

SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS

TRANSCRIPTIONS



**Defensive Coordinator Robert Saleh
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San Francisco 49ers
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When you look at the Eagles offense, what kind of problems do they present to any defense that's trying to stop them?

“They’ve got a great scheme. They’ve got a great scheme and they’ve got a heck of a group of players. Their quarterback is on fire. Their skill positions are really good, tight end is awesome. And then the back, [Philadelphia Eagles RB] [LeGarrette] Blount, he’s running very strong. He’s a very strong runner. Even the speed backs they have, the change of pace backs, they’ve got stuff to deal with also. Collectively, O-Line, all of them, they’re really well coached. They’re humming right now, let’s put it that way.”

What do they do particularly well on third downs and in the red zone?

“Third down-wise, they manage to get to second-and-two to five. They do a great job running the ball, staying on schedule. They get you in that two to five range where they’re very successful. And so the challenge for us is to try to keep it to seven and plus, six plus, getting back to what we’ve been really good at, and that’s defending the run to do it. But, they’ve done a great job staying on schedule, keeping the chains moving in that regard and giving the quarterback very easy throws in that two to five, two to six range. In the red zone, they’ve been very consistent throughout the year with what they do schematically. Like I said, they’ve got weapons all over the place. You can’t handle all of them. The quarterback is so good at locating the one player that would be open.”

Do you notice a difference, and how are you expecting them to come off of a loss-?

“We’ll see. Obviously there’s going to be a drop off with the tackle. I shouldn’t even say a drop off. I believe their replacement started 10 games last year, if I’m not mistaken. It’s a shame what happened to him. I always hate for a player to get injured. I don’t care if he’s against us or for us. They work so freaking hard to get where they are and then for that to happen to him I feel terrible for him. Schematically, I don’t think it will change them though.”

The issues you saw with the run defense on Sunday, what do you guys need to do to fix those?

“One of the worst things in football is to have somebody run the ball on you. They’ve got a heck of an O-Line, and a heck of a back, heck of a back. The biggest thing that went

wrong is he falls forward for four, five, and it's just natural instinct, because we've been very, very good against the run, for someone to think that they've got to do a little bit more. Defensively, when you're playing an all-11 defense like ours, when somebody thinks they have to do a little bit more, they leave their gap and then gap integrity becomes a question. And so, that was a domino effect as the game went on. They had a couple of cool runs that we feel like we've got fixed, we've got handled now, with that trap. It just got to the point it just seemed like people were just trying to do a little bit too much and gaps started opening. When you have a back like [Dallas Cowboys RB Ezekiel] Zeke [Elliott] he's going to find it and he's going to expose you."

When that's happening during a game, what can you as a coach do to sort of get them back on their responsibilities?

"You've got to coach them. You've just got to keep coaching them. Hopefully this is, hopefully for all of us, coaches included, a great learning experience for them to move forward, that on the sideline it's not about doing more, it's about doing your job and when you do your job, you trust that your job is good enough. From a run game standpoint, you buckle your chin strap and get ready to roll. Especially when you play a team like Dallas. Philadelphia, they've got a pretty good O-Line too. Another good challenge. Run game is all mindset. It's bringing out your dog and having that mindset that nobody will run the ball on you. We've got to get back to that point. We've got a chink in our armor, and we've got to get it fixed."

What's the thought process in playing S Eric Reid at linebacker?

"This is just me speaking. I can't speak for the entire league. This is just my thought. The evolution of the running back and the tight end has far outpaced the evolution of the linebacker. It's not even close. What Eric Reid, what he's done as a safety is unquestioned. He is one of the better safeties in all of football. [S Jaquiski] Tartt is a very good safety. [DB] Jimmie Ward is a very good safety. So, to utilize their athleticism, their speed, Eric Reid being a very physical player that he is, and being one of our smartest players, we as an organization felt like it wouldn't be an issue for him to move a couple yards closer than he already was. We thought he did a good job and in practice he's showing up again. There's no doubt in my mind, if the league thinks he was a really good safety, wait until you see his versatility and what he's able to do as a linebacker. He's going to be unbelievable."

You had a guy last year in Jacksonville Jaguars LB Telvin Smith. He's listed at 215. I don't know if that's what he is.

"205, 210."

I'm sure he's not that anymore. People look at Eric Reid's weight and say, 'Oh he's not a linebacker.' Are there any kind of similarities between what you did in Jacksonville?

"It goes back to a player's style. You look at guys like [Los Angeles Rams LB] Mark Barron, [Arizona Cardinals LB Deone] Bucannon in Arizona, and then Telvin who's a very small linebacker. What they've mastered is the ability to get on and off blocks within a short area. They utilize and create space to utilize their quickness and utilize

their speed. Telvin, over his first few years as a linebacker figured out how to get on and off blocks very quickly and to create space for himself in a very small area so that way he can use his greatest asset which is speed. For Eric, looking at what he's able to do, he's a very fast, quick, has great short-area quickness, and he's very physical. Now it's just trying to learn how to create space in such a short area. He's like a sponge, man. I think he's going to be cool in there. I do. I think he's going to be pretty cool."

With him and his ability to shed blocks, is that his greatest challenge in making this move?

"Yeah, and like I said, when people think linebacker, they think of old school [former Chicago Bears LB] Dick Butkus, block press, get off a block. Everyone's got a style. To be able to just quick shock and shed, get off a block, the whole essence of block protection is to get off a block, defeat your block however you have to. He's got such long arms already that if he can create that separation, he's strong enough to be able to handle it. He'll be able to get off blocks. He's already working on it. He's already done it as a safety. He's been doing it all OTAs and training camp. He's practically a linebacker in the box. Moving him one guy closer, it's really not that big of a deal. His improvement from practice last week to this week, already from yesterday, I'm excited to see him today because he's already made a pretty good jump from a practice standpoint."

Are you looking at him as a base linebacker or pretty much in the sub downs?

"I won't be surprised if he goes and takes it, wouldn't be."

Where would you put LB Reuben Foster on this spectrum? He's obviously heavier than Eric, 228, but he's lighter than a guy like LB NaVorro Bowman was. So, where would you put him on the quickness slash strength spectrum?

"Reuben's a little heavier. I think he's in the 235 range right now. I know his list weight might be a little bit different than what he actually is. Like I said, they're different styles. Reuben does have great speed. He has enough speed, he has enough quickness. He's proven that over time. When you find a guy like Reuben, he's just an elite talent. Then he plays linebacker and you're good with it. But, not everyone is built like Reuben. That's why he was projected to be a top-five pick."

How would you evaluate his performance? I saw a couple times he got sucked into some linemen. In that one tackle for loss he beat Dallas Cowboys C Travis Frederick with his quickness. Overall, how do you think--?

"For a first game it was pretty good, especially calling plays and all that stuff. He's missed six weeks. I don't want to say there was a drop off because I think he did well. His reads were right. He got to his drops. He didn't bust anything. He was really good communicating with the D-Line and the backend, making sure everybody was aligned. I though he did a good job. I think this week is very important for him, to take another step and continue to get better."

You mentioned the communication aspect with Reuben both last weekend and just now. When you were configuring the defense and moving Eric in closer to

him, is that a factor as well, maybe having somebody like Eric who knows the defense so well and can maybe help Reuben adjust to that?

“It helps. I don’t know if it factored in because I think Reuben is really smart. He’s got a real good handle of the defense, understanding what he needs to do and how to get people aligned and all that. Having a calming presence next to you, the whole thing with players in general, the person next to him, they need to get that connection where they can just look at each other and they know what the other one’s thinking. But yeah, to have Eric next to him as a calming presence it does help. But, Reuben’s got a really good grasp of the defense. That wasn’t a lead thought at all.”

Kind of a broad question, but when you look at CB Rashard Robinson and the penalties he’s committed, is it improving fundamentals for him? Is it positioning? Is it focus? How do you coach him up and coach him out of some of those penalties?

“Fundamentals, first and foremost. He’s still a young man. I’m trying to make sure I word this the right way. He needs to gain strength at the top of the route. When they get to the top of the route there’s jostling, there’s pushing, there’s shoving. It’s just natural for it to happen on every single play. His personal strength, we’d love to see that improve. And that’s getting in with [head strength and conditioning coach] Ray [Wright] too. Along with all the fundamentals and footwork, the eye placement, the hands. With all that, there’s another step where he’s got to get stronger at the top of the route so it doesn’t look so violent, where it looks like they’re just jostling for position. When it looks violent the referee just can’t help but throw a flag on him. Even though he may not be fouling. It just looks like there’s a big struggle going on and it just looks awkward in live situations. For Rashard, one of the biggest things he needs to improve is his overall strength, which I think will.”

What’s your evaluation of CB Dontae Johnson on the other side and how he’s doing?

“Dontae’s a very smart player, a very consistent player. They’re two completely different styles. Rashard’s in your face, wants to get up there. Where Dontae is more, plays the game. He plays it smart, he does. He does play smart. My evaluation of him so far is he’s been very consistent.”

When you say Rashard’s strength, you mean actual, physical strength?

“His physical strength. Yeah. Overall strength. Physical strength.”

You had some guys who were pretty emotional on the sidelines. Rashard. Jaquiski. How do you view all that? Do you see that as just part of the game and part of playing an emotional game?

“I do. I didn’t catch wind of it. I saw it happening on the sideline. I’m so engulfed in trying to get things right on the sideline and you see it over the sideline. Position coaches I thought did a great job handling it. In moments of adversity your best character needs to rise. With what happened, I’m not really concerned about it. When you see what happens on some of these sidelines it’s unbelievable. I think our guys, that’s a pretty tame moment in comparison to the rest of the league. Those guys being so young,

great learning experience. It was squashed the second it happened. Those guys within a series were back united. It happens.”

Last week I asked you about the third down defense and you said there was something you were going to do, hopefully it would work, but you weren't going to say what it was. Was that moving Eric Reid to linebacker? Are you envisioning that he will help on third down defense or what was it?

“If you look at our first three third-and-six pluses, it looked like a jail break. We had guys just pounding the quarterback. We got off pretty clean, felt really excited. I think we were four of six on six-plus yardage. The sad part is we couldn't get them to six plus after the first three. The third down package never really got to come to fruition. But, we were really excited about our plan going in. It showed. They lived on third and one and third and two and that kind of thwarted our plan.”

Do you see that as a gigantic move, a big undertaking for him or do you think it's what your strong safety role is in your defense, do you think it's not as severe as one might think going from safety to linebacker?

“Depends on the person. Eric is a very versatile, very smart, and a very committed individual. You give him a challenge and he's going to kill it. For a guy like Eric, I don't think it's a big deal because the person he is and the challenges that he's going to take on. And, he's a team guy. He's embraced it. He's excited about it. From all our conversations and just the amount of work that he's put into it over these two weeks to get himself to where he is today, which I think it's just going to keep going up, it just speaks volumes for him. For some people it might be, but for a guy like Eric, no.”

Do you see a switch with him, because it seemed like he wasn't all that thrilled about it? Did you have to have a talk with him to kind of explain where you're coming from?

“No. Never. I was getting ready for it and he goes, 'Let's do it.' Eric's been awesome. We've stood up here and we've always talked about it. The best 11. We're trying to do everything we can to get our best 11 on the football field at the same time. He is one of those. He's a selfless player. He knows that he's capable of doing anything that you ask him to do. To answer your question, he's been pretty excited about it, from our talks.”

Just to be clear, is he in the linebacker meeting room? Is it a full-time switch at this point?

“I'll save that one. Well, it's not a secret. He's been with the linebackers individual and doing all that stuff. So yeah, I guess there's no secret to that.”

Do you intend to play him in a stacked alignment behind a defensive lineman so that an offensive lineman doesn't get a free shot on him?

“We don't have that. I know some teams could hide him. We're single-gap control. You're always working an edge. Most of the time you'd want to hide a guy behind a three-technique if he's a two-gap, cover-two system. We're single-high, working edges. If he's good with his eyes, good with his feet, he should always be working a half a man anyway. So, he doesn't need to be hidden. Good question though.”