

**University of Virginia Football Media  
Conference**

**Tuesday, Oct. 22, 2024**

**Head Coach Tony Elliott  
Press Conference**

**Q. Coach, you mentioned after the game Saturday that even with the losses a lot of your goals are still out there. The five remaining games will likely determine how this season will be remembered, what's your message been to the players heading into this stretch?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Just keep playing. You know, recommit to the process. Don't be primarily outcome driven. Focus on the process and get back to the basics and go play football.

There is a lot of the football left, five games, we got some great opportunities versus some really good teams in the league. There will be shakeup with a lot of matchups getting ready to happen down the stretch. You never know.

We're sitting here 2-2 in the ACC and we got a chance to finish 6 if we take care of business. Still playing for everything that we started the season playing for, so the focus is to really learn from this past weekend and focus on things we can control, get better.

We got an opportunity to come to back Scott Stadium. We're playing the south's oldest rivalry. They're a football team fighting for their season as well. They're coming off a bye week. So we got a lot of things still to help create some motivation if we needed that, but my challenge is for these guys to be internally motivated, to go focus on the next game that's in front of them. Regardless of what happened the Saturday before, you still got to reset and go back to work.

**Q. Home attendance at Scott Stadium the last two games was not good. Do you think you guys have warranted better crowds with the way and you've improved this season? And**

**What's your message to the fans to encourage them to come out?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** I know we're doing everything we possibly can to put the best product on the field. These guys work extremely hard. They've shown improvement over the last couple years. I know the athletic department is doing everything they can. There has been a lot of improvements to the stadium, game day atmosphere. There is a lot to be excited about.

My biggest message would be we're in this thing together. It takes all of us. Hopefully we've shown that we're going to work as hard as we can to do our part, and hopefully they can see that that athletic department is working as hard as they can and that we need them. We need folks to be in the stands, create an environment for the guys, and also make it tough on opponents.

But the message is we're all in this thing together. We're building a program. The fan base is just as much a part of the program as myself and the players that are here in this building.

We're all in this thing together. We do it for them and we want to show the progress we're making. We're striving for perfection even though we know it can't be attained. We're going to play hard and put on the best show we possibly can. We would love for as many fans to be there to cheer us on.

**Q. Antonio Clary, I saw him dressed for a little bit for changing on Saturday. How far along is he in recovery?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Yeah, so we anticipate -- he practiced today so we're very hopeful he'll be back this week. Dre Walker is another on that practiced today that we're very hopefully for this weekend.

(Mike) Diatta and (Kempton) Shine got banged up in the game but they practiced today so they

should be good. Kam Courtney was back in practice today. He's probably a little bit further away than maybe Clary and Dre Walker. Griese still going to be down.

And from the game, (Ty) Furnish, I don't anticipate Furnish will be back from his ankle today. James is still nursing his foot and he'll be a game-time, week-to-week situation there.

Trell (Harris) had the surgery this past week so he'll be about three more weeks before we get him back.

**Q. UNC running back Omarion Hampton is a very talented back. What is the challenge of defending him and especially with the run defense?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Yeah, well, you know, I felt like early on in the pass game they were doing a decent job with the run, and then as the game wore on we weren't quite as stout as we've been in the past.

But the biggest thing is just eye discipline and fitting your gaps and being where you're supposed to be when you're supposed to be there.

With Mr. Hampton, he's the best in the league and one of the best in the country. He's big, physical, has great contact balance, very decisive when he runs. He doesn't give you an opportunity to get him before he gets going, because when he takes that ball, man, he hits full speed very quickly.

Trusts his eyes and trusts the scheme and he understands. We are going to have to be gap sound in what we do. If we do have any kind of chances to get him before he gets started, we got to go down level. You can't hit this guy high. You got to hit him low and be got to forceful when you hit him because he's not going to go down easily on first contact.

Great challenge for us, and I would anticipate with the off week they've done a great job in-house of studying their tendencies. They're going to make it more challenging for you to anticipate run or pass with any of the things you may have picked up on tape up to this point.

What I've heard about him is nothing but great things. He has unbelievable character. Unbelievable young man. He is the heart and soul of that team. I would anticipate they're going to come in here and try to set the tempo and run the football.

We got to be gap sound. We can't jump around blocks. We got to fit our gaps and press our gaps. Safeties are going to have to run in the alley quickly, and you got to get this guy may be when he's going a little bit east and west before he squares up. When he squares up he's going to bring the pain and it's going to take multiple individuals to get him down.

**Q. Chris Tyree back this past Saturday. What can you guys pull out of him the last five games?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Yeah, so we took a couple shots with him down the field; just didn't connect. I think he's back playing fast, at full speed.

Hopefully we can pull a lot out of him as we go down the stretch both in the intermediate and the deep passing game.

Overall we got to improve. That was a challenge to the guys this week about balls down the field. It's not just the quarterback making the throw. Our wide outs got to do a better job of running to win and not just necessarily working on the back shoulder.

Got to give them an opportunity as a staff and put the ball in the air and see can somebody can go make a play. Also too, in order to do that we got to be efficient and have situations where it warrants being able to just put the ball up in the air and see can somebody go make a play.

**Q. Depth chart question. With James Jackson being a game-time decision, you have Dorian Jones. Is it more him or Trey McDonald who seemed to play a lot more?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Trey McDonald -- so Dorian (Jones) actually wasn't available last week. He had a family situation he was taking care of last week, but he's back now. Really we got to play those three veteran guys we got with Kam Robinson and McDonald and Dorian.

You could see either or and both of them on the field at the same time if Kam needs a breather just because of where we are from a depth standpoint at linebacker.

**Q. Corey Thomas says probably no coach gets on him more than you do.**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** He said that? (Laughter.)

**Q. He said that. Obviously ya'll saw a lot of potential. What have you seen from him this year?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Yeah, so I think the first thing that you notice is, man, he's got an NFL physique. Physically he's built like an NFL player, and we saw those flashes in the spring. Now we're having to put him back a little bit deeper further away from the ball which is going to change things in the short-term.

For the long term it gives him some flexibility and versatility. It also allows us to get Kendren (Smith) on the field in certain situations where we feel like now we have our best five DBs on field as we are working Dre (Walker) back into the rotation.

The biggest thing for him is just want to see him play his size with his length, because he is a 6'4" long-armed young man. He's not afraid the contact. He knows how to be violent. Just need to see him play a little bit more in space with his length to set some edges on the perimeter.

Why I'm hard on him, I guess he could say is because I see a ton of potential. He came here with the desire to play at a higher level in hopes of preparing for the next level, which is the National Football League.

So not going to let him waste a rep because he doesn't have reps to waste. Then also too, I think that's what he wants. He wants to be coached. So I don't know if he said he asked for Coach Elliott to come over there and coach him, too.

I know he says I'm on him, but I know we've got a good relationship, but I see a ton of potential that I want to see him pull out of it so there is no questions that he's prepared for the next level.

**Q. Back in December of 2022, (Kam) Robinson had that late day signing ceremony, and you put out a statement that evening and you kind of praised him in a way that you haven't necessarily praised every incoming recruit. What made you so confident that despite the fact that he played in that tiny high school, not against the greatest competition, that he was as good as he turned out to be?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** When I watched him on tape, like you can see it. It's hard to describe. When you watch a young man on tape you can see that he has the "it" factor. He did everything for his high school. He would punt. He would play receiver. He would play running back. He would play linebacker. Go back to the secondary. He returned punts. He was doing everything.

So you saw that, man, this guy is a football player. Not every player you can put at all these different positions and they can function at a high level. So that was the first thing that attracted me to him, was I saw something on tape that I said, man, this look like the guy. Then you go watch him play live. Then you go watch him play basketball. Then you have a chance to meet his family. You see the big ole

smile that he has. He's a person that you just gravitate to.

Also when you watch the film he's one of those players that even if you're trying to watch somebody else, he just catches your attention. So those were the type of things that I saw that said this guy can be a potential program-changing kind of guy.

He was high profile guy in the state of Virginia that decided to stay home. A combination of all those things is what made me say that, and I still believe everything I said back in December of '22.

**Q. Even though (North) Carolina is struggling, they seem to be an extremely explosive offense. You touched on (Omarian) Hampton What else is the challenge?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Yeah, so you're exactly right. You can't look at the record. You look at all their games. For the most part they're close games. They are coming down to one possessions late in the game. The last game against Georgia Tech, 44 seconds left in the game and they're tied getting ready to take it to overtime and a miss-fit and the guy pops a big run.

And then Pitt, they're back and forth with Pitt in that game. Obviously the JMU game kind of got out of hand quickly. It happens from time to time. That football team that's sitting over there coming off a bye week, that's really, really good football team. So their record is not an indication of who they are.

Offensively the quarterback can beat you throwing the ball and beat you with his legs. He's different than Drake (Maye), but he still has the ability to make all the throws and he can beat you with his legs.

Then they got tight ends that pose a problem. When you're in 12 personnel your first thought is, okay, we got to stop the run and then they can go and be in passing sets.

So you got to be careful in term of how match your personnel versus their tight ends, and then they got wideouts. And special teams-wise they don't get enough credit. They've had punts returned for a touchdown. They have had kickoffs that have been momentum changes.

They have blocked the punt for a touchdown. So with the offense, and then the defense can generate stops, it's just a well-balanced team that I anticipate is going to come in here and give us everything they have.

In particular to their offense they can throw it over your head. They got the running back they can hand it to. Then they got a quarterback (Jacoby Criswell) that when he does drop back if you do move him off the spot, he can keep his eyes downfield or pull it and run.

He made some big runs to extend some drives in some third down situations. I think that's what makes them explosive and difficult to -- very similar to what they've been, but just looks a little different because the quarterback style of play is a little bit different than what you're used to seeing out of Drake (Maye) over the last couple years.

**Q. Just a little bit off the path. Since you were talking about Kam Robinson, how much can you point to guys when you're recruiting to not only Kam Robinson, but Malachi (Fields) and Jonas (Sanker) and what they've done in this program, where they are at this level. How much do you use that?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Yeah, you know, I think what I've told the coaches, and my message to the high school coaches in the state is we got to hold up our end of the bargain. We got to make sure when guys decide to stay home that they're developed, being treated the right way, and having success on the field.

So obviously we did not recruit Jonas and Malachi, but hopefully over the last couple years they've seen development in those guys.

So we can point to, hey, these guys stayed home and have been developed over the last couple years.

Then you point to Kam Robinson and then you look at Kam Courtney is having some early success on the field, and Anthony Britton is another one playing and having success.

I think you can point to those. And then as time goes on, those guys will be able to be spokespersons for the program in terms of what their experience has been like inside the walls of this building, inside the program, but also their experience on grounds.

So just all of that is what you use to try to illustrate to folks that this is the place to come in-state. We got to continue to have success on the field. That's important. The young people want to see wins and we fully understand that. But we also know there is more to it than just that. We want to win all the way around. I think if you look at not only the success that Malachi and Jonas are having on the field, if you see the impact they're having in the community, the way they're being developed off the field, the connections they're making for the rest of their life, all of those are selling points.

Probably a little bit more difficult to get a young person in this day and age of college football recruiting to understand, but we're going to be the adults and keep the main thing the main thing and focus on what we believe is really important.

That's creating a program that's about the total package. That's about development on the field, off the field, spiritually, socially, in all areas of your life, so that when you walk away from your experience at the University of Virginia you can say, you know what, I'm getting an unbelievable return on my investment.

That's the objective for us here as a program, to make sure when a family entrusts their son to our program we're going to do our part that

when he walks away he's really prepared, well-connected to go dominate in the next stage of his life. That will equate to a great return on the time you spend here at UVA.

**Q. Third straight week you're playing a really, really good running back, different styles. What's the challenge on defense when you see different styled backs?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Yeah, I think the biggest thing is you got to study. You got study and you have to pay attention to what the changes in tendencies are. Each one is going to have some tendencies from an alignment standpoint, from how they attack the line of scrimmage, the way they cut, how they prefer to attack defenders, which way do you need to tackle them.

So you just got to study each week and understand that it's not one size fits all. Just like your angles will be different when you're going against a young man in Louisville as opposed to let's say (Phil) Mafah (Clemson). It's going to be different when you attack Mafah. You better be able to bring it because he's 230 pounds; whereas a young man from Louisville is a little bit lighter. He also runs hard for his size.

The biggest thing is knowing schematically where you're supposed to be and executing with the technique that you're required to and understanding that if you're required to fit the gap, stay in your gap. Don't get antsy.

Then when he's committed to his gap, that's when you can fall off. I think sometimes guys want to make a play so bad that they get into a rush, and these guys that we're playing -- any good running back you call them the eraser. Right. He erases problems. If you show color in the hole too quickly, he's going to make you pay for it.

That's where we got to do a better job fitting our gap, staying in our gap until it's time for us to tear off and retrace so that we don't give him

any additional running lanes to take advantage of.

**Q. As a former running backs coach, are those things you can help the defense out and try to identify and share with them?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Yeah, I try to just pour whatever knowledge I have in all different areas to the defense, to the offense, to special teams, just experience over the years.

So I'll go in and talk about kind of what I see in terms of the running back, and not only just the way he runs from a pass protection standpoint, definitely trying to help our team have whatever advantage that they possibly can for whatever knowledge that I can see from tape.

I think you take all those different perspectives and put together as you build a plan of attack for each team that you play.

**Q. (Anthony) Colandrea hasn't thrown an interception in four straight games now.**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Right.

**Q. Makes the safe play mnd also bringing kind of that juice I guess we saw last year with him and making some big plays out there.**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Yeah, I think he's improving every single week and taking pride in that. Not that he didn't before. Now that he's having success, he's taking care the football, it's something that he's finding a little bit more excitement in.

Again, it's a delicate balance because you don't want to lose the moxie and the "it" factor that makes him such a special player.

Also we know the margin for error is very, very, very small. It's a game of inches, so you just got to be careful. So just super proud that he hasn't put the ball in jeopardy, and we're going to

need him to continue with that level of precision.

He has to take chances. We know that. You want to go through his progression. You want him to sit in there and throw the ball in tight windows. Is there will be some risk-reward, but right now he's doing a good job not putting the ball in jeopardy.

We're going to ask him to take some chances, throw the ball down the field because that's his job, and each game is a learning opportunity for him.

**Q. College football there is an assumption that with more time to prepare for the opponent, heal, coming off a bye week is in a better position than the team that played the previous week. When you look back, does that actually play out where you're better off a bye week?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Yeah, I mean, I think it's always based on the situation. You have to take each one in the proper context, you know. I've been in situations where coming off the bye week, man, the timing wasn't quite there because we didn't play the week before. Took us a little while to get the timing back.

So you would have that argument.

The health issue is a legitimate argument. The more time you have to take the wear and tear off the guy's bodies it's going to help them. But that doesn't necessarily equate to better performance.

There are other factors that go into that. So for us, coming off a bye week it's been really beneficial in each of the years we've had bye weeks, but I don't think it's an absolute formula where one team is -- because you still got to just go play, right?

There will be an advantage to playing the week before because your timing, you didn't take

time off. There is also going to be some potential disadvantages because the other team may have a little bit more in the tank so to speak or may have a couple more bodies because they were able to rest some guys and get them back healthy.

**Q. For Ben Smiley, is going to be available for the first half?**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Oh, I sent him in. Yeah, I don't know because the referees didn't come to me and say that he needed to go in. I just could tell how frustrated he was. It's an unfortunate situation. You know, obviously he made it right with his teammates. He understands that that type of behavior is not acceptable.

There were some things that were done, right, but it's not an excuse. Tristan (Leigh) has taken ownership, and big shoutout to him because he called about the situation remorseful. Then Ben has expressed his remorse to his teammates.

As far as I know, they did the same thing to me. I just could tell that where he was emotionally it was best for him to just go inside and cool off.

**Q. I know you're not a stats guy and I hate bringing this stat up.**

**TONY ELLIOTT:** It's all good.

**Q.** You guys have been outscored 82-23 in the third quarter. Have you put that under a microscope and tried to figure out why you start slow in the second half?

**TONY ELLIOTT:** Yeah, so, man, as a matter of fact got after the guys a little bit today in practice because we try to structure our practice the same way we approach a game. We want to get off to a fast start.

We have different aspects of our practice that are designated at the front to simulate a fast start. Then we have over inside run drill which is one of the more physical aspects of our

practice. We have it right before we take a break, so simulating that last part of that second quarter going into halftime. We take a little break and refuel them and come out and go out into typically competitive stuff against each other to simulate that.

I really challenged them today in practice, right, to practice so that we can come out fast after the half. So, yes, we have put that under a microscope. We call it the middle eight. This last game it was lost in the middle eight. You look where we were offensively the last few minutes of the second quarter, we had three possessions and really didn't do anything with it.

Defensively they held and didn't allow them to score anymore, and then we had a great opportunity coming out the half in a one-score game and then we gave up a touchdown. When you look at it, it was penalties that led to extension of drives. We got to a third and six and we slip in man coverage.

So really trying to evaluate the mindset that we have during that portion of practice where we're approaching halftime the right way. Not like, okay, it's just a break. It's an opportunity to go refuel, to get the adjustments, and then have an attacking mindset.

And we've demonstrated it in some games, but overall it just hasn't been good. Yes, I'm trying to evaluate what I'm doing, evaluating the practice structure, evaluating everything, so that we can have a better mindset.

I challenged them today, too, because I think the fourth quarter has been good for us. We put our fours up, right, and I think it's also a mindset.

So I got to change the mindset that when we say middle eight we think about the middle eight just like the mindset with the fourth quarter. That's what I got to do, and that's one of the things I told the team. Where I have to get better is I have to continue to push and prod

and research and look for ways to help from a mental toughness standpoint.

Really that's what that is. It's fighting the -- because you're going into halftime. There is a tendency to just relax. Okay, it's halftime. I am going to take a break. Really you're taking a break from play but mentally you're not taking a break. It's an opportunity to refuel with your hydration, get some carbs in your system to boost your energy, but you can't check out mentally.

We're definitely looking at that aspect. We have not done a great job the last couple weeks in the middle eight, which would be the third quarter.

Good question.

**Q. You made a point on a travel day for your team to make it over to JPJ for Tony Bennett's press conference on Friday. Any thoughts on his decision and his tenure here.**

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, man, Big T, man. Happy for him. Hate to see obviously him step away from the game because I think it goes without saying the type of coach he is. He's an unbelievable basketball coach and even better human being. He's been very, very supportive, inspirational, and available for me. I appreciate that. He's going to go down as one of the best to ever do it. He's a legendary type guy.

So regardless of what we had going on, I was going to make sure that I had a chance to support him. He does it the right way and got a tremendous amount of respect for kind of him taking a stand.

Like you're not going to find many people, right, especially in the business of college athletics that are going to step up and take a stand for what they believe. You may not agree with it, but the fact that he'll stand for what he believes and the humility and the transparency and honesty to say, hey it's time for me to step away

because I don't feel like I can give everything that I have.

Man, that's powerful. I'll never forget that. I'll always respect that. He said he might come out to the football practice now. Never been to a football practice. I welcome that because I believe he's going to stay here locally. He's is entrenched in the community and in the institution.

But definitely had to. He's one of the best human beings I've ever had a chance to interact with. He's inspired me. I want to do what little I could to show my respect on a tough day, but also a special day for him. He's going to go spend time with his parents that are 81. He's going to go focus on the relationships with his wife and children. That's to be respected and commended.

You can easily get caught up in and lose sight of what's most important. I'm proud and happy for him he's going to be able to do that.