

**University of Virginia Football Media
Conference
Tuesday, Nov.12, 2024
Head Coach Tony Elliott
Press Conference**

Q. Second week in a row your team is on the road playing a ranked opponent in a stadium the program hasn't had a lot of success or any success in this case. Is the message the same or how much does it depend on the opponent?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, the message is the same. The process is the same from a preparation standpoint. Hopefully the guys have confidence after last week that they know what they need to do to prepare, but just excited about the opportunity. There hasn't been any success. I told the guys today we haven't won against Notre Dame. We've set out all season to be a different team doing different things, and to be different you have to do different. So all we can ask for is an opportunity but it's going to take our best game and it's going to take just a commitment to the process.

Q. Having any previous experience with (Riley) Leonard help you guys in preparation for Saturday, even though he's in a new place?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, he looks like a different guy, to be honest with you. Just watching him, he's very efficient throwing the ball, very decisive when he pulls it down to run. He looks very similar but also making good decisions to protect himself at times. So I don't know if past experience really -- because he's got a different supporting cast, different offensive line in front of him, but just excited for the match-up and the challenge.

Q. What makes him such a tough runner?

TONY ELLIOTT: He's big. He's a big guy. You can see it on film. You can tell he's 6'3", 220 pounds, and he's very confident as a runner, decisive. He's not afraid of contact, and he likes to fall forward, and that's what makes him a good runner.

Q. Terrell Jones started against Pittsburgh, I think he was ne of your first offers as a head coach. How far have you seen from him as when you first saw him as a recruit to now?

TONY ELLIOTT: Super proud of TT (Terrell Jones). He's come a long way. We knew he would be a developmental guy, bought into the process all the way around you've seen it on and off the field. Super proud. I think he still has a lot more room before he even hits the ceiling.

We have an inside joke that I go back and forth with him. I kind of rate his percentage and we're trying to get him up there to 100 percent, so I've got a number I often say to him like TT I think you're at this number right now but we've still got more to go. I think he's embraced that because he wants to be as good as he possibly can and he's given us a lot of diversity, too. He was out on the edge to start the game but he's also played some interior for us.

He's got a body to be one of those combo guys as he continues to get better, I think he's got a ton of success in his future.

Q. He (Terrell Jones) said One of the biggest struggles was weight gain and nutrition. How much have you seen him embrace that as he he's tried to develop his body?

TONY ELLIOTT: Just look at his body where he is. You're starting to see his upper body catch up with his lower body, and then you can also see it in practice too and throughout the course of the game, his stamina is a lot better. And that's the big thing with him because he's got a frame that can be pretty big. He gets to be 280-285-pound guy that has some twitch off the edge but also powerful enough to play inside. That's the end goal that we're trying to work to, but what each young man -- I told a group of them the other day that you know you look at coaches and say, well, this coach can develop you.

It's really the player when they make a decision in conjunction with the coach. They'll take the

coaching, but it's when they decide that they want to fully embrace what it takes to be the best version of themselves and nutrition is a big, big piece of it, and sleep. That's another big piece that we know on the college campus is kind of all out of whack with the way they stay up late and up early, but he's really starting to embrace that.

You've seen every aspect of his life improve because of that.

Q. You've always had really veteran defensive lines since you've been here with guys keep coming back. You're starting to see younger guys like TT (Terrell Jones), Anthony Britton, Jason (Hammond) earlier in the season start to come up and Mekhi (Buchanan) is another guy you guys like but he's been out this year, how do you feel about that group coming up?

TONY ELLIOTT: Excited about their potential and we need that because with the veteran guys, that means if they're always out there, they're playing a lot of snaps, and they have only so many in their body. You need some of the younger guys to develop. But I think we've all seen over the last couple of games what we thought we saw in Britton now you're starting to see that come to fruition. Now you're starting to see it with TT.

Jason (Hammond) was playing really well prior to his injury and Mekhi (Buchanan), I think Mekhi has probably the highest ceiling of all of them. He's just a freakish athlete. But needed to repair his hip. So he's down this year. And Chase (Morrison) will be back. He had to have surgery on his hip this past week, too.

We feel like we are headed in the right direction with the body types and the raw materials. Takes a little bit of time to develop, but I want to get to a place to where we're like the bunch we're getting ready to play (Notre Dame); they've just got creatures coming like one after another. They just keep coming, and they all look the same. They're 6'7", about 260. They've

got freshmen 6'7" and 260 and they keep rolling and they've had to battle some injuries too on their D line. But that's the end goal is that we want to have a multitude of guys up front to stay fresh and just put pressure. Not quite there yet, but definitely like the direction that we're headed and if we can continue to recruit well, I think we can get there.

Q. How helpful has it been to have guys like Kam Butler, Chico (Bennett) and Jahmeer (Carter) to lead those guys to get them ready for when they depart?

TONY ELLIOTT: Going back to the question about TT (Terrell Jones), I think TT is where he is he gets to see Jahmeer (Carter) every single day we're going to hound it hold him accountable but ultimately when he has a peer seeing doing it the right way makes a very strong impact.

Q. Tomorrow is the second anniversary of the shooting. I think looking at your roster, half the guys on the team were elsewhere in November 2022. Is it challenging to keep the legacies of Lavel (Davis Jr.), Devin (Chandler), D'Sean (Perry) alive when some of these guys weren't here when they were here and there will be fewer going forward.

TONY ELLIOTT: I would say challenging, no, because again, as long as I'm the head coach it's always going to be a part of who we are, kind of the fabric of this staff and this program since the staff took over.

The sensitivity, right, is probably the area where you just gotta pay the most attention because again a lot of those guys came here knowing but they didn't experience it.

So you've got to be sensitive to the fact that they don't quite fully know. They want to embrace, and so you've got to respect kind of their boundaries. And at the same time, too, you want to also be mindful of the ones that were here kind of where they're at because not everybody is in the same space, right? I know

the process I've had to go through personally just to start the healing process and still in the healing process from that and not everybody's in the same space.

So challenging from the standpoint of it's always going to be a part of what we do. There's never going to be a time where we're not conscious of it, aware of it, but at the same time, too, in order for us to kind of progress forward, we have to kind of create a normal here and being sensitive that not everybody was a part of that.

But like tomorrow is going to be tough for many. And rightfully so. Probably tougher -- I wouldn't say probably. It's going to be tougher for the Davis family, the Chandler family and the Perry family. But I want to embrace their hardship based off of what I believe and what my faith tells me that I have a responsibility to endure with everybody that I'm associated with and connected with.

So we're going to endure tomorrow, but then also I have an opportunity, too, to bring joy, and the way I do that is come to work every single day, be the best version of myself, and then help this football team be the best version of itself because I'm pretty sure that all three of those families felt a lot of joy on last Saturday night seeing the Cavaliers go play well and walk away with victory.

So we'll definitely have the families in our thoughts and prayers and not just them, it's going to be a hard day for Mike (Hollins) because Mike's still here. It's going to be a hard day for Marlee (Morgan). All of the students that were on the bus. This community. I mean, it's going to be a hard day.

But what I will say is we can have confidence knowing that, man, we've endured. Man, we've shown what our character is all about, and now back when I said we were going to turn tragedy into triumph, we're kind of coming out of that stage to where now we can walk with some confidence and go bring about the triumph and

the beauty that was intended to come out of such a hard and difficult situation.

Q. Do you have a secret sauce for coming out of bye week, you're undefeated -- I know you talk about resetting. The extra preparation time, your research and film study and you pick up stuff that you don't normally get to do?

TONY ELLIOTT: It's a combination of things. It starts with you're able to take a deep breath and kind of step back and evaluate yourself for the first couple of days of the bye week. So you get to pick up on tendencies that while you're in the hustle and the bustle you may overlook, not overlook, but you get going, and you step back evaluate yourself and I think you get to develop some of your younger guys in practice.

The biggest thing that I think has helped us is it allows us to kind of get guys back. It allows us to have guys with a little bit of extra time to rest and in the North Carolina game we know what the situation with the offensive line was and the bye week gave us a chance to get all those guys back.

I think the break has always been good for these young men. They go so hard with a combination of what they have to balance, the academics and the athletics here, that weekend, and I err on the side of giving them time.

I want them to be able to refresh. And I think the bye week this week, this past bye week was big for us from a recommittal standpoint. I think when I look at how the season has progressed, the summer we were in the building. We were always together. Fall camp, we were always together. Then you get into the grind of the season, they have their lives back a little bit. So you don't quite have as much time together organically. You have to force it. And I think that's what helped us is we had a little bit more time to just be together and recommit, and man, look at each other in the eye and say how do we want to finish and what are we really doing here.

So I don't know if there's a secret sauce, but I think the time helps our bodies and then it just gives us a chance to get a good game plan together and then also have a better idea of what we're tipping and giving away to the opposing teams.

Q. What made you feel like you could run the ball so successfully against a team that loads the box as much as is did, you ran the ball like 42 times?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, so I think going into the game, what we said we had to do was we had to establish the run. And you have to be honest and to say that you're just going to go in there and pound it down the throat versus Pitt, that's not realistic because of their structure.

But what I think happened is the guys committed to the fundamentals. There was great chemistry with the guys up front. The backs played really hard and decisive and they turned some plays that were blocked for three and four, they turned them into seven or eight because they broke some tackles. So I think as the game went on, you started to see that the mindset of the guys was geared towards having success, running the ball.

And then credit to Pitt. Some of the things that we had an idea of trying to do in the game plan, they kind of took away. They started getting their ends way up the field, disrupting the quick passes to the perimeter.

We missed a couple but I thought they had a solid game plan. And so once we saw that we were having success running the ball, we stuck with it.

I told the guys this, but I thought they did a good job of was the second down run game. Because we got into some second and longs, second and nines and second and tens and next thing you know there was five or six that got us back on track. Got half the yardage back then we were in a much more manageable third

down situation. So I think it was more we had a plan. We needed to be effective and efficient to keep them honest so that we could set up some of the play-action, but I think the guys took ownership of the line of scrimmage. Created some running games and the backs ran hard through arm tackles and broke plays for us. And the quarterback did a really good job when we asked him to run the ball.

We knew that in that situation, with that structure, because of the extra hats, you're going to have to run your quarterback just to pick up to balance out the numbers a little bit.

Q. Antonio Clary came and had to go out, now he's no longer on the depth chart. What's his status?

TONY ELLIOTT: That was a challenging situation for me because we knew that he had a partial tear. And he wanted to try and play, which the doctors felt like and the medical staff felt like if he could rehab and get his knee to a position where the swelling was gone, we could give it a shot.

Just a testament to him. He wanted to go out like a soldier does on the battlefield. It was hard for me because, like, I didn't want it to happen in practice. I wanted it to happen in a game but I didn't want to have to have him go through the pain but that's just the kind of football player he is. That's the kind of teammate he is. He was adamant, no, coach, I'm going to rehab and get myself.

And he's been asking and champing at the bit for an opportunity to do it. Then we had a conversation and I said, man, this is tough on me because I value, I appreciate you. I don't want you to have to deal with anything more than what you're dealing with this injury. He was like, no, Coach, I have to go this way.

He was going to play as long as he could play. It just so happened in two plays he felt a little bit of a buckle. He knew like, okay, this is where it

is. So he'll have to have surgery. He'll be done for the year.

But I've just got a ton of appreciation for a teammate. And I've been around other guys that have played on partially torn ACLs. But he did. He did what he felt was the right thing to do for the team, knowing that in the end he was going to have to get it fixed, he was he wanted to try and go.

I love that kid. I love everything he stands for. You don't see that much nowadays, to be honest with you, a soldier wanting to go out on the battlefield. It was tough for me, too. I was kind of reluctant to do it, but once we felt like medically there wasn't much more that can be done or we knew we were going to have to fix it but he could have played if it stayed intact, but he'll be done for the year.

Q. Any update on James Jackson?

TONY ELLIOTT: James is back rolling in practice. Kind of in a limited capacity this week. But I'm hopeful. I'm more hopeful than I've ever been. This is the first week where he's been able to make it through back-to-back days from a practice standpoint. So we're hopeful that we'll get James in some capacity. He's been out for a couple of weeks. So conditioning-wise, I'm not sure how many snaps but we are hopeful we'll get snaps out of him this weekend.

Q. Noah Josey probably got talked about more after his one game at center than he has in his eight games at left guard. What kind of year has he been having?

TONY ELLIOTT: It's been steady. He's been really, really steady. Shows up every week. Does his job. It's almost like, okay, you don't worry about what's going on at left guard. You feel really good that he's going to take care of business. He's been leading, too. That's been the awesome thing is he's really embraced his role as a leader keeping those guys focused. Keeping those guys going.

And him and Brian (Stevens) are the two that I go to up front. We're like, you've got to have guys ready to roll. He said don't worry about it, Coach, I've got it. He's having a really good year.

Q. What you remember about recruiting Anthony Britton? He wasn't a highly recruited player, even though he played at Lake Taylor High School that has produced a lot of players over the years. What do you remember about recruiting him why did you take a chance on him?

TONY ELLIOTT: First, he's kind of -- you've got to be careful not to judge the book by the cover. He's a big guy. Real big guy. He's like man he can be a little bit intimidating when you walk up on him and he starts to talk. Man, this guy right here, he's a big Teddy bear, so to speak.

That's what you want. You want guys that are good human beings and gentlemen off the field but we also saw on tape and watching him in practice that he had what you need to have as a football player to be able to flip that switch. And then I think what we saw was the raw materials. Knowing that it was going to be a little bit of time to develop but you saw the power. You saw the change of direction and you just felt like you had a whole lot of really, really good raw materials to work with and not a whole lot of bad habits to have to break. There was just a ton of upside with Britt. And then getting to meet his family. You fell in love with the quality of family he's coming from. You knew coming out of Lake Taylor was going to be tough. You were going to be able to coach them because they get coached well and hard down there.

We just felt like it was a good fit all the way around.

Q. Has he increased his level of understanding the last few weeks? Seems like he's more in the backfield he's doing some things maybe a little bit better the last few weeks.

TONY ELLIOTT: Right. He's being forced into taking more reps with – Jah (Jahmeer Carter) was down for a few plays last week and now that Hammond is out. So he's kind of been forced in there. And then (Mike) Diatta battling a ankle for a while. You're seeing the light come on. But you anticipate that the more reps you get. It's one thing in practice, but when you're able to get reps in the game, right, it helps the process because now you truly understand the implications in the game because you try everything you possibly can to recreate it in a practice but it's not quite like the game.

With each game rep -- and he's a smart young man. And the great thing he's been around Jah. And I mentioned it watching film with the defense yesterday. When you watch Jah Carter practice, even in our slower periods where we walk through, Jah's pad level is down. He's really, really intentional with his hand placement. He's working his disengage even though he's not engaged in a block you see him work his hands to get off a block. Now you're seeing (Anthony) Britton mimic that because he's seeing this guy plays at a high level this is what he does from the start of practice to finish of practice. That's what you're starting to see Britton do. So his walk through his pad level is a lot lower. His hand placement is more precise. I think that is translating on the field as well.

Q. I talked to AC (Anthony Colandrea) about it. There's a couple of plays this season where he's running towards out of bounds and he could throw the ball away. Have you talked to him about that? He said he knows what he has to do.

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, because again I feel bad for the OL, right? We come out of the game. You see six sacks on the sheet and realistically it was one, and not even one. That was more on us as coaches. We put him in a tough situation. It's second and 25. We've got a draw called out of empty, knowing there's going to be some twist game. But the other five was literally what you're saying.

And that's kind of that Catch-22, right, because man he makes a lot of plays escaping from the pocket where he's got to continue to grow is knowing that, okay, having the awareness of where I am. If I can get positive yards, get positive yards. But if it's close, throw it away and don't risk the sack or the lost yards. Not so much the sack, that's oh a piece of paper. We can come in here and all say oh well that wasn't on the offensive line. We've got to coach the quarterback to get rid of the ball. So we talked about it, but it wasn't a huge deal because, again, I want him to extend plays. And we're going to need him in a game like this to extend plays. He just has to get a better feel for kind of where the sticks are, where he is, and if he can get positive yards, get positive yards. If not, throw it away and just so that the sack doesn't show up on paper or we take negative yards.

Q. I know guys are banged up, (Kam) Robinson had to leave early for some treatment at halftime. Where is he health-wise and how much is he battling?

TONY ELLIOTT: So he's a warrior. He's another one that's going to put his body on the line and he got banged up a little bit. Returned to the game. He's back in practice today. So he'll be good to go. The knee is feeling better. You notice the knee brace is gone. So the knee is healthy. Now it's just working through the bumps and bruises of playing the linebacker position.

One, it's a violent position by nature. Two, he's an explosive, violent guy and he plays reckless, too. The sack he got, come on, he gets cut by a running back and dives on the running back, grabs the guy by the legs. Again, we've got a lot of guys like that that are just battling and scrapping and putting their body on the line, but he'll be good to go.

Q. Was it a knee that he came out for?

TONY ELLIOTT: No, no, it was upper body.

Q. Brilliant play call by Des (Kitchings) on that fake quarterback draw down there. How important is it this time of year to throw in wrinkles like that?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, you've got to. You've got to have all of your opportunities. And you've got to practice them and make sure the guys are prepared and it just so happened that -- because I was over there and I didn't realize that they stopped. I thought we got stopped. I was over there like in the ref's area because I felt the defensive helmets were offsides. I was over here asking for the offsides, then we snapped it and then they reset it because the officials weren't ready.

So it's very similar to -- we had that wrinkle like we did up at Louisville, where we handed it to (Jack) Griesse in that package. I think you have to keep people honest. Pretty much every play you design you're going to have some type of wrinkle off of it. It's just being able to get the desired look at the right time to get it called and because we had snapped the ball on the quarterback sneak and we felt he were going to get a similar look, it was the right time for that call.

Q. (Chris) Tyree had a couple of those plays for you guys. Is he really coming into a zone?

TONY ELLIOTT: I believe so. I think he feels healthy. Before he was battling kind of an ab strain. I think he feels healthy and confident, and he's had some success. So I think that's going to be even more so down the stretch. And we had some things that we wanted to get to in the passing game, but again it was going to require us from a protection standpoint to do some things and then the way that they were playing, it wasn't the right protection on those deals so we didn't get to them.

But I anticipate that going forward you'll see him involved in the game plan more.

Q. Just a bigger picture on the running game. Both Xavier Brown and Kobe Pace have 400 yards rushing this season, Virginia hasn't had a running back with 400 yards rushing since 2019.

TONY ELLIOTT: Oh, wow.

Q. How do you feel about the running back room coming together and establishing the run? You both have been saying you wanted this.

TONY ELLIOTT: That's right. We definitely want to run the ball. Assess the tempo. I think one of the biggest things in the last game was the drive-in the fourth quarter where we went 18 plays in like eight minutes. Ran off the clock. I know we didn't finish with a touchdown but nonetheless, we kind of controlled it. If you can efficiently run the ball and again it doesn't have to be big play after big play after big play but if you stay ahead of the chains and now you can kind of control the pace of play, but if you can't run the ball, it's very, very difficult.

I like the way they complement each other. I think X is capable of taking it the distance at any time with his explosiveness, but I think what it's also done it's kind of helped Kobe's confidence, too, and Kobe's running hard, running tough and kind of doing the dirty work, so to speak. So I think we've got a good complement there. I would like to get more of those guys going because again we've got three more games. They're all going to be physical, tough, tough games and you want to have multiple guys that can go in there and function.

But I like the way those guys are complementing each other and we are going to need it because this bunch here is number two in the country versus the pass. 41st in country versus the run. Number seven nationally. Defensively we'll have to be able to generate some offense in the run game to give ourselves a chance to stay ahead of the chains and then capitalize on the drives that we have going.

Q. This game Saturday's game features two of the better safeties in the country in Xavier Watts and Jonas (Sanker). Do you see similarities in their game? How do you look at those two players and evaluate them?

TONY ELLIOTT: They're both extremely fast. Extremely intelligent. They play downhill when they need to, so it's going to be fun to kind of watch the match-up, not necessarily focusing on that match-up but you get to see those two guys high-caliber players go against each other.