

**Virginia Football Media Conference  
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**Coach Tony Elliott  
Press Conference**

**Q. You know your way around the Carrier Dome or whatever it's called now. Are there unique challenges as the visiting team playing in that environment when you don't typically play in a dome?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Yeah, I figured this question was coming. I didn't know if it was going to be a lead question, considering the experiences that I've been a part of going up to Syracuse. Definitely they create a home field advantage. They do a great job regardless of the size of the crowd. They find a way to make it loud in there.

Those guys in my experience, they always play tough at home. You've got to go in, and you've got to take it from them.

My plan is to show the guys the dome because I asked a lot of the guys on the team if anybody had been there, and there were very few hands that have gone up.

I think it would be important to get them there, kind of learn from Illinois. The schedule was a little bit different, but I wanted to make sure that we had some time for those guys to go in, see it, see the locker room, walk around on the field, see the new ceiling that they put in, for guys that are going to be catching balls in the lights.

We're definitely going to get there early so those guys can see the Carrier (JMA Wireless) Dome.

**Q. We're obviously going to chase the storyline all week of Coach (Robert) Anae and Coach (Jason) Beck and going against their former**

**pupils. From a football standpoint, is there any value to having players and coaches who know them? Do you change the schedule to sit for a half hour, or is that overrated?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** To be honest with you, I'm not -- I haven't been following the storyline. I don't know what the storyline is. The only challenge that I had to my guys, because they do have relationships with those individuals, is let's not make it bigger than what it needs to be. It's all about the game. Let's focus on what we can control.

But I'm not adjusting the schedule. I'm not trying to get any additional information or do anything different, because the key is we've got to get into a routine, and I think as we go forward, the guys will become better at understanding the biorhythm that it takes to be successful.

So I'm not adjusting anything, changing anything, doing anything different, other than the short week causes me to possibly change up just a little bit because you lose a whole day of preparation, but more importantly, lose a whole day of rest, because for me it's all about the game week, and so if we're playing a day earlier, then that means that Sunday we lost.

It's in essence, today is I guess physically Tuesday, right? It's really Tuesday. For my mind, it's Wednesday. We just finished our Wednesday practice.

(Short interruption due to Zoom feed freezing.)

Two, we've got to be disciplined, and then we've got to make sure that we capitalize when we can capitalize, because if you win a 10-play drive with what they do on defense, you could see 10 different fronts. You could see 10 different fronts. You could see a different assortment of blitzes. They've got guys all over the place.

Our guys are really going to have to trust their training and communicate and they're going to make it difficult to communicate because of how loud it gets in there.

It's always a challenge. They do a great job, and they're good coaches, and what they do is give their guys a chance because if you look at their roster, defensively they've got a lot of young guys, and they've got guys that they're developing, so the guys may not be the size that they want them, so then they have to put them in positions to make plays while they're trying to develop them.

I would say they're all over the place. They have a rhyme and reason. It's hard for you on this side to figure out what that rhyme and reason is, but our guys are going to have to be disciplined because they're going to see odd fronts, they're going to see bear fronts, they're going to see Okie fronts, they're going to four-down fronts, they're going to see all the different variations, three-three stack. They do it all. I don't know how I'm going to have enough time to coach all of it, to be honest with you.

**Q. Considering how much and how frequently Coach Anae threw the ball when he was at UVA, is it surprising to see Syracuse at 60 percent run? Is it surprising to see the number that high?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Well, again, and I don't know the previous coaching staff because Coach Anae wasn't actually here when I came in. I think he was back in Hawai'i during the time that I was here. I did meet Coach Beck, but we didn't have a ton of time together.

Good coaches, they're going to do what their personnel allows them to do, and when you've got a running back, I think he was close to 2,000 yards last year or something like that, he had an outstanding season. He's a really, really good player, and then you've got (Garrett) Shrader who is a big athlete that can run the ball.

When I had Kelly Bryant (at Clemson), I was going to run the ball with Kelly Bryant because it gave you an extra hat. Good coaches are going to play to their personnel and they're going to play to the strengths of their personnel.

They've done a good job of scoring points. It took a little while in the last game, but in the fourth quarter they came alive, hit some big plays, but that quarterback is a problem. You could see they're attempting to throw the ball, but they're also telling him if it's not there, if you don't like your reads, then you pull it down and you run, and it takes three, four guys to get him down.

**Q. I know you've been displeased with the turnovers offensively. You were a coaching staff, that you emphasized ball security. When you already emphasize it and it's a problem, what can you do to correct it?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** You know, to be honest, you can create a little bit more accountability, but I was here, I remember back I think it was 2016 was the year that man, we just were turning the ball over left and right and I think Deshaun (Watson) had a bunch of interceptions. We learned a valuable lesson. You've got to coach it, you've got to demand it, you've got to inspect it, you've got to continue to work on it, but you can't make it bigger than what it is. You can't make it something that the guys are scared to play that paralyzes them. We'll just continue to work ball security, take time to get the guys to truly understand the fundamentals associated with them.

You can tell, you assume that guys know five points of pressure, but when you ask them what are the five points of pressure, they don't know. So you've got to go back and you've got to teach.

So there's some things that you might make an assumption that you've got to make sure that

you dig into, and you've just got to work through it and illustrate to the guys.

I made the comparison, if you look at the playoff teams over the last several years and you break down the number of turnovers, it's somewhere in the 15 to 18, I'd say, in a season is championship level. We're already at seven in three games. I think there's only two teams that have won the National Championship and were negative in the turnover margin and it was like a 1980 something Miami and a 2016 Clemson team. So that's an anomaly.

So just trying to educate the guys, put an emphasis on it, coach it, have accountability, but also don't make it bigger than what it needs to be because they'll work themselves through it. It's kind of like a guy in a slump; you don't tell him to stop swinging. Or a guy that's missing shots, you've got to keep shooting. We've just got to keep working on it.

**Q. I know you said you didn't get to really meet Anae or talk to him that much and you had a limited time with Coach Beck, but what have you learned about them maybe through the players in this program and about their system kind of watching back last year?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** They did a great job of being creative and using their personnel. They had a different approach. That's just my perspective, and I don't know this for certain, but it was more kind of just go make plays, we're going to focus more on the play aspect, where my approach is more off of the timing, the design of the play, the progressions of the reads, the balance on offense.

So they did a great job with what they did. They found a way. I think it helped Brennan (Armstrong) because he was able to get in a rhythm where he threw the ball a lot, where it's a little bit different here, and it's more -- in the pros you don't throw the ball every single play. You have to be balanced. There's going to be

times you've got to hand it off. You've got to manage the game.

I think that's a little bit of where Brennan is he's trying to make every single play for us because he had that freedom last year in the system, and he was confident.

Again, he's a playmaker, whereas here I want him to play within the system and make the required play. I had that discussion with him today, said hey, maybe the required play is throw the ball away. That's the best football play.

You never go broke making a profit. Chad Morris taught me that. You never go broke making a profit, and sometimes the profit is hey, throw the ball away as opposed to scrambling around and you take a loss and now you're behind the chains.

In this game in particular with Syracuse's defense, we need to stay ahead of the chains because you get in long yardage, they're making 3rd down calls and they're getting exotic and they can create some pressure or disrupt your timing.

The biggest thing I learned is they fit their personnel with the kids that they had. They built it around them. The guys were confident in it. They had success, and now it's just a transition because my philosophy is a little bit different.

**Q. Logan Taylor is one of the offensive linemen who's been kind of thrown in this year to the fire. He would appear to have the stature you would want in an offensive tackle. Did he take a step forward against ODU after a rough game against Illinois?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** He did, and when you look at Logan Taylor, he didn't go through the spring. He was coming off of a hip.

Then right there before camp he came down with a little bit of illness and he lost a bunch of weight. We wanted him to come in close to 300 pounds and he came in closer to 280. So now he's starting to build himself back up, and then with (Jonathan) Leech going down, now he's playing both sides.

He's just a young guy. He's a guy that hasn't played much. So he's thrown into the fire, and now he's playing left tackle and right tackle, and he could possibly be doing it in the middle of a series.

But I thought he made -- I thought overall, the line made progress just developing that cohesion, developing that timing, and I think that's one thing that -- a luxury that Brennan had is he had those five guys last year that played together, experienced. He could take some time; they were going to protect him.

Here you've got young guys in there and they're trying to figure it out, and you've got a target on your back, too, because everybody is going to come after you at times.

I'm just thinking in particular the one sack fumble down there was an RPO, but the quarterback has got to manage that so he knows if he's throwing, he's got to send the back off the edge to protect him on the backside. Well, he doesn't do that, and then he's sitting there and the guy hits him. It's just a growth process offensively with all those guys, just understanding the details of what we're doing.

**Q. Antonio Clary and Billy Kemp didn't play last game. Are they available for this game?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Yeah, so Billy, his situation happened on Friday. He had been battling some illness but was practicing, doing well, and then he just became severely dehydrated and then had to go get some tests run. He's doing better now, but we're just erring on the side of caution to make sure that -- most important thing for

me is his health overall, and it's not a severe situation, but he needs to be cleared from a doctor, and he won't be able to go to the doctor until tomorrow, so we're not going to push it, so I don't anticipate that he'll be cleared.

Antonio is day-to-day. He's dealing with the stinger issue that you saw in the game, and really it's just a matter of how quickly the nerve responds and he has the proper amount of strength. So it could be a game-day decision, but he was out there today. He was running around. He was in a green jersey, which means no contact, but I saw him in a tackling drill, so obviously he's feeling better, so he'll be a game time, but I don't anticipate that Billy will be available this week.

**Q. With D'Sean Perry, we saw him at end. What did you think of that move and him back to that position, and how do you think he played this past Saturday?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** You know, I think that he's a guy that you get fooled by his stature. He's a strong individual for a guy his size. We felt like with the depth that we had, with the addition of the grad transfers at that position in Chico (Bennett Jr.) and the best thing for him long-term was to move to linebacker, and he had taken well to that. We were excited about the progress he's making there.

But it was a situation where (Jack) Camper was nursing an injury, so we just needed some depth and put him back there, and obviously what he does is he creates a different change of pace for those guys on the offensive line with his speed and athleticism.

Then he's a lot more powerful than you think, so I thought he did a good job.

Man, he's really, really come on and become a guy that's taken pride in special teams. We've told him that he needs to be a four-unit kind of guy. He needs to try to be on every special teams as he continues to develop at linebacker.

What my objective is to get into a situation to where we can build some competitive depth, but when you're fumbling the ball and you're having penalties and you're not scoring, then it's tough to take a Nick Jackson out of the game when you're living and dying on every single play to develop your depth.

So the challenge is for our guys to have the mentality to finish, finish the drives. You've got two fumbles inside the 10-yard line. You miss a field goal. Then you have a turnover in a two-minute drill that was unnecessary.

So there's just so much to teach, and I think that they're used to just kind of playing ball, and I want them to be able to play ball but within the framework of the game and understanding the situation -- being aware of situational football.

I thought we just didn't do a good job from a situational standpoint, in particular on offense.

Then defensively, same thing. Two-minute drill, right. Your eyes in man coverage don't need to be in the backfield on the quarterback. You need to have your eyes on the guys, especially when you're playing against the kind of players that you're playing against. The tight end and No. 0, those are two really good players.

One was on coaching. They got us in a match-up. They did a good job to formation it to where they got 0 matched up on a linebacker. The receiver should win that. That's what you're telling them and that's what you're looking for.

The other one, some of those big corner balls, our DBs not trusting their technique, and they've got their eyes and they're peeking in the backfield instead of keeping your eyes on your guy and then playing the indicators. When his eyes look back or when his eyes get big, and if you're not in position to turn for the ball, then you play through his hands.

Just a lot of opportunities to grow these guys, both fundamentally and then also from a situational standpoint.

**Q. Coach (Des) Kitchings talked a lot about Brennan needing to be more Brennan (Armstrong). When you talk about transitioning kind of styles of offense to this year, how does Brennan be Brennan in this kind of more system of an offense?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** You know, I think for Brennan, it's one, just quit worrying about everything. Just worrying about what's going on, what's being said, and just focus on controlling what you can control.

So I think that being Brennan means that when there's times you want him to go make a play, and it's kind of a slippery slope, but then also, too, what I don't need you to do is change your footwork away from what we're asking you to do and drift in the pocket. You can still be Brennan in the pocket and make that throw.

So having that confidence to still believe that you can make every throw, but just do it within the framework of the system, and then where I want to see him grow, too, is from a quarterback standpoint of just managing the game, and I think that's an area where he's working every single day.

In particular coming off the goal line we got the sprint out. We had a busted assignment at receiver, receiver converted a route when he wasn't supposed to convert a route. You see it; it's over; throw the ball away, because we're in a backed-up situation. Now we're going to punt and play field position.

As opposed to running around, he's trying to make a play. Yeah, well, you know, you're just outside the goal line; you get tackled there, that's a TFL. Now we cannot have -- we don't have enough room to be able to have a traditional punt, so now we've put ourselves in a tight punt situation, which is advantage to the

other side, whereas we throw that away, we move on to the next down, and then we punt the ball out of there and you don't take unnecessary hits.

That's the thing that I'm trying to get him to understand is like hey, it's okay. You're a warrior, and I know you're a warrior, and I will never question your toughness, but I need you to be smart, too, because your body is your greatest asset, and you don't need to take unnecessary hits. So the one where he fumbled, if you look at that, two things. We started the two-minute drive; we throw the ball to Tay; he's scrapping, but get out of bounds. Get out of bounds and stop the clock.

He's trying to make somebody miss and get back to out of bounds, but that's probably not going to happen. So then we're in a short yardage situation, he pulls the ball, makes the right read, he's got a lane to run, get the 1st down, get down, move the chains. Let's go on to the next play. We're scrambling around, trying to win the play on that one -- win the game on that one play, and then it results in a fumble.

He wasn't trying to fumble, but he was playing and playing ball and the ball got away and right before contact, so now I'm trying to coach that, hey, when your wrist is below your elbow, you don't have the power to possess the ball, especially when you have contact on the ball.

We could have avoided that if we were just playing situational football, and understand we're going into the half, so we're not playing for a specific amount of points, we're just playing for points. So even a field goal is good in that situation.

We were in position if we did that, then who knows what would have happened on the next play. We probably could have got a field goal and not a turnover in that situation.

**Q. Xavier Brown has continued to impress. How would you assess his play and your running back group as a whole three weeks into the season?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Yeah, man, he's come on the scene and just shown how tough he is. We knew he was a really good football player, but you never know how physical and tough a guy is until you get him in your system and you put him under the fire, but this young man, he's 190 pounds, but he don't care. He's running north and south. He believes that it's going to take more than one guy to tackle him. He has a good understanding of what we're trying to do, and there's not a whole lot of bad habits that you have to break.

I think that the running back room is coming together as a group. I think that's really, really important, because that's eventually going to bring the best out of each one of them.

Want to see Cody (Brown) a little bit more. He got -- we said, third series you're going in, so he gets put in in a backed-up situation, so there wasn't a ton, but at the same time, too, there's still opportunity for growth.

So I think the room is coming together. We've got to take care of the football, and I think the young guy kind of puts the old guys on notice. As I've said in the past and I always say, game recognizes game, so those guys recognize that this young buck, he's going to do it the way we ask him to do it. He's going to give everything he has; he's going to practice the right way; and then when he gets into the game he's going to produce.

At the end of the day, it's all about production, not necessarily potential.

**Q. I'm guessing there will be more kickoffs than returns inside the dome with those conditions, but is (Demick Starling going to -- does he get another shot at returner or are you going back with (Mike) Hollins?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Yeah, so both of those guys will still battle it out, give them opportunities. Again, Mike has done a good job for the most part on kickoff return. He's done a good job. I thought he was playing well. He just put the ball on the ground. That's just twice near the goal line you put the ball on the ground, and for him, too, I want to challenge him as an older guy just from accountability and ownership standpoint.

It could have been a mesh issue. I'm not discrediting that, but I want to see these guys say hey, Coach, it was my fault. It was my fault. I'll fix it. I'm going to go to work.

I think that's just collectively as a team, that's a mindset that we've got to change. Hey, something goes wrong I'm going to fix it, it's my fault, and not necessarily trying to give a dissertation on what happened.

Mike, and I told him -- as a matter of fact I told him last week, I said man, you've been practicing very, very well, playing very, very well for the most part, just got to take care of the football. It's got to be important to you.

What I used to tell my backs when I coached them as a coordinator, I'd say hey, man, if I put it in your hands close to the box, you'd better put it in because I'm not going to give it to you again. If you don't get it in the first time, then I'm going quarterback run, I'm getting an extra hat or I'm going to throw a fade to one of these big, tall receivers. Just trying to create that mindset that when you're that close to the goal line, put it in the box.

Also from an offensive standpoint, understand that anytime you snap the ball, there's a potential for something negative to happen, so let's go ahead and score so that we can eliminate the opportunities for a negative to possibly happen.

**Q. What kind of a sense do you have three games in now that guys know what Coach Ruzinski is looking for defensively and they're**

**maybe not thinking about it as much and just going out and playing?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Yeah, you're seeing that on that side of the ball, the guys are playing a little bit more free than we are on offense. I think on defense, too, defensive football is assignment sound just like it is offensively, but a lot of it, too, is effort, getting to the football, finding a way to make a play, whereas offensively it's a lot more all 11 on the same page, poetry in motion, guys working together.

What you see is you've got a couple of guys that are a little bit older that are leading, leading the right way. Nick Jackson has been awesome here the last three weeks. I've really challenged him to be more vocal, so he's being more vocal with his play and with his words. You're seeing that.

The competition, all those guys wanting to play, especially on the D-line, and you can roll multiple guys, and then on the back end, still challenging the guys on the back end, especially at corner, to play a little bit more physical.

But you see those guys, they trust what he's doing, and then on the offensive side, the flipside is the guys know that we know what we're doing, but at the same time, too, you've got some veteran guys that have had success doing it their way. So it's just finding that happy balance to say look, fellas, there's another way that we can do it. Just trust. Just trust and we'll show you.

Ultimately you're going to get the similar results, once you just trust, and then you've got to find some competitive depth, too. What you're seeing is the guys on defense aren't playing as many snaps individually, whereas on offense right now we're having to play the guys pretty much every snap because we're getting them to get the system down and then the young guys aren't getting as many reps and proving that they're trustworthy to get in there when the game is in a very tight situation.

**Q. You hit on a bunch of things about the dome in terms of the atmosphere and the physical structure. How about your experiences there, if you want to go there.**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Hey, it is what it is. We've taken some really good -- I've been a part of some really good teams that have gone up there on a Friday night and not had success.

But Coach (Dino) Babers and his staff, they do a great job. Their guys are going to play hard. They take pride in playing at home. We've lost -- I've been a part of some success up there, too, so it's not just one-sided.

But I've just been challenging the guys and letting them know, that hey, I don't want to make it bigger than what it is, but you've got to understand what you're getting ready to walk into, because these guys take a lot of pride, and they do a good job of creating a really good atmosphere for those guys to play in, which makes it tough for opposing offenses when they get to go in and the noise is -- if you give them momentum, they're going to capitalize.

**Q. Do you have the fight song --**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** We've got the fight song, we've got the train. Just trying to get them used to all the different noises that they're going to hear.

**Q. You mentioned with Syracuse on a 10-play drive you might see 10 different fronts. What challenge does that present to calling running plays for the play caller?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** You know, I think you have to make sure that you don't have too many variations because you're going to have to prepare your guys by showing them all the different looks, because it's going to be too hard to just do a check with me all the time and try to get into the perfect place. You're going to have to have call-it-and-run-its, and when you

have that, then the offensive line has to block whatever they see.

So the biggest thing is the backs got to understand what kind of game this is. I call this - - you've got to get the dirty yards. You've got to run through the smoke, kind of like NASCAR. There's a wreck in front of you, but you'd better hit the gas and close your eyes and hope you come through on the other side. They're going to have to have a downhill mentality, and they're going to have erasers because it's going to be hard to expect the guys up front to be perfect with all of the movements.

It's not just the alignments. They align one way, and then they're constantly moving. If you watch them, there's a twist game on every game. They've got the backers coming in and picking and looping and all that kind of stuff.

I think you're going with your base run plan. Don't make it too expansive, and then prepare the guys the best you can, and then capitalize, too, because some of the opportunities are going to be there.

With all the movement, there's going to be some creases. So the back has got to have clear vision. He's got to be locked in. He's got to find the crease, and once he sees the crease, he's got to have the eye-foot coordination to be able to make the cut to hit the crease and then stay ahead of the chains. That's the key; if you can stay ahead of the chains, then you can also keep them out of some of the exotic stuff that they get into in long yardage.

**Q. On the flipside, it looks like your pass rush is making some progress. Just talk about where they are.**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Yeah, biggest thing, and that was a challenge. Each Monday, I go through kind of the positives and negatives of the game, and one of the things to improve on defense was pass rush in a critical situation. I was like, man, boys, we've got two-minute drives, now



we've got to get to the quarterback. We've got to affect the quarterback precision on the twist game. Kam (Butler) is starting to become more comfortable. He's the most twitchy guy that we have, and moving him around, putting him on the inside, creating some match-up advantages, which you'll see a lot of people do with some of their hybrid ends.

The guys are playing better with their hands, and I think the combination of all those things and the ability to have different packages and put guys in different spots and then have fresher guys coming in and rushing, so it's a little bit different when a guy is rushing on -- you don't want him to be, but if he's rushing on play 30 in the game opposed to play 80, it's a big difference.

**Q. You mentioned looking for some of the positives and the negatives when you're reviewing with the team. We harped on turnovers, dropped passes, 16 points. You guys had over 500 yards of total offense. I know you're not happy with the other stuff, but is there a part of you that looks at that and says, hey, we're close? We're there?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** That was the positives that -- obviously you hit several of the things we've got to improve. Precision with the execution was something just overall we had to improve. The missed assignments, we had some mental errors that resulted in some negative plays, the drops. But the positive was we moved the ball. I felt like we moved the ball, and if you just clean that up, man, look what you can potentially be.

So I think we spent a lot of time saying hey, it's not all -- we're not going to throw the baby out with the bath water. We're not going to scrap everything. That's two out of the three games -- we played bad at Illinois. There's no getting around that. But two of the three games, and yes, you can say it was an FCS and a Group of Five, but still, you had 500 plus in two games, and you're balanced, you're running the

football, you're over 200 yards twice rushing. That's something that we as an objective have.

The drops, there were some that were competitive that were probably 50/50, but we want the ball caught, and there were some that were just hey, trying to do too much, trying to run before you caught the ball. If we just clean those things up, just imagine what you can be.

Definitely pointing that out from a positive perspective, highlighting the rushing. I'm proud of the guys for finding ways to run the football, and we've just got to continue to work through that, and I think the guys -- you saw a different sense of urgency this week, and I believe that was how I pointed out -- I pointed out after Richmond that we didn't handle success well, okay, and then pointed out after Illinois how we have to manage failure, and now you're back to a situation on okay, you had success, are you going to manage it the right way, or are you going to not learn from your mistake with Richmond.

I think the guys, even with the short week, they've pushed. You see a sense of urgency. They take pride in their performance. They don't want to drop the ball. They don't want to make penalties. They don't want to do those things. But it all goes back to how do you practice and are you having an intentional purpose every single snap or do you kind of fluctuate, and then when you fluctuate, it results in the game because that's what happens in the game. That's how you're training.

How you're training is how you're going to fight, and then fortunately how you fight is how you train. This week has been a good job of the guys training the right way, so I'm very, very excited to see if they can transition that to the field on Friday.

**Q. How has been the catching in practice?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Actually it's been a lot cleaner. It's been a lot cleaner. It hasn't been perfect. We missed a couple throws. We've dropped one here and there. But I've noticed a different sense of urgency with the guys.

I think, too, in fairness to these young men, they've been through a lot. You think about these guys, they were on the verge of having a winning season potentially, getting ready to go to a bowl game, to then now they go through a coaching transition, and then here comes a new staff, and then you think about the guys defensively, man, they're just looking for something positive.

The guys offensively, it's like hey, show me what you've got. So it's just working through those dynamics with these young men to get them to trust us.

I understand that, and we have to work every single day to earn these young men's trust. I think the more that they trust us that we have good intentions, that we want to help them become better first and foremost as men and then help them become better as students and then as football players, the more you'll see it reflect in their play.