

**University of Virginia Football Media  
Conference  
Tuesday, Nov. 21, 2023  
Head Coach Tony Elliott  
Press Conference**

**Q. You came here from a school that has a very intense football rivalry. How did the coaching staff there frame it to the players, and have you adopted a similar process here with this rivalry?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Great question. Coming from a that rivalry, which you knew it was 365 days a year. It was about bragging rights. It meant a lot to play in it. You experience it as a player, but it wasn't until I got out into the professional world that I realized, okay, folks are really about this. They planned their entire year around the football season and then this game at the end.

I sense that was very similar here from day one. You know, you get all the congratulatory texts and welcome to the family, glad you're here; now beat Tech. I was like, okay, I get it. This feels very familiar.

Haven't had a chance to coach in this game with everything that's happened last year. I do want to take a second to acknowledge (Virginia Tech Head) Coach (Brent) Pry and Virginia Tech's administration and their program for all the support they gave us last year.

I thought it was unbelievable just to see their folks showed up in town to be with us, to help us grieve, and continued support all throughout the process of determining whether or not we were going to play the game and even beyond that. Still continue to do feel the appreciation.

So you can tell that there is a very, very strong level of respect, but we also know that what happens those three hours on Saturday is going to last for the entire year.

So very similar in terms of the feel and what I anticipate the game is going to be like, and then kind of the significance of the game. I think you do have to frame it the right way, because it's a long week and really it's all year. Everyone talks about it all year and it leads up to this week.

Trying not to put undue pressure on the guys because at the end of the day you got to prepare the same way that you prepared for other games. The way you frame it is this is just like any other game in terms of the preparation process, but the significance of the outcome is a little bit different.

**Q. What would a win mean for you guys going into the off-season? Be back-to-back wins. What would it mean for you guys going forward?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Just momentum going into the off-season and understanding the -- one of the disappointing things is we didn't take care of opportunities early in the season. What you lose is you lose 12 to 14 more practices, which is an opportunity to continue to develop your team.

It would create great momentum into the final weeks of school so we can attack training and then give the guys some energy while they're away over the break to continue to put in the work necessary, not necessarily to make up for what we didn't take advantage of, but not lose momentum.

In recruiting it helps, but just for the guys to be able to do something that hasn't been done since '03, to be able to finish the season with two wins, would be big.

**Q. You already mentioned this, but didn't get to play those two last games last year. Is there a sense of gratefulness and privilege to be able to play the last two games?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Yeah, it's a privilege to play any game, and I think that last Monday was also a vivid reminder for us just to have an appreciation for life and opportunity to play.

And so it's Thanksgiving. One of the things as a coach, and you guys know as well in your profession, you're ready to give up Thanksgiving and Christmas until you retire. That's what I tell the guys. I'm so used to playing Thanksgiving, playing Christmas, and when I retire then I'll get to enjoy those holidays like normal folks.

Yes, definitely an appreciation for the opportunity to play, and then also, too, talking about Thanksgiving, want to talk about the folks that don't get recognized.

There will be a lot of people that will give up their time this weekend here in town to prepare for the game. There are a lot of other sporting events taking place throughout the department that a lot of people are giving up their time. They are in there cooking popcorn for the weekend preparing for everything that will take place.

Really want to give a shoutout to all the folks behind the scenes that don't get recognized that are going to pull this game off for us and make it an ease of transition as we get ready to play and entertain everybody.

Really grateful for an opportunity to coach and play in life, and we're talking about a rivalry. It's a football game in the grand scheme of things, right, but it is a big deal. There is a lot of folks that give up their time during this holiday season to make it possible for us and all the other sporting events taking place here on grounds.

**Q. This is the first time you and (Brent) Pry will meet. You talked talking about how important this would be going into the off-season. How important would this win be in terms of this new era of the rivalry?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Right, it's an opportunity for both of us. We're battling and jockeying to say this is our state. He's saying that they want to own the state; we want to own the state. That's what happens when you have a rivalry.

But I got tremendous amount of respect for Coach Pry. Our relationship goes back to South Carolina State when I was on the staff with his younger brother. Tremendous amount of respect for he, his younger brother, his dad. It's a football family.

Going to be big because it's the first time that we get to show and prove. We get to talk about we want to recruit the best players in the state, take ownership of the state. Now we get a chance to settle it on the field. I think that's important for each program, but then also it's an opportunity for all of the recruits from the state of Virginia to see both teams showcased.

**Q. Coach, first of all want to wish you and yours a happy Thanksgiving, you and the team as well.**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Thank you.

**Q. This year, a lot of close games, some you won, some you lost. Is there a lot you can take from the fact that you guys were competitive all year long under all the circumstances you've been under? You guys could easily be in contention for a bowl yourselves.**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Yeah, you know, there is a lot of different approaches or philosophies in how you build a program, but I believe the first component is learning how to compete. Obviously you're playing to win and coaching to win every single game, but the first thing you got to learn how to do is compete. Compete for four quarters, day in, day out, like the fabric of what we're trying to create DNA-wise with the program.

I'm not a big moral victory guy because I want to win. When you step back and look at it and put in context and what all the staff and the players have had to persevere view, it's really been eye opening to me, inspiring to me to watch them come to work every single day.

Even then when you're working and working and working and you come up short, you're close but don't get the reward you were after, but find way to come back the next day and do it again, just tells you the type of individuals that we have in this program.

And I believe that the next step is after you learn how to compete you learn how to win. I think in some of those close games we didn't make the plays we needed to make. That is the next step in saying, okay, we're not going to wait on somebody else not to make a play. We're going to have the confidence and the belief that we're going to be the ones to make the play to win the game.

So we're making the progress. You would like for it to happen faster, there is no question in terms of the results. But really, really proud of this group of individuals, staff and players, for their resilience amidst just normal adversity that comes with the football season, and then the things that were tacked on as a result of what happened at the end of last year.

**Q. Coach, your predecessor, and you mentioned the idea that this game is all year, 365, your predecessor talked about it 365. It was in the spring, pre-season. The guys said that while obviously the game is important, you haven't had the same maybe year-round drilling of that message. What is your thought process in when to bring it up and how often?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Right. So going back to my experience, I was part of a very intense rivalry and there was a time we lost several games in a row, and after looking back at it, a lot was we put too much emphasis on it.

So you got to balance it, right? So I think we all know the implications, that is this 365 days. However, you have to work towards each opponent as you play those opponents.

For me, the approach I'm trying to get everybody to understand is that every game is the most important game of the season, and then when you get to this game, now here is the significance around this game.

Every game is going to have a different level of significance. Look at JMU. JMU is a really, really important game. We lose by one point. We win that game, now we know the importance of that game, but the significance was different because it was the first game of the season back in Scott Stadium.

So each game is going to have a type of different significant, but they're all important and are all the most important games. That's been my approach, and trying not to put too much pressure on the guys and understand that what it takes to win this game is what it takes to win every game.

It's a certain level of focus, trust for the preparation process, respect for the process, and not just trying to find that external motivation associated with the significance around the game.

Because when we kick it off, everybody will be excited; 11 guys got to go on the field and do their job. They got to be passionate, energetic, and focused. I want to make sure we have that right balance.

**Q. Some improvement is players getting better the more snaps they play; some is coaches adjusting. Were pretty bad in short yardage earlier in the year. You had the open date. You guys put together the package with (Grady) Brosterhouse. From that standpoint, how proud are you of the results you got, because it was something that you guys kind of adjusted?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Yeah, I think early on, obviously with a young guy not being up under center as much, and Tony (Muskett) coming off a shoulder, probably not the right thing to do with those guys. You gain more experience with Grady (Brosterhous), more time to practice it, bigger body.

So grateful that coaches invested the time to give us an opportunity to be able to work, and the guys have taken ownership of it. I think a lot of it too is belief. As coaches, every player is designed to score, right? So every coach takes pride in making sure when he dials up a play it's designed to score.

Really what it comes down to is the execution. It's a lot of the belief and hard work and commitment out of the guys, and then also gave some guys an opportunity to have a role on the team. So once they saw that they had an opportunity for a role they maximized it. It's been beneficial here down the stretch.

We'll go back in the off-season and study the first part of the season and see why we wasn't as successful and see can we clean it up. Just as we adjust, somebody else will adjust, right? It's a constant game of cat and mouse trying to make the right adjustments and stay one step ahead of your competitors.

**Q. I think Virginia Tech leads the in pass defense. What challenge does their secondary present to you guys?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Yeah, so their secondary plays tight coverage, so going to get up in your face and play some bump and run. They play some variations of zones. Biggest thing is they also get some pressure on the quarterback. They got some guys, edge guys that can rush the quarterback.

You know, when you can be effective enough stopping the run you put people in long yardage, so they get people behind the sticks as well.

The biggest thing is the corners can get up in your face and they can play you man coverage. If they want to play cover 1 they be play across the board and be able to still have six in the box to play the run.

I think it's a combination of good pass rush, variations of coverages, and the athletes at corner that can play you in man coverage.

**Q. You mentioned recruiting. This is a big weekend in that respect. Do you have a lot of guys visiting this weekend?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** We do have a good amount of individuals from the state coming into town. It's still working around some of the state playoffs. Some games are on Saturday so some guys may not be able to make it.

I anticipate we'll have a good group of in-state guys that want to come see us play.

**Q. Building from what you said postgame from the progress you've seen from this team, when you look at starting six true freshmen, playing 12 true freshmen because of all the injuries, how much is that kind of a glimpse of looking into the future as you guys work through what you need in the off-season?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** We'll really flip the page next week and dive into that. Right now it's trying to find the right 11 guys to run out there in all three phasing of the game.

I think long-term you can say, okay, the snaps that Dre (Walker) and (Caleb) Hardy have played are going to pay dividends. Kam (Robinson) as well. We'll assess that further in more detail from a roster standpoint once we get through this game.

I think it's a function of kind of the direction we want to go in recruiting, and then also we have been hit by some injury bugs that have forced some of those guys to play.

But I'm definitely excited about the future. I'm happy with the progress that the young guys have made. We need them to play big this week, and hopefully they don't play like freshmen, they play like the experience they've been able to gain thus far this season.

**Q. I don't know if he's as elusive as some of the running quarterbacks you've faced, but (Kyron) Drones is a big, strong guy. Have you seen anyone quite like him as a runner at quarterback in your two years here?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Yeah, I would say he's very comparable to Riley (Leonard) at Duke. Big, strong guy that can run, that has deceptive speed. You know, not as quick as -- how do you say, Thomas Castellanos, up at BC. He's a little bit more elusive. Drones is 230, and when he puts his foot in the ground he's going north and south.

Got to be prepared for that. 33 is the running back. Doesn't probably get talked about as much, but I tell you what, I don't know if I've seen -- I've seen one in the last two years that has better contact balance than him. If you watch him and you teach your guys to go low, you don't want to tackle a back up high. You want to get down on his legs. He runs through a lot of hits on his legs and keeps his balance.

We are going to have to do a good job defensively this week in defending both, both the quarterback run and the direct running back runs as well.

**Q. I'm not sure the timing of this, but submitting medical waivers? Is that something you're in the process of, say Antonio Clary or possibly Kam Butler?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Yeah, some of those things we've been working on, and now it's at the timing of the NCAA to give us a response.

Definitely a couple guys that have expressed interest, and we've turned in paperwork to see can we take advantage of a year. (Antonio) Clary is a different situation than Kam Butler. Kam Butler has exhausted all his eligibility, so that will be a different decision than Clary. Clary does have an additional year that he can take advantage.

**Q. Josh Ahern has played through some pain the second half of the season. What it's it meant to you that he's toughed it out and gives you some depth there at linebacker?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** One of the toughest kids I've ever been around. He's probably going to get mad at me for sharing this, but I'm going to share it anyway. Underneath his cast he had like inch, inch and a half long pins stuck into the bone. Any time he did anything with that hand and had any contact, it was digging in.

When they went in to take them out the pins were bent. That just goes to show you how much pain he was playing through. He never complained. You basically had to take his helmet to keep him out. Just goes to who how much he loves his teammates, loves this program.

I've used him as an example on many occasions of the sacrifice that it takes as a football player. Hopefully that creates inspiration for his teammates, that man, he's putting it on the line.

We talk about in football you're going to play hurt. Never going to ask you to play injured. Playing injured meaning medically they tell you you cannot go.

There will be times you have to play through some pain, and he's played through a lot of pain, so has a very, very high pain tolerance and threshold. I can imagine what it's like when he goes home. Probably not showing it in front of us, but he's hurting. I'm extremely grateful.

And he went through an off-season surgery to come back and play with his teammates, so those are the things that don't get talked about that a lot of people don't see. As a coach, you have a tremendous amount of appreciation, because he's one of many on this football team that is playing through injury, through pain, because they love their teammates and they want to see this program do well. They want to be part of laying the foundation.

So I'm grateful, extremely grateful for Ahern.

**Q. Coach (John) Rud (Rudzinski) is so impressed he has the pins.**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Yeah, if you know Rud, you would know Rud you would like something like that.

**Q. (Indiscernible.)**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** I don't know. You have to ask Rud on that one.

**Q. Make a necklace out of it.**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Doesn't surprise me, and Coach Rud has used him as an example. If I had to speculate with Rud's military background, like there is probably just a sentimental value because of appreciation he has for somebody playing through that amount of pain for his brothers.

**Q. The Sam Hartman rib necklace. We'll stay on the injury theme. Any update on Tony Muskett?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Yeah, you know, he's progressed to running, and so we're hopeful. It will be end of the week type deal, but he has progressed to be able to get out of the boot and run around and try to work his way back into practice.

**Q. We've talked in here a bunch about Aaron Faumui, the fact that he is so far from home**

**and that his mom with the heart condition can't fly. She saw him play the BYU game and has never seen him play here is what he told me. How has he handled that, being so far from home and not having family?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Right, you know, last week I think he let his emotions get the better of him a little bit, but he had been doing so well managing all of that.

And then also, too, just to put it in context, his best friend is D'Sean Perry. Coming off that week, I could see how emotions run high. Not justifying it at all, but I got to do a better job making sure he doesn't cross the line to get to where it's unnecessary.

His mom, being that far away from home, he's married, got a son, he's managing all of that. I kind of went through some similar times when I was playing college in that my mom passed away and my dad got to see me play a couple games.

I know how that can weigh on you, especially after games when see all your friends go to their family and your parents are a long, long way away and you're wondering if the TV networks will have the game on TV.

Just to see him accept the challenge that we put on him from a maturity standpoint and see the progress that he's made, and I'm telling you, when I first got here I couldn't get two words out of him. To hear him put together an elaborate story in front of the team post-practice and taking pride and joy in that just is a testament to the growth that he's made.

But he's got a lot on his plate. In my opinion, he's managed it well. I'm excited for him to have his opportunity to play one more time as a Cavalier this Sunday morning.

**Q. One more with the (Grady) Brosterhaus package. One of the things that makes it hard**

**to prepare for is the fact that you guys did some different things out of it. To (Jack) Griese and ran one out wide out of that similar set. In terms of your mindset, obviously want those plays to work, but is there a value if they don't work getting out wide and knowing that teams have to question when you're in that formation?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Really, that's the objective for all of your offensive formations and structures, is to make the defense prepare. And very similar defensively. They're going to show you one thing one time, but you got to prepare for it.

Yes, there is value in having the mystery around what the possibilities are. At the end of the day you got to invest time in becoming proficient, sound, and good at what you do. You got to balance that.

But the flip side is when he gets into those odd structures on third down, right, we have to start chasing possibilities, just like when we get into that formation.

But I just been, like you said, impressed with the guys, the confidence that they have. To be honest with you, the one that was about two yards I was close to calling timeout. I don't know, boys, that's a long way. But they said, Coach, we got confidence in it, let's roll with it.

But just as things come and go, they'll spend the off-season figuring out a way to defend it and then you'll have to evolve it.

**Q. What's the status of (McKale) Boley? Nicked up a little bit.**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Yeah.

**Q. Talk about his development playing such a key role, left tackle. Would he be as good as he is now if he hasn't had that experience last year, even though he struggled last year?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Right, so (McKale) Boley is day to day for us. We're very encouraged with the progress he's making towards Saturday.

He's another one that played through a lot of pain. Has the hand, the ankle he's been playing through, and keeps showing up every day.

I think to go back to the part of the question you asked about last year I think not having as much success as he thought he was because you come out, I think he was the only true freshman to start since D'Brickashaw (Ferguson), and there is a lot of hype and you hit that freshman wall.

What it did is motivated him in the off-season to put in the work. For all the young guys, they all come in thinking, man, I'm ready to play. Then they get on the field, okay, hold on, there is a lot that I have to learn.

That humbling process is what usually fuels them to go back to work to hone their skills, redefine themselves so they're better, better prepares. I think athletically he's as good as I've been around in the way he can bend, roll his hips, move people.

Even though he hasn't really come into his size yet. He's a guy that would benefit from what we call our Power Hour, but because he was playing as a freshman this year he hasn't had the chance to go through that process.

It will be a build-his-body-as-we-go type deal. His ceiling is extremely high. Getting his nose bloody as a freshman and not having that success fueled him in the off-season. What you saw was a different mindset. How he ended the season, okay, all my buddies are redshirting and hanging out and having fun, I'm playing and I'm ready for the season to be over, to now he's pushing and fighting and playing through pain, which is something that last year he didn't quite have that same mentality.

He has a different mentality this year in terms of pushing through the bumps and bruises of playing at this level.

**Q. Saturday will be Senior Day. A lot of guys, like Mike (Hollins), it's their time to walk for the last time. What have they meant to the program?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Oh, you know, you start with Mike Hollins. I mean, can't really describe it, to be honest with you. I think he's one of those transformational type of individuals that we'll look back years from now and be like, wow, we were around somebody that's truly, truly special.

I would anticipate when we do our votes for captain he'll be a team captain and probably get all the votes, just because this time last year, where was he, right, to now where he is this year. I don't think any of us really can appreciate or put into context mentally what he had to do to be able to play football again.

And I know what I've seen from my perspective and some of the days he's been challenged, but to be where he is to playing the game last week, like just put that in context. For him to play in that game last week, and not only play well, to play well, play hard, play focused, and not be distracted, just the mental toughness that he has and he possesses.

That's what I'm so grateful for, because now, again, gets woven into the DNA of the program. So guys get to see that every single day. Then the other guys that are seniors that are not going to get talked about, guys like Nate Morris and Brayden Sheffer and all the guys behind the scenes that really kind of make things go.

And it's been awesome to be around those guys and to see them buy into what we're doing. They didn't have to, but they chose to buy into the program that we're building, so I'll always be grateful for these guys. Last year we didn't get to have a Senior Day. Now, we made one up

and did one in the indoor and had our own Senior Day, but they didn't have an opportunity to get recognized in front of their fans.

So it's going to be an awesome day to see all those guys have their moment to walk out and be celebrated with their families. But this team right here, and I've told the staff, man, we'll remember this football team for the rest of our lives and we'll remember a lot about it just because of the impact that this group of young people has made on our staff.

**Q. Will you celebrate Thanksgiving together as a team on Thursday or break up into position groups?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** No, what we'll do is tomorrow night we'll have our team Thanksgiving dinner. So we'll practice; no classes tomorrow. So practice a little bit later. I think we have -- might be 11:00 start our meetings, and we are off the field about 2:30. 6:00 to 8:00 we will have a big Thanksgiving dinner with all the families. All the players will get together.

We normally do a family dinner on Wednesday nights anyway, but this will be more of a formal Thanksgiving type dinner with everybody there at the same time eating.

Then we'll practice our typical time on Thursday morning and give them the afternoon off. They got about a two hour radius if they want to go home. We got some kids in Northern Virginia, Richmond. If they want to go home they can go eat with their families. They do have to let us know.

Just keeping track the guys that may live outside of that radius. If they don't have a teammate to go home with, we'll make sure they have somewhere to eat with somebody on the staff. Nobody will be on their own for Thanksgiving.



I believe in giving those guys that are close -- and then also, too, a lot of the families have come into town, so a lot of families are in town for the weekend. It's an opportunity for them to experience Thanksgiving together and get back together on Friday morning and finish up our preparation.

**Q. Favorite Thanksgiving side?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Oh, man, so actually had some collard greens shipped in from South Carolina. Got some homemade collard greens coming in.

And then, man, I'm ready.

**Q. Sweet potato pie or pumpkin pie?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** That's a tough question. I'm not a big pie guy, but in my household it was always sweet potato pie.