

**University of Virginia Football Media
Conference**

Tuesday, Sept. 17, 2024

**Head Coach Tony Elliott
Press Conference**

Q. When you get ready to play a non-FBS program, especially one with great success, how much time do you spend with your players briefing them on the importance of it?

TONY ELLIOTT: Out of respect for all opponents, I do it with each team that we're playing, with the mentality that every game is the biggest game of the season. You've got to respect everybody that you're playing. But in particular, this bunch, I had a chance to coach against Coach (Tim) Beck when he was at Ohio State and got a tremendous amount of respect for him. He's done a great job.

I know Coach (Jamey) Chadwell well, and they've done a great job down there at Coastal for years. You've got a group that's confident. They're used to winning. They've been to four straight bowl games. In particular, our performance in the last 10 road games versus Power 4s -- non-Power 5s, hasn't been good. So it's more we're just focusing on us, but having a healthy respect and understanding of who our opponent is.

Q. In terms of Chris Tyree, we saw him almost hit the big play, he comes with a hole. Is it a process for a coaching when you've got a guy who's that versatile to kind of feel out exactly how you want to use him?

TONY ELLIOTT: You know, the biggest thing with Chris (Tyree) is just getting him comfortable with the system, and I think there's a lot of flexibility, and as he continues to just grow within the offense, I think you'll see more opportunities. I hate that that one was called back, but we held on the perimeter, and the referee did their job. But it was good to see him -- I feel like you're starting to see more confidence. As I said, as he continues to grow

with his level of comfort with the offense, I think you'll see more opportunities for him.

The more that he can absorb, the more we'll be able to find different ways to get the ball in his hand.

Q. He had the drops, but it seems like his role has been expanding. Do you sense any frustration from him that he hasn't had the impact yet?

TONY ELLIOTT: No. Chris (Tyree) is first and foremost one of the best human beings I've been around. He's an unbelievable young man. He carries himself the right way. He's a very unselfish guy, and the best thing about what he did is he said, I'm going to focus on me and what I need to do to get better, and I think that's why you're seeing his confidence continue to grow, and the same thing on punt return. Each time he catches one, he just becomes more confident, and that's going to be another way for him to touch the ball and impact the game.

He was close on kickoff return. I challenged him a little bit to run through that last defender. You're starting to see him become more comfortable and understand that pressing is not going to get the job done. You've got to work every single day, and eventually the plays will come to you.

Q. With the expansion in the College Football Playoff, what it means for a Group of Five team, an out-of-conference, going up against a power conference opponent, what it means for them long-term?

TONY ELLIOTT: Great question. I don't want to talk about it too much, but I do want to acknowledge it. I'd rather them hear it from me than from everybody else on the outside, and let the message be clear. The message was that this football team we're getting ready to play believes they have a path to the playoff, which they do, and if they win every game on their

schedule and they beat a Power Four at home, they're going to have a chance to get into the playoffs. It's a prideful bunch down there that's playing for a lot, and we need to make sure we don't focus too much on them, but we also don't buy the lie, and the lie is oh, well, it's a Group of Five and you should be able to show up and win. You're seeing it all across the country with non-Power Four teams beating Power Four teams, and you'll see more of it.

I think when you look at their roster, they've got a lot of Power Four transfers that want an opportunity that are down there playing, and they've got an experienced bunch, and they know how to win. They're confident. They've taken care of business in their first three games and done it in a respectable fashion.

They know, right; now the question is how they're going to respond to the information that they receive. Are they going to choose -- really the challenge was let's be different. If we just look at us, let's focus on us and the last 10 road games versus non-Power Five, we're 4-6, so we want to be different, and we want to change things.

It starts with us taking care of what we need to take care of from a preparation standpoint to go 1-0 this week, and if we do that -- but don't think we're just going to roll the ball out there and this team is going to lay down and not show up. Man, they're playing at home. They've got a sold-out crowd. Homecoming, I believe. They've got parents' weekend. They've got a bunch of stuff. We're trying to get extra tickets; we don't have enough tickets for ourselves because they've got a big crowd. It's going to be a fun environment.

But those guys are going to come out of that locker room believing that they're going to win the game. So we have to have a greater level of belief, but we've also got to go out and bring that belief into action and do what we need to do, play in and play out, to put ourselves in position to win.

Q. They're top 20 in the country in turnover margin.

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, and we're actually at the bottom. We talked about that. There's a lot that we talked about over the first couple days of preparation just to know the opportunities that we have to get better. But they've got a deep defensive line. They move around well. They get to the quarterback. They disrupt him. They get him off the spot. They force him to make off-platform plays, and when they put the ball up in the air, their guys come down with it. They do a great job offensively taking care of the ball. That's where we've got to get better. We've got to create more turnovers, and then we've got to do a better job of taking care of the football.

Q. When you look at Anthony's Colandrea's style of play, what is the challenge? He's going to be the guy that's going to make those low-probability big plays, but then you don't want to take that away, so as a coach, do you just live with it? Do you help him balance it?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, you've got to help him balance it. He and I just sat down and talked, and really it was, okay, what did you learn. What did you learn from the game. What he's learning is that there's some plays, man, you've just got to let them die, and some plays you want to keep them alive.

That's where through experience he'll figure out that balance because if we tell him, well, don't keep plays alive, then that takes away a lot of what makes him special.

I pointed out, too, went back to 2016 with Deshaun (Watson), and Deshaun threw 17 interceptions that year and still won a National Championship. You can't take it away from him, but you've still got to coach him through it. Hopefully as he continues to get experience he'll be able to self-reflect and say, okay, this is where I did not maybe do the best job in preparation, so okay, that's an area that I want

to go attack, and then okay, this was a decision that I shouldn't make, so then what was I thinking, how do I correct it, but then also the pick that he threw over on the sideline where he was trying to get the ball to Kobe, he wants that one back, but man, as coaches, the play before that when he was scrambling, Malachi popped wide open and you want him to throw it.

You've just got to coach him through it, and as long as he takes ownership, which he will, there's nobody that wanted to win that game more than AC (Anthony Colandrea), and there's nobody that was more disappointed that we didn't win the game than AC. So we'll coach him, and we'll balance it. But we're not going to take away what makes him special. We'll just use every opportunity to learn and present it to him, and hopefully he receives it, responds the right way, which I believe he will, and you'll see him improve.

Q. Just on the health of the team on the sideline.

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, so good probability Kam Robinson could be back this week. Ty (Furnish) will be down. Actually it was a little more serious than what I was initially thinking. I hadn't followed up -- I came in right after the talked to the team, I came in and talked to y'all, but he'll probably be down this week. We lost Charlie Patterson to an ankle sprain. He'll be down for a couple weeks. Obviously Ethan Sipe with the broken bone in his foot, he's down. I think the biggest one coming out of the game was Ty, and maybe, Dre Walker. He's probable for this weekend. Hopefully he'll be ready to go, but he's got an ankle/leg injury that he went down with. Trying to think of -- let me look at the depth chart.

Q. Suderian (Harrison)?

TONY ELLIOTT: Suderian probably down another week with his hamstring, but he's progressing well.

Defensively, (McKale) Boley is closer. Boley is closer. I don't know if it'll be this weekend, but he's almost back.

Q. (Brian) Stevens?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, Stevens will be fine. Stevens will be fine.

Q. In Sackett and Eli Wood you have brothers who each joined the program as walk-ons who worked their way into the rotation at their positions. What's it been like coaching them, and given your background as a college player, do you have a special appreciation for walk-ons who end up making an impact like that?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, they're fun guys to coach because they're extremely, extremely intelligent, very, very accomplished academically, man, but they're also football guys. They just love football. They love being a part of the team. They'll do whatever you ask them to do. There's no question. There's no why, coach. It's like, yes, sir, and they're going to go do it with everything that they have, and it's made their teammates better.

You know, being brothers, you don't quite see them as much together as you would think. They kind of have their own personalities and their own friend groups within the team. But they're brothers, but Sackett is kind of letting Eli grow up a little bit on his own instead of being that hovering big brother, and it's been fun to watch, all the older tight ends that didn't know each other at this time last year, now they're probably the tightest group on the team. That's been fun to watch.

Eli is hilarious. He doesn't know it. He's one of those guys like he's funny and doesn't even realize it because of his temperament. Both of them probably were -- now that you look at them were good enough to go play somewhere as a scholarship guy and just chose to come to UVA, and I'm excited to have those guys on the team.

I've got an appreciation for walk-ons, having started as a recruited scholarship guy, going out to Air Force and then transferring to Clemson and kind of walking on and becoming a scholarship guy there, I have an appreciation, and that's why we treat our walk-ons the way we treat our walk-ons. We don't treat them like they're walk-ons. They're on the team. They're treated just like the scholarship guys. They get everything that the scholarship guys -- we don't have a hierarchy in terms of -- because they're all part of the team.

But yeah, I do have a special spot in my heart because they're choosing. You look at a scholarship guy, they're recruited, and they do choose, but all the schools choose them and offer them scholarships. Man, some of them are putting themselves in debt with student loans to be here, and they're just happy to be on the team and try to work their way up, and they have an appreciation for maybe the smallest role, but it would be the biggest thing in the world to them.

So it's always a great reminder, too, for the guys that are recruited, that man, if you truly love this game, you do it for free. You would do it just like a walk-on would do it. I use them as examples to challenge the guys to have a certain level of appreciation just for the opportunity and the blessings that they have.

Q. Going back to Chris Tyree, you all have gotten him the ball first play both of the last two games. What does that do for him as far as getting the ball into the offense?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, you want to try and get them all if you could, and you had your pick, you would just go like play after play, all right, let's get this guy a touch, this guy a touch, this guy a touch, get them all involved in the game early because I think your playmakers, the quicker they touch the ball, the more they get into the game.

But it doesn't always work out that way. So you try to script, and the first play was more so the progression led to him, not necessarily designed specific play. The toss sweep is a designed play. You know who it's going to. But on that first play of the game, it could have went to a lot of different guys. It just so happened the defensive structure put it in Chris's hands.

Q. A little off topic, but the guys talk about they have college football online dynasty they have with each other. Have you had a chance to play the game?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, so I think I've played it twice, once with my sons, and then smile I beat the brakes off me one day, and I told him, the game is rigged. I'm playing it like a coach. Like you shouldn't have been able to make that play. It's cover two and I've got the right call. There's a glitch. But I don't have time.

It's cool because I remember as a player when I was in college, it was still a thing, and man, you took pride in just being on a video game. I think if we're all being honest, everybody wants their 15 minutes of fame. We all want to feel relevant and to matter and to be on a video game that's being played all over the world is pretty cool.

But yeah, they play all the time. They know all the tricks. They know all the computer glitches. So after Ben beat me up pretty good, I said I'm not going to challenge these guys. I'm going to stick to playing my sons who might not be as versed in the game. Maybe I can win one. But they're getting pretty good at it, too.

Q. I know that offensive line is still not 100 percent, but where would you assess where they are at this point and is it where you thought they would be?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, you know, to answer that question, honestly, it's kind of like defensively last year with all the injuries. We're down several scholarship guys that we were counting

on, a couple of transfers that we counted on coming in here and contributing right away. They're down with season-ending injuries, and then losing (Noah) Hartsoe, who was a guy that had elevated himself to be a very viable option for us inside. He's down for the season.

So trying to just play guys in different spots, I'm really proud of Coach Heff (Heffernan) for managing that because you're constantly trying to find the best five to put out there.

But I feel like with Jack starting at left tackle for three games and he was a tight end a year ago, and then you've got a little bit of experience on the right side in (Noah) Josey, but you just don't have the depth right now.

But they've given us a chance in every game. We've won a couple games with those guys. My hope is that as we continue to progress in the next couple weeks, we can start getting some bodies back just to give us the depth.

So overall, they're giving us a chance, but in fairness to them, man, it's been a chess match trying to figure out the moving parts. As soon as you kind of get settled in, bang, one goes down. He gets banged up. Now that doesn't just affect that position, it might affect other positions, because what you have available may be a guy that's more versed and trained to play in another spot, but you're having to put him in there because he's the next man in the rotation.

But man, they're giving everything they've got. Now, are there things that we've got to fix? Yeah, we've got to fix our pad level. We've got to make sure from a communication standpoint that we're communicating the calls to everybody up front. But they've given us a chance in all three games, and that's all you can ask, and we'll keep pressing them to improve, and hopefully over the next couple weeks we'll get some guys back and be a little bit more -- have a little bit more depth to help us out.

Q. When you reviewed Saturday, it seemed like in the first half you were having a lot of success running the football. You had 14 carries for 70 something yards in the first half. Those guys got four carries in the second half. The game was never out of reach. What changed? Was it something Maryland did?

TONY ELLIOTT: No, so going back and watching the first half, we were very effective on possession and 10 downs. So coming out of possession on those first plays, we were effective, whether it was run or pass, which allowed you to get into a rhythm. We were able to play with some more tempo.

In the second half, we just couldn't find that rhythm, and then we had the turnovers, possessions cut short, and when you're playing behind the sticks, and you felt like the game was never out of reach, but we knew that we needed to generate some momentum, we just never could settle in from there.

So it was more just a function of -- and Maryland did a good job. You've got to tip your hat to Maryland. They didn't turn the ball over. They made good adjustments. Then their guys settled in. So if you look at the first half, early on -- shout-out to the student section because the noise was a factor early on. We had a couple false starts. They were kind of out of sync. Then they found their sync. Whereas we -- outside of the possessions and the turnovers in the first half, we're moving the ball, we're having success, we've got better rhythm, and then we just weren't able to -- once we went to the half we weren't able to come out and establish that rhythm.

Then started pressing a little bit to try and get into rhythm, which you've got to fight that urge all the way around, and then we just weren't -- we didn't have the explosive plays. I think the explosive plays help your run game, as well. So we weren't generating those in the second half and just couldn't find a rhythm to be able to re-establish the run as opposed to when we had a

rhythm and we were having success on P and 10s getting that first play out of the change of possession, having a positive play, typically led to success the rest of the drive. We lost that in the second half and just couldn't get much established.

Q. It felt like with (Anthony) Colandrea, they were flushing him to his right first half and then got him going to his left –

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, he goes all over the place.

Q. (Was Maryland) forcing him to his left. What adjustments did they make?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, I don't know if it was anything specific to force him to the left because you're forced, it's a breakdown somewhere. So the breakdowns, where they did a good job, but also from a technical standpoint, we didn't do some things well and lost some one-on-ones.

Like I said, their guys settled in when we kind of unraveled, if that makes sense. We lost pad level. We lost leverage on some blocks that led to guys being turned loose or him feeling the pressure. We got him hit early, too. I think we've got to do a better job of making sure we protect our quarterback because even on the first play of the game he got hit, and anytime a quarterback gets hit, he feels that. Then he got hit a couple more times.

But we were having success, and then in the second half we weren't able to overcome that. I don't know if it was anything in particular to force him to go to his left, but more like we had breakdowns in different spots that resulted in flushing one way or another.

Q. We saw Kam Courtney make a long catch in the game. What have you seen from him in practice and how is his development coming?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, what you saw on Saturday was what we've seen all through camp up until

he went down for a little while with an injury, so then he was out for a couple weeks.

For a freshman or first-year, he's a developed guy. He's strong, fast, really, really football smart, has savvy, and that's what we saw. He proved to everybody, which we thought we knew, but the lights weren't going to be too big for him. We had seen that.

But there was a time where he was down, and so he missed about two, two and a half weeks of practice. So now he's starting to get his legs back underneath him. Now he's caught back up from a playbook standpoint, and obviously with Suderian being down he was the next man up, and just proud of him and happy for him to go make a couple plays because with Suderian being down this week, as well, he's right there behind Chris Tyree.

Q. You talked about sitting down with Anthony (Colandrea) after the last game. What do you learn about a guy, especially like him, after mistakes like that, after going through some bad plays and hardships in the game?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, you learn how he responds, and as a coach, it's my job and Coach Kitch and Coach (Taylor) Lamb to help him grow and just present him and point out opportunities for improvement. But just talking with him, he understands the mistakes that he made, and he's going to take ownership, and he's already gone back to work to correct those mistakes.

That's really all you can ask for. It's a little bit different now when you're the starter. When you're the backup, people give you a little bit more grace. Now every mistake is going to be scrutinized. That's why I shared experiences that I've had with other quarterbacks, because we expect perfection, but it can't be achieved. So there's always going to be mistakes at every position throughout the course of a game. It's just do you have that desire to self-reflect, to figure out how you can get better so you can go

work on eliminating that mistake so you don't make the same mistake twice.

Just his demeanor and body language has told me that man, he's taking full ownership of it and wants to play his best week in and week out and just is learning and maturing and okay, when can I keep a play alive, when do I not need to press, and then how do I manage the new position that I'm in because it's a new position for him because he is the full-time starting quarterback.

So the questions are a little bit different that people are asking him. The guys are on him a little bit different. His teammates are now looking at him a little bit differently. Those are all things that whether you play well or whether you have a game where you may not play your best, you're still going to have to mature and grow through those things.

Q. Earlier in the season you've had questions at corner. Now that you've had a few games, what have you seen from them?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, you watch them, they've been challenged. They've been challenged to come up and tackle and they've also been challenged down the field. For the most part, with the exception of a couple plays that they want back, I feel like they've downed the ball pretty good, they've supported the run the way they needed to support the run. They're making guys, for the most part, make competitive plays.

Go back to Wake Forest, man, Jam (Jackson) was in position. Those guys made great plays. The tight end on the sideline, Jam is in position, that guy made an exceptional, exceptional play. You know, what I'm hopefully for is that they'll continue to be in position, and then through confidence and improvements in confidence and experience, then they'll make those competitive plays. For the most part, they've been in position. They've supported the run. I've been pleased.

I want Dre (Walker) to kind of get back healthy, fully healthy, so he can go and help us from a rotational standpoint, but I've been pleased with those guys overall.

Q. How would you evaluate the red zone part of the equation, whether that's execution or play calling? And when it's 2nd and goal at the 2, do you ever give any thought to Grady Bunch three times in a row when you're that close to the goal line?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, I mean, you do. You think about it. But we had an RPO, and we didn't block the A-gap defender up front, so it was a good thing that AC pulled the because if he hands it we're going to have a TFL, and that's just lack of execution right there. We've got to coach better and perform better in that situation. Split was a little bit tight, so there's some details on that slant route there.

But again, it's still risky with the Grady Bunch, too, because that's a scrum, and that ball is -- you're putting that ball in jeopardy, so three times in a row, I wouldn't feel as confidence calling it three times in a row, but you also want to reward the other guys, too, that have gotten the ball down there.

But we've got to evaluate it, and there are a couple things from a play calling standpoint that we've addressed and said we've got to do better, just from just a big picture understanding of the concept, and maybe it's one that we need to get rid of. So we're having those discussions as a staff and evaluating it.

But the object is to score every time you're down there, and right now we're not hitting our percentage of touchdowns, which impacts games, because if you go down there twice and you come away with 14 points as opposed to six, it's a little bit different. It changes the dynamics of the game potentially.

We're evaluating that. We're evaluating 3rd down, too. We've kind of masked it in a couple

games because we've been so explosive and we've overcome it with the explosiveness, but we've got to do a better job.

But that goes back to being efficient. When we're efficient on 1st down and 2nd down and we get it to a 3rd and short, 3rd and medium, much higher percentage of conversion as opposed to when you're sitting back there at 3rd and 7 to 10. You're not going to convert at a high rate in 3rd and 7 to 10.

We've identified what the factors are, now we have to just go to work to improve those.

Q. Last week as mentioned, A was anxious to see how you guys would handle Maryland's man coverage as opposed to what you've seen before. How do you feel like you fared in that, and what does Coastal do –

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, so Coastal is going to mix it up, but they are going to play some man coverage from a press alignment, and I thought we won some of the one-on-one match-ups, and when we won, we didn't quite have the protection or the throw.

Then when we had the protection and ready for the throw, we didn't necessarily win.

We've got to continue to challenge our guys. I think we have the personnel to be able to beat man coverage. You've seen Trell (Harris) be able to run by people. You've seen Malachi (Fields) able to get open versus some man. But it takes all 11.

I felt like we did a fairly, fairly decent job, but there's some things we can do from a play calling standpoint and then also from just a teaching standpoint and developmental standpoint because, again, as we progress in a season, we're going to see more man coverage, and where we're trying to go, to win where we're trying to go, you've got to beat man coverage. It was an early test for us. We're going to see a little bit more of it this week. I doubt

people are going to -- after seeing how Malachi came out of the gate with soft coverage, I'm pretty sure people aren't just going to give us easy-access throws, so he's going to have to work. But I believe that Terrell and Chris (Tyree) and Kam (Courtney) and the rest of the guys can win versus man coverage, but we've got to put it all together.

We've got to be able to protect long enough to be able to make the throw, and then the throw has got to be more accurate. That's the difference when you're throwing versus zone and throwing versus man coverage. Versus man coverage it's a much tighter window so the ball has got to be extremely accurate, whereas you've got a little bit more room for error when you're zone, where if it's not a perfect pass you still have the ability to make a non-contested catch and make your quarterback right. When it's man coverage, if you're off with the ball, it could result in a turnover.