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Chargers Week 11 Media Availability

Wednesday, November 17, 2021 ⚡ Hoag Performance Center ⚡ Costa Mesa, Calif.

HEAD COACH BRANDON STALEY

On OLB Joey Bosa:

“Joey Bosa is in the COVID[-19] protocol as a close contact trace of [DL] Jerry Tillery, so he is going to be out for a few days. He’s kind of day-to-day that way. He has tested negative, but he is going to be out for a few days.”

On if DL Jerry Tillery tested positive for COVID-19:

“Jerry Tillery has tested positive, yes.”

On if he has been in contact with Bosa and Tillery:

“They’re both feeling well, both of them are. I’ve been in contact with both of those guys. [DL] Christian Covington is another player who will be in the COVID[-19] protocol, as well. [LB] Drue [Tranquill] is still in there and trending positive.”

On Bosa’s protocol compliance:

“I know that Joey has been extremely compliant here at the facility and on the practice field. I know that we’ve been extremely diligent within our protocols. The NFL has been here several times, including last week, to spot-check us. We have video cameras throughout the facility that specifically are looking for those types of people to be compliant. I think that we’ve done a really good job here, with the Chargers, of putting the emphasis on this issue. As I think we’ve seen throughout the country, there has been some spiking of this issue. Now, we’re just going to try and keep it moving and keep our environment here, at the facility, safe, and when our guys aren’t at the facility, making sure that they are as safe as they can.”

On if there has been ‘any talk of a fine’:

“Not that I am aware of.”

On if he is aware of when Bosa will return to the team:

“I do not; it’s day-to-day. But, he has tested negative.”

On if Saturday would be the earliest that Bosa could return to the team:

“It would be, yes.”

On if Covington tested positive for COVID-19:

“There was a positive, then a negative, then a positive. He’s kind of in the middle of that sequencing, so he won’t be out there at practice today.”

On the depth of the defensive line:

“We just have to move forward with the guys that we have, that we’ve been training. Fortunately for us, those guys have played in the games for us, so we have confidence in them because they’ve been out there. We know who they are, know their strengths and weaknesses. It’s a good group of guys. We’ll put a good plan together for them that gives them the best chance to be successful, and us. The good news is that they’ve been out there. You’re not just witnessing something for the first time. Those guys will have to rise to the occasion. That’s thought that’s the NFL.”

On if the four players currently on Reserve/COVID-19 are ‘the extent’ of the players placed on the list:

“Those four guys, right now.”

On if DL Linval Joseph is a ‘non-factor’ in the players placed on Reserve/COVID-19:

“He is not a factor in that.”

On the team’s safety measures:

“We have outdoor team meetings. We don’t ever meet inside as a big group. Our lifting groups are organized where our unvaccinated guys are completely separate from everybody else. The numbers are a really good distribution so that we’re safe and sound in the meeting rooms, whether it’s a team meeting — position rooms are organized accordingly. We make sure that the NFL is fully aware of our setup. Like I say, they have access to all of the video within our organization. They also have spot-checkers negotiated with the union. I’m very comfortable with how we’ve addressed things. This issue was, more or less, I think, something coming from the game when they were in the locker room — which, that’s just our locker room. Everything else, our guys are doing an excellent job. I think that it has been a strength of our team, how we’ve handled it from the springtime to now. Now, we have to make sure that we maintain even higher awareness for this because, around the country, it’s starting to spike a little bit.”

On the headsets going out last week:

“It wasn’t something that impacted the game. The calls were in there fine. It’s just that our headsets went out. It was truly a technical error that we addressed with the NFL. [S] Derwin [James Jr.] managed it really well because he was kind of getting the play for me from the sidelines, so we were able to do that. It was just frustrating. We had to swap out the helmet device. There was a stretch where it was just stressful, more than anything, because you’re in a loud environment, but Derwin handled it very, very well — him and [LB] Kyzir [White]. I felt like the way we do things in practice really helped us get through that because we treat every walk-through, every game like it’s live. I commend both of those two guys for keeping their composure because it was a little edgy for a couple of series in there.”

On if CB Michael Davis will return to practice this week:

“Yeah, Vato is going to be back at practice this week. He was at the walk-through today. I think that he’s progressing well. We’re going to work him into practice and see where it goes. Hopeful and optimistic, for sure.”

On Steelers Head Coach Mike Tomlin:

“Well, number one, there’s not another guy that I have more respect for in the league. His consistency and performance; he’s been an NFL head coach for 14 years and he’s never had a losing season. He’s made two Super Bowls, won one of them. There have been nine playoff appearances and seven division titles in one of the premier divisions in football. When you take a look at them and Baltimore, they have two of the premier franchises in the NFL and he’s going nose-to-nose with them twice to three times per year. He was the youngest head coach, at the time, to win a Super Bowl. When I went into my interviews last year, because I’ve watched this guy for a long time and what stands out to me is his humility. He’s an outstanding communicator. I was with [former Steelers OL Coach and current Broncos OL Coach] Mike Munchak in Denver, who was with Mike [Tomlin] for several years. Mike [Munchak] is a Hall of Fame player and coach, and just the level of respect that he had for Mike [Tomlin] — this guy’s as good as it gets in all of sports. It’s that humility, that communication, that competitiveness. When I went into my interviews last year, a lot of people were asking me, ‘Who do you pattern your game after?’ Mike Tomlin was at the top of my list because he was an offensive player — played wideout at William & Mary — he had only been a coordinator for one year before he became a head coach. I felt like I saw a lot of myself in him. I was hoping to pattern a lot of my game after him. Watching him with a young quarterback — he had one of the top quarterbacks in the game as a young head

coach and that was certainly something that I was hoping to do. I just think that this guy, his consistency and his leadership skills and his ability to adapt over time. One thing that has always stood out to me is that he was a defensive coordinator that came up under a certain system, and when he became a head coach, he was with a legendary, Hall of Fame coach in [former Steelers Defensive Coordinator] Dick LeBeau. They kept that system in place because it was, at that time, one of the top defensive systems in all of football. I thought that said so much about his humility that he would learn that defense. He was a secondary guy that came up under [Hall of Fame coach] Tony Dungy and [former NFL defensive coordinator] Monte Kiffin — it's a very different style of play than Dick LeBeau. For him to have that type of humility and that type of awareness as a coach, to know that you're going to fit your team to the way it is and not someplace else, I think that there are so many lessons to learn from him. I just can't speak highly enough of him because he's one of the great competitors in the game."

On the injury statuses of S Nasir Adderley and RB Justin Jackson:

"Nas will be in practice this week — similar to Vato [Davis], trending positive. He's going to practice this week. We're going to see how it goes. Justin Jackson is going to be in practice. He's probably a week away, but I don't want to rule him out just yet because he's turning positive."

On if the NFL, the stadium or the home team 'oversees' the headset communication system:

"I'm learning a lot about that topic. It's a little bit of all three. Our issue was not related to our team, the technology by the league and all that stuff. We had to work with them to make sure that that issue doesn't happen again, or doing the best you can to avoid it. But, I felt like we did a good job of keeping our heads on straight during the game. Like I said, Derwin [James Jr.] and Kyzir [White] deserve so much credit because they kind of managed our way through it."

On Steelers RB Najee Harris:

"They really hit on this back. He's a really complete back. He's smooth, he can see, he can run with power, he can catch the football out of the backfield. He has a physical presence, so he's willing in pass protection. He's definitely a strength of their football team. He is one of these young runners that's making a name for himself in the league. I definitely think that they've done an outstanding job of bringing them along. He certainly has a great pedigree, coming from Alabama. He's an outstanding young player."

On if he 'is OK' with the decision-making processes on fourth down against the Vikings last week:

"I was OK with the decisions. The fourth-and-four early in the game, in my mind, is was right on the fringe. I just really felt like, defensively, giving ourselves a really good chance to get off the ground and get this thing started, I really liked our plan going into the game. I felt like we had a really good first series, defensively. I just felt like playing field position there would be the smart call, not giving a really prolific offense that type of short field when I felt like our defense was really playing well. Then, the one at the end of the game certainly can go either way. I'm fully aware of the modeling, in terms of that being your best chance to score, right there — you're close, score there. I'm aware of that. It was one of those things, in the flow of the game, where I just felt like we needed to make that a one-score game. I really had confidence in the way that we were playing on defense. With how much time was left in the football game, and where our timeouts were, where the two-minute was, I felt like we would be able to create that possession where we could score and go for two to win the game — that was my thought process, in terms of painting that picture. It was right there for us. We had a second-and-17, a third-and-six, a third-and-20. It was there for us to accomplish. It didn't go down. It's one of those decisions that I take full responsibility for. I understand why I would be criticized for that. But, I wouldn't change it."

On if the defense is preparing for both Steelers QBs Ben Roethlisberger and Mason Rudolph:

"You have to prepare for both styles. I feel like you get a strong sense of how they play with Mason because you have last week to go over, and then last year when he was in the game — you have film of him playing in games. Then, you can certainly watch him in the preseason, just to get a feel for if this offense is really changing for him. They're a similar style of players. Mason's a big statured guy. He has a very good arm, has enough mobility, like Ben. I think that we have a good plan for both guys. We're going to have to prepare that way. Like I said, fortunately for us, we've seen him in games, so we have a good idea of how he plays and his style of play, his mannerisms and some of those game-day differences between him and Ben, maybe how he operates from a communication standpoint at the line of scrimmage in the shotgun — all of those little things."

On if preparing for two quarterbacks adds an 'additional layer of stress':

"We're always preparing for both guys. You play Philly, [Eagles QB] Gardner [Minshew II] was their backup quarterback. You have to have your guys aware of the style of backup quarterback because it can happen. In the first game, you have [Washington QB Ryan] Fitzpatrick and [Washington QB] Taylor Heinicke — those two guys are completely different players. Every game, you go into the plan saying, 'OK, if this happens, then this person is in here and this is how the game is going to go.' It's part of your weekly routine, looking at both players. This one just happens to be a little bit different, like you're saying, because either one of them could play, where most of the time, when you're preparing for a backup, it's only in an emergency, where in this one, both guys could potentially play based on who is healthy and who is not."

On Steelers S Minkah Fitzpatrick:

"He's a fantastic player. Minkah is as good as it gets at safety. I have a ton of respect for his game. When he was coming out, that was one of my first years in the league — I want to say 2017, maybe. Such a fan of his game. [Secondary Coach] Derrick Ansley, our secondary coach, coached him at Alabama. He's one of the guys that has that rare versatility; corner, safety, star, money. He's a dynamic playmaker in the deep part of the field, open-field tackler, man-to-man. I thought that it was a great trade by the Steelers, going to get him and adding a difference-maker like that. I thought that was a really, really smart trade for them. Any time that you lose a key guy like that, it's impactful, for sure. But, the thing about Mike Tomlin, he's a secondary coach. The next guy is going to go and play well. The expectations are going to be high, so we expect them to operate similarly. If Minkah does play, it does add a different dimension of your awareness because he's a true ballhawk back there. He is a difference-maker."

On QB Justin Herbert's 'decline in passer rating under pressure':

"It's an interesting analysis to look back at, for sure. I think this guy has real poise under pressure. I know that we're not going to win five games without his play under pressure. I think that it's because he can play like that, when the circumstances are tight, that I don't think there will ever be any real regression with him. It may not be as historic, but I think that he is going to be one of these guys that thrives on third down just because of the type of player that he is. Then, I'm hoping that the way we play on third down, and I think that's a strength of ours — I think that we're like seventh in the NFL, or sixth in the NFL, on third down this year — is going to help him, too, with our protection plan and the types of route concepts that we're activating, matchups and all of that. Hopefully, it will allow him to stay a clutch third-down player. As we've talked about before, we want to be able to avoid those really tough got-to-have-it situations as much as we can. I think what we have going for us is that we have a guy that when it's known pass, and you guys have heard me talk about when it's known pass in the NFL — let's say you're behind, let's say you're on the road, you're never going to be a factor, as a team, if your quarterback can't play well, when they know it's pass or you're behind, and we have a quarterback where we can go play like that. I'm super proud of his performance so far this season. I think that he's going to continue to improve. The more that he sees, the more that he's going to be able to key diagnose and play even faster. We're going to continue to play well around him. I think that he's been a strength of ours under pressure. What we have to make sure that we do is make sure that we can keep him as clean as possible because we've seen how we execute when that happens."

On his assessment of the defense:

“I’m really excited about where we’re going. The last three games in the run game, we’ve played three really good running teams and been under four yards a carry against three really good running attacks. I feel like the way we’re playing, like in some of those tough situations, like the third-and-ones, the goal line plays — we’re playing tough and rugged and physical, the way I expect to play, the way we expect to play around here. I think that our third down and more than five [yards to go] defense has been excellent. Last week, we were, having a really big day, and then those penalties kind of sidetracked us a little bit. Then, they hit a couple of shots there at the end. The big shot, obviously — the third-and-six to [Vikings WR Justin] Jefferson, which is a tremendous throw and catch by them. I like the way that we are playing on third-and-five-plus. I love the way that we’re playing. I think where we’re ranked is reflective of, early in the season, the way that we were playing against the run. I think what we did for the first time last week, really, was get those tackles for a loss, get those negative plays. We forced a bunch of holding penalties, which I think is a sign of us playing aggressively, playing with the right fundamentals, playing with confidence. I’m optimistic about how we’re playing. I think that the product that we’re putting on the field is more of what I’m used to seeing. There’s still a lot of work to do. I know that we’re in the middle right now. The other thing I’ll tell you is that we’ve played, I think, seven offenses in the top 10. We’ve played a real schedule defensively. I think that we’re figuring it out. That’s real, too. I’m proud of our guys because I think that we’re improving. As a coach, you know what you see on a daily basis and you know the way it should look like. It’s getting closer to being that way. I think that our guys just have to keep diving into each other. We’ve figured out the right combinations. What we have to continue to do is survive the attrition of the NFL and thrive when guys go down. I thought last week was a good example of that, and the week before when we had a bunch of DBs down. You have a bunch of guys out, are you still playing tough? I felt like we’ve been doing that. There’s still a lot of room for us. That’s what I’m excited about because I think that, at the end of the year, hopefully, we can be playing our best.”

On penalties call on third down, specifically CB Tevaughn Campbell’s in the second quarter on third-and-15:

“He got called for a foul on that. If it had been incomplete, it’s a first down. Regardless of if it was incomplete, they would have still made the first down. From my standpoint, those are two technique errors on third-and-10, third-and-15. That was a huge deal in the game. That third-and-10, if you look at the context of the game, it was 17-13 good guys, and then we foul. Then, things went sideways from there.”

On his connection with Defensive Coordinator Renaldo Hill:

“It’s been a joy working with R-Hill. I feel like we’re getting better as we go. We’re figuring out one another and getting that ideal sweet spot during the week so that we can be who we need to be for our staff, in terms of timing and preparation. I think Renaldo is doing such a good job of leading our staff when I’m doing other things, like this, or working with the offense or special teams. I think that we’re very well-organized now. I feel like halfway through, we’ve really settled into our rhythm and routine. On game day, I think that it’s been excellent in terms of the adjustments that we’ve been able to make. I felt really at peace when a kicking game play is happening or an offensive play is happening, I may think of something. I can click over to R-Hill and say, ‘Hey, do we have this covered? Let’s preview this for the next series.’ We’ve been able to really make those as-the-game-goes adjustments and previews for our players. I think that we’re improving every time. Without Renaldo, there’s no way that I would be the head coach that I am today. He has just been a great leader for us. You guys meet with him every week, he is just so steady. He has so much wisdom. He’s so great with the guys, whether it’s our coaches or our players. I love teaming up with him.”

RUNNING BACK AUSTIN EKELER

On Sunday Night Football:

“It’s a little different. We’re playing under the lights which is always a special moment — it takes you back to the high school days. And it’s the only game that’s on at the time. So as far as outside factors, I’d say it’s special in that way. When it comes down to the game, it’s the same mentality as any type of game. But it’s more so the hype and being able to watch the other games building up to it going into the week. And that day in particular, it keeps building as you’re watching the other guys play.”

On his guitar-playing touchdown celebration against the Vikings:

“I saw they had a couple of them before the game, and I was like, ‘Man, if I score down here, I’m definitely coming over to play that with them.’ They had my jerseys and stuff too, so it was perfect — a perfect moment. Hopefully, that made the game a little bit better for them.”

On continuity in the offense:

“Everyone’s like, ‘Man, you came out hot at the beginning of the season.’ That’s because we were running the same plays through training camp for the entire weeks, we were doing that. Once you get into the season, you have to prepare for the team you’re playing. It’s not the same team, and you’re not running the same plays you’re running in training camp. You start to get some variance in there, and once you start to do that and switch things up, you start to get some identification problems. People going in the wrong spot, which changes the entire play from a two-yard gain to an eight-nine-ten. More efficiency comes when you’re on the same page. We’re getting deeper into the season, and we have some guys that are injured on our O-line, we’ve got guys that are playing some new spots. They’ve been playing for a while now, so it’s not necessarily an excuse, but we have to get everyone on the same page, everyone in the same spots. That comes down to practice. We’re professionals — it doesn’t matter if we’re a first year or fifth year, we still have to understand our job. Once you have a lot of stuff going on as far as different fronts, different safeties in the box, personnel. You have to process it all in a short time, sometimes it just builds up. It’s like, ‘I stepped wrong. Half-step here, and it got me behind now.’ That’s why football is so great, it’s the ultimate team game. Which means we need the ultimate buy-in and the ultimate focus. We need to get back to making sure we’re tightened up on our screws, and we’ll get back to the roll we were on at the beginning of the season.”

On adjustments teams make once season starts:

“You come into season, you’ve practiced these plays you’ve been running in training camp for so long. Now, defenses start to adjust. We have to adjust to their adjustments and it’s kind of a back-and-forth chess match.”

On the ‘next man up’ mentality:

“We’re banged up a little bit on defense, we have some new guys playing. People have to step up and when you have people hurt, it’s like, ‘Okay, someone who hasn’t taken those reps, has to come and take those reps.’ And they haven’t been getting the coaching that [Head] Coach [Brandon] Staley’s been putting on them; or [Offensive Coordinator] Joe Lombardi. There has to be some catchup, but it’s always a rush so you don’t have enough time. Sometimes, things are a little bit looser than you’d like. That’s football.”

On the second running back spot:

“It adds more opportunities for me because I’m on the field longer. I thought [RB Justin Jackson] JJ stepped up in the game right after that week [against the Patriots], just showing that this is his spot. Now he’s injured and working back from that, but I’m excited about what I saw from him. That’s the old JJ I used to know and see. [RB] Larry [Rountree III] stepping in right now. He’s pretty much the No. 2 — [RB Joshua] JK [Kelley] also coming in as well. They’re all getting opportunities to play, but still, we always want to see those guys making plays; more consistently just being on it. It’s the trust factor they need to keep building. It comes down to, ‘Hey, who could we have on the field and expect to know what they’re going to do out there — expect to know what they’re going to do?’ You have to build that trust within the coaching staff. That’s what I told them, when I was a young player, one of the most important things is having the coaches trust you on the field. It’s one of the most important things. There are all these new plays coming in and it’s a really quick turnaround. There’s a lot of things that are looser. We need to get these things tightened up. As older players, we understand that. Younger players have to get going. It’s getting more reps, giving them good coaching, keeping them positive. Sometimes it takes someone else’s perspective to really get something across to us.”

SAFETY DERWIN JAMES JR.

On headset issues affecting communication:

“In the second quarter, we were on defense, and I’m used to huddling up and the signal just went out — I couldn’t hear anything. I look to the side he’s talking into the mic, I could see him on the sidelines, but I couldn’t hear anything. For the whole quarter I couldn’t hear anything, I just had to go off signals, him signaling or me on third down having to run down there like a quarterback would and run back out to get the play. It’s just something we had to adjust to.”

On headset malfunction affecting the game:

“That’s part of the game, you have to be able to adjust, I am not here to blame as that’s the reason, I feel we still got off the field sometimes plays still need to be made.”

On COVID-19 affecting personnel groupings:

“You have to watch yourself and every day you have to take it. ‘Hey, that could be me that get a close contact, that could be me that affects my teammates’. So, you want to do everything within your power to stay clean and to stay safe. Whenever those guys become available to us again, we are looking forward to having them back out there.”

On Steelers QB Ben Roethlisberger:

“We have to prepare like he’s playing. He’s a professional, he can get healthy within the next two days, or a day — we have to prepare like he’s still there. Whoever their quarterback is we have to prepare because it’s football.”

On the Steelers offense:

“I didn’t get to check them all out yet, but it is basically all the same stuff. They’re going to run that stuff; they have a lot of faith in them. Last year we played against their backup quarterback, and you see what happened.”

On improving the defense:

“Focus is on the details a bit more. Knowing our leverage, knowing what we have to do in the secondary. Getting guys on the ground, some guys are fighting to get the extra yards. Just doing our part, making sure we’re all tied together, and having that focus.”

On Steelers RB Najee Harris:

“I like Najee’s game. I feel like he’s a big guy. He runs hard, runs strong, and I feel like he’s going to have a great career in this league. Every time we play it’s a tough challenge to bring them down. He’s another guy we have to beat to the ball.”

On Vikings run game performance:

“There definitely were positive notes to the game. I know we didn’t get the outcome we wanted, but as a defense, I feel like we did take some steps forward that are going to help us. I feel like we can clean up a few things and we’ll be good.”

On forcing takeaways:

“I do feel like we’re close. The operations are there. [Head] Coach [Brandon Staley] is doing a great job in putting us in positions. We just have to be there to make the plays. That game is coming where we are going to take over and get takeaways — you know they come in bunches.”

On the mood within the locker room:

“It’s, ‘Let’s go. Let’s get these wins — let’s get back to winning.’ It’s a sense of urgency and we have to go.”

On third down conversions:

“It’s a combination of everything. It’s the details, it’s the penalties — I mean we’ve got a lot of third down penalties. It’s been some holding calls, some hitting the quarterback. Been a lot of different things we can clean up overall. It’s not just penalties, not just leverage, it’s a combination of everything.”