

49ers Clips – February 16, 2017

Local Media

49ers defense will take on different look under Robert Saleh

By Nick Wagoner, ESPN.com

http://www.espn.com/blog/san-francisco-49ers/post/_id/23447/49ers-defense-will-take-on-different-look-under-kyle-shanahan-robert-saleh

NaVorro Bowman finds Achilles rehab 'easier to deal with' than knee injury

By Nick Wagoner, ESPN.com

http://www.espn.com/blog/san-francisco-49ers/post/_id/23404/navorro-bowman-finds-achilles-rehab-easier-to-deal-with-than-acl-injury

The Unconventional Career Path of 49ers GM John Lynch

By Albert Breer, MMQB.com

<http://mmqb.si.com/mmqb/2017/02/16/john-lynch-san-francisco-49ers-gm-career-path>

National Media

The NFL free agent pool gets more plentiful at an interesting spot for Seahawks — left tackle

By Bob Condotta, The Seattle Times

<http://www.seattletimes.com/sports/seahawks/nfl-free-agent-gets-more-plentiful-at-an-interesting-spot-for-seahawks-left-tackle/>

Drafting an inside linebacker could help ease Cardinals' depth concerns

By Josh Weinfuss, ESPN.com

http://www.espn.com/blog/arizona-cardinals/post/_id/24576/drafting-an-inside-linebacker-could-help-ease-cardinals-depth-concerns

Jets cut ties with Ryan Clady, decline to pick up contract option for 2017

By Darryl Slater, Newark Star-Ledger

http://www.nj.com/jets/index.ssf/2017/02/jets_cut_ryan_clady_but_might_he_still_return_in_2.html#incart_river_index

Jaguars decline contract option on left tackle Kelvin Beachum

By Ryan O'Halloran, Florida Times-Union

<http://jacksonville.com/jaguars/2017-02-15/jaguars-decline-contract-option-left-tackle-kelvin-beachum>

Broncos center Matt Paradis has successful surgery on other hip

By Nicki Jhabvala, Denver Post

<http://www.denverpost.com/2017/02/15/matt-paradis-successful-hip-surgery-broncos/>

Local Clips – Full Version

49ers defense will take on different look under Robert Saleh

By Nick Wagoner, ESPN.com

SANTA CLARA, Calif. -- The San Francisco 49ers are soon expected to officially announce that Robert Saleh, the former Jacksonville Jaguars linebackers coach, will serve as defensive coordinator under coach Kyle Shanahan.

Considering Saleh's background working for Pete Carroll with the Seattle Seahawks and Carroll disciple Gus Bradley in Jacksonville, it's expected that the Niners will be making some changes to their defensive scheme. At a basic level, the Niners will be changing from a 3-4 front to a 4-3, leaving some to wonder if some of the premium draft picks the Niners have used on defense in recent years will no longer be a fit.

It's important to know that Carroll's Seattle defensive approach is far from a "traditional" 4-3 scheme. Carroll has described his defense as a 4-3 front with 3-4 personnel. It's a method he told ESPN's Sheil Kapadia he honed under the guidance of Monte Kiffin at the University of Arkansas in 1977 as a graduate assistant.

"That really came out of all the way back to Fayetteville," Carroll said. "It was a one-gap principle defense way back then. Monte and I, when we were together in Minnesota with (former Vikings defensive coordinator) Floyd Peters, we were able to continue to build on and NFL-ize our scheme. And so, it's been a way to get guys to attack and play aggressive so that you can get good pass rush and still fit on the run. That's where the secondary fits and stuff like that really comes into play."

Beyond the fact that the scheme doesn't necessarily resemble a typical 4-3 or other versions of it, such as the wide-nine scheme, the other piece of the puzzle worth noting is the fact that because offenses are so regularly using three or more receivers, teams don't use base defenses as much as they once did.

According to ESPN Stats & Information, the Niners were in base defense (defined here as four or fewer defensive backs), for 687 snaps in 2016, the most in the NFL. Still, that was only 62.3 percent of their total defensive snaps, meaning they had five or more defensive backs on the field more than a third of the time.

For sake of comparison, Seattle and Jacksonville both ranked among the top eight in the NFL in terms of total snaps played in base defense, but came in at 57 percent and 62 percent, respectively, in terms of time spent in base defense. The 49ers, Seahawks and Jaguars were all in the top five among fewest snaps played in sub packages.

So what could the Niners' new base defense look like? The 4-3 "under" front is a gap-control scheme largely focused on stopping the run and allowing certain players to generate pressure on the quarterback. It also allows for variety in the terms of looks even if the principles remain the same. While Carroll's defenses have stuck to similar basics for most of his time in Seattle, he's also been flexible within that scheme to adapt to his talent.

For the 49ers, there will be some of that give and take as Saleh and his staff work to figure out where the pieces fit. But to hear general manager John Lynch and Shanahan describe what they want their defense to look like, the words "attack" and "aggressive" are common.

"Here's what we know on defense: We want to be aggressive," Lynch said. "We want to be multiple. Kyle talked a lot about what gives him problems as an offensive coordinator, so I think those are things that we're looking for."

For the most part, the 4-3 under asks each defensive lineman and linebacker to be responsible for one gap, which increases players' ability to play instinctively instead of overthinking. There is also some wiggle room for two-gapping, usually reserved for the left defensive end and/or the nose tackle.

In its basic alignment, the left defensive end (playing 5-technique) and nose tackle (playing a 1-technique) line up to the closed side (side with the tight end) of the formation with the SAM linebacker lined up over the tight end. The nose tackle and left defensive end are generally expected to be your best run-stoppers while the SAM linebacker must have the ability to set the edge against the run and drop in coverage consistently.

On the other side of the formation (the open side), you often will find the defense's two best pass-rushers, a 3-technique defensive tackle and what is known as the "Leo." The Leo lines up to the outside shoulder of the weakside offensive tackle, leaving the middle and weakside linebackers to handle the strongside 'B' gap and the weakside 'A' gap, respectively.

Coverages to pair with this front can vary depending on personnel, though the Seahawks have long been proponents of the Cover 3, largely because of the presence of free safety Earl Thomas. For Seattle, the perfect mix has included an athletic free safety paired with a physical strong safety who can play in the run box to complement long-limbed corners capable of playing press coverage.

So, how does the current Niners roster fit in with the projected change? That remains to be seen, but there are some reasonable matches that can be expected. Defensive lineman DeForest Buckner would be a logical fit as the 3-technique defensive tackle. Outside linebacker Aaron Lynch makes sense as an option for the "Leo" spot and NaVorro Bowman and Ray-Ray Armstrong have the characteristics to step in at middle and weakside linebacker jobs. The Niners also have corners such as Rashard Robinson and Tramaine Brock who could fit the mold outside. Upgrades at nose tackle and strongside linebacker, as well as more punch for the Leo spot, would appear to be the biggest needs in the front seven.

Still, there is sure to be a feeling out process for Saleh and the players on the roster in determining how all the pieces fit. No matter how the Niners line up from play to play, Shanahan has a bigger picture of what he wants to see from his defense.

"[I like] defenses that make you work for everything, that are extremely sound, that make you one-dimensional; they stop the run, make it a one-dimensional game, and they don't give up anything for free," Shanahan said.

NaVorro Bowman finds Achilles rehab 'easier to deal with' than knee injury

By Nick Wagoner, ESPN.com

SANTA CLARA, Calif. -- San Francisco 49ers linebacker NaVorro Bowman is no stranger to lengthy and strenuous rehabilitations from serious injuries.

Having suffered a gruesome knee injury in the 2014 NFC championship against the Seattle Seahawks, Bowman missed the next season as he attempted to recover. He went on to return for the 2015 season and played well, though he wasn't quite all the way back to the high standard he set for himself.

Then, disaster struck again on Oct. 2 of last season when Bowman tore his left Achilles in a loss to the Dallas Cowboys. He's now more than four months removed from the injury and is well ahead of where he was at this point in his recovery from the knee issue.

Bowman said last week there's no comparison between the rehab required for tearing multiple ligaments in his knee and tearing an Achilles.

"It doesn't (compare)," Bowman said. "It's much more easy to deal with. I'm not spending those long hours warming up trying to get my workout in so it's definitely easier to deal with than my knee. I can definitely see a positive light at the end of the tunnel."

At the end of the season, Bowman said he had progressed to the point where he was able to run on a water treadmill but he didn't have a definitive date on when he'd be able to run again on land.

"I'm working every single day, doing everything the trainers are asking me to do," Bowman said. "There's no timetable set when I will be cleared to do every single thing but the sky is looking bright for me. I feel great and the key is just keep improving every single day and giving me confidence knowing that I will be back."

Despite having now gone through multiple serious injuries in the past few years, Bowman is clearly intent on getting healthy and getting back to being one of the league's best linebackers. Bowman is still only 28, signed a lucrative contract extension last preseason and sounds like a man who has something to prove as he works his way back from his latest injury.

"I'm a grinder," Bowman said. "Anything that knocks me down, I'm going to get back up. It's just who is going to stick beside me and remember what I've done and keep praying for me that I get back to where I was."

The Unconventional Career Path of 49ers GM John Lynch

By Albert Breer, MMQB.com

Behind John Lynch's desk in Santa Clara, there are a number of bottles of wine, each one wishing him luck in his new venture as the 49ers general manager. That he got them from agents is one surprise from his first three weeks on the job.

"I'm telling you, I didn't think agents were this nice," he said over the phone on Wednesday afternoon, laughing before conceding, "They're buttering me up."

The haul of reds hasn't been the only things to catch Lynch a little off guard with this move that set the football world back on its heels at the outset of Super Bowl week. There's the breadth of the work, which goes well beyond scouting. And related to that, there's how a GM gets pulled in so many different directions during a given day.

But there's good news here, too. With a couple weeks to spare before the Niners staff packs up for Indianapolis and the scouting combine, this very much feels to Lynch—the former player and broadcaster—like what he's supposed to be doing.

"It does," he said. "I'd caution you, one thing Monte Kiffin always said to us was that the worst three words any football player can say are, 'I got it.' I'm right at the beginning stages. We're right at the beginning stages. We're taking on challenges every day. But I can tell you, I'm not overwhelmed, each day I come in and there's a routine.

"A priest once said to me, 'Think about eating a huge steak, you can't eat it all in one bite. You gotta take one bite at a time.' And that's the way we're going through it. You can get overwhelmed in this job, particularly coming in late. I got all this to do, how do I do it? Instead, we're just going about our business each day and taking things as they come. It does feel very natural."

In this week's Game Plan, we'll look at how the 2018 quarterback crop could affect the Mitch Trubiskys and Deshaun Watsons of this year, the Redskins' Kirk Cousins quandary, how the use of the franchise tag has changed dramatically over the past five years and a lot more.

But we start with the Niners' new GM, his first few weeks on the job, and why he hardly feels like a fish out of water—despite the fact that he landed in his new role without taking the traditional path to it.

Lynch's precursor to one of 32 jobs running the personnel side of an NFL franchise is comprised of 16 years as a player and some eight-and-a-half seasons working his way up in the world of football broadcasting. He, in fact, never left pro football, having been involved for the past 24 years running. And this is where, in these stories about him, you point out where he was never a scout.

That's where we'll take our left-hand turn. Let's explain why, through his words, his start has proven Lynch to be more prepared than most of the skeptics expected, and how he already has a pretty evolved vision.

- His playing experience. That's beyond just having played for Denny Green, Bill Walsh, Sam Wyche, Tony Dungy, Jon Gruden, Mike Shanahan and, briefly, Bill Belichick. It also goes past figuring, between the lines and through endless film study, what makes a great NFL player. And it goes to his first experience in the pros, and being part of the 1990s Bucs' transition from doormat to dominant force.

"There's a lot of parallels," he says, comparing those Bucs with these 49ers. "There'd been constant change, so the thought process as a rookie was 'don't get close to the guy next to you, because he may not be here in a couple weeks. Don't let your wives make friends, because they're not gonna be here.' That was the culture. Everybody talks about Tony [Dungy], and Tony was certainly integral.

"But before that, Rich McKay came in and brought some stability—we're gonna draft good winning players that have certain traits, and football character. Then Tony came in and gave it more stability—these are the schemes we're gonna play. We're not deviating in Week 1 or Week 2 if it's not working. We're sticking to them."

- His TV experience. Lynch settled in Denver after his playing career and grew close to John Elway. So when Elway took the Broncos' job in 2011, he'd get after Lynch about leaving broadcasting to work for a team. To that end, in 2012, Elway had him write reports on safeties in the draft. In 2013, Lynch sat in Denver's draft meetings for a month.

Now, Lynch maintains that he followed advice he got from Mike Tomlin in Tampa: Be where you're at. He was focused on his job with Fox, and was moving up in the ranks there. Still, he knew, as he puts it, "What was missing was a scoreboard." And so Elway's poking, plus working to be prepared as a broadcaster, opened the door to Lynch subconsciously developing team-building beliefs in the course of his work.

"I wasn't out there soaking up information from organizations as I went in their buildings, I was trying to be the best broadcaster I could be," he explains. "But you're meeting with the quarterback, you're meeting with the head coach, the GM usually comes and finds you, you're meeting with coordinators on both sides, you're meeting with finest players in the league. ... So it challenges your mind."

- His Broncos experience. At one point, Elway discussed hiring Lynch before deciding he didn't have the right role for him. In the end, the Broncos GM may have given him something more valuable than a job—an open-door to his own experiences growing into the role without the traditional career path behind him. Two pieces of advice stuck with Lynch. First, Elway said "hire some good people around you," which Lynch now jokes was to Elway's detriment, since Lynch's first hire was one of Elway's best people—new 49ers VP of player personnel Adam Peters. Second, Elway told Lynch that he had to learn to close his door, which seems simple, but relates to time management as a boss.

"Day 1, all I wanted to do was turn on the tape of the San Francisco 49ers to see what we have," Lynch says. "And it wasn't until 4:30 that I finally turned the tape on, because I was meeting people, meeting the trainer, going through the office. But that was very important too. That's how it is. ... You also have to learn to close your door. You need your quiet time to yourself where you can just get stuff done."

- His life experience. Lynch says that, at the end of his playing career, “You’re always saying, ‘I haven’t come close to knowing it all, there’s always something I can improve on.’” He took that thirst to learn into broadcasting, and he plans to take that humility into his new job, too. “I think that’ll be the case 15 years from now,” he says.

Early on, it’s been small stuff. At the Super Bowl, both college and NFL players would approach him, and he’d wonder, Is this tampering? He’s leaned on Peters and fellow new hire, and former Lions GM Martin Mayhew, for help in those areas. And he knows he has a lot to learn elsewhere. So yes, he’ll delegate some. But what’s as important is that he maintains that quest for knowledge in all areas.

“Part of the interview process was, 10 characteristics of a GM, go 1-10 on what you’d be strongest at,” he says. “And I just followed my heart. Setting the tone and vision for a building, that was 1. Negotiating salary cap and contracts, right off the bat, I had that as 10, because I haven’t done it. So listen, I’m gonna have to rely on some people. But I will learn that, because I think to be good at it, you can’t just say, ‘that’s my guy over there.’ You gotta learn it and be a part of it.”

So why will this work? I don’t know if it will, because these are hard things to forecast. But I do think that Lynch and head coach Kyle Shanahan have a chance, and not just because both are competitive, smart and driven football junkies. My feeling is it’s more because Shanahan has a very defined vision for a football team, and Lynch has a clear-headed idea of how to build that, and they share a lot of ideals.

Getting that alignment was a stated goal of CEO Jed York’s during the GM/coach search, and it looks like San Francisco has that at this early juncture. On Tuesday, Shanahan gave a lengthy, detailed presentation for the scouts on what his staff would be looking for at each position. And that adds detail to the character traits Lynch has talked to his scouts about seeking.

One that Lynch calls “critical” is football character. “You gotta live it and breathe it,” he says.

The 49ers GM certainly does, and he’s gotten to work in surrounding himself with others that do, too. Which is probably why none of this feels unnatural to him at all.

FIRST AND 10

10. One last thing on the Niners: Good on them for having two guys who weren’t on the NFL advisory panel’s list—Lynch and Terry McDonough—as GM finalists.