

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

Monday, November 22, 2021 ⚡ Hoag Performance Center ⚡ Costa Mesa, Calif.

HEAD COACH BRANDON STALEY

On his 'level of concern' with CB Asante Samuel Jr. in the concussion protocol for the second time this season:

"I'm concerned about all of our players any time that they go down. We're going to find out the severity of what happened last night here over the next couple of days. I'm concerned about all of our guys, making sure that they're safe and sound. That's our biggest priority. As coaches, as people in the athletic profession, when you play a sport, the health and wellness of your players is always paramount in all things. Asante has real stuff and I know that, after the first one, I talked to him about the same thing. He hasn't had a [concussion] history, so that makes you feel good about his overall wellness. One of his strengths is his toughness. I think that we all know that when it deals with that subject, that patience is a virtue, making sure everybody's safe and sound. That's the way that we will approach it. We'll just find out, in the coming days, what his exact prognosis is."

On if it is 'too early' to speculate on the severity of Samuel's injury:

"Much too early."

On CB Michael Davis's performance last night:

"I was glad to have him back. I felt like he was up and down. He had some good moments and he had some tough moments. The throw on the right sideline, that's just a big-time, Hall of Fame type of throw-and-catch. But I thought that he competed well in the game. He gave us a chance to win, for sure. His being out there allowed us to execute our plan going into the game. He'll grow from it. You could tell that he hadn't been out there for two weeks, so getting his wind back and playing consistent over time, especially when they're behind and they have to throw to come back, just being able to sustain focus and execute technique over time. I felt like he competed well enough in the game for us to win. I was glad to have him back out there, that's for sure."

On CB Tevaughn Campbell:

"He's competed well for us. He's given us a chance to win a bunch of these games. He's grown every time that he goes out. He's doing two jobs for us, playing outside and playing inside. He's in that same conversation with Mike [Davis]; playing consistent football down in and down out, the way we expect it to be played in the secondary. Last night, I felt like he gave us a chance to win the game. He had a huge pass breakup after the sudden change where we forced them to a field goal. It was later in the game. He had a really good pass breakup. He has a couple of good open-field tackles. The pass interference, it's just more unlucky than anything. He was connected on the route, like I told you guys after the game. We were in a really good coverage system. That's just one of those bang-bang plays. He was being aggressive. I think that he'll learn from that — when you have good position on the receiver, being able to be patient in the down and allow your leverage to create patience for yourself. I think that he will learn from that. I think that both of those guys are competing hard for us. Playing consistent, with fundamentals, down in and down out, over the course of an entire game against elite competition, that's where both of those guys need to go with their game."

On QB Justin Herbert's 'non-reaction' following Steelers DT Cameron Heyward's unnecessary roughness penalty:

"First off, Justin is a rare competitor. He has rare composure. He's a guy that is unaffected by a lot of that external competition, stuff that would rattle many of us. If you know Cam Heyward and [Steelers Head Coach] Mike Tomlin, you know that those guys are real competitors. Those guys have been doing this at a high level for a long time. I think that Justin also knows who he's playing against. He's also aware enough to know that Cam is made up of the right stuff. It's a competitive game and there's a lot of heat of the moment. Sometimes, you have to let time express itself so that you can get the truth. Justin has a level head and enough composure to be able to separate both of those things. Nothing but respect for Cam Heyward and Mike Tomlin and that group. We know what type of outfit that is over there. They do things the right way. I think that Justin, certainly, keeping his composure, I think that affected his teammates in a real positive way. As you saw, we got right back in the huddle and then scored. I think that calm is contagious. It has a real, real positive impact on our football team."

On a pass on first and second down on the second-to-last offensive possession:

"I felt like that's where we have the advantage in the game. Our best player is our quarterback, so just trying to stay aggressive and stay where the advantages are for your football team. That's where the thinking was, that we would be able to move the chains, finish with the ball and score the ball to truly extend the lead. Had a pass open and the ball was tipped. It didn't work out for us. I loved the first-down call, particularly the keeper where we missed [WR] Keenan [Allen]. I loved that play call, just didn't finish it. Second down, we got them open there. It was going to be a bang-bang play, probably makes it third-and-four, third-and-five. We were definitely going to stay aggressive with Justin, putting the ball in his hands."

On TE Donald Parham Jr.:

"I think that I've learned a lot more about his game. I think that he's a lot more of a complete player than we thought. We kind of felt like, 'Is this guy only going to be a passing game tight end, where when he enters the game, the entire defense is playing pass defense?' I think that what we've done is establish a role where they can't do that. He's been a factor in the run game. He's been a factor in pass protection for us. Then, he's been able to play a variety of roles for us in the vertical passing game, in the intermediate, middle part of the field and in the short part of the field, becoming a run-after-catch guy, a [quarterback] keeper-screen guy. I think that he's been able to expand his game. He's a lot better run-after-catch guy than I would have anticipated for a 6-foot-8 guy. This guy has some stuff with the ball in his hands. I think that's given us an advantage and it's allowed us to play with multiple tight ends in the game and truly have to force defenses to assess us, and then use that to our advantage. I'm proud of his progress. He's still at the beginning, for me. I'm looking forward to him expanding his role. He dropped that seam [pass] last night that he has to come up with. But, certainly, he got down the seam. You like the way that he looks when he's running down the seam. Now, we have to finish those plays. He's been a real bright spot for us, for sure."

On RB Austin Ekeler's praise of how the team practices:

"I'm really glad Austin brought that up because there's a one-to-one translation in how you compete in practice and how you compete in the game. I feel like we were really focused on the right things in practice last week. It's one thing to practice, it's different to practice with purpose. That's what you'll hear us talk about here in this program; practicing with purpose. I think that's where your level of execution comes from; practicing with purpose and doing things for reason, and people understanding the intent about everything that you're doing. I think there's that direct correlation to putting your guys through tough circumstances during the week, learning a lot. That's the way we walk-through. We feel like that cumulative effect of reps will take over. I thought that was on display last night. It was a good game for us. Now, we have to build on it. Everything we're trying to do in our program is engineered to get our guys ready to play. With our practices, as the season goes, that may look a little bit different, because of player health and all of that stuff, being ready to peak at the end of the season. You're trying to design these practices as you go and really work off of the dynamics of the NFL attrition. Then, being able to play your best football at the end. We're still going through that process right now as a football team, but I think that our players are invested because they know exactly why we're doing what we're doing. I think that's also a positive, that they have a firm understanding of it because they've been engaged in the process. Hopefully, that'll be a strength of ours moving forward."

On if the practice schedule and plan will be adjusted again this season:

“This November phase, we’ve been really trying to build our tolerance, build that competitive stamina. It’s not the time to take the foot off the gas right now. It’s also not time to accelerate, either. We just have to keep pushing right now. As you get into that last month of football, that last stretch of football, that’s when you start to taper and really build your team for Sundays and get your team to Sundays. That’s where I’m talking about a cumulative effect. The cumulative effect will set in so that you can do that. With our veteran guys, it’s just being engaged with those guys at all times about where they’re at with their bodies. Do they need Wednesday [off]? Do they need one more day? Get them Thursday and Friday, and then they feel like they’re ready to go. Maybe it’s the opposite. Maybe it’s practicing Wednesday, then taking one [off] Thursday. That process is dynamic, but I like where we’re at. We talked about toughness and resilience and playing well in the fourth quarter. I just can’t say enough about [Director of Sports Performance] Anthony Lomando, [Head Strength & Conditioning] Jonathan Brooks and [Assistant Strength & Conditioning] Lucius Jordan, that group. Our guys are totally invested in those guys and I really like what they have done with our football team.”

On fantasy football:

“I don’t know much about it. I know that it’s extremely lucrative. I know that about it, that that’s where the real money is. [RB Austin Ekeler] is capitalizing on that reality. He’s a real visionary that way. I applaud him knowing where the money is in life. You give respect to where it’s due:

On the fourth-down play call:

“We had a direct run there paired with a quarterback sneak. I didn’t like the sneak look because of the double ‘A’ gap threat. Kind of got talked out of it that way because of the look. If you look closely, they had a double ‘A’ gap, double ‘B’ gap and another guy floating around. The look wasn’t great. In terms of the run and where the run has to go, the run has to bounce. The guy that made the play, [Steelers LB] Joe Schobert, that’s the read for the back. It’s not easy, but if you watch the play, if he bounces it, it’s a huge gain because we had the roof caved into the left side. A good play by them, but if we bounce it, like the read takes us to — and I’m not saying that it’s easy on Austin [Ekeler], it’s kind of a bang-bang deal. Joe [Schobert] kind of shot that ‘C’ gap. What need to happen is Austin has to get that handoff and go left fast. It’s easier said than done. It’s a direct run. You kind of know that in that circumstance, it’s going to be tight like that. It just didn’t go our way at that time. Good play by them. I definitely would do it again. We’re definitely comfortable with the decision. I want the quarterback to sneak it as much as you. That’s, obviously, something that we want to have in our toolbox, for sure. Last night, it just didn’t go down on that particular case.”

On if he will ‘address’ dropped passes with TE Jared Cook:

“Not with Jared Cook. His resume speaks for itself. He’s doing well for us. Again, it’s more aberration. If you’ve studied his career at all his stops, he’s been fantastic at catching the football. I know that no one is going to be more disappointed than him. He kind of jammed his finger, too. His finger was jammed up pretty good. He’s made a ton of those big plays for us. I know that we don’t win the Vegas game and some of these other games, where he had some of these huge catches that he’s had for us, without him. For sure, he’s disappointed in the production that he’s missing there, but we’re going to keep going to him because he’s a real weapon for us. I know that Justin [Herbert] has full confidence in him, for sure.”

On pass rushers getting hands up to deflect pass attempts:

“Blocking shots is a real part of playing pass defense. When you’re playing a quick game, an RPO-oriented team, especially on early downs, or if they’re an empty team, you know that ball is going to be coming out quick — you’re not going to do much good as a pass rusher. What you can do is add value as a pass defender, so blocking shots is a real important part of your job description. We want to be that type of outfit that is getting our hands on footballs. That’s a way that you not only get stops, but you also create takeaways. You saw it last night with Cam Heyward on Justin [Herbert], blocking a shot and creating an opportunity for their team. That’s what good fronts do. [Defensive Line Coach] Giff Smith and [Run Game Coordinator/Outside Linebackers Coach] Jay [Rodgers] are doing an outstanding job of coaching those guys. What we like to talk about, too, is just attempts. If the attempts come, then you’ll get the blocked shots. The more activity that we can see, that’s a positive sign for us. It may not always result in a blocked shot, but the attempts matter. Knowing that that quarterback is going to have to find a passing lane, I just know that, as a quarterback, that bothers you. When there’s just a bunch of hands in the way, you have to change your arm angle, you have to find a slot. It’s hard enough to play quarterback, but then, now, you have to worry about these hands in your face, too, trying to mirror you. We had a bunch of good ones last night that really helped us.”

On Herbert's performance last night:

"I felt like it was a very complete performance. He made some real NFL quarterbacking stuff happen last night. I referenced it last night about just finding the halfback in some of those split-safety brackets, split-safety man [looks], using his legs in some of those, whether it was man-to-man, split-safety man or five-man rush man-to-man, where we was able to vacate and expose poor pass-rush lane continuity. From just the physical aspect of it, I just felt like he played with really good timing last night. Sometimes when you evaluate quarterbacks, it's like, 'How often are they stuck? Do they seem stuck ever?' That's one of his great strengths. This guy, he is not stuck very often. I felt like he played with really good timing and anticipation last night. That seam throw to Keenan [Allen], you're going to see very few throws of that caliber with that type of coverage. I know that if I'm coaching [Steelers CB] Cam Sutton, I'm saying, 'Hey, man, just get back in the huddle.' That's just one of those throws. The throw to [WR] Mike [Williams] in the turkey-hole shot, that's big-time quarterbacking, understanding the coverage, understanding how people are playing him by trapping the flat. He had seen it a couple of times. You've heard me reference the more experiences that he has — just the more you see and that inventory of experience — I think that's a good example of that, being able to key diagnose that coverage, then be able to trust your receiver, be on the same page with your receiver and actually previewing that to the receiver like, 'Hey, if this happens, this is what is going to happen.' There was a lot of that going on. I thought that the guy played with real energy last night. I thought that he played with real energy last night that our team responded to. I think that's a big part of playing quarterback, too. It's beyond the physical stuff. It's beyond just being the sharpest guy out there. Are these guys playing for you, too? I think that was on display, as well. That was real energy that helped us all last night."

On what he wants the team to take away from last night's victory:

"I want our team to know that we had real toughness and real resilience and that when that fight got fierce, that we were ready to fight back and to finish. That was really positive in the game. Then, the other reality is, when you're 27 to 10 and you have the game within your hands and you can close this game out and you can truly separate — 'Hey, here's what happened that allowed that game to go that direction. Here's a three-and-out. Here is a second-and-19 coverage mistake from us. Here is a special teams penalty on a 50-yard punt where a gunner runs out of bounds.' Guess what? You guys will study analytics and the data — when you have to punt again, it doesn't go well. Regardless of if the punt it blocked, it's just hard to go cover it again full-speed down there. A penalty equals a blocked punt. Then, you have an interception backed up. Then, you have a fourth-and-five penalty on a stop. Then, you have a fourth-and-one that you don't get. What people don't realize is that it was a third-and-19 before that because of another penalty that got us backed up and that put us in that position in the first place. Here are a bunch of examples of us doing this, us making this game happen the way it did. That's the reality, too. We have to learn from it. You have to acknowledge that and meet it head-on because both things are true. I think that we can grow from it. We have to do a better job coaching and playing to make that a cleaner win. The fact that we won is a very, very positive step for us. I don't want to minimize that, either, because it took real team stuff to make it happen. I think that's where we're going to put our focus moving forward. We're going to continue to improve because I think that we improved as a team last night, but at the same time, there is still a lot of room to improve."

On DL Justin Jones:

"I saw a guy that embodied that, 'Hey, we're going to do what it takes in this game.' He had to do what it took for us last night, which was play a lot more than he's used to, but he's that type of player. Again, he has real toughness. As you guys have all seen, since he's come back the movie has looked a lot different. That's the indicator of value. I think that his performance has spoken volumes for where our defense can go with him in it. He held it down for us last night. I thought he was a real general in there, helping those guys out and, in some of those designer packages, allowed [OLB] Joey [Bosa] to really play his game and allowed our EDGE guys to really rush free and be disruptive. J.J., he's just our type of guy, for sure."

On the chemistry of G Matt Feiler:

"I think it's an excellent point. Matt is the type of offensive lineman that we want to grow with. He has real size. He has real size. This is an NFL-looking offensive lineman. What he can do is he can create movement at the point of attack in the run game. He can truly create movement. He doesn't need another guy to help him out. He can create movement and he can pass protect one-on-one. The guy has played tackle in the NFL, that's where he got his start. When you have a guy that has that type of pass protection value inside at guard, it really changes your protection systems. Then, when you join up with a [C] Corey Linsley in a combination or with a [T] Rashawn Slater in a combination in the run game, now you have a premium thing working for you. He and Corey are so experienced that you're really able to leverage that experience to your advantage. Rashawn is such a quick study, now with those two working together — [Matt] is just a really steady player. Like I said, just tough, rugged. He's one of us, all the way. I'm really proud of him. He's been playing well for us all year."

On the blocked punt:

"Your eyes are seeing the right thing. The deep snapper has to get more vertical, he was way too lateral. We've seen that look. We've practiced that look. We have to get more vertical with the deep snapper. [LB] Drue [Tranquill] could stay more connected for a little bit longer and [LB] Nick [Niemann] has to clean that up. If you look, Nick was affected by this outside element. That should never have been the case. 'Hey, keep your poise. Hey, take your time.' Then, now, you can save a life inside and now we get that thing off. It's a learning lesson for a young player, for sure. We have to play with better fundamentals in front of him. Nick could have saved a life there and I think that's a lesson that he'll learn, for sure. That's where the breakdown came."

On LB Kenneth Murray Jr.:

"[His playing time was affected] a little bit. He just kind of rolled an ankle, but nothing severe. I thought he played well in the game. I felt like this guy got held in one of the early rush plans. He was outstanding with [OLB] Joey [Bosa] on a game that was really, really well-executed. We're going to keep expanding his role. We wanted to get [LB] Drue [Tranquill] back in the fold. Like I said, all three of those guys, to me, are going to play a bunch moving forward. We're going to try and mix-and-match them the best way that we can. We're excited to see him continue to improve because he's made very good improvements for us in the last couple of games."

On Pittsburgh's explosive passes:

"The one that [Steelers WR Chase] Claypool [had] off the bunch, [CB] Asante [Samuel Jr.] had single-safety man [coverage]. Asante on that wide departure was kind of thinking he was going to go out, you know, run an out-cut which is kind of a staple of their offense. He just kind of anticipated wrong and Chase just kept going. That was a tough one. He bounced back from that one, but that was a good play, a good throw and catch. Then, Vato [CB Michael Davis] turned 18 [Steelers WR Diontae Johnson] loose on the over-route, on the spear. He should be connected on that route. That's a coverage that's designed to kill that route. That was disappointing. He needs to be connected to 18 on that. On the first drive, that was the one that was disappointing. They ripped that big-time throw and catch. You tip your cap to those guys. We're in, again, a man-under look with the safety over the top and he [Steelers QB Ben Roethlisberger] threw it anyways and it was just bang-bang. Maybe you could say he [Davis] could get his head around a little sooner, but it was a heck of a throw and catch. Those are the ones that I was disappointed with. Then, that second-and-19, there was a coverage miscommunication when we had all the momentum. We had the sack on first down later in the game and they hit an 18-yarder. That bummed me out because we should have absolutely killed that route. I have to do a better job coaching. That one kind of drove me crazy. Other than that, they made some throws. Guys, those two guys are real receivers, man. 18 [Diontae Johnson] and 11 [Chase Claypool], those guys are good players. You tip your cap to them. They made a couple of plays, but our guys hung tough. I felt like we competed well. They had 44 throws for 273 [yards]. We can play better. We can tighten up, for sure, but I felt like our guys competed hard in the game."

On a '28-yard gain to Steelers WR Chase Claypool late in the third quarter on a third-and-two':

"Yeah, that bummed me out. It was a crossing-route. We were in three-deep. Vato [Michael Davis] mismanaged the crosser. He ran with the crosser. He should take Chase coming back and [S] Derwin [James Jr.] is there in the hook and we would have the route killed. If you go watch the L.A. Rams [against] Washington last year, there was the same route, same coverage and it was dead. We just have to do a better job of coaching. I have to do a better job of coaching."

On DLs Breiden Fehoko and Joe Gaziano:

"I was so proud of those two. I felt like Breiden and Joe just played so hard and so tough. They were both productive in the game. I really felt Joe in pass rush and in run defense. He just was active. He blocked a couple of shots. This guy was really active. Then, Breiden was just holding it down. He has that warrior sprit. He's a multiplier, man. He just makes you feel good at the game because you know this guy is going to give you everything that he has. Those guys both showed real toughness. Beyond just the intangibles, they play well. They produced last night. It wasn't just that they were out there and playing hard and tough. Those guys produced and made plays. I can't say enough about [Defensive Line Coach] Giff Smith coaching those guys. He had them ready to play. I'm really proud of that entire group."

On third-down defense:

"Oh, we're in tight coverage. We're in man-to-man. You see, we're not playing zone, for sure. We can execute some of those stacks and bunches better. You'll watch, we're connected and just need to play a little bit better. They made a couple of plays, but I'm not disappointed. The one I was disappointed about was the third-and-six, you know, the one that got out the back door on us on our hard left side, as we're looking at it. [Steelers WR] Diontae [Johnson] had that little five-yard short-in that got out the back door. Vato [Michael Davis], I wish would press that, but then [DB] Trey [Marshall] can't let that get out the back door. He's that hook defender in fire zone and he has to make sure he kills that route for a seven-yard gain. He let it get out the back door. He has to take a better angle, but I like the way that we're playing. I like our game plans, for sure. I just think that we have to have a little bit higher level of execution and, again, our guys just trusting in their technique and really understanding their splits and all of these things that are nuanced to third down. I like the way that we're trending. We just have to continue to improve and tighten up just a little bit more, but I really like the way that we're rushing. I think that has been a positive. I think our pass rush is really coming on strong and that's a real positive. Now, it's just that we have to sharpen some details in the coverage system."

On if the experience of the Washington and Kansas City games helped the team against Cleveland and Pittsburgh with the fourth quarters:

"I think the Kansas City game was kind of on that, sort of, wild ride in terms of the comeback. They made a run. Any time the team goes on a run and the crowd is into it, I think that makes you finishing the game that much sweeter, to make sure that you can withstand a run and then come back with a run of your own. I think what our team has really embraced is that all of these games in the NFL with good-on-good come down to the fourth quarter. I said it from the second I was hired, I said it in training camp and I'm saying it now — and it's not going to change as long as we're all alive covering the NFL — the games against the best competition come down to the end and that's when you have to have it. If you kind of feel like you're ready for it and you know that, then I think you can thrive and execute better. I think that you really can. Getting comfortable in that space where you need to have your best stuff when it's tight, I think that we've been in a bunch of those things this year and our guys kind of feel like, 'Hey, we're good living in this space. We're going to have what it takes and we're ready to go nose-to-nose with this however it unfolds. I'm proud of our guys last night and that's why I was so happy after the game because I felt like we showed the type of resolve that you have to have if you're going to make it in this league.'"

On wild games against Pittsburgh:

“Man, there were a lot of wild games in the past. The [former Browns QB] Kelly Holcomb — you have to remember the Kelly Holcomb playoff game. The shootout game, I mean I’m talking way back. Do you remember that game? That’s a game that stands out to me as an incredible Steelers-Browns game. When [former Browns RB/WR] Eric Metcalf was rolling, I think we played them three times in a year. He had a couple of incredible games, some return games where he was just all over the place. I remember a couple of those games growing up that were incredible. Since [Steelers Head Coach] Mike T., [Tomlin] has been the coach, it hasn’t gone very well for the Browns, that’s for sure. I think, more than anything, the Pittsburgh Steelers have stood the test of time in the AFC, and really the NFL. You just know that’s a real franchise. I have the utmost respect for Mike [Tomlin] and how he runs that football team, and the Rooneys and how they run their football team. I’m proud of that win because, like I said, I have so much respect for that organization.”

“Yeah, Eric Metcalf, man, there weren’t too many guys like him. That’s for sure. Those were the good days. Those were the good days for the Browns, that’s for sure.”

On his brother, who is a Pittsburgh resident:

“He’s here right now. He’s going to have to go to his office when he goes back though and have to deal with it, I’m sure. That will be a feather at his cap in his workplace, but it’s going to be tough. They’re not going to take it easy on him, I know that, in that city. They find out who he is, I’m sure they’re going to give him a tough time. He’ll be ready for it.”

On DL Linval Joseph:

“Linval Joseph will enter the COVID protocols today. He tested positive for COVID-19.”

On DLs Christian Covington and Jerry Tillery:

“Those guys are day-to-day.”

OUTSIDE LINEBACKER JOEY BOSA**On being activated off of Reserve/COVID-19 and playing in last night’s game:**

“It was tough. Obviously, I like to prepare. But, going into Week 11 and having a week to rest and get my legs under me, it wasn’t the worst thing in the world. I just tried to take advantage of it. I had some good workouts. I made sure I stayed on top of it. I felt great coming into the game. I actually was just talking to some teammates and they said I need to take some time off more often. It was unfortunate, obviously. I felt weird not being there with my team, but it worked out. It’s not going to happen again, hopefully. I definitely like to prepare. I feel like when I have good practices, it usually translates into a good game.”

On his sack on the Steelers’ final offensive drive:

“For me, I just hugged [OLB] Uchenna [Nwosu] and [OLB] Kyler [Fackrell] because they both had gotten a sack in the fourth quarter. Kyler was the play before. I felt like we kind of all did it together. I feel like, as the edge group, we’ve been waiting to have a really big impact on games. I think the last couple of games, we’ve been doing a really good job. To come up at the end like that was awesome. It felt great celebrating that moment with them.”

On his feeling at the end of games this year compared to seasons prior:

“It just feels different out there. I feel like we all feel like we’re going to pull it out. At the end, we’re going to find a way. We’ve done it multiple times this year. It definitely was a little sketchy when they came back. Our offense driving down and putting it in the way they did, it was just great offense.”

On if this season ‘feels any different’ than years past:

“My third year, when we went 12-4, I missed nine games, so I felt like I kind of was disconnected from that year. I missed out on a lot of those close ones, those awesome ones. For me, this year has a different feeling. There’s a lot of confidence. Even when they’re coming back, even in that Raiders game when we were up a couple of touchdowns and they started coming back. Nobody panics. We just stick with it. We kept fighting. I do feel like it’s different.”

On last week:

"I had the close contact [trace], but I was testing negative every day. I tested negative all six days in a row, so I wasn't too worried. I was getting the negative tests and I was feeling great. I was taking care of myself. I tried to do the right things regarding that, so I wasn't too worried."

On his prior concussions and how his experience can help CB Asante Samuel Jr.:

"I actually did talk to him. After his first one, I made sure to let him know that it was a real tough time for me. It's important to talk to somebody if you're feeling depressed or feeling down about anything. I reached out to him a couple of weeks ago, when he first got his concussion. It's definitely serious. I hate to see that. There were a lot of nasty hits last night. It makes me cringe watching that stuff. I can watch any injury, but a hit to the head always makes me cringe. I'll definitely talk to him again because having a couple close together like that is a scary thing. It can definitely affect your thought process, your mood and how you're feeling."

On the edge group's recent success:

"I think it's mainly a mindset. I think that [Run Game Coordinator/Outside Linebackers] Coach [Jay] Rodgers has been doing a great job. He came in two weeks ago with this whole new attitude. I was kind of annoyed at first, like, 'What is this guy doing?' But no, it was great. He pushed us to work really hard that week. Unfortunately, I missed last week, but I heard that they had another great week. We really put the emphasis on getting off the ball and being aggressive within the run game, just getting off people. I feel like we were doing a good job at the point of attack early in the season, but we weren't doing a good job of getting off the blocks and really being effective in the run game. Last week, I think we definitely made a step in the right direction. Then, this past week, to come out with three big sacks at the end was pretty nice."

On if yesterday's game was the edge group's 'best performance of the season':

"It was pretty good. I think I left some things out there. I feel like [Steelers QB] Ben [Roethlisberger] held on to the ball a few times. I got held up on the tackle. Of course, every time I went, he was firing the ball out. Ben's just a true vet. When you play guys like [Vikings QB] Kirk [Cousins] or [Buccaneers QB] Tom [Brady], it's the same thing. It was a fun game. It was just fun to get the win and celebrate with my teammates. I just need to keep improving."

On the performance yesterday by DL Joe Gaziano, Breiden Fehoko and Forrest Merrill:

"It was awesome. I'm really proud of Joe and Breiden. I was joking with Breiden after the game. He doesn't show it, but he was definitely super nervous. He made the first tackle the game and I was like, 'I know you were so hyped.' He was a leader last night. He really did a good job of stepping up and being vocal. Same with Joe and Forrest. Joe really had a great performance. I think he did a great job. Ever since last year when he got here, he's been working his butt off. I think that this position suits him a lot better than the 4-3 end that he was playing last year. He's kind of coming into his own. I'm proud of them. I was kind of nervous going in, missing them — [DL] Linval [Joseph] is an absolute tank, and [DL] Jerry [Tillery] and C.C. [DL Christian Covington] are both great players. I didn't know that we were missing Linval until I showed up. I was like, 'Wait, you're not playing?' It was great to see Joe winning rushes, making great plays in the backfield. It was awesome."

OUTSIDE LINEBACKER UCHENNA NWOSU**On last night's victory:**

"It meant everything. It was pretty big for us because, at this point, every game is like a playoff game. We needed that win desperately so that we could stay in the hunt, stay in the fight. It was good for our team spirit. We came off of a tough loss that we deserved to win. I felt like everyone played hard last weekend, so just to be able to come out this weekend, play hard and get the 'W' was great for our morale and for our team."

On if he is developing 'a level of comfort within the scheme':

"Yeah. It's building. Typically, at this point in time, guys are trying too hard for things I'm settling in and letting the game come to me, taking on my opportunities one play at a time. I've been just trusting the process."

On defending the Steelers' offense:

"One thing we preached all week was being able to stop the run. We took a huge step these last couple of weeks. To fulfill that goal, we just keep building on what we were preaching and what we kept practicing. We were able to come out there and dominate. Everybody was able to step up. We were down a couple of guys inside. Guys were able to step up. Guys were eager to play and get their opportunity to shine. They made the most of it and I'm really proud of those guys. Everybody has just been working hard."

On the offense being confident enough in the defense to go for it on fourth down:

"That's definitely a sign of confidence. That's our identity. We want to establish an identity of being the aggressive team, a team that's not going back down. We're going to go for it. We're going to take control. We're going to put the game in our hands. We're going to end it the way that we want to end it. I love what [Head Coach Brandon] Staley does, his confidence and how he goes for it, and especially how successful we are in those fourth-down situations. It gives the offense another chance with the ball. It gives the defense more time to rest and keep building. It's great for our team."

On if last night's game was a 'must-win':

"Absolutely. It was a must-win. To be able to remain in that playoff hunt, where the AFC is wide open — you just saw all these teams lose, all these teams winning — it's wide open. For us, it was a must-win to be able to stay toward the top of our division and possibly make it to the playoffs and get the No. 1 seed. We have to keep fighting. Every game is a playoff game."

On the performance yesterday by DL Joe Gaziano, Breiden Fehoko and Forrest Merrill:

"That they didn't flinch. All of those guys practiced very, very hard during the week. If only you guys could have seen practice, they practiced really hard during the week. No matter what opportunity comes, they're always going to perform. They didn't back down. They never flinched. They were ready for the moment. They were playing like they've been in the league for 10-plus years. I'm very proud of those guys. They really work hard and they really stepped up in a big way. They really helped our team become victorious."

On the improvement of the run defense:

"We just got tired of all the noise, people saying that they can run all over us. As a man, that just hurts your pride. At some point, you just have a muscle up and say, 'F-that, we're going to go ahead and just start punching dudes in the mouth.' The bye week really helped everybody get a realization of what was going on here. The coaches really harped on what we needed to accomplish. Guys just said that enough was enough. Everyone was stepping up. Everyone said that enough is enough. We just really hammered in on that run game, really coming off the ball and being very physical and aggressive. That's something that Coach Staley preaches about every day, being aggressive."

On partnering with OLB Kyler Fackrell to help 'create opportunities' for OLB Joey Bosa:

"It helps him a lot. Joey Bosa is one of the premier pass-rushers of this decade. Any way that we can take pressure off of him so that he can go do his thing and be successful is great — if that's matching him up inside on the guards, or getting an overload to one side so that he can work on the tackle, whatever it may be; being able to send pressure or rush with four, guys getting their hands up and disrupting inside, that really frees up Joey to do his thing. We try to rush four as one, five as one, six as one. Everybody has a part in that, too."