

Atlanta Falcons Media Conference

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Arthur Smith

Terry Fontenot

Weekday Press Conference



Q. Let's get started. Good to see you guys via Zoom there, Terry and Coach. Just as we set out on the off-season here, what are some of the priorities for Terry getting ready for the draft? First question for Terry on the off-season priorities for the franchise.

TERRY FONTENOT: Well, we're going to take a few days here to separate from the emotions of where we are right now, and we'll get back in the building. Obviously, we'll have a collaborative effort, sitting down with Arthur and the staff and the coaches and the scouts and evaluating the season and every single player.

That will be the beginning of -- whether a player is under contract or not under contract, that's the start. We evaluate every player and how we want to proceed with each player. Then we start to formulate that off-season plan.

So we need to just separate a little bit so we can come in with fresh eyes and be objective and evaluate every single aspect of this year.

Q. And for Coach, how will your off-season evaluations of the season go? Have the coaches started on those? Where are you all at with the evaluation process of 2021 season?

ARTHUR SMITH: Yeah, that's standard operating procedure. After anything, after any thing we've done here, I think the smart thing is to go back and look at it. What can we do better? That's certainly got to be every year. Whether you've won the Super Bowl or not, I think you've got to be objective and see where you can evolve and adapt. It can never stay the same. It just can't.

We feel like we've got a great foundation here, and we got a bright future. We'll look at every single thing we've done and see what we can do better.

Q. I guess I'll start off this question for Terry. Salary

cap rising in 2022. Do you feel like this organization is in a better spot in 2022 because of that? And how do you foresee that kind of shaping out the off-season for you guys?

TERRY FONTENOT: Yeah, we're in a better spot because the cap did increase this year. That was one of the bigger challenges last year because of the cap going down so much, and we already had challenges prior to that.

This off-season, the cap did increase. Yet there still are challenges here for the next couple years. Again, we have to look at every contract, every player, whether they're under contract or not, and make the best decision for this team moving forward.

Q. And this question is kind of for both of you guys big picture. What do you think is the difference between how you feel like this organization operates cohesively this off-season in comparison to where you were at this point last year, both of you guys just coming in here?

ARTHUR SMITH: I think everybody is more familiar with each other. Certainly, the second time around, if you've done your due diligence and your process is good, it should go smoother. It's just because there's so many things to do here.

One, as you start and hit the ground running, it should be a lot easier this time because you kind of understand how everybody operates. There's some things we want to do better than we did last time. You're just more familiar. It's like any relationship. You feel like you know everybody better.

Q. Terry, I was going to ask this. Last year you were talking about some of the cap constraints that you guys were working with. How do you manage the cap this year, do you think, versus what you had to do a season ago?

TERRY FONTENOT: Again, still some constraints, but we just have to look at every player and every contract and just do the best job we can. We know we have to bring in

competition and continue to work to improve this off-season. There are going to be challenges every year with the cap, but we just have to make the right decisions, and the players we bring in, make sure we have clear visions for them and do the best job we can.

Q. And for Arthur, you talked about Des Kitchings last week. Is that the only anticipated staff change that you're going to have, or do you anticipate more changes?

ARTHUR SMITH: Well, it's hard to predict the future. There's a lot of moving parts. We'll take our time before we fill the running back job. We'll talk to a lot of people. There's a lot of movement going on. Right now that's the only movement we've had, but you just can't predict the future. There's a ripple effect depending who gets what job.

We'll see. We'll take our time and make sure it's the right person we bring in here.

Q. Terry, do you have -- how will you handle the Calvin Ridley situation going forward? In terms of when you feel like you need to know something. Has there been any communication thus far? What's your expectation for kind of how it walks out?

TERRY FONTENOT: Well, it really hasn't changed. As an organization, we've done the best job we could to just support Calvin and do everything we can for him. I know he made the statement when he did, and we made a statement during the season as well. Really up to this point nothing's changed with that.

Q. Do you expect him to be on your roster in 2022, or is it too early to say at this point?

TERRY FONTENOT: Well, look, we have a roster with a lot of players that you can go down and ask that about every single player. Obviously, we're not going to answer those questions. Again, regarding him specifically, nothing's changed. We just continue to support him.

Q. What's the plan to fix the lines in the trenches offensively and defensively? A lot of sacks, weren't able to run the ball. And defensively, last in the league in sacks.

ARTHUR SMITH: Well, I love the loaded question, but like the whole team, we've got to improve. I think, again, statistics, however you want to manipulate them, those are easy. Those are the low hanging fruit. It doesn't tell the story of the whole season. It doesn't tell the story necessarily on how you win games.

Like I said before, we win 7-2 one-possession games, we've got to close the gap in the other game. We've got to continue to improve. There's a lot of ways to fix it. Obviously down to the end of the year, we need more shots on goal. I think, when you go in the game and you don't have the ball very long -- a lot of it was self-inflicted. But when you have five yards a carry, to make a grand indictment on the run game, I think that's a little bit at the surface level there.

We need to be better all around. There's multiple ways you can improve the fronts. We've got to improve this whole team as we climb. The goal here is to sustain success and to win championships. If that's not your objective, then you're just playing survivor and trying to manipulate narratives and stat pad.

But that's not what we're trying to do. We're trying to build a championship level team, roster, and that's our objective.

Q. What do I make of it being 30th in the league then? I've got to look at, evaluate something?

ARTHUR SMITH: You're kind of missing the point.

Q. Okay. Help me out then. I need some help then.

ARTHUR SMITH: That's what I was trying to do. You're trying to win games, correct? So if you sit there, we need to be better, we need more plays offensively. So we need to extend drives. We need to get off the field on third down. Like I said, we need to close the gaps in those games that we lost. That's clear. And there's multiple ways to do that.

But like I said, I think we're 31st in offensive plays run. That's a team issue. That's what we'll do. There's everywhere you've got to get better. If you win two games and you finish fifth in passing, are you patting yourself on the back? No. Clearly, we're going to continue to improve.

But it doesn't tell the whole story. There were times against really good defense we ran the ball well. We need to do a better job sustaining drives, getting in the red zone, and scoring more points than the other team. It's pretty practical. And we've got to close the gap in those other games.

Q. I want to kind of stay on the topic. Dean was speaking to us last week about the need to develop a pass rush. He spoke specifically through the lens of talent acquisition and talent development. My question for Terry is, when it comes to the acquisition part of that, what is the blueprint of what you all are

looking for?

TERRY FONTENOT: We're always looking for pressure players. You're always looking for cover corners. Like Arthur said, it's a complementary game. So as we improve the roster and bring in competition in every position, that's going to help. When you're playing with leads, obviously, you have more opportunities to rush.

It's a complementary game, so we have to improve the entire roster. We're going to look at every avenue to bringing competition, whether we're talking about free agency, the draft, after the draft. We're going to work hard to bring in players to compete.

Q. One more for you. I know this roster turnover was something we talked about earlier in the year and how kind of this roster was going to change a lot. I was just kind of curious how you feel like the front office did providing players in season to kind of be slotted in to this active roster. I kind of think of guys like Anthony Rush, James Vaughters. I was curious your thoughts on that and kind of how important that process will continue to be moving forward.

TERRY FONTENOT: I appreciate that question. It's really twofold. I think the personnel department did a really good job, the pro department, in bringing in players. But then the coaching staff into developing those players, getting them up to speed, and implementing them and having the confidence to play them because those players, some of the players you mentioned and some other players helped us in offense, defense, special teams.

So being able to bring in players during the season, the coaching staff and the scouting staff, I think they did a really good job with that. We're going to have to continue to do that and finding players wherever we can.

ARTHUR SMITH: That's why it's such a collaborative effort. I've said it before and I'll say it again in the way we operate here. I think the easy thing to do -- and you've seen this done a lot in this league. You bring a player in, and everybody wants credit for it. Or you win a game and you want to get out in front of the parade. There's so much work that goes in, and you've got to be in sync because those guys, the personnel department, they do a terrific job of trying to sort through the roster and see who's available in the spring.

Then it's our job to make sure we have a vision for them. And you've got to play them. You can't sit there and say one thing and bring a guy in, then you don't play him. So it's got to go both ways. That's why it's such a collaborative effort. You have to have a vision. You have

to be in sync. Nobody is looking here to jump in front of the parade because everything, the discussions we have daily, Terry and I and our staffs, is about the vision of building this roster to get to a championship level and to operate that way to win championships. And that's where we feel we're on the right path.

Q. Terry, this is for you. Again, when it comes to decisions that might need to be made down the road on some of your own guys, whether it's Cordarelle or Foye or Younghoe, how much do you weigh maybe their familiarity now and what their price points might be versus kind of that cap situation that we were talking about before? Where is that balance for you in building this?

TERRY FONTENOT: Well, you go through that process. Again, it starts with meeting with the coaches and determining who you do want to proceed with, and that's the beginning of it. We go through the process of looking at their market value. It does make a difference when a player is in your building. Ideally, the best form of free agency is developing and signing your own players because you're not guessing. We know exactly who they are in the building. So that's important.

So ideally, when it's players in your building, those are players you want to invest in. But there are a lot of variables and you want to look at the market value and making sure you're making the right decisions. When you can do that, when you can reward the players in your building, that's something that we want to do.

Q. This is for both of you. I know, Arthur, I asked about Matt after the game, and you said after the game you didn't want to be painted into a corner. With a couple more days, where do you guys stand as far as Matt being your quarterback going forward?

ARTHUR SMITH: I'll give you the same answer I gave you Sunday, the same answer I gave you in March or April. We're always evaluating our roster. You can't sit there and back yourself into a corner and make some grand statement that we'll never ever do this or that. That's not being objective and not trying to improve the roster.

Same thing with Kyle Pitts or Jake Matthews or Grady Jarrett. You can go on down the list. There's going to be no state of the union because it's a constant evolution. You look at it and you never want to pass up an opportunity to improve your football team. That's all.

I understand the headline you're seeking and you've got to ask your question, but the answer hasn't changed.

Q. It's never too early to look ahead to the draft. I wonder if you could give us a little insight as to you and your team and how soon do you start putting together a draft board? And at No. 8 do you feel like this is going to be a year where you go for best available regardless of position?

TERRY FONTENOT: Yeah, we've really had a draft board, it's really ongoing. You have a draft board at the beginning of the season, and it changes as more grades come in and as players declare or whatever happens so that it's really a fluid thing.

We've had a round of meetings. The next set of meetings are in February. So it's an ongoing process. I think we've kind of talked about that draft process in that we always want to be a team that doesn't reach for needs. And we go into the draft with needs and you know you want to fill those needs, but you always want to take the best player on the board and not reach for something. I think we think that's how you make mistakes.

So it's an ongoing process. The college staff has been grinding all year. Now it's to a point where the coaches are going to get involved in that process. It's going to be a collaborative effort. We'll make sure we bring in the best players we can.

Q. If I can follow up on Josh's question to you about Calvin. I understand you guys have been diligent in being sensitive to his needs, but of course you've got to be protective of the team's needs as well. So when you say nothing has changed, as you're looking at your team needs, do you have to assume that he is not available to you for 2022?

TERRY FONTENOT: I wouldn't assume anything. Like I said, we handle each situation individually. There's so many variables we deal with. We're going to try to add to every position this off-season. So whatever player we're talking about, whether they're under contract, not under contract, we have to be prepared for everything.

Q. Would you say that 7-10 is an accurate reflection of where your team was, or do you think that record was flattering or that you were actually better than 7-10?

TERRY FONTENOT: Well, it's funny because I read something at some point that said talk about the point differential and how many games we should have won. I think that says a lot about our team that what I really appreciate about what Arthur has built here, the coaching staff, the players, that I do believe we're building a winning culture.

We're not where we want to be. We don't want to be having this press conference right now. We want to be preparing for a playoff game. We're not happy that we're not playing right now, and that's going to be our charge moving forward. But I really believe that everything our head coach preaches about the culture and having a winning culture and being a smart, tough, competitive team.

You look at any game and you look in the fourth quarter where the game can be out of hand, and we have players flying around competing. Those players were bought in. Those guys in the locker room love each other, they love the coaches, and they really went out and competed.

So there's probably some statistics that can tell you how good we were as a team and how many games we should have won, but I believe we're moving in the right direction and we're building that winning culture. That's a credit to Art, the staff, and the players.

Q. As you all head into year two, how would both of you define success this next year? As you're sitting here next year, January, February, whenever it is, how would you define success for year two for you all?

ARTHUR SMITH: For me, it's pretty simple. We'll be better than we are right now. Hopefully, like Terry just said, we're not having this press conference this time of the year. It's later in the year. That's the ultimate objective. To me that's pretty clear-cut.

We continue to improve, win more games next year, continue to get better. Like I said, our ultimate goal has got to be to win a championship, not playing survivor every year.

TERRY FONTENOT: I agree. It's about, without looking at scores in the game or records, it's about continued development, continued improvement. Again, that's something we saw throughout the year, continued development, continued improvement. We'll see that in the off-season. It's about developing and getting better. That's our goal, that's our challenge to continue getting better.

Q. So to follow up, in year one, what were some of the challenges that you faced this season that you've learned from that you'll apply in year two?

ARTHUR SMITH: I think any time you go through something the first time, there's unknowns to try to prepare yourself. You go back and look at the last year, almost 365 days now, there's a lot of things that have gone on. It's been a big time transition year. We threw everything we had to compete, to win, to change the mindset.

I thought we made some pretty good strides. Obviously, we've got a lot that we need to build on and improve. But it was a great challenge. In going through it, there's lessons learned all the time, Chris. If you stop learning, you stop growing, you might as well get out of this thing.

TERRY FONTENOT: And one of the biggest challenges for me this year, I would say, when you come into a new building, when you've been somewhere a long time, you have relationships with everything in the building. We kind of touched on this earlier. You're able to build on those relationships, and that makes the communication smooth.

Yet here with the COVID restrictions, with a lot of new people, you weren't able to build all those relationships as quickly as you'd like to, and that does affect things. I'm excited about going into this next year where we have built more relationships. Hopefully, we don't have all the restrictions we have going into this off-season, and we can continue to communicate in the right way.

So I'm excited about going into this year and not having all those restriction that's we had last year.

Q. Since the season's over, can we get an update on Matt Gano and if he's on track to be back next year? Or what's his status?

TERRY FONTENOT: He's a free agent. Obviously, we expected Matt to come back at some point in the year with that injury. That's why we handled the transaction the way we did and it didn't work out. But he's not -- he's set to be a UFA.

Q. Terry, I want to get back to something you hit on a little bit earlier. When you were constructing this roster, when you look at how the season went, where do you think was the biggest miscue that you made when you were building this thing considering what you've had to work with?

TERRY FONTENOT: Miscue, we had a certain plan in building this roster. We wanted to do it in a certain way. We had a lot of contracts in this off-season. Part of that was because of where the cap was. Then we wanted to bring in -- we brought in a lot of veterans this year that really helped this team, whether they're going to be here next year or not, but it's going to build dividends moving forward.

I felt like this is a really close group. We have young guys. We have veterans. We love the way we constructed the roster this year. We said it already. We don't want to be having this press conference right now. We want to be

preparing for a playoff game. So we're going to bring in competition and continue to improve.

So I wouldn't say miscue. We had a plan last year, and we implemented that plan. We'll have one this off-season, and we'll implement that.

Q. Also, when it comes to the pass rush specifically, what do you like out of a pass rusher?

TERRY FONTENOT: Dean said in his press conference the other day about pass rushers, and he said something like you're not coaching it. They just figure out a way to get to the quarterback. They're pressure players, it can be an end, a defensive tackle, a linebacker, a safety. They just figure out a way to get to the quarterback. They're pressure players.

There's different ways that they do it. There's different guys and different ways they do it. But you're just looking for pressure players.

Q. I was really hoping to get your evaluation of this rookie class. How did their development in year one match the vision for, I guess, what you guys had for them when you picked them last year?

TERRY FONTENOT: They played a lot. You look at who's tops in the league in terms of the amount of snaps, our rookies, the amount of games they were active for and the amount of snaps they played, not just on offense or defense, but also in the kicking game they contribute a lot. That was our plan, for them to come in and contribute and grow and develop.

Obviously, rookies are going to -- you're going to take lumps, and it's not going to be perfect. There's going to be ups and downs. What I love about this rookie class is the mindset of the group. I believe we have competitive guys that fight and compete, and it's going to be a challenge for them to continue to develop even into this off-season. Develop and get better coming into next year. We love the fight in that group. We believe they're wired the right way.

Q. This may be somewhat hypothetical so forgive me. If you bring Matt back, do you feel like you have to do something different with the contract just from that cap number, or could you do it either way in your mind? Could you make the math work one way or another?

TERRY FONTENOT: We're not going to speculate on anything regarding contracts. We're not going to go there.

Q. A couple of random ones. Isaiah Oliver, how is his rehab going? Does that complicate your decision on

what you do there at all?

TERRY FONTENOT: We're not talking about -- because we have a number of players on IR that are free agents. I don't want to start talking about every single player.

But without talking about that, we make those decisions. We'll look at -- we're aware of where all our players that are going through the IR process are. Some of them, you'll wait until a certain period to sign them. Some of them, if you feel good about them that week, we can sign them. So a player being injured wouldn't restrict us from extending them, but I don't want to talk specifically about any players right now.

Q. Jaylinn Hawkins didn't play much on Sunday. I know he'd been on the COVID list. Was that conditioning stuff, or was that a performance issue?

ARTHUR SMITH: No, it wasn't a performance issue. As I always say, it's not one size fits all, and everybody was dealing with different things. So where we felt he was at coming back from it. That's why he played the amount of plays he did.

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