

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

TONY ELLIOTT: Just talking in reference to the running game, we got lucky a little bit in the first half because, as I told you, there was going to be a lot of different fronts, a lot of different parts. Didn't block things as well as we wanted to in the first half. Settled in in the second half. Perris (Jones) running like we expect Perris to run. He found a couple things.

In the passing game, I think we just need, with this group, that early play, that early spark. I think you look at that first drive, just off the fingertips of KT (Keytaon Thompson) on that first down call there. The frustrating thing is that third and accept, right hash, that throw he makes, that's a big-time throw. We're not making those consistently.

I think it's starting to come together. It is a transition. It's a change. We're challenging Brennan (Armstrong) to throw on rhythm, which is a little bit different than what he's used to. He's used to kind of sitting back there, being able to let things unfold. Some of the things we're asking him to do is to throw on rhythm.

We're asking the guys to read coverage and be able to make some adjustments. With that, it takes a little bit of time, chemistry and cohesion.

We're not far. We just need to find a way to hit that big one. If we hit that touchdown throw in that first drive to KT we're just a

little bit high, again, Brennan is trying to get it over the defender. We're not far off. The guys got to just continue to work, continue to believe, to have confidence in the direction that we're going.

In the meantime, run game complements that. As the offensive line continues to gain experience with the play-action pass, the things that come off the run game... Give Syracuse credit, man, they're going to challenge you with all the different movement. We struggled a little bit, to be honest with you, up front. Syracuse is not overall large, but they're quick. The quickness kind of got to us a little bit early on and the guys settled in, were able to pass that off.

Q. With the forecast for this weekend, you have to have a couple of different game plans based on whatever the weather is.

TONY ELLIOTT: Right. In my experience what I'm used to and where we started is we'll put together a plan based off of what we've seen on tape, okay? That's where we'll start. Within that plan we'll have variations of things that we can do to give us an opportunity to attack the structure. As you get closer to the week, the forecast.

I think back to the Notre Dame game we played. It was a torrential downpour. We had our plan and on game day made adjustments on thought process on passing game. But the run game will be installed. Our RPOs off of the run game will have to be there. Depending on how wet it is, the conditions of the ball.

We started practicing with a wet ball today, making sure that the guys get used to catching the ball. The receiver's got to be

comfortable with taking the shields off to make sure they can see, being prepared when their gloves get wet to take those off and catch the ball.

But we'll have a plan for all different weather conditions, whether it's no rain. Kind of like we were talking the NC State-Notre Dame game where it's a monsoon. I think back to '01 that we played Georgia Tech at Clemson, that would have been my junior year. No, it was '02. Same thing, hurricane coming through, a downpour. You had to take all the gloves off and be prepared to catch the ball with your body if you have to.

We're preparing and we'll have a plan. It will be adjusted once we actually see what the conditions are when we get there. But we're prepared.

Q. Nick Jackson, his ejection. He said textbook when he watched it on film because his head was down. What did you see? What are you coaching him from that?

TONY ELLIOTT: That's a tough one because the quarterback's going down. I think if the quarterback's not going down, probably not going to be as big of an issue.

The quarterback's positioning, where he was sliding down, that's a football play. You have to tell them, as we always tell them, Keep your eyes up. If he keeps his head up and he doesn't duck the crown of the head, I think they will let him hit facemask to facemask. They've backed off on the targeting rules. If you're not ducking your head, you can play football.

Try to be as smart as possible. Again, in the heat of the moment, that's a guy trying to make a football play. Not going to say much other than, Hey, keep your face up, see what you're hitting. If you see what you're hitting, you got a good chance to not be in the targeting position.

Q. D'Sean Perry is starting. What do you like about him in that spot? Who kind of takes on Nick's role?

TONY ELLIOTT: Nick (Jackson) is going to continue to lead. As I've said before, still to this point, he's the leader of the football team. He leads everybody just with the way he approaches business. His voice is really starting to assert within the team. He'll still lead.

(Josh) Ahern, as well. He has to step up his leadership role. Perry in particular. What you love about Perry is he's physical, he's strong, he's a violent guy. Who is twitchy. One of the more twitchy guys we have on the team. Still a little bit more inexperienced at the backup position.

Coming into the season, we felt the best thing for him and the football team was for him to move to the linebacker spot as opposed to edge rusher. Last week we had to put him back as rusher because of depth.

What you like is the ability to go sideline to sideline. You're playing a team that can spread you out, has skill guys that can run, have to have a backer that can defend the pass but also the run.

That's where we'll start. It's going to be him, Hunter, Ahern, James Jackson. They all got to be ready to go. Once we're able to turn

Nick loose in the second half, we're excited about getting him back for the second half of that game.

Q. You must be really proud of Coach Rud (Rudzinski) and his staff, the numbers they're putting up on that side of the ball.

TONY ELLIOTT: Just really was kind of word-of-mouth. Two of the guys that I knew right out the gate that I was going to try to go get because of the relationship was (Kevin) Downing. That was at Navy. Then Keith (Gaither) was at Army. They all played each other.

Just in talking to them, trying to get a feel for who are the guys that they knew of, they immediately said, Man, the guy at Air Force does a really, really good job.

He was kind of not looking other than he put a feeler out saying that Virginia would be the type of job that he would leave for. It was one of those situations like it kind of just all fell into place, to be honest with you.

Then we flew out to San Antonio for the coach's convention, sat down with him, brought all the guys that I planned on putting on defense just so they could meet each other. They quickly said, Yes, this is the guy.

His knowledge of the game, his demeanor, he's a guy that wants to do it right, do it by the book. Man, once he gets on the field, he's aggressive.

When you talk to him, look at him, this Air Force guy. You come watch him at practice, he's running around (smiling). Let me tell you something, on game day, you better

not go get a high five, he's going to tear your arm off. He's an intense guy.

He's what you want in a defensive coordinator in terms of his tenacity, understanding. That's kind of the point I'm making to the guys offensively, he's been able to galvanize that staff and get those guys to knowledge.

Now, he was working with a group that didn't have any confidence coming in. So they immediately wanted to go to believe in. He was able to give them that. But just proud of how hard those guys are playing.

Again, for me, when I evaluate the game, I know everybody else looks at stats, I look at positioning. Pretty much the guys are in position which tells me they've bought into the scheme, asking them what we're asking them to do, not overloading too much.

We still have technical things especially in man coverage that we have to clean up. For the most part those guys are where they're supposed to be most of the time.

Q. K.T. (Keytaon Thompson) is off to a great start. Is there a temptation when a guy is having that kind of a year to try to get him as many touches as possible?

TONY ELLIOTT: So where we started offensively is letting Des (Kitchings) do his deal. I know what it's like to be an offensive coordinator and have somebody kind of over your shoulder. That's where we started.

Now, as we're progressing, we're seeing to kind of back off just a little bit. I didn't realize, I don't think the staff realized, how

drastic of a transition it was from the system.

Coach my and those guys do a great job, but they do their system different than what we're used to. There's a lot of things we have to teach. We have to back off and go as they can absorb it.

Now when you're seeing is, Let's just get the ball in the hands of the guys, let them go make a play. As we progress and build and install what we want to have for the future.

K.T., he's just a football player. He's a football player. He's a former quarterback. He's got a savvy. He knows, because I get on him all the time. It doesn't look pretty all the time, but it's effective.

I call him the old man. He's my old man right there. I tell them, I don't know how the old man moves are working but you make guys miss so we're going to keep getting the ball in space.

Hopefully that will inspire and encourage the other guys to keep working. It's just like in the running back room, man, we going to feed the hot hand. Whoever has the hot hand is going to get fed.

Right now K.T. is the guy in that receiver room. We're trying to challenge Lavel (Davis) and (Dontayvion) Wicks to come alongside. They're extremely talented. But it's just been a process getting those guys and everybody on the same page.

They're working. They care. They want to. It's just offensively it's all 11, poetry in motion, on the same page. Right now each play we're one guy away. You got 10 guys

doing it, you got one guy up front. He's off. Then all five guys up front are on the same page. The throw was just a little bit off.

Those are things you have to work through, growing pains as we transition.

Q. On the secondary, Antonio Clary, he didn't play, but he did travel. Coen King isn't listed on the depth chart.

TONY ELLIOTT: Antonio we were hoping with the stinger issue he was going to have enough strength where he could be cleared, a game day decision. We traveled him anticipating we may get positive news. The doctor said it's not where it needs to be.

The reports are actually yesterday in our staff meeting that we anticipate he'll be at full strength. We got a follow-up appointment today. Haven't heard the results, but we're anticipating he's going to be ready to go.

With the knee and Coen, limited to 80 guys on the travel roster. It was a situation where there was no way he was going to play. He hasn't been able to practice yet. He's been in a yellow jersey working out on the side. We're hoping it's nothing major. Just a sprain to the MCL. That's one of those deals it depends on the guy. That could be a two-week, four-week. It just depends on how quickly those guys can heal and what their pain tolerance is.

I anticipate Coen will be out again this week.

Q. When you look at the young guys, how happy are you with their improvement?

TONY ELLIOTT: Each week they're getting better. Happy birthday to Lex (Long). Give a shout out to Lex. Today is his birthday. We sang happy birthday in the team meeting to him. Since he's our resident singer, I thought it only right to sing to him. He enjoyed that.

He's getting better every week. You're seeing his confidence grow. What you're seeing with him is he's able to play more aggressive and violent because the game is starting to slow down to him. He's starting to understand and process so that he's not thinking so much after the snap.

Still has to improve from a man coverage standpoint. He knows that. That's what he's working on. But just his voice on the back end, being able to make the adjustments.

He has a hard job. Him and Jonas (Sanker) has a hard job with what Rud (Rudzinski) does. They have to make a lot of adjustments.

Jonas is progressing as well. I think in the future you're going to see him around the football a lot more. He's got a nose for the football. But he's got to continue to progress. The game hasn't slowed down quite as much for him as it has for Lex.

Man, I'm pleased with him. He was a guy we didn't have this spring. He was coming off of a shoulder. He's very athletic. He's got great ball skills. He doesn't mind throwing his body around. Now it's just being comfortable in all the different checks and adjustments from the motions and formation shifts and all that kind of stuff.

Definitely proud of how those guys have progressed. We need 'em. They've stepped up when their number's been called.

Q. You brought in a punter who did not kick in a game stall last year, did not get here until the summer. How who on the staff taking Daniel (Sparks) was a good idea? What have you thought of Daniel's kicking so far?

TONY ELLIOTT: He has a nickname, we call him Sparky. If you have a nickname, you're doing pretty good (smiling).

Drew Meyer has led that charge through the kicking channels. He's tied into all of the guys. He was one of about three. Then Daniel came up, his mom, sat down with them and had an opportunity to have a good conversation and meet the family, see where he was coming from.

We felt like he was the best fit. Knew there was some ability there, just needed to be developed. So far, man, he's been a weapon. He's been a weapon for us. He's kicking the ball well. We got to continue.

He's got to improve on some of the locations with the ball. But for the most part he's doing a good job. Trying to get these guys to understand that sometimes you got to play field position to win the game, right? We got a weapon as a punter, so we need to do a great job of protecting.

We're going to be challenged this week. Their special teams coordinator, he's going to come after it. He's had some success blocking kicks. He understands schematically where to put some stress. Today was a good day for us because we

work punt on Tuesdays for us to make sure we're protected so we can get the ball off.

Q. You said that it came down to the Virginia job and the Duke job this off-season. What were things when you were researching the Duke job that maybe made you think they could be successful immediately?

TONY ELLIOTT: When you look at both institutions, from my perspective, when I was evaluating transitioning, is I wanted high academics. Both of them have high academics.

I wanted an opportunity to have alignment from the president, A.D., down to the head coach. You look at Carla (Williams), you look at Nina (King), you look at how they're structured, it was very similar. An opportunity to build, right? You got an opportunity to build both programs the way that you want.

Then ultimately when it came down to the deciding factor was you look at kind of history as an indicator. There was more history and tradition here, so to speak. Not to say that Duke doesn't have. When coach (Steve) Spurrier was there, they had success. You knew it had been done before, it could be done again.

Really Coach Elko was a guy even before this past year that I was going to target as a defensive coordinator just because of the tremendous amount of respect that I had for him competing against him while he was at Wake Forest, then Texas A&M. Had a chance to compete. Then just seeing him around, you know that he's first a quality human being, just a great guy, good family guy, kind of came up the hard way, real

blue-collar. I think he understands what it takes. He's been to the highest level. He was at Texas A&M, Wake Forest. He's done well.

I think everything existed at both places. It just came down to it, when I prayed about it, I thought about it, I said, Okay, you know what, if I'm going to make the decision, I'm going to take myself out of it, what's best for the staff.

When I looked at it. If I'm going to build an opportunity, I felt like there were more things in place right now here to be successful in the short-term.

Tons of respect for all the folks over there. They're first class. I'm excited to see Coach Elko. As a matter of fact we were in New York together, our families. Was it New York? We went to go see the Yankees. Our families were up there with the Pinstripe Bowl affiliation watching the Yankees this summer.

Excited to see him. Excited for his opportunity because he's one of the good guys in the coaching profession.

Q. You mentioned Brennan earlier, his footwork, you talked about that. What do you think other teams how they're defending you in the passing game? Have you seen differences in how they defend y'all?

TONY ELLIOTT: We got a little bit more cover two. We're going to give you the run, right, see if you'll be patient enough to run the football. We'll play you a little bit more cover two, then make you have to throw in specific zones down the field.

Right now we just hadn't really connected on the deep balls, so right now what they're saying is, Okay, if that's the case, probably going to try to get the quarterback in rhythm, so we're going to sit on the short throws, break on those, then we're going to make you prove to us you can throw the ball down the field.

It's a combination of a couple things. We got to do a better job at receiver of winning on routes, running to win, stacking defenders and giving the quarterback more room for error.

Right now we're not giving the quarterback any room for error because we're taking the air out of it by pressing the sideline a little bit too much as opposed to working back to about five yards from the sideline, holding your line, giving the quarterback the ability to throw it over the top, fade you. Running to win, if you get on top, throwing the back shoulder.

Just some technical things we got to continue to work on. What they're saying is, Okay, will you be patient enough to be able to nickel and dime down the field, right?

I'll say this, just being transparent, probably a little more aggressive. There are a couple calls in the game where I thought I might have been a little bit too aggressive. I understand that. I've been in that position. When you're trying to get something going for your guys, trying to manufacture the play, you're going to be aggressive.

20/20 hindsight you got 20/20 vision. We learned as a staff from that. We'll get better. Trying to slow some confidence in the kids. That's where we came up a little bit short.

I think what you're seeing right now because the timing is not there, the rhythm is not there, people can sit on routes a little bit more, they're willing to take a chance because they feel like we can't connect on the deep ball right now.

I've been there before. I'm trying to think. Maybe 2018, early on, we couldn't hit the deep ball, we were off. You just got to keep throwing them. All it takes is a little bit of confidence. You hit one or two of those, everybody's confidence is going to be up and that will open up some of the other things.

Q. The move to Jestus (Johnson) at center. Why? What did you get out of it? What's the plan going forward?

TONY ELLIOTT: Man, I love Ty Furnish. What you're seeing is a young guy that's trying to figure it out. He has to learn on the go.

The reason why is because the odd front, what we've noticed is for Ty, right, that's probably not the best thing for him when he's got a 300-pounder sitting on his nose right away.

What you saw is he gave us everything that he had, but as I've said before, abandoning technique a little bit. In that case right there at center, you cannot abandon your technique. We're not throwing the baby out with the bath water, right? Jestus, with the bigger body, gives us a little bit better chance when we're playing those odd fronts.

Right now Jestus is kind of like the other guys. He had the hot hand. Still got the hot hand. We're going to go with him. We're going to need Ty Furnish down the road.

There's a reason why he was a starter coming out of fall camp because he proved it on the practice field.

He have to get him to a point in the game, he transitions all the time, because he's very, very capable, all those guys up front are very, very capable, we just got to, man, when the bullets start playing, just stay together, don't abandon the training.

So when you're seeing a little bit with in particular the guys on offense, man, they've had success, right? I'm not down playing that in any way. They've had success. They built muscle memory to that success, right?

When we third set into a situation, it's easy to revert back to that. The problem is, that's not what we're doing. You know what I'm saying? You have lapses in the game where, man, you just revert. You watch Leech. Leech is doing great. Two plays, bam, good technique, kick setting on his slide. The next thing you know he's backpedaling. The moment he starts backpedaling, he gets beat.

Getting those guys to trust rep after rep. It starts in practice, trusting rep after rep. Belief, no question about that. It's just taking them some time to transition and eliminate kind of some of the muscle memory they've had in the past.

Q. (No microphone.)

TONY ELLIOTT: Billy (Kemp) is back. He's back this week. It was a situation, probably more so my call last week than anything. He went to the doctor on Wednesday as was cleared. But he hadn't practiced in a week and a half. Hadn't played. You're talking about a kidney issue with a reaction to

some sickness that he had before. I just didn't want to put him in a situation where he takes a shot on that kidney and we don't know.

He got cleared on Wednesday, Thursday-ish. I just decided with us traveling, let him take the rest of the weekend to rest, make sure we're fully in the clear with the kidney.

He's back flying around. Excited to get him back going.

Q. (Question regarding kickers change.)

TONY ELLIOTT: So the plan going forward is, man, I'm going give (Will) Bettridge a shot, give him a shot to see what he can do out there, let him go into the knowing that he's going to be the guy that's going to handle the field goal duties. Just let (Brendan) Farrell focus on kickoffs, but also be ready in case we have to make a change back.

The biggest thing is on the two that we missed, yeah, good snap, good hold, good protection, we just miss-hit it. We've had a couple where we've miss-hit. You got to have points. You got to have points when you go out there.

I know he's trying, but he's got to work through it. Right now with Will, that's what we brought him in here to do. I got to give him a shot, see if he can be more consistent for us.

Q. How much do you think the difference maybe is the scheme or maybe just the personnel that you have this year on defense?

TONY ELLIOTT: I'm not going to get into scheme. At the end of the day, like I'm telling the guys, man, it doesn't matter with the plays, it's about the Jimmys and the Joes, not the X's and O's. What you're seeing is the competition on the edges has made Chico (Bennett) back to back nominated player of the week within house for us. He's playing at a high level. His confidence is up.

Then you see with the addition of Devontae (Davis) inside, it's pushed those guys to get better. Then you got the progression of Ben (Smiley). Then Nick (Jackson), another year of just confidence then on the back end.

There are schematically things that they're doing very well because, again, the guys are not out of position. What I think is making the difference, man, those guys, they're playing hard, they're pushing each other, they have a lot of confidence in their unit, right?

They've chosen to say, You know what, we're not going to be defined what happened to us last year, this is a brand-new year, we're going to create our own future.

That's what you're seeing. I think it's a combination of the scheme being sound in putting them in the right position, the guys understand that. But at the end of the day the guys go going out and making plays, believing.

What you're seeing, too, they're trying to push everybody, special teams, offensively, challenge those guys not to compensate but complement what they're doing on defense.

Q. (Fentrell) Cypress seems to be playing pretty well. What you have seen with him?

TONY ELLIOTT: First game he was defensive player of the game for us. Probably nobody would have expected that because he's such a mild-mannered, quiet guy. You don't even notice him. I walk through the locker room, Say, what's up sign? I have to say it again because I don't hear him say, What's up, coach?

Really quiet, keeps to himself. The same every single day. What you're seeing is he's becoming a little bit more confident in his game. First game he had a good game. Second game was solid, right? I really challenged him and A.J. (Anthony Johnson) because I wanted them to be more physical at tacklers. I want them to come up, set the edge, get guys on the ground. He's really taken heed to that. Almost had an interception in the Syracuse game. Went down for a ball.

What you're seeing is he's continuing to gain confidence week after week. We're going to need that, especially at corner, too. That's why I got to get some of these young guys to step up. I'm really challenging Baker. One of our team captains that goes out for the coin toss. When he's gone in he's given us quality snaps.

Fentrell has just been solid. He's there every single day, shows up, same person, goes to work. No issues. You don't hear him. You don't have to call him out, which is a positive thing.

Q. Your defense is ranked first in the country right now in fumble recoveries. How important has that been?

TONY ELLIOTT: It's huge because offensively we're, like, 117th in turnovers, right? We're not scoring any points off of the turnovers. That's the worst part. The defense is creating turnovers for us, and then offensively we're not cashing in like we should.

It's all about the ball. That's what we tell them. Offensively the objective is to take care of the ball, put it in the end zone. Defensively don't let it cross the goal line and take it away. Really proud of those guys.

You look at it, they had five trips to the red zone last week, came up with one touchdown. Truth be told, that was tough on the defense when the kickoff team gives up a big return in the plus territory. Other than that, man, they've taken pride in not allowing them to cross the goal line. Man, they're trying to get there, get that ball out.

We need them to continue, then offensively we got to stop turning it over. I don't think the guys just want to turn it over, but they got to trust the fundamentals of carrying the football, the way that we carry. I talk to them about carrying the football. Understanding what are your problems.

You look at Brennan's fumble in the game. A lot of people don't consider this, a lot of time what happens is offensive guys see their own color, they relax, right? They run into their own color. The next thing you know, the ball is on the ground. That's kind of what happened. He was in a crowd of his own color, boom, now he wasn't anticipating contact. Here comes the contact. The ball comes out.

The interception, man, he just got to throw that away. Being aggressive, probably could have ran the ball. They might have been expecting it. They're going to drop back. Tight end is hung up, just throw it out-of-bounds. Can't throw that ball up just for grabs right there.

We got to do a better job offensively, but I'm challenging the defense to continue to create those turnovers. If we can do that, get it fixed offensively, we have a chance to be what I believe we're capable of being as a team.

Q. We're still getting to know your personality. Are you a bulletin board material guy? Are you worried at all the fact that you've said publicly I took the Virginia job over Duke is going to play to their kids?

TONY ELLIOTT: I'm not a bulletin board guy. I'm not a stat guy. I don't pay attention to those things. Like I said, never trying to be disrespectful to anybody. I mean, if you know me, you're close to me, you understand how torn I was between the two institutions, making the decision.

If that's what they want to use, I mean, I understand that. But will never be disrespectful to another program. Just transparent. People ask the question, and I just want to be transparent.

Also, too, hopefully you look at, Man, the guy really did consider Duke. That could be the perspective that you look at because there were a lot of people that didn't think that I actually was considering Duke. I really, really was considering going to Duke. Then Virginia came in and kind of gave me

something else to think about. That's how it transpired.

If they want to use that, man, so be it. At the end of the day, right, we got to spot the ball. That's what I got to get this team to understand is it's a game of emotion, but you got to be careful being emotional, right? You got to play with passion, you got to play with pride, got to play with intensity, but your single motivation can't be something emotional, right?

You got to play from an internal emotion that comes from the joy of playing the game. That's what I'm trying to get these guys to access because then you can access it every single game, not just when you have bulletin board material because not everybody is going to give you bulletin board material.

Hopefully people hear this and realize I'm not taking any shots at anybody. There was really, really serious consideration.

Very, very grateful to Nina (King) and her belief in me. At the end of the day there were some deciding factors that went all the way down to the wire that led me to the decision that I had to make. I wish them nothing but the best. Like I said, a big fan of Coach Elko. I want to see them be successful except for one game a year, and that's what we play them.