

University of Virginia Football Media Conference
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Coach Bronco Mendenhall

COACH MENDENHALL: Six years ago, I showed up in Charlottesville on this amazing adventure. And it's been one of the most amazing journeys of my life, to this point.

I've met amazing people. And what an incredible challenge. Been at an iconic university, completely different part of the country, traveling in a pack with my dearest friends and their families. Developing and shaping and grooming lives and helping a program, as Jim comes off the field almost after every game, it's the first time since, or the first time ever.

So lots of growth and experiences and things that have been imprinted on my soul. I've had the chance to work with, what I believe, is the very best athletic director on the planet. And Carla has become a dear friend, a trusted confidante, and exceptional leader that I'm so thankful for.

I've been a head coach for 17 years in a row. I was an assistant 11 before then. And I was a graduate assistant two years before then. And that's 31 years straight of football.

And, so, it's 31 years of straight football. And my wife and I will have been married 25 years in March. All we've known together is the rhythm of a football season. That's all my kids have known. And this January all three will be gone. And Holly and are empty-nesters. And all they've known is the rhythm and cycle of football. And we know what that looks like really, really well.

And I would love to say there's been this buildup and a long amount of epiphanies and thought, but clearly this week there was a sense of clarity to me that I needed to step back from college football and reassess, renew, reframe and reinvent, with my wife as a partner, our future and the next chapter of our lives.

I was requested to stay by our athletic director. I was requested to stay by our president. It's my decision only. And Holly, my wife's a little stunned and shocked too. But I believe a renewal and a pause and a reframing and a reinventing and a reconnecting is necessary to then become the very best person I can be moving forward. And as you know my passion and my wife's passion, we love to teach and inspire and build people, young people especially. And I know what that takes.

And I'm looking forward to, again, the chance to renew and reflect and reinvent and re-become and then reenter someplace at some time on rocket fuel to become even a better version of maybe who I currently am.

As I consider my boys, I'll be the proud parent of two off serving on missions, knocking on doors and doing good and trying as hard as they can to help other people. Another in college. And here Holly and I now will be together alone for the first time in, well, 23 years. Neither one of us know what that's going to look like either.

We're anxious to find out. And none of this, I'm viewing, as permanent. This is just a chance to re-become, and like on any summit, you don't do it all at one time. Right? There are times when you need

to pause and refuel and put the oxygen tank back up and, man, unthaw the freeze-dried food and recharge the butane tank. Unless you like eating cold, freeze-dried food, if you've ever camped, doing that, it's not very good.

I love, love my team. I just met with them and I'm so hopeful to be able to have us perform well and be together and have another bowl victory for this class and this team, to culminate this for them. And the reason the announcement now is to allow it to then be about our team moving forward as much as possible.

One more thing. There's a bit of heaven that Holly and I have carved out, we call it the HB3, which would be our brand -- Holly, Bronco and three boys, and this has been way more than football to our family, our little tribe of five. That sanctuary and that place we've lived on has been transformative for all of us and our lives, as well as the city of Charlottesville and UVA, and back to Carla as the world's best AD. Holly said it's clearly because she's a woman, that's why she has super powers. And I think I believe her.

And I believe that college football needs great people. And I think it needs grownups. And I think it needs a sense of balance and wisdom. And I think it needs a focus on the development of people, as young people regardless of whether they're a great player or not. So I'm not taking my decision lightly as I try to do those things and have tried.

And, again, the next journey will be uncovered as we go. And hard to uncover it if there's not a pause and contemplation and reflection. So that's what I'm choosing to do.

Q. Did the way the final month of the season went for the team have any impact on this decision? And how much of a toll did that take on you mentally and maybe physically as well?

COACH MENDENHALL: I can't put a percentage on it. My first response would be no. Because I like hard things. I know what it feels like. And I assess and I like challenges. And really there was enough separation from that time period -- and the coach's life, things turn over fast.

So the clarity of this was really finalized yesterday in my mind. In the coach's world, that's almost an eternity from whenever the last game was. So this is a personal and bigger picture, that's how I think, decision. And any other data point, it's hard for me to even remember, to your question, who we played the week before the last game and who we played the week before that. That's just how coaches are dialed because it happened so fast. So I don't see a correlation there. And I would tell you if I did. I just don't sense that.

Q. If it's not the losing streak, and you love your AD and you love your team, I have to ask, do you view college football as broken, and do you not want to be a part of kind of where it is right now?

COACH MENDENHALL: That really wasn't part of the decision. Again, just everything I said at the beginning is the reason for the decision. It's just a chance, right, after 31 years straight to step back and renew and recover and reconnect and reinvent myself and our family and our purpose, and then be intentional about where we reenter and how and whatever that is.

And it very well could be -- I don't know if it ever would be college football again, but, right, this is -- everything that I said prior to this is the purpose. And that's not what I mentioned. So, no.

Q. Did you have a chance to speak with your staff, or did this just kind of catch them by surprise?

COACH MENDENHALL: I spoke to my staff at 4:45 today. I spoke to my team at 5:00. And now I'm speaking to you at 5:30.

Q. You've always talked about just the family atmosphere that you have with this staff. What was their reaction kind of finding out about this from you, just kind of moments ago and then also your team?

COACH MENDENHALL: They had similar reactions -- tears, shock, sadness, disbelief. And it's going to take time to process.

We know, and for most of us there's different cycles you go through. And there's -- from anger or denial and then withdrawal, and then finally you get back to acceptance. And there's all of those things happening right now.

I know exactly the implications of people because that's the world I live in. The decisions I make impact families and young people. And so I don't take it lightly. And after 17 years in a row of being a head coach I know what's required. And I don't take that lightly.

And I absolutely want to be at my best in anything that I do for everyone that I'm responsible for. But most importantly, yeah, my partner, Holly, it's 25 years straight, 17 of which I've been a head coach. And, man, I don't know if anyone -- none of you know what that could be like, and I don't know.

But what I do know is I want to spend a lot of time with her together, reconsidering the next thing we're going to do together. And that would be my first priority is what are we going to do together and what's next for us before we take on anything else.

Q. With the way you built the program and the things you've achieved, Virginia (indiscernible) game four years before you got to UVA. What are your most proud of in terms of what you've helped build at UVA?

COACH MENDENHALL: I'm not sure I can name anything specifically other than bowl games are commonplace now. And that's below expectations. We expect to win the Coastal Division. That's what we expect. And so raising expectations, raising benchmarks, providing a new launching pad to really gain momentum now from here, helping UVA imagine and see what's required to play exceptional football, what kind of consistency that would be required.

And, so, I just like the things that we've done to help the program. But most importantly the people that are being built, that's everything. It's just through college football that's happening. And there's no record for that.

What I'm most proud of is through the higher expectations that have shown achievement on the field, the people that are being built along the way is the metric. And I love who my players are and who they're becoming.

Q. As strong as you've built the program to this point, is this program, was it more of a challenge than you anticipated? And how difficult is it to make Virginia a consistent winner in college football?

COACH MENDENHALL: I think we are a consistent winner. Year one reflected that it was harder than I thought. When I saw the first year of 2-and-10, I had to reframe everything. And that recalibration got us to 6-6. And that recalibration got us 8-5 and a Belk Bowl win. And that recalibration got us the Coastal championship and the state championship and a bid in the Orange Bowl. And I don't know how to calibrate for a pandemic. That wasn't in my manual.

And then we started again. And we're probably six plays short of winning the Coastal and winning the state. Probably six, arguably seven. And really disappointed because the expectation for our program now is to win the Coastal and the state. Right? And so that's a completely different place.

Now, in terms of your question, what will it take? Commitment. There's all kinds of seats you can buy for a concert. You can buy the price of admission and sit up in the rafters or you can buy front-row tickets and have a backstage pass. And both of those influence outcome. And so every institution decides what level of support and alignment they want with any program on their grounds.

And so really it will just come down to decision-making and reallocation of resources but also leadership selection. And I'm responsible for everything that happened in the program. And independent of anything else, the record is mine. And I own all of that and I love it. And I love my team.

And there's certainly things we can do better and could have done better. But my hope is that the past six years has shown specifically and decisively what the next steps are needed to be to launch us even farther forward than we are. And that's what I hope for players, the fans, this institution, our athletic director and everyone else is what I hope.

Q. Is there an accomplishment or accomplishments that you can take pride in from your time here at UVA?

COACH MENDENHALL: Lots, lots and lots and lots. And I would say too numerous. Maybe the ones that I will say won't show up on the score. But we just had a player get an amazing job after tremendous struggles. And he played so well. That's not the struggles I'm talking about. I'm just talking internally and becoming and the challenges of college and the rigor and managing family life and different things, and he just got an amazing job. Wow, did I feel good yesterday when I got that text.

Maybe equivalent to the Belk Bowl win. Maybe equivalent to, I don't know, any win you want to say. There have been fans that have rushed the field here. Felt like that, maybe, except maybe even better. Wow, was that so rewarding to see what he just accomplished.

Q. When did you really first start thinking about this? And how much did you wrestle with this decision? And did you surprise yourself with how you ended up with the decision?

COACH MENDENHALL: Yeah, it's been a process -- today is Thursday. Sunday through Thursday. First prompting Sunday. Then contemplation and a few action steps in a different direction. And, man, did that not feel good.

And then returning to the first thought yesterday afternoon. So short term but impactful. And that's right after 31 years, it's a pretty short window. But I know myself and I know what that means. And, man, does that take courage then to act on that, especially in a setting like this.

But this is a choice in time to reframe what I'm hoping is a more beautiful and even more impactful way to help other people after this. I don't know what that's going to be yet but I hope that's what it is.

Q. How did you deliver this news to the team knowing that they probably all would be completely is your priced by what you had to say?

COACH MENDENHALL: I don't really know how to answer it. Every year I redefine my purpose. I have a purpose statement. I put that on the screen. And I read that and showed it. And they see that it aligns.

And I think every choice is governed by a principle, and every principle is governed by a belief. And they've seen this before. So I reframe my beliefs and the principles that govern it and then showed how this choice reflects that. And that's the framework I started from. And hard to talk and be emotional at the same time in front of people that you love. But I wanted them to understand.

It's nothing they did. I love them. And trying to then say how could I add more impact to the world maybe after a refresh, a recalibration. And it's not sustainable -- like this pace as a college football coach and a head coach for that many years -- and if you want to do it right, not just winning -- but if you want amazing academics and really build great people, if you really want amazing character, if you really want to teach values, if you really want service to happen, that's harder rather than easier. And I want all of that.

And, yeah, I'm not going to do it unless I can and feel energetic enough to do all that. So they saw that and they understand -- it doesn't mean they liked it. But I'm looking to continue to add value, not just ride it out.

And there's a base camp and sometimes there's, I don't know what we'll call it, a halfway camp. And I just kind of pulled into the halfway camp for a minute and need to reheat and thaw out and just see what's in the backpack. And then here we go again at some point.

Q. You said that this contemplation began Sunday. What role, if any, did your deep faith --

COACH MENDENHALL: You were breaking up I basically heard the question as what role did my faith have in this decision?

Q. Because you said you started on Sunday.

COACH MENDENHALL: Yes, very perceptive, as usual. That's exactly where it started. And I believe I have a father in heaven. I believe if I live and really try to connect I can receive direction and promptings. Now it takes courage to act on those and faith. And most every decision that's been positive in my life has been when I've listened.

And most of the time the natural part of me says, no, don't do that. But inside I know that's what I'm supposed to do.

So, yeah, as you know, faith is -- my belief governs everything. My belief governs the principles and the principles govern the choices. Where else would I start than what I think governs all? And so, yeah, that's where I started.

And I tried different things in a few number of days and different paths that I thought might address another way. And it did not feel right. And I was not at peace. As I returned to my initial thought, it was very clear.

So that's where all of my major decisions come. And that's not only regarding this one but anything in my life. So I've just shared my pattern for everything else as well as this.

Q. Will you and Holly remain in Charlottesville?

COACH MENDENHALL: There's no better place on the planet than the HB3. And we don't know how we could ever leave that place. We don't know. So there's not -- I don't have a, like, if I pulled this out there's no words on it that says what's next. It's blank. We don't know. And, holy cow, is that scary. So we don't know.

But we love our place here. We love this community, the people, the whole thing and that's what makes it even harder. So I don't know yet. To be determined. Stay tuned, I guess would be the answer for that.

Q. You and I have talked at various points about just the sheer dizzyingness of the last couple of years from COVID to the amount that the college football landscape has changed with legal stuff, Supreme Court, to NIL, to one-time transfers and all of that. I'm curious, if this felt like the last two years was more in conjunction with the previous 30-plus of your career, do you think that things would be -- that this decision would have gone differently for you? How much have the last two years and all that's come with it influenced your decision that, look, I need to take a pause here, I need to step away and recalibrate?

COACH MENDENHALL: I think certainly both have influenced. I don't know a strategy for coaching football in a pandemic and having renewal at the same time. I don't know that plan. I kind of tried to invent it as we went. And the national landscape in college football right now, I don't have a plan for that yet. I don't think anyone does because it's emerging so fast.

This week alone, I was sharing with my staff -- I wish I had my phone with me -- you guys probably already know this because we keep track. But at last count there was, let's see, hold on just a second, I'm going to try to add some statistics to this. Earlier today, over the last three days, no, four days, 263 new players in the portal. So there are other issues as well.

That just means the direction is changing. That doesn't mean that's why I chose this. But there are new things coming and happening. And then you better be really clear and really sharp and really ready for whatever those are and aligned with it to continue.

And if you're not certain you're aligned, then you might want to pause just for a second and reconsider. And if I'm going to do this I know exactly what this new thing is. And then we're going to go.

So the last two years especially, but to say that that discounts the previous 29 or the other 15 as head coach, that's a cumulative effect. I don't know what proportion or percentage to put on that.

Q. You obviously said that Sunday was the first day that it sort of clicked in your head, but I assume that a big decision like this doesn't just instantaneously happen. Was there a moment that you -- or something that really jumped out in your head that said, you know what, I need to consider this, I need to rethink this? What was the time when you said, all right, this is a big decision but it's one I need to consider?

COACH MENDENHALL: There really wasn't a thing. It was just an inquiry on a Sunday at the end of the season as to what is next and how best to help my players and this program and our future, Holly and I and our boys, what's next.

I like direction. I like contemplation. I like doing things intentionally. And so, by the way, this isn't a one-Sunday thing. Right? This is an every Sunday thing and a nightly thing and a morning thing. So I just have a little more time on Sundays because we don't work on Sundays here.

Q. How hard was this decision as it pertains to your staff and especially the guys who made the trip from BYU across the country to do this with you?

COACH MENDENHALL: There's no way to say what that is. These are my closest friends. And this is now their wives and kids who all came. And I'm responsible for all of them. And I love all of them. We were very close before we took this journey. This is now inseparable and galvanized and welded to where you can't break it. I just did in terms of now the paths become different.

My hope the way each person goes, like how they do it, is the same. Where they do it, that's -- yep, that's on me.

Q. And you had said you hadn't hinted to any of them prior to breaking the news to them about an hour ago. They all kind of found out at that moment?

COACH MENDENHALL: They did.

Q. Obviously at home you're a rancher, you're a father, you're a husband. But in the broader picture of the world, as you said, for 31 years you've been a football coach. That's kind of your identity in the world. How hard is it going to be to walk away from that?

COACH MENDENHALL: It's really hard because the world defines me that way and it's kind of easy to define yourself by what you do. Holly has a pretty cool rule where we don't talk about football at home.

So I prefer cowboy, not rancher, but I'll take both. But I love husband. I love father. I love disciple. I love learner. I love just being a good human being. I love just so many other things. And I try to manifest that and demonstrate it through football. That's what I try to do.

And I actually consider myself more a teacher than a coach. And I think there's a difference. So to your question, I don't know how I'm going to do it. I would love to have said I have a plan. I should have just said that. I don't know how yet.

Q. That's my next question. As you're probably trembling somewhat and really shaken by having done this and maybe feeling like you've let people down or whatever. Obviously this is about you more than anything. In your mind, when you shift from, oh, my goodness, I can't believe I did that to, oh, my goodness, this is so exciting that I'm going to do next, how do you see that playing out?

COACH MENDENHALL: I think a couple of things. It's never entered my mind that I've let anybody down. But what has entered my mind. You mentioned trembling, because I don't know what's next, but already, if I didn't think the decision was necessary to become and add more value, then I wouldn't have done it.

So this isn't to break and pause and then become irrelevant. This is actually to break and pause to then become hopefully more impactful in helping and developing and teaching and serving others is what I'm hopeful.

So I'm excited about that. What is it going to look like? I don't know. But I'm already there. There's no remorse. There's emotion. And again after this call, I'm going to go back to seeing who we play in the next game and try to help this team and this institution and this program have success and have a lasting impact on these kids.

And then I'll be able to maybe be able to think about it. I'm addressing it now. But I haven't given -- I would love to say I didn't decide until I had a plan. I don't have a plan.

Q. How did your kids react? Were they, like, dude, you waited until we left the house, and now you're going to be around all the time?

COACH MENDENHALL: Ironic but they basically said we like this version of you better. So I guess I'm different already.

Q. You've often told us this is a results-based business and coaches are judged on wins and losses, but at the same time we know how much you value the relationships you built at Virginia and the culture you've instilled there. When you look back successes to you which one wins out, or is it a combination of all the above?

COACH MENDENHALL: I just view it as the collective. But you have to acknowledge both and compartmentalize both. And I think the world's view of success has to be acknowledged and then the eternal view of success has to be acknowledged.

And as the coach, as the person, you manage both the best you can and acknowledge they're both real. At least they are to me.

And so winning and losing matters. Absolutely. Developing people, wow. I love that part. When ultimately -- you say what's added the most value, man, I hope -- I hope I've hit and addressed all that with the same vigor and attention as the winning and losing.

Q. As far as the impact on recruiting and commitments and the like, have you had a chance to -- are you planning to reach out to some of those folks and kind of tell them what's going on? And what's kind of the plan as far as that goes?

COACH MENDENHALL: I don't have a plan that way. That will be coordinated with our athletic director, et cetera. This is one step at a time. And I've tried to work sequentially through those that I work with, which are my coaches. Those that I care about so deeply in my players. And in the team meeting where all the support staff members were there as well and our football family.

I'm now sharing it with you. And so I'm kind of working from the inside/out as best I can.

Q. Did you ever see yourself as someone who would coach into his 60s, mid-60s, late-60s, or did you always think that probably this day would come sooner rather than later?

COACH MENDENHALL: I think it's more of the second. I remember saying along the way that I would like the end of my life to add so much value that people forgot I was a football coach. And they'd have to go back and look it up, oh, wait that guy, he coached football at some point.

I've tried to add that value at the same time through football. But I would love for the next part to be helpful to others, impactful to others, inspiring to others, to do things of real value and substance.

And maybe someone will remember if I'm wearing an old ball cap or something, oh, wait, you used to be in football, right? And, yeah, I used to be in football.

And that doesn't mean -- I don't want to say because I don't know. Like after some time if I don't say, you know what, that's the very best platform I could do, and I'm needed now maybe more than ever. I could have the biggest impact there. I don't know. So I'm not ruling that out. But there's something. And I'm going to find it.

Q. You've talked about things you're proud of in this program and the accomplishments and the direction of what you've built. Do you have any input or any opinion on what should happen next in the head coaching position? And would you like to see your staff given the opportunity to continue what you've built?

COACH MENDENHALL: So, again, I've already talked about the most intergalactic championship AD in the universe. And my trust and partnership with her is off the chart.

And so I've already made myself available to vet or advise, if needed. We're so aligned. We visited today about all the things that the next head coach should have here. And I couldn't have written it any better.

It was just like we see it exactly the same way. And there is now still more here at UVA to go and do and become. And Carla wants that. I want that. And I'm certain that whoever is chosen for our program will be exceptional. And whoever is lucky enough to join as an assistant coach and a player, it will be an amazing experience for them as it has been for me.

Q. You were promised things in terms of facilities and support. The pandemic got in the way with fundraising, but it's not there yet at UVA. How much more work needs to be done on that front for your successor to reach the next level?

COACH MENDENHALL: Significant, in terms of -- I'll put it this way, significant in relation to expectation of where UVA would really like to be. And there's good progress being made through Carla's work and President Ryan's help. But more is needed. And everybody knows that. So, yeah.

Q. Will you still help me build my fence?

COACH MENDENHALL: So I'll probably charge you now because I won't have an income. So I need to look at what the rates are for a good fence builder and I'll get back to you.

Q. For you over the next couple of weeks what is this going to be like preparing this team for a bowl game now and how does that change in your mind?

COACH MENDENHALL: It doesn't. It goes back to normal because that's the normal thing I do as a coach. And that might be too much to ask, but kids are resilient. And coaches are resilient. And so once the routine starts, again, whenever we start that, in preparation -- we'll find out what game we'll play we'll count back number of days, the practices. We'll know how many days we need to lift and run.

That routine is our bodies, almost like when you drive to work you probably go the same direction and you don't have to think about it much. You move right to that spot, you get going.

And there's security and comfort in that. And so I think that for most of us is what change, what makes it so hard is it's new. It's a new road. It's a new path. I don't know this place. How do you know where do you go? What's that?

My hope is that our focus can be on our preparation, on our team, on the game we're going to play. And I'll work as hard as I can on that and not have the attention on me because, again, the players play. I'm trying to help them become.

And I know it's probably unrealistic under these circumstances but I'm trying to stay on this call for a world record length to diminish the amount of other calls I have to be on between now and when we play.

Q. How will you handle the recruiting aspect the next couple of weeks? There's an early signing day before the bowl game. Will you still be involved in that and talking to recruits? How will that work?

COACH MENDENHALL: Uncertain at this point. What I do know is anyone that chooses UVA has made the best decision of their life to become an amazing person -- the educational part, the community part, the relationship part and the football part. I think it's too much to say it's not influenced by the head coach, but we already know Carla.

We already know the principles she's going to pick someone on. And you're going to have another amazing UVA head coach of any sport. And I don't think there's any risk. Only benefit.

Q. Other than the master plan and the new football home that this program desperately needs, what else would you recommend that the program needs going forward for your successor?

COACH MENDENHALL: I think it's a great question, but I really think -- I'd love for us to find the right venue and let Carla answer that and stay on that point until everybody's tired. And just let her describe that.

And I think -- because I don't think it will sound right and I don't think it's appropriate for me because I'm grateful, but I'm so thankful to be here and the experience I've had. I don't in any way, shape or form want to frame this like if he had this. That's not what I'm saying.

So I think that ought to come from Carla. And that would be hard for me if I saw anything that came out like that, because that's not what I'm saying. I think for Carla moving forward, I think that would be the way to hit that.

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