

NBC Sports Group Media Conference

Thursday, August 28, 2025

Mike Tirico

Cris Collinsworth

Drew Esocoff

Melissa Stark

Rob Hyland

Press Conference



We'll take opening comments and then take questions.

ROB HYLAND: I'll make this quick. We've got a great schedule ahead of us beginning next Thursday night with the Cowboys and Eagles, followed by the debut of Sunday Night Football with Josh Allen, Lamar Jackson squaring off in Buffalo as the Bills host the Ravens.

It's going to be a special season, but 22 games later after kickoff, thousands of miles and 157 days, we will end our season in Santa Clara, California, with Super Bowl LX. It's NBC's 21st Super Bowl. And I am so excited that we are just seven days away from kicking this thing off.

With that, I turn it back to Dan.

THE MODERATOR: Let's go to Drew Esocoff.

DREW ESOCOFF: I'll sort of reiterate what Rob said and make this quick. Every time we come upon the beginning of the season, I pinch myself because I get to work with the best crew in the industry -- technical, production, talent -- and it never gets old, and I'm as excited leading up to next Thursday night as I was when I did my first NFL game back in 2000.

We have some nice things planned, some of which are just an upgrade of what you've already seen, but we'll experiment with some new stuff during the year. But the support we get from NBC's management and from the National Football League is unparalleled, and I'm looking forward to it every bit as much as I always have been.

THE MODERATOR: Let's go to Mike Tirico.

MIKE TIRICO: Hi, everybody. Same thing, we'll keep it short here. Just super excited. I can't believe it's season 10 at NBC and 30 years of either hosting a studio show for a primetime game or in the booth.

I'm so lucky to get to do it with Cris and Rob and Melissa and Drew and, as Drew mentioned, all the folks who are not on this call. We love our team. Our emails and texts have been going back and forth. It's like that last week before school starts for all of us, and we can't wait to get the whole band back together.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, everyone, for joining today's call as NBC Sports kicks off the 20th season of Sunday Night Football next week with the NFL Kickoff Game on NBC and Peacock with the Dallas Cowboys visiting the Philadelphia Eagles.

On today's call, Sunday Night Football's coordinating producer, Rob Hyland, who was the replay producer for the first three seasons of Sunday Night Football, now begins his fourth season as coordinating producer of SNF, and for the 13 seasons before that, was the lead producer of Notre Dame football on NBC.

Next we have Drew Esocoff, the director of Sunday Night Football for all 20 seasons. Drew begins his record 26th consecutive season as an NFL game director in primetime.

As the season kicks off next week, Mike Tirico begins his 20th season calling NFL games in primetime and 30th as an NFL studio host or play-by-play caller. Since Mike became the voice of Sunday Night Football in September 2022, he has called 67 regular season and playoff games, more than any other TV announcer.

Mike's partner in the booth is Cris Collinsworth who returns for his 17th year in the SNF booth, extending his record for the most primetime seasons by an NFL game analyst. Howard Cosell is second for those of you wondering.

Our sideline reporter is Melissa Stark who begins her fourth season with SNF. Next Thursday night's Kickoff Game marks 25 years to the day of Melissa's first NFL primetime game on the sideline, September 4, 2000, when the Denver Broncos visited the St. Louis Rams in the season opener of Monday Night Football.



And considering what this year is like with calling a Super Bowl for the first time for me plus Olympics and the start of our connection with the NBA again and calling those games, just super excited for what's ahead the next nine months, and thrilled to get it started in Philly with the champs and the Cowboys, who I guess have been in the news the last couple of weeks, as per usual.

Cris, go ahead, man.

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: I was all fired up, too, until I actually heard I've done this longer than Howard Cosell. I'm a little depressed. Yeah, it's an exciting time for all of us.

I think you look at these first two games, and it's amazing. We've been at this a long time, and I don't think we've ever had a game like Eagles-Cowboys, come back to Bills-Ravens.

Just exciting time. I know the whole country is excited for the return of football, and we're glad we get to do the first one.

THE MODERATOR: Melissa?

MELISSA STARK: Hi, everybody. 25 years of me being back on the sidelines makes me feel old. There's no group I would rather do all of this with. Mike mentioned our supporting cast, the people that aren't on this call. They are the ones who help make us the best in the business.

Just so excited. This group is like family. We spend so much time together. We're getting ready to kick it all off, and no group I'd rather be with.

Q. Mike, you kind of alluded to it there in your intro, but Cowboys have been in the news, a lot of Micah Parsons-Jerry Jones saga going back and forth. Obviously this isn't their first time, but it feels a little unique.

I'm just curious, how much do you think the lead-up to this with the controversy between Micah and the Cowboys, how much do you think that adds to the intrigue of the season opener?

MIKE TIRICO: I think it's par for the course with Dallas, right? If it's not Micah, it's CeeDee or Dak or -- I was reflecting on the start of covering the NFL for me personally in terms of a host or play-by-play role, and it was 32 years ago we did the first NFL Monday Night pregame show on ESPN, and that was the Emmitt Smith holdout season.

Cowboys opened that season on Monday night, got blown out, lost the second game, and then Emmitt came back and they were the first 0-2 starter to go win a Super Bowl.

We've been down this road before. I think the way this has played out, given all the attention on the Cowboys and more media outlets constantly talking the NFL, it just feels like it has reached an even different level with some direct animosity here.

I hope for the sake of the Cowboys it gets sorted out because without Micah Parsons, they're not as good a team. And their defense wasn't very good last year, and they've got a lot of changes in store on that side of the ball as well.

They need him if they want to be competitive.

Giants look good in the preseason. Washington and Philadelphia played in the championship game. You can't afford to give up weeks in this division or this league, so Dallas better get this straightened out quick, or it's going to be a long season.

Q. Cris, I'm curious about a team you're going to see in week 5, the Patriots when they play the Bills in week 5. You know all about the changes they made this off-season -- Mike Vrabel, Josh McDaniels, a lot of new free agents. What's a realistic timeline for the Patriots to be competing for a wildcard spot and kind of in contention at the end of the season again?

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: Good question. It's a long road, right? For Mike Vrabel, he's a guy I believe in. Josh McDaniels, a guy I believe in. Drake Maye, a guy I believe in.

But it's probably going to have to come from the offensive line -- Will Campbell, the new guys that are in and up there -- because this was a group that really didn't get it done a season ago up front. And so if they do, it'll be due in large part to the fact that they have better protection, they can run the football. And that's where I think it starts.

Q. I had a couple questions, first for Cris. This is the second kickoff game you've called in Philly after the Eagles won the Super Bowl, and I was curious if there are any differences going into this game than there were the first game or anything that you're sort of interested in.

And for Rob and Drew, I was just curious, this being the 20th season, are there going to be any bells and whistles in the broadcast that fans can expect to see?

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: Well, I mean, I always enjoy hearing the Rocky theme no matter what. So when you get into this kind of a game, we've had a chance to do these for quite a few years now, but this one feels a little bit different.

The first Eagles championship was a bit of a stunner, right, knocking off the Patriots the way they did, Nick Foles, the whole thing.

This one is a stunner. As a matter of fact, this was stunning. You saw the Eagles come out and they're up 34-0 at one point against a team that had been to three straight Super Bowls.

So when you were leaving the stadium, your thought was, what did I just see; what was that? Is this the start of something really memorable? Is this the start of a potential dynasty? You want to pick this team apart and go, all right, what is it the Philadelphia Eagles don't do well, and it's a pretty short list.

Did they have to flip over and change up a little bit on the defensive side? They did. But this is a rock-solid football team. Anything can happen -- injuries, we've got the whole thing. But they really beat up the Cowboys the two games that they played. I know Dak didn't play in either one of them.

But this is one of those games for the Cowboys where they really have to kind of try to reestablish something as far as what they're doing with this football team, and to Mike's point, that makes the whole Micah Parsons thing a little bit more interesting.

You certainly don't want to make it three in a row in the category of what we saw last year.

ROB HYLAND: In regard to the second part of your question, again, this is NBC's 20th season of Sunday Night Football. Obviously Sunday Night Football has been going on longer than that, but there will be occasions throughout the season where we look back at a really cool moment.

There's a chance, if the game lets us Thursday night, you could see Jason Witten running with his helmet off against the Eagles many years ago. But I think strategically and when it makes sense, there will be select moments that celebrate the wonderful history of the 20 seasons at NBC.

Q. For Rob and/or Drew, I'm curious about the impact of the new boundary cameras and how much that will play into the broadcast given some of those new NFL cameras.

For Cris, on the Eagles and Cowboys, if you can compare the way these two teams have approached signing players, and particularly their level of salary cap sophistication, and how much you think that has factored into the relative levels of success they've had over the last few years.

ROB HYLAND: In terms of boundary cameras, the NFL tested it all three preseason games, and they believe it's going to reduce about a minute of time that actually takes the traditional chain gang to come out onto the field and measure.

Truth be told, I think during the entire football season, there's only about 40 to 45 measurement stoppages during the entire NFL season.

I think the technology is still developing. The NFL is committed to making the game faster for the fans, and they believe that technology will help achieve that goal. And I think it's up to Drew and I to figure out visually how to make this interesting and create drama.

For years we saw the chain gang come out and there was drama and theater to that moment. I think it's up to us to figure out how to create new drama if this technology continues moving forward. I don't know, Drew, you can take it from there.

DREW ESOCOFF: Yeah, we talk about bells and whistles and things like that, and we'll always rely on equipment that just gets better with age, upgraded frame rates. Where I think the new boundary cameras that the NFL is putting out will really help is on the 1:00 C game that doesn't have the facilities that we do.

That being said, any TV tool that can give us a defining look of a critical play is the most important thing we can ask for. I brought this up a million times, but I'll go back to it again, and Rob and Cris and Mike and Melissa have heard this: If we don't have a defining look of the last play of opening night last year, the wrong team wins the game. That sort of puts that in perspective.

But we can add all the bells and whistles we want, and a lot of it is testing stuff out that you will see as we head towards Super Bowl 60. But in my opinion, and I think Rob and most of the group would agree, our job is to have defining looks at critical plays, and if it helps in that regard, that's awesome.

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: I'll give a shot at the use of salary cap and whatever here, but the Eagles, you have to give them credit because they've hit big on some of these young players, starting with Quinyon Mitchell and Cooper DeJean a season ago, just pure difference makers.



Allowed them to make some moves in the secondary. They didn't have to keep a Darius Slay, a C.J. Gardner-Johnson, they could go younger on the back end. Didn't sign Milton Williams back, Josh Sweat, Brandon Graham retired.

It's a very different defense for the Philadelphia Eagles, but one that doesn't feel like it's worse off than what they were, when you hit on Jalen Carter, when you hit on Nolan Smith and those young players.

Just exciting. I'm excited to watch Jihaad Campbell play, too, just to see exactly what he might be able to bring to this mix as well.

Then you look at the offensive side, and basically it's status quo. They change out Mekhi Becton with Tyler Steen who has played, comes in there.

But this is a team that doesn't feel like if they get disrupted this year or they don't win, I don't think it's going to be because of what they had to do as far as salary cap or anything else goes.

And for the Cowboys, obviously picking up Pickens gives them somebody to offset a little bit for CeeDee Lamb. But to me it feels like the Dallas Cowboys are trying to recreate with their offensive line, do a little of what Philadelphia has done, which is really get much better in the trenches and especially on that offensive line.

The question is going to be, and Mike hit on it earlier, can they do the things to stop the run. You play Philadelphia, and they run it as much as any team in the league. And until you stop Saquon Barkley, you don't have to worry about much of anything else. And then when you do, then you load up and you get Devonta Smith and you get A.J. Brown one-on-one, and teams haven't been able to stop them either. There's a reason they're world champs.

Q. I have a question for Cris. Obviously Lamar Jackson has so much skill talent available to him. He has guys like Isaiah Likely and Mark Andrews coming up on contract years, Derrick Henry in the backfield.

Cris, as a wide receiver who is at the top of his game, what do you think are the challenges for an offense and for a quarterback that should be as good as the Ravens but also is going to have to balance egos and everyone wanting a piece of that pie? And how do you think it adds to the level of challenge that Lamar faces during what's going to be a very critical year for him?

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: Yeah, I know that Josh Allen

won the MVP, but it was a very close vote, so it could have been his third MVP last year as well.

I look at Baltimore's team, and I just keep going, what I'm most surprised about is they haven't won a championship in the last few years. Last year the addition of Derrick Henry just made this a different team.

To have to handle -- we saw it in the first Buffalo game. To have to handle Derrick Henry, who ran for whatever that was, a 75-yard touchdown early in the game, and then Lamar Jackson coming off of that, and then the emergence of Zay Flowers, and Rashod Bateman has looked great, two tight ends really that can play. I know Andrews had a tough moment there in the final game, but Likely has been terrific for them. Ronnie Stanley bouncing back was a big deal.

But the combination, and I thought it from the beginning when I first heard the deal that was made, when you put Derrick Henry and the power that he possesses in the same backfield as Lamar Jackson, it's almost too much to overcome. That combination I still think will win a championship.

Q. I know you've got Aaron Rodgers a little later on in the season, so I wanted to ask this question. Cris, do you think the Jets made the right move by moving on from Rodgers, and how much do you think culture factored into that, maybe Aaron Glenn wanting to create his own culture without an Aaron Rodgers there?

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: Yeah, I think that was a tough spot for Aaron Glenn. You come in there, and he knew what he wanted to do. He wanted to build the culture that they had with the Lions. He knew it wasn't an overnight fix, and it was going to take complete effort. It's going to take a lot of practice. A lot of defensive coordinators like having a quarterback who can run the football. They know how hard that is to stop it.

But when you're starting to talk about a new era and turning around the New York Jets, you wouldn't be looking for a one-year solution at the quarterback position. Did I think it was a reflection of Aaron Rodgers? I really didn't. I just looked at it as there was going to be -- this was a buildout that was beginning and not in the finish phases.

Q. Melissa, how has sideline reporting changed from when you started 25 years ago, the biggest things you've noticed?

MELISSA STARK: I think obviously so many more cameras. I do feel like a little bit more access in terms of --

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

we do always talk to the coaches at halftime and things like that, but I just feel like for some reason you just can get a little closer. And also all of the just access in general in terms of closer media and getting to know these players and knowing the ins and outs I think really helps.

It just feels like you're closer to the action. I'm not sure if I can put my finger on why. But I also feel like our production elements and everything that we can support with and getting people there to cover what I might overhear or what I might see has just gotten better.

It's the best seat in the house. Sometimes it's hard to see. You're kind of starting three feet deep and you kind of got to wiggle your way in there. But it really is -- you're the eyes and the ears down there, and there's no better access.

We just try to take advantage of that as best we can.

Q. For Cris or Melissa, from more of a macro perspective, this year marks 30 years since the Cowboys' last Super Bowl. From your perspective in the booth, what's kept them from breaking through in January despite all of the talent?

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: You know, I can't help but be a little bit influenced by what I'm seeing on that Netflix show. You look back on this team and where they were after winning those two Super Bowls, and obviously the whole Jimmy and Jerry thing has been discussed for a long, long time.

But it was really a unique opportunity of a lot of young talent, including young ownership, including young head coach that could have gone on for a long, long time after that.

That certainly has to be played into this as a bit of a factor. They did bottom out at one time, where they did get the first pick in the draft in Troy Aikman, and you can't discount what that does for a franchise.

We've seen it obviously with Cincinnati, we've seen it with a lot of these teams that end up with the first overall pick and get that quarterback that really turns the program around. But they've been so close. They were close with Bill Parcells, a fumbled snap away there.

But it doesn't feel like they've quite been able to recapture just the raw emotion that was those early '90s teams and who those players are and -- I mean, I think about Mike McCarthy - I hope I've got this right - but out of the five years, Dak Prescott I think played all three years, three of the five, and they won 12 games, and the two outliers were

the ones that he didn't play.

Dak Prescott is a -- he was second in MVP balloting just a couple years ago. If he's right and the hamstring issue is gone and he can move a little bit better and he takes back over, and George Pickens becomes the guy that offsets a little for CeeDee Lamb, and they've got this rebuilt offensive line with three No. 1 draft choices now up there if they're all healthy and ever ready to go, there is an up there.

I tend to think this team is going to be, at least initially, a little bit like the Bengals or somebody. They're going to have to score a lot of points. Defensively they've got some injuries and new people they're going to have to worry about along with what's going on with Micah.

Hopefully it'll be a nice exciting game, but the pressure to me is really on this offense for Dallas to just outscore opponents this year.

Q. For Cris, it's the first time you guys have had the Vikings home opener since the first game at U.S. Bank Stadium. What do you remember about that 2017 game with the Packers calling that game?

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: Just how much fun it was. The stadium is incredible. It's a completely different feel inside that stadium than I think anything else. You sort of feel like you're in a fishbowl looking out instead of looking in sort of a thing, and it just -- the energy -- was that when they introduced the Skol thing too and started the new tradition? It was a very exciting time.

I'll tell you, the Vikings are a really fun team to watch. I just think that they've got a lot going on in the right direction here, and it starts with Kevin O'Connell. He's proven time after time that he can take young quarterbacks and really turn them into something and make them better than what they were at other levels, and J.J. McCarthy was pretty good at other levels.

But the question to me was always could they get him protected? Is that offensive line good enough to make a championship run?

Then on the defensive side, I think Brian Flores' style of defense is probably the single most exciting defense we see in the league. That is a pure attack, come-after-it, show a lot of different looks, take chances, be conservative, take the quarterback. It really takes a lot of film study to keep up with all the stuff that they like to do.

Yeah, we're excited to be back in there. It's a great atmosphere.



MIKE TIRICO: And on Thielen, so fun to watch him react with his family about "we're going back home." What a connection he has with Minneapolis, and obviously still very productive. And how good that is for J.J. McCarthy to have such a quarterback-friendly receiver to go with another one in Justin Jefferson, and Hockenson healthy coming into the season adds to what's, I think, a team that is really good and has really not been talked about enough in this off-season or the buildup to the season.

If you want to weigh nationally the number of words used on the Cowboys' off-season in the buildup to the kickoff or the Vikings, clearly there's been a lot more talk about the Cowboys, but the Vikings were a 14-win team last year, going for 15 in Detroit on that last game of the season. And they've got every chance to be just as good again this year, provided J.J. is able to pick up where the quarterback play left off last year. And obviously it's new for him, so it'll be different.

But I'm excited for that game in Minnesota against Atlanta, and any game in Minnesota. It is right up there with my top two or three favorite places to do a game in the league. I think the stadium, the fan base is awesome, and looking forward to week 2 with the Falcons and the Vikings.

Q. For Mike and Cris, with Lamar Jackson and Josh Allen playing on Sunday night, how big is that game for both teams? If they lose this game, they basically have to look up at Kansas City or Buffalo at the end of the year.

CRIS COLLINSWORTH: Yeah, it feels big, doesn't it. You never want to overhype, whatever it may end up being, and it's week 1 of 17. But you never know. But there is no question that Josh Allen and Lamar Jackson have been two of the best players in the league. They've been the most recent MVPs, their team seems totally dependent on them, and they both are very interesting in their approach to the game.

Lamar, a little bit more of the traditional read option kind of stuff, whereas Josh is just sort of, I don't feel like throwing this one, let me go run over somebody and make it happen.

We had them during the regular season, and Baltimore beat Buffalo pretty badly in that one, just some big explosive plays starting with Derrick Henry. But I thought the playoff game was much more of what we expected to see even in that first game that we called.

I mean, it was down to the wire. It was thrilling. The two quarterbacks were matching big blows in that game. I

don't know if there's two more exciting quarterbacks than those two guys, and to get them on the same field for opening night is pretty cool.

Q. Mike, for you, I know you're a Syracuse alumni, but just talk about these two games coming up with the Eagles and Cowboys next Thursday and Ravens and Bills. Does it seem like this is almost like a college feel game, almost like the College Football Playoff?

MIKE TIRICO: No, it seems like it's an NFL double-header. You can't match the history of Eagles-Cowboys over the years because of the twice a season that they've played for all these many years. And like Cris said, with the two back-to-back MVPs, you don't get returning stars like that playing in a college game very often.

From that perspective, it's such a big opener for us on both Thursday and Sunday, and full credit to the league schedule makers. There's nothing like the buzz that the NFL is able to create about the start of a season, and if you just look all the way across the board, the entire weekend on through Monday, it's there. But I love our two games.

To be in two great atmospheres, Philadelphia, as they celebrate their championship and raise the banner on Thursday, and as soon as that game is done, we're in Buffalo to start the last season for the Bills in their stadium before their new one across the parking lot opens up. Bills were undefeated at home last year. A large part of that is Josh, but a big part of it is that crowd as well.

No better place to start our march to Super Bowl LX and the 20th year of Sunday Night Football than Philly and Buffalo. Just kind of makes you smile thinking about it, and we get to live it up for real next week, which is great.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, everybody, for joining us today. We'll see you a week from today for the Cowboys at the Eagles, and there will be a transcript of this conference call later this afternoon on [NBCSportsgroup/pressbox.com](https://www.nbc.com/sports/group/pressbox).

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

