

# NBC Sports Group Media Conference

Tuesday, August 27, 2024

**Mike Tirico**  
**Cris Collinsworth**  
**Todd Blackledge**  
**Rob Hyland**  
Press Conference



As Dan said, we kick off the season with three great games in primetime in a four-day stretch. And it's such a pleasure and privilege to be a part of this football family. It is definitely a bond and a unique environment that we're in for this next few-month stretch, and I'm so excited for it.

Happy to kick it off to the next speaker.

MIKE TIRICO: I'll jump in. Thanks, Rob. Shout-out to Rob, who was our primetime producer at the Olympics for 17 straight nights, and now we get to do 18 street weeks of football together, which will be an absolute blast.

Nod to Dan Masonson for the research fact of the day on Todd and Cris, both of whom have been partners, Cris obviously the last few years, but one of my first college football partners in the late '90s was Todd Blackledge. So it's great to have Ledge as part of our family the last couple of years working with Noah on the college games and on these NFL games, as well.

Look forward to your questions. This season just can't get here quick enough. Having our group together in Washington for the last preseason game, I'm just reminded of the fun, the laughs, the work, but also the nonstop effort from our team. And it's a privilege, as Rob said, to be a part of a lot of like-minded folks that bring the show together and care so much about the franchise of Sunday Night Football and making it the best show in TV week in, week out.

The season, the NFL just continues to hit the ceiling and keep going higher. There's so much anticipation in all the markets, so much anticipation around the league. And I love that we started with two guys who have won the MVP four of the last six years in Lamar Jackson and Patrick Mahomes.

The schedule is great. We look forward to covering the best teams in the league in the best environments. I think what we're going to see Sunday night in Detroit with the Rams and the Lions, like we saw for the wildcard game last year, is an environment that was unmatched in the NFL in Ford Field in downtown Detroit. We're looking forward to all that. Look forward to any questions along the way.

I will throw it to Cris, who certainly knows how to catch them.

THE MODERATOR: Good afternoon, everybody. Welcome to today's NFL preview conference call. Next week NBC Universal will become the first media company with three primetime games on Kickoff Weekend with the Ravens-Chiefs in the kickoff game on NBC and Peacock a week from Thursday; the next night, the NFL's first-ever game in Brazil with the Packers and Eagles exclusively on Peacock; and then on September 8th, the Sunday Night Football opener, the Rams at the Lions in a wildcard playoff rematch on NBC and Peacock.

Joining us on today's call are Sunday Night Football announce booth Mike Tirico and Cris Collinsworth and the SNF coordinating producer Rob Hyland and a special guest, Todd Blackledge, who will call next Friday night's Packers-Eagles game from São Paulo alongside Noah Eagle on Peacock.

For those of you wondering, Cris and Todd's teams faced off once on Kickoff Weekend in 1986. Cris had two touchdown receptions, but Todd led his team to a 10-point win at Arrowhead. Both teams were 10-6 that year.

We'll have an opening statement from each of our participants, and then we'll take your questions. And we'll have a transcript on the call available later this afternoon on our NBC Sports Press Box website.

I'll turn it over to our coordinating producer, Rob Hyland.

ROB HYLAND: Thanks, Dan. This is my third year working on this amazing property and third working with Mike, Cris, Melissa, and Terry McAulay. Now in year three, I think I know what we're in for between next Thursday and mid-January. And honestly, I cannot wait to get this started.



CRIS COLLINSWORTH: Just looking in my Encyclopedia Britannica about the game with Todd and I; the internet doesn't go back that far. It's all good.

We got lucky this year. I guess it's luck, whatever. But you think about the opening, and Lamar Jackson, two-time MVP award winner, won it last year, Patrick Mahomes won everything in sight, three Super Bowls. Is there somebody that's going to catch Tom Brady? Maybe it's him.

And then a game that I think Mike and I both sort of treasure almost, Jared Goff and Matthew Stafford going at it in Detroit in that playoff game. I've had the good fortune of being in some pretty electric atmospheres during the course of games, but that one really kind of sticks out a little bit.

The city of Detroit is just so all in on the Lions right now, and of course the understory of Goff coming over from L.A. and Stafford going to L.A.

But sometimes there's just something special, and when a city kind of catches fire and falls in love with their football team, there's just magic there. Coming off of doing a game on Thursday night and trying to roll into Detroit and stay up all night and do all your homework for the next one, it sure makes it easy when you hit the broadcast booth and you just feel it.

Two hours before the game, you feel what that game means to that city. It's just going to be a blast.

The living legend who kicked my ass, Todd Blackledge, let's get him on here. He can do college football, he can play golf, he can do the NFL, he can do it all, and he definitely defeated my lowly Bengals on that given day.

TODD BLACKLEDGE: Well, I don't remember much about that game, Cris.

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: I don't remember any of it.

TODD BLACKLEDGE: It's an honor for me to be a part of this group, part of this call, part of the NBC family, part of the NFL coverage by NBC. I can't imagine there are too many broadcast teams that will match what Noah and I do going to Ann Arbor, Michigan, this weekend and doing a game in the Big House of the defending national champion (audio interruption).

So yeah, we go from there and then the following weekend, a trip to Brazil to call the Eagles and Packers. We are both excited about that opportunity. We had a chance to do a pair of NFL games last year and enjoyed it

very much, and this is a fun match-up. The first time that the NFL has played a game in South America.

Their initiative, the league's initiative to really grow the game globally has really taken off, and this will be an excellent opportunity, and two teams that -- both playoff teams from a year ago. Both teams have exciting, dynamic quarterbacks in Jordan Love and Jalen Hurts, but two teams that last year in the second half of the year just kind of went in different directions.

So it'll be interesting to see how both of those teams start this year. Some really exciting new additions on both rosters.

Noah and I are very, very excited to go down there. It's a long way to go to do a game, but we're looking forward to a great experience.

**Q. For Mike and Cris, here in Baltimore you hear a lot from fans that this Ravens team can't prove anything to them during the regular season this year, and there's almost this "wake us in January" mentality because that's really when we'll find out if this team has taken strides. Is that a fair way to judge the Ravens? And for the players themselves, would there be a danger in thinking that way, thinking ahead and being too focused on the Super Bowl?**

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: I'll tell you, just to make it to the championship game in the AFC, I mean, think about what that's going to mean this year. Everybody is going to pencil these two teams back into the championship game. They played so well.

So who doesn't have a chance? Bills, Dolphins, Jets for sure, Bengals, Ravens, I don't know what the Steelers are going to do, Browns for sure, the playoffs last year, Texans, what they did, Chiefs, Chargers now with Harbaugh out there. It's just really hard.

We all know about Baltimore's toughness and what they've been known for all this time. But I think we collectively have to give Kansas City some credit. They weren't playing particularly well, especially late in the year. Ended up putting it together. In my mind, I thought Baltimore was the best team in the AFC and playing at home and I fully expected them to win the game.

Yet we have seen it before, right? The flip the switch, whatever it is, that Kansas City and Andy Reid and Patrick Mahomes and all those guys can do. The game was so explosive in the first quarter and then sort of settled down into this defensive battle, which you would think always would sort of favor the Ravens.



But I really think that the story of last year for me anyway was the way Spagnuolo's defense played. After they gave up an early score in that game, they just locked down one of the best offenses and one of the best quarterbacks and the MVP of the league.

Sometimes you've just got to give people credit. I know it was a tough day to play weather-wise and all those things. But it was a physical battle. I thought Kansas City came in there and understood fully if they're going to win that game, they had to go and try and out-physical a very physical team in the Baltimore Ravens, and to some extent, they accomplished that.

MIKE TIRICO: I'll just add on real quick, it's hard in this league to get back to where you got to the next season because so much changes, everything from rosters to health to schedule.

I understand the Baltimore fans because they've been spoiled by some terrific football. I think the Ravens have won 66 games in the last six seasons. That's a lot. That's more than almost every other team in the league. But in that same stretch, they're 2-5 in the playoffs. For a team that's winning 11 games a year, you're looking for more than just two wins in the playoffs in that six-year stretch.

So that's just a reminder to get back there, it's really hard. Detroit is in the same boat. You're not going to wake up on championship Sunday in this conference and say those teams are back there again. You've got to earn your way there.

You understand it from the fans because this has been such a sustained very good football team and they want to see the trophy that comes with it, and it hasn't come.

I understand the fans being restless about trying to get back there, but I think those players know full well, as Cris detailed, how many good teams you've got to play to get from week 1 to the last Sunday of the AFC season and the conference championship game. Very hard to get back and shouldn't be underappreciated how difficult that task is going to be, in my opinion, for them this year.

**Q. For Cris and Todd, I wondered your thoughts on the Chargers this year and Jim Harbaugh coming back into the league after 10 years away, and maybe, Todd, you saw him at Michigan, maybe how he's evolved from the Niners to coming back into the league.**

TODD BLACKLEDGE: Well, I'll say this: I've known Jim for a long time. Jim's dad, Jack, and my dad are very good friends. They went to Bowling Green together. They

coached high school together back in Canton, Ohio. My dad was an O-line coach for the Colts when Jim played in Indianapolis. I've known him -- look, he's a different dude. He's got a little unusual personality. He's kind of quirky. He's different to talk to.

But make no mistake, he is an outstanding football coach. He crosses his T's and dots his I's. His teams are physical. His teams can win at the line of scrimmage. They can run the football. He's great with quarterbacks. He'll be great for Justin Herbert. I really expect that he will do quite well there.

What he was able to do the last three years at Michigan was pretty remarkable because in the COVID year, 2020, they were about ready to get rid of him. They were a bad football team at that point, and the next three years, they really changed their whole culture and everything that they had going there.

I wouldn't say that he's mellowed since he was last in the NFL, but I think he's just evolved and grown and matured as a head coach, and I'd just expect to see him do very well there.

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: Yeah, everybody is going to have their own opinions on Jim, right. But one thing you can't deny is that he's won everywhere he's gone. He just keeps winning.

Greg Roman coming over and them drafting a tackle in Joe Alton in the first round instead of a receiver or whatever else might have been possible there to me said what I would want to see if I owned that football team. Look, we think we have a really special player in Justin Herbert, but let's quit asking him to do everything. It's just not fair.

One thing you know about Jim is they are going to run the football, and Greg Roman, we're talking about Baltimore before, he's the one that laid the foundation for Lamar Jackson, and people thought, oh, man, somehow holding Lamar back by running the ball.

But they established a style of play and an offense that they just built upon. I think you're going to see the same thing coming now.

It's almost ironic that Roman comes over from Baltimore and the two running backs they end up signing are Gus Edwards and J.K. Dobbins from the Ravens.

It is a really interesting case study. I give Jim a lot of credit for popping into the division with a still very young Patrick Mahomes, knowing that he's going to have to beat him if he's going anywhere in the AFC, and then probably has to

beat his brother somewhere down the road to keep the whole thing going.

But it is a definite, definite interesting team to watch, for my money now, in a way that maybe they haven't been in the past because of the physical nature of the way that he is a head coach, and what he did with San Francisco to me was one of the great coaching jobs of all time.

**Q. You just saw the Patriots on Sunday night so you're well aware of the state of the franchise right now. Expectations don't seem to be too high for this team going into 2024. What in your mind would make this a successful season?**

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: Hmm. Interesting question. You know, I wish I could go somewhere other than Drake Maye, but let's face it, that's what it is. You come out of that game, and I saw him and I've watched him all preseason and sort of go, okay, if it's truly a competition, Drake Maye won. I don't think anybody would dispute that.

But if I owned the Patriots, if I owned them, I'm looking at this as a three- to five-year decision. And we all know, we all know that it's all about the quarterback position. The rules in the National Football League right now are such that you've got to have one of those guys playing quarterback. You have to keep him healthy, and you have to develop him the right way.

We've seen teams like Green Bay hold people out of the lineup for three years. So is it in the best interest to do that with Drake Maye? Is it in his best interest to do that for three weeks? Is it in his best interest to go, you know what, look at our defense, we can play, we know this is New England, we know we have talent on defense, and Drake Maye is a guy that we think gives us an edge in the overall play of things.

With the flip-flopping of the offensive line, with the youth at wide receiver, I think that's a really tall task to ask of such a young player, especially when he's going to do his first in-season press conference for the first time. He's going to get a game plan with defenses that he's never seen in his entire life. He's not even 22 years old yet.

I really -- Mike and I went back and forth on this a million times, even during the course of the broadcast, and I probably don't want him starting on opening day, even though I think he gives them the best chance to win.

I kind of would like to see him watch Jacoby Brissett lead practice, run the huddle, go through the game plan, memorize everything you do. If you lose the game, get beat up by the media, just let him watch somebody else do

that for a month at least, and then if you feel like it's time for a change, that's probably what I would do.

**Q. I know last year during the playoffs for the Chiefs-Dolphins Peacock game there was a commercial-free fourth quarter. I'm curious, going into the Brazil matchup, how you're thinking about differentiating, if at all, the Peacock presentation of an NFL game compared to what folks are going to see Thursday and Sunday night?**

ROB HYLAND: I'll kick it off. One of the things the Peacock game will feature is where there are few traditional commercial islands, we'll do what's called sort of a studio takeover and not go to a traditional commercial but stay at the field and deliver additional content while not going to a traditional break.

We think we can provide the viewers, like we did last year in Los Angeles, with additional football content during some of the TV time-outs to keep viewers more engaged in this period.

I think there are three of those instances in Brazil. There's actually one of those happening in kickoff, as well, at the end of the first quarter. But that's one of the features of -- and TV innovation elements that the league and our Peacock partners wanted to introduce, and we're going to be pursuing those on the opening weekend.

TODD BLACKLEDGE: The only thing I would add is I've not been up to date so far on kind of the nuts and bolts of that, but I'm kind of linear in my thinking. So I've got to get this first game taken care of with Michigan and Fresno State, and then when I get to Brazil early in the week next week, kind of get caught up and clued in on how we're going to do this broadcast in whatever way it might be different than whatever way we're used to traditionally.

But Noah and I will be well prepared and well versed to handle however the time is used and whatever content is needed in that time.

**Q. Rob, the production bar has risen everywhere in the NFL. There's so many more, quote/unquote, A games as you'd call them. The night games, Amazon, Netflix, early single broadcast, even the early Sunday games, set SkyCams, next-gen stats and everything. In your opinion, what does it take to keep Sunday Night Football feeling special and differentiated the way it has for so many years?**

ROB HYLAND: Well, I think it begins sort of in April every year where we dissect and break down every single element of the production. We truly do. We challenge



every element to how we've done it. I watch some tape of other broadcasts. The more you watch, the more you see that everyone is basically doing the same show.

I think things that continue to differentiate us from others is taking viewers somewhere they could never go on their own. Todd and Cris played in the league and understand what it's like, but 25 million people watching have never experienced what the players on the field or the coaches on the field experience.

I always push for greater access, be that in-game interviews with coaches. This year, new to the NFL, we're going to be allowed to speak to a home team player in full uniform either at the end of warm-ups or just after run-outs.

I would say just the continuation of pushing for more access is something that hopefully will continue to differentiate Sunday Night Football.

All network partners for the first time will have locker room access after the field clears, 20 seconds of video per team, and that's new this year, and all head coaches are now required to do in-game interviews with our sideline reporters.

Again, I would point to just one thing that might look and feel a little different to a sophisticated eye. In the past every network has allotted super slow motion cameras on their package, and Sunday night has a heck of a lot of them, as well.

But given the fact that I can use my iPhone to record broadcast-quality super slow motion footage of my daughter Audrey's gymnastics practices, I challenged our crew to make every camera on our show a high-frame-rate camera.

Now, our booth camera is not a high-frame-rate camera, and neither is the All-22, but our three game cameras, our high end zone, our slash camera, and our pylons are now all high-frame-rate cameras.

We converted seven more cameras to be high-frame-rate super slow motion cameras. There's no excuse not to have every frame available, as you guys know. There are calls that come down to the centimeter sometimes, and I just really wanted to challenge our group to make sure that we had the best possible video available for our viewers to experience Sunday Night Football, and that's something we're doing this year.

**Q. Cris and Todd, a lot of hype about the Texans entering this season. What do they have to do to avoid the regression we've seen from teams like the Giants**

**and Jacksonville in recent years after they made the playoffs and they won a round? Also, second part of the question, we've seen second-year QBs like Patrick Mahomes, Joe Burrow, Jalen Hurts, Brock Purdy lead their teams to the Super Bowl. What do you need to see from C.J. Stroud for him to make that leap?**

TODD BLACKLEDGE: Well, I think C.J. Stroud is right on track to continue to achieve at a high level, continue to lead his team. I was very, very impressed with him, not only in the games I watched on film leading up to the playoff game, but just how he played, how he carried himself, how he handles himself. And even through this off-season, just every time I've seen him interviewed or listened to him, I just think he's got -- he's a very well-grounded guy. I think he's a mature guy. I think his team rallies around him in a great way. And he's extremely talented.

This is a team that I think kind of went all in on what they did in the off-season and some of the players they picked up and drafted, and I just see this as a team that maybe before the season started last year, they might have said, we might be two, three years away from where we want to be. I think after the way he played in particular and the way some of their other guys played around him last year, that timeline maybe got shrunk a little bit.

I think that they are in a good place and on track to keep growing and keep climbing as a team.

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: Just quickly, I think they're a better team. I really do. You add Stefon Diggs, who's one of the quickest players and one of the hardest guys to play bump and run coverage against. You've got Joe Mixon, who is a legitimate threat, not just running but receiving out of the backfield. We saw him for a long time here in Cincinnati.

Nico Collins and Tank Dell I think proved what they can do. And I thought the Texans were very lucky to hang on to Bobby Slowik. Bobby is a guy I love because he worked for us at PFF for a long time, and he's been knocking it dead.

But you watch that offense, and it really fits C.J. Stroud. I had not seen a lot of C.J. during the course of the season. So in the off-season I went back and just watched, like, every graded throw that we had on him, and you just get more and more and more impressed.

Todd can help me on this one, but it was the last game that he played -- was it Michigan? Whatever it was. But the game that he just couldn't miss. It was like he just could not miss a throw. And everybody said, oh, okay, well, if he plays in the NFL like that and not like he did before when



he wasn't so accurate, whatever, blah blah blah, and he did it all year. He did it all year. It was amazing to watch him just sort of jump in there, and such a deserving offensive Rookie of the Year.

I think he only had like five interceptions on the season, something like that.

He is the argument -- we were talking about Drake Maye. The argument you make back is C.J. Stroud. It's like, hey, give Maye a chance; look what C.J. Stroud did last year. And it's hard to argue with that one.

**Q. Cris, you get the Bills in week 4 this year. How do you expect Josh Allen and Joe Brady to scheme up this offense to account for no Stefon Diggs?**

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: Yeah, I think it's going to be a little different, right. I don't know all the inner workings of that and what happened and why it happened and all the different things.

But I think Dalton Kincaid is going to have to have a major role as we move forward here. James Cook is going to have to be more than what he's been. Shakir obviously is going to be the one that we did a lot of focus on.

This will be a really interesting case study for me. You're missing key guys on offense. You're missing your two safeties that I thought were sort of the cornerstone of this team for a long, long time.

When the quarterbacks get paid a lot of money, eventually you can't surround them with the kind of talent that you can when they're on their rookie contract. So then it really falls back on the quarterback, just like it did Patrick Mahomes. It's falling back on Josh Allen. He's really going to have to carry this football team. He's fully capable of doing this, but this is a different team than what we saw. There's no Gabe Davis, either, on the receiving side.

Sean McDermott has proven to me that he can build a defense out of -- even though he's missing key parts. I think Joe Brady has a chance now to prove the same thing on the offensive side.

**Q. Cris, just want to ask you about Zay Flowers, what you see in him as far as a wide receiver that makes him special, what you think his ceiling might be. And as a former player, in a situation like this where he has a chance to get some get-back with the Chiefs right away, how much do players relish being in a situation like that?**

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: Well, first of all, you saw what

kind of competitor he was in that championship game. Yeah, he had a couple major mistakes, right, and not that we all haven't in the past, but I loved watching him play in that game. I thought he was just fighting his tail off to try and go win the game. Sometimes you try and win it almost by yourself and extending the ball and getting it punched out, whatever the case may be.

But he's a weapon that they really have not had. They just haven't.

I think that you're going to see this offense build around Flowers and the two tight ends if they're staying healthy. Likely, to me, proved a lot last season with what he was able to accomplish, and Mark Andrews came back for that championship game, but he wasn't what he could be.

This is a team that if Zay is what I think he is, which I think is a very, very special player, and can provide that sort of explosiveness on the outside that they've just been waiting for for a long time, and you throw in Derrick Henry into that mix, think about that.

Let's say you go two tight ends and you've got Zay Flowers outside and somebody has to tackle 250 pounds of Derrick Henry, so forget about the scheme of going out there and, okay, let's go ahead and add two safeties to play linebacker so that we have the speed on the field to stop Lamar Jackson, and then they get these 220-pound safeties have to go try and tackle Derrick Henry, and he gets the ball time after time so you take them off the field, and then there goes Zay Flowers and Likely and Lamar running the ball.

There's a lot to stop on this offense. There really is. There's a reason that he's been MVP. They've built something around him. And I thought Zay Flowers in many ways was that missing component part, and I would expect him to come back pretty angry this year. They're a step away from the Super Bowl, and if a couple of those plays go their way.

But he's a cornerstone. Don't let anybody say anything other than that. He's a cornerstone going forward for a really good team.

MIKE TIRICO: I'll just add, not being there during the preseason, looking forward to talking to them, and Coach Harbaugh especially, because hearing the stories of Zay Flowers being very intentional about his work to be a better route runner in the off-season, to make a true jump from year one to year two as a technician of a wide receiver, and to hear the anecdotal stuff of his leadership and really stepping up, and you see it because you're there all the time, stepping up as a leader in the group after what

happened at the end of last year, just kind of shows you what he's made of and the kind of player that he is.

I'm excited to see if that shows itself in terms of a jump from year one to year two with a player like this. Excited to see if all the things we're hearing about him are going to be brought to reality once the season gets going on the field.

TODD BLACKLEDGE: If I could just add one thing about Zay Flowers, and this is off the field but something that really impressed me and has always stuck with me, I remember covering him at Boston College, and his coach was Jeff Hafley at the time who is now the new defensive coordinator with the Packers so I'll see him in a week.

But Zay Flowers was a guy that was pursued in the off-season by many other teams that were throwing a lot of potential NIL dollars at him to leave BC, and it was his last year that he was going to play there. His dad was a single parent. He had several siblings. But he decided to honor his commitment, stay at BC and finish what he started there. He and his dad were in agreement to do that.

To me, that showed a depth of character and maturity that I don't always see in college football and today's game, but I think that also speaks to him. He's a special player on the field. I think he's a pretty special guy off the field, as well.

**Q. Cris and Todd, what are you looking for from Lamar before we get to postseason, maybe that what Chiefs game exposed, what you're hoping to see as his next evolution building on that MVP performance from last year?**

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: Well, I would just warn to -- a little bit like when people talk about Dallas and Dak Prescott and what San Francisco's defense has done to them in the playoffs a couple of times, that's a pretty good defense.

I would say the same thing about Kansas City's defense. To me, they were the -- not untold. Everybody talked about their defense, but not enough. That defense carried them in some of the toughest moments of the year when the offense was struggling.

They had a huge day. They just had a huge day in Baltimore, and the weather was a little bit bad.

I wonder if they came out of that game questioning whether or not they were able to run the ball enough in an off-weather kind of day because they do have an offense that can flip. They can throw it when they want to throw it, but they also can really go pound that thing in there and then have the flash of Lamar's play action passing or just

play action running to come off of that.

I literally am salivating to watch this offense play with Derrick Henry. I just think it puts so many threats on the field that for the first time maybe since Lamar has been there, you go, okay, maybe they could add one more really top-end receiver, maybe Bateman will be that, whatever.

But this is a complete offense now. Now the question becomes about the offensive line, right? Sorry to hear about Joe; that was horrible.

Yeah, I do think that this is probably as many weapons as they put around him, and really can't wait to watch them play together. I just think it's going to be a very exciting opening night.

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