

**University of Virginia Football Media
Conference
Tuesday, Oct. 15, 2024
Head Coach Tony Elliott
Press Conference**

Q: Eventually you knew taking this job that you'd have to go down to face Clemson. You talk to you players about blocking out the outside noise, is that something you have to do this week yourself?

TONY ELLIOTT: I have to apologize to some family members, some folks that have reached out. I have not answered, I have not called back. I eventually will get back to you.

But yeah it's been some requests, and people want to talk, but, and I have a responsibility to his football team, this football program, to be, to be laser focused. And that's one of the things that I learned from where I came from (Clemson), is just how to block out the noise.

So, yeah, this is one of those weeks where some people are mad at me right now, but I promise you, I love you. I just need to focus.

Q: When you brought Kobe Pace here, did you envision the type of year he's off to now, halfway through this season, and are you seeing some of the things that he did at Clemson when he had his breakout year a few seasons ago?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah. And the relationship was well established with Kobe prior to him getting here. And reason I wanted to coach him when I first saw him is because of the upside and the potential, and so just happy for him that it's all, coming together. I know he probably would have wanted to have him faster than it did, but there's natural transition that takes that takes place, and I'm just excited that that he's having the opportunities that he's having. He's taking advantage.

Q: A lot of guys missed the last game, including Antonio Clary, Chris Tyree, Trell Harris, any Updates? McKale Boley?

TONY ELLIOTT: Boley was at practice today. So Boley should be good to go. Really, was precautionary, just making sure that everything was good to go. With them big guys and them having knee braces out on the field, it's hard to see structurally where they're at. But he practiced today, so he should be good to go.

Clary's pushing hard. I don't know if this will be the week that we get Clary, and then Trell will be down for a couple (weeks). Trell ended up deciding to have surgery, which was the right thing, just a small bone fragment that was in his knee. Kind of what happened Chico (Bennett Jr.) last year, just something jarred loose, and had to go in and take it out. Fragment not quite as big as the one Chico had, but still, he'll be down for a couple weeks. And is there anybody else? I'm trying to think, who?

Oh, Tyree practiced today. He should be, he should be good to go.

Suderian (Harrison) practiced today, so he should be, he should be good to go.

Q: I know a lot it's this week is always focused on the past, going back to, kind of where you started and everything. How have you developed? How have you changed since arriving here at Virginia and kind of having this new experience?

TONY ELLIOTT: I think one of the ways is I had to learn how, kind of how Virginia works all the way around. I just learned the environment that I'm in so that I can adapt to be the most effective. And there are some things that that I brought in the door that worked where I came from, that just weren't as applicable here, and so they had to be tweaked. I think just having a better understanding of how the university works, how the athletic department works just kind of how the relationship is with

the program, with the community, the fans, all of that. I've had to learn that. So I'd say that's probably where the most amount of growth was taking place.

And then also learning how to build relationships with the student athletes that I have, right? Because, obviously the demands are a little bit different here. So you so you're dealing with, a different type of young man. So I had to learn that.

Then learning new coaches, right? So there weren't as many folks that came from, where I came from, with me, and so, so I've had to learn how to go back and kind of start at the beginning, as opposed to when I first got here.

Man, I was running full speed expecting everybody to catch up, but they didn't quite understand why I was sprinting so fast, or why we're doing things the way that I did things. But I think now there's a much better understanding both ways.

Q: A handful of other guys have played a game or two, but (Ethan) Minter and (Kam) Courtney are the only true freshmen who have basically played in every game. Obviously, you got a lot of experience at some positions. Do you have a sense of that first year class now about how, how much it ultimately will contribute?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, I think those guys from the time they showed up kind of kind of stood out as guys that would probably be able to make the transition quicker and be ready to go and then also add depth at some other positions. For some guys, has kept them working with the with the scout team, but we hope that down the stretch, we can take advantage of at least a four-game rule with a lot of our young guys. But you never know. Injury wise, there may be some, some other young guys that get elevated up pretty quickly.

Q: No turnovers for Anthony Colandrea for the last three games, knock on wood.

**Where have you seen him grown the most?
And how would you evaluate that progression?**

TONY ELLIOTT: that area right there, just taking care of the football. I think he's learning every single week, the totality of the job that he has, right? It's a big transition when you, when you go from high school to being the starter at the power four level, there's a lot that you're responsible for. So I think each week, he's learning. And the first thing, the biggest thing, is just taking care of the ball, like he's grown in that area and he's understanding that it's preparation that leads to that, so that he can be decisive. And when he's decisive, and he's very effective too.

Taking care of the ball when he's running right. I've seen him grow and protecting himself running the football, right? You've seen him slide a little more, get down, step out of bounds, so he doesn't take unnecessary hits. And I think he understands now that's not a that's not an indictment, or you have a lack of toughness, that's actually being smart. Because the quarterback, you don't need to take those hits. I know that you'll drop your shoulder, no question. I know how competitive and tough you are, but I need you to be upright, right? I don't need to get a shoulder or an elbow or something because you're taking an unnecessary hit.

I think he's growing with his with his leadership in the huddle, with the guys, of starting to see him now assert his voice a little bit more, and telling guys where to get lined up, how to get lined up, challenging them in the right way. So you're just starting to see him step into that fullness of the of the position.

Q: Coaches hate playing their friends. And I can't imagine you having anybody closer to you than in the sport. And Dabo (Swinney), how awkward is that part of going to be? Describe your relationship.

TONY ELLIOTT: I think before the game. And again, I, to be honest, which I really haven't had a ton of emotion, going into it, like, it's really, there's so much that goes into preparing for a game that's really all I've been focused on. And then I've also been mindful, too, that I did not want this game to be about me. And I told the players that this ain't about me. This is about you guys going down there and playing your best game. And my job is to is to prepare you.

I'm pretty sure pregame there'll be some smiles and some laughs and all of that will be good. But once they go to whistle and kick the ball off, like, it's like any other game, to be honest with you, you really don't pay attention much to what's on the other sideline, right? And like, I like, I really like (Wake Forest) Coach (Dave Clawson) and I think the world of him, and have gotten to know him over the last three years, but once the ball's kicked off you're just focusing on doing your job. There's so much going on. So he's (Dabo Swinney) a competitor, and one thing I know is, what when it's when it's go time. He's gonna be trying to put it on us right, like they're gonna be competitive, they're gonna want to win the game. And he's not gonna be thinking about, Oh, that's coach Elliot over there. No, they're there. They're coming, right? So we gotta have our guys with the same mindset, because it's gonna be a battle.

In terms of the relationship, I mean, he's gone from being a father figure when he was coaching me as a player, right to being a mentor as a young coach in the business, and then a colleague. So it's kind of had all three phases tied in one. He's one of the first individuals that I'll call if I have a problem or I have a question. And I don't think he gets enough credit for that. I think that people focus on the wrong thing sometimes, when they when they deal with Coach Swinney, because he's he tells the truth the way he sees it right. And not many people nowadays tell the truth the way they see it. I value that. But I think if you really know his heart and what he does off the field, and how many people he's impacted, not just his players,

but family members of the players and people in the community. I mean, there's nobody that, in my opinion, in college football that gives more back than coach Swinney. It's gonna be fun to compete, and it's a great test for our program to see where we are. That program, there has been the standard in the league for a very long time, and they're, they're back playing at a very, very high level, and looks like, it's going to be, you got to go through them to win the league with, with the way that they're playing.

So it's going to be a good test to see where we are as we build this program, and there's gonna be some similarities too. So it'd be a good game for us all the way around.

Q: What do you remember about Cade Klubnik's recruitment, and what are you seeing from what he's done, especially the last four or five games?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah I was a very small part of it, so I'm not gonna take any credit for it but I do remember some really in depth, mature conversations with Cade throughout the process. He's a very, very mature young man.

Great family comes from a great family, very humble. He's got, a very strong in his faith. So those are the things that I remember. Very good athlete come from an unbelievable high school program one at a high level. So you had all the traits and characteristics that you're looking for in a in a high level quarterback. Happy to see him, kind of persevere through a little bit of adversity, and now he's on the other side of it. It looks like he's taking that and managing it the right way and turn it into success at high level.

You talk a lot about player development over the years, are there two better examples than Jonas Sanker and Malachi fields, as far as what they came in as, and kind of where they've reached in their level?

TONY ELLIOTT: I mean those guys, to see them, from the day I showed up to where they are.

Yes, I think physically, both of them have really done a good job of transforming their body. First and foremost, I think that's one area that kind of gets overlooked sometimes. You know, in the development process, you got to develop your body. Those guys have gone to work, and so physically they look they look great. Then you got to develop your fundamentals and your skills. You see those guys executing on high level because of the fundamentals and skill development, and then your knowledge. Obviously Jonas is extremely fast, but he knows where he's going, and he gets there a lot faster than maybe how fast he runs, because he anticipates now and then you're seeing Malachi just having an understanding of coverage. Leverage is allowing him to make some of those catches because he understands where he needs to be, where the ball is going to be placed. It's just fun to watch those two guys and they're two of the best young men you're going to encounter. They both lead very well on this football team. So been grateful to have them and grateful just to be a small part of process.

Q: You've played in front of one sellout crowd this year, but that was 20,000 fans at Coastal Carolina this will be 81,000-plus. How do you prepare your guys for being the road team in that atmosphere?

TONY ELLIOTT: We try to get it out the way early. Let the guys see it before they get there, so it doesn't catch them off guard. Just really challenging to focus on themselves. That's one of the things that I value the most that I learned while I was there (at Clemson) under Coach Swinney. It's never about anybody else, it's about yourself. Because at the end of the day, if you take care of yourself, you give yourself an opportunity to be successful.

So we have to focus on us, obviously we had some noise out at practice just to kind of get ready to communicate. You can't walk in and lose to the environment. Two things that I challenged the program, don't lose to the logo and don't lose to the environment.

So we gave them a sneak peek of what it's going to look like, so that we got out the way on Monday, and then we don't have to think about it, talk about it. We can just focus on our process, so that when we get down there we're fully locked in and not distracted.

Q: Kam Robinson, he was saying he's put in some extra work to try to become a better blitzer, pass rusher. Have you seen that from him? He's got three sacks this year. What have you noticed about his blitzing ability?

TONY ELLIOTT: I think a lot of it comes from his athleticism. You know, he's a very athletic guy. But I think what he's learned and doing better job is with timing. The timing on the pressures, and then also his angles and knowing how to attack, different leverages on different on different individuals that he's pushing against.

Because it's not just always coming off the edge. You might have an interior rush. There might be some kind of cross action. He's learning the nuances of those things that allow him to really activate his athleticism, to run the path.

Q: Dabo (Swinney) said earlier today, that's he sits next to you at coaches' meetings and stuff. Not sure if you like that or that. And then, did y'all share any text messages when you saw the game come on schedule a long time ago?

TONY ELLIOTT: The first one, it don't bother me. I knew my place. And they would pick at me when I was there, because I was, I was his first former player that he hired. I knew my place, and so it don't bother me. I might make fun, or the other coaches make fun of it, but it don't bother me.

I enjoy seeing him. It's always an opportunity for me to pick his brain and gain a little bit of wisdom, too. And then another thing is a competitive nature. Man, he's gonna be locked in. He's gonna be taking notes. I'm over there, like, Hey, I'm gonna be locked in taking notes just the same way he is. And that's, I think that's

what you're looking for in any relationship, is somebody that makes you better, and that's what he does. And I can't remember if we shared a text. I'm pretty sure we did, but he operates with class and I operate with class we both want to win. We both want to want to win. We both want our teams to be successful. We're both going about it the right way. But no, I don't remember any like joking or joshing, going back and forth.

Q: You were part of that greatness for so long down there. What does this team look like in comparison to those teams? Does it look like those teams and what? What distinguishes this team?

TONY ELLIOTT: I think when you watch them from the offensive perspective. Man, you see, they're very balanced. They're very balanced. They got dynamic players at all positions. They got a dynamic tight end in (Jake) Briningstool. They got a big, bruising running back and Phil (Mafah), and then their skill guys can run. Very similar to where to where we were.

It looks like up front, they're playing well together. And then defensively, they look very similar to the teams of the past, with them big old bodies inside. And they got, they got two, well actually, they got six. They had six of them (defensive lineman) because they roll them (out) every other series. They got a whole new set of D linemen coming in there, so very similar than a fast on the back end. And then their linebackers are very similar to the to the ones that we had. So I think where they're playing now, right? They look, they look very similar to the to the teams of the past.

Q: Malachi Fields has playmaking abilities, but beginning the season it was Trell Harris who can really stretch the field. Have you seen guys like JR Wilson really demonstrate his ability to do that as well?

TONY ELLIOTT: JR showed it in fall camp, and that's what had us extremely excited. Now

we're kind of getting them back, in the groove. So I think you'll see a little bit more come out of him. I think Dre (Andrew Green Jr.) has it. Dre has it. It's just a function of every week, he's more and more comfortable with the system and then getting (Chris) Tyree back helps us, because that gives us some legit, documented speed down the down the field. And wouldn't sell Tyler (Neville) short. He makes some big plays too, maybe not quite as explosive, but he's making some nice plays as a tight end. So I think we're figuring out how to fill that void that Trell (Harris) gave us but I think we got enough bodies and enough guys that can do it. It's just a function of opportunity.

Q: I'm sure you couldn't have imagined how in 2003 you're sitting there with a (Kevin) Youngblood and (Airese) Currie and all those guys. Then this young guy that you don't know anything about, walks in as your receivers coach, and the impact that he's had on you at least 20 years later, that's, that's kind of, that's a remarkable situation, right?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah. So obviously, man, it was, it was a tough situation, because I graduated, I was, I was headed out the door. I was going to work in the engineering profession. And I came back because (Rick) Stockstill, who was my position coach asked me to come back. And then he takes a job in the offseason. And then here comes, Coach Swinney. I'm like, man, I'd finally worked myself up from kind of the bottom to where now I have an opportunity with my position coach that's not necessarily start me but I think I'm going to play a little bit. And I got a talented room, so you Roscoe Cosby was in that room, Curtis Baham was in that room. Kelvin Grant was in that room. There was some, really good, talented kids. And then coach Swinney comes in and instantly I could tell, that we're gonna, get along just fine, because similarities in the background, just persevering adversity at a young age, and then just his core values aligned with my core values. So it was a God thing, right? When you look at

it, not you look back, he knew exactly what he was doing when he paired all of us and you speak about it, Youngblood, Curry, Hamilton and they have the same relationship too, right to this day, all those, all those guys in that room still have a very good relationship with Coach (Swinney).

Q: Dabo joked today, he knows how you think but you know how he thinks. Is that going to help you guys?

TONY ELLIOTT: We'll see which one knows. But no, I think one of the things that that, that I learned there was as an assistant, because he would always talk about him and (Alabama) Coach (Gene) Stallings, and the job of the assistant is to make the head coach look good.

And in order to do that, you have to understand how the head coach looks, so that you can sell his vision. You can push his vision to the to the players.

Q: Dabo was talking earlier on how he hired you as a running backs coach that you were a little bit surprised.

TONY ELLIOTT: I was.

Q: But he said it was because of the person that you were. He was going to hire you to coach running backs because he believed in you as a person. How rare is that for coaches to make decisions that way, and how much do you owe him for seeing that in you as a person?

TONY ELLIOTT: Oh, I mean, I wouldn't be, we wouldn't be having this conversation had he not made that decision and then he made another. He made another tough decision when in You 2014 season, which Chad (Morris) left, what he was going to do with the (offensive) coordinator. That surprised me, too. I didn't think that he was going to go the co-offensive coordinator route and give me the play calling responsibility, like that that surprised me. I was also very

surprised about the running back job, and part of it was too they had come off a six and seven season. I knew he was battling for his job, and I had just been retained at Furman. So I really as we were getting together, because he told me to come to his house so we could sit down and talk, I was kind of preparing myself to be like Coach, you don't need to hire me. Don't even think about it. I'm good. I'm staying at Furman. I just want you to be successful. Because I knew it was a running back job, and I hadn't played the position, I hadn't coached the position, but it is rare, and I think he proved that you can do things differently than maybe what the status quo is. And his approach is to do it with people, believing in people, believing in the human spirit, believing that if you find good quality people and you give them an opportunity, they'll take it, they'll run with it, and ultimately, everybody will be successful.

So I'm not the only one, and I know that lot of the focus is on, on me and him because of the of the game, but there are so many other individuals that he's done the same thing for because he believes in him.

Q: Obviously, you went through a horrible situation your first year as coach here (at Virginia). Dabo was talking about how you guided Virginia during that year. Did he offer you any advice or anything you learned at Clemson that helped you navigate that situation?

TONY ELLIOTT: The biggest thing was him just telling me to be myself. And lead with your heart and the good Lord upstairs will direct your path. And that's really, now that I look back, that's, that's what it was like. I just showed up every single day. And that was one thing you know that we talked about there. You just show up every single day and you go to work, regardless of what the circumstances are. And so you hear me talk a lot about competitive stamina here at the University of Virginia, and that's really what, it is. It's being able to work

and operate to a standard or push towards a standard, regardless of what circumstances are.

Now that we're kind of on the other side of things, a little bit, nobody would ask for what we had, actually we still live with it every single day. So we're not we're not done, and we never will be done, because it's a part of our new normal. But, man, we show up every single day.

We just go to work, we focus on what we can control. Those are all things that that he taught, not just me, but everybody that was, was part of the organization and still part of the organization down there about, man, you just just show up life. Life's going to always present challenges, just like always going to present challenges. You just focus on the next play, what you can control, and eventually you'll, you'll, you'll look up and you'll like where you're at.