

**University of Virginia Football Media
Conference**

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**Head Coach Tony Elliott
Press Conference**

I think it's the goal of every team that goes into a bye week to come out healthier than you went in. Did you guys hit that mark?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, definitely believe we're in a much better place. Just off the top of my head thinking of guys, you have Malcolm (Greene) back, so that extra week helped Malcolm. Dre (Walker) is still a couple of weeks away, but he's improving a lot. Paul Akere, you get Paul back for sure this week.

Unfortunately (Josh) Ahern, he broke a bone in his thumb in the last game. Had surgery already, but really it's -- you've got to let the suture set, and he has probably about another week. Then we take that off, and then it's a pain tolerance deal, so we won't have Ahern going into this one.

The best thing is to see Su (Olasunkonmi Agunloye) up on crutches walking around, so that's been awesome to have him at practice, but definitely feel like some of the bumps and bruises have had another week to heal, so I feel better from a health standpoint going into this one.

Q. Nice way to be welcomed back facing one of the top offenses in the country. Is this, in your opinion, the best team you've played this season and certainly. If not, the best offense you've played? Just talk a little bit about their offense.

TONY ELLIOTT: I believe it is the best team that we've seen so far. They're playing very complementary football, if you watch them. Defensively I'll start there, they look different than they did last year. You can see similar players. They have a couple of new guys in

spots, but they're a lot more cohesive. They're playing with a lot more energy.

They have a better understanding of what they're doing, which allows them to generate turnovers. You know, they're one of the top teams in turnover margin in the country, which gives the offense some short fields, but then you look at that offense, Drake Maye is as good a quarterback as I have seen. I've been fortunate to be around some really good ones. In my opinion he's the best in the country. Nothing seems to rattle him. It doesn't matter what's going on around him. He's always got his composure about himself. He knows the offense inside and out. He's able to get to his progressions quickly, and if it's not there -- he doesn't put the ball in jeopardy much, so if it's not there, he's very confident as a runner.

He's a big guy, and so it doesn't look like he's moving fast, but if you watch him, guys very rarely are able to actually get a hit on him. You know, they're diving at his legs. He knows where the sticks are, so he knows when he needs to slide. He can make every throw, and then they run the football.

I think they talk a lot about the passing game, but if you watch him, Hampton, man, he's a big guy. He's going forward. Just looking at the stats from last week and just his stats over the season, he doesn't have many negative yards, right? So even if it's not blocked great, he's going to get positive yards.

Then they have three of them that they can roll. They were already dynamic at wideout, and then 9 (Devontez Walker) comes into the equation, and man, he's special. He's really good. I think he had three touchdowns in the last game.

Then the tight end-wise, they can play multiple tight ends and not miss a beat, and those guys are productive as well.

Man, they're very, very challenging to defend because, one, they know what they're doing. They're really good at it.

Two, they have the personnel. They can play. They can play 11 personnel, 12 personnel, 10 personnel if they need to. They challenge you with different formations, and then their base stuff, they do it well.

So when they're going to line up and come downhill at you, I think they're averaging close to 5 yards a clip handing the ball off, and so that compliments the passing game.

Then when you have a quarterback back there that knows where to go with the ball and if it's not there, can pull it down and not just get you back to the line of scrimmage. I mean, when he pulls it down, he's going for 10, 12, 14 yards. So it is a challenge.

Then special teams-wise got one of the top returners in the country. He's up there, and they do a good job of allowing him to catch the ball and get it started. Then he does the rest.

Yes, I would say this is the best team that we've seen so far this season because they're playing as a complete team. They're playing with a lot of emotion and passion, and they're complimenting each other. Credit to Coach Mack (Brown) and his staff for really having these guys playing at a high level.

Q. A little bit out of left field, but you guys obviously play on grass. You have some turf for practice. You've heard from the NFL there's a big push for the Players Association to get rid of the artificial turf. Do you have any concerns with your guys practicing on turf? Are you glad your field is grass for games? What's your take on that?

TONY ELLIOTT: My preference is grass. I just think that's football, in my opinion. I love the game, so I love the smell of the game. I just love everything. I love this time of year, you know,

when the grass is turning and the leaves are falling.

I understand there's certain situations where it makes sense, right, to put artificial turf in. I don't have a big indifference to it. We haven't noticed any trends that would make us think that practicing on turf is leading to more injuries.

So I don't have any concerns with playing on it or with practicing on it, but my preference is grass. I just like how grass feels in my opinion.

Q. How do you decide when you're going to practice on turf, and is it about the opponent's surface? Obviously if it's raining, I know you might get out of the elements, but what kind of goes into that?

TONY ELLIOTT: So, weather. Weather is a big factor of whether we'll practice outside or inside.

The opponents. So like this week we're playing on turf. Today we stayed inside and did all of our special teams and kicking on turf and letting the kickers kick a little bit more on turf because that's the surface that they're going to be on.

They won't have access, but for 45 minutes to an hour before the game to get their footing right, so we did all of our special teams inside. Also, got to prepare for noise. I anticipate that it's going to be loud.

Really weather is a determining factor, and then if we are playing an opponent that's been on turf and we haven't been on turf in a while, then we may take a couple of periods and go inside.

Q. Xavier Brown had some really good moments last season. He comes back to a crowded running back room. Have you given a lot of thought about how to use him this year? Would you like to keep his year of eligibility if you could?

TONY ELLIOTT: I would love to be able to protect his year considering how much time he missed on the front end of the season. So our biggest thing is getting him back in shape because with his arm, he was not able to do a ton while he was out for the first several weeks of that injury.

So right now it's really just focusing on getting him in shape, getting him back in tune with the playbook, and then as we go down the stretch, I'm pretty sure there will be some more game plan specific things you can use him for.

But would like to protect his year considering that there's depth in the room, and the depth has been productive too while he's been out.

Q. (Off microphone)

TONY ELLIOTT: It is. It definitely is for these guys to be able to get them some experience. Now we have to do a great job as coaches to manage all of that for all of our guys, and I don't know if it's going to be feasible to be able to practically get all of your first years four games of experience, but you're definitely conscious of that, and I want to do right by the guys.

Obviously the team rights superseding the individual rights. There's no question about that, but in certain cases you do want to try to protect these guys' eligibility while you can.

Q. Tony Muskett mentioned this morning that you brought up to the team the stretch you guys have that you are going into with some ranked opponents ahead. What was your message to them about this daunting part of the schedule?

TONY ELLIOTT: It's a great opportunity. You know, it's really why you come to a school like UVA is to be able to play in these type of games. My vision and hope is that we're on the other side where we are the ranked opponent and having to learn how to manage success, but we have to get there.

So right now we have opportunity. The first half of the season I feel like we didn't take advantage of some of the opportunities that were there. We were close, but we're tied of being close.

What better opportunity than starting this week and then every week after it? Really that's what the ACC is. In my experience and my years it's week in and week out are games that are very significant, so to speak, when they have ranked implications on the line.

For us it's about opportunity and having confidence that they return a lot of guys. We return a lot of guys. We got some new additions, and last year this was a three-point ball game, and it was a possession-for-possession ball game.

We didn't have – Jim (Daves) was reminding me we didn't have the big three. Our top three receivers were out last year. So hopefully they have some confidence going in that you can compete.

If we can compete, which we're learning how to do consistently and get the game to the fourth quarter, then hopefully we can flip it by finishing in the fourth quarter and having some success down the stretch, but this is what you want as a competitor.

That was my message to the guys this morning. Come on, man. It's primetime. It's 6:30. It's on the road. Top-10 team. This is what you dream about. When you are a kid, these are the moments that you want to be in. We're not going to make it something bigger than what it is, but be truly understanding of what the opportunity is.

We're fighting, man. These young men want to go to a bowl, right? That was the goal. Several guys on the roster have never been to a bowl game. They're scrapping and fighting every single game. The great thing is we got an opportunity to see where we're at. So it's all

about competition and seizing the opportunity in front of you.

Q. Then having some older guys is who have played against Drake Maye before, you had some success against him. Guys like Coen (King) and Jonas (Sanker) who have seen him in person.

TONY ELLIOTT: Right. You know, I think they can speak to the guys that haven't faced him just because the film is going to be the film, but it's different when you step on the field.

His poise, his presence, his calming effect that he has for everybody on that side of the ball, his athleticism, his ability to extend plays. You know, they can speak to that, and hopefully that will resonate with the guys.

Then, also, they can speak to the difficulty in defending him and the rest of the guys on offense and just how detail-oriented you have to be. Man, you have to be present in the moment. You have to do your work on the front end. You have to study film so that you can recognize because one of my messages this morning to the guys is the saying that Conor McGregor had at the end of one of his fights, which was "precision beats power and timing beats speed."

So if you have a guy that's big, fast, and strong, then you have to be more precise with your technique and then your timing has to be pristine so that you can neutralize his speed. That's what you are going to have to do against this football team is we have to be precise, meaning our footwork. If it's a six-inch step, it needs to be a six-inch step, and then our hand placement needs to be proper leverage on the V of the neck, not outside on the tips of the pads.

So that's kind of been the message of how I think they can actually put that into words that their teammates can understand as I kind of present the approach for the game.

Q. When you look at the linebacker room, there's a couple of switch positions between Mike and Will after Josh Ahern. How happy are you with that depth and their versatility kind of moving back from Mike and Will?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, really, really proud of James (Jackson) because he's a guy that waited his turn. He waited his turn behind Nick (Jackson), and now it's his time.

Obviously a little bit of injury, but then you have this young talented freshman, right, that's at the same position and just his willingness to go to Will so that Kam (Robinson) can get on the field, and it's been fun to watch. I think that's the epitome of what a teammate is.

I think it makes us better because we've got both of those guys on the field, and you've got two very, very athletic linebackers. Then when (Josh) Ahern -- because obviously Ahern is missing time and he is out now, but when he is able to roll in there, I think what it does it is it allows him to just play fast and play free, and he's not thinking about having to play 65 to 70 snaps. So you have a little bit of a rotation right there.

I've been pleased with Trey McDonald's progression. You're seeing him a little bit more. It's a second-year guy for us, and then the same thing with Stevie Bracey.

I feel good about the athleticism. We still have some growing and maturing from a knowledge standpoint and from within the scheme. I like, especially when Ahern is available, that rotation of those three guys and then the versatility.

You could be out there with Kam and James. You could be out there with James and Ahern. You could be out there with Cam and Ahern. It just gives you a ton of depth, and you can keep that depth fresh, right, so that they're playing fast late into the game.

Q. Status of Lex long? Will he be available this week?

TONY ELLIOTT: So Lex has decided, and it was the right thing to do. He was trying to come back from the foot, and just after we got him back, he practiced for a day, and it didn't quite feel the way that he thought it would after the rest. So sent him to a couple of more specialists to look at the foot, so he has decided to have surgery on it.

That was the best thing. So I don't anticipate we'll have Lex for the rest of the season.

Q. Have you seen a difference in Ugonna (Nnanna) since he has been back at I think his natural position of guard?

TONY ELLIOTT: At times, you know. Ugonna is a guy -- I have to remind myself that he hasn't played a ton of football, right? Even his time at Houston, he hadn't played a ton. He is extremely athletic, moves well for a big guy, strong. He's learning to play with the new technique that Coach Heff (Terry Heffernan) is teaching him.

I've seen flashes. Seen flashes. The biggest thing with Ugonna is we're just trying to push him to stay disciplined with your technique from start to finish and try not to revert back to anything else that you may have been taught because those things may not be applicable to what we're doing.

I think he has a ton of up side. That's why he is in there. He has been productive at times. When he puts it all together, he can do some really good things. The biggest thing is just being more consistent.

And then having Jimmy (Christ) back, each day that goes by, his knee is feeling better and better and better, so that gives us the ability to put Jimmy out there at tackle, and then you can roll Ty (Furnish). So now you have some depth in there at guard. It's been good to get Jimmy back so that we could push Ugonna inside.

Q. You've talked a lot in here with us about Kam Robinson's athleticism. Where is he in terms of comfort with the scheme, and how much more does his speed show up when he kind of knows where he needs to get to?

TONY ELLIOTT: Right. I think you saw it more in the last game. The dude can fly around. When I'm out at practice, I'm watching him in particular and listening to see can he make the calls, and he is getting more and more comfortable in understanding what all the checks are?

I think he is just going to continue to improve. The guy is already fast for his position and athletic. Each day, each practice, because he is getting a ton of reps, he is going to get better at the system.

The challenging thing for a young guy is week in and week out, you know, it's a new game plan, right? Each week you have a different game plan based on what you are looking at. Your reads may change slightly. Your calls may change slightly. There may be coverage tweaks or tweaks up front with different twists. You may set on this call this week versus this look you may set the front this way and then set it -- next week it's better for us to set it at a different way.

That guy has a chance to be special in my opinion, and I think I've said that from day one with him, but I think right now he's making a lot of plays just off of athleticism. See ball, get ball.

As he takes more reps, he is going to be able to diagnose, and I can't wait to see when his anticipation is there, and he's going to play even faster.

Q. I know every team is different, and every situation is different, but are there some things you've picked up from last year from your time as an assistant in terms of how to handle coming out of a bye week? Again, it's different

if you are winning, losing, but are there some tricks of the trade that you can kind of picked up?

TONY ELLIOTT: I don't know if there's tricks of the trade because I think us as coaches, we're all anxious to see how they were going to respond today because coming out of the week, and talking about this team, I thought it was critical that we focus on helping the guys get a little more healthy, right, get some guys back.

So last week's practices obviously were intense, but we took some of the physicality out of it just because, man, our guys have been playing a lot of snaps. We're beat up. We're banged up. Then hopefully the couple of days off helped those guys rejuvenate, and I thought today the energy was really good in practice.

Man, the defense was flying around. I saw guys getting after it pretty good, so I'm excited about how they've come back, but each team is different. Each week is different. I think you have to look at a lot of different factors, but one of the big factors is the location and the schedule. For us it's halfway through, which I thought was a good place for it to be. You don't want it too early, right? You don't want it necessarily too late, but I thought it was in a good spot for us. Each team is a little bit different.

I don't know if there's any tricks of the trade. I think you develop a plan, and you try to stay as close to the plan as possible, and then you look at the health of the team and determine what you need to tweak.

Q. What makes (Jonas) Sanker so special on his spot?

TONY ELLIOTT: So, one, he is a really good athlete. You know, you watch him run around. He's a really, really good athlete.

I think now he's a lot more comfortable in what he's doing. He's able to play with a lot more

passion and intensity and physicality because he understands what to do.

I can say that because when I watch him, he's coaching the younger guys. He's telling the younger guys what to do, whereas last year he was kind of listening for the older guys to tell him what to do.

I think it's a combination of his athleticism. He's a really good athlete. His understanding with his experience and then that's allowing him to play with some of that internal passion that sometimes is hard to bring out when you're not quite comfortable in what you are doing, but all three of those are clicking on all cylinders for him.

Q. This past Saturday Carolina's pass rush beat up Miami quarterback Tyler Van Dyke pretty badly. How much of a challenge is that just trying to keep Tony Muscott clean?

TONY ELLIOTT: Big challenge. When you look at it, you know, we have not done a great job of protecting the quarterback. Just flat out calling it like it is.

We have (given up) 22 sacks on the season. Now, all of those are not necessarily on the offensive line. There were a couple of situations where the quarterback has got to get rid of the ball, and that's his job to protect himself.

But, yeah, their pass rush is -- you can tell that they're a lot more comfortable in the system. I think that's what's allowing them to generate turnovers on the back end, interceptions is because they can rush with four, and they can play a lot more coverage. They can drop guys into coverage.

What that front does is it requires you to double and stay on those doubles so they keep their linebackers clean in the run game, and then they're two deep, so they're rolling four new guys, which over the course of the game makes a big difference because it changes the speed, but then it also changes the type of pass rush

that you are getting, so your tackle is constantly having to adjust.

It's hard for your tackles and your guards to get settled in on a guy because next thing you know here comes another guy, right? 25 (Kaimon Rucker) is playing at a high level in my opinion. Man, he is playing violent. He is playing physical. 10 (Desmond Evans) looks like he is on a mission. He looks like a different guy from a last year.

Where I think they've really improved is their interior guys. You know, 8 (Myles Murphy) and 98 (Kevin Hester Jr.). Who else do they have in there? 0 (Tomari Fox), 5 (Jahvaree Ritzie), 4 (Amari Gainer). They have all these guys, and they're big, and they can move. So they can push the pocket interior-wise, and then they can collapse it from the outside with the speed. I think it's the speed and the power when you look at it.

Most times if you have a speed guy, he is a speed guy, but 25 (Mali Hamrick), man, he looks the part. Man, he is the first one I'm rolling off the bus because he is put together, and he plays that way. He plays with a lot of fire and a lot of passion.

Prior to that, they didn't have a ton of sacks, but they figured it out, and I guess for them at the right time, for us at the wrong time. But, yeah, we're going to have to have a plan to make sure that we do a great job. It starts fundamentally. You know, our guys can't panic. Trust your technique, but I thought they did a good job.

Then you get the third down. So for them if they can be efficient on their first and second down and get to a third and long, then they're able to bring even more speed on the field, get into those five-man fronts. They can do it with five down linemen. They can do it with three down lineman and two linebackers, and then they start doing all the different twists and picks and all that kind of stuff to generate pressure.

They've got a good plan. The players are really good, but the biggest thing I see differently is, man, they're playing with a lot of energy.

Q. Tony, just a follow-up on what you said after the William & Mary game about the quarterbacks. What's the plan for Tony Muskett and Anthony Colandrea moving forward, and how could that plan change in the middle of a game?

TONY ELLIOTT: Great question. So, obviously, love both of my quarterbacks. And starting with Tony, won the job coming out of fall camp, and everybody in the building believed that that was the right decision and that he earned it.

Then obviously he gets hurt, goes down. Colandrea comes in and does a great job. Probably surpassed any expectations that any of us had for a first-year guy.

So now you're sitting at a situation where you've got the veteran guy, so to speak, that won the job coming back, and then you have the young guy who has played in four games, and you want to be a respecer of his year as well.

So the plan is Tony is the starter, right? Colandrea is the backup. Colandrea is preparing every game as if he is a starter ready to play, all right? Colandrea knows that we're going to try to protect that year just like we did in William & Mary. Wouldn't use it for just a snap because Tony, you know, feels a little bit of pain. But, no, if it's a situation where Tony is going to be down for an extended amount of time, series or two, and we have to go win the game, then Colandrea is prepared to go in there and go play.

If that situation were to present itself, then obviously now we would have to sit back and see what the situation is because now you've played Colandrea in his fifth game, and you want to take advantage of that year if you can, if opportunity presents itself, but then also, you

have your starting quarterback who is out there battling day after day with a shoulder injury that's going to bother him the entire year. So really just trying to manage that in my opinion the right way, do right by both of them. So that would be the plan going forward.

Then obviously we have Grady Brosterhous, who you saw come in it in the short yardage situation, and also, he came in and handled that one snap for the offense before Tony came back in the game.

Q. As a coaching staff, how does an extra week to prepare give you an advantage, or is it an advantage?

TONY ELLIOTT: Well, considering the bunch we're getting ready to go against, I don't know if it gives you an advantage per se. What it does is allows you to take a little bit of time to scout yourself because when you are in season, you're going to be trying to do things week in and week out in your game plan that you want to tweak. You're going to create some tendencies, so you want to evaluate yourself to see what tendencies the opponent may be picking up on you in offense, defense, and special teams year.

Then it's an opportunity for you to help your guys become a little bit more healthy and refreshed, and then you get to just get a head start to be able to cover more of the film than you necessarily would in a game.

Typically in a game week you're going to really study the previous four games, and then you'll have support staff looking at the other games if you're deep into the season, and then they'll be diving into some of the stuff, but you have a chance just to try to pick up on any tendencies that your opponent may have.

I don't know if that's going to give us necessarily an advantage, but we feel like it just helps us to be a little bit more prepared as we go into the matchup.

Q. I know you made the change a few weeks ago, but Suderian (Harrison) as your punt returner, what was the thought there, and are you trying to get a spark there on special teams?

TONY ELLIOTT: Definitely, trying to get a spark. He's a guy that was a quarterback in high school and also a baseball player, so that naturally says, okay, you played baseball, you can track a ball. Let's see, can you catch a punt?

The biggest thing there is I feel like with the ball in his hands a little bit more dynamic than Ethan (Davies). Ethan did a great job for us while he was in there. It was just a matter of time of trying to get to a point to where you felt Suderian had enough reps in practice to where he would be comfortable in the game, but the biggest thing is definitely just try to get a little bit more dynamic athlete back there with the ball in his hands.

Q. How important was it to get the run game going? I know they've had their struggles throughout the season, but how important was for that group to have the game that they had last time out?

TONY ELLIOTT: Very important because I want to run the football. That's where it starts. I'm going to continue on about our offense, but going back to the previous question, I know the quarterback is really special that we're getting ready to play, but they're running the football. When you can hand the ball off and it's four, six, seven yards, you know, it allows you to be more aggressive in what you are doing. You dictate the pace of play when you can run the football.

Also, for me it sets the mindset of the game that we're going to run the football when we need to, when we have to, and when we want to. It was critical, and that's where it starts for us because then off of there now your play actions and play passes and boots and naked and all that kind of stuff is more effective because people have to commit to the run.

Then no defense wants you to run the football down the field, right? Like I said, mentality-wise it was critical, and that's what we've been stressing.

Perris (Jones) did a good job last week, and so did Kobe (Pace). The biggest thing for us is if we can eliminate the sacks. When you have 22 sacks and 161 yards of negative, then your rushing average is going to be down, and you come out of the game like, man, we were at 2.7 or we're at 3 yards a carry where when you are carrying 40, 50 yards of negative yardage, that hurts your rushing average, right?

So when you are effective now in the run game, then you stay ahead of the chains. Then now instead of it being a third and seven that you are trying to convert, it might be a third and three. So now in third and three you have more options. You can run the ball. You can pass the ball. You can move the pocket.

You don't have to drop back and try to throw the ball at the sticks. Whereas when you're not running the ball effectively, then you become a

little bit more pass-heavy on first and second down. And if you're not effective there, then you're in long yardage.

Or if you are effective on first down and then you try to hand the ball off and you have a TFL, then now you are back in the third and long, and that was an area when where when we did our stealth scout, there were way too many third and seven plus. It was very, very difficult to watch the third and 11 pluses, and we've had way too many of those. It goes back to not being effective on first and second down.

If you can run the football and you can get four yards on first down, then you feel good. So now second and medium, you know, you want to get at least half of that, but second and six is a much easier situation than second and nine.

It kind of flips the dynamics of the game, and it gives the offense the ability to be a little more aggressive as opposed to when it's second and nine, second and ten, the defense can be a little bit more aggressive.