

Josh.Rupprecht@chargers.nfl.com ⚡ Jennifer.Rojas@chargers.nfl.com ⚡ Jamaal.LaFrance@chargers.nfl.com  
Brock.Anderson@chargers.nfl.com ⚡ Lauren.Meyer@chargers.nfl.com ⚡ Danny.Markino@chargers.nfl.com

## Chargers Media Availability

Thursday, January 20, 2022 ⚡ Hoag Performance Center ⚡ Costa Mesa, Calif.

### GENERAL MANAGER TOM TELESKO

#### **Opening statement:**

“I appreciate everyone’s patience and flexibility. I know that we meant to do this last week, but this is your time, so I’ll stay here and answer questions for as long as you need me to.”

#### **On his assessment of Head Coach Brandon Staley’s first season:**

“He handled things very well this year. It’s great working with them. We have a great working relationship. I think you guys can tell, too, he really has a great connection with our team and with our players. I think you saw that on a daily basis. He has definitely brought an identity to this football team, which is step number one as you come in as a new head coach. I think that the future’s bright with where we are. We have a lot of work to do, obviously, but I think that he handled a lot of situations — not to mention everything that goes on with COVID[-19], which is not really part of the head coach handbook. He handled things very, very well this year.”

#### **On Staley’s decision-making processes:**

“I love the identity that we play with; I really do. I support him 100 percent. I’m a big believer in using data to make decisions, as is he. It doesn’t mean that there isn’t context involved in that — I mean, we’re not robots — but we’re trying to put our players in a position of strength, in a position of advantage, as much as we can. I love the identity that we play with. I know, on the outside, that not everyone may agree with how we play, but it’s who we are and I love it. That’s what we are and that’s the way that we’re going to play moving forward. You know what you get with us; we’re going to play aggressive — it’s not reckless, I really don’t see it as reckless. All of these decisions, even though they’re made in real-time, there’s research involved in it prior to the game. There’s also context involved in that, too. Like I said, Brandon [Staley] is not a robot, but with decisions on the field, you have to make quick, quick decisions in real-time. I thought that he did a really excellent job with that this year. He has my support behind that.”

#### **On ‘how secure he is with his job security moving forward’:**

“I don’t think a lot about job security, but I’ll say this: I’m lucky and grateful to have this job. I love it. I love being a part of a team and leading a team at the highest level. We all know, in this job, that nothing is guaranteed ever. That’s why I have a sense of urgency every single day. That’s just how we work. As far as how we get better for next year, it just means that right now, the focus is on 2021, on this particular team, and then as we put the plan together for this offseason, what we need to do. We were playing for a division lead in mid-December. But we’re not there yet because we didn’t even make the tournament. We do have work to do. It certainly wasn’t a perfect product by any means, but I think if you’re objective and you look at our team this season, I think it’d be hard to say that you don’t see a bright future with this football team, but that’s not to say that it’s a finished product. We know that we still have got work to do, but I think it’s an exciting start with what Brandon [Staley] has put together and what we have, together, as a team. I’m excited to get moving on it. The one positive of having this presser this week, two weeks removed from the season, there’s so much emotion after that last game, it’s helped me a little bit to kind of get a better perspective on what happened this past season, not so much focus on the last game of the season and not remember what happened in the early in the year and the middle part of the year. We have some really smart coaches, we have a really strong front office, a great scouting staff — we’ll have a really good plan for 2022.”

**On minority candidates for head coach and general manager openings across the league:**

“This is the best part, I think, watching this interview process — from the outside, obviously, with the teams that have openings — and to see the amount of people that are being interviewed from all different backgrounds. You’re talking about, for different GM jobs and head coaching jobs, interviewing eight, 10, 12 people, it didn’t used to be like that. I think having more exposure to know what’s out there, because I can tell you — from being in this league for as long as I have, and I do have a good amount of contacts just from networking and knowing people in this league — the pipeline is there; it’s there, you just have to do the work. I think we’re seeing that. With some of the names that I’ve seen interviewing for jobs, it’s a really good group — not only coaching-wise, but general manager-wise. Hopefully, some of those continue to be hired. I know that our numbers across the league, going into 2021 on the coordinator side, those numbers have increased. Hopefully, those numbers will continue to increase. That leads to that pipeline. I know that on our staff, even position coach-wise, we have a nice pipeline of coaches that are going to go on to bigger and better things at some point. I’m assuming, with this hiring period, that you will start to see those numbers go up.”

**On continuing to stress the importance of creating opportunities for minority candidates:**

“It’s up to us, head coaches and general managers, to develop the people that we have, whether that’s assistant coaches, or whether it’s a scout, or director of pro scouting, director of player personnel, to kind of lend our advice — advice that I was given when I was coming up this ladder, and develop our own and have them ready for jobs. In our case, [Director of Player Personnel] JoJo Wooden is going to interview for the Chicago Bears job. Obviously, I think he’s a great candidate for that job, not just because he works here with us, but because he’s really smart and he came up the right way and he learned from the right people when he was with the New York Jets, and he’s learned a little bit here. It’s our responsibility to develop our own in our organization. That’s a big part of it.”

**On ‘why the team hasn’t been to the playoffs as often as they would like’:**

“That’s such a general question to say that. Obviously, we haven’t gone to playoffs as much as we would have liked, but each season is really unique in its own. When I talked to the team the day after the Raiders game, the one thing I told them — certainly for guys like [OLB] Joey Bosa, [WR] Keenan Allen, [RB] Austin Ekeler, guys have been here a while — this was Year 1; Year 1 with this football team, Year 1 with Brandon Staley, Year 1 in a stadium full of our fans, not an empty stadium. We’re going to build on this year. I’m not so much concerned about what happened in years prior, I’m really just concerned on 2021, what happened, how it happened and how we get better next year. I see this more as a beginning than anything else.”

**On the potential of ‘being more aggressive’ this offseason ‘to get to a Super Bowl’ and ‘capitalize on this window’:**

“I don’t believe in Windows, but we are in this to win it every year. If that’s the window, then that’s fine. I don’t know if making a trade will win a Super Bowl for us. If it’s there, and it will help, sure. I feel like we’ve been aggressive. It may not have been the aggressive that you think is there, but we’ve used free agency and we’ve been selective with it. Obviously, you guys kind of see where we are with that. I just don’t believe, no matter what cap space you have, you can’t build a team through free agency, but you can certainly supplement it. We were aggressive with [C] Corey Linsley last year. We’ve always been selective with it, more than anything else, to supplement our roster. We’re in this to win every year. Everyone has a different definition of aggressive, but there’s certainly a sense of urgency every year with how he put it together.”

**On if re-signing WR Mike Williams ‘will be a priority in the coming weeks and months’:**

“We’ll get into 2022 and that plan soon, but I’ll tell you this with Mike: So happy and grateful that we drafted him. Obviously, his first year with us was really a medical redshirt. I know that I’ve said this before, but every time he’s had an opportunity to make a play for us, he does. I didn’t see this as a one-year thing with Mike this year. His second year in the league, he had 10 touchdowns. His third year, he had 1,000 yards and lead the league in yards-per-catch. Then, this coming year, where we knew he was going to have more targets and that we were going to expand where we used him on the field, and he produced again — a career year in catches and yards. He’s had a great early career for us. I came down to the field, for the Raiders game, in overtime, and watching him play in overtime, he gave everything he had — he had nothing left by the time it got to the end of that game. If we would have won that game, it would have been a performance that we would’ve been talking about well after the fact. I’m thankful that we drafted him and I’m thankful that he’s here. We’ll figure out the future moving forward, but he was a big part of this football team this year and he has been in the past, as well.”

**On 'how he would evaluate his nine years as general manager of the Chargers':**

"I'm not really into giving retrospectives on my career. Like I said before, I'm focused on 2021; when we did well, what we didn't do well, how we can get better and how we get better for 2022. Maybe, when my career is over, I'll sit back and kind of take a look at the grand scheme of it and how it went. But every year is different and every year is unique. Next year's team is going to be different than this year's team on both sides of the ball. That's just the nature of this business. That's really where my focus is right now."

**On what he learned this season:**

"I think that no matter where your team is, no matter what your staff is — whether it's head coach, assistant coaches — you have to learn to adapt to the people that are around you. Same thing with roster-building; you build a roster differently, depending on where your team is at that current time. Certainly, my job is a huge problem-solving job, probably much more so than scouting. Part of that is just working with people. I'm called a general manager, I generally manage a lot of people, and there are a lot of people in this building that are really good at what they do, so I try and bring everybody together. That's part of the job. Obviously, this past year, a lot of turnover with the coaching staff, almost a brand new coaching staff, new ideas, new schemes. Made a fresh start, made a fun start. I like where we are. Obviously, I wish that we were in the playoffs. It was hard to handle not being a part of this, but I really like where we are with this group of people. Again, that changes year-to-year. Next year's team will be different than this year's team. The one thing is that if we do look to 2022, if you get one takeaway from this, is that we're going to focus on the whole, complete team going into next year. There won't be one side of the ball, there won't be one position group, that won't be one position — it's a complete look at the football team. We're not going to just look at the offense and say, 'Well, it's a top-five offense, so we're all set there and we're just going to look other places.' It just doesn't work like that. It's just too complacent. It's going to be a different team next year. We're not going to have the same exact 11 starters on offense and defense. There's going to be a total team focus, as you move in through this offseason, to get us where we need to be."

**On 'his thoughts on aggressive play-calling':**

"I trust our head coach 100 percent, I really do. He has a reason for everything that he does, and it is backed in research, as well. I want to play aggressive football. Being here in Los Angeles, obviously, our No. 1 goal is to win — 1A is to entertain on the way to winning. If you watched us play this year, I think it'd be hard pressed to say that we're not an exciting football team. We throw the ball a lot, we throw the ball downfield, we have playmakers on both sides of the ball and we play with an aggressive mentality to go win the game. It's even a mentality that we're not playing to get to overtime, we're playing to win the game. That's the goal. That's the template that we play. I love it. I think it's fun. It's exciting to watch. I'm with Brandon [Staley] 100 percent and that's one of the reasons why we hired him."

**On if 'aggressive play-calling was a topic broached midway through the season':**

"I apologize for not answering your first question the right way. But the answer to that second question, your follow-up: No, there was no discussion of that during the season."

**On 'overcoming challenges' this season with a first-year coaching staff 'that were invisible to anybody outside of the facility':**

"This isn't unique to Brandon [Staley], but any time that there's a new head coach, there are a lot of changes. This year, you're talking about two sides of the ball where there were pretty big schematic changes for us. Part of that is the transition, and it takes time. That's a challenge that we knew was going to be there. It certainly didn't scare us. That's just natural to this league."

**On parting ways with former Special Teams Coordinator Derius Swinton II:**

"With our special teams, there was an improvement from 2020 to 2021. There was an improvement in-season this year, certainly. I really think that Derius is a good football coach. I don't think that he will be out of work for long. I still think that he has a bright future in this league. I do think that Brandon [Staley] wants the perfect fit of his coaching staff and he wants to get that fit done as early as possible. It just didn't quite work out, as far as being the perfect fit for what he's looking for. This is a tough business. But I also do believe both Derius and [former Assistant Special Teams Coach] Mayur [Chaudhari], they're good coaches. They did a good job for us. There was definite improvement from one year to the next, and even improvement in-season. Those guys will work in this league and they have bright futures, but it just wasn't the perfect fit for us right now."



We're going to take a bigger look at it and see where we are. Those are tough decisions, they really are, but that was the move that we felt like we had to make."

**On the 'fit' difference:**

"It was just a general feel, without getting into specifics. I think that our schemes were solid. That wasn't an issue. Their work ethic was outstanding. They were great to work with. As a front office, you work a lot with the special teams coaches when it comes to personnel — certainly with specialists, as well. They know the league very well. I worked a lot with those guys on a daily basis really and I really enjoyed it, but like I said, it just wasn't a perfect fit in the end. We're in the process right now of interviewing a pretty big group of coaches, and there still may be more to come. When we have a hire for you, we'll let you know."

**On if Wooden, Offensive Coordinator Joe Lombardi, or any other assistants have requested to interview for any other openings across the league:**

"At this point, no."

**On his message to fans 'who have lost patience' with not routinely appearing in the postseason:**

"I understand. I think, if you watched our team on the field this year, objectively, I think it's hard to look at this team and not be excited for the future. We play an exciting brand of football. We have a lot of playmakers on the field. We're not that far away. In mid-December, we were playing for division lead. But, when our best was needed — and our best was needed late in the year — we just didn't quite have it, which is why we weren't the playoffs. So, I understand the fan frustration. I really do. There's a sense of urgency in the building. There always has been since I've been here. We just have to keep working on it and try to get over that hump to get in the tournament, and then make a run from there. I think if you look at where the roster is right now, you look where our coaching staff is right now, and when I look at the support that I see in the stadium, in town — to me, this has been a pretty big transformation this past year and a lot of it has to do with the 2021 team. The identity that they have, how we play, I feel the support and I can see it — I see it on gameday, which going into this year was completely new, we didn't know what we were going to see in our first year in a new stadium, in what, basically, is a new market for us. I think that there's a lot there to be proud of with this football team and how they play. We're just going to keep working at it. I understand that people want results right now, and they should have results right now, but this team is different than the team a couple of years ago. I'm really just focused on 2021, and then getting better for 2022."

**On the final three weeks of the regular season:**

"We just didn't play our best when our best was needed. Obviously, the focus is late in the year, but, obviously, we had the whole year to try and pick up a little bit extra ground. But I will say this, and I know it's going to be a big topic, and I understand that it should be; when you look to where our defense was this year — and accountability is taking ownership, it's also taking blame, however you want to define that — I'll take the responsibility that our defense did not play up to the expectations that we had for them. As I looked at the defense, moving into this year, I certainly knew that it was going to be a different scheme, new system, new coaches, but I felt like at all three levels, we had a playmaker, or playmakers, at all three levels — plus, with high football character, high football intelligence — it should be pretty seamless. But, I can't argue with the numbers. We were bottom-five in most points allowed, bottom-five on third down and bottom five in red zone — those are pretty key categories. And, kind of middle of the road in takeaways. Obviously, I overestimated where we may be with that because I love the scheme, I love the system and I love the coaching staff. If we had gotten a little bit more, we would probably still be playing. We need a lot more, but this year, if we just had a little bit more, we just didn't quite get there. As you move into next year, we have a lot of work to do, but, obviously, another year of learning and repetition, I think that's going to help a lot. Another year of player development, that's going to help. Another year, and this is really on both sides of the ball, there's going to be some addition and subtraction, which is normal. Then, we're going to get back after it again. It was frustrating. We just didn't get the stops that we needed to get. We didn't get enough stops. We got some, but not enough. A lot of times, it's some things that take no talent; alignment, assignment and technique, those are three things that any player can do and it's so important in defense. If you're just a little bit off of one of those, a two-yard run turns into eight [yards], a four-yard run turns into 10. It just may be a little thing that's off. We just didn't get to that point consistently enough. That all being said, we just didn't have enough at the end to get it done."

**On 're-tooling' the defensive roster:**

"There will be some different things. Any time that you change coordinators or change head coaches, there are going to be some, maybe, different characteristics that you're looking for. We still had enough this year. [DL] Linval Joseph has played at a high level for us for two years. He's played well. He was challenged, at the end of the year, with a shoulder [injury] and COVID[-19]. I understand that. That hurt a little bit. [DL] Justin Jones, when he's in the game, he makes things happen. We had some players there, it just didn't quite get to where it needed to be this year. It doesn't mean that we can't get there next year. There's going to be some addition and subtraction to this football team, not just on the front, but in all three levels. It's just kind of natural. But yes, there will probably be some characteristics that are a little more important with what we're asking players to do now, than, say, before, but that's nothing new to us, that's not like a new phenomenon for us."

**On the use of analytics and data-gathering:**

"Every year, it's gotten bigger and bigger and bigger. When I started in the league 26 years ago, we just didn't have as much information as we have now, but we still used it — we just called it, 'The numbers.' We didn't use the buzzword 'analytics' at the time. On the coaching side, they've always used data to try and predict what teams are going to run and when they're going to run it. That goes all the way back to, probably, [Hall of Fame Coach] Paul Brown. Obviously, nowadays, there are just a lot more data points. Part of our job is taking everything we have and narrowing it down to what we think works for us and what we think has no correlation. Certainly, on the player acquisition side, there's a good amount, and on the coaching side, there's a lot. It's more than just fourth down and two point conversions, it's much bigger than that. It all goes into game-planning, both offensively and defensively. Everybody does it. It's an edge that you have to have. The biggest edge — we all have similar numbers, but the edge is how you use them. I really like where we are with that right now. It's not exactly perfect or a finished product, but I like how we're using the information that we have, whether it's coaching or whether it's in player acquisition, just to try and increase our odds of making the right decision. It's a probability-based decision-making processes. That's what it all comes down to. We're trying to put ourselves in the best possible chance to make that decision, rather than just kind of making it from your gut of what you think could happen. 'Well, I'd like to see some data behind that to help us make that decision.' It's just a factor just helps us, more than anything else. Doesn't make a decision for us, but it makes that decision, hopefully, a better probability of being successful."

**On if he is 'happy' with the club's use of the information that has been gathered:**

"I am. That's why this is the people business, and it's the people that make the decisions in the end. There are always other factors going on. Just think about a football game of all the things that go on in the course of a football game that a head coach has to keep track of on the football field. You need a sharp, smart, quick decision-maker in those instances, which Brandon [Staley] is."

**On the value of the club's Alex G. Spanos Coaching Fellowship:**

"That's very important because it gives people opportunities in a couple of different ways. One, education and learning, getting in the building every day and working with the coaching staff, that's the position that you're talking about. Working every day with the coaching staff and just learning the position. It's also great for networking because once you get in the league and you meet more people, inevitably, in this business, a coach you work with today leaves and goes somewhere else, then your tree gets even bigger. It just gives people more opportunities to get that experience, to get their foot in the door. That's the big thing; you need that opportunity to get your foot in the door, and then once you get that chance, it's up to you what you do with it, but you need to get that opportunity. I tell that to everybody; however you got here, this is your chance to show what you can do. This is a production-based business. It's not a business where we just play to compete; we have to win. If we don't win, then there will be somebody else in our jobs. You have to come in and produce, and those who produce usually go on to pretty good careers, and those who don't kind of fall by the wayside. But the biggest thing, though, is getting that chance. That's why it's so important, not only on the coaching side, but also on the player personnel side."

**On ‘how vital it is to keep coaches in that pipeline’:**

“It’s critical. Like I said, you just need the opportunity to get in. That’s part of that. Speaking from the player personnel side, a lot of it, whether it’s a former player or whoever, give them a look at what the job is like. You may like it, you may not like it, but just get an opportunity to see what this job is really like, to see if it fits for you or not. It’s critical to have those positions available throughout your organization — not just scouting and coaching — to give people opportunities to show what they can do.”

**On what aspects of the defense’s operation ‘he overestimated’:**

“It was more the transition. I thought that the transition would be more seamless and quicker than it was. I actually thought that it would take much longer on offense than defense. But that’s kind of how it worked out. On the overall football team, I don’t see a depth issue. To me, the depth helped us get to where we were in mid-December, to be where we were with this football team. It just didn’t come along as quickly enough, on defense, as I thought it would. We’re going to analyze it this offseason. It’s more of a deep dive than an answer you could put on Twitter, to see exactly why not, but it’s my responsibility to get that fixed. I do think that we’ll see some pretty good jumps next year, naturally. I really do love the scheme. We just didn’t get through a need to go this year.”

**On ‘the opportunity to bring in more defensive players that fit what Staley is trying to do better’:**

“You can’t take your focus off of the full football team, you just can’t. I’m not going to look at the offense and just say, ‘We’re all ready to go.’ It’s a complete look, a balanced look. Last year, the offensive line, but the offensive line had three UFAs [unrestricted free agents], and then our right guard, we released, so there was going to be change there no matter what. Certainly, on the defensive line, right now we have at least three UFAs, I think. It’s going to be a complete, balanced look at this football team. That’s the way you have to build it. You just can’t rely on one side of the ball and say, ‘It was good last year, we’ll be fine moving forward.’ Certainly, they’ll probably be some change on defense, but that’s kind of natural. I think there are a lot of players here that fit in just fine, but it may take a little bit more time. It’s like putting a big puzzle together, we’re trying to find the best pieces that fit in there. It’s not perfect, by any means, but there’s still a lot there to work with.”

**On the run defense:**

“The run defense has to improve. I think [Staley] also said that run defense is an 11-man unit, it’s about run fits. It’s a lot like playing defense in basketball in the NBA, it’s much less one-on-one defense, it’s more team defense. That’s just the way that it is. We had a lot of stretches this year that the players that are out there did some pretty good things, but we weren’t consistent enough by any means. We have to take a good look at that, and we have to get better, there’s no doubt about that. Some of it is alignment, assignment and technique, some of it’s personnel and some of it is just being in the second year of the defense. Run defense is very important. We can’t be bottom-five in anything. Pass-rush and coverage are probably a little more important to me, but we have to get to that point, and getting to that point is being able to stop the run when we need to stop the run. We did in different parts of the season, but just not nearly consistent enough.”

**On DL Jerry Tillery:**

“Jerry has a lot of skills that we really like. He has that on-field demeanor that we like. Jerry knew defense, but he came along. He’s big. He’s long. He’s tough. He’s durable. He’s flexible. He’s gotten better each year. He has the dimensions that we’re looking for in that spot. He plays hard. He gives everything that he has every snap. He’ll continue to get better. He certainly fits in what we want to do up front. Is he the finished product? No, he’s not, like a lot of our players are not the finished product yet. You look at what [LB] Kyzir White did this year, his fourth year in the league, he took a huge jump and played great football for us. It doesn’t always come along, right out of the package, the way that [T] Rashawn Slater did. Jerry has a lot of things that we like, a skill set that we like and a demeanor on the field that we really enjoy watching play.”

**On if the team will exercising Tillery’s fifth-year option:**

“Like I said with Mike [Williams], as far as those decisions, we have time on that stuff to try and figure out exactly what the plan will be for next year. I’m concerned right now with just getting through 2021 — try and get through that aftermath, and then put the plan together for next year.”



**On if the outlook of a contract extension with S Derwin James Jr. this offseason:**

"I think you know what D.J. means to this football team. All of those things, I'm really not focused on that right now, I'm trying to focus on 2021; what we did and what we have to get better at. That one's no secret, as far as what he means to the defense and the whole football team. I can't say enough good things about him — as a player, as a person and as a leader for us. He's a big part of this, a major part of this."

**On QB Justin Herbert's season:**

"I said this earlier. I really feel like this team kind of transformed. I say organization, that may be a little big, but how they played, their style of play, the resolve that they showed in games, we were never out of the game — especially with Justin. There were a lot of positive moments in this year with this football team, Justin being one of them. Even on offense, we had some groups step up when we needed them. We went, essentially, nine deep on the offensive line. We lost our right guard and right tackle early in the season. That group did tremendous, the front. Everyone wants to focus on the last game of the year, I know that [Raiders DE] Maxx Crosby is a challenge, he was a challenge for [T] Storm [Norton]. Maxx, to me, reminds me a lot of [veteran pass-rusher] Jared Allen when he was in this league, if you guys go back and look at Jared Allen. Jared Allen was one of the harder players to block, probably, in the early 2000s. That's the way that Maxx plays. Overall, if you look at that offensive line, we threw for 5,000 yards and ran for 1,800 yards. We ran the ball when we had to run it, which is in the fourth quarter of games when we had the lead. We held the ball for like four minutes, six minutes, eight minutes, sometimes with those five offensive linemen. Our sack numbers were top-five least allowed. Our pressures allowed were top-five least allowed, and that's from that whole group of five, that's not just all Rashawn Slater or Corey Linsley, that's all five of those guys. Really proud of that group. I'm proud of the tight end group. We lost [Patriots TE] Hunter Henry, that was a big thing here. Hunter, a player that we drafted, a player we love. He was highly productive for us. That tight end group gave us 90 catches and did it in different ways — a great group, great depth from that position. Offensively, we did some great things. Austin Ekeler had a huge year for us. We threw the ball well. Defensively, we had our moments, but not enough. There's just a lot to work with here. It's exciting football. We just have to keep building on that."

**On his philosophy on unrestricted free agency:**

"Great question. If you've followed us long enough, you can kind of see what our philosophy is. We would rather draft and develop our own and sign our own, wherever we can. We know that it can't be everybody, but that's our desire. We have a lot of cap space this year. It doesn't change how we'll approach free agency. We have to budget for the future. We have got six Pro Bowlers and three of them are on rookie contracts, so that has to be in the back of your mind. But our philosophy on free agency is that we're selective, but we also been relatively successful with those signings. We have not hit on all of them, nobody does, but as far as the money we've paid out the players and the production that we've received, I've been very happy with that. It's more selective-based. Our first priority is to reward our own, where it's needed. Then, we'll go from there and look on the outside and see what players really fit what we want to do here. Free agency is very difficult to find the right players that come in and fit at the right time. It's very difficult. The draft is much easier, in that regard. But, we have to pair them both, you just can't try and just draft your way through this, you have to add the frequency. That's part of it. Our philosophy is what it's been. It's probably what it will be moving forward. It doesn't mean that we're not aggressive with it, we're selective with it and we think that it works."

**On the Week 18 loss:**

"Professionally, it was one of the most difficult defeats I've been through because when I looked at this football team, this 2021 football team, you only get one chance with this team. This team will change next year. I just felt like we had enough to be a playoff team and get in to show what we could do, and it didn't happen. No matter how we lost, it probably would have hurt. But even that game, where we didn't play our best in that game, that was easy to see, but the flight that that team showed all the way through, and then to have it end, basically, on the last second of the last game of the year — the last play of the year — and you're out. It's hard to take, with all the work that everybody puts into this, because you also that this is our last chance with this team because every team's a little bit different. I could also tell the support that this team has gotten just this past year locally, so you want to capitalize on that and show that people the results. You want to show the people, these are the results. This is a playoff team, we're going to make a run at this. Yeah, it was difficult. It's just natural, when you're emotional. It's an emotional game. We're all emotional about it. It's hard to speak right after the game when people want to know the why. You have to really look at the whole season, not just that last game. It just gives a little bit more perspective. I could still probably use some more, but, obviously, it is what it is. Time helps heal that a little bit and give a better perspective of what you need to do."

**On watching playoff games through the lens of ‘we need to get better in this area because this team is doing this well’:**

“A little bit. You can usually tell in the playoffs. The playoffs are good versus good. When a team loses in the playoffs, a lot of times, whatever their weakest link was, it just gets magnified. I wouldn’t say that it’s that 100 percent of the time, but that happens a lot. We’re constantly looking at how we match up with everybody else, but I also want to watch how they match up with us. It’s not just a one-way street; it’s a two-way street. I would love to sit back and not watch the playoffs because it’s hard to watch when you’re not in it, but just from a professional standpoint, I’m watching. I’ll also probably watch it on [All-22] video, as well, because those are the teams that we’re going to compete with every year. The work is never done. It’s not like a leisurely watch of a playoff game.”

**On the right side of the offensive line:**

“Just in general, you’re always looking to get better across the roster. [T] Storm [Norton] had his moments. He played some really good players. [T] Rashawn Slater was an All-Pro as a rookie. He gave up five sacks, Storm gave up nine. Okay, I know Storm gave up a good amount of pressures, I get it. He also played well in a lot of games for us and he was also part of a group that put up top-five offensive numbers this year. He was doing something right. He went in and battled for us. We’ll see how it plays out. We’ll just see how things play out. He went in and really battled for us. He’ll continue to get better. It certainly helps the depth of our offensive line to have someone like him step in and play how he did. I know we want to focus on how he played against [Cowboys LB Micah] Parsons, how he played against [Raiders DE] Maxx Crosby. He also did some pretty good things for us this year and was a critical part of us, up front having those five guys play that our quarterback put up the numbers that he did. Our quarterback is an excellent football player, but he needs blocking up front, he needs backs who can run the ball, he needs receivers and tight ends that can catch and make plays for him. He can’t do it all on his own. Is every player on your offense going to be an All-Pro or Pro Bowler? That’s not the case. Will we have competition on that side of the line? More than likely, I would say so. I don’t think we’re really into giving people positions right now. For what [G/T] Michael Schofield [III] did at right guard for us and what Storm Norton did at right tackle for us, I’m proud of those guys because our offense scored a lot of points and moved the ball pretty well for us. They’re part of that. I don’t think that you can exclude those guys from that.”

**On OLB Uchenna Nwosu:**

“I love Uchenna. He produced in the last scheme, he produced in this scheme. It doesn’t matter what scheme you play, he’s going to produce. I love how he plays. I love the tempo that he plays at, I love his toughness. He’s a play-maker. He was a play-maker in college. He’s been a play-maker with us. He closed out a playoff win against the Ravens with a strip-sack of [Ravens QB] Lamar Jackson against [former Ravens T] Orlando Brown — that’s a good tackle, that’s a good quarterback. He made a huge play for us and won that game. He’s done that for us. We’ll see how things play out. There’s really no part of his game that I don’t like. I love him as a person, too. Those are the type of guys that you build around.”

**On LB Kenneth Murray Jr.:**

“I think he can do some different things, but I think in the end, he’s an inside linebacker, which is what we drafted him to play. I think you’re right. We love his skillset and we love his makeup. I think you’re right, he had some challenges this year between a couple of ankle injuries. One was relatively severe. Everybody got COVID [-19] at some point this year, but he got COVID as well. We had a lot of different injuries on the defense where he was playing in some different spots and playing a new defense. It was a challenge for him this year. Like I said to start, we love his skillset, love his makeup. He has a bright future. We just have to get him grooved and get him going. I think we’re going to be okay. I know from his standpoint it was a challenging year for him. It just seemed like as soon as you got going, an injury hits, COVID hits or — hey, look, we were really deep at inside linebacker this year. It was probably the deepest that we’ve been since I’ve been here and, ‘We need some help on the edge right now and you’re the guy to do it.’ I really am proud of him for doing that for us.”



**On CB Michael Davis:**

“He made a lot of plays for us, too, but I acknowledge that, yeah, there were some struggles out there, as well. Michael is similar to what I just said about some other guys — we love his skillset and we love his makeup. When Michael came here from BYU as an undrafted free agent, [former Defensive Backs Coach] Ron Milus and [former Defensive Coordinator] Gus Bradley really did a great job developing him, his skills and how he played in the last defense and what they asked him to do. It really took off. By the time he got to the end of his contract, he really turned into a really good starter in this league. Now, change the defense, different things are asked of him. There’s going to be a learning point here. He was a developmental player when he came in. He’s well passed that at this point, but we are asking him to do some things that are different than what he has done in the past. He will continue to get better because he has the mindset, the work ethic and the skills, obviously. He has long arms, tall and runs very well. He’s athletic. He still has a lot of improvement to make and he’ll make it. Just more time, more repetition, more learning.”

**On the special teams:**

“We made huge improvements on kickoff return. We were one of the top five [teams] in kickoff return this year. We were top five in field goal percentage — now, I don’t take that for granted, guys. [K] Dustin Hopkins came in and did a great job. Look, we had a veteran kicker, a veteran punter, a veteran long snapper, a veteran returner, a veteran personal protector, a veteran gunner in [CB] Ryan Smith, who was really making an impact for us before he got hurt. We have some veterans on that side. We have some younger players on the interior on punt. Some younger players on the kickoff team. That’s not uncommon in this league. I thought a lot of our rookies made really big jumps through the year. [LB] Nick Niemann ended up top-five in special teams tackles this year. Those guys brought a lot of energy to our special teams. We still have a lot to learn, but having players like that on your special teams is not uncommon in this league. There’s no doubt that punt, punt return, we have to make much bigger improvements there. Obviously, we did better on kickoff returns this year with better blocking and, obviously, a better return man. Dustin Hopkins really settled things down for us. Dustin did a great job with kickoffs and his kicks. There’s improvement there. We still have to make more, obviously. I do think that a lot of the young players that we used this year, those guys have the traits that we’re looking for on special team — they’re fast, they’re long, they hit, they’re aggressive, they bring a lot of energy to covering kicks and punts. We do have some pieces there.”

**On the value of punters and San Diego State P Matt Araiza:**

“They have a lot of value because they flip the field. If they can do it consistently, there’s a ton of value. I mean, a punter is part of your defense. [Araiza] is a unique punter with the distance that he puts on the ball. There’s not necessarily a lot of hangtime, but the ball goes a long way. He’s a pretty good athlete, too. He’s a really unique punter. We’re looking forward to doing more work on him. I got a chance to see him this year. He’s different than other punters that I’ve seen come out of college in a long time. Just a totally different style. He kicks off and does field goals, as well. He’s a really interesting player. San Diego State had a great year this year. They have a couple of players that are probably going to be highly sought-after for our league. They’ve done a great job down there. He’s a really unique player.”

**On San Diego State DL Cameron Thomas:**

“His size, he’s high-motor, really quick. Tons of production at San Diego State in that conference and consistent every single week. That defense played hard, played aggressive. It’s not surprising based on who their coaches are, what their staff is like. He’s certainly a player that stood out. He’s a player I didn’t know much about going into the season. Our scouts, I think, did. They’re much further ahead of me as far as who’s out there during the fall than I am. I’m assuming he’ll be at the combine and we’ll get a chance to meet him more. Not only is he a good player, but their team had a great year this year, they really did.”

**On when assistant coaches are requested for interviews from other teams and internal discussions with aspiring coaches:**

“I have done that with coaches, say a position coach that sees his future as a coordinator or a head coach — what he can do to get better. I’ve worked with coordinators that we’ve had on what the interview process will be like when you do interview to be a head coach to try and give them a little bit of a game plan, a scouting report of what it’s like, especially if you haven’t done it before. I really enjoy doing that. Do we have coaches coming in asking for bigger roles? I mean, the coaches are here. They know what their roles are. If a team wants to interview one of our coaches for a better position, we would always grant it. There are certain instances where we have no choice, we have to grant it, but even before that rule went into effect — if a coach

has a chance to move on to more responsibility, higher salary, move up the ladder, we would always allow that. That's how I got here. That's how [Head Coach] Brandon [Staley] got here. It's how we all got here. I think it's just good for the staff to know that. Our No. 1 job here is to win games for the Chargers, we understand that. That's easy. That's unsaid. But I want to see our coaches and front office and scouts better their careers, too. Part of that helps with morale. I want guys to feel like they're not just going to be doing the same job for their whole career because you can get stale really quick. We want to help that. We want to help develop that. I learned a lot of that from [former Head Coach] Anthony Lynn. That was his philosophy when he got here. He really wanted to help his coaches continue to move on. If a coach leaves, we'll find another really good coach. There are plenty of coaches out there. There's never just one coach where if you lose them you can't function. That was Anthony's philosophy when he got here and it's Brandon's philosophy. I love it. It works. Does it mean you may have some extra change on your side? Yes, but it's our responsibility to have the next guy ready to go. Some of that is having your quality control coaches or your scouting assistants ready and developed to take on a bigger role so that you can build from within. If you can't build from within, then you may have to work from the outside."

**On QB Justin Herbert:**

"The coaching staff was tremendous. It started in OTAs, but it really started in earnest in training camp with how they wanted this to come together. It's a big lift. Justin is a young quarterback with only one year under his belt, so things are still new for him. Now, we're really changing the offense pretty dramatically. I thought they did a tremendous job with him. Obviously, Justin is gifted, physically. He's also gifted, mentally. Not just smart, but preparation, work ethic and he has a drive to be great. It's a quiet drive, but it's a drive to be great. You can feel it in the building. To see his second year and really start to see the preparation part, the Monday through Saturday of working downstairs, watching film, getting a better feel for what the team is trying to do to him. I think that's where [Head Coach] Brandon [Staley] is such a great influence on Justin because Brandon give him that other side, that other look of what the defense is trying to do to take things away from him. Brandon can see the game through the quarterback's eyes and Brandon can see the game through a [defensive] coordinator's eyes, which is a great trait to have. Watching the relationship with [Offensive Coordinator] Joe Lombardi and with [Passing Game Coordinator/Quarterbacks Coach] Shane Day and with [Run Game Coordinator/Offensive Line Coach] Frank Smith, to see those guys all work together, that's exciting. I really just think that we're still scratching the surface of what Joe really wants to do with this offense. Justin is still a young player. He still has a lot in front of him. I couldn't be more happy with how that has developed, how that relationship between the head coach, coordinator, quarterback coach, quarterback and even the quarterback room with [QB] Chase Daniel and [QB] Easton Stick, how those three guys worked together. I think that's really important in that position group of how they work together, how they study the opponent during the week, how they question each other, how they support each other. It can't always be the coaches. Shane and Joe have other work to do, they can't be with the quarterbacks 24/7, but those guys really work at it and love it. They get along well together. It was really great to see everything kind of come together. As you could tell this year, it's not the finished product. We had some bumps in the road early and we had some bumps in the road late, but there's a lot there to work with still."

**On the backup running back:**

"I agree with how you phrased that, 'Inconsistent for a lot of the year.' You saw when [RB] Justin [Jackson] got on the field, Justin gives us a spark. He ran well, blocked well. He's smart, he's patient, he has vision. He's always produced when he's had the opportunity. He's been held back a little bit by injuries here or there, but he's always produced for us. [RB] Joshua Kelley didn't get a ton of snaps. I still think Josh has some play in front of him. He's going to have a running back and special teams role, but Josh runs downhill and runs hard. He can convert first downs, but we're still looking for development from Josh. [RB] Larry Rountree [III] started off well. He's a young player in this league that's still learning. Again, his role has to be running back and special teams. I still think there's a lot there with him. For young guys early on, it was just a little inconsistent behind [RB] Austin [Ekeler]. Austin had a tremendous year. Austin can handle a heavy workload, but he shouldn't have to. We have to be able to rotate other guys in and it has to be more than one guy rotating in. We want to have a really good committee there of running backs that we can use. I think Justin [Jackson], as you saw late in the year, he ran the ball really well for us and he can pass protect for us well, too. He's very smart and he was a really key special teams player for us."

**On the relationship between Head Coach Brandon Staley and Defensive Coordinator Renaldo Hill:**

“They had a relationship coming in, so I think that helps. It was my first time having a head coach really having a strong influence on one side of the ball, which really means calling the defense. I love what Renaldo has done and what he’s doing. He’s a high-level coordinator in this league. He has a great connection plan with the players. He obviously knows the scheme really well. He works tremendously well with Brandon. He does have to pick up a lot of work because Brandon is also the head coach. There are some things that will pull him away from a defensive meeting, defensive install, but Renaldo has the right temperament. He played in this league. He knows the league well. I thought they worked really well together in the first year and it’s going to continue to get a lot better.”

**On what lessons from 2019 and 2020 did he take and apply to 2021:**

“If you look at what the teams were in ‘19 and ‘20 and what I learned — I don’t have a specific answer for that. As you work in this league from every position that I’ve been in from an intern to a scouting assistant, to a pro scouting director, to player personnel, to GM — whenever. You learn something at every single spot. There’s never a time in this league where you don’t learn something. I think you have to be open-minded and adaptable, which I try to be. Just generally, you’re learning from year-to-year, but specifically from those years? I don’t know, I would have to go back and look. I’m really just focused on this particular team this year and what we need to do to get in the playoffs and make a run at a championship, which I know we have the ability to do, but we have to prove it. We have to show it on the field.”

**On having QB Justin Herbert on a rookie deal the next two years:**

“This year is important to me right now. I don’t believe in rookie quarterback [deal] windows. If you look at the playoffs this year, at least 10 teams had quarterbacks not on rookie deals. The team that I used to work with, we had a high-paid quarterback for over 10 years and we built the team just fine around him. You have to build it differently, but certainly you can do it. I don’t see that we only have a year or two window with this quarterback’s contract. It’s not how I look at it at all. I think that’s just a really bad narrative. We’re focused on 2022. What can we do in 2022 to go win a championship? It doesn’t really bother me whether the quarterback is on a rookie deal or on an [Packers QB] Aaron Rodgers deal. Either way, we’ll make it work. That’s what our job is. Like I said, we’ve done that before.”