

Transcript – Tony Elliott Press Conference

Tuesday, August 30, 2022

Q. Season openers can be unpredictable, even for teams that have established coaching staffs. Do you have a sense of what to expect on Saturday, how your team is going to play?

TONY ELLIOTT: Well, how my team is going to play, I have a vision. Now, I'm hoping that that vision comes to life. But the things that are going to be important for me are just the program, philosophical, transferable aspects of what we've been working on, just the little things, playing hard, playing with toughness.

I want to see them get lined up. I want to see them get on and off the field. I want to see how they handle adversity. The Xs and Os of the scheme, really relying on the coordinators at this point because it is, everything is new, so I'm at the point where I'm still coaching the coaches, coaching the players, doing a lot of that. The focus for me is going to be on the little things.

In terms of Richmond, I know they're going to play hard. They're going to come in here confident because they've won in Scott Stadium before against UVA. They're well-coached. They've got some transfers that have come to. Defensively they know what they're doing. They trust their scheme. They've got experience there. Their linebacking corps is really good. They've got some returners on the D-line. Their boundary corner is really, really good. They can put him on an island which allows them to play different types of coverages to your three receiver services and feel good about that.

Offensively kind of a toss-up because they've got a new coordinator coming over and we anticipate it's going to be similar to what he did last year so we're studying some of the things he did last year, but still unknowns.

The biggest thing I challenged our guys is to own the plan, the current plan, based off of what we've seen in the past, what we expect, but in a season opener everybody has got to be ready to adjust, and the only way we're going to be able to adjust effectively is if we know the plan going in so we're not caught off guard with what we see. We can recognize what we see, which gives us confidence if we see something that we can fix it on the sideline.

Q. Does having a returning quarterback and a good one in Brennan (Armstrong) give you more peace of mind than you might have otherwise going into a game like this?

TONY ELLIOTT: It does from the standpoint of just procedurally. He's been in that situation. He knows how to manage the play clock. He knows the system. He can get people lined up, so some of the young guys.

That's the thing about college football is you don't have any preseason games, so the first time you get to see some of these guys, it's in a situation where the real bullets are flying.

It definitely gives you confidence from that standpoint.

Still, at the same time, too, the offense is a little bit new to him. He's done a great job of commanding it thus far, but once you get into a live situation and things start moving fast, it may take him a second or to kind of get settled in, but he'll get settled in before everybody else, which will allow everybody else to make that transition.

Q. During your career, have you had a good sense of how your team was going to look in the opener, or have you had a lot of you thought one thing and you got out there for better or worse and things looked real different? What's been your experience?

TONY ELLIOTT: Over the last probably seven years, you have a good sense of -- but again, you're returning, so you're basing that based off of what you've seen in the past. I wasn't there for any of the games last year, so I've seen things on tape and I know what I've seen on the practice field, but I can't verify that with what I've seen in a game situation.

It's going to be fun. Just really now trying to make sure that the guys are ready to have some fun. Training camp is hard. It's difficult. It's challenging. There's a lot being thrown at them. You're putting them in adverse situations.

Now that we've had a little bit of extra time to prepare for Richmond, which is different than a normal week because you've had all summer and then you've had a portion of the last two weeks to prepare for them, the next couple days is really just getting those guys to control their nerves, not to play the game too soon, but show up feeling good, ready to play, excited, ready to have some fun.

Q. McKale Boley, freshman, starting at left tackle, can you tell us a little bit about him and how he won that job?

TONY ELLIOTT: So a lot of it is (Jonathan) Leech being injured, so he was the next guy up. But for him to even be in the position to be the next guy up, he comes from a pedigree. His dad was a college football player, played in the NFL, so he has that background. He came in with good size. Still can improve from a strength standpoint, but he has the functional strength, and he's big, he's athletic, and it didn't seem to overwhelm him, which allowed him to be able to perform to give us the confidence to say, you know what, if Leech is down for the game and he's going to be the first guy to run out there. So I'm excited for him and his opportunity, and Jim (Daves) let me know that this is the first freshman tackle that's started (in a season opener) since a really good one started as a true freshman (D'Brickshaw Ferguson in 2002).

I'm not going to put that on him, but that is a special accomplishment to be in that situation.

MODERATOR: The last true freshman to start a season opener was D'Brickshaw Ferguson in 2002.

TONY ELLIOTT: As a matter of fact, as we were walking on the practice field, someone let him know that today. One of the guys said yeah, the last freshman to start at tackle was also the fourth pick in the draft, so hopefully that didn't scare him. I'm trying to get him to calm down, not to put any pressure on him. But he loves football. It's important to him, and you can tell that he put in the work to be able to understand the concepts we're asking him to understand and then be able to physically go out and play.

Q. The other spot was running back, and I know you said a couple weeks ago had you had to start somebody at that moment it would have been Perris (Jones). How did he finish off the job in training camp?

TONY ELLIOTT: We're still going with that rotation. Perris will start and then Mike (Hollins) will be the next guy up. I love Mike and challenging Mike. I just believe Mike has got another gear that we can get him to go to, and if he'll push to that gear, then he has a chance to be really good and reach his potential.

Again, new staff, different philosophy, running the football, a little bit of a change, but Perris is a guy that's always done everything you asked him to do, and his confidence is at an all-time high. He's put in the work for this moment, and he just took advantage of his opportunities.

He was the most consistent day in and day out. Not that Mike was bad, but I just think -- we all feel like Mike has an extra gear. You're going to earn it. I mean, you're going to earn the right to run out there first. But Mike will be in there, and I hope that it doesn't become like a situation where he's a gamer. We need to earn trust in practice, not just in the game.

Q. James Jackson is a guy that you've praised as having really high potential. What did you see from him in camp and what do you expect out of him Saturday?

TONY ELLIOTT: Right, James is a guy at the linebacker position that we feel probably has the best movement skills of those guys, so he's a really, really good athlete. He loves football. It's important to him. You can see that he's been able to internalize the defense and process it.

Now, a lot of the reason that he's in that spot is because Josh Ahern is going to be down from the targeting call (against Virginia Tech in 2021). We got verification from the ACC office that because he didn't play the Fenway Bowl, he has to sit the first half of this game, so James got bumped up, but James will be in the rotation.

He's a guy that you could say "or" if you wanted to with him because of the progress that he's made, but it just comes down to the fact that he's a linebacker through and through, he's a physical guy, contact guy, really good instincts, movement skills, and you can see that he's commanding the defense better than he did in the spring, when gives him a chance to play fast.

Q. When you evaluate this team at the start of game week, do you think this is exactly where you guys thought this team would be as far as evaluation?

TONY ELLIOTT: Truthfully, offensive line-wise, it's ahead of where I thought offensive line-wise. I've talked about the guys that have been in the program that may not have the game experience but they're veteran guys.

You look at (Derek) Devine is a guy that's been here, (Jonathan) Leech is a guy that's been here, Jestus (Johnson) has been here for a couple years, (Ty) Furnish is a younger guy, but they've really started to gel. So I'm excited to see those guys because the progress that I've seen them make over the last couple of weeks has been impressive. That's a positive for us because I believe with their progression, we're also going to get more leadership out of that group.

Pleasantly surprised with where they are. The receivers are the receivers. We know those guys can make plays. Brennan (Armstrong) has looked sharp.

So I think offensively those guys are starting to develop a chemistry and kind of hit their rhythm. Now we've just got to put it into practice on the game setting and make sure that we have it.

Defensively still challenging the back end to show up a little bit more than what I've seen so far. I know they're capable. Again, with the system, we play with three safeties, so those guys have to make a lot of calls, a lot of checks, all the formation adjustments. And this is going to be a challenge for those guys, so hopefully they'll have it ready to go by Saturday.

Defensive line-wise, man, I'm anxious to see these guys get turned loose. (Ben) Smiley -- I keep talking about Smiley, but I think Smiley has a very, very bright future. We got him you guys are going to like what you're seeing in Jahmeer Carter and then these grad transfers have really helped us, and the linebacking corps is very solid with Nick (Jackson) and (Josh) Ahern and James (Jackson) and (Hunter) Stewart and (D'Sean) Perry. I think Perry is going to help us, too, at linebacker.

Overall I feel like because of the addition of the grad transfers, with the progress of the offensive line, I think we're probably a little bit ahead of what I was expecting, but now they've got to turn it into performance. That's what I told them earlier this week, that this game is not about potential, it's about performance, so we've got to go out and we've got to perform on Saturday.

Q. Beyond just winning your first game, what are your objectives for the team, your benchmarks for success that you want to see in game 1?

TONY ELLIOTT: It's going to come down to the core values. First it starts with effort. These guys play hard. From snap to snap, when we come in on Monday and we meet as an entire team, how many guys am I going to have to call out for not giving maximum effort? Those are things I want to see. Do we do the little things? Do we get on and off the field the way we're supposed to? Are we in tune to the game? Are we not having any substitution issues? Did we transition smoothly from offense to special teams, special teams to defense and vice versa? Did we do all those things right? Did guys buy into the concept of dressing the right way?

For me it's the little things. We talk about Saturday everybody looking the same for the most part, being a team. Those are the things that I'm going to be evaluating the most after this game.

Then really, you talked about win. For me it's not so much the winning as it is seeing the joy and the smiles and the excitement on the guys' faces in the locker room, so that's what I'm looking forward to the most and then also evaluating, and again, still, I'm teaching. I'm teaching the game because we've never been in a game setting. I'm teaching the staff what the expectations are, so that's what I'm looking for this Saturday.

Q. Did you come out of spring ball thinking that (Ty) Furnish would be the starting center for the opener or did he make a move during camp?

TONY ELLIOTT: He made a move during camp. For us coming out of spring, just being transparent, we were pushing Jestus (Johnson) to be the guy, pushing Jestus to be the guy, be the guy. In fairness to Jestus, he had been a guard and we're trying to make him a center. So it didn't happen as fast.

In that process we were rolling guys, we were rolling Jestus, we were rolling Ty, but Ty finally said, I want to win the job, and not that Jestus didn't do what he was supposed to do, but Jestus feels a little bit more comfortable at guard, and then be a guy that rolls in at center.

So I'm excited about that. It actually worked out better for us that Ty took that step because now we have more versatility, we have more flexibility if let's say Ty doesn't make that step, you're pushing Jestus in at center, then you lose a little bit of depth. But now with where Ty is we've got some flexibility. We're also training up John Paul (Flores) at center, as well, so give us some more flexibility.

Q. You joked about this recently being a head coach for the first time, you've got to do stuff this Saturday that you haven't done before. What do you do to prepare?

TONY ELLIOTT: So the Cav Bowl is what we did last Friday, and it's a scripted dress rehearsal run through of game situations. So trying to put myself in that mindset of transitioning between all of the different things that happen, and also preparing the players for those things.

I don't play any video games because I'm adamant that the video games know when they have an experienced person because they always cheat. Like there's no way that's cover two, you've got to run the football on cover two, you can't stop it with that. And the same thing in the passing game.

So I just gave up on Madden. Great game. My boys love it. The guys love it. But I'm like, man, I'm not going to play that; I know too much, and it's unrealistic, and the computer always speeds up, don't it, and it makes that interceptions. So no video games for me.

But more it's just reviewing situations, going back through my mind and thinking about situations that I've been a part of, starting to think about into the game situations, okay, what are we going to do if it's overtime, do you take the ball, do you go on defense or do you go on offense. Just things of that nature. I've got a little checklist of things that I'm just running through in my mind to make sure that I've at least processed those things so that in that moment it's not something I'm thinking about for the first time.

Q. Jonas Sanker is a guy who had a solid spring. What has he done to get his name on top of the depth chart?

TONY ELLIOTT: Very good athlete, first and foremost. He's a very good athlete, and he's a conscientious guy, and he makes plays. That's what he's done. Now, we've got to see where he is with his shoulder and actually getting guys on the ground, but just athletically he brings something on the back end that makes us better. He's got a nose for the football. He tries hard.

That's the biggest thing is his athleticism and his versatility because we can play him in multiple spots in a three-safety look that we have.

Q. This has been a year of firsts for you. How does game week 1 kind of equate to that and just kind of -- I know you said at the beginning of fall camp it's not about you, but do you take a moment this week to think about it?

TONY ELLIOTT: You know, I haven't yet because it's just constantly -- every day is something new for me so it hasn't been routine yet to where I can think about it. Cool moment today, though, is the guys got their suits for travel, and we also got them a little garment bag. You'd be surprised how many of them had no idea how to hang their suit and put it in a garment bag, man. That's what it's all about to me, and just to see those guys be excited.

But I'm going to try not to, like I always do, and not make it about me and make it about these players because at the end of the day on Saturday, I can't step on the field. All I can do is be there to support them and guide them and help them if they need to be helped.

Q. Brennan Armstrong is on track to break several school records this upcoming season. What are your expectations for Brennan coming into this year?

TONY ELLIOTT: I just want Brennan to win because that's what he came back to do is to win and be the best version of himself, and hopefully the offense will allow for him to be able to break those records. But for us, and as I told him, we're installing a Virginia offense, and there's things that are going to help you for the future. Things are going to be different than what you've done in the past, so we're going to work really, really hard to be a balanced team and establish the run, and then allow you to benefit with all the things that come off of it, but play in the system and not put that pressure on you to always come up with a play and be the guy that's got to make a play. Use your playmakers around.

I think if we can establish the run, then he'll have his opportunities to deliver the ball down the field, intermediate and in the quick game and in our outlet run game -- outlet run, I mean our screen game, which is our outlet run game. I think he's got a chance to do anything he wants to do, but my expectation for him is to lead, improve in the areas that he's identified he wants to improve, and then have fun and go win a bunch of games.

Q. These guys are still kind of new to you and you said you haven't seen them in a game. What's your approach to making sure they don't take an FCS opponent lightly? And Clemson, what's the plan?

TONY ELLIOTT: Right, so again, I spent 11 years at Clemson, so it's like it's my DNA, and I played for Coach (Dabo) Swinney, and even prior to us meeting we had a lot of shared values and ideas.

The thing that I'm trying to instill in these guys and get them to buy into is man, every game is the biggest game on your schedule. Richmond, no offense to them, but they're just a nameless, faceless opponent, and it's about us. It doesn't matter who we're playing.

I'm challenging them to establish what is going to be our standard of play. I know what the standard should be, but I want them to establish the standard, and then I can guide them and say, okay, that's the standard, or no, you need to push yourself a little more to reach that standard.

For us it's a daily focus. We just talk about what can we control today. So all we talked about today was take over. Let's take over today. Let's do all the things we need to do, own the situations, be intentional,

be appreciative, and then be present. Those were the key words today, and we talked a little bit about desire and that motivation, and part of the passage that I shared with them in the description of desire is that metaphorically desire is the breakfast of champions.

Just kind of get these guys to understand that it's about us, it's not about your opponent, and then also be honest with them, and if this is not the biggest game of the schedule, lose it and see what happens. So this is the biggest game on the schedule. We can't worry about anything else.

We know there a really, really good football team that's well-coached that's probably got a chip on their shoulder because they want what you've got. Let's embrace that and let's go -- but let's not make it about them, let's make it about us, and if we do that each week and treat every week like it's the biggest game of the year, then you'll develop that consistency because now you're working to a standard and not an opponent. That's been the message throughout just day one since I've gotten here. It's never about the opponent, it's never about the time, it's never about the uniform, it's never about any of those things; it's about, okay, a standard that we're trying to establish.

Clemson, rightfully so, they've established that standard. This group right here, which is so awesome, they get to start a legacy. They get to be the ones that set the expectations and the standard of performance for Virginia football.

So I know they've got some statistical records that they could chase, but more importantly I think they've got something that will live forever. They get a chance to set the legacy and the standards and the expectations for what Virginia football looks like this year and moving forward.

Q. Do you get the sense that they want to be part of that and they want to be the guys to set the standard and start building something?

TONY ELLIOTT: Oh, yeah. They, first and foremost, want to become champions in their own right, and I'm not talking about champions on the field per se, but just in their personal lives. They want to be the best versions of themselves. They love challenges. That's why they came to UVA. If you're not a person that embraces the challenges, then you don't come to UVA because this environment here is a challenging environment both physically and mentally every day that you're on the grounds.

They want to win. They have the expectations to win. It's my job as the leader of the program to empower the staff to develop them so that they have the proper mindset to be able to not just win on the field but win in their daily lives.

Q. Do you have a good feel for the excitement level outside the program, fans, community, for your debut?

TONY ELLIOTT: I don't, because I really haven't paid attention. I've heard people say that people are excited, but if you know me, I keep my life simple. I don't go on Twitter. I don't pay attention to any of that. Because one, you can always get caught up in what that excitement is, and I want them to maintain that excitement, so I'm focused on working every single day as hard as I can to do what I'm supposed to do to prove that the excitement needs to stay where it is.

I'm excited for the guys. I'm excited for Wahoo Walk that the fans are going to get to embrace the players, that the players are going to get to embrace the fans, the players are going to get to see their families. Just again, creating that appreciation. There's a connection, so there's an appreciation.

So I'm excited about those things, but in terms of just my presence, I don't pay much attention to that.

Q. You had a pretty strong homefield advantage at your last job. How important can that be, and how important is it to you to build that here at Virginia?

TONY ELLIOTT: Oh, it's critical. Before you can go on the road and consider yourself a road warrior, you've got to defend your home turf, and you've got to take pride in that, and that's where it starts.

Then also you have a responsibility to those that came before you to defend the home turf, so that's where it starts.

I believe that at Scott Stadium we can create the most difficult place for other teams to play in the ACC. I've seen just in brief glimpses going out there with the first years, the class of '26, and the amount of noise that they made, just themselves, lets you know that we can create an environment in Scott Stadium that is a lot of fun for the guys, that just fuels that desire to defend it, but then also makes it a difficult place for opponents to come in.

So it starts with defending your home turf before you can be ready to go on the road and be victorious.

Q. Richmond's transfer quarterback (Reece Udinski) and transfer receiver (Jakob Herres), they're pretty accomplished, going back to their time at BMI. What stands out to you about them?

TONY ELLIOTT: Just first of all, tremendous amount of respect for what those guys do. The quarterback is athletic. He can pull the ball. He can run it. Receiver is big, versatile. They've got him back there catching punts, so he's a big athlete that can run around and do a lot of things, so our guys are going to have to be ready to play, and again, they're going to come in with a chip on their shoulder with something to prove, so I'm excited for our guys and the challenge that those two guys and the rest of the team. Every one of their kids is going to play hard. We can't expect anything less from those guys, but that's how you want it.

I've also told the team, too, that we want to expect to win and not hope that our opponent doesn't show up or hope that our opponent makes a mistake so that we win. We want everybody's best shot so that when we win we have a great appreciation for it.