

Atlanta Falcons Media Conference

Monday, October 12, 2020

Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Arthur Blank

Rich McKay

Weekday Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Thank you both for being here. We'll start with questions.

Q. Are there more plans to make any other adjustments to the coaching staff in terms of responsibilities other than Raheem Morris being named interim head coach?

ARTHUR BLANK: My answer would be is that is going to be up to Raheem. He'll look at the staff the way it exists. He may decide to reshuffle some responsibilities, make some other changes. That will be his prerogative.

Rich, do you want to add anything to that?

RICH MCKAY: I think Arthur said it best. We've talked to Raheem about that. It will be up to him.

The one thing I would say is that could include naming a different defensive coordinator, himself having the title now. There are some things that he'll work through. He's just been at this for a couple hours, right? Yes, that will be up to him.

Q. What specifically are the issues you would like to see fixed by Coach Morris and the rest of the coaching staff moving forward? Which problems have become the most disturbing for you?

ARTHUR BLANK: It's called lack of winning. So the problems we have to solve are all the problems that are ahead of us that keep us from winning.

I'd add, if I can, this is not just a response to a 0-5. It's a response to really almost three and a half years post Super Bowl, playing less than .500 ball. When you look at that many games over a long period of time, you adjust for injuries, which every NFL team has, we just haven't performed to the level we're capable of.

We think our talent is better than we have the record at this point. For a variety of reasons, we weren't getting the results we needed to get. The time for the change was now. Though it's always difficult and it's sad personally because we all know Dan is one of the most beloved coaches in the NFL, Thomas has been with me for 13 years of my 20 years as an owner, done a lot of wonderful things. Known he and his family for many years. It's a very difficult decision. On the other hand the bigger responsibility that I have, and I've said this publicly for the last 20 years, is to our fans, everybody connected to the franchise.

Performance wasn't there. Every opportunity was given over the last three and a half years. Just needs to be addressed now.

Q. How do you make certain this coaching staff is motivated towards making the necessary changes to improve the record this season when the perception is they will all be gone at season's end regardless?

RICH MCKAY: First of all, these are professionals, both the players and the coaches. They understand how important every game, every moment, every practice is. I don't try to minimize how difficult it is to be in an interim situation. But by the same token, I know the effort you will see.

We have 11 games to go. That's a lot of games. I've only been in one of these situations before in my entire career, that's what Coach Petrino left. We were not too sorry to see him leave, but he left. We didn't play well the first week, but played pretty well the next two weeks.

They're professionals. They're on it now, working on it now. They had a team meeting via Zoom this morning. They're underway. I have every confidence they will do what's necessary to give it their best effort to win football games.

ARTHUR BLANK: The other thing I would add is that traditionally if you make the change at the end of the season, nothing to do with why we made it now, if you made it at the end of the season, the question you're asking is probably a more substantial one, whoever is asking it.

With this many games to go, these guys, they all want to perform at a very high level not only because whoever is coming in later may want to consider them, may want to consider them as part of their staff based on how they perform, also they'll be looking for other opportunities. If it's not here, it will be someplace else.

How they perform as coaches and players is important for them personally because the reasons we've described, as professionals. Two, they want to do the best they can for the 11 games this year because they know they'll have an opportunity at the end of the season no matter who is the head coach or general manager at that point.

Thirdly, they want to prepare themselves for their future. If it's not here, it will be someplace else.

Q. Do you guys feel like you need a head coach who is more of a disciplinarian rather than a rah-rah guy when it comes to dealing with players? Do you feel you need someone who is not hesitant to bench somebody who is playing poorly or call out a player publicly?

ARTHUR BLANK: I think this is a situation where you can and probably in many ways really should have both. I think I would hate to liken this to golf, if I could for a second, 14 clubs in a bag, you use different clubs for different reasons.

I've been involved with leadership for probably 60 years of my adult life. I think it's important to have a leader, a leader of men, whether it's a coach or general manager, whatever it may be, a leader of somebody who understands our values, is going to live and play within the context of those values.

Having said that, you want somebody who can make the tough decisions when it's required to do that. That's in keeping with our values. Usually it's right for the person, the coach, the player, some of the personnel, to be able to be clear in terms of what your expectations are. If they're not met, be willing and able to make the changes you have to make.

Do I publicly believe in calling out players? Personally probably not. I don't know many coaches that really do. Most coaches when they have a reason to bench a player or talk to them in a stern way, they'll do it in a way that will maintain their grace and dignity and integrity, both the coach as well as the player, so the player comes back and feel like they can do the job that's expected of them. You really want to balance the two.

That's a long answer to your question. That's probably true for everybody in all of our businesses.

Q. Do you plan to hire a search firm to help with this search for a coach and GM?

RICH MCKAY: We've done this before and used a search firm. I always think there's nothing wrong with using consultants for the role they can play, for the background checks, for the testing, for reaching out and making contact with agents and doing all those things. We will. We'll talk to some. We'll interview some.

We haven't talked to anybody, reached out to anybody. But we will. If we find the right fit for us, then we will. It just depends if you can find the right fit.

ARTHUR BLANK: The other thing is sometimes if you get the right group to work with you in this regard, it's dependent on who you find, whether they're the right group or not, sometimes they can challenge some thinking, bring in some collateral, lateral thinking that we may not even be thinking about because they're more current on this stuff, working on a variety of things. It's good to have voices in the room that you're not familiar with, voices that can express some ideas and thoughts that are unique.

So we'll see.

Q. Why were Dan Quinn and Thomas Dimitroff fired at this specific juncture of the season?

ARTHUR BLANK: I would say there are probably two reasons. One is that we made it clear, and they made it clear, it was kind of a mutual collateral togetherness, in a circle, that this year was going to be a playoff year or bust, if you will. Dan signed up for that, so did Thomas, so did this owner, so did Mr. McKay, our president and CEO. Our fans did, too. It was pretty clear when you go 0-5 that's not going to happen.

I think that we made the right, in my view, decision the end of last year. It's always easy to look back, a Monday morning quarterback. But given the team we had last year, the team was 6-2 the back half of last year, fifth in the league in offense, eighth in the league in defense, won three away games to opponents that were really good, playing for high purpose at that time. In my opinion we had every reason to think this situation, if anything, would get better. We'd roll over and, in fact, get better given free agency and draft. It hasn't.

When you go back and look at the last three years plus five games, et cetera, our record has been less than .500. That's never what I'm about personally. It's not what promised Atlanta in 2001 when we acquired the franchise. It's not what Rich is about. It's not what we're about in any of our businesses. It is the best or nothing. This

philosophy is true with our football team.

We felt this was just the right time to do it. There's nothing particular about this one loss that we could have rationalized it for any one of the other losses, the next one coming up, whenever that might be. Hopefully there will be no more.

Spoke to Raheem a little while ago, he's very positive, as you might expect.

Q. What will Ruston Webster's role be in the day-to-day personnel operations?

RICH MCKAY: Ruston has been a national scout for us for a number of years. I've known Ruston since 1992 or '93. Worked for me in Tampa. Worked for Tim Ruskell in Seattle, GM in Tennessee.

I just want another set of eyes to help me because I've got a lot of things going on on our plate with respect to the search. He knows our scouts well. He knows Steve Sabo, Shepley Heard, Anthony Robinson, the three guys that are running our college, our pro and player personnel.

I just wanted Ruston because he's got a very good comfort level with Raheem Morris. Know each other from the Tampa days. I felt like he was the right guy to come in and help me on a day-to-day basis. Called Russ. He worked for us. He's worked out of Nashville for the last couple of years. Just wanted him on campus.

Q. What do you want the new direction of the franchise to be?

ARTHUR BLANK: Direction? It's called winning. What was that expression, Al Davis: Just win, baby, something like that. May he rest in peace.

I think we need to win. That's what our fans are counting on. That's what they signed up for. We ask them for a lot. Their resources, commitment, energy, passion, time, all of that of the families as well. We created a great environment, stadium. We're ranked number one in terms of fan experience, food and beverage, security, welcome home environment. We've created the right environment and stadium, but we have to have a better set of results on the field. Our fans are entitled to that. Our organization is certainly, but our fans are entitled to that.

That's been my commitment. At the end of the day whether it's reflected in the book Good Company, you read about it there, we are about our fans, we are about responding to them, understanding this is a reciprocal relationship, and we have to be there for them as well.

Q. How will the football operations side of things be structured from the top down beginning with you and the staff remaining?

RICH MCKAY: In the interim, if you're talking about in the interim, people remain in their same spots. Anthony Robinson is director of our college, college is underway, a different year. COVID has created a different year for our college guys that can't travel. They're doing it at home. They're doing it virtually. All their meetings in a different fashion.

On the pro side Shepley Heard runs that. We'll continue to do that. Steve Sabo is the connector. That's not going to change.

In the future we'll hire a general manager. That general manager will have personnel control. Depending on who the individuals are between the head coach and GM exactly all those -- how that structure may work. The GM will have final say on personnel. They're report to me.

It will be a structure that we tried to put into place this last off-season with Dan and Thomas. My role is to support them. That's what I'll do in the new role.

Q. Was this type of decision always going to include both Dan and Thomas instead of letting one guy and keeping the other?

ARTHUR BLANK: No, I mean, the answer going back to 2016, six years ago, we made a change with Coach Smith, Thomas was kept on at that point. There were a lot of reasons for that which are not important now. But that was the right decision at that point.

We think this is the right decision at this point. So it's very difficult, everybody on this call is a genius in this regard, but the business is very complex. Where the players start, where the schemes start, where the coaches start, where each of those start and end, it becomes increasingly difficult to separate them.

We felt we had given both gentlemen a long period of time to create the winning environment that we promised ourselves and promised our fans. They both haven't done it. So it was the right decision for them both in this case.

Q. Are you guys more inclined to look harder at offensive minded head coaches based on the current makeup of the roster or is that something you're not weighing at this point based on how the roster to change?

ARTHUR BLANK: The roster is always going to change. I think to make a coaching decision based on who is on the roster today when it may change tomorrow or two years from today is not always a wise decision.

We'll look for, A, a great leader, a difference maker. A number of coaches around the NFL who are not available who we all know are difference makers. We have to find our own version of that. If you don't find a version of that, you find someone who plays .500 ball. A .500 ball team and not what we promised our fans.

Which side of the ball that will be, I can't tell you. We'll look for the right person. That's a holistic view of who that right person may be.

Q. Given the team's salary cap situation, will you change veterans to amass draft picks?

RICH MCKAY: No. Last year we made one trade, right? It was a trade we thought was in the best interest of the player, definitely in our best interest we thought. We executed that trade.

If somebody came to us with a trade for a player, it made sense to us, it was in that player's interest, our best interest, we could do it, would we consider it? Maybe. This will not be a situation where we're going to predetermine the roster for the next head coach and general manager. We're going to let them come in, let them evaluate this roster, let them see the moves they want to make.

The salary cap is something that people talk about and they should because it is definitely a constraint. For us, we have a lot of really good football players paid at a very high level that impact our salary cap. That said, I've always believed that salary cap is something that you can maneuver around, you can work within, and you can operate within. I'm not intimidated by it.

There's no question that given our roster and given some of the players we have on it, that we will be tied to the salary cap, but we will be able to maneuver within it. Same thing we did this year when we signed Todd Gurley, made the moves we made. We were tied going in.

ARTHUR BLANK: I would say we've been going at this for 20 years, I have been. We've always been tied to the salary cap. We've always spent right up to the maximum. I don't know, Rich mentioned the other day, he thinks we have been leading the league in cash expenditures. That may be so or very close to it. We're always going to be in that position. We're never going to keep resources from doing the right thing.

The league with the pandemic this year is going through some new math with the salary cap going forward. I think, in my opinion, I don't think the league is going to do anything that's going to hurt the quality of play on the field.

Q. Matt Ryan has said he wants to play until he's 40. Do you see Matt Ryan as the quarterback of the future?

ARTHUR BLANK: I love Matt, much like I love Dan, Thomas. Matt has been a franchise leader for us, a great quarterback, one of the leading quarterbacks in the last 13 years in the NFL. I hope he's going to be part of our plans going forward. But that will be a decision I won't make.

Matt has the ability to play at a very high level even at this age. Whether that's going to continue or not I'm not sure. I appreciate his willingness to consider doing that, and the level of what he's played for for us for 13 years, which has been incredible.

I will have to see. That's going to be a decision at the end of the day that will part of it up to the player and part up to the coaching staff. Whether or not Matt can keep himself together, God willing he'll be able to do that, play at the level that he's capable of playing at.

Q. Some might say Raheem Morris having been in the organization for several years the philosophy could be the same. What do you see in him that things could be different?

ARTHUR BLANK: I would say this. Raheem has had experience as a head coach, which helps. He understands our system, which helps. He has the right kind of enthusiasm to lead the players I think in a positive way. He's been an offensive coordinator and he's worked with our receivers, understands that side of the ball well. He's been a defensive coordinator.

I think he'll bring whatever new ideas, task the players in maybe ways they haven't been tasked, maybe moving some folks around. That's what happened in the middle of last year. Raheem was in the middle of a lot of that in terms of the defensive side of the ball. He was a catalyst for a lot of the changes. We'll see if he's able to do that again this year.

He's very positive. I spoke with him a few minutes ago. Rich has talked to him. Maybe even has seen him, I'm not sure today. He's ready to go. I know we made the right choice with Raheem. We'll see where it takes us, so... The players will definitely be supportive of him. That I do know.

Q. With Raheem assuming the role of interim coach, will he continue to serve as defensive coordinator? If not, what staff adjustments are needed?

RICH MCKAY: I think that will be left to him. I think he'll probably make that announcement sometime today or tomorrow. I think he's talking to the staff about that as we speak. They may be in a meeting right now discussing it. I think they're going through that.

Q. Given the new measures passed by the owner, what will the Falcons do to make sure the searches for coach and general manager are diverse and that minority candidates are considered and interviewed?

RICH MCKAY: There are rules. We welcome those rules. We intend to exceed those rules I think. Arthur is an original member of the diversity committee that was formed way back in Paul Tagliabue's day, created the Rooney Rule. We know what those rules are, we respect them, welcome them. We hope there is some intention at this year by teams in the interview process. There certainly will be on our part. That will not be an issue for us.

We believe there are some really good diverse candidates on both the GM and coach side. They'll certainly get an opportunity to interview with us.

ARTHUR BLANK: I would add, I still serve on that committee. I understand the rules, understand the intent behind them. As Rich said, it's our intent to be intentional. Doesn't mean we'll be bound, but it does mean we'll certainly create a level playing field as best we can.

Q. Will Raheem be given a true opportunity to vie for the head coaching job?

ARTHUR BLANK: Absolutely. If Raheem ends up 11-0, he'll certainly be a candidate. I mean, that's what his aspiration is. I do think, I said this to him, nothing to do with the timing, we were chatting, often my experience with interim head coaches has been no more than three games. Dan Reeves left, Bobby Petrino left. It was only a matter of three games.

This I think is unusual, 11 games to go. I think it's to Raheem's advantage. I know his aspirations long-term are to be a head coach again. He's learned a lot since his Tampa Bay days, he's learned a lot with us. I'm sure he's more polished, mature, aspirationally, technically. I think in 11 games he'll have a chance to show his own capabilities. I think he's looking forward to that.

Whether it be with us or somebody else in the future, we'll

see. That's a lot of games. He'll have the ability to step forward and step up and do everything that we hope he's capable of doing. He believes he is.

Q. Which hire comes first, a head coach or a general manager? Are you looking to do it simultaneously? What kind of timeframe are you looking at?

ARTHUR BLANK: I don't think it's terribly important the sequence of it. In a traditional sense, usually hire a general manager, general manager picks the head coach. This is a little bit unusual situation since they both report to Rich. Doesn't really make a difference.

We'll look at the timing of the best people, when they're available. Because of the nuances of the pandemic this year, how we're dealing with that, how it affects the league, how it affects college, a variety of other things, we may be doing things a little bit out of the normal sequence.

We'll look for the most talented people as soon as they're available.

Q. With the defense performing the way it has, why did you decide to move the defensive coordinator to interim head coach? Was this a move you discussed in previous weeks?

RICH MCKAY: I would say on the defensive side, we're all disappointed with the defensive numbers and the productivity, no question. I think for us, we had to look for the leader that we felt the players could follow, would follow. That was going to be Raheem. That was because the connection he has with those players. He's been on the offensive side, he knows our offensive players. He knows our defensive players.

I think the blame, if you want blame, for the defensive statistics to date go all around. I think the players would be the first to say to you they would put their hands up. Had some real injuries in the secondary. Not an excuse. Everybody has injuries. I think in our case we looked at all those factors and felt like Raheem was the right fit.

Q. Do you see this change as the starting spark of a rebuild? If not, why are you so confident in this roster? What are the first steps of the rebuild?

ARTHUR BLANK: I'm not smart enough to know whether it's the start of a rebuild or not. What I am smart enough to try to participate in is hire two really strong leaders, intelligent football people, that will help respond to that question.

As Rich said earlier, we have a lot of talented players on

our roster that have been paid substantial salaries, but competitive salaries for what their performance has been.

On the other hand bringing new talent, looking at a different way of looking at it, different kinds of schemes, may have a little different approach. It's not our job, when you hire people like that, the last thing you want to say is this is the way you need to do your job. You want their thinking unencumbered by anything. That's the way it should be.

I think both Rich and I will become very good listeners and understand where people are coming from. We'll figure out the very best formula going forward that will produce the kind of wins for us that are important for the franchise.

Q. What have you learned since the first general manager and coaching hires you made with Rich McKay and Jim Mora?

ARTHUR BLANK: Since then?

Q. Yes.

ARTHUR BLANK: I love the guy on the screen who has been with you, with you now. How many years have you and I worked together?

RICH MCKAY: 17.

ARTHUR BLANK: 17 years. He had a full head of hair, it was all black 17 years ago.

RICH MCKAY: I don't know about that (laughter).

ARTHUR BLANK: Anyway, it's been a great relationship both at the club level, stadium level, league level. A whole variety. Commissioner has said more than once he wouldn't know what he would do without Rich McKay cheering the Competition Committee, being a counselor and adviser to him. That's true with me.

I think his knowledge of the game, knowledge of the history of football, what's going on in football, the future of football, is very helpful to whoever you bring in as a general manager and head coach. He's a great reflection of our culture in every sense of the word both professionally and personally.

The second person was Jim Mora?

Q. Yes.

ARTHUR BLANK: Jim is a very talented coach. I would say this very respectfully because I was very fond of Jim

and his family, but Jim from time to time would spin off and go into outer space. Rich is laughing a little bit. I mean, that's fine. I have a temper, we all have tempers. We can lose them from time to time.

I think that his judgment as it relates to what actually created the environment for us to make a change with him was not good. He's matured, too. I'm sure he's moved on. He had a fine career at UCLA. I'm sure he's matured in a lot of ways as well.

I think you look for, always, somebody, another note from my partner today, very infrequently gives me counsel on football stuff, other ways he's a father and brother to me. You always want to hire somebody that is in keeping with our values and our culture. All those things are not soft things, those are hard things, things how we relate to our fans, our players, everybody in the building, the community, et cetera.

You want to hire people that are technically the very best that there are, people who can see around corners, people who have a leading edge. All of my business all my business career has been trying to connect the people like that.

We'll be actively doing that, trying to do that, again.

Q. We've received several about the concept of a rebuild. Do you think it's time for a rebuild with this roster or if not what gives you the confidence that you can continue on this path?

RICH MCKAY: I'm not avoiding the question. May sound like it. I agree with Arthur. You can't begin to look at the roster in that way and try to tie the hands of the next people that are going to lead this franchise, the head coach and the general manager. They'll make those determinations.

We're all disappointed we're sitting here right now at 0-5 with this roster. No question. But we have a lot of good football players. They'll determine what mix of those players should stay on the roster going forward and what mix shouldn't.

I'm not the one that's going to answer that question for them. I'm going to do just what Arthur said: listen to them and see where we go from there.

ARTHUR BLANK: I would add you bring in two people hopefully of this level that would be highly capable, highly credentialed people. They're going to want to know that they have a degree of freedom to do their jobs. If not, they're going to say, You're asking me just to continue with

what you got, is that what you really want? Another .500 record for the next three and a half years? The answer is no. Will there be changes made? I'm sure. Where they'll be made, coaches, players, that kind of thing remain to be seen.

Q. You announced today a \$200 million grant for Children's Healthcare of Atlanta. Is that a proud moment in a gloomy 24 hour period?

ARTHUR BLANK: That's an extraordinarily proud moment and will go well beyond today. Children's Healthcare System of Atlanta is one of the leading pediatric hospital systems in the United States today. The new hospital will be the third largest pediatric hospital in the country today.

I think every bit what Children's does for young people in terms of enhancing their lives, supporting their lives, research, educationally, clinically, is beautiful because children represent a third of our population but all of our future.

I'm privileged, my family is privileged, all of our associates, I've said this publicly, 98% of my estate is going back to our foundation to be able to tie our family name, our associates, everything we're all about, to a beautiful, inspirational facility like children's is a wonderful moment for me.

That hospital will be here for another hundred years, well beyond us being back to Super Bowl, any number of times of winning. But thank you for the question. I appreciate it.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you to both of you for taking the time today. Thank you, everybody, for submitting questions.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports