

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 Week 17 Media Availability

Wednesday, December 29, 2021 ⚡ Hoag Performance Center ⚡ Costa Mesa, Calif.

HEAD COACH BRANDON STALEY

On players returning to the active roster off of Reserve/COVID-19:

“It’s going to be happening throughout the week. We’re going with it like you are. We should have a tremendous amount of guys coming back this week. Then, some guys were added to the list, as well. We’re just still following these rules as they come. Each day, there seems to be an update. We do know now that there’s that five-day sequence that you can test out before then, so that should give us a good number of guys back for this weekend.”

On DL Breiden Fehoko’s performance last week against the Texans and his development this season:

“Breiden came in and did a nice job. It wasn’t a good day for us, as a defense, but I thought Breiden held his own. That’s the type of player he is. He brings that type of intensity, that type of energy, that you need to the stadium every time he goes out there. That’s something that I think is a real strength of his game and something I really appreciate about him. He was tough and rugged at the point of attack and that’s what we’re going to need moving forward.”

On adapting to updated COVID-19 protocols:

“It’s a really dynamic situation because you’re dealing with two different parts of your team, the injury part of your team, and then the COVID part of your team. The thing about both of those things is that they can happen at a moment’s notice. I think that that is probably the challenge that all of us are facing in pro sports, just truly how dynamic the situation is. Most of the time, you are putting plans in place and you know who’s going to be there and who’s not, and then 24 hours before the game, an hour before the game, things are changing. All you can do is stay connected as a team — coaches, players, staff — and that’s what, I think, all of us are trying to do, and manage this the best that we can. There’s just a lot of stuff that’s happening for the first time. We’re going to try and do our best to stay connected, stay positive, and do our best to figure it out.”

On the Broncos’ receiving corps:

“They have outstanding receivers, tight ends and backs. [Broncos WRs] Courtland Sutton, Tim Patrick, Jerry Jeudy, that group of receivers is as good as you’re going to find, that trio. Then, when you take in [Broncos TEs] Noah [Fant] and Albert Okwuegbunam, those two tight ends are really quality players. Then both backs, [Broncos RBs] Melvin [Gordon III] and Javonte [Williams], both catch the ball out of the backfield at a really high level. They have a very complete skill group of players. They certainly have our full attention. As I said in the first time [playing the Broncos], I have a lot of respect for those guys because I was with a lot of those guys. They’re going to be a tough cover on Sunday.”

On the last game against the Broncos:

“Offensively, I felt like we moved the ball a lot in the second half. I felt like that end of the half sequence where we drove it down and got a touchdown before the half, that was a really strong sequence for us. Then, really, that third quarter, and really the beginning of the fourth quarter, I really felt like we moved the football at a high level; running the football, throwing the football, mixing it up. I felt like we had a really positive stretch there. Then, on third downs in that game, I think we were seven out of 14 on third down. They’re a tough team to play against and I felt like we definitely performed at a high level in that aspect of the game. Defensively, I felt like we really played well in the passing game. I felt like that was a strength of ours. I just feel like in that first game, in the first half, we didn’t do a good enough job against the run in that game. Then, we gave up a couple of red-area touchdowns that you were really disappointing in that game, and then we weren’t able to close it out. In that first game, it was a really tight game, all the way through the fourth quarter. It’s the type of game that you’re going to play against a quality team like them. We’re going to have to have our best stuff ready this Sunday in order to close it out.”

On QB Justin Herbert:

“I think this guy’s playing as well as anybody in pro football at that position. I feel like the way he’s operating gives us a chance to operate just the type of plays that we’re able to run, a lot of the premium design, premium looks that he can get us in. I feel like he’s doing a really good job with decision-making, not only in the passing game, but in the running game, too, and from a protection standpoint. You guys all see his production — touchdowns, passing yards, all that type of good stuff — but he’s done a really good job taking care of the football. If you take a look at the fourth quarter in games, being able to close out games and give us an opportunity to come back, I feel like he’s done that all season long. I just think that he continues to improve. I’m really, really proud of the season that he’s having so far.”

On how CB Asante Samuel Jr. impacts the game:

“It impacts a lot because you’re playing with one of your best guys. I think that you guys know how I feel about Asante. Last week was his first game action in five weeks, which isn’t easy. Guys like him, [T] Rashawn [Slater], [WR] Joshua Palmer, they make you feel like they’re older than they really are. He had a lot of time off, so I think that getting his legs underneath of him in that game was important. I think this week, just having another full week of practice because I think the one thing that people lose sight of is the amount of work that you miss in five weeks — and if you were there for five weeks, how much you would improve by being out there at practice, by being in these games. I’m excited to have him back, it feels more like we have our secondary when he’s out there. If you look at when we’ve performed our best, he’s been a big part of it.”

On how ‘better prepared’ he is ‘to match up with’ Broncos Head Coach Vic Fangio:

“We’re matching up with their team. Me and Vic, we’re not playing in the game, for sure, so we have to match up with their team. They have a lot of really, really good players. I think that the one thing about Vic is that he’s going to have them extremely well-prepared. I think that what he brings to the table is that he’s extremely well-prepared. You can see the season that they’re having on defense, and then on offense, creating an identity for that football team. The second time around, we have to play our game. We have to make it about the Chargers. There is that game within the game, but it’s really going to come down to our level of execution and the energy that we play with on Sunday.”

On his ‘lasting takeaway’ of Pro Football Hall of Fame Coach John Madden:

“Number one, what he has meant to the game of football in so many different ways. When you think about an icon, you think about someone who has truly impacted people forever. He was able to impact people forever as a coach, and then he was really one of those like iconic media members that really brought life to the NFL game, from an announcing standpoint. I know as a young kid growing up, you just felt a little bit more sure of what was being said, because this is a Super Bowl coach; this is a Hall of Fame coach. Then, he had that flair, that kind of flavor that a coach would bring to the announcing booth. He had that staple with him and Pat Summerall. Growing up, you always looked forward to the CBS game with him and Pat Summerall. As a little kid growing up, I always used to love that because you just knew how special he was. As you guys all know, you have a video game named after him; I don’t know too many coaches that have a video game named after him. Now, there’s your Madden rating and how important that is. He’s just had that everlasting imprint on the game of football and beyond. I was never fortunate to meet him, but, truly, our thoughts and prayers are with him and his family. What a legacy that he’s left behind. I think that all of us in pro football are better by having him being a big part of it.”

On if his 'approach changes at all with the playoffs on the line':

"In a game like this, I think that you have to really fall back to the consistency of your approach and really trust how you do things. I think with the dynamics of COVID, that's even more important because there are going to be a couple of things that change; virtual meetings and stuff like that. What you have to do is you have to trust the relationships that you've built over the course of 10, 11 months. You have to trust those relationships. Then, you have to trust your plans and how you prepare. I think that's what our approach is going to be this week, putting the focus on us and giving the Broncos their full respect by preparing each day the best that we know how. That's how you have to do it every single weekend in the NFL. Regardless of the circumstances, treat each week like it has a life of its own. The NFL requires your full respect and that's certainly what we're going to do this week."

On the defense:

"It's been a fight for us on defense. I feel like we've been able to compete and give us a chance to win in all of the games that we've played. Some games, we've performed better than others, but I feel like we've stayed connected, we've hung tough. I still think that our best is out there, as a team. I'm hoping that we can get as many of our guys to joined up as possible because I know what it looks like when we have a group out there that's healthy. If not, if that's not the case, then I've still been proud of the way that we've given ourselves a chance in these games. As a coach, I know that that's all you can ask for. I think that we've really had to fight hard, defensively, to find it. That's just the truth of it. I think that there's still a lot of football left for us to figure it out and prove ourselves. I'm excited to get that underway today."

On how preparing for Broncos QB Drew Lock compares to preparing for Broncos QB Teddy Bridgewater:

"They're different players, for sure. I still think that you're defending Denver's offense, but then you have that inventory with this season of when Drew's been the starter; Are there any differences between him and Teddy? There are mostly similarities in terms of how they run their offense, but there are some things that Drew brings to the table that Teddy doesn't, and vice-versa. I think that you just study the player and what type of style he has; the differences, the subtle things at the line of scrimmage, and in the huddle. Then, you go full speed ahead with him. We obviously have to be ready for Teddy to play, as well. It's going to be one of those weeks. We've had a couple of weeks like this season where you're preparing for multiple guys. I was with Drew, so I know that Drew is a quality player. When I was with Drew, he finished the season 4-1 as our starter and won us a lot of big games down the stretch in 2019. I know this guy's a quality player. He's really talented. He has our full respect."

On LB Drue Tranquill's injury status:

"Drue's day-to-day with that lower leg. Like I said, X-rays were negative. He's truly day-to-day. We'll just see how this week takes shape with him."

On S Derwin James Jr.'s injury status:

"Trending positive. Feels much better than he did last week. I'm hopeful that he will play in this game."

On his message to the team this week:

"I think that you have to respond after something tough happens. On Sunday, there was the tough side of the NFL. We've had that happen throughout this season. As a team, it's about our response to that. I think that what we need to do is just treat this week like it has a life of its own. You can't have your team change week-to-week based off a circumstance, because when you have when you truly created consistency and performance, every week is going to require your full attention. We're getting closer to the end, so there are other people that may feel more intense, but this is a division game against the team that we lost to the first time — and like you said, there is a lot at stake — but there was a lot at stake last week, there was a lot at stake the week before then, and the week before then. There's been a lot at stake the last five or six weeks. Once you get past halfway, every game counts for a lot. What we need to do around here is we need to make sure that no matter who we play, no matter what the week of the season, that we create that consistency in our approach. That's been my message. You have to have consistency in your approach, and then you have to be able to respond when something like Sunday happens. That's going to bring out the best in you. I know that these guys that we're going to get back, guys like [DL] Linval [Joseph], guys like [RB] Austin [Ekeler], they're going to help us have a really good week of practice."

On who would start at RT if both T Storm Norton and T Trey Pipkins III do not play:

“We’re hopeful that those guys will be back under the protocols. We would expect to get both of those guys back in some shape or form. This week, we will practice with a couple guys in that role until they come back. We’ll kind of go from there.”

On OLB Kyler Fackrell:

“He’s getting closer. I don’t know if it will be this week. We’re fighting hard for that to happen. Definitely getting closer, but I would say he’s a little bit more day-to-day, week-to-week. We’re just going to see how he feels this week. I know that he felt good last week, getting out there on the grass. I think this week, we’ll try to ramp him up even more.”

On his biggest takeaway, as a first-year head coach, from Sunday’s loss to the Texans:

“I think that in the NFL, there are a lot of things that can happen. When we left for Houston, I felt like we had, in my opinion, one of our best weeks of practices amidst the circumstances, especially coming off of the Kansas City game and what type of game that was. A lot happened in that game; D.P. [TE Donald Parham Jr.]. We had a lot of things happen COVID-wise. You have Christmas. Then, you have to go play a game on the road against Houston. I felt like we navigated those circumstances well. Then, there were a couple of things that happened at the game. There were just a couple of situations at the game, before the game happened. What you have to be able to do, I think, at the game, when some things like that are happening, make sure that your guys are connected and understand how you need to go play that game. Going into the game, I felt really confident in what our approach was, but then at the game, we didn’t have our best stuff. At the game, you just have to make sure that you can tap into as many people as you can and make sure that you’re playing the way you need to play. Like I said, it’s the tough side of the NFL. When tough games like that happen, you have to put it away quickly, and then keep it moving. I think that that’s what we’ve done this week. We put that one away on Monday, and then our full focus has been on Denver, and that’s where it’s going to be. I really appreciate our group because we’ve been through some tough things this year and Sunday was no exception. Some of the circumstances were different, but it’s all the same, it’s all tough. I really liked the way we’ve responded the last couple days and looking forward to getting out there on the practice field.”

On DL Jerry Tillery developing as a run defender:

“I think that that is going to be where he can elevate his game; that consistency at the line of scrimmage, at the point of attack, in the run game. That’s going to determine his future as a player, being a complete player. I know that he’s made improvements in that area, but there’s still a lot of work to do. He’s well aware of that. That’s the part that we have to continue working with; myself, him, his position coaches, his teammates to bring it out on a consistent down-in, down-out basis because I know that he’s capable of it. We just have to have that intensity and that focus to do it right every single time.”

On ‘inconsistencies’ in Tillery’s run defense:

“I think that he’s still a young player. I know that people say, ‘Oh, but this is his third year in the NFL,’ but he’s playing in a brand new system. What we’re asking him to do is a lot different than what they asked him to do before. I think there’s been that transition for him, as a player. He played on the edge a lot last year for them because of where they were injury-wise and stuff like that. He wasn’t inside very much for them, and when he was, it was more in a pass-rush context. I think it’s just him settling into that role for us, and I think that’s where the consistency will come from. The more that he is in there and with us, then I think you will see that consistency and performance. That’s why I’m so committed to him and I have so much belief in him is that I understand that there is a transition that is taking place. What you have to do, as a coach, is you have to stay with your guys. As long as you’re showing them the expectations, that’s where the accountability can come from. I know that he can get there. We’re going to work really hard with him.”

On the impact of the addition of the 17th game in the regular season:

“The way I looked at on the schedule is that you’re subtracting a preseason game and you’re adding a regular-season game. To me, it’s still adding up to the same amount; it’s still adding up the 20, in terms of games that you’re playing before you get to the postseason. The 17th game, for me, it’s an odd number. You’re so used to 16 [games]; it’s just an odd number. I think where your bye falls and things like that, I think it has an impact that way. For these guys, where my mindset is for these players, making sure that in one more game that they can be at their best, and trying to engineer your performance schedule so that these guys can be their best on the stretch. When that extra game came out, that’s where my mindset was; how can we take care of these guys and get these guys peaking at the right time, making sure these guys know why we’re doing what we’re doing so that they have that belief that, ‘Hey, I am going to be fresh at the end, and I am going to be able to find that gear that you need to find heading into the postseason.’ I think that that’s probably what everybody’s been working on, making sure their guys are at their best down the stretch.”

On the ‘difficulty’ of adjusting to the 17-game schedule:

“It’s a really young league. I don’t know if people have the amount of experience, so that may be overstated a little bit. I know that [DL] Linval Joseph and [CB] Chris Harris [Jr.] will agree with you, for sure. The 17th game is going to impact them in a lot of different ways; financially, health-wise. It has a lot of implications. For players, for coaches, for everybody in the NFL, it’s sorting through all of that. Then, you have to keep the main thing the main thing. If it’s agreed upon that you’re going to play 17 games, then that’s what you have to do. I think that all of us, that’s where our mindset is. You just have to do whatever it takes to do something you love. If they tell us to play 17 games, then that’s what we’re going to do. We’re going to figure it out to the best of our ability.”

On how the defense is ‘different’ when S Derwin James Jr. isn’t on the field:

“Different in every way. When I’ve talked about him in the past, I hope that you guys don’t think that I’m just doing that for effect because I’m certainly not. I probably don’t describe him well enough. Since Derwin’s played for the Chargers, I know what our record is with him and what it is without him, and there’s a reason for that. There are a couple of players in sports that have that kind of impact on their teams. He just happens to be a defensive player. You’re mostly used to it with quarterbacks. You’re mostly associating someone not being at the game being a quarterback, but he is a quarterback for us. He is a quarterback for our team. What he does for our team, on the field as a player, and certainly for our defense, what Derwin does is he makes everything better because he can be a lot of different places. He can really cover up for some holes, for some weaknesses. He can also be an equalizer with a matchup; maybe this is a tough matchup, he can make it a better matchup because of where you can put him. As a signal-caller, it’s like losing your quarterback. He’s the guy that’s in front of your defense every single day. He’s the one talking to them. He’s the one talking to me. He has that same impact that a quarterback has. You’re talking about that side of things and you’re talking about premium production on the field. He means a lot to our football team. I’m excited to get him back, hopefully real soon this week.”

On if all 11 players currently on Reserve/COVID-19 ‘still possibly could play on Sunday’:

“Everybody is day-to-day on that list because they can test out. I think the big thing for you guys is when their initial positive test was, and then you count from there, in terms of their availability. But these guys all have the ability to test out now. I think that’s the thing. That’s why, for all of us, it’s day-to-day. It really is day-to-day based on the nature of the protocols.”

RUNNING BACK AUSTIN EKELER

On 'keeping the rest of the team calm amidst all of the chaos':

"It's going back on our routine that we've set throughout the rest of the year. That's what this game comes down to; it's what life comes down to; setting back into your routine. If you have a good routine, then you can always fall back to that to look forward for where to go next. For me, I know my routine, as far as being a leader on this team, is bringing energy, really just being vocal out there in the field — not necessarily towards people, but just in a general sense, as far as making sure we're all locked in, and also doing my part, as far as doing my job as an individual as a part of this team, as well."

On RB Justin Jackson's performance last week against the Texans:

"I think we can always play better, but I was really proud of J.J. going out there. If you follow my fantasy show, I was telling everyone to pick up J.J. He went out there and produced. He was pretty efficient. We could clean up some stuff here and there, but I was definitely happy to see my guy out there and get an opportunity to lead the running back role. I know, going into this week, it's going to be both of us, now, coming in and being efficient."

On his overall assessment of the run game:

"Some weeks we run the ball well, some weeks we don't. It comes down to our execution. These past few weeks, I feel like we've been able to run the ball pretty effectively, which is great. I think it means that we're coming together; we're really getting a sense of what we're trying to do in the run game and figuring out the tempos of how we want to run each run because every run has a life of its own. I think just having enough time with the O-line and the coaching staff, and doing it in practice, has really just built this up to a point where now we really feel like we understand the run game, which is going to help us out because being able to physically do it is one thing, but mentally knowing how this is going to be the most effective, based on what the defense is doing, it takes your run game to the next level."

On being back with his teammates:

"It feels great. I was talking to [Head] Coach [Brandon] Staley this morning — he popped into the weight room — I was just like, 'It feels good to be around this energy again,' even though it's a little different now, we're in masks and have different protocols, still just being around the guys, after being out for a week-and-a-half at home, not really seeing anyone, I'm coming home to my family. This is my family away from my family. You can definitely tell. I have good energy and I'm excited to be back."

On preparing for the Broncos and how much he will rely on the last meeting to prepare for this week:

"Every week has a life of its own, but we've seen these guys before. We know what they're going to do. They're going to play some man. They can play sub [personnel] to our base look, so we're going to take advantage of some of the looks that they're giving us, putting them in positions where we think that we can run the ball well. I think that's going to be a key in this game. I think a part where we struggled last time against them was running the ball. We've really found a rhythm and will try to continue to put that rhythm together. I think that's really going to help us this time."

On watching last week's game from home:

"It reminded me of last year when I was sitting at home with a blown-out hamstring. I just sat and watched it and couldn't help but remember last year. We lost like three games, and on the third game, I just started doing push-ups because I was so mad. I didn't get to that point, but I was definitely pretty disappointed, seeing our team lose the way that we did, not making enough plays to get it done. The Texans showed up, and we really didn't. That just goes to show that it really doesn't matter what your record is you have to show up to every game that's played in the NFL. Now, it's a chance to bounce back. We're on the outside looking in for the playoff picture now, but it's still the same mindset where we control what we can control right now, which is this week."

DEFENSIVE LINEMAN LINVAL JOSEPH

On Sunday's loss:

"It was very frustrating. With COVID[-19] alone, it would have been frustrating, but to end up losing the way that we lost, it stings a little bit."

On the team's mentality entering this week:

"Right now, we're just taking it one day at a time. Like [Head] Coach [Brandon Staley] said earlier this week, 'When your back is against the wall, what are you going to do? Are you going to fight or are you going to give up?' Now, this is really going to tell us what type of team we have, so I'm excited to go to work today, go to practice, see where everybody's spirit's at and take it one day at a time."

On the team's 'constant change' this season:

"I just feel like it's a roller coaster. I just feel like the last couple of weeks have been a roller coaster. Eventually, you are going to get to the top end of that roller coaster. Hopefully, last week was the down end, and now, we can come back up. It's been frustrating. Everybody's been doing all that they can do. Now, we just have to take it one day at a time and put it together and finish off strong."

On preparing for the Broncos:

"They have two good running backs. We have to go out there and stop the run. We have to do our job and do our job at a high level. We have to try to give [QB Justin] Herbert the ball as much as we can."

On DL Justin Jones:

"He's a very solid player. He's really good at run [defense]. He's making splashes in the pass rush. He's still growing as a player, so to get them back is amazing; it's really amazing."

On 'lacking energy and intensity' against the Texans last week:

"To be honest with you, I'm really past that game. Last week felt different. If you want to say that it was energy, if you want to say it was lack of production, last week wasn't our best week. I'm just glad that we have the opportunity to go out there and do it against Denver because they beat us the last time around. The only way to get this taste out of your mouth is to go out there, do your job and do it well."

On the lesson learned from last week's loss for the younger players:

"Every week is a different week. Everybody's all on a professional team. That's how it is; you can't overlook anybody because once you do that, once you do relax, things like that happen."

On 'their playoff lives being on the line' this week:

"I just think it's a good opportunity for everybody, to be honest with you. We do have a young team, so to take a loss like that last week, we have to respond. Now, it's now or never. You don't want to put it in everybody else's hands; you want it to be in your hands. We have to go out there and do what we have to do. We have to go out there and get it done this Sunday."

On preparing for Sunday's game:

"We're taking it day-by-day. We get a chance to be together in about an hour or so on the practice field. I can't wait. I can't wait to see everybody's energy. I can't wait to pick up everybody's energy because this is big. This reminds me of when we went 9-7 my second year and won the Super Bowl. We started off hot. We had a lot of guys hurt. Then, boom, we came together at the right time. Then, we didn't lose any more games and we won the Super Bowl. That's exactly how I feel right now."