

# LA Times NFL Speaker Series

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## Leigh Steinberg

THE MODERATOR: Welcome to Hall of Farmer. I've got super agent Leigh Steinberg, who I've never seen in a suit. I've seen him in a suit every once in a while, but what's with the suit, Leigh?

LEIGH STEINBERG: It's like Halley's Comet. It comes around every 70 years. Well, I have the party today, and I want people to be able to find me. We're having 4,000 of my closest friends over to Sony Studios for our 35th annual Super Bowl party.

**Q. The Leigh Steinberg Super Bowl party. There's always a purpose to your parties and a theme, whether it's salute to service or health and safety. It's teaming with players and NFL celebrities, in and out of the NFL. What's the theme this year?**

LEIGH STEINBERG: So we're raising money for the Lantern Network, which helps inner city at risk kids get into business careers, so it mentors them.

In addition, we're having another brain health summit because we've been exploring for 30 years prevention, awareness, and cure of concussion and trying to find solutions. So we're actually going to exhibit at the party a hyperbaric oxygen unit, a stem cell presentation, something called RTMS, light stem.

And of course it's Sony Studios. The last time the Super Bowl was here was 30 years ago, and we used 20th Century Fox, the backlot of Hello Dolly. So it was a street from old New York. But this time we're going to have things decked out for Black Panther movie and for Men in Black. We've got the little pug. We've got Spider-man floating around.

And then we do humanitarian awards to highlight the fact that so many people in professional football do philanthropic things off the field. So we're giving an award to Tom Telesco of the Los Angeles Chargers and an award to Les Snead. Then at the last minute, thank goodness they made the Super Bowl, so we'll be presenting it to his phantom ulterior reality because he'll be back with the Rams.

**Q. I want to get into the Rams and your long relationship with the Rams. But first just touching on concussions, you say 30 years ago. 30 years ago they didn't have concussions, did they? Everybody just got their bell rung. I'm being facetious, but nobody talked about concussions when you started this 30 years ago.**

LEIGH STEINBERG: So there was a point, Sam, where I was representing half the starting quarterbacks in the NFL, and they kept getting hit in the head. And we would go to doctors and ask, how many are too many? What's the number at which you should contemplate retirement? And the doctors had no answers. They couldn't tell us.

So I put together a brain health summit, and Steve Young, Warren Moon, Troy Aikman, Drew Bledsoe, players like that, came and listened to neurologists and listened to the dangers. So we've been pushing the envelope on helmetry and perhaps having a football that has no hitting in training camp, no hitting during the regular practices. They save it all for the game. And it's the age at which young kids should not play tackle football before because their brain is in development.

So we're going to have presentations because we finally have some modalities that can cure the brain, a concussed brain. What we found is three or more concussions occasions an exponentially higher rate of Alzheimer's and premature senility, chronic traumatic encephalopathy. So I couldn't continue to represent players without aggressively searching for a solution.

**Q. Can you give me an example of -- you're as close to these players as they are to their families. A situation that scared you with a player who was concussed.**

LEIGH STEINBERG: So I was at a game with the Arizona Cardinals, and Troy Aikman got knocked flat in his rookie season, and he was lying there, and he wasn't moving, and I could see blood coming out of his ear. And I thought, oh, my goodness, the borderline between sentient consciousness and dementia is so thin that we have to look after the long term health of these players.

It's difficult because they're in denial. They grow up from Pop Warner and little league accepting norms of behavior

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

that are completely different from what you and I share. In other words, long term health is an abstraction. What matters is this play right now.

So you have young people's denial -- in other words, long term health is an abstraction, and then you have athletic denial. So you've got denial cubed. It's very dangerous because my best allies are the wives, the families, because they care about long term health.

**Q. Leigh, as I mentioned at the top, I usually see you in flip-flops and running shorts. Can you tell me about your background, how you got into this, how you became really a preeminent super agent.**

LEIGH STEINBERG: So I grew up in Los Angeles went a year to UCLA, went to Berkeley. I was student body president when Ronald Reagan was governor, and every time we demonstrated, he cracked down. I learned everything I needed to learn about how to negotiate from dealing with Governor then President Reagan.

I was living as an undergrad -- a dorm counselor in an undergrad dorm, and they moved the freshman football team into the dorm. Well, one of those students was Steve Bartkowski, who became -- a quarterback who became the very first pick in the first round of the NFL Draft in 1975. There really wasn't an organized field of sports agency. Owners like Mike Brown, who's here this week, could just slam the phone down and say we don't deal with agents. So there was no guaranteed right.

So my dad raised me with two core values. One was treasure relationships, especially family, and the second was to try to make a meaningful difference in the world and help people who had trouble helping themselves. So I was hard wired for change.

And I saw that athletes, if they would retrace their roots to the high school community and set up a scholarship fund, church, Boys & Girls Club, could have that as a place where they were rooted and go back to. And at the collegiate level, it's meant endowing scholarships for athletes going back, Troy Aikman at UCLA, Edgerrin James at Miami, Steve Young at BYU -- bonding closely with those alums who could be generous mentors.

And finally at the pro level, putting together a charitable foundation with the leading business figures, political leaders, and community leaders that attacks a problem that's near and dear to the athlete's heart. So that's Warrick Dunn putting the 200th single mother and her family into the first home they'll ever own by making a down payment and moving the family in. Or it's Patrick Mahomes and his 15 and the Mahomies, where there are

youth charities for at risk kids, kids in hospitals, where he does everything from school lunches to funding community organizations.

So it's athletes making a difference and using sports to trigger imitative behavior. So it's the boxer Lennox Lewis I represented, and we cut a public service announcement that said real men don't hit women, and that could do more to trigger behavioral change in rebellious adolescents than a thousand authority figures ever could.

**Q. Tell me about Patrick Mahomes. Do you predict right away that he would make such an impact on the league?**

LEIGH STEINBERG: Well, no one could have predicted that, but he had the great experience of sitting for a year, and Alex Smith, the incumbent, was a generous mentor. And I thought that was a great help.

People underestimated him because Texas Tech had such an sieve of a defense that they were giving up 50 points a game. So if Patrick hadn't had to throw for touchdowns every single drive, they would have realized he could be a disciplined three-five set under center quarterback.

But no, he exploded. You don't expect a first year starter to be MVP of the league and then a second year starter to win the Super Bowl. It was like a supernova erupting over the National Football League.

**Q. We have two No. 1 overall picks starting in this Super Bowl. What are your thoughts about this game, the incredible wealth of receivers in this game, and the two quarterbacks?**

LEIGH STEINBERG: First of all, what you see is it's impossible in contemporary football to win without a franchise quarterback, and let's define that as someone that you can win because of rather than with, someone you could build a team around for 10 to 12 years, and most importantly, what does that quarterback do in adversity?

So we saw two weekends ago that all four playoff games came down to the very last play. So it's very likely that the Super Bowl tomorrow will come down to the last quarter or the last play unless it's a blowout.

So the quarterback's thrown a couple interceptions, the crowd is getting restless and starting to boo. The center's looking at the quarterback like his play calling, he must be on hallucinogens, and now what's happening is the game's getting out of hand. So what does the quarterback do now? Can he compartmentalize, adopt a quiet mind, tune out extraneous stimuli, and elevate his level of play to take

a team down and to and through victory?

Joe Burrow is amazing in how quickly he's developed, and they've got an explosive offense. I guess my feeling is at the end of the day I'll take Matthew Stafford with experience over Joe Burrow, and I'll take Aaron Donald and Von Miller and Jalen Ramsey as a defense that can slow him down. Well, you know I'm biased, but I'm picking Rams.

Because they started, Sam, my dad took me to the L.A. coliseum to see the Crazy Legs Hirsch Rams, and we sat so high in those seats you would have needed an electronic nuclear microscope to be able to identify individual player faces or names, but I fell in love with football.

Then later, of course, when the Rams were going to leave Southern California, I had played a role in saving the San Francisco Giants, who were about to move, and then helped the mayor of Oakland keep that team in town.

I said, why are we just letting this team go? We should fight. And pretty soon Jack Lindquist of Disneyland and I chaired the Save the Rams committee. We had 125 mostly business people, and we envisioned a sports town contiguous to that Anaheim stadium, where you'd have like a Disneyland of rides sports themed, VR, imagine it a tourist destination. Otherwise it's difficult to justify spending \$5 billion on an edifice that has ten home dates. So if you could create and activity zone.

So we did all that. We went to Phoenix. The Ram move was up for vote in 94. We beat them. They voted it down. But they slipped out of town anyway. I've been helping every group that wanted to bring a team back. Sunday is redemption. It's resurrection. It's come full circle. I couldn't be more thrilled.

**Q. Yeah, it's remarkable for a lot of people that the Rams are in the Super Bowl and playing in their hometown, but it must be surreal for you considering all the work you put in over these decades to try to bring the team back. I wonder what it was like for you when you got the word in '95 that they were leaving, along with the Raiders? Was that devastating?**

LEIGH STEINBERG: It was. It was crushing because, look, a team that essentially is a private business claims to be a civic treasure. So they're your Los Angeles Rams with the implied obligation that you root for them win or lose, that you'll watch television, you'll buy products, you do all that. So to rip that team out of the heart of Southern California -- my son who was 10 at the time came to me and said, well, dad, how can a team move? I mean, is

Disneyland going to move?

So the point is, if you really think about it, the NFL made a mistake back in 1995. St. Louis was missing a team. Baltimore was missing a team. And instead of giving those franchises, they gave Carolina and Jacksonville franchises, and that set off an open St. Louis, an open Baltimore that stole the Cleveland Browns, and it goes round and round.

**Q. Was it a mistake for the NFL to leave San Diego?**

LEIGH STEINBERG: I think so. Why break the hearts of loyal families? This is all about new stadia because every owner that has one that's more than 15 to 20 years old wants the luxury boxes, the premium seating, the jumbo scoreboard, the naming rights, all the ancillary revenue streams that can come from it.

I mean, it won't be long before we see parimutuel betting in stadia. You'll be able to walk up the aisle and not just bring back a beer, but bring back a ticket that's your bet. They'll bet on all sorts of things. Who kicks off first? Who wins the coin flip?

**Q. In game betting?**

LEIGH STEINBERG: In game betting, and I think that's here and coming. We've never seen a sport dominate American culture like the NFL does now. It's not only by two-to-one the most popular sport in every reader poll, it's the most popular televised entertainment. So 71 of the top 100 TV Nielsen shows last year were NFL football. So it's completely dominating the sports scene today.

And we get to play this out in our hometown. The Super Bowl, Sam, is a convention of Americana. Big business, big politics, big sports, and big entertainment -- all have come together for a super convention in our city, and it will never be quite the same.

**Q. On gambling, we all know about addictions and gambling addictions and how ruinous those can be. What's the league's responsibility in not promoting gambling addictions?**

LEIGH STEINBERG: Well, remember they serve alcohol at the stadium, so what's their role in promoting sobriety? The league for years would not ever talk about Las Vegas as a place because the biggest fear always was that somehow a player would become compromised, owe money to bettors, and then somehow the game would be shaded.

The whole presumption is these games are played on an even playing field with heavily motivated people who are



trying their hardest with the same rules, with the same dynamic. And if you ever were to alter that, then it would become wrestling.

But the first time I saw Indian casino gambling advertised in stadia and realized that the NFL and franchises were buying part of fantasy betting apps, that cow left the barn some time ago.

**Q. The credibility of the NFL is probably its most important asset, the notion that any team can win the Super Bowl in any year. Part of Brian Flores' complaint was that he was paid to -- offered \$100,000 per game he lost as coach of the Miami Dolphins.**

LEIGH STEINBERG: Well, that's alleged, right?

**Q. Alleged. Alleged.**

LEIGH STEINBERG: We don't know if that happened.

**Q. Right. If that were to be proven out --**

LEIGH STEINBERG: Then they'd take the franchise from that owner.

**Q. It's that serious.**

LEIGH STEINBERG: In other words, that is a step too far. And I will tell you the truth, a losing team still has motivated players. They're playing for their next contract. They're playing for incentives in their contract. And their basic nature is an athlete will want to beat you and be competitive at anything. They'll try to beat you at tiddlywinks.

**Q. Yeah. Any thoughts on what the league can do to diversify its head coaching ranks?**

LEIGH STEINBERG: Well, they have to do a really in depth study, coaching position by coaching position, on why black coaches weren't hired. We regressed, if you think about it, there was a time there were five or six African American quarterbacks in the NFL. We've gone backwards. We only have two teams right now that have -- and then Ron Rivera obviously.

**Q. I think there are five people of color or minority head coaches, two black head coaches in a league that's 70 percent black players.**

LEIGH STEINBERG: Right. So you have to start with the root of the problem, which is how many qualified assistant coaches and coordinators can you get? And then what's going on in the interview process? I mean, look at the

longest lasting head coach in the league at Pittsburgh, and Ben Roethlisberger, who I represented early in his career, just retired after 18 seasons, not one loss.

So you were referring to parity before, and it really doesn't exist because, Sam, if you were going to have a draft, draft owners, draft front office people, draft coaches, because it's the quality of the organization, even with all these parity procedures they have where reverse order in the Draft and big cap availability for losing teams. Why is it that New England is still in the hunt year after year after year and some teams never make it? It's the quality of the organization. The players go round and round.

**Q. Would you have some type of draft lottery system to sort of de-incentivize losing a little bit, to take a little bit of the notion of tanking away from teams? Or any solutions about that?**

LEIGH STEINBERG: Until Brian Flores brought that up, I had never heard that. This is my 48th draft, and I have a hard time believing it. Owners make their fortune in the rough and tumble free enterprise system and become billionaires by being the most hypercompetitive people on the face of the earth.

So to think that an owner sitting in his box is going to encourage losing. I mean, if they can win one game, they want to win one game.

**Q. What was the draft like early on? How have you seen that evolve over the years? You've had so many No. 1 picks, so many first rounders. I don't think anybody touches those records, do they?**

LEIGH STEINBERG: No, I don't.

**Q. How many No. 1 overall picks have you had?**

LEIGH STEINBERG: 64 -- oh, overall. 64 first rounders, and then 8 that were the very first pick overall in the Draft.

**Q. All of them quarterbacks?**

LEIGH STEINBERG: No, it was Bruce Smith and Dan Wilkinson and Ki-Jana Carter and players at different positions.

**Q. Yeah. How have you seen that evolve? Now you have a traveling circus of the draft. It's coming to Las Vegas in the spring.**

LEIGH STEINBERG: Well, the draft is inherently dramatic, and it's the most fun day of the year besides today in that you've got all these hopes and dreams, this lifetime of

striving to get there. You have an extended family. They're all together. The tension ratchets up.

Now, draft time's not realtime, Sam. It's water torture time. So the time between picks, every second seems like a minute. Every minute seems like an hour. You know, drip, drip, drip. Then all of a sudden, it's tighter and tighter and tenser and tenser, and boom, it explodes in exotic joy and ecstasy. And you've got this family that's just -- it's ultimate fulfillment.

Draft day, having players in the Hall of Fame, and having a quarterback in the Super Bowl are probably the three -- outside of the charitable and community, are the three highlights that doing this has.

**Q. So the last Super Bowl in Los Angeles 29 years ago?**

LEIGH STEINBERG: Troy Aikman.

**Q. Tell me about your client Troy Aikman in that game, what you told him before the Super Bowl and what you told him after the Super Bowl.**

LEIGH STEINBERG: Well, I remember before that, they were playing -- year after year, it was San Francisco versus Dallas for who would represent the NFC. So I was preparing him carefully at the San Francisco game for what would come next, and he said, you know, that's great, Leigh, but everybody thinks we're going to lose.

So we go into the game, and he was hyperventilating when he hit the field. He was having a hard time catching his breath. The jets are going over and everything's happening. So we're in the car on the way home, and they've thoroughly trounced the Buffalo Bills, and I'm representing Thurman Thomas and Bruce Smith that are not real happy.

And we're in the limo going back, and I said, Troy, do you understand what just happened? He said, yes, we won the game. I said, no, you walked into the game, and you were Troy Aikman, very good quarterback, former first pick overall. You walked out of the game, and you're Troy Aikman, name in lights, superstar.

And this game has the ability to transcend the narrow genre of hard-core sports fans to reach out to people who never watch a football game, who are uninterested, but they're involved with this game because it runs on the front page and the lifestyle section and the sports section.

So a player who performs dramatically -- I've had Ben Roethlisberger, Patrick Mahomes, Steve Young, Troy win

the Super Bowl. What happens is they go into a celebrity making machine after the game, which consists of early morning talk shows, late night talk shows, People magazine. It transfers them over from the tiny core of hard-core sports fans to become a household name.

And that's the power and impact this game can have on Matthew Stafford, it can have on Joe Burrow, or it could have on another player who plays dramatically. It's the marketing bonanza in American sports.

**Q. How long did it take Troy Aikman to find out?**

LEIGH STEINBERG: We got back to Loews Hotel in Santa Monica and he got out of the car, and literally there were hundreds of people waiting outside the hotel for him, and we had a hard time opening his door. He was mobbed.

**Q. And you said, Troy, this is it.**

LEIGH STEINBERG: And he looked at me, and he said, I get it.

**Q. Leigh Steinberg, thank you so much for coming on Hall of Farmer. Incredible --**

LEIGH STEINBERG: Well, when you make the Hall of Farmer, everything else pales next to that.

**Q. Yes.**

LEIGH STEINBERG: Tremendous honor.

**Q. I've got to pick a color of jacket for the Hall of Farmer. Nobody knows this better than Leigh Steinberg. You've been around, sorry, forever. You've had the biggest players in the game.**

LEIGH STEINBERG: No, wait, you mean the fact that saber-tooth tigers and woolly mammoths were circulating the earth my first draft?

**Q. Yeah, and for no one is the game, Rams in the Super Bowl back in Los Angeles in SoFi Stadium, more surreal considering what you put in to keep them here and bring them back. So thank you, Leigh.**

LEIGH STEINBERG: Thank you.

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