

**University of Virginia Football Media
Conference
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Head Coach Tony Elliott
Press Conference**

Q. Wake runs an unconventional offense. When you're preparing for that, is that similar to like facing a triple option team, something you only see once a year, or is it less extreme than that?

TONY ELLIOTT: No, it's definitely unique, and they've done a really, really good job over the years of being able to create their own niche. It's built off of a lot of option principles, and then the way that they, their style of play, you've got to figure out how to attack it. But they do a really good job of recruiting the right personnel to run that system, and they've been highly effective. They've scored a bunch of points. They have a lot of yards. They can run the ball. They can pass the ball.

So it's something that you don't necessarily have to change wholesale, like you would preparing for an option, because that's completely different, but they do force you to be assignment sound like an option offense. If you're careless with the ball, you could limit your possessions.

So philosophically, there's some philosophical approach to it, but in terms of the play concepts, it's very similar. They run a lot of zone concepts with the zone read, and then they can spread you out in ten personnel sets. So it's still similar concepts that you see, but the style in terms of the pace at which they run their zone is different than what you typically see.

Q. Their running back plays out of that set. What does he do well? He's an 804 kid. What was his skill set?

TONY ELLIOTT: He's very, very patient and explosive. And he runs bigger than his listed size. So he's a violent guy. He's got really, really

good feet, explosive. And then he can finish runs. They do a good job out of the backfield too of getting those guys involved and getting the ball out of the backfield.

Q. McKale Boley?

TONY ELLIOTT: So he's still day to day, and we're hopeful to get him back soon. Again, we're coming off he had ankle surgery in the offseason, and then early in camp got rolled up again on that ankle. So it's a day to day to where we can get him to a point where he can tolerate the discomfort. So hopeful, but again we're going to go at the pace in which he feels confident and comfortable to be able to play at a high level.

Q. The program hasn't won ACC openers since 2020. You guys will be 2-0 for the first time. In your tenure how much progress would it show just in that regard the league, 2-0 if you guys can get a win on Saturday?

TONY ELLIOTT: I appreciate the education on some of the numbers. I didn't realize because again I kind of just focus on what I can control, but that's some good information. So you helped me out for my Friday night meeting right there with some bulletin board material. But I think this is a great from a program standpoint. Since I stepped into this role, I tell you Dave Clawson has been awesome just to watch his leadership at the coach's level in the ACC with the way he conducts himself, the way he leads meetings.

And I've been able to have conversation with him and you look at what he's been able to do with that program, the amount of wins in this conference, is up at the top in terms of the last 10 years or so. So for us I think it's a program type of game because we get to evaluate where we are because they play extremely hard. They're very, very well coached. The guys have a lot of confidence. They understand the identity of who they are. And those are all things that we're trying to establish here.

In terms of our team goals, our second goal is to win the ACC opener. So it's extremely important to us to win the first game in conference.

So some of those other things that you educated me on will be nice for us to accomplish, but our focus is to go out and treat every game like it's the most important game but also we understand the importance of winning the ACC opener, and it would be awesome for us to be able to play our best game on the road against some very good football team that I think when you watch them on tape, they're much better than where a lot of people have predicted them within our league. They return a lot of veteran guys on their defensive front and their offensive front. I know they're working out the quarterback situation with a couple of older guys, but the older guys are experienced. This is a very experienced football team. They play complementary football in all three phases. It will be a good test from a program standpoint in addition to being the ACC opener.

Q. You have a very veteran experienced defense. How does that help you in games adapting -- a couple of the guys were mentioning Richmond was running counter plays different than you prepared. But you were able to diagnose it and adjust on the fly. How much easier when you have older players to do that?

TONY ELLIOTT: Great question. So when you've got guys that have experience, the first thing, they're a little bit more poised. So they're used to having to make adjustments. And so there's less panic, and because there's less panic and more poise, it's easier to have the conversations necessary.

And then they can make the adjustment quickly. Whereas, the younger guy, just naturally, because of inexperience, they need repetition. So they need to kind of go through the teaching progression. They have to see it on the board. They have to see it several times in practice. But when you have veteran guys, you can just have

conversations right on the board and they conceptually can make the adjustment and then be able to go out on the field in real time make that adjustment.

So it starts with poise and then confidence and then just the ability to effectively communicate, and that's one of the things, when you're developing young players, first you're teaching them the vernacular, to be able to talk, especially when you're in battle, everybody needs to speak the same language.

When you start talking about, okay, it's a counter. If you say we're going to spill it or box it, they know exactly what they mean. Where a young guy, he might be, spill it, box, what does that mean? What shoulder do I strike with, what's the technique, Coach whereas when you see this play we'll spill it in this coverage or box it in this call. They know exactly what you mean, they know the technique, and they understand the big picture and why we're making that adjustment and that allows them to play a lot faster.

Q. Does the tablet and the helmet communication, does that factor in there?

TONY ELLIOTT: The helmet communication, you've only got one guy. So only one guy is receiving the communication on the field at one time. So I don't know if that aspect of the new technology does.

But the tablets definitely help because now it's you add another part of the teaching progresses. Right? Especially for the younger guys, because you can show them in real time, right, the video, and then you also can draw on the tablet as well.

So the tablet definitely helps. We're trying to figure it out, too. That was the first opportunity. We didn't have any opportunities last year to use it. So we are still getting used to it. Got good returns from the staff in terms of how much it was a nice added addition on the sideline.

Q. You told the team during camp that last year they showed they could take the game to the fourth quarter and that the next step for the team was to push through and win in the fourth quarter. What's the biggest missing piece, what was the biggest missing piece last year?

TONY ELLIOTT: I think last year you're teaching them the whole plan. So our plan to win, we have seven components broken down of what we believe it takes to win a game and then just overall, philosophically as a team, we want to start fast, win the middle eight and then finish in the fourth quarter. So you're teaching how to start fast and then you're teaching, okay, how to win the middle eight. And then you're trying to teach them to win the fourth quarter. And the biggest thing it's a mindset. It's a mindset, and then capturing those moments in practice. So if you're at a practice today, it was a big emphasis in the last few periods of practice to emphasize the fourth quarter, making them mindful that this is where it's not just we put our four fingers up in the air and we play a video and, like, it's a mindset. It's a mentality and an understanding that this is where we have to have our best, our best focus, our best attention to detail.

That's difficult because you've been playing now for probably two hours and 45 minutes. You're 60 plays into the game. Man, your body is starting to hurt. You kind of can see the light at the end of the tunnel.

The fans have been there for a while so you might not be maybe not getting as much energy from the environment. You have to create that yourself. So it's a mindset more so than anything, and that's been a big point of emphasis for us, is transitioning that mindset, that when we get to the fourth quarter, that's when we're at our best, understanding that every possession matters but possessions in the fourth quarter -- like you tell them at halftime, the most unimportant thing in football is the

score at halftime. What matters is the score when you get into the fourth quarter.

Q. At receiver, you had some guys make big plays last week, Trell Harris, Malachi Fields. How do you evaluate that position after the first game, and with Chris Tyree, is it a matter of maybe you tweak some things in the offense to get the ball to him better in spots or him making better plays with the opportunities he's got?

TONY ELLIOTT: So overall, what I liked is how they blocked on the perimeter. So everyone's going to follow the ball, especially when it's in the air. But I like to see their commitment to the football team by how they block the run game. And a lot of the explosive plays we had in the run game were the result of receivers blocking on the perimeter.

So that was the first thing I was proud of that effort. And now that gives us something to say, hey, this is the minimum of what the expectation is.

So overall I thought as a group, they blocked well on the perimeter. Made some big plays. I'll say I haven't seen a play like the one Malachi made, that diving play, like, since Mike Williams did it his freshman year against NC State. Unbelievable, full extension play. It's wet. No gloves. That was a big-time play to be able to come down with that ball.

I thought Malachi took a step, and what made me say that is we threw a couple just spot screens to him, and he's got two defenders. He makes them both miss and comes out running. That's something we've been challenging him to do. Man, just play your size and be such a dominant guy with the ball in your hands, and it was good to see Trell make a play. So overall, I think that the guys are building that confidence and the chemistry is starting to develop with the quarterback.

And Chris, I'm just going to chock it up to, man, back home in Virginia, wanting to do so well, pressing a little bit, right? And if you look at the balls he didn't come down with, he takes his eyes off of it because he's ready to run. He wants to go make a big play.

We're not going to make it a big deal. He knows what he has to do to correct it, and that's just finish the catch before you take off and run and doesn't change anything in terms of how he fits in our offense, and nothing to tweak in terms of trying to get him the ball.

That's one of the great things, when you have multiple threats, you can spread the ball out and it puts a lot more pressure on the defense. But I anticipate that you'll see Chris bounce back, but I'll chock it up he was so amped up, wanting to make a play, especially being back home in Virginia, and tried to take off running too soon and didn't finish the catch.

Q. Reason (Antonio) Clary is back on punt return?

TONY ELLIOTT: Chris (Tyree) was down a little bit in fall camp. So we alternated the two. Clary has shown just over the years, it wasn't just this year, but in the past, if he was available, we put him back there because he's been very, very sure handed. We know how dynamic Chris is.

Obviously if you see a guy that's struggling a little bit, you definitely don't want to put him back there in that situation unless you know he's ready, because that's a totally different ball that you're catching, a totally different environment when you're looking straight up in the air for four seconds and you're concentrating on a ball that's moving on you and you've got guys barreling down.

So again you'll see Chris back there. But it was more just as the flow of the game, and obviously when the conditions changed, we wanted Clary back there.

Q. Even though Wake Forest is not a true option team, is it just as important as stopping the option, shutting down the A gap, is that one of the keys to stopping –

TONY ELLIOTT: So they run a couple of different what we call zone option concepts. And so when it's a five-man surface, meaning they don't have the tight end involved in the game, yes, you've got to be able to stop the dive, so to speak, and then have a quarterback player on the zone read concepts. Then they do some six-man surfaces where they involve the tight end where they have the backside C gap accounted for. Now you can go more to second level, third level reads. That's where it's not so much the dive there as you've just got to be sound on those second level reads.

They pose problems just overall, you've got to be able to stop the A gap, so to speak, or the dive when they hand the ball off, and then you've got to be prepared for the quarterback pulling it, and you've also got to be prepared for the quarterback riding the mesh and they ride the mesh for a long time.

It's actually pretty fascinating. As an offensive guy, I've marveled at it. Coaching running backs, it's like, how do you train the running back to be so slow because, right, they literally skip and walk. I've never seen anything like it. But they're phenomenal at it. And they've perfected it. But you've got to be able to have the run accounted for and then you have to make sure that you're disciplined to stay in position so you don't give them the big windows on the back end when the quarterback pulls it back to throw it. Really you want to force the quarterback to become a runner if that's probably the option that you want the most because the backs, they do a really good job, they're slow, slow, once they get the ball, pump, they're gone. And they can find the creases. They hide in between those big offensive linemen you can't find them and they spit out. Yes, you have to stop the run but you also have to account for the quarterback and you've got to be in position on

the back end so they can't expose you with big windows for the explosive plays downfield.

Q. You talked all training camp about weighing in the trenches. Can you assess how you guys did on both sides of the ball?

TONY ELLIOTT: I thought offensively they did a good job of creating a new line of scrimmage for the backs to be able to get up a good head of steam. We did give up two sacks, but I thought the protection was solid and the sacks were more the quarterback, one, should have got rid of the ball in the red zone and the other one, just having the presence to know that it was a half roll setup. Don't get up the back of your guard that's out there protecting you. But other than that, I thought they did a solid job. Defensively, I thought they pushed the pocket better interior-wise, and, man, we were getting close but not close enough. So we're going to have to be much more disruptive. We've got to find a way to get to the quarterback when they do drop back.

So I saw some improvement but still challenging the guys on the defensive front. And then this week, the game is going to be won in the trenches. Like just flat out it's going to be won in the trenches because in order to slow down their rushing attack offensively, you've got to create a new line of scrimmage.

Their objective is to kind of create a stalemate at the line of scrimmage. Again, when it's run/pass they know they can't go beyond three yards. They want to create a stalemate with no penetration and let the quarterback make the decision and the back hides and spits out wherever he can find a crease.

We'll have to be more disruptive, create more a line of scrimmage and defensively they've done a great job over the years. Always been a thorn in my side, being for many years on that side of the division, playing them every year and man it was tough because they know their system. Their kids know the system. They recruit to the

system. And then they change structure on you quickly. They'll stem to different structures right before the snap. And that creates problems, right? Because you go from one identification to another identification and then they'll line up and then post-snap they'll one-gap exchange. Then they'll move to those spots which creates some one-on-ones.

So they're really, really good at what they do. They recruit to their system and, as I said earlier, they've got a bunch of seniors on that defensive front and they can play two groups.

The game is going to be won in the trenches. Our guys offensively have to catch all the movement that they do and then defensively we've got to find a way to create a new line of scrimmage in their backfield to hopefully disrupt a little bit of the timing on the zone RPO stuff that they do.

Q. (Daniel) Spark is kicking it eight-yards deep in the end zone (on kickoffs). Is he doing that consistently in practice and how does that help that unit with him doing that?

TONY ELLIOTT: Got to be transparent. Man, I was scared to death based off of what was happening during camp. So early on, there's no question about Sparks' leg. It's phenomenal. He's got an extremely powerful leg. So we knew that we wanted him to work on kickoffs and so when we started practicing kickoffs, we almost couldn't get a kick. He was ten yards deep and, man, he was coming too fast, and, man, he was putting it over here to the left, to the left. There was a stretch in our scrimmages where I think we had four kicks out of six total that went out of bounds, we were like, oh, Lord, what are we going to do. We said Spark you've got to figure it out. We challenged him. What he did was he shortened his approach. That's a great job by him and Drew Meyer and Coach (Keith) Gaither figuring out an answer. We knew if he hit it right, it would go deep but we had issues pulling it to the left. When we shortened up took -- like a golf swing. We were pulling it way, way back

there, once we shortened it, he was able to consistently put him that deep. Really proud of him because he's pulling double duty.

The biggest thing I didn't want, I didn't want his kick offs to take away from his punts. His punts, we feel if we can protect him, he's a weapon for us.

Q. Seen (Dakota) Twitty, different skill set to tight end than the other guys there. Was his move from receiver something you began thinking about last fall or was it strictly in the spring, and was it his idea at all or the coaches?

TONY ELLIOTT: Twitty, that's an interesting one. I said, dang, man, when I was at Clemson I tried to convince you were a tight end. I was coaching tight ends, wanted to recruit him as a tight end. He said, no, I'm playing wide out. I ended up not recruiting him.

Fell into it because this past spring Tyler (Neville) wasn't here. He had to finish up at Harvard. And Sage (Ennis) was coming off the knee, wasn't available. So he wasn't available in the spring. So we needed, he was the next option because of size. We went into it saying, we'll give this a look this spring and kind of see where it goes, but this isn't necessarily a permanent move. If you want to go back out to wide out, you can. And so he did in the spring and came to me and said, Coach, I think this is what I want to do.

It was more his decision. It was never any pressure to say, hey, we're definitely moving you to tight end, but out of necessity, to get through practice in the spring, we needed another body, and he just fit the profile. I'm excited for him. So awesome to see him play have a couple of catches.

You think about Dakota for two years, man, he had two knee surgeries. Then he had a hamstring. He's just the epitome of

perseverance in the way that he battled to be in that position.

He does bring a different skill set to that room, which we like because it gives us versatility at the tight end position because we have four guys that we can roll in there. They've all got a little different skill set. We can be in 12 personnel and have the effectiveness in the run game with certain guys in there, and then from 12 personnel we can also spread out and create the match-ups that we want.

I'm excited for Twitty. He is just only going to get better the more time he spends at the position.

Q. I'm wondering what do you see in the recruiting Jam Jackson, started at corner, how have you seen him excel (inaudible) the transfer, what did you see from him?

TONY ELLIOTT: First of all, the corner recruiting is crazy. It's crazy when you look at the portal there. There are probably outside of offensive tackle the highest, biggest commodity, biggest demand out there. Everybody needs corners in this day and age with how people throw the football.

He was a guy that, when you just evaluated his film, definitely love his length, his willingness to be able to come up and tackle. And we knew also, too, taking a guy that's an undergrad transfer for us is you've got to get to him early, right, because once they get into their third year, very difficult to bring them into UVA. And then truly have an opportunity for them to graduate. And so you can take younger guys, but I'm not going to take a guy that's at a point where I know he doesn't have the eligibility to be able to finish the required credits to graduate. He kind of fit that mode of a younger guy that had multiple years left, and we knew that if we could get him in our program and get him on a nutrition plan that his body had growth potential. So it was more potential and upside and then timing for us is what we saw,

but really liked his length, his willingness to tackle. And you saw his skill set as a cover guy. We felt if we could get him here and get him -- he's already changed his body. I think he's probably gained about 15 pounds since he got here.

Q. You talked about (Antonio) Clary Saturday, but just having him, (Jonas) Sanker -- Corey Thomas played a lot of college football back there. Sanker talked about they can move around kind of switch positions. How does that help the back end of that defense and shore things up?

TONY ELLIOTT: It does. It's like having additional coaches on the field. And then you throw Malcolm into that equation, he's another one that's kind of in that battery of guys that go between the three safety positions and going back to the earlier question, you can make adjustments quickly. You can communicate things and then they can pick up things and make adjustments on their own.

So as a coach, it's where you always want to be. You always want to be in a position where you feel like you've got veteran guys, developed guys. But out on the field, they can solve problems on their own. They can play off of each other.

I'm just excited to see the secondary grow as we move forward, just because again Clary hasn't played in a year. Corey's coming in from a different institution. So their chemistry will only get better as the season goes on.

Q. You talked about perseverance. (Antonio) Clary also handling that perseverance. What did you see from him last year when he couldn't play and how he overcame that to come out and had some of the first hits of the game?

TONY ELLIOTT: I think what you saw was his leadership, right, and that was a great indicator that when he comes back he's going to be ready

to go. You worry about a guy that has a season-ending injury, are they going to go and isolate themselves? Are they going to be in their own head? How are they going to handle it? But he handled it the right way. Provided leadership. Was constantly mentoring, teaching the guys. When it got to a point where he could stand back there, you could see him back there kind of processing everything that was going on. So even though he physically wasn't able to take reps last year, mentally he was able to take reps, and I still challenged him from a leadership standpoint. Now, your role is just a little bit different, but you still have a role on this football team. Your role is to be a mentor and leader to these younger guys.

He came up and gave me a big hug. He said I hadn't played in a year it felt so good. Excited for him. Again, injury is one of the hardest things to deal with as a football player because as a football player you have a mentality that I'm not going to get hurt. I'm the exception to the rule. It's not going to happen to me. That's how you have to train yourself to be able to play this violent game and play it well. So then when it does happen, the first thing you do is you start questioning, why me? Why did this happen? How could this happen? What am I going to do? I'm not going to play. You really have to have a lot of positive self-talk to get through it. Then you get to the point where now you can see the value in it.

So the value for him is that it put the game in perspective. So his passion and his appreciation is at a totally different level. Then he maximized the opportunity to take mental reps and get better, which allowed him to play fast and then provide leadership.

So it's awesome to kind of watch him and just now then it's only going to grow now because he's playing too and he's back.

Q. Ben Smiley playing outside. How do you think he looked and how does he help the rotation?

TONY ELLIOTT: So I thought Ben did a good job considering the amount of practice that he missed during fall camp with injury. But I thought he played fast, and I saw him trying to improve on some of the fundamental things that we asked Ben doing. You all know since the day I got here he's probably the most talented guy we have on the defensive front and I stand on that.

He's extremely talented, where we have to help him is help him by using technique. He's very talented. He loves the game. He plays extremely hard. But at times that can get new trouble, right, if you don't use the right technique. I saw him being more conscientious with the reps he had, of trying to use his technique. So with having him back, now that gives you a rotation that you feel really, really good about and I'm excited to get Bryce Carter back. So Bryce was out with a knee for most of fall camp, but he was turned loose this week in practice. I'm not sure how many snaps he'll be able to play being it's the first week of practice. But with Smiley back in the mold, and then TT and now Bryce, just gives you some confidence in your rotation because you've got some older guys that have played a little bit of football and then you can keep Kam (Butler) and Chico (Bennett) fresh.

And each one brings a different skill set, which creates a changeup on the tackles, and that's probably one of the hardest things for a tackle, when you think you've got a guy figured out, boom, here comes another one with something different.

One may come in, and his move is a two-hand style to a one-hand bull rush. Then you've got a guy that comes in and spins on you. And then you've got one that's a little bit lighter and faster, or you've got one that's a little bit heavier and stronger.

So that creates some challenges for a tackle throughout the course of the game, when

you've got multiple guys with different skill sets that can change it up on you.

Q. Not as many ors this week. Is that more having to do with just the fact that you saw what you liked from Saturday or does it just have to do with the match-up this weekend?

TONY ELLIOTT: A little bit of both. And what I tell all the guys, man, I want ors at every position. I want ors at every position because that means you've got depth. The match-up changes a little bit. We saw some of the things, but you'll still see multiple guys out there playing. I want to play the guys who deserve to play. That doesn't mean it's equal reps for every guy at every position. But I want the guys that have run the reps, earn the trust of their coaches in practice, to be able to play. I think that helps our football team big picture-wise, long term, we want to play, we want to earn that 13th, 14th game, and in my experience, to be fresh and to be ready to compete then, you have to play multiple guys. And then again just going back to the previous question, when you've got multiple guys with different skill sets at each position, man, it creates challenges for the defense or the offense to prepare for.