

NBC Sports Group Media Conference

Monday, March 23, 2026

Sam Flood

Jason Benetti

Adam Ottavino

Dan Masonson

Press Conference



DAN MASONSON: Good afternoon, everybody. Welcome to today's conference call ahead of the return of Major League Baseball to NBC and Peacock with a day/night doubleheader on Thursday, March 26.

Joining us on the call are Jason Benetti, who a few weeks ago was named the voice of Sunday Night Baseball; Adam Ottavino, who will serve as an analyst for our Pirates-Mets coverage on Thursday, fresh off a 15-year MLB career; and Sam Flood, our NBC Sports executive producer who produced NBC Sports pregame show for multiple World Series in the 1990s.

SAM FLOOD: We can't wait to launch the baseball season. Much of the team is out in Los Angeles right now getting prepared to do a rehearsal game today and another rehearsal game tomorrow before we lock in on the launch on Thursday at Citi Field and then at Dodger Stadium for the prime-time game with another banner raising.

We just love the concept of starting the NFL season, raising the banner of the Super Bowl championship team. We love the idea that we're in Oklahoma City raising the banner with the Thunder, getting their title up in the rafters. And now we'll get to do the same in baseball, launching its season in Dodger Stadium with a banner being raised after an incredible seven-game World Series that had more drama than you can dream of.

We're excited to get into this space. We really believe in baseball at NBC Sports, for a lot of long-time baseball-aholics in here, and it's good to get back in the mix.

We've got some fun ideas with Jason as our lead play-by-play. He's going to be the host for one analyst from each team for every game, which is going to create

that unique feel where we're inside both teams' clubhouses and giving you the real information on what's going on well beyond the clips and well beyond what you can research.

These will be two people that are involved with the team, really know the teams inside/out. And we've seen it work with our Peacock lead-off games back a few years ago. And we're excited to put it on the big stage on NBC.

In addition, we're adding a new element to the shows this year. And Adam is going to be -- he and Clayton, for our first two games -- are going to be filling this role of getting us the inside pitch, taking us inside the mind of a pitcher as he approaches each one of the hitters.

We'll do this maybe once an inning, every other inning -- depends on the match-up, depends on the situation -- but the idea is to really take you through how Adam would approach pitching to Soto or the password. Whatever it is, he's going to take you through that approach, during the at-bat, and looking at it through the lens of a pitcher who was on that mound in a recent season facing these same hitters.

Although, I don't think he's ever faced the password since he was in the minor leagues a year ago. But the idea is a fresh approach inside the pitch, how we're attacking what's going on.

We're looking at this a little bit like inside the glass for the NHL and On the Bench in the NBA, just a new perspective and a new way to attack it.

But the ring leader for all of this will be Jason. I will hit the long fly out to you Jason, try and catch it.

JASON BENETTI: Ringleader. I only went to one circus as a kid. I don't know how they do it there, but I do know how well this all went when I first got the chance to do Sunday Leadoff. Thanks to Sam and to Rick Cordella and everybody at NBC for having me and bringing me back into the NBC Sports family.

I grew up with World Series on NBC, and I think the world of NBC Sports coverage of sports and the detail that this network provides.

I think about this in a lot of ways, like when you have the



conversation with your friends, hey, if you could be at a dinner party with three people from baseball history, who would it be?

I don't know who everybody in America would say, but we're going to try to do that every game. Like, Thursday, Orel Hershiser and Luis Gonzalez. I don't know how many people across the country have ever heard a conversation involving the two of them at the same time, but what this format provides is the ability to have a different conversation about the game in front of us every Sunday night and Thursday night in this case before we go to Seattle on Sunday.

So the novelty of it is, yes, in the format, but it's also in that conversation is going to be different every week, and the different wheelhouses of our analysts who can be breakout stars in the booth as they were on the field. I'm just thrilled to help stoke the fire of that conversation.

To Sam's point about Adam Ottavino and Clayton Kershaw and what they're going to do, so much of baseball -- we hear a lot about baseball changing the rules to get more balls in play and to see the athleticism of the players. And that has been a brilliant success for the game over the past couple of years, from my chair and from so many other people's chairs.

But in large part, this game is still that tactical battle between pitcher and hitter. It's a pitcher's job through tunnelling, through sequencing, through decisions of pitch types, to befuddle a hitter and try to avoid contact. Teams pay for that.

So to have a pitcher be able to break down how we can avoid a baseball bat and make it cool to get swings and misses, and not just, "Oh, why didn't the hitter hit the ball again?" is the essence of the game in some ways right now.

And so we all love the game of baseball, but we're going to love the granular details of how strikeouts happen as well. And that just enlivens my mind, and I hope that enlivens a lot of baseball fans' minds out there.

But I couldn't be more excited to get to hang out with Adam Ottavino, who, in a lot of ways is the contemporary pitcher who dove into how he could make himself better at every turn.

I'm certain that talking to him about sequences is going to be fascinating on a week-to-week basis when he's with us. So, Adam, I'll turn it over to you.

ADAM OTTAVINO: Thanks, Jason, and thanks, Sam, for

including me in this product this year. I couldn't be more excited. I'm really particularly excited about the local flavor that each broadcast is bringing. I really like that dynamic. I think that's a lot of what the fans want to hear and want to see, that inside knowledge, and a little more connection to their ballclub, even when they're on a national stage like they will be with NBC.

As for me, I'm really excited for this assignment. I feel incredibly lucky to have landed this opportunity to kind of share my expertise and kind of connect the dots between the analytical side of the game and the visual side of the game.

I truly believe that the Major League game is played pitch to pitch, and there's more variables to consider than ever in the modern game.

So I'm looking to do a really good job of bringing complicated concepts and making them easy for the viewers to understand and give them a little bit more insights to how we think about the game within the game -- the pitches, the soft time in between pitches, where you're kind of recalibrating, recalculating and making your best bet and then going out there and trying to execute it.

So really excited to get started. I think we have a great team. And I'm just very antsy to get to Citi Field on Thursday.

DAN MASONSON: Ready to take questions.

Q. I'm interested in how Sony's Hawk-Eye will be used with your ABS system this season on your broadcasts?

SAM FLOOD: I'm going to let our director get back to you with exactly how we're going to execute that. It is part of the plan. But with all the rules of Major League Baseball, I don't want to misspeak here and get outside my knowledge area on exactly how we're going to execute with that. Dan can set you up with our director and he can talk you through.

Q. Dan, I was wondering if there was any other production elements that you guys are planning to announce just with the two analysts from other teams. Is that kind of a homage to the past because World Series broadcasts for many years were done that way?

SAM FLOOD: Yeah, one from each team is something we used during our Peacock lead-off baseball games, and it worked incredibly well. We're excited to just move it on to the national stage with the Sunday night games on the bigger audience and this incredible window that now hosts



Sunday Night Football, Sunday Night Baseball and Sunday Night Basketball.

So the idea of doing it this way, we think it's going to be really beneficial.

The biggest complaint you hear during the postseason in baseball is, I can't hear my people. I can't hear my guys call the game. We're going to have one person that's authentic to that team calling games through the season. When we do the wild card round, it will exist as well. Because it's the best way to know exactly what's going on inside each clubhouse, on the field, who's hot, who's not and what matters most to those fans.

We really want to honor that part of baseball, and, yeah, I go back to the '75 World Series with the Carlton Fisk home run, and NBC, the local announcer was on the call for it, Dick Stockton.

Q. Sam, what do you think Sunday Night Baseball's identity will be? Sunday Night Football has a very clear identity. The NBA on NBC has certainly shown for you guys this kind of modern nostalgia certainly is working. What would you describe Sunday Night Baseball's identity as what you would hope it will be?

SAM FLOOD: I think it's going to be an opportunity for the audience to really be inside both clubhouses, take a look at this game through a unique lens. Add to that the ability to take you in a pitch sequence the way Adam described it in a minute ago. We think that's going to be a unique lens on the game, particularly, as Jason said, pitch to pitch, it means so much and how those pitches are sequenced. We're going to look at it through that lens.

But in the tradition of Sunday Night Football and Sunday Night Basketball, we have a musical open that was a shot a week ago that we're really excited about. More to come on that. That will launch on our first Sunday NBC game on April 12th.

I've heard some of the early cuts. It's a lot of fun. It feels big. And it feels like it belongs on Sunday night on NBC, which is a premier platform for sports in this new world order.

We'll also do some of the whimsical things we did in the past. For example, if you go back to the 1997 World Series, it's the only World Series that had two penguins on a set at a game, which that was the first World Series that Bob Costas saw snow at. And when we're in Cleveland, having come in from Miami, he said it's not fit for penguins, and we decided that penguins should join the set the next show. So penguins and other surprise guests will appear

throughout the new Sunday Night Baseball world.

Q. Jason, can you explain how you got from Fox to NBC, and what drew you to this opportunity?

JASON BENETTI: Sam and I always joked after 2022 -- and he was serious, and it turned out I was, too -- that if NBC ever got baseball back in this sort of state, that I would be on the list of people that he would call. And I firmly appreciate that.

First of all, let me say, I had to get out of my contract at Fox a couple of months early, and all credit to Brad Zager over there for being willing to let me pursue this opportunity. Had they not done that, it would have been very difficult to make this happen. So I thank Brad for doing that.

But I personally have always been drawn to this format since I heard about it back in '22. I had done the Olympics for NBC that year in Tokyo from Stanford in 2021. And they liked my work enough that they called me for the Sunday Leadoff position in 2022.

And the format just makes a lot of sense to me. It makes a lot of sense that you would want to have the announcers that know the teams best. But also with the curiosity that baseball provides, there's always another detail to dig on. There's always another stat to remember to think about.

And all of the conversation you can have with different people about the teams, there's so many personality types who love baseball. And to have all those different personality types representative over the course of the season in the booth, I think, is phenomenally interesting.

But NBC was willing to have me, and I'm grateful to be there full time now.

Q. This one's for Jason, too. Is there any challenge to working with different broadcasters every week, maybe some guys you've worked with in the past, for sure, but also others you may not be that familiar with? Is that an added layer of difficulty, or is it a challenge you're looking forward to?

JASON BENETTI: "Challenge" makes it sound like I'm lifting pianos or something. I'm not. There are a lot of people with very difficult jobs in America.

There are people who do plumbing in cold environments and have, like, 22 frozen pipe calls to get to on a Sunday night in an emergency situation. I'm not that.

You know, I do think of our late, great former colleague, Bill

Walton, when I get asked about the difficulty of partners or anything like that. Because Bill Walton was, quote/unquote, difficult to wrangle. But if you think wrangling Bill Walton is the joy of working with him, you've got it all wrong.

The point is to see the people for who they are and what their strengths are and for what they do best. So placing rules on people and placing parameters on people, I learned from Bill very early on, not only is it stifling, but it doesn't get the best out of that person.

And, so, I think for nine innings to work with somebody who's got their own cadence, their own tenor, it's a fun puzzle for me.

I mean, there were games for the Sunday Leadoff where I would sit and talk for maybe an hour with the two analysts before the game off and on, and having a bite to eat or whatever. And you'd think they're one thing, and then you get on the air and they have a totally different rhythm and cadence.

And so, you know, the top of the first inning I was like, oh, you're this instead of that. That's interesting. It's a little bit of a sociological crossword puzzle. And it's pretty fun, honestly, because the goal is to get the most, the best stories, in the short window of two and a half hours that we have and the best analysis and the best details out of those people.

And I think it's more fun than challenging. But I'm the type of person who said I enjoyed going to law school. So maybe it's something about me. I don't know.

SAM FLOOD: One thing to add there, we remember last year, when Jason did it, he came out of the shows almost on a weekly basis and would say, both guys said it's the most fun they've had this season.

Inevitably that was the response. How much fun the two guys had, and that's the most fun they had calling a game all season because it was so different. It wasn't a time to make the donuts. It was a unique opportunity to tell stories to a different audience with different partners.

Q. There's already a pretty good familiarity with this, with how it's going to go, right?

SAM FLOOD: Yes.

Q. In terms of the rotating analysts, you said you had learned from the Sunday Leadoff that it worked really well. I was curious about details as to what you learned. Like, what about it clicked or worked really

well? Was it just viewer reaction or were there other things that sort of made you guys decide to do it like this?

SAM FLOOD: Three things were primary. One, we loved how well Jason handled it and made special television with it. Two, we love what it meant for the local markets to have one of their people involved in the show, since they were able to give real time insights and the freshest information. And, three, the unpredictability and the fun we have had figuring out the lineup and who is going to do it.

I was just in with the talent team office a few minutes ago going through the green names, which means they're green, good to go. Great group of people, and we're excited, and on a weekly basis we'll have that extra bite of the apple to be able to tell people who is going to be calling the game. That will be one more way to expose the folks in each market that Sunday Night Baseball is coming to town and it's going to be on big NBC.

Q. Were there any issues at times with certain partners? Because obviously you're relying on different networks, sort of, partnering with you on this. Did you run into any issues with that, or was it all pretty clean sailings?

SAM FLOOD: We've had good conversations with everyone. And it's amazing how willing and excited people are to get their analysts the national stage. Look at what Detroit is doing with Jason, allowing him to be the face of Sunday Night Baseball and the lead character on that for the entire season.

In some ways, it's a real tribute to the Tigers for realizing what this platform means and what this opportunity is, in Jason's career, and to build his brand, which at the same time makes the Tigers a bigger game in the national spotlight.

Q. Sam, number one, during the weeks where, on Sunday Leadoff, when Matt Vasgersian is not going to be doing the play-by-play, does NBC plan to have a local announcer on, or is there another hire or someone from another property to contribute there? Then also, as a follow-up, I guess, not having reporters on Sunday Night Baseball, are you guys going to experiment maybe having analysts down at the field level, similar to what you do with On the Bench?

SAM FLOOD: Yes, there is another play-by-play we're not ready to announce yet. But there is one more that we've got conversations with and have agreed to a plan with, but not ready to announce quite yet.

We will have reporters in the lead-off games, and we do like the idea of trying something like in the dugout, like On the Bench? We're working through some ideas there, but some process there. Some process there will be available.

Remember, we're going to have Adam, who is going to be positioned in a unique spot. We're still not willing to announce exactly where he's going to be. But it will put him in the middle of a lot of fun action, and I think it's kind of exciting to see how that evolves.

It's just like with On The Bench, where we have to have conversations with a number of people to make sure the access we're getting in the NBA wasn't intrusive to the teams.

We made it our mission to say -- we didn't say trust us; we said we will earn your trust. And that's what we intend to do with whatever access points we end up with in the baseball world.

Q. Sam, this question is for you. Baseball has a significant amount of quality play-by-play people right now who are working. Why was Jason the right candidate over others in what is a very, very deep pool of talent?

SAM FLOOD: We had the opportunity to work with Jason for that '22 season, and we realized how good he was and is in engaging with people and bringing out the best of the people sitting next to him. It was not a difficult decision. Always was going to be the first call we would make.

Obviously very appreciative of Brad Zager and his willingness to let him out a couple of months early, which allowed this all to take place.

But just something about Jason. You spend time with him, he's a spectacular human being who cares so much and is so good at his job. He's a guy you want to have on your team, and a guy you want to be the face of your team and the lead character.

And we're going to send him out to the mound every week and he's going to throw heat and he's going to mix it up. Then he's going to throw the knuckleball, and we'll have fun with it. That's the most important part. He understands that it's a job, it's an adventure, but we're in the entertainment business, with information and storytelling at the heart of what we do at NBC Sports.

Q. Sam, the NBA media rights deal, you guys struck that, I think, July 2024, ahead of an October 2025 debut. Negotiations have been going from early '24. With baseball, that was officially announced in

November of '25. They had a March '26 debut. Negotiations have been going on since, I guess, maybe last February or somewhere thereabouts. I would ask you, has there been less lead time? If so, how has that affected your preparations for this new package?

SAM FLOOD: We've learned how to launch packages having been involved with multiple fresh launches over the years. And the plan is always to think ahead what sports you might get, how you would handle them.

You have the wish list of talent, wish list of techniques. And for this one, Rob Hyland, coming off the Super Bowl, we've told him midway through the NFL season that we wanted him to oversee the project.

So Rob, who did such an amazing job with Sunday Night Football for the last four years, as he took the chair from the legend Fred Gaudelli, Rob has been overseeing the day-to-day with our lead producer Matt Borzello.

But Rob, having just come off a Super Bowl, had great big-picture ideas, working through how we could execute everything. So we really put elite hands on deck to make this happen and work as a team.

And from our graphics group, as soon as I get off this call and I'm going to go down to the graphics room and look at some of the latest iterations of what we have. But we have a whole team of people who are involved, thinking of ideas, throwing ideas out there, figuring out the best way to execute. And energy and excitement drives a project like this. And all of that is full force.

Q. How do you plan to keep the Peacock exclusive Sunday night broadcasts having the same look and feel as the ones on NBC? Or will they look and feel differently? I know, obviously, you won't have Costas for the Peacock-exclusive ones. I mean, will it be a little bit of a step-down from the NBC games, or will you maintain a consistent approach?

SAM FLOOD: We will maintain a consistent approach. We believe if we're producing it, we have one standard, which is the standard at NBC Sports always -- work to put the best possible product on the air, tell great stories and engage at a really high level. And with Jason in that middle seat up in the booth, we know that's going to happen.

Q. Adam, what does it mean to you to have your first assignment with NBC in New York where, of course, you were a member of the Mets for three years as well as separate stints with the Yankees?



ADAM OTTAVINO: For me it doesn't really matter but it's a good feeling obviously, to show up to a place that I'm very familiar with. I'm very excited for the Opening Day match-up. We're going to have Paul Skenes on the mound for Pittsburgh. What's better than that?

Obviously he's one of the most talked about pitchers in the Big Leagues. And Freddy Peralta making his debut for the Mets. This should be a very, very juicy Opening Day match-up and I look forward to seeing how these guys go about it.

Q. Jason, when you were doing Single-A baseball on the radio for the Salem Avalanche back in the day, was this always the goal? Was this always the dream, to be the number one play-by-play guy for a major network?

JASON BENETTI: When you said your name, I was, like, oh, is this going to be a Salem Avalanche question? I'm so excited that it is.

What's funny, at that point, there were a couple of booths in the Carolina League that wouldn't even fit three people. So when we went to Kinston, North Carolina to do Single-A, the Kinston Indians at the time, my partner and I couldn't fit in the booth together, so we'd have to switch off doing the innings while we strung our crowd mic outside the door of the press box where kids who were having their birthdays could pick up the microphone and say, say it's my birthday, and not even confront us.

So if I told you that was the dream, it would have been pretty far-fetched at the time. But for me it has always been something that has meant a lot to me to be a really good play-by-play announcer.

I've always wanted to do this since I had a radio station in high school. And without sounding like Ted Baxter from the "Mary Tyler Moore Show," this is an honor for me.

And I do credit a lot of those minor league years -- and I spent two of them in Salem and a bunch of them in Syracuse and independent ball -- it's an honor for me to get to do this and to have seen enough baseball where I know I believe in how I call a baseball game.

And, yeah, if I told you that back in the Salem Avalanche days, when Katrina Waugh was covering the team for the Roanoke Times, you would have laughed because there were some booth where you couldn't fit three people.

Q. Did those couple years in Salem, did that help shape you as a broadcaster? Did that help guide you

to the broadcaster you are now?

JASON BENETTI: Goodness, yes, I mean there was that -- look up the 2008 Salem Avalanche. They did not win very many games. There was a starting pitcher for that team that had an ERA above 6. Like there were some nights where it was, like, 10-to-1 Frederick after two innings. And I better figure out with my partner what we're talking about.

And so you learn very quickly that baseball is a sport that sparks the senses, that you can look around the crowd. There was one game where there was like a rain day but SpongeBob was there in Salem. And there was this very forlorn SpongeBob walking through a crowd that had substantially thinned out because the kids had to go back to their summer camps to get picked up by their parents and loved ones. But there was like a sad SpongeBob walking the concourse looking for kids that weren't there.

And we may or may not have narrated that. And that may or may not have frustrated the general manager at the time.

But you know what? Like, there's always something going on in a baseball stadium. There's always food. There's always fans. Any fan can become the story in a really hilarious way. But also there can always be a comeback, like the Sunday night Cleveland-Seattle game, which we have Cleveland-Seattle coming up on Sunday, there's a Sunday Night Baseball game with this massive comeback in Cleveland. Like you never know, right?

People say baseball is timeless. But it is because if you have an out -- it's like a chip and a chair in poker, like you have a chance to do something.

So those years, first of all, let my creative wings spread, and then, second of all, taught me do not believe games are over. And if they are, go look for a really forlorn SpongeBob.

Q. Sam, are there any plans for nostalgic programming moments, similar to the NBA or NBC's Throwback Thursday? If so, can you share details?

SAM FLOOD: We will not shy away from the rich history of Major League Baseball and NBC. The partnership and relationship goes back generations.

I can't promise exactly how it's all going to take place. The throwback NBA game was decided once the season had begun exactly how we're going to do that.

So we want to launch the right way with what we've got



going on now, but bag of tricks, we've learned how much of fun that was and how well the audience reacted to that throwback game in Philadelphia, we're always thinking. The concepts are always churning, and you led us into something that could possibly happen, but no promises.

Q. Jason, first a quick editorial comment. Thursday you got pressed into duty in Buffalo with Jimmy Jackson, correct?

JASON BENETTI: Pressed probably isn't -- but yes, yeah, I did.

Q. Had you ever worked with him before?

JASON BENETTI: We had done a handful of games at Fox together. Maybe a couple a year, yeah.

Q. What this leads to, you've got more out of him. He was the Jimmy Jackson, relaxed, he was hooked into your humor, your vertical, et cetera. With the carousel of partners you're going to be working with this season on NBC, how long does it take you to get a read on a new guy?

JASON BENETTI: Better not be very long. We only have nine innings.

The read comes from knowing what they're good at based on hearing them before, maybe. But also, I do believe play-by-play kind of has fundamental tenets of improv in it. Yes/and is better than no, and just seeing where people go.

I mean, everybody that we're going to have has some fountain of baseball knowledge bubbling inside of them. And so finding what that is, you just -- it's a little bit like the first at-bat between pitcher and hitter. Like, you probe a little bit. Or the first four minutes of a basketball game, like, what are they doing with us?

And Mike and Chris are great at this in Sunday Night Football. Like, hey, what did they do in the first drive that they're not doing in the second drive?

Those in-game adjustments, that's kind of the pocket you live in as a play-by-play announcer that sees those tenets, and that carries me a long way. Because let's face it, every partner wants to do well. Nobody's trying to be a landmine here. So it's about finding out what gets them there. And they're doing the same with me. But we're all in the same boat.

So I think knowing that people want to get to yes, you just find what yes is. You find what yes/and is and you go with

it and you see where it takes you.

Q. But the technical is one side. Everybody in a booth with you is good at technical. You bring out humanities. You have a tremendous wit. Your pop cultural historical vertical is \$200,000 Jeopardy stuff. How do you factor that in to instant flow with a new partner week after week after week?

JASON BENETTI: Thank you for saying that, Jim. Like, really, thank you. But I guess I would say that at its core, if we're talking about where it comes from with me, like, the way I walk, the way I navigate the world, I always end up surprising people in one way or the other.

I think doing what people expect is good for a time. But when you surprise them, when you go that direction that people don't expect, when that skit on SNL takes the turn that no one saw coming, that is what creates the memory and the moment where people laugh and enjoy.

Frankly, at the core, I want people to smile because I think it's a better way to live. So I think the surprise factor of random pop culture that people might not even understand, it's a joy for me because it just makes the world a little bit more vibrant. Like, it makes everything a little bit brighter.

I mentioned his name before in this call, but he's really important to me. And I wouldn't have said that in that way without Bill Walton impacting my life as he did. I promise you, truly, I think about him every day.

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