

**University of Virginia Football Media
Conference
Tuesday, Oct. 31, 2023
Head Coach Tony Elliott
Press Conference**

Q. Halloween night, and you encouraged the staff the other day that if you've got youngsters, take a little time, go home, trick or treat with them, and you said your kid was dressed like a string bean or something. Maybe I didn't hear that right.

TONY ELLIOTT: So just to clarify that, you know how on your phone you have those memories that pop up, and so my oldest, he might have been one, one and a half, and one of my favorite pictures of all time was him in like a little spring bean costume. Someone was getting his attention so he was giving one of those looks, but it's almost like he knows he's in a string bean costume at one and a half. That's what I was saying. I was trying to make a point to the staff that obviously we've got a lot of work to do, but you can take 45 minutes to an hour to get out this evening and trick-or-treat because you don't get those times. My youngest has the flu so I don't know if there'll be any trick-or-treating in my house.

Q. You were also at the volleyball game...

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, Shannon has been very, very supportive of me. Kind of came in around the same time, but after every game, regardless of the result, she's always texting me. Shout-out to Shannon and volleyball's big win. It was fun to watch. Great turnout, too, in JPJ, so it was great to see.

Q. How soon upon returning to Charlottesville Saturday night did you see what was happening in the Georgia Tech-Carolina game, and what was your reaction when you saw the total yards for Georgia Tech?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, before returning to Charlottesville on the plane, sitting next to Coach (Des) Kitchings, he was looking at some of the scores and just kind of didn't say much, just tapped my shoulder and showed me his phone and was like, okay. All right. But it doesn't surprise me because (Georgia) Tech has been putting up a lot of yards and scoring a lot of points all season versus everybody that they've played.

Until you watch it, you don't get the feel of the game, but man, they really came alive in the fourth quarter and really took over the fourth quarter, and I think they scored, what, 22 points and 220 plus yards rushing and really kind of took over the game.

Up until that point, that was back and forth, but early on, North Carolina was kind of having some success both sides of the ball. They hit a couple big plays, kept it close, and then got it to the fourth and just took over the game.

Q. The veteran leadership that you guys have, how important has it been this year when you're 2-6 and things could spiral to have guys that are trying to keep the locker room together, Malik Washington, your older guys who have been here for a while?

TONY ELLIOTT: Right. You point out being 2-6 and losing the four games by 10 points. I don't think without your -- I'm not going to say that I'm that good of a coach to say that it's all us and the coaching staff, but it's really the players in the locker room, and they continue to be bought in, and they continue to take ownership for the opportunities that we've let get away.

Man, they're eager to come back and work day in and day out. They've accepted the challenge.

Without strong leaders in the locker room, you wouldn't see a team continue to compete regardless of what the circumstances are.

Q. In the game against Miami, there was one defensive drive, you saw four true freshmen on that side of the ball, including Caleb Hardy. What have you seen from that class and especially Caleb in their development and their contributions?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, and I tried to give some context because obviously 54 plays I thought they did a good job, but just holding up versus the run and the pass, and it came down to a situation where just came up short on the last play.

But overall with the challenges that they've had on guys going down and forcing young guys to step in, what I think it's done is it's obviously allowed some of the guys that are playing a lot of snaps to be able to feel a little bit of confidence to know that we've got somebody that can go in and spell me when I need a play or two.

But with those guys, I think what you're seeing is just their belief in the program and why they came to UVA, to have an opportunity to contribute and get on the field.

What you're seeing is that it's happening fast but they're absorbing it. They're showing up every day going to work and creating competition, too. In some of those situations it's been more by attrition, but also a couple of those situations it's been because they've put in the work and they're at a point now where they can truly compete and push the other person in front of them.

Q. Chico (Bennett) had the shoulder first and then the knee, which has put him behind. He hasn't had the season he wanted to have. What have you seen from him in terms of his work ethic throughout the season and I know he's in Slade's position group, but have you talked to him about the season?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, as a matter of fact talked to him yesterday and just told him, shared a

personal story about some of my experiences and really, really pushing hard for something and being on the cusp of feeling like it was time for it to happen and then it doesn't happen.

But staying the course, and then eventually it worked out the way the Lord desired for it to work out. So we just had that conversation yesterday, and what I told him is don't press, just play, because a lot of times when you want something so bad, you can push too hard to where you're not playing free, and so when you think that you are, you're actually not necessarily playing with the technique or the pad level to give you a chance to be successful.

Just reassured him that everything happens for a reason, and had some setbacks that he wasn't anticipating, as well, with the knee. Nobody was anticipating that, and it takes a little bit of time when you miss practice time, especially at that point of the season when you're coming out of fall camp, those reps are critical, so it takes a little bit of time.

Then you've got a spotlight on you, so it's not like you're sneaking up on anybody. They're going to have a plan for you. When a team knows that you're the, quote-unquote, best pass rusher, those tackles are going to be ready to play.

Just encouraged him to stay the course, but what I've appreciated most is his leadership through it all. This is a guy who obviously has a lot of expectations, both externally and internally, not going the way that you want it to go, but he showed up every single day and accepted the challenge, and he just comes back to work, and he broke us down at the end of practice, and it was comforting for me as a coach and reassuring because he's echoing the same message when he easily could have said something different. He's saying, hey, I'm staying the course. I'm just focusing on what I can control and taking it one play at a time, and we all need to do the same if we're going to change the outcome.

Q. If you remember the wording of Jeff's question, I have the exact same question about Ben Smiley. He's a guy who's been through a lot, obviously. I know this year hasn't been the breakout that he envisioned. What have you seen from him?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, with Ben (Smiley), and I've been probably his biggest advocate because I see a ton of potential there, but also recognizing that he hasn't played a lot of football, and then he had the setback where he was down a couple games kind of when he was starting to hit his stride.

What I've seen with him is a similar demeanor to Chico (Bennett Jr.) in that he shows up every single day. He's a very, very eager guy to learn. He's also a pleaser, so he wants to do it right and it's just a function of building that muscle memory, whereas Chico per se played more snaps in his career up to this point than Ben had.

Seeing progress, I think he and I and Coach (Chris) Slade just wanted to kind of fully click in, and I think you saw it up at North Carolina, his best game. But we've just got to continue to work with a play with a little bit more extension because man, he's such a violent guy, fast guy. Sometimes he gives himself up too easy by going down the middle of the blocker, and so we're really just trying to work on some of the fine points.

We got the effort where it needs to be, there's no question about that. Now we've just got to clean up his hand placement and his extension so that he can keep his eyes out of the middle of the tackle so he can see and react a little bit quicker.

Q. Aaron Faumui was a guy early in his career, obviously a lot of potential, but a lot of 15-yard penalties, a lot of discipline issues. Played with a lot of emotion, which is a good thing at times when controlled. When have you seen from

this older, more mature version of him, and what have you thought of his development?

TONY ELLIOTT: Man, super proud of Aaron. He was a guy that when I first got here, was kind of one of the guys, all right, I need to tread lightly with this guy because we don't quite know each other, and he kind of looks at you and he's got that demeanor. Just kind of the way he looks, he's got a little bit of a scowl on his face so you don't know what he's thinking, like all right, I don't know this guy so I need to make sure that I choose my words the right way. Then you see him on the practice field and you're like, man, this guy loves to play, but we've got to make sure that we channel it during the proper times.

What I've seen is I've had him up in front of the team now about four different times to just give a word of encouragement, and each week that he gets up there, man, he's more and more comfortable. He's starting to open up to the guys. You know he's married, he has a son, so you've seen a little bit of the transformation.

He didn't believe it when I told him. I said, look, man, as soon as you see that baby boy come into the world, your life is going to instantly change. No, Coach, that's not going to happen. Now ask him.

I picked at him a little bit, too, I was like, you know what, I bet you're getting sugar from head to foot, aren't you. Before he was like, no, I'm a big tough guy. But when you have that son, it makes you melt.

I'm seeing a lot of maturity out of him and trusting Coach (Kevin) Downing, trusting myself that hey, we're not trying to take away what makes you special. What we're trying to do is we're trying to teach you how to play with it at the right time so that you don't waste it.

Don't waste any energy in between plays, getting into a jawing match and pushing and shoving. Man, I need you to focus for four to six

seconds, and then after that when the whistle is blown, get your eyes to the sideline, regroup so you can give maximum effort, and don't let anybody walk through your mind with dirty feet is what I like to tell him. He who angers you owns you, so don't give it to your opponent, other than when the ball is snapped until that whistle is blown. That's when you be Aaron Faumui. In between plays, I need you to be a leader, your body language, because everybody is watching you, and they're going to take their cue from you.

Q. As successful as Malik Washington has been this season, how are other defenses trying to take him away from you, and how much of a challenge is that for you and Des to try to use him more and make him stay effective?

TONY ELLIOTT: Right. You know, defenses are not letting him get behind for the most part, so it's forcing Des (Kitchings) and the staff to move him around a lot to try to make sure that we don't put him in a stationary place to where they can kind of hone in on where he is, so you see him in a lot of short motions. We're also having to do more play action stuff to try and spring him on some move-the-pocket stuff so he can run away from people.

So each week it's going to be a challenge. It's good to see Malachi (Fields) continue to make plays because I think that helps when you have those two guys because then you can kind of make them make a decision on which one you're wanting to take away, and the next challenge for us is not so much with Malik, it's just, okay, who's going to be the third guy that's going to step up, and if we can get that third receiver to really come on, and now you really balance out the field, and then the more production you have from the tight end position, then you're able to take a little bit of the focus off of Malik.

But you're seeing people, they're not letting him get behind. They're trying to force

everything in front and then seek and then rally and make a play and tackle.

Q. You haven't won a home ACC game yet. What kind of emphasis are you putting on defending your home turf?

TONY ELLIOTT: Oh, man, huge. It's how we started the week. For us, we talk about the wind shield mentality, and I know a lot of different people talk about it, but it's focusing on what's ahead, and what's ahead for us is a time where it's an opportunity. It's been our theme since the bye week, and I also put up on that windshield because we have a graphic, first ACC home win. In two years we haven't won an ACC game at home, and it's time.

If we're going to take the next step as a program, then you've got to start with defending your home turf, especially when you have your fans, your crowd, you're used to the environment. You know the routine inside and out in terms of the preparation process. You've got to defend your home turf. It's a big point of emphasis and one of the things that was put in front of them from the opening meeting.

The first thing they saw on Monday morning before they heard anything come out of my mouth was they saw that first ACC win at home.

Q. The ACC released their new football schedule model. You obviously have a lot of freshmen, so do you feel the need to address that with the team, about how the future is going to look?

TONY ELLIOTT: Haven't had a chance or a thought about it, to be honest with you. I saw all of the information that came out and appreciate all the work that the folks down in Charlotte at the ACC office put in in putting that model together. Took a peek at it, but I'm focused on Georgia Tech.

Until everything is set in stone, obviously we kind of know the four at home, the four on the road. We don't know the rest of it. Don't want to put that in front of the guys. They've got more than enough to worry about in this bunch from Georgia Tech that's coming in here.

Q. You talk a lot about focusing in on the details, honing in on the details. Is that almost a skill you have to develop, or how challenging is it to just stay locked in in that moment on the details that you've focused on?

TONY ELLIOTT: Oh, it's tough. I think about my phone. Think about throughout the course of the day how many times do you just tap your phone to see if you got a text message. It hasn't buzzed but you're checking to see has somebody reached out to me.

I think in our everyday lives we've got so many distractions. It's a mindset more so than a skill. We've been going through the book "Training Camp" by John Gordon and talking about the 11 characteristics of the best of the best, and No. 5 was zoom focus. Being able to zoom focus.

I think that one of the challenges for myself in dealing with the younger generations is I was kind of raised like hey, sit down and be still a little bit. Just chill out for a while. Whereas man, they're constantly stimulated. They can multitask. I don't even know how they do it. Literally I watch my boys, they're 10 and 8, and they'll have the TV on, the iPad, headphones on, and somehow they can hear everything and do everything. I'm like, I don't know how you guys do it.

But for them in this game, it is a game of inches, and you have to be able to focus. That's the key, and that was a message after practice today is man, we've been in some four-quarter games, and they've come down to the last play, the last drive, and it's about four or five plays, and you never know when those plays are going to come, so you have to be able to focus in, play in and play out.

It's a mindset first and foremost, and it's getting the guys to understand that, hey, there's a time when you want to have a lot of stuff going on and operating, but then there's other times where you've got to be able to just lock in and focus because you never know, and we look at going back and looking at the game, we had six trips to the red zone. We had two touchdowns and four field goals. Man, happy for every point. The objective is every time you get in the red zone you want to score points, but you want to score more touchdowns than you do field goals, and when I look at it -- I'm thinking about one play in particular, Mike pops open on a wheel route, man, it's a walk-in touchdown. The snap is a little bit low, so the quarterback's eyes have to come off of it to go down to get the snap. By the time he comes back up, he's got a little bit of pressure in his face, the timing is off. Man, it's a game of inches.

Nobody is trying to have a play where they're not successful, but it's just a game of inches, and you have to focus play in and play out, and that's been consistent.

One of the things that I try to do is obviously lean on my experience, the things that I've personally experienced. Also the places that I've looked to try to get confirmation on the things that I'm teaching, and then I try to validate it by having a lot of different voices, so to speak, and today we were talking about the New Zealand All-Blacks, and I've quoted them in the past in the book Legacy, and for those who don't know, it's the winningest percentage-wise, I think they're 77 percent win percentage since 1903, so it's the most successful sports franchise in the world.

It's about the little things. They start with cleaning up the locker room, and so just trying to get these guys mindset-wise to understand that football, things may change, but there's going to be some things about this game that are never going to change, and at the end of the day when you're trying to win a one-on-one match-up against another person that wants

the same thing that you want, it's going to come down to your fundamentals under pressure, and that's just being detail oriented.

Q. You have played 10 true freshmen this year and several of them have been in prominent roles like Kam (Robinson). Are there guys in that class who have either played very little or have not yet played but have caught your eye in practice?

TONY ELLIOTT: So we're at that point in the season where we've got four games left, and with the redshirt rule and being able to play guys in four without burning the year, we're constantly having discussion about where guys are.

Some have already crossed that threshold like a Kam so there's no more discussion on whether or not he'd be a guy, but you've got a guy like Jason Hammond who played about eight, ten snaps this past week that's played in a couple games, so now we've got to make the decision on, okay, is he a guy that we try to just turn loose for the remaining four, which would probably be his situation. We need to get some productivity out of him, and he flashed and he showed some things. He's at a point now where we feel a lot more confident.

Anthony Britton is kind of on that threshold where we need to get some experience out of him, as well, and TyLyric (Coleman) is another guy that we want to take advantage of his time. Titus (Ivy) would be one. He's been banged up a little bit.

In terms of how much we can get out of him down the stretch, I don't know. There's a couple other guys that have been more in a role where they're servicing the defense or offense respectively on the scout team that if the opportunity permits itself, but the guys that are on my radar for sure are the two D-linemen there that I just mentioned, Britton and Hammond. We'd like to see what we can get out of Devin Clark and Trent Baker-Booker.

Those are guys that have shown me, and it may just be on special teams.

But those are the four guys right now off the top of my head. Xavier Brown would be another guy that we're going to try and see how we can incorporate him. Obviously he's in a situation where there's a lot of depth, but he's a guy that can provide us, even though I know he's not a freshman per se, but we want to take advantage of, because of where he is now with the elbow, we feel like he's in a good position.

Q. As far as injuries, Sackett Wood missed against Miami. Is he ready to go, and also Dre Walker, how close is he?

TONY ELLIOTT: Dre Walker was cleared to go last week, but having missed so much practice time and then only playing 54 snaps on defense, it just was -- we were better served to go with the older guys.

But he'll be cleared and ready to go and looks good.

Sackett (Wood) probably won't make it back this week because he's got two things going on, so he's dealing with the knee and the shoulder. Just doesn't make sense to rush him back. We need to give him a little bit more time.

(Josh) Rawlings was a guy that got through the week and was able to play on game day, so we expect that he'll be back fully healthy and turned loose.

Suderian (Harrison) wasn't with us last week. He's back practicing. He'll be more of a game-time decision on where he is.

Q. You started Blake Steen at right tackle. What did you notice about him in the recruiting process, and what did you say to him because he felt a lot of schools were after him because of his brother. What did you see that you wanted him particularly?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, so obviously comes from a very athletic family and have a relationship with the coaches down there at his school. They felt like he had a tremendous amount of upside. Maybe at that stage in his career, probably the most upside of the brothers. So felt good about their assessment. Obviously is a big guy. You can't coach size.

He's the younger brother, so you know he's going to have some toughness to him, especially when you've got some older brothers that play in the trenches. They're going to make you tough.

For us, we told him from the get-go that we're recruiting you separate from your brother. This isn't a situation that we'd love to have both of you, but we're recruiting you guys independent of each other.

Q. Just your willingness to change personnel on the O-line, you guys have shuffled throughout the year, is that rare? Sometimes you stick with five all year. You guys might not be able to have that luxury. Has it helped you?

TONY ELLIOTT: You know, I think that that's to be determined in terms of the last part of that question. But I think what it does is it forces competition. It forces the guys to show up every single day, and I think it creates a lot of trust and a strong bond between the position coach when they know that -- if the guy that's getting it done is going to be the guy that's going to be rewarded.

You know, in Jimmy's (Jimmy Christ) situation, in fairness to Jimmy, Jimmy is trying to do everything he can and still not fully healthy from the knee. He's battling, giving us everything that he can. Then Ugonna (Nnanna) is battling. We've asked him to play two different spots.

Ty (Furnish) started off in a good spot and then kind of was struggling a little bit. Now he's back playing some of his best football.

For us, we're trying to find the best five on that day that give us the best opportunity to be successful, but I think they all know that if we come to work every single day and we're productive in practice, we're going to have an opportunity to be able to show what we can do in the game.

Q. In terms of size and speed, J.R. Wilson appears to have a lot going for him. What has kept him from becoming that third wide out you're looking for?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, I've got to remind myself of his situation. He's a kid that was a basketball kid early on in his career, and then he hurts his knee senior year of high school, so kind of missed some time there, and then was last year a first-year playing behind some really, really talented guys, so not quite as much experience.

The biggest thing for him is just experience. As soon as he continues to gain confidence through experience, I think you're going to see a guy that's got probably -- I don't want to put this kind of pressure on him, but just in fairness to the question that you asked, he's probably got the most upside of any of the guys in the room because he's a legit 6'3" and a half to 6'4" -- man, he's got arms that touch the ground. He runs well.

But what you're seeing is still some of the receiver movements. He's still learning them. To play fast at that position and to play confident, and when you look at the position and I can speak to it because I played it, catching the ball is not the most natural thing. If you can just test somebody's natural ability, you throw something at them real quick, and the guys that have it, boom, they can do that. Other guys, they have to learn how to make it a very natural movement, and then you've got to run fast, stop on a dime, do all those kind of things.

I think it's just a matter of, man, him gaining experience.

He wants to do well. He knows that his team needs him. Putting a little bit too much pressure on himself and trying to do too much too fast, and just, hey, focus on what you can control, pick one thing each day to get better at, and when you have a little bit of adversity, don't get too down on yourself. Just chalk it up to it's an opportunity to learn. It's not failure, it's a learning opportunity. I think it's just going to be a matter of time but also considering that he didn't play the position as long as some of these other guys have.

Q. You guys did a real good job pressuring Drake Maye in the Carolina game. No sacks in the Miami game. What did you see and how would you evaluate first the D-line getting pressure and then the blitz package?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, great question. So obviously their line is a little bit bigger, a little bit longer, and they were running the ball a little bit, trying to lead with the run.

I thought (Tyler) Van Dyke did a good job of trying to get the ball out and dump it off, where Drake is going to kind of prolong a play a little bit. He'll move around a little bit, buy a little bit of time. Sometimes he's really decisive and he'll take off and he'll go. Other times he'll try to move around, and it gives an opportunity for your rush to catch up.

Blitz-wise, I thought that we had a little bit more precision with some of our timing and our spacing on our twists the previous game, and with this group that we just played, if you're late, they're going to be able to swallow you up.

I think you also saw we were down the middle of the tackle a little bit more than we were the previous week, and we weren't quite getting on edges.

When you get on edges, you can kind of condense the pocket and force the quarterback to hitch a couple times and get off the spot,

which allows other guys to be able to generate some pressure.

I think it was a function of their length showed up and their size, especially at tackle. When you look at those two tackles that they have, Jalen Rivers and the freshman that they have are really long, really big. Our precision wasn't quite where it needed to be, and then I thought the quarterback at times found a place to get rid of the ball and wasn't going to sit back there and hold it too long.

Q. Spinning forward, Jim's notes point out that Georgia Tech has been pretty effective protecting their quarterback. What do you see from their front and their protection?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, they do a good job with their quick game. They get the ball out. They get it in space. Man, they motion and they shift in motion to kind of slow everybody down. Kind of slows down the pass rush there because there's a lot of communication. Their quarterback is athletic. He's a lot more athletic than people want to give him credit for. Like he can run. He's not trying to sit back there and hold on to the ball, and then they incorporate their play action, so they'll move the pocket.

They've got a really good scheme, and their guys have a lot of confidence. They have ways to protect the quarterback in unconventional ways as opposed to just sitting back there and trying to drop back. They're going to get the ball out quick, they're going to move the pocket, they're going to dump the ball down when they need to and then they're going to move and buy some more time on some of their play action stuff.

Q. What's the beauty of your outside zone running philosophy?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, so I have to give credit to Des (Kitchings) because he's a wide zone guy. I cut my teeth as a coordinator off of the tight zone. I was a tight zone counter guy, so a lot of

my stuff was focused between the tackles. I was always curious about it, but the beauty of it is it creates space, whereas when you're running tight zone or you're running counter, you're kind of boxed in with those tackles. There's a lot of double teams and you're trying to create a new line of scrimmage, whereas on the wide zone you get guys running. You get guys running, and then the linebackers, can't just come flat downhill. They've got to kind of scrape over the top. It creates some bigger gaps. It causes misfits by the safeties.

I'll say it's a risk-reward type of scheme in that you're a lot more one-on-one blocks, so there's a lot more opportunity for a potential negative play, but I think because of the space, it allows for the greater opportunity for the bigger plays or the more consistent chunk plays as opposed to with a tight zone you've got to fit it up just right, your back has got to see it just right, and then you also can get gapped out.

What I like about it is it gets guys running. It also challenges the D-line, too, because they can't just come off the ball. They've got to be ready to run or they can get cut out of their gap, and if they get cut out of their gap, then now that's a lot on a linebacker or a safety, and if they get cut out of their gap and the safety or the backer doesn't fit it right then it's a big play.

That's what I really like about the wide zone.

Q. As Georgia Tech's receivers, are they the fastest you've probably seen this year?

TONY ELLIOTT: They can run. They definitely can run. They play fast. Obviously they run really well, but they also play fast, and you can see a big difference in the guys are a lot more confident and they're playing faster, and they do a really good job of getting those guys in space and allowing them to get the ball in their hands and moving as opposed to being stationary and letting people converge on them for the tackle.