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# How Jim Harbaugh built the Chargers culture: Black Eyed Peas, blue-collar gifts, authenticity

Daniel Popper Jan 9, 2025

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On a Sunday night in Arizona, Jim Harbaugh walked into the team meeting room at the [Los Angeles Chargers](#)' hotel.

Harbaugh was a week removed from a medical scare. Just before kickoff of a Week 6 game at the Denver Broncos, Harbaugh experienced a heart arrhythmia. He left the field to be evaluated in the locker room. The condition was an atrial flutter — something Harbaugh had dealt with twice before in his life. He was checked out and later returned to the sideline. Harbaugh saw a cardiologist the next morning. He was prescribed to wear a heart monitor for two weeks to gather more information. And he was wearing that heart monitor as he strolled into the room for this final preparatory meeting.



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“They’re talking about my heart,” Harbaugh told the team.

He showed the group the heart monitor on his chest. Then, abruptly, Harbaugh did an up-down, dropping into a plank position before rising again.

“I’m good!” Harbaugh exclaimed.

“That was the start of the meeting,” offensive lineman Trey Pipkins III recalled. “We were like, ‘This is gonna be a wild ride. We’re here.’”

Harbaugh then started reciting lyrics.

*I got a feeling. That tonight’s gonna be a good night. That tonight’s gonna be a good night. That tonight’s gonna be a good, good night.*

Every word. Every nuance. Every ad-lib. No singing. Just reading, monotone. Skipping nothing.

*Tonight’s the night, let’s live it up. I got my money, let’s spend it up. Go out and smash it, like, Oh my God. Jump out that sofa, let’s kick it, off.*

“He’s literally reading,” said quarterback Easton Stick.

*I know that we’ll have a ball. If we get down and go out, and just lose it all. I feel stressed out, I wanna let it go. Let’s go way out, spaced out, and losin’ all control.*

“It was like slam poetry,” Pipkins recalls.

*Fill up my cup, mazel tov. Look at her dancin’, just take it off. Let’s paint the town, we’ll shut it down. Let’s burn the roof, and then we’ll do it again.*

“He was dead-ass serious up there,” left tackle Rashawn Slater said.

Harbaugh arrived at a particularly memorable section of the song.

*Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday (do it). Friday, Saturday, Saturday to Sunday (do it).*



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reading without a tune.

“He went through all the days,” Pipkins said, “straight-faced.”

This was a giveaway.

Someone made a drumbeat on the table with their fists.

“We all started hyping him up,” safety Alohi Gilman said. “Then he starts going. He starts singing it. His foot starts tapping. He starts swaying.”

The energy spread. Within seconds, the whole room was standing, singing, dancing, laughing.

“It turned into a concert,” receiver Quentin Johnston said.

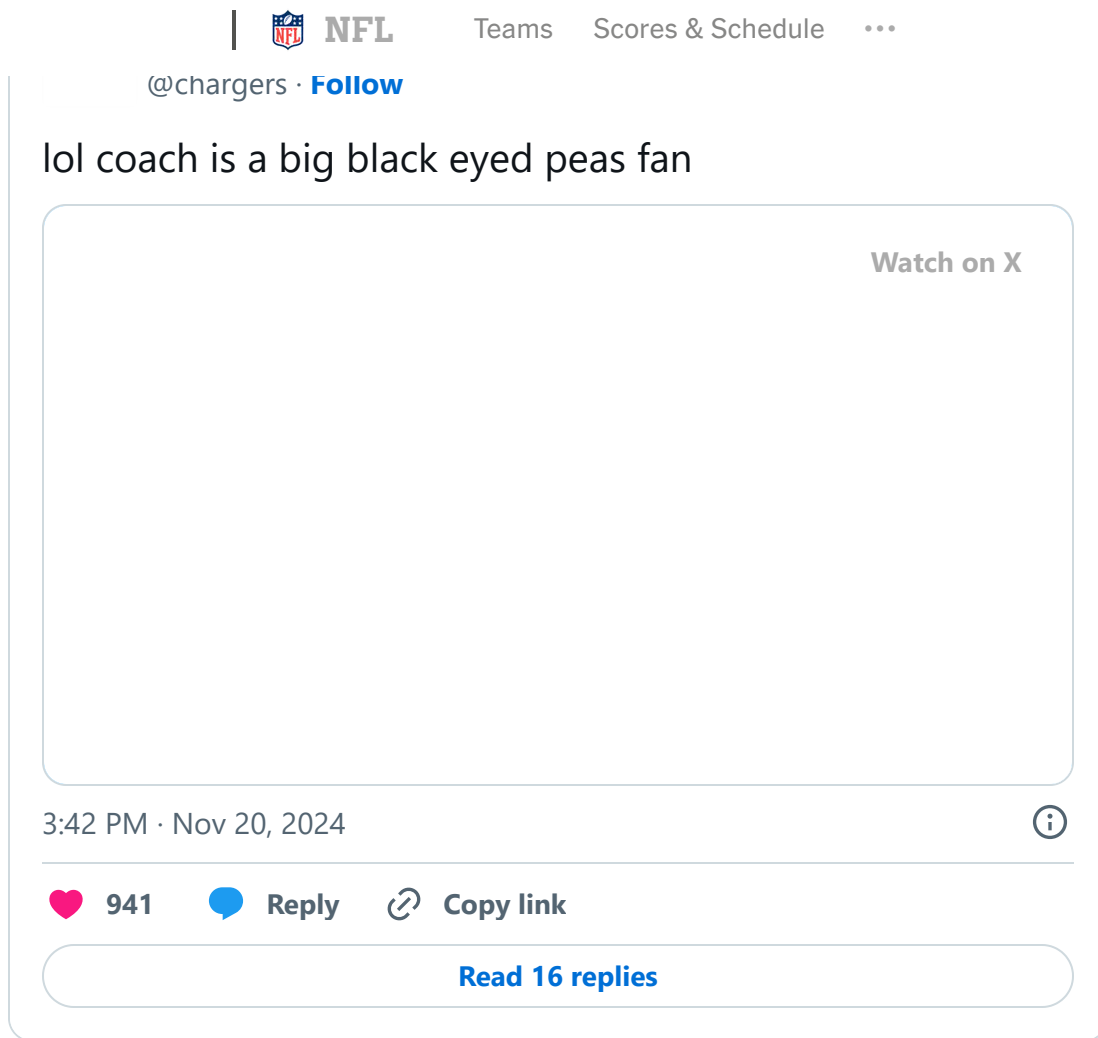
When he finished, Harbaugh relayed the message behind why he chose this song.

There is always a message with Harbaugh.

“This is one of my favorite songs,” Harbaugh told the team, “and the game tomorrow is going to be like this song.”

A prime-time game. Make it a great night.

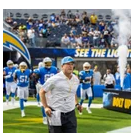
“Everything he does is for a reason,” quarterback Justin Herbert said.



Culture is easy to identify but difficult to define. You know a good one when you see it, when you feel it. Understanding the specifics of what it takes to build one? That is a rare skill.

Harbaugh has changed the Chargers' culture in one season. The Chargers went from 5-12 in 2023 to 11-6 in 2024. They are in the playoffs and will play at the Houston Texans in the wild-card round on Saturday afternoon.

How did he do it? The trust exists in the moments. In doing up-downs in front of the team. In reciting Black Eyed Peas lyrics. In wearing Jordan cleats to every practice while doing drills with his players. In wearing powder blue gloves on game day while catching passes from Herbert.



#### GO DEEPER

How has Chargers coach Jim Harbaugh shifted the culture? Mailbag



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“Coach Harbaugh being Coach Harbaugh.”

“You don’t really get buy-in if people don’t look at you and say, ‘He’s being authentic. He’s being real,” Slater said. “He’s so vulnerable and OK with just being goofy like that — because that’s just how he is — that you have no choice but to respect it.”

These are the moments that shifted a franchise.

Early in the offseason, Johnston ambled into the Chargers weight room chewing gum.

Players were already assembled for a strength and conditioning session with executive director of player performance [Ben Herbert](#).

Herbert saw Johnston chewing. He stopped what he was doing and walked over to the Chargers receiver. Herbert stood in front of Johnston and held out his hand directly in front of Johnston’s mouth.

“Gum,” Herbert said.

Johnston was floored. He froze for a second in confusion.

Then he spit his gum out into Herbert’s bare hand.

Herbert walked to the trash can and threw the gum away, with all the players, including Johnston, still looking on.

Then Herbert began the session.

“Once you see somebody take a breath in and start choking on their gum mid-rep,” Herbert told the group, “you don’t want to see it again.”

Harbaugh brought Herbert with him from Michigan this offseason to oversee the Chargers’ strength and conditioning program. It was a crucial hire for the organization and for building the culture. Before Harbaugh even held his introductory news conference on Feb. 1, he and Herbert went to Home Depot to buy a [Shop-Vac](#) so Herbert could clean out the weight room. The Chargers were still at their temporary facility in Costa Mesa, Calif., at this time.



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“When we go in the weight room,” Johnston said, “it instilled into us a certain level of just discipline.”

Initially, Herbert’s approach was bordering on overwhelming.

But this was all calculated from Harbaugh. The NFL offseason is divided into phases. For the Chargers, Phase I began April 2. And during Phase I, players are limited to strength and conditioning activities. As such, only strength and conditioning coaches are allowed on the field with players. That meant Herbert was the member of the coaching staff who would have the most interaction with players for the opening weeks of Harbaugh’s new program.

And a staff only gets one chance for a first impression.

On that first day in the weight room in April, Herbert laid out the operating procedures of his program.

“He’s very open about why certain rules are certain rules,” Pipkins said.

No gum. No wristbands. When players take their shoes off for balancing drills, they must be aligned in a very specific way. One shoe must be pointed in one direction, the other must be pointed in the opposite direction.

“If you put your shoes this way, it’s more room,” Herbert told the group. “You get an inch of space.”

“The tone in his voice, you felt the approach,” safety Derwin James Jr. said. “Every detail matters.”

Players participated in various baseline tests — such as neck flexion — to track their progress. Herbert dove into anatomy and different muscle groups. The information stuck with James, who just last week cited the “infraspinatus” — a muscle near the shoulder blade — while recounting these early days in the weight room.

The buy-in was not immediate, according to James.

“Some guys was glancing, like, ‘Man, what the hell we got ourselves into?’” James said.





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Some Chargers weren't sure about Ben Herbert's methods at first but bought into the idea of doing something different.  
(Kirby Lee / USA Today)

But James was determined to chart a new path. Since being drafted in 2017, James has won one playoff game. He was ready for a fresh approach. And he remembers voicing that to edge rusher Khalil Mack early in the offseason program.

“Why not do something different?” James told Mack. “The stuff we’ve been doing hasn’t been working. So why not try to change? We can try to trick ourselves every day into thinking that we got all the answers, like, hey, we’re doing enough. But why not buy into what these people are saying?”

The Chargers had not even held their first real football practice. But the culture was already shifting.

“You could just tell that there were things that were no longer going to be tolerated,” Pipkins said.

Herbert demanded a level of commitment from the players in the weight room.



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The mundane details that were once afterthoughts had become required priorities.

“We’re going to set the foundation for not just the strength program,” Gilman said of the messaging in those early days, “but just the way of life.”

Phase II began in late April, and coaches were allowed on the field.

James first noticed the cleats.

“I remember somebody with these flashy Jordans on,” he said.

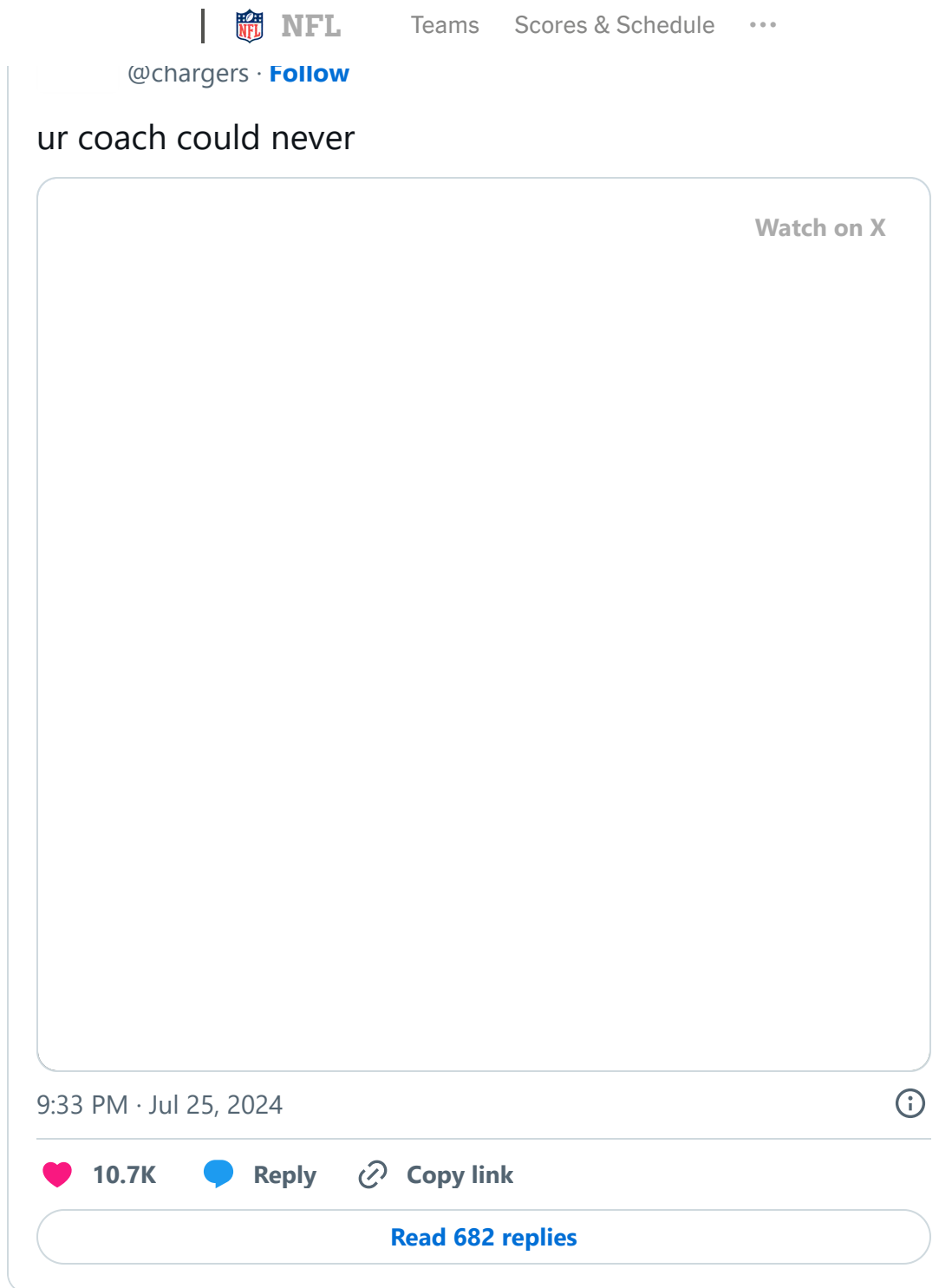
As James’ eyes slowly elevated, he saw the khakis, and then the Chargers polo, and then the glasses.

It was Jim Harbaugh.

“He got all the fire Jordans,” James said. “He got blue Jordans, the navy, the white, every color.”

Harbaugh was not wearing the cleats just for show. They served a purpose. As the players went through Herbert’s various tailored exercises — backpedaling sled drags, battle ropes, flip sleds and rest — Harbaugh was right there with them.





One of Herbert's contraptions is a short rope with a handle on each end. One person grabs one handle. The other person grabs the opposite handle. Both set up with their feet staggered, crouching with a strong base. One person pulls while the other provides resistance. Then vice-versa. Back and forth.

James was paired with Harbaugh for this exercise one day in the spring. Coach and star defensive player face to face. Harbaugh grimacing and giving James everything he has.



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that, I'm like, all he cares about is football, faith, family and work. If you a bulls—, you're not going to get along with him. If you like work, if you like winning, you're gonna rock with him.”

Gilman said he was “in shock” the first time he saw Harbaugh participating in the drills. He has been around coaches who have done one set of an exercise with players. But nothing about Harbaugh’s participating was performative.

The first time Harbaugh did a drill with Gilman’s group, the Chargers safety expected Harbaugh to head to the sideline. Instead, he was running with the players to the next exercise station.

“What this is guy doing?” Gilman remembered thinking.

Harbaugh’s presence added an intensity to the drills.

“You got to be ready,” Gilman said. “You got to be on your stuff because coach is doing it right there with you.”

When the Chargers opened organized team activities on May 20, these strength and conditioning exercises moved to the end of practice. Harbaugh termed them “fourth-quarter finishers.” After a full practice, the Chargers had more work to do. Harbaugh was trying to instill one of his favorite mantras: Having your best when your best is needed.

Johnston was at the battle ropes station one day after an OTA. Players would grab the large, weighty ropes, one in each hand, and drive their arms up and down.

“All right, switch,” Ben Herbert called out, telling the players to move to another station.

Johnston stopped his movement. He dropped the ropes and turned around.

There was Harbaugh. He turned his hat backwards on his head and grunted.

“Appreciate it,” Harbaugh said. He grabbed the ropes.

Johnston recalled this story inside the Chargers locker room at their new facility last week. Eight months had passed.



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“Even though we didn’t see it at the time, everything was for a reason,” Johnston said. “They’ve seen way past the next day or the day after that or even the next month after that. They were always looking at the bigger picture while we were all looking at the next day. They were worrying about all the little things, all the details, everything that they needed to do to put us in position to get us in the right mindset and take us where we needed to go.

The Chargers opened their second week of OTAs on May 29, and there was Justin Herbert in a gold jersey.

During the spring, the Chargers rotated between wearing practice T-shirts and their game jerseys depending on the day. This was the first practice open to media in which Herbert was in the gold jersey. All the other quarterbacks, including Stick, were in white jerseys.

Herbert loathes being the center of attention. It’s a trait that, at times, can run counter to some of the fundamental components of the position he plays. He deflects praise and, instead, heaps it on his teammates. A uniquely colored jersey felt like the antithesis of Herbert’s personality, and he said as much when he spoke publicly later in the offseason in June.

“I asked him the first day if the other quarterbacks could wear one, as well,” Herbert said then. “He said it was his rule, and so if it’s his rule, I’m following it. Doesn’t matter what color it is. I’ll wear it.”

Herbert was being diplomatic.

“It could not be any further from what he would actually prefer,” Stick said of the gold jersey.

Harbaugh framed it as a safety strategy. He said in June that he wants to have “halo” around the quarterback during offseason practices.

“The gold jersey is just a reminder: Two yards for all the quarterbacks,” Harbaugh said. “But the guy wearing the gold jersey, let’s make that two-and-a-half or three.”



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“He’s nudged him,” said Stick, who has been teammates with Herbert for his entire NFL career. “Justin feels more comfortable to be a little bit more of himself.”

Stick said it is “not Justin’s personality to embrace the praise.” Harbaugh, though, has given him no choice with his repeated glowing comments about his franchise quarterback.

In June, Harbaugh said Herbert performed so well on a conditioning test that “he could play tight end, he could play edge rusher.”

Herbert missed three weeks of training camp in August with a plantar fascia injury. On the day Herbert returned, Harbaugh said he heard the “voice of angels” seeing his quarterback throw.

In early September, Harbaugh said he asked the Chargers equipment staff for the same Nike sneakers Herbert wears around the facility every day. “There’s not a gene in his body I wouldn’t immediately trade for,” Harbaugh said that day.

Harbaugh said he was changing his quarterback’s name to “Beast Herbert.” He said Herbert is “not only one of the best (quarterbacks) in the game currently, he’s one of the best of all time.” He passionately criticized the lack of roughing the passer penalties Herbert receives. He said Herbert has the “strength of 10 men” when discussing his quarterback’s various regular season injuries — two sprained ankles, knee soreness, a thigh contusion.



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At every possible moment, Jim Harbaugh is looking to elevate his quarterback Justin Herbert. (Kirby Lee / USA Today)

If it sounds over the top, that is because it is.

Like everything with Harbaugh, though, it is calculated.

“Especially (with) someone like Justin, who’s really the best, it’s good to embrace some of that and recognize, ‘Guys, what he’s doing is really special,’” said Stick.

Herbert was uncomfortable with Harbaugh’s approach at the start. There is probably no better example than when Harbaugh started smacking Herbert’s shoulder pads after the national anthem ahead of the Chargers’ Week 1 win over the Las Vegas Raiders. Herbert was unprepared for the pregame ritual. He went in for the hug while Harbaugh was hammering away.

“I could have been more aware,” Herbert quipped the next week.

Much like the relationship at large, though, Herbert is now accustomed to this routine. They do not skip a beat after the anthem. Harbaugh has lessened the amount and the



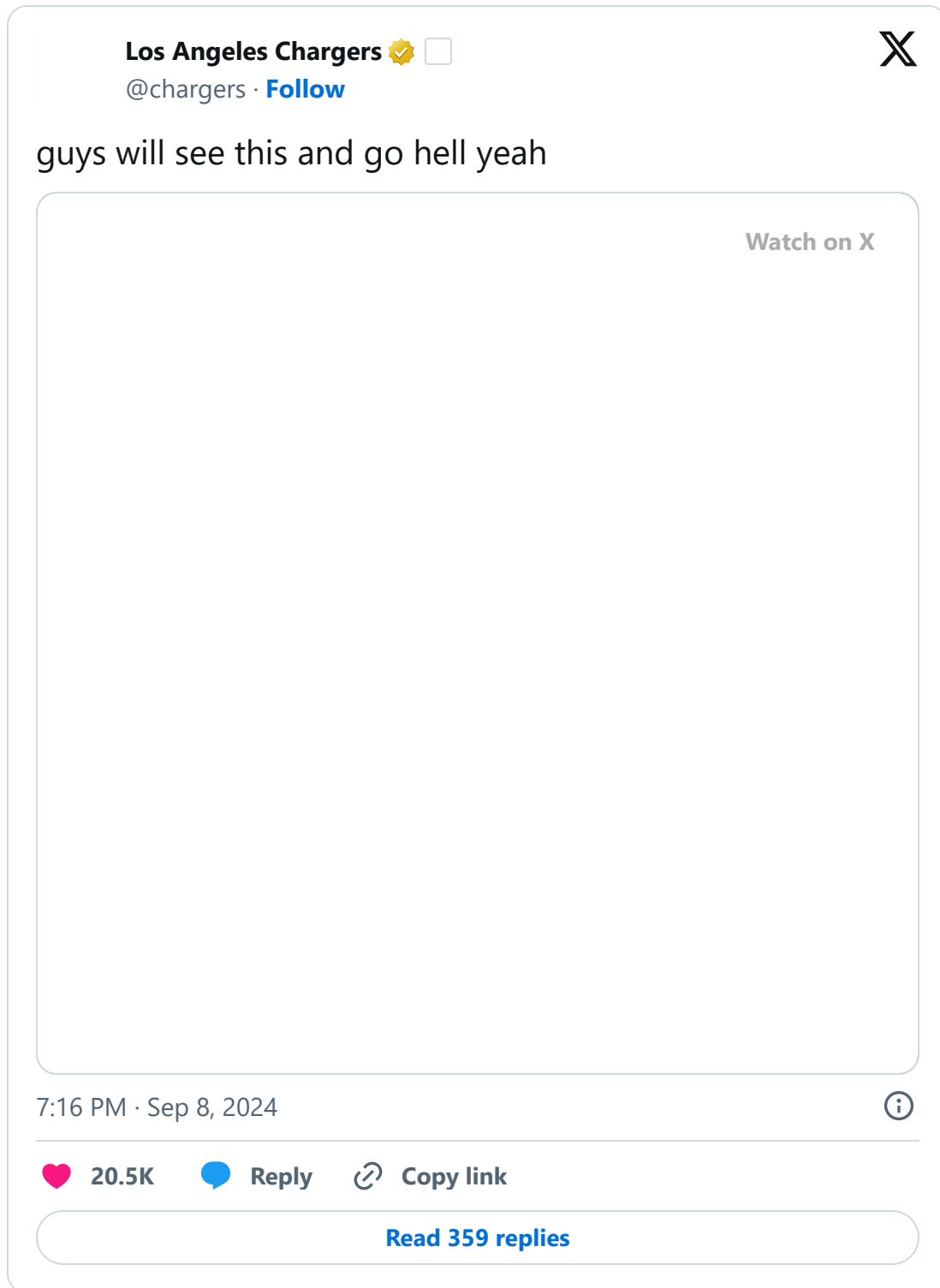
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“It’s not really my style to want that,” Herbert said of the attention. “But the more you go through it, it bothers you less and less, and I think it’s cool to have a coach support you like that.”



Harbaugh catches all of Herbert’s passes in warmups, while wearing powder blue gloves and, yes, Jordan cleats. The coach has asked Herbert to speak in front of the





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“I’ve got so much to say and so little time to say it,” Herbert joked.

He paused to think. Then he looked up.

“Great job, everybody,” Herbert said with a smirk.

The locker room erupted.

“The more you’re in those situations, the more normal they feel,” Herbert said. “There was probably a time where I was growing up in high school or in college where you’d feel awkward, you’d feel like everyone’s watching you. At this point, it is what it is. I’m the quarterback.”

Within this postgame moment is the epitome of what Harbaugh has attempted to draw out of Herbert. He just wants his quarterback to be himself. Just talk to us. Whatever is on your mind.

“It’s just like, dude, this is yours,” Stick said. “If you have something to say, say it. If you don’t, don’t. But I’m just telling you, we’re doing what you want to do.”

These might seem like contrary things — pushing Herbert out of his comfort zone while asking him to be nothing more than his true self.

But Stick sees them as hand-in-hand.

Harbaugh has created an environment for Herbert to be Herbert.

“You don’t need to lead like Derwin,” Stick said. “You don’t need to lead like Khalil. Just be yourself, and that works.”

Gilman was drafted in the same year as Herbert, in 2020. He has noticed a freedom in how Herbert has carried himself and played this season.

“I feel like he has to carry less burden, less weight on himself, versus in the past, I feel like he kind of carried a lot with this franchise, and he felt like he had to take it all on by himself,” Gilman said. “But now I feel like he’s playing more loose and free because he doesn’t have to. He doesn’t feel like he has to because he has more people to rely on.”



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Proof of concept came on Sept. 12 against the Raiders. The Chargers led 9-7 after three quarters. They scored two touchdowns in the fourth quarter to put the game away.

All those fourth-quarter finishing drills in the spring had led to a fourth-quarter finish in the season opener.

“The formula works,” Gilman said.

In the locker room after the game, Harbaugh was giving his speech to the team. Edge rusher Joey Bosa interrupted. “The worm has turned!” Bosa said.

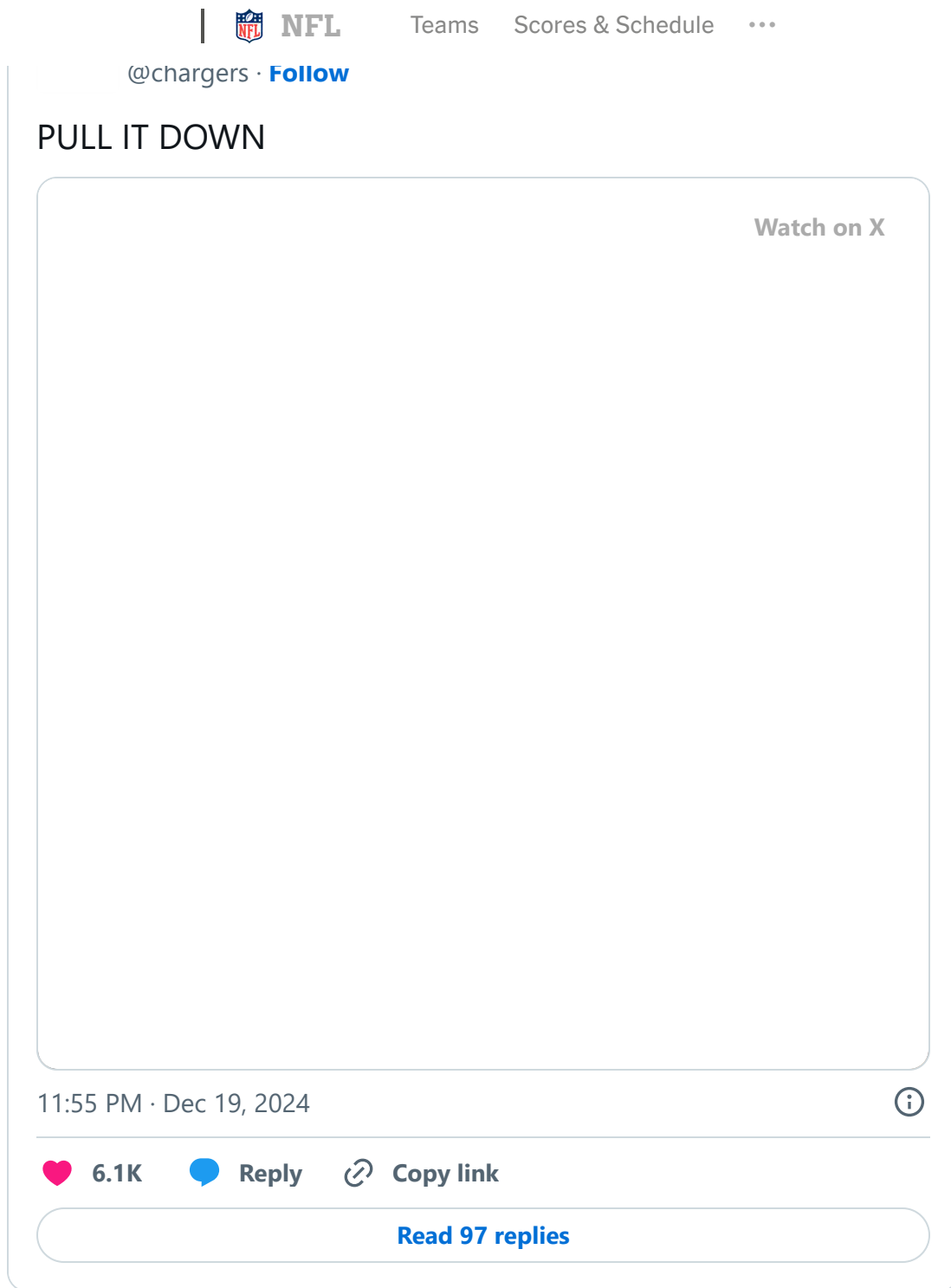
Another favorite idiom for Harbaugh. His opportunity to coach this team had come after the Chargers lost in disastrous fashion to the Raiders in 2023 in Las Vegas. The new era had started with a win over the same team. And with that win, the organization — the worm — turned in a new direction.

“I don’t know if I’ve ever felt that good after a win,” Slater said.

The postgame traditions started amid this celebration in the locker room at SoFi Stadium.

Harbaugh started singing, “He’s a jolly good fellow” after the Raiders win. There were some confused faces this first time. Now, the Chargers sing the song in harmony after every game.

“Us as grown men in the locker room singing this song, bro, I don’t know how, but you just kind of buy into it because it’s genuine,” Fulton said. “Guys just had to learn the song because it’s a tradition now.”



Harbaugh gives out up to a dozen game balls after each win. He calls these players the “guardians of victory.” Harbaugh also provides recognition to usually between eight to 12 more players. He calls these the “heroes of the game.” All in all, somewhere between 16 and 25 Chargers get some form of validation from Harbaugh after each win.

“We see what you’re doing,” Pipkins said. “Keep working.”



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boots; a pocket knife; and a Leatherman multitool, to name a few.

Harbaugh also gives team-wide gifts, like personalized lunch pails with the word “stalwart” plastered on the front and hoodies commemorating each prime-time win. (The Chargers have two of those, one from the Sunday night win over the Cincinnati Bengals in Week 11 and one from the Thursday night win over the Denver Broncos.)

Last week, before the Chargers closed the season against the Raiders, Harbaugh debuted the newest team-wide gift.

He was standing in front of the team, again.

“I’ve got one more thing for you,” Harbaugh said.

He reached into his pants and pulled out a back-scratcher.

And yes, there was a message.

“You need to have your own back sometimes,” Harbaugh told the group. “You need to count on yourself. Make sure you get done what you need to get done. There’s not always going to be somebody there to scratch your back for you, so you do it yourself.”

Each player had one sitting in his locker personalized with their name and number.

“It seems funny at first, but we learned to kind of just go with it,” Johnston said. “We learned to love it.”

Harbaugh’s antics can seem cliché and even corny at times.

Yes, in the middle of one meeting this season, Harbaugh told the group that he had a poem to share. The players were expecting something short and sweet. Harbaugh went on for two straight minutes, reciting the poem from memory.

Harbaugh rewrote the lyrics to “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” with football terminology and shared that in another team meeting.

But to focus on the substance is to overlook his true genius.

“He’s been the same guy ever since he showed up,” Slater said.



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Harbaugh weaves a web, one authentic moment after another.

“He can’t be anybody but himself,” Pipkins said.

And that is the culture.

“We were looking for an answer,” James said. “We were just looking for a way to lead. We were looking for a way to walk, looking for a way to turn. And when Coach Harbaugh came, it gave us the way.”

(Top photo: Harry How / Getty Images)

What did you think of this story?



MEH



SOLID



AWESOME

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