

Virginia Football 2023 Signing Day Press Conference

Dec. 20, 2023

With Head Coach Tony Elliott

Question: So how do you go about striking the balance between adding transfers who can help you immediately and also adding guys who might need a year or two but will also be in the program longer?

Tony Elliott: Right. So I think philosophically you have to make a determination on who you are and what your program is about. And I've said from day one I want to be a developmental program. And with that, meaning that the bulk of your guys are going to be high school guys that you recruit and then you develop and they become the good players over time. They also help you establish the culture and the environment. Now with the way things are in college football, the ease of movement, you have to be ready to react.

Roster management is a daily thing that you're working on. So I think it starts philosophically. And for us, we want to be a developmental program and then supplement through the transfer portal as needed. And so that's how we strike the balance. And that's the approach that we take.

When you look at it, 18 total guys that we signed so far, and 13 of those are high school guys. And so we want to kind of keep that balance as long as we can.

Now, what that also means too, is we got to do a great job of retention of our guys. We got to develop our guys so that we can keep that balance. And then if it gets out of balance, then you may have a year where you just got to react. But philosophically, our approach is we want to be a developmental program.

Question: Within the high school class, you have six early enrollees in this group. How important is getting those guys on grounds? And what stands out about this group of early enrollees?

Tony Elliott: Yeah, we actually added one, so we got seven of those guys, and it's just huge. I think that's one of the larger numbers that have come in high school-wise at UVA. It allows them to get acclimated academically. When you're talking about from the player perspective, they get acclimated in the spring, they get a chance to go through 15 practices, they get the winter workouts. It's huge. And so by the time you actually hit the grass in the fall, it's almost like they've had a year under their belt. So that transition doesn't take as much time.

And then also it gives us an opportunity to evaluate and kind of see where they are and if they're going to be able to contribute early. You have a better idea of that. But the guys that we do have coming early, I'm just excited about these guys. And pretty much all but one, or actually two, were committed for a long time. Five of them were committed from last summer and kind of stayed the course with us and then we added Kam Courtney and Myles Brown kind of in season with our evaluations and their recruiting process. So we get some guys in pretty much all

different positions. You know we have guys coming in offensively and defensively that I'm excited and I think we have some core guys that are about what the program is about so they'll have a chance to get a head start on immersing themselves in the culture and then they'll be able to also communicate that out to the guys in their class that are that are coming in the summer.

Question: What's the biggest difference in trying to pitch a high school recruit versus a transfer recruit and how does the speed I guess play a factor in that knowing the portal is quick and fast?

Tony Elliott: Yeah, so it's two different like two different worlds. Me personally, I would like everything to be relational as much as possible and not transactional.

But when you're dealing with a high school kid, it's a lot more relational because this is their first time going through it. So they're taking everything in and their approach is more so a holistic approach. They're looking at every aspect of the equation in terms of academics, football, just transitioning to college, all of that. So it's a lot more relational. You're educating them on what the future's going to look like. When you're dealing with a transfer, it kind of depends on undergrad versus grad transfer, and it's almost like speed dating, to be honest with you.

It happens fast, because you can't talk to them until they get into the portal. The portal doesn't open until December 5th, right? And here we are, December 20th, so, and a lot of these guys in the portal are already making decisions, right? So basically you got a two-week window to try to develop a relationship, evaluate it, and they're typically more pointed on what they're looking for. They've been through some of just the fluff of recruiting, so to speak, right? They've done the photo shoots. They've done a lot of those things. They want to know more about, okay, I'm leaving this institution to come to this institution. I have specific criteria that I'm looking for, you're able to kind of get right down to what it is that they're looking for. For a high school kid, they're still trying to figure it out, right?

So you're trying to educate them on what they should be looking for as opposed to a transfer guy that pretty much knows what he's looking for, but the timing is really different. And it's also happening, it's speeding up some of the high school stuff too, because with the portal, you know, some of the high school kids that thought they had opportunities now might not have those opportunities because a program may favor a more experienced transfer guy for that particular spot. So it's a juggling act, but each one you kind of know where they are and what they've had exposure to and then you just try to be able to educate them and provide them the information that they need relative to where they are to make the best decision.

Question: You have quite a few guys from the state of Virginia on here. Just talk about the challenges of trying to rebuild that trust and relationship around the state and how you feel where you are right now.

Tony Elliott: Right, so we got I think six total from the state of Virginia, four high school, two transfers right now so far and we're still working and we'll continue to work throughout this

time up until the next signing day. As I said, Virginia is a priority inside out. I want to do it with guys in state and I feel like we made a run at all the top players in the state and we got in a race with some of them and came down to the final two and then some we weren't able to get into the race because they had already had established relationships. I think for us the biggest thing is making sure that the guys that we do have, right, they have a great experience. And so far the guys that that are from Virginia are having a good experience here, and I think that resonates with the coaches.

I think the addition of a couple of guys coming back to Virginia is going to help us because they see they kind of create some interest with especially the younger high school guys that may not have had a connection to Virginia, but now they see some of these older guys that were high profile coming back. It's like, okay, well, then maybe let's take a look at what's going on at Virginia. I think we have to work at breaking some stigmas and some stereotypes about UVA that may have been warranted or unwarranted, right? We have to educate them on what UVA is right now. And the only way we can do that is be consistent in the schools. The players that fit what we're looking for, we've got to recruit them hard, provide them every opportunity to come, and when they do come, have success, but then also make sure that we're delivering on the deliverables, that they're having a great experience, we're making sure that they're progressing academically, they're developing football-wise, and as we do those things I think the relationships will continue to improve. But I want to sign as many guys from the state of Virginia as we possibly can, and I know the staff and myself are making a run at all the top players, and it's just going to take us, you know, more time, but I think we're headed in the right direction.

Question: And it appears you did a really good job of retaining your players. Did you do anything different this year?

Tony Elliott: I think last year, we're in two different spots. Last year we were coming off a situation that was unfathomable. And then you had guys that were in a position where they had finished their degrees and then they have that. There's opportunities out there from an NIL standpoint. It was a lot of different factors. This year, I think the guys had been through now, I'd say almost a normal year, right, with the staff, better relationships. I think the guys saw the investment in them from a program standpoint, both in-house and then also within the NIL space, trying to improve those opportunities for them. They felt like they could get whatever they needed from a development standpoint with the staff.

So I don't know if we did anything different as much as we just had another year of time together. It was a little bit more of a normal cycle even though we did have some external things that we had to deal with. And I think that the guys also are a little bit more educated on what the reality is out there. I don't think that perception is the reality when it comes to going in the portal for NIL and all those type of things So I think they feel good about the development opportunities the relationships the direction that we're headed and then the work that was done By the by the athletic department and our supporters to help them have opportunities from an NIL standpoint

Question: You go on Twitter some and you see Colandrea and Kam Robinson kind of advocating for some guys to come to Virginia out of the portal. What does that say about your program that they are helping recruit and how helpful is that?

Tony Elliott: I'm grateful for those guys because those were a couple of the early individuals to believe in what we're doing here as a program and what our program is about holistically. And then they had early success and they want to, you know, they want to be advocates for what's going on within the program. I'm not on Twitter as much so I don't see what they're doing but I appreciate the work that they're doing. It's just a testament to the fact that they're having a good experience. They feel like they're being developed. They feel like they're being taken care of. They're having opportunities to grow and they believe in the direction that we're headed and good players want to play with good players. And so they're doing their part as well to help recruit the top guys that have an opportunity to come back.

Question: And then sticking on the portal, you got Chris Tyree from Notre Dame. Obviously, you wish Malik Washington could play here forever, but his one season here, what kind of impact has that had on bringing in other wide receivers?

Tony Elliott: I think it just illustrates what's possible and obviously we talk about as coaching staff we have a vision for what we want to do offensively, defensively, special teams wise, the direction that we're headed. But to have Malik have the type of year that he had just kind of opens up people's eyes to what's possible.

So when you have conversations with him and you have the proof and you say, okay, well here's a guy who he bet on himself last year, went into the portal, believed in what we're doing, and he came and he had production. And so those opportunities are available to you if you desire to come to the University of Virginia. And so it's a credit to, one, Malik's work. You can't take anything away from Malik. He put in the work. He earned it. But also, it opens up some eyes and creates a little bit of a spotlight on what's possible through what we're doing here at UVA.

Question: I think last year you added four players, all of them transfers after signing day, guys who came after the spring semester. When you look at the roster now, I mean, A, are you expecting to add more players, and B, what positions need to be filled out at this point?

Tony Elliott: Yeah, so we'll continue to not just recruit the portal, but also go back and see which high school guys may not have signed that push their signing out to see if there's some good developmental guys out there. But quarterback is a position where we're continuing to look in both aspects to find the right potential fit with our numbers at quarterback. We're good at running back. Tight end, we'll continue to actively look at tight end. Wide out, we're still recruiting at wide out. O-line, we feel like we're in a pretty good spot with the three young guys that we brought in and then also adding Drake. Defensively, on the D-line, we feel like we're in good shape.

Also, with all those guys, those four guys coming back on the D-line, really helped us out there, kind of slows it down until the next cycle. Linebacker, if we find the right one at linebacker. Safety, we feel like we're in a good spot. Well, we got it. We got to be really active at corner. Yeah, we got to go. We got to go, you know, beef up our numbers at corners and find some experienced guys that can, that can come in here and compete. And then also be looking for potentially a long snapper.

Question: In the running back room, I know Perris Jones' career here is over Mike (Hollins) moving on presumably, so you got you got Foston? Who else?

Tony Elliott: Foston and then Cody Brown have moved on but you got Xavier Brown returning you have Dante Hawthorne, you have Jack Griese, is a guy that's been in there and then you got Kobe Pace and then you got you got Noah Vaughn. So we so we got we got four scholarship guys and a really, really good high level walk-on that could be a scholarship guy at other places. So right now we're sitting at that number. So the previous cycles, we were a little bit heavy at running back. And now we need to prioritize those numbers in a different spot. And we feel good about the five that we have in the room right now.

Question: At tight end, you added Tyler Neville. Do you want to use the tight end more in the passing game? Is that the thought with bringing Neville in?

Tony Elliott: No doubt, and even in the past, we wanted to use a tight end. And the way that I kind of explain the situation is, I go back to my personal experience when I was coordinating. When we had the tight end body, the tight end was pretty dynamic. And then when you didn't quite have that body, that's when Hunter Renfro kind of came on the scene, right?

Because he took, and then so that's what we saw out of Malik Washington. Like Malik took some of those play concepts that typically you would like a bigger body tight end to be there, but the tight end's got to be able to stretch the field, he's got to be able to do all those things. So adding Tyler with his production and his body type, we definitely want to get the tight end more involved. And then it balances us out too right so then now it spreads the distribution a little bit. It forces the defense to have to declare a little bit quicker so definitely want to get the tight end more involved and being that we're predominantly an 11 personnel offense you know you don't want to become super predictable in passing situations by constantly having to motion or formation a certain way when certain concepts you typically want to use your tight end for.

Question: You mentioned the returning D-line guys. What was your message to them and surprised at all that they all decided to come back?

Tony Elliott: I knew if Kam Butler was given an opportunity, he wanted to because it's just unfortunate for him. I thought he was trending in a great direction from an NFL standpoint. I thought he was having a great season. And that gets cut short. And then the recovery time would put him where he's missing combine. He's missing pro days. I don't know if he had enough body of work. We knew that if he was granted an additional year, he would come back.

Chico (Bennett Jr.) was one that I wasn't sure on, because he has enough body of work to test the waters and get a shot. But he made the decision that he wanted to come back and improve.

(Ben) Smiley had told me early on that I had him for a couple years, so I was just trying to hold him true to his word when he told me that.

And then Jahmeer Carter was kind of on the bubble. And so there was two of them that I thought we had a good chance. The other two I just didn't know because they played a lot of football. And you know, the NFL is, I mean, that's something they've dreamed about. But the message to them was, hey man, if you're going to come back, let's go to work. Let's figure out what it is we need to do to help you improve so you can improve your opportunities for the next level. Come back, lead, and then let's go finish what we started.

Question: Kind of following up on that, Brian Stevens, today also announced that he will come back. How big is that?

Tony Elliott: That's huge and just a credit to him and the ability of the staff to evaluate. Here's a guy that was a non-scholarship guy at Dayton that comes in and he's honorable mention all ACC. Really what you saw is when he took over at center we kind of just had a calming effect on the offense and kind of stabilized it and really that's where you got to be strong, is at your center and at your quarterback position.

And that helped the young quarterback when he was in there. So that's huge. He brings a ton of leadership, ton of experience. So excited about having him back. It's kind of crazy when you got signing day, but sometimes you're celebrating just the guys staying on your roster as much. So that was a huge get for us as a program.

Question: I think his decision came around when Drake Metcalf also committed around that same time period. What did you like about Drake when you saw him and what do you like about his versatility of playing like center and guard?

Tony Elliott: Yeah, it gives us gives us option there and obviously so now you feel good with three guys that could snap the ball that have all done it in live action. But what Drake brings is man he brings a toughness. He plays on the edge, a nasty demeanor about himself, a complete gentleman off the field.

He's an experienced guy, he's got versatility. He doesn't have much of an ego. There's already a cohesion and a chemistry between he and Coach Heff (Terry Heffernan). So there were a lot of things that were very attractive about Drake. And he's kind of been through this one time before. So now you know, okay, he's already been through this, he knows exactly what he wants, and so he found that here at UVA, he already meshed well with the guys while he was here on the visit, because part of it is when we bring these guys in, we want feedback from the players too, and tell us, okay, does this guy fit where we're trying to go? So it was just a good match all the way around.

Question: You were confident on this day last year that Kam Robinson had the potential to contribute as a true freshman. When you look at the incoming freshman group, do you see players or a player like that who you feel the same way about?

Tony Elliott: Yeah, when I look at the list of guys, I'm excited about Keke (Keyshawn) Adams. He's a guy on the back end. Myles (Brown), athleticism, may need a little time in the weight room to develop. Kam Courtney, I'm excited. I think Kam Courtney is a guy that can contribute both in the return game and then at receiver. Really excited about what he brings coming from a from a championship caliber program. The young lineman, you'd like to not put that pressure on the on the young offensive lineman. Kevon (Gray) may be a guy that that might have to at a corner. The guys in the trenches, Jewett (Hayes) and Chase (Morrison) we'll see when they when they get here. Tyler Simmons is a guy that that I could see kind of like a Jason Hammond last year. As we get as we get into the season being a guy that could be a rotational guy. You never know, but I think if I had to say, I'd say Kam Courtney, Keke, and then possibly Tyler Simmons as I project. But again, we've got to wait until they get here and see where they are when they arrive.

Question: I was going to ask you about Kam Courtney, just how important it was to get a guy like that after he decommitted and he had a lot of options. How how big a step is that and get a guy like him?

Tony Elliott: Man huge, because it's one, it's an in-state guy and a guy that we uh, that we went on early and then ended up deciding to leave the state. Then an opportunity presented itself and we jumped on it and the program that he's coming from coach Overton does a great job with those guys. I mean they've won, back-to-back state titles, undefeated seasons and so not only are you getting the talent but you're also getting the championship character and somebody that can speak to what it what it takes and what it's like. It's a huge get, he's a very versatile guy too. He can play a lot of positions man, obviously we're going start him at wide out but he could play corner he could play he's a kick returner and he's just a football player.

So I think for me, what's exciting is one, he's a football player. He's from the state of Virginia. He knows how to win. And those are all pluses for us.

Question: Some of the guys could possibly fly in a little bit underneath the radar, like Jewett Hayes, I think, is one of the guys. What did you like about him? And is he one of those guys that you think could be, I guess, better than their ranking or someone that could kind of pick up later on?

Tony Elliott: Right, what you like about Jewett is the upside. I mean, he's long. I just saw him last week, went by the school, and he's every bit a 6'4". His arms are down to the ground. He's got twitch, as we like to say in this business. He's explosive, still developing. His body's only going to expand. So I think he's a guy, him and Chase (Morrison) as well. When you see Chase, man, Chase is continuing to fill out his body. So I think with both of those guys, what you like is the upside and the potential. So you have some really, really good raw materials that you can kind

of shape into some really good players when it's all said and done. So the upside is what you really like, the athleticism and then their frame and the projection on how big their frames can get.

Question: You mentioned that you're looking for another quarterback who would be open to that. What's the situation going to be in the spring? Is Tony Musket going to be available or is he recovering? I think Tony had surgery on his shoulder.

Tony Elliott: Doing well. Talked to him the other day. And in spring, what we're anticipating is he'll be able to start back throwing. So that's what we anticipate for the spring.

Question: I guess along those lines, is it tough to sell the quarterback room when you have two guys who have played? Yes and no. I think one, the quarterback recruiting right now is crazy. And you guys that follow the portal and everything that's going on. It's just it always was accelerated.

The quarterback recruiting was always accelerated, always happened faster than any other position group, but naturally so, right? Now, it's crazy. And for us, we were more targeting younger developmental guys, right, to keep the distribution. But even those guys, man, at the high school level, man, those guys are hard to come by. So I think it's more a function of just the state of quarterback recruiting and then when you do have two guys that have had production and had success to a certain extent, it does – especially in the transfer world. Younger guys, maybe not so much because there's distribution, there's spacing, but in the transfer world it does make for a difficult conversation.

Question: And then on Kam Courtney, did you guys get a chance to see him when he was in the state title game right at Scott Stadium?

Tony Elliott: Yeah, that was awesome. I was really excited and really appreciate Blanda (Wolfe) and the facilities crew and everybody's work that was involved in pushing to have the games hosted here in Charlottesville. It was fun to watch everybody that played. It was some exciting games, high level football, ton of talent on the field and from all four teams, competitive. They were back and forth, so it was fun. But yeah, you got a chance to see his versatility out of the backfield, carrying the ball, catching the ball, and also in the return game.