

NBC Sports Group Media Conference

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Rob Hyland

Mike Tirico

Melissa Stark

Cris Collinsworth

Press Conference



again.

Around this time last year, Mike, Melissa and I were the newbies to this storied franchise. Cris and our director, Drew Esocoff, were the only veterans, and now we all know what we're in for between next Thursday and mid January, and I cannot wait for this to start.

It is truly a pleasure and a privilege to be part of this football family with such a great production and engineering team.

We had the chance to televise the final regular season game of the 2022 season, which featured the Lions defeating Aaron Rodgers and the Green Bay Packers. The Lions are a really fun team to cover, so it's great to pick up right where we left off with them, and what better place to start the season than in Kansas City with Patrick Mahomes and the Chiefs.

With that, fired up to get started, and I will turn it back over to you, Dan.

THE MODERATOR: Mike Tirico?

MIKE TIRICO: Thank you. I guess it's a good sign that I was going to start the same place our producer started.

The coolest part of last year was, for Rob and Melissa and me, how awesome Drew Esocoff and Cris were in not just making any transition as smooth as possible but also willing to do new things and fun things. It was a great season, and we look forward to it.

As Rob said, we ended the season with the Lions' win at Lambeau. We ended our postseason with the Chiefs playing Jacksonville at Arrowhead. It just feels like a nice continuation of all of that.

Needless to say, there's nothing like Sunday nights, from Carrie Underwood's start to the players introducing themselves and the lineups. There's a juice and an energy to it that is unmistakable, and it's a privilege to be a part of this package, and I look forward to being next to Cris, and Cris, by the way, September 7, 1986, I was starting my junior year at Syracuse and had just called the Mississippi State football game. I'm sure that next day I watched you with your two touchdowns at Arrowhead, so

THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon, everybody.

Welcome to today's call. One week from tomorrow on Thursday night, September 7, on NBC, Peacock and Universal, we will kick off the 2023 NFL season with the Kansas City Chiefs hosting the Detroit Lions.

Then three nights later on the season debut of Sunday Night Football, the Dallas Cowboys visit the New York Giants. It's the series-high fifth time these teams have played on the opening NBA Sunday night game.

Joining us on today's call are our coordinating producer Rob Hyland, who starts his 15th season leading at NBC Sports football production, the first 13 years on Notre Dame and now his second season with SNF.

Play-by-play voice Mike Tirico next week begins his 18th consecutive season calling NFL primetime games. He's joined by game analyst Cris Collinsworth, who enters his 15th season in the Sunday Night Football booth, and our sideline reporter, Melissa Stark, who kicks off her fifth full season as an NFL sideline reporter and second with Sunday Night Football.

For those of you who like stats, in seven week-one games, Cris Collinsworth for the Cincinnati Bengals had 36 catches for 557 yards and two touchdowns, both of which were scored at Arrowhead Stadium exactly 37 years to the day before this year's kickoff game, so that's September 7, 1986.

We'll begin with some opening comments and then we'll take your questions. Here's our coordinating producer Rob Hyland.

ROB HYLAND: Thanks, Dan. I was starting sixth grade that year, Cris. Really excited to be a part of this group



congratulations on that anniversary you get to celebrate next week.

THE MODERATOR: We'll go to Cris.

MELISSA STARK: Should I jump in until Cris comes back?

Love this group. Everyone is so supportive and smart, engaged, fun-loving. They're like family truly.

We're going to be going back and forth across the country a bit again this year when you look at our schedule. I'd say as a Jersey girl, not native Jersey girl but living here now, I'm happy to have a few games at Met Life. We haven't been there in a while. Big storylines there, of course, with the Jets and Aaron Rodgers.

We couldn't be more excited to be together again this year. We've just got to make sure everybody is on time, and it'll all be good. Hopefully Cris is back on.

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: Ta-da, there we are, the wonders of modern cell phones.

I also would like to declare that I have absolutely no recollection of 1986 football, that game, those two touchdowns or really anything related to 1986. I guess I was a deadhead then.

But looking forward to this coming week. It's amazing after all the years that we've been doing this, you still feel that buzz at the start of football season.

Maybe it's just me. Maybe it's just -- but I don't think so. I think that all around the country and fantasy drafts and now you've got the gaming companies involved, there's just an excitement in America when football season kicks back in again.

We're honored that we get to kick it off. Looking forward to it.

THE MODERATOR: We'll open it up to questions.

Q. I know the Broncos won't be on your Sunday night slate for a little while into the season, but I was wondering if, Mike and Cris and Melissa, if you could just speak briefly to what do you think about the prospect of Sean Payton, quote-unquote, fixing Russell Wilson after he had that bad season last year, and secondly, what did you make of Sean's comments about Nathaniel Hackett's performance last season?

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: Sean Payton is one of the great

coaches of all time. Of all time. Do I think he's going to fix Russell Wilson? I don't think you fix Russell Wilson. I think you find Russell Wilson. You figure out what he wants to do and what he does best, and you make it work.

Sean has been able to cobble together offenses with a variety of quarterbacks and players, but there's something about Sean Payton. He's a commanding presence in the room. I think that Russell was coming in a season ago and had a certain way of doing things, and he sort of did them that way, and now I think he'll do things the Sean Payton way.

I'm kind of anxious to see what that might mean. This is a team that we're used to being really good. They have a fan base that's used to seeing him be really good and seeing them be really good.

But I do not believe that Russell Wilson is finished. I think that we'll see a little bit more of what we've seen in the past, with what seems to be working in this league right now -- of course we're all trying to copy Patrick Mahomes and what he does, but the ability to take deep drops, to move around, to buy time through your receivers to get open, which is exactly what Russell Wilson does, is still very much in vogue, and I think we'll probably see a little bit more of that along with maybe a little bit of Drew Brees's quick release game.

But (indiscernible) buy you some time on the other end, too. But don't be surprised if we end up doing a Denver game at some point this year.

MIKE TIRICO: I will hop in and just simply tag on to that. Sometimes business, society, whatever, you get a fit, and sometimes things don't fit, and for whatever reason, Nathaniel Hackett and Russell Wilson and the whole Denver situation didn't fit.

I'm going to bet on Sean Payton figuring out a way to make this fit, given his history with quarterbacks who aren't the tallest, quarterbacks who have some mobility and veteran quarterbacks, so I think that will work. I also think Nathaniel Hackett is going to be a fit back with Aaron Rodgers with the Jets.

I think both of those guys just didn't connect and will connect in my opinion going forward. I know we get out to Denver on our schedule once. It'll be great to see.

I think the two owners up there in Denver have shown supreme commitment to getting the Broncos back to where we've known them for many years, and my guess is we're going to see that going forward.



Q. Cris, you were here in 2020. It was a COVID year, and I was wondering how Arrowhead seemed different that year than in years past for the kickoff game. Just for Mike and Melissa, what's it like to be at a game for the kickoff of the season as opposed to Sunday Night Football?

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: I don't know. Kansas City is one of the great stadiums to come in to do a game anywhere. Everybody always talks about you smell the barbecue and you see the people. But there's just such a passion for what's happening with the Kansas City Chiefs, and of course it all dates back to my buddy Len Dawson and what he was able to do in that city, as well.

It's different. It's not Green Bay or it's not one of those kind of cities where you just can feel it, Buffalo. It's not exactly that. But it's a fan base that has really seen the absolute best of football at the highest level. Their level of knowledge in discussions, at the hotel or driving around town and meeting people, is incredibly high.

COVID and wearing a mask did nothing to that. It just didn't.

As I talked about in the opening a little bit, it's just football season, and in some places it's more football season than it is anywhere else. There are some places that we go to that football means more than it does in other cities, and Kansas City would be pretty far on the high end where it's really, really important.

MELISSA STARK: I was recently there for the NFL Draft, which is just an awesome venue, and it was so great to be there.

Love going to Kansas City. I think the adrenaline rush, Cris talked about the adrenaline. There's nothing like being there live at the games. We're so fortunate to have that be part of our jobs. You can double that for me by being on the sidelines. You're right there in the center of the action.

But then last year was the first -- I used to do Monday Night Football in early 2000s, so the kickoff situation didn't exist, so last year was my first official kickoff game.

I don't even know how to put into -- there's nothing like it. It's the beginning. Everyone has been waiting for however many days. The countdown is on, and you're there. It's an absolute privilege to be able to be there and cover that game.

MIKE TIRICO: I'll just tack on there. This is year eight for me, football season No. 8 for me at NBC, which is hard to

believe. I've been to the kickoff game most years that I've been there except for that COVID year.

I think what this has built up over the last couple of decades is league-wide and nationwide anticipation. If you think about it, you can't wait for preseason football to start, until preseason football starts, and then you're like, come on, let's get to the regular season.

Well, this is it, so when it's on the tee at 7:15 central time on Sunday 7th, every team in the league and every fan base has some hope, our rookie quarterback is going to be better than he was in the preseason, or we're going to surprise people, or our team can get to the Super Bowl.

You think of the two teams there, Chiefs fans, we can go back-to-back and be the first team since the Pats to do that. And for the Lions' fans all the whole buildup of this whole summer, let's see if it's for real.

There's a great energy to that opening game, and I think that's really what's built up.

When you have Arrowhead and the Chiefs' fans and the banner and all that stuff on top of it, it is really one of the fun moments of the year. You're asked what it compares to in terms of Sunday night, you've got a great buildup every Sunday night, but I just feel everyone's energy from around the country of the start of the season for this kickoff game. I'd say that's where it differentiates from what we get to do every Sunday night.

Q. Mike and Cris, just in both of your times covering the National Football League, has there ever been a more anticipated Detroit Lions game that you've ever seen?

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: I'll let Mr. Michigan go first on that one.

MIKE TIRICO: Yeah, I've lived in metro Detroit for the last quarter century or thereabouts. My wife is from there, so that's been our home for a while.

They've played in playoff games. People forget sometimes they've played in playoff games, so the games to get to those games were highly anticipated.

But I think early in the season, there's no doubt this is as big a buildup to a Lions' game as we've seen in a long time.

I'll share this anecdote. We have the Paris Olympics coming up in July of '24, and a month or so ago it was one year out, so I was in Paris doing some stuff for the Today

Show and was on a walk and was walking from the Eiffel Tower across one of the many bridges in Paris and I was wearing a Detroit Tigers hat. I don't cover baseball so I can root for a team. They're my hometown team.

A guy stopped me and he said, hey, that Lions game in Green Bay was something; I can't wait for the opener. Some guy stopped me in Paris to talk about the Lions. It just gives you a little inkling into the anticipation.

But as I've warned anybody who I've come across this summer, because you end one year on a high, you don't pick up on the next chapter of that book. It starts all over again. They're going to have a little pressure to prove all this buildup is for real.

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: Come on, man. I thought you were going to predict they're going to knock off the Chiefs in Kansas City. You're not really that Michigan guy. Come on.

MIKE TIRICO: Thanks. Nothing like getting me in trouble with the hometown folks. Thank you.

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: You know, I'm going to just go ahead and be really honest with you. So we saw Detroit the last game of the year knocking off Green Bay to kind of end Green Bay's hopes for the playoffs, and I think we were really impressed with that team. They really didn't have anything to play for. Green Bay had everything to play for.

They came out and they just were so tough. My recollections of the Detroit Lions go back a couple of years, and I can see the progression.

When I saw Dan Campbell come in there and just the toughness that began to emanate through that team, and they were losing games, but it just so happened there was about a two- or three-week stretch where everybody that the Lions had played were the next ones on Sunday night. So I was really studying the other team.

But what stuck out to me is that they were losing on the scoreboard but physically whipping the teams that they were playing.

I don't know everything about football, but typically that doesn't happen over a sustained period of time.

Then they came out last year, and they started slowly -- and I was like, well, maybe this just is not going to happen. Then it happened. Then they won eight out of their last ten games. Then their offense really started to take off, and we started going, hey, who is this Ben Johnson, this

offensive coordinator; could Jared Goff really be the answer in Detroit; could this guy that was sort of a throw-in on this whole Matthew Stafford deal be a difference maker for Detroit. He kind of fits that underdog mold, right, that they seem to be able to deliver.

But great teams are typically built around their offensive and defensive lines, and Detroit is following that pattern. They really are. You look across their offensive line, and they are really good. Penei Sewell is as good as any tackle playing; Aidan Hutchinson is really coming out and making a name for himself; a guy like Alim McNeill on the defensive line, really a top-end player. So there are some exciting players.

But I will admit that when the schedule came out -- so we're anticipating, yeah, what's our opening night game, too, and it was Kansas City and Detroit, I was like, really? Really? Detroit, all right.

But they've won eight out of ten, they were the hot team, they're kind of a very interesting team with a lot of interesting personalities, and in many ways I think it was the perfect game to match up against Kansas City in that opener.

Q. My question is about a team you're going to see in week 2, the New England Patriots. Seems like their big move this off-season was a coach, getting offensive coordinator Bill O'Brien. Cris, what do you expect out of Bill O'Brien as the offensive coordinator, what can he do for the Patriots and what can he do for Mac Jones do you think?

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: Yeah, it's interesting you said Mac Jones and not the quarterback position, right? I guess he sort of is the quarterback position now.

I'm intrigued. I've never seen sort of an experiment at the offensive coordinator position like we saw last year. It sort of, I think, bought Mac Jones a year of kind of growth.

Now we go back to an unquestioned successful offensive coordinator in Bill O'Brien. He's been there, he's done that. He's a very talented guy.

But the Patriots for me are always a little bit of a mysterious team, and we're so used to them never being out of a game offensively. I don't think you're ever going to question Bill Belichick, Jerod Mayo, Steve Belichick -- you're not going to question what they do on the defensive side. They may get beat, they may give up plays, whatever, on occasion, but you know they're going to be in the football game defensively.

But offensively they have to re-prove it. They have to re-prove that it wasn't just Tom Brady and that offensively they can put 30 points on the board.

That's always sort of my standard line is that at some point you're going to have to put up 30 to beat the top teams in the league. Even when you're playing Philadelphia in the Super Bowl, who would have ever figured that their backup quarterback is going to come in and put up that point total against your defense.

At some point, you've got to be able to put up 30-plus points, and the question is can the combination of Bill O'Brien and Mac Jones get that done.

MIKE TIRICO: I'll just tack on one thing on Bill O'Brien. I've known Bill since the late '90s when he was an offensive coach for George O'Leary at Georgia Tech. Here are names I thought I'd never throw out on this call. He went from Joe Hamilton, a running quarterback, mostly a running quarterback, to George Godsey at quarterback, and Bill O'Brien's teams on offense always found a way to be productive, found different ways to be productive, and always played with a toughness, too.

So while we are in full flash-and-dash mode in the AFC East with Tua and Tyreek in Miami and Aaron at Jets and Josh Allen and Stephon Diggs in Buffalo, the Patriots may play a little bit of a physical kind of strong offensive game that might be a half step different than everybody else, and I'd be willing to wager that Bill O'Brien is going to get the most out of that talent.

Is it enough to be better than those other three teams? I don't know. But Bill O'Brien is a professional offensive coach proven at many places and at many different levels, and I think the Patriots are going to make big steps on that side of the ball this year.

Q. I'm wondering if anyone can give perspective on what it means to be now not the only property with flex scheduling and what you're going to contend with that, with ESPN getting in and Amazon getting in on an experimental basis.

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: That's so much a Rob Hyland question right there.

MIKE TIRICO: I was just going to hand it to Rob, too, Cris.

ROB HYLAND: I appreciate that. Thank you so much, guys. The question is how are we going to deal with flex scheduling, given the fact it's now open to other sports partners?

Q. Yeah, your perspective on that you and how that affects NBC.

ROB HYLAND: Yeah, I think that's more a business side. Listen, we're tasked with putting on the best product every Sunday night, and we hope we are giving the viewer the best game every Sunday night that we can.

I think the landscape has gotten obviously more competitive, as you note, but we will do the absolute same job with any game on our schedule. If you look at our schedule today, on August 30th, it looks pretty darned good. I think that's pretty much all I can say about that.

I hope the NFL works with us if one of our games doesn't pan out the way it looks today on August 31st when we get there.

But again, we expect and are hopeful that our schedule will hold up and that we don't need to flex. But we understand the landscape is now different.

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: I'll just add on, I'm glad. I mean, the majority of the football that I get to watch is in primetime, whether it's on Thursday or Monday. Those are the games that I get to sit down and relax and enjoy watching football. I don't want a bad game in primetime.

At least if you're watching at 1:00 or 4:00 you can always flip around and find a different game if the one you're watching is not very good, but if they put a bad game in primetime, you feel a little cheated. There's only one game on, there's nowhere to go.

First and foremost, yes, I work in the NFL, but first and foremost I'm a fan. I like watching the games, and I want to see the best games.

Q. Cris, you're getting into the sports broadcasting Hall of Fame this year. What does that mean for you after a long career in this industry?

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: It means apparently it's been a long career in this industry. I'm honored. I don't want to not say that I'm honored. I certainly am.

But I'm not much of a look-back kind of a guy. I never have been. I'm intrigued by tomorrow much more than yesterday, and I'm honored, blessed. My wife is putting together our whole family, and they're being told they're flying in to New York whether they want to or not for that night.

But yeah, it makes you think backwards a little bit and how lucky I've been to work with some of the unbelievable



people, whether it be at NBC or FOX or HBO or Showtime or wherever it's been that I've worked, NFL Network.

You appreciate how lucky you are. You appreciate going to work every day. I even appreciate going down in the basement on Tuesdays now, knowing I've got a 12-hour day in front of me with film.

You know it doesn't last forever, and I think that's probably what it's made me do more than anything else is stop and think, boy, you'd better enjoy every one of these that you get to do because it doesn't go on and on and on, and I'm lucky I get to do it.

MIKE TIRICO: Does this mean we all have to go to this thing now in New York?

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: Are you related to me?

MIKE TIRICO: No, but your wife is going to make us go so that's okay.

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: And you know she's a lot tougher than I am.

MIKE TIRICO: Hey, I'm going to cut the line here for a second and just brag on Cris.

I mean, 17 Emmys? That shouldn't be like, oh, by the way. If you think about how great, and I mean great, that overused word is used appropriately here, Cris has been in the studio and in the booth doing games, it's hard to imagine anyone in the history of the business who's been that great in both seats.

I knew that for years watching, and I knew that for years working at NBC and getting to do a few games. But week in, week out, day in, day out, last year, what an appreciation for -- no T is left uncrossed. Every morsel is researched. Cris is desperate about making sure that we are right as a team and does all the hard work when nobody is looking.

My respect for Cris was at the top of the roof and grew even more, if possible, by sitting next to him. It's an honor to sit next to somebody who defines what a Hall of Famer in broadcasting truly is.

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: I take back the Lions joke now.

MIKE TIRICO: Thank you.

Q. I have two quick questions. One, you guys will be coming to Philly in week 7 for an interesting game between the Dolphins and the Eagles, interesting

match-up. I was wondering if you have any thoughts about that. I also want to get your thoughts on Merrill Reese. He's entering his 46th year calling the Eagles now for radio. I didn't know if you guys knew him, had any interactions with him or had any thoughts on his broadcasting?

MIKE TIRICO: I'll take the Merrill one and let Cris add on and do the same. Merrill is one of those guys who you walk through the Philadelphia pressbox, you can't wait to see him. Getting to know Merrill over the years, traveling the NFL, my friendship with Ron Jaworski, one of my partners for many years, and being around Philly, and you walk in the booth and you go see Mike quick and Merrill and you know you're going to get a great story about the Eagles. You know you're going to get some great perspectives.

But also watching the NFL Films replays or listening to Sirius XM NFL Radio and hearing some of the highlights, Merrill just sounds like the Eagles. His voice and his calls are so associated with one of those franchises that always makes headlines, and he has written the greatest captions for Eagles' highlights over the years, right there in front of his eyes.

Those are the people who are the special ones to us as broadcasters in the NFL and I know to the fans of Philadelphia.

He's one of those gold standard guys who every time you're in Philly you want to make sure you get at least a few minutes to visit with Merrill and just share some good stories and good time. One of the best.

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: Yeah, I'm going to agree. Merrill always takes time to come say hello. He just does.

But there's something so unique about his voice. There's a level of excitement in his voice when he said hi, how are you. I don't know if it's the pitch. I don't know what exactly it is. But you kind of get a little bit more jacked up for football when you talk to him.

I can remember calling their Super Bowl win, and I was really anxious after the game, I knew what we had done, but I was kind of anxious to hear what Merrill had done with that whole end of game and Hail Mary and the whole thing on top of it, and I found myself happy for him.

We get to know the broadcasters around football, and just thrilled that he had the career he's had, and he finally got to put a ring on his finger, too, which is great.

As far as the Eagles, I think that in many ways they're the



team to beat this year because I think there are teams that are the equal of the Eagles if you take the NFL as a whole, but the NFC I don't believe is quite as strong team to team as what the AFC is this year. I think that's a pretty standard belief.

The Eagles seem to keep getting better. They seem to keep adding players that are going to help them in some way, and sometimes it's just an Albert O who just -- a tick better, is just going to make them a tick deeper in case they have that injury.

But I love the way that they've put together this football team. Howie Roseman does it exactly how I would do it, which is be the biggest, baddest team on the offensive and defensive lines and then fill in around it. Find you a quarterback that finally puts you over the top, and they certainly have done that in one of the most incredible stories that I think I've ever been a part of.

To see what Jalen has done to improve over the last couple years, probably one play away from being the Super Bowl MVP a season ago, and just how calm and cool he was in that game was really pretty amazing to think about when you go all the way back to his Alabama days and being benched in the championship game.

Just his mental toughness. I mean, when you talk to the guy, it makes you want to go to the weight room and start lifting weights. He's just one of those intense characters that you can see how he can drag any team for a 1st down on 4th and 1, and why they went to the double-cheek push, because who would you rather have the ball in their hands than Jalen Hurts because you know that 600-pound squat guy is going to pick up that 1st down, especially if he gets a little push-push, as well.

Yeah, it's a fun team to watch, and I'm really anxious -- I can't believe they got Jalen Carter. I just can't believe they got that. I thought he was the best player in the draft. More power to them.

Q. My question is for Melissa. You brought up earlier your excitement for the Jets game and the first time you have them. I'm curious, what are your thoughts on interviewing Aaron Rodgers on the sideline? Obviously he's a guy who there's been a lot of discussion about how he relates to the media. How do you see it?

MELISSA STARK: Well, we sort of see a different side of Aaron Rodgers because our production meetings, and the guys can speak to this, but Aaron Rodgers comes across one way, I think, in the media. He certainly thinks his own way. He is very unique. He uses unique, very smart

words. He's introspective.

When we are in these production meetings with him, he does all of that, but he really wants to hang around and talk. It was interesting because he was part of our production meeting for Hall of Fame game earlier this season, and the Jets wrapped him up, and he was just content to sit there and chat, I'm sure because of Cris and Mike, and spend time just talking about the game.

He's really sort of in a reflective, I believe -- you see how he is right now in New York, he's in a reflective stage of his career where he's a coach out there and he's mentoring all the young kids and he's the elder statesman out there.

I think he's relishing in that and enjoying that, and the guys had a really nice interview with him during the Hall of Fame game. He had the headset on, and he was just -- he's very engaging. He's very smart and clever.

He's really fun to interview, I think.

So I'm excited about it. I think the guys would say the same thing, especially after their interview with him during the Hall of Fame game earlier this year.

He's brought a ton of energy and excitement to New York. That's a franchise that I live -- as I mentioned at the beginning of the call, I live in the Jersey area, and I've known a lot of disgruntled and sad Jets fans through the years, and he's brought hope, and a very critical media and fan base and a lot harsher than most across the country.

There's a tremendous sense of excitement because of him, and he's handled it, I think, all the right way, and he's embraced New York, and it's been fun to watch.

Q. Mike or Cris, anything you guys want to add in your time talking to him?

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: I don't know how Mike feels about it, but if you ever had like a really hard class and they decide that you get called on in class and you're going to have one of those exams and the teacher is going to figure out just how much you know, it's kind of like interviewing Aaron. You'd better bring something to the table that perks him up and gets his attention because he's going to bring back something from some book written in ancient Egypt.

A couple times I've found myself going, hey, Aaron, I'm a simple guy. I watch football. That's all. I don't know what you're talking about here.

But he kind of has a twinkle in his eye right now. I've been

interviewing him for so long now that -- I don't know, Mike or Melissa, if you guys felt this, but he just seems happy. He seems engaged. He seems like he has something to prove but he didn't have the burden of having something to prove, and he was enjoying being in New York City.

I don't know how it's going to go. I don't think he knows how it's going to go. But there was a happiness to him right now that was palpable.

Maybe he's just enjoying teaching or I don't know what it is, but when he gets like that, sometimes he can be really tough to beat.

MIKE TIRICO: Echo all that. Been doing production meetings with Aaron for 15 years. We got to call his first start on a Monday night in Lambeau September 8, 2008, and from that meeting on, every time you get to talk to Aaron Rodgers is eye opening, different than the rote answers you might get from other players. He's just a deep-thinking, introspective guy who, when there's a comfort level with the folks on the other side of the table, he opens up and says a lot more than many do.

Most of it is incredibly interesting. I always like to ask him what book are you reading right now because he always gives you a book that has some unique twist to it, and I agree with everything Melissa and Cris just said.

He's provided a juice to the Jets' franchise, an energy to the New York market which has been missing that in the NFL for the last several years, and he's not that far removed from being the back-to-back MVP of the league. Only a year removed.

I think we all watch with great interest, and the opener against Buffalo will be fabulous on that opening Monday night, and then we've got him week 4 against Mahomes, which has never happened before. Those guys haven't hooked up. So that'll be fun.

We're so excited to see him and see this play out this year.

Q. This is a question for everyone. There was a lot of discussion in the off-season about whether teams are devaluing running backs, and I was interested to hear, where do each of you stand in that debate, and for this season who do you think are going to be the top running backs?

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: I'm going to say I think that they have been devalued. I always feel a little guilty about this because some of our PFF numbers show that sometimes rushing yards have more to do with the offensive line than they do the running backs.

But it's hard to -- when you see Christian McCaffrey go in and what he was able to do with San Francisco after that trade, considering what he's meant, yeah, it's a tough one.

It's probably one that should be addressed in collective bargaining because of the fact that they're a very unique group that has a small window. So if they're a first-round draft pick and you can tag them for a couple years at this lower-end price, basically a running back can run out his entire career without them being able to take a shot at that big-money second contract or third contract that some players get.

Whether it's Saquon, whether it's Jonathan Taylor, whoever you want to talk about, in a way it's kind of sad to watch because we enjoy watching them so much and they're such a part of the broadcast and Fantasy Football and all that goes with the very public side, sort of an underappreciation of their talents is -- I understand their frustration. I do understand.

MIKE TIRICO: I think the system has just forced this hand a little bit, and as Cris said, it's unfortunate because, one, there are so many star players and terrific players at the running back position year after year. Secondly, with the importance and interest level in Fantasy Football, people as fans across the country become very attached to these running backs because of their value in Fantasy Football, and then they don't get that same treatment that the sack master off the edge or the quarterback gets in terms of that third contract or even second big contract like Cris said.

Think about how many running backs have been great in the last 10 years in year eight, nine and ten of their careers. There just haven't been that many. So economically for GMs, you understand, and if your team invests a lot of long-term money in a running back, as a fan you'd probably be one of the first to call your local sports talk station and complain that this GM isn't giving us the flexibility to win like other guys. So that system has just kind of caught up to the running backs.

I don't know if there's a way out because I don't know how you creatively find something in the CBA to say let's take care of running backs differently than every other position group. That's something that the market has set, and really those guys have gotten the raw end of the deal, and I don't see it changing in the short term.

Those guys unfortunately, although their voices are loud because we all know them, they've said the right things, and as fans you feel bad for them. I don't know if there's an answer to clean that up in the next six to nine months.

Q. What do you expect from Giants-Cowboys on Sunday night in week 1 here, and how do you think the Giants' success last season impacts expectations for year two under Daboll and Joe Schoen?

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: Melissa, do you want to go first?

MELISSA STARK: Sure, I'd love to. Well, we expect a great game. If you look at past history, obviously it's a little lopsided.

We had the Cowboys in week 1 last year, and there was so much excitement about Dak Prescott and all the things -- I remember I had a sideline report about everything he had done in the off-season to make sure he was healthy and in good shape, and then the finger at the end of that game, and their season seemed to be derailed. It was not a good start for the Cowboys, and you just never know how these things are going to pan out.

But with Jerry Jones and the Cowboys organization and being America's team, there's always huge expectations for this team, and I expect a great match-up. I can't wait.

I'll let these guys dive into it a little deeper.

MIKE TIRICO: I'll go so Cris can have the last word. Hey, the Cowboys, the volume is always on 10 with the Cowboys. It's always max attention, max noise. Hey, sure, let's bring Trey Lance in here just to stir it up a little bit. How do you not love what the Cowboys have given us in terms of storylines for forever really but certainly over the last years.

Now, the interesting part of this is this has been such a great rivalry for generations, and now you feel a little bit of energy with the Giants. We were able to go to Allen Park where the Lions' headquarters is in Michigan to watch the Giants and the Lions have a couple of days of joint practices before they played, and Cris, we had a chance to visit with Joe Schoen, their GM, and talk to Brian Daboll a little bit.

Last year was really good. They kind of got in and got the thing going in the right direction, but now you feel like they're starting to add some pieces that fit what they want to do, and you see, much like the Jets, a turned-positive energy around this coaching staff in New York and an excitement around the Giants' organization that we haven't seen in the last few years.

For all of their off-season questions of Daniel Jones this or Saquon Barkley that, they're both back, they've added more pieces. I think Darren Waller is going to be really interesting to watch as he builds a connection with Daniel

Jones. It'll certainly make Daniel Jones a different and a better quarterback having a tight end like Waller who can do some unique things with in the passing game.

On the passing side, it's never dull with Wink Martindale and the pressures he brings, and a couple of these late additions the Giants have made at the end of the preseason, players who will be really intriguing to watch in that system.

Giants-Cowboys never lacks for sizzle, and I think with what we've had in this off-season from both sides, it's ratcheted up one more notch to back where it has been for many, many years when Cris has been doing these Giants-Cowboys games over the years to start the season.

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: Yeah, I'll tell you, I really appreciate what Brian Daboll and Joe Schoen have done with this team. That came out of nowhere, their making the playoffs and winning a playoff game a season ago, and that really was without being very good at all in their division. I think we were 1-4-1 or something like that in their division.

I'm really curious.

The thing that they lacked was explosive plays. They just couldn't get easy yards or easy touchdowns, and they went out to fix that. They went out and got Darren Waller, who he's right, he was not right last year. He had a bad hamstring and just could not make those big plays.

But he can be sort of one of one in many ways in this league. Teams will leave him on the single receiver side, and if you choose to just put a corner or just a safety on him, they'll just throw the ball up in the air all day and let him out-rebound whoever he want to put over there.

This Jalin Hyatt has a chance to add that speed component to this football team and see exactly what that might mean; Darius Slayton can fly down the field; Saquon Barkley, one of the top backs.

It probably comes down to a little bit of what this offensive line looks like. Andrew Thomas, clearly the best on that team, but they've got a rookie center. They've had a different center in there every single year, and now they'll do it again with a rookie. Evan Neal playing right tackle is going to have to be better.

They're just going to have to be able to hold up against one of the best pass rushing teams in the whole league in DeMarcus Lawrence and Micah Parsons, and those guys will be coming hard in this one.

Can they block them? Can they create some big plays in a way they haven't in the past? I'm really curious to see if the Giants can do it again. They surprised me last year. They just surprised me.

I think that Daboll will prove that he is really one of the better coaches in the league.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks so much for joining us, everybody. We'll see you in eight days for our kickoff game.

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