

Atlanta Falcons Media Conference

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Arthur Blank

Weekday Press Conference



ARTHUR BLANK: Good morning, everybody.

Q. On January 8th, when you had your press conference, you had Rich McKay basically saying he was leading the search. When you announced Raheem's hiring, you basically said that Rich McKay is being out of day-to-day football operations, then you had Terry up there talking on Monday. What changed within those three weeks that forced, necessitated a change with how you structured the organization?

ARTHUR BLANK: Well, it was nothing really in those three weeks. This has been an ongoing process. Take you back, a little bit of history.

Rich got promoted in January 2023 to be CEO of AMBSE, which is the umbrella organization that is responsible for the Falcons, for Atlanta United, for the stadium itself.

Steve Cannon, who is our vice chair, is transitioning. He's retiring. He's been directly responsible for soccer. Part of this change was made in contemplation of that.

Part of the change also was Rich has been with us for 20 years, been in the NFL for 30 years. During that time as general manager, president, served in a variety of functions.

I think given these last particular situations we had, basically new head coaches, new general managers, particularly this last go-around, he served an important role in terms of helping them transition into their roles as a head coach and general manager in the league.

That is no longer necessary. He's been with us for three years, going on four years now. Raheem has been with us for six years, been in the NFL for 23 years. That transition role, that guidance role is really not needed.

Rich, however, is still the CEO of the Atlanta Falcons, of the franchise, not the football team but of the franchise. That includes all the business parts of it. He's still a very

trusted colleague, will be very heavily relied on. Is just not in day-to-day football operations.

I might add also, of 32 teams in the NFL, I think there's four or five, example would be the Packers, where the head coach today, as of today, the head coach and general manager, do not report directly to the owner. All of them, the rest of them, report directly to the to the owner or some form of ownership.

Packers, publicly owned franchise, their CEO actually performs the role. There's a few other ones where the owner is physically not on property, lives in another area, is not there very often, et cetera, so they have a CEO that will serve that function.

Hopefully that answers that question.

Q. You talk about us knowing Raheem. I think all of us know Raheem. It was interesting with the introductory press conference that it almost didn't feel like introductory. As you were going through the process of the coaching search, how did you see Raheem change since the last time he interviewed for this position after the 2020 season?

ARTHUR BLANK: That is a great question, maybe the best question during the first press conference and the chat we're having today.

Raheem was with us for six years. I would say during that six-year period of time, worked on offense, defense, in a variety of areas. On a scale of 1 to 10, being a cultural leader, being somebody that defines leadership with coaches, players, people throughout the building, et cetera, on a scale of 1 to 10 I would say he's a 20. Today he's still a 20. That hasn't changed.

What I did see change, to answer your question very specifically, I think the three years he had in L.A. where he worked with a different coaching environment, a different kind of setup which Sean McVay operates differently than a lot of other coaches do, their coaching scheme, setup, how they promote from within, move coaches around in a much more lateral way, was a learning experience for him.



I think the collaboration that Sean McVay and Les Snead had, a general manager who worked for us for many years, was very, very close. I think there was a true definition of what a collaborative relationship is.

One of the things that Raheem said during his press conference, which I thought was right on, if you really have a great relationship, it's almost you can speak without having to use words. People understand each other, et cetera. I think he saw that relationship there.

I think he also understood the importance, which I don't think frankly back in 2016, he and I talked about this when he was here with us and left after that, I think he appreciated now the importance of trying to build a coaching staff, understanding when you're going to have a winning team, you're going to lose coordinators, position coaches.

Like in any business, in this case the business of the NFL, how do you anticipate that, how do you build a coaching staff when you go through that, your best coaches are picked off and go elsewhere in the NFL, which is what should happen because they have opportunities, how do you maintain the consistency of play on the field, et cetera.

I think he brought back a plan which showed me his thinking had really changed in that regard and he had learned a lot in that regard.

I think as you all spend time with Raheem, spend time with his coaches, coordinators and coaches, get to know them, I think you'll really fully appreciate that. The depth of his coaching staff that he's put together to me is remarkable.

But it's not remarkable because they're ready to perform now. I'm going to assume, I know it's a big word, but I'm going to assume we're going to be successful, win a lot of games. Therefore in the NFL what happens, whether you're Kyle Shanahan, Sean McVay, Matt LaFleur, Andy Reid, their coordinators leave. They leave because they become head coaches or their position coaches become coordinators. These organizations prepare for that. The head coach is the one that has to help prepare for that.

I think Raheem came back from L.A. with an intense knowledge of how to do that and how to put that in place in Atlanta, which is very important.

By the way, if you ask a question, if I didn't give you a clear answer, I'm trying to, just say, Can I have a second one?

Q. You interviewed twice a guy who is on the verge of being the winningest coach in NFL history in Bill

Belichick. It would be remiss if we didn't ask you how that process went, what drove your interest, and what ultimately led you to choose Raheem Morris against a guy whose résumé at least is better than anybody alive?

ARTHUR BLANK: Well, I would say what drove our interest initially is exactly what you said. I mean, his record, 24 years of the Patriots, been coaching in the NFL I think for 49 years, is incredible. Whether he's the greatest coach to ever coach the game, if not, he's on a very short list. That's really what drove our interest.

We spent time with him in face-to-face interviews. One I did myself. We were restricted, I couldn't interview coaches that were under contract until January 22nd. The second one we did in a group.

First interview was excellent. One was very informative, because you're talking to kind of a living legend, someone who has great historical knowledge of the game, great perspective from all the years of success he had...

(Loss of audio.)

ARTHUR BLANK: Can you hear me now?

Q. Yes.

ARTHUR BLANK: Where did you stop hearing me?

Q. You said he has a wealth of historical knowledge.

ARTHUR BLANK: Yeah, we learned a lot during that process, as you might expect anybody would.

I would say this to make it absolutely clear. There were 14 candidates. There was not any one of the candidates against Bill Belichick. It was all 14 candidates I would not say against each other, but each were competing with each other. We selected the one that we thought for a whole variety of reason was the best choice for us.

I want to make it one thousand percent clear, two thousand percent, one hundred thousand, whatever percent you want to use, Bill Belichick never asked in our discussions for full control of personnel, the building, anything of that nature. He was very inclusive, very collaborative.

He met Terry Fontenot. He checked our people doing his own references. He sent me a private text which I eventually shared with Terry that he was happy working with him.

I don't know what you want to call them, I want to be kind



to the media, all of these things that were being produced by the media were totally not true. I don't say it patronize Bill, but to be fair to him. He never had that as a requirement.

He's got his history, he has a way of doing things, et cetera, which has been very, very successful. You can debate is that true the last four years or so? Might be a different picture. There's a lot of stories behind a lot of things.

I think it was a very good series of interviews with him. Our folks were impressed with him. I was impressed with him, as I was a number of the candidates. We felt, all things considered, for a variety of reasons, that Raheem Morris was clearly the best choice for us.

Q. You guys weren't the only job open. I think there were seven jobs open. He didn't get any of them. Guys who have the reputation for being more of a one-man show, Terry even used the word 'collaborative mindset'. It felt like potentially there's a shift in the league's thinking in terms of how you want to do this job. Fair?

ARTHUR BLANK: I don't think there's a shift. I think if you look at any of the clubs that I mentioned a minute ago, any other ones that you might think of that are winning teams consistently in the NFL, Kansas City, San Francisco, big game this weekend, L.A., I mean, you can run down the list.

Every single one of them you have a very collaborative relationship, truly collaborative relationship between the general manager and the head coach. If they don't see the vision for the football team the same way, it is an uphill battle. Every day you get up, you have a headache, it's worse than a headache. You have to be able to see the thing the same way.

That doesn't mean you don't necessarily agree on everything. You may disagree on players, drafting, free agency, et cetera. You have a healthy dispute, you understand each other, make a different selection, move on.

But you have to have that connection. I don't know of one team in the National Football League that's not successful where you don't have a collaborative, close relationship between general manager, personnel, scouting and the head coach. You have to have that.

I've said this before. I said it during the first press conference. The word 'power' should never come into play. It really needs to be a collaborative, inclusive

decision. You make the best decision that fits for the prescription that you're looking for for your franchise.

It's very important for a head coach, coordinators, position coaches to be as prescriptive as they can. My dad was a pharmacist. Kind of like going to the doctor, the doctor said this is the prescription I need for my patient. If you think as the doctor being coaches, coordinators, position coaches, they go to the pharmacist, say, This is the prescription I need to fix my patient. The pharmacist goes out and puts that prescription together.

In our case that's the job of scouting personnel. Have a prescription to fill, understand it, debate on it. You have debate on it, but it's in an inclusive way.

Q. Terry said going through this coaching search process is something that ideally no team wants to do, but when you do it, you're better off for it as an organization. Assuming you agree with that sentiment, how do you think the Falcons as an organization have improved outside of what Raheem might bring as the head coach?

ARTHUR BLANK: I think if you do it too frequently, stay with the same analogy, certain kinds of medicine, it might be fine to cure something, but after a while it will kill you.

I don't think you want to go on coaching searches all that often. If you do it, in this case talking to 14 candidates, each one, depending on how much time they have to get ready, does a pretty thorough evaluation of your roster. A lot of timing you're talking about really good coordinators, sometimes retired NFL coaches, sometimes coaches that have been head coaches before, whatever it may be, so they can give you an outside perspective on your team that sometimes you don't hear on the inside. I think that has real value.

But I wouldn't encourage people to do it on a regular basis. I think the longer you do without it... The last three years are a very short run for us. Dan Quinn was almost six years. Mike Smith was close to eight or nine years, I remember. You're shooting for that or longer.

I didn't fully answer the question before.

I don't remember exactly what was said, but there was not going to be one person driving the search process. If there was one person driving it, ultimately it would be me, but it really wasn't me, it was a process. The process drove the process. There was a group of five or six key people, another 10 or 15 people helping out on the edges, et cetera. Basically there was a core of five or six people that were heavily involved in it.

It was a process kind of thing. Nobody was chairing it, running it, per se. The process drove it. End of the day we looked at all the candidates, all these people that were involved, all of the virtual interviews, the in-person interviews, they all gave their opinion as to what they thought and why they thought what they did.

Q. I think where the confusion was, when you guys announced Smith's firing, you said you and Rich McKay would be leading the search with input from others. I think a lot of people thought it was you and Rich leading the search. That's where I think that came from.

ARTHUR BLANK: I got you.

Rich was involved in the search. He was one of the individuals who was helping through the process. But I would not say Rich drove it. I wouldn't say Terry drove it. I would say the process we agreed upon as a group is really what drove it.

Again, a reminder, the only reason Terry was not there in the initial press conference is because we had wars going on several fronts. One was the Flowery Branch where coaches were walking out the door that day. They had professional and personal needs to be attended to, responsible to do that, as well as obviously dealing with the media. That was nothing more than trying to deal with the logistics of this transition.

Q. What was the delay in presenting Raheem to the public? It took 11 days. We brought it up about teams taking so long to introduce their coaches. I'm going to ask all three of mine here. Did you all offer Bill Belichick the job? I need a Super Bowl pick from you. That's a lot.

ARTHUR BLANK: You're doing the same thing a couple of reporters did during this press conference. I wouldn't get into that habit but I'll try to remember them.

The last one is the easiest one. I'm not going to tell you. I love both organizations. I love both of the coaches. Obviously, I probably have a special affinity for Kyle because he worked in our building for a long time. We went through Super Bowl LI together.

But they're both extraordinarily well-balanced teams offensively, defensively. I just hope for the National Football League, for America, for the world, that we have a really good game.

The second question was Bill, was ever offered the job?

That was reported by Boomer Esiason. He said he heard that from some NFL executive. He was never, capital N-E-V-E-R, Bill would tell you this, I would tell you this, my dogs who were probably with us during the second meeting would tell you the same thing, he was never offered the job.

So where Boomer heard that from, I have no idea. I don't know Boomer really well. I know him to say hello to him. I have no idea why he would be reporting on something from somebody who wouldn't have any idea either, whoever that might be, so... Unfortunately.

There was a third question.

Q. Why did it take so long to have the Raheem Morris press conference, 11 days from when he accepted the job?

ARTHUR BLANK: It wasn't a question of too long or too short. It was when it was convenient. Raheem lives in L.A. He has a big family, a lot of logistics. His first series of business was to hire coaches, some of which are coming from L.A. He and our staff, Ryan, Kyle, Terry, they were working literally day and night on recruiting and putting together a coaching staff.

I ended up with a little bump from a medical standpoint, but that didn't really impact anything. Obviously did the press conference very well without me.

It was a question of just doing it correctly, not doing it quickly. Like everything we try to do, we try to make sure we do it correctly, fully, be present, be available. I think Raheem and the team did a great job, so...

Q. I was wondering during this process, was there a chance or moment that Raheem really stood out to you the most, that kind of set him apart from everyone else? Besides the quarterback on this roster, the talent, are expectations in his first year that you make the Playoffs?

ARTHUR BLANK: As I said earlier, I know he recognized you I think from his first six years here, so I think from a cultural standpoint I've known Raheem for a long time. I know his energy, his leadership. I know the endorsements from people like McKay, Tomlin, Shanahan, other people think he's long overdue to have an opportunity, et cetera.

I think in my interview with him, it was very clear to me that the three years he spent in L.A. was very powerful for him professionally. Personally I'm sure it was good, too, but it was very powerful professionally.

As I said earlier, I think he saw how a different, very successful coaching staff and tree was built, how (indiscernible) could be taken away, but because the base, the roots of the tree were strong, they were able to replenish those roots and limbs to grow back, continue to compete at a very high level.

I think the fact he took almost a completely rookie defensive squad this year and played very competitively with them throughout the year, I was very impressed with that.

I was very impressed with the fact that he had put together in his mind a plan, knowing they were going to be successful, and if we lost this person, this person, this person, where would the people be on the staff that we could promote within, continue to move forward, not have that drainage of talent, which we had in 2016.

As he and I talked about, I talk about it actually in a critical way, is that we had Mike McDaniel, we had Matt LaFleur, Kyle Shanahan all on our staff, and we didn't retain them. Kyle we knew was going to San Francisco.

I look back on that and I say it was not probably the best we could have done. I've learned from that. I think our organization has learned from that. It's very clear to me that he's learned from that, too.

The other thing I would say is while he doesn't have 50 years of coaching in the NFL, he does have 23 years coaching in the NFL. In a sense, he's kind of developed his own network, his own version of a tree, beginnings of a tree, if you will.

He's well-liked, well-respected. He's well-loved by coaches, players throughout the league. A lot of people enjoy working with him. The impression I had was he was going to bring together, now that he had another opportunity as a head coach, a very strong staff because of all these relationships he's built over so many years, whether it be in Tampa, in Atlanta, in L.A. or his early years in Washington. I think he was drawing upon all of that.

I saw somebody who had a great deal of experience, learning in his three years, then bringing all that into bear in this new opportunity for us.

Q. You guys were going through second interviews, you had other second interviews scheduled, then you hired Raheem almost as he was about to get on a plane to go to Seattle. Was there concern maybe he was going to get hired by the Seahawks and that's why you acted like you did, or something that happened in that 24-hour stretch that told you he was the guy?

ARTHUR BLANK: I think we finished the interview with him, the group met, I think we all felt that way.

I mean, he did have plans to go to Seattle. You always know Seattle is a great organization, they have a great organization up there. Pete Carroll still there. John Schneider, one of the best general managers in the league. They have an emerging team. That would certainly be attractive to a lot of coaches.

From our standpoint, we had come to the point we had made up our minds this was the right fit for us going forward, made the most sense. We totally believed in his vision. I understood the man, understood the history, understood the present, understood how he had grown. Universally in the group we were ready to go forward with him, so there was no reason to wait any further.

Q. The quarterback situation, you described it as deficient on January 8th. In these interviews, what did you need to hear from Raheem or other candidates to make that the person your hire?

ARTHUR BLANK: I don't think there was anybody we spoke to who would define our quarterback situation as anything other than something that needs work. I'm being kind. This is not a criticism of the players. I said this during the press conference.

Sometimes what makes a quarterback really good or not so good is not just how he's playing the game, but it's the scheme they're in, the plays that are being called, just a variety of things that go into making good quarterback play.

Having said all that, it's very clear to everybody, all of our fans, all of you, anybody throughout the NFL I would say, this is a position that we need to figure out how we're going to get better in 2024 and beyond that, as well, whether it be trades, free agency, draft, whatever it may be. There's lots of opportunities out there for us and we'll look at them all.

There was nobody who felt, there was no disagreement on that point. Anybody who was an observer of the game, a student of the game, would come to the same conclusion.

Q. I know in his introductory press conference Raheem and Terry said they had limited discussion about the quarterback position. From your standpoint, at what point are you looking at I need to see the plan, what is the plan? I'm sure there are different levels of plan. For you, what are you looking for in that regard?

ARTHUR BLANK: Well, I mean, this is not one of these things where you take a year to develop a strategy. Free

agency is coming up in a matter of weeks. Draft preparation, we're in the middle of it. All those things. How do you put that room back together again. We have new coordinators, new position coaches, new assistant quarterback coaches, et cetera.

We have to bring together all of this knowledge and all this wisdom in a very short period of time. I would tell you quite honestly one thousand percent there's not a defined plan, but it is being talked about. It will be talked about pretty intensely, I would say, over the next coming weeks.

Did that answer your question?

Q. Yes, sir, thank you.

ARTHUR BLANK: Thank you.

Q. I have one completely out of left field. If your answer is you haven't given it a moment's thought, we can skip on. I wonder if the league, to your knowledge, has had any discussions about how to handle artificial intelligence, what it might bring to the game?

ARTHUR BLANK: I would say there's a lot of discussion about it. There's a heavy movement I think at the club level and the league level, the use of analytics in a whole variety of ways, which obviously embodies AI. How that is going to impact player selection, player evaluations, both soft tissue, hard tissue, medical standpoint, capacity standpoint, I think all those things will be evolving over time.

It's still the game. We have to determine somebody's love for the game, their passion for the game, their heart, et cetera. I definitely think AI is going to impact, is impacting us, across the board in our lives. I think it will be even more so in the NFL in the future.

Q. Do you think the league can get to a point where it feels like it has to restrict the use of AI? I'm not smart enough to understand where all this could go. In theory, you could stick some sort of artificially gained information into this system and have it build your game plan.

ARTHUR BLANK: Yeah, I think conceivably I guess you could. I'm not an AI expert either.

I would say great decision making and great coaching in particular in a game where you have to make decisions as quickly as you do, and a lot of it is based on what you see on the field, how you feel the players are responding, where they are mentally, physically, do they have strength to continue to compete in certain ways, et cetera, all that

makes decision making for play callers very subjective at some point.

All the analytics are helpful, they give guidance, they can give you some wisdom, but at the end of the day you still have to make those decisions. The same thing when you're selecting a player in the draft process. You can look at all the analytics, we all can do it today, I've played with it, which is the best way.

They'll take all the years of high school ball, college ball, put it together to give you a profile, but it doesn't really tell you can they project to the next level, win at the next level, how much do they love the game, how much grit is in their commitment. There's a variety of things you have to weigh, which I think AI is going to have a tough time weighing.

But I think AI will be more of a factor going forward in some form or fashion as it has already.

Q. A question about the World Cup. We've had a week to let this sink in. What does it mean for you personally, for the city of Atlanta, to have the number of matches and also to have a World Cup semifinal coming here?

ARTHUR BLANK: I think it's incredible. I should have added that, another thing to be part of Rich's responsibilities. The stadium, our commitment to soccer, et cetera, the World Cup is kind of a culmination of that. We'll have eight matches, including one semifinal match. It will be incredible.

I attended one World Cup in Brazil some years ago. The one match I went to was a U.S. match, I can't remember who, it was like going to the Super Bowl. If you think that in terms of Atlanta, it will like eight Super Bowls over the period of a couple months in Atlanta. It's hard to fathom that and understand it fully.

This 'beautiful game' as soccer is described internationally will be coming to Atlanta, will be living in Atlanta for months. I think for Atlanta, for our stadium, for our fans, our commitment to soccer, whether it be through Atlanta United, MLS, US Soccer Federation, which is a huge commitment for us now, our foundation and our businesses, potentially other aspects of soccer, I think it's a great sport and I think we're becoming in some ways a Mecca for soccer in North America.

We'll continue to push on that and continue to figure out ways we can help grow the game. But the World Cup in 2026 in Atlanta is a huge deal. Our stadium deserves it. Both the Atlanta Falcons, NFL, MLS, has been ranked

number one or number two, generally number one in the last two years, for fan experience. That includes everything under the sun for how people are treated when they walk in the building, food, beverage, security, seating, just everything.

That's not done by us. That's done independently by fans across the universe that come visit the stadium against every other facility. It's one of the reasons that our stadium, Mercedes-Benz Stadium, which for the World Cup will be called the Atlanta Stadium, has gotten the kind of support it has.

FIFA is very demanding, plays soccer all over the world. We had an award several years ago in Spain as being 'the best place to play soccer in the world' at that time. That was our stadium, Mercedes-Benz Stadium.

When we designed Mercedes-Benz Stadium, we did it with the hope that eventually we'd be able to not only have MLS soccer but potentially compete for World Cup matches in our facility as well. This can be a blessing for all of us. Very exciting.

I want to thank you all very much for your interest, time. As always, I appreciate it. I feel a little badly because I feel like some of this rumors that have gotten out there. I just want to remind you when it comes to the Falcons, we always will make ourselves available. I'll make myself available 24/7, if I don't have anything else going on medically like I did for a couple days. So will our staff.

I'd rather when you hear things, question things about rumors, who you're hearing from, et cetera, if you go to the source, to us, we're always going to be straight with the media because we're always going to be straight with our fans. We always want the fans to know the truth. We always want to be as clear with the fans as we possibly can, subject to competitive balance, things of that nature.

Feel free to ask questions of myself, Raheem, Terry, whoever it may be. We're always going to give you answers. They will always be answers as honest and forthright as we possibly can. I encourage you to do that in the future.

I tried to clarify everything today that I know has been in the news for the last couple weeks. I feel a little badly all that stuff has been beaten around as much as it has been. It hasn't been productive for anybody.

I think I've hopefully set the record straight on those things today.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you all very much.

