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Offensive Coordinator Todd Downing

Q: In what areas do you think Amari Cooper has grown or improved?

Coach Downing: "Yeah, certainly his play strength. There has been a lot made about him being a little bit bigger and stronger and you see that. It's harder for defenders to knock him off his route. He gets his route depth more consistently, and his play speed has been really impressive for a guy that didn't get a lot of practice. We were pretty pleased with what we saw the other night."

Q: Do you see opponents trying to be physical with him. Is that something defenses tried to do?

Coach Downing: "Yeah, I think you see that with any elite receiver. In my experiences with guys like Calvin Johnson and Isaac Bruce and Torry Holt and Randy Moss. Those guys, they try to disrupt them at the line of scrimmage so it throws you off timing, it's certainly something that we're experiencing with Amari. It's good to see him a little bit stronger and more physical."

Q: Can you just talk about your relationship with Larry Fitzgerald?

Coach Downing: "Us Minnesota guys stick together. I've seen Larry since he was a really young man as I was starting my internships with the Vikings, he was a ball boy with the Vikings. Just watching his work ethic then. I knew that he had great things ahead of him because of how important the details were to him back then. Nothing was beneath him. He'd be folding towels or picking up dirty laundry and he was just happy to have an opportunity to be around some of the game's greats. The Chris Carters and Randy Mosses and picking their brains. Larry is a great guy. He's just a wonderful person, and it's been really fun to stay in touch with him over the years."

Q: Is the relationships you build through football what you find to be most rewarding?

Coach Downing: "Yeah, you know I think that's how I've always lived my life, is investing in relationships with those around me. I think that when you do that, you build a trust with people and accountability with people that helps you become the best version of yourself. Whether it's in life or in football. So, what I'm trying to do with my players is give them a voice, give them a platform to be able to share with me what they like and don't like or things that they might be struggling with or things that they want to see more of. When you do that, you breed this culture of accountability where instead of looking for an excuse, guys are looking for a way to get better themselves. I hold myself to that standard. I think the only way you can accurately do that, is by having genuine relationships with people and investing in those people and that's how I've always tried to live my life."

Q: Was having your hand on the back of Jamize Olawale kind of a testament to the relationships you're building with your players? How much of that was something you guys discussed beforehand or did you feel like you needed to do in that moment? Can you explain why that was important for you to do?

Coach Downing: "It was not planned at all. I kind of chuckled when talking with 'Maze' [Jamize] about it afterwards. I think I surprised him a little bit. I knew some other guys were planning on showing their unity. It certainly wasn't a protest or statement or anything like that. It was kind of a reaction myself to seeing what we have going on as a team is such a great unity and a team chemistry that when you see other guys like Derek [Carr] and Khalil [Mack] doing it. I looked over and there was 'Maze,' a guy who works his tail off for us. Gets no credit from anybody. Shows up every day and works his tail off. Does anything we ask him to do, and beyond that is a great person. I just walked over and put my hand on him. Wasn't anything more than showing that he's a guy I love."

Q: How would you assess the backup quarterback competition?

Coach Downing: "Yeah, it's a great competition. The cool thing is both those guys have approached it with such a great attitude. They've both taken strides and at times one guy has taken a bigger stride than the other, but the both have progressed so much in this offseason, this camp. It's going to be fun to see how it goes down the stretch here."



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Q: Was Connor Cook frustrated earlier in camp when it seemed like EJ Manuel was getting more second team reps?

Coach Downing: "He's a great competitor, so I don't know if frustrated is the right word, but unsatisfied certainly could apply. Connor has worked very, very hard and he wants to win that job. I think that it's necessary to say that it was EJ's performance that earned those reps, not anything Connor wasn't doing. EJ was told earlier, both of them were told early, you will get the reps that you earn, and EJ was having a great, great camp, so he kind of continued to earn those number two reps. It's still an open competition, and we're going to let the best man win it."

Q: What have you seen the tight ends group be able to unlock for this offense?

Coach Downing: "You know we talked the first time I stood at this podium, we said we needed to attack the field vertically and in the seams. Talked about the addition of Jared [Cook] and I think what you've seen from the whole tight end group is understanding their role a little bit better in the passing game. We'll create some matchups with those guys and when we have them, we'll take advantage of them. Those guys work so hard, not just in the pass game, but in the run game and in protections. They're really starting to round themselves as the strength of this team."

Q: Are you planning on escalating more and more mismatches on the field with your tight end group as the preseason goes on?

Coach Downing: "Yeah you know, you tend to keep some things vested in the preseason. We've been working on some things in practice that we're excited about with the tight ends. I'm going to continue to give them opportunities to make plays throughout the course of the remaining two games. We'll see what they got."

Q: Where is Gabe Holmes at in his development?

Coach Downing: "Gabe is coming along. Gabe is doing a nice job coming back, obviously, from the injury last year and getting his strength back. He's a hard worker. He's a smart kid. All those guys, all those young tight ends. He and Ryan O'Malley and Pharaoh [Brown] and Clive [Walford], all of them are developing and doing a really, really nice job."

Q: Do you have a clear vision on how you want to rotate running backs or is that still evolving?

Coach Downing: "I think that falls in the preseason theory that we were just discussing with the tight ends. There will be things during the season that we ask specific backs to do. Right now, we're just calling the offense and figuring out what guys' strengths and weaknesses are. Right now, no, there's no plan to who's playing what reps and specific downs. During the season, I'm sure we'll get a little bit more specific."

Q: How much work does Marshawn Lynch need during preseason games and even out at practice?

Coach Downing: "Well he works hard on the practice field. We know what he is as a gamer. He has tape to prove that. He doesn't need to prove too much to me from a game standpoint. Where I think he's still putting in his work, is getting comfortable in the system and understanding the offense and setting up blocks a little bit different way than he has in the past. He's getting plenty of work with that in practice."

Q: What have been your impressions of Michael Crabtree since he came here? Has anything surprised you?

Coach Downing: "Well I knew from watching him in college and seeing him go as highly drafted as he was that he was a talented receiver, but man, you watch him make some catches in practice and you just think, 'I'd love to have that skill.' He's pretty incredible catching the football."

Q: What was your assessment of the running backs in pass protection in last week's game?

Coach Downing: "I think it's an ever-evolving process. We're going to give guys the opportunity to go out and show that they'll stick their face in there with the linebacker and protect the quarterback. Obviously, that's something that we've done well here in the pass. So I think it's an ever-evolving process with those guys. For the most part, I thought they did a nice job. They were completely assignment sound, and I think that technic continues to develop in the



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preseason. It's one thing to do it practice when there's just two cones out there as the tackles. It's a whole other thing to do it when you got O-linemen to sort your way through and so on."

Q: How does not seeing Marshall Newhouse play much right tackle factor into your decision when which guy will start there?

Coach Downing: "Yeah, he's a true pro though. We saw a good amount of him in the offseason even though we were in pajamas out there. We saw him at right tackle in the offseason. We trust his preparation, his ability and his ability to transfer technique from the left to the right. That's going to be a fluid situation until we get to Tennessee. It may still remain fluid there."

Q: Is Kelechi Osemele going outside something that's possible or are you set with where he is now?

Coach Downing: "I'll tell you this. I'll answer it this way, I love what he's doing at left guard. How about that?"

Defensive Coordinator Ken Norton, Jr.

Q: As you assess Saturday, what was your takeaway?

Coach Norton, Jr.: "The improvement is there. We were certainly better than the Cardinal game coming into it. We feel good about our process and our ones played a little bit longer, and this week, they should play a little bit more. As far as improvement is concerned, I think we're better than we were the week before."

Q: Where do you stand with Marquel Lee at middle linebacker?

Coach Norton, Jr.: "He's really young. He's in a process. Anytime you start young in the process of any job, especially in the pros, the best athletes in the world, it's going to be some work. He's all for it. He's a big, strong, really smart, really passionate player and I really like where he is right now."

Q: Has what he's done on the practice field translated into the game yet?

Coach Norton, Jr.: "Absolutely, absolutely. Again, he's come a long way and he's still got a long way to go. The guy has a lot of football in him and he has a lot of passion about him. He's really smart and he's doing all the things that the really good young players should do to become productive people and players on this team."

Q: You've got a Division III guy out there who is holding his own. What do you see out of him?

Coach Norton, Jr.: "You're watching the games – a lot of speed, a lot of passion. The guy shows up when the lights come on. Nothing is too big for him. Really good on special teams, so we like where he is and again, the evaluation process still continues."

Q: How has the integration of John Pagano been? When do you solicit ideas from him?

Coach Norton, Jr.: "We work together every day, every day since he's come aboard. The process of communication, the process of making things clear, the process of getting the secondary tight, he's really been a really big help. I'm really glad he's on our team."

Q: Where do you think that you guys are in that process of getting the secondary...

Coach Norton, Jr.: "It's all improvement. I think every week you want to get better. Every week you want to improve. I think that nothing is perfect, but we're going in the right direction. I think that obviously there are things you need to improve on, but we are better in a lot of ways than we were the week before or the year before, so I like the direction and the plan that we have."



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Q: There might be some impatience out there amongst fans with the first-team defense. What would you council to those fans?

Coach Norton, Jr.: "They should be impatient. We are impatient as well. We want to win and we want to shut teams down and we want to do all the things that it takes to be a really good defense. The players and the coaches are really in the process of coaching hard, playing hard and bringing it out to the practice field and carrying over to the game. The ones are going to play a lot more this week. We're getting healthier and our process of being really good, we really like the direction we're going."

Q: Has it been frustrating for you not to get Obi Melifonwu and Gareon Conley on the field that much and how much better can your defense be with them?

Coach Norton, Jr.: "We don't know. They haven't been here much, so we're not quite sure how good they are or how good we can be. We know that we're going to coach the guys that are here and then work them really hard. Again, the evaluation process, the coaching process, is still really early in the preseason. The guys haven't played a whole lot of football together, so we're really coaching and talking and working and it's a lot of good things that'll happen."

Q: Why is it important for Khalil Mack to play in a preseason game?

Coach Norton, Jr.: "It's just a team building. It's getting the rust out. I think that it's important that you stay at a high level. You just don't get good and stay good by not playing. You have to play ball. The only place you have to get better is on the field, so it's important for your good players to stay sharp and to play with the other players and it's important that the team cohesion continues."

Q: Did you see any rust from him with the way you split that double team?

Coach Norton, Jr.: "He's amazing. He's amazing."

Q: When Jack Del Rio talks about eye violations, what does that mean?

Coach Norton, Jr.: "It's just discipline in the eyes. If you have a certain responsibility, if your eyes are supposed to be on a certain object or a certain thing or person, just make sure you have the discipline to keep you eyes in man coverage and not let them roam. It's just about focus, being disciplined and being very responsible."

Q: How do you improve on that?

Coach Norton, Jr.: "You work on it. It's all about work. Everything is about work."

Q: The first touchdown that you guys gave up, that play as coaches must drive you crazy.

Coach Norton, Jr.: "Imagine being a coach. Imagine being out there. We're working really hard. No one likes to get scored on the first drive. We had a few really good plays in that drive and then obviously we had those violations that you speak of and those are things that you continue to work on. You look around the league, we aren't the only team that has a violation. Lots of teams have eye violations; that's why they run certain plays. But I really like the guys' response. It's important that you have things to work on, to coach and then you see how they respond and they're responding the right way."

Q: Are those eye violations something you can see and correct right there? How much do you see that on the field?

Coach Norton, Jr.: "It's just a practice. The work, being pointed out and making the players and yourselves aware of it. It's just all about work."

Q: Was it surprising to see so many eye violations?

Coach Norton, Jr.: "There weren't so many. There were the few that you saw, but there are mistakes. There are also a lot of good things happening and it's important for us to be the team and defense we want to be. We have to eliminate those mistakes because it just seems like those are the things that are most talked about."



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Q: When you watch the film, do you see a few specific things right away that you know you can tighten up? Does that message get across to the players?

Coach Norton, Jr.: "No question. There's big stuff, lots of things that we talk about that players are evaluated. They have mental errors, they have sacks, they have great plays, great effort plays, leverage. There are so many different things that we evaluate the players on. The ones that you're talking about are just one. There are like 50 things and you're just talking about eye violations. There is loafs, great plays, great effort. There are so many things that we work on and things that we evaluate on and the players are responsible for. It's important that we not only talk about the things that they do not as well that we do talk about the things that they do really well and continue to build them up and make them into the players and the team that we want."

Q: What to you has been encouraging and the type of plays that you're looking for?

Coach Norton, Jr.: "We're looking for effort, always coaching effort first. Really being strong on our leverage, our tackling. Our substitutions, guys that are really involved in the game. When the veterans go out, are they helping coach the younger players? Are the younger players learning from the veterans? If the younger players make a mistake, are they coming off and getting really good instruction on the sideline. When they go back out, are they learning from the guy who was in with them before. The stuff that they're being taught on the practice field, are they carrying over to the game? Are they finishing the game strong? There are so many different things. At halftime, evaluation of production is going OK? Then the younger players, some guys that we're trying to have really good depth, are they showing up on special teams. Who is our best special teams players? There are so many different things and evaluations that we're working on. It's important that we just don't talk about one."

Q: What have you seen out of Cory James?

Coach Norton, Jr.: "Cory James, he looks like what a linebacker is supposed to look like. He runs right. He's really smart. You can see he really knows how to hunt the ball. You really see the improvement from Game 1 to Game 2, Day 1 when he came in to now. You really like to see that improvement and the ability to really be the dominating player consistently. Consistently be around the ball, consistently communicate, consistently make his plays and be available consistently."

G/T Vadal Alexander

Q: What have you seen from Connor Cook and EJ Manuel?

Alexander: "They're both doing really well. EJ's doing a great job of commanding the huddle. Connor's taken steps forward too from last year. They both feel like they're very good, very comfortable in the offense."

Q: Where do you think you've grown over the last month while working with the first-team offense more?

Alexander: "A lot. You're going against guys like Khalil [Mack] and Bruce [Irvin] every day. You have no choice but to get better. Defensive Player of the Year last year in Khalil, Bruce is one of the top defensive players in the league. So, it's like you have no choice but to get better. I get better every day going against those guys."

Q: Although the team wants Donald Penn here, how helpful has his absence been in your development?

Alexander: "Well, I'm really focusing on, in training camp and now, is just getting better technique-wise, learning the game better and it's definitely helpful going against players like Khalil and Bruce. Just having another year in this offense. I've taken it step by step."

Q: What was the biggest thing technique related that you knew you had to get better at coming into camp?

Alexander: "I think one thing I want to do is expand my knowledge of the game. Technique-wise, hand placement, footwork in pass and then run. I think those are very important. Offensive line is the kind of position where the small details matter and that's what I was really trying to improve on."



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Q: How do you expand your knowledge of the game?

Alexander: “When you’re looking at defenses, different coverages you might see might predict different things for the defenses to do. Stance alignment, stance – the weight of each guys’ stance – learning a guy that you’re going against that week and kind of studying him in a sense of what he likes to do and things like that. So, all of that goes into the game itself.”

Q: What is some of the advice that you can give a guy like David Sharpe, who is playing left tackle at times, or what have you seen from him thus far?

Alexander: “David’s a really good player, man. He’s a smart guy. He obviously comes from a good conference, SEC. *(laughter)* He’s used to going against really good players and he’s done a really good job of developing and learning the offenses and learning the things [offensive line] coach [Mike] Tice wants us to improve on. I just gave him the advice of just taking it one day at a time and improve from yesterday and focus on one thing at practice and just keep working on your technique and your goals.”

Q: Has the game slowed down for you from Year 1 to Year 2?

Alexander: “Absolutely. I think Year 1 and going into Year 2, this is Year 2 for me, I think Year 2 the kind of things that you see kind of slows down like you said. Just because, you’ve experienced everything one time already. So, it’s even from like a Game 1 to Game 2, it’s a big jump, and Year 1 to Year 2 is a big jump.”

Q: What were the days in Napa like when there were only 10, 11 offensive linemen and you were working a lot more than with just the first team?

Alexander: “You call those the dog days of camp, man. But I think it got me better. Really training myself to do a lot of reps and be pushing, fighting though guys like Khalil Mack and having more reps than most guys would. I think my conditioning has really improved and I think the game is going to be slower for me. I’m going to be very well conditioned for the game and because I push myself hard in practice.”

Q: Do you tell yourself preseason games are like real games to get you in the right mindset?

Alexander: “Absolutely. I take the preseason like a regular game. So, I do all the same things I would do for a regular game, so it’s really like four trial runs to get ready for Week 1 and go into the regular season. So, absolutely.”

Q: What are your impressions of James Cowser after going against him in practice many times?

Alexander: “Oh, he’s a very good player. He’s a guy that’s going to give you all the effort that you can possibly imagine. You’re going to block him from snap to whistle and that’s not an understatement. He’s a very hard-working defensive player, very good technique, he’s a lot stronger than he looks. He’s not the biggest guy, but he’s a lot stronger than he looks and he’s a smart player, so he knows who he’s going against.”

Q: When Khalil Mack is going 100 percent, is he able to be blocked?

Alexander: “Very hard. Very hard. In my opinion, when Mack wants to get there, it’s a matter of time before he gets there.” *(laughter)*

CB TJ Carrie

Q: Preseason gives you the opportunity to improve as an individual and a group. What have you guys seen on tape?

Carrie: “Preseason, we’ve made a lot of mistakes, but we’ve got a lot of good things going as well and that’s what the preseason is for. It’s kind of for you to put it out there live and get a chance to critique what you’ve learned through OTAs and training camp. There’s a lot of things that we can still fix and a lot of things we want to get sharper so that when we go into week one we’re pretty perfect on it.”



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Q: Are there any takeaways individually or otherwise, on that first touchdown?

Carrie: "Eyes. Eye violations. That's very key in this game. You have to do your job. You have ten other players on the field with you that are all supposed to do a certain job. For me, I was supposed to do a job on that certain play and I feel like I let my teammates down on that particular play. It showed. So the critical mistakes like that, those are the things we have to work on and that's something that we've been hitting on this week, and throughout all corrections. Making sure our eyes are in the right place so the next time we go out there... we'll continue to get that same play and they'll continue to challenge us in that coverage."

Q: Was it the misdirection that caught your eye?

Carrie: "A lot of the misdirection but that's what offenses do. That's what they're supposed to do, misdirection, get your eyes in the wrong place. You look up and it's a touchdown. Going into the season, those are the kinds of things we cannot have happen."

Q: Better to happen in August rather than September right?

Carrie: "Better to have it happen not at all. But now that it happened, it's something we can fix."

Q: What were some of the points of emphasis for the defense, the secondary in particular, coming into training camp this year?

Carrie: "Some of the big points were that we have a lot of new faces. The biggest point is just the cohesiveness of us playing together and all of us on the same page. When we're going out there and you switch up positions and you add a couple of new pieces and new defenses or coverages, you want to make sure that everyone is thinking the same way and that everyone is on the same page. That's what we continue to stress. We did it throughout training camp. In the midst of preseason we've had a couple of chances to do it and we've had a couple of chances to improve."

Q: The schemes in preseason are a lot different than the regular season, and it seemed like some of the slant routes were causing you guys difficulty. Is that something when you get into the regular season schemes it can be mitigated?

Carrie: "I think it was my eyes and my leverage. Every defense that we call, we have a specific leverage that us as defensive backs are supposed to play so we can take some of those things away. Your eyes are critical. Making sure my eyes are through the break, those are things receivers live on. Giving you a couple moves here and stretching your leverage inside and cutting outside, those are all fundamentals of leverage and eyes. Those are the things that our coaches continue to stress. One of the biggest things of my performance last game was poor as far as my eyes and leverage. Coaches are really stressing that, not that they should have to because it's something that we're supposed to do. That particular game and situation, I was very poor with that."

Q: How do you feel you've responded to that challenge this week?

Carrie: "Good, I've been getting some extra work with some of the receivers out here. Just going over the route concepts that I got that night. Getting the formation and feel for what I should do better. There's a lot of things I could do better. One, getting my hands on the receiver because I'm going to continue to see stacks and bunches to allow me not to have the advantage of getting my hands on receivers. We'll see other teams do the same things so they can get in the receivers' face."

Q: Do you attribute any of the struggles to the fact that you were moving inside and outside, and that you hadn't gotten consistent reps on the inside like you did last year?

Carrie: "No. I've been playing inside and outside most of the season and most of the years I've been here. At this point, going into Year 4, that's something I should have had down pat."



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Q: You go against Michael Crabtree in practice. Is he getting better with age?

Carrie: "I think 'Crab' hasn't lost a step. He comes out here and puts in a lot of work. Him, 'Coop' [Amari Cooper] and the other guys put in a lot of work together. Their bond with D.C. [Derek Carr] is pretty efficient so they continue to come out here and perfect every little thing. Sometimes it's not even the biggest things, it's the smallest things that make the biggest differences with them on the field. For 'Crab,' I think he hasn't lost a step at all."

Q: Where do his hands rank in terms of receivers?

Carrie: "The guy has some great hands. To me, I think he has the best hands in the league. That's just in the stance of what we see out in practice that you guys aren't allowed to see. Even in game time, some of the grabs he does are pretty remarkable."

Q: Are there times you have him totally blanketed and he gets it anyway?

Carrie: "All the time. That's attributed to the bond that he and D.C. have as well. He could be covered to the max and DC will slip it in there where only he might be able to get it with one hand, or he might be able to get it with just a certain type of body position. That just goes to the strength of how much the bond they've created together over the last couple of years has grown."

Q: Has John Pagano been a help to you? Does he work with guys individually?

Carrie: "All the time. He continues to stress us to come in early and stay late, just to do the little things and go over some of the schemes that offenses like to do, some of the things offensive coordinators like to do as well. That's taking it to a bigger level because as a player, you kind of go through the surface of the receiver, formation, the quarterback. Taking it to the offensive coordinators and what they like to attack and how they like to attack defenses has really been an extra point that he's given us to look at film at."

Q: What have you seen from Karl Joseph from Year 1 to Year 2?

Carrie: "Comfortable. Very comfortable in what he's doing and his ability. Once you get past the game speed and understanding the situations of football, because I think from year one you don't realize how many different situations you stress about and how many different situations you're put into in the game, so now I think year two he's really gotten a chance to adjust, adapt. Now he's out there playing fast and physical. He's a very smart kid. That's what we need on the defensive side."