

Carolina Panthers Media Conference

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Coach Dave Canales

Weekday Press Conference



DAVE CANALES: Had a great meeting with the group today, players, coaches involved. You know, again, just unbelievable to have this kind of opportunity right in front of us. And while there is disappointment, while we know there is more work out there for us, just collectively for the whole season just to be able to play in this environment, Bank of America Stadium, with the fan base, it was amazing just the whole time through.

Could feel it in pre-game. As guys were coming out in pre-game it was loud. Every time it was almost like an introduction felt like. It was amazing to be able to find some really good ball in the process, and just unbelievably disappointed we weren't able to get it done at the end.

The guys played incredibly hard, battled back, made it a game. The lead changes, I mean, I've been involved in a lot of playoff games, and that was a special one for me in terms of back and forth and the plays being made on both sides really.

And, again, just can't be more proud of the group and where we are right now.

Q. Dave, do you have an update on Ickey?

DAVE CANALES: Ickey, yes, so Ickey has a ruptured patella tendon and is going to require surgery. Timeline-wise, all those times vary. It's significant. It's going to require surgery.

So prayers and thoughts for Ickey. You know, he just battled for us and worked through some things along the season, and just a guy that I love, a guy that I really trust out there. You know, so we'll all be with him the whole way, and wish him a speedy recovery as he comes back.

Yosh stepped in and allowed us to play some good ball. Really proud again. Just another moment where somebody had to come and step in, and we've counted on our guys to do that this year.

Q. Was that related to his earlier knee issue?

DAVE CANALES: It was not.

Q. Do you know the timeline?

DAVE CANALES: Yeah, I don't want give any specific timelines.

Q. Dave, it's my understanding that EJ has time left on his contract. What's his outlook moving forward as you guys plot out the offseason?

DAVE CANALES: I have complete trust in Ejiro. Love the way he's brought this group to play quality football together. He's got my full support. Love our scheme, love what we do there. You know, getting our guys to play together when we execute this scheme, it's really difficult to play against, and the guys have found a way to play together, communicate together, and really like you saw last night in glimpses, just the style of play that we're looking for: the big hits, tackling, you know, the coverage on the back end, and the rush at times. The pressure packages, the different things he was able to do to create rush, to create pressure for quarterbacks. I just love where we are headed that way, and as always, with all our schemes we'll look at it and continue to evolve, push the envelope, and move forward from there.

Q. Just to clarify, the last public knowledge on his deal was that contract was expiring after this season. Is that not the case?

DAVE CANALES: No. We've -- we had conversations beforehand about his contract and his future going forward there, so just that will come out whenever it does.

Q. Did he sign an extension when you were hired?

DAVE CANALES: I can't remember the exact dates of it.

Q. But since you've been hired he has signed an extension; is that fair?

DAVE CANALES: Yes.



Q. And to be clear, he'll be your defensive coordinator next season?

DAVE CANALES: Absolutely. Yeah, 100%.

Q. And the plan for the offense, you've been the playcaller for the last two years, are you planning to maintain that role as well moving forward?

DAVE CANALES: Yes, right now, and, again, all these questions and all the stuff we're going to be talking about as a staff coming up in the next couple days, getting a chance to regroup on the whole season and how it came out. We're always going to look for ways to improve what we're doing.

Q. How does Ickey's injury impact the draft and free agency, and looking through the offseason and how will you approach it?

DAVE CANALES: It certainly is something we have to consider just depending on the duration of the injury, knowing we're going to go through a full offseason, and what's the timeline-wise, how does that affect training camp and roster numbers and all that.

Q. The team seemed to gain a lot of respect nationally with their performance. Just curious how that changes things when you go to the offseason where you're maybe a team that teams are chasing as opposed to the underdog and that sort of mentality?

DAVE CANALES: We've operated really well being the underdog. That mentality -- I had a friend tell me, we're just that team, you get it out the mud.

The guys having that kind of chip on their shoulder to work for everything. Everything is earned. I love this mentality. How do we keep that intact? What are we pursuing? We're trying to find our best, trying to find the best football we can play, and that was a 2025 Panthers.

As we go forward in 2026 it will be the same pursuit. I think that works. It's a timeless approach. Can we find our best? That's what we'll be committed to.

Q. I know you don't want to talk timelines, but with Ickey is there a chance he could miss the start of next season or all of next season?

DAVE CANALES: I don't know that. Yeah, I don't know.

Q. (Indiscernible)...the team after the game, but all year. As you look to still ascend and add more talent

going forward, how can that be part of the foundation?

DAVE CANALES: There is a couple ways you can look at it. First and foremost, it's getting guys here healthy, Pat Jones back out there. Obviously now Ickey, making sure the guys we're counting on. Rob Hunt missing most the season. Getting all those guys healthy will certainly help.

Developing the guys that we have here currently within our team, whether they came from somewhere else or are new to us as rookies. Just continue to pour into the development there.

Then of course Dan's job, my job, our job is to challenge this roster every year. It's a combination of all those things moving forward.

Q. Understanding that every year is a different team, what did you learn about this team this year that maybe you didn't know during the offseason that kind of shapes this next offseason?

DAVE CANALES: Yeah, just the resilience of the group dealing with adversity in-game, and also through the season with the ebbs and flows of an NFL season. To watch a group just come back to work and to be really curious and coachable. Curious about how we can improve things and then being coachable on the principles and the fundamentals, the things we should be reminding each other of.

I just watched a group just take the notes, take the coaching, ask questions, and just keep pressing in so that we can continue to grow in all our phases.

Q. Dave, you were out there last night with five receivers all playing their first playoff game, two of them being rookies. Just curious how you feel about that group moving forward in particular T-Mack, Jaylen, and Xavier?

DAVE CANALES: It was unbelievable to watch the guys. Just really a culmination of the work that's been happening behind the scenes, at practice, the conversations in the hallways, in meeting rooms. You know, Bryce right at the center of all that making be sure we're all on the same page with how we want to get things done and to watch the group really have to find a way to improve that.

When we were in a modified mode for a couple weeks with shorter weeks, last week we had the opportunity to have full speed practice without pads on Thursday. Really felt the chemistry of the group come alive in that practice, which was cool just to see like, man, how much we've needed that time on task for this group.



To see it come alive in the game and be something we could count on and depend on to play a really good Rams team here was fantastic.

To see their energy, to see them not shy away from the moment but to attack it and find wins along the way.

Q. Dave, understanding that there are a lot of free agents in that locker room, what does Rico Dowdle's future look like in Carolina? Just generally how do you think his season went?

DAVE CANALES: Yeah, those are all things we'll have to talk about over the next couple days with Dan, Brandt, myself, and the coaches included. We have to evaluate all the guys and see what our next best move is.

Q. Is part of that evaluation is also the coaching staff, right? How would you assess your performance as a playcaller this year? And when you evaluate everything, how much do you have to consider the operation of the offense?

DAVE CANALES: Yeah, got to take all those things into consideration, look at the concepts that we're running first and foremost. Are these things that we want to continue with? Do we need to make some tweaks and evolve?

I'll be really critical of myself. That's part of my weekly process with our staff, and just having those conversations about how we can put our guys in the best position.

But as we continue to grow together, this is a part of it, taking all those things into consideration and just trying to find a way to win. Trying to find a way to put our best football out there and whatever that may look like.

Q. You took over a two-win team when you came here. I would imagine scenes like last night were sort of what you envisioned. Were you able to take a moment to soak that in at all, enjoy it? How did that work?

DAVE CANALES: It was really the whole week. It was such a blessing to be in this position, to play a wildcard game at home, which comes from winning the division, which is the language we use around here. You got to win the first championship first.

We were able to win the division to get that home game, to give us the advantage of being in Bank of America Stadium. It was a dream come true. Just gives me a lot of gratitude for Mr. and Mrs. Tepper for giving me the support and opportunity to do this, to work with a bunch of staff, a bunch of players, to get on the same page with the same

mindset, you know, to find our best, and to pursue every day like it's fourth and one and to go for it.

Just what does a win look like today? We been asking ourselves that question for two years now. What does a win look like today in these meetings, whatever it is, so that we can continue to advance what we're doing here.

Q. Dave, Rico said that he wanted to go somewhere where he could get the ball, carries, here or elsewhere. Said he wasn't sure why his carries decreased late in the season. Were those decisions that you had with both backs and what does that look like going forward?

DAVE CANALES: Those are conversations that we had as a staff in just trying to put our best foot forward. When you have two backs that you trust, you want to make sure they both touch the ball, and that was the approach we took.

Q. Dave, when you look at the rookie class, have they set the bar for what classes in the future will look like and what you want from them? Because you leaned on a lot of young guys this year and they performed in a lot of big spots.

DAVE CANALES: They were very impressive by how they worked. And, again, I get to talk about Dan, the amazing job that he's done evaluating the football character with the personal character; the talent as well.

All those things have to align in different ways. The guys that I don't get to talk about enough, Ryan Fitzgerald, the job he's done this year in critical situations, giving us an edge on kickoff in different ways, and he's battled through some tough times, too and some opportunities missed. But to come back, to keep battling, to work on his craft.

Bam Martin Scott, a guy that doesn't get talked about a lot on special teams, the different roles that he's played for us. To be reliable as a rookie on special teams is pretty special.

Unintended.

He just flies around. He's got amazing athletic ability, length. His play style, he's got in at linebacker a couple times. He doesn't get all the reps in the week, but to get thrown in there and just play fast is all we ask those guys when we're in a situation where you might be down a guy or two and he has to help out.

Corey Thornton, a guy came along and got an opportunity to start for us for a while in the season, and to watch him progress.

You know, three undrafted guys that Dan and our scouts were able to identify to come in here and help us and make a team. That's hard to do for undrafted rookies, but those guys worked their tails off to have opportunities, seize some opportunities, which gives me a lot of faith they'll continue to progress.

That goes with the entire rookie class. I don't get to mention Kevin Winston and Jaiquawn Jarrett because those guys spend so much time with our rookie group from the time they get here, onboarding them, giving them access and resources to different things outside of the building.

I don't get to talk about them enough, the support, especially the mental and emotional strain of a long NFL season. You'll see Kevin and JJ, they'll have them in their office talking to them, working through different things, encouraging them.

So it's an all-hands-on-deck approach, but it was -- I was really pleased with how the rookies were able to contribute this year.

Q. In year three, where do you think you've made the most progress as a head coach that's in charge of a whole team?

DAVE CANALES: I think just listening to my staff, listening to the coaches that have been around for a while, connecting with Dan, Brandt, Mr. Tepper, and making sure that we're on the same page with our processes and ways that we can affect our team.

I think just trying to be -- it's one thing to be able to listen and have those exchanges, but then to translate it into tangible progress, that's a challenge. That's something that I'm blessed to have the coaching staff that I have, to have the resources around me, to have those checks and balances to make sure that we're not overlooking anything.

But I feel like it's been a place of growth for me this year.

Q. Is there an example you saw from year one to two that played out this year?

DAVE CANALES: Just utilizing Coach Caldwell. He sees things from that 10,000 foot view a lot of times, and while for me because of my mixed roles with my involvement in the offense and different things like that, I can get hyper-focused at times on helping the run game, helping the pass game different ways. You know, just trying to connect with the different phases, special teams and defense.

There is also a story being told and a messaging for the whole team, and Coach Caldwell has been amazing for some reminders or anecdotes from years past where he's been -- I've been in this situation before with this coach and this was something that we did that helped us a little bit, that was a little bit of a shot in the arm.

So that was a real blessing for me.

Q. Dave, how much were you a part of other meetings, like special teams, defensive meetings last year? How much of a concerted effort did you make to do that?

DAVE CANALES: Being in there, being around the guys. My biggest goal is to reinforce the messaging that's coming from our coordinators so that our players understand how important it is to me as the head coach as I try to create this culture.

I think it's important to have that presence. We modified or schedule a little bit this year with Josh Hincks and Denny Kellington. Just because of the size of our team at times we would split the offense and defense up for when they do their body preparation and re-gen versus meeting times.

That allowed me to be in those meetings so I didn't really have to miss anything. Tracy has our special teams meeting before we start, so that's always an opportunity for me to be in there and be involved with that. I just want the guys to know how important all this is to me.

I'm not just the offensive playcaller as the head coach, but this is our team. This is what the play style should look like, and so I wanted to make sure I supported that.

Q. Dave, do you feel like you've found your starting wide receiver tandem with two very young guys? How reassuring is that? Do you feel like those are the two going forward?

DAVE CANALES: Yeah, Jaylen and T-Mack produce for us in an incredible way, and the chemistry with Bryce has certainly grown. They're going to have the first opportunity to be out there to start. You want those guys on the field. You want them out there because of the impact they've made for us offensively.

Q. What does Xavier need to do moving forward to get back in this mix? Seemed like that's where he was to start off the year and things have shifted obviously.

DAVE CANALES: Yeah, just keep grinding, keep working, connecting with Bryce, making sure they're on the same page. Making the plays when they come to him. It's that

simple. When you get opportunity in this league, this game, all the margins are so fine. It's just critical that when you're called upon, when your number is called, you make the play.

That's how you build trust and that's how you get things back on track. The thing I respect about Xavier through this process all that's done is work, all he's done is continue to try it find ways. How can I help? He continued to block, continued to be available. His returning kicks yesterday, and just finding ways to do that. He's made of the right stuff. I have full faith and confidence that Xavier will bounce back and have an excellent year next year.

Q. Every athlete recovers different. When you were in Seattle, Jimmy Graham ruptured his patella, came back nine months later. What do you remember about that process? And I know it's fresh, but didn't know if you had shared that with Ickey yesterday?

DAVE CANALES: I have not shared that with Ickey. We'll have a chance to talk about that. Right now it's so fresh. What I remember about Jimmy was like it was an all-hands-on-deck thing, everybody just making sure that he was ready to go, that we were pushing him at the right pace, going through all the steps that are necessary.

And then once he got to the season, it was just the maintenance thing to make sure that he was ready for the game and making sure that we're smart about how we practice and do all these things.

So that will all come with that territory.

Q. Over the next two years, you're projected highest paid trench group of O-line and D-line together. At least the Top 3 over the next few years. You haven't drafted an offensive lineman yet. You've developed some young guys. You drafted Cam. But you also spent a lot of money there. As a developmental coaching staff, how do you look at the trench group as Cade is a free agent, Brady and all those guys? How do you look at those groups?

DAVE CANALES: Yeah, it's very important we look around the league. Watching the Bears game last night, you know, the money they spent on this offensive line is paying off for them because it all starts there. You can run the ball, throw the ball when you do that.

So that's something we definitely have to make sure is a consistent thing for us, to get guys in there that can help us on both sides, because it starts with the run game and the line of scrimmage. You know, I look at this group and a bunch of guys that I trust. A lot of conversations between

Dan and I and Brandt going forward in the next couple days to make sure we get this thing right so that we can continue to build from the inside out.

Q. You said last week that every mistake a rookie makes is an investment in the future. Last night Trevor had that costly fumble on the punt. He is back out there for the next punt. How important are those decisions in instilling confidence and letting the rookies know you still believe in them?

DAVE CANALES: Yeah, it was the exception, not the rule. He's done a fabulous job continuing to improve catching punts and kicks, the kickoffs. He's worked tirelessly at it. He dropped the ball and it was an unfortunate play. I wanted him to know we got your back. Let's go.

We all make mistakes. That should be the feeling. We want to make sure we create an environment that's accountable for all of us, and we share those things from the coordinators and myself and all the players and coordinators. Tell the Truth Monday is what it is because none of us are exempt from that.

I want the guys to feel that they're getting a fair shot to be able to redeem themselves and just get right back to work.

Q. Dave, I know it's way too early to ask this question, Mike Jack will be a free agent after next season. Can you just -- I know you can't share too much. You have to have some conversations. Is possibly extending him a priority this offseason?

DAVE CANALES: I won't talk about that part, but I will talk about Mike, just the unbelievable way that he just shows up on a daily basis with focus. He's an amazing competitor. He's really brilliant. He's a heck of a chess player. Our team meals night before the game and people walk up to the table and Mike is sitting there and has that gamesmanship about him. He approaches the game that way. Studies film, sick about his craft, technique, footwork.

He's thinking about things, how they may try to attack him in this formation and this. He's just aware of it all.

The story will be told if you ever saw him in a walk-through. If you look at his face in a walk-through it might as well be the game. His eyes are in the right spot, knees are bent, and he takes it very seriously. That affects the whole group in how we should approach any time we're on the grass, any time we're that meeting. He loves it.

Every since I've known him back in Seattle I remember just like running across the field chasing runs down on the back side. I'm talking about in practice and camp.

I told him -- I went up to him one day in camp and was like, Mike, you got to be the fittest guy on this team. I just respected so much his work ethic and what he did to pair with his experience and the way he played this year, knocking balls down, coming up with the big interception for us; unbelievable year.

I'm just really proud to have been a part of the early story and to watch it progress, and I'm so blessed and fortunate we were able to bring him here last year.

Q. What do you think has made the biggest progression from the beginning of the season to now or beginning of your time here to now?

DAVE CANALES: Belief. I would say that. I would say it's an expectation to win. Proving to our players. As a staff we have to prove to our players that when we do things right, we can play with anybody, we can beat anybody. That has been true for us at times where we played really good teams and come out with the win because we did right a little bit longer than the other team.

That opportunity is always out there. That's why they say any given Sunday. It's true because the fundamentals of the game, I believe our players truly believe that. I know our staff believes that.

That's what we try to push and remind the whole group. There is something that's grounding about that. We talk about you can't improve anything you can't measure. The things that you can measure are the most fundamental, technical breakdown, the most fundamental things that need to improve, the things that are working for us.

If we can point to those things, the guys always feel like we have something to work on. It doesn't feel nebulous. It doesn't feel like it's gray out there. But there are specific things we can get better at that will help us this week.

Q. I know last year with the defense finished last in a lot of categories. They've improved across the board. What is the level of encouragement heading into the offseason with the way that unit has performed?

DAVE CANALES: Yeah, the system is in place, and when we execute the system it works. I coached against it for years and watched it continue to grow right in front of our eyes. Where it becomes special is our coach's ability to help the guys connect with each other. Then they got to take it.

We've done a great job of that, creating this platform for the guys to own it. Guys like Nick Scott quarterbacking the

back end, getting guys lined up and talking and making sure they're lined up.

Christian Rozeboom just settling things out and running sideline to sideline to make plays.

And of course Derrick Brown up front, the hustle he plays with. An unbelievable jet sweep that he chased down and stopped for about a three yard gain by Puca Nacua in the game was just a classic example of these guys owning this defense with our play style, our schemes, and I saw a group playing really good ball down the stretch.

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