

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

Wednesday, October 27, 2021 ⚡ Hoag Performance Center ⚡ Costa Mesa, Calif.

HEAD COACH BRANDON STALEY

On signing K Dustin Hopkins:

“We had the opportunity to bring Dustin in for a workout, and [former Falcons K] Elliott Fry from Atlanta. To get a kicker of his caliber, with his experience and production, we felt like we wanted to investigate that. He was just let go by [Washington], so we wanted to ensure that we explored that possibility and saw him kick live. We wanted to see him kick live and compare him to [former Chargers K] Tristan [Vizcaino]. With his experience, his productivity, we just felt like this was good timing for us and for him. At the same time, we still believe in Tristan Vizcaino. We’re trying to keep him on our team. We still believe in him as a player and we’re going to continue to coach him, but we felt like with where we’re at this season, we felt like Dustin would give us a lift and it would also allow us time to continue to develop and coach Tristan.”

On if the team’s plan is to sign Vizcaino to the practice squad:

“Yes, it is.”

On ‘how much they dug into’ Hopkins being released by Washington:

“I can’t speak to what that organization did, but all we tried to do was evaluate the film, evaluate his film over time — not just this season, but preseason. Then, the previous seasons. The other thing that we did was evaluate him live. We got to see him live yesterday. I think that was important, too, because you’re comparing him to Tristan [Vizcaino] and we wanted to make sure that he was of that caliber. We felt like he had a really good workout. We felt like with his experiences, being a starting NFL kicker for six seasons, and being a guy that has kicked in playoff games, that that would be an advantage for us. We’re looking for production from that position. At the same time, like I said, we really believe in the talent of Tristan. The reason why I’ve continued to say it is because I believe it. Dustin’s [Hopkins] path is similar to a lot of past kickers. He’s on his fourth team. He was drafted by Buffalo, then went to New Orleans and Washington, and now he’s with us. Sometimes, that’s how it happens for kickers, where it takes some time to get your legs underneath of you. For other guys, it happens right away. What I’m discovering with that position is that sometimes it takes some time. We’re going to try and get Tristan back on our team and continue to develop him. At the same time, we think that Dustin really brings us something right now that we need.”

On if Hopkins wasn’t available, would Vizcaino still be the team’s kicker:

“I think that’s tough to say. We just wanted to make sure that we were exploring the possibilities out there, where we felt like we could bring in some competition to see how it stacks up with Tristan. I think that we were able to do that effectively. I thought that [General Manager] Tom [Telesco] and his staff — [Director of Player Personnel] JoJo Wooden — I thought that those guys did a tremendous job of creating that competition, which is what we’re after. It’s the same thing that we wanted to do with [WR] Andre Roberts], try and search every avenue that we can to improve our football team. The timing just happened to work out well for us.”

On the competition between RBs Joshua Kelley and Larry Rountree III and which player will be active on gameday:

"I think it's game-to-game. It's competitive and dependent upon the matchup. A lot of it is factored in on special teams. [RB] Justin Jackson has carved out a nice role for us on special teams. He's kind of a multi-dimensional player for us. He gives us a lot of versatility as a runner, receiver, pass-protector and on special teams. That other back, between Larry and Josh, is truly a competitive situation. I'm glad that we have both guys. They're both young backs. We'll continue to let that competition play out."

On the running back group behind of RB Austin Ekeler:

"I think that it's going to be a group approach. I think that is what has expressed itself so far, that we're going to need all three of those guys behind Austin. I think Austin's had a really good season. I think that until a guy emerges as like, 'Hey, that's going to be our second back,' then we have to continue to let the competition play out and try to get those guys doing the right jobs for us, which I think we are. Then, hopefully, those guys will continue to develop and grow."

On if he expects S Nasir Adderley, DL Justin Jones and LB Drue Tranquill to practice today:

"Yes, expect all three of those guys to be out there. Like I said, I'm optimistic. Those guys look good on Monday. They were out there in the walk-through today. So, we're going to see how they practice today. Today will be a full practice. Excited to see those guys get out there. We'll see where the week goes."

On how the offense can 'improve on first and second down':

"It's just little things. I think that we're throwing the football a lot of first down, so it's not a lack of aggressiveness. I think that it's just our level of execution on first and second down. I think that we have a really strong sense of who our team is right now. I've mentioned that, and I think that's important. When you go through the first part of the season, we've played six real games. I think that now we have an idea of who is blocking for us and who is throwing and catching for us. On early downs, it's maximizing your players and really trying to stay ahead of the defense. I think that there's a lot of specifics to that, but I think that us throwing the football at a high level is always, to me, a big factor in your first- and second-down success. Then, being able to run the ball effectively and making sure that you have good solutions in the run game to crowded looks, I think that we're going to continue to do that. Like I said, it's not big things for us on first and second down, they're little things. But, I think what's been good for us in the last week-and-a-half or so is just being able to really assess our guys and have a real, clean direction moving forward."

On Patriots RBs Damien Harris and Rhamondre Stevenson:

"I've loved Damien Harris since college. I played against them last year. We loved Stephenson coming out. I really loved him as a back. He really fits that style of runner that they're looking for; a bigger guy — they haven't had a bigger guy like that in a while. I think that he's been fantastic. [RB] Brandon Bolden has been playing a long time. He's a good back, too. He's a really complete back. He does a lot of jobs for them. They've always had running backs that do a lot of things well. They really do a nice job of creating roles for their backs. I think that the one thing about New England is that they know how to run the football. They run it in a variety of ways. I think that you're seeing that over the last couple games, too. They're really starting to find their rhythm in the run game."

On his evaluation of the offense when the unit is in 12 personnel [one running back, two tight ends]:

"12, it's an advantage for you if people are going to play you a certain way. Putting two tight ends out there — and, again, depending who the two tight ends are — is going to depend on how they probably play you or assess you. We just feel like, with the guys that we have right now, that it's always an advantage to create more gaps in the run game. I believe in stress value, which has gaps and vertical threats in a formation. The more gaps you have in the formation, the tougher you are to defend in the run game, and the more vertical threats you have. I really believe in that, just philosophically. What is interesting about our tight end group is that they're all different. We have Jared [Cook] and Donald [Parham Jr.], who are more pass-catchers and stretch guys. We have Stephen [Anderson], who kind of has that fullback flex. Then, we're really hoping to get Tre' McKitty going, who is a little bit more of a 'Y' tight end. We're going to continue to look at that group really extensively. Again, we feel like it can give you an advantage, depending on how people play you."

On if he has ever met Patriots Head Coach Bill Belichick:

"I have not."

On how much DL Justin Jones 'could provide a boost' to the run defense:

"Our entire defense, not just the run defensively. He's a really good rusher, too. He's a quality player. He plays the game the way that we want to play it. I know that in training camp, he had fantastic camp, and he really got off to a really good start in the Washington game. If you go back and watch his Washington game, he was playing really, really well. He's just the quality player. He is going to help us if he can get back out there, for sure."

On his level of 'comfort' with G/T Michael Schofield III at right guard:

"I felt like he played well versus Baltimore. The game before, he really did a nice job, too — against Cleveland. He's a stabilizer. I think that we know what we're getting with him. He has that experience. Mentally, he's picked it up so fast because he's seen a lot. He's a stabilizing force for [T] Storm Norton, as well, just having a guy that Storm can really trust. I think that's something that we've needed at this early juncture of the season because I think that it helps you get your offense off the ground. When you're brand new offense, it allows you to kind of function at a higher level, when you have an experienced guy. It also gives some of the younger guys, like [G/T] Brenden [Jaimes] some time to develop and get ready. Brenden and Tre' [McKitty] have both trended really positively. I'm just using those two guys as examples. Those guys are going to be more ready to play because they've had older guys kind of taking the workload at the beginning of the season. I'm excited about Mike, though. I think that he and Storm have both done a good job."

On DL Christian Covington:

"Cov has had a really good year for us. That was a big value signing for us. I can't picture what we would be like without him, for sure. He's one of us. This guy is our style of player. He's really been a stabilizer in there for us. He's done a lot of different jobs, and he's done them well. I'm excited to continue coaching him."

On if Covington 'has earned a starting spot' once Jones returns:

"He's going to play a bunch. I consider Christian a starter because he's going to play a ton in the game. I think that definitely will give us a lift. Just getting one more guy out there, it allows other guys to take a little bit less snaps. I think it will be real positive for our depth."

On RB Austin Ekeler's 'presence' and how that has impacted the locker room:

"Austin, his path, is one that, I think, everybody on our team, and on other teams, can respect because he's earned everything that he has achieved in the National Football League. Where he started in the NFL and where he is now are two different places. To become kind of a special teams sort of walk-on player — undrafted free agent player, who's just fighting to make a team — to now be in a feature back. I think everyone in the NFL would consider him to be one of the elite, all-around backs in the league. His work ethic, the standard of performance that he has every day, the expectations that he has for himself — he's a tough, tough, tough player. When you start something, as a head coach, he's the type of player that you want to join up with. He's having a really good season. I love the way that we are utilizing him. I look forward to continued success from him."

On the field goal protection team seeing pressure off of the unit's right side as of late:

"Good observations. The right edge has definitely been a point of emphasis for us over the bye. That's one of those areas that we've definitely assessed. That needs to be better for us because our operation is good — snap to hold to kick, the timing has been good. We have to continue to improve on that right side. Some of it is personnel, some of it is technique. We're going to continue to look at that because your point is well taken."

On his assessment of the special teams phase through the first six games:

"I really like where our punt unit is trending. I really like that unit. I like who is on it. I like our punter a lot. I think that our kickoff unit has a lot of potential. I think that we have had some really good moments. We're kind of in the middle right now, which is kind of how we played, but we have a lot of young players, on [special] teams, that I think are going to continue to improve. But, I like our approach on kickoff. Then, our return units haven't been as good. A lot of that has to do with who's back there returning. Anybody that has studied the kicking game, any press conference in the history of special teams, is going to talk about who their return guy is. I was in junior college with one of the great returns in the history of this game, and that's [Falcons WR] Cordarrelle Patterson. When I was with him in junior college, all of those return schemes work better when you have someone like him back there. That's why we felt like going to get [WR] Andre [Roberts] was a good move for us, because he gives us production and stability back there. We can more thoroughly evaluate our schemes because I don't think that we've been able to evaluate them properly because of the returner, so I'm excited to see that in the second half [of the season]. I think that the kicking situation puts a real negative impact on your special teams scores, from an extra point standpoint. Our overall feeling of special teams comes down here because of some of the misfortune on extra points and field goals. Hopefully, with Dustin [Hopkins] out there, that will help us. The one thing that he brings to the table is that he can kickoff. That was something that was really important to me, is that we didn't lose anything on kickoffs. He has an outstanding kickoff leg, as well. We have to improve, for sure. I know that we have the right guys out there. I think that [Special Teams Coordinator] Derius [Swinton II] and [Assistant Special Teams] Mayur [Chaudhari] are doing a really good job of coaching them."

On the pass rush:

"I'm really glad that we got [OLB] Kyler Fackrell and I think [OLB] Uchenna [Nwosu] is playing well. We haven't had enough opportunities for those guys in pass rush. Our third-down percentage is outstanding. We're one of the elite teams in the NFL in third-and-four [yards to go] or more. We've had far too many of third-and-three or less. That's a result of how we're playing on first down. I like both those players. I think both of them are tough and rugged. Both of them have shown the ability to rush. We've seen Kyler with some big sacks, whether it was the Vegas game or Dallas, huge sacks. Then, Uchenna last week against [Ravens QB] Lamar [Jackson]. Those guys both have what we're looking for. [OLB] Chris Rumph [II] is playing well, too. He's developing nicely. I like where both those guys are. What we have to do is play better on first down so that all of those rushers get more opportunities and can get into rhythm."

On the progress of the team so far:

"Every single day for us is important. Where we're going to be at the end of this week is much different than the first six weeks. We're going to see real improvement on special teams because there are a lot of nuances to special teams. A lot of it is experience. When you come from college, for a lot of these guys who're not core special teams players because they're star players on their college teams, there's a learning curve. Our guys are going through that right now, learning the tricks of the trade and understanding how we do things. We're going to have a great challenge this week. [Patriots Head Coach] Bill Belichick is one of the elite special teams coaches in the NFL, and always has been. We're going to get a really good challenge this week. They have a lot of good, core special teams players. That's how they've built their team. I'm excited for our guys to rise to the challenge. I know our guys are working the right way. We've taken a long look at our process and our personnel. I'm excited to see how we perform in this next stretch of the season."

On DL Jerry Tillery:

"Our defense in general has had some really good moments. In the pass rush, he's been a factor, which is a strength of his. In the run game he needs to improve, like all of us do. Where that starts is with me. We've had some really good conversations on our entire defense with being more exact, more defined. That will help everybody out, especially Jerry. But, I love his approach and I like coaching him a lot. He's up for it, and I think you're going to see a lot of good football from him this second stretch of the season. We're off to a good start. I really like coaching him."

On 'efficiency' on second down:

"Some of it is, 'Hey, they had a good call.' You felt like you had good design. I know in the Baltimore game, we had a couple good plays up that just didn't quite hit. That's sometimes how it happens. Our approach on second down, I'm good with it. Our results just haven't met the caliber of our offense, what we are capable of. But, our design has been really good. What can't be minimized is that we are plus-three as a team in the takeaway margin. If you take a look at our pressure percentage — protecting the quarterback — we've protected our quarterback well. There are other numbers that really matter to me. As it relates to the second-and-seven-plus, it's just finding that sweet spot where we can be a little more aggressive to stay out of third down. Find an easier completion. Find an easier run solution. In the second half of the season, we're going to spend a lot of time on that, because third down in the NFL is tough. We've been spectacular, but you don't want to live like that. It's just getting our engine going on first and second down more and getting the ball to our guys. I'm excited to see us do that in the second half."

RUNNING BACK AUSTIN EKELER**On his bye week:**

"My bye week was awesome. I actually went up to Watts, California, with a foundation. We're doing a project up there. If you haven't been there, it's a place that needs a lot of help. A lot of people need a lot of help up there in that area. Trying to make an impact."

On the project:

"Right now, it's still undisclosed. We haven't gone public with it, but my foundation is just trying to implement resources that people can use for the long run to give them a fair-level opportunity so that they can have the resources that they need to learn about themselves and take advantage."

On the benefits of the bye week:

"The bye week always comes at a good time in the NFL. No matter what week you're in, the bye week always comes at a good time. That's the nature of the NFL, especially when you go through a few games. Your body is not feeling as 100 percent as you'd like it because of the violence of the game. It definitely came at a solid time — I feel rejuvenated, I feel fresh. I was dealing with some injuries that are pretty much recovered, so I'm looking forward to making this last stretch."

On the 'self-scouting' aspect of the bye week:

"First and second down. We've had a lot of third downs. That was the biggest emphasis [Head] Coach [Brandon] Staley was talking about. Like, 'Hey, we have to get better on first and second downs. Whether that's being more creative with our play call or being more aggressive. Whatever it is, in that week — it's different week to week — we have to make sure we're winning first and second downs.' It gets us out of those third-down situations, where we have record amounts of third downs that we had to convert. Then, it keeps you out of those fourth-down situations, although it seems like everybody's going for it now. I think that Coach Staley started a trend. That was the biggest emphasis, first and second down."

On areas of improvement for the offense:

"It's always execution. That's what it comes down to. That's the entire name of the game. I think that's a given."

On if the team's 'belief' in itself 'took a hit' following the Week 6 loss to the Ravens:

"The belief never takes a hit as an individual. Maybe as an organization, if you're out of the playoffs then you can't make it, but as far as individuals, every single time that we come in here, this is our job — the belief and the optimism we have in ourselves, and the confidence. I know my experience is always like, 'Look, this is everything I have for this opportunity to continue to have success in this league, regardless of if we're winning or losing.' It takes individual mindsets like that, that come together and help to make the team mindset the same thing. As far as now, I don't think we took a hit, even when we lose, we don't take a hit. Win or lose, it doesn't matter. Even Coach Staley said it the other day. He said, 'We should feel the same after we win as we do after we lose. There's definitely difference in there, but the fact that there's still plays you could've done better, regardless of if we win or lose the game.' That's a good mindset to have. I know that it's individual. You just climb, regardless of if we're winning or losing. We've gone through losing seasons. It doesn't matter, you have to show up."

On last season's loss to the Patriots:

"This is a whole new year. Our team is so different than it was last year. That's how the NFL is. Teams turnover, new guys come in, people get traded, people go all over the place — the draft, obviously. I feel like this is a new opportunity in this new season."

On his role in the offense:

"[Running Backs] Coach [Derrick] Foster has been doing a great job getting me in the rotation. I'm definitely open about how I play this game. That's how I've had the most success and stayed healthy, so let's keep that going. It's been a good balance so far. I know we've been rotating a lot of guys, trying to get someone to step up and spark that number two role. We're turning over a bunch of guys right now. They're all competing, which is great. It's making it hard on Coach to say, 'Alright, who do we want this week?' It comes down to special teams, just like it used to be for me. It was special teams, and then you get some opportunities on offense. It's fun to have a room where we're still constantly competing. But, my balance has been solid. I'm grateful for that."

On the role of the No. 2 running back:

"I'm definitely ready for someone to step up. It's like, 'Hey, guys, let's go. Someone has to rise to the occasion. Come on.' It's been a mix, which honestly hurts them, in my opinion, because now there's no clear role for them. Psychologically, it's like, 'What am I doing?' Regardless of your situation, you still have to go out there and practice as hard as you can, trying to earn a spot. But, I'm ready. They're keeping it hard, which is good. You want some type of competition. But in the end, I'm just hoping one of them makes a bunch of great plays because that's what we're looking for. We're looking for someone that makes plays, comes out, and it's like, 'Man, this guy's got it going on.' I'm looking for that, too, because I'm reminded of myself and how I just kept working and working. They're all doing that, so it could be any of them. But, time will tell."

WIDE RECEIVER ANDRE ROBERTS**On his decision to join the Chargers:**

"It was a good opportunity. I understood a bit about what they are struggling with special teams. I wanted to come in and help."

On his plan with the Chargers:

"I just plan on making an explosive impact in the return game, whether it be punts or kicks."

On his initial impression of Special Teams Coordinator Derius Swinton II:

"I like him a lot. He has a lot of good energy. That's what you want out of a special teams coach. I met with him when I got here. He's willing to do some things that I like. As a player, that's what you love."

On if he will play on offense:

"Maybe, maybe not. You never know."

On the Chargers special teams scheme compared to the schemes implemented with the Bills and Texans:

"In the return game, probably more similar to Buffalo than to Houston."

On what he has learned from his time in the NFL:

"Be a little crazy. Run hard, run fast. Sometimes you're going to take a shot, you are going to get lit up a little bit. Understand that's just part of the game and trusting your teammates."

On what influences his decision to return a punt:

"The guys in front, the guys that are blocking. A little bit of the timing, understanding what the punter is trying to do to me. The time of the game and when you should return. When we're trying to block it and not trying to get a return in fair catch situations."

On 'key identifiers' on returns:

"In punt returns, it's about the guys in front — especially the guys on the outside blocking the gunners. If they can get those guys stopped, you'll have a lot more time. Then it's your job to make everybody else miss. Hopefully, it's not everybody else, but as a returner, that's what you want to do. On kick returns, you just want to kick it downhill fast and trust your blocks. Sometimes when the blocks aren't there, you might get hit, but you might make somebody miss just because you are running hard and trying to hit that hole."

On deciding to fair catch:

"I try my best not to fair catch it. I like to be aggressive as much as possible. But, there are times where you just want to get the ball back to the offense."

On joining a team with a winning record:

"It's a breath of fresh air."

On joining a new team in the middle of the season:

"This is the first time that I'm joining a team in the middle of the season, but I have been to a lot of new teams from year to year. It's just getting to know guys, letting them get to know you a little bit; about your family, about where you are from, how you play the game. You just gravitate towards different guys. That's just how you do it."

On joining the Chargers during the team's bye week:

"It definitely helped a lot. It gave my body some time to rest, get to know a few of the guys. Talk with the coaches, try to understand my role, and what they are going to be asking me to do. It made a difference. I was happy to get that little bit of rest."