’s also great in protection, too, from a pass-protection standpoint. You can’t book him for anything because he can do everything and that’s really what makes it hard, he can lineup in the slot and run routes. He’s good.”

How does that determine whether to use nickel or base, whether to match up with a safety or linebacker or corner? I mean, are those tough decisions with him?

“Big time. He’s a big-time matchup issue and it’s our job to try to find the best ways to make sure that he’s, now they also do have other players. The quarterback is playing really well. The tight end [Carolina Panthers TE Greg] Olsen is obviously a really good tight end still. [Carolina Panthers WR Curtis] Samuel at receiver and a couple of other guys. But yeah, he’s definitely the workhorse. He’s pretty good.”

What have you seen from Carolina Panthers QB Kyle Allen?

“Kyle Allen? He’s accurate. He’s very decisive on where to go with the football. He understands coverages, he understands the offense and what they are asking of him and you can see it because he’s not throwing interceptions. And it’s not like people are dropping interceptions. He’s putting the ball where it needs to go, he’s on time with it. And so, he’s got full command of the huddle so he’s doing a really, really nice job commanding the offense, getting the ball where it needs to go, using his check downs and he’s actually got more scramble ability than you’d think looking at him.”

Going back to that first game in 2017, back to McCaffrey, without having seen him in a regular season NFL game, can you kind of remember what you thought of him then and now with two-and-a half seasons under his belt, how is he different than what you thought you’d be getting that first game?

“I remember him vividly. In our first year, I felt like he was a scat back, change of pace. We had a plan for him. We felt like he’d get his touches, but didn’t think he’d hurt us. He is a more complete back, a very powerful runner where he can break tackles. He’s the full package. He’s obviously had a heck of a meal plan and a heck of a weight lifting program because he’s a very, very complete back. There’s no weakness in his football game.”

There’s probably not a ton of those guys out there, maybe him and New York Giants RB Saquon Barkley, some of those guys. But, when you go out and get a guy like LB Kwon Alexander in the offseason, I know you don’t see those guys a lot, but is that in the back of your mind that there are backs coming like this?

“It always is. We’ve always said that the running back has outpaced the evolution of the linebacker. To us, ever since 2011 we felt like we’ve gotten ahead of the chains in terms of finding linebackers that can keep up with the backs that are being used as receivers, basically. So, we’ve always had Kwon Alexander, [LB] Fred Warner-type linebackers in our systems. When you go back you have [Jacksonville Jaguars LB] Telvin Smith, [Seattle Seahawks LB] K.J. Wright, [Seattle Seahawks LB] Bobby Wagner, [Atlanta Falcons LB] Deion Jones at Atlanta. [Jacksonville Jaguars LB] Myles Jack now in Jacksonville. Obviously the three-headed monster they have over in Dallas. For us, we are mainly a nickel defense. Can we go dime? Absolutely. But, you always want your linebacker being able to handle the back so you don’t feel like there is as big a mismatch as there would normally be if you were playing a different type of a system.”

How beneficial is it having CB K’Waun Williams in that nickel system where do you feel like there’s that much of a let off with the way he’s been able to tackle in the open field, especially against the run game? With the way you’ve increased your nickel usage, do you feel like having K’Waun gives you additional flexibility in the way he’s been able to tackle?

“For sure. His speed, there’s no speed drop off. The guy’s incredibly fast and his tackling has been a lot better since he got here. [Inside linebackers coach] DeMeco Ryans does a great job teaching tackling fundamentals and all that stuff, so he’s been working on it and he does a really good job. Anytime you can keep a bigger body in there for the run and you don’t have to get small because you’re afraid of a running back, it’s always beneficial. Having Fred [Warner] and Kwon Alexander in there always will give you that

flexibility where you're not as nervous to play your coverages because they have such a dynamic back like McCaffrey."

Right now you guys have the number one passing defense in the league in yards allowed per game. A big part of that has been the two safeties you guys have back there in DB Jimmie Ward and S Jaquiski Tartt. Considering they haven't played a whole lot together until this season, they were former high school teammates, how much of that chemistry between the two kind of gives you confidence in putting them back there together and how do you think they've been able to kind of play off each other this season so far?

"With Tartt and Jimmie, I'm not sure that the history, obviously I know they were high school teammates, they've very close, funny way of communicating with one another, but when it comes to the defense and all that, they do a really good job playing off of one another. They can speak to each other without speaking. And it doesn't matter who's back there. You've got to get to that point and it's easier to get to that point when you understand football and you're smart. And those two are very, very smart and they both understand football. It doesn't hurt that they're also very athletic and fast. It just all around for those two guys, and really anyone playing that position, the faster you can get yourself in sync with one another so you guys can play off one another with regard to disguise, who's playing what position because they are interchanging every snap, it just helps those guys. It really helps the defense because you can actually, like I said with disguises and all that stuff, so they do a good job, both of them. The way they can communicate with each other is pretty good."

What have you learned about CB Emmanuel Moseley in these last three games now that he's had all this playing time?

"The same thing we said when we were going into that Cleveland game. The young man is fearless, he'll go tackle, he'll compete, the game's not too big for him. He understands the defense, he knows what's coming. He knows the techniques to play, so he's got a fearless mindset and he's got a short memory. Eventually, he's going to get tested again and he'll always come right back. For him, he's doing exactly what we all thought he'd do."

Is the door open for him to stay in the starting lineup even when CB Ahkello Witherspoon is back?

"You know, we haven't crossed that one yet. Ahkello had been playing so well. That's a tough question, but you never have the philosophy that an injury will put you on the bench. But Ahkello, he's been working, trying to get healthy and when he's ready to go he's going to be ready to go."

What has the added depth on the line this year allowed you to do differently relative to past seasons?

"You know, from a coverage standpoint, it's really the same. Obviously, [defensive backs/passing game coordinator] Joe Woods has come in and he's done a fantastic job with technique and honing in on alignments and making sure that those guys are really clean with what they're being asked to do. The front has really allowed us, with the pass

rush, has allowed us to focus more on the things that we feel like we're going to get. I don't want to say it's more predictable, but there's certain route concepts that teams can't run because those guys are coming and, not that you can't, obviously you can, but the deeper developing concepts, the long developing concepts that we got a year ago are not showing up as much. But at the same time, our guys are so disciplined and they're so used to what can happen to them after three years of playing three-deep, that they have a good feel for coverage. They've done a great job, the players have, in terms of tying themselves to the rush but at the same time not losing connection with all the different issues that can arise with the way offenses attack us."

They've done a pretty good job forcing fumbles. This quarterback you're going to face fumbled a lot his first two starts, but not as much the last two. Is there something that he did differently the last two games?

"You know what, for a quarterback, obviously it starts up front, they've got to protect him. But at the same time, holding the ball high, some of his fumbles, to be honest with you, in those first two games looked a little unlucky. I don't know if it's anything he's done. I'm sure he's had to have done something, but just from an outsider looking in it looked like some of his fumbles early on were a little bit unlucky to be honest with you."

Carolina Panthers QB Cam Newton was the identity of their offense for years. What do you see as the identity of their offense now? What are the hallmarks of a Carolina Panthers offensive coordinator Norv Turner scheme?

"Norv Turner, obviously run first. I think McCaffrey touches the ball 29 times a game since Cam's been hurt, whether it's through the pass game or run game. He's always been a dominant, run-first oriented coordinator, always have respect for those. But, it's run game, take shots, play their game and got to make the plays that he's going to count on those guys when they've got an explosive in the waiting, he's going to count on those guys to make that play. He's always had that same deliberate mentality, to me anyway."

How much easier does it make your job when you don't have to dial up blitzes and you can still be effective with just rushing four and playing the other seven in coverage?

"It always makes it easier, right? You still have to be able to protect those four. I think the coaching staff does a great job every week coming up with the scheme to make sure that the offensive line, quarterback, running back, tight end can't just t-off on our four D-Linemen. We've got to always be cognizant of the fact that we still have to be able to bring pressure, which we have. We still have to be able to, and from all different directions, just so teams can't sit there and chip our ends and pay all the attention they can to the two ends and the two interior guys. They still have to account for the two backers, the safety and the nickel. When they have to account for those guys, it still creates space for the defensive line. It does make it easier, but at the same time, on us to make sure that there's enough balance always to make sure they're accounting for everybody and not just those four."

Is it particularly important to be able to just rush four when you're going against a running back who's as dynamic as McCaffrey?

“Not necessarily. You’ve got to do different things with regards to him. Not always the main focal point, but yeah, that wouldn’t necessarily be the case.”