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Chargers Media Availability

Monday, January 2, 2023 ⚡ Hoag Performance Center ⚡ Costa Mesa, Calif.

HEAD COACH BRANDON STALEY

On if OLB Joey Bosa ‘came out of the game healthy and OK’:

“Yes.”

On an update regarding S Derwin James Jr.:

“We’ll have more of an update for you on Wednesday, but he’s working through the protocol. You’ll be able to know his practice status on Wednesday.”

On TE Donald Parham Jr.’s touchdown reception:

“A tremendous story of perseverance, of will inside of a player. Football has tested his patience. To see him go out like that and play a really complete game — I thought that he blocked extremely well yesterday, he was a factor in the passing game. To score a touchdown, a big red-area touchdown for us, it was a big moment for him. Everyone on the sideline, you could see it, the way that his teammates feel about him, his coaches feel about him. We have to continue to build off of that performance. Hopefully, he can continue to play with the confidence that you’re seeing because he is a weapon for us.”

On T Trey Pipkins III’s example of perseverance through injury:

“You have to have toughness if you’re going to play offensive line in the NFL, and I think that he has displayed that time and time again. From the onset of that initial injury to now, I think that this guy has really battled for us, and then produced, because the other thing that you have to be able to do is not only just be out there to play, to be available — it’s one thing to be available — but then to produce, and show that you can also produce when you’re not feeling your best, I think that he has accomplished both of those things. He’s been a great example of that toughness that I’m talking about within our football team I’m really proud of him.”

On OLB Kyle Van Noy’s ‘display of toughness’:

“His durability. His ability to play down-in and down-out, the type of style that you have to play in the league. He’s really physical. He likes contact, he’s a contact player. He has the mental toughness. He’s steady, mistakes don’t bother him. He has experienced so much, he has lived through so much. He has the mental toughness, too, because toughness is physical and mental, and he has both of those. That’s what makes him such a good player. You’re seeing all of that help our defense and help our football team. You guys have experienced what our players think of him and the impact that he has had on them in all three phases. He’s been a very impactful player, not just with his production on the field, but in the locker room. It’s been a great season for him and we’re looking forward to him playing even better down the stretch.”

On if there were any additional injuries coming out of the game:

“Not really. In terms of the bumps and bruises, normal, but nothing to report just yet, in terms of practice for Wednesday.”

On the importance of production in the run game yesterday:

“Very important. I think that everyone is aware of where we are ranked and stuff like that. These guys know, and they know that we have been working our way to a performance like that. I don’t think that anyone believed that we were far away from accomplishing a performance like that. We just needed to stay together and find that rhythm in that right set of runs and get our guys doing the right jobs at a high level. I do think that it was the hardest we have played, yesterday on offense. I thought we finished our plays, run and pass, but particularly in the run game. I thought that our tight ends had, probably, their best game blocking. I think our receivers, probably, had their best game blocking. I thought that we were in the right runs, we had some good run-game checks to get us into the right play call. Then, our running backs did what you have to do in order to have a performance where you run for 192 [yards], as they broke a lot of tackles. I think that all of those things came together yesterday. It was awesome to see us get 31 runs off in that game for 192 [yards].”

On the ‘discovery process’ of ‘finding rhythm’ in the run game:

“It is a process, when you have the moving parts on the line at tight end and at receiver. That lack of continuity does affect you. I think what we’ve been able to do is lock into — yeah, you have to scheme for the matchup and who you’re playing against, but we also know who our O-line is and we know who the tight end group is, and we know that we can really lean into this style of play. We had good mixture in our personnel groupings yesterday, which I thought really helped us. I think we had the right amount of inside runs at, what I would say, were more direct runs, power runs. Then, we had some good perimeter runs, as well, to balance what a defense would have to defend. We’re going to have to continue to do that down the stretch here.”

On the defense’s performance against the run yesterday:

“The toss-crack was poor perimeter run support. If we just have the support, then [LB] Kenneth Murray [Jr.] is unblocked coming inside-out. We lost the support there, which was really disappointing. Then, on the touchdown run, [LB] Drue [Tranquill] gets pulled down. It’s tough to overcome that, when you get pulled down at the point of attack. Our guys we’re in the right defense for that. We were prepared for the run. That was just a tough one. Outside of those two runs, I thought we probably could have been more physical on contact. There were a couple of contact runs I didn’t like. In this ballgame, you can sum it up in three plays; those two runs, and then the pass the [Rams WR Van] Jefferson off the loose play. I felt like [OLB] Joey [Bosa] and [OLB] Khalil [Mack] both got held. Those are really the three plays in the game. Outside of that, I thought that we played well.”

On the deep completion to Jefferson in the second quarter:

“Regardless of what happened with Khalil [Mack] and Joey [Bosa], there was someone that had that tight end man-to-man. We should have had another guy being able to secondary contain that, never should have been able to get outside like that — the quarterback, that is. They made a good throw-and-catch. [Rams QB] Baker [Mayfield] threw a great ball to [Van] Jefferson, and [S] Alohi [Gilman] just was a little bit short. We have to learn from that because we are going to play against good mobility, starting this week, and then moving on. We have to make sure that we learn from that.”

On what has led to CB Michael Davis’ development:

“Mindset, a different mindset. More physicality. He’s tighter in coverage. If you’re tighter in coverage, you’re going to be closer to the football. He’s challenging much more consistently and playing with the proper leverage. You’re seeing a player that’s trying to make plays, not just trying to cover people. There are plenty of guys that can run with guys and stay close to them, and then there are the guys that make plays. He, I think, is gaining a lot of confidence in his ability to make plays. He’s doing a nice job for us, for sure.”

On how he built a close connection with OLB Kyle Van Noy despite having not coached him personally prior to this season:

“There’s a close connection. It’s actually a really pure connection, which is the game film. I’ve watched him. I’ve always respected how New England defends. I know a lot of people there, there a lot of John Carroll guys there. There are a lot of guys that I know that are in that organization. Just in watching him over the years, he just has a lot of qualities that I really value in playing defensive football. When I was at John Carroll, the story that, I think, is a cool one — you, obviously, know because you’ve interviewed some of these guys in the past — is that I used to show my inside and outside linebackers at John Carroll film of Kyle Van Noy and [former Patriots LB] Dont’a Hightower because that is the style that we played. [Former John Carroll OLB] Chris Rizzo, [former John Carroll LB] Andy Bryan and [former John Carroll LB] Mason McKenrick, I used to show them Kyle and Dont’a. I felt like I knew a lot about him before I even met him. The good news for him is that he has been better than advertised.”

On his first interaction with Van Noy:

“I first met him on the phone when he was going through free agency, when he was kind of working his way through free agency. I felt like I had to get my recruiting hat on a little bit [*laughter*]. I was able to talk to him on the phone. We had, probably, about a 45-minute conversation, if I recall, it was a long one. It kind of started there. I did not know him personally, didn’t really know his personality really that way, but I knew his playstyle. I also knew that the people around him that were in New England spoke really highly of him. I felt like it would be a really good fit for where we were trying to go.”

On the team’s approach to the upcoming game with a playoff berth already secured:

“Our approach is definitely going to get shot to win this ballgame and play as well as we can play heading into the playoffs. I think that there’s certainly an advantage to be in the No. 5-seed [for re-seeding], from where I stand, so we’re going to try and get there. Then, the case-by-case nature of the players, I think that that is the approach that we’re going to take, in terms of whether or not to sit them. If there’s something that we feel like that would be a good decision, we’ll take that case-by-case. I think that going into the playoffs, you have to be playing football to get to where you want to go, so we’re going to try and maximize our group heading into the playoffs, for sure.”

On if he has any ‘added interest’ in watching tonight’s Monday Night Football game:

“It’s interesting that you say that. I think that there are some coaches that can concentrate, like get into game-planning and have another game on at the same time — I am not one of those people [*laughter*]. I have to have darkness. The whole multitasking thing is a total myth, in my opinion [*laughter*]. I just try to put my entire focus where it needs to be, whether that’s on our team or the team that we’re playing. That’s my direction. There are some people that maybe can do that, I’m just not one of them. I’ll make sure that I read the box score, and if there is something that I can learn from it, we’ll be in tune with that, but our focus is going to be on us and on the Broncos this week.”

On a play where Van Noy ‘clicked’ this season:

“The counter-spin on [Dolphins T Terron] Armstead against Miami was a pretty special rush. I think that you saw a confident player in that. That stood out to me because we were in a three-man rush on that play. Obviously, Terron is one of the top players in the league at tackle, so a lot of respect for him. For Kyle [Van Noy] to beat him that’s a good win for him. I thought that, from a pass-rushing standpoint, that was a really nice play. There’s a play in the Indianapolis game, it’s a run play that you guys probably would see as a harmless play, but we really know where the run is going — you can see all 11 guys really know where it’s headed — and then we stuffed the run, it’s a really good stop, and he just gives a thumbs up to the sideline. The thumbs up was because that’s the way it should look. That’s what he was doing. Those are the types of things that are hard for people to understand, but they give you a lot of confidence, as a coach.”

On DL Morgan Fox’s contributions this season:

“When I think of Morgan [Fox], I think of a glue guy, I think of tough and rugged, a playmaker, versatile, do whatever it takes to help the team win. He just set his career high for sacks. He has been such an incredible addition to our locker room. You guys are all seeing what I saw back in 2020, except now he’s just better. He’s just an even better player. He’s been a big factor in our ability to play defense at a high level.”

On T Rashawn Slater's timeline for a potential return this season:

"He is still working through his return to play. He's working through things and progressing well. If he returns to play, I think that you guys will sense that momentum, in terms of how we will handle it."

On special teams improvement this year:

"Last year, I thought that we finished the season on a high note, from a return standpoint. I thought that there were some good things happening with our young core players, that you could see the development of them. What we did in the offseason, we put the investment where we wanted to, which was to become a complete football team. You guys heard me say that after last season, that we were going to invest in becoming a complete football team. I think that we put that into action with going to get [LS] Josh Harris, who is a Pro Bowl deep snapper, by improving our punter — I think that [P] JK was an outstanding addition. We knew the talent in the player. We have coaches on our staff who knew of the player or had competed against him. Then, we were able to bring in [WR] DeAndre Carter, who has been a quality returner, as you guys know, and a quality receiver. Then, we were able to get [K Dustin] Hopkins back. Obviously, fortunate to onboard [K Taylor] Bertolet and [K] Cameron [Dicker]. In order for those guys to thrive, we also drafted a bunch of young players that are killing it on special teams right now, with [DB] Ja'Sir [Taylor] and [S] Deane Leonard and all of these young guys out there that are playing at a really high level — [S] Raheem Layne, [LB] Nick Niemann, who we drafted two years ago, [LB] Amen [Ogbongbemiga], bringing in [LB] Troy [Reeder]. I think that we've really put the investment in special teams. Then, you can't say enough about the job that [Special Teams Coordinator] Ryan [Ficken] and [Assistant Special Teams Coach] Chris [Gould] are doing, coaching that unit. There's a lot of belief, in terms of the way things are being coached from a technique standpoint and from a scheme standpoint, getting people doing the right jobs. Obviously, being able to handle the kicker transition has been critical. I'm really proud. We have to continue to improve because, as you know, every possession counts in the postseason. You have to make sure that you maximize the hidden yardage and that you're getting an advantage from your unit. I think that that's what we've been able to do all year."

On 'teaching the 'skill of hard work':

"It probably goes back to me being the son of a coach and what my dad always used to emphasize. It's always going to start there with us, because that's something that we can control. The thing about playing hard, too, is that there's always another level that you can get to, there's always another level of playing hard that you can get to, that you can achieve. A lot of times, you need a group that really believes in that so that they can bring out the best in one another. I think that that's something that you have to constantly talk about within your football team, because this is competition. To the casual fan, or to you guys, perhaps, it's like that's what they get paid to do, like they should play hard. I hear that a lot. It's like, if it were only that simple, if you really knew what these guys go through. There are so many factors of the scheme and the matchup. There's so much in understanding their job and what to do and where to go and how to do it. Then, sometimes, you can forget that the most important thing is just going out there and playing as hard as you can play because these guys have a lot on their plate. Sometimes, you can focus on this play call that has 5,000 words in it, or these adjustments that are really, really tough, or maybe you're focused on, 'Hey, I have to freaking cover one of the best guys in the NFL.' You can forget that what they really have to do is play their tail off, play as hard as they can. I do think it's a skill because skills are something that you're not born with, skills are something you earn. I think that playing hard, you have to earn that. You have to earn that mantle. It has to be at the front of everything that you do. I think that we're working that way as a team. I think that we can play a lot harder, and we're going to need to."

RUNNING BACK AUSTIN EKELER

On his 72-yard rushing touchdown in yesterday's game:

"In my head, I remembered my old run from the Browns game and I was just in my head thinking, 'Do not get caught. Do not get caught. Pick up my knees and run.' I had just enough speed to make it there."

On if his 'tank was empty' after the rush:

"Not necessarily. I like to think I am in pretty good shape, so a sprint here and there is not going to kill me."

On the run game over the last couple of weeks:

"We have gotten some holes, which has been nice. We have been able to take advantage of those. We have been making some people miss, which has been nice. It has been different. It has been up and down. It has been really game-to-game, 'How is this going to go this game?' That last game, we were able to mesh as a whole unit, not just offensive line, but also receivers blocking. Making critical blocks to spring success in the run game, as well. I think as a unit, we have done pretty well comparably to what we have done in the past in the run game."

On the importance of having good rushing performances before the playoffs:

"We knew we were capable. We were just trying to get back to it, which is not easy. Simple, but not easy. And then, guess what? We're going to have to do it again. That's going to start to, I guess, gives us that confidence, 'OK, we're starting to run the ball a little bit more.' Give [Offensive Coordinator] Joe [Lombardi] that confidence in the run game to call more runs if we are able to continue to establish ourselves. I think we have one more game with the Broncos coming up where it's like, 'Alright, let's dominate the run game again.' Then I think that opens up the playbook for us a lot more and makes us a little bit more of a dynamic offense when we are going into the first round of the playoffs. Definitely trying to get that going because we know that [QB] Justin [Herbert] is going to come out there and do his thing. It's like, 'Okay, is the run game going to show up today or not?' So, we have to make sure we are out there doing that."

On how close the offense is in identifying runs that the offense can do well:

"When it comes to the run game, I think it is really predicated a lot on who we are playing. We know we are playing the Rams this last week and we knew exactly what they were going to be in. Their defensive line was beat up, so we were going to try to attack them interiorly. It just depends on who we are playing. We're going to play the Broncos now. I haven't looked at our game plan as far as this week, but it comes down week to week for us in the run game. So, it's like, 'Are we trying to attack inside? Do we want more gap scheme? Do we want more zone? Outside zone? Do we need RPOs [run-pass options]?' It's a whole methodology that goes into setting up the run game with [Offensive Line] Coach [Brendan Nugent] Nuge and [Offensive Coordinator Joe] Lombardi got to go through."

On if the success of the run game is because of better execution:

"Better execution, for sure. Typically with coordinators, I feel like when the run game is going well, they are going to keep calling runs. When it's not, they're going to get away from runs. It's like, 'We're not running the ball well today. Let's throw it a little bit more.' Which I get. I would do the same thing. Whatever is working best for your team, your team identity, you should probably lean more towards that. Probably Justin [Herbert] throwing the ball for us, or has been in the past, and so now that we are starting to establish the run game, starting to open up some more play calling. Like, we're calling the same runs over and over again now. We haven't done that in the past where it has been we ran that one time. Now we are coming back to it because we liked it. We ran well, we executed, so let's do it again."

On what a long rush like his 72-yard rushing touchdown does for offensive momentum:

"It's definitely exciting. It's definitely exciting and it brings some energy to the sideline, for sure. I think it gives a lot of confidence and just the entire organization. Any type of big play is going to do that, right? We had a goal to get 10 explosive plays this game. That was another one of those that we were able to check into and mark down. We definitely got our goal and it showed. You start having a lot more fun when you are ripping off of big runs, as well. That rhythm and the energy definitely can fuel off of that."

On the return of WRs Mike Williams and Keenan Allen to the offense and their run blocking:

“I would say it has given us more of an identity having those guys back. In the beginning of the season when we didn’t have them or we only had Mike [Williams] and then some of our tight ends were out, it’s a little bit hard to realize who are we as offense. Like, what is going to work well for us? When we have those guys back, now guess what? Now those guys are going to get double-teamed. They are pulling people away in the red zone, so it opens up the run game down in there because you have to put two people on Mike [Williams] or Keenan [Allen]. Which one? If you let these guys go one-on-one, or you can play zone, but then Keenan has got to still get into space and has good spatial awareness. We have [TE] Gerald [Everett] up in there, as well. Right now, I feel like we are really hard to defend just because we have our receivers back, so pick your poison. What do you want to do?”

On the blocks from TE Donald Parham Jr., and Allen on his 72-yard rush:

“Keenan [Allen] actually had a few good blocks like that during the game. I think it is hilarious watching Keenan run block because he will throw his body in there and he will get in there. His body gets beat around like a pinball sometimes, but he doesn’t care. He is going to get in there. I really appreciate those guys because I know that is not necessarily the most enjoyable part of a receiver’s job. [Donald] Parham, he is used to it being in the tight end position. We call those touchdown blocks. The ones down the field that can spring you from having a big gain to taking it all the way. I think that gets me more excited than anything on those types of plays.”

On ‘how many fantasy football owners he heard from after his game yesterday’:

“Hundreds. I am trying to take advantage, trying to get everyone to go check out the app. *Eksperience* finally soft launched, and so I am going to be making a little video here and say if they want to thank me for the things that I have gotten them through this season in fantasy, then come check out Eksperience.net or download us in the app store and interact with me and let’s get a video or something.”

On what it would mean for him to record 20 scrimmage touchdowns in back-to-back seasons:

“That one definitely has some weight behind it. Obviously, I just want to score more touchdowns. The number doesn’t necessarily matter. I just want to score. In this case, it’s like I had 20 last year. I am so close this year. I think it would be pretty special to be able to look back on my career and say I had two back-to-back seasons where I had 20 touchdowns. There is definitely some value in that as far as for me down the road. If it happens, I don’t know, but we’ll see. You never know with these games, but definitely something that is on my mind like it always is, getting in the end zone. But, definitely want to get in there twice.”

On if he feels healthier right now compared to this time last year:

“No. Now we are even deeper into it. My body does not feel good. No, it does not feel good at all, but I can play, for sure. The NFL season has a toll on your body. That’s why a lot of us were really against adding an extra game for these reasons because the season already beats us up. You are lucky if you are able to make it through without any substantial injuries. There is no time to heal. There is no time to heal our bodies, so these things that we have going on, they just stay around. Now, I have my knee that I have to worry about and it’s still my calf and it’s my neck and it’s my lower back and it’s my shoulder. It doesn’t heal. My thumbs are jammed now. My body does not feel good at all, but it’s to be expected this late in the season.”

On the biggest takeaway from the ending of the season last year that has helped the team this year:

“As far as takeaways from last year, I honestly can’t even remember what happened last year. I know that we didn’t make the playoffs because we didn’t beat the Raiders at the very end. As far as lessons from then to now, I think it’s like a whole new book every single year and you have to write your new chapters as you continue to go down and through the season. For us, it’s like, ‘OK, what is working? What is not?’ We found a rhythm. We have gotten to a spot where we have a chance to go to the playoffs. We secured that and now we have a chance where, ‘OK, let’s try to continue to bump up or seed.’ We’re in the fifth seed right now. We haven’t said one word about last year. Last year is last year. We have to focus on now because our team looks a lot different than it used to. There is a lot of the same messaging, but it’s not necessarily the same scenario, so it doesn’t really apply the same as it did before. We do what we do every single week. Just focus on trying to beat your next opponent, regardless of what the circumstance is, playoffs, non-playoffs, whatever it is.”