

Thursday Night Football

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Ryan Fitzpatrick

Richard Sherman

Tony Gonzalez

Andrew Whitworth

Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: Really excited to start season three of Thursday Night Football. We have Richard Sherman, Tony Gonzalez, Ryan Fitzpatrick, and Andrew Whitworth on the call today.

Q. Fitz, you've had an up close look at Tua and his progress through the years, and I'm wondering what are you seeing out of him now? Has he broken through any ceiling you may have had or just how much growth he would have in his career? And where do you see his career going from here?

RYAN FITZPATRICK: I think it's been talked about a lot getting him in the right system for his skill set, but the biggest growth I've seen from him, even just talking to people around the building -- this isn't just players, but other people working around the building. His maturity and now this leadership quality that Tua has. He's outspoken. He's giving speeches at halftime.

Those are things that I didn't see and I didn't know really existed in Tua. But I think with the new contract and the newfound ownership in this football team, that he really feels like this is his team and they're going to go where he takes them.

So that's been an exciting thing for me to hear about, and I've been asking around plenty because you never know with different reports. On the field, he's the same guy. He's got a calm demeanor. He spreads the ball around, does a great job.

But he's taken a step up in his leadership abilities, and I think that's going to be a huge thing for him as he progresses because this now is his football team.

Q. This question is for Ryan and Andrew. You guys are going to have Jayden Daniels up later this year. I'm curious, Ryan, as a quarterback that wasn't afraid to take off and run, when you look at a guy like him

and even Jalen Hurts and Lamar Jackson, is there such a thing as running too much? And what's the challenge of having a dual threat quarterback, especially a rookie like Jayden, having to block for?

RYAN FITZPATRICK: I'll take just the first part of that and say there's a big difference. I always ran out of fear and was trying to get away from guys and diving headfirst into the ground where he's an absolute weapon.

I think what they're going to have to do there, they're going to have to figure out the right balance because he is, and he's already shown, he's one of the top probably three or four runners at the quarterback position in the NFL.

It's a big weapon, and it causes a lot of problems for defenses, as Sherm could attest to.

As we saw with Anthony Richardson last year, it's exciting until it's not, until there is an injury. And these are big boys out there in the NFL, so he's going to have to learn how to manage that a little bit.

I think, when you watch Lamar, and even watching him run a little bit more in week 1 against the Chiefs, he does such a great job of protecting his body, of eliminating the big hits, and then he can pick and choose in terms of who he's running against and when he can lower his shoulder.

But Lamar is a great example of how to do it, but how to do it and stay healthy.

ANDREW WHITWORTH: Fitz is not giving himself enough credit. I played with Fitz in Cincinnati. I seem to remember a veteran tackle screaming at him a number of times in preseason about getting on the ground instead of running for first downs so we can stay on the field, but he was a good scrambler.

I would say to follow up on that, you and I both played with a receiver that always come in mine when we have just conversation in Chad Johnson. He did an exceptional job of being able to contort his body when he was catching



balls.

It always felt like guys were giving this massive shot, and he would always have a way to be able to avoid it, not take it clean, not get every bit of it. I think in young quarterbacks that's one of the things you want to see.

I always look -- when I see them scramble, it's not how good they are running with the football. We know they're fast and athletic and guys that like to do it a lot. But it's really the art of do they know how to avoid hits? That's to what Ryan is saying about Lamar. You saw that immediately.

I think Richardson stepped out last year in the preseason when he played, really not avoiding those hits, and you were a little concerned about it.

Seeing Jayden and knowing him, he's going to be very similar to Lamar's style.

As far as protecting for him, honestly that doesn't dictate a lot. Plays go off within the timing and rhythm they are, and then quarterbacks that can create have a special ability to do it.

Now, if you're into your pass rate block rating or you're into your efficiency rating, you might catch a couple pressures on the websites the next week.

But as I always say, if that ability to scramble and move is leading to victories, I think everybody is going to get over it. I think offensive linemen will move on and get past having a couple more pressures because there's nothing better than a quarterback that can go get a first down without you having to block forever.

I think those guys will grow to love him. Jayden is a special dude. He has a special ability. I look forward to seeing his career and where it's going to go.

Q. My question for you, and I'll start with Tony, what is the -- what do they tell you in terms of what you're trying to accomplish with your show in terms of the mood, in terms of what you're trying to get across to the audience? And anybody else can answer after Tony.

TONY GONZALEZ: You mean as far as my bosses, my producer?

Q. What's the theme? Like Inside the NBA, of course, is something that's renowned, kind of the relaxed atmosphere. What are you guys trying to accomplish after going for a couple years? What's your goals?

TONY GONZALEZ: At least what I hope we're doing out there, I think it's presenting entertainment. To me, it's got to be -- you want to watch guys that you think are just having a conversation up there, that the only thing missing are some drinks on the table, guys sitting around at a bar talking about football games.

We like to keep it light, but we also like to dive deep at times too. We just have the one game. It's not like when I worked on the Sunday shows you've got a whole bunch of games you've got to talk about.

This is just getting ready for one game for the most part, 90 percent of that. We'll talk about other games coming up throughout the week and maybe some other stuff that's like in the newsworthy that we need to talk about.

But it's about us having a fun time. I want to see some joking. I want to see us laughing. Also, let's get into the weeds, get a little nerdy sometimes with some stats on football. Because I think if we're having a good time, that means the audience is having a good time watching us.

RICHARD SHERMAN: Tony did a great job of pretty much capturing it all. We try to have a good time. We try to inform the fans. We try to entertain.

As you can see, we're good friends on there. We get along well. We know the game. So we just try to let that show on the camera. We try.

I don't think we philosophically think of anything that we're trying to accomplish per se when we're going in there, but you put really smart people together, you put a great host in Charissa. She's a great quarterback in getting us where we need to be, getting us in and out of spots, and she's really entertaining and hilarious in her own right. So we just try to keep up with her.

Q. I'm sure you saw obviously the Tua comments last month about being told you suck when you come to work every day and his regard for Brian Flores. Were you surprised by his comments, and did you witness any of that firsthand, any behavior that you saw from Brian that you considered degrading to Tua?

RYAN FITZPATRICK: I wonder when this story is going to die. At some point this story is going to die since we're a couple years removed from it.

I spent one year with Flo and Tua, and then Tua obviously had an extra year with Flo after I was done. I wouldn't say -- look, there's a certain style that Flo coached with. For me, he coached me differently than he coached Tua. I

would say what Flo did was try to get the best out of Tua.

I think when you put the coaching style that he had with Brian Flores and you put it next to what Mike McDaniel came in and did, was come in, love him up, tell him how great he was, then it probably made it seem like it was even worse than maybe it was at that time.

But I'm happy for Tua. I think Flores has said it. He's happy for Tua. He's happy for the successes. I know we still have to continue to talk about that story. It's so far in the past now that I just want to continue to see Tua taking these steps to get this team a playoff win and deep into the playoffs and into a Super Bowl because he certainly has been on his way and he's done a great job.

Q. This question is for Richard Sherman. Richard, you were really early in terms of athletes having a role in the media. I remember when you did Monday Morning Quarterback for Peter King. It was pretty revolutionary at the time when you were a player. Now you've gone into the audio space and you have your own podcast. So I wanted to ask you, we've been seeing a lot of current and former athletes in the audio space have a lot of success. I wonder just how do you see it as someone who played the game? In terms of sort of athlete owned and athlete oriented podcasts, versus what came before that, which generally speaking, was kind of like third party podcasts, people who didn't play the game.

RICHARD SHERMAN: I figure just give the different perspective. I think it gives an authentic perspective from guys. Obviously there are different realms. You guys doing an amazing job in the media, giving them information and informing the people. These players who are doing their podcast give a different perspective.

In the locker room, they could have different conversations or have different input or insight into situations, and sometimes even to the point where they're still in contact with the players.

Tyreek Hill just went through an incredible ordeal, and a player may have just had a conversation with him and get him on the podcast, those are things -- that's access that people didn't have years ago, and I think it's really important. I think people enjoy it. People enjoy that perspective.

I try to keep it fun. I try to give my input. It's also different for players because, at least myself, you try not to be overly critical of players because you know how hard the job is, you know how tough it is to be criticized when you're in a slump. Except Daniel Jones. It's tough not to criticize

Daniel Jones, but outside of him.

You try to entertain people, have fun, but it's cool to control the narrative and get to give your perspective. If something -- if you don't agree with something, you can immediately address it publicly, and it's something that wasn't available in the past.

Q. This one's for Richard too. Obviously you guys have the Jets next week. I have a Sauce Gardner question. He's the first corner in the modern era to make all pro the first two years. I'm wondering, do you think he's worthy of that status? What's your assessment of his overall game? And how much of a barometer should be interceptions when evaluating a cornerback? He only has two in his career. I'm wondering from your perspective how much of a barometer that should be.

RYAN FITZPATRICK: Rich, that's a great question. I can't wait to hear this answer.

RICHARD SHERMAN: Sauce has covered well. He's been great. Obviously being in a New York market helped. It helped (indiscernible). It helped Sauce.

I'm asking how worthy is he? He's incredibly worthy because he got them. He's been named first team all pro. It's not because he hasn't played well.

But it definitely helped playing in a New York market and getting that focus on you and then playing well while you got the focus.

Guys like Patrick Surtain, for example, you're in Denver, you're in a different market. I honestly believe watching his tape and watching everything he's the best corner in football, but there's a debate when he's not in a big market.

If he was in a big market, if he was with the Dallas Cowboys, I don't think there would be any debate because people would watch him all the time, people would see him, people would understand this guy's game is fully complete. There's not a weakness in his game.

The same with a lot of these other players, but Sauce there's a lot of credit. There's a reason he was named first team all pro. He's been playing at a really high level. He played at a high level against big time receivers consistently in a tough place, because New York can chew you up and spit you out the same way it can raise your game.

I do think interceptions are important, but I guess this day and age they don't because there's not a lot of guys getting

them. You've got Daron Bland and Trevon Diggs who went off the last few years. Trevon got ten; Daron Bland had all the pick sixes.

Even those guys, it's almost like people weren't valuing interceptions the way they are, because guys that were expecting to get them aren't getting them. So I don't really know what to say. There were so many things that are changing about the game.

It used to be the Hall of Famers, you've got Deion and Champ and all those guys, 50, 60, 70 interceptions, and now these days you'd be surprised if a guy gets 30 in a career. I think the game may be just changing in terms of CBs picking the ball off.

ANDREW WHITWORTH: Being in a big market can dictate whether you get attention or not? I didn't know that. Never realized it.

RICHARD SHERMAN: Whit, I'm not saying...

ANDREW WHITWORTH: I didn't know that.

Q. First question to Ryan Fitzpatrick. I want to get your thoughts about Jalen Hurts now under the new coordinator, especially with Kellen Moore. And for everybody else, what are your thoughts on the Philadelphia Eagles this season since you guys are going to have them in week 11 and also with them adding Saquon Barkley?

RYAN FITZPATRICK: I think everyone is really interested to see, starting with that offense and missing Jason Kelce. I think we all saw it right away how big a center can be, not just with making calls and leadership, but even just snaps and just the way that an offense actually operates. He was such a big part of that. That's going to continue to be a growing process for them throughout this season.

But when you look at that offense, I think Kellen Moore is going to be great for him. I think he's going to challenge him in different ways that he hasn't been challenged the last few years. They're going to put a lot more on Jalen's plate, and they're going to see if he can handle it.

Skill-wise, they've got elite skill. I don't know that there's a better set of weapons. Maybe we'll see one tomorrow night in Miami, but skill-wise, they have two of the top receivers in the game.

Adding Saquon, you see what he can do. There's going to be a lot on Jalen making this right and just spreading the ball around and getting these guys balls.

I'm really excited to see it because it seemed like last year -- obviously they fell off a cliff in terms of their record and then losing all those games at the end of the year, and there was a lot of strange tensions in that building.

So as the season progresses, can we get rid of all the strange tensions? Can Jalen really make this his football team? And Kellen's going to have a huge hand in that because he's going to be obviously the guy that works with him every day, but a different voice that he hasn't had in the past.

THE MODERATOR: Do you want to weigh in on the Eagles?

TONY GONZALEZ: I think he said it all. What else do you want me to say? Vic Fangio coming in at defensive coordinator, I like Philly. Along with what Fitz said, offensively looking at their weapons, it's top three in the league. They've got a great tight end. Saquon is going to give them that dimension of what do you want, pick your poison, and they're going to be tough to spot.

I had them, next to the 49ers, second best team in the NFC. I think they're going to get back to that elite status by the time the season is over. I wouldn't be surprised if they're playing in that NFC Championship game, maybe even the Super Bowl. I think they're that loaded.

I do believe what they did with the coordinators, getting new guys in there, it's going to be a good thing for that team. They're going to go pretty far this year.

Q. I have one for Ryan and then one for everybody else. Ryan, could you just talk about how you know if a -- how you know, is it possible for a quarterback to just lose it? I'm talking about Daniel Jones, Deshaun Watson, Russell Wilson. To go from being whatever they were at the top of their games, and not age related, you just lose it, whether it's the yips or whatever. Can you just lose it without it being a matter of age?

RYAN FITZPATRICK: Well, I think -- two things. There are about five or six quarterbacks in our game that are elite quarterbacks. It doesn't matter what system they're in. It doesn't matter what team they're on. They're going to be successful.

I think you've got another tier of guys that have great skill sets and can potentially become elite if they're in the right system. We're seeing that with Brock Purdy. We're seeing that with Tua. Sometimes when you're misplaced and not in the right system, it gets difficult.

Now, the other end of that as a quarterback is confidence. One to keep an eye on right now is Sam Darnold, who just came in. He was given a bunch of confidence. He's in a good system. Let's see how that goes as the season progresses.

Yeah, Daniel Jones is a case -- and Deshaun Watson is probably in the same category where their confidence is at an all-time low. It gets difficult, especially when you're in a big market like New York. I went through two seasons there, 2015, which Rich will remember was a great year. It was so much fun. It was kind of the highs of the high.

And what Sherm was talking about, when things are going great in New York, they're great, and 2016 which was an awful year for me. And then for me, after that season I didn't know if I wanted to continue playing football. That's how bad it got. Your confidence is shaken, and you don't play well. You just continue to snowball. It's a difficult situation that Daniel Jones is in right now. He's not playing well. He knows he's not playing well.

Then things just start to happen. Andrew Van Ginkel picks off a breather play for him, which is a screen to the sideline. The Ginkler. These things snowball and things happen and to you and the boos keep raining in.

But confidence is an enormous part of playing quarterback, and when you lose it in the middle of a season, it's tough to get back.

Q. Then for everybody else, whether it's your quarterback or any teammate you guys are relying on, how do you know -- how quickly do you know if one of your teammates just isn't the right guy, like isn't what you guys need? And in that situation, how hard is it to not just kind of give up on the guy and actually pick him up? Whether it's the quarterback, a young player like Bryce Young, a veteran like Watson who's struggling, or a tackle, a tight end, whatever you guys are counting on. How quickly does the team know if this guy is not salvageable, so to speak?

RICHARD SHERMAN: I think each team is different, so I can't speak for every team. But as a veteran player, you've got to pick him up. There's no choice. Like Deshaun is not going anywhere. These guys got paid a lot of money. They're not going anywhere. All you can do is make the best of a situation.

You're in the National Football League. As teammates, putting him down and beating him down is not going to help you. You need them to get to where you want to get, so usually you've got to encourage him.

You don't know sometimes. Sometimes they look really good in practice and look consistent in practice, and get in the game and it just looks totally different. Again, you don't make the choice either way. It's not like you can say, hey, man, they look like crap. I'm going to pull him. You don't have that option. You don't have that power.

So all you can do is make the best of it, and I think most of the time that's what you do because you're at the will of the head coach and whoever is making the personnel decisions.

ANDREW WHITWORTH: That's part of the leadership of the team. The reality is really to your question, guys can sense that a guy doesn't have the confidence, or maybe he struggles in pressure situations. You start to have concern about it, but really it comes down to how good your locker room and your culture is. Do you have the ability to make people play better than they are and feel more confident in themselves and then maybe even you have in them? Do you have the ability to lift their confidence level in themselves?

You see it across the teams that every year are competitive. They've got those kind of guys in their locker room, and the teams that continue to struggle seem to always have the same kind of issues popping up.

I think it's one of those things that inevitably you know you've got a season long of games to go through, and maybe you feel that way, but if you're about winning and finding ways to win, then you have to devote yourself to finding ways to help that guy be the best version of who they are, whatever that is, and that's when coaching comes in. What kind of situations do they put in? How are they able to put them in the best situation to be successful?

I think that's really when you see great teams with coaches who understand that. You look at even this year right now at the Los Angeles Rams, all the losses they've had on the offensive line. Like Sean McVay is going to find a way to make them productive on offense either way, and he's only going to ask the guys who play to do certain things, and they'll call the game that way and find ways to survive and win games.

There are people who think they won't. They only way they were able to be competitive with four guys out of the game up front. The real good teams, the good coaches, they find ways to help guys be successful, because the end point is the only thing anybody cares about, and that's winning football games.

TONY GONZALEZ: I think, looking back at my career, when you play -- I played with quarterbacks that had lost

confidence, in Kansas City, Tyler Thigpen, Brodie Croyle, guys that weren't really handling it and weren't playing well.

I think it goes back to what Sherm said, who's backing them up? If they do take them off the field, who do we have there? For me, I never had patience for guys that were older, I guess. So someone like Daniel Jones, we've seen this before. We've seen it, his confidence is down.

After a certain point, you're like, okay, you're a little old. You're a veteran now. You're not supposed to be going through that type of stuff.

But who is the backup there? If you talk about Deshaun Watson, Jameis Winston is there. Would you put him in because maybe he can do better or at least do the same and get something going. You can lose the locker room quick. I've been on the other side of that, especially as a receiver playing with a quarterback -- or tight end, whatever you want to call it -- you look at that and say, what are we doing here? We could have him play and his confidence is low and we're not winning games, we're just going to keep doing this?

Put the other guy in there. Let's go. Give us a chance. At least change it up. I'm going to go down fighting. I can't just keep doing it the same way.

It's a tough situation, but it's all about who the backup is and then where they're at in their career. Daniel Jones, he's getting a little too old for this as far as I'm concerned. It's the same old story again, and they're going to have to make a change here probably midseason because it's just not working.

I think that's when you've got to say to yourself what's going on here, what are our goals, and let's just reset and try somebody else.

Q. Wanted to get your thoughts about how Aaron Rodgers looked in his first game back and your expectations of the Jets offense moving forward.

RYAN FITZPATRICK: I think for him and for all the Jets fans and even solid on that team, there's just a little bit of relief. We made it through the first game. I think Saleh even had a quote: It feels better at 0-1 right now than it did last year at 1-0.

But getting that first game, getting those hits, guys not playing in the preseason, and just getting a little bit more comfortable. He's going to continue to get more comfortable as the season goes on. I was surprised, Garrett Wilson had the four catches and the one drive, and that connection is going to be great.

Aaron missed him on a throw late that usually doesn't miss him on. It was a tough opponent to start off with, and I think that was a lot of the frustrations of week 1, just watching.

I mean, San Francisco really controlled that game. They didn't have a lot of time of possession. They felt like they were always kind of treading water behind and not able to catch up because they just kept scoring and running the ball.

So I think the Jets, their schedule coming up here in Tennessee, New England, Denver, I think they're going to get back on track here, that defense is going to get back on track. Then as Aaron gets more comfortable, we're going to continue to see him become more like the Aaron Rodgers we've been accustomed to.

ANDREW WHITWORTH: I was going to say I agree. I think that I'm not overly concerned about him. I think that's a really tough start. I'm sure Sherm's watched the practice a few times between Shanahan and Saleh. Kyle Love destroying a defense and their rules and everything they're taught to do. He's one of the best at it.

I'm sure Saleh was a little bit worried about this being the opener defensively on that side from the beginning, but I think the overly concerned thing to me was the way they were able to run the ball so well.

Jets defensive line, really that front, I mean, really that side of the ball carried this team the last few years. They were not looking ready for that kind of attack from the San Francisco 49ers in physicality really.

Then offensively, I think they're going to be fine. The offensive line, actually, I thought they did a solid job. They'll get better the more time they play together. They have some really good players up front. They've got to be able to run the football. It can't just be all Aaron Rodgers this season.

He's healthy. He's going to play a certain level of play, which we all expect. There's some throws you can still see he's Aaron he is airing. He's got a weapon in Garrett Wilson, but I think they've still got to be a team that can run the football.

If anything, they should have watched that game and said, hey, how do we be more like this 49ers team and run the football like this and possess it and then allow our defense to be on the field and get a stop?

RICHARD SHERMAN: Yeah, I think it was just one of

those things. San Francisco is further along than the Jets at this point in time. It's just they know how to win, they've done it for a long time. They got the system. Saleh is trying to get that with the New York Jets.

Obviously they've come a long way and they're going to get on track, but it's tough. If you're not going to give Kyle exotic schemes and exotic fronts and things that confuse the fronts and confuse the blocking scheme, then it's going to look like that.

He had a whole year since the schedule was released to know he's going against Saleh, the fronts he's going to get, where the running backs are going to be, draw up a scheme. I'm sure he slept well because he just knew what he was going to do and how this plan was going to go because he's gone against him year after year. I was in the those practices with Kyle game planning defense and tricking around with that inside and outside zone scheme.

I think the Jets are going to be fine. I think this is just one of those opponents. The San Francisco 49ers, Kansas City Chiefs are in a realm of their own. I think the Jets play against any of the other 29 teams, they're fine. It's a much more competitive game.

I think they play San Francisco late in the season and it's a much different game. I think you let Aaron get more comfortable. You see him injecting confidence into Allen Lazard throughout that game, even after he dropped one in the initial drive. That's going to be huge for him because they need a second receiver outside of Garrett Wilson to be productive, to take some of that pressure off.

Obviously Breece Hall making plays late in the game. He's going to be great. Obviously you guys already know that, but I think they're going to be fine.

TONY GONZALEZ: And I'll be quick about this. Going into that game, really who had the Jets winning that game? Honestly, flying across country, Aaron even talked about it after the game. He didn't seem too upset. Maybe Aaron's always that cool after a game, but he knows where this team is going. They're a good football team. They answered a lot of the questions that they had going into it. I do think they got it, like you said, Sherm, a little bit.

You didn't say it, but I'll maybe say it. They got a little outcoached. I think Shanahan knew what Saleh was going to do and had gone against him a bunch in practices and stuff and knew what he likes to do, and he exploited it, and he was out there backup running back running crazy all over him.

If I'm a Jets fan, I'm excited. Especially after that one drive,

they're going against one of the best defenses in the league. They shredded them up on that one drive. Everybody got really excited about it. Didn't really come back later in the game, but it's there. You know it's there.

You got a Hall of Fame quarterback, and I think the Jets fans, I can't wait to watch them play when we have them this year in a couple weeks.

Q. For Richard in particular, but anyone else can weigh in, you guys are doing some different things on Thursday Night Football with the defense alerts last year and now with the coverage ID, the defensive vulnerability. I'm wondering how do you feel about this as a defensive player? Do you think this helps viewers to maybe get some more understanding of what's going on on the defensive side of the ball?

RICHARD SHERMAN: No question, no question. I don't think the casual fan understands absolutely anything about defense and what's going on. They think everybody's in man coverage and zone is one thing. A guy was in the area and a guy caught the ball, then he was responsible for it, things like that.

But I really like it. I think it's going to get fans more excited to watch the games, at least feel like they're more informed, especially the defense alerts with the pressures coming and identifying where their eyes should be on the play when a pressure is coming or identifying the weaknesses and the coverages and where their eyes should go.

When you watch football your whole life or you prepare for it like an athlete and somebody competing in the games, you watch it totally different than a casual fan, just watching the quarterback receive the ball. Then the running back has it, and then he's running right or he's running left.

Now you're like, okay, I see the pressure. I wonder why that pressure. It starts to make the game more for the fans. I think it's going to be incredible. Sam Schwartzstein and that team have done an incredible job over the years developing the software. Whitty and Fitz have had input in it. I've had a sprinkle of input in it. I'm sure Tony has had some input in it.

It's just a really cool system that I think is going to revolutionize the game if the coordinators and the defensive coaches and the offensive coaches get a hold of it.

RYAN FITZPATRICK: I would just add to that really quick to say -- I always go back to a few years ago my wife has

seen a lot of football over the days, wasn't necessarily a football fan until having to watch 17 years of NFL football. But she told me she really liked Tony Romo, and I said, yes, he's cute. She said, no, I like him because he tells me where to put my eyes, and that's something that always stuck with me because that's what these alerts are doing.

Everybody watches the quarterback, right? This is just giving another option to say, look, this is where the action is or this is where the action has a high probability of happening or occurring. I think that's the coolest thing about this, is just giving the viewers a place to look to predict, look, this is where the action's going to be.

Q. For Tony and Andrew, your thoughts on the Falcons. Richard, how tough is it coming back from the Achilles and then just any thoughts on the NFC south with the Saints and the Bucs out the gate clean and the Falcons and the Panthers not so much?

TONY GONZALEZ: I'll go first. Falcons, I was a little disappointed with that opening game that they played. I thought old Kirk was going to play a little bit better. I love me some Kirk Cousins. I thought he was going to go out there and shred them up with that offense.

But it's a work in progress and you've got to give them some time. First game of the season, new system, new team, new teammates, new guys throwing to.

I thought Bijan Robinson, I thought he played really well. I think they need to get Drake London more involved. And I'm waiting for the big breakout season of that tight end down there. Kyle Pitts had 1000 yards his first season in the league, and I thought it was going to be that guy, the guy at that position, and everybody's kind of waiting for him to break out.

I've got a feeling that Kirk, he knows how to throw to the tight end, and they need to lean on him a little bit more and start using him.

Atlanta's got big plans. They've been making some big moves. They got Michael Penix Jr., though, and I know that's probably going to start rumbling if Kirk can't go out there and get it going for them.

But like I said from the top, I love Kirk. I think he is definitely capable. I think, when he's on, he can play with the best of them and he can get that offense going. The defense played pretty well, from what I saw. So they've got a good football team.

The Buccaneers obviously have been dominating that division, and Baker Mayfield looked good, and Mike Evans,

that connection has been there since they started playing together, and they're going to be tough to beat. So we'll see.

I still think Atlanta can go out there and win this division this year.

ANDREW WHITWORTH: Yeah, I would say, following that up, talking about Atlanta, knowing Zac Robinson well and really having worked with him in L.A., he's a young, bright mind. He's a guy that obviously has followed under the tutelage of Sean McVay. You're going to see that Shanahan-McVay system come out as the offense grows.

It's also the first time they're all together, playcaller, quarterbacks, everything. Even a guy like Kirk who's played as long as he has, there's still a feel to get from one another, and really how Zac's going to call the game and the plays they want to execute every week.

I think maybe you expect them to jump out fast, but maybe not. Maybe it's going to take some time. It was disappointing. I really expected more in their first week.

I think, when you look at it, there's a lot of pistol in that game, which is really something that McVay and Stafford did to end last season. After their bye week they got hot offensively. That seems to be something the Falcons want to do with Kirk Cousins, and he hasn't done much of that in his history. Not that it's a super difficult thing to do, but it is different. It's playing the game a little different, seeing it different, a little faster.

I think it will be interesting to see how they grow together and mature together, or if you see Kirk kind of influence what they do offensively.

In this division, I still have the Bucs. I'm the opposite of Tony. I think last year we had the same argument about this division, and I still believe in Baker Mayfield and the confidence he has in himself and the swagger. It's infectious. His little time in L.A., getting to be around him, he's a different dude, and he has a different aura around him really than maybe the perception I had of him when he played in Cleveland.

I think they're a lot more talented than people think. Up front, offensively, their offensive line, they handle them. They look physical. They look like a group that's one that can be leaned on or run the football. I thought Godwin and Evans looked reminiscent of what we've seen them be in their career. Those guys both look good.

I really love the Bucs. I think they're going to be a really good football team and one I think some of these top

teams in the NFC better respect when they play them because I think they're a football team that's going to execute well, play well on both sides of the ball, and be tough to beat.

RICHARD SHERMAN: Just talking about coming back from Achilles, it's very tough, tough to get your confidence. That's the thing I'm concerned about watching that game, that Atlanta Falcons game, and I'm concerned about what they're doing in the pistol. Not because schematically I'm concerned about it, because it works really well. They do a good job.

I'm concerned they're doing it because they don't think Kirk can get back there quick enough and hand the ball off fast enough for outside zone and stuff like that, so they're getting him to the handoff.

That's where I'm getting concerned that they're catering to offense. Not to his skill set, per se, but to the injury and to his rehabilitation and things like that. If that's happening, then I think you might be better off playing Penix, but they have 50 million reasons not to play Penix.

That's where Terry Fontenot is going to be in a bit of a bind, that even if Kirk can't play as high of a level as he's played in the past, he's not going to be able to replace him because you just paid him \$50 million, you know what I mean? You're between a rock and a hard place.

Maybe the rookie gives you a better chance to win, but you just paid Kirk, and you don't sit \$50 million on the bench even if he's not 100 percent.

A lot of the frustrations we saw and a lot of things we expected to see we didn't see because Kirk is not driving the ball off his back foot, like we would expect. There's some times I'm seeing him drop his heel in the ground and kind of stumble away. That's reminiscent of being a guy that hurt his Achilles. You don't want to step on that foot all the time. You don't want to drive all of your foot into the ground because you're worried your Achilles might pop. It may be subconsciously, but you're doing it, and I saw it on the field.

To your question about the division, I agree with everything Whit said. I think this is Tampa's division to lose. I think people don't give Todd Bowles and his scheme and their staff enough credit that, when they pick guys, they've got a lot of homegrown talent in Tampa that really executes well, really plays at a high level. And they develop guys, and they get guys specifically for their scheme, at least defensively, and they've developed those guys.

Joe Tryon-Shoyinka, Antoine Winfield, Jr. Lavonte looked

really good in his 15th year in the National Football League. Looked really sharp last week and does really well in this scheme.

And they keep coming with these guys, and I think they're going to be a really tough outfit to deal with, especially if Baker is playing this confidently.

I don't know what the Saints are going to be because the Panthers don't look like an NFL team right now. They don't look like an NFL talent team. You saw the low lights from that game, three guys falling on top of each other unblocked, chasing Alvin Kamara. You don't want to see that on the football field.

I don't care how bad your team is, you see three NFL players, starters, falling on the ground in one play, it's Bad News Bears.

Q. Third season of Thursday Night Football here. I'm wondering what sets your pregame show apart from other networks? What makes you guys distinctive?

ANDREW WHITWORTH: I don't think I really look at it as anybody else. I look at it as all of us at our desk and the crew behind the camera and in front of it. Each one of us is us every single week.

We have fun. We have a blast together. We love traveling, going to NFL cities. We love the game of football. We want to create an atmosphere, when you're sitting at home, that you say, every one of those people I'm watching right now talking about this game, I'd love for them to come sit in my living room and watch this game with us.

We hope that involves giving you information about the game, educating on something you should be looking for and how one team or the other is going to be successful and the game plan they're going to implement in that game. We hope that involves making you laugh and having a good time and wanting to get a drink or something to eat that you love and enjoy yourself.

And just create a moment to get away from everything else in your life and just enjoy the game of football and celebrate what is a game that's changed every one of our lives for the better and been something that we've all enjoyed the opportunity to play, and we hope it gives you a great experience to sit and watch and enjoy the game with us.

I think in our pregame show, we hope to educate, entertain, have fun, and create an atmosphere where you want to come back and spend your Thursday nights with



us. That's basically it. Outside of that, I don't think we concern ourselves with what everyone else does.

RYAN FITZPATRICK: Just to quickly add to that, I would say we all absolutely love football, and we all have relationships -- I hate to say leveraged relationships, but we have these relationships with players and coaches from just being all over the league. It's so fun every week to go to these cities, to experience the fan bases together, to go out and have our meals, and also just to catch up. Catch up with equipment staff, training staff, different coaches, different players.

For us to be able to share our experiences and really to be a conduit of sharing the experience of these players to the viewers, I think it's really important, and it's just something -- football's meant so much to all of our lives. We love being a part of it still.

RICHARD SHERMAN: I would agree with everything they said. I think we've got a great crew. I think we have a lot of fun with one another. We appreciate one another. We care for one another. We care about, as Whit said, the guys behind me, camera and everybody, the work that goes into putting a production together, and I think that genuine appreciation shows on the camera.

Q. This question is an offshoot of Ryan's comment on Tua and hoping this is the year they get the playoff win and take the next step. So my question -- and this is for the four of you -- how confident are you guys this is the year the Dolphins can take the next step and break through, or is there a concern that their track meet style of offense kind of puts a ceiling on what they can do?

RICHARD SHERMAN: I'll start this one, I guess. It has to -- it starts today. It starts this game because they've got to show they can beat Buffalo. If they beat Buffalo last year, then they play Pittsburgh in the first round instead of going to Kansas City in the first round. It's things like that that you've got to focus on that changed the outlook of the season.

They've lost to Buffalo, what, 11 of the last 12, so that's got to change today. They're the better team this week. They're technically on paper the more talented team. They've got to win this game.

RYAN FITZPATRICK: I would say that's a big lesson from last year. It's been pointed out, and I know you know very well Tua's record in the cold. This team is built with speed. This team is finesse. This team is an explosive team. But they need to get a home playoff game, and I think that's on the front of their minds this year.

I think that really hurt them last year, and it was one of the coldest playoff games last year in Kansas City. It's a really important thing for them to get over the hump is to host a playoff game.

ANDREW WHITWORTH: I think so. I agree with Ryan. I think they've got to get those games and start getting them played in Miami because I think it's a huge impact.

I even look at the one time -- I've been to two Super Bowls, but the one run we've had, we got a chance to play in good weather, play in a dome, all those things. We ran those offenses that weren't necessarily an 18 -- sure, we ran the ball a lot, but under Matthew Stafford, that wasn't really our thing.

You look at this offense, and I think they need an opportunity to play a lot of these games in Miami in the playoffs, and you'll get rid of this narrative a little bit.

The truth is, in those cold weather games and in those atmospheres, there's a style that wins: playing great on defense and having an effective run game. You look at Andy Reid and the success the Chiefs had, but people don't talk about when they get to the playoffs, they play lots of 12 and 13 personnel and they run the football and they run play-actions, and they do a lot of things differently.

Every year back to back playoff runs, it's the same game plan that executes and wins. To me, it's about understanding the NFL season is really to me broken into parts. There's these eight to ten games that start the season where being explosive, winning games, all those things. You'll see everything be electric, play makers making plays.

And then the last half of the season, teams are beat up. Even if you've got the last player and he's healthy, the game moves a little slower. You better be able to play that style of football and win. That's whether you can play defense, run the football, whether you can be efficient on offense, and not make the most mistakes of the other team and just and go out and play efficient, winning football.

Then when you get in the playoffs you've got to play some version of a physical, defensive football game and have you little one-offs on it that have explosives built in. To, me, when you look at teams that make those runs, there's little parts of it built in.

This Dolphins team, back to what Sherman said at the very beginning, is the most important. They have to show they can beat the Buffalo Bills. That's the reality. They have to show they can play that style of football and win and play

that way against teams that are really good that everyone respects that way, and that will give them the confidence to make that late season run.

TONY GONZALEZ: I agree with what everybody said here. To me, there's no way the Miami Dolphins can go on the road and get to the Super Bowl. They're just not good enough. What Whit said, physicality-wise, you look at the Chiefs, and people, a lot of people will mistake them for saying, oh, they've got Pat Mahomes and they're a finesse team. You look at last year, all of a sudden, they're winning the Super Bowl because of their defense.

Obviously Patrick is a great football player, but Chris Jones and Nick Bolton and Sneed last year, and McDuffy. These guys will bring it on defense. They'll stop you.

I have not seen that -- don't get me wrong. The Dolphins have some talented players on the defensive side of the ball, if they stay healthy. I would like to see that happen, go to the playoffs healthy. But right now, until proven otherwise, their style, I have a hard time believing that they can make it through a Super Bowl.

They can be a really good football team, be a playoff team, but as far as winning the whole thing, I think some things have to change. I'm sure they know that, and they've got to get that identity. They've got to get, okay, we're going to be more of a physical team because that's what the Chiefs have done.

Just really copy them. You can be a finesse team and be a physical team at the same time. There's no reason why they can't do that, but I haven't seen it yet. We'll see what they can do this year.

Q. This is for Richard and then one of the offensive guys. I'm wondering how the proliferation of four down offense has changed play calling. Richard, I'm curious, if like knowing teams on fourth down are going to go for it, if you've seen defensive players take a different approach than maybe a decade ago? Do they hold something back knowing it's fourth down? And for the offensive player who wants to answer it, if you see offensive play callers attacking the game differently than maybe a decade ago knowing they have an extra down here.

RICHARD SHERMAN: I don't see them attacking it differently, at least players. I think schematically the coordinators are obviously working that situation more because at times -- there's only so many ways you can go at it, especially fourth and short plays. It's usually similar to what a two-point play offense would look like on the goal line situation.

It's going to be some version of play action or sliding down the line, getting the quarterback out, run/pass option, things like that.

It's just going through practice and practicing those scenarios more often than you probably would any other season and then getting up on the ball and not jumping offsides. That's another thing guys got to work on because a lot of guys go up there with a dummy count and hut, hut, hut, see if they can get a guy to jump on a fourth and one.

So I'm sure they're working on plays, but I don't think they're necessarily in there, like, hey, we need to blitz more or we need to do this more to keep them out of a short yardage situation where they're going to anticipate they're going for it on fourth.

Because not every coach does it, so I'm sure the coaches that do it, they have their teams ready for them to hurry up and get back up to the line and have a play ready, have a coverage quickly called, a signal that they can get out and get back to the line.

ANDREW WHITWORTH: I think obviously that fourth and short situation is one thing. I think another thing you see, really it begins with play calls. I think that -- I know Ryan would say this -- really what you've seen is the evolution of when a third down call comes in, let's say third and medium, or third and kind of two to three, a coordinator may say, hey, look, we're going to go for it on fourth down if we don't get this. Here's a play call. Here's something we're going to do. Take this chance here if you want because we're going to go for it anyways.

You have those situations come up more now because I think the coaches think of it as there's more four down territories they get in on the field. They're say, hey, at this point we're going. We have four downs instead of three. So they kind of call that entire set of plays that way.

They even give you a heads up. Playing in L.A., we got a lot of those, where Stafford would say, look, this is four down territory here. This is third down. I'm going to take this shot if I got it, but we're going to go for it on fourth down, so stay out here.

There's a lot of things now where the offensive game has changed, and the play caller is telling them that. Hey, this is a situation, guys, or a quarterback, this is third and short. Maybe be a little more aggressive than you normally would, and maybe you're throwing a ball or doing something the defense wouldn't expect us to be doing in this situation because in our minds we're going for it on fourth down anyways.

RYAN FITZPATRICK: I think the mentality for a quarterback, it really changes if it's third and eight -- and I know that, if we get it to fourth and two, we're going for it, maybe that does change in terms of like the mentality that I'm approaching.

The other thing that I think is interesting, I think as long as coaches are consistent with their aggressiveness, because sometimes, if you don't get it on fourth down, you're going to put the defense in a bad spot, in terms of Jacksonville, for example. You've got teams that are now going for it, not just 40-yard line in, but they're stretching the entire field now and going for it.

I'm sure Jacksonville's defense wasn't very happy they had to go out on the field and it was already 39 yard line going in or whatever it was. But that mentality, as long as it's consistent, as long as you know as a defense, as an offense, as a team, our coach is aggressive, this is what we're doing, he's explained that philosophy, I think that goes a long way.

When you start jumping around and aren't consistent about your decision-making and it just seems like you're going by the seat of your pants, I think that's when problems arise.

TONY GONZALEZ: Analytic, that wasn't really said back when I was playing, and I remember there was a lot of situations where, when it was short yardage, as the player, you're like, let's go for it. We can get two, three yards. And we knew that going into our third down. Like, hey let's get close enough, and then we'll go get it, but it wasn't done as much, and you're seeing a lot more because of analytics.

The percentages, hey, it looks like this was actually a smart thing to do, and I think a lot of teams are doing it because of that. That's why the numbers are up. Teams will go for it in all types of situations now. I think a lot of players are on board with that, especially as an offensive guy. Yeah, we can go get two yards.

Look at Philly. I mean, you can have the tush push. You can have big quarterbacks like Josh Allen.

RYAN FITZPATRICK: Not anymore, Tony. No more tush push.

ANDREW WHITWORTH: No more tush push.

TONY GONZALEZ: You can get a big guy like Josh Allen. He is the tush push with his big butt. I think that guys are wanting to do a lot more because I think analytically and percentage-wise, it's there. It shows your chances of

getting it are pretty high, so why not go for it?

THE MODERATOR: Thanks for joining, everybody. We appreciate it. Looking forward to a great season.

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