

# Carolina Panthers Media Conference

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Charlotte, North Carolina, USA

## Coach Dave Canales

### Weekday Press Conference



DAVE CANALES: Growing this team. I'm just proud of this group coming together and finding a way to win.

**Q. You said back in the offseason that it would take about four to six weeks to know who this team is. Six weeks in, do you have a clear enough picture to know who you guys are?**

DAVE CANALES: Yeah, and that picture kind of keeps changing. We've been affected by injuries with different people coming to us. And, of course, we're going to have a few more guys that are going to have an opportunity to come help us, and trying to find that chemistry.

But it's finding the styles of runs. It's finding the style of pass game that's going to work for us. And as far as the defense goes, same thing. It's finding the coverages and pressures that work for us -- scheme-wise, to play off of each other and swarm the football like we expect.

And I'm seeing that, yes, I'm seeing that part come together, but I think the picture still isn't crystal clear. We're still waiting for some guys to continue to make bigger impacts, things that we expect them to grow in and to help us with.

**Q. The guys who potentially could help you, Jalen Coker, you guys activated him last week. How close was he and where is he at now?**

DAVE CANALES: He's really close. He looks great. We'll give you the full report on Wednesday, but this week is going to be a big week for him to really prove, physically, to prove he can do it and handle the load we're expecting.

**Q. Who else is among that group of guys who could help?**

DAVE CANALES: It's J.T. Sanders. It's Austin Corbett. His window will open this week to see where he's at physically. Again, this is proving we can handle the physical load from a football standpoint. So it's Turk Wharton, it's all those guys. Chuba, of course, yeah.

**Q. Your O line has been performing pretty well, especially over the last couple of weeks. They've allowed you to run basically whatever you wanted. How does that help with the fluidity of your play calling?**

DAVE CANALES: It's so important. I don't have to second-guess calls in different situations, in different areas on the field. I can just go with the call that fits the zone, that fits the area that we're in.

And I don't have to take too many things into consideration when I have guys that I trust like Brady Christensen and Yosh, who has played a couple of games for us over the course of time. So there is a trust factor there that's really important.

**Q. To clarify, you said Corbett, you were going to open his window Wednesday?**

DAVE CANALES: Yes, we will.

**Q. Along the lines of the offense and growing things, Bryce has really good numbers late in games, coming back, game-winning drives, those kind of things. Are there common threads you've seen in him in those situations that kind of lead to some of that?**

DAVE CANALES: Belief, consistency. He expects to win. This has been kind of wired into him forever. He was a high school winner. He was a college winner, in the pros. We're trying to build a team that expects to win, that expects to have success. And see those outcomes be possible as a group, it's about belief.

That's what I see from Bryce. He just keeps believing. He just keeps going back and attacking. And when the odds are a little bit stacked against him in some games and he might feel like -- I've just seen him respond really well in a competitive way to take on the challenge and to hit it right up front, to go to his guys that he counts on, T Mac, Jimmy popping up. He goes to Hunter on a fourth-and-4. So guys that he's growing trust with just finding a way to win.



**Q. JC said he went to Evero and asked to line up against Pickens on that last drive. Did you know about that request? And can you tell me about him having the competence or wanting to go up against the number one wide receiver? And is that something you all could have done earlier in the game?**

DAVE CANALES: I love that about JC. I'm not going to get into the conversations about what happens with the coaches and the players on the sideline. Different strategies, different ways to effect it. If you're a man-to-man team, you can follow a guy everywhere all the time.

We have a little mix of man, but we're mostly a zone team. So from a strategy point, I don't really want to get into the specifics of the conversation. But JC, love the competitiveness. He's like, put me over there. He's got that pit bull mentality.

I wasn't aware of it until after the game. But again I'm glad we have guys like that that want to take those challenges.

**Q. Is that another example of what you envision when you say this is a player-led team?**

DAVE CANALES: Absolutely. It's the results of things that happen in the game. Now, we do need to play within the system. We need to play within the confines of what we're doing. We also ask the guys, don't make stuff up. Let's just execute our ball and trust the calls that are out there.

But I want feedback from the players. And it's up to us to be responsible with that information as coaches. We know just because a player asks for something doesn't mean we always do it. It has to fit within the nature of the full game plan and the opponent that we're playing.

But these are very important things because it's about ownership. At the end of the day, if something is yours, you do whatever in your power to protect it. You'll do whatever in your power to make sure it's successful.

As I see that ownership happening throughout this group -- you know whether it's Rico asking for a specific run, or whether it's JC saying, hey, let me go cover this guy -- I love that type of ownership because they're the ones out there at the end of the day on the field that get to execute this game.

**Q. Prior to free agency and looking to rebuild there, when was the first time you actually watched him, studied him and what were your impressions?**

DAVE CANALES: It was in 2023 in Tampa. And Skip

Peete's, the running backs coach in Tampa. He had Rico as a practice squad running back in Dallas. When he worked with me in Tampa, he said a guy we need to take a look at is Rico Dowdle. You'll love this kid.

He's aggressive. He's smart. He's really into it. He's a little bit quiet, a little bit serious, but he loves the game, plays the game with passion. And just kind of knowing his history, we didn't end up acquiring him at the time, but Skip was right. He's all those things, he's an aggressive runner and he's tough. He cares and he's focused, all the things you love in a teammate and a player.

**Q. Has he earned the right to be the starting running back right now?**

DAVE CANALES: We'll see.

**Q. Back to the offensive line, Damien Lewis has been (indiscernible) people the past couple of weeks. Bryce said you stop tape just to give Damien his moment. What have you seen from him just in the run game and blocking and everything?**

DAVE CANALES: It's his attitude. He is a violent player. And for him it's like a one-on-one, like, wrestling match. It's a fistfight out there for him.

He takes that mentality out there. He takes that aggressiveness and that attitude, the attacking mentality that we love. But I also think the hidden part of it is Damien just continues to improve his technique. And he'd be up here and tell you, there are times where he gets out of his -- his hands get wide or he gets high in his stance and different things like that. He's been really committed to the fundamentals, keeping good pad level.

He's got natural leverage. He's a 6'3" guy. He's not a 6'5" guy. But just improving the fundamentals is one of the biggest pieces why he's playing so well right now.

**Q. Could you explain what Derrick Brown's return, how has that helped other guys in run deep in particular, if it has?**

DAVE CANALES: He's relentless, and that's infectious for the whole group. You see a group running to the ball. And it starts with Derrick Brown. And it's the reason why we have to have this guy long term and the reason why he's a captain and the reason why I ask Derrick, you've got anything to say? It's because of what he does every day.

He does this in practice, and he chases the ball down. If it's thrown down the field, he comes out of the stack and he chases the pass. If it's the run game, he knocks it back.



He gets off the block and runs down the line of scrimmage, whether it's to him or away from him.

It's that type of mentality, like, that should be the standard. That's the standard for defensive football in general, and he certainly has a huge impact on his teammates.

**Q. What would you say are a couple of the other keys, the run D in the last couple of weeks, 50 yards total you've given up. In addition to Derrick, what would you point to?**

DAVE CANALES: Setting edges, Pat Jones, D.J. Wonnum, Nic Scourton, Princely. Princely had a couple of nice plays on first and second down, setting edges and chasing on the back half. And of course having Bobby Brown, having A'Shawn Robinson, LaBryan Ray coming back, he's playing against the run, knocking things back.

But it starts with those front five and then it's Trevin, and, boom, just running like crazy. But even when we watch the film today as a team, you're seeing JC and Mike Jack show up in the run game.

The corners set an edge, first the outside linebackers, then the corners start to come up and set edges, and all of a sudden your pursuit, it's a shorter run. You can set a tight edge, it's a shorter run to the ball. And it all works that way. It's all got to be tight end.

**Q. You're very familiar, obviously, now with Bryce and also with Baker Mayfield, who is having an incredible season. I wonder if you see any similarities in those two since you've coached them so much?**

DAVE CANALES: Probably the biggest similarity would just be belief, belief and confidence. It's the return -- it's the return to the sideline after a touchdown or after an interception, and it's the refocus. It's the return to like, all right, we've got more football, and just having that type of mentality where, the next play could be a touchdown.

And that's a great trait to have. And that makes me feel confident that I could just continue to call the game that's supposed to be called versus having to make adjustments based on what the quarterback feels, when Bryce gives me confidence to just call whatever's on the sheet for whatever the area is, and we can just build from there.

**Q. How important is it for Bryce to prove that he can win on the road?**

DAVE CANALES: I think it's important for the Panthers to show that we can take this on the road and play good football, stop the run, run the ball, be balanced and

complementary.

This is a big deal for us. We have to find a way to play well on the road. We're looking at all the things. We're looking at all the scheduling. We're looking at how we go to the hotel, how we travel, how we practice going into it.

I'm scrutinizing all of it just to try to find an edge to see if we can help our team perform better from start to finish on the road, a great challenge this week going up to New York.

**Q. Who do you have helping you there?**

DAVE CANALES: Jeff Brown, he's my guy. I just have a wealth of knowledge. I have Coach Caldwell in my pocket. I've got Coach Capers I can talk to. Harold Goodwin, my assistant head coach, he's been around a bunch of different coaches and he kind of remembers the different flow and what worked for different teams.

It's not always the same. What worked for us in Seattle doesn't necessarily work for us in Tampa, which doesn't necessarily work for us here. I'm trying to find that mix to do my part, to make sure that the structure of it is right.

Now, we can point to the basics, take care of the football early in games and don't spot a team 10 points. That's big, right? Is there anything, anything at all, that's affecting how we execute and how we play, I'm willing to look at it and try it and just try to find an edge.

**Q. You brought up Harold Goodwin. The run scheming has worked out exponentially well these the last few weeks. What's he brought to the discussions between you and Brad and why has it started to click?**

DAVE CANALES: Year one was about establishing the midzone system and getting the different variety of ways to -- that's the core of our system. So I was really committed to making sure I got enough of those called through camp, through the season, let's have Chuba grow with this system, learn how to hit the cuts, learn the front-door cut, the back-door cut.

And you could see him over the course of the last season really start to hit those runs and be patient with it and let it develop, how those blocks are hit on the second level as well, and what it takes to be connected this offseason was about diving into, now how do we protect the core of our scheme? How do we throw variety at it? Can we get gaps scheme involved? Can we get toss cracks involved? Can we get the play passes to come alive?

The better you run the ball, the more the play-action



becomes deadly. And we hit a couple of explosives yesterday in the pass game just using different options. But Goody has done an excellent job of just giving variety and working with Brad, and they both were charged with just looking at different teams and seeing what we can incorporate and things that we had in the past that we can grow to, and it's coming alive a lot quicker than I expected, and I'm very excited about where we're at with it.

**Q. You faced Steve Wilks' defenses before. What are the primary challenges you expect this week?**

DAVE CANALES: It's an aggressive attack, looking at the first couple of weeks and then looking at what they did last week, there's a little bit of change. So there's some variety, and I know he's got a lot more.

I remember coaching against or being a part of staffs that went against Steve Wilks defenses and the attacking style, the exotic pressures, and they had a lot more than what they're doing right now. But there was a little bit of a shift. But this is a group that's salty. They run to the ball. They're a very aggressive group. They have a good front, and it's certainly going to be a good challenge for us this week.

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