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LOS ANGELES CHARGERS vs. PITTSBURGH STEELERS POSTGAME TRANSCRIPTS

Sunday, November 21, 2021 ⚡ SoFi Stadium ⚡ Inglewood, Calif.

LOS ANGELES CHARGERS HEAD COACH BRANDON STALEY

On tonight's win:

"I'm extremely proud of our football team, as proud as I've been of our football team the entire year. That environment was really, really challenging for us. We stayed together that fourth quarter. We stayed together the whole game. We played with tremendous energy tonight. I felt the Powder Blues the whole game in all three phases. That's why we won the game, because when it was tight and the crowd was going crazy against us, our guys were ready for a fight today. I know how the game expressed itself in that fourth quarter, and it turned into a wild ride. But, we were ready for it because we played nine games before today where we've been preparing for a fourth quarter like that. When the fourth quarter happened the way it did, our guys stayed connected. We played our best at the end. We finished the game on our terms. I can't say enough about our players and coaches because that's as good of a win as we've had."

On the crowd:

"It's just tightened our focus. That's all it did. We were prepared for it. We deal in reality here. We knew that this crowd was going to show up. Our players were ready for that environment and they thrived in it. You can tell by the way we play because our offense and defense came ready to play tonight. We played a real NFL team today and that was a real NFL win. I just can't say enough about the toughness and the resilience of our group. That's what we're trying to build here. Today was a good step in the right direction."

On the contributions of DL Andrew Brown, Breiden Fehoko, Joe Gaziano and Forrest Merrill:

"We have four undrafted players who were holding the rope for us. [Defensive Line Coach] Giff Smith is doing a heck of a job coaching them. Just an incredible, gutsy coaching and playing performance by those guys. I'm so proud of them. I told you guys on Friday that I felt like we would play that way. We played well around them in the run front. That allowed us to play the way we wanted to play. I feel like those four guys deserve so much praise for the way they competed tonight. I'm just so proud of them. They played with the warrior spirit that we expect. It was a tremendous performance by that group."

On QB Justin Herbert:

"He was fantastic in the game today. He was the best player on the field. He has real instincts at the game for the position. He has real instincts at the game. His legs, today, really helped us win that football game. What happens is if you're trying to play this guy a certain type of way, if you're going to try to play this split-safety man-under [coverage], and you're in a four-man rush, well, the one guy that they're not accounting for is the quarterback. When it's drained out and he sees daylight, now he becomes a tailback. He moves the chains. That's part of your job as a quarterback. Part of your job as a quarterback is to move the chains by any means necessary and that's what he did tonight. They blitzed us a couple of times, where he was able to move and buy some time, and then extend the play and make some first downs for us. He was fantastic in the game. He threw the football at a really high level tonight, kept himself protected, stayed turnover-free —obviously, the interception is not his fault. To play mistake-free in a game like that, especially what it turned into. That throw, the recognition on that throw — they're playing trap where the corner is baiting him into throwing it to [WR]

Keenan [Allen] in the flat. He's probably going to wait on it to steal it for a touchdown. Justin knew that he was waiting on him and he ripped it for [WR] Mike [Williams] in the turkey-hole shot to close it out. That's real quarterbacking stuff, the way he hit [RB] Austin [Ekeler] today in the burst game. That touchdown in the red zone, it's split-safety man-bracket-ish, where you have to go is you have to find the back against that coverage, and he finds it. It was just real quarterbacking today. I'm really, really proud of him."

On if Herbert's scrambling was a 'point of emphasis' in the gameplan or if the game 'dictated' his decision-making:

"The way that they were playing the game. He has real instincts. He knows when there's daylight, and then he ran to it. What that does is it forces the defense to change, and that's a good thing because they can't play those coverages against us. If they do, they better account for him. A real quality game by him."

On Herbert's scramble and Steelers DT Cameron Heyward's ensuing unnecessary roughness penalty:

"I think that the truth will express itself from the video."

On if prior fourth-quarter comebacks prepared the team for tonight's final quarter:

"Yes, I do. Like I said, we've played a real schedule. As you guys see around the NFL, the teams that we've played are in it. All of those games have been fourth-quarter games. We knew that this was how it was going to be against Pittsburgh. We felt like we were playing at a high level. We had created that room that we've been searching for to play that type of game. Then, things kind of unfolded the way they did. It got tight again, which has happened before, and we had our best stuff at the end when we followed that interception with a touchdown in the turkey-hole. Then, you finish it out by closing it out on defense with two big sacks. Closing it out like that, there's no better feeling like that, as a team, knowing that you had what it took. That's what the NFL is all about. I feel like we've shown real stuff through 10 games. I'm really proud of this group. This game was one of my favorites, for sure."

On RB Austin Ekeler:

"He's a complete player. I think that's the thing I love about the guy, that he's a complete player. He's a threat in the run game, a threat in the past game, pass protection. He has real toughness. That's how we're trying to build this program, with guys like him that are tough Ball-Playing Jessies. That's what he is. He had four touchdowns in an NFL game, which is really hard to achieve. It's going to help his fantasy and all that. He's into that. He has this lucrative career that he's building and today was a good step in helping that empire."

On if being on the 'stage' of *Sunday Night Football* aided in execution:

"I don't think the stage hurts. The stage helps everybody. It helps all of you guys, too. When you when you're on *Sunday Night Football* and everybody's watching, it brings out the best in you. I think that we had a really quality week of practice. After last week, you heard me talk about execution. I felt like that's what we did. We really executed at practice this week. I felt like we came in with the right intensity, the right type of focus. My big goal for us was to play as hard as we did tonight because of the trust in one another, the trust in the plan. Then, we were able to execute our plan because of it."

On tonight's win:

"This was a big game. You're past halfway [in the schedule] against a real AFC team that's ahead of you. I have so much respect for [Steelers Head Coach] Mike Tomlin, [Steelers Defensive Coordinator] Keith Butler, [Steelers QB] Ben Roethlisberger, that group of guys. They're the class of the AFC since I've been doing football, and I grew up in Cleveland, Ohio. You have to go through the Steelers in the AFC. That's real. For us to be able to beat those guys, it was good stuff for us tonight."

On the pass rush:

"I felt like our pass rush came alive when we needed it. I felt like we were aggressive all night. We were close. We finished with three sacks. I feel like you guys will see in the tape that they were holding us quite a bit, and our rush was coming. We did it out of a variety of groupings tonight. Because you're down some D-linemen, we activated our rabbits grouping with three edge players with a D-lineman. We had [LB Kenneth] Murray [Jr.] in there in our dollar grouping. We were able to activate some of those designer groupings so that we could rush today. I felt like [Run Game Coordinator/Outside Linebackers Coach] Jay Rodgers, Giff Smith, [Linebackers Coach] Mike Wilhoite; those guys did a great job of coaching and organizing our pass-rush plan. When we needed our best tonight, we had it."

On the 'sudden changes' for the defense:

"That's why you have to practice and organize your practices so that you're there. That's why we practice the red area, the goal line. We had the huge stop on the goal line, and we were ready for their tonight. We're ready for them tonight. That's exactly how we played. We knew that the shovel pass was coming. We knew the jet sweeps were coming. On the fourth-and-five, we knew that was coming, too. You'll see that we were there. We were in position. We were ready for these guys tonight. That's what I saw tonight. I saw a team that was ready to play. I know that it didn't go down for us in a couple of those. We had the fourth-down stop that was a penalty, but that ended up in a touchdown. We forced that field goal, which was significant. That was a huge, huge sequence in the game because, defensively, you've had to go back out there like three times in a row in an adverse circumstance. For [S] Derwin [James Jr.] to keep everybody connected like he did, he's a G. He kept everyone connected. We had everybody banged up out there. We had a bunch of new D-linemen. Everybody kept their poise. We didn't flinch. We kept playing hard. Like I said, that's why I'm talking the way I am because I'm really proud of the group today."

On CB Tevaughn Campbell's defensive pass interference:

"It looked like he got there early. He didn't need to be because we had [LB] Kyzir White waiting as the rat in the hole. It wouldn't have been completed anyway, which you guys will see on the tape. He got there early."

On CB Asante Samuel Jr.'s injury status:

"He's in the [concussion] protocol."

LOS ANGELES CHARGERS QUARTERBACK JUSTIN HERBERT**On the game-winning touchdown to WR Mike Williams:**

"That's one of those plays that we ran a couple of times in the game. The corner ended up sitting on our 'F' — whoever ran that little option route. We kind of talked about it on the sideline. It happened the first couple of times we ran it and I told Mike to just be ready for it and he did a great job running his route, breaking tackles and scoring."

On the Steelers bringing pressure on the game-winning touchdown to Williams:

"That's just one of those things. I thought [RB Austin] Ekeler did a great job picking it up and protecting it for enough time."

On tonight's win:

"Winning always fires us up. You try to win every single game. I thought we did a great job of moving the ball. We can't turn the ball over like that. Kind of a weird situation, but the offense did a great job of answering back when we needed to."

On his 36-yard scramble on third-and-13:

"I was just trying to score. I did a little slow cutback, but just tried to find as much room as I could. The guys down the field did a great job blocking, so it was good to see a little bit of green grass for me."

On if he thinks Steelers DT Cameron Heyward 'made a dirty hit':

"No. I haven't really seen it. He's a tough player. Football is an emotional game. Whatever happened, happened in the game. We'll shake hands and say, 'Good game,' after the game."

On the fourth-quarter:

"It got a little too close, for sure. As an offense, we had our opportunities to go down and score and put the game away. We failed to do that, so it got a little too close, but I thought the defense did a great job coming up with stops. For the offense to answer and go put points up on the board, I thought that was a huge step for us."

On Steelers fans in the crowd:

"We didn't pay too much attention to it. It's one of those things that, here at SoFi [Stadium], we love the way it is. The Chargers fans, they showed up, they showed out and they were loud. They were under aim the entire game. We have so much respect for them."

On rushing for a career-high tonight:

“You just have to convert, whether that’s by the ground or through the air. If there are open rush lanes and guys are getting covered, and no one’s playing defense on the quarterback, you have to kind of step up and find a way to get through the line. I thought the line did a great job of protecting me and making sure those lanes were wide enough to run through.”

On scramble opportunities:

“It kind of just happened. We’ve been watching a lot of film. It has happened a couple of times. They’re very sound fundamentally and that’s really good defense. We just had to take whatever we could get, and that’s a tough defense. For us to be able to do that, I thought it was big for us.”

On difference from this season to last season:

“I think it’s the mentality heading into the game and knowing that you have the right guys, that you’ve been through it in practice and you’ve experienced it. We’ve gone through it a couple of games so far this year, putting away games. I felt like we could’ve done a better job out there tonight, but to be able to come back, bounce back after a couple of close losses, I think it’s huge for us.”

On his connection with the offense:

“I think it all starts with the guys up front. Our offensive line has done a great job battling all year and they gave me plenty of time to throw the ball today. To have those guys on the outside, Mike Williams, Keenan Allen, [TE] Jared Cook, [RB] Austin Ekeler; those guys make plays. They make my job so much easier. All I have to do is get them the ball and something is going to happen.”

On how he prepared for tonight’s game:

“Nothing was different. We knew that going into the week we just had to have a good week of preparation. Every game is going to come down to the wire. It is all about how you handle adversity and how you bounce back. I thought we did a great job of answering that today.”

On his thought process prior to the game-winning drive:

“Just get him the ball. That is just one of those things that you love to see. I told Mike to be ready on that route. We have seen it all game and talked about it on the sideline.”

On the culture Head Coach Brandon Staley is establishing

“I think it has a lot to do with him. Immediately when Coach Staley was hired, he built relationships and reached out to guys. He said this Chargers team cannot be the same as it has been, that we have to be able to win these close games. We have to believe, it all starts with that. For those guys to come together — offensively, defensively, and on special teams — when we come together, we can play some pretty good football.”

On his success:

“It is a next play mentality. Success is never going to be a straight line to the top. You are going to have your ups and downs. Adversity is going to happen. We have certainly faced that over the past couple of years and I think that we have done a great job answering. We are not always perfect and we do not always win. There are definitely things we need to clean up from this game, but to be able to keep growing and keep developing, that is what’s most important for us.”

On Ekeler’s four touchdowns:

“To be able to do that in the NFL, it is not easy. For him, we know how special and how gifted he is. We see it during practice all week. Giving him the opportunity to go make someone miss, that is a great option for us. We have done such a great job of getting him the ball and finding ways to get him the ball because something good will happen.”

PITTSBURGH STEELERS HEAD COACH MIKE TOMLIN

Opening statement:

“That was a tough one. I’m just very appreciative of the efforts of our guys. All those expected and required, it still should be appreciated. I appreciate the way they stayed in and stayed together and fought. It was obvious we didn’t have a good enough plan tonight with our current makeup and state. We couldn’t get enough stops defensively. We couldn’t apply pressure with our four-man rush or keep them in the pocket. We weren’t good enough in coverage with less than seven. We have to get back to the drawing board and do a better job of putting them in positions to be successful with the people that we have at our disposal. That was challenging tonight but we make no excuses. It needs to be better. That’s how we win these circumstances and get out of these circumstances. Just really appreciative of the efforts of all the people involved. Thankful for [Steelers QB] Ben [Roethlisberger] coming back in the manner in which he did and getting on the moving train and contributing. We didn’t get it done tonight. We have a division game next week. We will assess where we are in terms of who is available to us and we have to make a better plan this week on our way to a divisional game. From an injury standpoint [Steelers TE Eric] Ebron wasn’t able to return, he has a knee that is being evaluated. [Steelers G/C] JC [Hassenauer] has a pec that is being evaluated. [Steelers CB] Arthur Maulet has a neck that he may or may not have been able to go back in. I think he was able to go back in. We had some other people go down, but I think they’re cleared in terms of being able to go back into the football game. That’s where we are.”

On if he expected QB Justin Herbert to scramble as much as he did:

“Yes. We just weren’t effective at keeping him in the pocket. We talked Tuesday about his mobility and what a factor it was. It wasn’t a surprise to us. We just didn’t perform well enough against it.”

On what makes Herbert difficult to defend:

“It was us today. It was about what we did or did not do. No disrespect to those guys and what they did. They played well and won the football game. That’s always our general approach and attitude. We didn’t rush well enough. We didn’t keep him in the pocket and we were not tight enough in coverage.”

On if he expected Roethlisberger to ‘play at a high level’ after being activated off of Reserve/COVID-19:

“Yes.”

On facing the Chargers:

“I just focus on our guys, particularly with the challenges that we had this week, in terms of who is available and not available. It was about putting our guys in a position to be successful. I’ve got respect for him and his program but that’s where our focus was and that’s where it should have been.”

On Steelers DT Cameron Heyward:

“Cam is Cam. He gives everything he has, that’s why we love him and respect him. That’s why we elected him as a captain and that’s why he represents us in that way.”

On the Chargers’ final touchdown:

“It just wasn’t good enough. Not a good enough plan.”

On the AFC this year:

“I don’t worry about that. I stay focused on what it is that we do. We step into stadiums and we win games, we don’t have to look around. That’s generally our focus.”

On Steelers WR Chase Claypool:

“He’s a key component.”

On Steelers RB Najee Harris:

“He’s our feature runner. He’s good in the running game. He’s good in the passing game. He’s good in all circumstances. Our inability to stop him, or slow him down, really minimized his impact on the game tonight, which is obvious.”

PITTSBURGH STEELERS QUARTERBACK BEN ROETHLISBERGER

On being activated off of Reserve/COVID-19:

“It’s a crazy process; testing every day, lot of vitamins and minerals. Have to give a lot of credit to [Steelers Head Athletic Trainer] John Norwig and the rest of the staff. You literally just take a test every day and hope it’s negative. That’s kind of what it is. It’s a very interesting process.”

On his recovery process over the last week:

“Interesting. Different. I think the MVP of the week is my wife because it was not easy for all the kids to be home, for me to be home; a grumpy husband that probably wants to be at football. I just had to be the backup substitute teacher. It was a lot of interesting time, me wearing a mask at home and trying to help with homework and still try to spend time on meetings and looking at the iPad and going over plays. It’s tough not getting practice perspectives, watching practice from behind. I know I don’t always participate in practice, but at least you’re there and you can see it firsthand. It’s different watching it on film at night. It’s definitely a different process, but we got through it.”

On tonight’s game:

“What a crazy game. I think we had three series in the first half, three and three. No punts. We kept the punter on the sidelines, which is always good for offense. We blocked a punt, scored. The defense gets a turnover. Just a bizarre sequence of events. Obviously, we’d like to finish the game off. We’d like to stay on the field and score a touchdown. There was a pass interference or holding, and then they picked it up for uncatchable, which is referee’s discretion, I guess, and we settled for three. That’s disappointing because, offensively, we’d like to use the clock and finish that game off.”

On the Chargers:

“They’re a really good football team. It starts with their quarterback. He’s a great young football player. He ran all over the place today, made throws. What a special talent. He’s the next generation. He’s a good football player.”

On when he started to feel like he would have a chance to play tonight:

“It was Saturday night. I remember I got a lot of credit for self-reporting. I really just called our trainer, John Norwig, and told him I wasn’t feeling well and that I didn’t think I should head into the team hotel because I didn’t want to get anyone sick. I just assumed I had a little bug. He said, ‘Ben, we’ve got to test you because if you have any kind of symptoms and you don’t get tested, it’s trouble,’ or whatever it is. So, I drove down and got tested, and still thought it was going to be nothing. I found out when I got home that I was positive for COVID[-19]. That night was the worst night. Fever, not feeling well. By Sunday, I started to feel better. Then, by Monday, I knew I felt fine physically, but just because you feel fine, that doesn’t mean you’re going to be able to pass the test. Credit to the doctors and staff for helping get me out here.”

On how he ‘stayed active’ during his time away from the team:

“I threw on Friday with my trainer, just after we had one negative test. I was hoping that there was a chance, so I threw with him outside. Then, I forgot what they call it, but I did like a three-day ramp up where you do some cardio at home, at my home gym. I did some cardio over the last three days.”

On tonight’s loss:

“It’s a big loss. You never like to lose football games. You like to go on runs like we had had, but it’s a good football team. We came to their place and things happen. There’s still some time left. We’re just going to have to get it figured out and play our best football down the home stretch. That’s what it’s all about. It’s when can you play your best football. We have a few games left. We have a lot of division games coming.”

On Steelers RB Najee Harris:

“He does a lot more than what the stats say. You’re looking at 100-yard games and touchdowns and this and that, but what we does in protection; he caught some balls out of the backfield, continued drives for us. That’s what’s special about him; he brings a presence and a threat. I’m glad to see him back on the field there and doing OK.”

On his 'frustration' at the end of the game:

"It's just frustrating when you can't score. As an offense and as the quarterback, the leader of the offense, when you can't score, you have to take it on yourself. There's no one specific reason, other than we didn't put seven points on the board. That's frustrating as a quarterback."

On if they considered running the ball on the second-to-last offensive drive that culminated in a field goal:

"The first play was an RPO, but they packed the box, so we had to throw it. I actually wanted to throw it to [Steelers WR] Chase [Claypool]. I think [Steelers RB Kalen] Ballage was in the game. He bobbled, he hit me a little bit. A guy was driving and I threw it behind him, which wasn't a big deal. Second-down play, we threw it to [Steelers WR] James [Washington], picked up eight or nine yards. Then, the last play, we thought they anticipated us running the ball, so we tried to mix it up and take a shot down the field. Like I said, that's the play. I felt like [Steelers WR] Diontae [Johnson] got behind someone and got tackled."

On the AFC being 'wide open':

"I don't know. It is though, isn't it? That's why you have hope, regardless of your record. There's a few games left and I feel like the AFC is still kind of anybody's game."

On whether the next two games against divisional opponents are a 'defining stretch':

"It's a big part. That's why it's important for us to get back on track. We get home late tonight. We'll get ourselves ready to go. A divisional opponent on the road, they're a good football team. This is going to be a big one for us. I would like to say, 'Happy Birthday,' to my son."