

**Virginia Football Media Conference
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Coach Tony Elliott**

Press Conference

Q. Coach, under Coach (Pat) Narduzzi, Pitt has really prided itself on playing physical kind of meat-and-potatoes football. Is this a different challenge you faced last week with Carolina and that offense?

COACH ELLIOTT: I think every game that we play, especially in conference, is going to be physical. They're structured a little bit different. Their defensive front is more of a penetrating front, a lot like Miami. So I'd say it's probably similar to Miami where North Carolina was more multiple. They shifted fronts and played three-man structures, four-man structures, a little bit more two-gap mentality. But the thing about Coach Narduzzi is he's going to do what he does on defense. And they've been doing it. They've been doing it well at a high level for a very long time. They've got experience, I think seven returning starters on defense. And so they're going to play Steel City football. That's what I told these guys: Be ready for a fistfight, more similar to Miami than last week.

Q. You challenged the offensive line to be more physical, more dominant. Seemed like they really responded to that. What did you like in Saturday's game from the front five? What's their progress been as the year's gone on? And where do they still need to get to?

COACH ELLIOTT: I like that we were able to establish the run. I think when you're able to establish the run you can stay on rhythm. You look at the first drive, what was impressive to me about it was how we didn't have any third downs. Everything was first and second down, staying on rhythm. It was second-and-five, first down, second-and-six, first down.

When you can establish the run, it allows you to be more aggressive when you want to be aggressive. But then also you can have a little bit more flexibility in what your play calling is. I liked that they established the run. I thought they protected the quarterback well. You look at -- we were able to get to Drake (Maye) a couple times put some hits on them. But Brennan (Armstrong) stayed pretty clean with the exception of the one sack. And that was on a seven-man protection that wasn't necessarily involving the offensive line.

Q. You have an update on your wide receivers?

COACH ELLIOTT: They're day to day. They're all back. Lavel (Davis Jr.), because of his situation, wasn't with us on Saturday, but he's back. I just saw him as I was coming across the street. Got a big smile on his face.

They'll be day to day, but also you want to make sure you do what's best for them, make sure they're fully healthy. But K.T. (Keytaon Thompson) is probably the closest, you know, right now. With Tay (Dontayvion Wicks) being the longest because of the bone bruise. And Lavel's going to be day to day.

Q. What is Lavel's (Davis Jr.) situation?

COACH ELLIOTT: He was in protocol -- concussion protocol.

Q. You mentioned the Miami game. That was kind of tough sledding running the ball that day, and Miami had some success running against your defense. Do you feel like that experience should benefit your linemen on both sides of the ball ahead of this one?

COACH ELLIOTT: I mean, you win in the trenches. I've said that since day one. You've got to be able to establish a run, stop the run. So Pitt's going to come in here, they're going to run the football, they're going to get in 12 personnel and get into some I formations and come right at you.

They've got one of the best backs in the country, and they're leading -- up near the top our league in rushing. And they're top 30 defense and pride themselves in stopping the run. And the structure that they have is built to stop the run. So you're going to have to win the one-on-ones on the outside.

Turns into the games you like, where it's just our scheme versus your scheme, nothing special. Let's just line up and see who can win the one-on-one matchups.

Q. Following up on Mike's question about the O-line, Jonathan Leech, probably had one of the most steady games he's had. How would you evaluate him?

COACH ELLIOTT: Really proud of (Jonathan) Leech. We give out awards in recognition of the game. Gave him a hard hat. That's just a guy he's given everything he has. You think about it, he's been playing with a cast on his hand and playing out there at right tackle. Got to be able to run block, pass block, and he's doing it at times with one hand.

Really proud of him and his effort and just his willingness to stick it out, to fight and persevere through pain and through adversity. We need him and his leadership. The more he continues to play well, I think the more his voice will become more prevalent in that room.

And the best teams that I've been around and the team that I'm trying to establish here are going to be led from the inside/out. When you have great leadership and performance and cohesion on the offensive line and the defensive line, then you have a chance to be able to be in games in the fourth quarter and find ways to win.

Q. Looking at just the record, now 3-6, three games left. I know a bowl game was a goal for you coming into the year. Do you talk about that knowing you have to win each one of these games to qualify?

COACH ELLIOTT: Not trying to put any pressure on the guys. But we will take a second, every now and again, to peek our head up and look at the big picture and what we have to play for and then go right back in the submarine and focus on the game at hand.

So, you know, we'd love to be able to win three and become bowl eligible and have a chance to finish on a winning season. But we can't put the cart before the horse. We've got to go and play Pitt, which is going to be a very, very tough game for us, a great opportunity to measure where our program is.

You're talking about defending the ACC champs. And there are a couple of plays away from being in a different situation, right up there in the chase for the Coastal and the chance to go represent in the ACC Championship.

We're not putting any pressure on the guys, but they're aware of the opportunity that they still have available for them. But the biggest thing is to learn to continue to make each game a season of its own, because you put everything you have into it and that's the only way you can become consistent is to treat it that way.

Q. We saw an extended amount of J.R. (Wilson) on Saturday, just due to the injuries. But what has kind of made him stand out and help him rise up and get those opportunities?

COACH ELLIOTT: I think the biggest thing from Saturday was he knew that it was his opportunity. And I said this before in the challenge with any football player is if you're in a backup role that you continue to prepare as if you're a starter and it shouldn't be any different. But unfortunately at times the starter, when you feel that responsibility, there's a different sense of urgency.

What I think what you saw was him having an opportunity, being excited by his opportunity and then going out and performing and

knowing that the team was counting on him and really, really proud of him.

Proud of Demick (Starling) for stepping up. And, again, those guys didn't find out until Thursday because, you know, we had the situations, injuries in practice on Wednesday, and weren't sure until Thursday or Friday if the other guys would be able to play.

Q. You reached that point in the season where you could play someone, a freshman who has yet to play. Could play him in these final three games and a bowl game if there were one and still save that year of eligibility. Does that affect your decision-making on -- is there anybody in that group right now?

COACH ELLIOTT: Right. So each week, after the game, I'll look at the participation report and make sure that we evaluate guys from a four-game standpoint and a guy that probably the biggest decision was made on Trey McDonald. He's got a couple of games under his belt. He's a guy that we think is going to have a great future here. But you don't want to waste a year. Some guys have already gone past it. J.R. (Wilson) has gone past it. X. (Xavier) Brown has gone past it. (McKale) Boley has gone past it. Houston (Curry) hasn't played yet. He's a guy we're priming and preparing. What you would love to do is to get those guys some experience. And we've been in four-quarter games and in those games you're going to play your top guys unless you have to have a substitution.

Q. One more on J.R. (Wilson) He came in, was dealing with the injury. He said that he kind of anticipated redshirting because of that. What was his prognosis as you recall? And did he get healthy ahead of schedule, or what was his --

COACH ELLIOTT: He was coming off a knee. He was fully cleared, but you know that it takes time. Even when you're medically cleared, mentally you have to get yourself to a place where you're ready to play and physically as well.

Just throughout the course of the season, you see him over there working versus the defense as a scout, and, man, he's making plays. As we were progressing through the season and just trying to find ways to increase competition and increase productivity, you said, man, with his skill set, he's a guy we could lean on.

And you had injuries and situations that forced him into the lineup. We get to last week and the big three are down and he's the next man up. And I thought he did a good job of seizing that opportunity.

Q. You said, this is completely different topic, but you said in August that you wish you had a little more time to recruit the four linemen who ended up transferring out. Obviously you are where you are now. You've developed here. Can you go back to that time? What do you recall about the timing of that? Were there decisions made already kind of before you were in place?

COACH ELLIOTT: I believe some of the decisions were made, to be honest with you. Really didn't have much of an opportunity because as soon as I got there, the guys were like nice to meet you, but I'm planning on moving on.

So it just happened so late in the cycle. You're talking about, I think, December 10th and then those guys are trying to get enrolled somewhere else in the spring. So they have to make those decisions relatively early so that they can make sure they secured their spot at other places.

Q. Speaking of the offensive line, how would you assess where these guys are now? Have they come along to your expectations or are they still a work in progress?

COACH ELLIOTT: I think we're still a work in progress. I think the biggest challenge for those guys is just continuity. We've had a lot of different lineups for each game. You start the season with J.P. (Flores) playing at left guard

and now balancing injuries and now Noah Josey in there.

And we've gone back with Jestus (Johnson) and Ty Furnish, at center. Been pretty consistent at left tackle with Logan (Taylor). And then going back and forth at right tackle with (McKale) Boley and (Jonathan) Leech. So the biggest thing for those guys, and they always get beat up a little bit because everything revolves around the offensive line, because it's probably the hardest position to play and the one that takes the most understanding. And then there's a lot of things that happen and they happen very, very fast and it has to be a lot of coordination and chemistry.

You've got to play together as a group. When you're constantly trying to figure out the right rotation, whether you're doing a substitution on your own or whether it happens to be because of injury, it's just tough for those guys.

But I thought I saw for the first time on Saturday kind of what the chemistry potentially could look like. I felt like the energy on the sideline was great. Those guys were a lot more vocal than I've seen in the past. So I think they're becoming more comfortable and embracing the opportunity to lead.

Because you think about it, you've got a couple, you've got Derek (Devine) and (Jonathan) Leech that are seniors but they haven't played a lot. Your more veteran guys are more proven. They're at other positions. So naturally you'd expect those guys to lead.

But you really want your offensive linemen to set the tempo. I felt the energy was really good on Saturday. I'm excited to see these guys come out and compete this week, especially with this challenge that we have with the D line that Pitt has.

Q. Malachi Fields warmed up before the game. Is that a final step to getting back out there? How close is he?

COACH ELLIOTT: He's been turned loose to go and trying to do what's best for him and then also what's best for the team. And so we wanted him to go through the process of warming up this week knowing that he wouldn't be cleared until -- or last week, wouldn't be cleared until this week -- so it wouldn't be his first time in the season going through and he's got to get ready to play.

But I anticipate, load-management wise, he'll be a 15- to 20-play guy. You still worry about, just me being a former skill guy, dealing with a lot of skill guys, the game. You can't replicate the intensity of the game. You can't replicate the physicality of the game.

It's going to be a game where there's going to be a lot of press coverage, a lot of bump and run. You don't want to overwork him and try to do too much. Plus conditioning-wise, he's been running and preparing on the side doing his rehab, but he really hasn't been in game shape or getting himself in game shape.

We're excited to have him back. I think he brings another element to the group that we've been missing. But at the same time, too, we want to make sure that he stays healthy. So we're going to manage his load on Saturday in hopes of picking that up throughout the course of the season.

Q. One last thing on injuries, it was a deep injury bench. Perris Jones, is he back to --

COACH ELLIOTT: He's getting close. I'd say he's a potential day-to-day guy. But, again, missing a week and missing practice, I don't know, from a load-management standpoint, how much we can expect.

I'd say if he's cleared, which we're anticipating he'll be cleared to do some things, probably focus more on special teams and let Mike (Hollins) carry the road along with Ronnie Walker and X (Xavier Brown) at the running back position.

Q. I believe Ben Smiley was featured in the last game. His status?

COACH ELLIOTT: Ben, a lot like Lavel (Davis Jr.), was in his concussion protocol. And, again, when it comes to that, I don't play any games. I fully support whatever the decision is from the medical staff. And I err on the side of being cautious, because you're talking about -- these young men want to play but I'm trying to create an environment, too, where they're truthful and honest because I don't want to put any guys at risk.

But he feels a guy that was in protocol last week. And he's day to day and we're hopeful that we'll have him available on Saturday.

Q. Paul Akere got more snaps because of moving him outside and inside. Could you talk about his versatility?

COACH ELLIOTT: Yes, Paul (Akere) is a guy that's strong enough to be able to go inside, but then he also has a skill set to play on the edge. And that's kind of what you want. You want those guys that are built in that mold. They can rush a passer from the edge and in certain situations, in particular third down, they're strong enough to be able to go inside, play the double team. But then if you get in a situation where you can get them matched up in a passing down, one-on-one with a guard, then they have a quickness and skill set to be able to defeat guards that are more so working with big guys from a pass-protection standpoint.

Q. Back on the running backs, you have Xavier Brown and Ronnie Walker on the depth chart for the first time this season. Xavier has played a lot, but Ronnie got a chance on Saturday. What did you like from him, and what are you looking for from him and Xavier and Mike with Perris out?

COACH ELLIOTT: Just being able to do like they did, complement each other, play from a committee standpoint and support each other

and keep each other fresh. And I think that was big for Mike (Hollins). Mike's a guy that when he's fresh and he's rolling, he's good to go. But any tired back is a back that potentially could put the ball on the ground.

That's what I've been pleased the last couple of weeks is being able to take care of the ball better and not necessarily put him in jeopardy. But Ronnie Walker, I was excited for him. You could tell on that first one he hadn't been hit in a while, so he was anxious to get hit. And once he got hit, he said, oh, man, I remember this. And he took off and provided some big runs for us, especially in short yardage situations.

I expect we'll roll forward with the rotation. If one of them gets super hot then you feed the guy that's super hot. Otherwise let those guys complement each other, roll as a committee and keep each other fresh.

Q. Those might be the best back-to-back performances that Mike (Hollins) has had at Virginia. Have you seen an improvement in his practice habits that you hoped for?

COACH ELLIOTT: Yes. And we coach these guys hard because the game is hard. Life is hard. And to win, you know, you have to train a certain way because when you get into the fourth quarter, you get into those must-have-it situations, what you revert to is your training. We push these guys hard. And to be honest, there's probably nobody that's been challenged more than Mike (Hollins). And might not be fair, but you've got myself, you've got Des (Kitchings) and you've got Keith (Gaither), so you have a running backs coach and a coordinator and a head coach that have coached running backs throughout the course of the years.

He's very talented. And I think you're starting to see that. But it's not just talent at that position to be consistent. And you've got to bring everything together.

Really, really proud of him, the way he's practiced, the way he's responded, the way he's persevered. I'm excited to see him down the stretch. Hopefully he can step into that role that we all anticipated as being the feature guy.

Q. I can't recall what you said when you retained coach (Garett) Tujague, but did you have any connection with him before?

COACH ELLIOTT: I did not.

Q. What has been your kind of impression now that you've worked with him for most of a season? What do you see from him?

COACH ELLIOTT: First and foremost, he brings a ton of energy. Every day is a good day for Coach Tujague. He's got a great level of appreciation. He loves the game. He loves just to talk football, to learn football.

And he's been very, very eager and excited to learn the run schemes that Des (Kitchings) has brought and myself have brought which is a little different than what he's used to. I've seen growth in that area.

Man, he loves his players. He pushes them hard. He's fundamentally sound in what he does. He tries week in and week out to structure his drill work to prepare these guys for what they're going to see.

I've been extremely impressed with Coach Tujague and just his connection with his players, his knowledge of the game and just his passion and energy that he brings, both recruiting and also coaching football.

Q. This is completely away from the game today is election day. Did you talk to your guys at all about voting to them, or what was your approach or take?

COACH ELLIOTT: So a component of the program is the Cavalier Code. It's the personal development piece of the program that I'm still

working to put pieces in place to develop there. But we've got a young lady that I retained that was working in operations that's kind of taken over our player engagement role within the program.

She was able to get in front of the guys and present to them just the importance of voting. She went all the way back to the history in this country of how voting has transpired for different groups, some of the challenges that people had to overcome to be able to secure the right to vote and the importance of why we need to vote.

We've got a couple of veterans on the staff as well. Coach Potts (Nathan Pototschnik) that I retained that was in strength and conditioning, he was in the military, former Black Hawk helicopter pilot. Gave him an opportunity to give his perspective on why it's important that we protect the freedoms that we have and exercise the rights we have.

So we did some educating up to this day and then yesterday. They're off today. So today we chose to give them an off day. We practice on Sunday. And yesterday took the day off so they had the opportunity to perform their civic engagement and go vote.

But really just you get these guys to understand and have an appreciation for the rights that they have and to be able to use their rights to have a voice and a say within this country. Nobody wants to talk about the timeouts that we wasted that cost us -- come on. It's all good. That's why we're here.

Q. You have talked about Brennan (Armstrong). Sometimes it's better to throw the ball away and lose a down than to get sacked. Are there situations where the punt, where it's better to take the five-yard penalty for a delay and save the timeout?

COACH ELLIOTT: Yes, there was that situation. And obviously I know there was some people

that saw me get upset. But my frustration was not with the players, it was with the staff and miscommunication and wanting to take a chance, you know, that we didn't need to take, take a chance in that situation.

And so there were some built-in checks that we were getting ready to check to that just didn't feel like it was the right time. And the only way to stop it was to call a timeout.

And then the second one was just a substitution, communication, just trying to get a guy that's been playing a lot of snaps, get him a sub. But we didn't get it communicated. And my frustration is because we have a lot of layers. We have a lot of individuals that have eyes and responsibilities from a special teams standpoint and we didn't get it communicated. And that's not on the players. That's on the coaches. And so that's where my frustration was.

And it comes down to four or five plays. We have two timeouts. The first one, Brennan made the right decision. He has that ability on that fourth-and-one situation in the third quarter, he made the right decision based off of the checks that we had in place.

And so I'd let him take that timeout any day. But other two were costly because we score, we've got three minutes left in the game. You have to onside kick because you have no timeouts. The clock management is going to tell you, with no timeouts, they can run about two minutes and 30, two minutes and 40 seconds off the clock with their four downs.

If you let that transpire, you kick it deep. Even if you force a stop, you're going to get the ball back with about 30 seconds.

And so you make the decision to go for an onside kick. If we have two timeouts, you put it on the defense, say, hey, boys we're going to kick 'em deep, and let's get a stop, use the timeouts.

And now maybe we get the ball back midfield or just on our side of the field with a minute 20 with no timeouts. That's a better situation than 30 seconds with no timeouts and you're probably going to be pinned deep.

Q. (Inaudible)

COACH ELLIOTT: I called a timeout. I called a timeout. We get so low on the play clock. Keith (Gaither) was mentioning, hey, coach, we probably need to get out of this. So I make the time out there because, in essence, it was a call that was pretty risky.

But where we were, if you look at what had transpired, we bring the ball out. We get tackled on the 14. We have a holding call. And now we're in third and long, along the 22-yard line. We just weren't in the right call.

So rather than back it up, we would have been backed up if we went with the play call. So I had to call the timeout to get us in a better call.

Q. James Jackson called one of the most talented guys in the linebacking corps, had a good game against UNC. What did you see from him growth-wise? You talked about taking him off special times at one point, he had to learn to give effort out there and everything. What did you see from him lately?

COACH ELLIOTT: Seen a lot of growth in responding to the expectations of the level of effort that I want these guys to play with and just the core values. And he's a young guy still learning.

And so he learned from it and he responded. And now, with the situation with Ahern kind of being in a load management situation, working his way back into playing, he's had to play a lot of snaps.

What you're seeing now, he's much more comfortable with the communication. He's much more comfortable with the keys that he has to read, which is allowing him to play faster

and allowing him to make more plays. And he was actually internally our defensive player of the game for his performance.

Q. I asked you after the game about the defensive penalties on the final. Coach John Rudzinski said, wanted them to play through the whistle. You were obviously upset with the flags. When you reviewed it, what did you see? What's your take on it now?

COACH ELLIOTT: That's a slippery slope because you're challenging these guys to play every play for four quarters. And you get to the game and it's the best play -- it's the best play on offense. And when we finished our walkthrough on Friday, that's how we finished because we want to end every game in a situation where offensively we're kneeling the ball for victory. And defensively, the flipside, is that's the worst play you could go against. You want guys play-in and you take a chance on the first one to see can you get them to make a mistake. And then after that, I think you've got to concede the fact and jump in.

When we jumped over the pile, that wasn't necessary. But still, understanding guys are playing to the whistle. The problem is, is that could turn into, you know, a more significant costly penalty and now you're out the next game.

So getting the guys to play all the way to the end but then understand you've got to be smart in those situations. And so obviously, in the heat of battle, everybody's trying to battle to the end and sometimes you want to keep fighting and also, too, you've got to make sure that you think big picture and long term and I didn't want to lose anybody there. So biggest thing was guys were trying to play to the end, but we've got to play to the end the right way.