

**University of Virginia Football
Head Coach Tony Elliott Spring Practice No. 1
Press Conference
Wednesday, March 17, 2026**

Q: Second year in a row that you are incorporating a large transfer class. Did the lessons you learned from that last year help you getting ready for spring ball this year?

Tony Elliott: *We hope so. But it's still different because it's a new team and then you got to mix in the amount of guys that we have out. So we're proceeding very similar structure wise to how we did last spring, but also being conscious of the high rep guys that we brought in. So just really trying to figure out who this group is, but you got to get out there, you got to run around, you got to see what you got. Good start to day one. But really today was about practice habits, practice standards, the way we do things, a little bit of install.*

So I'm excited to see us about five practices from now when everybody knows where they're going, what they're doing. But I think what we learned from last year is that you do have to practice, you got to get out there, you got to run around so you can figure out what you got. But also to we learned some lessons last spring where we lost some guys where we got to be a little bit smarter so a couple adjustments to certain periods and drills that we do in practice that we would have done in the past and we did last year that we're modifying, changing a little bit this year

Q: The program is in a better place this year, a different place because of the season you had last year. Does that change the way you go about things at all or the way you frame the importance of spring ball to the players?

TE: *Yeah, because the hardest part is handling success. And so the biggest message today is that we have to go create this team's identity. And there's not any carryover of stats and plays from last year.*

So we got to start over, we got to double down on our core values. and we got to create an identity for this team based off of the foundation that's been laid from a program standpoint.

Q: You guys found, for lack of a better term, the special sauce last year with the chemistry, right? Leadership, chemistry, the way the guys came together. Along the lines of Jeff's question, were there lessons you took from that aspect of it? Or because it's a different group of guys, you got to wait and see what the chemistry is going to be?

TE: *The lesson is, is that fit matters. I think you can get enamored with ability, especially with the portal, but fit matters. So you have to try and find that balance of guys that improve the talent level, but at the same time fit the institution, fit the program, fit the team, and are willing to come together as a team. And so that's a similar message to this group. However, I anticipate it's going to be a little bit different.*

We had pro day today and it was awesome To see the turnout and the number of guys participate, but also man we lost we watched a lot of leadership walk out. I was looking at that was like man, Jah (Jahmeer Carter), (Antonio) Clary, (James) Jackson, Mitchell (Melton). Like all these guys, but I believe we got a good core group of guys that are coming back and (McKale) Boley spoke to the team after practice today. And so he's a guy that we're going to lean on. Now his leadership style may be different, but the great thing is that he understands and he's seen it up close and personal what it looks like. And I think he's going to embrace that role. So the key for us is to help foster that leadership with the guys that are returning within the program.

A guy like Kam Robinson, It's his time to lead. Before he didn't have to because James Jackson was here at that position. Now he's the guy, he's got a lead. However, he's not going to do it the

same way that James did. We just got to make sure that he does it. And that's the key.

Q: You got tremendous leadership last year from the quarterback position. What when you look at that group of guys or bow, however, you want to look at it. Do you feel good about what you're getting there?

TE: I do. I feel good from a DNA standpoint. You look at the two, the two guys that we brought in for the most part, they are older guys, they both were starters and played at a high level. And so that tells you that they got, and then they had their teams playing at a high level, which tells you that they have leadership. And when you look at this time last year, you had Chandler (Morris) coming in and you had Danny (Kaelin). And so there was still competition.

So it wasn't just a dead set. Hey, it's automatically your team, those guys had to kind of figure out and then the channel step forward. So that's what I anticipate is going to happen this spring, but it wasn't like it was day one of spring practice, it happened over time. So I believe we got the right DNA with the guys that we brought in, but at the same time too, I've learned that I have to let that kind of organically run its course. I think as coaches, we all will sit there and say, nah, this guy should lead, this guy should lead, this guy should lead.

And then you know what? We're not in the locker room, right? So right now they're down in the locker room and it's a totally different world than maybe the coaches see it. So you got to let it happen organically, but I like the DNA that we have.

Q: I was going to ask, not many guys have to go through a two-a-day on their first day of spring practice. Beau (Pribula) was throwing during pro day. How do you think he handled that and then going out and then practicing with the team?

TE: Yeah, I thought from the perspective that I saw is I really just focused on the practice aspect

of it, and I thought he did a really good job. I was out there for a majority of pro day, and then I had some obligations from a media standpoint with ACC Network, and so I missed his actual throwing session. So I hadn't heard he did what he needed to do for those guys. But in terms of practice, You couldn't tell that he had done that early in the day.

Q: And then to see Jam Jackson back out on the field today, what's that mean for you after knowing kind of what he went through last spring to get back?

TE: Just proud of his perseverance and really it's confirmation, I believe, of the program that we're building. Life happens. Like I tell the guys, life be lifin'. And it happens for everybody and the key is how you respond. And so to see him respond and stick with it and to now be out there and you hear his voice and just the confidence. I think when you first get injured, you can't really see the future.

You're so upset and disgusted. Woe is me, it's never going to be the same. And then as you persevere, I think you learn many life lessons. And so to see him come out more confident on the other side, his body looks a lot better. And so now you'll hear his voice a lot more, so that's what I'm proud of.

Q: I think the last time we talked to you, you said something about waivers on some of the offensive linemen they were looking at. I think Ethan Sipe was one. Do you have any update on some of those?

TE: I really don't. So now we've done what we needed to do on our side. And so I think there's a little bit of follow-up from the NCAA on just a few more things that Seip has to turn in. Same thing with Wiggy (Kevin Wigenton). Chandler's (Morris) situation is further along in terms of it's now out of the university kind of circuiting into the court circuit. And so that's really more a function of Chandler, his camp, and the NCAA in the court system.

So I wish I did. And I know they wish they did, too. But really, it could be any day now, or it could be a couple weeks from now. So I just, I really don't know.

Q: And sticking with the offensive line, you have a Monroe Mills and Makilan Thomas back. How is it having those guys back and healthy, and what have you kind of seen from them, either from the Wahoo workouts, but just now as well?

TE: *Really happy for them because I know how devastating it was to transfer in and high, high hopes for what you thought was your last season of college football. And then before you know it, boom, you're out and you miss an entire year. So really, really proud of their perseverance and both of them led all the way through last season. But for them to now be out there just to see the smile on their face is awesome. And then man, when them two big jokers get out there and start moving around, you're like, yeah. That's what it's supposed to look like.*

And I think that entire... first five right now with (McKale) Boley, (Noah) Josey, Makilan, Monroe (Mills), and Drake (Metcalf). They've really embraced the opportunity that they have because really it's probably the most veteran group. And really what I've said from day one is I want to be led from the inside out, meaning that the trenches on both sides of the ball. So I think that at D-Tackle, we got some really, really good veteran depth. And across the offensive line, we got some good veteran depth. And then hopefully some of the veteran edge guys will contribute to that.

And we can be a very, very, very strongly led team from the inside out. So that's what I've seen is those guys really, really embrace. And I stood back out at pro day and you see the guys out there and that kind of whole group just move together, right? So that's what I'm seeing is that group is really moving together, which is

what you really want when you got five really, really good players that are also embracing the camaraderie and the leadership opportunity.

Q: I think last year a lot of the players kept mentioning Monroe Mills was like another coach with them. How important was that aspect that he stayed around the program last year and made sure he was involved like that?

TE: *I think it was huge for him personally. to help him through the injury because he's had injuries in the past. And anytime you're going through a similar injury for a second or a third time, it can be tough mentally. So I thought it was really, really crucial just for his personal recovery process. And then I think it illustrated to the guys just how much he loves football, how much he loves his teammates. And so even though he wasn't playing, he was still a very, very strong leadership voice for us, which will just continue to carry over this season.*

Q: Last year there was a lot of give and take between Chandler (Morris) and you and Des (Kitchings) and what he was comfortable with. What he liked and that sort of thing. What was the benefit of that and looking back on it? And are you doing the same thing with the new quarterback?

TE: *Yeah, it'll be very similar approach with the new quarterbacks, giving them just some ownership and some autonomy, because at the end of the day, players play. I mean, they're the ones that got to go out there and play. And one of the challenges as a coach is to take your ego out of it. And I think that was the biggest lesson for us is like, hey, we know ball, we can get on the board and draw with the best of them. But at the end of the day, it's not about what we know, it's about what they know. And if they're comfortable, and then you look at the timetable.*

You don't have two, three years for guys to go through four or five, six iterations of the offense to know it inside and out. And so you got to kind of piecemeal and figure out, okay, these are the

things that we believe in. So these are the things that we are going to do. What are the things that you're comfortable with? And then do we have things within our system that we can transition to what you're more comfortable with? At the end of the day, man, players play and for the players to play, they got to play free. And I think that's what we learned. And that's some of what I did, too, with the quarterbacks that I had in the past, is really letting it be about what they're comfortable with so that they can go out and play free.

Q: And even though it's the first day, who were you excited to watch and who will you be excited to watch the rest of the week?

TE: I was I was excited to see all those secondary guys, man. I was excited to see Hillman run around Christian Ellis wanted to see (Donovan) Platt. We've transitioned him to more of a safety type role. See how he handled that a guard. Jacobie (Henderson) juice, Jaylen Jones, see all those guys move around because I thought they moved well during our mat drills and then offensively, the quarterbacks to see how they how they moved and the wideouts that we brought in Alex Payne kind of kind of see how see how he moves around Peyton (Lewis) and the rest of the running back. So pretty much at every position Zion (Wilson).

I mean there were there were guys that I was, you know, trying to trying to watch but at the same time trying to make sure structurally everybody's on the same page just with how we how we practice so tonight and tomorrow just watching the film will help to see how those guys really flash but I thought there was a lot of want to, I mean, the guys were especially considering the circumstances, right? So yesterday morning we met at 7 AM. Anticipating we were going to be on the grass at 3:30 and then we got shut down because of the weather. And so then now we got to come around and work around pro day. And so the guys were excited and then there's a letdown and now they got to get back up. But I thought

they handled it very well, really good energy, a lot of want to, still a lot of things to coach.

I thought the want to was there. And as long as you have that and a willingness to work, you'll have a chance to improve.

Q: You mentioned some of the veteran guys on the O line. What does it mean to have guys like Drake (Metcalf) and (Noah) Josey back just from a leadership standpoint?

TE: It's huge because Coach Elliott only has two eyes. I can only see so much. And there's a lot of things that happen in the locker room and then just in the community when the guys are out that, you know, impacts how we perform. And so to have guys that understand that balance and what is acceptable, what's not, to be able to be that extra set of eyes, it's huge. And then for the guys that may come out of practice and might not get as many reps as they like, or they might not like their spot on the depth chart, or they might not understand the acronyms that Coach Elliott's throwing out, and why do we have to dress this way in the weight room? Why do we have accountability teams? Why do we have to go to class? Why do we have to do all these things?

Because it may be different than places that they came from. They're able to articulate it in a way that their peers understand. And that's what's huge from a leadership standpoint.

Q: And then obviously still day one, but who do you anticipate? Which returner do you anticipate making a big jump or put in a good body of work this offseason?

TE: I'm excited to see Ben York and John Adair and Grayson Reid, those guys, because that's really going to determine, in my opinion, the strength of the offensive line is going to be, can we get to 7, 8, 9, 10 guys that we can play with so that the guys that have played a lot of reps don't have to play every day? Because again, 14 games last year and trying to play more this

year. That's a long season, you need quality competitive depth. So those are a couple guys that I'm anxious to see take the next step. I want to see JoJo - Josiah Abdullah, Dillon Newton-Short, Isaiah Robinson, I want to see those guys take the next step.

I want to see Cole Geer take the next step and go, like I know everyone's talking about Beau, everybody's talking about Eli (Holstein). But heck, I mean, I want to see him take the next step. Why not? Go compete with those guys. That's why we recruited him. I want to see (Jason) Hammond take the next step, Britt (Anthony Britton). Take the next step. I think those guys can be really good players in this league.

They take the take the next step Kam Robinson. I want to see him take that leadership step I think we all know ability wise what he can do but the defense is going to be hinged on his ability to lead from that from that mike linebacker spot You know, also two Maddox Marcellus. I want to see Lando (Landon Danley). And it's kind of tough because all three of those guys are out this spring. So I kind of got an expectation of the step that I want to see each one of these guys take.

The timing may be different. It's just because some are in practice and some are out of practice.

Q: When I asked you about putting the roster together, you said fit was so important. Brandyn Hillman, why is he a fit for UVA football and obviously somebody you've known for a little while?

TE: *He's an intense football player. cares about his education, his academics, and he was like that coming out of high school. He's an in-state guy that it means something to be from the state of Virginia. He's a guy that he's comfortable in his own skin. He is who he is. He likes what he likes.*

He's got a strong personality, but it's a good personality. He is who he is, and that's what I like about him. And here at Virginia, that's one of the things that I really, really like about being here at UVA is, man, you can be yourself, right? You can be all of who you are. And so that's why I think he's a good fit and he wanted to be here. This time around, I think when we recruited him before, he liked the staff, but we just didn't have enough to show him at that time.

But now we have enough of the things to show him, but I also think he's more mature. And he's beyond that. And the things that are really important to him, we also have the substance, too. And that's why I think he's a good fit. And he's a really, really good player, too. Watching him get off the hash, man, he can run and track that ball.

Q: That was my next question, was on the field. What does he bring? And you've lost some safeties back there. Where does he fit in?

TE: *He brings speed and range, very similar to Jonas (Sanker). He brings a very similar level of physicality. So I think he brings a lot of the things that you got accustomed to with Jonas. Now there's a learning curve, he's got to learn what we do. But man, he's a dynamic athlete that can run, he'll strike, and he's got good ball skills too.*

Q: How do you sort through kind of all your new receivers? You got a lot of new faces there in addition to the young guys, the freshmen who are rising up, and (Josiah) Abdullah, and Dylan (Newton-Short), and Isaiah (Reese). But how do you sort through all the receivers?

TE: *Throw them out there and let them go, right? Throw them out there, let them practice, and then we'll figure out. That's one of the exciting things about kind of where we are in college football. I don't think we knew what we had in Malik Washington when we signed Malik Washington, right? I think we knew we had a really, really good young man that had some*

productivity, that's a good football player, but I don't know if we truly knew what his upside, you know, was. And I don't think we knew what Trell (Harris)'s upside was when we signed Trell a couple years ago.

And so you got to let him get out there, let him run around. And after about, the first six or seven practices, I think you'll have a better idea of what positions they actually fit, right? So like, you know, J-Rob (Jordan Robinson) is a guy that we felt like, hey, he probably is more of a Z, but man, he's building his body to where he can be, you know, an X for us. And, you know, Dylan Cope, is a very similar body type. And so I think we need a couple of practices, but we just get them out there, get them acclimated to the system, let them run around, and then eventually they'll start to kind of gravitate towards which one of the three spots fits them best.

Q: I saw you guys move CJ Spence to receiver too. What was behind that move?

TE: Yeah, I went down to bowl practice and we were down some bodies and he was playing receiver and I saw him put his foot in the ground and go get a ball and I said, okay, maybe that's the spot for him. And then he kind of wore me down. Throughout the course of the year. He kept showing me clips of him playing wideout and he's like, hey I want I want a shot to play wideout and I said, okay if that's where you feel like You're going to be most productive then while you're young. We'll take we'll take a shot there. So it was a combination of his passion and desire to do it and then he showed some things throughout the course of the year that said you know what, that might be the best home for him because he's a big long guy. Not that he didn't do what he was supposed to do over there on defense. But and then we also kind of got a need, right now with some of the some of the body types that we've lost.

Q: A couple guys were sidelined with offseason surgeries and everything like that, are there

guys you expecting back who's completely out for the spring?

TE: Yeah Guys that are out, X (Xavier) Browns out, (Corey) Costner, (Landon) Danley, lost Jim Harris to a turf toe in the last week and a half. (Noah) Hartsoe is out, (Noah) Josie's out, (Tekai) Kirby, (Billy) Koudelka, Marcellus (Maddox), (Ethan) Minter. Ja'Maric (Morris), Kam (Robinson), Tyler Simmons, possibly (Triston) Ward we could get back maybe. (Lukas) Unger's out, so we got some guys that are down.

So it's going to be a lot of fun when we get to fall camp and we got everybody back. But it also creates some opportunity for other guys to get some quality reps. I think this is going to be huge for Myles Brown. Myles Brown is now going to be forced into action and get some really, really quality reps, which is going to be huge for us, right? Because if we can go five, six deep at the linebacker spot, we can keep guys fresh and we don't have a drop off, that's going to be huge for us, big picture.

Q: I was actually going to ask what the linebacker is next. You mentioned Myles Brown, but guys like Justin Rowe. How much have you seen him grow and what do you want to see from him in this?

TE: Yeah, he's almost growing too much. I don't know if y'all seen him lately, man. He's getting huge. I didn't expect him. That's another thing, sometimes you don't know, because he was a receiver, kick returner, played a little bit of everything. And man, if you look at him now, he's stacked.

So I don't want him to get too big. So we got to be careful there. But no, this is going to be huge for him, huge for Isaiah Reese and really going to be big for Caleb (Hardy). You know Caleb was a guy that transitioned from safety to linebacker and was kind of throwing in the fire now He's going to have a chance to maybe slow it down and get some good quality reps and then Dallas (Brannon) coming in here as a mid-year is going

to get thrown in the fire and CCC (Cayden Cook-Cash). We don't talk about CCC as much but he's a guy that's got the ability to help us in some form or fashion So this spring is going to be huge for him

So I think it's a great opportunity for all the guys at the linebacker spot to be able to get some good quality And then when you come back in the fall and you add Kam (Robinson) back and (Landon) Danley back and Marcellus (Maddox), you add a bunch of experience with some youth that has developed and you have a chance to be pretty dynamic.

And then all of a sudden, guys hopefully will gain some confidence that even though they may not play as much as they like at linebacker, man, they can dominate on special teams for us, which is there's some areas of special teams where we can make some improvements as well.