

September 25, 2025

## **Defensive Coordinator Joe Whitt Jr.**

### **Opening Statement:**

“All right. So we'll start off with just a recap of last week's game, and then I'll talk about Atlanta. And then any questions that you guys have. Last week, I thought a couple guys that really stood out were [DT Daron] Payne. He graded the highs on the defense. I mean, he was just outstanding. I mean, the highest of the year and along with him up front you had [DE Dorance] DA [Armstrong], and [DT Javon] JK [Kinlaw], they all graded really well in the midline. [LB] Bobby [Wagner] he graded out really well. And then on the back end it was [CB Marshon] Shon [Lattimore] and [CB] Trey [Amos]. And so, I thought we did a nice job and we've done a nice job all year on first down stopping the run. So that's produced more second and seven plus, which gives us the ability to rush the passers. I think we've produced the fourth most second and seven plus and the third most, third and 11 plus. So, when saying that, that allows us to get after the quarterback a little bit more. But it all starts with stopping the run, especially in between the tackles. Green Bay [Packers] game, they got outside of us some with some receiver runs. So, I think the rushing coverage was, was good from that standpoint. Third down I thought was really good in the game. I think they were three of 14, somewhere around there. I think we're very high in the league in that. So, some things that we have to make sure we sure of, they had a hundred yards on two pass plays. And so, you definitely don't want, and one, and those, those went for 10 points. You definitely don't want that to happen. We, once again, we had opportunities at turnovers. You know, we dropped the interception, two times we were sacking the quarterback. He had one hand on the ball, and we were close to getting the ball out, but close doesn't cut it. So we didn't have any turnovers. So, that was a recap of what from the [Las] Vegas [Raiders] game. But I thought the guys, man, the play style was what we were looking for. We have what we call turnbacks where either we tackle them behind the line of scrimmage or their head is pointing towards their end zone, and we had 26 of those plays. That's a lot when you're hitting and turning people back the other way, or hitting them behind their line of scrimmage. So, I really like the running hit. We just have to cut down the explosive plays. We have nine for the year. That's three per game and that's too many. Now talking about Atlanta [Falcons]. Man, really just a young, talented offense. Okay. And it starts with the running back [RB Bijan Robinson]. You know, we put up the key players each week and you put your strength, the strength and the weaknesses. And I didn't have any weaknesses for the guy, man. I was just like, man, he can do it all. He can run inside outside. He can catch, he can block, he can, he can run the screen game. He can, he does it all very, very well. So, and then you have, [Atlanta Falcons WR Drake] London, who's a really good, tough, when I say dirty, he gets in there and block, but he's a receiver and he blocks like a tight end. And then you get to the tight end [Atlanta Falcons TE Kyle] Pitts [Jr.], he runs like a receiver and he's very talented. I think he's having a good year. And the quarterback [QB Michael Penix Jr.], really good arm talent, the ball pops out of his hand. He could throw a deep, he could throw, make any throw. And then the line, you know, the veterans [Atlanta Falcons T Jake] Matthews is still there. The guards still. I mean, they're blocking as a unit. So, I know people are

going to say, 'what happened to them last week?' Well, guess what, what happened to us in Green Bay? We did not want that to happen twice, so, they're not going to want that to happen twice. So, they're going to come out ready to play. [Atlanta Falcons Head Coach] Raheem's [Morris] a hell of a coach. He knows both sides of the ball. And he's going to have those guys ready to rock and roll. So, we with that any questions?."

**On what makes Atlanta Falcons RB Bijan Robinson hard to stop:**

"Like I said, he can do everything. Okay. He has the ability, if you start crashing the inside to stop the inside run, he can beat you to the perimeter and he's fast enough to outrun people. He runs with power. He has a jump cut. He can run in between the tackles, the screen game. They haven't run a lot of screens, but he can catch the ball. You can put him out on receiver, he can run slants. He's just a complete football player. And I, man, I just, I just really enjoy watching his film because he does it all."

**On cutting down on the amount of explosive plays by the opposing team:**

"It's really not a theme. From this last game, we just didn't do our job. Cover the guy and send the ball where we're supposed to send it. So, every coverage that we have there's rules to it and we want to send the ball. So, in certain coverages, if they catch the ball on the out route, nothing's going to be said because we have other coverages for that. If they catch the ball here or there, we have but if you're not defending where it's supposed to be defended it's going to be an issue. And so, we just have to the players at that, and they have to do their job there. So, and I have to make sure they do it."

**On S Will Harris being out and adjustments being made:**

"Yeah, first I hate that Will is out, but tough player went back out there and played on it for another play or two. So [S Jeremy] Reavo [Reaves], we talked about Reavo during training camp. Not training camp, but even before then during the spring, man he's deserved this time. And the thing that I said was, 'how do we pull him away from special teams?' and that's going to be the challenge and that's what we have to work at, because he is our special teams ace. But you saw the play he made on third and one just diving in there. He's a physical guy. He's a guy that I do feel like can produce the ball. He's smart. He communicates well. So, you know, he'll, his role would definitely pick up. TO [S Tyler Owens] will have to pick up his role. And now that we have [S Darnell] Savage here, [Defensive Pass Game Coordinator] Jason Simmons had Savage in Green Bay, and I remember when he first got him, he called me, he's like, man, this dude is the smartest rookie I've ever had. And so, when he got here a couple days ago, we have our concept teaching that we put on our iPad. He was popping off our defense because he had gone through our film already. And so, or the concept tapes. So, he's extremely smart guy and so hopefully he can grasp it soon and so we can get him out there."

**On having three starters out on the back end of last game:**

"That made it a little bit difficult from a play call standpoint because we had people in spaces that they hadn't practiced. So, the call sheet really shrunk down to really three calls and especially the last drive, you know, when they hit that long ball. And so, but that's just, that's football, you know what I'm saying? It happens. Like I said, injuries are just like catching and tackling. We have to fight through it. The game was, we had control of the game at the time, but we didn't want to put guys in harm's way and calling calls that they really weren't comfortable with. So, we kept with three calls at that time of the game."

**On how DT Javon Kinlaw has added to the defense:**

"Yeah, I, you know, I begged for the young man last year when he went to the [New York] Jets and I

sort of chuckled when people were saying negative things about him. He is what we needed at that position. He's a penetrated, disruptive man. Okay and now what has that done for Payne? Alright, Payne doesn't have to, he's not going to get all the doubles. He's not going to get it, because they have to take care of 99 and then once they take care of 99, now they have to take care of 94 at times. And so now 92, alright, he's had a sack every game and everybody talks about Uce or [LB] Frankie [Luvu] not having a great year. Yes, Frankie is having a good year. Okay. Alright. People aren't going to allow Frankie to do what he's done. I'm going to get, I'm going to answer your question, but there are people not going to allow Frankie to do what he did last year. So, they're turning bigs to him. So now DA, so now the people are not going to allow DA to keep doing what he's doing. They're not going to allow JK to keep doing what he's doing. So, they have to make decisions on who are they going to allow to be factors in the game. And so JK has given us the ability to open up other pieces same way that Frankie has given us the ability to open up other pieces. Frankie's time will come because they're not going to keep letting DA go wreck the game. They're not going to keep letting 99 wreck the game. So, when those times come, um, the other players will have the opportunities to make plays, if that answers your question.”

**On a future role LB Preston Smith:**

“Oh, there's definitely a role. Once again, he was in Green Bay with Simo [Jason Simmons], so to have history with him there. And then we played him in the playoff game here. So, I know the guy, I know he has the ability to get to the quarterback and he's smart. He understands the scheme similar to some of the stuff that he's done before. So, it's just really him getting into football shape and ready to go. But from a mindset he's a smart man that understands what we're doing.”

**On Atlanta Falcons QB Michael Penix Jr.:**

“Yeah, I think, man, he, the ball pops out of his hand. He's a strong-arm guy that moves better than people think. He put a ball in on that fourth and 13th last year up the seam against us that shouldn't have got in there and the coverage that we were in, but he got it in there. And so, he's just a talented, strong armed guy and Raheem's going to make sure that he puts him in position that he's going to be successful.”

**On what has made DE Dorance Armstrong effective:**

“I'm not trying to minimize what he's done now. We saw this coming because of the way that he worked during the off season and he's playing his best ball because of the work that he's put in. I anticipate that to keep going on, but it's just not the sacks, it's the way that he sets edges the way that he communicates up front. He's a complete football player, he's just not a pass rusher. He's just not a run stopper. He's a complete guy. So pleased where he is and, and I anticipate the play to stay the same coach.”

**On his plan for confusing a young quarterback:**

“That's a good question. I don't do scheme questions though because I know Raheem is watching this interview just like I watched his yesterday and so I can't really answer that right now. But he's a young quarterback and you try to do certain things with those guys, but I can't talk about it right here.”

**On what it takes to scheme a defender to have an open sack:**

“Well, the thing, it starts with stopping the run. So, once we knew that we could get them in known past situations, okay, we were going to force them to make a decision on who they're going to put the back on and on that play, you're talking about, the back was supposed to block [LB] Bobby

[Wagner], he ran out and he aborted it. So, we were free. So, now to your point, that's a rookie running back. He made a mistake there. And so, if we can stop the run and play the run, now we are putting them in known passing situations. Now we can sort of dictate on who the back, is he going to block Bobby? Is he going to block Uce [LB Frankie Luvu]? Is he going to be on one of those big guys? They don't necessarily want to do that. But we have to stop the run, and that's the most important thing, stopping the run to get into the known past situations.”

**On playing against a left-handed quarterback as a defender:**

“Yeah, I could think all the way back, I wasn't the coordinator at the time, but we were playing the Eagles, and I can't remember the starting quarterback. [Former Philadelphia Eagles QB] Mike Vick was the backup, and we hurt the starter and we had shifted, we had our best cover guy on the left side. And then when Mike came in, he scored a touchdown and I didn't flip the corners and he scored a touchdown on a rookie corner that I had in there and I should have put him on the backside hand of the quarterback, and I didn't do it. And so things like that, you understand, okay, typically right-hand quarterbacks throw better to the right, alright, some can throw, which way do we need to roll the coverage? Are we going to roll left or right depending on where the ball goes. And it just spins out their hands different for the guys catching it also.”

**On LB Bobby Wagner's ability to get sacks at his age:**

“I tell our scouts all the time, because I like veteran players, they move faster than rookies because rookies don't know what they're looking at. And so, they might run on 40 faster, but they don't play faster because Bobby can key and diagnose what he sees, and he goes while the rookie's still sitting there trying to figure it out. So, he plays extremely fast. I don't know what his 40 is, but he plays fast and that's all that matters.”

**On playing against Las Vegas without DE Deatrich Wise:**

“Yeah, I've been really pleased with [DE] Jacob Martin. He's a man's man. He can set edges, he's tough. I initially, when we brought him on, I thought he was going to be a guy that just rushed the passer. He is not that, he is a complete football player. So, I've been pleased with him. [DE Javonte Jean-] Baptiste was able to get in there and start to do some things and I was pleased with what he did. And then we brought [DE] Jalyn Holmes up and he's a big, square body that can play inside and outside. So, I thought the front played, I think they played really well all three games to be honest with you.”

**On the explosive plays given up this season:**

“Okay, the ones in Green Bay, the guy was free, right? We didn't play that one correctly. The very first play of the game this past week, the kid didn't play it correctly, right? He should not be that open. The last play, played the coverage right, didn't play it the way they should have been, shouldn't have been open. So, those three plays, they were just wide open. And that's bothersome to me because if you're fighting like hell and the guy catches the ball, like on the one that was on Shon [Lattimore] that I thought was OPI on the sideline in Green Bay, that's football, okay? They're going to catch some balls every once in a while. But we can't have free runners and so the switch

verticals, which this team ran again, they ran the switch verticals and [CB] Noah [Igbinoghene] broke it up and then we ran the switch verticals on them and [WR Luke] McCaffrey scored the touchdown, same play. They ran the same play, we ran the same play. You're going to get it every week at some point, you just have to defend it. We got it against New York, we defended it. We got against Green Bay, we didn't. Got it this week, we did. Hopefully we defend it the rest of the week, because you're going to get those issue type plays but we can't allow those free runners."

**On the communication between the defensive backs:**

"I've seen it being really, really good. One reason that we're getting so much pressure on the quarterback is because those guys are covering their ass off on the back end. You can say what you want to, the free runners sort of skew the look of, alright, everything's open. Well, we're number one in the league in completion percentage. We don't give up a bunch of completions. But just the ones that we have given up have been just too long. And once we shore that up, and that's why I just talked to those guys about if we do two things, we shore that up and start getting the dang ball, now the defense takes up, because the run game has been under control. We're pressuring the quarterback, and the communication of the safeties have been outstanding. Communication of the DB's have been outstanding. A lot of those sacks come from, there's been nowhere to go with the football. And so, the guys can get to their second rush. It's complimentary defense when the rushing coverage work together. And so, I told the guys that we left meat on the bone in this game from a, we should have had three more sacks. We dropped the interception, we didn't get the fumble out and then to have the points at 16 and they give up that deep touchdown. If we want to be the type of defense that we can be, we can't give up and put that stank on us at the end of a game and make it feel bad. Because the game, if that play doesn't happen, it feels just better. And so, hopefully we can just not let that happen and I don't anticipate it to happen."

**On playing someone exclusively on one side:**

"Yeah, I caught myself being smart one year because [Former Green Bay Packers CB] Sam Shields played on one side of the field. He's always on the right. I said, man, I'm going to put him on the left and he didn't play as well over there and I put his butt right back on the right, because that's where he made his living. So, to that point, yes, but Shon can play because he's matched before a lot. And so, once Sam got to matching it didn't really matter putting him left and right. So, Shon has matched so he can play left and right and [CB] Trey [Amos] can play left and right as well."