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Chargers Week 13 Media Availability

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HEAD COACH BRANDON STALEY

On Bengals QB Joe Burrow:

“Joe’s having a fantastic season. He’s doing a really good job for that team. I think that he plays the game far more experienced than just his two years in the league. I think that he’s done a really good job moving the team. He’s a really good decision-maker. He’s really accurate with the football. He can make a lot of winning plays when the pocket is tight and there’s not a lot of offense there — in that initial play, he can move and create. I think that he’s really good in the clutch. I think that he really elevates the performance of the people around him. Since he’s been the quarterback there in Cincinnati, their fortunes have changed. He’s doing a really good job. He’s off to a good start in his career. I think that they’ve done a really good job of supporting him with players out wide, skill position players, and up front on the offensive line, the tight end group. They’re a very difficult offense to defend. They’re a very challenging cover.”

On the similarities between QB Justin Herbert and Burrow:

“They’re both winners. They’re both franchise quarterbacks that you can go into any environment and win with. I think that’s where they’re similar. They both have that type of stuff where, I think, both teams feel like you can go into any game and feel like you’re the team to beat. I think that’s a good sign for both of them. I think they’re two of the elite young players in the league. Their styles are very different, the type of players that they are. But, I think that their leadership, their toughness, their smarts, all those things that make a franchise quarterback, they both have them. They’re both leading their teams to successful seasons. They both, I think, have transformed the fortunes of both franchises. Both these players have. I think that that’s where they’re similar. It’s exciting for the NFL when you have two players of this caliber that are, hopefully, going to be playing for a long time. It’s really good for the NFL.”

On if the team conducted a pre-draft evaluation of Bengals WR Ja’Marr Chase:

“Oh, yeah. We were looking at everybody.”

On Chase’s start to his NFL career:

“I think the challenging thing with Ja’Marr was that he didn’t play last season. But, going back to his last season that he played on that team — you know, there were a lot of good players on that team, and you can make the case that he was the best one on that team, and that’s including Joe [Burrow] and [Vikings WR Justin] Jefferson, [Chiefs RB] Clyde Edwards-Helaire. You could make a case that he was the best guy on that team. He has a lot of really elite traits for the receiver position. He’s really physical for the position. He has a great body. He has deep speed. He’s sudden. He can beat press [coverage]. He’s good after the catch. He’s having an outstanding season. He’s averaging like 18 yards per catch. He has like eight touchdowns. He’s been very productive. You can see that chemistry, Joe [Burrow] really trusts him. You can see that. He’s a very complete receiver. He’s still at the beginning, but he’s off to a really good start. He’s an exciting young player. We really liked him.”

On if Bengals HB Joe Mixon is 'underrated':

"I don't know how that is possible. For him to be underrated, I don't even know how that is possible. He's one of the top backs in the league. I don't know how that's possible, because when you flip on the film, he jumps off the tape. He's as good of a runner, right now, as there is — pick a runner, he is as good as any of them. He has balance, body control, speed, power on contact. This guy is really good on contact. He can catch the football out of the backfield. He's a very, very complete back. He's certainly been an engine for them because they have the skill players outside that you have to be concerned about, and then they've done a nice job with their offensive line, giving him a group up there that can really block for him. They've really developed a complete offense, running and throwing it. He's having a really good season."

On if Bengals Head Coach Zac Taylor has 'adjusted his offense to Burrow's strengths':

"I think that Zac has done a good job of playing to Joe's strengths. Zac has a really good offensive background, number one. He's been around a lot of good coaches. He came from the Rams; does that offense look like the Rams? It does in some cases, but I think he has definitely fit it to Joe's strengths and the strengths of their team, offensive line, and skill position group. I think that that's why they're having success, because there's a comfort zone there. Zac's a really good offensive coach. He's had time to build that offense and they've been able to onboard a lot of players through the draft and free agency. Now, you're seeing that offense come to life. They're tough cover, and it really starts with the trigger man."

On if DL Linval Joseph will be activated off of Reserve/COVID-19 tomorrow:

"He's day-to-day. That's our expectation, but have to go through those final chapters. That is our expectation."

On RB Justin Jackson:

"Just trying to get the consistency in production and reliability. I think that he played really well in the kicking game against Denver, which excited me. That was a good sign for me because that means that he's fully healthy. In terms of the run game, we're just making sure that we give those guys every opportunity to show who deserves that second amount of carries. We've been saying it, but going to make sure that we truly do what's best for the team, in that specific week, until someone says, 'Hey, I'm going to go and run with this.' That's what we got to do with the team. That's what I've told them. Those guys are going to duke it out this week, and then we'll see who's up on gameday."

On T Bryan Bulaga:

"Bryan's working hard. I don't know when the initiation of that timeframe will be, in terms of that window, but he's been working hard. He's been out on the grass with our training staff and our performance staff. We're hopeful. I think we're right towards the end of, maybe, initiating that timeframe. I know that it means a lot to him. I've been really pleased with how he's attacked it. Hopefully, we'll get good news here soon."

On if Bulaga will return to the lineup this season:

"We're going to see, but my expectation is that he's back. I think we have to let his health tell us the story. That's his hope. That's my hope. It's our expectation. He's been working closer to that to that point."

On what he wants to see out of the team this week:

"I think it really starts with the purpose and your preparation. If you truly mean that you're going to treat each week like it has a life of its own, you have to focus in on the specifics of your team and theirs, and really come into the building, and then go on to the practice field, knowing exactly what you're trying to accomplish. I think that that's really important this time of year because once you get into that middle-ish part, the fog of the NFL can kind of set in if you let it, like this is just kind of a over and over and routine. When you really establish a rhythm, you're doing things with purpose. There's a reason behind everything that you're doing, whether it's performance, meetings, on the field. That's what we're trying to do, we're trying to energize our team each week so that we can have a good week of practice so that we feel like, going into the game, we have our best stuff. I think that that's the key, going into these weeks as you go, is taking the performance side, the tactical side, and then making sure that your players know exactly what is expected of them because that's where you're going to make the most progress. As a team, you never have it figured out. You're always trying to figure it out as you go. There are so many things, week to week, that you have to keep working at so that you can be your best the next week. That's where we're at right now with our team. Excited to attack Cincinnati."

On the team establishing a rhythm and routing:

"I told the team this morning, in our team meeting, that I think that we've established a good rhythm and routine. I think we've established that. But, it's December 1 today, and then, now there's another level. When you're in the hunt, there's another level of focus, there's another gear that you have to get to. That's what I'm talking about, the purpose of the week. When you're in the hunt, you have to make those improvements, your margin for error is smaller, so your attention to detail, your focus, needs to be better. You can't talk about it, you have to go do it. You have to go do it on the practice field. You have to do it in the meeting rooms. You have to do it in the training room and in the weight room. That's what we're after right now, but I think that we've established a good thing. Now, where can we take it so that it's a special thing?"

On S Derwin James Jr.:

"Derwin is the central figure in our defense. He is the key to how we play. He's the key to how we play structurally, schematically. He's the key to how we play from an energy and from a pure intangible standpoint because of his leadership, his toughness. What he allows us to do, defensively, he makes a lot of people better because of all of the places that he can play for us. We're asking him to do a lot because we need him to be doing a lot right now. Like I've told you guys before, what's best for him would be just to play safety. But, what's best for our team is for him to play both safety spots, Star, Money, X, playing a lot of different places. That's what he's done for us. Last week is as good of a safety performance as you're going to see, him tackling that back — he had two tackles on that back that if you go watch the previous 10 games, no one has tackled him like that. Nobody has. He had the big pick at the end of the half. He has the sack-fumble. You're just not going to see a lot of players play like him, guy that can play man-to-man, a guy that can play in the deep part of the field, the guy that's your signal-caller, keeping everybody calm. Last week was as good of a safety performance as you're going to see. He didn't have any range plays deep. It didn't work out like that because they weren't playing that way. But, he did everything else that you could ask a safety to do within the game. He gave us a real chance in the game. He's one of the special players in the league. He's getting better each game. I've told him that because sometimes when you have a premium player like him, what you can't do is you can't take them for granted. You have to keep coaching him so that he's improving at a high level. What that does for us is it allows all the other players to know that we're coaching Derwin James harder than anybody. Then, that has a real impact on his teammates. This guy is as good as it gets in the NFL."

On the signing of CB Davontae Harris:

"We were with him in Denver. We picked him up, I think, from Cincinnati. I think that's where he came from, when we were in Denver — me, R-Hill [Defensive Coordinator Renaldo Hill], [Broncos Defensive Coordinator] Ed Donatell and [Broncos Head Coach] Vic [Fangio]. He has athleticism for the position. He has a pro body. He has real traits for a corner. He played in some games for us and really kind of saved us, bailed us out. We played up against those guys in the preseason, when he was in San Francisco, and we were able to get a live evaluation of him. He's played in some games for them this year. With where our numbers are right now at corner, we needed to onboard somebody that we felt like could do the job, help us and make us better. It was good to see him yesterday and get him out on the practice field today. We're hoping that he can help us."

On his assessment of the defense through 11 games:

"I think that our guys have come to a lot firmer understanding of how we want to play. I think that we're doing a good job of limiting explosive plays, which is a big goal of mine. That's been a strength of ours. I think that we're attacking the football. I think that we're third in the NFL in forced fumbles. I think that's been a strength of ours. I think that, from a personnel grouping standpoint, we've been able to adjust with the attrition. We've played a ton of different lineups because there have been so many guys going in and out of the lineup. I think we've responded to that well and been able to play good enough defense to give us a chance in these games. We're not performing well enough at the line of scrimmage in the run game, which is affecting not only our offense but our third-down defense. Then, I think that if we can detail our run defense up and play the way that I know that we're capable of, we'll be able to finish this season strong. But, that hasn't been a strength of ours so far, our third-down defense. I was very pleased until about a few weeks ago. We had a couple of tough things happen on third down — penalties and some technique errors and some inconsistency that allowed guys to stay on the field. We've worked really hard to address that. We've really had to fight this year to figure it out on defense. I think that we're a work-in-progress. But, I think that we've played good enough defense to give us a chance in these games. I think that what we did a good job of is we've played some really, really, really good offenses and we've been able to go nose-to-nose with them. What we still have to do is have that performance where we win the game on defense. That's what we're

striving for. When I say work-in-progress, we're working really hard so that that happens. What we've done a good job of is staying together and figuring it out, coaches and players, because it hasn't been easy. I'm excited that we have six games, and hopefully more, to prove ourselves here at the end."

On third down defense:

"Early in the season it was the third-and-shorts. Our third-and-six-plus defense was outstanding. I think when some of that attrition hit us in the secondary, some of the technique, the communication and all of these little things that make a big difference started to creep up after Vato [CB Michael Davis] and [CB] Asante [Samuel Jr.] went down. You're starting to put a lot on the plate of new guys. Then, Nas [S Nasir Adderley] goes down. It's just finding those right combinations. It's been a couple of little things. Nothing where it's like, 'Hey, man. That is the issue.' We've worked really hard so that our guys know the piece that they play in the play so that we can be more consistent. I think that, like I said, being a work-in-progress that's what we've spent a lot of time thinking about, talking about and showing our guys so that at the end of the season — we made those big improvements in our run defense, we want to make those big improvements on third down and, hopefully, we can, down the stretch here, play a lot better."

On how the team 'gets better at the line of scrimmage' and how the team 'is working to get better at the line of scrimmage':

"I think alignment and technique are a big part of what we need to improve on. I think how our setup is, if you can go watch one of the runs in the Denver game — early in the game, it's a counter-play to 33 [RB Javonte Williams]. We lose the edge and it goes for like a 14-yard gain. Then, they run the same exact run in the fourth quarter and it goes for no gain. It's the same exact front, it's the same exact cover system, it's the same exact players doing the same exact thing. All it was, was an alignment and technique between three guys at the point of attack. It's understanding that role that you play and making sure that you do and do it consistently, over and over again. When we've done it, we've played good run defense around here. Even in that game, it was plenty good to win. Where we need to get is where they don't even want to run it. That they can't run it even if they try. Then, now, we get into second-and-pass, third-and-pass and now we can go play football. It's been a fight, a work-in-progress. I think we're improving. Hopefully, down the stretch here, we play our best."

On G Matt Feiler:

"Matt is going to be out there today at practice. He's still day-to-day. He's going to be out there. He's improving. Like I said, he was a game-time decision. He's feeling better, but we're going to make sure that we get him out there to practice and get that thing loosened up. He's day-to-day."

On CB Asante Samuel Jr.:

"Samuel is still in the protocol. He's feeling better, but still in the protocol. We're going to be safe [with him]."

On Bengals DEs Trey Hendrickson and Sam Hubbard:

"These guys play really hard. I did a lot of work on Trey coming out and Sam — that was my first year in the league, I want to say. I think Trey had a 30 visit to Chicago. He's from Apopka, down in Florida. I know his head coach, Rick Darlington, really well. I think both of those guys have earned their stripes in this league. I think they're both high-effort players, high-toughness, high-football IQ. Those guys, they're long. Their best trait is their motor. Those guys really play relentless football. I think that the Hendrickson signing was a really good signing for them. It's really upgraded their pass rush. Then, being able to keep Sam — you know, Sam was a third-round pick. To be able to keep one of your own, I thought that was a good signing for them to get him back because he's played quality football. Their defense is much-improved this year. Much improved. They've onboarded [Bengals S] Vonn Bell — he was a good signing — and two new corners. They have a fantastic safety, Jessie Bates [III], who's one of the top players in the league. I have a lot of respect for his game. I was a big fan of his game coming out. Then, onboarding [Bengals DT] D.J. Reader was a big factor inside for them — the guy from the Texans. He's an inside player that we have a lot of respect for. I did a lot of work on [Bengals LB] Logan Wilson when I was with the Rams. [He's] out of Wyoming. He's done a nice job for them. They've just played really solid defense this year. It's been a big factor in their success because they're a complete football team."

On offensive drops:

“I think you just have to trust what you see and you have to trust — you have to consider who’s throwing it and who’s receiving it. I mean, the guys that have had drops for us are some of the elite playmakers in the league. I mean, when you’re talking about [WR] Mike [Williams], [WR] Keenan [Allen], [TE] Jared [Cook], [RB] Austin [Ekeler]. All of them have probably said something similar, but to me, it’s just time on task together. We’re still — I mean, I know it’s the NFL and production and all of that, but we’re 11 games in together. Things are still happening for the first time even though we’re practicing a bunch and all of that. I think there’s some of that, but in terms of their hands, their focus, their concentration — there’s none of that. There’s none of that. I mean, our skill group is as good as there’s going to be in pro football right now. We’ve got one of the elite players throwing it in the entire NFL. We’re going to continue to improve and I think those guys are going to continue to feel that connection, that confidence. Keep working at it. That’s what we’re going to go out there today at practice and do, is try to create even more of that so that we alleviate some of that stuff.”

On his philosophy regarding trick plays:

“Well, I was with a great coach in college named [University of St. Thomas Head Coach] Glenn Caruso. He’s a big friend of mine and a mentor of mine. He was National Coach of the Year at St. Thomas in Minnesota. He always looked at trick plays as there’s always either good football or bad football. There’s winning football and there’s losing football. He’s an offensive coach and he had a lot of those types of plays. I think what plays like that do for you — they have a couple of effects. It really forces defenses to apply their rules. It takes advantage of bad defense or a poor assignment play on defense. It can create some indecision or some off-balance to a defense. It can create a little bit of indecision if you have to get ready for it. Then, there’s that element sometimes of where you need something. You need a spark. You need something to happen for you, so there’s a strategic element to it, as well. I think it has to be part of your culture. It has to be something that you do. The teams that perform those types of plays well, it’s a part of their culture. It’s the type of culture that we want to have here. We have a lot of stuff up in every game plan. Whether we get to it or not, maybe, maybe not. There’s that element that you want to have that in your arsenal so that you force a defense to have to prepare for more. I think that’s probably what most coaches would tell you. I think there are several elements to trick plays that are important — some strategic, some intangible. The excitement, keeping it fresh within your team. ‘Hey, we’re going to be aggressive. Hey, we have this in our toolbox. We have this in our arsenal.’ There’s a lot to that as well, too, is just mixing it up and keeping it fresh. I think it still boils down to winning football, losing football, good football and bad football. We certainly want to be part of that.”

On DL Linval Joseph:

“[His shoulder] is getting better. We’re kind of hoping that’s a silver lining of his time away, is that he can get that thing even more strengthened so that we have him for the stretch run, as close to full health as we can.”

On S Alohi Gilman:

“Alohi is hurting. He’s hurting. He’s kind of day-to-day, week-to-week, but I do not think he will play this week.”

On the performance of the team in the middle-eight minutes of a game:

“I feel like in some games — the last game was a good example. I felt like we did a nice job of managing that last part of that [first] half and the beginning part [of the second]. I feel like, in some games we’ve been able to come out and do it the right way. Certainly, we’re trying to create as many two-for-ones on offense as possible. I think we’ve managed the clock well. I think that’s been a strength of ours. I think we’ve managed some sudden-change situations well defensively at the end of the half. Then, coming out of the half, I think so much of that — so much of how you come out of the half is the way you start a drive. I think those drive starters are big when you come out, whether you’re on offense or defense. I think for us to be the team that we’re capable of being — just like the fourth quarter has to be part of your program — that middle part, when you can get that two-for-one swing, your whole team has to know that. Like, ‘Hey, this is what we’re doing.’ When we create these possessions, ‘Hey, this is a huge part of the game where points are at stake here.’ When all of these games are starting to mean so much, that big part of the middle is really important. We’re really going to continue to emphasize it and try to manage that clock as well as we can. I thought we did a good job of that against Denver. Obviously, it worked out because [S] Derwin [James Jr.] got the interception, but I felt like we managed our timeouts well. Then, when [QB] Justin [Herbert] got the ball, it felt like being able to finish the half with a touchdown was big. In the second half, it’s just making sure we come out and finish drives.”

On his growth:

“You know, I don’t think that I can put a tangible explanation to you because it would just take too long. Every day, you’re learning so much about schedules, about tactics, about offense, defense, kicking game, personnel, performance, relationships within your team, relationships with the media, travel. There’s a lot. Your family. I think when you’re experiencing everything for the first time, you improve a lot quicker, you learn quickly. You have to. That’s what I feel like is the big takeaway for me, it’s just how much better of a coach I’ve become since training camp. Where I was last year as a coach, as a defensive coordinator to where I am now are two completely different spaces. That’s what the NFL requires of you. This last month or so — two months, three months — will require even more of me. I’m going to have to learn even more.”

WIDE RECEIVER KEENAN ALLEN

On the Chargers 'performing better following a loss':

"I haven't even thought about it like that. We just have to make plays when it's time to make plays."

On areas in which Head Coach Brandon Staley has grown:

"I think just understanding the team, understanding how to take each week. He says every week is new and to treat every week with a new gameplan. I think he does a great job of, like [RB] Austin [Ekeler] says, refocusing us, debriefing and putting us where we need to be ready for the next week."

On what stands out about the Bengals' defense:

"A lot of takeaways. Obviously, last week against Pittsburgh, but even more than that it's a lot of flying around, going after the ball, and playing together."

On what 'stands out' about S Derwin James Jr.:

"His energy and the way he leads us. Every day, he comes out with a passion. He just leads us in the right way. He's making plays. When we need a turnover, he goes down and makes it. They should've given him a fourth fumble and a sack. He's making plays. Every time that we need a play, he's the one who comes up with it."

On if James should be considered for NFL Comeback Player of the Year:

"Yes. He's the best safety in the league. I think he's going to be All-Pro again. It's just what it is. It's his consistency and availability. If he plays all 17 [games], only God can stop it."

On offensive improvement:

"We have to execute and make plays. When it's time to make a play, we keep doing what we're not supposed to do. I don't know how to fix it, but we just have to make the play when it's time to make a play."

On if the speed of which QB Justin Herbert throws the ball is 'leading to drops':

"I have never been a fan of somebody saying that. You have to catch the ball. If he throws it too hard, go out there turn the JUGS machine up and get ready to catch the fastball. He's throwing the ball to you; you better catch it."

On his level of frustration:

"As far as wins and losses, we keep shooting ourselves in the foot. We have to beat the guys we are supposed to beat and we haven't been doing that. It's very frustrating for me, but you have to come back to work, grind it out and try to get the next one."

On the playoff picture in the AFC:

"It's wide open. The whole NFL is wide open. We have to just keep winning and executing. We're still fighting for something."

On Herbert:

"I think he's been playing well. Obviously, he's still growing and getting better with time. Just have to find a way to win."

SAFETY DERWIN JAMES JR.

On areas in which the defense can improve:

"I feel like we definitely can get better in our run defense, but I feel like throughout this whole season we have been improving, especially coming from the last game and from off of the bye. I feel like, as a defense, we've been taking that next step, but we still can get better at our run defense."

On approaching 100 tackles this season:

"It feels good because I love to be out here. I love playing for my teammates each and every week. Everybody knows that I give them my all."

On if reaching 100 tackles was a goal of his entering the season:

"That definitely was one of my goals, over 100 tackles. That was one of them. I needed five interception coming in. That was one of the goals that I wanted to have for myself, that I set for myself. We're getting closer"

On allowing offenses to convert on third-and-long:

"I am definitely frustrated with that because when you have a team in third-and-10, third-and-12, especially with the type of quarterback that we have, we have to give him the ball. We have to get the feel in those situations. We have to keep working on those situations in practice, putting ourselves through them. That way, in the game, we'll be ready."

On Bengals WR Ja'Marr Chase:

"I like Ja'Marr Chase. I feel like he is a great young receiver. Him and [Joe] Burrow have a special connection dating back to LSU and you can see it in the league. He trusts his guys, not only Chase but [Bengals WR] Tee Higgins is another guy that is a great receiver, too. I know Tee well. Those guys have a good team, so we have to be ready."

On Burrow:

"He can get the ball there. People don't think that he's as athletic, but he can move and break tackles. We just have to be ready. I feel like he does a great job. We have to be ready for him."

On if he enjoys rushing the passer:

"I definitely like rushing, but I like to cover a guy and rush a guy. I just like playing football, so, to me, it doesn't really matter."

On preparing for the Bengals:

"We have to stop their run. We know [Bengals HB] Joe Mixon is one of the top backs in the league. At contact, he knows what he is doing. We have to come out and be ready to stop the run. They are throwing to him, too. They are very balanced. They can run, they can pass. We just have to be ready to play our style of ball and get off the field."

On Bengals TE C.J. Uzomah:

"I like him. He's a big guy. He has a lot of size. He's a good blocker. He presents a lot of different looks for them. In 11 personnel, he's making it look like a different look. We have to be ready for that."

On treating each game like a playoff game:

"Every game we play from here on out is going to be a big game. We have to be ready"

On if he believes that he should be NFL Comeback Player of the Year:

"I just want to go out there and focus on playing the hardest that I can. At the end of the year ,when I look back, I'll just let my tape speak for itself."