

**University of Virginia Football Media
Conference
Tuesday, Nov. 19, 2024
Head Coach Tony Elliott
Press Conference**

Q. I don't remember the details of everything that happened in December 2021, but were you involved at all in the game prep for the game against SMU that never happened?

TONY ELLIOTT: No, actually I wasn't. I was around, so I was here, and obviously I think Bronco (Mendenhall) had agreed to coach the bowl game. He allowed me to stay around up until a certain point. So I was just observing practice from a distance. You know, wasn't involved in any meetings.

The only meetings that took place were just individual meetings that I had with Coach Mendenhall. Then there was a certain point that he didn't feel as comfortable with me around, so that's when I took off and went home and then got the call that the game was going to be canceled.

Q. I was talking to another UVA head coach recently, and she said that I guess at a head coaches meeting when you all were talking about ACC expansion, you said something along the lines of, "Don't sleep on SMU."

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, I did.

Q. You didn't think they would be as good. They've been good across the board, but in football as good as they turned out to be?

TONY ELLIOTT: Watching from afar you could see that they were having success. I know firsthand Coach (Chad) Morris went down there, left Clemson when we were together to go to SMU. I knew Coach (Rhett) Lashlee and his background, his pedigree. Then also, too, we all know that they like football and have resources to be able to commit.

So that comment was more just kind of prepping everybody to understand that SMU even though it's moving up, right, there's a commitment to football within their program, and it's been there over the years. Now they have an opportunity to level the playing field with everybody else.

I think you're seeing the byproduct of the investment that they've made in football.

Q. After the game against Notre Dame you said you were going to evaluate how Tony Muskett did after watching film and see what steps forward. How did you evaluate him and his performance, and what are kind of the steps forward?

TONY ELLIOTT: I thought he did a good job, as he has done all year. He's prepared considering the circumstances. Each week he's owned the game plan and been ready to go. He gave us a spark. He found a way to help us move the ball and score some points.

Just evaluating it, you look at it, AC (Anthony Colandrea) had a bad really three minutes in the second quarter. He had three throws I know he wants back all trying to make plays. So just after evaluating it, did feel like obviously it opened up opportunity for Tony to have a chance to take a few more first team reps.

I want to see how AC is going to respond. So far the week has gone well. They both have taken reps with the first team and just been going about owning the game plan.

If we were to play today, obviously AC would run out there first. The week before he went up and won a road game and made some big plays in a top-25 matchup. He's put us in position to win a lot of football games.

I think that, yes, he wants three throws back, but I still think that he reserves the right to have an opportunity to show how he is going to

respond. So far he's done a really good job of things that we've asked him to do.

Also, too, I think Tony has warranted more opportunity to prepare himself and to go compete for the job. So we're still looking at everything throughout the course of the week, but up to this point it's been good to see both of them go out and respond and do a good job getting the plan down.

Q. Those guys have had a good relationship kind of throughout this whole thing over the last two years. How do you think that influences how they competed, how they've played, and how they support each other when there's only one quarterback spot?

TONY ELLIOTT: It's tough because it's the quarterback position. You try to manage them the same, but a little bit different, right, because their responsibilities are different than anybody else on the team both on and off the field. But to see those guys, I think they made each other better, to be honest with you. Their relationship has made each other better. It's helped them to improve in the areas. That's what you need. You need somebody to make you better. So I just have been really proud of the relationship that they've been able to establish and how they've been able to maintain it and block out the noise. Hopefully they'll continue to do that.

Unfortunately they're a lot like coaches in that they get a whole lot of credit when things go well, and they get all the blame, right? So learning how to manage that is difficult. So you've got to have a tight circle, and it's great that when you are able to have a tight circle with somebody else that understands firsthand what you're going through.

So super proud of those guys, and I think that that's what's allowed them to get to this point, and we're going to need them. As I said from the beginning, we need both these quarterbacks to be able to go win.

I believe in both of them because both of them have proven the ability to win football games for us. It's a delicate situation because it is the quarterback position, and generally you only have one guy in the game throughout the course of the game.

It's also such a position about rhythm and timing. So that's part of the reason why we wanted Tony to get more first team reps working with the wideouts and the offensive line because he's got to be ready. If AC doesn't respond the right way, he's got to be ready to roll.

That's difficult if you're not getting the same I guess speed of practice. Just super proud of them. I've learned a lot just watching those two, how it's supposed to be done, and I've said that from the beginning. I'll continue to say that and just encourage those guys to keep leaning on each other because it's brought out the best in each one of them.

Q. Not always the case, but Tony Muskett has done a nice job of staying engaged, staying ready, and being positive. How impressed are you with his approach and how ready he is week in, week out?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, it's what you would wish every football player would have, just that approach to not necessarily focus on the circumstance, but focus on what you can control and what you can control is your preparation.

It's the attitude that you walk in the building with every single day. It's the attention to detail that you have in your meetings. Then it's also the investment away from the field to have yourself ready to play. He's been a great leader for us and even from a difficult position as technically the backup quarterback.

You might even feel like it's hard to lead from that position, but the way that he's gone about his business, you can't help but notice and

watch him. I think it inspires other guys, and that's the key. That's very difficult.

That was part of the message to the guys today is doing difficult creates natural separation. I got that from a video and shared that video with them.

That's why he is able to kind of separate himself because he's willing to do what's difficult, especially in a day and age where there's a lot of pressure to kind of take the easy route.

Q. With AC's (Anthony Colandrea) interceptions, and I'm thinking about the Maryland one where he's on the sideline, could have run out of bounds and tries to pop it over the top, and then you mentioned this past weekend trying to make plays. Is that the common theme, or are there other things you are seeing, commonality?

TONY ELLIOTT: I think you got to look at each one. I also saw after the Maryland game there were a couple of instances where he didn't decide to throw the ball. As we sit down and look at film.

In particular in the Pittsburgh game there was one where he's rolling to his right, and one of the receivers pops open way down field. I asked him, Well, why didn't you throw that ball? He said, Coach, I wanted to, but I was thinking about the situation, so I ran out of bounds. I can't remember if he threw it away or ran out of bounds, but he didn't take that shot.

I think what happened in the game this past week is we're 7-7. We finally get some good field position, and we're driving. Kobe (Pace) pops a 14-yard run and a fumble. We had an opportunity to go 7-7. Well, then that turns into 14-0. Now you've got a young man out there that says, I want to go make a play for my team.

The first one I know he probably wants that one back. He tried to force it with the safety sitting on the hash. The other one he's trying to make

that throw to X (Xavier Brown). Really I'm jumping on X too. It's, like, X, don't run back inside. When we coach our scramble drill, we get to the sideline, stay friendly with the quarterback, and don't go back inside to even entice him to throw that ball. That's probably the one there.

Then the last one, again, we're in two-minute situation. He's trying to force the ball down the field. I think it was more of a situation of you have a young man in a game that he wants to make his impact.

The team is kind of out of sorts a little bit, and he's trying to go make a play. I think you look at each interception individually, but I saw progress from the Maryland game because we talked about that, and there were some instances where I saw the progress where he didn't force the ball and threw it away or made the required play.

That one with X, I think he was just pressing a little bit because he wanted to go make a play for his teammates. You just have to stay disciplined. It's with every player, right? It's all across the board.

When you look at the film, there's going to be situations where guys know exactly what they're supposed to do. It's just not quite -- that's football. That's why it's so hard because for 75, 80 plays, seven seconds at a time you just have to focus, and you have to focus completely on your job, your technique, your pad level. That's why you have guys that make a plan, don't make a play, right, because that momentary lapse, and it's happening fast. Sometimes you make a decision that it feels right in the moment, and then once you are out of the moment, you are like, yeah, that's probably not the right decision.

Q. You were around when back in 2021 when the announcement came out. What do you remember about kind of that game being canceled and talking to players after that after

having that postseason opportunity taken away?

TONY ELLIOTT: I don't remember a whole lot afterwards, but I do remember the guys were practicing. Seemed like they were excited to get ready to go play. I think I went home if I remember correctly. Was it right after Christmas? The game was right after Christmas, right?

So I think I went home maybe on the 21st or something, and I was at home a couple of days with my family. Then essentially got the call that, Hey, the game has been canceled, the team is yours. I was like, Whoa, because I was planning on flying to was it New York or Boston? Boston. I was planning on flying to Boston and just kind of being around in the background just observing. That was the plan.

Then it was like, Okay, the team is yours. I was, like, Oh, I have to accelerate the process because I thought I had about another week and a half to kind of observe and make some more decisions. Then it just was turned over to me.

We haven't really talked about it in detail as much as we've just talked about how, man, it's time. It's time for us to get back to the postseason. We've missed out for too many years around here, and we need to make the floor the postseason and then start building towards raising the ceiling. So we haven't really talked in particular about the last matchup versus SMU.

Q. A lot of injuries last game. Any updates on (Corey) Thomas and James Jackson?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, I had to make some notes because I don't want to forget them all, but James Jackson will be out. He was nursing a foot and then gave us everything he had and about 22 plays in he couldn't deal with the pain anymore.

You know, Robinson, Kam, will be probable still. He's been battling that shoulder all year. We knew that it was going to be week-to-week.

Corey Thomas will be out this week. (Dante) Hawthorne will be out. Lost both of those in the game due to head injuries.

Jah (Jahmeer Carter) should be good to go. Trell (Harris) will be back in practice. He's been doing a lot of running and conditioning on the side. He should be back in practice tomorrow, but I don't think he'll be ready for this week. So I said Trell will be down for another week.

Then, unfortunately, in practice today Jaden Gibson went down with a hamstring, so I don't know what his status will be for this weekend.

Q. You have had a lot of quarterbacks in your career. When you have a quarterback who is having a slump like AC (Anthony Colandrea) is, seven interceptions in the last three games, what do you do as a coach to try to help him?

TONY ELLIOTT: You have to help him stay focused on his fundamentals. Keep encouraging him. Help him to just focus on taking ownership and what he can correct and then he just has to keep playing.

I go back to 2016. You know, DW (Deshaun Watson) threw 17 interceptions in that season. He just throws a little rough spell, and I think Trevor's (Lawrence) sophomore year kind of there was a little bit of a stretch. You just have to keep playing and keep working.

The difference I think in this situation is I guess the separation between those guys and the next guy was a lot larger than it is right now. So this is a much closer gap between the two quarterbacks that we've got.

Also, too, just keep on responding, encouraging him to block out the noise. Don't listen to anybody on the outside. Just go back to work and the basics. Last thing you want to do is just

scare him and have him fearful and indecisive, right? I know we have seven. One of those I felt like the ball should have been caught, so that was going to be a couple of situations where it's not necessarily on him, but he has to take ownership of the ones he can control and go back to work and just keep playing ball.

Like a baseball guy, you just have to swing yourself out of a slump, but don't let yourself go into a further slump by just over-analyzing. Get enough critical analysis and then focus on what you can control, your fundamentals, and go play ball.

Q. SMU leads the league on rush defense. What makes their front seven so good?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, they're very active. They're deep on the defensive line, so they roll in a lot of guys. They stay fresh. Their backers are athletic. They flow fast.

They can change up structures if they need to, but they play gap sound and kind of get extra hats to the box to help support it in their eight-man structure. They can have guys on the perimeter that can support it very quickly, but then also take away some of your run outlets. They just do a good job. They are playing fast. They are playing physical. They're playing as a unit. They have good depth, and then they a lot of speed too.

Q. This stretch you guys are in playing rank the opponents one week after the next, what have you learned about your program so far?

TONY ELLIOTT: I think what we've learned is, one, the importance of depth and staying healthy, right? I think when we're healthy and we're at full strength on our top-tier guys, you saw us battle. You saw us hang for a while with Clemson and then even we spotted Notre Dame seven points from the jump.

Really if Kam (Robinson) doesn't have that personal foul, it's three points, right? So they held.

Then defense had, what, was it four straight three and outs? Yeah, four straight three and outs. Then offensively if we could have got in rhythm, and then even with that we have the chance to be second quarter 7-7. When we're healthy, which is a note to us as coaches to make sure from a practice standpoint and then also just everything involved in helping these guys' bodies at this stage of the game.

We're in November where it's hard for everybody, so we have to stay healthy. We can compete. We just can't beat ourselves. We can't lose to Virginia. That's something we've been talking about, and I think when you look at it in those -- Pitt we were able to not lose to Virginia and find a way to win. Clemson we're hanging in there. Then, you know what, we start losing to Virginia in my opinion and give up a sack, we dropped a snap. We have some plays that we can control that we don't make that obviously creates momentum for teams like Clemson and Notre Dame.

Those are teams that they know how to capitalize on other people's mistakes. That's what they're waiting on. They're waiting on you to make a mistake, and they're going to pounce on you. We've made our fair share of mistakes. So if we're healthy and we're not losing to ourselves, man, we can go compete and then big picture for the future we really have to attack at developing our depth. Our depth right now is we feel we're encouraged by the guys that we have. They need experience.

Unfortunately, the experience that they're being thrown into is the game is moving really fast when you are playing against teams like Clemson and Notre Dame and SMU with the speed that they have.

Q. Injuries are part of the game and your team is not the only team banged up at this time of

year, does the staff, after the season, kind of go back and look at each one to see if any of these injuries could have been prevented or measures you could take to stay healthy? This was an issue last year too.

TONY ELLIOTT: Great question. You know what I shared with the team, the message kind of this week is obviously we want to be different, so we have to do so different, and we have to finish, right?

Also, November is difficult because of the wear and tear on your body. So I think the last bye week came at a good time. However, you're not going to have a bye week every week, so you are going to get back in the rhythm of playing.

We're analyzing all of our injuries now from the sports med standpoint, from the strength and conditioning standpoint, from a nutrition standpoint. Also challenging the guys to make sure that they're staying committed to the things that they did early in the season.

Life is picking up for them. You have the holidays. You have all this kind of stuff going on. School is in full swing. They're coming towards the end of that too. Academics are picking up. Are they sleeping the way they're supposed to sleep? Are they continuing to eat? Are they hydrating the way they're supposed to hydrate? All of that matters. We're looking at it now. The things that happen in the game, those are hard to prevent, but we do analyze each play to see, okay, fundamentally especially with your head, your head injuries, like what can we teach better from a tackling standpoint to make sure that when we do go out to practice, that we're teaching the proper fundamental from a strike and a tackle standpoint.

We're constantly evaluating it. In my experience it seems like kind of each year it's a different thing. Last year we had the patellas. We had the patellas. This year it's kind of a mixture, but we've had more hips this year. Then we had two ACLs, which we haven't had in a while.

We are evaluating everything that we can, and we'll do another thorough deep dive program-wide once the season is over to try and stay healthy. One thing that I have learned too is once you get later in the season, we've cut back practices a little bit, just the amount of time to limit the exposure, spend more time from a meeting standpoint as opposed to the actual physical repetitions on the field.

Q. With some of the injuries in the linebacker room you have to turn to more inexperienced, Landon Danley who is getting more reps now and also Dorian (Jones) who is more assimilating to the program, what have you seen from those two?

TONY ELLIOTT: Dorian (Jones) was a guy that when we went after him in the portal, he had a ton of experience. Just took him a little bit of time conditioning-wise to get into the shape that we needed him to get into and an understanding of the system.

He's a guy that has a knack for the ball. He's great in the box. He can diagnose plays quickly, and he can strike. That's what you like about -- and he's an experienced guy too. He's played football. So he can kind of make adjustments on the field.

Whereas where Landon (Danley) everything is happening fast. He was more of a safety offensive guy in high school. He was out last year with a shoulder too, so he missed a lot of reps. Everything is happening fast, but what you like about -- we call him Lando. What you like about Lando is he is athletic, he's fast, he's not afraid to strike.

His body is starting to catch up. He's probably about 215 pounds now. He is playing with a cast on his hand, which limits him a little bit at the point of contact at times, but each rep you see him becoming more and more comfortable.

What you like is he's got a ton of upside. I think he's got the athleticism in the range that we're

looking for at the position. He's just going to have to get baptized by fire on the field and grow up pretty quickly come Saturday.

Q. Two guys with injuries, Terrell Jones and Blake Steen. Are they ok to play this week?

TONY ELLIOTT: So TT (Terrell Jones) has been practicing all week, so he should be good. Blake (Steen) should be back in practice tomorrow. So we anticipate that both of those guys will be good to go once we get to Saturday.

Q. You mentioned that it's kind of a balancing act with that quarterback position. How do you weigh the future of the program, the offseason next year as opposed to what gives you the best chance to win on a specific Saturday. Thinking about AC's (Anthony Colandrea) mental well-being.

TONY ELLIOTT: To be honest with you the future really hasn't factored into the decisions that I've made this week. I'm really focusing on trying to figure out how to win Saturday for these seniors and find a way to go out to Blacksburg to win next week.

With the way college football is nowadays and the transfer portal and all of that, you'll fry a bunch of brain cells trying to think about what it's going to look like in the future. I believe if I'm fair and just and which I believe that a decision and how we proceeded this week is fair, you know, based off of kind of the body of work and where we are, that's really been the focus. Then once the season is over, we'll focus more on the future.

I don't want AC (Anthony Colandrea) to be thinking about next year. I need him to kind of get back going. Again, you can see how it's not far because up at Pittsburgh, man, he made some plays. He made some plays. The one interception, it hits the receiver in the hands, right? So that ball has to be caught.

The other one, man, it was a great play by that guy, but you know what, now that we look at it, schematically we probably could have probably helped him out. We brought the running back back across the formation, which traveled a guy back across with him, and it brought the linebacker into the throwing lane.

Again, he's just trying to rip a ball down the middle and Malachi (Fields) was open. He didn't see No. 9 coming from the back side.

So really it's been focusing on the right now and not necessarily thinking about the future because, heck, I don't know what the future is going to look like next year anyway. It's going to change, but really just trying to do what I believe is fair.

I did the same thing for Tony (Muskett) in my opinion last year, right, because there was always the, Well, we got AC right there. If he misses a throw, put AC in. I love my backup quarterbacks just like everybody likes my backup quarterback, but I love my starter too.

I have to be fair and just, and what I believe, okay, you had one quarter of football, but he's also put us in position to win games. We take the lead in the fourth quarter versus Louisville with a chance to win it with AC at quarterback.

Those are more of the things that I'm factoring when I'm looking at where we are right now, and then obviously the outcome of this game gives me more information to make a decision based off of how we move forward after this game, but right now I'm just operating off of what I got right in front of me.

Q. I talked to Coach Pry (Virginia Tech) before coming here. He said they used the open date to meet with some players that could have decisions in the offseason, thinking about the portal. Is that something you have done, had communication with...

TONY ELLIOTT: Not yet, but it's something that will be -- unfortunately, it is something that will

be part of this business model going forward that you're going to have to have conversations. There's going to be some tough conversations, right? Some really, really tough conversation that really haven't been a part of college football in the past. It's going to be tough.

I don't know if everybody is really kind of processing that yet. Especially when what's projected to happen if it happens, you know, there's going to be some young men that haven't done anything wrong that are no longer going to have an opportunity just because of potential roster numbers.

Then you're also looking at guys that got potential to go to the NFL where now they've got to look at do I play another year of college football from a financial standpoint, or do I go to the NFL?

I didn't want to start too early with the guys because, man, we're trying to finish. We're trying to get to the postseason. That's the focus. Then I believe we'll have time once the season is over before those guys got to make decision, but we are prepping to start having some more tough conversations down within the next three weeks or so.

Q. Just, again, with the quarterbacks, how late in the week do you feel comfortable making that decision? I guess, when do you kind of see that decision?

TONY ELLIOTT: I feel comfortable going all the way up until game time if need be, if it gets to that point, but like I said, if we played today based off the body of work, I believe that AC (Anthony Colandrea) deserves an opportunity to respond.

It's tough because we're talking about the quarterback position, but you know, I think about the right guard position between Ty Furnish and Ugonna (Nnanna). They split reps every single day in practice, and it goes all the way up until game time.

X (Xavier) Brown and Kobe (Pace) split first team reps in practice, and there are several other guys in several other positions that I could call out.

For me it's let's finish the workweek. We have tomorrow. We have Thursday. Then Friday is a prep day if we need to go, but right now, like I said, if we were to run out there, right now AC would have an opportunity to go out there and show everybody how he can respond because, again, there haven't been very many top-25 road wins.

He's coming off of that, really three minutes of bad football right there in the end of the second quarter, which warranted Tony an opportunity to go in there and finish out the second half. But also, too, I look at his body of work. He's put us in position to win a lot of football games. Unfortunately we came up short in a couple, but we also have won a couple because of the position he put us in.

That's kind of where we are. If that changes, then I'll be ready to make that decision at the end of the week.

Q. You have your Senior Day. What are your thoughts dealing with guys like Jonas (Sanker) and Malachi (Fields) and Chico (Bennett Jr.) that were here when you got here and stuck through the coaching change, through tragedy and what do they mean to you?

TONY ELLIOTT: Man, I'm extremely grateful, and I mentioned this to the staff that I know that I came in the door with a big dream and a big vision, and I still have that big dream and that big vision.

But also, too, what I have learned is that the good Lord, he may have a different route to get to that vision than maybe what I had, but it's the right route if that makes sense.

I think about those guys, and they had an opportunity, more than one, to leave. Those

guys that you just mentioned have really helped us to solidify the culture that we have got in place right now.

Jonas (Sanker) has been huge, right? Same with Chico (Bennett Jr.) and Jah (Jahmeer Carter). Those guys that have been here the entire time. Regardless of what maybe the win-loss record is, these young men always have a special place in my heart just because of the character that they've exhibited and how they've helped me grow as a human being and how they've helped the staff grow, how they've helped us bring this team back together to be able to work daily on turning that tragedy into triumph.

So they're going to be a big part, and we wouldn't be where we are. Currently we wouldn't be here without those guys making the decision to stay and fight and battle for what they believe in.

They believe in the University of Virginia. They believe in this athletic department. They believe in this community. They believe in this football program, and that says a lot. That says a lot especially with young people this day and age. That says a lot about who they are and what their character is.

Q. What do you think it means to them to reach a bowl game and hit that benchmark?

TONY ELLIOTT: I don't think they can even really put it into context right now. That would be one of those 5, 10, 15 years down the road type of deals where they'll look back and say, Man, I was really a part of that. Right?

When all of the glory of football fades and you're an old man and you're reminiscing, you'll see the value that you had and then what will happen is you'll hear it from your teammates because your teammates will express to you just how grateful they were to you for what you established.

Then they'll also be able to have a front row seat to see all of the -- all of maybe the things they aspired to do, but somebody else is doing them, but they wouldn't be doing it without their investments. So those individuals will be standing on the shoulders of what I consider giants. Those guys will be giants within the program because they laid the foundation. There's nobody that wants a win in Scott Stadium more than I do for them for the senior class. It's not just the high-profile guys.

Everyone is going to talk about the high-profile guys, but man, you got a guy like Joe Holland. Nobody is mentioning Joe Holland today except for me, but Joe Holland is a big part of what we do because we can't get better on the practice field without Joe Holland.

Then Joe Holland kind of has got his signature on this building. He was working on the project that actually with the contract crew that was actually building this building. There's going to be a lot of those guys.

So it's going to be a special moment pregame. Man, I'm very, very eager and hopeful to be able to send those guys out the right way at the end of the game.