

SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS

TRANSCRIPTIONS



**Defensive Coordinator Robert Saleh
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San Francisco 49ers
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Houston Texans WR DeAndre Hopkins was having a huge game midway through the third quarter and then was held to, I think, five yards from that point on. Can you just talk about what you did, the adjustments you made from that point forward?

“I’ve said it a couple times. I’ll go through it again though. In the first half with DeAndre Hopkins, he had seven catches for 91 yards. Two of his catches for about 50 yards were when we had him double covered. One of them was a third and 15 where he made that circus catch on the sideline. The second one came in that two-minute drive, [Houston Texans QB] T.J. Yates’ first drive, which was that two-minute sequence. So, we went into the locker room to evaluate where we stood as a defense, see what kind of adjustments we needed to make and he had about two catches for about 50 yards when he was doubled and five catches for about 45 in our normal three deep. So, we felt really good about where we were at halftime with regards to Hopkins. Made a couple of really good circus catches in double coverage. Still felt good about the plan. Came out in the second half, which was T.J.’s first real drive and it was very clear to us once that drive was over and probably to the entire world that they were force-feeding DeAndre the ball. Which they did a great job of. So, we were able to get to the sideline, make the adjustment we needed and from there he had one catch, which was the screen, for the rest of the game, that [DB] Adrian Colbert was able to force out. The way it happened, the sequence of events with the change of the quarterback, going into the locker room, I wish we could’ve gotten to it earlier, but it was a situation where we needed to get to the sideline to regroup and talk about exactly what they were doing with the guys. Got the necessary coverage adjustment that we needed and then from there we felt really good about the way we played him the rest of the way.”

CB Greg Mabin said you guys threw a variety of different things at him. One of them that I noticed was the nickelback was kind of shaded over there. In that case, was there any vulnerability that you were worried about them counter exploiting?

“There was. The way we cheated over, we thought we were sacrificing a little bit in the run game. Obviously, any time a player garners extra attention you’re going to sacrifice run game. Taking a half a hat out of the box. And so, that’s kind of what we did. By the time it was recognized, our offense had generated a lead, which was awesome and they didn’t have time to make their adjustment.”

That's a great example then of your offense helping you and giving you guys--?

"No doubt. Offense has been unbelievable for the last six, six weeks or whatever it's been. It's been awesome."

Speaking of the run game, how have you guys progressed from the beginning of the season? Are you happy with where the running game is right now?

"Defensively?"

Yes.

"For sure. We felt good throughout the entire year. There were a couple of lame ducks in there. Dallas game still punches me in the stomach, punches all of us really. Overall, just the overall structure of the defense and the way we've been playing we don't feel like we've been schemed at all. From a run-game standpoint, we feel like we've been very sound. It's been progressing. The yards per carry has remained constant. We feel really good about where we are from a yards per carry stat, if you want to give it that. Overall, we're holding teams town in overall rushing yards. But, that's also contributed to the way our offense is playing, able to get us the lead, keep us in the game. It's all team ball. I'll go back to the way those guys are playing too, it's been great."

3.9 is that what you want?

"Anything under four is really good football in this league. If you're under four yards a carry throughout the history of this league, well I shouldn't say history, but recent history anyway, you should be in the top 10."

You said you haven't been schemed in the run game. Can you explain that?

"Teams are throwing a lot of different things at us in the run game and we feel really good about the way our guys are recognizing different schemes. So, they haven't been able to get us into a position where we're just not really sure what the fit is or whatever our responsibility is. So, we feel very sound with the way the players have been executing the defense. This week is going to be a great challenge."

What are you going to have this week? Can you just talk about how they use Tennessee Titans RBs Derrick Henry, Latavius Murray and Tennessee Titans QB Marcus Mariota all together?

"They have a large, probably the biggest run-game playbook I've ever seen on tape. They come at you many different ways. This is going to be a great game with regards to locking in on your keys and trusting your fundamentals, being great with your eyes and understanding your responsibility. This is going to be, you've got to be very sound fundamentally and structured on defense to ensure your gap integrity is in good shape."

I think when you first talked to us in the offseason you said 'We're going to stop the run.' Those of us who saw last year's team were like 'I don't know about that.' Did you really have that confidence and if so what gave you that confidence?

"The whole mindset, and the players have been fantastic with the whole thing too, it's the whole mindset of our scheme is to eliminate something first. Obviously, if you can

stop the run, you can get after the passer. To try to get teams to be one dimensional. So the first thing you do in the scheme is to stop the run. Everything is designed to stop the run. Since I've been blessed to be a part of the scheme however many years ago, we've always had a very successful run defense. The way the scheme is built, the philosophy behind it, the detail at which we go over run fits and gap integrity, I felt very confident that we'd be able to improve in the run game."

There was one play where Yates escaped when he was on third down. Was the goal to have one side overloaded and you just get to him before he can escape or was there a misalignment there?

"In the two-minute situation, third and five. It was an overload. We needed to get one more player to cross face, take care of that wide-open B gap. T.J. is obviously a much better scrambler than [Houston Texans QB] Tom Savage is, and he caught us. It was a good play by him. Not the best execution on our part."

You said you think the Titans have the biggest run game you've seen on tape. What all goes into that?

"Anything from gap-pull to zone-read to just normal bounce schemes. They shift you. They motion you. They do everything they can to get you out of your gap and get you confused on what your responsibility is. For us, repping all that stuff and being sound is going to be the challenge."

You've got defensive ends and defensive linemen, you've made guys inactive and switched those guys up at the bottom of the depth chart on the active 46, with DL Aaron Lynch and DL Leger Douzable and those guys. How do you make that decision each week and is it about evaluating for next year or is it about the matchups? How do you go through that?

"It's a discussion. First and foremost, it always starts with the opponent and what they do best. Whether we need to get big or small, it's the first thing, whether run-game, pass-game. With regards to the overall roster, we feel good where it's at with the D-Line. It's unfortunate, there are some healthy scratches in there that deserve to be playing. Love what [DL] Ronnie Blair [III] is doing. Not having him up was more of 'Let's get Aaron and [DL] Tank [Carradine] out there to see what they can do.' Same thing with Douz. Just giving people opportunity to go out there and put tape on. They're deserving, they work their tails off. Sometimes it's just a matter of guys are working really hard and they deserve an opportunity to play. What's cool about this team and where it's going is that it's becoming a very selfless team. In regards to those D-Linemen are all really pulling for each other. So, yeah I'm sure a guy like [DL] D.J. Jones is frustrated that he can't be active. But, he's pulling for the guys who are active. And vice versa with Douzable not being up last week, is pulling for Lynch and Tank to do very well. That part with that D-Line and having each other's back, that part is cool. That's really what it's come down to is that there are some healthy scratches that can be on the football field, but again, it's giving guys the opportunity to play who deserve it with their practice habits."

It seems like DL DeForest Buckner can't get a break so many times this year and then he gets the sack but it's called intentional grounding to negate the sack. Is that a bizarre rule?

"You know what, we talked about it on the plane. They need to change that rule to intentional grounding is a sack, plus five yards. But, it's an offensive league so I don't know if we'll ever get it."

You don't coach WR Marquise Goodwin, but you watch him. From your perspective as a defensive coordinator, how does he threaten a defense and is he becoming more of a multidimensional threat this year?

"Just from the outside looking in it looks like he's done a great job improving week to week. I think [wide receivers coach/passing game specialist] Mike LaFleur is a heck of a football coach and he's doing a great job with that group. The one thing Marquise Goodwin does is he scares the living daylights out of you with regards to explosive plays. He's earned a big cushion. He's earned space just by the nature of the way he gets off the ball and his speed. His ability to run routes the way he does and stop on a dime and the precision at which he's running, Mikey shows me some of his routes every Monday and it's pretty cool to see how much he's progressed over the course of the year. He's got a chance to be pretty darn good."

You guys over the last four weeks have allowed fewer than 300 yards of offense, on average. How much of that do you attribute to LB Reuben Foster getting in the rhythm of things and being able to build off his playing time? And what else factors into that do you think?

"There's a lot of things. Reuben, obviously he does help. He's a special talent. Glad we have him. The injury bug has kind of settled down on defense. So, those guys have been able to stack together practices and weeks and they're starting to understand and play off each other and communicate. All those different things that are so critical to the success of the defense. I also don't want to diminish what the offense has been able to do over that same timeframe these last six games where they've been doing a great job on the sideline. The energy that's being fed to the defense and the urgency that they feel the need to get the offense the ball. It's verbalized by those guys. You're starting to see the team kind of rally around each other. Even if the offense is in a lull, the defense they're at a point where they just feel if they get it to them enough they're going to start moving it up and down the field. You kind of saw that in the Houston game. Offense started out a little slow, we started off pretty quick. Then the offense started to pick it up a little bit. We gave up those back-to-back touchdowns. But, the overall sentiment was, keep getting them the ball. They're getting hot, keep getting them the ball. Then they got hot and we were able to kind of blow it open in the second half."

Some of the defensive guys yesterday talked about QB Jimmy Garoppolo's pregame pep talk and talking about playing with violence. Have you seen a quarterback give any sort of pep talk similar to that?

"You know what, I've never listened to the pregame pep talk, but that's good. Extreme violence man. That's everything. It is cool. It is part of our deal. Extreme violence,

attacking the ball. He's been great. He's one of the guys, just from my little cocoon of defense it feels like the guys are rallying around him."

How does Tennessee use Tennessee Titans TE Delanie Walker to stress out defenses?

"Delanie is a weapon. They use him a lot in different ways. But, he's definitely a focal point of their offense and a guy that we have to deal with, as well as the other guys with DeMarco Murray and Henry and all that. Again, it's a challenge for us. I feel like our guys are ready. Like I said, the way they're starting to understand our three-deep concepts and our fundamentals, I feel really good about our ability to go execute."

He mentioned on the call that he thought Reuben on him might be a mismatch. What would your reaction to that be?

"He's supposed to think that way."

Is Reuben supposed to think the other way?

"No doubt. If a player ever says 'God I think I got my hands full,' I question what that player's thinking. I would expect Reuben to think that he can get after Delanie and I would expect Delanie to think he can get after Reuben. That's what makes these guys tic. They think they're invincible, they think their unstoppable and that's why their special."

Is CB Dontae Johnson still a starter?

"He's working through the week. Him and [CB Greg] Mabin are working through practice. They're both going to play a lot of football. I have not lost faith in Dontae. That whole sequence, when you go through a drive like that the thought process behind that whole sequence with Johnson is just give him a breather. Just relax, calm down, you'll be find. The intent was to get him back in. Then [CB] Ahkello [Witherspoon] got hurt. Either way he was going to go back into the game. So, it was not a benching more than it was a breather. But, Mabin is one of those guys who's been working his tail off in practice. It goes from D-Line, linebacker and DBs; work hard in practice and you're going to get rewarded with some playing time and an opportunity to go put some tape forward. Mabin has been doing a great job. So, if you see him on the field it's not an indictment on what Dontae Johnson's been doing as much as it is what Mabin's been able to do in practice and giving him a chance to go put some tape on."

Did you get a sense that for guys like DL Earl Mitchell and defensive quality control coach DeMeco Ryans that going back and getting that win in Houston meant something for them?

"Heck yeah. Meant something for me too, being there six years. DeMeco for sure. [Defensive line coach Jeff] Zgonina, he was there. [Linebackers coach] Johnny Holland, all those guys. [Equipment manager Jay Brunetti] Jay-Bird, our equipment guy. There's a lot of people who have ties to Houston that it meant a lot to. Earl getting that big fourth and one stop, that was a freaking awesome moment for him. DeMeco going back like you mentioned. So, there's a lot of people that that meant a lot to. So, it was great to get the win down there."

I know you've gotten more than a few weeks of tape on him in the new role, but before the injury, how would you assess Ahkello taking on the number one cornerback?

"That came up whether or not we wanted to match Ahkello. I thought when DeAndre was over there on Ahkello, I thought Ahkello did a very, very good job. There's a couple plays I'm sure he wishes he had back. But, I thought he had great poise. He showed great physicality at the line, was able to run and break down and transition with him and be able to maintain his face with the receiver so he could always keep his eyes on the quarterback so if they did throw it his way he could play the ball instead of the receiver. He showed up really well. We have no worries about Ahkello versus any receiver in this league. We think he'll do a very good job on anyone."

He did make a couple big tackles too. At Colorado they didn't throw the ball at him very much, you didn't really get to see his tackling. Has his ability to perform in that area surprised you or met your expectations this year?

"I'm not surprised by Ahkello's ability to tackle. Felt like he displayed some toughness in college. Being able to have, and we've talked about it with him, having a plan on how to tackle the right way. It doesn't matter how big you are, you can be a physical football player. He's really taken to our tackling style and because of it he's really, really improved in that regard. At times he looks as violent as a linebacker. It's cool to see him progress, for sure."

Mariota these last four games, have you seen anything to why he's more prone to interceptions, whether its pass-rush or scheme?

"A lot of times there's tipped balls from Mariota. He's been unlucky. I'm not in their meetings to know whether or not a receiver busted a route or not. Having gone against Mariota in the past at Jacksonville, he is a very talented quarterback and I know we as a defense are going to have our hands full and we're excited for the challenge."