

NBC Sports Group Media Conference

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Al Michaels
Cris Collinsworth
Michele Tafoya
Fred Gaudelli

Press Conference

DAN MASONSON: Good afternoon, everybody. Welcome to today's call. NBC Sports will bookend this NFL season kicking it off next Thursday, September 9th with the Cowboys at the Bucs, and then crowning the next champion at Super Bowl LVII in Los Angeles in February.

Joining us on the call today, the on-air team of Al Michaels and Cris Collinsworth who begin their 13th season together in the SNF booth, and Michele Tafoya who is in her 11th NBC Sunday Night Football season, and will return on the sidelines this year.

Executive producer of Sunday Night Football is Fred Gaudelli who begins his 32nd season as the lead producer for of NFL Primetime game. Each will give an opening comment and then we'll take your questions.

With that, Fred Gaudelli will kick it off.

FRED GAUDELLI: Thanks, Dan. I'll be brief. It's always a great season when you get to kick it off, as we will on Thursday the 9th in Tampa, with the Super Bowl champion Bucs and the Cowboys, and then end it at the Super Bowl at SoFi in Los Angeles on February the 13th.

Just really excited about our schedule this year. We start out with a bunch of just excellent match-ups, and of course the big one, Tom Brady going back to Foxboro on October the 3rd with the Bucs taking on the Pats.

Hopefully the delta variant is going to cooperate and start settling down a little bit. Everybody will feel good about being back in these stadiums, and it'll be football as we once knew it.

AL MICHAELS: I love being a part of this show. Continuity is so huge. We're talking about how long you've been



doing it and the rest of us, so it's my 21st year working with Fred, 22nd with our director Drew Esocoff, who is the Steven Spielberg of live television. Trust me, he's phenomenal. 13th with Cris, going back to the Monday Night years, 14th with Michele, and so many of our production engineering people have been there from the get-go.

We're pretty much one big extended family, driven every week to put on the best product, and once again, the league has given us a fabulous schedule. You can't help but, as Fred said, focus in on week 4. Tom Brady goes back to Foxboro and the buzz that that will generate all that week.

And then you come off of that and you would think that there would be a letdown, and the next week's game is Buffalo at Kansas City, a rematch of last year's AFC Championship game.

The stadiums are going to be full. Hopefully last season becomes a distant memory and a one-off, and I'm just excited to get it started next Thursday.

Partner, slide on in here and take it over.

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: You know, the opening is just fantastic. For us to get a chance to do Tampa and Dallas right off the bat, so much intrigue, not only with Tampa with Tom Brady and what that team could possibly end up doing, but I think that Dak Prescott probably is the most compelling opening day story that we've seen.

Here's a guy coming off the ankle. He doesn't practice because of the shoulder, and now he comes in against the world champs and the defense that shut down Patrick Mahomes. That's pretty good stuff.

Then on the other side you have Matthew Stafford taking over for the Rams. I've been watching a lot of tape on him, and he has some magic in him. He really does. He has some big-play ability that the Rams have not produced here lately, so that one is going to be interesting to watch.

Then we'll get to talk about Andy Dalton and Justin Fields and all that goes on with that game, as well.

For us, opening weekend is going to be a lot about the



quarterbacks. It's going to be a lot about some teams that have some real opportunities to win world championships, too. With that, I'll turn it over to Michele Tafoya, our favorite on our crew.

MICHELE TAFOYA: Well, thanks, Cris. I feel this way every year, just excited and privileged to be part of this group because this group is stellar and kind of astonishing.

It's nice to be back on the field again. We went all last year sideline reporters not being on the field. We were in what they call the moat, which was that first row of stands.

There were some pluses and minuses, but I have to say, at our preseason game on Sunday in Atlanta it felt good to be back on the field, being able to talk to people face to face, albeit from six feet apart.

But I'm looking forward to that. And like Fred, fingers crossed, I'm very hopeful that that's going to continue and that things are going to settle in here for fans to be able to enjoy the game and for us to be able to bring the same product to the screen that we always do.

Q. As you are well aware, there's been speculation about whether you will continue after this season doing the Super Bowl. Have you given any thought to your future beyond this season?

AL MICHAELS: Not really, because it's a long season. I know there's a lot of stuff that's already been out there, but frankly I have chosen to just concentrate on what's directly ahead of me right now. And I've been doing this, as you know, for a long time. Still love doing it.

I don't know what the future holds, and that is the truth. I mean, as we go through the season and we get toward the end of it, I think there will be a little bit more clarity, see how I feel about certain things. But all I know is I just want to make this, which is year 36 for me on primetime football, the best, and then we'll see what happens.

I just have not come to any conclusions at this particular point.

Q. As you know, over the decades, there have been people who have been around as long as you who have always lost their fast ball. I've never seen anyone accuse you of that. How do you personally feel about where your game stands these days?

AL MICHAELS: Well, I mean, if I begin to feel that I can't do it the way I have to do it and want to do it and have done it, I think I'll be the first to know.

I think if all of a sudden it just doesn't click for me the way it has, I should be the first to know. Believe me, I'm not going to just play out some sort of a string to set some sort of a record or be a burden on anybody.

As long as I feel like I can get there as quickly as I have to, can do the job to a certain degree, and certainly I get a lot of feedback from the people who really know me and work with me, and they get it, too. I want them to be, and they have been very, very honest.

At this particular point, I feel good. I feel good physically, I feel good mentally, and hopefully that continues. You never know what's around the corner, but for right now, I feel great.

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: It's never been the fast balls that worry me about AI, it's the knuckle balls and curve balls that's always been my concern.

Q. Fred, first of all, are you guys introducing any new cameras or other production elements this year to the show that haven't been there in the past or enhancing anything that had been there in the past that you're going to try up a notch?

FRED GAUDELLI: Well, we're going to add the line-to-gain cameras. We haven't had that in the past, so those will be added for this season.

I'm hoping at some point in the season that we'll have a second camera on SkyCam that would be an 8K camera where we'd be able to do some really great isolation of offensive and defensive linemen from that SkyCam angle.

Not ready at the moment, but I'm hopeful that at least halfway through the season we'll be moving to that.

Q. Obviously we've seen so many of the shallow depth of field cameras, the cinematic look come into NFL and football coverage. Are you guys going to be utilizing those this year?

FRED GAUDELLI: You know, that's a great -- I figured I'd get this question, so Drew Esocoff, our director that AI mentioned, we spent a lot of time studying these cameras in the off-season, and obviously you see them now on every single event. Call me old fashioned, but I just like shots that are in focus, and I think one of the issues with that camera is sometimes the subject will go out of focus and the background will come into focus.

Not to blast anybody else's show, but it's just not consistent enough, and it doesn't match the look of the other cameras.

At this point Drew and I really don't have any plans to utilize, so I guess that's my long-winded answer to your question.

Q. Obviously in a Super Bowl year you guys always look as a marker to kind of boost levels and take things to the next step. How much are you guys looking at this year as a marker from a production standpoint and a technology standpoint since you have the Super Bowl this year?

FRED GAUDELLI: Well, I mean, the Super Bowl affords you the opportunity to perhaps incorporate more things than you would in a normal season.

I think at the end of the day we just want to do it better, and if there is new technology that allows us to make the game more enjoyable or make it more understandable or make the experience of the viewer just better, we would obviously do it.

But I don't know that that's any different than any other season we would do it. The Super Bowl does afford you some opportunities you wouldn't have in a normal season, but for us, I think the operative word is better, not different.

Q. Cris, a couple quick ones for you if you don't mind. First of all, the Patriots made the decision to go with Mac Jones; what do they need to do to be successful with a rookie quarterback?

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: The one thing that I find interesting about that is I think they'll get back to their offense, which they created an offense last year for Cam, but when I watch Mac this year, it looked like -- I don't want to say it looked like Tom Brady, but it looked like Tom Brady's offense. It looked like Josh McDaniel's offense, and with the two tight end set now, I think that there's a certain comfort factor that goes with that.

I didn't think it was a particularly tough decision. I thought Mac really did win the job. Whether or not the other factors played into it or not I don't know, but Cam is such a big personality and has such a presence -- I think you always have to worry about does the young guy really get a chance to lead if Cam is still there.

I don't know if that was a factor for the Patriots. It would have been a factor for me. I like the decision. I thought it was the right decision. I think it starts from a platform of growth and opportunity for the Patriots, which is kind of where they started with Tom Brady, too.

Q. I guess my question is what are in general some

things that teams need to do to be successful when they have a rookie quarterback?

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: Play great defense, run the football, have a simple scheme. You know, Mac has made some pretty sophisticated throws. I think of that back shoulder to the tight end that he made in this most recent game. He doesn't look to me like a guy who's out of his element. Some of the other rookie quarterbacks I think still have a little bit of growth to go as far as the reading the defenses and making those kinds of NFL type throws.

But I think Mac is that, and he has the big-game experience. I mean, what is it that you could throw at him that he hasn't seen in some way, shape, or form? He comes out of the system where defenses have to throw every single curve ball they can think of at Alabama in order to compete.

I mean, he just looks so calm and in control and making the right throws. If you didn't know he was a rookie, you wouldn't even be asking that question.

I think they're just going to play offense. I don't think they're going to water it down. I think they're going to play.

Q. Cris, you've known Belichick for a long time, obviously as a broadcaster and just in football. He was really aggressive this off-season in free agency in that he went and got a first-round quarterback. What's your reaction to how aggressive Belichick was this year?

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: It was different. You know, it was definitely different. But I thought they played on the minus side of the ledger a season ago because of all their COVID opt-outs and various things that happened, having to change their offense to accommodate Cam and some of the different things that happened.

I think, and maybe I'm wrong on this, I thought there was a feeling of let's get back to Patriot football, let's get back to playing great defense, let's play the man-to-man coverage, let's go two tight ends, let's run the football, let's go play action, let's find a quarterback that fits that mold, and I thought they did all of that.

Jonnu Smith is an exciting tight end. Hunter Henry is an exciting tight end. They get the play from their receivers that they're hoping for, I'm sure. This is a team that can be very competitive.

It's a tough division. Miami wins 10, Buffalo is tough. But I really do -- expand the seven playoff teams, I think they're going to be one of the seven. I just have from the start.

Q. Cris, as I ask you every year, what do you think of Miami? I know they added Jaelan Phillips, a player you loved in the draft; they got Tua, Fuller, Jaylen Waddle. Is this a playoff team to you?

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: Absolutely. You don't come off of a season where you win 10 and have it not be that. The other part that they have that I love is always they're so strong at the cornerback position. They get a chance to make plays on the back end, and now they're going to add Phillips to the front end on the pass rush side of things.

I mean, I don't know all that much what he's done down there, but the other thing that I thought from the beginning was that Tua did not push the ball down the field. Whether he was getting settled or uncomfortable with the offense or whatever the case may be.

But that hasn't been the problem so far during the exhibition season, and I don't think it will be because the speed they're going to have on the outside, Jaylen Waddle and Fuller and Jakeem Grant, those guys are legit speed players.

Now it's going to be -- the interesting part of what they're doing on offense, if they can get it protected, is can Tua play that style, can he be that dynamic quarterback that gets it down the field, because that's what it's going to take in this division.

Buffalo certainly can do it, so if you're going to try and knock them off, that's what you're going to have to do.

Q. Fred, what do you think the chances of you working for Amazon as well as NBC when they have their exclusive package next year?

FRED GAUDELLI: I'll be happy to answer that question next year when and if NBC is part of the package.

Q. For Cris, what are your thoughts on what the Jets might do this year with Zach Wilson at quarterback and Saleh coaching?

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: Well, I'm a big fan of both. Robert Saleh was one of the top names on my list when I get calls from owners or general managers or whatever, and I know it's so easy to go offensive minded with a coach.

But I just think he's a dynamic leader. I think he's so well respected within the room. He was able to do what Matt Laffleur could not do, which is get Mike Laffleur away from Shanahan, so that was a huge advantage, as well.

Corey Davis has been playing great football, so he has a first-class target on the outside.

I just get the feeling that if it all comes together, they're going to be a different-looking team. I don't know if they win four games or eight games or ten games. I have no idea. But I think the elements are in place right now.

For the first time in a while, you go, Man, the New York Jets look like somebody that I would bet on to make it over the next two or three years. Too bad about Carl Lawson; that was disappointing.

Zach Wilson, at least in preseason, and let's just hesitate for a moment as to exactly what that means, but Zach Wilson so far in preseason has been fantastic. He was exactly what we saw coming out.

There was a concern at BYU the offensive line was so good that he was never under pressure and we didn't see what he was going to face in the National Football League, and to be honest, in preseason we still haven't seen what he's going to face in the National Football League.

But he has some it factor. It's ridiculous to compare him to anybody, but I mean, you can't help but think Aaron Rodgers when you watch him on tape. I mean, that's just his style of play. That works pretty damned well.

Q. For Al, with the Super Bowl in LA, is there any appeal for you to kind of -- if you were to retire, to go out in LA and to kind of have that ending like that in your hometown, your adopted hometown? Is there any appeal for you with that?

AL MICHAELS: Not at all. It's just an irony that it comes at a time in my hometown where I'm winding down to a degree, and I don't know how much longer it's going to go on.

But no, there's no sense as far as I am concerned to put a coda on some part of my career just because the Super Bowl is in Los Angeles. I'm just thrilled that I'll be able to take an Uber home; it's as simple as that.

Q. I wanted to follow up on what Cris talked about Sunday night about the Odell Beckham and Baker Mayfield dynamic. Since Baker only threw one interception the rest of the regular season, what do you think happened there? Was it just him getting a better grasp of the offense? I don't know how many of those games post-Odell that you watched.

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: I saw most of them in some way,

shape, or form. We asked Baker that very question, and he admitted that they just didn't know what they were doing.

Think about a new offense and playing quarterback in a new offense in last year, the COVID season, the lack of practice, the lack of OTAs, the working together. I've been on both sides. I played quarterback up through college, and I played receiver afterwards. The timing is so intricate that it's difficult, and they were figuring out what Baker could do and what he couldn't do.

But there were also interceptions thrown at the end of that process that his coaches were telling me that when they finally made it to mid-season, and I think their bye week was almost dead in the middle of the season, that they had enough to show Baker, and Baker had enough ideas of his own of things he liked to do and things that weren't in the offense and things he didn't like to do and didn't want in the offense.

That whole conversion sort of happened at mid-season, but I think naturally you can also understand that by mid-season that the team started to have a better feel for that offense. So I think it sort of came together.

Unfortunately for Odell, as I went back and watched all those plays, I go, okay, he threw all those interceptions in the first half of the season; were there throws that were forced into Odell? Maybe the last interception that was intended for Odell down the boundaries and was covered and all that sort of stuff. Maybe you could point to that one.

But I never saw Odell loafing. I never saw Baker staying too long and Odell feeling some obligation to get him the football. I never saw anything that would tell me, Odell Beckham is the reason this offense got off to a slow start and Baker Mayfield threw all those interceptions.

I would suggest if you want to -- it's not like I'm some football savant here. If you put on every single pass play that Odell was involved in, I think you would see the same thing.

Q. Just from your perspective as a receiver, when you're trying to get a relationship with a guy but you have two kind of alpha males there, what does the receiver have to do to kind of grow that relationship?

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: Suck up a lot. I mean, I hate to say it, but the quarterback is the guy. He's the one that has the ball that you want in your hands. So yeah, you build relationships. There's -- but you also have to know there are going to be games and times that you don't get the ball, and you can't let that bother you.

You have to be happy because if other people are getting the football, that means eventually coverage is either going to become balanced to you or is going to begin to shift away from you, and then you're going to see the ball.

I think Baker gets that, and I think Odell gets that. Think about the difference in the Cleveland Browns and what Odell was watching last year compared to when he first got to Cleveland. When he first got to Cleveland, whether it was a joke or not, it was always, Oh, the Giants punished him sending him to Cleveland.

Now what did Odell watch last year? He watched his team win in a playoff game in Pittsburgh, go to Kansas City, be very competitive with the defending world champion and the team that would ultimately represent the AFC. You've got to think of the mindset that he has coming back in now compared to what it was when he first got to Cleveland.

Q. Al, last year you talked about kind of a new dawn of the Browns-Steelers rivalry. Do you see kind of a new dawn of the Browns now? I know you didn't get to see their whole team on Sunday, but do you get a sense of that?

AL MICHAELS: No doubt about it. You can tell, all of a sudden there's stability there. There hasn't been, as you know. Eight different head coaches over the last decade and a half. They finally got it together. They made some curious choices as to head coaching and other people in the front office, but now with Barry in there, and you've got Stefanski who couldn't be more impressive, the way that whole operation is working right now, I think Steve Podesta is a big part of this, as well, they've got it together.

You win 11 games last year, it's pretty good. You go into Pittsburgh and have a 28-0 lead at the end of the first quarter, give Kansas City all they can handle, I'm very impressed with that team.

I said to Cris on the air the other night after Michele had interviewed Baker Mayfield, this guy has really got it together. He really does. The offensive line is terrific, the defense should be a lot better, and I said I think at the beginning of the show on Sunday night, Atlanta is looking for a new dawn; Cleveland already has a new dawn. I see good things ahead.

Q. Cris, two questions about the 49ers' unique quarterback situation at the moment. By all indications it looks like they might start off with a rotation to some extent, not as aggressive as it was against the Raiders on Sunday, which I guess has a possibility of being herky-jerky and a little janky, but

maybe in Shanahan's eyes it could be very dangerous. How do you view that, at least for week one, week two, maybe week three when they play the Packers on Sunday night?

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: Yeah, I always think of the 49ers as a running team. If you saw the amount of time resources that they spend dedicated to running the football, I'm not sure there's another team in the league. Maybe Cleveland, now that I think about that, that that would impact.

So when you have a running quarterback in Trey Lance, who probably at this point after sitting out his last year of college, he played one sort of exhibition kind of game, when you have that kind of quarterback and that sort of weapon, it's just a complementary part of a very involved running game.

Jimmy Garoppolo is not going to be that. Unfortunately for the 49ers right now, Trey Lance isn't quite ready to be what Jimmy Garoppolo is throwing the football and making the reads and knowing the offense and knowing defenses and all that sort of stuff.

The running quarterback, as we saw with Cam Newton, can be a real weapon, especially in the red zone, and the red zone is hard. I mean, it's just -- there's the shrunken field; it's hard to score touchdowns in this league.

I think Trey Lance can be a factor all over the field, but the simple fact that they are going to have to deal with him in the red zone, may have to deal with him in short yardage kind of situations, and maybe more importantly it just gets him on the field.

There's some things that have to be learned on the field. John Elway, Troy Aikman, so many quarterbacks -- the first year did not go well.

If you can introduce them to it and just have it to where you're on the field learning but you're not deciding the game necessarily, that that's a split process, I actually kind of like it.

I would have kind of liked them to have kept Cam Newton in New England from that standpoint, as well, just an added weapon in that red zone.

Q. I don't know how much grinding on preseason tape you've been, but from what you've seen of Lance, what gives you the indication, beyond his background, et cetera, that maybe he's not quite there like a Mac Jones, which isn't surprising given their college pedigrees and all that?

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: Yeah, well, when you saw the first game and that big throw back across the field, the first -- I don't know what it was, quarter and a half or so, I was like, Oh, my gosh, I have thoroughly underestimated Trey Lance; this guy is amazing. He's doing everything right. He's making reads and throws.

Then in the second half it wasn't really that. Then you started to see some of the room for development that was there. I think you continued to see that, the turnover-worthy plays that were involved where he got lucky. He had some interceptions dropped. He had some things that actually went his way in that situation.

I think you want to put him on the field to be successful. I think Kyle will pick out a small package of plays that will make sure that he's successful and that his teammates start feeling good about him, and then he will slowly work his way into what Jimmy knows with the passing game and the reads and the sophistication of that part of the offense.

I kind of like the plan. Plus you're putting so much pressure on defensive coordinators to get ready for two completely different styles, and that's what makes it kind of fun.

Q. Do you expect things to be any different being back on the sidelines compared to 2019?

MICHELE TAFOYA: A little bit in that, again, the social distance component. We have yet to see how every stadium applies these different either local mandates or their own mandates.

I mean, my hope is that we're getting closer and closer. At the same time, I know most interviews, whoever I'm talking to is going to be on a headset six feet away from me, just so they can be sure to hear me. Even pregame, it used to be really easy just to run up to a player and start talking to them and not worry about the distance or any of that.

That's not really the case anymore. You just have to be respectful and play by the rules. But as far as just doing the actual job of being a sideline observer every single down, I don't think that's going to be very different. I just think it has to do with that accessibility.

I was able to talk to both coaches at halftime Sunday in our preseason game in Atlanta; that was no problem. So it's not going to be exactly the same, but it's going to be a whole lot closer.

Q. Al, it's 50 years since you hit Cincinnati and that young lady who asked the question a little earlier, she

was sitting in her backyard I'm sure sweltering listening to you call those games. In 50 years, how has play-by-play changed, not only how people receive it but more so in your preparation?

AL MICHAELS: Well, number one, I think the big difference is radio and television. When I was in Cincinnati I started out on radio, and one of the big differences between the two mediums is that in radio, you have the ability to use verbs. Now, you can use verbs on television, but people can see the verb.

I have found over the years that it's okay to speak in ellipses because somebody can see what the action is. Unless you describe it perfectly the way their eye sees it, it can be a little disconcerting.

I would say through the years there's been a great evolvement -- first of all, the technology today is unbelievable. I sit there and I watch the game, I'm looking at the monitors during the game, and I'm amazed by how beautiful the game looks, how sharp and clear the game looks, how inside the game you can get.

I think my feeling has always been in play-by-play that to a certain degree less is more. You don't need to over-talk. You don't need to overwhelm the viewer. It is a visual spectacle, so I think that's one of the keys. You just can't have incessant chatter.

I think the other thing is to make sure that you're working very much hand in glove with a partner, and I know he's on the call, obviously, but I've had no more fun with anybody or had more enjoyment working with anybody than Cris because he just gets it.

I think what we do is we both have the same philosophy: Make this interesting for the viewer, make it entertaining for the viewer. Don't go over the top, don't make it about us, but try to get the viewer to understand certain things that we know that we are aware of, stories that we know that they will find interesting, and do the best you can with that.

But to me, that's one of the differences.

Through the years, it's not that this all happened overnight. It's been a gradual process. But again, I've always been -- I guess sometimes I go back to the tenth grade, journalism, who, what, when, where, why. This is why we're there. People want the answers to questions that they don't know the answers to.

For the most part, I know this is kind of a long-winded way of explaining it, and I'm a guy who just started out by saying less is more and I'm giving you more than less right

now, but I think you understand what I'm talking about.

Q. As you say that, your two role models, you've been pretty public about this, Vin Scully and Curt Gowdy, and both of them had a different approach, each one I should say had a different approach. Scully was best alone and Gowdy was more conversational. Where do you fall in that mix?

AL MICHAELS: Maybe in the middle to a degree. I think both men were wonderful listeners, and they -- I think the key to any really good broadcaster is his communication, knowing how to communicate, knowing how to connect with your audience.

Gowdy and Scully did it in different ways, but both were so enjoyable to listen to.

There's no one way to do this. As you say, those were the two guys I really admired and idolized and took a lot from both, but I think I took a little bit from both guys without trying to sound exactly like one or the other.

Q. Al, since you're the gambler's favorite play-by-play announcer, subtly mentioning the lines to games, what do you think about the NFL's new attitude just embracing sportsbook and kind of maybe catching up compared to other leagues?

AL MICHAELS: It's a brand new situation. We're in a brave new world of sorts. I've always had fun, and you alluded to it, by being the guy who could play a little bit of the rascal role, because the perception of the fan was that the league didn't want any references to gambling, so what I would do, obviously, through the years is I would come in the back door, sometimes I would come in the side door, and now I guess they're allowing me to come in the front door, which is not as much fun as kind of doing it subtly.

I think one thing we have to remember is that gambling is not pervasive. We hope it's not. I think a lot of people -- I think the majority of people will watch the game and not have a betting interest in the game. Others clearly will. Hopefully they'll do it in moderation. We hope that people -- it's fun when you go back 25 Bucs on a game and you have a little bit more interest in it, that's fine.

I think where you could run into some trouble and people could run into trouble, you start betting on every play, and look out, the next thing you know, they'll foreclose on your mortgage. Hopefully we don't get to that point.

There will be certain references the way it is right now. I've got to see how this plays out, but you can't do a show predicated upon thinking that almost everybody in the

audience has a bet on the game.

By the way, if you have a bet on the game, I don't need to tell you where you stand in terms of the point spread. You can figure that out yourself.

Anyway, it's a brave new world; we'll see what happens.

Q. For both you and Cris, what are your thoughts on Brandon Staley? AI, I know you got to do a mock production meeting with him during mini-camp here, but just you, Cris, too, in four years he's gone from being a D-III defensive coordinator to coaching a ranked top defense and now an NFL head coach.

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: I can tell you this: There was a bit of a line for Brandon Staley. It's not just us that have been impressed by what he's done, or you. It is the entire National Football League. There were a lot of owners very interested in Brandon Staley.

I thought the Chargers did a great job getting him. I really did. They sold it, they worked it. Give them credit for getting that one done.

They've done a lot of great things there, and already off the bat, the first thing he does is come in and completely redo that offensive line that I feel like -- you never even had to think about what you were going to say when somebody asked you about the Chargers because it was always, yeah, if they ever fix the offensive line, you feel pretty good about them. Now they've got the rookie of the year, they've got a completely remade offensive line, Derwin James coming back into the secondary who's as good a player as we've seen.

This is just a team that feels to me -- along with Joey Bosa, that feels to me that they legitimately have a chance to be a sleeper this year. If I had to pick out somebody -- everybody tells me Justin Herbert is going to regress because all of his great plays last year, he had the highest grade of anybody under pressure. Well, that is not a very predictive stat. So if he's the best one year, you tend to be lower the next year.

But he may not be under pressure as much this year as what he was a season ago. I just think there is a lot, a lot to like with this football team. I really do.

Q. Obviously Deshaun Watson's situation here in Houston, I'm not going to ask you about the legalities of that, but less than two years ago this team was up 24-0 on the Chiefs in a playoff game and things have kind of gone off the rails since then. What's your view from afar of how things have gone in Houston and how

long it might take this team to get back to relevance?

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: Boy, that's a good one there. I don't think they're going back to Deshaun, do you? It just doesn't sound like that to me, and I don't know where Deshaun's head is right now. I'm sure he's trying to figure out what his life is going to be in general as opposed to just the football situation.

All this was so shocking to me. I mean, we've met him, we know what he's done for the ladies in the lunchroom when they had a need. It's really heartbreaking for a lot of people.

Anyway, that's not the right thing to say, either.

I hope his career is not over, but this is a tough one. This is really tough. For anybody who has daughters, this is a really hard one.

But I tend to think he's not going to be there, and I don't know what their answer is going to be. I don't think there is a quick fix right now for Houston. I just think they're a team that's going to be years away recovering from this.

Q. Cris, you were around the Bengals of the '90s. I'm not saying the Texans are there yet, but can you recall a franchise just becoming this dysfunctional this quickly when you look at all the changes that have happened here?

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: No. This is pretty close to it. It's unfortunate. It was a fun team to watch. They tried to make some big moves that caused some draft picks. They took their swing, and it obviously just has not worked out.

Q. I know you don't get Lamar Jackson and the Ravens until week 2, but I'm curious what were your biggest questions about them coming off that last game that you guys did in Buffalo at the end of last season and what are you most interested in seeing when you get your first glimpse of them?

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: It's pretty much a -- this is the Lamar Jackson story, right? This is going to be, A, does he get paid to that level; B, does enhancing the wide receiver position turn this into a little bit more balanced offense; and C, for me, if they do pay Lamar and they have to tap out on a few of these defensive star players that they've really built this organization around, what happens to the overall team.

There are definitely some questions about what's going on right now, but as long as you can play on the back end of a defense the way these guys can play, and Marlon

Humphrey, who I thought really deserved consideration for Defensive Player of the Year last year, is a guy that -- and Marcus Peters, all those different guys, this is still a heck of a football team. This is still we've been talking a lot about Cleveland, but between Pittsburgh and Cleveland and Baltimore, this is rich territory in the NFL. These are three tremendous teams.

Q. Cris, kind of a two-parter about the Washington Football Team. What version of Ryan Fitzpatrick do you think we'll get? And two, do you think he's good enough to lead this team back to NFC East titles?

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: Yes, oh, absolutely, because the weapons are so good around him. Terry McLaurin is a guy that he's had all along, but if Samuel comes back and Dyami Brown, their draft pick, they've got big-play, down-the-field kind of threats. Logan Thomas was so good. But they've got a front four that's second to none in all of football.

You're going to have Ryan Fitzpatrick, who's going to take this offense from a little bit more of a ball control kind of situation to one where they're just taking this thing and taking their shots. I mean, he is a down-the-field, let's-throw-it-around, let's-take-care-of-business with these big play receivers.

I think this offense will look completely different. The defense is going to be what they are. They're going to be dominant up front. But the offense is going to be much more of a vertical style, I think, in which the way that Miami is going to be this year, too.

Q. A ratings question: Obviously we know that the ratings for the NFL last season were modestly down, held up a lot better than a lot of sports, but Sunday Night Football probably took a bigger hit than the other windows because it had to go up against the NBA Finals and World Series and NLCS I think four straight weeks in October. What are your expectations this year? Do you think the ratings are going to bounce back to where they were say in 2019, or are you thinking that maybe there will still be some lingering impact from what we saw last year?

FRED GAUDELLI: Look, I think we're definitely going to be better than last year. I don't think there's any question about that. I think the league has done a great job not only for us but I think for all the partners. If you look at the national windows in the first five or six weeks of the season, those games are populated with really attractive games.

I think the NFL wanted to really jump start the ratings at the

beginning of the season to get people enthusiastic again and to get them in front of sets.

I really feel it's going to be better than last year, and I'm hopeful we're going to be back to where we were in the years prior.

AL MICHAELS: Let me jump in for one second and put a period on this. A lot of people will come up to me and say the ratings were down, how do you feel, et cetera, et cetera. I go, boy, we went all the way from No. 1 and we dropped down to No. 1. To me, it's all relative, and if I'm not mistaken, and Dan Masonson is going to eventually give you what the numbers are, but I think we were No. 1 by a larger margin over the No. 2 show than we had been in a number of years.

All of the ratings across the board on all shows are down, and as long as we maintain that top position, I think everybody is pretty happy.

Q. How much are you looking forward to calling Rams-Bears on Sunday Night Football in week one with fans at the stadium after last year's experience after calling Rams-Cowboys but without fans in the stands?

AL MICHAELS: Can't wait. That stadium is fantastic. We were in there last year, the first game ever played in there, and it was eerie and it was kind of sad in a way because as you know, that stadium is very different. It's incredible. Obviously they lost a ton of money, no stone unturned. Stan Kroenke did a tremendous job visualizing what took place.

I did go to the Charger preseason game. It's exciting in there. It's going to be different. It's going to be filled up. It's an amazing facility.

I guess you guys have already filled it a couple of times already with the Los Bukis concert 70,000, so at least we'll have 70,000 there for Sunday Night Football.

Q. Cris, after a record-setting 2020 season, what gives you optimism about the Buffalo Bills here in 2021?

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: Everything. I mean, that was really the first good year that Josh Allen put together. I think you -- and you go, okay, you're No. 3, he was this, so you're No. 4, I think he was runner-up for MVP in year number four with Stefon Diggs and now Emmanuel Sanders and Beasley and these guys. What can this offense really be. But they've added a couple of rookies in there, Rousseau and Basham and those guys that add a little bit to the pass rush that they needed to have at the



end of the day.

But this is a legitimate team. Like when we watched Tampa in the preseason, that last preseason game go up and down the field, you're like, wow, the world champs are sharp. When you watched Buffalo play in that preseason game, you're like, wow, this team is legit.

I think it's all there. I really do. This is a team that's felt like they should have been in the Super Bowl a season ago, and one more year of experience under their belt, they're going to be tough to keep out of there this year.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, everybody, for joining us today. We will see you next Thursday.

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