

**Virginia Football Media Conference
Monday, October 17, 2022
Charlottesville, Virginia, USA
Coach Tony Elliott**

Press Conference

Q. From a health standpoint, how much did the bye week change things?

COACH ELLIOTT: Yeah, it was good because we had a lot of guys that were nicked up. I think it was good for Nick Jackson. Proud of the way he's attacked his recovery. It was good for [Josh] Ahern. Ahern will probably be out. He'll be with us on the trip but I don't know if he'll be ready to go.

But it was just good from an overall standpoint for the guys to have a chance to get away for a little bit, have a couple days off, to re-energize as we go forward trying to attack the second half of the season. It came at a good time and I think we're close to getting back to where we need to be but not quite all the way there.

Q. (Off microphone).

COACH ELLIOTT: Billy [Kemp IV] was out moving around. Looked really good today. Still noticed a slight limp at times but other times he looked like he was full speed. So it was really, really good for him. The bye week was good for him. Anxious to see, when was it, yesterday, because our schedule has been a little bit different. So yesterday and today were the first two days where he turned loose with the group. But I anticipate he'll be ready to go.

Q. On the field during the bye week what did you guys accomplish? What were you looking to accomplish, things to shore up along those lines?

COACH ELLIOTT: So you want to do a couple of things, depending on where your health is, you use the bye week to build your team. But unfortunately, with where we are from a depth standpoint and this guy being

injured, we weren't able to do as much of that. But the coaches got to do some disaster report review with, things we need to improve to be able to take a chance to look at all of our issues that we need to clean up and see what the culprits were and then go attack those from a fundamental standpoint.

You're able to get a head start on your opponent. You get about six days of practice. Biggest thing for us was an opportunity to grow some of the young depth because several of the guys key guys were down for a little while during the open week.

Q. All these questions about you doing this for the first time. First open date as the head coach, what was your role? I know the coordinators like to do the self-scout, what was your role? Were you in on both? Were you overseeing?

COACH ELLIOTT: I spent most of my time just kind of evaluating the big picture. Just looking at the staff, make sure that work responsibilities and all those things are continuing to be followed. See if we needed to change anything just structurally from a program standpoint and then really focusing on just where the guys are mentally. Mentally and physically that was my biggest focus this open week was just to make structurally, with the way we structure the practice, the amount of time off, the amount of contact we had during the open week was enough to get us ready to play coming out of the open week, but also to help the guys heal, make sure that the focus early in the open week was on us and making sure that fundamentally we go back to work, taking some of the analysis that the coordinators did and making sure that we apply that and we just didn't rush right into Georgia Tech.

It was more just managing the coaches and their evaluation, making sure that we're not getting away from the fundamentals because we're still a team that needs a lot of work fundamentally at every position. So wanted to

emphasize that, wanted to emphasize accountability from top to bottom in where we are in the first half of the season and then set the direction and the vision for where we're headed coming out of the open week.

Q. What was sort of the takeaway of the analysis of the offense in terms of -- is it married to the personnel you have now in an appropriate way?

COACH ELLIOTT: I think it's more just fundamentals and trusting your technique. In particular, I think we got 19 sacks on the season. You look at the sacks, the majority of them were not coming when they brought pressure. It was more just guys staying true to their fundamentals and their coaching, continuing to slide in their gap, having their eyes in the right place, making sure that we're not getting our shoulders turned when we're trying to pass off twists.

Then you go to ball security. There were a couple of issues in ball security, but it all stemmed back to how are we carrying the ball prior to contact, not so much getting ready for contact, anticipating contact, but is the ball in the proper position?

Saw a lot of guys carrying the ball with their wrists below their elbow. As soon as their wrist goes below the elbow then you lose basically all power in any of your pressure points to secure the ball. More importantly you always try to correct before contact. The problem with that is when you don't have proper ball security and you're trying to correct, you don't fully correct. It creates opportunities.

So more of it was just guys trusting their technique. And you saw youth at time show up. And then also challenging some of our older guys to be more consistent in making plays. We evaluated the drops. And looking at the drops and really wasn't anything other than guys not finishing plays, fundamentally letting

the ball get behind your eyes. We talk a lot about that.

You catch a football with your eyes, contrary to some people, you catch with your hands. You catch it with your eyes. You've got to follow the ball all the way into your hands. And hand placement is key.

So over-the-shoulder balls, if you don't shoot your hands into your peripheral, it's very, very hard to track the ball all the way to your hands.

If you're trying to run before you catch the ball and you forget to look it in the last six inches of flight, you take your eyes off to see what's coming, a lot of times you can't anticipate the contact on your hands and you drop the ball. So more of it is just guys transitioning what they're doing in practice, trusting the direction that we're headed and trusting the scheme. But more importantly, being disciplined to carry the fundamentals from practice into the game.

Q. How have you gone about framing the second half of the season to the team after the bye week?

COACH ELLIOTT: You've got six opportunities. And you just look at college football, we got an opportunity to win all six of our games. We can't get ahead of ourselves. We've got to play well on the road. We gotta get our first road victory. We have to focus on getting our first road victory and from there building momentum.

I think the biggest thing is you've got six opportunities for the seniors. That's all you've got left. You can't waste a day. We started with a countdown, about 120-plus days and now we're on 47 days until two teams are going to advance to Charlotte to play for a championship.

So the days are going fast. You can't waste a day. And being honest and realistic with ourselves and owning the fact that we have

underachieved based on what our talent is. So what's the gap? And the gap is we need to be a team. We've got to come together and we've all got to do our job.

We can't put all of the pressure on one side of the ball. It takes all three units. But we've got an opportunity. We've got four home games. We've got two road games and in my opinion all those are winnable games with the team that we've got.

We don't need to focus on too much of what we did other than correct the mistakes from the first half. And then let's go do something special in the second half, and let's finish this thing the way we want to.

Q. It's also homecoming for Nick Jackson. What have you noticed about his approach this year as a senior and how he's taken this season?

COACH ELLIOTT: He's embraced -- the approach that I want to take is that the best teams are led from the locker room up. Obviously myself and the staff, we have to set direction and define the vision but then empower the guys in the locker room to lead. And he's caught on the quickest out of anybody.

And so just really proud of, one, how he comes to practice every single day. He's consistent in his demeanor. He doesn't change. Very, very energetic. Also he is not afraid to challenge his teammates when they need to do better.

So just really proud of the leadership and excited for him to have a chance. I heard him saying to all the guys, anybody that's not using their tickets, just pass them his way. Sounds like it's going to be a homecoming for Nick Jackson down there in Atlanta.

He's progressing day to day, moving around. Better than I anticipated considering the injury that he's coming off of. But I anticipate he'll

go out there, lay it on the line and give everything for this program.

Q. In the Louisville game, Sackett Wood caught three passes and showed potential to run with the ball after catching it. Is he someone who you would like to get more involved in the passing game going forward?

COACH ELLIOTT: We'd love for the tight end group, in general, because the whole premise and thought behind the 11 personnel, spread-style system, you create a matchup advantage with your tight end, whether it's on the Mike backer or on the Will backer, but you can catch a matchup advantage because you have a big body that can run and catch the ball. And you have the flexibility to get into the two-back stuff by putting the other tight end in the backfield.

Both he and [Grant] Misch and hoping to get Josh Rawlings involved and the more those guys can do, the less predictable you become because then you can stay in your 11 personnel and easily get to somewhere where you're running heavy sets and also spread them out get into your empty and get into your 2-by-2 stuff. Need to see him continue to emerge. Misch as well. And hopefully with the way that Josh has been practicing, that we can get him some opportunities to see what he can do.

Q. Stevie Bracey is another guy who is coming home. What type of development have you seen from him?

COACH ELLIOTT: Bracey showed up here, and you could see early on that he's a football player, that he loves football, that he's big, he moves well, loves contact, has a good foundation. It's just been in the situation where he's got some older guys with a little bit more experience.

But with Ahern looking like he's not going to be able to go, so you've got Nick and we're trying to get a little bit more speed on the

field. Obviously Hunter [Stewart] is going to have to play for us and give us some good snaps, quality snaps, which he's done here in the past.

But now Bracey has got to be ready to go. And with Nick and his situation, don't anticipate he'll be able to play as many snaps as he played in the past. He's still trying to progress through his knee. So Bracey has got to show up and be ready to go.

I'm excited for him. I think he's excited. I can tell just with the conversation with him, he's come to me about probably about five times already this week asking me questions like, Coach, is this okay, is this okay. I know you're going home, bud. But let's get that out of the way early, get all those questions about tickets and all that stuff out of the way because we're going to use your lock in because you'll have to get ready to play some snaps for.

Q. On the offensive line, Jonathan Leech just played through an injury. What's it been like watching him go through that process? And what's it mean for him to play through that pain?

COACH ELLIOTT: It just shows his commitment to the program. And what I've seen is that he's learning to, what I say, go mind over matter. Meaning that it doesn't matter how you feel, but have the mental toughness and let your mind control your body.

So what you're seeing now, and one of the things that I say to him and I've been saying to him the last couple of days whenever I see him, I say, Leech, what's on your hand? And first he wanted to say a cast. And I'm, no, nothing. Nothing's on your hand. That's how you have to approach it.

You've got to think there's no cast on my hand because if I think there's something on my hand I'm not going to use it. You saw right after the injury when he was cleared to play,

he wasn't using that hand. But now you're starting to see -- and when he wasn't using the hand, then what happens is now fundamentally his base is not where it needs to be and he stops kick stepping and starts back pedaling. Now he's trying to shoot and punch with one hand. Now he's becoming more comfortable.

We need him, him and Derek [Devine] are the two guys up front that need to lead with us. I think with his hand starting to feel better, him being more confident, now we can get some more leadership out of him. And that was something that we talked a lot about, going back to one of the earlier questions.

I pulled up several quotes from John Maxwell just talking the guys, first indicating and -- I'll say things and they'll be, like, that's just Coach Elliott saying it. I'll show them a clip of Nick Saban -- you're saying the same thing. Yes, I'm saying the same thing.

There's a certain mindset that winners have. But I share a lot of John Maxwell coaching. The one I used yesterday is "everything rises and falls with leadership." I wanted to put some context with that.

The other thing we talked about is leaders have a certain lifestyle. They live a certain way, that leadership doesn't come by position, right? Leaders define the position. Position doesn't define leadership.

And then we talked about the pessimist. He complains about the win. The optimist believes it's going to change. And the leader adjusts the sails. So just getting these guys to address from a leadership standpoint.

In Derek and Leech, even though you haven't played a significant amount of snaps you're in a position to lead. Don't let that deter you from leading this football team.

Q. Sounds like you also share the Al Pacino quote from "Any Given Sunday." Is that a personal favorite?

COACH ELLIOTT: Couple times. Personal favorite and it's fresh on their minds because they've seen it. And then we went to see, what's that movie, we just saw it. Is it called "Bullet Train"? Is that a new movie? We went to see "Bullet Train". There's a part in the movie where the elder statesman makes a comment. He says, either we work together or we die as individuals. Which is similar to what Al Pacino says: 'Either we heal as a team or we die as individuals'.

That's been some of the things that are happening to us when we haven't been successful is that, A. we're dying as individuals because we're not healing as a team. We're not coming together as a team. We've got 11 guys on the field. We've got nine of them doing it right. We've got two of them doing it wrong. That's what costs you plays in a game. Or one guy has a bad play, well then now it turns into six bad plays by other guys. So just learning the concept of being able to pick each other up, moving on to the next play, but ultimately understanding that teams win.

And we talked about college football this week, I was looking at the Top 25, there were six Top 25 matchups and only one of them did the higher seed win. That was Michigan beating Penn State.

The other five games, the lower seed won. So, fellas, you've got to play the game. Doesn't matter who is the more talented team. It's the team that shows up and plays together that usually wins football games.

That's been a common theme. Just kind of -- what I'm working towards is, within the entire organization, is where I start to hear the things that are being said by the leadership. And it's repetitive. That's why you heard the Al Pacino quote has come up a lot.

Q. I know you guys focus week-to-week one game at a time. The value of a bowl game, not just as a reward, the practice, especially when you're establishing -- I know it's way down the line, but how important would a bowl game be for you laying this foundation?

COACH ELLIOTT: First of all, the mindset is, man, we want to play 15 games a season. That's the belief, that's the hope. That's what we're building for. And understanding that all those additional practices and games that we earn are opportunities for our team.

But in particular, a bowl game, you have an opportunity to really get your young guys some work. You have more time to prepare. You have more practices. You can be more intentional with structuring your practices to where we get the work done that we need to get done in preparation for the opponent. But then we also have specific time, whether it's 20 minutes, 30 minutes of practice to dedicate to the young guys, but over the course of 14 practices, that adds up real quickly. You almost get the equivalent of spring ball when you start talking about a bowl game with the amount of time that you get to be on the field and prepare.

Q. Of your true freshmen, [Will] Bettridge is on there at kicker. You talked about Bracey, [McKale] Boley is on there, Sean Wilson?

COACH ELLIOTT: Xavier [Brown].

Q. And are there other guys in the class who maybe are not playing or are on the two deep but are impressing in practice giving you reason to believe that down the road they'll contribute?

COACH ELLIOTT: Right. You know, Houston Curry is in our two deep. He's listed in our two deep. And I'm really excited about him. I think the future is very bright at the tackle position between he and Boley. Boley

obviously being a little bit physically ahead of him, ready to come.

I think an offseason with Houston in the weight room, but man he's got a great demeanor about him. He's tough. He loves football. We talked about it. We talked about J.R. Trying to think, Karson Gay. I think Karson Gay is going to be special. I think he has a chance to be special.

He's gained probably about 10, 12 pounds already. He's very explosive, natural pass catcher. He can run. And he loves football. He's a guy -- I think Blake Steen so far with what we've seen is going to be a guy down the road that will give us some added size and ability on the inside. He's been doing a great job challenging our D line every single day in practice.

We talked about Bracey. I think Trey McDonald is a guy who is now, because of the injury situation at linebacker, has been called up to getting reps with the group, but he's an athletic young man. Needs the weight room to help build his body where he needs to be. But he's violent, very coachable. I'm excited about him.

Trying to think of the other guys. Snoop [Leona Amaata] really hasn't had a chance to see as much out of Snoop. He's been out for a little bit here dealing with the injury.

T.J. [Terrell Jones] T.J., I think he's going to be, Terrell is going to be special. We're fortunate enough to have some depth to where he can go into what we call power hour. He's been lifting. You're starting to see his body expand. He's going to be a guy for us in the future.

So T.J. I'm trying to think of off the top of my head. I'm going by position. Delaney Crawford is special with the ball in his hands. And you're seeing that.

Last week, he had a chance, or two weeks ago, he had a chance to beat Malik [Cunningham] in practice. Man, let me tell you, when that young man takes off, it's a little different speed than what they're used to seeing.

But didn't have an opportunity because of the timing to really get in and compete at quarterback. But I'm excited about him.

Running back, we talked about X. Tight end, we talked about -- that might be the class, yep.

Q. I don't think they initially know what power hour is, which is something you brought from Clemson. Could you explain that?

COACH ELLIOTT: Power hour is an opportunity for most of your freshmen guys that are redshirting but then any of your other guys that just need more time in the weight room.

So the way we structure it, we carve it out. We get 20 hours a week. Then the varsity will usually lift twice a week for 30 minutes. But the way that I've structured it is to give Smo [Adam Smotherman] an hour pretty much every morning with those guys in the weight room lifting. So those guys will come in before the varsity, so to speak, and they get after it in the weight room.

And then they'll transition into position meetings on certain days and then also transitioning in practice and be part of the scout team for us.

But it's really an opportunity for them to develop their bodies and take advantage of the time as opposed to, okay, putting them on the maintenance lifting. Throughout the season, you're trying to maintain and certain times within the course of a season you'll push a little harder just to see if you can improve a little bit.

But with the amount of practice that they have, it being a year-long calendar, right now during the season, your weights are structured to help them with soreness, flush their body, maintain strength and keep them healthy and strong going into the postseason.

Q. Georgia Tech seems to have gotten a little more new life in the last few weeks. What do you see from them on tape, specifically on Jeff Sims?

COACH ELLIOTT: He's a problem. He's a problem. He throws it much better than you want him to. And he's shown some accuracy on some down-the-field balls. When he throws the ball down, he takes off. Takes two, three guys to tackle him.

But what I've noticed having played Georgia Tech over the years, their offensive line now is starting to have more cohesion up front. They've got some big bodies with some length. It looks like Sims is really, really comfortable in the system.

He knows what he's doing. They're all typically headed in the same direction. And the skill guys on the outside, man, they play hard and they take advantage of their opportunities. And then defensively, they are multiple. So they can create -- they can create some havoc by jumping in and out of structure, and that's something we focused on this open week is being able to handle the structure.

When people line up, it's easy to target them. You can have some successes when you jump around and guys start moving, that's where it creates problem for any offense.

They're playing with a lot more confidence. I think their mindset is to take advantage of the situation and not let it be a detriment to them. We know they'll come out, play hard. They'll be excited. But we've got to make sure that we focus on us and we come out with a mindset

that we want to play our best game from start to finish.

Q. You mentioned that one of the things that you managed or watched during the bye, the open date, was mindset, where guys' heads are at. What have you seen from the receivers? You managed analyzing the drops. Where are they mentally, emotionally? They've been turning down media requests. Are they a little frustrated, where would you put them at?

COACH ELLIOTT: Just to put it in context, too. I've had to evaluate myself, too. That's one thing I try to make sure that I do is hold accountable myself and improve what I need to improve. So just putting context to it, right out of the gate, I'm an ex-receiver, I coached receivers for five years.

And that was the alpha group. And I kind of went after the group and challenged them, challenged them in a positive way like, okay, this is the best group on the team and we need to lead. And I think that was a little different approach than maybe the approach in the past.

It took a little bit of time for them to get to know me and what my expectations are and understand that I'm going to push KT [Keytaon Thompson] and I'm going to push [Dontayvion] Wicks the hardest, and Billy the hardest. Billy wasn't in practice in the spring. And then have high expectations. And I think you're dealing with young people that don't really know how to deal with not meeting expectations.

And so those guys have worked through it. I'm proud of them. You're starting to see that they're becoming a cohesive unit, that they're challenging each other as before. It kind of would be, drop the ball, all right, we don't want to drop balls. Now it's catch the ball, we've got to do our job.

You're starting to see those guys take a little bit more ownership. And truth be told, with the system that Des [Kitchings] runs, with some of the pro background, you can put guys in position.

You can kind of move guys around. And again that was all new to them. So that group you're asking a lot, especially in the passing game, when you're trying to do those things.

So we've learned it. We've got to back off a little bit. Try to understand where they have come from, what they're used to and then try to mesh what we're doing to be able to fit those guys.

But we go as they go. And I think that now they understand that, hey, there's a reason why we were so hard on you to begin with because we know that you guys gotta lead.

And just like all the other guys, with the exception of Nick, they're now starting to understand how I'm trying to empower them to lead their locker room so I don't have to do every single thing because reality is I don't know all the things going on because I'm not in there. There's things you're not going to tell me. But knowing what the expectation is -- you've got to take into consideration kind of where this generation is.

It's with all of us, we have a phone, can hide behind a phone. There's not accountability like there used to be. There used to be a lot of accountability for all of us and people would be able to speak their mind and call each other out.

They're getting used to that. That's a group right there. I'm not talking about any of these individuals, but I've always said it, coaching wideouts, they have the biggest egos and lowest self-esteem. They have to have huge egos because of where they play. They play on the outside. Everybody's eyes follow the ball. Everything that they do is magnified.

But at the same time, too, you can get caught up in some of those things. So it's been fun to watch those guys kind of persevere through the adversity. And I'm excited to see the second half.

I've seen a little different sense of urgency out of those guys. And proud of the quarterback. Proud of Brennan, because I've asked him, take ownership of this football team. Not just the offense. You and Nick need to be leading side by side.

Him on defense, you on offense. But more importantly, man, let the receivers know what your expectations are.

So now you're starting to see that the conversations in practice are more organic as opposed to me pulling them together and say, y'all talk. Now it's a little bit more organic because it's a learning curve for all of them. Brennan is learning a new system. They're learning a new system. That chemistry has to be built. But it can't be fabricated.

It's got to be authentic. And it's taking a little bit of time. I'm excited about that group. They all want to do well. They all want to perform at the highest level. But it starts in practice and it starts in your demeanor every single day and pushing through. And then also, too, availability. What you've seen is those guys have had to push through some injury, too.

Billy has been up and down. Wicks was out last week, or went out in the game. And KT is an old man. I call him the Old Man. He's always got something that's nagging. So just kind of continuity, consistency, all of that within the group has been fun to see those guys accept that challenge and persevere, and I'm excited to see what they're going to do down the stretch.

Q. Brennan, the mindset but also workload in the past when he was throwing 50 times a game they worried about not making him

throw too much in the off week. You've got more balance now. What did you do with his workload? Was there a day off? How did you manage him?

COACH ELLIOTT: I think the way we structured, the way we structured practice with Monday being more of a mental day coming off of a game -- so if you play on Saturday, the players are off on Sunday for recovery.

Monday is more of a mental day. So there will be a lot of meetings. We're only on the practice field for about an hour. Not throwing as many down-the-field balls, cleaning up mistakes from the previous game, getting introduction.

Tuesday and Wednesday is a heavy day for us and then Thursday is more of a polish. And truth be told, there's been a couple of Thursdays throughout the course of the week where Brennan said I don't want to throw the ball down the field.

So we ran the plays to get timing with everybody else and then we don't throw the ball down the field. So we've managed a little bit of that. But no real conversation to say we need to shut him down. He hasn't complained anything about his arm hurting.

We track all their movements. I think with the different approach that we have with quarterbacks and our strength and conditioning with the amount of stretching, the amount of yoga activities that we do, the amount of core strengthening, all those things contribute to effectively throwing a football. So it's not just your arm that takes the wear and tear.