

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 8 Media Availability

Friday, October 29, 2021 ⚡ Hoag Performance Center ⚡ Costa Mesa, Calif.

HEAD COACH BRANDON STALEY

On RB Austin Ekeler:

“He practiced phenomenally well. He came back [from the bye week] and had a really high-level practice, finishing every run like crazy. He just came up a little bit sore after the practice. It didn’t happen during the practice. He just had a little bit of soreness in his hip. He felt much better these last two days. Real hopeful that he can play.”

On being cautious with Ekeler in practice:

“On Wednesday, this guy was flying. He looked incredible. His speed and his workload is amazing. He had an awesome practice. He stayed after practice with [QB] Justin [Herbert] and felt a little sore. We just wanted to be careful with him these past two days, so, hopefully, he can play.”

On LB Drue Tranquill:

“Drue practiced this week. I’m hopeful that he can play. He was out there yesterday in pads. He was there all three days, but yesterday in full pads. He has practiced well. We’re listing him as questionable, but we’re hopeful he can play.”

On if DL Justin Jones will be activated off of Reserve/Injured:

“It’s still to be determined. Like Drue [Tranquill], he’s practiced all three days, and in pads. He’s looked good, but we’re just going to make sure that that there is that final, ‘yes,’ then we’ll go from there. Hopeful that he can play. “

On former Chargers LB Shawne Merriman complimenting T Rashawn Slater:

“I think what makes that legitimate is who it’s coming from. Shawne Merriman is that type of player. If you know Shawne, he doesn’t say something that’s not true. One thing about being around special players is, normally, they don’t throw out compliments because they feel like it. That’s normally my experience with special players, that they don’t throw out compliments because they feel like it. Obviously, Shawne feels that way, and I know that we certainly feel that way about him in terms of his ability as a player and as a competitor. What those guys did was they did it for over a decade-plus; that’s the key to being as good as they were, to do it over and over again and doing it better and better. That’s going to be Rashawn’s challenge. I know that he’ll be up for it.”

On Slater’s upbringing impacting how he has developed:

“Rashawn’s been raised the right way. He comes from a tremendous family, and he’s got such a great head on his shoulders, as most great competitors do. They’re very critical of their own game. I think he knows how much he needs to improve and how much he needs to learn. He’s so self-aware that way. It’s a quality you need to have if you’re hoping to be as good as he is. I’m excited that he said that because the opponent that we’re playing this week is really, really good. I know that he is really aware of that because he’s been studying tape. The fact that he said that makes me know that he has been studying the tape because we’re playing a really good team this week.”

On Herbert's mobility:

"It's such a strength of his, and I think that any strength of his is a strength of ours. I don't think that you can ever have enough of it. Every game takes this shape and life of its own, but what I do think you can do is commit to a gameplan. On offense, you can do that with those specific plays because of where they come. You can implement them on any down-or-distance, any field zone. That's a point of emphasis for us, to create more of those types of plays for him. What it will do is create more space for our offense, more effectiveness and explosions. Hopefully, we can do that moving forward through the second half of the season."

On CB Asante Samuel Jr. being in the 'dog house':

"Oh, he was never in the dog house. Asante just needed a second to chill out. He played fantastic last week against Baltimore. He was really, really good in the game. He has responded just like how we knew that he would. I think what says so much about Asante is that we were so surprised that he had a couple of tough plays against Cleveland. It just shows you the standard that he has set, much like [T] Rashawn [Slater]. They've set really high standards for their performance, and they're only six games into their careers. Asante has practiced outstanding this week. He was really good yesterday. He made a couple of plays yesterday that I was pumped up about. We'll see what he does this week against a really good team. He's the right guy to be coaching, and we're going to build our defense with him, for sure."

SPECIAL TEAMS COORDINATOR DERIUS SWINTON II**On the signings of WR Andre Roberts and K Dustin Hopkins:**

"I think, as [Head] Coach [Brandon Staley] said, we look at the roster every week and we look at how we can improve. I think, when he talks about Dustin, his experience and things he can do — and the experience he has in the league. This guy has done it a long time. He has been productive. It's just, a guy like that, you can't pass up on. I think, as everyone knows, given the lack of production in that area, it's something where [K] Tristan [Vizcaino] moves into a development role and Dustin is the experienced guy that we're going to lean on that has been in those situations. I think that's an area that we did really improve on, same thing with Andre. I don't know how many times you can look at in the NFL where a three-time Pro Bowler is now a free agent. You can't just pass that up. He has an impact in everywhere that he goes. If you look at just what he's done professional-wise the last few years of his career, the guy is a pro. He's a true pro. This is what he does. He's an expert at it — his conversation with the blockers and everything is just some high-level conversations. So, just adding those two pieces to a young team, I think that helps you more than anything. You get an older guy that can talk to them about his experience, what he can do for them, how he has been in these situations. 'Hey, I've played against this guy. He's going to do this.' I think both of them can do that and it's really good for us."

On the return game with Roberts:

"We treat our special teams — unlike some people — we treat it just like offense and defense, in terms that we play to the strengths of the players. I think if you look at [QB] Justin [Herbert], [Offensive Coordinator] Joe [Lombardi] probably would tell you that he goes and says, 'Alright, Justin. What plays do you like?' And then we try to scheme that. It's the same thing that we do with our returns every week. It's, who is our returner? Who are we blocking? Who do they have? Andre and I will talk. We talked on Tuesday and I said, 'Alright. What do you like? You've played these guys. Who do we have blocking and who do they have covering?' Then, based off those things, we'll build our scheme together. With a veteran like that — I mean, I was in Denver with [Hall of Fame QB] Peyton Manning and that's how he collaborated with [former Broncos Offensive Coordinator] Adam Gase. I think good coaches do that with their best players. To say our three-time Pro Bowl returner is our best player on kickoff return and punt return is true. So, we do have collaboration on that because he's seen a lot. I've seen a lot and he's seen a lot. We can talk through it. He was in that division and played them twice per year for a while. It's kind of, 'Hey, when you did this, what did you think? When you did this, what did you think?' [And he can respond,] 'Hey, when I was here, I've done this.' When I was in Denver playing against them, it was the same conversation and then we would build our scheme based off of that. We try to take that approach in everything that we do. It's, 'Hey, what do our players do well? How do we build it around them?' So, for us, it's not every week that the scheme is going to be the same. He's been really good on that. Our conversations have been great. We look forward to being productive in that area."

On Hopkins:

“I see a productive, strong-legged kicker. I think he’s a guy that knows himself. He’s very meticulous in his technique with everything he wants — how he wants it filmed, how he wants it held. All of those things. You see a high-leveled, experienced kicker that knows situations. We went over to the stadium earlier in the week just to get him comfortable with those things. There’s just little things like that you do with an older guy because he’s getting a feel for it. It’s a calm that he brings because you know what you’re getting. He has to get adjusted to some of the things, as always because everyone plays so long, but he’s done a really good job of coming in and saying, ‘Alright, this is what I do. This is how I like it.’ Like I said, we build around him. Our kickoff, our field goal, we’ll build around him. It’s been really good, in that aspect, having him in. You just see, for whatever reason, in this league kickers are moving around. We were just lucky enough to have him be on the street and pick him up.”

On Hopkins’ leg strength:

“I think you have to look at — let’s start with kickoff first. When you go with yards per kick, it’s what are you asked to do? In Washington, they’re asked to kick touchbacks, so that’s why. He’s asked to just kick it out of the back of the end zone. We didn’t ask Tristan [Vizcaino] to do that. We were asking Tristan to kick it short so we can cover. That’s why we’re in the middle of the road in kickoff. We were seventh up until the Baltimore game. It’s just what is he asked to do? Can he do those same things? Yes, that’s another thing of why we have him because he has that ability. He was asked to kick touchbacks, so you can look at the yards and be like, okay he has more yards because of that. You go to Carolina where they don’t cover kicks, they just kick it out of the back of the end zone, they have the most yards. It’s scheme-wise on that. As far as field goals, I think also you have to look at, offensively, what he had there. When did they stop in the game? How productive was the offense? We don’t kick a lot of 50-plus [yard field goals] because in our offense we go for it and we’re scoring points when we get past midfield. I don’t watch, offensively, Washington, but if you watch it around the league and what’s happening, they don’t have the high-production offense that we do. He was asked to kick more 50-yarders. In that situation, probably if you kick more, you miss more. It just happens like that. Not everyone is going to have a [Cardinals K] Matt Prater from Arizona. Not everyone is going to have a [Ravens K] Justin Tucker. The league average, he’s a little bit below it, but then we have to look at situations and when he is kicking those kicks. I think that’s why those numbers are where they are. Sometimes, you have to just look at them and say, ‘Are the numbers real or is it situationally why he’s asked to do certain things?’”

On pressure from the right side of kicks:

“We’ve had zero blocked, right? So we’re good. Let’s just stop there. I’m saying this for this reason. That’s like saying [QB] Justin Herbert has had 700 pressures and he’s never been sacked from the right tackle. We can deal in ‘what ifs’ but they didn’t block the kick. The kicker has to make it, right? So that’s why I stop there. You can talk about leakage or this or that. If Justin Herbert never got hit on the right side, he got pressured but he can make the throw. That’s why I look at it and stop it there because our field goal unit hasn’t had one blocked. Pressure is pressure. It happens. They get paid, too. They get paid, too. We tighten up every week. We look at their rush. Sometimes, you tip your cap and say that they’re really good at what they do. Did they block the kick? No. We had enough time to get the kick off, there it is. I’m just telling you, listen, nobody has gotten close. We have a 6-foot-9 tight end. If you watch the film and you pause it when he’s kicking it, the guy is behind the tackle. That’s where I say, go stop the film when he kicks the ball. There hasn’t been one guy that’s closer than the tackle. He’s diving, the ball is away and then he slides.”

On missed kicks despite pressure:

“It’s always on the kicker. Unless it’s blocked, it’s on the kicker, right? Like in basketball. Unless he blocks your shot, you’re asked to make the shot. They can adjust it, but you’re asked to make the shot. It’s a bottom-line business to me. Now, the protection, can they get blown back? Yeah, but at the end of the day, his head is down and he has to make the kick. Any coach will tell you that. Things can affect it, but at the end of the day, he has to make the kick. It’s different than punting where a punter has to step into it and if they’re in front of him, he might jam himself. Kickers won’t get jammed because they’re swinging through, unless the guy is coming at them and they’re not coming at them.”

On how often the coaching staff evaluates which players play on each special teams unit:

“Every week. Everybody is a potential personnel change. Every week, every position. If you look at our kickoff return team, from Week 1 to Week 2 to Week 3 to last week, guys are never in the spot. The same goes with inactives, actives. There are so many variables: who is up, who is down, what are we doing all around the team?”

On TE Donald Parham Jr. remaining on the field goal unit, based on if he is active or inactive:

“That’s not my job, [Head] Coach [Brandon] Staley gets paid to do that. Inactives, that’s on him. I work the lineup based on what our inactives will be. Whoever is up — game time, we’ll figure it out. He’s been good. The guys have been good. We just swap guys out and rep different guys in practice. You look at last week, [LB] Drue [Tranquill] was down, so [LB] Cole Christiansen steps in right there. If the roster changes, we do different things. [LB] Nick Niemann, he was the personal protector, but [RB] Justin Jackson ends up being the personal protector. Different guys are repping at different positions. On kickoff, we do different things with different people. The personnel, for us, changes every week. I don’t know if you pay attention to it, but we don’t ever really have the same guy in the same spot every single week. They’re going to watch film, too. I know that [Patriots Head] Coach [Bill] Belichick is watching this. I know that he is going to see where we put this guy, where we put that guy. They’re good. We watch their stuff. Every week, you can’t just be the same.”

On Parham’s position on the field goal unit:

“He’s been up. He’s been there. We move different tackles; look at when [T] Bryan Bulaga went down. Those things happen. He’s been healthy. Same as the back side. We didn’t start with [G/T Michael] Schofield [III], but nobody got hurt for him to go down. We just move people around. If the guy is healthy, we kind of keep him there. We’ve had [DL] Forrest Merrill play left guard, so different things just happen. If things happen, then we move. If Donald is up, we might put him there, we might not put him there — it depends on all of those factors. All of those factors go into our decision-making. I look at it that way. I don’t look at it that we’re dead set on it. From play-to-play, we do change things, too.”

On what CB Ryan Smith has added to the special teams units:

“Speed, experience and play-making ability. It showed in that first game. He will tell you that two weeks ago against Baltimore, there were some plays that he left on the field. He’s an explosive guy. He really adds an element of that he’s been there and he’s explosive. They have to put attention on Ryan Smith. That helps us. If they’re putting more than one guy on him, now somebody is a man short and we have single blocks in other places. That guy really does a lot for us in that aspect. He’s played a lot of football, so he can talk to [CB] Kemon Hall, [S] Nasir Adderley, those guys about what he is seeing. It’s been good.”

On Patriots WR Gunner Olszewski as a punt returner:

“Consistency. He’s very consistent. He’s very situationally aware. He understands field position. What you have to understand about the Patriots is that everything ties into each other. He knows the flow of the game. He knows how [Patriots Offensive Coordinator] Josh [McDaniels] is calling the game. He knows when he can be aggressive. He knows, ‘Hey, I can pick this ball up because the gunners are more aggressive, my blockers are going longer.’ He knows who he has blocking in front of him. Then, he’s just a vertical guy. He does a really good job of getting vertical. He’s more slippery than you think. It’s not a very big man, but he’s very slippery. He can get through things. Against the Jets last week on kickoff return, it looked like they had him dead to rights, then he slipped through there for another five, six yards. He’s a very productive, high-level NFL returner that takes calculated chances. It really goes with what their team does. He knows that if they’re up, or if they have them backed up, that he can be more aggressive. He knows that he can pick it up off of the bounce at certain times. He hit us with one last year in Arizona being savvy. He sold [letting it bounce], then, all of a sudden, catches it. That’s something that they do in all phases. It’s little deception stuff that they do that you have to be on top of. They do it all over the place, you just have to be on top of it because they’re very good at that. Those are the factors that go into it.”

QUARTERBACK JUSTIN HERBERT

On the bye week:

"I think that the bye week was huge for us, and for those guys up front, especially with getting their bodies back. It's a long season, so for those guys to get some much needed rest, I think it's great. I think that it was a great opportunity for us to attack this week and have a good week of practice, which we did. Looking forward to the game on Sunday."

On the challenges that the Patriots defense presents:

"A lot of challenges. They're incredibly well-coached. They make all of their looks look the same. They disguise very well and they have some really talented guys on defense. They're able to make plays in all three aspects of the game, whether that's up front, in the middle or deep in coverage. They do a fantastic job."

On if he went back and watched last season's game against the Patriots:

"We did. It's always tough to go back and look at that game. There was a lot of good learning stuff from it. I think that we did a good job of, last year, learning from it, and continuing to develop from it. A lot of mistakes were made and there were a lot of things that we had to correct. As tough as it might be to watch, you have to go back and learn from it."

On if he has thought about last year's loss to the Patriots at all this week:

"No, you always move on from it. That's what is going to happen in the NFL. Every team that you play is going to be really good. Sometimes, that happens. You don't ever want it to happen, but you have to learn from it. You can't let that game beat you twice. You have to move on. I felt like we did a good job with that last year, especially this year, from moving on past losses. Just looking forward to playing them on Sunday."

On former teammate and Patriots TE Hunter Henry:

"We've texted a little bit throughout the season, and especially during the offseason. I was a huge fan of Hunter. We got pretty close. Just excited to see all of the things that he has done. I wish him nothing but the best."

On Henry helping him transition to the NFL last season:

"He was the first guy to reach out to me as soon as I got drafted. We created that bond of lifting, throwing and doing all of these things. He helped me so much on the field, and off of the field, as well. A great mentor, a great friend and one of those guys that I want to stay in touch with throughout his career."

On his takeaways from 'self-scouting' over the bye week:

"I think that there are a bunch of areas that we can improve on; first-down aggressiveness, I think that on third down, we need to complete more. I think that we need to move the ball better, especially early on in the game, so that we can limit the time that the defense is on the field. I think that one of the things that we made a mistake on in the Ravens game is that we let the defense be on the field for too long. You can't expect to win playing football like that. That's just one of the things that we have to work on."

On developing the screen game:

"I would say that we've been awfully close in screens this year. I think that kind of perfecting those and mastering those would be huge for our offense, just how balanced everything is. It does a great job of kind of holding the D-line from rushing the passer. If you can sprinkle those in from time to time, I think that it helps our offense. Like [Offensive Coordinator] Coach Joe [Lombardi] said, I think that screens are a huge part of the game. If we can get better at those, I think that it helps our offense."