

Atlanta Falcons Media Conference

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Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Owner Arthur Blank

Weekday Press Conference



Q. Arthur, it's good to talk with you again. I want to start with the tough decision to trade Matt Ryan. And I want to know from your perspective, was there doubt in doing it? Where were you when they came to you and talked to you about this?

ARTHUR BLANK: Well, I would say this: From a personal standpoint, there will always be doubt. I love Matt Ryan. Matt Ryan, you know, he loves Atlanta. He's been -- everything you want in terms of the face of the franchise, great quarterback both on the field and off the field for 14 years.

But Matt will be 37 in May. And so that's one factor, though he continues to play at a high level. And as I told Jimmy Irsay, the owner of the Colts, I think he'll continue to play at a high for another -- Matt thinks he can play as long as Tom Brady, 45. Although now Tom announced he thinks he can play until 50. Although I'm not sure.

In any event, Matt still has some playability in him for sure. I think from our standpoint, age is definitely a factor. But most importantly, our fans, they look to us to plan not only for the short term, how do you win the next game, but how do you win for seasons to come.

And Matt, this year, is close to 25 percent of our cap. One player. Next year it will be a little less than that. But let's say in that range. And you go back 20 years in the history of the Super Bowl, there's never been a quarterback that's been more than 12 percent of a salary cap. Except for one year, 2009, Peyton Manning, who happened to lose that year, was a little bit higher than 12 percent, a little closer to 17 percent.

So when you have a situation where you can't even sign your own players, like De'Vondre Campbell, an All-Pro player a couple years ago, you can't sign a play Foye Oluokun, led the NFL in tackles.

You're not playing golf. You're not playing chess. You're not just playing by yourself. You need a team around you.

And I think the salary cap, you know, was becoming a real burden for us, the way it was being distributed. And I think it was important. And it's not an issue with Matt. I mean to his credit, we collectively had agreed to extend him several times to get us even more cap flexibility during the last number of years but that doesn't go on forever. It's like having a credit card; at the end of the day at some point the bank's going to call and say you actually do need to pay it off.

So we felt this was the best time to do that for us. And we'll have a lot of dead money this year, but I think we've got a really good player in Mariota. And I think we'll end up with another quarterback beyond Franks, either through free agency or through the draft. So I think we'll be in a good position.

I think as usual, Terry Fontenot and Coach Smith have done a good job with free agency, picked up a lot of very competitive players. And one thing I would say, just to answer beyond your question, is one of the things that means a great deal to players in the NFL, are they being put in the best position to win?

And I think the story of Cordarrelle Patterson this last year was very informative to the couple thousand players in the NFL. Here's a guy that had all the skill sets, had been coached by four other people beyond Coach Smith and had never produced to the level where the teams wanted to keep him for any extended period of time. So everybody saw what Coach Smith, what his offense and his creativity did with Cordarrelle last year.

So we have players coming to us now saying this is a coach who is great with players, smart as heck. He's very creative. And he's going to put us in a real good position to win, both on offense and on defense.

So I think we're in a point of change. I get it. Transition, which is painful personally, but I think organizationally it's the right thing to do.

Q. No disrespect to Matt, just for about 72 hours, a lot of Falcon fans, like me, were really excited over the idea of Deshaun Watson acquisition, making a trade

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with Houston. I understand that you get marketing and you know you want to put fannies in the seats. Were you the person that was the driving force to try to get Deshaun Watson here?

ARTHUR BLANK: No, I certainly wasn't. That was really driven by our football folks. But I'm certainly aware of it. It certainly was part of the process. When we did the interview with Deshaun, which was about an hour and 15 minutes, I was part of the group.

And we did the amount of work, which was somewhat extensive but not totally extensive to match at least an hour, 15-minute interview. That was as far as we went. Obviously the criminal charges have all been dropped against him. But the civil allegations are serious. And we have great sympathy for those individuals that were affected.

What shakes out from it, I don't know. That will go through a process. But as you both know, and our fans know, Deshaun was with us for four years as a ball boy, developed a great relationship with Matt during those four years. And really his fellow ball boys but really all the staff at Flowery Branch so our experience with him was good.

Coach Swinney at Clemson had nothing but great things to say about him. He left there with a very clean record. What's happened since then I can't really comment on because I don't really know. But it's certainly serious and I understand the significance of the allegations.

Q. Did you back out on the Deshaun Watson situation? Was it you who said we're not going to do this?

ARTHUR BLANK: No. No. It wasn't me. I think collectively we had our discussion with them and then we really, it was up to the Texans at that point whether they wanted to pursue it with one team or multiple teams and up to the player. Deshaun is, our fans probably know, had a no-trade clause in his contract, which simply means that he had the option of declining to go to a certain place if he didn't feel comfortable, if they wanted to trade him to wherever it may have been, a team on the moon he probably would have said no to that.

But he had that option. Which teams he approved and which ones he didn't, I really don't know. The only thing I know is that we were granted an opportunity to have a visit with him by Zoom, which is what we did.

Q. Do you wish now in hindsight that maybe we'd moved Matt sooner because of what you would have gotten in return for him?

ARTHUR BLANK: I don't know. I would say no. I know that Coach Smith played against Matt, studied Matt. Wanted to have a good year with him, which I think we did. We won seven games, six of which in the last possession. That's not where we wanted to be. But we were much more competitive than a lot of people thought last year. And I'm sure that will be the case this year to come as well.

So I think it's a matter now, really looking at our cap, looking at the percentage that one player is of our cap, and we love Matt. But still 20, 25 percent of the cap startup with one individual, it's not the best position to be in and one that you really can't plan to build a total roster with and be able to keep the young players.

He's a young man that we drafted and coached up and got him ready to play and playing at a high level. And then the cap space, we have to let him go. That's a very painful thing. I'm sure it's equally painful for our fans to see that. Certainly was for me, when you talk about players like Campbell and Foye and others as well.

So this will give us the ability to build our franchise in more of a long-term view than we currently have right now.

Q. Let's turn the page. What does the owner want to get in the draft? What do you want us to do in this draft?

ARTHUR BLANK: What I want us to do is to listen carefully to the general manager, our coaching staff and our personnel department to continue to make the decisions that have been made. I think this last year, in very limited free agency, I think we did an excellent job in bringing in a number of good free agents that played well, many under just the one year contract, which was the nature of the salary cap last year was depressed because of the pandemic the year before.

But I think they've done that again this year. And so I expect it to be a very competitive thing. And I expect Marcus will play really well for us. And he's got a background both collegiately as well as professionally. With Tennessee, he had a number of good years there.

And he certainly knows Coach Smith's system well. And Coach Smith knows him well. So that's a major plus. And who I want for the draft --

Q. Do you want a quarterback?

ARTHUR BLANK: Do I want -- I want to make sure we have a quarterback -- unfortunately, Marcus has gotten hurt in the past. So we need somebody else besides

quarterback, Franks, who has been a really good athlete. He's got potential, et cetera. But I think we need somebody else in the room that's either a seasoned free agent or somebody else that we decide to draft.

And that's a decision that will be made by the coach and general manager and their respective staffs. But we do need somebody else.

Q. I was going to say we've spoken about you're a businessman, you made your bones knowing what the customer wants and trying to create more buzz around this team. That's why I was told you were the guy behind Deshaun Watson. I wasn't trying to throw you under the bus, because I was excited about it. But we talked before you came on the air, the quarterback sets the tone. A new young quarterback has a chance to energize the fan base. Would you like to do that sooner or later where you say that's a Fontenot and Arthur Smith decision?

ARTHUR BLANK: It's really is their decision. I say that, it's from the bottom of my heart. That's when I can get in trouble. It's not for me to dictate the draft free agency. Truly what they've forgotten I will never know, by a long shot. So my job is to support them, give them the resources, make sure that the franchise is moving in the right direction, thinking about not just short term but long term. And that's my responsibility, to make sure we do those things well. But beyond that, that's what they're paid and they're both outstanding.

Coach Smith is a really great football coach but incredibly smart person. I think Terry Fontenot had 18 years of great training in New Orleans, but he worked for a great general manager in Mickey Loomis, worked with a very successful coach and really good coach, Sean Payton. So he's made a lot of good decisions.

I love our team. I love our leadership. And I love the fact that Rich McKay is there having a long history in the NFL, long history with football, the general manager and team president and CEO, I think we have a great group of leaders in place. So it's my job to stand behind them, support them and to just make sure that all the resources that I could give them are put in play.

Q. I'm a competitor. I know you are.

ARTHUR BLANK: Yes, I am.

Q. You like to compete in life and everything you do. And so do I. So I'm a realist when it comes to telling guys to go out and lose, that's not going to happen. But is this a rebuild?

ARTHUR BLANK: No, I don't think -- I think that Coach Smith, he answered the question during his press conference when he and Terry did one I think probably a week, ten days ago, something like that, a week ago. There's no way, you can't ask in any sport, I think, at any time, but certainly I'll speak for NFL players, you can't ask these guys to put their minds, their bodies on the line to make the commitments they make, physically, emotionally, mentally, in every sense of the word, and tell them, well, actually we don't really plan on winning.

We plan on winning. We plan on being very competitive. And I think it's not just (indiscernible), I think it's real. It was real last year. It will be real this year. That's what every single player would expect of us. And every single coach, they're paid to do that, but beyond that, that's how their lives are, how they think.

We'll be competitive this year, and I promise you we will be successful. We are going through a transition. And that will take a little bit of time. And our fans -- our fans should really, in my view, our fans, looking at the longer term, not just the immediate, short term, our fans in some ways really should understand and almost in a sense celebrate, not that Matt is gone, but that we will have 25 percent or the better part of 25 percent of our cap back.

Next year, going into free agency, it will be probably at least \$110 million under the cap. The most we have ever been in the history of my 21 years as a owner, probably in the history of our franchise, and probably maybe only two or three teams in the NFL next year that will have the amount of cap that we will.

And that will give us an opportunity to make sure we sign our own players, which is what you have to do, take care of your own children first, make sure you keep them. And then obviously be as active in free agency as we can be.

So I for one, and I'm sure our fans feel this way, I'm tired of drafting players who turn out to be good players, not every draft pick is, but the ones who do, and have to let them go because you don't have the cap space. It is what it is.

Q. I guess you want to hold onto Grady Jarrett then?

ARTHUR BLANK: Absolutely. We love Grady and someone like Grady, he's a great leader, great player. But he's a great leader. And Grady makes the whole team better. Not just on defense, but he makes the whole room better, the whole locker room better. So we're working hard to try to make that happen.

But we also have to be thoughtful about it. You don't want



to put yourself back in the same situation that we just got out of. So we have to be thoughtful about that. But we love Grady.

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