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Chargers Week 5 Media Availability

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HEAD COACH BRANDON STALEY

On the Browns' defensive line:

"They're one of the elite fronts in the league. They certainly have proved it so far through the first four games, and the last two weeks in particular. You're talking about two former number one draft picks up front. They also add [Browns DE] Takkarist McKinley, too, who is a former first-round draft pick. Takk's first year was my first year in the NFL, so I did a lot of work on him. They've done a really nice job adding pieces to that front. [Browns DT] Malik McDowell is a former high draft pick that's playing at a high level — [Browns DT] Malik Jackson, that group of guys. I think that they've done a really good job of adding pieces to that team. I think that [Browns Executive Vice President, Football Operations & General Manager] Andrew Berry is doing an outstanding job there with [Head Coach] Kevin [Stefanski]. That's certainly a strength of their football team. [Browns DE] Myles [Garrett] is as good as it gets on the edge in the NFL."

On how facing Cowboys RB Ezekiel Elliott and Raiders RB Josh Jacobs prepare the defense for the Browns' running backs:

"What they all have in common is that they are all elite runners. [Browns RB] Kareem Hunt, he's actually from where I'm from in Northeast Ohio, so I've known a lot about him since high school. I know his high school coach really well, [Willoughby South (Ohio) Head Coach] Matt Duffy, so I've known about Kareem for a long time. He played at Toledo. He's an outstanding runner. He can catch the ball, too. [Browns RB] Nick Chubb, he's such a powerful runner. He has speed, too. As much as he's a power runner, this guy can really run, too. It's a really, really good tandem. Right now, it's as good of a tandem as anybody in the NFL. We played [Cowboys RB Tony] Pollard and Zeke, we played [Washington RBs Antonio] Gibson and [J.D.] McKissic. Last week, [Raiders RBs Josh] Jacobs, Kenyon Drake and Peyton Barber. What that tells you is that the NFL is loaded with good players. These two are as good as it gets on contact. That's what the data will tell you. Yards after contact is a real strength of this team, especially in the fourth quarter. A lot of that has to do with how good their runners are. A lot of it also has to do with how good their O-line and tight end are. Their fullback, [Browns FB] Andy Janovich, I was with him in Denver. He's an outstanding player. There's a lot of good run game design with that group with [Browns Offensive Line Coach] Bill Callahan and [Head Coach] Kevin Stefanski. They're a tough cover, for sure."

On the running back group behind RB Austin Ekeler:

"I thought Larry was a real presence in the game the other night. I thought that he had a couple really quality runs. I thought he had really good ball security — [RB] Justin [Jackson], the same way. What we're trying to do is find the balance, besides Austin, so that we can really have that healthy rotation. Then, [RB] Joshua Kelley is still competing, too. I feel like we're finding that sweet spot with that group and featuring their talents. Really trying to feed off of our O-line, tight ends, fullbacks to create a run game that suits us and that can attack our opponent. I really liked the way that we finished the game in the fourth quarter. I felt like Austin was fantastic."

On if CB Ryan Smith will be activated off of Reserve/Injured this week:

“To be determined. He’s definitely going to practice this week, and will be full in practice this week. I’m excited to see him. We’re going to try and keep that window alive to fully evaluate him, but he’s healthy. Now, we’re just making sure that we get a full evaluation of him to determine his status.”

On CB Chris Harris Jr. is ‘trending to play this week’:

“I think so. He was out there today. I know that he feels even stronger than he did last week. And last week, he did practice — he was in pads and stuff like that. I feel like he’s getting close. Barring any setbacks, I would anticipate him being out there for practice, full, all week long.”

On Browns QB Baker Mayfield:

“I’m a huge fan of Baker Mayfield’s game. I think that since he’s become the quarterback of that team, their win-loss record speaks for itself. The fact that they went on the road and won a playoff game last year — since he’s become the starting quarterback there, things have changed. That’s what he did at Oklahoma. I think he’s an elite competitor. I think this guy can really create. He’s an outstanding thrower of the football. This guy can really drive the ball. He’s not a tall guy, but he’s he feels bigger than that. I think that he’s a little bit like [Seahawks QB] Russell [Wilson] that way, where they’re not tall guys, but they feel bigger. He can really drive the football. He can really make plays outside the rhythm and timing of the play. He can really play within the offense, too. He can play from the pocket. He’s really good on the keeper play pass game. I just think that this guy is an outstanding player. He’s a real engine for that team.”

On if there are any injuries to report from Monday night’s game:

“We came out of it pretty healthy. Today is more of a walk-through for us, just because of the tight turnaround. We wanted to have more of a walk/jog-through to kind of regenerate our football team. You guys be able to see more tomorrow, but we were able to get out of that game pretty healthy, which was a real positive for us.”

On if there is a ‘timeline’ for T Bryan Bulaga’s return to practice:

“No timeline yet. I think that we’re going to know more soon — before the bye, for sure. We’ll have some information there before the bye, for sure.”

On the Browns’ receiving corps being ‘underrated’:

“I think that you make an excellent point. Number one, I’m a huge [Browns WR] Jarvis Landry fan. He’s an outstanding player. When they traded for them for him, I thought that that was a really good trade because he’s kind of an engine guy, too. He’s a real tone-setter. He can do a lot of jobs. Great target in really any part of the field. Real toughness. He’s a creator, an outstanding thrower the football. I think what they’ve done a nice job of in building that offense, with him out, there are some young receivers that I have a lot of respect for. I did a lot of work on [Browns WR] Donovan Peoples-Jones, who has a lot of traits physically that translate to the league. We did a lot of work on the young receiver, [Browns WR Anthony] Schwartz from Auburn, who can fly. Have a pretty good inventory on those guys. Then, [Browns WR Rashard] Higgins has always been kind of an underrated part of their team. The other thing that makes them difficult to cover is that they have three tight ends that can all catch the football. They have [Browns TE David] Njoku, who is a former first-round pick. When you guys see him coming off the bus, he’s a prototypical-looking tight end. He’s fantastic. [Browns TE] Austin Hooper is a really, really good tight end. I played against him when I was in Chicago my first year in the league, when he was in Atlanta. He’s an outstanding player. The way that Kevin [Stefanski] wants to play offense, it’s just a great fit for them. [Browns TE] Harrison Bryant is kind of like [TE] Stephen Anderson for us, he does a lot of different jobs well for them and gives them the ability to play the game the way that they want to plat it. That’s not even talking about their O-line. I think that they’ve built a complete team. You’re seeing a team that plays that way.”

On comparing the Browns' offense to offenses they've played earlier in the season:

"That's a really good point because the styles are different. What makes the NFL so special is the challenge. Cleveland is a really good offensive football team because they are a complete offense. They're an outstanding running team, an outstanding throwing team. They throw the ball a lot of different ways. They run it a lot of different ways. They have a variety of targets. That challenges you to play team defense, where you can't just isolate on one thing or one person. That brings out the best in you. I think that's why the NFL, people love watching it, because the challenges are real. This team is going to force the best thought of us. That's why they have such a good record. They're a few plays away from being 4-0. They certainly have played like it."

On the run defense:

"Each week has a life of its own. That's what we really try and emphasize here. We felt like going into last week's game, that Vegas would try to run the football, especially with Josh [Jacobs] coming back, and that that would kind of create more balance for the football team. I was just really proud of the way our guys responded. The Kansas City game was a different kind of game plan for us. In the Dallas game, you guys were there, we did not perform well in the run game in that game. You have to take full ownership of that. For us to be able to really focus on that aspect last weekend, to see it translate, that gives our guys confidence. Now, what we got to do is treat the Cleveland game like it has a life of its own, because what we did last week against Vegas does not apply to this week. This running attack is much different. It requires our full attention, for sure."

On LB Drue Tranquill's performance on Monday night:

"Drue Tranquill was fantastic in the game. He played a really, really good football game. He was commander, a connector out there for us. He tackled well. He was physical within the core. Outstanding blitz game for him, had two or three really good rushes that helped us. He was where he was supposed to be in coverage. You kind of felt his pass coverage in pass coverage, too, his range. He's a complete linebacker for us. We're excited to continue down this road with him. Until 'K9' [LB Kenneth Murray Jr.] gets back, [LB] Kyzir and Drue are going to be holding down the fort. We have some young guys here that are competing, too. I thought that those two guys, in the game, gave us a real chance. Kyzir and Drue both were outstanding in the game. That's the way that they played all through camp, which is exciting. They've been that consistent. I thought that they both played well together the other night."

On the defense's improved tackling:

"I did not think we tackled well in the Dallas game, in particular. That was the game that we were disappointed in our tackling. The Washington game, we felt like we were pretty good. It's such a big aspect of the game. I think what tackling does, when you miss tackles — I would challenge you guys to watch the TV copy of a game — when you miss a tackle, like just see the response, see the energy, of the opposing sideline or the opposing crowd. It just creates a lot of energy. Oftentimes, when you miss a tackle, it's because there's a lot of space in the tackle. I think when we've tackled well, there hasn't been as much space in the tackle. We've had more guys at the football and. I think that's a good sign of team defense. When we haven't tackled as well, we haven't had as many guys at the football and our technique's been a little bit off. It's such an emphasis. With this team, you have to be at your best because they have so many guys that can do something with the football. The runners are fantastic, but then you have [Browns WR] Odell Beckham [Jr.] who's like an incredible creator with the football. I mean this guy with a football, he can do anything with the ball in his hands. The quarterback's a tough guy to tackle. He has a really strong lower body. He's kind of sudden. We're going to have to tackle well against this team, for sure."

On S Derwin James Jr.'s 'five positions':

"At safety, you can play to the passing strength, what we would say the 'strong safety' or the 'weak safety,' which we call the free safety. We play 'right' and 'left' a lot of the time, but where you're located within our scheme, they're different. You can say that that's two positions. We also have him play a role within a six DB defense, it's called the 'X' — it's kind of a hybrid outside linebacker job for him. That's where you get five; star, money, X, then both safety positions. It's a tall job description. He's one of the few guys in the entire world that can do it. He's also our signal-caller. The weight of that is real. Like I said, I'm sensitive to that because if Derwin James we're just doing two jobs out of five, it would be easier for him — and you may see more production from him — but it wouldn't be as good for our team. Him playing five roles for us helps us be the best defense and the best team that we can be. That's why he's amazing."

On the 'X' role:

"In certain packages, we'll have two linebackers in the game, 'mack' and 'money' — you'll have a star, which would be somebody else, and then the 'X' would kind of be where Derwin [James Jr.] would be, which is that hybrid, outside rusher, money type of player. We call him the 'X' because there's another linebacker involved that's playing money. It's a six DB variation for us."

On his motto of 'Our Way':

"I really believe in the power of team. I really believe that you do things together. When you talk about Our Way — when I got here, when you're trying to establish something, you want to establish something that's meaningful to everybody within the organization, not just players, not just coaches. Our Way, for me, is relationships and competition. What that does is it puts the emphasis, and it puts the focus, on you. It doesn't put the focus on something else. It puts the focus on everyone within the organization because everybody plays a really important part in becoming the team and the organization that you're capable of being. No matter who it is, man or woman, no matter their role, they can really identify with that sort of mission statement. When you have things going, when you break down, you want to be known for something as a team, I think that Our Way is something that really brings people together and that people can identify with, that you can get behind. It's just a way of bringing people together and knowing what we're fighting for."

On hosting a team meeting every Thursday that encompasses the gameplan for all three phases:

"I really believe in shared purpose. I think that when the offense understands what's going on the other side of the football, there's more purpose to the plan, and there's more ownership and buy in from people. I really believe that in 2021, it's important to bring people together because I think you play with more purpose when you know what's happening around you and that you're transparent about what's happening. I think what that does is there's nowhere to hide. Whether things are good or bad, you know where the ownership is, you know where the accountability is. What we try to do is create real transparency so that we can have high standards for performance, where everybody's accountable for their performance. When you go into a game, everybody knows what it's going to take, not speaking in generalities. When we go into those meetings, we're not trying to be general, we're trying to be specific, because that's what can happen sometimes, you're really not saying anything. We want to be specific so that these players understand that there's a lot that goes into these games. The specifics of it are what players love. Tell me what I need to do. Tell me what we need to do and how we need to do it and why it's important. I think that by bringing everybody within the organization together, you'll have a better team whenever you play."

On if that method applies to the analysis of prior performance:

"For sure. Just last week, for instance, after two games of procedural issues, the way that we practiced last week with our operation offensively, there was more urgency. In practice, there was more ownership for people. You could see it unfolding. Our defensive players were able to see [WR] Jalen Guyton, [TE] Jared Cook, [WR] Keenan Allen — you were able to see these guys do it the way it should be done. You can see it. The offense could see our defense in the run game. They could see, 'Hey, yes, there it is. This is what he's talking about.' That's what people want. They want to know that you're working on things, that you're fixing things that aren't going right, and that you're taking accountability because you're not perfect. I think a big thing about pro ball, and just life in general, is taking ownership when it doesn't go well. It's easy to take ownership when it does. It's much more challenging to take the ownership when it doesn't go well, and not hiding from that because we're not perfect people. I think that it's a lot easier life to live when you're willing to make mistakes and own up to them."

On how success on the field impacts 'trust and belief' by the players and staff:

"It's much easier to create trust and belief when it's going well, but easier doesn't mean better. No matter how it's going, well or not, I think what you have to be able to do is tell the truth. Sometimes you can have success, and I talk about that illusion — and I use that word illusion because I think it's powerful, because we all know what an illusion is, it's something that's really not there. It can happen both ways. I think what's awesome about the NFL is that we have the film that can tell us the truth. The film, mostly, tells us the truth of what happened. That's where our focus needs to be is, is on the film and on our preparation and on the things that really translate to our success. I think that's what creates the trust and the belief, just that consistency in our performance and not being lulled into a trap of one wave or another, whether it's low or high. We're not really focused on that. We're just focused on the truth. Hopefully, we can continue to do that around here."

On if he 'has adopted' the use of analytics based on how the Browns have operated:

"I know that [General Manager] Tom Telesco has a really good relationship with [Browns Executive Vice President, Football Operations & General Manager] Andrew Berry. I know [Browns Head Coach] Kevin Stefanski. I wouldn't say that I know him well, but I know him well enough. Two of my really good friends worked with him in Minnesota for a long time, because he was in Minnesota for a long time. I have a lot of respect for him. I've certainly read a lot about [Browns Chief Strategy Officer] Paul [DePodesta] and his journey through professional sports, whether it's baseball or football. I think the one thing that I know about being from Cleveland, and then just observing Andrew and Kevin from afar, the one thing that I respect is that they're really good people. They're really good men. I think that they're really smart. When you're a good person and you have a high capacity, that you can take things a long way. From what I understand, that's a big factor in their success. That's usually a winning formula, no matter what you're in. What they've done is what you have to do in professional football, professional sports, is draft well. They've drafted well and they've onboarded quality players that fit what they're trying to do. They have a lot of really good players on their team. When you look at their team, they have a lot of really good players that are clearly listening to those coaches and those personnel people. They're doing things the right way. It's not just the winning and losing, it's how they're winning. They're playing the game the right way."

RUNNING BACK AUSTIN EKELER**On the team's confidence level heading into Week 5:**

"It's definitely high and I think that's what you come into the season with. You come into the season with high expectations, and we're keeping almost all the way up to our expectations. Just playing well, competing, and sticking to the game plan. Making it work and winning games. As long as we continue to have that formula, we're going to continue to have high confidence. My thing is whether it's individual or as a team, you should always have high confidence in yourself and your abilities. If you don't, that's what you need to work on."

On the run-blocking against the Raiders:

"It was amazing. There were gaps, double-teams. The Raiders play a little bit further back, so it was allowing our guys up front to get really good double-teams solidified so we could get through to the second level to linebackers. They did a really good job of that. I'm looking forward to seeing more of that coming. Even with pass protection, it's coming together. I mean, [T] Rashawn Slater — wow. Talk about a pick, that guy is locked down over there. You're just thinking, 'Keep doing this, J-Herb [QB Justin Herbert]. Stay upright, keep pushing the ball down the field.' Then we start running the ball, as well."

On getting his ankle taped mid-game on Monday night:

"It's just football, you sprain an ankle every once in a while. Tape it up, get back in there."

On the offensive line:

"The camaraderie in the entire team has been growing. The trust in the offensive line has been part of that as well. Even with the coaching staff, there's a lot of camaraderie that we missed out on last year. We didn't have an offseason; we didn't have OTAs, preseason. Just having that and being around each other for a lot longer and building chemistry with how we're going to call the IDs from the center. Usually, you see a quarterback out there calling points. We have [C] Corey Linsley, who's been out there so long, now he's calling the points. It allows [QB] Justin [Herbert] to take one thing off his plate. He'll [Herbert] work into that as he continues to grow as a player, but it's been great to have him [Linsley] at the point and guys around him that also hold up their end."

On the offensive line creating rushing lanes:

"On either side, I'm happy about these guys. [T Rashawn] Slater and [G] Matt [Feiler] are some big human beings. They're really big human beings and they're really strong, as well. I saw the video of Rashawn front-squatting 600 pounds, or whatever it was, three times. Insane. And I'm getting to run behind those guys. If I'm running behind those guys, there's going to be something there."

On T Rashawn Slater and G Matt Feiler:

“He’s athletic, he can run. Him and Matt can both run. They’re big people, it’s usually straight lines. But that’s all I need, just get in the way. Once we can get those guys running, it’s awesome. Now, I can just move the offensive line. It’s not necessarily blocking straight up-field, but it allows me to cut off a good amount of space.”

On his touches on the ball through Week 4:

“I’m pretty open about it just as far as my workload. I can’t take every single rep the entire season, I don’t think many running backs can. Maybe [Tennessee Titans RB] Derrick Henry can. But there has to be some balance, and we have other backs that have been making plays as well. I’m happy to see these guys get in the game, too. I’m a 195-pound guy, you see the guys tackling me. It hurts, football hurts. That’s why recovery is such an important part of it and making sure there’s a balance. That’s what I’ve always had. When [Broncos and former Chargers RB] Melvin Gordon [III] was here, it was the same thing — a balance. I’m still able to produce during that time, but that’s because I’m available and healthy.”

On the Browns defense:

“Any defense we go against where there’s a lot of edge rushers, we have to have a plan. You have to have a run plan for how they fit in the run, and a pass plan too, just mixing it up. Putting a tight end on top of them, putting motions in front of them, making them play football. They can’t just rush the passer all day. It comes down to our game plan. We had a great game plan against [Washington Football Team DE] Chase Young over in Washington for that pass rush. And then even for the Raiders, too. It comes down to how we’re going to put a different view in front of these guys to slow them down and get some misdirection; make them stop their feet. Putting a chip on them, bunch them with the tight end, things like that. When it comes down to that, I feel like we can really open up our run game when we’re just giving them a bunch of smoke and mirrors.”

DEFENSIVE LINEMAN LINVAL JOSEPH**On stopping the run against the Browns:**

“We have to play a complete game. They have a good offensive team, a good defensive team — they’re a good team. We just have to do our job. Stop the run, get after them, do our job on the offense and be great on special teams. I think special teams might be the winner’s edge this week.”

On the key to successfully stopping the Raiders run game in Week 4:

“We did our job to the best of our ability. The focus was on it. We had a great week of preparation, and it showed up on Monday.”

On DL Christian Covington:

“Covington’s a good veteran guy that can do a lot of things. I think this is the first time in his career he’s around a group of guys that are tight and want him to have success; that want to help him. As you can see, it’s starting to translate on the field in practice. He’s been doing a great job.”

On the physicality of the scheme against the Raiders:

“Every week is different and Monday night was one of those things where it’s a Conference game, and you have to bring your all. You can see the difference in that game from previous weeks because our focus was on it. We wanted to be physical, and we wanted to play a complete game, which still is not complete. But that’s the goal every week, to play a complete game. We’re working on that each and every week.”

On his definition of ‘complete game’:

“Complete game means no penalties. Every phase of the game is somewhat perfect and as a football player, as a football team, that’s what you chase; to have complete games.”

On his belief in Head Coach Brandon Staley:

“We as a team, we’re close. We’re working together, we all believe in one another. That’s where it starts; you have to believe in one another. You have to come in each and every day and put in that work. You’ll see growth each and every week and it’s starting to come to life.”

On DL Jerry Tillery:

“Jerry’s a heck of a player and every week he’s getting better just like everybody else. I try to tell all the guys, ‘It’s not what you did last week, now it’s what you can do this upcoming week. You want to get better each and every week, you never want to stay the same.’ That’s our motto right now — we have to be better than we were last week.”

On winning back-to-back division games:

“Right now, we’re so focused on the Browns it’s not even funny. Every week is a dog fight, another chance to prove ourselves, and this week we have a big test. We want to pass it. We’re going to put in the work and do what we have to do to get the job done.”

On Browns QB Baker Mayfield:

“He’s smart, he makes some big throws. He’s got two good running backs, a lot of receivers, they have a lot of weapons over there. Their head coach [Kevin Stefanski], I used to be with him at the Vikings. They have a good team, and we have to play great. That’s what we’re planning to do. We have to play great, stop the run, get after them and be great on special teams so we can come away with the victory.”

On Browns Head Coach Kevin Stefanski’s prior work with the Vikings:

“The talent is so much different now. You look over there [at Cleveland], they’re loaded. They finally have a good coach, and they finally put it together. It’s going to be a great test. I can’t wait for it. Every week’s been a great test.”