

## Chargers Week 3 Media Availability

Wednesday, September 20, 2023 ⚡ Hoag Performance Center ⚡ Costa Mesa, Calif.

### HEAD COACH BRANDON STALEY

#### **On the Minnesota Vikings:**

"A ton of respect for their team, the year that they had last year, in [Vikings Head Coach] Kevin's [O'Connell] first year. A lot of dangerous players on both sides of the ball and in the kicking game. They have had two tough games this year. They had a fantastic season last year. A lot of the key guys that were the engines in that season are there, a lot of experience and a lot of dangerous players. A lot of respect for them."

#### **On Vikings WR Justin Jefferson and his performance against the Chargers in 2021:**

"A completely different offense, but just in terms of Justin [Jefferson], one of the fantastic players in the league. He is certainly off to a historic pace. One of the most complete receivers, I think, to be in the NFL in a long time. For him to be able to do all this as such a young player, he's definitely one of the faces of the league."

#### **On his relationship with O'Connell and competing against O'Connell for the first time as head coaches:**

"He's like a brother to me, but we're going head-to-head on Sunday, so our friendship is going to be a distant second to us winning and losing [laughter]. I just have the utmost respect for him as a leader, as a coach. He's one of the top coaches that I've ever worked with. He's one of the top play-callers that I'm going to have to go against. He's doing a great job with that team and it's going to be a great challenge."

#### **On 'game-planning against someone that you know so well':**

"There's that chess match of what we're going to do. I think the fact that we know each other so well makes it even tougher, at times, but it's going to be about the players on the field on Sunday. It's going to be our players executing at a high level. That's going to be determining who wins and loses on Sunday."

#### **On O'Connell 'as an offensive mind':**

"He just knows how to use his people. He knows, number one, how to feature the quarterback. Wherever Kevin [O'Connell] has been, as a coach in the NFL, the quarterbacks have played at a high level. He's had a lot of different players at quarterback. I think that what he's been able to accomplish with [Vikings QB] Kirk [Cousins], as the head coach, he's definitely gotten Kirk in rhythm. They have a relationship. Then, just the production of their playmakers, whether it's Jefferson or [Vikings TE T.J.] Hockenson, the runners, [Vikings WR K.J.] Osborn, the new receiver, [Vikings WR Jordan] Addison. He's just been able to distribute the football. They've been one of the top passing attacks in the league."

#### **On 'an update' on RB Austin Ekeler:**

"No updates, no timeline."

**On if OLB Khalil Mack had 'a veteran rest day':**

"It was, yes."

**On 'how those in the know view' Cousins:**

"If you talk to the coaches who have coached Kirk [Cousins] — and some of the top coaches in this league, offensively, who have coached him — they don't feel that way about him, they feel very strongly about Kirk as a player. When you're talking about the coaches that he was with in Washington, the coaches that he's had in Minnesota, he's played for some of the top coaches in the league, some of my friends that have personally coached him have the utmost respect for Kirk. I know that we went against him when I was in Chicago, and then Denver, and then here with the Chargers. He's an outstanding player. He's one of the most productive players at his position. I think he has stood the test of time, they've won a lot of football games with him there. I think the weapons that they've had have really benefited from him being the quarterback. He was a big engine for them being a playoff team last year and he has our full respect, for sure."

**On the pass protection through the first two games:**

"I think that our group is the right group to be coaching. I think that group of five, plus tight ends and backs, gives us a chance. We had a tough day against Tennessee, that's a good defense, but we were still able to throw for over 300 yards. I thought that we were bloody in the run game. We were patient in the run game. We didn't get those splitters, but our O-line is going to continue to improve. They're still kind of brand new together, in terms of the sides that they're working on. We're only two games in, but that group is a real strength of our team."

**On the defense 'refining technique and being in the proper leverages':**

"Especially at the beginning of your season, you have to really build your fundamentals for the end of the season because you're in pads. This time is critical in the team-building process. It's fundamentals at every position in all three phases of our team. I think you're alluding to the secondary, but there's nothing more important than being able to play your leverage with the right technique. That is going to put you in the position to play clean football and it is going to put you in the position to make plays."

**On 'one ingredient that is missing from being 2-0':**

"There's not just one ingredient, but I think the key thing is being able to capitalize on our opportunities. I think people are looking at the ends of the game, but I think that we've had opportunities at the beginning and the middle part of the game to separate, and I don't think we've been able to do that. We just have to execute at a higher level to get that accomplished. Then, at the end of the game, we have to be at our best."

**On the Vikings' offense this year compared to last year:**

"It's just different matchups for them. They played Tampa [Bay], who has a really good front seven — as good of a front seven as you're going to see, really big guys, really athletic linebackers. The matchups are a little bit different. We played against [Vikings RB Alexander] Mattison, we have a lot of respect for him. [Vikings RB] Ty Chandler is a dangerous player, we did a lot of work on him out of North Carolina. With the way they run the ball and the way they scheme the run, they're dangerous in the run game. That run action sets up a lot of their passing game, the marriage of the run and the pass. They have the tight ends to do the job, with [Vikings TE Josh] Oliver and [T.J.] Hockenson and [Vikings TE] Johnny Mundt, who I was with with the Rams. The run game has our respect."

**On if LB Eric Kendricks 'has a chance to play this week':**

"No timeline on Eric [Kendricks]. He's working his way back, though."

**On 'frustration' with the Middle 8:**

"There are those critical, big-picture components in a game, and that's certainly one of them that we have emphasized since I've been here. Last week, the end of the [first] half and the beginning of the [second] half, we didn't have our best stuff. The beginning of the [second] half, with the two third-down penalties, that was a big factor in the game. What I liked about the beginning of the third quarter was our offense went right down and scored to get us the momentum back. I thought that that was a really good response for us and got that lead back to 21-17. We have to be better in that juncture of the game, for sure."

**On Vikings S Harrison Smith:**

"Harrison [Smith] is one of the, I think, most underrated safeties of his era. I have a lot of guys who have coached him — [Cardinals Head Coach] Jonathan Gannon, who is one of my best friends, and [Linebackers Coach] Jeff Howard, that group of guys. To me, he is one of those safeties that set a real standard at the position. I've been around a lot of special safeties — [Bears S] Eddie Jackson, [Broncos S] Justin Simmons, [Broncos S] Kareem Jackson, [Rams S] John Johnson [III], Derwin [James Jr.]. I've been around a lot of good ones. But, I think that Harrison [Smith] has been as consistent of a safety as there has been in his era of playing. In Minnesota — again, we've played Minnesota a lot of years, since I've been in the league. He's just always been in the way. I can remember my first year in Chicago, he had a game-winning interception at Soldier Field in [former Bears QB and current Steelers QB Mitch] Trubisky's first start. He is just one of those guys who is a problem. He's so smart, he has seen all of the looks. He can do everything well, pass defense in the deep part of the field, as a blitzer, open-field tackling. He's a commander. Again, so much respect for him."

**On Vikings Defensive Coordinator Brian Flores:**

"Brian [Flores] is an outstanding defensive coach. Wherever he's been, he has been one of the top coaches in the league. The one thing about Brian is that he's going to get the best out of his group. He knows how to fit whatever group he's playing with, with the type of scheme that he believes in. He's not tied to one scheme. He's flexible. He was trained that way in New England. Wherever he's gone, they've been a little bit different. He's an outstanding coach. They play with toughness and discipline. They're very game-plan specific, so you don't necessarily know, going into a plan, what you are going to get."

**On being on the same staff with O'Connell in 2020 and 'if there was ever a feeling that they were going to both be head coaches':**

"There were a lot of coaches on that staff who are capable of being head coaches. That was one of the things that was, I think, for us, such a special part of that experience, was going head to head against who we felt like were some of the top coaches in the league. We had some of the top players in the league to coach and there was just that special environment. Each day, you had to be on it, you had to perform. That's certainly [one of] the best places I've been around. That's what I love about what we have going here is that when you have coaches and players who are of the top caliber in the league, then you're going to get better. Kevin [O'Connell], in that year that we had together, besides us being friends, you knew that he was going to be a head coach, for sure."

## **QUARTERBACK JUSTIN HERBERT**

### **On the Vikings' defense:**

"They're a really good defense. They're really well-coached and they have a lot of athletic guys up front. It's going to take a lot of attention from us, a good week of preparation and practice to get on."

### **On facing Vikings Defensive Coordinator Brian Flores in 2020 against the Dolphins:**

"We'll have to re-watch it again. We've definitely looked at it, addressed it. Saw some things that we could improve and saw some things that we did well that game. It's definitely one of those games to look back and watch again."

### **On the energy at practice:**

"The energy has been great. We're professionals here. These guys show up every day to work and they do their best. It's been an honor to be sharing the field with them."

### **On if he 'did watch that Dolphins game this week' from 2020:**

"Correct."

### **On the Minnesota defense:**

"They're really well-coached. You have to be prepared for all of the great things that they do. It's up to us to have a good week of practice protection-wise, run game so that we're sound up front."

### **On Vikings S Harrison Smith:**

"He's very smart. He's had so much success in the league. He's such a great defensive player that is so instinctual and athletic. He poses a lot of threats. He's one of those guys that you have to be aware of whenever he's on the field."

### **On the final offensive series from Week 2:**

"You have to be better on those three plays. You have to try and complete the ball and that's on me as a quarterback to be able to get the ball moving."

### **On the team's cohesiveness:**

"For sure. We believe in everyone in this organization. Things haven't gone our way the past couple of games, but panicking is never going to fix anything. It's up to us to be able to fix that. As an offense, score more points. We believe in the defense. Sometimes, we're going to score a bunch of points and sometimes we're not, but it's up to us as a team to play together."

### **On if the start of this season is 'any more frustrating than other periods' of his career:**

"It's just the NFL. You have to come and take it for what it is. We've lost two games. It's up to us to answer that and not let these past two games affect our next one."

### **On the Chargers and the Vikings both being 0-2:**

"I think you said it best, right there. They're right there with us. They're a really good football team. It's up to us to have a good week of practice, of preparation to be ready for the game on Sunday."

### **On the offense against Tennessee:**

"I thought we did a lot of good things on offense. I think there are still a lot of things that we could have improved and could have done better. I thought, up front, those guys battled. The offensive line did a great job of holding their own. There were a couple of costly sacks that I have to get rid of the ball quicker. That's on us as an offense to get better."

**On the team's focus:**

"I think we do our best to not listen to stats and listen to things outside of our control. We're going to do everything we can to win this game on Sunday. We're doing everything we can during practice, in the film room, in the weight room. Anything beyond that is not in our focus right now. We're focused on the Vikings."

**On the if 'pressure from early in the game' on his mind on second-and-10 in overtime against Tennessee and what could be 'done differently there':**

"I went through my reads there. I didn't see anyone open. They had done a good job of covering our guys downfield. Instead of taking an illegal grounding or taking a sack, I ended up throwing the ball away and going to third down."

**On the ending sequences of the first two games of the season:**

"I think it's on us as an offense to be better. I think the coaches have done a great job of putting us in a position to win. We just have to execute better."

**On if a specific third-and-four rushing attempt by RB Elijah Dotson in the fourth quarter against Tennessee was a 'check':**

"I'm not quite sure which one you're talking about. I'd have to take a look at that one."

## **SAFETY DERWIN JAMES JR.**

### **On if there's a 'sense of urgency':**

"Definitely. Definitely need to get going, keep playing and keep trusting it. We'll get the results."

### **On takeaways from the defense in Nashville:**

"We started fast. I feel like we gave up one or two plays in the passing game and two to three in the run. That was the difference in the game. I feel like we've got to make those plays. I had a flag in the third-and-long, I've got to be better on that. A couple plays we need to clean up."

### **On his penalty:**

"I don't really know. It's tough, it's a boom-boom play. I'm trying to keep them out of field goal range, so I don't know how they want me to play it. I can't not be aggressive. Try to get my strike zone lower and keep working within the rules."

"It's hard in those split seconds, but like I've said, it cost my team seven points that drive. I've got to be better. Whatever I have to do to make it work."

### **On the two deep passes:**

"We just have to be better with our eyes. I feel like we let the receivers get on top of us. Knowing the personnel, who's in the game and who's coming in the game. [Titans WR Treyton] Burks and [Titans WR DeAndre] D-Hop [Hopkins], they're not coming in [the game] to crack. Just us being more aware of the situation."

### **On Vikings WR Justin Jefferson:**

"Hell of a player. He's a guy that can get open, create separation and makes a lot of plays for his team. We have to be ready to take him away this game."

### **On watching the 2021 Vikings game film:**

"Yeah, but they have a different coordinator. Like I said it's different plays, different coordinator. We definitely can take things out of the game."

### **On working to capitalize on turnovers in practice:**

"We do that every day. We do daily drills every day to get ourselves ready to get takeaways and get the ball. We haven't gotten the results that we want on defense, but we're going to keep working and the turnovers will come. We're plus-two right now, but we'll continue to get better at that."

### **On 'how close' the defense is to their goal:**

"Very close, but like they say you've got to do something about being close. You can't just be close in this league. You've got to make it happen."

### **On being 'the voice of the secondary':**

"I am the voice of the secondary. It starts with me getting better and relaying the message. Making sure everybody is communicating, seeing it the same and us getting off the field when it counts on the third down and we're not making the penalties that keep us on the field to keep the drives going."

### **On 'having faith' in the defense:**

"I've got all the faith in the world. Everybody is focused on the results. Like I've said, we know the sense of urgency that we have to get. We're going to play harder and continue to get better. We got better today on the practice field. I have all the confidence in the world in all of my guys."

**On starting 0-2:**

"You have 17 games to play. You try to win every game that you play. You can't put them in any order for the ones you're supposed to win. We've got to line up and take it one at a time. We can't think of 1-2, 1-4, 2-4 or 2-2. It doesn't matter. We just have to worry about Sunday and take care of that one."

**On any blame on the defense:**

"We definitely take it upon ourselves — we have a lot of pride on defense. Our objective every week is to keep the points off the board and to get takeaways for the offense. Of course, we want to be better in that aspect."

**On the two plays influencing the outcome of the game against Tennessee:**

"That's the NFL. You can play the whole game perfectly and when you give up that one play it can have an effect on the game and the outcome of the game. That's why I say that you have to continue to trust the process that we're working every day and we're doing the right things. We'll get the results that we want."

**On focusing on technique this week:**

"Even more. Even more just getting back to the technique and taking the scheme out of it. Like I said, we play hard and we get off the field. We don't know what play is going to change the game — whether it's that one play, two plays or three plays. We have to make sure we play them all the same."

**On other teams going 0-2 to start the season:**

"You can't look at who's going 0-2. There might be some teams that start 4-0 and they can get an injury and their whole season goes. You never know in this league, you have to keep playing them all the same. We're going to keep doing that."

**On Jefferson:**

"One of the most elite receivers we have [in the NFL]. He can get separation and catch radius. He can do everything."

**On 'having faith' in the team:**

"Like I've said, there isn't anyone panicking. We're going to play football."

**On seven Vikings receivers catching multiple passes against Philadelphia :**

"Having a guy like [Vikings QB] Kirk Cousins, that's what you get. A veteran quarterback that can spread the ball around. A lot of experience. He knows where he's going against the defense. When you have an experienced quarterback, he knows how to spread the ball around to different guys."

**On going against 'elite' receivers:**

"Every week you have to take it the same in the NFL. You'll get embarrassed if you take anyone lightly in this league. Each week we stress to come out and get better and compete at a high level."

**On facing Jefferson:**

"It definitely [can be] frustrating. Like I've said, he may make a play or two, but you've got to get back in the huddle and keep playing against guys like that. Guys like that will make a play on you and you have to keep playing."

**On if Jefferson is 'one of the best when catching passes in tight windows':**

"Oh, for sure."

**On DB Ja'Sir Taylor:**

"I'm excited for Ja [Taylor] cause he's a confident guy. A guy who works his butt off every day and doesn't say too many words in the building. He does a lot for us on special teams, too, with tackling. We have a lot of confidence in him. He's physical. He's going to be in the right place where he's supposed to be. Everyone in the organization believes in him."

**On Vikings QB Kirk Cousins:**

"I just saw him in a Pro Bowl a few years ago. He's a good player — he's a great player as a matter of fact. He's a veteran. When you're a veteran guy, you've seen a lot. He's played a lot of football before. You've got to be ready to play."

**On rotating players in the secondary:**

"As a player, you definitely want to get that rhythm established. I know those guys want to get out there and compete every play. It's a good problem to have when you're having depth. We're going to get everything sorted out, we're going to do what we need to do to play."

**On being frustrated with the defensive performances:**

"It's definitely been frustrating. We haven't gotten the results that we wanted. We're going to keep working hard. We're not panicking. We're not quitting. We're not turning our back on each other. We're going to continue to get better each and every week."