

SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS

# TRANSCRIPTIONS



**Defensive Coordinator Robert Saleh  
Press Conference – December 28, 2017  
San Francisco 49ers  
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**Head coach Kyle Shanahan said yesterday he thought DL Solomon Thomas had his best game on Sunday. Did you see it that way as well and what stood out to you about his performance?**

“He had a really good game. He played with an edge to him. He’s played with an edge to him all year, but he was making plays. He was productive, he was getting off blocks, and I hate to give him a loser’s lump or anything, but I think he’s really starting to recover from that injury that he suffered earlier in the year and we’re really starting to see what we saw in the first half of the season.”

**How would you assess his growth over the course of the season?**

“I’m very pleased. I think we all are, really. He’s a very explosive athlete, he plays really good with his hands, he gets knock-back in the run game. There’s the developmental part that we need to get to with regards to consistency in pass rush, which I think he’ll reach, I’m not really concerned about it, but as far as his growth, I’m very pleased with where he’s at.”

**Is there still an element with his pass rush where you’re trying to find the best spot for him to rush to get him there consistently?**

“We have an idea of where his best spot is going to be. We still believe that on third down, pass-rush downs, two-minute it’s going to be inside, between him and [DL [DeForest] Buckner.”

**Are the edges something that you need to work on more next season to get better pressure off the edges?**

“We need to get better, just from a technical standpoint. We just need to improve in general. The people that are here, whatever happens, I can’t speak, but just every week we need to find a way to get better at really every spot, edge rusher notwithstanding.”

**While a guy like DL Arik Armstead is hurt, I haven’t seen him around, but do you see him a lot? Is he still in the film room?**

“Yeah, Arik was here today. He’s still involved, really, really excited about getting back. He’s itching to get back. He sees the growth with his teammates. He sees the way they’ve been getting better and you can tell that there’s a fire in his eye that he wants to be a part of it. We’re excited to get him back in OTAs.”

**How much can he do right now?**

“I’m not sure on that one. That would be a question for the trainers.”

**Everyone says LB Reuben Foster plays recklessly which is a good thing. Kyle was eluding to the fact that maybe you need to figure out how he can play and not put his body at such risk. Is that possible? If you try to do that do you risk taking away what makes him special?**

“This is going to sound ludicrous in a way, but I think he can be even more explosive and more violent when he hits with proper technique. When he learns to run his feet through contact he’s going to destroy people, without hurting himself. That’s something that he’s got to work on through the offseason is how to tackle the right way, because when you see him he just throws his entire body in there. But, if he learns to actually accelerate through contact with his shoulder through the sternum or shoulder through the thigh, those hits will just be what’s already explosive will be even twice that. There’s an element that he needs to work on with regards to his technique and tackling to not put his body at so much risk and I truly believe when he does figure it out it’ll be even more explosive.”

**Are you saying that when he accelerates it will he be more under control?**

“I think he’s got plenty of control. It’s just when you leave your feet you’re losing all your power, you’re losing all that acceleration that you built up to get to that contact point. I’m a big golfer so it’d be like decelerating at the ball. You might still hit the ball 250, but if you accelerated through contact with all the right technique that ball might go another 25 yards. It’s the whole trying to get and understand what it feels like to accelerate through contact and what he needs to get done from a technique standpoint to get even more explosive.”

**You can decelerate and still hit it 250 right?**

“275.”

**You mentioned you need to improve rushing from the edges. What would an improved edge rush do for this defense? What kind of domino effect is there?**

“The domino effect, I think I’ve said it to you all earlier, when you look at the evolution of defense, when people talk about building a really good defense, in the old days it was through the middle of the defense you start, right? You get those guys to the middle of your defense. I think that’s good enough to get you to third down. The edges, your corners and your edge rushers are what get you off the field. They’re the ones that get you off in two-minute. They’re the ones that win in the red zone. And so, from that regard it is a domino effect. We get to third down very, very easily. We’ve built leads here over the second half of the year. Now we need to as a defense, we need to learn how to close. We need to learn how to close the door on third-and-12 where there is zero chance an offense can get a first down. Two-minute situations where even if we’re rushing four and you’re trying to bleed the clock, but we’re still capable of getting off the field because the edge rush and the corners are just straight lock down. It would be a huge domino effect because you’re adding the element of closing the door on offenses.”

**Does an improved edge rush also benefit Thomas and Buckner in the middle?**

“Big time. Because when the quarterback has to step up, those guys are definitely going to have to, we get great pocket push and there’s times where our guys are winning on the edges too. I don’t want to take away from what they’ve been able to accomplish this year, but anytime you create those edges, that pocket gets very uncomfortable for a quarterback.”

**Would you say that Buckner, looking at the overall game, his durability, his production in the run and pass game is your best overall defender this season?**

“I think he’s one of the best in all of football. He’d be one of the best for every single team in football. Not trying to sugarcoat it for him. He is dominant in every facet of football. The scary part is he can still get better with pad level, he can still get better with hands, he can still get better at creating edges in pass rush. But, as far as where he’s at now for a second-year player, as young as he is, knock on wood, the durability, he’s unique, he’s special.”

**Does he belong in the Pro Bowl?**

“You never really want to get caught up in the Pro Bowl. If you truly watch tape, you’re really dissecting the player, and I think the players are starting to realize it too, that the Pro Bowl is really not the big picture. It’s a compliment from your peers, but I think Buck has bigger goals in mind in terms of what he’s trying to accomplish as an individual. Pro Bowl, it’s a nice reward I guess, but it’s not something that I’m sure defines him.”

**With the run defense improving significantly over the second half of the season, how much of that is a product of continuity and Reuben being in there healthy and just the overall development from now since training camp?**

“When you look at from the Dallas game, the Dallas game was the culmination of all the injuries in terms of guys just coming in and out of the lineup. Since then we’ve been able to field the same guys over and over and over again. There is so much value in being able to play with the same person next to you and being able to play in a spot that you’re comfortable with for consecutive weeks. Because you’re going to see the same things over and over again. Your communication’s going to be the same thing over and over again. Then you’re working with the same guy and you’re hearing the same voice. Our guys have gotten to the point now where they just look at each other and that’s their signal. Now there’s non-verbal communication going on. Our walk-through just now was fantastic. Guys just yapping and talking and alerting everything to each other. The continuity part is such a big deal. In respect to it, I get there’s going to be injuries in this league. It is rare in my opinion to see as many as we did suffer over the first half, both offensively and defensively. For us on both sides of the ball to be able to have that continuity throughout the second half of the year, I think there is a direct correlation with the success of the team.”

**With LB Eli Harold and the position he plays at SAM, is that a position just in general that isn’t going to get a bunch of tackles and isn’t going to show up in the**

**stat sheet just because his job is to set the edge and allow other guys to make plays? Is that how you would classify his position particularly in base situations?**

“He might not show up on the stat sheet, but what Eli’s been able to do run-game wise, he’s one of the better edge setters I’ve ever been around from a SAM linebacker standpoint. He does provide an edge rush that forces teams to go five-O protection on us. They can’t just put a back on him. If they did it’d be a joke in my mind. He does create one-on-ones just by where he’s aligned and the amount of times that we’ve been able to blitz him. Stat-sheet wise, I’m not a big stat guy in the fact that if you just watch the tape you’ll see Eli has improved immensely over the course of the year, even since a year ago, and the guy is only 23 years old so he’s got a lot of room to grow also. I’ll never look at stats. I don’t want to pigeonhole. If we did, people would think Buck’s not a very good football player because he has whatever amount of sacks. But, if you watch tape and you really study him you’d understand that he’s one of our better players. Same thing for Eli. If you watch his tape you’d see where he’s very, very strong. There’s nothing that he does that hurts this defense”

**Kind of on that same note, does NT Earl Mitchell fall in that category too?**

“I will say this; if the nose is getting a lot of tackles it’s not designed. He’s the grunt, takes on double teams, keeps the center off the linebackers so they can free flow and get to the ball. The nose will never light up the stat sheet.”

**Has he also been a steadying influence as a veteran?**

“Heck yeah. He’s doing exactly what he needs to do, what he’s being asked to do and he’s been a tremendous leader for the D-Line room. Extremely pleased with what Earl Mitchell has brought to us this year.”

**Has Kyle come up to you and asked you, ‘Hey can I use this guy to go push the pile on offense?’**

“There’s no asking, he just does it. I’m sure Earl loves it though.”

**Was he pretty excited about it?**

“Heck yeah. Any time a defender gets to go in there, heck yeah. They love that stuff.”

**What does LB Pita Taumoepenu need to do to get on the field more next season?**

“I’m excited for Pita in the offseason, we all are. We think an offseason with [head strength and conditioning coach] Ray Wright developing in the weight room and getting stronger, reaching another level of maturity, he’s going to be a guy that’s going to be very hard to keep off the field, I hope. The big thing for him is strength. He’s smart enough, he’s fast enough, he’s got enough instincts. Now that physical strength, I think he can play SAM linebacker and be an effective edge setter the way he is now. But, in terms of winning one-on-ones in pass rush and being a guy that demands linemen to block him rather than just backs, that’s going to be where he needs to get to next.”

**When you drafted him you were thinking LEO. Has that changed a little bit or you just want that versatility to be able to play both sides?**

“He’s a guy that I would see versatility wise. For us, we still envision the SAM being able to be cross trained as an extra LEO, as your third, fourth Leo. Our vision of him being an edge rusher and being able to get after the passer has not changed. We still think he can do that. For him to reach another level it’s going to come from strength.”

**Kyle mentioned last week, not that your job was in question, but that you’re for sure coming back. What goals do you have going into next season?**

“For next season? I don’t want to sound cliché, but you want to get better. Continue to represent the style that we’ve come in with the violence and the speed and ball hawking. Last week was really cool, the last half of the season was cool just in terms of our guys really understanding what it is to be a ball-hawking defense, what it is to play with the speed that all gas no brake isn’t just running, it’s about communicating so you’re on the same page so you can go faster. Then the violence, our guys are playing with great violence. When you dissect it play-by-play and just watch tape, they’re playing with a level of violence, especially in the run game, that would make anyone in the league very happy. To continue to grow off of that and get better and provide a spark so the offense can, our offense is pretty good and if you just give them the ball a few times, if you spark the stadium just a little bit, you could blow the doors open pretty quick. Overall, just continue to get better and continue to represent the style that we’re trying to create and the image that we’re trying to be on defense.”

**Do you have time during the season to self-evaluate, to take a step back and look at how either you prepare the guys, you put together a game plan with your assistants and how you call a game?**

“I self-reflect. I’m always self-reflecting, always looking at ourselves, always trying to find a way to get better. To implement it mid-season and try to throw a curveball at the guys when everything that we try to do is remain consistent, the consistent messages, the consistent scheme, just being consistent throughout game week, we believe is very important for a player and their preparation. So, to try to throw curveballs throughout the week, I’m not sure how realistic it’d be. I’ve always been around consistency. I’m sure there are other teams that believe that you can change things up throughout the week. For me, I’ve got plenty of notes on things that I want to attack in the offseason to see if we can get better.”

**Are there things that as you’ve gone through the season you’re feeling more comfortable with that maybe early on you were a little bit unsure about or maybe you didn’t feel like you were in a good rhythm with?**

“I don’t know if the season really ever gave us a chance on defense to get into that because of all the different things that were happening in the first half of the year. We as a staff, we feel really good about the way we’ve been able to handle things, the way we’ve been able to prepare our players and the positions that they’re put in to see if we can be successful to really try to build the system and an understanding of what exactly we are on defense and what it’s supposed to look like. There’s stuff, will we do differently? There’s going to be stuff. Can’t really get into too much detail now, but to answer your question I don’t know if there’s really a curveball that makes us second guess anything we’ve done.”

**Since the Bye week your defense has been giving up low yards per carry and you're making offenses one dimensional. How is that helping your pass defense?**

“Where it helps pass-defense wise is the play fakes aren't as big of a deal, if you want to put it in that regard. We've been performing very well against the run. Part of that is because the offense too, they've been on the field creating leads for us, for the team. Play fakes aren't as big. It's a lot easier to smell B.S. when you sniff out B.S. run action when you've been dominating the run game. The way teams come off against us, because they know it's going to be a fight so they come off a little bit harder when it's an actual run versus when it's an actual play pass.”