

Atlanta Falcons Media Conference

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Arthur Blank

Weekday Press Conference



(In progress) 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, you're going to lose position coaches. Like in any business, in this case our business with the NFL, how do you anticipate that and how do you build a coaching staff that when you go through that and 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 that his thinking really had changed in that regard and he had learned a lot in that regard.

I think as you all spend time with Raheem and spend time with his coaches and coordinators, as well, and get to know them, I think you really will fully appreciate that. The depths of his coaching staff that he's put together to me is remarkable. 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 that we're going to be successful, and we're going to win a lot of games

Therefore in the NFL what happens is that, whether you're Kyle Shanahan, Sean McVay, Matt LaFleur, Andy Reid, the coaches that win consistently, 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 who has to help prepare for that

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

Q. You interviewed twice a guy who's on the verge of being the winningest coach in NFL history in Bill Belichick. I'd 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 resume, at least, is better than anybody

alive?

ARTHUR BLANK: Well, I would say what drove our interest initially is exactly what you said. His record, 24 years with the Patriots, been coaching in the NFL for I think 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, two face-to-face interviews. One I did myself because we were restricted, we couldn't talk to coaches -- I couldn't interview coaches that were under contract until after January 22nd, and the second one we did in a group.

First of all, the interviews were excellent. One was very informative, as it might be, because you're talking to kind of a living legend, somebody whose who's got great historic perspective from all the years of success he had (audio interruption).

Where did you stop hearing me?

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

ARTHUR BLANK: Yeah, so I think that we learned a lot during that process, as you might expect anybody would, and so it was never really -- I would say this to make absolutely clear, there were 14 candidates. It was not any one of the candidates against Bill Belichick. It was all 14 candidates -- I wouldn't say against each other, but each were competing with each other, and we selected the one who we thought for a whole variety of reasons was the best choice for us.

I do want to make it 1,000 percent clear, or I want to go to 2,000 percent or 100,000, whatever percent you want to choose. Bill Belichick never asked for, in our discussions, full control over personnel or the building or anything of that nature. He was very inclusive, very collaborative. He met Terry Fontenot. He checked out 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.



All of these -- I want to be kind to the media, but all of these things that were being produced by the media were totally not true.

I don't say it to 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 could debate is that true the last four years or so. It might be a little different picture, but 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 we were a number of the candidates, and we just felt all things considered, for a variety of reasons, that Raheem Morris was clearly the best choice for us. It's not a criticism of Bill.

Q. You guys weren't the only job open. I think there were seven jobs open. He didn't get any of them. Mike Vrabel, guys at least who have a reputation for at least being a one-man show, it felt like -- I think Terry used the word in Raheem's press conference, 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. If you look at any of the clubs that I mentioned a minute ago, any of the ones that you might think of that are winning teams consistently in the NFL, Kansas City, San Francisco, too, with the big game this weekend, LA, you want to run down the list, every single one of them you've got a very collaborative relationship, truly collaborative relationship, between the general manager and the head coach.

If they don't see the team, the vision for the football team the same way, it is an uphill battle. Every day he gets up, you've got a headache, you've got worse than a headache. It's going to get bad. You have to be able to see the team the same way. That doesn't mean you agree on everything, 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, you make a different selection, you move on, whatever it may be.

But you have to have that connection. I don't know of one team in the National Football League that is not successful when 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, said it during the first press conference, the word "power" should never come into play.

It really needs to be a collaborative, inclusive decision, and you make the best decision that fits the prescription that you're looking for for your franchise. It's very important for coach, head coach, coordinators, position coaches to be as prescriptive as they can -- I've used that language because my dad was a pharmacist. It's kind of like going to the doctor and the doctor says this is the prescription that I need for my patient, so if you think of a doctor as being coach, coordinators, position coaches, they go to the pharmacist and they say, pharmacist, this is the prescription I need to fix my patient, and the pharmacist goes out and puts that prescription together.

In our case, that's the job of scouting and personnel is to have a tight prescription to fill and to understand it, and if there's debate on it, you have debate on it, but it's done in an inclusive way.

Q. Terry said that 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 that the Falcons as an organization have improved outside of just what Raheem might bring as the head coach?

ARTHUR BLANK: Well, I think if you do it really too frequently, stay with the same analogy with certain kinds of medicine, it may be find to cure something, but after a while they'll kill you. I don't think you want to go on coaching searches all that often.

I think when you do go on them, 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, and a lot of times 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 can do without it -- the last three years were a very short run for us. Dan Quinn was almost six years. Mike Smith was -- Mike was close to eight or nine years if I remember. You're shooting for that or longer.

I didn't fully answer the question before. It was never said -- I don't remember exactly what was said, but the notion -- there was not going to be one person driving the search process. If you had to say it 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. There was another 10, 15 people helping out on the edges, et cetera, but basically there was a core five or six people that were heavily involved in it. So it was kind of a process kind of thing. Nobody was chairing it. There was nobody running it per se.

The process drove it.

At the end of the day, when we looked at all the candidates, all these people that were involved and all the virtual interviews and 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, though, was, just to kind of push back on that, when you guys announced Arthur Smith's firing, it said that you and Rich McKay would be leading the search with input from others, so I think a lot of people thought it was you and Rich leading the search and it was the two of you up there and not Terry. That's where I think that came from.

ARTHUR BLANK: I gotcha. 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 what really drove it.

Again, a reminder, the only reason Terry was not there at the initial press conference is that we had lots going on several fronts. One was at Flowery Branch where coaches walking out the door that day and they had professional and personal needs to be attended to, and we were 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 just brought it up in the PFWA meeting about teams taking so long to introduce their coaches. Did you all offer Bill Belichick the job? Boomer Esiason kind of alluded to that out here in Vegas. And then I need a Super Bowl pick from you.

ARTHUR BLANK: You're doing the same thing that a couple of reporters did to Roger during his 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 because 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 dark balanced teams, offensively, defensively, and 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 ever offered the job. That was reported by Boomer Esiason, and he said he heard that from some NFL executive. He was never, capital N-E-V-E-R, never -- Bill would tell you this, I would tell you this, my dogs who were probably listening to the second meeting, probably would tell you the same thing. He was never offered the job. Where Boomer heard that from, I have no idea.

I don't know Boomer really well. I know him to say hello to him, et cetera. I have no idea why he would be reporting on something from somebody who wouldn't have any idea, either, whoever that might be. 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 LA. He's got a big family, got a lot of logistics. His first series of business was to hire coaches, some of which are coming from LA.

He and our staff, Ryan, Kyle, Terry, they were working literally day and night on recruiting and putting together the coaching staff.

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

There was no -- it was a question of just doing it correctly, not doing it quickly. Like everything else we try to do, we've got to make sure we try and do it correctly, fully, be present, be available, and I think Raheem and the team did a great job.

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

ARTHUR BLANK: Well, I think, as I said earlier, and I

know he recognized you, I think, from his first six years here. I think from a cultural standpoint, I've known Raheem for a long time. I know his energy. I know his leadership. I know the endorsements from people like McVay and Tomlin and Shanahan and others who think, well, he's long overdue to have another opportunity, et cetera.

But I think in my interview with him, it was very clear to me that the three years he spent in LA 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 and how limbs from that tree could be taken away, but because the base of the tree, the roots of the tree were strong, they were able to replenish those roots and grow back, the limbs and grow back, and continue to compete at a very high level.

I think the fact that he took basically almost a complete 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 that we were going to be successful and how if we lost this person, this person, this person, where are the people on staff that we could promote from within and continue to move forward and not have that drainage of talent, which we had in 2016.

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

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

The other thing I would say is that, while he doesn't have 50 years of coaching in the NFL, he does have 23 years of 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. He's 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 that 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 that he's built over so many years, whether it be in Tampa or whether it be

Atlanta or whether it be in LA or whether it be 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, and then bringing all that in to bear in this new opportunity for us.

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

ARTHUR BLANK: No, I think when we finished the interview with him -- I think the group, we all felt that way. I mean, he did have plans to go to Seattle, and obviously Seattle is a great organization. They have a great organization up there. Pete Carroll is still there, John Schneider, one of the best general managers in the league. They have an emerging team. That certainly would be attractive to a lot of coaches.

But from our standpoint, we just felt like we had come to the point where we'd 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 presence, understood how he had grown, and then universally in the group we were ready to go forward with him, so there was no reason to wait any further.

Q. Really quick, the quarterback situation you described as deficient on January 8th. In these interviews, what did you need to hear from Raheem or maybe from other candidates when they're talking about the quarterback situation to make that person your hire?

ARTHUR BLANK: Well, I would say -- I don't think there's anybody that 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've said this during the press conference. Sometimes what makes a quarterback either 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, is that 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, so we'll look at them all.

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

Q. To follow up on that really quickly, I know that in his introductory press conference, Raheem and Terry both said that they'd had limited discussions about the quarterback position. I was kind of curious from your standpoint, at what point are you kind of looking at hey, guys, I need to see the plan. What is the plan? I'm sure there are different levels of the plan, but for you and the timing of everything, what are you looking for in that regard?

ARTHUR BLANK: Well, I think you have to -- this is not one of these things where you can 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, 1,000 percent, there is not a defined plan, but it is being talked about, and it'll be talked about pretty intensely I would say over the next coming weeks.

Q. I wonder if the league, to your knowledge, has had any discussions about how to handle artificial intelligence and what it might bring to the game.

ARTHUR BLANK: I would say there's been 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's going to impact player selections, player evaluations, both soft tissues, hard tissues, medical standpoint, capacity standpoint, I think all those things will be evolving over time.

It's still a game where you have to determine somebody's love for the game, their passion for the game, their heart

for it, et cetera, but I definitely think AI is going to impact us, is impacting us across the board in our lives. I definitely think it'll 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, but in theory, you could stick information -- some sort of artificially gained information into this system and have it build your game plan, right? Or make a call from the box?

ARTHUR BLANK: Yeah, conceivably I guess you could. I'm not an AI expert either, but I would say that great decision making and great coaching, particularly 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, and they give guidance, and they can give you some wisdom. But at the end of the day, you still have to make those decisions.

It's the same thing when you're selecting a player in the draft process. You can look at all the analytics and you all can do that done, and I've played with it to say which is the best, whatever it may be, and they'll take all the years of high school ball, college ball, put it all together, et cetera, et cetera, to give you a profile, but it doesn't really tell you can they project to the next level, can they win at the next level, how much do they love the game, how much grit is in their commitment. It's a variety of things that you have to weigh which I think AI is going to have a tough time weighing, but I do think AI will be more of a factor going forward, in some form or fashion, as it has already.

Q. If you're okay with a quick question about the World Cup, now that we've had a week to let it sink in, what does this 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 to another thing that will be part of Rich's responsibilities is 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'll be incredible.

I attended one World Cup in Brazil some years ago, and the one match I went to was a U.S. match versus I can't remember who, but it was a U.S. match and it was like

going to the Super Bowl.

If you think about that in terms of Atlanta, it would be like eight Super Bowls over the period of a couple months in Atlanta. It's hard to fathom that and understand it fully, but this beautiful game, quote-unquote, soccer, was described internationally will be coming to Atlanta, will be living in Atlanta for months.

So I think for Atlanta, for our stadium, for our fans, for our commitment to soccer, whether it be through the Atlanta United, MLS, or whether it be the U.S. Soccer Federation, which is a huge commitment for us now, both through our foundation as well as through 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 all of 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. Our stadium, both for Atlanta Falcons, NFL, Atlanta United, MLS, has been ranked No. 1 or No. 2 -- generally No. 1 the last two years for fan experience, and that includes everything under the sun for how people are treated when they walk in the building, food, beverage, security, seating, just everything, and 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 World Cup will be called the Atlanta Stadium, has gotten the kind of support that it has.

FIFA is very demanding, plays soccer all over the world. We got an award several years ago in Spain as being, quote, 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 that facility, as well. This is going to be a blessing for all of us. Very exciting.

I just want to thank you all for your interest and your time as always. I appreciate -- hopefully I've answered your questions. I feel a little badly because I feel like some of this is -- there's some rumors that have gotten out there, and I just want to remind you that when it comes to the Falcons, we always will make ourselves available. I'll make myself available 24/7, as long as I don't have anything else going on medically like I did for a couple days. And so will our staff.

I'd rather when you hear things and question things about rumors and who you're hearing them 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, be subject to competitive balance and things of that nature.

Feel free to ask questions. Myself, Raheem, Terry, whoever it may be are always going to give you answers, and they're always going to be answers as honest and as forthright as we possibly can, so I'd encourage you to do that in the future. Please. I've 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 was beaten around as much as it has been. It hasn't been productive for anybody.

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

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