

**University of Virginia Football Media
Conference**

Wednesday, Feb. 5, 2025

**Head Coach Tony Elliott
Press Conference**

TONY ELLIOTT: It's good to see everybody. Happy New Year to you. It's been a while.

I just want to start by saying a couple of thank yous. It's been a crazy last couple months, different than I've ever seen in college football. But I'm very grateful that this staff had the support to be able to go out and just navigate and compete. Obviously we're aware that we got a couple of major gifts that really, really changed the landscape for us.

To the individuals and the folks that are part of that, man, just want to say thank you on behalf of my staff and also the team 'cause I think the ones that feel the biggest impact are the young men in this program.

To have an opportunity to go out and show we're serious at the University of Virginia in terms of football being successful and being provided an opportunity to be able to do that, I'm very, very grateful and appreciative.

Thankful for Dr. (Carla) Williams and her leadership, President (Jim) Ryan, Rector (Robert) Hardie, everybody behind the scenes. There's so many people that worked really, really hard navigating some uncharted waters.

Being able to know we got the financial support of the folks that contributed both on the football side and also on the nutrition side, I think it's going to really make an impact. I think we're already seeing some of the impact that's made.

I want to let those individuals know how grateful we are. A lot of work to get to where we are today, but we still got a lot more. I think

everybody is in a good space to just continue to move forward.

I think the vision of the program is really starting to come to life. I shared that with the staff. When we look at where we were three years ago and where we are today, I think it's just confirmation of the hard work, but then also the belief and the vision of what's ahead.

I just wanted to make sure I did take a second before we start talking about specifics about recruiting, but just let those individuals know that were a part of the success to get to where we are, just really, really grateful for their contribution. Made a huge impact and shows everyone that we're serious but more importantly gives us the opportunity to get into some conversations that we may not have been able to get into before.

Q. You have a couple years' experience navigating the portal. In other ways, did your approach to player acquisition change this year from previous years?

TONY ELLIOTT: Great question.

As I said, the month of December was different than any other December that I've ever been a part of. To be honest with you, really couldn't anticipate what it was really going to be like until we got into it.

I think the approach was let's first make sure it's a fit, right? We know where we're trying to go. We know what the culture of the team is.

I think the first thing was retention, that the guys we had in our program that we needed to retain, we focused there first, then go out and bring in the acquisition and try to balance it out the best we can in terms of high school acquisition and then also portal acquisition.

It was different. You said two years' experience. This December was even different than the December before and the other windows.

I think we still wanted to go attract the best talent in the country, but we also wanted to make sure we got the right fit from a team dynamic.

Q. When did you feel like you needed to be involved with the players?

TONY ELLIOTT: Each one is different. Every recruiting opportunity is different. It depends. Sometimes I'm on the front end and I may be the one that initiates the contact with the young man. Could be a relationship that was already established where I'm the first point of contact. Sometimes I'm in the middle. Sometimes I'm a closer.

I don't necessarily have a preference. I try to be respectful of what the process is or where we are. There may be an assistant coach who is deep in the trenches with this young man. I don't want to come in and blow it up, right? There's going to be things I got to be briefed on so I understand kind of the dynamics of the relationship and the situation.

For me, I don't necessarily have a presence. Every one of them is different, to be honest.

Q. You brought in four offensive line transfers all with experience, you also bring a number of guys back. Fall is a long way away but how confident are you in that group?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, we got 15 practices to really know what it's going to look like. But on paper, man, you feel a lot better about the situation than years past. I've been saying that, man, we need to get to 10, 12 guys from a depth standpoint at that position because of the wear and tear over the course of the season.

I'm excited about the experience. There is a lot of experience just from total snaps and games started. Got a couple guys that we've brought in at that position that even have some all-conference recognition to go along with the guys that are returning.

I'm excited for that group to have a chance for them, one, to say we feel confident from a depth standpoint so we can go out and compete and mesh.

What I will say, too, as we're talking about this, our players that are on this roster that were here prior to the acquisition of the transfers, they need a huge thank you as well. Man, they went to work. They're the best recruiters, right? Obviously the head coach may come in and be the closer, get credit for it.

At the end of the day your roster that you have here are your best recruiters. At that position in particular, those guys embraced the opportunity to bring in, even though they're competing, some guys to help make them better, then also provide an opportunity for us to have a healthy offensive line room from a depth standpoint.

Q. Sometimes transfers are not about relationships. In the portal acquisition, in the quarterback position, seems like you prioritized previous relationships. Is that something you wanted to focus on, that you had a relationship?

TONY ELLIOTT: I don't know if we were saying that's going to be the philosophy. What we knew is that we needed initially going into it, prior to the start of December, we thought we were just going to take one, right? It turned into two. Then we had to respond and react.

I think it helped that we had relationships. I don't think that was the strategy in particular. You would like for there to be relationships.

At the end of the day this is still a developmental sport and a developmental time in the lives of the players. So I think relationships are important. However, we do have the dynamics of the timing, the way the portal is structured, that you may not be able to have as deep of a relationship.

I think you're still trying to form relationships. Football is a relational game. When there's 11 guys out on the field, they better have a relationship so they can play together.

I don't know if that was necessarily the strategy to say let's go find guys that we have previous relationships. I think it helped. I think the previous relationships allowed us to be a part of the conversation so then we can present what the total opportunity is for those guys if they come to UVA.

Q. You talked about offensive and defensive lines. You wanted to target that. Talking about the offensive line, what you did on the defensive line, how good you feel about that?

TONY ELLIOTT: Man, I'm excited just to see the growth and the opportunity. I've said it for a long time and I fully believe this, whether it's life or football, or constructing a team, you got to do it from the inside-out. It starts in the trenches, not only from a play standpoint, but from a leadership standpoint as well.

I've referenced the teams that I've been a part of that have had a ton of success. It was because they were led up front. That's what I'm excited about, is not just the depth but also the opportunity to bring experience and competition, which hopefully will foster leadership that will carry us to where we want to go. I'm excited about kind of the additions on both sides.

Then also, too, where we are from a high school standpoint, as well. If you're going to win, you got to have a quarterback. Everybody knows that. More importantly, man, you got to be able

to protect and run the ball, and you got to be able to get after the pass and stop the run. That all starts up front.

Q. You talked about returning players being big in recruiting. Jason Hammond, how big was he? What do you make of the personality that he's grown into?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, just super proud of his growth, right? This off-season has been a great opportunity off the field because he's battling some surgeries and some recovery. He's attacked that well. Just a testament to who he is and how passionate he is about UVA that he wants to go recruit good players to come play with him at his position, even though it creates competition.

He's got a great personality, if you spend any time around him. He's a guy that believed from the beginning in what we're trying to build here at UVA. So, as I said, the best recruiters are your players.

If we're doing a good job of making sure they feel valued, developed, and they're enjoying their experience, then they'll go out and help attract other players who want to come play with them.

Q. What excites about you Chandler Morris? Tell us a little bit about what makes him so good.

TONY ELLIOTT: I'm just excited because, man, he's a football guy. He grew up in a football family. He's been around it. That means it's in his DNA.

Leadership, man. If you know anything about him, he's a great leader. He accepts the challenge. He's a quarterback. He understands all of the nuances and the responsibility that he has. He's a fierce competitor. Prior to a couple injuries, before going to North Texas, man, he was performing at a high level.

I think he brings just a moxie and a leadership. He understands 'team'. He understands the dynamic. He understands the leadership and requirements of his position. He's extremely talented. He's got a good personality that can gel with every position group on the team, which you need as a quarterback.

You don't want to isolate or alienate the quarterback. At the end of the day in the game of football, that's the guy, right? Yes, he's a leader of the offense, but generally he's the leader of the team. Everybody looks to him.

You got to have the personality to be able to resonate with all the different position groups. That's what we've seen.

I like what I've seen so far out of Daniel (Kaelin) as well. You know what I'm saying? He's got the same moxie about him. Seen him on a Saturday with a couple guys working out which tells me they're gravitating towards him as well, which is going to create healthy competition.

At that position, to me it's about leadership. You have to have physical talent, make all the throws, but it's really about leadership and being able to galvanize a locker room. So far I've liked what I've seen out of both of those guys.

Q. I don't know how much film you watched, when you were watching his past performances, anything wild that knocked you out?

TONY ELLIOTT: You're talking about Chan Man (Chandler Morris), right?

Q. Right.

TONY ELLIOTT: Obviously my relationship goes back. I watched him as a little guy in camp running around with the older kids making plays. I don't know if there's just one wild moment because kind of I knew who he was and what to expect out of him.

Hopefully we'll get to see some of those wild moments coming up in Scott Stadium in the future.

Q. What was your reaction when that first anonymous donation came in?

TONY ELLIOTT: Very grateful and appreciative. Again, I think that I've stated this and made it known that I chose the University of Virginia because I believe that we could do something special, right? Not at that time did I anticipate the landscape would be the way it is, no. But I believed in what UVA is, right, and what the potential is.

So just to see somebody also see that potential and belief in this program and in staff, to say I want to make a contribution that's significant to give these guys an opportunity to truly bring the full vision of life. I was very, very grateful, very appreciative.

Also understood the responsibility of somebody kind of anteing up and we got to do our part in matching.

Q. The spring portal, when you look at what you were able to bring, 19 transfers, do you feel there's any position you still need to attack in the spring?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, the secondary is still a position that we know we're going to have to address with a couple of spots there. Then we'll see. We'll evaluate and see where we are after spring practice to see if there's anything.

Right now the most pressing from a sheer numbers standpoint is in the secondary. We do have a plan to address that. We'll evaluate everywhere else, the possibility of a running back, because we are under a number at the running back position. Never can have enough good wideouts. Tight end, we'll see. It's not a must-have. There's a possibility there.

But we'll be evaluating the entire roster. The biggest need right now is going to be in the secondary.

Q. Are you still working at the 85 scholarship level or has that changed?

TONY ELLIOTT: Right, y'all experienced what I'm experiencing. I try to figure out what to believe, who to believe, what's accurate.

What I do know is there is a settlement out there, we're hoping that's going to get signed in April at some point. That will give us the direction. You got 85. You hear 85. You hear 105. You don't know exactly what that number is.

More for me, I'm just trying to get my mind around roster management, if that makes sense, right? Roster management, whether it's 85, whether it goes up, whether it goes down, really to me it's what is that roster number, then you kind of figure out everything from there.

Q. If it stayed at 85 and you didn't have an attrition after spring ball, how many spots do you have open?

TONY ELLIOTT: If it stayed at 85? Not many, obviously because of the additions that we had...

We're good if it stays at 85. If it goes up, I mean, that would be awesome, as well. But I think 85 is kind of where we're sitting right now. I'm just trying to wait on what is that cap number.

Again, that's the unfortunate part of kind of where we are. When that cap is set, it's going to impact people whose rosters are above that cap number if it's not set to whatever your current number is.

Q. 19 newcomers, you're trying to put together a depth chart for the start of spring ball. Who

goes out there the first time, how do you go about that?

TONY ELLIOTT: Great question.

One, you got to be loyal to the guys that are here, the guys that were here. But it's going to be competition. Really that's just where you start, to be honest with you. Really it's about reps, right? We only got so many reps throughout the course of practice. Yes, one guy may run out there first, but really it's about being fair with the reps, giving everybody an opportunity to compete.

It's a starting point. You'll take into consideration guys that have been here, been inside the program. Also injuries for the spring are going to have a factor. There may be some guys running out there because the returning guy who was the number one guy may not be able for all the reps in the spring.

Q. How do you plan to break up the quarterback reps?

TONY ELLIOTT: Man, we're going to let them go battle. That was part of the conversation, right? Both of them were told this is the plan, we plan to bring in a veteran guy, an undergrad guy and let them go battle.

We don't have set starters. Those guys will get reps. Kind of like how we've done in the past: both guys will get an opportunity to run out there and compete with the different groups.

After a certain amount of time, we should have enough reps to delineate a pecking order. Right now we're going to let them go compete. Really all the positions.

In the spring, not so much worried about how we start or who's the first one to run out there. By the end of spring, we should have a good body of work to really kind of say that this is the direction we're going to go for the summer, but

then also when we get back to fall camp, we have 25 more practices. Every job, you got to earn it every single day.

Q. When you look at the roster, there are three guys who are not on there – Donte Hawthorne, Dawson Alters & Miles Greene. Are they no longer part of the program?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah. All those guys are dealing with nothing bad, but just dealing with some personal issues that we're being respectful of. Just trying to support all those guys.

Donte is more from the side of determining what's the right thing to do for his future because of some injuries. But the other two are dealing with personal issues that we're supporting.

Hopefully there's opportunity for them to be back with us when we actually gear up in fall camp.

Q. The portal is very different, but this is the first time you'll able to go through the portal process with the Virginia Bill that was signed earlier this year with the NIL collective. How different was that? What's the process look like?

TONY ELLIOTT: I think even prior to that, there was a really, really good working relationship between us and Cav Futures. Now it allows us to really kind of work together better, right? I'm not sitting over here kind of tiptoeing on my words because I don't want to cross the line.

Also, too, it gives them the flexibility to do what they need to do as it relates to how the process is really going or taking place in the new landscape.

It's kind of like how they changed the rules for coaches with contact in the spring, man. You feel like you can do your job, right, so to speak. You still have guidelines, parameters, but you

feel like you can do your job relative to what the actual current landscape is really like.

Q. Watching Jahmal Edrine, what he was able to do, obviously a Purdue team that struggled. What did you see in him that made him a good fit?

TONY ELLIOTT: You watch Jahmal, the bigger body. He's a big guy. Really fluid for his size. You watch the way he catches the ball. He looks very, very natural catching the ball.

Really for me it was a screen play that I saw where I saw him stop and start and be able to make somebody miss as a guy that size. The next play he's running a slant into a tight window and catching the ball. So just a big body, the fluidity of movement, the natural hands. You did see a little bit of run after the catch that says that this guy is very, very intriguing to me.

Q. He (Jahmal Edrine) said the opportunity to be developed and the track record here is what sold him. Where do you see his development taking place?

TONY ELLIOTT: Part of recruiting, right?

This is one where I was actually in pretty early on this one, right? We identified him. I'm on FaceTime. I said, man, I've seen a lot of great receivers. You want to guess which one you remind me of in my background?

He took a couple guesses. I say there's a big guy named (former Clemson wide receiver) Mike Williams. I'm not saying he's... That's the first thing that came to my mind because in my mind I have specific plays from Mike Williams, it was a screen play, for a big guy he does that. It was a slant play or was what we call a bang eight, which is a skinny post.

I kind of led with that just letting him know he reminded me of one I've seen in my past.

Obviously him and Coach (Adam) Mims developed a relationship pretty quickly. Obviously we had opportunity with the departure at that position with a ton of production.

I'm excited about him. I'm excited about pretty much all these guys 'cause I think they fit what we're doing from a schematic standpoint and also from a character standpoint.

Q. Back to (Chandler) Morris, he has so much experience. The offenses he ran, is anything similar to what you guys run?

TONY ELLIOTT: I think when you watch the tempo aspect of what we're doing when we're running the gun, how we can run out of structure, the empty concepts that we're doing. He had a really, really good slot receiver that he threw to. Kind of similar to what we did with Malik (Washington) when Malik was here. I think there's a lot of comparisons.

Also, too, with his background in football, we know that some of the things that we do that maybe he hasn't had traditional experience with, we anticipate that he'll be able to pick up pretty well.

Q. Is he similar to any quarterback you've coached before?

TONY ELLIOTT: I know he didn't run quite as much at North Texas than he has in the past. I think there's some elements of him that is similar to AC that was here. The size, the elusiveness and the ability when he does take off and run to be electric.

I'd say stature-wise probably similar to AC (Anthony Colandrea) but maybe with a little bit more experience. I think he gets the ball out extremely quick, as well. Great anticipation. So I think you could say he's like Trevor (Lawrence) in his ability to anticipate and get the ball out.

DeShaun (Watson) had that same ability to get the ball out because he anticipated.

I think you see different components of each of those guys. Also at the same time he's his own player.

Q. Is there more demand in the portal for players who have more than one year of eligibility or are you focused on one year at a time?

TONY ELLIOTT: I think that's a tough question to answer 'cause it's probably relative to each institution and each program based off of the state of where their roster is.

I think for us, and I'm grateful, too, for Dr. (Carla) Williams and her leadership and the folks on the other side of the grounds being willing to work with us because guys that have multiple years for us is a little bit more challenging just because of the environment they're coming into and progress towards their degree and what they're required to complete at UVA before graduation. For us the premium is probably more on the one-year guy just because of that aspect.

But there's also situations like we go back to the quarterback situation, basically lost a sophomore that I wasn't anticipating losing. Now I'm trying to figure out how to spread out, right?

Again, I know we're talking about the portal, but at the end of the day I still believe teams win. I think when we watched the College Football Playoff and the teams that were in it played as a team, right?

There's a lot of things that go into team, but I think distribution on the roster, too, right? You need the ability to establish culture in your locker room. That's why you got to kind of balance that.

To answer that question, it would be hard for me to speak for every program. I just know for us, like, we had a need for both, right? We did have a good amount of undergrad transfers to kind of balance things out. But it's probably going to be more of a year-to-year type approach whether you're heavy on one side or the other.

Q. From a pass-rush standpoint, do you feel like you are in a spot to have more production from the defensive line specifically?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, I like the versatility of those guys. They're different body types with different strengths, so to speak. I'm excited about getting Mekhi (Buchanan) back this year, who was a guy that was trending in the right direction as a freshman. You add him into the mix.

I think there's a little bit of versatility with some of the inside guys, right, that can play both on the edge. TT (Terrell Jones) is going to be a year older. That gives us some flexibility to add some versatility to the edge when we need him to.

Jewett (Hayes) is going to be a year older. We'll get Chase Morrison. From an overall standpoint, I think we'll improve. We got longer. We improve some length. I think we picked up more of a true potential pass-rush specialist kind of guy. I think we got more flexibility, versatility and depth, which creates competition, which hopefully leads to more production.

I think also, too, the additions on the inside gives us some depth. When you can push the pocket from the inside, it's very helpful, as well. Jah(meer Carter) not having to play every snap, right? Now you're starting to get into just production improves because you got depth, right?

When you have depth, that means guys are a little bit fresher later in the game. You're also changing up different body types and ability

levels on the offensive line, so they're constantly having to make adjustments throughout the course of the game.

I think there's a lot of factors that go into it that I think we were able to address, which hopefully will manifest the production of getting to the quarterback primarily from the edge but also from the interior, which takes also a little bit of stress off the second-level guys having to be the ones that get to the quarterback.

Q. Will you start Hunter Osborne at the edge or on the interior?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, so right now going into it we're anticipating the interior as a big body on the interior. Again, he has that flexibility, as well, to be able to move around. Which also, too, especially in some of your third-down situations where now you can get all of your pass-rushers, whether it comes from the edge or interior, you can create some varying looks to create some one-on-one matchups with some of your five-man fronts.

Q. What was your experience recruiting two guys in the National Championship Game?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, it's definitely different, right. It's definitely different.

Obviously one made his intentions known early, which give us an opportunity to reach out. I think the balancing how to be respectful of where the young man was at. At the end of the day you don't want to take away from his experience, especially when he was voted by the seniors to be able to stay, right? You want to respect that.

At the same time, too, man, you're trying to press to let him know what a priority is. That was unique, right? That was done over Zoom around his schedule, being sensitive of his practice times, being sensitive of the bowl game

he was in, preparing for the national championship. Obviously the second was more after the championship game that that one came about.

Definitely, definitely unique. Also, too, for me as a program, to have three guys coming in that have played in a national championship game, you got Chandler (Morris) that was a part of that experience, then you got obviously Jayden (Thomas), and you got Mitchell (Melton). That's also, too, a big thing for me.

They're bringing culture, as well, right? They're coming from winning cultures to continue to add to the one that we're building here.

Q. What would you like to change in the portal if you could choose?

TONY ELLIOTT: Wow. Good question.

So just to address the first part of that question. Obviously I was there at the meetings in Charlotte when the coaches voted. Trying to get everybody on the same page is challenging. But I was proud of the progress that we made. It was the first time in my experience as a head coach that there were that many guys present, and the dialogue was very, very healthy. It seemed like the dialogue was more unified around us getting on the same page to try and protect the game, but then also protect the student-athlete.

So I don't know what the answer is, to be honest with you, 'cause there's a lot of things, if it were up to me, that need to be changed, right?

I'm probably going to get backlash from my colleagues, but I think it starts with us as coaches. I think there's some things that we got to do better, right, from our own accountability standpoint in staying put and being committed to institutions, being committed to staffs, being committed to student-athletes, right?

I think that's where you start 'cause that's probably what's driven a lot of where we are, right, is giving some leverage back because maybe we didn't handle it the right way or the best way.

That's probably where I'd start, man, just put some more structure around the coaching aspect of it so you can truly build programs. Then maybe there wouldn't be as much of a need for the young people to move around, then maybe you can kind of, like, set the example, and now it teaches them how to do it the right way.

I don't know what the answer is, right? Do I agree with what we came up with? Yes, it makes sense to me. The big push was to try to get the actual portal window out of the playing season. That makes it tough for everybody. But then is it there or is it after the spring?

I do agree, I'm in lockstep with the other coaches, that window we did propose does make the most sense in terms of that movement.

Do I think that the players need the ability to be able to move? Absolutely. I'd like to see some more not constraints but some more parameters put around it and keep it focused on the scholastic experience, about the educational piece, about the personal development piece.

Really to me what makes football special is all of the life skills and experience that you learn through the game - let's get back to that, right - to where we're using the game to help develop young people and help develop the leaders of the future through the game of football.

I mean, football is a unifying sport. Man, it brings people from all different backgrounds together for one common goal. It's really a healthy thing that can help unify and foster leadership. I'd like to see it get back to that and

not so much focused on just the business piece of it.

Do I want the players to be able to be compensated? Absolutely. They're why we're here, right? At the same time, too, man, I want young people to be developed and led and grown in a healthy way so that their future is secured, then they can go out and continue to make positive impacts.

Not saying we can't do that now, but man, I would just love to see the game get back to being about what it's supposed to be about, and that's about a kid's game that transforms lives, which ultimately transforms communities and brings about change and not something that's purely for entertainment.

I think this was the last level that you had the opportunity to keep some purity of the game in it before it became strictly about the entertainment piece. I want to see it get back to that because, man, there's a lot of good that comes out of football, right? Especially in the lives of young people.

I don't want people's education and their personal development and growth to be sacrificed in the short-term for the entertainment piece of it.

I think we can do it all. I think we're smart enough to be able to do it all. Hopefully that's what happens, is we finally come around and say, you know what, let's not get away from the intent 'cause it's college football, all right? We still got that word 'college' on it.

If we think about all of us sitting in this room, we wouldn't be where we are without those healthy experiences. Did we need some adversity? Absolutely. But think about the structure and discipline that you needed at that time in your life to help you get to here, right?

When I look at these young men, man, I'm challenging myself daily to stay focused on what I say brought me into this business, and that's seeing a young man sitting in these seats that's 18, 19, 20, 21 years old, and having a vision of what 30 may look like for him. Not saying I know exactly what it is, but just seeing that 30-year-old version and trying to help that young person through the game experience, yes, the short-term success but then also helping them truly prepare for what life's going to look like at 30 and 40.

If we're honest, how hard is it? Let's be honest. How hard is life? It doesn't matter, like, how much money you have or what your job title is. Life is hard for everybody, right?

Think about what you're leaning on. You're leaning on experiences that you had in those pivotal developmental years.

I know I kind of went off on a tangent.

What it want, man, is I want to be able to do it right, keep the main thing the main thing, help young men secure their future through their education, use football as a training ground for leadership, provide the entertainment value on Saturdays, but not putting the cart before the horse.

I don't know exactly what that looks like. But you asked the question, so I kind of felt compelled to answer it.

Appreciate it. Thank you.