

POSTGAME TRANSCRIPTS

Los Angeles Chargers vs. Denver Broncos

Sunday, December 10, 2023 ⚡ SoFi Stadium ⚡ Inglewood, Calif.

LOS ANGELES CHARGERS HEAD COACH BRANDON STALEY

On an update regarding QB Justin Herbert:

"Justin [Herbert] has a right index [finger] fracture."

On 'the prognosis for the rest of the season':

"To be determined. He wasn't able to come back into the game. We'll know a lot more in the next few days."

On the finger:

"I don't have any information beyond that. It's a right index [finger] fracture."

On pass protection:

"We didn't protect the passer well enough today, particularly when they blitzed, when they rushed more than five. We didn't protect well enough today. There was a lot of pressure, sacks, and it caused a lot of negative plays for us today."

On the 'schematics' of the Broncos' blitz packages:

"It was a combination of things. There was a combination of some identification things, then some technique errors, and then we just lost some matchups. It was a combination. It wasn't good enough today."

On 'who is responsible for the blitz pick up':

"Most of those are accounted for. Like I said, sometimes a guy loses fundamentally, sometimes it's just a one-on-one matchup. There was a free runner there, which goes back to the plan. It was a combination of things today, and it wasn't good enough today."

On the offense's performance on third and fourth down:

"We didn't execute well enough today, and it was in all phases. It's not just one thing. When you have numbers like that, it's everything. We didn't have a good enough plan today."

On QB Easton Stick's performance today:

"I thought that he competed in the game. Once he got his feet underneath him, I thought he did some good things, particularly in the second half. I thought that he moved the team in the second half and gave us a chance. It was good for him to get into the flow of the game because when you come in there cold, it's tough to just get in there right away and get moving. There are going to be some things in the second half that we can build off of."

On the outlook for the remainder of the season:

"The best thing for us is that we play on Thursday. We have to put this one behind us quickly. We have to get our rest, get recovered. Then, we have to get a good plan for Las Vegas. That's all we can focus on right now. I'm glad that we're playing Thursday because after you lose one like this, you want to play again. A division game on the road and we have to be ready."

On the defense's performance today:

"I thought that we did a lot of good things out there. I thought that we did a good job against the run game. I thought that we rushed well when we got the opportunity to rush, when it was a third-down game. When you make it a two-score game and they were going to play it conservatively, it's going to be tough for you to create any plays. We gave up some third downs that were routine, which I think affected how we're going to feel about the performance, but our guys hung tough."

On 'why hasn't everything come together':

"It's just been a combination of things. Our guys have competed the whole way. Certainly, today, when you when you lose Justin [Herbert], that's going to affect the outcome, but we've just been a little bit off. Today wasn't good enough. Our guys are going to have to dig in. We still have games left to compete. We're not out of it yet. We're going to have to dig in and compete on Thursday night."

On the decision to go for it on fourth down on the drive following CB Michael Davis' interception early in the game:

"We felt like we had the momentum. Fourth and three, we were going to get the field position. Felt like being aggressive in the game was the call there. We had a good play, just didn't knock it down. Just felt like with the field position there, to our advantage, that we were going to be aggressive."

On challenging the Broncos' third-down spot in the third quarter:

"I didn't think I got a great answer. We thought we did get a good look at it, with his elbow on his knee down before the line-to-gain. We are trying to get our way back, we felt like that would have caused the punt. We would have been able to gain some field position from it."

On if he 'weighed that those calls don't get overturned often':

"We did. Just felt like it would be worth it to try and get the field position, based on how the game was going, to kind of march our way back."

On the timeout taken before a fourth-down attempt:

"We just had a guy that was in the game that shouldn't have been in the game. One of those unfortunate deals where we had to take one."

On 'what is causing limited touchdowns':

"It just hasn't been clean enough in the run game or the pass game. We just have been inconsistent, out of rhythm. That defense is playing well, from Denver. It's going to be tough when you lose your quarterback. We didn't make enough big plays to score the ball. When we got the third down, they made a lot of big plays, and that really affected the game."

On 'getting the rhythm back':

"It starts on the practice field, but it's everybody just doing their part. It's coaches, it's players, it's a combination of things. When we have a performance like today, it's a combination of things. You have to go back to work. In this case, we have to go back to work quickly. We have to get right back on the practice field and try and put a good plan together for Las Vegas."

On 'compartmentalizing' his 'job status':

"I'm just focused on getting ready for Las Vegas. I have a team that's hurting in there. We have to rally, we have to make sure that we get a good two days of practice before we travel and get ready to play a division game. I'm focused on doing my job well and that's what I'm going to continue to do."

On 'if this stretch has been the most challenging as a head coach':

"Yeah, I think so. It has been, just because you know the type of games that you've been in, you know the fights that you've been in, you see how other teams are doing in the league and how we've competed. We just haven't been able to knock them down. Like I've told you guys, I take full responsibility. But, yeah, it's been a tough stretch, but we're not going anywhere. We're going to bounce back and we're going to be ready for Las Vegas."

On his confidence:

"I think that every time I go out, I get better at this job. Every single day, I get better. That's what gives me the confidence. That's all you can do, as a competitor, is continue to improve. When you get your opportunities, compete to the best of your ability. That's what we're going to do. We have a good group in there and we have to really show what we're made of because this is a really tough stretch that we've been in. We have to get ready to play Thursday night, so we have to go."

LOS ANGELES CHARGERS QUARTERBACK JUSTIN HERBERT

On his finger:

"Just went in there right before halftime. Got the X-ray. We'll know more as the week goes on."

On how his finger is feeling:

"It doesn't feel good."

On the play in which his finger was injured:

"I think it was after the throw — I can't remember whether it got hit on a helmet or whether it hit on someone's shoulder pads. I just remember coming up and it wasn't feeling right."

On the offense's performance on third down:

"It was a tough day. Obviously, not the way that we wanted it to go. But, I know that our focus is on Las Vegas this Thursday, and we're going to be better because of it."

On if he 'can play with the broken finger':

"I'm not sure. It's something that we'll know more [about] as the week goes on."

On if this injury is 'similar' to the injury sustained on his other hand:

"I'm not sure. I think that's probably a doctor question. I don't know to which extent. Got the X-ray and came out and couldn't quite grip the ball."

On if the injury is to the 'tip of the finger':

"No, it's a different part of the finger."

On if the injury is 'closer to the knuckle':

"Yeah."

On if he has ever 'tried to play through something on his right hand':

"I tried today."

On if he has ever 'played through a fracture on his right hand':

"Not with a bone injury, no."

On if it was 'challenging to grip the ball' after sustaining the injury:

"Correct."

On the 'difficulty of this last stretch of games':

"We're taking it one week at a time. Obviously, not the result that we wanted today, but we're going to know more as the week goes on. Whether I can play or whether I can't, I know that the team has full faith in [QB] Easton Stick. I thought they battled today. We're looking forward to the next matchup."

On 'how devastated' he was when he 'realized' that he would not return to the game:

"It's, obviously, tough. You feel bad for hanging the team out like that. You never want to be taken out of the game. It's something that we'll know more as the week goes on. If there's any chance to play, I'll do everything I can to be out there. I'm going to do everything I can in the treatment room to get back to 100 percent."

On if surgery is required:

"I'm not sure. I think we're going to find out more either tonight or tomorrow and kind of make a decision off of that."

On if 'further testing' is planned:

"I would assume that that is the plan."

On 'if there is a chance' that he 'could have surgery quickly':

"If that's something that they recommend, I'm sure that there'll be able to get that done, I don't know quite the plan right now. All I know is that we got one X-ray and we're going to have more done in the next day or two. We'll figure out that plan. Once I know, we'll let everyone else know."

On if his finger 'bothers him right now':

"Yeah, it doesn't quite feel good. It is what it is and it's part of the NFL and it's part of playing football."

On if his finger is currently in a splint:

"Yeah."

On the Broncos' 'pressure looks on known-pass situations':

"It's tough. When you get a front seven like that, it is tough. But, I thought that we had a good plan. We just didn't execute. We have to do better, offensively. I thought that the defense played well, they came up with some big stops today. It's on us, as an offense, to be able to convert those third downs, go down and score — especially in the red zone, when we get turnovers like that down there. That's on us and. We have to be better because of that. It wasn't good enough today."

LOS ANGELES CHARGERS QUARTERBACK EASTON STICK

On his performance today:

"It's been a while since I've played. I felt like we got in and out of the huddle for the most part. Obviously, we did get the one there on the last drive. I kind of lost track of it. Other than that, we got in and out. Just unfortunate when you don't score enough points. That's the way it goes."

On his long completion to WR Quentin Johnston:

"[Johnston] did a really good job. [Offensive Coordinator] Kellen [Moore] did a good job of kind of scheming it up during the week. Q [Johnston] ran a great route and tracked it, made a big-time play. I'm proud of him. He's someone that we have to keep getting the ball to."

On the 'adjustment when going into a game cold':

"It's just part of it. Obviously, yeah, I hadn't played in a while, but that's part of the job. I've been here, this is five years. I've gotten to watch Justin [Herbert] and I've watched [former Chargers QB] Philip [Rivers] play and play really well. That's the standard. Just went out there and tried to compete, did the best I can."

On if he was 'nervous' upon entering the game:

"No, we got settled in pretty quick [laughter]. I've taken a ton of snaps with [C] Will [Clapp]. I've played with these guys, I know these guys, and I know that they have my back. At the end of the day, it's just football. We got in there and we tried to compete."

On his 'thought process' if he 'ends up starting the remainder of the season':

"We have four games left, however it goes is how it goes. Obviously, right now, thoughts and everything are with Justin [Herbert]. We'll see how it goes."

On preparing for 'potentially starting' on Thursday night:

"We're all doing it, we're all in it together. That's part of it. Everybody has one of these games and this is where ours falls. We'll be ready regardless."

On if there 'would be any frustration' if his first NFL start occurred on a short week:

"No, I haven't thought that far ahead. If that's the case, then that's the case. Like I said, right now, we're thinking about Justin [Herbert]."

On if he has spoken to Herbert since the game ended:

"Just a little bit. He's a competitor. For him to not be out there, that was really tough. But, he knows that everybody has his back, especially me. I love and really appreciate Justin [Herbert]."

On if Herbert 'provided any words of advice':

"You get into the game and you're rolling. I've been with him for four years now. His example on the field is the biggest advice."

DENVER BRONCOS HEAD COACH SEAN PAYTON

Opening Statement:

"I'll be brief. Good overall, it was a good team win. I thought the one thing that stood out was our ability to play a lot of that game on their end of the field, especially in light of how it started. We get off the field, defensively. We talk about it a lot, but it did feel like most of the game was on their end of the field, and then when mistakes happen, like the interception, they become more significant. A lot of things to look at and point out. The third down numbers were big. Turnovers, we won, plus one. [Broncos WR Courtland] Sutton's big play, [Broncos QB] Russell's [Wilson] throw. Defensively, we did a good job harassing the quarterback, both of them. It was a good win."

On the defense collecting six sacks:

"It's too hard of a league to give a guy like [QB Justin] Herbert, to give him his time — especially a player like him that is very accurate. Disrupting that timing is important."

On the defense's performance:

"We knew that they were going to go for it more often than not. I think that they converted one fourth down. I was pleased. It was a big turn there to come away with no points given up, and then, there were a number of drives. I think one resulted in a touchdown. Usually, we talk about two first downs, if you're backed up inside. Two first downs puts you into a neutral position. We were able to do that and then some. It was one of our better team wins this year."

On Broncos WR Courtland Sutton's long touchdown catch:

"He's like that — big, powerful. It was a play that was called for [Broncos WR Jerry] Jeudy. The coverage actually went to the field where Jeudy was. If you notice one thing on that play though, I think [Broncos QB] Russell [Wilson] had seven, eight seconds. We had great protection. Obviously, that was the second part of a broken play. There's a lot of confidence that Russ [Wilson] has in [Broncos WR] Courtland [Sutton]. It's earned certainly. He gets the penalty, and he still makes the play. It's impressive."

On 'success on the ground' today:

"One of the keys to victory — I mean, it was one of few. We knew that was going to be important. We had a good balance."

On 'becoming a tough and physical team':

"I think you have to practice in training camp. I think there are certain things that you just have to demand and do. It's hard to get in-season ready with just going through walk-throughs. When we practice Wednesday, we spend a lot of time Tuesday night like, 'Are we in pads tomorrow? Are they banged up? Do we need to back off?' There's always that fine line as to where our team is at. I hope that's something that you can say about our team, that we're a physical team, because that's something that we emphasize. Emotionally and physically, you have to be tough, and we were today."

On three third-down conversions near the end of the game:

"That was big. I hated how quickly they came back with a couple of chunk plays. We have to stay on top of that. When you're playing with a lead, you know that they're going to get some shots. But, then, to answer was big. Overall, we did a good job. Our punter was outstanding. I just felt like a lot of the game was inside their 30, and you're going to win a lot when that's the case."

On 'adapting to a new quarterback coming into the game':

"As a play caller and a head coach, you pay attention to how the game is unfolding. Certainly, it's a game driven by quarterback play. It's also driven by defense and running the football. They moved it a little bit better with the other kid in there. Now, the game was different at that point, in fairness to what they had to do. They came out, I think, and wanted to run the ball a little bit, as well. I mean, you saw that. It's a divisional opponent. We'll see them in three weeks or what have you. It's one less question about one more demon that we've answered."

On an injury update regarding G Quinn Meinerz and OLB Nik Bonitto:

"I'll keep you posted. I've never talked to you about injuries after a game. I'll keep you posted, though."

On if Meinerz was ill before the game:

"No."

On Broncos CB Ja'Quan McMillian's coverage:

"He has really good instincts. Part of it is timing – you know, snap count, a lot of those things. He's a smart player. That's a good trait to have, you know his football IQ."

On Broncos Defensive Coordinator Vance Joseph's gameplan today:

"You just can't sit with one look. You're going to go in with pressure, with coverage, walk up. You have to win with a few different pictures or it's going to be a long day. I think to his credit and our staff and the players, it couldn't just be one thing, it had to be a mix. The timing was good."

On the schedule moving forward:

"We get in these — and I say this respectfully — you get in these routines where it's like, 'I can't believe Christmas is right around the corner.' I really can't because it's just the next week, it really is. We play Detroit on a Saturday. What's the schedule like? Tomorrow, a scouting report, we'll look at the Lions and all this other stuff goes on outside. It's difficult sometimes when you get to Thanksgiving and Christmas because it's hard. There's not a lot of reflection. You take a peek at what the AFC did today and let's go, it's on to the next challenge. I'm being honest."

On Broncos WR Jerry Jeudy:

"He'll get his touches. The key is winning, right? He had a chance to make a play or two today and he made a few plays early on. I'm not as worried about it."

DENVER BRONCOS QUARTERBACK RUSSELL WILSON

On the touchdown pass to Broncos WR Courtland Sutton:

"I think, first of all, that play doesn't happen without the line. I think I had about 35 seconds about back there on that play. I went left, went right, went through my reads probably one, two, three, four, five, back to one, and then back to [WR] Courtland [Sutton] again. I think Sutton obviously has been all special year. A tremendous work ethic, great leader, great teammate, great hands, can catch everything. He did a good job because he was going deep, kind of came back for a second and then he went deep again which was really great play by him and one hand in front of our fans is pretty special."

On the performance of the defense:

"Our defense has been amazing, the past seven weeks or plus, I think they've been unstoppable. They've gotten turnovers and making plays, we're playing together. I think our leadership on the defense, obviously [Broncos S] Justin [Simmons], [Broncos LB] Alex Singleton, [Broncos LB] Josey [Jewell], there's so many guys stepping up. I just think also, too, you have to credit [Broncos Defensive Coordinator] Vance Joseph. I told him in the Bears game at halftime, when we came back out at halftime, I just told him 'Hey listen, I've gone against you probably 100 times, you're one of the best defensive coordinators I know.' And one of the toughest guys go against. I knew that he could turn it around, he's done a good job. We have more to do. I think a collective effort you know, from obviously [Broncos Head] Coach [Sean] Payton, and all the coaches, the defensive staff, offensive staff, everybody, special teams, we're all doing it together. That's the best part about this game. It's 11 guys on offense, 11 guys on defense, 11 guys on special teams and then all the guys that are helping us. Whether it's in the game on the sideline, practice, mentality. Everybody is giving their all. I think it's what's making a difference."

On his connection with Sutton:

"I think the nonverbal communication is everything, obviously the verbal and the nonverbal. As we watch film and study film throughout the whole week and the offseason everything else, just talking about ball you know these guys. These receivers, tight ends and running backs everybody offensive minded guys are obsessed with the game and we get to play with guys like [Courtland] Sutton, who cares about the game. His intellectual understanding of what to do in certain situations. Really trying to create the script, a scam is going to happen in the game, especially when our line is blocking the way they did today. He thought top down and said let's go deep, let's take a shot. I tried to give him a chance and he made a great play."

On Sutton 'hearing' Wilson 'in his head to be calm':

"A little birdie in his ear, I guess [*laughter*]. Through all the hard work, I think it pays off. When you know when you practice the right way and you have the right mentality and when guys care as much as they care. I think he said he had heard my voice on that play out thinking deep, top down whatever. It was good play by him."

On Broncos G Quinn Meinerz:

"I think he'll be fine. I think our trainer staff, all those guys, do a great job of making sure everybody's okay. I think from my understanding, he'll be alright."

On the postseason outlook:

"We're in a horse race. We're three quarters of the way through and you have to finish the last quarter strong. I think the best thing that we can do is stay focused on us and playing our best football. I think that's really key. I think the best thing too is, I told you guys at the beginning of the week, you know painting the picture and the truth is in our season we're five and one over the past six weeks and now six and one. We kept telling the guys, I kept telling the guys that, early in the week, that's the reality. That's the truth of the past seven weeks, now we're six and one and I think there's great belief, told the guys in the huddle before the last knee, stay humble and hungry, let's keep going. We're not even at our best yet, and that's a good thing."

On if the team is 'peaking':

"Listen, I think we're steady climbing. Climbing a mountain is not easy, you know there's going to be bumps in the way, and there's going to be stuff that's going to try to knock you off. We just have to stay focused on the peak and stay focused on what we're trying to do and understanding that we're doing this together. It's going to take all of us, we have to get better. Starting with me and we're all going to get better as a collective group. Keep challenging each other to be our best every day. Like I said, that's practice. We're going to enjoy this win, it was a big one, AFC West against the Chargers, a good football team. They have a lot of great players. I thought we did this thing together, that was special tonight."

LOS ANGELES CHARGERS HALL OF FAME TIGHT END ANTONIO GATES

On the feeling of the ceremony at halftime:

"So many emotions run through your brain. I think the reality of it is that I see so many people who have been through the grind with me. The countless support over the years. I said this earlier, it's almost like the roles reversed in a crazy kind of way. Although you are the one that's receiving all of the praise and honor, it feels like it's your turn to thank the ones who have helped you flourish to that level. That's kind of how it felt. When I see so many guys and they've meant so much to me, whether or not they've played a role — major or minor. It was just almost — I wanted to say something else, but I felt like it was my turn to thank those people. God blessed me with ability, but those guys were that, steel sharpening steel term that got me to this point. It's crazy because the roles kind of reversed. Everybody is talking about me, but I'm like, 'Wait, I need to thank this dude. Oh man! I need to thank this dude over here, too.' It's just a great, great time. Great experience. I'm just happy to be part of something as prestigious as that, being able to go into the Hall of Fame for this franchise."

On his football journey:

"My journey was probably the most unique journey in all of football because I came in as a former basketball player not knowing what to expect. For the most part, didn't even know why I would even decide to play the game of football because I had so much skin in the game with the game of basketball. In my mind, it was just destiny. It was just meant to be. That's the way I see it. Never in a million years did I imagine being in the position to be in the Hall of Fame for a football franchise. My point is that God, his destiny trumps whatever you have going on in your brain."

On if there are specific memories from his career that stand out:

"It's a combination of both [memories that stand out or if they blend together]. You get a chance to think about the championship moments that we had. We didn't win a Super Bowl, but there were times where we were AFC West Champions. There were times where we were picked to win consistently. Then, you think about the times that your trials, the trial-and-error. The times that you struggled. Through it all, you think about how we stayed together. That's the whole journey. We stayed together in tough times. We stayed together in good times. I think what makes up this day is that we fought through different times and we stayed together."

On playing college basketball less than an hour from the Pro Football Hall of Fame:

"We would always hear about the [Pro Football] Hall of Fame when I was playing college basketball. We would always hear about it, but it just never registered to me that I would even be somewhat close to doing it in that phase. Obviously, basketball was a passion of mine. It never struck me as a thing that I would even consider being a part of. I would hear these speeches consistently over and over when football players were going to the Hall of Fame. One thing I would commonly hear is that they wanted to be there. They strove to be there. That's not quite my story. Although, when I played, I played for the sake of certain things: The sake of my teammates, the sake of my coaches. It led to me having an opportunity. Some of those guys who are in the Pro Football Hall of Fame, they wanted to be Pro Football Hall of Famers when they were 14-years old. I wanted to go to the NBA [*laughter*]. I wanted to play in the NBA. That was my dream, right? Like I said, I still haven't wrapped my head around it all. I'm soaking this all in right now. I will say, through it all, I maintained a certain level of consistency — not to get too high on myself, not to get too low on myself, never looking at the past. Basically, I outlasted people and I did what I needed to do every single year. It led to me having an opportunity to become a Pro Football Hall of Famer."

On seeing his former teammates:

"It's always great to rekindle old relationships, right? Old games. Old memories. I think, when it was all said and done, that's what you miss the most about the game. You miss the laughter, the joking and the fun. Obviously, the game, the battles that we've had at practice. I mean, I remember it one time, there were 11 guys in the Pro Bowl and we would battle throughout the whole year in practice alone, before we even played the game on Sunday. That's what you miss the most. You miss that camaraderie. You miss that laughter in the locker room. We had 'Tie Fridays'. Everybody had to dress up and we would laugh about who had the worst suit on, you know what I'm saying? *[laughter]* I actually miss those moments. Now, they all came back for this special occasion. That's what you talk about. Unfortunately, we would always hear that when we were playing. I'm saying the same thing — you ask guys, 'What do you miss the most?' The camaraderie. The connection. The laughing. The chemistry. That's the most important thing because those are the memories that carry you when you're done playing the game of football."

On thanking Chargers fans:

"They were the ones that embraced me first at 22-years old. I can say that I wouldn't be standing here today without their support. I think that's important to acknowledge the ones who started with you from the beginning. What's the song? 'Started from the bottom now I'm here?' Like Drake *[laughter]*. That's kind of the concept. They started with me. They supported me. One thing I appreciate the most is whether we won or most, they still supported No. 85 and the Chargers."

On paying attention to WR Keenan Allen's season:

"He's getting closer and closer to my record *[for receptions by a Charger]*, yeah *[laughter]*. I know what he's doing *[laughter]*. Yeah, yeah, yeah. He's coming. We knew that from the first time we saw Keenan play in a live game. I think my first ones to *[former QB] Philip [Rivers]* was, 'This kid can flat-out play. He understands how to play the game of football.' What he's doing hasn't surprised me or the guys who knew what he can do when we play with him. I think the rest of the world is getting a glimpse of what he's capable of. We already knew. I remember saying to him — and I can't remember what year it was — we were doing something where we were training and I was always the No. 1 option. I said, 'Keenan, I'm going to pass the torch.' Insinuating that I think it's about your time to take over this organization, in terms of the passing game, you becoming the No. 1 option and I take the backseat. He was that talented. He's my little brother. I loved watching him play. I always root for him."

On former QB Philip Rivers attending:

"That was amazing. You're talking about a guy that I've been through it all with from really my second year on. Although he didn't play my second and third year, he was my locker neighbor the whole time. We already had built a relationship prior to him even getting on the field. It speaks volumes about what he feels about me. I think you never truly know what anyone feels about you until it's time. To see him and all of the other guys show up, you never really know how you impact the guys. To see all of these different guys show up, it speaks volumes in terms of how they feel about me. I appreciate it. I couldn't be more excited or joyful at this point to see just about every guy that I've played with show up for this ceremony."

On if he considers himself a 'trailblazer' for former basketball players to excel at tight end:

"I think what we *[Hall of Fame TE Tony Gonzalez and I]* did was create a certain lane for guys who are power forwards but are undersized. What it does is gives scouts and ownership a sense of skillsets that match. That's all that this is about. This is about chemistry, in terms of how they look for certain guys to play the position — what fits. You think of a guy, 6-3, 6-4, 6-5, 6-6, in some cases 6-7, but he's right on the cusp on NBA power forward. He's not quite as tall as you would like. He fits right into the tight end position if he can run and jump because generally, when you play the power forward position or the small forward position, part of your skillset will be to be able to attack the ball at its highest point to rebound. That's the same qualities that you need to catch a football. I think, when you take in consideration that you remove a guy from playing the game of basketball and put him in the game of football where he was accustomed to going against guys that are 6-8, 6-9, 6-10 and now he's going against defense backs that are 6-0, 5-11, some are 5-8 in some cases, right? He has a major advantage. I think that's a matchup issue. That's why you see the flourish of the position. Every time you look up, there's a tight end on every team that can beat you. It wasn't that way when I got to the league. It's a trend. Any team that comes in — when the Chargers play any team, I'm sure they have a tight end that can impact the game in the passing game more than it has ever been in any generation in the history of this game."

On Kent State alumni to play in the National Football League:

"I didn't know [former NFL WR] Josh Cribbs. I did know [former NFL OLB] James Harrison. We were at Kent State together. I didn't know [former Patriots WR] Julian Edelman, he was after us. The reality was that their names were the major names on campus. I was by far the biggest, just so you know [*laughter*] because I played basketball. We were a basketball school and we went to the Elite 8. I would hear about Cribbs. A funny story is that [former NFL Defensive Coordinator] Coach Dean Pees, who ended up being the Baltimore Ravens defensive coordinator, he was the Head Coach for Kent State. He had come from Michigan State from [Alabama Crimson Tide Head Coach] Nick Saban. He wanted me to come out and play [football], but Josh Cribbs ran the ball too much. I knew he wasn't going to throw, so I decided to just stick with basketball and it ended up working out for me.

"I can't even tell you why, how I even made the choice to just not play football or even make the transition to try to basically come out of high school. Basically, that's what I did was just come out of high school to play the game of football. I don't even know what I was thinking. I just know that it was more of a relationship standpoint. Someone that constantly comes after you with passion, that's how those NFL scouts were. They would just constantly show up. I was averaging 20 points per game. In my mind, I wanted to go to the NBA. I had no interest in football or the NFL at any point. The passion was just so overwhelming.

"It was funny, my intuition just felt like that was the right choice. I like to say that it's intuition. You can say it's your 'gut'. Whatever you want to say, but it just felt like that was the right choice for me. I didn't know why. I couldn't put my finger on it. It had never happened before, so it wasn't like I had a blueprint of why I felt this way. Everything I did for those NFL scouts, predominantly [Charlotte 49ers Tight Ends Coach] Tim Brewster, who was the Chargers tight end coach at the time, it was 'great.' My hand-eye coordination was 'great.' My lateral movement was 'great.' I was listening to that terminology. When I went to try out for Portsmouth and the NBA, it was always like, 'Can you do that again? What position do you think? Can you do that against Kentucky?'

"I'm just like, 'Dang, man. Something about this [football], man, just feels right.' It wasn't like guys were doing it. I was like, 'Man, there's something about what this guy is making me feel like I need to give this thing a shot.' I went back-and-forth with father. I went back-and-forth with my close friends. It was like, man, I don't know. I had so much skin in the game with basketball. All-American in high school, All-American in college. It wasn't my true belief that I couldn't make the NBA, it was just that it felt right. It's like a relationship, right? When someone treats you a certain way and then you like something else, but someone likes you, it just has to feel right.

"I think that's what happened, it just felt right. I look up, man, and I was on an active roster. I was just trying to make the practice squad. My goal was just to be on the practice squad. I look up and I catch my first touchdown. I look up and I'm starting as a rookie. I look up and I'm in the Pro Bowl as a second-year player. I'm like, 'Wow.' I knew I felt something, I just didn't know what it was. Ever since then, I try to use that for decision making throughout my life, just how I truly feel internally, in terms of my choices and what I want to do."