

# Carolina Panthers Media Conference

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## Dan Morgan

### Weekday Press Conference



DAN MORGAN: All right, well, good to see everybody. It's been a little while since I've talked to you guys so excited to talk to you guys.

You know, just a few thank yous just before we get started, just talk about the season, and then I'll answer any questions that you guys may have.

First off, just want to acknowledge our ownership, Dave and Nicole Tepper. They're a great example of how to operate a team. They're selfless, no egos, and just been a big reason for our success with how they operate together and support and trust myself, Dave, and Brandt to do our jobs. And we definitely don't take that lightly.

Kristi Coleman and the business side, we appreciate their support getting the game day atmosphere the way that it's been. It's been awesome, and she's done a great job on that side.

My crew, working with Brandt, Jared Kirksey, Lee McNeil on the pro side. We have a lot of good chemistry going on over there. They're great teammates, and we're looking forward to putting a free agent plan together, setting the draft board, and getting this thing going.

Really want to thank our fans for all the love and support that they gave us throughout the year. The environment was just unreal on Saturday site. You know, kind of gave me chills sitting up there just looking at the crowd, looking at the fans, looking at the excitement, the city coming together, this region coming together, the Carolinas. Just amazing what football can do to a community.

So it was just awesome to see, and I can't thank the fans enough for coming out, supporting us, and just showing us love all season. It wasn't perfect throughout the season, but you guys stuck with us through thick and thin, and again, we really appreciate that.

Coach Canales and his staff, they spend a lot of hours in the office away from their families. That definitely doesn't

go -- you know, we don't take that lightly. We know they put a lot of work in and they're away from their families. We really appreciate them for their hard work and dedication to the team throughout the season.

Talk about Dave a little bit, just his leadership, how optimistic he is, you know, his football acumen. Just his ability to develop our players, lead our players, and he's just done a great job of really shifting the culture and making this culture a winning culture.

Like we're expecting to win now. We're not coming into a season unsure. We feel like we know where we are. Feel like we know who we are. We're just ready to get to work, and we got to earn. Everything that we get we have to earn. We know this season will be wiped away, 2025. We're going transition into 2026, but we got to earn everything.

It's only going to be by hard work, our players staying together, and I've just really seen our locker room just really come together. It's a family environment. This is the type of environment that we want to create here in Carolina, is the family environment that attracts all types of free agents, all type of guys.

Obviously we're going to select the right guys for our culture, for our scheme, and I just think Dave has done a great job. He's definitely a coach that I would want to play for if I was still playing.

Also just want to recognize and acknowledge the people behind the scenes. The equipment staff getting the players on the right cleats, right equipment, washing the clothes. You know, the chefs making the food, fueling our players. Our analytics department giving us information so that we can make informed decisions.

So they're behind the scenes. They're not always talked about. Obviously we really appreciate them.

Special shoutout just to Denny Kellington and Josh Hincks. We went from the bottom half of being injured last year to the top half this year, so we went into the playoffs with a pretty much healthy team, and that's hard to do in this



league. I just think they've done a great job, so just want to shout them out.

In terms of the season, I love the way our players competed on a day-to-day basis and game-to-game basis. It wasn't always perfect, but you can really feel the chemistry and the continuity of our team really come together as the season went on.

Our locker room was tight. Again, it was like a family environment in there, and that's what we want here. We want these guys to be close because we're only going to go as far as the players. They got to be close in order to go where we want to go. This is definitely a close locker room. It's made up of the right guys, and from my seat we'll continue to add guys that fit the mold.

You know, we have a high standard of play. We're smart, tough, physical, high effort, play with high energy, and we have to uphold that standard on a game-to-game basis. No matter where we play, who we play, what time we play, we have to uphold this standard. I know our players know that and they're hungry to get back at it and attack the offseason.

As it pertains to the roster, again, I feel like we have a strong foundation of guys. You know, I think that they -- it's definitely something foundation-wise that we can build upon, and that's my job and my team's job and Coach's job, all of us collaborating together to bring the right guys and build this thing the right way.

Still going to be patient. We're not going to be reckless. We're definitely going to attack our weaknesses like we have the past couple years.

With that, I'll open it up to any questions you guys have.

**Q. How much can you share with us regarding Evero's contract extension?**

DAN MORGAN: Yeah, so we aligned him and Dave up before the season.

We think highly of EJ. EJ has a really great football mind. We love his defense. It's a really aggressive defense. You know, I think as we continue to add players to the defense, you know, I think that you'll see this defense kind of come together.

We made a lot of the improvements on the defensive side of the ball this year and we'll continue to get better and add pieces.

You know, we're up for that challenge.

**Q. To clarify, you aligned his contract and Canales' prior to the '25 season?**

DAN MORGAN: Yes, correct.

**Q. You've said when you were first brought in this role how it was your dream to see the stadium with fans waving towels. With what you saw Saturday, what does that tell but where you are at this point versus where you thought this team would be right now?**

DAN MORGAN: I think it definitely tells us that we're on the right path. Again, though, I mean, just to hit on this a little more, that atmosphere was unbelievable. Like I was here in 2003, 2004 when we played the Cowboys in that playoff game, and I've never seen the crowd like that.

So, again, that was unbelievable and really a credit to them for showing up and showing out and supporting our team.

So, yeah, it's definitely what I envisioned when I took this job, but I see even bigger things moving forward to where this is going to be a consistent thing and not just a flash in the pan.

**Q. Dan, there were some questions about Bryce, even though he finished last season on a high note. This was a big year for him. What did you see out of him and do you feel like he's franchise...**

DAN MORGAN: Yeah, just to hit on Bryce, we're going to pick up his fifth-year option. I think Bryce has shown flashes of greatness this year against high level competition. You know, I think just as a team, we weren't as consistent as we want to be on a game-to-game basis, but I think that's part of what happens when you have a young team. You have a young team that is building continuity and kind of figuring themselves out.

So I think Bryce did a great job this year, and just really excited about moving forward and him still developing chemistry with our receivers and just the pieces around him that we add.

**Q. What did you see that you liked out of his play?**

DAN MORGAN: I would say if you look at Bryce on a day-to-day basis out there, his work ethic, his ability to command the huddle out there, take control of the line of scrimmage, make the proper checks, make the proper protection calls, and then really having that translate into Sunday or Saturday or whenever we play, I just felt like he had a lot more command out there this year.

Really just kind of like coming into his own and getting better every week. You know, just attacking every day. That's really all you can ask for just from any player, let alone your quarterback.

**Q. Dave didn't have a real good idea of Ickey's timeline. Couple days have passed since we talked to him. Do you have a better idea of what it might look like, and how does that injury impact the contract discussions that ya'll have been having?**

DAN MORGAN: So he didn't get his surgery yet so timeline-wise I really don't have anything for you guys. We're going to obviously take that on a day-to-day, week-to-week, month-to-month basis. From my seat, obviously like, yeah, we have to plan accordingly, which we'll do. I'll talk with Brandt, Coach Canales, and we'll come up with a plan.

I think it's just too early right now to really know timeline-wise when he'll be back.

**Q. And the contract discussions?**

DAN MORGAN: Yeah, contract stuff, again, that stuff -- it's two days removed from the season. Myself and Brandt and Coach Canales, we'll all get together and talk about the plan moving forward and go from there.

**Q. Dan, you've improved by three wins each of the last of the two season by using that patient, not reckless approach. You guys have had selective splurges. Do you anticipate the offseason being similar to that, or with the win-now mentality do you find yourself being more willing to maybe go at the approach a little bit more aggressively?**

DAN MORGAN: I think we're always going to be the win-now mentality. Even last year we had the win-now mentality. We're going to do what's best for the organization, and we're going to trust our plan, our processes. We're not going to be reckless.

But at the same time, we're going to bring talent in here. We're going to make moves that we feel like will help us out in the future. You know, who that is, you know, whether it's a free agent or draft or -- we're going to attack it and we're going to make the right moves.

**Q. 19th overall pick in the draft; lower than recent years. What's your general early approach to that, and what do you think the draft class? What do you prioritize?**

DAN MORGAN: Yeah, I think we've done a lot of work

already on the draft. I think we already have 600 and some guys on the board. It's early. Picking at 19 there will be a good player there, so we're going to have optionality on when we want to do.

I think everything is on the table. I think there will be a really good player there if we want to pick. Again, I'll leave all options on the table. At the end of the day we'll get a good player right there.

**Q. Dan, Rico Dowdle seems to be up in the air, not really happy with his carries the last part of the season. Can you explain why they decreased? Anything to do with not planning to resign?**

DAN MORGAN: No, I think it's more just the flow of the game type thing. There is only so many carries to go around, only so many drives, and I think it just kind of worked out that way.

Him not being as productive on the back end or running backs in general not being as productive on the back end I think all this works together. The offensive line has to be right. Receivers have to be blocking right.

So it's not just one guy or one thing. They all have to work together for the run game to get going. You know, in terms of Rico, resigning him or -- I think it's still early in the season. I think you let those guys take a break, just assess if it was the right fit for them, and we'll do the same thing upstairs. We'll talk about a plan of action and go from there.

**Q. Rico strongly suggested again online yesterday too that he might be looking to move on. Is he giving you that indication?**

DAN MORGAN: I met with him. Had a really good conversation with him in my office upstairs. I meet with all the players before they leave for the offseason. He didn't give me any indication of that.

I thought we left on a good note. We'll see where it goes from here. You know, we'll just take it day by day.

**Q. Staying in the running back group, Jonathan Brooks obviously didn't play this year. What is his future with this team as it stands right now?**

DAN MORGAN: First off, just seeing Jonathan around the facility every day, the way that he attacks his rehab, the way that he attacks the weight room, just always around the building with a smile on his face. He's been through so much adversity and he's overcoming it.

He's looking great. He's running really well. I saw him out there running routes the other day. He looked great.

So, yeah, he's doing really good. I'm really proud of him and the way he's attacked this rehab process. It's not easy. He's done great at it so we'll see where he is at. Again, take it week by week, month by month, but he's headed in a good direction.

**Q. Follow up on that question. Trevin Wallace and, Xavier Legette, other members of that draft class, had kind of rough years. Where are you at with those two guys as starters as well as their outlook for the future?**

DAN MORGAN: Yeah, feel good about them. I think we're also quick to judge these guys and they're maybe not developing as quick as the outside ones, but I think you got to be patient with these guys. I think you got to let them develop, let them grow.

I think Trevin is still 22 years old. Xavier, took him until his senior year to really start developing and coming into his own at South Carolina.

So I think we take a patient approach with those guys. We let them develop and keep getting better. We work with them and keep coaching them, developing them, and helping them out.

**Q. Dan, back to the point about the 19th overall pick and you got 600 names on the board. As you go into this draft, as you're looking at your roster -- I know you got a figure out free agent to set up in the draft, but do you have a general area where you're looking to try to make involvements with the draft and bringing guys in to get into the culture? The rookies this year played a ton of snaps. There is a lot -- I would think this entire class and the philosophy going forward is similar.**

DAN MORGAN: Yeah, I think with the 19th pick, you know, I think you never really want to force a need. Now, if it's equal and you have two guys up on the board and they're even, I'm always going to go with the need.

But, yeah, I think with that pick ideally you draft best available. You don't force a need. I feel like in my experience when you force a need it really doesn't always turn out that good.

So we're just going to draft good football players, and then same thing with free agency. Just going to sign good football players. That doesn't mean we're not going to attack the needs in some way, whether free agency or draft, but definitely just want to bring good football players, good culture people into this building.

**Q. (Indiscernible.)**

DAN MORGAN: Oh, yeah, yeah. I got 'em. Yeah, definitely. I think some of the needs aren't a secret, so from a competitive advantage I'm not going to really like name all the needs up here.

**Q. Back to Ejiro, you extended him on the heels of one of the worst seasons defensively.**

DAN MORGAN: Yeah.

**Q. Why do it at that time and what gave you the confidence in him to extend that contract?**

DAN MORGAN: Yeah, I mean, I think if you look at EJ, if you're around him every day, you see the way he works. How smart he is. I believe in his defense. I believe in his philosophy. He's really good at developing players.

Again, it's my job as well to equip him with the right personnel, and again, it's a patience thing to where we're going to attack those needs and we're going to get better across the board.

I think as you see us keep adding talent on our roster, players on our roster developing, I think you'll see that defense keep ascending.

**Q. How does you pitch to free agents change when you have tangible results to offer as opposed to a plan for building something?**

DAN MORGAN: Yeah, I think definitely having some success makes it easier to attract those free agents, you know, but I would also say having a coach like Coach Canales, I think guys are going to want to come here and they're going to want to play for him.

Just the way that he carries himself, the enthusiasm that he has on a day-to-day basis, the way he leads those guys. This is a fun environment. We work really hard but also have fun doing what we do.

If I was a player, again, I would want to play for a coach like that.

**Q. Are you comfortable with him continuing to call plays moving forward? Is that something that's still part of the plan? I know that at times he's expressed frustration on Sundays with the way the offense ran. Been discussion around that. Curious your thoughts on that.**

DAN MORGAN: Yeah, I think coach does a great job first and foremost. That's really his call if he wants to promote somebody into being the playcaller or bring somebody from the outside. We haven't really talked about that, but that is something I'm sure we'll talk about. We talk about every decision together. Yeah, that's just something else I'm sure we're going to talk about. If he feels like he needs to add somebody or promote somebody to being the playcaller then I trust him.

**Q. Dan, back on Bryce, picking up the fifth-year option, might you start in on a contract extension talk prior to this next season, or do you want to see him play out that '26 season and then address the contract?**

DAN MORGAN: I think that's something that Brandt and I are still talking about. We're still talking through the roster and just kind of like where things look from the big picture view.

So, yeah, it's stuff that is still up in the air that we're still working through at this point.

**Q. Coming in you had a plan, right? This is what I want to do year one, year two. After year two, with the NFC South championship, with a playoff appearance, do you feel like you're ahead of schedule?**

DAN MORGAN: You know, from the inside I really don't put timelines on it. Kind of leave that for the outside. I think for us, we have the vision, we have a plan moving forward, and we're going stick to that plan and we're going to build this thing one brick at time. We have a good foundation right now.

I think you're never one player away, so I think we just got to be smart. We got to be disciplined in our process and approach like we have been and just stick to that model.

**Q. The plans obviously change. EJ is having interviews with other teams. If he were to leave, do you feel like you have a defensive roster that can adjust and adapt to multiple schemes? And if you were to go internally, do you feel like you're prepared in case EJ were to get one of those head coaching jobs?**

DAN MORGAN: Yeah, I think obviously like if he gets a job we're going to have a plan of action, but I feel like our personnel can fit any scheme. So if we needed to adjust to a 4-3 or 3-4 if that comes, I feel like the personnel, we'll be able to adapt and adjust quickly.

**Q. Going back to the question about timeline, you**

**mentioned being patient with the defense. Dave has made a comment a couple time about every mistake a rookie makes is a an investment in their future. What's the balance between being patient, knowing you're building something long-term, and wanting to address stuff right away?**

DAN MORGAN: Again, I think it comes back to just being patient and developing your players. I think we're always so quick to want to go get this guy or go get that guy, but sometimes the answer is they're already on their roster; sometimes they're not.

That's for us to look at, assess with the staff, and talk through those things. But again, we've been -- since I've been in charge, you know, per se, like we're always going to attack those needs and be aggressive in those situations, and we're also going to develop the guys on our roster and they're going to get better and grow. We'll just be that type of program.

**Q. You're projected to have the third highest offensive line payroll without a starting left tackle healthy and without a starting center. Yu guys haven't drafted an offensive lineman since you've been in charge. How much do you feel like you need to add cost control to that group?**

DAN MORGAN: Yeah, I definitely feel like that is an area that I would like to add to, even before Ickey's injury. We want to obviously keep our strengths strong, and I think the only way to do that is drafting young guys and just stay ahead of the curve in terms of positions and just kind of look ahead in that succession planning.

Yeah, we feel good about our O-line. I'm glad we kept our core together this year. I think it really paid dividends for us this year. We had I think 15 different offensive line combinations. We didn't have the same offensive line combination play together I don't think all year long.

So getting those guys back was huge for us because they had that familiarity with our system, and I think it definitely helped us in the long term.

**Q. Dan, guys that stood out to you that maybe you were on the fence about or weren't sure about because you hadn't seen enough. Who are a few guys that really stood out to you?**

DAN MORGAN: Yeah, I think there are a lot of guys. Not to pinpoint one guy because I was really proud of just in general how our guys competed, attacked every day out there.

But, yeah, I think there was a lot of really good things, whether it's a young guy that really showed up and showed out or a guy that's been here and he developed and got better.

I think that, yeah, there was a lot of guys that caught my eye that way.

**Q. You talk about Dave is a guy I would like to play for if you were a player.**

DAN MORGAN: Yeah.

**Q. How did you see him grow this year? He talked about the importance of going into other meetings more instead of just the offense.**

DAN MORGAN: Yeah, I mean, I think that right there, and I think every year, whether it's me or whether it's somebody in our building, one of our scouts, we should be getting better every single year. We're always looking for ways to improve, and Dave is no different.

I just think he's done such a great job of his messaging to our players on a week-to-week basis, keeping them in a positive mindset, and like I said before, just developing that culture of winning, positive attitude. We're going into this game to win. We're not going into in game with any questions in our head.

So I just think he's done a great job leading our team.

**Q. You said earlier we expect to win but you got a long way to go. Like can you sort of quantify that a little bit? I know what your goals are. How far do you think you're away? When you say you're not one player away, how far away is this team from going on?**

DAN MORGAN: Again, like we can talk about like, hey, I think we're going to the Super Bowl this year. That's our goal every year. We want to win the NFC South, have a home playoff game, go to the NFC Championship, win the Super Bowl. But I always go back to just we got to put the work in.

Like everybody in this building from myself to my scouts to the coaching staff, the assistants, the players nothing is going to be given to us. We have to earn everything that we want.

It's just about putting the work in and rolling our sleeves up and that's how we're going to get to where we want to go.

**Q. Jalen Coker is in an unusual situation. Ascended to being starter pretty early after being an undrafted**

**free agent. He's going to be an exclusive rights free agent and can only negotiate with you guys. How do you weigh rewarding a player like that and also keeping on eye on the future and his limited amount of reps and games in the league?**

DAN MORGAN: Yeah, I'm really proud of Jalen, just another guy that's been through adversity with injuries and has overcome it. Credit to him. He put the work in. He got his body right. Reshaped his body. He looks like a different player, and it shows on the field.

Again, it goes back to the work. You put the work in in the offseason, during the season, like it's going to show on the field. Jalen is a prime example of that. Just put the work in and he's a resilient guy. He came back and played great, so in terms of the contract and stuff, like that stuff, again, me and Brandt are talking through. Timing on when to extend him and give him a deal, that's all stuff we're going to talk about.

**Q. Bryce's ankle bother him the second half the season at all?**

DAN MORGAN: I think second half of the season I think it's not just Bryce, it's every player. Everybody is dealing with something.

**Q. He seemed to keep tweaking it. I didn't know if that was something that...**

DAN MORGAN: Yeah, I'm sure it was. He's the type of guy who is never going to complain. He's going to go out there and practice and push through. That's what you really respect about Bryce, is he's a tough dude. He's a really tough dude.

If his ankle was bothering him he sure enough didn't tell me, didn't tell Coach. He just went out there and played. Again, he's selfless and a great teammate, and those are the type of guys that we want around here.

**Q. Do you think you got enough from your tight end room this year? Did you like the development? Is that an area you think that maybe be an opportunity for an upgrade?**

DAN MORGAN: I think the tight ends did a great job, from Tommy to Mitch, JT before he got hurt; James Mitchell coming in here late. We ask those guys to do a lot. We ask them to block in the run game. We ask them to protect. We ask them to run out on routes.

So I think that we have a really good tight end room as a whole. Yeah, that doesn't mean that I wouldn't add

somebody in the tight end room. Again, we want to create competition at every position group, so that's not out of the question.

**Q. Can you speak to the chemistry that Mike Jack and Jaycee have developed over the past two seasons? Are you looking to extend Jack beyond next season?**

DAN MORGAN: Yeah, you look at Mike Jack and Jaycee, arguably one the top corner duos in the league. They are always out there working with each other, taking the young guys under their wing.

Really good leaders out there. The type of guys that we want. We extended Mike Jack last year. You know, again being that's something me and Brandt have to talk about. He'll have one year left on his deal this year, and then, yeah, so it's something me and Brandt will talk through and come up with a strategy.

**Q. Dan, when it comes to this year's rookie class, it seemed like so many players made big impacts on the team. Was there anyone that kind of exceeded your expectations or surprised you?**

DAN MORGAN: You know, I'm just really proud of all of them. I think that they all competed at a high level every single day. To come in as a rookie, it's not easy and it's not easy to play that many games and be locked in. You're usually done playing your college season -- they're not used to playing as many games as we play. For them to come in on a week-to-week basis with the work ethic that they showed, I just thought they were all really impressive.

**Q. (Regarding T-Mack leading rookies across multiple categories.) With the new draft, do you envision (indiscernible.) What has the season been like for you watching them?**

DAN MORGAN: Yeah, I definitely think we definitely envisioned what we got. Otherwise I don't think we would've drafted him at No. 8. He's done a great job. Just another guy that comes in, he works, attention to detail, and shows on the field on Sundays.

**Q. I know Matthew Stafford is a Hall of Famer and you didn't have Jaycee Horn. Do you think you guys played too soft in the final drive?**

DAN MORGAN: You know, again, like I trust EJ and the defense that he puts out there. I'm never going to question what he does. I know he has a plan, same way where I have a plan for attacking free agency, the draft. He trusts me. I trust him. That's what we have around here. We all trust each other to do our jobs, and I'm never going to

question anything that he does.

**Q. How do you balance the fact that everything you saw on Saturday night, that was I think you said the best you've seen there, versus the fact you lost your last three games and four of your last five? How do you balance that moving forward?**

DAN MORGAN: Yeah, I think we made a lot of progress. A lot of progress, a lot of growth, a lot of development from our young guys and even guys that were here, so we're really optimistic about the future. Like I said before, it's about putting the work in. You know, they have a taste now of that environment.

If anything, I think it's just going to make guys hungry err than they already are. The guys want to win around here. They want to bring a championship to this city, to the Carolinas, and that's their focus right now.

**Q. You guys have obviously brought in a youth movement over the last few years. Three guys over 35. How much longer do you believe those guys can still perform at the level they are?**

DAN MORGAN: Yeah, I mean, they make our -- like we're the fifth youngest team in the NFL right now. Probably be a little higher if we didn't have them on our team. They're all really good players and they're guys that we value around here.

You know, I think that's something that we'll talk about in terms of resigning JJ, resigning all those guys. So, yeah, I think they can play as long as they want to. You know, it's a two way street. We have to figure out what's best for us, what's best for the Panthers.

So we'll see moving forward.

**Q. Would you be open to developing a young quarterback behind Bryce?**

DAN MORGAN: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. I think we want to add competition to every room; quarterback is no different. Yeah, that could be something we do this offseason.

**Q. As the GM, was there a moment this season that will stick out to you as a core memory?**

DAN MORGAN: You know, I think obviously like there were some ups and downs during the season. I am just really proud of the way our guys in the biggest moments, they came and they competed.

So like you go into Green Bay to a hostile environment and you beat a team that arguably was the best team in the NFL at the time.

Then the Rams come here, another team that was arguably the best team in the NFL. We beat them. Then to play like we did against them on Saturday night, it just makes me excited about the future. They're performing in these big games. We know we have it in us to play that type of football all the time.

That's where we have to become more consistent. We know who we are. Just play to our standard the play.

**Q. Dan, do you have an update on when the indoor practice facility will be done, and just that whole practice area?**

DAN MORGAN: I don't. I think that's something you could probably talk to the other side about, but looks like they're making progress out there. Looks like it's going to be awesome just from all the things I saw.

So that will be really cool when that's done.

**Q. And then aside from Ickey's surgery, is there anybody else that's going to need any clean up, surgery?**

DAN MORGAN: There may be a few guys here and there, but nothing really major to really report to you guys.

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