

## **Bronco Mendenhall Press Conference Transcript – 9.20.21**

**Q. Bronco, now that you've had a chance to go back and look at the film from the game, did your opinion of the team's defensive performance change at all? Did you see anything other than Fentrell's (Cypress) interception that you liked?**

**BRONCO MENDENHALL:** Not really. I think my opinion is the same. I think the effort was most likely at the highest level of any of the three games we've played for the longest, so effort overall was a step forward. The competitive spirit I think was. Execution was very inconsistent and poor at best. And lack of assignments and just basically being where we needed to be frequently or infrequently led to just lots and lots and lots of yards, plays, points, et cetera.

We can certainly do a better job preparing our players to give them their best chance, as well.

**Q. The 2019 team got off to a really strong start in the ACC; how much harder is it to contend for the Coastal title when you start off 0-1?**

**BRONCO MENDENHALL:** Yeah, much harder. But I think that if you -- man, if you can get the lessons exposed and what needs to be improved early, early on, man, that gives us the best chance to recover and go forward. UNC found themselves in a similar situation after losing to Virginia Tech in the opener, and man, I think they've made considerable improvement from what I've seen by the time that we faced them.

Yeah, some definite weaknesses exposed, some overestimations on my part of where we were after two weeks, and so the urgency on a short week to get it all applied, yeah, the time is now.

**Q. I know it's hard to get a sense until you're really out there with them much, but how did the team take that loss in terms of were they humbled? Is their confidence down? Are they angry, eager to get back? What do you sense?**

**BRONCO MENDENHALL:** I would say all of those. There's a continuum of people when you have 125 players, and not all traveled, and staff, and there's really games within the game, right. So most likely our offensive players feel somewhat different than our defensive players.

There are individuals even within a strong side that might not have performed to their capability, and so I think it's probably the full range. But we did go to UNC, and at halftime we expected that kind of game. We didn't know what the score would be, but we battled really hard. We were resilient and fought back after kind of an overwhelming start and resettled at halftime and really believed we'd come out and battle right until the very end, just did not execute well enough, especially defensively, and then we turned the ball over, and those kind of things in that type of game allowed them to pull away.

Lots exposed, lots to work on, but wow, what a huge opportunity for us to see it, have it right out there in the open and get to work on it.

I think right now it's probably that residue lasts through the entire Monday, at least it does for me, even though we're working and already immersed starting yesterday on Wake Forest. Once you start applying

on Tuesday, you can't look back. It'll be probably like what you described, any of those and all of those all the way through today, and then you've got to go.

**Q. I know you gave an update on Saturday, but just with the short week, do you have any idea what the availability for Joey Blount, Nick Grant and Wayne Taulapapa will be?**

**BRONCO MENDENHALL:** Joey (Blount) and Nick (Grant) will be back at full speed. I haven't heard (on Wayne Taulapapa) -- concussion protocols are harder to gauge, so I haven't heard.

**Q. Wake Forest and Clemson are the only two ACC teams to average at least 30 points a game in each of the last four years, and Wake is on track clearly for a fifth. That takes into account an awful lot of personnel. What is it about that offense that has made it click? You prepared for them last season and again this year.**

**BRONCO MENDENHALL:** Yeah, I really think Dave Clawson and the plan he has at Wake -- I think he's one of the best coaches in college football. They have a really complementary style, meaning the defense fits with the special teams which fits with the offense, and so it's a style really no one else in college football is running, at least at the Power Five level, so it's difficult to prepare for.

It's pretty simple, right; there's a player in conflict most all the time if you choose to play zone, and if you choose to play man, they like the personnel they have at wide receiver, running back, quarterback, so they like their match-ups. That's led to that kind of point production for that long really at a place that you don't view like Clemson, since those are the two examples that you used.

Really I would say matching the scheme with the personnel to the place and doing it consistently, they really should be commended for that, and I think the numbers you said just kind of verify and validate that. That's really regardless of who they play, whatever league, whatever type of defense or whatever their rankings are. It's a very tough system to stop.

**Q. One thing I've noticed over the years is when you have a lot of issues on one side of the ball like that and you try to fix everything, you end up fixing nothing. How do you go about choosing what to do this week to try to improve it?**

**BRONCO MENDENHALL:** It's really -- the biggest -- my biggest task is to prioritize and truly identify, take all the emotion out of it and step back and objectively say what actually happened, where, what common themes, because even though there might be run defense mistakes or pass defense mistakes, are there common themes, and they could be different for each play.

Then I just target one thing at a time, and I put them in sequence, because as you mentioned, there's not enough time to do it all. But you look at for the outcome, and again, I was really impressed with how we played week one and week two, and UNC is a different type of offense, very good skill players, and again, some overestimation on my part of where we were, so underestimation on my part of where they were and what the match-ups might look like. So much clearer now, but then within that, to your point, there are some schematic things or there are some strategic things that certainly can be addressed, as well, besides some technique things. So rather than taking it, oh, man, there's no chance, a couple things addressed would have made a huge difference in that game, and so that's really what I'm focusing on.

And quite frankly, most of my time to this stage, I really work early, early on in the week and I tell -- I'm working with our offense telling them what the opponent defense is doing and how and why and making sure they understand that, which has really been beneficial to our offensive planning.

In moments like this, it's helpful for me to twitch and spend a little bit more time not as a play caller, not as a coordinator, but just making sure I'm digging deep enough to advise as my week goes on a little bit clearly and earlier, and so those are the ways that I usually address it. That could be the same with special teams. So as the head coach, I'm kind of moving and putting myself where the most help is currently needed, and then I kind of reassess.

**Q. The Wake Forest defense had a very impressive game over the weekend against Florida State. I think they had around six turnovers. What stands out about them right now?**

**BRONCO MENDENHALL:** Well, it's kind of like their entire program. It's very intentional. They don't do anything randomly, and each thing they do complements something else, and so if you overplay or overemphasize one part, there's an immediate complement that they look to and know they have an answer for. So it's the same defensively.

I think basically they just played really physically, so when they were tackling, and sometimes an intentional strip, but just they were playing more physically than their opponent and jarring the ball loose on a number of occasions. That usually just means they're trying hard and they're confident.

**Q. We saw (Dontayvion) Wicks leave to go to the sidelines during the game. Is he doing okay? I know we weren't asked about him earlier.**

**BRONCO MENDENHALL:** He's great.

**Q. Obviously when you just look at the numbers, Brennan (Armstrong) is much improved as a quarterback, but when you look a little closer, when you look at stuff like patience in the pocket and decision making, when you're looking on film, what do you see in that regard from him this year?**

**BRONCO MENDENHALL:** He's playing exceptional football. I wouldn't trade him for any quarterback in our league. He's really, really skilled. His accuracy, his poise, his decision making and production, he's doing a really, really nice job. There's really not an area he hasn't improved. Really, really am impressed.

**Q. Whatever he did against Illinois, was that a factor at all against UNC, the injury or when he spent time in the tent?**

**BRONCO MENDENHALL:** No. It's affected his mobility a little bit you could see, and so we're a little bit more -- we were a little bit more cautious with him, but the rest is the same.

**Q. How much more challenging does a short week make it in terms of implementing those defensive corrections and just kind of as a follow-up to that, where would preventing explosive plays rank on that sequencing of lists you mentioned in terms of priorities for the defense?**

**BRONCO MENDENHALL:** Yeah, it has to be first just because that's where points are occurring, and those are correctable things, as they were, again, and our focus had been in the off-season, and again, apparent the first couple of weeks. But you have to execute those things well also.

But yeah, points are everything, and what gives up points is the priority, and big plays have to be targeted. As you pull that thread, there are schematic things and/or technique things that usually are the contribution, not just personnel. So we have a number of things to fix that way, as well.

**Q. As far as the short week goes, to implement that, how much of a challenge is that?**

**BRONCO MENDENHALL:** Really I see, and this might be counterintuitive, I see it as an advantage, urgency, urgency, urgency. When you have a week like that and you have weaknesses exposed or you don't play to your potential or you're disappointed after some hard setback, man, I like kind of being under the gun to go, and so sincerely I believe that could be helpful.

Now, it doesn't mean against this type of opponent and this type of offense it's going to be easy, but I do like the urgency that could be effected.

**Q. Wake Forest historically is not an opponent to be feared; how much does the film help with waking your guys up that this is a really good team this week?**

**BRONCO MENDENHALL:** You know, it really hasn't taken the film. It's not hard because we've played them twice in my tenure here and they've beaten us both times in really hard contests, and the week is just a very difficult one to prepare for. The story has already passed from the older players to the younger players, so this isn't -- we really -- I don't know how the rest of the world views Wake (Forest), but in the ACC they're a good football program, and they win a lot, and they do it at a place that's pretty challenging.

That really hasn't taken any motivation on our part. We have plenty to work on, and this opponent we're viewing just like we always have because they've beaten us twice. They've earned our respect.

**Q. When you give up 59 points, how much does that bring the defense into better focus maybe?**

**BRONCO MENDENHALL:** Yeah, you know, it's really interesting because the focus really wasn't an issue. If anything it was, man, just playing outside of their technique and outside of their scheme and outside of their assignments, maybe because they were -- wanted to win too much. That's not the right way to say it. Because they were motivated at a really high level, they were going outside of what was really necessary and expected, and a lot of times that was the cause of the problem. I don't know, I didn't see motivation. I don't know if I articulated that as well to answer your question, but almost by trying to do too much I guess is a better way to say it.

**Q. Sam Hartman obviously has experience. What concerns you about him?**

**BRONCO MENDENHALL:** Experience is first and foremost, so he has a great idea of how to run their system. He knows exactly where he's to look, and he knows what decisions to make, and he does it in real time, which is a part of how their offense is designed, to give them a little bit better chance to be right on every play, whether to give it, whether to throw it and where because of their exchange timing.

So experience and capability, so an active runner, he's tough, he's competitive, he throws the ball well, so when you add the right system to a quarterback that can do all that, then yeah, you end up with scoring a lot of points, which they are.

**Q. Did you see enough of Josh Hayes in fall camp before he got hurt to get a gauge on what he might be able to add to the defense, and now that he's cleared to play again, is he someone you see kind of moving into the rotation or is he more of a depth guy at this point?**

**BRONCO MENDENHALL:** Yeah, so no, I didn't in fall camp, but I did on film. So he transitioned back into practice last week, and so this week would be a great chance, and we are planning on him playing, and how much and where -- this week will tell a lot because we've only had one week of practice with him coming back from injury. But good timing for us, but too early to say yet.

But we did bring him right -- like all grad transfers, we're bringing him to start and to play, so that was my initial evaluation.

**Q. Wicks has been averaging about 25 yards a catch and he has 14 catches. Have you been impressed just with the volume of explosive plays from Wicks through three games?**

**BRONCO MENDENHALL:** Yeah, we were really excited before, and I know early on, and it's hard to say when Lavel (Davis Jr.) got hurt, we were hoping to trade Wicks for Lavel. That had to happen. That doesn't mean I don't want them both.

But we saw that capability, and we expected and were so hopeful that it would manifest, we just didn't know how long it would take for him to get back into game rhythm and that production. Really been a bright spot so far, as really has our entire offense. We're moving the ball really well to a lot of different targets. We're scoring a lot of points. We're causing all kinds of alignment and havoc issues as you saw with UNC trying to get aligned in our game, and I think we're doing a really nice job on the offensive side right now.

**Q. It's sort of gospel in football to stop the run first defensively. The way you guys are throwing it and with generally what you haven't shown in the traditional run game, do you anticipate defenses to kind of abandon that mentality and shift to really focusing on slowing down Brennan (Armstrong)?**

**BRONCO MENDENHALL:** Man, it remains to be seen. I think there's enough run capabilities, and we're excited about those possibilities when they manifest. I think I was asked after that game was I disappointed. Really each game it kind of manifests and then you kind of design your menu of what you have and you pick from that as you go, and we got off to such a -- we gave up so many points early on, our best way to catch up was through throwing the football.

And really we were kind of playing from behind the entire first half.

In the second half they jumped out again, so there wasn't really a need for it, but I'm more confident, and yeah, for the teams that would like to kind of play pass first and softer, I think we'll be in good shape.

**Q. You referenced a few times the tackling but also just being out of position, the lack of execution. When you went back and looked, was the tackling poor or was it guys were late to the spot and kind of trying to grab to make up for it?**

**BRONCO MENDENHALL:** It was the tackling was poor, and again, so much of it was a surprise because I was really impressed by week one and week two. I really -- again, what I saw and then what I saw on Saturday, the difference was beyond what I had expected, and it was consistent. So that was frustrating, I think, to all of us.

So give UNC credit. We didn't have many players beating blocks and making tackles, and sometimes and more frequently we had unblocked players missing tackles. All those things we hadn't seen in week one and week two, but it wasn't because of -- I would say being out of position and being assignment sound was a contributor, but those are almost two separate issues as you saw them.

**Q. Was some of the difference and disparity, whichever word you want to use, was some of that the skill of Carolina's players that maybe you hadn't gone up against guys who could do those things?**

**BRONCO MENDENHALL:** I think there was a difference in talent, certainly, between Illinois, who it's interesting, right, because it's hard early on, and that's why I don't put much value in the rankings until about week eight, because Illinois played Maryland really tough the other day and it took a field goal to beat them, and that was off of a pretty lopsided loss to us.

Hard to tell, but I do think that UNC's skill was superior, and I think they were more physical and prepared to be more physical consistently than we had expected. So I give them credit; they outplayed us offensively, they out-prepared us and they out-executed us really from beginning to end. But I think the skill difference, I think it was a jump up from the Illinois game from what I saw.

**Q. You mentioned Brennan's mobility being impacted earlier. Do you think that has played into not going to the run as often, not having that normal threat that you would have with him running the ball?**

**BRONCO MENDENHALL:** Yeah, and for quarterback runs specifically certainly. When he got banged up against Illinois, that certainly contributed. The rest of the run game, no, but him running specifically, yes.

**Q. As a defensive-minded guy, do you take a loss and 699 yards like that as a personal affront to you?**

**BRONCO MENDENHALL:** Yeah, I take any loss that way. They certainly leave scars no matter what. Man, when I used to be the defensive coordinator and the head coach, wow, that would have been double trouble. And so really the role that I have now, when I'm advising and helping direct everything, it hurts every bit as bad. Not quite as bad as if I was actually calling the plays, but yeah, because it just is -- I expect and am used to dominant defenses and them being the strength of our team.

So yeah, it doesn't sit well.

**Q. Does it cause you to interject yourself more into the defensive preparation and planning?**

**BRONCO MENDENHALL:** No, it doesn't. Again, I don't ever overestimate or underestimate one game, and I don't let a single mark get in the way of objectivity. I just work as hard as I can to do my job for our offense, for our defense, for our special teams, for our whole team at the highest level I can, and I make sure my expectations are clear for everyone on my staff.

**Q. You've talked a lot about what you do nightly to go home and kind of decompress from football. What do you do after a loss when you've given up 700 yards of offense?**

**BRONCO MENDENHALL:** That's a good one. I haven't found something that completely cleanses that slate yet. Basically because of time, if I was able to spend more time out with the horses and have more stalls to clean and more wood to chop and more brush to cut, but man, on a short week, yeah, I kind of got shortchanged on that.

**Q. We talked a lot going into the last game about road woes, how you were -- do you attribute any of the execution to being away from home, or is that not how it shows up? Did being on the road make a difference?**

**BRONCO MENDENHALL:** Oh, sure, and that's been part of -- one of the things we're looking to overcome here. Again, really, again, as I tried to explain our mindset and our intent to play, I felt really good about that, and our preparation. There still is what we call slippage. There still is come of that happening, and it's happening in execution. It's happening in confidence. It's happening in consistency. We saw some of that. That's why I was so encouraged about us battling back in the game to get the lead at halftime, and that can't be underestimated. I know we've talked a lot about only the outcome, but man, I saw a lot in there in that stretch that I was really encouraged by.

Now it's just sustaining it for another half. Yeah, plenty of fix, but there was that part that I'm holding on to as a bright spot.

**Q. Saturday was the first time we saw him play while you were trailing. I know sometimes last year that was an issue for Brennan (Armstrong). What did you see from him in terms of that aspect, how he managed the game on Saturday night?**

**BRONCO MENDENHALL:** I really liked it. There was very few flaws. If you had to say was there one, the interception that was thrown, I don't even remember when that was. A little bit forced and trying to possibly do too much in that context, but really just, again, improvement and significant improvement in that area, as well.

Really to win the Coastal Division you have to say that you're always going to be ahead. Yeah, we know better. Again, that's why I was so encouraged to see him battling back in that first half the way we did, and again, we just didn't sustain it long enough especially on the defensive side in the second half, but Brennan I think was just as effective. I think he's doing a nice job.