

NBC Sports Group Media Conference

Thursday, November 5, 2020

Pete Bevacqua

Mike Tirico

Tony Dungy

Cris Collinsworth

Rebecca Lowe

Dale Earnhardt Jr

Eddie Olczyk

Press Conference

CHRIS MCCLOSKEY: Greetings, everyone and welcome to NBC Sports' big event weekend media conference call. This is a special weekend for NBC Sports with numerous high profile events across both days.

Saturday we have the Breeders' Cup Classic beginning at 2:30 p.m. Eastern on NBC. Saturday night, No. 1 Clemson at No. 4 Notre Dame. It's the first time the No. 1 team in the country has been to Notre Dame stadium in 15 years. Coverage begins at 7 p.m. Eastern on NBC.

On Sunday morning it's the last two Premier League champions facing off, Manchester City and Liverpool. Coverage is exclusively streaming on Peacock Premium at 11:30 a.m.

On Sunday afternoon at 3 p.m. Eastern on NBC, the 2020 NASCAR Cup Series champion will be crowned, one of four drivers.

And the big event weekend concludes with Sunday Night Football, the NFL's top two all time passers, Tom Brady and Drew Brees, Buccaneers hosting Saints. It begins with Football Night in America at 7 p.m.

And to talk about this weekend is a truly impressive roster of NBC Sports hosts and analysts. We have Mike Tirico, who handles play-by-play for Notre Dame football and is our host for Football Night in America; Cris Collinsworth, our Sunday Night Football analyst; Tony Dungy, our analyst for both Notre Dame football and Football Night in



America; Dale Earnhardt Jr., NASCAR analyst; Rebecca Lowe, host of our Premier League coverage; and Eddie Olczyk, our Pucks and Ponies analyst who this week will be handicapping the Breeders' Cup.

We'll also be joined by NBC Sports Group chairman Pete Bevacqua. A quick reminder that a transcript of this call will be available in a few hours on nbcSPORTSGROUPPRESSBOX.COM or you can contact one of us in the NBC Sports Group communications department.

But let's begin the call now with opening remarks from NBC Sports Group chairman Pete Bevacqua.

PETE BEVACQUA: Thanks, Chris. I appreciate the introduction. I want to also thank everybody for being on the call today. Certainly going through an interesting, unique, and challenging time in our country's history when you think about the pandemic. Obviously, with our election on Tuesday night and still kind of going into yesterday and today and maybe somewhat of the foreseeable future. We know you're very busy, but just wanted to thank you for taking the time to be with us.

And thankfully we have sports. You think about the passion level of sports around the country over the course of this pandemic, how they have really served maybe more than ever as just a great form of escapism to bring some joy into people's lives around the country and that's really what motivates us and makes this, what we do each and every day, so up lifting. And I've been so really remarkably pleased with the effort of our team across the board during these really, really challenging times. When you think about the great work of a Sam Flood, a Molly Solomon, Fred Gaudelli, Rob Hyland, how we have kept the team united, how we've brought live sports back to the viewing public, and I think in such a remarkable way, and doing all of that while never losing site of the fact that we have to keep our people safe. We're going into these sporting events certainly in a different atmosphere than anyone has ever expected or certainly has ever been trained to. And it's really been a remarkable few months.

And this weekend is a perfect example. And Chris went through it, but you think about what we have in store for us with the Breeders' Cup on Saturday, we have this unbelievable matchup on Saturday night, which is obviously near and dear to my heart, with Clemson coming



into Notre Dame. And you think back to these historic matchups when the No. 1 team in the country came and visited Notre Dame; you think of Miami in '88, the great Charlie Ward FSU team in '93; you think of the Bush Push game of 15 years or so ago when USC came into Notre Dame. And I think this has the ability to be another one of these great iconic Notre Dame football games.

And then we mentioned the Premier League has been so unbelievably successful for us, when you think about the Manchester and Liverpool, that we're going to have that on Peacock. And we have been so unbelievably pleased with the success of Peacock. And we have seen firsthand the power of sports on Peacock and the impact the Premier League has had on the success of Peacock.

And then last but certainly not least, when you talk about an unbelievable sports weekend, we have this great matchup between Drew Brees and Tom Brady and New Orleans at Tampa in Tampa, which is a home game for Cris Collinsworth. So I know he's excited about that.

But we're great that live sports are back, maybe more furiously and feverishly than ever. I think it's been a great moment for NBC Sports and should be a wonderful weekend. And again, wanted to thank all of you for being here with us and wanted to turn it over to a colleague and a dear friend, Mike Tirico. So Mike, take it away.

MIKE TIRICO: Hi, everyone. I'm in South Bend, Indiana. Just got here, getting set for the game. So maybe the signal is not ready. I haven't been here for a three-day lead up for a game in quite some time.

But in any case, thank you, Pete. And hi to everyone. Let me pass the ball around to my friends and coworkers who most of whom I get to work with or see on a regular basis, so it's a nice party-line way to catch up with everyone.

I'll start with Tony Dungy as we get set for this game on Saturday with Clemson and Notre Dame. Tony, we have had a couple of weeks to get a look at Clemson, and then last week without Trevor Lawrence, who many think is the No. 1 player to be ready for the NFL draft next year, they are very fortunate to have an incredibly talented back up, DJ Uiagalelei, who is a true freshman in his second start, first on the road, can come into South Bend and beat the Irish.

TONY DUNGY: Well, he certainly can. If they don't, it certainly won't be his fault. We watched him in his first start be 18 points down and bring his team back. Talking to all the Clemson players yesterday that we talked to and coaches, they said there was no fear, no worry on the sideline. He was the most relaxed guy in the stadium, and

he played lights out. Only nine incomplete passes the whole day and just played great.

So it's going to be a fantastic game. We obviously wish we could see Trevor Lawrence, but DJ Uiagalelei will put on a great performance. He'll be ready to go. And he's got a big challenge with that Notre Dame defense, but it should be very, very exciting.

MIKE TIRICO: Yeah, Notre Dame's built up all year for this game. They have even spoken about it the last couple of weeks, which is atypical for coaches, but Brian Kelly's embraced that, looking ahead and what the players talk about, that elephant in the room that's the matchup with No. 1 Clemson. And Pete hit it perfectly earlier. This is such a rare treat to have No. 1 at a stadium that's been around for 91 years and has all the history that Notre Dame has. So we're looking forward to that Saturday night.

And then Sunday night it's going to be a tremendous matchup with the two quarterbacks who have thrown for the most touchdown passes and the most yards in the history of the National Football League, Tom Brady and Drew Brees with Tampa and New Orleans. And Cris, obviously, there's a lot beyond those guys, and their wide receiving cores are adjusting and getting right, finally, but here we are at the midway point of the season. What do you think of this as a measuring stick of these two teams as they play the second time around?

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: New Orleans got after them pretty good the first time. But that team that they played, Tom Brady's team, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, is not the Tom Brady team their going to see coming back in. It's remarkable to see now how many more plays that resemble or directly copy the New England Patriots that are in this offense at this time. I mean, this thing now is really starting to take shape around what Tom Brady likes to do, what his feel is for this offense. But you go, you know, on the other side of the ball, and certainly what Drew Brees has been able to put together with this win streak, what Alvin Kamara has been this season. Arguably the best player in the league. I think he's the best running back in football right now.

And they have done it all. Emmanuel Sanders hasn't been out. He's been on the COVID list. Michael Thomas basically has been a non-factor during the course of this season. But you begin to see that both of these teams are starting to get right. Both of these teams are starting to get that offense geared in exactly the way that they want it, and their guys back healthy. Neither of the receiving units have really been close to being a hundred percent. And as we come screaming down the stretch here in the National

Football League, these are two teams that are going to be right there sitting at the top and it wouldn't surprise me at all if one of them ends up in the Super Bowl.

MIKE TIRICO: And wouldn't be surprised if this isn't an NFC Championship preview with the way these two teams are. And one of them, whoever doesn't win the division, is going to slide down to a five seed and their road becomes very difficult. So these head-to-heads, especially if it's a sweep for New Orleans, would be really, really huge to look at. So that's Sunday night.

Then the other type of football, the Premier League, Pete mentioned earlier how they have continued to go through the difficulties that England has been dealing with COVID-19 as well. Liverpool and Manchester City -- and every Sunday when I get to the studio for football night, I always love to pop into Studio 3 and talk five minutes of Premier League with Rebecca and the Robbies or Tim Howard, who has been a great addition to our team this year, and my love of soccer is only heightened when I get a chance to talk about it.

And Rebecca, this match with Liverpool and City really brings two teams that had a remarkable 2018-2019 season that Man City won on their great run, and then Liverpool had the extraordinary year last year.

But as we hit their meeting this year, first time in a fixture, it's a little bit different because Liverpool has still delivered, yet City hasn't been what we have come accustomed to the last year or so.

REBECCA LOWE: You're absolutely right. Pep Guardiola doesn't normally stay at clubs longer than three years and he's a lot longer than that at Manchester City and he's in the final year of his contract and he just feels like a different manager and therefore, when you look at the Premier League table, Manchester City, this great powerhouse of English football are sitting in 10th position going into this game. Now it is at home. It is against Liverpool, who over the years they have developed this huge rivalry just based on success, really. I mean, if you rewind the clock 10 years or even further, this has never been a rivalry. But this is all purely based on recent modern day success.

Liverpool, as you say, they have kept going. They haven't had it all their own way. They have lost what most people see as the best defender in world football, Virgil van Dijk, to a knee ligament injury, out for probably the rest of the season. They have some problems in their back line because of that plus other injuries. So they're having to bring in some youngsters, some young kids who have never played in the Premier League before, which that's

hard enough going into a Bournemouth or a Bryson or a Bermy, but to go into the Champions back line at the age of 19, like somebody like Reese Williams, who may well play this weekend, is a huge amount to ask.

So Liverpool are not perfect. They do have a new striker up front that they got in the summer Diogo Jota, for around 45 million dollars, who has very much hit the ground running with goal after goal after hat trick after hat trick. He'll probably play against Manchester City.

And as I say, it is at Manchester City, so although there are no fans, there is still a slight mental home advantage, but it's only slight. So as difficult as this always is to call, Manchester City at home should still feel like their favorites, but the form and the table, Mike, as you say, tells you otherwise. But when these two get together, when you have Pep Guardiola and Jurgen Klopp, arguably, probably not even arguably, the two best managers in football right now anywhere on the globe, it is must-watch television.

MIKE TIRICO: And it feels like the rest of the Premier League is rooting for City to win at home because Liverpool seems always difficult to beat. So if they a couple of losses on their card in the first eight matches, that would change the feel of the whole season. So I was super excited for that on Peacock. And Rebecca will answer any questions about that in a little bit.

And Sunday, the NASCAR season comes to an end, and Dale Earnhardt Jr. is on the line, as you know.

Junior man, when I saw the season play out and it was at Indy, you thought there was no way Kevin Harvick wouldn't be part of the final four with nine wins, right? But he's not. The final four is Denny Hamlin, Brad Keselowski and Joey Logano, a couple guys who won the Cup Series title, and then Chase Elliott. His youth, his excitement winning last week, his popularity just like his dad when he drove has a lot of folks thinking Chase Elliott has a chance. What are you looking for as we get down to the Final Four in Phoenix this weekend?

DALE EARNHARDT JR.: Yeah, I think that Chase Elliott's definitely not -- I wouldn't call him a dark horse. We have just never seen Chase in this situation to win a championship, but yet here he is and he's coming off of a win at Martinsville. That was kind of a dominant win. So he's going to have a real good shot at winning his first championship on Sunday and that Elliott name has a ton of history in our sport, so there will be a lot of folks I think pulling for Chase.

But honestly, the four drivers, Chase Elliott, Denny Hamlin, Brad Keselowski, Joey Logano, I don't think anybody in

terms of speed or performance throughout the year has a clear edge. I tend to look at the mentality of that driver, his attitude, how he's handled stressful situations like this, high pressure situations like this in the past, and the guy that stands out to me when you go that route is Joey Logano. He does everything he needs to do to win and he doesn't apologize for it. And he can get aggressive, physical on the racetrack, and he does doesn't seem to crumble under pressure. I think that -- so I have to kind of put him, I think, in the favorite for me, just slightly over Chase Elliott. I know Denny Hamlin has had an amazing season, but his performance in the playoffs has been just a little bit off. He's not concerned, but it's hard for me in my position not to be concerned about that. And Brad Keselowski, his whole motto this playoffs is, Why not us? I hear you. I hear you, Brad. But the speed for that team just seems to be a little bit below Joey Logano, his teammate.

But it will be an interesting -- it's the first time that we're going to go to Phoenix to crown our champion. We have traditionally done this at Homestead in Florida. This is a pretty wild racetrack, the restarts, they get four, five, six wide down in turn one and two on these restarts. If we have late restarts in this race, which I expect we will, it's going to be pretty dramatic. You won't want to miss it.

MIKE TIRICO: NASCAR used to be it all comes down to Florida. Now it all comes down to Arizona, and maybe that applies elsewhere this week. Ed O, my man, I know you got some bets to make because you got racing going, two days worth at Keeneland. The Breeders' Cup is so great every year, brings the best horses in the world together to wrap up the season, and to have it in the space in our country where the horse industry, really all the horses almost get their start in Keeneland, amazing breeding area for horses from those beautiful farm country. And their Keeneland is just a special place to host the Breeders' Cup and it's headlined on Saturday afternoon by the Classic, Eddie. So I know the whole card is good, but just give us a little focus on what you're looking for with the variety of horses we have who are pointing to the Classic, which could well decide Horse of the Year this year.

EDDIE OLCZYK: Yeah, great to be with everybody and we're going to miss you here, but we're going to man the ship down here in Lexington. Yeah, it's incredible. I mean, our relationship with horse racing, and particularly the Breeders' Cup, is second to none. I mean, we are, we have a lot of personnel on site and just looking forward to incredible racing. 14 Breeders' Cup races, 31 million dollars on the line. As you mentioned, Mike, all headed to the Breeders' Cup Classic, 6 million on the line. And a little tie in with Sunday Night Football. The late Tom Benson and his wife Gayle into horse racing very much. They have Tom's d'Etat, the No. 4 horse in the Breeders' Cup Classic.

So it might be a daily double when it comes to pigskins and horses for the New Orleans Saints and winning the Breeders' Cup Classic. So keep an eye on Tom's d'Etat owned by the Benson family. It is all about Bob Baffert, as you know, Mike, with having three horses in this race out of the 10. He has the No. 8 horse, Improbable; the No. 9 horse, Authentic, who won this year's Kentucky Derby ran on the first Saturday of September; and he also has Maximum Security changed to his barn, who crossed the line first in last year's Kentucky Derby and was disqualified, and rightfully so, to 17th. He is now in his barn.

So he has three horses that will be, I would say, probably two of the top-3 favorites coming into the Breeders' Cup Classic. So it should be a one heck of a weekend, lots of drama, horses from all over the world. And considering we are living in a worldwide pandemic, to have these horses come in, being quarantined, their handlers being here, I think it speaks volumes to what people think about this great game and this great sport, and just truly proud to be a part of it this weekend. And we got a betting field coming up on NBCSN here in about an hour and a half. We have coverage tomorrow on Future Stars Friday at 2 o'clock. We'll have five Breeders' Cup races, and then we'll be on both networks NBCSN at noon on Saturday and then switch over to the big network and be the appetizer for Clemson and Notre Dame on Saturday night.

MIKE TIRICO: We'll be in the booth in South Bend early watching. I'm glad you mentioned that too because I think for all of us, and I obviously haven't been to England and the Premier League, but you've seen what happened there, but in all these other sports just the sacrifice, obviously our crew, our team, we are so appreciative of that, but also the athletes, the coaches, the people who run all of these sports in general, to have, as you say, during a worldwide pandemic, all these championship events still going on and to have them all fall on one weekend, I think it's just, it's a great opportunity to step back as a lot of us are doing, from 30,000 feet, and taking stock of what we have and what we are appreciative of in our country and our lives.

To have all these champions in sports; Notre Dame, Clemson, Brady and Brees, and the last couple of championships of the Premier League and the championship on the line with NASCAR and a couple of drivers who have won the Cup title, and as we've said, the Breeders' Cup Classic with Bob Baffert and the other horses involved, what a great championship weekend this is.

I know all of you want to get in questions, so we will turn it back over, and I guess we can open it up to questions for any and all of us.



Q. Pete, understanding that you have a lot of people at NBC that you would be coordinating this with, but from your understanding, how will NBC navigate having these high profile sporting events with the prospect of significant breaking political news happening during one of these events?

PETE BEVACQUA: Yeah, thanks. We have talked about that pretty consistently kind of in the lead-up to the election, obviously through Tuesday and then thinking about this weekend and what may or may not happen this weekend. I was actually on a big back-and-forth over the course of last night into this morning with Sam Flood and Fred Gaudelli talking about what changes we may need to make during halftime of Sunday Night Football. Obviously major breaking national news is always of critical importance and we will break in accordingly. The good news and the added benefit we have and maybe a bit of what's advantageous to us compared to some others who are invested in sports as much as we are is we have MSNBC and CNBC and now we have a 24-hour news portal through Peacock that's available to, as you heard maybe in our earnings call, over 22 million people, so we're well covered in that regard. We'll balance it. A lot of it, we have a lot of experience in terms of people handling those decisions, we'll break away as needed, we'll try to minimize any interruptions of these great sporting events, but it's always just a bit of a balancing act and that very well may occur at some point over the course of this weekend. So timely question for sure.

Q. Pete, just what, with sports returning over the past four or five months what has been your impression of the ratings so far? Are they about where you thought they would be for all sports or slightly down due to the pandemic and just trying to get your views on NFL at mid season with how the Sunday Night Football ratings have performed?

PETE BEVACQUA: It's all relatively speaking. Sports have continued to perform so really unbelievably well and you think about the power of the NFL and Sunday Night Football. And where we have been the No. 1 show in prime time television for nine years in a row and hopefully we'll hit the decade mark, we have every expectation that we will this year. I think when you think about sports, you go back to the pandemic and I think back to when I was at the players championship in March, left there on a Wednesday and by Friday the entire sports world had come to a grinding halt and we, like everyone else, were scrambling to put up meaningful content and to search our archives to see what could be of interest and we had the great cooperation of the leagues in doing so. But then when live sports came back, really led by NASCAR and the PGA TOUR, we did what we do best, which is bring live

sports to the viewing public at a time when people need maybe needed live sports as much or more than ever.

But then when everything started to come back, I think there was a bit of a sense where there were some live sports and so many live sports occurring during times when people weren't used to it. So we saw that very firsthand knowledge and firsthand experience with the U.S. Open. The U.S. Open being contested always on Father's Day now to move that into September, people weren't used to having the U.S. Open golf in September and now it was going up against college football and the NFL.

You had the NHL playoffs occurring at a time when they usually didn't. And the NBA and Major League Baseball. And then with the advent of the college football season, which was stop and go and obviously with, particularly with two of the Power 5 conferences waiting to start play.

So it's been a difficult time, I think, for the industry to navigate, but certainly for the viewer to navigate I think it's been confusing. So I think we're starting to see a return to normalcy. I think the election was kind of a pivotal moment. We have seen the skyrocketing of cable news ratings. Now that the election is nearing an end I think people will go back to kind of normal consumption patterns.

So we think we have weathered the storm, of course it's been difficult at times, but we feel like we're coming through this in a good place. We really believe with the NFL schedule, particularly with us having the flex schedule, should be unbelievably strong as we enter into the second half of the season. We think the game we have Sunday night that Cris talked about is going to be so powerful. So we feel good about where we are and now we're heading into what I believe will be the busiest two years in the history of NBC Sports. When you think about all of our property partners, Tokyo the summer games in 2021, followed so soon there after by Beijing in February and, oh by the way, what do we have right in between those is a Super Bowl in L.A.

So it's an exciting time, ratings have been challenged at times, but the power of sports and the overall sports performance during this time period continues to be relatively strong.

Q. I have a question for Tony and Cris about the game on Sunday night. Obviously it's going to be the debut for Antonio Brown with Tom Brady. And Tom Brady seems to have put a lot of energy into his relationship with Antonio Brown last year and this year, inviting him to stay with him and really going to the mat for Antonio Brown. I'm just curious, why do you think Tom Brady is investing so much into Antonio Brown?



CRIS COLLINSWORTH: I'll take the first shot at this one. He needs him. There's no question as you look at this offense, the one missing element, if you think back to all the great New England teams, they always had the Danny Amendola's, the Julian Edelman's, that slot receiver who could just get open quickly one-on-one. So you really couldn't blitz Tom Brady because of those one-on-one assignments in the middle of the field.

Now the Bucs have been trying a little bit of everybody in that slot position. They have had their main receivers Chris Godwin can do a lot of stuff in there, Mike Evans now has become a little bit of the slot player, which I just wasn't used to seeing him playing there, and you know what, he's really good. He's added almost a tight end kind of element inside there.

But when you get right down to it, if the Bucs are going to win a World Championship, which is what this is all about, right? You don't bring Tom Brady to town unless you're thinking Super Bowl. Antonio Brown in that slot, if he is what he used to be, which, who knows, but if he is what he used to be or anything remotely close to it, he could well be that missing piece. He could be the piece that puts them over the top in this offense and I honestly, I can't wait to watch it.

TONY DUNGY: I believe you're right Cris, I think Tom Brady and the Bucs are thinking playoffs, they're not thinking this week. They would love to win this game and get that one up on New Orleans, but this is for January when you're playing those big games and it's tight and you need that one play to win it, is this a guy who can add that one play at the right time. They're going to have about eight weeks to get the timing down. We saw Tom and Gronk, we saw Tom and Mike Evans early on in the season kind of misfiring. There will be some misfires with Brown. I thought he was breaking this way, I thought he was going to come out at this angle. But they want that timing to be there in the playoffs.

Q. I know you mentioned Manchester City being in 10th place in your open, but what surprised you most so far of this season?

REBECCA LOWE: Well, quite a few things. Down to, I think, a lack of fans, it's really taking the Premier League into a different direction. I think what surprised me most is the affect of no fans on both end of the field. So I have spoken a lot to Tim Howard about this and he assures me that when you're a defender or a goal keeper, as he was, the support in the stadium gets on your back and puts you under pressure in a more positive way than if you're a striker.

So, if you're a defender, you're kept on your toes, you're kept focused by the crowds, so maybe you can see field goals, maybe you're on your game more.

If you're a striker and there's no crowd, if you miss three chances, you're not getting the crowd on your back now. Now you used to have abuse hauled at you if you're a striker and you missed three in a row. Now you're not getting that, which means that the confidence level of the strikers are staying high because nobody can bring them down and then they score on the fourth chance, which perhaps beforehand that never happened. Which is why I think we're getting so many goals. So I'm kind of surprised at that as a big picture sort of answer your question, but other than that I've also been surprised at the slow start that so many clubs are making who normally are atop by now. The Manchester City's, the Manchester United's even Arsenal at times, Liverpool themselves they lost 8-2. Against -- or 7-2 against Aston Villa. So are there are stories in this season's Premier League -- we know it's a soap opera, we know it's always been a soap opera and every single week we get served up amazing story lines. This season, with all the added things going on in and around the league, it's just ratcheted up another notch. And the surprises are coming from the way the goals are being scored, who is scoring them and how many are being scored, which has led to such crazy results at times. But we're all here for it.

Q. Pete, or anybody else, obviously with the challenge for the pandemic having going from no events and then events with no fans now we have some fans. But, Pete, from a production side how hard has it been to integrate kind of the fan back into the show and is it any more difficult now than it was when NASCAR, when you guys started the NASCAR up this season, with probably your first events with fans and how -- if you want to just kind of take me through how to integrate those shots back in and everything else.

CHRIS MCCLOSKEY: Chris McCloskey here, I apologize. Pete and actually Eddie Olczyk have both had to leave the call around 12:30. So apologize about that. However, given your question there on NASCAR maybe Dale Junior could handle that. Dale, are you there?

MIKE TIRICO: Before you get going on the NASCAR things, since I've been at a bunch of these I'll jump in on the fan deal, because I've seen different parts of it. When I was at Indy for the NASCAR weekend along with the Indy Car, there were no fans there. We have done shows from the studio like the Kentucky Derby with no fans. We have done a Saints game with Cris with about 500 people in the Superdome and Tony and have I experienced 10,500 fans at Notre Dame stadium.

So I think each one is different and unique and obviously the fan factor is missing, just from the ambience, from the juice in the building, the excitement, I've had more players, more athletes and more sports tell me we have to bring our own energy, we have to bring our own enthusiasm, because the crowd isn't there. I don't know if, other than Rebecca's point about the goals in the Premier League, I don't know if it's affecting the performance of the athletes on the field nearly as much, but I do think the environment has impacted going into those games and getting started.

And the last point I'll make, from a television standpoint, crossing over a bunch of these sports, I think it's just all unique to the events. When there's been a crowd at a college football game we have shown them. We have shown the 10,000 at Notre Dame, we have shown the band, the band being there actually added to the ambience, more than any of the other sports, made that missing group of fans seem a bit smaller than it otherwise would be.

I think it's something we're going to see for awhile, I think we have all adjusted to it from a production standpoint and I think when the fans do come back I think you'll see them celebrated and appreciated even more within parts of the broadcast. So that's just from the overall perspective, but I know Junior's been to a bunch of races where there have been fans in the stands at NASCAR and just curious what you've seen on that.

DALE EARNHARDT JR.: Yeah, we have had races where there were none and races where there were a select few fans. I think the drivers absolutely prefer having someone in the grandstands to celebrate what they're seeing and even if it's just a very small crowd of people to have some kind of reaction. It is the strangest thing for these drivers -- and this has all come from drivers telling us this -- they work for three and a half hours to win that race and they get out of the car to nothing. It is the strangest feeling for them to climb out of the car right there on the flag, right there on the flag stand or the finish line, to get the checkered flag and wave it to nobody.

So while that was obviously all a necessity and we worked through that, when they did get the opportunity to get fans back on the track, no matter how small the number just any kind of energy off of that crowd is really, really appreciated by the drivers.

So, like Mike said, I think it's really put into perspective just what the fans bring to the event. NASCAR's always been very appreciative of the fans, but I don't think we'll ever, I don't think beyond this we could ever take them for granted because it's completely obvious to all of us what they bring

to the event with energy and passion and I believe it does affect the performance or it does affect the vibe and the energy and how the race is played out. And what the drivers are going to do, the decisions they're going to make and the risks they're willing to take.

When you have that crowd and those people, you can see them, coming off the corner, when you take the lead, and your fans are on their feet cheering that moment, in that race, when that's missing, it certainly has to affect the drivers quite a bit.

Q. Tom Brady has been an incredible bright spot as far as TV ratings this year. As Pete said, some TV ratings have been down, but Brady's Bucs have really performed great in terms of TV numbers. Why do you think that Tom and the Bucs are such a compelling TV story this year?

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: I think you know it's coming to an end, you know. I think, you know, when I watch him play right now, that's not what pops through my head. Like some people at the end of their career you go, oh, boy, okay, let's, this may well be the last time I see this guy play.

We had a conversation last night and I, if you just took it off of the tape that I've watched in the last three or four weeks here, you would, he legitimately could go to 44, 45, 46 years old. If he chooses to retire at this point, it will not be based on what you see on tape from Tom Brady. And yet in your brain you're going, here's a guy that's won six Super Bowls and he's in his 40s, is this the last time I'm going to see him play. But I also think there's that little bit of a thing and we all knew it was going to come, was it Belichick or was it Brady. Right? And you knew it was going to be a part of the discussion. No matter which way this thing went.

And to see Tom Brady go down there, lose the opening day against the Saints, and just sort of the slow progression of what this offense is beginning to look like under Tom Brady, it's starting to look a heck of a lot more like what he was doing in New England and now I think the excitement of what could be, right -- like they asked me to pick top-5 and all that sort of stuff, but it's not where they are today -- but when you see the progression of what this team is doing and what it could be, at the end of the season and throw Antonio Brown into the mix, it's pretty darn interesting at that point.

MIKE TIRICO: I'll just make it simple here. Most scrutinized position in all of sports, greatest champion at that position, did it in one place for so long, still at a high level and going to do it somewhere else. It's taking Bruce

Springsteen taken him away from the E Street Band and moving him to Maroon 5, like all of a sudden Maroon 5 is like, oh, my God, are you serious. You know, it's just that you're taking greatness and you're moving it somewhere else and you want to see, is it him, was it where he was, and I want to see if he can go win another one somewhere else.

So the fact that everybody's familiar with him, the fact that the opponents have kind of lined up pretty well given their schedule this year, everybody wants to go, oh, oh, it's Brady playing against Rogers, yeah, I want to see that. Oh, it's Brady going to play against the Raiders, which should have been a Sunday night game, now it's Brady against the Giants, it's Brees the second time, every time he plays -- and by the way, in a couple weeks there's a Mahomes game -- there's just something magical about him and you can't say that about many athletes in any sport, especially the fact that he's doing it here at the back end of his career, with something to prove, and that pick 199 sixth round chip still on his shoulder. I think that's why it's must see TV every time he gets on the field.

And no disrespect to Maroon 5 fans, I'm sorry I didn't mean to knock them like that. (Laughing.)

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: Maroon 5?

MIKE TIRICO: I know. I don't know why I picked that, but (laughing.)

Q. NFL big picture, you look at the race this year, Saints, Bucs, Seahawks, Steelers, Chiefs Ravens, they have all made a trade or signed a guy to help shore things up or are you guys noticing maybe more teams kind of trying to keep up with the Jones near the traded line and make some of these splashy moves that these franchises maybe aren't all that known for.

TONY DUNGY: Well I personally don't think it's keeping up with the Jones, I think what you're seeing is there aren't complete teams. Everybody's got holes. And everybody's gone through seven, eight weeks and saying, I really want to make a playoff run, Tampa, I need another big play receiver. I need a pass rusher in Seattle. I need this, I need that. And it's wide open.

So it's not like, hey, we're sitting here and we can't catch some of these other teams, but I think teams realize what they need and they're going out to get it to try to make this run. So that's the one thing I've noticed, that every team you look at, no matter how well they're playing you say, boy, there's some holes here. They would be great except for this. And I think those teams are trying to fix that coming down the stretch.

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: I think you have a couple of things to talk about. One is you have older quarterbacks Brady, Brees, Roethlisberger won't appreciate me putting him in that category, but those kind of guys, and you realize that that window's a little bit short, right? You don't know how many more swings at the plate you get with that high-quality player at that position.

And then you also have, which we have never really had before, the other side of that spectrum which are these young players on those rookie contracts like a Lamar Jackson, where they don't take up very much cap and you can afford to take a couple of big swings for a defensive player or make a trade or take on some salary that maybe you wouldn't have been willing to do otherwise.

But I'll say this, if you're from Pittsburgh, that was two of the most impressive physical performances back-to-back that I've seen from what they did. Watching them in Tennessee, I was like these two teams, Tennessee and Pittsburgh, no way they're coming back a week later and being able to play to that level. They were trying to kill each other out there.

And it ended up being true of the Tennessee, they got beat in Cincinnati. Pittsburgh, on the other hand, went to Baltimore, a game every bit as physical, we know the rivalry, we know the intensity of that thing, and to go in there and pull off that one as well? To me that jumped Pittsburgh to another level in my mind. And I still don't think that their offense is close to where they're going to be at the end of this thing, I just don't.

MIKE TIRICO: And I'll just chime in quick that I think people are quicker to hit the reset button in the NFL. They're quicker to cut losses, teams are also trying to add, as you say, once they see they're in a window where they're going to have a chance, I think they're willing to add pieces. It's almost, it's not where baseball used to be at the trade deadline, but it's much more of that mentality than ever. The fascinating part of that is with the salary cap that will go down next year, how is that impacting some of these decisions. And there's not a lot of a tolerance to sit there in the middle ground. If you're not building around a young quarterback and a new head coach, chances are you're selling off assets to be in position to draft in the top 10 to get one of those elite quarterbacks or young quarterbacks and start a rebuild quickly. Because we're seeing Arizona, in a couple of years, has turned themselves into a 5-2 team with a chance to go 6-2 here against Miami this week. So I think that the reset button has come quicker for teams because the chance to get it turned around seems to be quicker than it was five or ten years ago. So I think that's part of the willingness on the

back end where, I have assets, I don't think I'm a playoff team, let me sell off this asset to see if I can get to the top of the draft line a little bit sooner.

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: And those quarterback assets in college football coming up in this year's draft are pretty amazing.

MIKE TIRICO: Exactly.

CHRIS MCCLOSKEY: Well, thanks everyone, for joining us today, and a big thanks to Pete Bevacqua, Tony Dungy, Cris Collinsworth, Rebecca Lowe, Dale Earnhardt Jr. Eddie Olczyk and Mike Tirico for hosting. Again, big event weekend, Breeders' Cup Classic, No. 1 Clemson at Notre Dame, Manchester City/Liverpool NASCAR Cup Championship, and Sunday Night Football Bucs hosting the Saints. Tune in to NBC this weekend. Thank you, everyone.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports....