

University of Virginia Football
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Head Coach Tony Elliott Weekly Press
Conference

Q: So about half the guys on the roster were elsewhere this time last year. Many of them got here not knowing anything really about this game or this rivalry. How are you framing it, this game, to the team in general, but to the new guys in particular?

TONY ELLIOTT: *Great question. You're leaning a little bit on maybe the assumption that everyone's been a part of a rivalry game, so knowing the importance of the impact that it has beyond just the Saturday that you play it. We talked about it a little bit, just put it in perspective, the significance of how it's 365 days, how we have a responsibility to play our best. We have to carry the burden of what hasn't been done in the past, and we got an opportunity to change the future. But also not taking away from what got us to this point, and that is treating every game like it's the biggest game. So we have that approach with our schedule.*

This is the next one. But we understand the significance. And so really relying on that, and then also the leadership of the guys that have been here, that have been a part of it, to let them know in their own way what this game means to them.

Q: When you look at Virginia Tech, you found they're playing hard in all of these games. They don't maybe have the talent they've had in some past years. What stands out about them and where are the areas where they're still maybe more capable when people are giving them credit?

TE: *I think you pointed out they're playing hard and that's a credit to (Interim Head) Coach (Philip) Montgomery and the staff in that situation to have the guys still showing up every week and playing hard. Every game has been*

competitive, you know, to a certain point and they found a way to win a couple games. I think areas where you can see possibly some improvement, it's just consistency, right? I think in putting together drives and not giving up a big play here and there, the ball not bouncing their way. a couple of times. But we're anticipating that we're going to get their best effort, their best focus, their best attention to detail in this game.

Q: And I know it's always kind of cliché because it's always important, but rivalry game, big crowd, getting off to a big start, not letting them kind of hang around, are those going to be things that you emphasize with your group?

TE: *Some of those, I think the crowd, we need the crowd to show up and be loud. And I think the crowd has evidence of their impact on the game in several of the games that they've caused some havoc for the opposing offenses in some key times. So we need the crowd to be there. We need the energy to be evident because we're going to have to play the four quarters. I think ideally you want to get off to a fast start, but this is going to be a four quarter game and we're anticipating that it's going to come down to one possession regardless of what everybody else may think. It's a very, very capable football team and they still have talent in that locker room and they're going to be motivated.*

They're going to be motivated for those guys who this is their last game and they want to go out on top. They're going to be motivated because I'm sure they have a certain mindset relative to this to this rivalry and rightfully so, they've earned that. We got to change that mindset. So you're going to see two teams out there playing physical football with passion and desire and a want to win. And it's going to come down to the details and execution ultimately.

Q: Kam Robinson left the game early against Duke, do you have an update?

TE: Yeah. Unfortunately for Kam, got some bad news on his knee, ACL. (He's) going to have surgery here, so he'll be done for the rest of the season. But really grateful for all that he did to help the team get to this point. And I'm sure that the guys are going to rally around him and support him in his recovery. But it's an unfortunate situation. of the game of football, but he'll be out this weekend and for the foreseeable future until he recovers from his surgery.

Q: The bye week's also a chance for other guys also to be healthy. I think you had a few guys you were thinking maybe close to coming back this week. Maddox Marcellus, who also got banged up up against Duke.

TE: Yeah, so Maddox will be good to go. Who else did we have? We had a big league. He'll be good to go. Ben York will be good to go. JT (Jayden Thomas) may still be a week away, but he'll get back into doing some things on land and in practice.

And we'll see. But I anticipate it's going to take another week on him. Noah (Vaughn) will still be down battling the ankle. I think those were the main guys that we were hoping to get back maybe last game, but for sure this week. But JT is still probably going to be another week. When I say JT, that's Jake Thomas.

Q: Landon Danley, obviously, is going to have a bigger role this week with camp down. What have you seen from him from when he first started, right? And he was getting used to the linebacker position. To now, it seems he's a lot more comfortable, a lot more firm in his position.

TE: You saw last game he played versus Duke. He went right in there, ended up, I think, leading us in tackles or being tied for leading tackles in the game, coming in a reserve role. So it slowed down for him. He understands the process of preparation throughout the course of the week. His keys are becoming a little bit more known to

him in terms of you're out there, you're trying to figure everything out. There's a lot of eye discipline that it takes, and you've seen the maturity and the growth from that standpoint.

Excited about him, his opportunity to have a bigger role, and then Maddox (Marcellus) will have to have a bigger role as well with Kam (Robinson) being down.

Q: If you guys win Saturday, you get to go to Charlotte. How would you sum up what it's taken to get the program to this point, where you're in and when you're in a situation?

TE: That's a great question. I don't know if we've got enough time to go through everything. But just super proud of the staff and the players and their commitment level. I think that's what it comes down to. Because early on, there were probably some days where people couldn't see the vision.

Or the vision was very, very blurry. Or they didn't trust that the vision could really come to light. But they showed up every single day. And so I think to really sum it up is commitment and people showing up every single day and working even when they couldn't see the light at the end of the tunnel. And so now if we're able to take care of business on Saturday and earn a right to be in Charlotte, just be full circle moment for the program.

Q: J'Mari Taylor is closing in on 1,000 yards. What have you seen from him this year to allow him to be at this point where he's got a shot at back-to-back 1,000 yard seasons?

TE: First of all, available. He finds a way to stay healthy. Even though he's banged up a little bit, he is available. And then on Saturday, no matter how he's feeling, he just plays. And then I think his ability has really come to light, especially at this level in this league. His ability to make people miss, his ability to run behind his pads, ability to have the vision to find the cuts.

and he's just a competitor. And so being available every single day, he's a competitor, and he enjoys playing football. And he shows up every day ready to work and get back.

Q: You had about five or six guys that were here before you got here or that played in season before. How, and I remember you saying after that first spring game, you were looking for guys that were two feet in the pool. Have those guys kind of been the foundation of guys being bought into what y'all are doing here?

TE: Man, if I said two feet, man, these guys are neck deep, right? They're all the way in. And it took a period of time for them to transition because, again, they came to play for another coach and were fully bought into what his core philosophy was and his culture. And then you got a new guy coming in, painting a big picture and talking about things that were a little bit different from what you may have signed up for. But those guys have bought all the way in.

We wouldn't be here without those individuals and their big reason why this team is where it is because in the locker room they were able to bond with those guys that were coming in the door and saying, hey, we made the transition and this is kind of what it takes and this is some of the things to be prepared for and they helped in the locker room tremendously to get us to where we are.

Jahmeer Carter, James Jackson, Antonio Clary, some of the guys I'm talking about, Noah Josey.

Q: What have they just done to kind of usher in the success that y'all are having this year?

TE: Well, two of them, two of those guys have a C on their jersey as permanent captains. And then the other guys got a lot of votes and easily could have been selected team captains. So what they've done is they've been the biggest supporter of what our culture is all about and where we're trying to go. And then they show

up every single day and they not just talk the talk, but they walk the walk. So they live all of the things that we try to embody as a program to set the example for the new guys that are coming in, both transfers and young signees.

Q: When (Virginia) Tech beat Cal in that overtime game, ran the ball nearly three times more than it passed. (Kyron) Drones had 21 carries. Do you expect to see a lot of RPO until you prove you can stop it?

TE: That's what I would do. I would make you stop the run. I told the guys at any given point they got about 440 pounds of running back in the backfield between the tailbacks and the quarterback. But the quarterback has the ability to throw too. So you got to play assignment sound football. They stress you with their scheme.

They're going to pull you apart. They're going to cut your defense at some point. All of their backs plus the quarterback can run through a single tackler. So you're gonna have to swarm and gang (tackle), hit these guys low, get them on the ground.

Q: Yeah, on the other side of the ball, they've got some defensive linemen who are pretty dynamic guys. They can get into good matchups. What challenges do they present and where are you with the offensive line? How do you feel about how your group has held up this year?

TE: Yeah, I mean, I think when we got a consistent five that have been able to practice together and create some chemistry. I mean, we've had, what, five games or maybe six where we haven't allowed a sack. We've rushed for over 200 yards in several games. So I think with Brady (Wilson), I know he was out a little bit with his toe, but he's back, and when he's rolling, I feel, and then last week versus, or last game versus Duke, we didn't give up a sack versus, you know, that front that has one of the highest pressure rates in the country. So, you

know, I feel good going into this game just because I believe we got some consistency in the last couple weeks and practice with the guys that we're going to run out there. I feel better about the depth with (Kevin) Wigenton and (Ben) York being back ready to go.

So I feel good about just the depth that we have relative to the last game we played. Some of those guys weren't available and you're crossing your fingers. So I feel much, much better there. I think they set the tempo for what we do. And when they play well, everybody else is able to feed off of that. that.

You know, (Ben) Bell is a problem. He's a very dynamic pass rusher, very elusive, hard to get your hands on. And then (Kemari) Copeland is as good as anybody in the league, plays with good power, good get -off. And then they got several other guys, and so they got a little bit of depth at that position. to be able to stay fresh throughout the course of the game. So we're going to have to play well up front, and that's where it starts.

And at the end of the day, in this game, it's going to come down to whoever can control the line of scrimmage. And we didn't do a great job of that in years past, so we're hopeful that we can get off to a better start and give ourselves a chance by establishing the line of scrimmage, efficiently running the football, and then when it's time to pass, being sound in our communication and our technique so that we can give the quarterback time.

Q: Mike Hollins was with you as a GA for a little bit. Now he's working with Vincent (Croce) and FCA. What does Mike Hollins give to young players, young student-athletes? What can he impart?

TE: *Mike Hollins is just the picture of inspiration. Here's a guy that was trending in the in the right direction from a football player, had all of his goals in front of him. And then boom, doing what he was supposed to do, the right thing,*

just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. And now his life is in jeopardy. And to make a decision to go back in pursuit of his football dreams while trying to deal with all of the fallout that comes with being in a situation like he was in, to not only finishing, but finishing well. His story is still still being written and it's gonna be an unbelievable testimony when it's all said and done.

But he's just a model of inspiration and taking what cards life gives you and playing to the best of your ability. So I think anybody that he has an opportunity to coach or be around will instantly see that he's a man of humility. Man, he understands the calling that is now placed on his life. And I believe he's going to do a very good job of walking out that calling.

Q: (Virginia) Tech is right near the bottom or at the bottom in those passing categories in the league. How crucial is it for you to try to shut down their running game and try to make them one-dimensional?

TE: *I think that's important to anybody that you're playing. You want to try and take away whatever their strength is and force them to kind of beat you the other way. They do a good job. They're very well coordinated. They're very talented. And so they're going to find a way to run the ball.*

We just got to do a good job of containing it, right? And when we get hats to the ball, we can't let them extend plays. And that's what you see in a lot of cases. Defenses may have a number in position in the run game and then either the quarterback or the backs. They make a guy miss, and then there's space, and then they're talented enough to be able to take advantage of that space. So we definitely gotta be a silent sound.

Man, we gotta flow to the ball. And when we get one hat to the ball, we gotta wrap up, and we gotta wait for the rest of the guys to help get these guys on the ground, and not give them

those extra explosive plays when we have the hats or the numbers in position to down the ball carrier, and then force them to throw the ball a little bit more than they want to, but they can throw it. I know the categories may say that they're not at the top of the league, but (Kyron) Jones is an experienced guy that can throw the football. And you've seen a lot of explosive big plays and some really, really good throws. So we got to try and keep them off balance in the passing game and find a way just to contain the run game enough to see can we make a one dimension.

Q: How big a game was this for Chandler (Morris), a chance to shine in his last home game?

TE: Yeah, and he spoke to the team after practice yesterday. I let each one of the captains speak throughout the course of the week, and he talked about the importance of this game, playing in Scott Stadium. for the last time, how important that is to him and to a lot of the guys that have been here before him. It's a game of significance. It's a state championship. It's a rivalry game.

It's one of the goals on our goal board. When we have five, it's one of the team goals. So there's a lot of significance, and I don't think he's thinking about playing well in this game for anything outside of this building. He wants to play well in his game because he loves his teammates. He understands the importance of the rivalry for all of the folks associated with Virginia football and support Virginia football. And he wants to play well in his last go-round.

Q: What were just some of the main areas you wanted to focus on with the team this week before going up against Virginia Tech?

TE: I wanted to recover and rest a little bit and get back some of the guys that were banged up so we could get ready to go. I wanted to focus on eliminating as many distractions as we can as we come into this stretch of our season so

that we can build off our last game performance and see can we put together our best four quarters and then get a good plan. Together get a little bit of a head start on (Virginia) Tech because you usually don't have a bye week this late in the season before before the last game. So it was a great opportunity to rest, recover, get a head start and reset our focus on where it needs to be.

Q: A lot of the other guys were still in middle school, but back in 2019, (Antonio) Clary was actually in the program. I know he's not a captain as such, but he's a team leader. Will you have him, or has he said anything to the team about that game, or does he do that on his own if he wants to?

TE: He does that on his own in the locker room. He sometimes doesn't want to reveal how old he is with the team. But he does that, and then there'll be a time throughout the course of this week, because we got, not only do we have the game, we got Thanksgiving. So we'll have an opportunity just to express what we're thankful for. And then anybody, whoever wants to address the team at any time can. So I'm sure if he has something he wants to say publicly to the team, he will.

But I know down there in the locker room, he's letting the guys know how important this one is to them.

Q: You mentioned how much that you try to avoid looking at stats within the conference, looking at rankings, looking at those kind of things. What does that actually look like when it comes to getting your guys to lock in for this final game that feels like the most important so far?

TE: Yeah, I don't know what the stats are. I really don't know what the tiebreaker is for the conference championship. I don't know where we're ranked. I really don't look at that stuff because again, at the end of the day, all that matters is finding a way to win. And that's the

focus. And there's so much that goes into that process of preparation that you really don't have time, right?

If I'm over here worrying about what the stats are, then I'm missing an opportunity to study more tape on their left guard to see does he give you any tips for run pass, right? That's less time being able to watch recognition to see if I can get a tip on when the crack toss is coming. So those are the kind of things that I focus on as opposed to the stats because at the end of the day, what's that matters? Wins and losses, right? And that's what we're focused on.

And then at the end of the season, then we'll take a step back and we'll look to see where we are. Actually, I do care about one stat, two stats, turnovers and sacks. I think if you turn them all over, I focus on turnovers. Now, I don't know where we are nationally or in the conference. I know at one point I was told that we were doing pretty good. But I do know that when you win a turnover margin, you're gonna win most of your game.

And when you can protect your quarterback and keep him upright, then you're going to win a lot of your games. And on the flip side, defensively, if you get to the quarterback, then I know you have a chance to impact the game in a positive way. So those are really the only two stats that I openly talk about, but I don't talk about them in terms of where we are relative to the conference. I just talk about those two stats impacting it.

Q: I've seen a ton of boards in here. That one over there, though, had specifically Charlotte, is that correct? Can you explain the significance of that one? And how is that being emphasized all week this week?

TE: *So that is our team vision board. So at the beginning of the season, before we start, we have a question. And I think it says, why should my teammates trust me that I will help the team get to Charlotte? Because the rally cry or the*

mantra of this team has been TLC (Team, Leadership & Commitment) to CLT (Charlotte). I know a lot of people have questioned that. I got a lot of questions at the ACC media days about, you know, you really talk about Charlotte, you really talk about winning the ACC championship with your team.

I said, why not? I mean, I'm not going to tell my son to dream small. I'm going to tell my kids to dream big. It's the same thing with this team. And so then after that, we try to put that into words.

So there's times where during team meetings, I'll walk over and I'll say, all right, Sage Ennis, these are your words. This is what you said. This is what you said you're committed to doing. to your teammates, so it's just a constant reminder, right, of focusing on what matters most, you know, what we think, what we say, what we do, right, the things that we can control. So that's what that board is right there. That's our team vision board and really the commitment of each player to what he's going to do for his teammates to help do his part to help his team get to Charlotte.

Q: Is that further emphasized this week, or is that implied, obviously?

TE: *I mean, it's emphasized every week, right? And it's pretty cool, because sometimes you'll see players calling each other out, not in a bad way, just like, hey, man, I spent some time looking at the vision board, and you know what, Dre Walker, the words that you put on that board, and they mean something to me, and I appreciate what you said, and I'm going to hold myself accountable, and then I'm going to hold you accountable as well to the words that you said.*

Q: Just in terms of the depth on the D-line, you guys made it a point in the offseason to upgrade that. Do you feel like it's shown itself, particularly over this last month, where you guys have divvied up those reps throughout

the year to maybe allow those guys to stay fresh?

TE: I think it's really showed up all year. And it's been, in my mind, a huge difference. And again, I experienced that in my past. And practice and then also benefited by having a being on team with really, really good defensive lines with a lot of depth. And so they impact every game. But then also as you get later in the season, your guys are a little bit fresher, right?

You got more experience. Those guys were more experienced. And then what also I've seen is it creates some leadership. When that group right there, in particular, becomes unselfish and willing to not worry about their snap count, just making their snaps count, and then they start, you know, taking pride in how their teammates are playing. And it really elevates everybody's level of play.

And it brings so much leadership to the team. And yes, I'm a skill guy. I played receiver and always have been a skill guy. But I've come to understand that when your team is led from the inside out, meaning from the trenches, from the offensive line and the defensive line, and then you've got a quarterback that can come alongside those guys, you have a chance to have a good football team.

Q: You've talked a lot today about depth, and you have a depth chart that has a lot of older guys in it. I know this isn't the prime concern this week, but where have you gone this year in terms of developing the younger, because we hear so much about these grad transfers and these veterans and these guys who've been here. How do you feel about the development phase as you're building all this?

TE: Yeah, that's a great question, because times are changing in college football, and development is going to be critical. But I don't know if it's going to be highlighted, because you're going to have movement of older guys and those guys taking advantage of the limited

time that they have left. But I look at The young receivers have all played and made some plays for us. And they're gaining experience on special teams. And then you look over the defensive line, a little bit tougher there. But I think Sichan (John), in particular, had an opportunity to come along.

I think Jewett (Hayes) has had an opportunity to get a ton of reps. Not as many in the game, per se, at defensive end, but he's played on special teams. and getting tremendous amount of work in practice. (Corey) Costner and (Josiah) Persinger, Montino Williams. So there's a lot of guys that may or may not be getting their name called as consistently as some of the older guys. But there's been opportunities for those guys to contribute, you know, starting on special teams and then moving their way kind of into the rotation on offense and defense. And so it's a big point of emphasis there.

And I've been as emphatic as I possibly can. Now, I know there's going to be times in the game where you just say, hey, man, we need that veteran guy in there just because of the situation and the experience. But also, I think we've done a solid job of giving guys experience. And then the other thing, you've got to manage the four-game redshirt, too, for these young guys. So that becomes a little bit of a challenge. So I feel good about the direction that we're heading.

I wish there would have been some more games where we had it in control maybe a little bit earlier to where you could get these guys a little bit more experience. You know, in particular, I think about with Danny (Kaelin), you'd love to be able to have gotten into some situations where you could throw Danny in there and just let him. And then, you know, he's gained invaluable reps in competitive game situations and not just the end of the game.

Q: Last time you came out of the bye, This team started off a little bit slower, went into half. I know you say that the score at the

halftime doesn't matter, but what are you going to do for this game to try and bring back momentum that's there and motivate your guys to get to a hot start early?

sense of urgency with this group coming out on Saturday.

TE: Right, so great question. James (Jackson) talked about that last week when he spoke to the team about making sure that we're committed to the preparation process, make good decisions over the bye weekend so that I think a lot more guys stayed in town, stuck around. The first bye week, man, they were coming off of four weeks of fall camp, six weeks of regular season play. They'd been kind of cooped up, and they wanted to get away, go home, travel a little bit. I'm not saying that's the reason why, but I think there was a different sense of urgency with this bye week as opposed to the earlier bye week in the season.

I think there's gonna be enough motivation for these guys to wanna come out and get off to a fast, not saying that there wasn't the last time. But I think this is a different football team, right? So now we're 11 games in, right? That was a football team that was kind of figuring themselves out. So you had an offense that started off fast and then kind of hit some injuries and it wasn't quite hitting on all cylinders.

Defense gave up some big plays early. They were starting to settle in. So then you got a football team that's trying to figure itself out. Now we play five more games, right? And I think we kind of have grown and evolved as a team. So I'm hopeful that that'll help us to be able to get off to a fast start.

And they got to see last time out when they get off to a fast start, they play complimentary football, what they're capable of doing as a football team. But at the end of the day, man, we understand we got to play our best four quarters this week. We're playing a very, very good football team, regardless of what the record is, that's going to be amped up and excited to play, that's very capable of winning a football game. So I think there'll be a different