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Chargers Week 1 Media Availability

Friday, September 10, 2021 ⚡ Hoag Performance Center ⚡ Costa Mesa, Calif.

HEAD COACH BRANDON STALEY

On when RB Austin Ekeler's hamstring injury arose:

"It kind of came right off the off day — the off day, that bonus Monday. He kind of felt a little something. It wasn't anything significant, but we just wanted to make sure that in these first couple of days of practice that he kind of regenerated and got all of that discomfort out. Yesterday, he was moving well. Then, today, he practiced."

On when precisely Ekeler's injury occurred:

"In Monday's practice. Just felt a little discomfort there coming off of the off day. We were just careful with him the next couple of days. Today, he looked good. He looked really good out there."

On if he expects Ekeler to play on Sunday:

"Yes. We're ruling him as questionable, so we'll see how it goes when we get there — we have to fly and all that. He looked good out there today, so optimistic for sure."

On which running back would fill in if Ekeler's workload is limited:

"That group behind Austin would split the load. We're going to need all of those guys in the kicking game, too. This was a good week for them to get off to a start without him being there so that we could kind of see those guys within the gameplan. All of those guys were able to get a lot of work this week, which was a positive."

On if it is 'safe to say' that all four running backs will be active on Sunday:

"No. Probably three out of the four."

On who the backup quarterback and kick returner will be on Sunday:

"Quarterback will be [QB] Chase [Daniel]. Kick returner, to be decided."

On what would qualify as 'a successful season' for him:

"Us establishing a competitive standard of performance, where we go out and we compete the way that we're capable of competing in all three phases of the game, where we can take a gameplan each week, in all three phases, and go apply it to our opponent. I think that's big when you're starting a program: establish your way of playing. You have to start there before you get into winning and losing. There are a lot of illusions in the NFL. You could have an illusion of winning where you're not playing very well, and you could have an illusion of losing where you're losing, but, hey, you're getting better, you're getting closer. For me, it's just establishing the way that we want to play. I think that if we establish the way that we want to play, then our results will take care of themselves. A lot of it comes down to if you have enough talent. When your way expresses itself, and it's going well, then, how good are we? I think that we have a really good team. We have a really good team and we have the type of team that can compete against anybody that we play against and beat anybody that we play against. For me, I really want to be a deep team. That's important to me this season, to be a deep team, where all three phases of the game can go into any type of environment and play the game nose-to-nose. It's general. Wins and losses, I don't know. I think that's really challenging to assess a total. I don't think

like that. But I think that for the fans and for the people that follow us, I just really think that our standard of performance, the way we play and how we play, you'll know how it's going by what it looks like on the field. We have to be ready for the tough things that are coming. When you talk about what would be a successful season is our guys being able to respond to the NFL. There's a lot to respond to; injuries, losses, there are just so many things that come at you — COVID[-19]. There are so many challenges. To be a team that's playing at the end, you have to be able to respond. We're certainly going to try and to everything that we can to be a team that can face all of that throughout the year."

On if WR Mike Williams is 'up to speed' with the offense and 'ready to go' for Sunday:

"Yes. Mike has had two really good weeks of practice. I really like the way that he looks on that football field right now. Within our gameplans, I feel like he's come alive. I think he's in a good spot. I'm proud of him, how he worked to get healthy. He looks fast. Just looks like a guy that's going to have a good year for us."

On how T Bryan Bulaga looked in practice:

"Really good. I was really proud of him, too, because he really had to battle through that discomfort. Then, he got it loosened up. He's just a pro's pro. Guy has real toughness. I appreciated him. It's that type of toughness that we're going to need moving forward."

On his plan for reviews in the coaches booth and the communication process:

"We had a couple of maybes up there. [Offensive Assistant] Dan Shamash has been doing a really good job for us, with our coordinators that are up in the box. A lot of it, what we're learning, is those TV angles. Whether you're on the road or at home, that's a big difference. So understanding those variables when you go into a game. I felt like the line of communication between Dan [Shamash], myself, and the coordinators was outstanding in the preseason. Hopefully, it'll be a strength of ours moving forward."

On his level of comfort with the fourth-down and review decision process, based off of his decisions in the preseason:

"Different than the regular season. There were some things, strategically, that we were trying to do with our kicking situation, so some of those fourth down things will be different moving forward. But, I think that what I've learned, and what we're trying to do, is be week-to-week. Who are we playing? Who do we have on our team? Who are we playing on the other side? What's the weather like? Then, taking all of those variables into our models that we make going into the ballgame. Then, being able to be ahead of the game — myself, [Offensive Coordinator] Joe [Lombardi], [Special Teams Coordinator] Derius [Swinton II]. Derius has such a great background, too. From a modeling standpoint, we went through that modeling process in the preseason, like playing three different games, and worked through that. I felt like the communication was right for me. I didn't feel sped up at all. I know that it's real. Now, we'll see where we're at. But, I like the communication process with Dan [Shamash] and [Director of Football Research & Analytics] Aditya [Krishnan] up top, and the coordinators — that triangulation of communication."

On the 'amount of leeway' that he has based on the analytics model present in any particular in-game moment:

"There's green, yellow and red. Yellow is more the judicious side, where it can kind of be either/or. Then, that's when you have to use your coaching. You have to put your coaching hat on then. We're going to err on the side of being aggressive and putting pressure on our opponents, and using a lot of tactical things to our advantage. But, we're going to trust our modeling, too. When it does get into those yellow areas of where it could be either/or, then you have to coach, then you have to understand some of the things that are happening within the ballgame and how you're playing, how they're playing, setting things up for the rest of the game. All of those things come into play. I think that we trust our process. Hopefully, it will be a strength of ours."

On if a green designation in the model means that they would go forth with the suggested option:

"For the most part. It's not like you would never, but green is a healthy yes. That's why we put it that way and term it that way."

On if he is a coach ‘that wants to go for it a lot’ on fourth down:

“I’m a big fan of trusting our quarterback, of putting the ball in his hands and putting pressure on the defense. I believe in that. From a strategic standpoint, there are a lot of reasons why. Fear is definitely not going to be a motivator for us, one that we make decisions by. We’re going to be able to live our results because we trust our process and we trust our players. I think that there are certain situations that everyone knows, like there’s not a perfect decision to be here to be made. Sometimes you’re going to have to live with the criticism. That’s part of the job. Like I said, I know that we won’t be perfect, but I know that we’ll be confident in how we made the decision. If we make a mistake, we’ll admit the mistake, we’ll move forward and we’ll learn a lot from it. I like where we’re at right now. I trust our players a lot. When you have a quarterback like ours and you have skill players like ours, you have a line like ours, you’re going to err on putting pressure on the other team.”

On what the ‘main point of emphasis’ has been this week:

“That this is what we’ve been doing since we joined up, we’re just better at it now. The first week of preparation, there is more specificity within the detail of playing new. How we do things, it’s not changing. Every day is game day here with the Los Angeles Chargers. Every day is game day. Every day there is a lot at stake. Every day we have to perform. Now, what we’ve been able to do is just apply that process to the specific parts of a plan, which I’ve really enjoyed. There’s a lot to work through in a week. I think that our guys have kind of seen how we structure the week, just with the meetings, the lifts, the practices themselves, the recovery, the travel this week, and why we do what we do. That’s been fun to get underway. Now, it’s time to go play ball.”

On preparing to face Baldwin Wallace University five years ago and his ‘rapid rise’ to head coach of the Chargers:

“I know that there was a lot at stake in that game. It’s a big rivalry game. We had lost a tough one to [Wisconsin-] Oshkosh, who we would eventually play in the semifinals, so we had to really respond to that loss. BW was a team that was really well-coached. It’s a rivalry game. It was a tough game. We had a freshman quarterback, so defensively, we knew that we were going to have to play a really good game. We ended up holding them to 10 [points], and that touchdown came after one of our turnovers — I think our quarterback threw three or four interceptions that game. We really had to play tight in that game. We actually turned them over late in the game to get a touchdown to go ahead. We had a big takeaway to get the ball back to get us that last touchdown. There was a lot that went into that week. They had a really quarterback run game that we really had to prepare for. They were a really good running team. We knew that they were going to try and keep it away from our offense. I’m giving you all of those details because that’s exactly the way I’m feeling now. I’m going through all of the situations of how we’re going to block these rushers from Washington and this linebacking corps that’s really good, that’s really well-coached. This secondary is really well-coached. They have a really good pass defense. On offense, they have a lot of weapons. Team speed. They have a quarterback that’s played a long time and has seen a lot. I’m just going into all of the details of the plan. That’s just how I am. I was no different five years ago, just not as good as a coach.”

On if he creates any time to ‘savor the process of getting here’:

“That reflection, I think, will happen after I’m done coaching. Right now, my reflection is just on how I’m coaching and trying to be as good as I can be. Hopefully, when I’m done coaching, I can look back and enjoy all of the things that you’re talking about, and I’m sure that I will. I’m certainly proud of my path and all of that, but now is not the time for reflection.”

SPECIAL TEAMS COORDINATOR DERIUS SWINTON II**On ultimately choosing K Tristan Vizcaino:**

“It was his collective body of work he put together in camp. He really set the tone every day. Kickoffs, field goals, he was consistent. Ball strike, ball flight, I can get into technicalities; everything he’s done, his mentality. I would be remiss [not to say congratulations] since [K Michael] Badgley signed with the Titans today to the practice squad. I told him on the way out, I said, ‘You’re and NFL kicker. You changed my opinion on what you did last year.’ He changed his body of work. As you see right now, he got signed. I expected him to be on a team. But we’re happy Tristan’s our guy. You see the guys running around him. He has an amazingly talented leg. And his mentality [is great]. There’s going to be lumps, there’s a lump for everybody. But all those things go into why we made the decision. We feel like it’s the best thing for the Chargers.”

On the deciding factor in going with Vizcaino:

“It wasn’t one thing. I don’t think you always want to kick touchbacks. I don’t think you’re going to always want to kick it short. It’s being able to do everything. I think Tristan gives you that ability to do everything. I think [K Michael] Badgley can do it at a level that some people want. We looked at it and said, ‘Alright, this kid at this age – the upside on it – the ceiling is a lot higher on a kid that age.’ He hasn’t had a lot of kicks on his leg. And he’s [Badgley] a larger man that has more on his leg right now. That’s not to say he’s [Vizcaino] going to be perfect. We’re saying that right now, projecting what we want to get done, he can do those things.”

On Vizcaino’s potential:

“I think if I had a magic ball, I’d say we’re going 17-0. We’re going 16-1, and he’s going to make every kick. It’s not about a leash. If anything, like every player, you go into every rep hoping they’re at their best. You build that confidence with a young guy. They’re going to take their lumps. I’ve been with players whether it’s a veteran or not [who’ve taken their lumps.] I’ve been with [former 49ers K] Phil Dawson while I was in San Francisco. He missed a kick, and you’re not going to get on him. Any good skill player, any person that does things like that – shooters, golfers, pitchers – you can’t be only them like other players. You have to be able, in the moment, let them be. Do you have corrections later on? I can’t see a playback of what they did in the middle of the game. If things go awry, you ask them what they saw. Just like a good caddy isn’t going to say [anything] in the middle of a round. He’s just going to say, ‘Hey, what did you feel here. I saw this.’ That’s really what you’re talking about. You just go from there. [Being a specialist] in the middle of the game isn’t like being a defensive tackle, where you have another one and you can throw them back out there. You really have to keep them [specialists] on a level plane. That’s what we want to do, whether it’s him or anybody else, specialist-wise. It’s a matter of his confidence. You guys have seen he’s a highly confident kid. That’s not going to be an issue with him. It’s just making sure his fundamentals, his techniques are on par. Every single kick, every single day. Being able to sustain this throughout the whole season.”

On the pace of the special teams unit:

“We’re healthy. We’re healthy as far as what we have on our teams. I like where we’re at, team-speed wise. I really feel good about who we are – our identity, building that identity. I think they know how to practice; they know how to put in the scheme. We had a full week now and the guys that were young [have learned a lot from the veterans]. The veterans have taught the young guys, ‘Hey, this is how you prepare for an NFL game and how you get your body ready.’ I think we’re going to be able to show that speed, show our techniques, fundamentals on Sunday. The dance at training camp is the bodies; who’s getting used, some guys are out. But when you’ve got everybody on week one, going into week one healthy, will be an advantage for us.”

On who will play gunner against Washington:

“When we punt the first time, you’ll see. Who would you like it to be? We can put that in a hat. We’ll see who runs out there. Maybe [WR] Mike [Williams] and [WR] Keenan [Allen] will go out there. We’ll never know until Sunday. All jokes aside, hopefully the punt team doesn’t go out there. That’s my mentality every week. I’ve been in a situation with the Broncos where we went three weeks at the end of the 2013 season and we punted one time. I would love for [QB] Justin [Herbert] to never have [P] Ty [Long] on the field except for PATs and field goals. Gunners? Maybe we don’t have gunners on Sunday. Maybe we don’t punt. That would be nice. But we won’t give away any secrets, we’ll let the Washington Football Team think about who’s going to run out there, at any position, until Sunday.”

On Vizcaino’s NFL experience prior to joining the Chargers:

“I don’t look at the why behind a lot of it. You look at the variables, the situations he’s been in. They had established guys. When you kick with the 49ers [like Vizcaino did when] they just signed [K] Robbie Gould to a huge deal. They’re just not going to keep him [too]. We’re focused on the tools he has, and what he presents. It really wasn’t [a question of] why he doesn’t stick. I’m just glad we have him. I’m glad to have the guy. I told these guys this story when I first got here. I said, ‘You go back, you look. [Former Browns and 49ers K] Phil Dawson and [former Colts K] Adam Vinatieri were on the same training camp roster when they came to the NFL. Phil had to sit. He was on the practice squad, he bounced to another team, and then he got on.’ You really don’t worry about the why you didn’t make the team. It’s all about when they get the opportunity, do they fulfill that. Do they get to the promise of what we want them to do.”

On Vizcaino not sticking with a team earlier in his career:

"I don't really look at the why behind a lot of it. You look at the variables and the situations that he has been in, they've had established guys. When he kicked with the 49ers, they had just signed [49ers K] Robbie Gould to a huge deal. They're just not going to keep [Vizcaino]. Really, we try to focus on the tools that he has and what he presents. It really wasn't, 'Why didn't he stick?' I'm just glad we have him, you know? It's more that. I'm glad to have the guy. I told these guys the story when I first got here — when you go back and look, [former NFL K] Phil Dawson and [former NFL K] Adam Vinatieri were on the same training camp roster when they came into the NFL. Phil had to sit. He was on the practice squad and then he bounced to another team. Then, he got on [a roster]. You really don't worry about the why didn't they make this team. It's when they get the opportunity, do they fulfill that and [perform] to what we want them to do."

On returners:

"I mean, I still think we don't want to lead anybody down that road. I think it's a thing that we'll see what the game says. Like [Head] Coach [Brandon Staley] says, we'll play the game that week. I think we have capable guys back there. I think we have guys that can do multiple things. I think we'll see what the game brings. We'll see what the wind is. We'll see what the time on the clock is for punt returners. We'll see all of those things. I've tracked this as we've gone to different places. We were in Denver, again, and we had [former Broncos WR] Trindon Holliday that would return punts sometimes. [Former Broncos WR] Eric Decker would go back there and then [former Broncos WR] Wes Welker would go back there. We had [former Broncos S] Omar Bolden would be a kick returner for one and then Trindon Holliday would be back. It's good to have more people that can do it because we might be able to put different people in different situations. We might put two guys back there that they might think are the returners. We try to hold it as close to the vest as we can until we jog out onto the field because you just want to see how prepared they are. Just like we have to be prepared for whatever they do. I mean, they have some great returners. [Washington WR DeAndre] Carter is a kid that was in Houston. He's been in Chicago and now he's there. I told the guys this week, he's a tough runner. The kid [Washington RB Jaret] Patterson, he had a great preseason. They have guys on their roster — [Washington WR] Adam Humphries has done it, if he shows up back there. It's the same game that they're playing, we're playing. We're just keeping them on their toes. We have guys that really are going to be able to contribute at a high level. We just want to hold it until then, so that we don't help the other team. That's going to be every week for us. If a guy returns next week or this week, understand that it's a week-to-week thing. It's not [QB] Justin Herbert back there. It's going to be like that for us."

On the factor of offensive and defensive snaps for special teams contributors:

"Yeah, that plays [a factor] for everybody. That plays for the core guys. That plays with returners. I really think it does because you have to be able to balance those things, right? You have to be able to balance. If guys are playing 30-something snaps on offense, you can't kill them on special teams. That's where depth comes in, which we have good depth. If a guy is playing 30 snaps, you probably don't have him on special teams unit. You probably have him on two. If the guy is playing 15 snaps, then you can play him on four. I think we address that in every area and every position. That's why we have the depth that we have and it's really good. That's a good problem to have. We have a team where, even if a guy is playing a lot, he can contribute on special teams. There's only a few — [WR] Mike [Williams], [WR] Keenan [Allen], [RB] Austin [Ekeler] — even Austin has come to me, in a joking way, saying, 'Hey, put me at gunner.' I'm like, hey maybe we'll throw Austin out there at gunner. That would be fun. We'll see who's out there and we'll just go from there."

On RB Joshua Kelley:

"I don't know if those were lapses [last season] because I don't know what he was being coached to do. For us, he's been really good. All of those backs have been really, really good for us. It is rare where you have a running back room where from No. 1 to No. 4, No. 1 to No. 5, they can all contribute in some way. All of those guys have been good. Like I said, I can't say [about last year] because I wasn't in that room. We could all look at it and maybe he missed a tackle, but who knows if he's making up for somebody else? I looked at the game last night and you see some of those things that are going on there. Everybody was getting on [Cowboys K Greg] Zuerlein. Did you watch it? Do we know? Do we know what he was supposed to do? We try to look at it from that standpoint. The past is the past. Today, they've all been progressing well. Joshua has been good. He's one of many that have been good. There's nobody that I can say hasn't been because if you haven't been good, you probably aren't here right now. Joshua has been one of the guys that has been really good for us."

CORNERBACK ASANTE SAMUEL JR.

On anticipating his emotions on Sunday:

“I don’t think I’ll be nervous. I am more anxious just to play, to get out there and see how everything is, more than nervous. I have been preparing for this all my life. We’ve been grinding the whole training camp, so we just got to go out there and show what we have been doing.”

On the advice he’s received from veterans in the secondary:

“Just go out there and play fast. Don’t try to think too much about things. Just go out there and play, you can’t really think too much.”

On the advice he’s received from his father, Asante Samuel Sr.:

“Just keep grinding and keep God first.”

On Washington WR Dyami Brown:

“He is a good receiver. He has good speed. We are just going to go out there and compete, compete at a high level.”

On if he believes that Washington will ‘target him’ since he’s a rookie:

“For sure. I am a rookie, so I am ready for anything. Those guys have proven themselves. I haven’t proven anything yet. I am ready for whatever.”

On what Chargers fans ‘can expect out of him’:

“Just a guy that loves football, loves to compete against top-notch guys. Just a winner, a guy who wants to win — win every rep and win every game.”

On learning from CBs Chris Harris Jr. and Michael Davis:

“It’s good. Those guys teach me different things. Michael Davis will teach me on technique things. Chris Harris, he’s more of a scheme guy, but he’s helped me with scheme things. Just try to listen to everybody in this whole organization, whatever they have to say, I am open ears, just trying to listen.”

On the best piece of advice he’s received since entering the NFL:

“Just be yourself. I have been doing this all my life, playing football all my life. Don’t try to change up who you are or what you do just because you are at the next level. Just keep doing what you are doing, do what got you here.”