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Linebackers Coach Steve Russ

On Head Coach Ron Rivera:

“I think he is just very relatable in how he goes about his approach with guys. He is also very real and genuine. You don’t see a lot of hidden agendas. What Coach Rivera says, he means, and the guys see that. The guys can feel someone that is real and genuine. A lot like with [defensive coordinator] Coach [Jack] Del Rio, those guys were great players and in this league that certainly helps. Coach Rivera is very honest, forthright and trustworthy. I could go on, but he is the right guy for this job no doubt about it.”

On why he personally wanted to join the staff and if it helps that a lot of the former Carolina Panthers coaches were brought on to this staff:

“I think it’s great and a spree to core and camaraderie is so important in an organization. I wanted to be here because I wanted to continue to coach with Coach Rivera and continue to learn from him and help him. Also, the opportunity to coach with Coach Del Rio and learn from him. I don’t know if there are any linebacker coaches in the NFL – if any – that can say they have two guys that they can look to on a staff like this. I am able to say, ‘wow what an opportunity to learn and grow.’ I want to be around guys like Rivera and Del Rio. I like to fix things. I am a teacher and I love challenges. I like going into something that could be really good but hasn’t been that way yet. I like being a part of the solutions and that really appeals to me. I think we all can see that we have potential. I don’t like that word potential because that means you haven’t done it yet, but we have to start somewhere and I like to fix things.”

On what he has seen from DE Ryan Anderson:

“I haven’t worked with Ryan, so I don’t want to comment. With him being more with [defensive line] Coach [Sam] Mills [III]. It is my first day so I just saw him, and I can’t comment on that.”

On if there is anyone in this group that carries themselves like former Panthers LB Luke Kuechly:

“Luke [Kuechly] wanted to be coached like everyone else. He craved information and coaching, which is one of the reasons why he was very good. He was also very instinctual and has incredible talent. I think Luke Kuechly is a no-brainer Hall of Famer and absolutely loved coaching him, just like I loved coaching Thomas David and Shaq Thompson, all of those guys down there. I can’t say I see someone that looks like Luke Kuechly because there is only one Luke Kuechly. I see a lot of good football players here that I think I can help reach their potential and that’s what we really want to do as a coach. To be able to help somebody, whatever that potential is, we want to be able to reach those guys. In this day and age of the NFL that we live in – especially this season – we need to build depth as much as anything. I think we have a good core group of guys and I think we are going to have great competition amongst this group. This is a good group that I am really excited to work with. I think everybody has things that they bring to the table that are good. What I do like about this group is one of the things that made Luke good, he is a football junky. He was also studying, he was always learning and always asking questions. We have a bunch of guys that love football. They love getting in there, studying and learning. It’s 11 p.m. and I am getting a text message with a video on it saying, ‘hey coach is this right?’ I like where this group is going because I like their intent. I like their work ethic and how hungry they are. Having competition, the way that we have it brings out the best in people in that regard as well. It gives everybody a chance and everybody wants a chance in the NFL that’s for sure.”

On if he brings any of his military background to how he works or interacts with the staff and players:

“You bring in the structure, you bring in the organization, you bring in discipline. When people hear discipline, they immediately think this guy's dropping the hammer. This guy is doing this, this guy's doing that, he's going to be really hard on these guys. Well, yeah, we can be we can be demanding but we don't have to be demeaning. We can have high standards; we can hold people accountable. That's what you do in the military. You're not going to sit there and berate somebody you are going to lift people up and more than anything, the military just like playing football. It's mission oriented. Great things happen when people unify behind one vision and one mission. I've seen that and I've seen it firsthand in the military. When a bunch of people that think more of others than they do themselves, what they can do when they when you mix some people like that together. I think that's, that selfless attitude, and that accountability and that discipline and not doing things for yourself but others. Those are the things that you see a lot and is very prevalent in the military. You see Ron [Rivera] bringing a lot of those things to the table. I try to do that as well. But, first and foremost, I'm a teacher and I keep saying that because that's what my job is. My job is to teach these guys and I take that very seriously and having that mindset has really helped me to be honest during COVID. To be able to teach them over Zoom or to teach remotely or coach that way. If you have a teaching mindset and you structure all of your meetings that way, whether you're with them or whether they're in a in a video setting like this, I think that can pay real dividends. I really do.”

On LB Reuben Foster:

“Well, what we do is, I treat him and teach him and interact with him, like he's going to be out there. That's the only way you can do it, right. There's an old saying that you never know if you're going to have an opportunity, but you better be prepared, right? It's better to be prepared and not have an opportunity to then have an opportunity to not be prepared. Reuben is treating it that way and I'm treating it that way with him. It'll all work itself out once if he's able to get cleared and all that kind of type of thing, but I want to have Reuben Foster ready mentally and emotionally to go out there and play football. The physical part will come through reps and obviously with great work with RV [head athletic trainer Ryan Vermillion] and the trainer's and [head strength and conditioning coach] Chad [Englehart] and in the strength staff, all that kind of stuff, but my job is to make sure that he is ready when he hits that field. It's a lot of mental work. We were out today with the rookies and the injured guys were in. Reuben has been fantastic. I mean, he's back there taking mental reps. He's making the calls. He's lining up. He's putting himself in that position. He's saying out loud what he's going to do. I quiz guys a lot in meetings and one of the things I like to do with Reuben is Reuben will, push, mute. And I see Reuben making all the calls with his hands whether I asked him or not, and, I can see his lips moving whether I asked him a question or not. So, I told him, I don't have to ask you a question for you to be able to answer it. And I really like where Reuben is, I like his intent. I really like his focus. I like his discipline right now. And obviously we're rooting for him. We are his biggest fans; I want to see him get back out there and play football. I know that's what he loves to do. And that's what he's worked very, very hard to do. So, we'll see how that all works out. I don't know, I'm not a trainer. I coach the guys that I'm able to coach, but that'd be a fun one to work with. There's no doubt about that. And I like his approach right now. He's approaching it like, I'm going to be back out there and I'm going to be ready.”

On what he's seen from LB Cole Holcomb on tape and what he expects out of him this year:

“Cole, I think, we always said, you know I come from a college background, we always expected guys to be able to make their biggest jump between their freshman and sophomore years, from year one to year two. As a football coach I always thought a lot of times a football team would make its biggest jump from game one to game two. You see Cole out there being thrust into a role with some injuries and what not, you see the raw talent. He can run, he's aggressive, he does have some instincts, but I also see a very raw player. They moved him around, I think he was a safety. He came in and walked on at North Carolina. I think he played a lot of different spots. He's got very good football IQ. He studies the game, he loves the game. He puts time in away from the game. He's one of those football junkies and I really, really like coaching those football junkies

because they're a lot of fun to be around. You see some rough edges that you'd love to be able to polish up, and I think as a coach that's going to be my job to make sure that A, he knows what he's doing, but not only that, how he does it. Some of his key reads, some of his initial footwork. You know, being locked in all the time, as far as what he's supposed to do. Part of that is being a rookie. You get a lot thrown at you, you get thrust into a role. You saw him flash. You see him make plays. You see him show up. He was productive. But, there's a lot of rough edges on him we're working on. He knows it. He's the first one to say, 'How can I improve? I want to improve.' He's very eager to do that. I think if we can help smooth out those rough edges, we can hopefully see some really, really good improvement from him from year one to year two. He's one of those guys where you've got some physicality to you, you've got some juice to you where you can run and cover, in this modern NFL that's going to be very, very important. So we look for guys who can play blocks and play in the run but also be very productive in the passing game. I think we can spruce up some things blitz-wise to help him be a little more productive there as well."

On if he has any good LB Thomas Davis stories that symbolize what he represents as a member of an organization:

"I wish I had stories. My memory's not very good when it comes to stories. Thomas Davis, I had the privilege to play with [former Broncos defensive back] Steve Atwater when I played with Denver. To this day, I always thought that Steve was the best player-leader I had been around, you know a leader as a player in my time as a coach or a player. When I started coaching Thomas, I said to myself, 'Wow, he's better than Steve.' And that's no knock on Steve. That's just how exceptional Thomas is as a leader. Everybody knows the career he's had, but just the man and the leadership that he brings is tremendous. You couldn't ask for a better example for some of those younger guys because nobody holds himself accountable as much as Thomas Davis. You know, I'm old, I get a free pass, I've been in the league forever. There are no corners [he cuts]. When he doesn't live up to the standard that he's set for himself, he'll be the first to tell you that. He can lead by word, he can lead by example. He's got a great presence to him. He's obviously got incredible credibility, and I think Thomas Davis is not only helping our room tremendously, he's going to help our football team kind of get what [Head Coach Ron] Rivera would like and what Coach Rivera and [defensive coordinator] Coach [Jack] Del Rio are doing. He's going to be great in that role. He's still playing at a good level, too. So, it's fun to watch. I learn from Thomas every single day. I do. I always say, 'Check your ego at the door and it's amazing what you can learn.' I learn a lot from Thomas Davis. It's really, really fun to be a part of coaching him."

On what he is asking this group to do differently than last year:

"Well, I wasn't here [last year]. When you're not there every day listening – Coach [Rob] Ryan was their position coach. Shoot, man, he's been coaching a long time. He's been coaching for a long time. He's a great coach. I don't know what they were being taught exactly. I don't know all the ins and outs right there. Really to me, regardless of what happened, we're going to do things the way that we do things and we're going to teach the way that we teach. My expectations for these guys is to have great energy every day. We set the tone and tempo for everything that we do as a defense and as a football team whether it's our meetings or our walkthroughs, whether it's our practices, whether it's playing the game. We've got to be those guys that bring the energy. We've got to be those guys that quarterback the defense, that make sure that we're aligned and organized when that ball is snapped. I expect us to play fast and aggressive and not fearful of making mistakes. I expect us to be tough physically and mentally. At the end of the day, we get paid to produce. We've got to be productive players. That's my vision, so regardless of what anything happened in the past, I don't dwell on those types of things. I try to get them to do what we want them to do. Not just me, but what Jack and what Ron expect the linebackers to be. That's first and foremost leaders of men and producers."

On what he is focusing on teaching LB Khaleke Hudson:

"You know what, just let's learn how to be a pro. He's been great. He's attacked it. For what little we've been together, he's eager. He loves to learn from other guys. That's the biggest thing. If you can come in as a rookie

– we’ve got some great guys to learn from. He can be very, very well-served learning from guys like that. We’ll be able to get our hands on him a little bit more. Shoot, I’ve got Zoom meetings and what not, but the last time I looked we didn’t learn football virtually. It’s fun to watch him get out there. I expect all of my guys – I don’t treat my guys like, ‘Okay you’re the starters, you’re the back ups, you aren’t going to make the team.’ I don’t look at them like that. I look at every guy like a future starter in the NFL. I try to coach them that way and I try to get them that way. So, I’ve got to get him ready in this environment to be able to play football. The special teams guys are going to get him ready to play special teams, I’m going to get him ready to play defense. That’s my job. I expect him to make great strides in that area.”

On if Head Coach Ron Rivera and Defensive Coordinator Jack Del Rio jump into his meetings:

“No, they’re in and out of everybody’s rooms. I’ve worked with Ron for a couple years and he’d come in. I’m one of those guys who truly believes I try to practice what I preach, ‘Check your ego at the door.’ I’m a damn fool, pardon my language, if I don’t really gravitate to those guys and just learn from them. They were great players, great linebacker coaches, they’re great coaches, period. I like it. Ron told me when I got hired, he goes, ‘You’ve got the hardest job of anybody in the building. This was back in Carolina. He goes, ‘Because I know you played linebacker and you coach linebacker, but I coached linebacker and I played linebacker and I’m the head coach.’ It was all good. He was trying to be funny. I love learning from those guys. I really do. It’s not something I find evasive or whatever. Those guys want to learn from them too, so if they want to jump in, obviously I embrace that. They’ll jump in from time to time, but they’re also very good about letting people coach. So, I think we’ve struck a really, really good balance there to be frank. I’m really pleased with it. As I said earlier, there’s not many guys out there that have the opportunity to learn from two guys on their staff, let alone one guy on a staff like that. I’m fired up. I’m getting my PhD in linebacker play every day.”