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An interview with:

DEION SANDERS ERIC WEINBERGER

DAN MASONSON: I want to welcome you to our conference call with the NFL Network's newest talent Deion Sanders. I'd like to turn it over to the executive producer of the NFL Network, Eric Weinberger, for a few brief remarks.

ERIC WEINBERGER: Hello, everybody. We here at the NFL Network are real excited to add Deion to our team. He will be on NFL Game Day, our highlight show, at 11:30 PM eastern on Sunday nights. He will also be part of our pregame show crew and Super Bowl coverage this year. More importantly, what we're so excited about is Deion being part of this team and contributing in more ways than just on-screen. Deion is so knowledgeable of this business, so knowledgeable of entertainment, has even before hitting the air already contributed in many ways to bring great football ideas that our NFL Network fans will even be drawn more to the network for.

With that being said, again we're so excited to kick the season off with Deion. I turn it over to Prime Time.

DEION SANDERS: How is everyone? First and foremost, I thank you all for taking the time out for being on this conference call. It truly means a lot to me. I thank Eric, all my partners and friends at the NFL Network for just allowing me the opportunity to get back on the television. Man, I missed it thoroughly in the last two years. Thank you, guys, for giving me a chance to do what I've been blessed to do.

DAN MASONSON: Let's open it up to questions from the media.

Q. Deion, do you look at it any differently working for a network owned by a league as opposed to a typical network? Also, there's a bit of a tension with Tagliabue critiquing Bryant Gumbel. Do you feel if you say something, the commissioner will be like, Bring it back in?

DEION SANDERS: First and foremost, I think it's an asset to be working with the NFL Network. I don't view it any differently, although I do view it pretty much in a better sense of having the access to more coaches, more players inside the locker room than the normal networks would have. I'm thankful the NFL Network allows us to go more in-depth than the other various networks that cover the NFL.

In response to your secondary question with Mr. Tagliabue, I don't think we're going to be censored. I think their desire is for us to be who we are. They hired Deion Sanders and they wanted his opinions. I don't think those opinions will be censored.

Q. There's a lot of ex- players that make their way over to the NFL Network. What attracted you to come there? What is your general view of the network and where it's going?

DEION SANDERS: I like where they're going. I like where they're headed. They're young and fresh, innovative. They have the insights that are unbelievable. The access is unbelievable. I think it creates a tremendous platform for me to do what I'm gifted to do.

Q. Which is what?

DEION SANDERS: Which is be me and say what I feel and feel what I say.

Q. When people talk about the greatest athletes of all time, your name is mentioned quite often. Recently people have been saying Tiger Woods might be the greatest athlete of all time. What do you think of that? You had

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some pretty interesting comments about Bill Parcells with regards to TO. Would you expound on those as well.

DEION SANDERS: Okay, the first question, greatest athletes. I don't think you're an athlete if you don't have to get taped up before the game. If you don't have to get taped up or sit in a cold tub or get treatment afterwards, that's not an athletic sport, that's a sport that you have great skills at doing. In regards to Tiger, he's the best at what he does, so that puts him in the upper echelon.

In regards to what I was saying about Bill Parcells, I live in Dallas, I live in the country in Prosper, Texas, where I get the newspapers, the press, and I hear all the things. I was just sick and tired of the whole TO issue. I don't think we would be speaking of the Dallas Cowboys at length if it wasn't for the fact that TO is involved with the team.

It's just a circus. This guy has never had his work ethic questioned or had an injury questioned. Just to prompt him to get back on the field, I think that's nonsense, when he has pretty much a decade of film in the archives stating what he does. What he does, he does it well. Just rushing the guy back on the field, this is your horse, and you don't rush a horse back on the field before it's time just to satisfy your desires.

Q. Maybe you could expand a little bit on what Gumbel actually said that got Tagliabue upset. Gumbel said on Real Sports that Tagliabue had Gene Upshaw on a leash. What is your opinion of his take on that?

DEION SANDERS: First of all, I'd like to speak on Gene's behalf. I think he's done a tremendous job. I'm coming in the fifth pick of the overall draft and I think received a signing bonus at \$2 million. Now a few years later, many years later, these guys are receiving \$20 million and \$30 million. I think he's done a tremendous job with the salaries. Most of these guys can retire off the signing bonus alone, and that's a tribute to Gene Upshaw.

I don't know what personal vendetta Bryant Gumbel has against Gene, but I think it should be taken care of personally if it's personal, not nationally. I really don't understand two African Americans who have worked their butts off to get where they are, one has a personal vendetta and would carry it out nationally on him. I really don't like that. I think it should be discussed privately.

Both these men have been an asset not only to the public but to the various communities and private sectors and their perspective (sic) fields. It sounds like a personal vendetta, it really does. I don't think it should be dealt with publicly if it's personal. I really don't agree with that. That's nonsense.

Q. There were some problems I think Upshaw had with a report Bryant did a couple years ago on overweight linemen. I think it stems maybe from some of that.

DEION SANDERS: It sounds personal and should be handled personally. It's just ignorance, and I don't think Mr. Gumbel handled it correctly.

VOICE: You mean Mr. Tagliabue handled it correctly?

DEION SANDERS: I don't think Mr. Gumbel handled it correctly. Mr. Tagliabue did handle it correctly.

Q. I wanted to ask you, in the off-season, the Green Bay Packers acquired Charles Woodson, probably their most high-profile free-agent acquisition. I wonder if you thought Charles Woodson was an elite cornerback? Is he among what you consider an elite cornerback in the NFL?

DEION SANDERS: I don't think Charles Woodson presents the fear factor that he once did. I think Charles Woodson is an excellent cornerback, but I think he's going to make a great safety in the near future. They have two cornerbacks, formidable, in Green Bay. Adding a third, and one of them could possibly nickel back, that gives them a tremendous tandem.

No, I don't look at him presenting the same fear factor that he once held. But he's still a great athlete. Green Bay should use him dearly. Their problems truly are not on the defensive side. Most of them stem, but I would give Brett Favre some help also.

Q. What do you mean by "fear factor"?

DEION SANDERS: When a quarterback drops back, looks over the defense. When you look over to find a Champ Bailey, you look over to see where De Angelo Hall is. I don't think they're looking over there to see where Charles Woodson lines up. That's what I mean.

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Q. If you were a player on the Jets, Eric Mangini, first-year coach, came in and told you not to talk to the media, not to say anything, what would be your reaction as the player? What would be the reaction in the locker room? What do you think the reaction is in the locker room?

DEION SANDERS: If I'm a first-year player?

Q. If you were a veteran player, you're Deion Sanders, in the locker room when Eric Mangini comes in, first-year coach, he basically implements a don't say anything to the media policy, don't reveal anything to the media, be as bland as possible, how would you react as a player?

DEION SANDERS: Well, I probably -- first of all, I wouldn't do anything to be a distraction to the team. I've never thought I did do anything as a distraction when I played the game.

Also, I viewed myself as an entity as well as the New York Jets. I was out there trying to do what I needed to to command the millions of dollars for my family and the security of my family. If that meant being charismatic and charming and energetic in a press conference, that's what I would do. I never said anything to talk negatively about my opponent or my organization. I would keep those morals intact.

That's a hard rap to put on players as well as coaches. I understand the Parcells, the Belichick philosophies of the coaches not speaking to the media. You really can't sensor a player because you really want the player to -- you can't in one state want him to be emotional, outrageous, go out there and tear someone's head off, but after the game you want him to be subdued. That's really forcing a man to have two gears. Some of these players don't feature two gears.

Q. How do you think the Giants and Jets will be this year?

DEION SANDERS: I think the Giants will do well. I don't know if the Jets have solved their quarterbacking situation as well as who they're going to start at running back or the offensive line. I don't think they've answered a lot of those questions.

Q. Eric, regarding Gumbel, do you want Gumbel to be part of NFL Network? Do you think he will be part of NFL Network?

ERIC WEINBERGER: For me to answer that, first of all, I'm here to talk to Deion. Secondly, what my group out here oversees is the studio portion of the network. We're excited to have him as part of the network, but I think it is more important for our group here to concentrate on what we're doing in the studio and on our pregame shows.

Q. Deion, here in Philadelphia Andy Reid doesn't like to use Brian Westbrook or Edell Shepherd to return kicks for fear of injury. You did dual roles all those years. Can you talk about why you did that and whether you were ever worried about getting injured on kick-offs, whether you think it would be a good idea to use Westbrook or Shepherd for the Eagles?

DEION SANDERS: Usually what people fear the most in life, that's normally what happens to them. When a person is on their sickbed, they're thinking about dying, sooner or later it eventually happens. I never really concerned myself with the negative part of it. I always thought in the positive. I'm going to return this for a touchdown, my team needs this, it creates field position for the offense, so forth.

In regards to those players not returning kicks or whatever, I played on a couple teams that didn't allow me to return kicks also. I didn't understand. When I played in San Francisco, I may have returned one kickoff. That might have been in the playoffs. As well as my first two years in Dallas, I never returned any kicks. I do understand the method. I don't agree with it. But I think you should go with your strength at all time and not concern yourself with the negative.

Q. You're going to be talking to more of a hardcore football audience than during your time at CBS. Will you change your approach? Eric, will you use him in a different fashion than Deion was used on CBS? It seemed like sometimes there was a little bit of showbiz in there in addition to trying to pass on information. Will you be more of a serious analytical guy or pretty much the same?

DEION SANDERS: I think when the situation calls for me to be serious, you will get the serious side of me. But when the situation calls me to give you numbers and to give you statistics, I really don't think -- the fan doesn't care if the Baltimore Ravens offense averaged 2.3 yards a

carry. I really don't. I think they really care about why are they averaging only 2.3 yards a carry. I'm not really the one to get into statistics; I'm the one to really explain what's the problem, what's the situation, how do we correct the problem. And if I could offer this in a charming and charismatic way, I think it's a two-fold win for the network because not only are we being informative, but we also are entertaining you while we informing you.

ERIC WEINBERGER: We also think we have a whole different platform for Deion as well where he has more time to talk about games that have already happened. He's going to have 90 minutes on a Sunday night and he's going to have three hours on a pregame show leading to our games, plus leading up to the Super Bowl he's going to have a full week to show all the different personalities and analytical skills that he does have.

Deion, as you can hear from this call, he's incredibly current and incredibly analytical in what goes on in the National Football League. To no fault of their own, sometimes the pregame shows just don't have the time to dedicate to analyzing all 32 teams.

Q. I was curious about your thoughts on Mario Williams' potential here. I suppose the horse is out of the barn whether they did the right thing in taking him over Reggie Bush. Curious about what you've seen from Kubiak thus far, including that particular draft decision?

DEION SANDERS: First of all, Kubiak sat up under one of the best offensive minds in game of football to me, Mike Shanahan, whose offense is always proven and had the defense to support the offense.

In regards to their first-round pick, there's a reason he was the first pick of the whole draft. There's a reason they turned away from Reggie Bush. There's a reason this team is getting ready to play Peyton Manning and so forth in a division where you don't want to have a shootout offensively; you need someone to stop the offenses that you play against. So I do agree with that pick.

Yeah, it's hard to turn away from a Reggie Bush because you never know the upside, you never know what you're going to get. But solid defensive players like that, you pretty much know what you're going to get. I'm happy with that pick. I know a lot of thought and consideration and

testing and concern went into that pick. I applaud them for having the guts to make that pick.

Q. How do you see football now that you're outside playing that sport?

DEION SANDERS: I'm much more appreciative of what goes behind the scenes as well as the product that is placed on the field. I really am. I took for granted a lot of things in football that were going on when I played the game.

So stepping away from the game, then having the luxury to step back into the game, now having the luxury to step outside the game and work with a network who has the emphasis on being direct, telling the truth, showing you what life really is inside the locker rooms of the NFL, regarding the cheerleading, making the squad in the NFL, just capturing the whole essence of the NFL, I am happy and thankful and I've learned a lot. It's been a tremendous learning process retiring from the game, going back into the game, and on television. I've pretty much completed the Trifecta and I'm thankful for it.

Q. What is your opinion about the international part of NFL, talking about outside games of NFL outside your country?

DEION SANDERS: I think pretty much every time we go to Mexico, it's sold out, isn't it? It's, what, 80,000, 90,000, something like that. I think we should continue to do so and branch out even into San Juan, Puerto Rico, and other places.

Q. Now that you're coming back into TV, is there anything that you've noticed that you'd like to see more of and less of? Are there any cliches or sort of mistakes that folks make when they're broadcasting NFL games?

DEION SANDERS: I'd like to see more of the truth being told. I'd like to see less of us having a buddy system. You take care of your buddy, I take care of my buddy. I don't get off on that. In reality, I have so many friends in the NFL with regards to coaching, management and players, it's unbelievable. So I couldn't dare to even start to venture into, you know what, I'm going to take care of my buddy today because I know he was wrong, but I'm going to take care of him anyway. I don't have time for that. I really want to give the fans what they deserve and want, and that's the truth and insight that they wouldn't normally get.

Q. What do you think of Bill Cowher getting kind of ticked at Jerome Bettis for Bettis saying he thought Cowher was going to retire after this season?

DEION SANDERS: You know, it's sort of like what I just said. That was his buddy. I guess his buddy wasn't supposed to say that. I applaud Jerome for having the audacity to say so.

Q. What do you think of the Cowboys secondary? How do you think they'll be this year?

DEION SANDERS: I think they're going to be better, for one simple fact, they're practicing against a man who doesn't know but one speed. It's like lining up against Jerry Rice in practice, lining up against TO in practice, lining up against Andre Rison, the various teams that I played on. They challenge you. We're not cutting a deal here where you take it easy, I take it easy. TO doesn't cut deals. Mike Irvin doesn't cut deals. Jerry Rice doesn't cut deals. He's that same form. Challenging those guys each and every day will make them a better unit.

One constant that people really negate to say that Dallas has had in the few and the last decade, the defense has always been a capable unit. Why? It's a guy by the name of Mike Zimmer, who is the defensive coordinator here. He has always been there, even when it is unheard of, a guy like Bill Parcells, this micromanaging head coach, wants to put a finger on everything, Jerry Jones said, You know what, you can bring in who you want, but there's one guy we're not leaving here, that's Mike Zimmer. I think that defense will always be up to par. Remember, this was the No. 1 defense just a few years ago.

DAN MASONSON: Thanks a lot, everybody. Thank you very much, Deion. We'll see you on the air September 10th.

DEION SANDERS: Appreciate it. I can't wait, man.

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