

Carolina Panthers Media Conference

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Coach Dave Canales

Weekday Press Conference



DAVE CANALES: A great finish to the week, great focus by the group. I can see that just by their body language, by their eyes and what they're fixed on, the most important parts of the plays, taking in the cues and communicating, and that's what we're looking for, and that's what it looked like today leading into this game.

An amazing opportunity we're really fired up about.

Q. Before practice today a bunch of veterans walked to practice that typically wouldn't. Was there any symbolism or anything behind that?

DAVE CANALES: I didn't know that.

Q. What have you seen from the culture this week, at least as far as -- we talked about earlier in the week the veterans speaking with the younger guys about the importance of this week and the trials of the playoffs and stuff.

DAVE CANALES: Yeah, there's great exchanges happening in the building with coaches, with players, player to player, all those things. People that have playoff experience, and it's kind of the same message really for me talking to the guys. It is special, and it's important that we recognize that, we lean into it and we feed off of that energy. That's all right. That's all a part of it.

At the same time, we've got to keep our head about it, and we have to make sure we execute on the most fundamental parts of it because, as you can imagine, if you get too excited and caught up in the moment, then you can sacrifice technique. You can sacrifice the most basic parts, and sometimes you'll go too far, and that's not what I want, either. I want everything they've got within the whistles.

But for the moment of it, it's like, it's a special thing. I know the guys appreciate that, sharing that with each other. I'm hearing stories, guys walking out. Had a player I talked to, he's like, I've never even been in a playoff or championship environment at all in their career, and that's amazing to

think about on a group of NFL players, the best of the best that are here, that just as chance would have it not ending on teams that have a chance to play for it.

It's been really cool for guys to support each other, and they're all kind of just excited about it.

Q. Rob Hunt sounded optimistic yesterday. What's his status?

DAVE CANALES: Status is questionable but he had a great day. He had another fantastic day. He was out there with his guys. I'm very optimistic about Rob playing, and I can't put anything official out there until, of course, we come up with the final roster and all that stuff.

But he looked great.

Q. Regardless, will he be your starter?

DAVE CANALES: Absolutely. Oh, yeah, if Rob can play -- that's the whole reason for last week. It's like, we're not going to put him out there part time. If he's playing, he's playing. This is it. This is the only game we have. This is it. He's got to go. He's fired up to help out his teammates, and obviously that'll be all official whenever it is.

Q. How would you use Austin?

DAVE CANALES: Austin will be ready to play, pop in there in the interior. That's the great part about Austin; he's given us the ability to play center, to play guard, different spots.

Q. Just the energy that he brings to games, I know he's there on the sidelines, but I would imagine it's different when he's padded up?

DAVE CANALES: Absolutely, just play-style wise -- you're talking about Rob? Yeah, just talking about our play style, we start with effort, we go to enthusiasm because that's how you connect with each other. Culture is what you celebrate. If you want to create a powerful culture and you want to create a mindset, then catch your players doing right. Catch them doing good, and then each other, that

accountability goes both ways. It's not just about correcting people, it's also reinforcing what you love.

Speaking of that, Rob is one of those guys. When somebody makes a great play, the first one down there is Rob Hunt. If it's a big run, if it's a big pass, a touchdown, you're not going to see anybody bigger or more excited than Rob Hunt, dancing with the guys, trying to get into the choreographed dance any way he can. He brings that type of energy, so I'm so glad that we have a chance to get him back this week.

Q. Mike Jackson had a bad interception drop against the Packers. On Tuesday he said he rededicated himself to where he went JUGS during practice. Have you seen the benefits of him refocusing his practice?

DAVE CANALES: Absolutely, and that's the cool part about Mike is just having the humility to work on your craft and knowing if something shows up as a weakness necessarily or it's just a part of your game that you need to work on, go attack it. Don't avoid it. That's a great way that Mike Jack just models that to the rest of the group. If something came up with a game that you need to work on, you should be there before or after practice figuring it out, working through the issues. So it's really cool that he sees the work paying off because he's come up with some great plays for us.

Q. Y'all have won a lot of close games this year to get you to this point. You've mentioned this before, George Lee has had a big role in that as game management coordinator. Is that fair to say, that George has had a big role in y'all's playoff push this year?

DAVE CANALES: Absolutely. George has been unbelievable for me, especially, as you can imagine, head coach hat, play caller hat, all these different hats that I have to wear. It's so important that George chimes in and makes sure that I'm ahead of what's coming so that I can plan, I can wrap my mind around what does this 2nd, 3rd down sequence look like if I can potentially go for it in these 4th down areas. So giving me those cues. Also just at the end of games, the mode that we're playing in, we need to be in tempo here or normal ball probably for another series, when to use time-outs, end of half, end of game. Those types of things are hugely important as we try to get more opportunity to win a game, or if we're ahead, to seal it and to make those decisions.

He's just been unbelievable. We have conversations all throughout the week. He plans our situations during our walk-throughs. George just kind of goes through the league to see, like, fun critical situations that have come up

for other teams, or if there's one that we need to repeat, we'll see that on a Wednesday or Thursday. Those are such great reps. They're invaluable for Ejiro and I as we get to call it against each other, when to use time-outs and not, and the different field zones so that you can have your menu ready, and the guys know what to expect. George has been unbelievable in that way.

Q. The team indicated that Cam Newton would be here this week to bang the drum. What are your thoughts on that?

DAVE CANALES: I heard that. I heard that rumor. For me, we can use all the help we can get. You talk about bringing juice, and that's that momentum and that energy that comes, and I think with Cam, I just think of aura. He's the biggest big person. It's not just by his height and size but also just the personality.

If that happens, I think it's amazing, and we can use any type of energy and that enthusiasm, and I know our fans in Bank of America Stadium will be fired up if that does happen.

Q. What are you thinking about with Wharton, Bobby Brown, some guys like that? Do you expect them to be full go?

DAVE CANALES: They all looked pretty good today. They're going through. They're making sure that they go through protocols the correct way. Obviously we have to respect that part of it and go day-to-day until they're cleared. Obviously the full injury report will come out a little bit later because of the West Coast time with the Rams.

But the guys are stacking great days. It's a blessing to be getting as healthy as you can. As far as the league is concerned, this is amazing just -- and I get to talk about Denny Kellington, I get to talk about Josh Hingst and how they prepare our guys and how they regen our guys after games and get them ready for an entire season, and to have essentially like a fully healthy group other than a few RI guys, it's unbelievable.

Q. When you do have guys who have been out for a little bit pushing themselves, and clearly they want to be out there but also the protocols that come, just toeing the line -- I think everybody knows this could be the last, so just their desire to play?

DAVE CANALES: Absolutely. That's the exciting part about it for a lot of them because they came into the season with the intent of helping win the division so that we can go to the playoffs, and to have this opportunity, you can feel that urgency of guys battling to get back and really

wanting to.

So they attack their work each day, and it's created a great urgency about what we're doing. But then also with that comes roster moves, and those parts are hard, too, because there's a bunch of guys that have helped us to get to this point, and as guys come back on the roster in different ways or step into playing roles, there were guys that played meaningful football for us to help us get there, so that's always an emotional challenge but a great opportunity for everybody, as well.

Q. I know you're locked into the playoffs, but if you can go back to 2023, you were getting ready for a playoff run, also getting ready for head coaching interviews. There was a lot going on. You guys won a playoff game, had success, you ended up here. Do you say anything to anybody on your staff about how big -- obviously they know how important a playoff game is, but how big it could be for their careers long-term or short-term?

DAVE CANALES: Not really. For me, it's about the focus. We know that when you do well, good things happen for everybody. We try to extend that from coaches to coaches but also with the players. Like guys, when we do good, it's good for everybody. It's good for the organization. It's great for the community, for our city here just driving around and the excitement that's happening, Panthers flags everywhere.

I know that it elevates the whole thing when you have this type of success, including from a job opportunity standpoint.

Q. What have you seen out of Bryce this week that's maybe a little different? First playoff game, anything unusual at all?

DAVE CANALES: Pretty consistent. Bryce is really consistent in terms of his prep. Our normal conversations throughout the week, checking with Brad, checking with Will, checking with myself, making sure we're all on the same page for the purpose of the things. He goes out there to practice, and he just continues to lead the group and make sure that we get to the right play. His demeanor stays pretty even, which is why he's performed really well for us in critical situations and end-of-game type of situations, 4th downs, those type of things. It's just his makeup.

He's played in big games before. He played at Alabama. Every game there, every home game there is a high-pressure game, the expectation to win and all those things. I believe he's just a guy who's prepared for this

emotionally, and he's had a great week.

Q. They've seemed to indicate that Quentin Lake would be back for this week. I know you didn't face him in week 13. From what you've seen, how does he change that defense?

DAVE CANALES: He's a phenomenal player. He's got size, length, speed. He's aggressive, plays around the line of scrimmage aggressively, almost like a linebacker at times, and then he can cover, cover in the slot. He matches up well against Jalen in the slot, T-Mac and those guys because of his length. He's over 6'1", 200-ish pounds, a fantastic player, and we love playing teams when they're at their best, and they've got one of their best players back in the secondary, so we've got to be up for that challenge.

Q. Big picture, you mentioned the excitement and managing that for the guys. How have they handled sort of enjoying the moment and enjoying what's at stake but also not losing focus?

DAVE CANALES: Yeah, I've felt a shift. First of all, my group, our group, our team, they're a pretty serious group. Our meetings, it's taken all of two years to really get into the flow of guys. These are supposed to be fun. We want to learn good content, but we're trying to entertain you. We want you to be happy about being here, and at the same time give you great information.

But I've seen the group grow, and especially this week, coming into a workweek where it's like, they understand how big of an opportunity this is. At the same time, I don't want them to miss the joy of it. I don't want them to miss how hard we've had to work to be in this position.

As the week has gone along, with each day, the confidence, I can feel the guys just kind of press into the moment and really enjoy each other's time because there's also this other element. I would love to win this game. I would love to make the divisional round. And if we don't, this is our last week of work together. Let's not miss that. We've had too much fun together. We've worked way too hard, built relationships and spent a lot of time together. Let's cherish all these moments, and let's go out and celebrate one more time on the field.

Q. In your years in the league, I'm curious how common or uncommon it is to see a rookie class with so many guys that have stepped up in different ways, and looking at this year's class specifically, how much confidence does that give you in the program you guys are building, to know that you've been able to identify and develop guys that have been able to

contribute in a bunch of different ways throughout the season?

DAVE CANALES: It gives me an opportunity to talk about Dan Morgan, the amazing job he's done evaluating talent, evaluating football character, personal character, and then the ability to help us from a football standpoint. He and I just have constant conversations about how can we get these guys involved because they're going to have to help us at some point, and that's been true for all of them. They've all had to step up and help us, and Jimmy Horn's role continued to grow. You talk about Nick, who's been out there the whole time. Lathan Ransom, just growing into different roles and making impacts on special teams, those types of things.

I can go on and on, our entire rookie class. But it's also a staff that's committed to development, that's committed to spending all the extra time they need to with these guys to make sure they're as ready as possible for game day.

But we need them. We need them now. We've needed them down the stretch, and certainly in the future. I like saying this, too: Every mistake a rookie makes for you early on is an investment in your future, and it's an opportunity to learn and to grow, and it does pay dividends.

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