

Houston Texans Media Conference

Tuesday, September 3, 2024

Houston, Texas, USA

James Liipfert

Chris Blanco

Press Conference



Q. (On the rookies that made the team.)

JAMES LIIPFERT: The class as a whole, I think you can see what DeMeco and what Nick are trying to do as far as the type of guys we're trying to get in here. So I'd say a lot of these guys, what they have in common is dudes with really high work ethic, guys that are competitive, guys that love ball. I think it starts there. I mean, all these guys in their own way, they're all unique type of dudes, but they all have those traits about them.

So I'd say a lot of them showed up really day one -- just to use Kamari as an example, Kamari was hardened by three years in Athens. Really good program, kind of knew what we were getting from a worker standpoint, and the guy just showed up and really he's been the same guy since day one. He's done a really nice job, and don't want to go on down the line - I'll kind of pass the baton to Chris there for his thoughts - but my final thought on the class is a lot of really high-level dudes that work and love ball, and they're competitive.

CHRIS BLANCO: Yeah, just piggy-backing on what James said, we brought in a lot of guys who fit our culture, with DeMeco, with Nick. Just the things that they asked us to look for and identify in players to help build a competitive roster, and I think all the rookies embody the things we look for in a Houston Texan.

Like James said, they've all come in hungry, eager, and everything that they've gotten they've earned. That's something we're all looking forward to seeing not just the two players you asked about but all of them.

Q. I'm curious when you first identified C.J. Stroud, your first impression of him, and now what you think of what he's become as kind of this successful player who really is a role model for other people. Did you see that when you first met him, him possibly becoming that?

JAMES LIIPFERT: I think that I go back to just on a personal level, the year before C.J. came out, I saw him at the pro day and knew that he was going to be the starter and probably come out the following year. I was impressed with just the way that he carried himself.

As a scout, you're always watching. You know who the guys are going to be next year. Whether it's physically looking at body type of a guy or how they interact with their teammates, I go back to that and being very impressed. He was hanging out with Smith and Jake Bud and some of the other receivers, and you could tell he just had a way about him even back then.

So then you get into the scouting process of truly tracking him all year. The stories that came out of the program about some of the things he did with his NIL money for some of the teammates, how he truly became a leader of that program, how he was spoken about. Like maybe Stover would be one way, C.J. would be a different way, but they were both leaders in their own unique way.

Then I would say not being around him every single day in the meeting room like Jerrod, Bobby and Bill, some of those guys are, but everything I hear, he's just incredibly mature, consistent. That shows up on the field. He's got a handshake with every single person in the whole building it seems like, which is awesome.

But just thrilled to have him here, and he's a really good player on top of that.

Q. James, this question is for you. Throughout the year when you're working with Nick and DeMeco, how do you all get on the same page in order to know what you're going to need to fill the team needs going into next year?

JAMES LIIPFERT: I would say the answer to that is throughout the process, just specifically on the college scouting process, it really starts as soon as the previous draft is over. I would say the team needs is an element of it. It really doesn't get spoken about until late in the process because it doesn't change how you evaluate a class, and hey, we're heavy at this group or we've got

these guys coming back on a contract or we're going to be light here. It doesn't change your output you have or your effort, like hey, I'm not going to go see this guy because we may have a guy under contract next year. You just never know what's going to happen until -- the last thing you or your department you want to do is, hey, we didn't do the work because we didn't think we had a need. All of a sudden you have a need and you didn't do a good job at the practice at the University of Miami in September when you probably should have.

You have to be prepared A to Z, and so the team needs are the team needs. That certainly is a part of it, but it all stems from Nick. A to Z, every single player, quarterback to long snapper, everyone is going to get evaluated with 100 percent of our effort. I know that's what our staff is going to be about.

The needs will come up, and that's a popular talking point in the spring, but it doesn't really affect the work.

Q. Y'all talk a lot about character and stuff, and I know from a scouting perspective a lot of times y'all are just evaluating players, crunching tape, all that type of stuff. What is the process, maybe the order of figuring out, this guy has got really, really good character? Do you find out, okay, this guy can play and then you dig in? Do you hear stuff about him? Do you dismiss someone because you hear maybe they don't? What is that process like?

JAMES LIIPFERT: No, that's a really good question. It's quite honestly my favorite part of the whole process because it's such an intensive process. To answer your question, it's a really -- they're running parallel to each other. You're evaluating the players, whether it's sophomore and junior tape if they come out early or junior and senior tape, really look at everybody based on the last couple years of performance, and it can start as soon as -- hey, go back to the anecdote I had about C.J. earlier. It can start as early as that; hey, I saw this kid really stood out as a freshman, okay, I'm going to put that note away in my files for a couple years from now. But you're getting information from coaches, sources at schools. Nick is going to call somebody; DeMeco may know somebody, he coached with the defensive coordinator there at some point; Chris Blanco, hey, actually I played with the secondary coach at Dartmouth.

We are always bringing in whatever piece of information we can get on player X. At the same time, it's got to be good information, just like your evaluation of a player has to be on point, too.

Missing on a player's ability can happen just as much as

maybe missing on the character of the player, and I'd say we put as much stock in both of those as we possibly can. You're really doing them simultaneously, and those seven guys that live full-time on the road, they don't get near as much credit. Chris has done the job, I've done the job. That's a hard gig. You are guessing on human selection and predicting what these guys are going to be three years from now. That's not easy.

I've done it, and I have a ton of respect for our guys, and I would put our crew up against anybody. They do a heck of a job.

Q. This is a question for both you guys. You kind of mentioned earlier about seeing C.J. You also mentioned Cade. At the time Cade was still learning how to play tight end. Last season he doesn't have C.J. to be his quarterback. When you're seeing a player like that who has to transition positions, what were some things that really stood out from a sophomore to junior approach or junior to senior approach, and as somebody who is still learning how to play the role, when you think of the potential, what does he add to this offense, and how does that relationship with C.J. and him coming from college benefit both growing in their progression?

CHRIS BLANCO: For the first part of your question, watching Cade, previous exposure, at the time I was with the Vikings so we were studying the quarterbacks watching C.J., and the tight end was always popping up on tape. So that really piques your interest. You do some background and you find out what class he's in, you make a little note. You're constantly building profiles like what James was talking about, the college process being a multiyear study.

So Cade is somebody, speaking for myself, and I know James, we've talked about it, other people in the building, that this is a player that popped on tape early; we're going to track him. And fortunately we were able to make some moves to acquire him in the draft.

In terms of his role this season, obviously the chemistry, the relationship that he has with C.J., it's very valuable. We've seen it all throughout training camp, in preseason, and that's something we're excited about seeing throughout the regular season.

I believe we have a deep tight end room. We've got Dalton, we've got Brev, Cade is going to be a nice piece in that room, and he's a versatile player, and I'm excited to see how Bobby deploys him, and just really excited to see him on the field.

I think he's a good pass catcher. He's a good blocker in



... when all is said, we're done.®

both phases. We're just really excited to see him.

Q. Stefon Diggs' statistical production dropped a bit late last year. When you watch his 2023 tape, did y'all still see a top flight receiver? What made him such an enticing target for you guys?

JAMES LIIPFERT: On staffing, I'll kick over to Chris. I think what Nick and DeMeco have talked about it several times, and really you're looking at the skill set -- Nick goes back to really Stef's time at Maryland, working him out. Nick has had exposure to him. The skill set, the run after the catch, the hands, the routes. After the fact we acquired him, you have conversations with friends and people around the league, and it comes back to a lot of people said the same thing, just how competitive Stef is.

DeMeco has mentioned that in his press conferences several times, just the overall level of competitiveness in this program, on this roster, from young players to veteran players. I think that's what we're trying to be about as best we can. And Stef certainly contributes to that.

Excited for his opportunity in the offense. Has a very good skill set, a very well-rounded skill set. There's something to be said for year after year of production. I think that's far easier said than done. I'm very excited to see him play.

Chris, I'll kick it over to you.

CHRIS BLANCO: Yeah, as you said, from my lens looking at the player, the tape, evaluating his moving skills, his explosive ability and dynamic player after the catch, a lot of that's beyond the physical production.

Like stats, that can kind of come and go as the flow of the season, the flow of the game. Sometimes that's out of your control as a player. So our job is to really look beyond the stats. Not to discount them because they still play a part in our overall evaluation.

But a guy like Diggs, he's been doing it for a long time in the NFL at a very, very high level, and what James has said, when he got here day one, he's hit the ground running. He's ultra competitive. I think he raises the room. He raises the team. Just like a lot of the players that you guys have asked about, another guy we're really excited about seeing this season.

Q. Chris, what is the difference between the NFL combine and a college pro day when you're scouting a player, and does the outlook on that player change whether they participate in the NFL combine or not?

CHRIS BLANCO: You know, I think the difference,

obviously with the combine, is very well structured, and it's a week-long event. So you're going through medical, you're doing the player interviews, whether it's a group setting, individual one-on-one, and then you're seeing them test in a controlled setting.

A lot of that adds great datapoints to add to the complete picture. At that point the tape eval has been done, and now we're just trying to connect more dots, gather more information, so when you get to the pro day you're seeing them operate in maybe a more comfortable setting amongst their peers, their teammates, interacting with scouts, interacting with the media. So you get to see them maybe in an environment where they're a little more comfortable, an area where they can showcase -- just kind of tie up loose ends, any questions that us as scouts may have. We're able to put them through drills, ask more questions, more follow-ups, so really that's kind of the last piece of the puzzle, so to speak, prior to the 30-day visits and whatnot.

Q. Because you have so many schools, I'm wondering how you approach some of the smaller schools, especially like the HBCUs, your plan for how you follow those players throughout the year. I know you've had some in your program. I think of Tytus. What's your approach to that? That's for either of you.

JAMES LIIPFERT: Yeah, I'd say the approach is on the front end as you're sort of plotting out from an area scout level, you're plotting out where am I going to visit, maybe what schools warrant a visit. Okay, so who's been productive, whether it's a skill player or a defensive player like maybe a non-offensive lineman or something like that, like okay, who's caught a lot of balls, who's scored a lot of touchdowns; this guy at Prairie View had 12 sacks, whatever the case may be.

So on the front end, who's been production, maybe who was first-team all SWAC, first-team All-American. Then I think as the fall sort of progresses, these guys -- having been there myself, these guys they talk, hey, did you go through Prairie View, did you go through Texas Southern, did you go through Grambling. The word gets out on these guys, and the league does a nice job the last couple years with the game they have in New Orleans, whether it's East-West, Senior Bowl.

There's not really an era of draft sleepers and diamonds in the rough. I'm not sure how much that exists anymore. These guys, they can really play. Tytus is a good example. They're going to make their way down to Mobile and probably the combine, and we're going to get a chance to evaluate them, sit down with them.

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

We've gone down to New Orleans and had some decent success seeing those guys at the game, just specifically to the HBCU point of your question, but small schools, these guys, they can put their highlights out there, they're going to get pub, they're going to get media, and I think we'll find them at some point.

Q. You've been here for a while. You've had years where you haven't had any draft picks early on and then you've had years where you've had multiple first-round picks. From your perspective with what y'all do, is there ever like a certain element of, damn, we're watching these guys and we have no chance at getting these guys? What's the difference between, say, 2020 where you didn't have any first or second and then two first-round picks? Is there any level of defeat? I know from a media perspective even talking about the draft, we're like, damn, what are we going to talk about, the other team's quarterbacks?

JAMES LIIPFERT: No, the obvious example is 2021 when Nick came here and we didn't pick until 67. Objectively, Nick said it so it's no secret, there's just guys we didn't talk about. There's guys, I forget off the top of my head, guys that went super early in the draft, we had no chance. Like hey, look, we'll put it in the archives, hey, whoever was a really good player, but there was no chance a guy was going to get to top of the third round or maybe an opportunity to trade up to the second round to get him, we just weren't going to spend a lot of time on him.

Hey, a lot of good came out of that draft, Davis, Nico, Brev. Roy is still playing out in Arizona. Garrett unfortunately got hurt over in Tennessee, but he was doing a good job for them. Still proud of the work we did, even though we weren't picking until 67 that year.

But it's a lot different that year relative to 2023, when, I mean, it was like nonstop there. Second pick, 12th pick, which ended up being two and three.

Yeah, you certainly had to spend way, way more time on those guys that we're going to go high in '23, whereas in 2021 if Will Anderson and C.J. were in the '21 draft, we'd have spent about 30 seconds on them and kept it moving.

Q. I want to ask about Nico Collins and the development you saw from him last year with a stronger more flexible Nico and durability, and then for Chris, about Tank Dell and his resiliency from an injury and everything he's had to deal with and just the way he's been playing throughout the preseason.

CHRIS BLANCO: Just with Tank, very impressive work ethic, really second to none. That's a guy, he obviously

plays bigger than he measures. With Tank, the speed is real. Great route runner. With him, the rapport, the chemistry that he's developed with C.J. right off the bat, very impressive. That showed out last season. You talk about being resilient, he attacked his rehab throughout this entire off-season, training camp, preseason. The guy didn't miss a step.

Tank is another player of ours that we're very, very excited about. Looking forward to seeing him produce and have a great season.

JAMES LIIPFERT: And Nico in my opinion is a good example of humble, very hard worker, very physically talented, combined with, in my opinion, excellent job by the coaching staff, specifically Ben. I know Ben has known him forever, dating back to the Michigan days, and to watch Ben coach him on the details, on the details, knowing that Nico has all the physical ability to do what Ben is asking him, whether it's an indy drill, routes on air, team, whatever it is, and then to see it manifest in a large uptick in production last year was, at its simplest form, very fun to watch, and I was just happy for him to get rewarded by the club. It was great to see.

Hopefully another opportunity to have a big year for him, and just wish him continued success. It's a joy to have him in the building every day. He's an awesome guy, and he's a good football player.

Q. I just want to get your thoughts on the future with college football, especially with NIL. There's more players that are determining that line of do I go back for another year if I can make a big profit, better my draft stock, potentially win a national title. With that in mind, does that also speed up the processing clock or the mental clock to where you expect them to progress as players to where maybe it ends up benefiting them financially for one year but when it comes to their overall stance, it may end up hurting their draft grade because of where you think they could actually continue to develop?

JAMES LIIPFERT: You know, it's a big-time question. It's very, very unique to each individual player. I do not think there's a blanket answer.

There are going to be guys -- a lot of quarterbacks that went back last season, and then on the flipside our first three draft picks are all 21 years old. It's all so unique.

My hope would be for whoever the player is that whatever information they're getting is they're just getting good information. They reach out to the league. Doing it in the proper channels, reach out to general managers, coaches.

The league has done a great job of getting these guys feedback. You just want them to take it.

It's always situations when guys come out early and they're being told they're going to go in this certain route and they last far longer than they thought they would. That's never fun to see. But at the same time I'm personally happy for these guys, that they can cash in.

The popularity of college football is not going anywhere. Nick talked about it this morning, 105,000 people up the road at Kyle Field. That atmosphere was unbelievable. LSU, USC, that atmosphere was unbelievable.

College football is very, very strong right now. I don't think the NIL is affecting the product.

Now, I think the transfer element -- again, Nick talked about it a little bit this morning. There's like another layer of information on players now. Just to use Henry as an example, you can call coaches at Tennessee and you can talk to coaches at Bama. There's Ladarius Henderson, you can talk to coaches at Arizona State and you can talk to coaches at Michigan.

With the transfers, there's a whole 'nother layer of information that's available to get, so we've asked our scouts to really stay on top of that.

Not all information is good information. I think part of our entire process is identifying what information is real and applicable to the Texans going forward, but all in all, every person and player has to make the decision that's right for them. Would you rather get to the league ASAP or would you rather stay in school and try to cash in and put some money in the bank. Whatever they decide, we'll adjust and we'll attack it however we see fit.

Q. How quickly after the draft do you all go into the undrafted free agents and start talking to Nick and DeMeco about some of those guys who are out there? Let's just use British Brooks, for example.

JAMES LIIPFERT: Yeah, I'd say it begins far beyond the end of the draft. Chris is involved. We get the pro staff involved. We try to have those guys maybe cross-check some of these guys for us and help us with strategy. But I would say, just to use British as an example, sixth-year player, misses a junior season with a bad injury, was there for six years, started three games, but he was a special teams captain, special teams MVP, very highly thought of in the program. He's talked about his relationship with Mack Brown.

So British is an example of there's half a dozen college

All-Star games and British wasn't at one, not at the combine. So you have to really put a lot of stock -- to your question earlier about the pro day, pro day for British Brooks was massive. John Ritcher was there for us. John spent time with him. John and Naj went in the school and got great information all throughout the fall, and then the spring process, to give John credit, he tracked him, developed a relationship with him, so when the draft concluded and now British has a decision to make, he thinks highly of -- not to speak for him, but the idea is that he will hopefully think highly of the Texans. He and his representation are going to be aware of our situation. It's going to make good sense for him to come here. He came here and took advantage of his opportunity.

If Chris, you want to add anything else on the undrafted process, you've always had a very good feel for it, as well.

CHRIS BLANCO: Yeah, so the undrafted, like what James was talking about, we're starting on that piece months before the draft, just having a complete picture of what the draft board looks like. You talk about players that maybe you'd rate in day three that we might have as priority free agents going into the draft, and you're meeting with your coaches, you're figuring out what the draft board, how it's going to fall, and maybe what holes you have on your roster when you're coming out of day three, or just identifying, hey, these are players that we'd like to draft but we couldn't, and maybe they fell through, so you're attacking them as soon as the bell rings after that last pick.

To James' point, it's a full-court press once that bell rings, and we're trying to acquire the best players available to us that fit our situation, that fit the culture that we want to build.

British Brooks is another example of just good process. He's a guy, just going back to James' earlier point, just touching on what DeMeco and Nick said, everything here is earned, and British has earned every opportunity he's gotten, and we're excited for the season that he'll have this year.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports

