

Bronco Mendenhall Press Conference - Monday, September 13, 2021

Q. Coach, I have a league question. You guys are one of only two teams in the league that's won a non-conference Power Five game. The league is 2-6 if you include Notre Dame in that. How much of a sense do you guys have when you go into those games of kind of carrying the banner for the league to some degree as well as -- obviously winning is job one, but how much do you pay attention to what other teams do in those games, and how much pride do you try to play for the ACC as well as yourselves?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: I think you've hit it accurately. It's sequential. The very first thing is loyalty and care for our own players, our own team and our own program. Man, that doesn't leave much room for much else, but then if you were to say, okay, what else, certainly the league matters.

Certainly we keep track. It's presented to us how we're doing in crossover games. Every year in bowl season that seems to be when it's tracked most, what teams did best and what conferences did best in bowl appearances is kind to league to league match-ups, but the other time that I think you're hitting on that sometimes is overlooked but it's a bigger thing now, as early season games are craving narratives and stories and things and rankings and et cetera to add to them, I think now that's becoming a bigger thing that's tracked and emphasized early on.

I think as coaches, yes, it matters to us, and yes, we're becoming more and more aware early-season games, not only just postseason games, but every one of us, we just want to help our own team win first, and then it goes to the conference, which is really important.

Q. You guys have done very well against North Carolina; is there anything you do to make sure they don't look back? Obviously it's a veteran team; do you have any concern about that?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: No, every game is so challenging and takes every bit of effort we have to prepare from the minute the last game is over until we play. So no, I'm not -- it's not even on my mind. Looking back doesn't help anyone. We're focusing only on today and today's preparation and then we'll do the same tomorrow and we'll do the same until we show up to play.

Q. You've placed a great emphasis on the importance of playing better on the road this season. You've had some really good road teams at BYU; when you look back at those teams, was there a common denominator for success on the road besides obviously having talent?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Yeah, absolute mindset, mindset, mindset. We relished going someplace else and not being welcomed, and the harder the better. We looked forward to it. We celebrated it. The louder teams were against us, the better it was, the more we would cheer, the harder it was, the more we liked it. That was fostered over time.

Right when you're building a program, and that's not to say that I haven't tried to do it all at the same time, but there has been different emphasis, and so as I'm learning, try to remain updated with the statistics, our first game -- and I keep going back to that, there's a few games along the way, but when I saw our first game against Richmond when I arrived here, it was priority number one to become exceptional at home first, and that's taken a lot, a lot of work to become 19-2 and now 15-1 over the last little bit. That's one of the best records in college football at home.

So we're now getting ready to -- and maintaining holding on to that, which is preserving the core, and then we have to stimulate progress, which to win the league and to win the division and to have the program I want, we all want consistently, that has to travel.

But there is a sequential element and architecture to it, but that's the next thing, without losing any of the other things and the ground that we've already taken. So we have to hold the ground we've taken and now expand.

Q. Is there a way to practice getting better on the road? Is there something design-wise that you can actually do to sort of improve that or you just have to go out and do it?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: It really just depends on, I guess, how far you're willing to go, and extremes sometimes are necessary to change culture or to get different results, and I believe that we're designed for the results we're getting. So I inherited a program that wasn't strong on the road, and sequentially now have become strong at home and have become a contender for the Coastal and are the defending Coastal champs, right, and that was when we won at least half our games on the road.

Yeah, we have tried and are working on different things, and one of them simply is to practice somewhere else. That is -- I don't know many teams that do that. Just like we moved into our own stadium for spring practice, we are and have been practicing at different locations starting in the spring, and that's just part of the emphasis. That doesn't mean immediate results, it doesn't mean automatic returns, but it does mean emphasis.

Again, while we're holding the ground we've won, we are working now hard to expand that and with pretty unique methodologies, and I think they'll gain traction over time.

Q. Are you able to say where those locations are?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: I'd rather not, but it probably would take you like five minutes to find out. It won't be one of your harder jobs. Let's just do it anyway for fun.

Q. Looking more at this week's opponent, what do you look for your team when you're facing a team like North Carolina, they started off with the loss to Virginia Tech, but just the caliber of that opponent. It's a little bit of a rivalry, as well. How do you look for them to respond this week?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: I look for them to respond how they would against any team. It's a Coastal Division game, and if you want to win the Coastal Division, then you want to beat the teams that are in your division, wherever you are, home or away.

It just is that, right; it's a Coastal Division football game, which really says it all.

Q. Listening to Mack this morning, Coach Mack Brown (UNC), and also Coach Jay Bateman (UNC) and Coach Phil Longo (UNC), they all stressed that they felt like you guys have out-physicaled them in the previous meetings, at least the two years they've been there. Obviously that's what they're emphasizing and telling their players. Do you agree with that assessment, and how important will it be to match that again?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Oh, I think it's -- that emphasis isn't just UVA/UNC, that's any team any week. Yeah, perceptions from different opponents and their staffs are always varied, and the lenses are varied, but it is something that has to happen to win a division. You have to be physical. You have to be tough. You have to play hard. And then you have to execute your assignments and techniques.

That is kind of the core of what it takes to repeat as a division champion or to remain consistent in college football, even with all the run, play action and RPOs and spread formations and quarterback runs and unique formations and the ball going downfield and all the points. If you don't address that part when you need it, it's not there, and that's usually in really critical moments.

Q. Unrelated question, but obviously the missed field goals, when you went back and watched, were they bad kicks? Were there operational breakdowns? What are you doing at that position this week?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Yeah, as excited as we were in the opener and the great start that we got off to with Justin (Duenkel), one just a little bit off and not quite adjusting to the cross-winds that were at that end of the field, so just a little bit there. And one, if I remember it correctly, there was a time-out (penalty – illegal procedure) and we kind of went out and there was a time-out and there was a pause and we restarted, and yeah, we didn't manage that really well just in terms of handling our new -- handling Justin and just bringing him back and all that.

Yeah, we learned some things just protocol-wise. He's going to be fine. Yeah, kind of a cross-wind issue and then a timing issue of just -- again, that doesn't mean both of those caused the misses, but they influenced it, and yeah, we can do a better job as a staff just addressing those things.

Illegal procedure, Jim just reminded me. I knew there was a pause or something, and that's what it was.

Q. How much are you looking forward to seeing -- because so much of the talk coming into the season was about your defense and how it wanted to improve. How much are you looking forward to seeing them tested in a different way on Saturday night and also just maybe showing a few things that you haven't shown defensively yet to this point?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Excited for every game. So far, again, we're only two weeks in, right, and I think the thing early is -- well, the tendency most of us have to generate either content or identity is to overreact to anything that happens early on, and so far our team has responded really well to both challenges, exactly as I would have liked them to. They've given me no reason to expect they won't do the same to No. 3, and the schematic changes, and there will always be some. That's what I believe in. They will happen and they'll happen this week and they'll happen on offense and on defense, and that's in relation to our opponent.

So my hope is that that'll happen every week, not only that the mindset will remain consistent and continue to grow and become better, but we'll be able to employ and deploy different tactics that will give us an advantage, and so yeah, looking forward to that.

Q. Just a bigger kind of generic question. Before the season you said that you wanted to be further along because of the experience and veterans that you had. Going into ACC contests, do you feel happy or at least somewhat satisfied where your team is now to where you thought your team would be at this point?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: We're where I would have hoped we would have been after two contests. We've had two convincing wins, two dominant performances on each side of the ball. I did not think our special teams played as well in week two as week one, partly because there were no kick and kick return opportunities, balls going out of the end zone, et cetera, but it showed our punt and punt return wasn't as strong as I would have hoped and our PAT field goal I just addressed. That area I think still needs some attention, but in terms of how the games have gone, the number of points scored, the number of points allowed and the production and diversity of production and impact that so many players are having, yeah, I like where we are as of Monday of week three.

Q. Brennan had that injury in that second half. How is he doing right now? Do you have any concerns from that?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Anytime your quarterback has anything, I'm concerned. I haven't heard, which is always good news, otherwise I would have got texts and emails and alerts and reminders. I haven't had any of that, so I'm taking that as a good sign.

Q. Sportswriter math is always suspect. If mine is correct, it'll be the 103rd consecutive season that Virginia has played North Carolina. Has Jerry Capone or maybe any other veterans there in the athletic department given you a sense of this rivalry? I know it's not Virginia Tech, but we are talking about like-minded public institutions from border states.

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Yeah, I learned early on here, Craig Littlepage told me, and specifically and rarely did he ever come down to talk football. This was when -- wow, Larry Fedora was the coach, and he said something to the fact of keep an eye on him, the onside kick surprised us here in whatever game at home, and then there was still urgency in his voice like I wouldn't have known that or already discovered it.

I think he reminded me the first two years or maybe three about that, and Jerry gave me the same UNC history. So yes, I've heard.

And now that I've heard it, we're just going right back to our weekly preparation as diligently as we can.

Q. The other day you mentioned that the inspiration for this year's offensive scheme goes back to Taysom Hill. Have you ever had this much, I guess, unique personnel, so many weapons in an offense even though Taysom was as great as he was?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: No, not at one position. I'll put it this way: A lot of other players that we're bringing in are quarterbacks, and I've already kind of articulated not just regular quarterbacks but great athletes at quarterback. When you see Ira (Armstead) or when you see KT (Keytaon Thompson) and Jacob Rodriguez, again, as he'll keep emerging, and then Jay Woolfolk will come out, just more at that position, so Taysom was the beginning. We just last year when Brennan (Armstrong) got hurt, that just doubled down on our direction of putting more quarterbacks on the field, but not only more quarterbacks, more football players, and not only more football players, good athletes that can do multiple things.

It was the Taysom origin, Brennan's injury, facilitating and adding fuel to an existing path that has kind of emerged into what you've seen so far.

Q. Going into the season the secondary was a big question mark; Carolina obviously has a strong passing game. Are you satisfied where your secondary is right now?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: I don't think I'm ever satisfied with anything, and my team knows that, and I do my best to promote confidence while making sure they know there's always something to work on. I'm not easy to satisfy.

But I am pleased with how we played and what we've done in week one and week two, really all across the board, and so yeah, I would say so far, so good. Is it exactly how I want it? No. Is anything? Never has been.

But I like where we are.

Q. You were very excited about what Jelani brought to the offense before the season started. He wasn't much of a factor in game one, but he kind of had his coming-out party the other day. You have all these quarterbacks. As a defensive-minded coach, what kind of nightmare are you creating for other defensive coaches to try to prepare for everything you guys are doing?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: That is the exact hope is what you just said, that it is a nightmare, that it is sleep lost, it is extra time, it is uncertainty, it is what will that player do and what personnel group, and in regards to Jelani, I really believed right from the spring and through the summer that game two would have been game one. But what it showed is we're learning about him, as well, and how much volume can he handle, how many special teams can he play, how much of the tempo plays can he do back to back, can he block for a long kickoff return and then be in the next series. And so a lot of it was just him seeing what our expectations are on game day and game week for him, ours then learning about him, what can he currently handle, and then we just kind of reset and recalibrated for week two. So we certainly got closer week two than week one. As much of that was on us as it was on him adjusting to what our game tempo and speed and preparation looks like and volume and practice is also how we can manage his sustainability.

I really believed, again, last week would have been week one, but we're learning about him as a grad transfer, and we just saw a glimpse, and the match-up is so difficult for anyone because linebackers aren't 6'7" and safeties aren't 6'7" and if they are they're not 260. So it just is tough.

By the way, he's a former quarterback, just so we're all clear.

Q. So a lot of tight ends are either really good blockers or really good receivers. Often they're not both. As big as he is, able to get down the field, how unique is he in what you've seen over the course of your career for having that skill set?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Yeah, the thing that got my attention first when I watched his film at Oklahoma State was not his pass catching and not his athleticism, it was his blocking. I think he's a very, a very good blocker. When you have someone with that mindset who also has good athleticism and can catch and run, I was endeared to him immediately because a lot of the pass catchers are -- they like the space and they like the air and the perimeter. He's not afraid. He likes contact, as well. Man, when you do both, that's tough for an opponent.

Q. Nusi Malani got banged up late last season. I think he missed all of spring practice. How much did those surgeries set him back? How did he grade out the other night? And what do you see as his upside as a lineman?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: I'll go in reverse order. He has really, really strong upside because of his length, his size, his speed and his athleticism. The setback is an entire off-season of strength development, an entire summer of strength development, an entire spring and summer of just fundamentals, and at the defensive line position you can't go around anything and be exceptional unless you only play on 3rd down. That limits the number of things he can do.

Yeah, he's playing catch-up in all of the every-down situations to regain strength, size, technique and all the things of just playing the position on an every-down basis.

And so his grades reflected that, right? There's glimpses and there's positive and then there's some inconsistency, and it all reflects capability, but it does also -- we just have to acknowledge what you just said; that is part of where he currently is.

Q. If I can follow up, I think he ended up committing on signing day itself two years ago or a year and a half ago. Was that one that you went into with any confidence? I know he was considering a couple West Coast schools, too.

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Man, I wish I could remember. I don't remember any of it. I really don't. I don't remember if we recruited him -- it's just gone. I do remember a visit to a family member's restaurant out in the San Francisco area, and man, that was good. The rest of it, I don't remember very much.

Q. North Carolina has lost a lot at the skill positions from the last season or two, wide receiver and running back, but they still have Sam Howell. I was curious how different the offense looks this season or if it's pretty different just with some different personnel in there.

BRONCO MENDENHALL: It looks more like your second point, it looks very similar with different personnel. The scheme is well thought out. It's very well-coached. I think like every team every year, you learn about maybe the impact of losses of personnel as you go versus different match-ups.

The running game and the running backs from a year ago, the receivers from a year ago, the personnel was very strong, and I think it's still strong, but it is different. But the system is more similar than different than it was, which I think was the intent of your question.

Q. You mentioned earlier about the expectations for Jelani (Woods) coming into the season. What about Dontayvion Wicks who missed all of last year? Has his production lived up to what you thought he could do, maybe even going back to last year?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: I would say it's living up to, not lived, but living. But we would expect that from game one. Lots of potential, and I could see week two more production and more certainty and more confidence. He's a dynamic football player. Can you imagine if we had Lavel (Davis) to add to what we already have, and so Dontayvion (Wicks) really is playing a critical role because we're basically counting that as a trade, one for one, and that's really a credit to Dontayvion that we think he's of that caliber.

Q. Noah Taylor said something on Saturday just about getting to the quarterback and getting those sacks. Y'all had a couple more this week. Has it just been the play style, quicker passing from William & Mary and Illinois? Noah was kind of talking about this week against UNC is going to be the first real test of what that havoc looks like this year.

BRONCO MENDENHALL: I think that's partially fair, so William & Mary, really their intent was to never get sacked by how fast the ball was delivered, the formations and the lack of usage of the pass game, and then Illinois as the game went and the situations called for it, we got similar opportunities to affect the quarterback, and what this game will look like, we'll see, but neither one of those teams obviously -- they would rather throw on rhythm, they'd rather have possession throws, they'd rather move the chains than take the chance either through protection or max protection to take a loss.

Each one provided a little bit more opportunity from game one to game two. What game three will look like, we'll find out. But there might be more opportunities.

Q. Obviously true of I guess any good veteran quarterback, but a number of defensive coordinators have remarked that Sam Howell is particularly effective when you don't disguise what you're doing and he can see kind of what the plan is. Does it put any extra pressure on you to disguise what it is you're doing pre-snap when you have a veteran back there like Howell?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Well, I think so. I mean, so many offensive systems, there's the clap and the fake clap and then all they're really just trying to do is see you -- if the defense will declare if there's pressure, where is the pressure from, what coverage is it, what coverage it might be. And then the game goes through will they call a different play, will the defense change. Right, that's really all that's happening. If it didn't matter to be able to predict what an opponent was in, then none of that would happen. So the more experienced the quarterback, the more clean his diagnostics before the play, the better chance the play has to work.

So yeah, that's not only -- we're just not talking about UNC and their quarterback, we're talking about any opponent, and so there's create outs, right, how far will you go outside of your normal alignment to show disguise and making sure you can still perform your task. Every coordinator and every team chooses that, and some don't change at all. They will say this is where we are and this is what we're going to do, and they go execution versus execution.

Yeah, it's not specific only to UNC, it's just part of football.

Q. I'm still on a kicker's kick; how about your transfer punter Finn? What have you seen there? How pleased have you been with what you've gotten at that spot?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Yeah, capable. Needs to be more consistent. I think he has a really strong upside, and we think he's going to be exceptional. On Saturday not as consistent as we already know he is, and so we're just chalking that one up as to a one-off, and we move on.

Q. You mentioned him a few minutes ago, but it's been a few weeks since we pestered you for a Level Davis update. Is he still ahead of schedule, or what is that timetable looking like?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: From what I've heard, he's ahead of schedule, and there's a possibility of a late-season return. If you ask him, it's probably earlier than that. So that's good. But that's not realistic.

Yeah, if he is to come back, it'll be late season.

Q. Is there an update on Adeb Atariwa and his status for Saturday?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Not yet. Hopeful, I guess. I'm going to put my own label on it. I don't know if that's even one of the options, but I'm putting "hopeful." We've created another category, so I'm adding "coach hopeful" category for Adeb.