

NBC Sports Group Media Conference

Tuesday, September 8, 2020

Sam Flood

Mike Tirico

Tony Dungy

Rodney Harrison

Chris Simms

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you for joining us today for our Football Night in America conference call to preview the upcoming NFL season. Joining us today is our Football Night in America host Mike Tirico and analysts Tony Dungy, Rodney Harrison and Chris Simms, as well as our executive producer Sam Flood, and in addition to Football Night, you may have heard, Tony will be joining Mike this year in the booth for Notre Dame football for the first time. So NBC Sports' Notre Dame season, 30th season of broadcasting Notre Dame football begins on Saturday, so feel free to ask questions about the Fighting Irish, as well.

Football Night is entering its 15th season and has been the most watched studio show in sports since its inception. NBC Sports kicks off the NFL season on Thursday night with the Super Bowl champion Chiefs hosting the Texans, and then on Sunday night week one we are opening the new SoFi Stadium in Los Angeles as the Rams host the Cowboys. Coverage begins both nights at 7:00 p.m. eastern on NBC.

SAM FLOOD: Thank you all for joining. Excited to have the season going. It's exciting to see that football is coming back and all the efforts that have been made by the NFL to get this season to happen. It is a new season. There are new systems and new opportunities to tell the stories of what's going on, and what a great group on the air to do that with Mike, Tony, Rodney, Chris, Mike Florio doing the inside information, the Liam McHugh and Jack Collinsworth.

A quick overview of how the talent is going to work this week. As you heard last week, Mike Tirico is going to call a few games this year, the first one being week three. So



on week three Liam McHugh will leave his normal duties as the host at the remote and come into the studio and join Tony, Rodney and Chris, and Jack Collinsworth will be the on-site remote host.

Jack is also going to be doing features and telling stories for us and will be in the studio week one, but we have a team that can go tell the stories of what's going on.

Tony comes in to Connecticut tomorrow. Rodney is going to be working from Georgia. He'll be our Georgia bureau of NBC Sports, while Chris and Tony will be in the studio with Mike, and Mike Florio will be our West Virginia NBC Sports location, so we've got some broadening new areas we're going to be coming out of with our talent as we continue to work on ways to social distance and follow what is most comfortable for everyone as we go into this new world and the new era of broadcasting.

We're going in different people's houses and today there's a group in Rodney's house setting up a studio camera setup for him which will put him into the show in real time, no different than the great Doc Emrick, who is calling the Stanley Cup Playoffs from his home somewhere outside Detroit, Michigan. We have structures in place to make sure everyone is ready to do their jobs with all the assets needed to be the show of record, and that's what Football Night is America is.

We start the conversation every week on what happened on Sunday and most importantly why things happened and the implications for the week ahead. With that, I go to our quarterback, Mr. Tirico.

MIKE TIRICO: Thanks, Sam. Hi, everyone. I'll be brief so you can get to all the guys with your football questions. This is such an exciting time. I'm sitting here right now just putting together the game chart for the Notre Dame game this week and balancing that with going back and forth preparing for the NFL season. I didn't think that we'd get to a football season, but here we are, with so many questions.

Obviously the off-field stories of COVID-19, social justice, race relations in America have been a significant part of everyone's lives here this year, and the NFL usually mirrors what's going on in society, so that will have an impact, and we'll cover it, but parallel to that, I'm really intrigued to



watch the football. We have not seen any of these teams do anything but maybe a little blip out of their scrimmages, so Brady as a Buccaneer, Mike McCarthy as a head coach in new place, Cam Newton with the Patriots, the new stadiums in Vegas and Los Angeles, Kansas City coming back as a resounding popular story as a champion in the NFL, how good Baltimore was last year.

There were so many really good stories on the field that I just feel like we haven't talked about much, and I think that first Sunday is going to be just an avalanche of story lines and the unexpected.

I'm fascinated to see how the first month of the season plays out. Thrilled to be year three in the studio with the guys, and I can't believe it's year five already as part of the NBC NFL team, the best team in the business. It's a privilege for me. It's something I don't take lightly and I'm thrilled to continue working with the guys. Look forward to your questions, and I'll throw it over to Tony.

TONY DUNGY: Thank you, Mike. I am in total agreement. These story lines are fantastic, and any other year we would have -- we would be all over this already. But this is so unique, and I have to think back to 1982 when I was watching, a strike year where you really didn't know coming to that first game what was going to happen, what teams were going to be like, who was making the adjustments. We're going to see a lot of that beginning Thursday night and then again Sunday night.

I'm excited for the first month, as well, and just delighted to be broadcasting this and happy that we are back to some football. Should be fun. Looking forward to it. With that, I'll turn it over to Rodney.

RODNEY HARRISON: Hello, everyone. Along with Tony Dungy, this is our 12th year at NBC doing this show, and this has really been the strangest year that I've ever experienced really in football. We talk about so many different story lines. I'm excited because I didn't think football would actually happen this year. I just said there's no way with COVID and everyone getting sick and people were dying, there's no way we're going to have football, and just the due diligence of the NFL, the players and their discipline has just been tremendous.

Coach and Mike talked about all the different story lines. Yeah, Kansas City, can they repeat? I was on the last team that repeated in 2003 and 2004, how difficult it is, very difficult to try to repeat. My former teammate Tom Brady, he's out in Tampa, he left the Patriots, so I'm excited to see what he brings along with Rob Gronkowski.

Look at the Dallas Cowboys who they play on Sunday

night. I think they have a roster that is a Super Bowl roster. I think their defense, at least a front seven, one of the top five in all of football. We'll see, we haven't had a chance to really gauge or see anyone in the preseason, but I'm just really, really excited about this season, and I'll hand it over to Chris Simms.

CHRIS SIMMS: Man, 12 years, wow. Gosh, Rodney, you are the man. Patriots, Chargers, 12 years on NBC. That's what I'm working to be right there one day.

I echo the sentiments of what everybody said. There's so many interesting story lines this year, and I think the thing that I'm -- I don't know. I don't know the rest of the guys feel, but I've never felt so clueless going into a 2020 football season, and I think that's where it's really interesting.

Yeah, the story lines are awesome and Big Ben and Cam and Brady and is this the last hurrah for Drew Brees and can Lamar Jackson win a playoff game, does this become the jump-off point for the Kansas City Chiefs' dynasty. There's so many things I'm excited to see about the start of the football season. What is the quality of play going to look like?

I'll say this: The one thing that jumps out to me the more and more I get into this and start to feel like I've got to start picking playoff teams and make a Super Bowl prediction and all that, I kind of lean towards the proven commodities this year this year more than ever, with no off-season and just the weird, of course, pandemic and the world we're in right now, yeah, I tend to lean on teams that were good last year, or at least didn't have a whole lot of change on their roster. We'll see if that proves right, but that's kind of where I'm going as compared to maybe some of these teams that have new coaching staffs, new quarterback in Brady. I'm very interested to see how that works out in Tampa Bay.

But I think those are my overall thoughts going into the year, and I'm just like the rest of the guys, extremely excited that we're going to be playing football, talking about it, and I'm pumped for that. For that, I think I go back to Chris McCloskey.

THE MODERATOR: That's right, thank you so much, and now we will open it up for questions.

Q. I've got a question for Rodney then maybe a quick question for Tony and Chris. For Rodney, I'm curious about the Patriots' defense. They've lost five starters from last year, a lot of young new faces on the defense. What are you expecting from that unit this year?



RODNEY HARRISON: Wow, I'm expecting them to really be led by their secondary. That's the strength of -- if you look at Hightower to me was really the biggest loss because this is a guy that's making the calls in the huddle, all the different things that he does and what he brings, I think that's the biggest loss for them.

But they're going to have to depend and lean on their secondary. They're going to have to find a way of stopping the run. They have to be able to do a better job of stopping the run, especially when they play against running teams like the Baltimore Ravens.

We don't know what they're going to look like on the offensive side of the ball. Cam Newton is a great story, but as I look at the Patriots, they don't have many weapons. Who are you afraid of? Julian Edelman is doing to do a lot -- N'Keal Harry (indiscernible) draft choice. They drafted him last year. I think there's a lot of question marks. Having Cam, the great coaching staff and really probably the best (indiscernible).

Q. For Tony and Chris, with Cam Newton in New England, what are your expectations for what the offense will look like and just overall thoughts on how the Patriots will do with Cam Newton running the show this year?

TONY DUNGY: I'm looking forward to seeing the offense because Bill Belichick does the best job of anybody in football of tailoring his attack and his defense to what his players can do, so he's going to do some things with Cam that we haven't seen him do with Tom Brady. He won with a number of different quarterbacks going back to Matt Cassel and Garoppolo and Jacoby Brissett and the offense looked a little different. So he'll play to Cam's strengths, and I'm anxious to see what that's going to be.

CHRIS SIMMS: I'm the same here. I think I lean towards what Coach Dungy said. This is the builder of one of the greatest schemes we've ever seen in Bill Belichick, Josh McDaniels, understanding how to change a schemed approach on a weekly basis. You know, again, I'll say this: Cam Newton, I know it's been a long time since we've seen him play and certainly since we've seen him play healthy. But he's only 10 years into the NFL career. He's in his early 30s. Before he tore his labrum two seasons ago when they were 6-2 up in Pittsburgh, he was in the conversation only behind Mahomes as a possible MVP candidate, and I really think in a lot of ways the way I look at New England right now, and Rodney brings up the concerns on defense and I understand them and of course the weaponry at receiver is still an unproven commodity there as far as New England is concerned. I just feel like

nobody is better at finding diamonds in the rough, and of course also I think just formulating game plans on a weekly basis that give them a chance to win football games, and I really think Cam Newton is going to have a good year, and I think in a lot of ways this team is built for Cam Newton's style of football than let's say Tom Brady's style of football; let's spread it out and I'll find the Wes Welkers and Edelmans and do all that. I think you're going to see more of an aggressive running attack and play action pass attack with Cam Newton at the helm this year.

Q. I've got an NFL and then a Notre Dame question. First for Tony and Chris, with the NFL piping in crowd noise, and we don't know the level and how loud it'll be yet, just as a coach and quarterback, how much of a concern do you have about other teams and also opponents on film being able to pick up audible and signal calls and possibly having to frequently change out more than usual this season?

TONY DUNGY: I don't think you have to do it any more than usual. A lot of teams have done that and taken the TV feed and tried to get little tips here and there on what people are doing. Some stadiums that don't have big crowds or raucous crowds, you can hear everything called anyway. So I don't think it'll really change things too much. As a matter of fact, the crowd noise that they pipe in may make it noisier in some places. I don't think that'll really be a factor.

CHRIS SIMMS: Yeah, I think a lot of the concerns I would have had if there was no noise at all, and you could actually just hear the communication going on. Whether that's the quarterback just instead of signaling a signal just yelling, hey, slant route or whatever their code word was for a slant route, to where that could become an issue, to where the sound could be so clear there. But I think realistically with -- it sounds like it's going to be around 70 decibels. If I'm a quarterback of a football team, I'm just telling my coach like a normal away game even before the pandemic, let's just, crowd noise, let's throw the speakers on, loud music, fake crowd noise, whatever it is, and let's learn to deal with it, and I think of course guys are going to adjust to this pretty quick. But I don't think it's going to pose a lot of problems, either.

RODNEY HARRISON: But you know what, let me jump in from a defensive perspective, too, it's not just -- it doesn't just apply to the offensive players. It also applies to the defenders because back there they're making all the checks and adjustments, as well, and they're paranoid whether the offense or quarterback can hear all their checks and adjustments, as well. They're going to have to make adjustments as far as hand signals, not communicating verbally a lot because of the quarterback

might try to steal their signals.

TONY DUNGY: Rodney, you've played in Indianapolis and our crowd was very quiet when we had the ball. You could hear everything out there. You could hear Peyton talk and we could hear you guys. I don't think it's going to be much different.

RODNEY HARRISON: And still couldn't figure out what the heck you guys were doing.

Q. For Sam and Mike, with Notre Dame this season having an All-ACC schedule, do you think during the pandemic and everything this is maybe a good test case of whether Notre Dame joins the ACC full-time and how it can work, especially with you guys maybe doing the home games and everything and all of that?

MIKE TIRICO: Just from a football standpoint, and I'm also an alum of an ACC school and still heavily involved at Syracuse, so I at least have a passion for what's going on in conference and keep up to date with all that.

From a Notre Dame perspective they have played four, five games per year against ACC opponents and that's a contract that's in place for the next decade and a half going forward. I have learned in now my fifth year of covering Notre Dame football for NBC, Notre Dame really loves the independence in football because it gives them the opportunity to play Stanford and USC, and if you look at the schedule, those games are played in opposite years, so Notre Dame is always on the West Coast, which helps their national recruiting, which helps their alumni base get to see them in person out there.

In addition, college football tradition, whether it's Michigan, a series down the line with Ohio State, schools from the SEC, we've seen Notre Dame play that national schedule. I think it would have to be a drastic change in philosophy to see Notre Dame want to become part of a conference and away from this independence because they do love the history, they do love the tradition, and it's one of the very few schools that can pull this off.

I think all of college athletics is going to undergo a significant reexamination, but everyone I've spoken to on the Notre Dame side, this is a one-year thing and they really enjoy having the ability to keep that national schedule and their independence.

SAM FLOOD: Mike nailed it, and most importantly, we're just thrilled that there's going to be a Notre Dame season for us to cover, and I know Mike and Tony and Jack Collinworth, who will be out in South Bend this Saturday, are thrilled to be able to cover a college football game. So

that's what we're focused on, but I think Mike gave very good perspective.

Q. Chris, to my fellow University of Texas alumnus, to what degree to Patrick Mahomes and Deshaun Watson represent the current state of the art for playing quarterback and to what degree is that an apt way to begin the season? And for the defensive minds on the panel, how do you stop them?

CHRIS SIMMS: Sure. Well, I mean, they're the cream of the crop. Come on, you know this. Patrick Mahomes, there's no doubt he's the best player in football from my opinion. I would think the other guys would echo those same sentiments, and I think he's going to be up there towards the top of football here for a long, long time. I've never seen anybody come into the NFL and take the league by storm like Patrick Mahomes has.

And honestly, Deshaun Watson is not far behind and kind of been lost in the shuffle because of what Mahomes has done, but Deshaun Watson, extremely talented. Easily both of these guys are top-5 quarterbacks, could maybe be the future as far as a Brady-Manning type rivalry, but the biggest thing to me more than anything is this is the modern-day quarterback. Yeah, they can beat you with great decisions and surgical passing, but they also, hey, everything is covered. Oh, no big deal, I'll make an unbelievable throw, or oh, everybody is covered and I have a little pressure in the pocket in no big deal, I'll buy some extra time back here in the pocket and extend the play and then I'll make something happen or I'll just scramble and run because I can do that, as well. I'm interested to hear what Coach and Rodney have to say about it because they're so rare, they're so talented, they're so fun to watch, and I am so happy that we are kicking off the season with these two great, great players, and then in a lot of ways, I'll say this, too, I think this Texans offense will no longer just be about Watson to DeAndre Hopkins, I think it's going more by committee, which can make them a more dangerous offense, give Watson more options, and I'm excited for that aspect as far as our Thursday night game is concerned.

RODNEY HARRISON: Yeah, it's a very difficult question how do you stop these guys. I don't think you go into a game saying, I'm going to stop these guys. I think it's more about overall philosophy. When I talked to a few defensive coordinators about Patrick Mahomes as well as Deshaun Watson, they all told me the same thing about the patience, being very patient, because it's frustrating going against those guys. It might be a 3rd down and 15, you see Patrick Mahomes, he might backpedal 10 yards, throw the ball across his body, and all of a sudden Travis Kelce comes up with it and a 1st down. That's what they do.

They demoralize you on those big plays. Yeah, it's easy to say try to keep Patrick Mahomes in the pocket, but how do you do that?

It's just very difficult. I think patience is the key, not giving up the big play, and understanding who you're going against. They have a lot of weapons. They have a lot of speed.

And I agree with Chris; you look at the Houston Texans, they were so predictable in the most critical moments whether it was 3rd down, red zone, goal line, they're going to DeAndre Hopkins, and now you look at all the guys they have, it's actually more pressure on the defense to try to defend all these different guys if they're healthy, Brandin Cooks, Will Fuller, all those guys. It's very difficult to try to cover those guys compared to saying all our focus should be on DeAndre Hopkins.

I like what the Texans have done. I know a lot of people criticized Bill O'Brien for getting rid of DeAndre Hopkins, but this offense is actually more dangerous without DeAndre Hopkins.

Coach?

TONY DUNGY: I don't know if I qualify as the defensive mind, but I do know this: You'd better have pass rush to deal with those guys. If you don't have great pass rushers that can pressure them, get the ball out of their hands, you're not going to have a chance. They are athletic. They do more than just stand in the pocket and make great throws. They're instinctive. They're both smart guys, and I think they are the future of the NFL.

You look at guys like this and Russell Wilson and Lamar Jackson, the athletic quarterback that can make things happen off script gives defenses so many problems.

RODNEY HARRISON: Yeah, and I'll jump in, too, you think about going against a guy like Drew Brees or Tom Brady, you know they're excellent quarterbacks, they're accurate, but really going into a game against those guys, you kind of know what to expect. With these other guys, you don't know what -- you have to expect the unexpected, whatever that is. It's very difficult dealing with these guys because they're so athletic, you have to worry about them being involved in a run game, which definitely becomes another headache, now the defense and the linebackers and the safety have to figure out how they're going to stop the quarterback, whereas against Drew Brees and Tom Brady you know you don't have to worry about scrambling.

I agree with Coach, man, these young guys, how athletic they are and how smart they are, they just pose so many

problems on the defense.

Q. Coach Dungy, the Jaguars and the Indianapolis Colts are facing each other this weekend, and the Jaguars as you know have done a pretty significant overhaul to their roster. They sent a lot of veterans packing. The Jaguars obviously are coming off two miserable years. When you see what the Colts have done with particularly under GM Chris Ballard who's overcome losing Andrew Luck, he's overcome having a coaching change where he had to go back and get a second coach, but he's made incredible use of his draft picks, particularly in his first two years, has Chris Ballard in a way almost set a little bit of a standard for how to build a franchise, even though last year didn't finish the way he wanted and now he's coming back with a veteran quarterback? Has Chris Ballard said a standard for GMs in the league?

TONY DUNGY: Well, I think what you have to have to make that happen, you have to have ownership, the GM and the head coach being on the same page. I think it's a great program and a great fundamental philosophy that they have, and they are building for the future. Nobody there in Indianapolis is going to panic because they didn't make the playoffs last year. It is building for the future, and playing young guys and developing them, so you have to have a coach that is willing to do that. You have to have an owner that is willing to do that. It's easy to say that's going to be the plan until you lose a few games.

But I love what they've done, and I think they have set a great foundation and shown people that you can build for the future, win a few games on the way and be okay.

Q. Coach Dungy, I'm not sure if you've seen this, but Jerry Jones has now said he will allow his players to potentially kneel or protest during the National Anthem or take similar sort of socially aware measures. The fact that the NFL and the teams like the Cowboys are on board with that, do you think, Coach, there will be an adverse effect on fans and that perhaps maybe we will see a downturn in interest, or do you think that is more overblown and the league is doing the right thing accordingly?

TONY DUNGY: Well, I think you're going to see it go both ways. You're going to see some people who say if these players kneel I'm not going to watch anymore because I just feel very strongly that they shouldn't. And then you're going to see people like my young kids who say, oh, I think that's great and that they have a voice and they're speaking up for people in their community that don't have a voice, and I'm going to be more apt to watch. Which way it's going to go and who's going to attract more or lose

more, I'm not really sure, but I think just like everything in this country, you're going to see both sides of that.

My hope is that our players won't be just kneeling and not just protesting, but what are we going to do to come up with solutions and how are we going to move forward, and that's what I want to see, and that's what I hope Jerry Jones and the Cowboys and everybody else, I think it takes center stage with solutions as opposed to raising awareness with protesting.

Q. Following up on that last question a little bit, Mike, in your opening you sort of mentioned social justice and sort of these converging story lines this season. How will that be covered? You guys have the special tomorrow night; will you be involved at all in sort of -- how much will we hear some of those efforts talked about, and how much a part of that from what you're doing will we see?

MIKE TIRICO: Sure, I'll let Sam hop in with the specifics on the show tomorrow night in a little bit, but on Thursday night and Saturday and Football Night in America on a weekly basis, this is not the first time these issues have happened, right, so we have covered them in the past before I was here, and now that I've been a part of the show, and it's one of those situations where we're very lucky to have Chris and Rodney not too far removed from being in the locker room context throughout the league, and Tony, who so many people in football and in America seek out on a regular basis for wisdom, advice, context and perspective, and we have it right on our set and in our viewing room and we watch games.

It's so comforting to have as relevant and intelligent a voice as there is in sports on these issues as Tony, who's lived through this now for the better part of six decades, this has been part of Tony's life. He can add some common sense without screaming at you. It's a great, great benefit for us.

We'll cover it as it's relevant to the games. The story on Sundays are pretty simple. You're getting -- we get you ready for the game coming up but also try to give you everything that happened of significance in the other NFL games. So if there is a form of protest, something significant that happens, we'll discuss it, document it. If we need to put it in perspective, so be it, but then we'll show you the highlights of the game.

We have brilliant viewers. These are complex situations. We can do both. And I think we have in the past. I'm really confident that we'll be able to do it.

Thursday night's pregame show we'll certainly have a little bit more of it because it's the start of an NFL season

coming off an off-season like we've never had before. Then once we get to Sunday, obviously the league-wide displays that happen we'll document. But we're also going to show you Brady and what happened with the Bucs and his first game and Cam and the Patriots and all that stuff.

It'll be the typical blend, and I think as the season goes on, as you have more of a focus probably on the games, we'll adjust accordingly.

Q. Tony and Chris, you both alluded to sort of the uncertainty of what we're going to see, especially early in the season. We've come to expect some pretty sloppy football in September in the past years, and that was with four preseason games and extended preseason training camps. Do you think that the level of play is going to balance the field a little bit for some of these teams that maybe on paper wouldn't be able to compete against some of the top-tier teams, and will it allow for more upsets, especially early in the season?

TONY DUNGY: I kind of think it'll be just the opposite. If I were looking to handicap this, I would say jump on the veteran quarterback and the veteran coach who have been together. I think they're going to have the advantage in September and early in the season. You look at Kansas City and the Texans, for instance. I think we've got a chance to have some real explosive stuff and some good plays because you've got quarterbacks, you've got veteran players who have been in the system, you've got the same coaching staff. I think those are the teams that are going to have the advantage, and they're going to be tough to beat early.

CHRIS SIMMS: I'm with Coach there all the way, too. That's why I kind of made that comment to start as far as proven commodities, that's exactly what I was talking about. Teams that had a lot of change in the off-season, new coaching staffs, accumulated a lot of players, man, I just -- I'm interested. I really am. I don't know where that goes. There's a lot that goes into being battle tested as a football team, playing as a team, camaraderie in the locker room. I think sometimes we under value that stuff a little bit and just go, hey, look at the names on the paper, they should be awesome. Well, yeah, the names on the paper Cleveland Browns probably should have been 11-5 last year, but the reality is it was their first time together and there was a lot of dysfunction in reality that way.

I'm with Coach there, and I expect teams like the 49ers and the Saints and the Chiefs and the Ravens and even the Green Bay Packers and the Seattle Seahawks to get off to a good start, because yes, it's pretty much very close to the team they ended with last year. They know what to expect

with each other. They're not learning a new playbook. And then yes, the quarterback thing is very real, to which Coach alluded.

I would think the offenses for the most part, if you have a good quarterback and a good passing game are going to have a severe advantage over the defenses early on just because live action, oh, wait, they went to this formation, wait, we don't have our check-in yet because it's too early in the year and we haven't had enough reps for it and I think defenses will be a little bit behind, like we saw in the 2011 season with no CBA where they had those three 5,000-yard passers. The passers and catchers did not have issues hitting the ground running when the season started, and I think we're going to see that again here this year.

Q. Mike, I don't know if you've had a chance to watch some of the college games that have been played already with no fans, one last night. What do you anticipate it being like to call football games without a crowd? Your voice tends to rise when there's an audience around you, but have you given any thought to how you might handle Notre Dame games and then NFL games with no fans in the stands?

MIKE TIRICO: Sure, I think with the Notre Dame games, since that's immediately ahead of us on Saturday, it's going to be reading the room a little bit. Notre Dame will have students in attendance, faculty and staff and parents of players from both teams, with a cap of 20 percent or about 15,000, so there will be some atmosphere there. So I think it's not that situation like the Navy game last night. I was watching Reese and Kirk call that game and there was no atmosphere there for them to work with.

I'm going to lean back on something that I stumbled on after 9/11 and the first weekend back doing football. I did a game at Michigan and I had no idea going in how to react, be upbeat, be positive or continue the somber tone that was in the country, and on that day, I felt as though -- I remember walking into the stadium just thinking, I'll react the way the people react. If there's crowd noise and there's enthusiasm and you can hear that coming through the TV, I'll match that. If there's not, you're a little more subdued, I'm going to try to use that as a guide or a barometer for how we do it.

I think my biggest concern or I guess unknown is a better word is the logistics of calling the game, being socially distant in the booth in terms of spotters, statisticians, things like that. We've worked a lot to have a game plan in hand to have all the services and the ancillary things that are essential to getting a good broadcast on the air replicated.

For me that's more of a trepidation going in than what's it going to sound like with no fans because we will have some in South Bend on Saturday.

Q. Mike and Rodney said earlier in the call that they didn't think there was going to be any NFL games this season. How concerned, how worried are you whether or not the NFL can pull this off safely? After all, they're the only major league that's going to have fans in the stands. The others are all completely empty.

RODNEY HARRISON: I don't really know how to answer that question. Any time you're allowing thousands of people with a chance to gather together, there's a chance of the virus spreading, so I'm not an expert at anything like this. The NFL through training camp they've done a wonderful job of trying to social distance the players, keep them safe, test them and do all those different protocols. I have no idea. Am I concerned once the season starts, will they be able to finish? Of course, what happens if the entire Patriots secondary gets wiped out, will the game against canceled, will it get delayed? You just don't know what's going to happen. But I am happy for at least the start of the NFL season. Not sure if they're going to be able to finish.

MIKE TIRICO: Yeah, and just on my end, from a fan perspective, that's local and regional governments making those decisions and those calls based on their expertise. Far be it for any of us to question what their purview is on these situations, and the situation is different in every part of the country. That's why some teams will have home fans and some teams won't for the early start of that. That's out of our league.

My focus has been what's happening on the football part of that, and from the football perspective after lengthy conversations with the NFL and seeing what they've done procedurally and also significantly and I don't think it's gotten enough attention, conversations with the Premier League, the Bundesliga, other leagues where competition has gone on where there's physical close proximity of the athletes, they have found a comfort zone between the players and the league that they can get the players to the field safely and have a good knowledge as best we can at this point of what their status is regarding COVID-19.

I think the NFL has the longest runway of the major sports in the U.S. to try and figure out a plan, and from what they have shared to this point, I see why they've arrived at the decision that they will be able in their mind to get started safely. None of us can sit here and say we know what's going to happen because none of us thought we'd be in this conversation six months ago. That speculation would just be absurd.

But I think in general they've done what they needed to to get the season started, and I applaud them for getting that done.

SAM FLOOD: The league also has protocols in place that creates a DMZ between whatever fans are in these very few stadiums that'll have very few fans in them. There's a protocol in place where the fans will be far away from the players, so the mixing of people isn't going to take place. So it's very well-thought-through in the rare instances where there will be spectators.

Q. Mike, I know that you've only done I think just the one game of play-by-play with the Ravens back in 2018 up there in LA, but I'm sure you watched Lamar play at Louisville and again last year when he became just this superstar MVP. From the perspective of a broadcaster or play-by-play guy, what is it like to just cover someone who plays the position and a position so important, so radically different from other guys at his position, even some of the best guys at that position?

MIKE TIRICO: Chris hit on it earlier. Both he and Patrick Mahomes, they bring a different energy to the quarterback position and just technically from doing play-by-play, you're much more prepared for a runner, a play to be extended, and it takes you back to Michael Vick and Cam Newton and Russell Wilson and the plays that they've made over the years that are those highlight plays, and you know that can happen on every snap. I love watching Lamar play.

It has come at a time when I think NFL football, as these players have come in, has taken more of a semblance of college football in terms of Xs and Os, and Chris and I covering college and pro the last couple years have that conversation; there's more Saturday football on Sunday afternoon and Sunday night and Monday night than there ever has been, and that's because these players have a "wow" factor. That's why we're seeing Deshaun Watson and Lamar and Patrick come into the league and do these things, and from not just a play-by-play announcer's perspective but as a football fan, it's awesome. It's great. You never know when the next snap might be that play of the year that you'll be seeing over and over and over, and that keeps you on the edge of your seat, and there's nothing like entertainment where the unknown spectacular can happen 15 seconds from now.

Q. For Coach and Rodney, you all talked about the new quarterbacks, what about the old guys and their abilities to traditionally get it done, and any thoughts on the top receivers?

RODNEY HARRISON: Well, I look at the older quarterbacks and I've been around Brady. I know how competitive he is. Drew Brees used to be a teammate of mine out in San Diego. These guys are competitive. They see these new hot young guys come through and they're getting a lot of attention. These guys have been some of the best quarterbacks in the history of the NFL. They have a lot of pride. So these guys are stepping their game up. You see the way Tom, the energy that he brings, Drew Brees we got a chance to cover him the last two years on Thanksgiving, and just his tremendous work ethic, spend time with him, and just everything that they bring.

So these guys, they pay attention to the young quarterbacks, and they're like, hey, don't forget about us, we're a little older and maybe we can't run and scramble and do the things that you can do, but we can still get it done.

But as far as the wide receiver debate, I think it's one of those where you look at I think Julio Jones is the best wide receiver in the National Football League, then you have to go between DeAndre Hopkins and Michael Thomas, but I think those guys are the cream of the crop, just how consistent they've been and what they bring every single week.

Q. Tony and Rodney, are you guys surprised at how the Cam Newton situation ended in Charlotte, and what do you think about the future of the Panthers post-Cam? Could they use McCaffrey too much, and are Charlotte fans in for a number of 2-14 seasons moving forward?

TONY DUNGY: Well, you said something about how they did Cam?

Q. The Cam situation, yeah.

RODNEY HARRISON: I went through a very similar situation where you've been at a place for nine years, and when they have new ownership, they have new coaches, they have whatever it might be, you're going to get a new philosophy. You're going to get people in there that say, hey, we don't want a guy like Cam Newton, we want a change, we want to go in a different direction, and that's exactly what happened. I wish it would have been a little bit more conversation with Cam. I wish they would have maybe communicated just a little bit better with Cam, but Cam is in a really good situation.

I said this months ago, I said the Patriots are crazy. I was very disappointed in them not pursuing Cam because here you get a guy who's extremely motivated, a guy that's hungry, you don't become MVP of this league and get to

the Super Bowl because you're lazy, because you can't play. He can play. He's really good. Yes, he's very immature at times in media, but I think it's all for this purpose. He's getting an opportunity with the best coach in the National Football League, best situation for him, and he has a lot to prove.

It's not just one of those things Belichick comes out and says he's working hard, he's the captain. He has to produce, and he gets his opportunity this Sunday. I'm looking forward to Cam. I think he's going to have success. Like I said before, I think my only concern is they haven't put greatness around him. Julian Edelman is fine, but who else? Who else in the wide receiving corps can they count on?

Q. Tony and Rodney, I'm just wondering, with this craziness of the off-season and limited off-season, do you think the Patriots and Coach Belichick have an advantage over some teams where they have an established program in place for so long?

RODNEY HARRISON: Well, the program -- the system is the system. It's been there. It's going to be there. When you have a coach like Tony Dungy, when you have a Bill Belichick, you have stability but still understand they have a lot of new faces and a level of talent, the Kyle Van Noys and Dante Hightowers, those guys are gone. More so than athleticism and physicality, those guys brought leadership, and that's the challenge when you have young players. Can you find young players that are willing to sacrifice and step up at a young age and become leaders. And that's what needs to happen. They need more of those young guys. Kyle Dugger, the young safety, he's going to be expected to come in and play right away and play multiple positions. And that's his challenge. I had a conversation with him. I asked him how's camp going, he said, it's a lot of different things going on, and I said, hey, you've got to continue to stay in your playbook, it's all part of the program.

But yeah, I think they're going to be challenged a lot in that situation.

Q. The Ravens obviously had a great year last year, but they're looking to take the final step to the Super Bowl. If you put yourself in John Harbaugh's shoes, what are you thinking about and what are you telling the team as you try to take that final step?

CHRIS SIMMS: I mean, I look at the Baltimore Ravens like this: This is the most talented roster in all of football. There's really not a weakness to the football team itself when you look at it. I don't look at any one area and go, oh, my gosh. Oh, they don't get that better, then they're

not going to be a good football team. There's nothing like that. They're unbelievably constructed that way. Lamar Jackson is extremely talented. They're running an offense that the NFL has never seen before.

So that's all cool to watch. But yeah, one of the themes of this year, especially as we get to December, I think is going to be, especially if Baltimore is up there in the rankings, is going to be, oh, Lamar Jackson, can he win a playoff game, he's 0-2 and all that. We all know more goes into that than just one guy, certainly. I think you can point the finger at a few places.

Hey, two years ago they lose a playoff game, they're a young football team. They've got a rookie quarterback. He didn't play his best. And the Chargers got to see that offense for a second time around and were ready to go.

This past year, I think between Harbaugh taking his foot off the gas pedal at the end of the year where basically the Ravens didn't play a meaningful game for three weeks, that hurt them. I think they panicked once they got down to the Tennessee Titans a little bit, and then also I think it showed if there is any flaw to Lamar Jackson's game, it showed, and that's kind of what we saw in that other playoff game, where hey, if our game plan designing and our physicality can't dominate with the run game, okay. If we can't do that, can Lamar continue to progress, which was an unbelievable jump from year one to year two, and I expect another big jump to year three to where, okay, we're not dominating the run game, can we trust Lamar to drop back and throw the ball 38 times and make good decisions and be efficient and move the ball that way. To me that's the last piece of the puzzle.

RODNEY HARRISON: To me that's the most important point right there because we know they can run the football, we know that he can run the football. But in case that run isn't working, that's the question right there. That's the million-dollar question; can he put a team on his back, throw the ball 30 plus times and have success and win football games.

I think the second part about that is not only can he throw the ball, can he throw the ball down the field and have more completions and have more success. I think that's a big part of -- if you're talking about taking the next step as far as Lamar, being able to throw the ball to the wide receivers and not just focus on the tight ends or the backs out of the backfield. Throwing the ball, spreading it around and throwing it outside the numbers, making sure that he can -- those sideline catches, giving the wide receiving receiver the opportunity to catch the ball on the sideline down the field.

THE MODERATOR: Well, thank you very much, everyone, for joining us today. Appreciate it.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

