

**University of Virginia Football Media
Conference
Tuesday, Nov. 5, 2024
Head Coach Tony Elliott
Press Conference**

Q. The other bye week you were coming off a one-sided win. This bye week you're coming off a one-sided defeat.

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah.

Q. Do you anything different in that case with the bye week?

TONY ELLIOTT: No. Very similar approach. First thing we want to do is study ourselves. It's a four-game set to check tendency-wise if there is anything we're giving away.

So similar approach. Had to reset. Took the first part of the bye week to really evaluate ourselves and study what we were doing, and then turn the page and start getting ready for Pitt.

But very similar format to how we handled the first bye week.

Q. Quarterback-wise, what did you work on with (Anthony) Colandrea?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, I mean, it was tough day at the office for everybody the last outing. In fairness to Colandrea, when you're taking a three-step drop and you're at the top of your drop and your third step is in the ground and guys are on your back or at your feet, I mean, doesn't matter who you got at quarterback.

Biggest thing is getting back to the fundamentals, controlling what we can control. Obviously there were a couple of reads that he probably would want back.

Other than that, to be honest with you, I was proud of how he competed considering the amount he was getting hit in this game. He just

kept battling. To me he didn't lose his composure. Stood in there and threw some good balls. Then also, wasn't able to fully get through his progression. It's hard to evaluate.

Man, right now AC is our guy. Do recognize that Tony (Muskett) has come in and provided a spark. As I said at the beginning of the season, we're going to need both of those guys throughout the course of the season to figure out how to win games.

But just been proud of how those guys have battled amidst the adversity, and really just focusing on AC's fundamentals and the things he can control to get better.

But what happened in the last game I think is tough on a quarterback when you're getting hit that much to truly evaluate them.

Q. (Regarding getting healthy.) What's the latest?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, we needed it. We needed a bye week. Obviously Brian (Stevens) is back healthy, back practicing. That was kind of a scary deal. You know, it started as we thought it was a viral infection and next thing we know it's -- I saw a picture of his lungs and he's got a lot of fluid on his lungs, and it happened fast. I guess it's going around a lot. I guess it is more common now. But happens fast.

Good to have Brian back.

(Ty) Furnish was back in practice, so excited about having him back.

Ugonna (Nnanna) is back in practice with the dislocated toe.

Obviously Jimmy (Christ) had to have surgery on his ankle so he's out.

I think more time has helped Chris Tyree. I think he's back full speed ready to go.

Just looking through the list. Who else was out?

James Jackson is still battling with the foot. We're getting closer. He'll be a game-time decision. But the time off has been good for him.

(Antonio) Clary is back. Been competing in practice. Swelling has stayed down on the knee, so excited about the possibility of having him back.

Trying to think. Anybody else that was out that last game? Most of the big issues were on the OL. We anticipate, with the exception of Jimmy (Christ), having all those guys back ready to go. (McKale) Boley's knee is good. Been practicing during both the weeks off.

Q. Trell (Harris)?

TONY ELLIOTT: Trell (Harris), he is probably about two, three weeks away. It's a four-week deal with his surgery and he had surgery about, what, a week and a half, two weeks ago.

Q. Is that a situation where you'll save his redshirt?

TONY ELLIOTT: We'll be smart. We'll be smart. He's got one game left which will be his fourth game this season. We'll see kind of where we are. Definitely want to do right by the young man and make sure we don't burn a year if we don't feel like it's going to be beneficial to him or the team.

Q. You've seen teams I guess defend (Anthony) Colandrea differently as the season has progressed as they get more film on him and see what he likes to do. He was talking a lot about teams trying to keep him in the pocket, a lot more man-to-man coverage. What have you seen?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, you know, I don't know if it's as specific to just AC (Anthony Colandrea). It's always been like this. The later you get in the

season, the more competitive the more, you're going to see man coverage.

In my experience, especially playing in the postseason, you got to get ready for four-man coverage. Each team will have that variation of coverage in their package. I think teams want to keep him in the pocket and make him throw from the pocket.

Once he pulls the ball down to run he's dangerous. Both run and pass outside of the pocket. I think it's also still kind of challenging to tell because we've had some issues up front here lately with being able to consistently protect the quarterback.

But I think with Trell (Harris) being down in particular, teams are sitting on us a little bit more. We got to figure out a way to get the ball down the field, put the ball up in the air and see can we have somebody.

Then with Chris (Tyree) being in and out of the lineup, we just haven't had that true vertical speed threat that we have with those two guys. Having Chris back hopefully will help.

The structure we're getting ready to play -- and I love Coach (Pat) Narduzzi. He's one of my favorite of guys that I've been around in this profession. First, he does it the right way. You can tell he cares a lot about his players.

He's going to go what he does. Competed against back him back 2016, 2018, and this is the same defensive structure. They're going to put seven in the box; they are going to have a safety sitting right at about ten yards ready to support the run; and then they're going to play you man coverage.

So this group we're getting ready to play, I don't think they'll change up to defend AC (Anthony Colandrea) or anybody else on our offense. They're going to do what they do, and they've been really, really good at it. That's why they're top in the country at stopping the run, and they

force you to make contested plays down the field.

This will be a great test for AC and all the guys to be able to put together consistent drives versus the other defensive structure we're getting ready to play.

Q. He (Anthony Colandrea) said without Trell Harris, ya'll changed things up to get more of a deep threat in there. What are some ways you can do that?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, I mean, one, we got to protect so that when our shots are open down the field we can deliver the ball. It starts right there.

Then you just have to create some move-the-pocket stuff, double-move stuff just to see can you spring a guy down the field. For us more than anything is being able to protect long enough so that we can give AC (Anthony Colandrea) a chance.

You know, if you're throwing quick game all the time it's hard to get the ball down the field. You got to drop back. Got to have some of your five-step, seven-step timing stuff. Move the pocket to allow the routes to develop down the field.

Q. Knowing how committed (Antonio) Clary is to football and the team, has it been tough as a coach to see him have to deal with another setback? And also, what has been the impact of his absence on the defense? He and (Jonas) Sanker seemed to be a really good one-two punch early in the year.

TONY ELLIOTT: Right. Yeah, Clary was playing at a high level, his best football, in my opinion all-conference level before the injury. Man, he's worked extremely hard. Took full advantage of the year off last year with the ankle. Used it the right way to have himself in position to do that. So it's tough. Still is leading, but it's a little bit more challenging when you're not necessarily on the field. It's one thing when you can holler

from the sideline and tell guys, but when you're out there in the heat of battle you really can lead and elevate the play of those around you.

For him, it's bittersweet because I know that in the big picture, grand scheme of things this adversity is just going to continue to refine his character. He's got so much more in store for him beyond the game of football.

But it is tough to watch a competitor that's completely sold out for the team, will do anything for his teammates, and a guy that's worked extremely hard.

But the positive is we know he's going to get to play football again. It's just a minor setback, but it is tough to watch a young man go through that adversity. I also see the positive in what this is going to do for him personally, short-term and long-term.

Q. Corey Thomas is slid over and played that spot and he's getting to return home to his home city this weekend. How has he improved this season since you guys got him? And what have you seen from him as this year's gone along since he's made the jump from group of five to the ACC?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, you know, we saw a lot of stuff in the spring that has translated. His ability to have range and the flexibility to be able to go from playing our field safety position to now being at the strong safety position and being back on the hash, just shows his versatility.

With each game that goes by you'll continue to see him improve with his ability to run the alley down footballs. Seen him improve man coverage-wise since he got here.

So a lot of stuff we saw in the spring is really starting to translate now. He's taking it in stride. He was getting settled in and now he's got to go play another spot. Excited for him to have an opportunity to go back home, a homecoming for him. He'll be excited and ready to play.

Q. Pitt had difficulty protecting the quarterback the last three games. Did you see anything from the SMU game plan that might help you or does that give you hopes that you guys can get to him?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, I mean, I've seen progress in just the development of our guys from a pass rush move standpoint. I'm hopeful that it's going to start paying dividends on Saturdays. You know, when you look at it, it was kind of like our game versus North Carolina. What I saw was some technical issues, some fundamentals breakdowns, and the other team taking advantage of it.

Structurally didn't see any major issues other than -- saw some guys lose some one-one-one battles, which does give you confidence. You know that if you go out, you play hard, you play with great technique and you have good timing, then you have an opportunity to be able to get to the quarterback or affect the quarterback. That's one thing that I don't want to diminish, is if we can get the quarterback to move off the spot and disrupt timing, to me that's as effective as getting to the quarterback.

I would like to see it. Been challenging those guys, too. Spent a good amount of time this bye week these last two weeks with that group, because I believe they're close to being able to put it all together to get some true pressure on the quarterback.

Q. When the team is struggling, how much in the bye week do you have to put on your Dr. Phil hat and keep them encouraged?

TONY ELLIOTT: That's a great question. Every day it's Dr. Phil. You're dealing with 18 to 22 years old. And they have their lives back. That's one of the differences. In fall camp it's just football. You're spending so much time together.

Then you get into the season and then they get their lives back and they have so many things

that are going on both in this building, out of this building, back home, relationships.

So every day I'm trying to figure out, okay, what's going to be the right message that will resonate with the entire team.

Also, too, we had to look ourselves in the mirror, right, this past week. We had to own what we put out there. Yeah, it was a tough day at the office last time out. That's who we are right now until we fix it. So either we can sit here and feel sorry for ourselves and hope that it's just going to change, or we can own it and be honest with ourselves, be honest each other, and go back to work.

Last week there was a lot of transparency all the way around from coach players and players to coaches to just evaluate where we are, and we had to get back to the basics. Part of the basics is, man, we have to spend more time together. We got to simplify our lives so to speak so that we can have that synergy and cohesion.

When you see a team out there playing hard and starting to find their identity, it's because they've spent a lot of time together and know what they're playing for.

So it was an opportunity for us to get back to the basics of knowing each other. Been excited about this week of practice. Now that we really turned the page to really game planning for Pitt, the guys have had a really sense of urgency and a good demeanor about themselves.

Yeah, during that bye week got to look in the mirror and take ownership of the things you did wrong, and also take ownership of being the solution finder. It's been good to see these guys persevere through the adversity.

I feel like they handled it the right way. One of the quotes as Mark Batterson said, leading indicator of the success is well-managed failure. Right, leading indicator of failure is miss-managed success.

We've had a chance to be on both sides of that. You start 4-1 and everybody is patting you on the back and telling you how great things are going, and then you don't manage the success the right way.

So then you start to think more about yourself, spend more time way doing other things, kind of living in this patting on the back. Then you lose a little bit of connectivity. That leads to adversity, failure.

The question is, is this group going to allow that to continue to take place or are you going to say, you know what, we're going to take ownership of our failures and turn it into success.

I'm excited to see this group get back out on the field Saturday night.

Q. Follow up on the question about downfield passing. When you look to the wide receiver room, how much do you see JR Wilson getting more of those reps?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, and so coming out of fall camp, man, JR was the talk of fall camp. Of all the returning guys, the biggest turnaround. Bang, hurts his knee. So we're hoping with this extra time he'll be a guy that can do that. I think his size, with him and Malachi (Fields) and also Dre (Andre Greene Jr.), I think we got the size. Also got to get better at giving them a chance down the field. We got to run to win and not necessarily run just for back shoulder balls.

We got to be able to run past people and the quarterback has to put it up and out there for these guys to get it.

Really going to lean on Malachi, JR (Wilson), Dre And then also having Chris (Tyree) back, everybody knows about his speed. Find ways can see can we find ways to get him open. It's all going to start with protection, right? To get the balls down the field we got to be able to protect a little bit better.

And proud of those guys, too. Nobody has a harder life than the offensive line. Everybody is watching them every play. Even when it's not their fault it's their fault. They have to take ownership of some of the things and they have. So it's been good to watch that group kind of recommit to each other and get back to the basics.

I told them straight up, only way we're going to get to where we want to go is on the backs of our offensive line. Those guys got to lead. The leadership has to come from the inside out. That's the offensive line and the defensive line.

Q. Talking to AC (Anthony Colandrea) I know there is a lot of guys in his ear, Brian Stevens says he talks to him on the sideline, Coach (Taylor) Lamb talks to him but he also talked about Vincent Croce, the team chaplain. What affect has he had on the team?

TONY ELLIOTT: Right. And I try minimize how much I talk to AC (Anthony Colandrea), especially on game day, because in my background when I was coordinating it was me, Jeff (Scott), (Brandon) Streeter, and coach (Dabo Swinney). That's four voices that could be in the quarterback's ear.

Even if you're on the same page, it's still difficult for four individuals to say it exactly the right way. I try not to, especially on game day, get in his ear too much.

For me it's just more encouraging him, letting him know the things he has done well, even though maybe the drive wasn't as successful as he wanted. I want him to know these are the things you're doing well. Maintain your body language. If there is something technically, I will discuss that.

Having Vince (Croce) around, former player that understands more than just the football piece, understands the student experience, the social experience of being here at UVA, obviously he's an individual of faith and can speak to that.

It's just good for young people to have multiple positive voices in their ear. Not only is he available to the players, but he is available to the staff. He also has Bishop Gordon that helps as well.

I think it's important not necessarily to push faith on these young men, but just to be a sounding board. Not only are they trying to figure out how to be really good football players, but they're trying to figure out who they are as men. They're trying to figure out who they are in the academic world. They got so many social pressures. It's a time of discovery for young people during this window of their lives.

So it's awesome to have him around. He has just got a calming demeanor about himself. At the end of the day it's probably one of the few unbiased voices that he's going to hear. So even if Coach Elliott is coming, he knows Coach Elliott more than likely in the game is gonna be talking about football. If he sees Shep (Khalek Shepherd) coming from the academic side, it's about academics. Coach (Taylor) Lamb is probably football and social life.

So an unbiased voice for him to be able to -- again, he's starting quarterback. It's different when you're starting quarterback, man. There is a lot of pressure. He can't go anywhere where he's not recognized. And then he gets a lot of credit when things are going well, and also gets a lot of undue blame when things are not going as maybe he or the team wants or other people want.

It is good to have that voice to help him stay calm. His job, man, he is a such a fiery guy. I love that about him. I want that. But also at his position he has to stay kind of even keel most of the time to be able to execute with all the stuff that's going on around him.

Good question.

Q. Pitt's been pretty stingy against the run. SMU had some success on the ground this past Saturday. What have you seen that they did well to run the ball with (Brashard Smith)

TONY ELLIOTT: Not to take anything away from SMU, thought they had a good game plan, did a good job. But I think kind of what happened to us at North Carolina, just some missed tackles. Was some missed tackles and then I thought that No. 1 from SMU, he ran with some passion and toughness. He refused to go down on first contact.

But to me it was schematically a couple things, but it was more just some missed tackles. They weren't quite tackling the way that I've seen them tackle in the past in that particular game.

Q. Do you guys want to get Xavier Brown the Ball?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, you know, you look at X (Xavier Brown) and X is very dynamic. Still growing from a protection standpoint. Definitely want to try and get more touches in his hands. I got a little empathy for Des and even Red (phonetic), both of them, man. When you're in games like that, and especially on offensive side and your base concepts, just we're struggling to execute.

Wasn't a ton of missed assignments or mental errors. It was more just technical breakdowns. Guys playing with high pad leverage, not striking the way they're supposed to strike, and now you're trying to be perfect in every play call. When we can get in rhythm I think you have a chance to really take advantage of what X brings. When you're sitting there trying to figure out from a pass game standpoint what can I call and protection is a premium, I think it's an area he's getting better. As he evolves there I think that makes him an every-down back that can be in there in all those situations.

Right now it's kind of been by role depending upon what the game dictates. Different guys

have different roles throughout the course of the game.