

Atlanta Falcons Media Conference

Monday, January 4, 2021
Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Arthur Blank

Rich McKay

Weekday Press Conference



ARTHUR BLANK: Good afternoon. I wanted to just first made a comment or two to our fans as well as to the media. One, I think you know us by reputation, you know by reality that a couple seasons of 7-9 and 4-12 doesn't represent any aspect of our goals that we set out in the year 2000-2001 when we acquired the franchise. It's not our history. It's not what we do in any of our businesses. It's not what we do for our football team, for our soccer team, whatever.

So we've been through a difficult period of time, and we're at a point where we need to make a coaching change or coaching decisions and a general manager decision.

I want to thank our fans for their support, number one, over the last 20 years but particularly the last three years as difficult as they've been for all of us, and I certainly have the feelings and the empathy and the compassion, and probably not the patience that I would like to have, but this is not a game of patience, it's a game of results, and I understand that fully.

We've begun this journey now with hiring a new general manager and new head coach, and I know it's going to lead us to a very good place. We have a lot of talent on our roster. We have some holes that have to be filled.

We're in a very good position in terms of the draft this year; we're picking No. 4, as most of you probably know already. So we feel good about that.

And we have a long list of candidates, both general manager and head coach candidates. It's a very diverse list. It's one that I feel very good about, that our team president and CEO, Rich McKay, along with Abraham Lincoln hitting behind him there, really feel good about, as well. If you have any questions for Abe, you can ask him, too. If you get him to talk, it would be a miracle, but maybe you can get him to talk.

I really want to thank you for that.

I also want to take a moment and also acknowledge and thank our media partners who are on the phone because your job is to help tell the story of what we're doing with our franchise, what we're doing with our coaching staff, coaching decisions, et cetera, to analyze every game and to help interpret for our fans where we're going directionally, what's good, what's not so good, what needs to be improved upon, et cetera.

The only thing that shocks me is that a number of you write pretty regularly about all the things we need to do, but none of you have applied for the head coaching position, so I guess sometimes it's a little bit easier to be on the outside and writing as opposed to being on the inside and doing. So if any of you do have that as an aspiration, you're welcome to submit your CVs and we'll still consider them.

But seriously, I do thank you for all the time, all the coverage, all the storytelling about not only our game on the field, our results on and off the field, et cetera, but all the stuff we've been involved in the community-wise, particularly this year with all the social justice questions and issues, the voter registration, the voting rights, getting out the support, with how heavily involved our team has been, our franchise has been, and that's something we feel like regardless of the 4-12 record, in that regard our record is 16-0. We've gotten a lot of great storytelling behind our players and everything they have done, and I want to thank you for sharing those stories with our fan base, as well.

With that, let's open it up to questions. We'll be as transparent as we can be. There are things we can talk about and things we can't talk about. We'll try to talk about whatever we can and share with you whatever comments that we have or we're able to.

Q. Arthur, during this period, have you had time to reflect on how you got here so fast, from being on the brink of the Super Bowl trophy to 4-12?

ARTHUR BLANK: Yeah, I think we -- I mean, that's a very good question, and actually we've talked about it, a great deal about it internally. A lot of our talent is still the same. It's changed somewhat on offense particularly in terms of the offensive line has changed a good bit, but we have



some of the same young talented players on defense, and I think there's a number of factors, some of which we can get our hands around, but most of which we can't.

I think it's not due to a lack of effort. It's not due to a lack of trying. It's not due to a lack of planning on behalf of our head coach and coaching staff and our general manager, et cetera. I think we've made some mistakes in the draft which have hurt us in my opinion. I thought we made some mistakes in free agency, which is always very dangerous waters to tread in because you can pick a lot of -- pick up some really good players but you also -- you're always exposed to some other teams' issues or players' issues that we probably may not have fully dimensioned.

But I think we are who we are, and I think this year in fairness the record is 4-12, but I would tell you that anybody that we played along the way, this is a great credit to Raheem and the whole coaching staff, even to go back to Dan during the 0-5 run with him, is that the players have competed really hard. They've never given up, whether it be against a team like Kansas City or even Tampa Bay. The score got out of hand at the end but it was very competitive through the third quarter and guys were fighting and fighting hard, so I give them a lot of credit.

You guys know the numbers better than I do, it's probably six or seven games we lost by less than a touchdown, by less than a couple, two, three points, and in many cases they were by one critical play. Usually it's two or three plays that would cost us a game, but in many cases it was just a single play for us. Take the game against Kansas City; if 24 holds on to the ball, the game is over. But that's just an example.

As Bill Parcells used to say, you are what your record is, and it's true. We were 4-12 this year and two years of 7-9 before that. The point is that none of that's acceptable, and like everything in life, what we do do is do an in-depth self-analysis, take the X-ray machine, examine all the bones, examine every aspect of our body, those parts that are good and need to be carried forward we'll do that with. Those parts that need to be changed out we will change them out because this is not acceptable.

Whatever the reasons are, the results are not acceptable, and this is a results-oriented business, and we understand that totally.

Q. Arthur, what are you looking for in a general manager and a coach, and how have the interviews gone that have been completed, with Bieniemy and Morris?

ARTHUR BLANK: Yeah, I think the ones we've had so far

have gone well, both on the GM side as well as on the coaching side. We've got a long list of interviews set up over the next week or beyond next week. As I said earlier, some very good candidates. Really both general manager opportunities and head coach opportunities.

I think the ones we've seen so far, I think they've been thoughtful. They've been thoughtful about our team, what we have to do to get where we need to be.

So I think to go to the essence of your question, I think it's critical, and you're not going to find anybody in the NFL, I think, or in most businesses for that matter, who would say that a general manager and head coach should be or could be on different pages. I think it's okay to have different opinions about a variety of things, but they listen to each other respectfully, that they become good listeners, et cetera, but whatever they do, they need to do it in collaboration with each other. There needs to be the respect for each other, great respect not only with each other but with their staffs, personnel to coaching, coaching to personnel, et cetera. So I think that's very important. So they have to see the game the same way. They have to have a similar plan for how do you build a championship team.

If you have different plans, then you're fighting over the draft, who do you pick, who you don't pick, in free agency who do you pick, who you don't pick, who do you chase, who you don't chase, et cetera. So it's very important that they speak the same language but not always in agreement. There's always room for disagreement, and that's a healthy thing to have in an organization.

We're looking at some really good candidates. And again, fortunate, both coaching-wise and GM-wise we have a very diverse set to look at, which is a real blessing given the emphasis of the league and our franchise has in terms of diversity.

Q. Arthur, this goes along with what you were just talking about. You often referred to Dan and Thomas as co-team builders. Is that how you'd like for the next coach and GM to interact, or do you have maybe a different approach in mind as it pertains to the roster construction?

ARTHUR BLANK: Well, I think it's always important. I've been one to not put as much emphasis on who has the 53 and the 46 and the 46 and the 53 and the practice squad. But it's that -- I think it's most important that they come together in a respectful way, that one is not dominant over the other because I think that doesn't speak well for dynamics and for good decision making. I think they need to be able to listen to each other, listen to each other and



understand where each person is coming from.

And I would say if you do that and if you go in with a plan that you both agree to, championship plan, how do you get from here to where we're playing in February, not somebody else is playing in February, we're playing in February, then there shouldn't be a lot of disagreements over particular players and what have you.

And if somebody has to use their, quote, power, if you will, to make those decisions, usually dynamic is not a very good one, it's not a very healthy one.

So you want a general manager and head coach to be collaborative and to work together. Who ends up with the 56 and the 43, Rich can comment on this, as well, to me it is secondary, completely secondary, to whether or not they support each other and see the world, the football world, through the same lens. If they do, your chances for success go up dramatically. If they don't, then you'll be fighting things internally, which are always a problem.

Things you put in front of yourself, it's hard enough to win on Sundays if you have to try to figure out how do you win in the building Monday through Saturday. That's a tough road then. Rich, do you want to add any comments to that?

RICH MCKAY: I think the one thing we would say and I think we've learned over the years is process is more important than power, so if you have the right process and the right collaboration along the way, then the power kind of takes care of itself. If the process isn't quite right from a collaboration standpoint, then the power will be used, and that usually is not a good result.

Q. Rich, you obviously have been in this league and around it for your entire life. How would you say the respective GM and head coaching fields of candidates kind of compare to previous years?

RICH MCKAY: I would say that it's -- on the coaching level, it's probably about the same, right, because the coaching level is always going to feel like there's less available candidates because there's less names known to the public, not known in the league but known to the public.

On the GM side, there are also less known, but the names are -- we know them all, right, so I think this GM list is really deep. I think there are a lot of candidates that are ready to be GMs. I look at when we hired Thomas and his skill set and what he brought to the table, he was not known. He was definitely a not known commodity but he was known within the league and hired and very successful.

I think on the coach's side it's just always hard because as you begin to interview people that people don't necessarily know, they immediately go, oh, that's not a very good candidate. It is a good candidate; you just don't know them. It's amazing how the measurement for that list is different because of a GM or a coach. I think both of them are plenty deep.

I think as Arthur points out, we have a very diverse slate on both sides, but it's also a deep slate that we may not get to. There are a bunch of GMs we have listed that we're not going to get to them all from an interview standpoint, I don't think.

ARTHUR BLANK: I would say, also, that some of the younger coaches that you've seen around the league that have gotten opportunities are people that would be on the list that Rich is referring to, that you wouldn't necessarily know who they were. Did a lot of people know who Sean McVay was before? The answer is probably not a lot of people. Kevin Stefanski, probably not. The young man that's in Arizona, what's his name, I can't pronounce his name correctly, but you all know who I'm talking about.

They were not household names, but they will become very successful and what have you. I think you have to do the research.

The thing I will say that I think is different, I do think -- and this is a credit, I think, to the league and it's a credit to the candidates and a credit to I would say the NFL generally, is that the extent of qualified diverse candidates in my opinion for both positions is deeper this year than I've seen in the past, and I think that's a really good thing.

I think that'll continue as time goes on. You'd have liked to see that have happened sooner. Some progress made but not as much as you'd like to see. I think we'll see more of that this year.

Q. This is for Arthur. When comparing this job opening with others now open, I believe there's now six or seven GM spots open, why do you think that Atlanta is a top job opening and what do you think is the biggest draw to this job?

ARTHUR BLANK: Well, I would say, and I don't want to -- I appreciate the question. I think that if you would ask the candidates that, I think they would say a couple of things. They would say, who are the owners, and I think that's -- it's difficult for me to talk about that because it's talking about myself in that sense.

So I think that certain ownership groups or owners around

the league have a stronger reputation for being committed, doing whatever it's going to take to win at all costs -- not at all costs in terms of culture but win at all costs in terms of resources and facilities and staffs and things of that nature.

So I think that generally I would say -- and others can comment on this and you all probably might or will, but I would say in that regard we get fairly good marks.

I think the culture of the organization, the quality of the building, whether or not we're seen by the league as being a team that's involved, a team that's a leader in a variety of ways, how we're involved in the community I think is important to a lot of the people that we chat with today. Much like all of us in society today we have a greater sense of awareness and sensitivity to what's going on in our communities throughout the United States. So do general managers and so do coaches, as well. So I think that becomes a factor.

I think Atlanta is a factor. Atlanta is a great city, has a great history, a great history in civil rights, and I think a lot of the general manager and coaching candidates feel good about coming to Atlanta just as a community, as a parent community.

So I think there are a lot of things that are really very positive. I think they recognize our roster, which is not perfect, obviously, but they recognize the talent that we do have, and they recognize the age of the players. Some are young and some are a little bit on, but they recognize a lot of that, and I think most would say this is a roster that is much better than 4-12. That doesn't mean that changes aren't necessary. They are necessary. But they recognize those opportunities, too.

And I think -- I won't say this -- I say it because Rich is not saying it, but I'll say it for Rich. I think Rich is the -- the opportunity to work with somebody like Rich, who's had a long storied history in the NFL and is of the highest respect at the league level and at the club level, both as a leader, as a CEO and a general manager historically is a real plus.

Only somebody that's frankly a weak person or somebody that would feel like Rich would be overly involved or overly whatever it may be would be threatened by him. Anybody who's a legitimate candidate and is thinking right about themselves and understanding our culture and our organization would view that kind of brain power available to them, not pressed on them but available to them when and if needed would view that as a real plus.

So I think the fact that Rich is available to a lot of these folks I think is important, too.

Q. Rich, what time frame are you looking at in order to see a turnaround, and does that answer have the foundation in the specific plan these candidates present to you?

RICH MCKAY: Yeah, okay, so I would say that we want to win in 2021. We don't want to make any sacrifices that then hurt the franchise for the future. So I think anytime you talk about turnaround, I've said this, I think, in a call that you and I had with Jeff a couple weeks back, is that in '07, we left the '07 season with most people feeling like we were going to take a dramatic step back in '08, we were going to have to rebuild the team, Michael was gone and we needed to rebuild the roster, and the next year we were 10-6, went to the playoffs and should have won a playoff game in Arizona.

I believe you can win in this league and win very quickly, and I believe with the roster we can do that. But we're not going to do it by sacrificing the future from the standpoint of the salary cap or trades or things like that. We're going to do it with the idea of having a short-term, a mid-term and a long-term vision.

ARTHUR BLANK: If I could add to that, I think you need all three of those plans. I don't think -- I think the best head coaches who obviously focus from Sunday to Sunday, but even the best head coaches, they also think about the mid term and think about the long term.

Obviously general manager's role is particularly focused not only on the one season but how do we build for the future in terms of bringing along young talent, talent development, how do we draft with intentionality, how do we make sure those players get time in the dirt, hand in the dirt and get the reps they need, et cetera.

I think it's a mixture of both, but I do think that with the talent that we currently have, supplemented with a proper draft, and we're in a great position in the draft, and we won't be back in this position hopefully for a very, very, very long period of time, and being active again appropriately in free agency that we have a chance to be very competitive this coming year.

Any team that you spoke to that we played against this year will tell you that this team fought hard throughout the game. They didn't make all the plays and made some plays we shouldn't have made, et cetera, but it wasn't due to a lack of urgency and a lack of commitment and doing all the things that are really important fundamentally as an organization.

Q. We've heard from Raheem yesterday saying that he believes this team is close, that this team can win with

a minimum amount of change. Are you expecting to hear diverse opinion on that question as to whether a more dramatic rebuild is necessary, and are you most open to hearing those who believe that you could meet the standard that Rich just commented on, that you can win in 2021?

ARTHUR BLANK: Well, I would say this: Obviously I want to hear what all these general managers and head coaches -- that's one of the advantages of going through this process, is that you do get an outside assessment of your team and where you are and your players, which is always good to hear.

I would say based on what we've heard so far and seen so far, I think the opportunity certainly there for us to win in 2021. I think that the team is better than the 4-12 record. There's no question about that. But it's probably not better than 7-9 and 8-8 and that puts us back where we were the last two years.

We can't fool ourselves to think, yeah, we lost three or four games that we shouldn't have lost, et cetera. Even that being the case, it's not an acceptable level. It's not where we have committed the franchise. It's not where we have set our standards and our bar, and it's not acceptable. Just is not acceptable under -- with any lens that we look at.

I expect every one of these people coming in to have a plan, to have a plan that will end up leading to a championship, and because of some of the reasons that Rich mentioned, you see this turnaround in the NFL because of the parity structure of the league, the opportunity to go from last to first, if you will, or make dramatic improvements year to year is very real. I expect that to happen for us in this coming year.

But there will be some changes fundamentally that will have to be made as we go forward, and there's probably some veteran players that may not be with us in the future. Some of that may be their decisions to move on, some may be our own decisions to prepare for the future, and that's one of the things that our fans should expect of us is not only win tomorrow but prepare for the future, as well, because what I've said from the outset, starting the year 2000 when I bought the team, on behalf of our fans is that we're interested in not a one-year wonder, we're interested in a sustainable winning team over a period of time, which meant that whether it be Jeff Schultz or you, Charles, or anybody else that's writing about us over the summer, we have real opportunities to be in the conversation, to be in the top six, seven, eight teams in the National Football League every single year. DL, as well as you.

And I want to make sure that we're in that conversation, not

only then, but more importantly that we're playing, as Rich would term it, important games in December and January, and we end up playing in February, as well. That hasn't changed. That's our standard, and that's not going to change, and we'll continue to do whatever we have to do to make sure we reach that as soon as we possibly can.

Q. Rich, in your conversations with potential GMs, have salary cap concerns come up as an issue, and can you clarify if you're hoping to get the GM hire first?

RICH MCKAY: Yeah, we've talked about salary cap in both the interviews that we've done so far on GMs and what their thoughts and plans would be. I wouldn't say anybody expressed over concerns about it. They certainly are aware of it. We'll get a lot more this week out of it.

One of the things that I think Arthur noted that -- and I know you all on this call know this, but you should realize what an opportunity it is for us to get to interview all these people, and you learn so much and there's so much brought to the table on, for instance, an analysis of why we're here.

You ask the question, well, why are you here. Well, we've done plenty of internal analysis, we've done all the analytics, we've done a lot of that. It's nice to get a fresh set of eyes from the outside that looks at your team and says, what about this and what about that. And so I think that that's going to go on.

I think with respect to the GM candidates, we've got more of those coming up later this week. I'm certain the salary cap will be in discussion, but I think it will be in discussion from the standpoint of strategy around it, as opposed to the word "concern," which is the word that you used, that I know based on the articles I've read, people are writing, but I'm not sure heard that from the candidates.

ARTHUR BLANK: The other thing I would add to that, the advantage to the number of candidates that we're talking to is we're getting not only an independent valuation of our roster and what have you, but these are from general managers and coaches that have competed against us. It's one thing to get somebody else from the outside, but it's quite something else when you get it from somebody who actually had to do all the advance work, the pregame stuff and getting ready to compete against you and then having competed against you in the current year or very close to the current year and sharing with you not only just things that you see through your eyes, which can be a little bit rose colored like we have with our own children, but somebody from the outside looking in saying, you know what, we saw some other things that we think are real

pluses or maybe things that need to be addressed sooner.

Q. Arthur, you talked about the diversity and the candidates out there. The percentage of minority head coaches is low, GMs even lower. For you guys is it intentional -- it looks like the people you've interviewed so far have been a lot of minorities. Is that intentional on your part? And why is it important for the league to start moving in that direction?

ARTHUR BLANK: Well, I think we could -- I could take a pulpit and make a speech about that, but that's not the purpose of the call. But I do think for all the reasons everybody on this call, our fans and the media generally would understand why social justice and social equity and equality is very, very important. And I think it's important the NFL recognizes that we need to have a greater representation closer to what represents our players actually and many of our fans, particularly here in Atlanta.

So there's a great deal of sensitivity about that, and if you're looking for the most talented people, you can't -- you have to be colorblind. You can't look at whatever color it may be, you have to just look for the most talented people.

I do think this year because of a lot of the pipeline work that's been done over the last number of years we've gotten more talent in the diversity department than I've seen in the past. Rich might disagree with that or he might have a different view on that, but having seen these lists for some years, I think you've got more focus, I think, on the opportunities.

I think in every case, every organization is going to -- and that includes the Atlanta Falcons, are going to try to hire the best person they can, regardless of their color or background, general manager as well as head coach as well as coordinators and position coaches and personnel folks, et cetera.

But I think the advantage we have this year is that the list of candidates is much stronger than we've seen in the past, and so it doesn't mean we're biased one way or another, but it does mean that we have really good choices to make this year, and I'm happy about that.

Q. This question would speak to your patience as much as anything else. Do you think the 59-year-old Arthur Blank who bought this team would think that he would still be here at 78 looking for the right formula to win a championship?

ARTHUR BLANK: Well, I would say this: I think the formula hasn't really changed a whole lot. I think we've been close. Obviously we were close when we played the

Super Bowl. One year we played against 49ers, if Roddy White is not held, we're probably in the Super Bowl. It would have been close on a couple other years.

So I think by and large our win-loss ratio up until the last few years has been really, really good. I've been in the top five of the NFL. Not true the last three years for sure.

I think in this business it does require a degree of patience, value developed talent, letting the coaches do their thing, letting the general managers do their thing. Patience probably my family would say and probably guys like Rich McKay would say is probably not my strongest suit, which works in the favor of our fans, I think, but I've learned to be more patient in order to develop an organization that actually is sustainable over a period of time. You can do short-term fixes, and short-term fixes, sometimes they feel good and they look good, but it's like a Band-Aid you put on something and you rip the Band-Aid off and it still hasn't healed correctly.

So you need to build it correctly, I think. That's part of our culture is to build it for sustainability over a period of time. A lot of it has to do with the process you go through in bringing these people together and the process that they go through in building an organization and sustaining it over a period of time, making decisions that are based on transparency, research, listening to each other, respect of each other, collaboration, the best brains in the building, using all the brains in the building, all those things that we care deeply about.

We've had a lot of success. The last three years not so much. And it is very disappointing. Disappointing for our fans, disappointing for everybody, certainly myself.

Q. I think almost everybody who's ever followed this team has asked themselves the question am I going to live long enough to see this team win it all. Have you asked yourself that, or do you feel more of an urgency, I guess, to --

ARTHUR BLANK: You know, I'll be -- I am 78. I plan on living to 178 if I can, God willing. But seriously, I have a sense of urgency, not only because of my age, honestly, but because I just feel like we owe it to our fans, owe it to our fan base to provide them with a winner, to get us in the tournament, so starting this coming weekend, for instance, that we'd be one of the teams people are talking about, or the weekend beyond that, with the new structure in the NFL in terms of conference championships and what have you.

There's nothing that I or we will not do within the constructs of what's allowed in the NFL to provide us a winning team



and a sustainably winning team because really, honestly, to win one year and then to go to this kind of trouble for three years is not acceptable.

You can go back and say, well, you were in the Super Bowl in '17 and it's only three years later. I don't want to go through that. Most importantly, I don't want our fans to go through that. It can't be Super Bowl or bust, but it has to be competitive, competitive, competitive, and then you get into the tournament and you have a chance to go as far as you can. A single-game elimination, anything can happen, I get it, and sometimes the ball is not round, it can bounce a lot of crazy ways, so things happen sometimes during the game.

But we need to be an important team throughout the year, and not one year but year after year after year after year. There are teams in the NFL that have done that, and there are ingredients that they've built into their organization which are sustainable, and those are the things that we have to do.

Q. Arthur, when it comes to the next head coach and general manager taking those steps to improve this roster, do you personally want them to include Matt Ryan and Julio Jones in their plan?

ARTHUR BLANK: Well, the answer is yes, of course they need to be included in the plan. Now, what they do with them is not going to be my decision and it's not going to be -- the general manager and head coach will have to look at people like Matt or people like Julio and young stars like Cal Ridley and other players that -- so they need to look at the whole roster and how is it built for today and how is it built for tomorrow. Are we getting ready for tomorrow; how do we have a successful transition into the next chapter or chapters of the Atlanta Falcons.

You can't hire -- cannot hire the very best people you can hire, whether it be general managers or head coaches, and then tie their hands and tell them, well, this person is off limits and that one is off limits and that one -- what you're asking them for, which is not off limits and needs to be probed deeply, do they have a championship plan, do they have a plan on turning around the franchise sooner rather than later so we're winning in 2021. Do we have a plan that's sustainable over a long period of time so we can make sure this team is competitive not just for the next year or two but over a longer period of time than that.

So whatever that plan looks like, and we're all part of the discussion, we'll all anoint it and approve it, et cetera, however that affects certain players, it affects certain players.

You know, in many ways these players are -- they're part of the family. They're part of my family. We care for them personally, each one of them. We care for their efforts and what they put on the line every Sunday. I know they're well compensated, I get that. But they're putting life and limb on the line and playing this game and we appreciate that. But at some point for the best interest of the franchise, which is the suit that we have, the holy grail, if you will, is that we have to make certain transitions and we'll do it.

It doesn't mean we'll love them less, it just means that when Roddy White decided, using him as an example, to retire and move on and we collectively came to that decision, it doesn't mean that we take away at all from the memories of Roddy playing at a higher level and being committed and being a tough player and being everything we want him to be in an athlete, but it was time for a transition at that position, and we're fortunate because of the trade we made at the time to pick up someone like Julio Jones and in anticipation of Julio getting -- I'm not saying Julio is a great example, but we selected someone like Cal Ridley, which apparently he's going to be a superstar for us, around for a number of years.

That's the healthy transitions that fans should expect us to go through and be prepared for. It doesn't mean we love any of these players less. We love them all just as much, whether they're with us or whether they move on to something else in their lives.

Q. Rich, what is your overall assessment now that the season is over of the talent level that's on this roster at the present time?

RICH MCKAY: Well, I would say that I'm going to leave the assessment to the next group. I would say that for us, the one thing that -- the assessment I'm going to give of this team is what Arthur said earlier, which is I can't give enough credit to them for the way they continued to compete because we were 0-5 at the start of the season; we're in the middle of COVID.

We changed a coach and we changed a GM, and they were dealt a really hard hand. I think if you look at the team and how hard they fought and how hard they competed, they never backed down from anything. We didn't win the games we wanted to win, but we never backed down.

The assessment itself, I don't want to prejudge that for those guys that are going to take those roles, be our principal football people. Let them assess it. I just know that I'm thankful for the effort that the players gave, that the coaches gave in a most challenging year. It's been challenging for everybody for many reasons, but for this

football team it was a most challenging year.

Q. You said you personally would like to keep Matt and Julio, but how important is it for you to pick a GM and head coach that they have the same views? Is that important to you, or can you be convinced that it's time by the right candidate?

ARTHUR BLANK: Well, I should be clear, and I apologize if I wasn't. I didn't say it was important for me to keep Matt and Julio. What I think is important, most important, is that we hire people who are the, number one, the very best at their jobs. That goes without saying. Who will come forward with a plan for us to have a championship team, a competitive team, et cetera, and that may include Matt and Julio for now, for the next two years, three years, or may not. I have no idea.

But in my opinion, this is just my opinion, I think it's a mistake for an owner to lay out a set of dictates like that for general manager and head coach. If I was a general manager or head coach considering this opportunity and I heard an owner say that, to me I'd be a little nervous because I think that's crossing a line for me that I don't believe an owner should ever cross.

And I would say that's true about Rich, as well, even though he has this football knowledge, et cetera. I will tell you that we've talked about this subject collectively, and the only sacred cow we have is we have an obligation, a responsibility and an opportunity to put a competitive, winning team on the field, and obviously to treat every player with the utmost respect when they come in the building, whatever number of years they're with us, and when they leave the building to treat them with the same degree of respect, as well.

I had a nice conversation yesterday with Matt Schaub, again, for the second or third time. Matt has played his last game for us. He's retiring, as you all know, and I thanked him for what he has done for the NFL generally. We interviewed him back in 2008, the year that we drafted Matt, and Schaubby has been a -- he was a really good player for us, and he's been a great player for the Texans and came back and gave us the support from that. But it was the time in his life ready to move on, both from our standpoint and from his standpoint.

Q. Rich, Arthur has said that he doesn't want to be in the spot that you guys are right now picking fourth in the draft. Are you going to consider picking a quarterback with that fourth pick?

RICH MCKAY: That will be a consideration for whoever the two people are that are in those principal football positions.

They're going to have to look at the whole plan, right, what's their plan and how are they going to try to win now, try to win mid term, try to win long term. I don't want to sit here and speculate. It's a good question but I'm going to give you a non-answer. That's up for them.

We'll hear what they think. I'm sure there will be a lot of speculation. I do not like picking high. I first came into a franchise when I started in this league in Tampa that kind of owned the top 10 because they were in there like a few too many times. It's not a good place to be. We haven't been there since '08, and we don't want to be back there -- I don't know, how long has that been, 12, 13 years? Let's at least go that long until we've got to do it again.

Q. Arthur, this follows up a couple recent questions and also the earlier allusion to the fact that there's so many GM and coach jobs over. I've never remembered seven GM jobs ever being open.

ARTHUR BLANK: Usually there's that many coaching jobs but not that many GM jobs.

Q. This kind of goes to the whole perception about how good is this job relative to other jobs that are obviously out there for the candidates. Have you gotten -- what kind of feedback have you gotten from people you've spoken to in terms of sort of what they would be inheriting, whether it's the organizational structure, whether it's the roster, in terms of where things are going? And have you made it clear to them that they can do whatever they need to do to put you on the right track?

ARTHUR BLANK: Well, I would tell you that probably every candidate that you talk to tells you in one form or another during the interview that this is the perfect place for them, this job. They can't see themselves at any other place in life other than Atlanta.

But I do think when you listen to them -- and you listen to others who are not either ourselves or them being interviewed, being would generally say this is a really good situation. You know, we're not picking No. 1, so does that mean something to somebody? Yeah, potentially. But I don't think so. I think most people look at this as a long-term situation.

Again, I'm just repeating myself. The ownership is important. Culture in the building is important. Community I'm bringing my family to is community. Their outreach in the community and how involved they are is not unimportant, much more important today than it's been in the past, and are facilities, resources, all those things, going to be made available to me, and am I going to have

an organization that's going to support me and allow me to do my job, not try to influence but just try to support them and do their job.

I mean, I think they come away with the feelings that in those regards that we check every box.

You know, we'll see. But I think if you look at other people who look at this on an independent basis outside of myself, or you guys are much more independent but you're in Atlanta, guys and gals, but you look at the national media and they look at us as being a really good opportunity I would say.

You know, part of it, we have to make ourselves clear to these candidates we're not selling anything. We're not in the business of selling. We're in the business of telling our story, telling the facts, telling them what we can do, telling them what we're prepared to do, tell them what we have done, acknowledge our own failures when that discussion comes up, why is this, why is that, et cetera, and own what we need to own, and then they have to decide for themselves is this a make-believe story, which we don't think it is, or a real story, and do we come across that way, and do they have in their reference check -- and I tell these guys that you need to check us out. You need to check us out carefully. It's not like buying a car; you don't like it, six months later you get another car. This is a bit of a marriage.

And so you check all the references, and these guys do that. They tell us, well, we talked to so-and-so and so-and-so and this is what they've had to say. They share a lot of that with us, not all of it but a lot of it.

So I think they have a very big fraternity. The NFL outside of competing on Sundays, general managers talk to lots of personnel, coaches talk to each other, et cetera. So they have their way of gauging what's real and what's not.

Q. And for either you or Rich, you've both been involved with hiring head coaches. Some came from the offensive side of the ball and then you hired -- you tried to hire a strong defensive coordinator to go with or the reverse; you hired the head coach from the defensive side of the ball and then you try to hire an OC. I'm sure you know what's coming, but as a general rule do you have a preference? Do you think is one more likely to succeed than the other? Just your general thoughts on that.

RICH MCKAY: I'm going to be brutally honest here. I've changed my opinion on that about five times in the last 30 years, and so I think that it really does show you at the end of the day that leadership matters. Is the individual a

leader? Are they an expert on their side of the ball? Do they bring something on their side of the ball, an expertise to their side of the ball that is sustainable?

Because what happens to you is if you win, whoever is on the other side of the ball when you win is liable to go be an OC or a DC at another team. So you need some sustainability out of that individual that is your head coach.

So I really don't think there is a preference. I could show you studies that would say to you, boy, you should hire a defensive head coach because of these numbers and I literally could show you the same study from a different angle and argue OC.

So I'm of the position, and we've done this, Arthur knows, if you look at the slate of people we're going to interview, it's pretty evenly split, and it's for that reason. We're just not going to get slanted that way.

I've told you I take the blame forever for the Petrino situation in that we pigeonholed ourselves. We said, we've got to have an offensive coach. We've got to have somebody to deal with Michael. We've got to have somebody that can get us to the next level. We've got to do it, and that was not the way to look at it.

ARTHUR BLANK: The other thing I would add to that, you know, the complexity of being a head coach today in the NFL has just grown more and more over the years. The size of the staffs have grown, dealing with the media, the responsibility of dealing with a lot of issues of training. The athletes are different, their backgrounds. Some of the things they're exposed to today, the social media effect on not only the players but on the coaches and on the content relative to the franchise, et cetera.

I think you need somebody, first and foremost, who has all the elements of a strong leader, and that's a long list of things we could discuss on another call sometime, but a strong leader. And then whatever side of the ball they're on, but they need to honor, respect and nurture and care for both sides of the ball from an equal standpoint. They need to really think of themselves as a head coach. If they get so immersed in one side or the other side, which I've seen happen over the years, that takes away from their opportunity to be a head coach for both sides of the ball and special teams, as well.

You really need somebody who obviously has a background maybe in one area or the other area, but as long as -- this is the most critical thing, I think, beyond being the right person leadership culturally-wise, you've got to hire the right coordinators; you've got to hire the right position coaches; you've got to be willing to hold your

players accountable, not just roster spot 53 but roster spot No. 1, either 1 or 53, and you've got to hold your coaches, coordinators, all position coaches as accountable as you hold your players.

And I think those qualities are more important than which side of the ball that they're coming to because then really they're honoring the entire ball. They're honoring the entire game.

I mean, I will say this to you and you've got an expert here, Abraham Lincoln, the guy sitting right beneath him, but really truly the game today has been skewed to score points, and so there's been adjustments -- it's harder to play your defense in this time and age, and this year the NFL despite no training camps, no OTAs, no anything, we had the most points score that we've ever had in our history; is that correct, Rich?

RICH MCKAY: Yeah, the highest scoring year in the history.

ARTHUR BLANK: Yeah, so their committee, the chair of the competition committee has continued to ease up a little bit to make it a little bit easier for the offenses to be a little more creative. That's just a factor. That's just reality. But you can appreciate that from both sides of the ball. If you're talking offensively, an offensively minded head coach, he would tell you that their ability to dissect a defense in today's environment and to use everybody, grass on the field, which is what one coach used the expression, is important today. You have more availability to do that than you've had in the past. That's one way of viewing it.

On the other hand, if you look at a great defensive coordinator he would tell you you have to be more creative to stop all these offenses that are using more movement and more variety of different things than what they've seen in the past.

Q. I wanted to follow up on what 2021 but of course with a first time head coach, what do you measure in the first season when you look back and you're obviously not going to put a number on how many games you want to win, but what makes a successful season for a first -- coach in a first year?

ARTHUR BLANK: So I think to go back to the comment that Rich said earlier, I think you're asking between both individuals, general manager and head coach together because it's collaboration. You want a shared plan both as a short-term plan, next year, median plan, a year or two out, and then a longer term plan, how do you sustain the franchise five or six or seven years out.

So when you have those benchmarks and you look at them, and the one that you had planned on for next year is the one that you're shooting for as you build to the second and third year and beyond that.

So whatever you agree to as your plan, if you will, unless something changes, you follow that plan and you support that plan. If that's the goals you reach, then you treat it as a success. If not, you go through the diagnostic and figure out why we're not successful.

Q. Rich, the teams that are in the playoffs playing this weekend obviously either have a really good offense or a really good defense or can run the ball really well or have a great quarterback. Where do you feel like the team is at in those two areas in terms of running the ball and defense because Raheem said he felt that those two areas, especially the pass rush, kept them from winning this year.

RICH MCKAY: Well, I'll leave it to Raheem and the way he evaluated. I would just say that we didn't run the ball in the fashion that we needed to run the ball to give enough balance to the offense at times. There's no question about that.

You know, defensively we got better over time, but we didn't get to where we needed to be.

Listen, Arthur quoted Coach Parcels, right, we are what our record says we are, and we probably should have won a few more games than that, but those areas, defense and the run game, are two areas we know we have to get better at in order to get the record where it needs to be so we don't keep hearing Coach Parcels ask us that question.

ARTHUR BLANK: The reality is that whether 4-12 or another version of 7-9 or 8-8, it really is not acceptable. It's not that we were run game or two games away from where we needed to be. We're a whole lot of games away from where we needed to be, and you have to accept that as reality and then move on from there.

Q. Arthur, I was more so curious, do you feel a greater sense of urgency to try to make that hire for a GM head coach sooner rather than later with all of the vacancies out there, and what's your timeline for that?

ARTHUR BLANK: Well, I would say we want to do it as quickly as possible, but having said that, I will tell you, I was telling this to somebody the other day, the existing head coach in the NFL, one of the processes we're going through called me, a senior coach, and reminded me that take your time, be thoughtful, don't rush. You'll get

coordinators, you'll get position coaches. You've got to get the head coach right, and this isn't just a coaching search.

I also had somebody, Dan Rooney, who's gone now, but Dan called me the year he hired Mike Tomlin, as a matter of fact, who was not a household name then. Now he is. He was the last person they interviewed, and he called me to tell me, you know, as a senior owner in the league, principal owner and great family, he said, I want to remind you as you go through this search that we were going through about the same time, I think. He said, take your time. Make sure you make the right choice.

So do we have a sense of urgency about it? Yes. Do we know we're competing for talent? Yes. And we know it's a free agent, yes, in both areas, GM and head coach. But we need to go through the process. We need to interview all these incredibly talented men and see where we come out. So we'll move as quickly as we can, one, because of the competition, but most importantly we want to make the right decision. And if we have to kind of check ourselves and check our own urgencies, I think we have to do that. We've got to make the right decision.

And frankly some of the most talented people because they'll be playing this weekend are not available. We spoke to a young man this morning from Kansas City, as you know. He is available because they got the bye, so we had an opportunity to visit with him today. If they didn't have that situation, we couldn't speak with him.

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