

**University of Virginia Football Media  
Conference  
Tuesday, Oct. 24, 2023  
Head Coach Tony Elliott  
Press Conference**

**Q. Is there a noticeable increase in energy level at practice and attentiveness in meetings from the players after a win like that?**

**COACH ELLIOTT:** I would like to hopefully say no, right, because we talk about every week and every practice being the biggest one of the year. But obviously the guys -- one of the things that we've got to take into consideration, too, is, man, it was a late night. They didn't get back until 3:00 in the morning, and that's one of the prices that you pay for playing in prime time.

But they've had a good pep in their step since coming back from the off week. I mentioned that last week. But I think the guys understand now the price you have to pay to be able to experience moments like that.

Today was a good practice. Very, very similar to last Tuesday, and hopefully we'll continue to have that energy and that focus, not just because of the previous result, but because of a gratitude and a gratefulness to be able to get to do what we do. That's one of the things I remind the guys is we get to do this. It's not that we have to. We get to do this.

But we had a good Tuesday practice. Tuesday is a tough physical practice for us. It's full pads. It's right at about two hours. So they had good energy today.

And just like I saw last Tuesday, man, it was highly competitive, and good-on-good portions of practice. So I was pleased with the preparation today.

**Q. Is the challenge this week to match Miami's physicality after what they were able to do against Clemson, 211 rushing yards to 30? Is that a challenge to build on what you guys built a little bit against UNC?**

**COACH ELLIOTT:** It's a challenge every week in the ACC. I think obviously I know there's different perspectives and people say things about different conferences. But in my experience, man, it's a physical conference in the trenches, week in, week out, and it doesn't matter who you're playing. And we knew it was going to be a physical battle this past week.

And same thing this week and the weeks to come. So biggest thing with Miami and just trying to get our guys to make sure that they understand that this football team is a few plays away from being undefeated and being potentially a top-10 ranked team. And they're a different team than the team we played last year.

And it starts in the trenches. So on both sides of the ball -- and you see these guys, they get after it. They're physical. They're well-coached. They're athletic. They're fast.

So it's going to be a challenge regardless of what they did last week and what we faced. Because that's the ACC. You've got to win in the trenches to be able to have a chance to do things on the perimeter.

**Q. Caleb Hardy was out there at safety against Carolina for some snaps. How have you seen the true freshmen who have played kind of progress? Are they benefitting from the on-the-job training?**

**COACH ELLIOTT:** No question. You're baptized by fire. You've got to go out there and learn the hard way. And really proud of Caleb because Caleb was a guy that showed up in mid-summer, was in the 170s. Now he's up to 190. Body's filling out. A guy that we saw a lot of promising things on tape and in fall camp.

Then he hurts his ankle. So then he's out for about three weeks, and it kind of put him behind just a little bit. But now you're starting to see the flashes that we saw.

So I think with all the young guys that are playing, man, they're having to grow up fast. I know, in particular, with those guys on defense, Coach Rud (John Rudzinski) does a great job of just maximizing reps.

So there's one thing they can't say is they haven't seen it because they're getting reps. Now it's just the ability to process it, slow it down so that you can play up to speed with everybody else on the field.

**Q. It was clear this past Saturday that the pressures, the blitzes, the stunts impacted Drake Maye a little bit. As an offensive guy knowing what Coach Rud (John Rudzinski) does defensively, what makes some of those things tough block and identify, especially in those third-and-long situations?**

**COACH ELLIOTT:** Good question. The biggest thing when you're facing all of the twists -- one, you want to stay ahead of the chains so you don't give them the opportunity to get into exotic fronts and start moving. It requires the guys up front to be disciplined. It's happening fast. Timing is the key.

When you have precision -- so the guy that's the first one whether you have him penetrating or you have him working a specific placement on the lineman adjacent to him and the guy is coming off his backside fast, if a tackle or guard, they turn their shoulders too much, man, it's hard for them to recover.

And I thought early on they were able to get to them and get a couple of hits. They didn't equate to sacks, but when you get to a quarterback potentially early in the game, it could disrupt his timing potentially. Not saying that's what happened with Drake. But you always want to try to get a couple hits on the

quarterback early. And then that may make him force the pocket the next time.

The biggest thing that makes it hard is there's so many different ones, and they all look different to the guys. And it takes a tremendous amount of coordination, communication.

And then there's going to be some situations offensively that you're just not in a good call. So sometimes you're sliding to it. Sometimes you're in man blocking, and there's advantages to sliding but there's disadvantages to a full slide to it.

And when you're in a man scheme, which a lot of those third-down exotic fronts cause you to be in a man scheme, now everybody has to be on the same plane. But you're trying to win your one-on-one battle. If you have any distortion of playing then you can't twist. So then guys get picked and now you have a free rusher.

There's a reason why defensive guys do it. And there's a reason why offensive guys want to stay ahead of the chains so they don't have to be as precise in those situations.

And then the other thing is, in long yards, the quarterback has to hold the ball a little longer because most of the routes are going to the sticks or beyond the sticks, whereas if you're in a quick-gain situation and short yardage you can protect, the offensive linemen and the backs can protect (indiscernible) ball is out of your hands quickly.

**Q. How much do you and John (Rudzinski) go back and forth during the week about what may work against a certain opponent, down-and-distance situations, that kind of thing?**

**COACH ELLIOTT:** For me, I'll give some initial thoughts and then kind of assess what they're doing. If I see anything that causes problems, I rely on him and the staff.

And the same thing with Des (Kitchings) just because there's so many other components of

the job that pull me away at times. So I don't get to see every bit of all of the different situations that they're preparing for.

But we'll bounce ideas and talk about things that are tough. And he'll ask my opinion on, okay, what do you see on them offensively. What are some of their weaknesses? And typical the most conversations I have is with him and D line guys about this is what I see from a front perspective. These are some of the things I see.

Maybe this is the offensive lineman in the lineup that turns his shoulder or this tackle is opening the gate pretty quickly or you're getting an underhand strike as opposed to a three-point strike, and just different things we talk about, just trying to give them some tidbits.

**Q. For the first five weeks of the season these guys did not get a lot of praise from outside the McCue Center. What's the key for them handling the pats on the back and congratulatory text messages and everything they're getting this week?**

**COACH ELLIOTT:** So my message then and my message now is simplify your life. The 24-hour rule, you celebrate it, you enjoy it for 24 hours.

And my first question to the senior leadership group, when we met on Monday morning was, what now? And I wanted to hear their response. What now; to see where their mindset is.

And their response was we've got to go back to work. It's Monday. It's mindset Monday. We can't be thinking about what happened on Saturday night.

And then I told them again today, this was -- Coach (Chris) Slade actually said this, so I'm going to piggyback off what he said after the game; he said, this is a blue-dot game, meaning on your phone you have a lot of blue dots from text messages, where you get a bunch of those after a win. But after a loss there's not many

blue dots. Maybe mom, maybe your wife. Maybe your child.

But you want to respect the individuals that reach out. And with me I make sure that I respond. I take time on Saturday night and Sunday to respond to those who took it but after that I'm focused on the game.

So it's teaching these guys that you have to be in love with the process. And we saw a cool little video. One of the players sent it to me and I thought it was appropriate. It talks about the honey badger. The honey badger, he has to go face in to the tree to get the honey. Now the rest of his body has the fur coat to sting but his face is vulnerable.

The message was the taste of honey is worth the pain. So we've got to focus on the pain, the pain of discipline or you have the pain of regret. Hopefully these guys will learn and grow in handling success. And if you want to continue on this road, man, you've got to pay the price. It doesn't come -- there's nothing easy.

And that's the stretch that we have. And really it's ACC football week in, week out. Man, you've got to show up. The only way you can show up is you consistently have to respect the process and take it one day at a time, one snap at a time, one practice at a time.

**Q. Who is in that senior leadership?**

**COACH ELLIOTT:** There's a bunch of them. Pretty much all the guys that are listed as seniors. Then I've got a couple of guys that are fourth-year guys that this could be their last season because of their graduation. But man, there's a ton of them.

I don't want to miss anybody. But there's probably about 25 to 30 guys in that group. And we meet on Mondays before the team meeting. And then we meet on Fridays before the team meeting. And that's just me and those guys. And then I have another group of representation called the Hoo Cadence, which is

a selection of guys from each classification. And they meet with Strength Coach (Adam) Smotherman, the strength coach, they usually meet on Thursdays. It's just a way for them to have a voice in the program and a way for us to get messaging out to the team.

**Q. Belief has been something that you've talked about throughout this season. How do you make sure that belief stays intact regardless of the results, good or bad?**

**COACH ELLIOTT:** I mean, we talk a lot about life in this program as well. And if you look at just their lives the last year, to get to this point, it's taken a lot of belief. And belief is faith, in essence. And that's the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things unseen. So that's what it takes in life. That's what it takes in football.

Every week, when you start the week, you're believing that you're going to win the game. That's how every week starts. And so I want that to be a foundational principal within this program.

We talk about holding a cable. Cable is commitment, appreciation, belief, love and effort. That's the part of who we are. So I think the times that these young men went through back in November, December, January, to get back to grounds, beliefs sustain them. So they have evidence of what a belief can do, and they're believing that they can finish the season strong. They're believing that week in, week out they can win.

But what's the alternative? If you don't have belief, what's going to get you up every day? What's going to sustain you? Because, man, life is hard.

Amongst all the congratulatory texts, I got a text about a young man that I was associated with in one of my previous stops that got hit really hard with life this week. And the only thing that's really going to sustain him is belief, because

there's going to be days that he doesn't want to get up and go forward. There's going to be days that I'm struggling. There's going to be days you're struggling.

And at the end of the day, there's really only two things that I believe that you really control in life, and that's your education, in a sense your attitude, your belief.

So as long as I'm privileged to be the head coach, there's always going to be belief because we all desire to become what we were created to become. And in order for that to happen, you've got to believe.

**Q. You had a breakthrough this week with the ground game and that, of course, led to good advantage in time of possession as well. How important is that cycle of ground-attack success with time of possession moving forward for you guys?**

**COACH ELLIOTT:** I think it allows us to play some complementary football. Allows you to dictate the pace of the game, so to speak. In essence, you believe when you win the time of possession, you limit their opportunities to score.

So there's a lot of benefits to time of possession. For us, we want to be a football team that's balanced. We want to run the football. For us, when we can run the football, it opens up a lot of things on offense.

And that was what I was most proud of throughout the course of the game is, from start to finish, you felt like every time those guys on offense took the field they believed that they were going to be able to go right down the field and score.

And it started because they were staying ahead of the chains. They were having success. They weren't in long-yardage situations. And then you started to see the line of scrimmage change.

And then the flip side is defensively, those guys, they feel good going out there because you know what? Let's go do our job and get that ball back.

I thought one of the biggest things that helped with that was special teams. Special teams, early on in the game, created some very, very long fields for the opponent, which the defense did a great job of maintaining that field position.

So then, now, when you're getting the ball back at midfield, right, you can be more aggressive offensively. And so you can run the ball. You can pass the ball.

So it's big when you can run the football. And then it kind of sets the mindset for the game. And we know that for lack of a better way to describe it, down the stretch there's going to be fistfights. And it's going to be won in the trenches. Whoever can control the line of scrimmage is going to have the best chance of winning.

**Q. Just piggybacking off of that. Des (Kitchens) said after the game that you guys felt like you could run on Carolina. Did you see something in your film study during the bye week that convinced you that you would be able to run the ball successfully against them?**

**COACH ELLIOTT:** I think it started with, last game, one of our better running performances was versus that group last year. So I think there was confidence with these guys that, okay, we've seen ourselves do it once versus -- not to the extent we did on Saturday -- but we've seen us have some success and what that led to, being able to go possession for possession for a while the previous year.

Structurally, they line up. So I think you gain some confidence because you kind of know where they're going to be at. They're really good on defense. They've got really good

personnel. That's what you should do. You should just be able to line up.

But I think the guys just were confident because structurally there wasn't as much to prepare for as opposed to this week. Like, Miami does a lot. There's a lot of different structure that you have to prepare for. So there's a lot of details -- you're able to get more consistent reps at what we're doing.

I think coming off the previous week, being able to run the football decently, just gave them some confidence. And the guys just showed up and had the right attitude and said, you know what? We're going to believe that our will is going to be greater, and we're going to find a way. And they did.

What happened, when they had some success, it bred more success. When I went back to the honey badger, when they tasted that honey, they were willing to take the pain to have success.

**Q. Moving forward is the key to the second half of the season, do you think, relying on the running game and being able to do that, especially against, like you said, Miami?**

**COACH ELLIOTT:** This bunch is top 10 in the country stopping the run for good reason because they're very talented. Even though they do a lot of structures, their guys handle it very well. So you don't see them out of position.

I think being able to win the line of scrimmage. So that's going to start with the run game, for sure. Gotta protect the quarterback. Gotta take care of the football and we've got to find a way to continue to improve special teams-wise to win the matchup.

That's where, this past week, as I said, Sparky (Daniel Sparks) punted the ball well, and our punt-return team was able to create favorable field position, whether it be they missed a couple punts or we were able to field balls and

didn't let them hit the ground. We had one returned, so we won that matchup from my perspective.

So I think it's going to be more than just the running game, but I think the running game starts -- because offensively everything flows through the running game. You don't want to become one dimensional, especially not down the stretch with the caliber of defenses that we're going to be playing.

**Q. Are you seeing the benefit of that rotation you have at running back, that their legs are still pretty fresh? Perris (Jones) looked as fast as he did at the beginning of the season the other day?**

**COACH ELLIOTT:** I think the bye week helped with that because we were able to get some guys some rest and some reps. But definitely those guys complement each other.

The beauty of it is when you've got three guys, they're all a little bit different. You're hoping that one of them gets hot in the course of the game.

That's what you saw a little bit more with Mike (Hollins). Mike was finding it and they all are happy for each other. They all are rooting for each other. There's no kind of division or jealousy or animosity there.

They understand -- and Coach (Keith) Gaither has done a really good job with those guys. They understand what the position standard is. And whoever goes out there, the expectation is perform. And if one guy happens to get the hot hand, they want to see that guy continue to be featured.

**Q. Seems like Brian Stevens has kind of threaded that needle of being a new guy who's taken a leadership role. How difficult is that, and how much do you need that up front for that to happen?**

**COACH ELLIOTT:** Man, it's huge in terms of up front. Because again if you're going to win you've got to win in the trenches. So with kind of where we were offensive line-wise, with young guys and got a couple of transfers coming in, you're trying to figure out the best rotation -- you need somebody that's just going to take control, hey, boys, follow me, this is where we're going. And Brian has done that.

And obviously I know he's coming from Dayton and wasn't probably a highly recruited guy. But if you go and you watch him as a player at Dayton, we knew that there was something about this guy.

And first time you talk to him, you can see he's a very, very serious young man. He cares. He's a team-oriented guy. And once -- because he's kind of looking around, coming into a locker room trying to figure out who are these guys, and he's looking at the coaches, is it okay, can I be who I am? Is it okay for me to lead?

And we gave him the keys and said, hey, we need that leadership because we didn't have a ton of veterans. There's not a ton of veterans up front. Really Ty (Furnish) was coming back and (Noah) Josey, and then (McKale) Boley, but Boley was a freshman, or first year last year. So definitely needed his leadership.

And I think also just his demeanor, too. He's got a quiet confidence about himself that I think calms guys down. What I was proud of is we had a couple of issues early on, where they got to the quarterback. But man, the guys settled right in. And for the rest of the game I thought the protection was pretty clean.

And we had to move some guys around. And you need a guy inside like Brian that can just keep everybody calm amidst the changing and tweaking until we can figure out the right rotation.

**Q. With the success Brian has had coming from a non-scholarship FCS, does that make the staff maybe less hesitant, when you look in the portal, to look at guys from FCS schools or Division II if somebody's out there?**

**COACH ELLIOTT:** We're looking for the best football players, the best football players that also fit what we're building here at UVA. And first thing for me, I want guys obviously that have the ability that we're looking for, but I want guys that want to be at UVA. This is where they want to be.

So to me it doesn't matter. If their body of work says that they have the qualifications and the skill set that can make us better and they want to be here, and it means something to them, those are the guys that I want to recruit.

And obviously there's always going to be the lure of getting caught up in the rankings and the measurables and all of those things; but for us, I just want good football players that are good young men that are passionate about their opportunity in the classroom on the field in the community that want to be a part of what we're doing.

**Q. Along those lines, why are you guys willing to take that chance with lesser players? He's not the only one that maybe wasn't as highly recruited. You've got (Tony) Muskett and Paul Akere, made a huge play for you Saturday, why are you guys more willing to take those chances?**

**COACH ELLIOTT:** I think when you look at UVA, it's got its own niche. There's -- I wouldn't say challenges -- there's opportunities here that are different, per se, than other schools.

First and foremost, you're looking for the total package. You look at Paul Akere, he's a guy, from an academic standpoint, graduate of Columbia; it fits.

When you look at his production on the field, it fits and he fits in the locker room.

And we've also got Kobe and Malcolm and some guys from some other schools -- for us, it's about the fit to the university, to the community and to the program.

And got to battle hard to stay true to that, because when you have success it may create more opportunities. But at the end of the day we've got to find guys that want to be at UVA that fit, that make our football team better.

**Q. Talking about fit. Tony Muskett. Talk about how he has come along, and how important is it that he's willing to put everything out there with a shoulder like it is and he ran the ball a dozen times the other night, picked up key yardage, how important is that to have him in there?**

**COACH ELLIOTT:** Man, it's been awesome. And I can't give him enough praise, especially in this day and age. Here's a guy that had significant injury to his shoulder. But he's committed to the program. He's committed to his teammates. He's a competitor.

And I think you're able to see what made him successful at Monmouth and what's making him successful so far here at UVA is that he's extremely competitive. He works extremely hard. He prepares like a pro and just his leadership as well that he was able to bring in the door and just the impact it's had in the locker room, especially from that position. Not only that, you look at the relationship that he has with (Anthony) Colandrea, the young quarterback, man, you would have thought they grew up together as close as they are. It's just a testament to the type of young man that he is. And those were all things that we thought and we believed that he had, and now we're starting to see that and everybody's starting to see just the type of competitor and leader that he is.