

Atlanta Falcons Media Conference

Saturday, April 29, 2023
Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Arthur Smith Terry Fontenot Draft Press Conference



TERRY FONTENOT: We're excited about the outcome today. We clearly value the lines of scrimmage. We know that's where games are won and lost, and to get two players with Matt and Zach too, we got bigger. We added size, strength, power up front, and both those guys are wired the right way. They're made up of the things that we value. So real excited to bring both those players in.

Q. What are some of the traits that you all saw in Bergeron and then Harrison for the Buckeyes?

ARTHUR SMITH: I'll start with Matt, D-line. Matt is a guy that played out of tackle at Syracuse. We'll start him inside.

Just the vision we have for him now, we like the depth we have, and where we're at with the O-line, and so we can bring him along the right way. He has a lot of power in his game. So you see some of that at the Senior Bowl when he went in there.

Like I said, he is wired the right way. Got to some spend time with him. Led did and Flats. We've got a clear vision for him, and we're excited about getting him in our program.

Zach, Zach is another guy we were able to work out at Ohio State when we went up there. Length. Clearly he was a big recruit coming out of Ohio State. Obviously kind of coming into his own. Still pretty young, and there's not the pressure on him right away. We have some good veterans in there on the edge that can help him. He can give you a little interior pass rush too. We'll see when he gets here.

But that's a good room for a young guy to walk into with Calais and Bud and Zo and Grady and David. So we're fired up about both those guys being here.

Q. You said he was just kind of hitting his stride. Did

you all see that? He said he could play all up and down the line?

ARTHUR SMITH: Sure. Those guys have confidence and stuff like that. And when you get those guys, they're excited. Sometimes I'm hoping whether they give us some good team-getting material, so I'll come back through and see what those guys said. That's usually entertaining.

With Zach, he led from that area of the country. Huge expectations coming in there, and he wants to come in. He is a young guy, and so we feel that there's a lot of room to develop, and there's no pressure immediately for him because of the way that room is constructed right now.

Q. Going back to Bergeron for a second. (Indiscernible) It seems like there's a lot of guard tackle flexibility. Is that something specifically that -- is there something specific that attracts you to that type of player versus maybe your traditional this guy is a guard type situation?

ARTHUR SMITH: Sometimes. As you get into the season, Mike, when you are dealing with injuries, you don't want to have musical chairs for a young guy. Some of it's necessity. Like our first year even with Jalen because of the way the camp started and just to even get him going, and then obviously, we have talked about many times what happened in week one, and kind of thrown into the fire there and dealing with his back issues where his development is at.

To answer your question, it certainly helps because if they aren't a starter, they need to have position flexibility. Now, it does help that you can dress eight of them, but we do value that.

Q. To follow up on that with Bergeron, he has been a four-year starter at tackle, but only practiced one time at the Senior Bowl inside. So there's not a lot to go off of in terms of that, but what is it about his game that you thought could translate?

ARTHUR SMITH: It's the way he is built. Everybody has different philosophies, you know, what they're looking for in



offensive linemen. And some people get so rigid on schemes or whatever it is, their cup of tea that they're looking for with O-linemen.

When a guy is as smart as Matt and the way he has played and really for us the vision of the way he is built. I hate using comps, but I will give you one in this instance about guys that played tackle that ended up out of necessity = moving into guard. A guy named Rodger Saffold. I coached Rodg at the end of his career. He was playing really good football there. Early in his career the tackle, that's what he was drafted to be. You know, he ended up having a great career and still playing right at guard.

I'm not saying Matt is Rodg, but they're similar body types, power. It's just similar experiences with them. He is big, tough. Obviously all these guys are transitioning to the NFL. It's a lot different from college. But we feel good about where we're at and our program and our coaching staff to develop him as well.

TERRY FONTENOT: In a lot of cases you're going to see that, where if you are the best offensive lineman, you're going to play left tackle. So you'll see that a lot in college guys are playing that, but then I think our staff does a really good job and Coach does a good job of looking at the skill set, really evaluating the player and having a clear vision of how we're going to use him.

Q. You all traded up to go get him. What was kind of the motivation there? You just worried he wasn't going to be there at 44?

TERRY FONTENOT: We always talk about conviction and passion. When you love a player and you really want him and then you want to go get him. When you feel that, you would rather do that. There's other players that we value. If we're sitting there, we have a plan. If we're here and if he goes, we know how it goes off, but sometimes, I'm telling you, man, it's almost like people have cameras in your facility sometimes, and you'll sit there, and you have a stack of eight players, and they just go, and they go, and they go. So when you have conviction and you feel really good, which we did, we said let's go up and get him.

Q. Zach obviously took pride in the ability to play inside and play on the edge, but I believe you referred to him as an edge. Do you want him to --

ARTHUR SMITH: You know, Charles, that's a great question, it's how do we develop these guys and let them have some early success early. He does. He is a smart guy. Eventually as his game evolves, we can play him in multiple spots. Just early on, you know, I think there's a lot of early downs to develop him at the edge, and that's a

good room for him to do that. There's a lot of veterans that he can play and learn from. They all have their own unique skill sets, but early on, and then if he continues to work and has success, then his game can expand.

A better example, he steps in there with Calais Campbell. He is in different schemes and has played different spots, and he has had a 40-year career. We get in there, and we feel good about Ryan and that room with Lanier and Hux and some of those vets. I think it's a very good room for him right now.

Q. Coach, can you continue down that train of thought with specifically Calais Campbell and how you envision him working with Zach Harrison because being that body type, that's not always something you can speak to unless you are that size.

ARTHUR SMITH: Sure. But you have to have the right vets. Sometimes people run away with narratives that just aren't true, and they're in buildings, inside the walls, and you pump up somebody and say, oh, this guy is a great leader, and he may fool the outside world, but Calais is. That's a real dude.

Trust me. I've been on the other side of going against him and game-planning against him. There's a lot of things you can learn. He can learn from Bud too. As a guy that's started to find a groove as a power rusher, Bud has had a lot of success as a power rusher. As his game expands -- really it's like the day-to-day routine. These guys, when they come in here, it's a long journey as a rookie.

Those guys can help him out. They've been through it. Same struggles.

TERRY FONTENOT: And Zach is big, but nobody has Calais's body type. That brother has to duck to come in that door. He is a big dude, giant.

Q. Very true. How much does Matthew's ability to get to that second level match up against linebackers on the move, seal those lanes? How much did that factor into why you guys wanted him in the system?

ARTHUR SMITH: There's a lot of reasons we wanted him. We have our core values, but we don't put ourselves in a box. You know, you start eliminating some good football players. Just like ad nauseam we talk about positionless players, well, a little bit too, he might not be the perfect -- if you are writing it out, he is a different player than Chris. That's a bad guard comparison. He is a different player than Henne and Kyle Hinton and other guys that we have in our program.

But we like the intent that he plays with. I do like guys that are going to go, and you might have to pull them back. That guy is trying to put somebody into the sideline. I'll deal with that. You have to push to go harder. That's a problem. It's a problem for Terry and I.

We like Matt's intent. He is smart. Like I said, there's not a lot of pressure. Certainly there's an expectation when you invest like that, but the way the room is built right now, I mean, he has to go in there and earn his spot, and we feel good about the depth.

Q. When you reference the way Matt is built in terms of liking him at guard, are you talking about just physically, or are you talking about other things there?

ARTHUR SMITH: Well, physically, yes, starting there, and then things happen a lot quicker inside with some of those guys with tackle. An old coach told me this one time, and certainly everybody has their arguments, but for younger players it's harder the closer you are to the ball. Things just happen pretty damn fast in this league.

As much movement as you see and all the multiple fronts, that's the trend. People start moving a lot, trying to cut the run game up for us. Things happen quick. Like the way you set sometimes at tackle, it doesn't happen as fast. It happens a little bit quicker at guard. You're looking for instincts, spatial awareness, and then the way he comes off the ball, it gives him a chance early to have success. Sometimes you have young tackles.

There's only a handful of blocks you are really getting. Sometimes I joke, you get confused? That big guy on the end, block him. Let's start there. We joke, but there's not as many blocks. On the back side, you're kind of in a combination. Guard, there's all kinds of things. You're working with the centers. You're working with tackles.

You have to be very intelligent and have instincts. Certainly we feel that about Matt, or we wouldn't have made the selection.

Q. Matt told us about spending one day. I believe he said it was Wednesday at the Senior Bowl at left guard at the request of the coach. He said he felt better as the day went on as to --

ARTHUR SMITH: Sure.

Q. -- how that went for him. What kind of impression did that make on Ledford and the report he gave to you about --

ARTHUR SMITH: It's not just him. We value everybody's

opinion. You have to have a vision for a guy to have success in here. It's not going to happen overnight. There are things we feel good about where the roster is at. Obviously we believe in the player. He has to go in there and earn it, but, yeah, certainly any time. Even if you played left guard and all of a sudden you have to go over and play right guard, it's going to take a little bit. Depending how much you've done it.

Q. Obviously the offseason is not over yet. There's more free agents. Can you just talk about what this offseason has been like for both of you because obviously you've been able to do some things that you couldn't do the last two years?

TERRY FONTENOT: It's been a lot of fun and not taking anything away from the other off-seasons, but we have a clear vision for what we're looking for and the makeup that we're looking for and the types of players that we're looking for just like, again, that's two players we added today. It's fun to watch them because these are violent. Their tape is fun to watch because they're trying to finish people, and they're blocking people off the film. They're violent, tough, physical players.

So we believe we've added a lot of those players. When you have the opportunity to add those players, it's exciting. It really is. Then you can continue to add because it's competition, so you are going to have more competition. You're going to have a more competitive camp and iron sharpens iron like man sharpens man, but our focus has remained the same that, hey, we have to bring in the right Keefe people because we know how we're going to win games, and we're going to win it because we're going to be the smarter, tougher, more competitive team because we're going to put in that work on a daily basis. So we have to bring in players that like to work.

It's been fun. It's been fun to be able to sit down and discuss things and have a plan and really have an opportunity to execute that plan.

Then we get into the draft, and we can just keep adding players. Once GE get out of this draft, we're going to keep looking.

If there's an opportunity to make this team better, we're going to do it. Only way I can say it is it's been fun and exciting.

ARTHUR SMITH: It has been. Jeff, that's why we haven't felt desperate going into the draft. A lot of times if you are really thin and hopefully we're healthy going into week one, but it allows you to certainly develop guys at the right pace when you don't feel like you have to put them out there too

quick. If they're ready and certainly if they're the better player, they will play. I'm not saying that. Strategically, there's kind of, like, guys that every point of their career. We have some guys that are veterans that expect to play good football. Maybe in a one, two-year deal. We have guys in the middle part. Guys that we brought back. Then we have the young guys that are going into year two, year three, and with this class.

It will be a very competitive camp. We know that. We feel really good about where we're at right now, but like Terry talked about, any opportunity to improve, we're going to do it whether it's a trade or somebody makes a cut. We think the guy can help us, we'll obviously bring him in.

Q. This is more a question towards the free agency stuff you did, but obviously when you go into that, you know the amount of money you have. You know the amount of money everybody else has. I would think for two guys who really get into the team-building aspect something inside of you says, ha ha, we can do this, you can't. That feeling that you couldn't -- you didn't have that the last few years.

TERRY FONTENOT: I'll say this, though, and I guess, yeah, there are certain ways you can structure things, but I'll say really a lot of the players that we were talking about there were other teams in the same range. So it's not like we just said, hey, we're going to go offer more money than anybody else and get this player in here. It really wasn't like that.

There was options for the other players in the same range, and that was kind of the cool thing about it. I think it says a lot about this organization, the city, the culture, the coaches, the people that are here. The players really want to be here, and it's been made real clear because there's a lot of situations.

All the players that we signed were players that had markets and they had a lot of people that wanted them, but they wanted to be here. Again, I know the money is, but there are players that other teams had the same range of money on the table, and they really wanted to be here. That's what was really fun about it.

Now, obviously, you try to figure out ways to do things that other teams can't do. But at the end of the day the players that we brought in, that we offered, other teams were in those ranges, and they chose Atlanta. They feel that they want to be a part of something special.

I think they know that, and it's the staff. It's the coaches. It's the players that are already here and the locker room that we already have, the Grady's and the Jakes and the

Chrises, all these guys, players want to be a part of that.

Q. With the way the NFL is, for a running back to be drafted as high as you guys took Bijan, does there have to be a level of versatility for that player versus maybe just being more of a strict runner, like 95% runner. Does there need to be more versatility in today's NFL?

ARTHUR SMITH: For us. I'm not going to speak for another team. We certainly value that. Sometimes conventional wisdom, everybody likes to run out in front of certain hot takes, and sometimes you see old trends become new again and get proved wrong. You see it in every sport. I don't want to sound like every team -- I love people that talk about these theories and these vague theories and you have to do this and you have to do that. Some people get arrogant where their takes, and they get proven wrong and cry like you can't do that.

Okay. Well, it's been proven over and over again in every sport. In basketball, all right, you have to shoot nothing but threes to win. Well, it works for some teams, but there's ebb and flows. Can you be big-man centric? Milwaukee, right, they won a championship. I don't know the intricacies of the ins and outs. Just see the ebbs and flows and try to get creative. And certainly the game changes in certain areas, and you are probably getting more versatile players coming in the league too. Just by nature we've talked about that too.

For us, we value that. But to say that somebody -- if Earl Campbell was in the draft, and somebody couldn't go with Earl Campbell, I wouldn't bet against Earl Campbell. I'm not comparing Bijan, I know they're Texas guys, I'm not comparing at all. You understand my logic. Like could Walter Payton still lead your team? I think Walter Payton would probably still be a pretty damn good football player.

I don't know. For us, we like the versatility.

Q. Bijan can do a lot of different things (indiscernible) do you also see the league a little bit maybe moving back towards running powerful --

ARTHUR SMITH: Yeah, Jeff, that's another great question. That's the beauty of this game because there's so many variables.

There's a lot of smart people involved that study it, and it's -- you can go through it, and sometimes you got to watch through the film and you're really crying through it and you're in it like, and some people -- like I said, it's good for the game, so many people covering, so many people care, people are debating it.

But it's probably the most complicated game when you really break it down just because you have 22 people out there and the scheme, and you may feel like you have a perfect play, and the snap gets botched or -- come down to it, and you have a great play, and the right tackle just misses or whatever it is or a corner falls down.

As you see trends, certainly there was a lot made about people playing shell defense. It just becomes a numbers game in math. How do you protect those gaps? Sometimes is it necessarily because of the way people are playing on first and second down and a lot of the jet motions and things like that? You need to sort it out in front of you, and maybe people say, hey, we'll keep it in front of us instead of playing so much single high. It ebbs and flows.

No different than the trend that Seattle had where they made cover three in vogue, and now you see people coming back and two-high. Is it out of necessity because of the motion and people need to sort things out?

When you go to shell coverage, it's just a math game. How do you want to get that extra player into those fits in the run gaps. Do you want a two-gap up front, the way you want to cut the front up to do it.

That would probably be why you're seeing a trend coming back to it. Just kind of going whether or not, whether you are going to play that shell defense and take away some of the shots that are happening, first, second down, play action. Okay, have you to counter back because the defense -- they're always going to adapt. They're always going to adapt.

That's probably my best answer to give you there.

Q. Bring it back to the players tonight. Do you expect Matt to teach Kaleb any French?

ARTHUR SMITH: Which Kaleb? Huntley or McGary?

Q. McGary, of course. Offensive line.

TERRY FONTENOT: Trilingual. He already knows French. You know Kaleb.

ARTHUR SMITH: He will greet him with a bonjour or something like that.

Q. In all seriousness, is there anything about his kind of background that is intriguing for you guys when you are looking at player like that? You mentioned something the last training camp about describing the

players that don't necessarily come up through the ranks and the kind of typical fashion that a lot of elite players do.

ARTHUR SMITH: If there's a good player that happens to spend time and grows up in Antarctica in one of those regional -- whatever they call it, those scientific research areas, right, yeah, we'll take them if they can help us win.

In all seriousness, he is a unique background, right? The cool thing is he wasn't a big recruit. Went to Syracuse and stayed there, was loyal to that commitment. There's all kind of cool stories.

Terry kind of talked about it. We love getting out and meeting people. Like I said, there's a lot of cool stories. You see that in a lot of sports, too. The Canadian influx in basketball. You're seeing certainly coming into football too.

Q. Do you have a philosophical belief about how many people on the line of scrimmage you have to add every draft? No matter the round, just to fill those positions that eat up so many bodies? Or does that matter?

TERRY FONTENOT: No, not really. I think for us, we love the way today went. We wanted to go up and get Matt, and that worked out. We're excited that we were talking a bunch of guys. Who knew who was going to be there at 75? If that would have been a defensive back or other position, a linebacker, we would have taken one of those players. We value the line of scrimmage, and obviously, we made investments in free agency because the right guys were available.

We value that, but we never put a number on, okay, we have to come out of this draft with this many players here or there. We really want to take guys that we have a clear vision for, and they're going to make an impact. It fell. Sometimes you do. You do your best. You work as hard as you can, try to anticipate things. Sometimes you need a little luck, and we came out today and we're excited how it happened that we were able to add two players that we have clear visions for.

Q. I was joking about it when you sat down, but you have a gap. Unless you move, you have a gap of, like, 110 or so picks tomorrow. Provided you don't move, what do you do in that three, three and a half hour break?

TERRY FONTENOT: You try your best. You do try to anticipate who you think could be there. We say, okay, let's discuss. We've had those discussions and have done all that. You get a little deeper into it. And we talk through things of who you think is going to be there, and then when



you get closer to your pick, there's already going to be a few players that we say we will move up for these particular players, and you talk about it.

Yeah, four or five players that you would move up for, and then you are down to one, and you say let's go get him. You do things like that.

If there's not, then you just want to be patient and just wait. When you get your ten picks out and, okay, you have a little more serious discussions. Do you need to pull in medical and talk a little bit more about something? Do you need to get a little deeper with some of the conversations? You work through that, but outside of that, you are just being patient and waiting.

Q. Analyze seventh round picks in the history of the NFL Draft.

ARTHUR SMITH: Yeah.

Q. You're not doing anything else to pass the time, playing solitaire or something.

ARTHUR SMITH: Hanging out with you guys. We'll come down here and hang out. I mean, the food is pretty good, it looked like, down here.

TERRY FONTENOT: Did you eat yet?

Q. Several times.

TERRY FONTENOT: Yeah, I'm going to eat some of the short ribs. It looks good.

Q. Junior Mints.

TERRY FONTENOT: Did you get your gluten-free stuff today, man? Can you eat any of that out there? Do you have a gluten-free menu? Don't let them discriminate against you, man.

ARTHUR SMITH: Josh, I do want to add context about your necessity about how you're going to play a certain number of positions. Like, our job -- what I love more than anything is blowing up his depth chart because it's not a fixed depth chart.

He was so used to having 12 personnel, 11, 4-3, 3-4. I take a lot of joy.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports