

**University of Virginia Football Media
Conference**

Tuesday, Nov. 26, 2024

**Head Coach Tony Elliott
Press Conference**

Q. Second year with this game. Has the way you framed the rivalry to your players changed this year? And if so, how?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yes, it has. Obviously the first season we weren't able to participate. We know the circumstances around that one. Last year was the first opportunity for me to experience it.

I've framed it a different way. I'm leaning on my experience in rivalries in the approach and understanding the big picture, what it means. It's not just a game that you play because it's the last one on the schedule.

It's one that's a season of itself. It lasts for 365 days. It means a lot to a lot of people. It's not -- we don't have a choice. We got a responsibility.

So definitely have framed it now that I've experienced it and I think knowing the history behind it, there is a lot of things that we have to change collectively in order to get it back to being a rivalry where it's competitive.

And challenging this football team to be different, to be the ones that start the change to make it more competitive.

Q. What's Kobe Pace's status going into Saturday? Some of the injuries at that position, any chance you would consider using Chris Tyree if you have to?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, start backwards and work to the first part of that question. With Chris Tyree, he does have a skillset, but also need him at wide out. We know for sure that X (Xavier Brown) is going to be down with the shoulder. Kobe be more an end-of-the-week type of

decision. See how much he heals up before we know for sure.

We got to rep the young backs and find a way to generate some run game. We will consider Chris, but that's a tough ask in one week for a guy that's been playing receiver all year just to make the switch.

But all hands on deck. We'll do whatever it takes.

Q. What did see from Noah (Vaughn) on Saturday?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, so I feel like he's got a ton of upside and a lot of potential. I think once he gets going in the rhythm, in a groove, I think that's when you really start to see the quick feet he has, and the vision.

But he has to grow up in pass protection. That's the one area. That's always the biggest transition for a young backs, especially when you're in there on third down and you see like in the NFL they have third down backs because they specialize in the ability to protect because of all the exotic looks they end up seeing.

So the areas I want to see growth and improvement and hopefully quickly will be in pass protection, and then I think as he has more reps and more touches you're going to see more of the things we see on the practice field. I think he is probably of all the backs he's the most all-around. He can do a little bit of everything. He needs some experience, reps, and contact in a game to get him going.

Q. Going into the season people had you guys I think next to last in the conference.

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, 16 out of 17.

Q. How big a step is it to just get the results you've gotten, and then how much of a bigger step would it be to get to six, to beat the rival, to make a bowl game?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, I think in terms of getting to a bowl game, that's the next step in the development of the program. That would be huge. I think the focus right now is not necessarily the bowl game.

I think we got to take a step in terms of the rivalry and playing our best game in this game. If that happens, then we have the ability to think about the bowl game.

But just outside of that, coming in to pre-season, I let those folks determine that. I felt like we had a better team than where we were picked, but we had to go out and earn it and prove it.

Actually, we let a couple opportunities get away, but it's all part of the growth process. We're not satisfied. The focus is taking care of business this week and then hopefully earn another game, which will give us more practices to help us develop more of our roster and then propel us into the off-season.

Q. I won't use the word satisfied since you said you're not satisfied. How much pride do you think the veterans in this program take in the fact there is improvement and there is growth and people always talk about...

TONY ELLIOTT: Right. I think they'll really understand that and put into context five years from now when they look back. A lot of them are in the grind and they're just trying to daily exhibit that pride.

So I don't know if they're thinking about it the way we are thinking about it because they're living it every single day. When they look back and they look at their career, all the things and all the challenges and adversity they had to face and the perseverance and commitment they given to this program and how they've set it up for the future, they're going to take a ton of pride in that.

Q. (Regarding injuries in secondary.) Saw Ethan Minter come in last weekend. Got him switched from quarterback to that position. Was it a shock to you how quick he was able to absorb the playbook and adapt to that position?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yes and no. And I say no because if you know who Ethan Minter is, and we got to know him during the recruiting process, he's an outstanding young man that takes a lot of pride in everything he does. He loves football, so he's constantly thinking about the game.

You know, the transition to the position, the movement, you know, going from being a quarterback, it does backpedal a little bit, but it's kind of sideways. He does mostly run forward, and now you spend most of your time running backwards and then transitioning.

So that impressed me how quickly he was able to just become in tune with the movements. But just in terms of football IQ, didn't surprise me. He's a quarterback so he's used to absorbing playbooks and learning quickly and making adjustments every single week.

To see it all happen as quickly -- and he really didn't have a choice. He chose to say, I'm going to embrace it and I'm glad he did, because he's been forced into a role where he had to go out there, and doesn't matter if he's a freshman. Nobody stops the game and says, hey, Ethan is in there. Let's call basic plays. They're going to attack him.

He's also done a great job showing leadership. I think I see from the quarterback background he's able to take guys even older than him and inspire and motivate them to absorb the playbook quicker and forcing those guys to want to come in and meet on their own, putting in that extra.

Q. ...Kendren Smith, safety to corner. He is doing that a lot this season. How much have you seen him adapt on the field?

TONY ELLIOTT: That's right. So that was a big reason why we were interested in bringing Kendren in, because he can play corner, but we also knew he can also transition and play some of the nickel or field safety as we call it.

He's having to do it on the fly. He's a UPENN grad, so we know he's smart. He has played a lot of football. He has got some experience, so he can adapt a little bit quicker than maybe a young guy, per se. But he's been a do-it-all kind of guy for us on special teams making plays as well.

So we believed that's who he could be, is and he's been forced in that role. It's a three-way switch. If Kempton goes out then Kendren goes to corner; Ethan (Minter) comes in; Corey (Thomas) is dropped down. So it's a lot of moving parts because of where we are with injury.

Kempton (Shine) had a foot and a knee during the game. I think the foot is good. The knee is still bothering him a little bit. But I'm hopeful that by the end of the week he'll be ready to roll.

Q. Tyler Neville said there wasn't a lot of looking back on what went wrong offensively. Just on to the next one. How can you change results offensively in such a short time from Saturday to next Saturday?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, I know how it felt on Saturday. Man, it felt like everything was just going wrong. When you watch the tape it comes back to what it typically is. It's a game of inches, right? So I evaluate everything critically, especially the offense in terms of the calls. Are the calls putting the guys in position?

So I'm looking for hats and angles. Looking for technique, execution. When you look at it, it was one guy maybe not stepping exactly the way he's supposed to step or one guy sliding a little bit too far oversetting.

So wasn't like it was all broken. Sometimes it was the quarterback getting the ball out on the first progression and just trusting it. And then there were some issues you're just going to have to kind of grow through when you got young backs in there trying to pick up third down protections from that standpoint.

So when you look at it, it wasn't as bad as it felt in the game. All the things are correctable, right? So it's correctable with guys just straining a little bit harder fundamentally, and then having the right mindset collectively to go out and play their best game.

I know what Tyler said. We're going to correct those things. That's what happens on Monday. But every week you got 30 minutes of special teams and an hour meeting for offense/defense. You got to get those things corrected and prep for the next.

So each week it's a really, really quick turnaround. Also too, with this one, it's going to take us correcting those mistakes. But it wasn't a ton of just busted assignments as much as it was technically we got to be a little bit better. Pad level has to be a little bit better. Can't slide quite as far from a protection standpoint. Young backs do have to grow up. Quarterback has to throw the ball away or has to release the ball in the flat right now for the touchdown.

Because when you look at it going back, and everyone will focus on the sacks, and rightfully so. That's the number one stat everybody looks at. You look at the sacks, it was, okay, we slid a little bit too far on a base four-down front. That shouldn't happen. We can correct that with proper communication.

Then we had a couple -- I think it was a third and six and we got a receiver open at the sticks, right, and we overset and get beat inside. Now the quarterback can't step up and rip the ball. Those are things that can be corrected.

If it was discombobulated, guys going on all over the place, then that's a much tougher fix in a week.

There were a couple calls that coaching staff-wise we can put them in a better situation. It's really just offensively it's a bigger, I guess more magnified because it's 11 guys. So if you're a little bit off it's going to affect all 11.

And there is not that equalizer like on defense. Sometimes you just have a guy go make a play. Offense it takes all 11. The focus is to get the right motivation, intensity, and focus this week to go practice in a way to make sure that our pad level is where it needs to be so that we can properly have our hands where they need to be to be able to protect the quarterback and really stand on those guys about getting the ball out when we need to get the ball put, and everybody understanding we got to strain a little bit more.

You can't always hit your first progression. Defenses are too good. Got to have time to get to second and third progression sometimes.

Q. Seems like (Virginia Tech) finds a different gear, something that hasn't clicked earlier in the year that clicks in this game. How do you find that extra gear?

TONY ELLIOTT: I knew I was going to get this question. It's rivalry. Bottom line, it's rivalry. That's what it is. It's a rivalry game. That's the difference.

And that's where we have to take a step as a program, as a staff, players, everybody. It's rivalry week. That's been the message to everybody.

Nothing else matters. It really doesn't. Nothing else matters but what you do this week. I think that's the difference. When you have that intensity, that focus, you have that passion, right, and you can block out the distractions.

Because you know, yes, bowl eligibility is on the line, but there is a lot more on the line, right? Bowl eligibility, right, is what we're after, but I'm really after having all the folks that support Virginia have the upper hand for 365 days. That's just how I was bred in rivalries. I think that's the difference, the way you look at it, the perspective you have.

You are playing for something bigger than yourself. That's the message that I'm working on getting the guys to understand, the intensity that it takes and the way it should feel, the way you should approach it.

I know I talk a lot about every game is the most important game on the schedule and that's true, but rivalry game is different. It's just different. Has to be different. For everybody. Everybody that's involved it has to be different. I think that's what your question is asking, what's the difference. It's the way you approach it and how you see it and how you view it and what you're willing to give to have your team come out on top.

Q. Assume you're talking Clemson-South Carolina when you're talking about the rivalry. What stood out to you about that rivalry that is similar to this one?

TONY ELLIOTT: It's two in-state schools. It's houses divided. It's bragging rights. It's a true dislike, right, that's not just on game day. It's 365 days. Man, you have to live with the comments. You have to live with people having bragging rights. You also understand that households, like everything they do in their household is around this. I mean, it's deep. I believe that that's what it is between us and Tech, but we got to change it on the field. I think football drives a lot of that. That's what I learned. Everything is rivalry, every sport is a rivalry, but football drives the overall rivalry for bragging rights.

Everybody, they want to brag about every sport, but they really want to brag about football.

Records don't matter. Bowl eligibility on the line doesn't matter. What matters is you win the rivalry game.

So I think the similarities are here, but I got work to do getting my football team to truly understand that, what they're playing for and what it means to a lot of the folks. For a lot of folks it's everything.

Q. Protection issues, how much of those are heightened when you face a player like you face a player like Antwaun Powell Ryland, and what is he doing to get to quarterbacks so well?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, he's a slippery guy. Man, he's a slippery guy. He's got really good pass rush moves. Got a great spin. He's got a good get-off. When you say heightened, it just means you can't get caught up in trying to out-athlete him. You got to trust fundamentals and technique, the design of the scheme. If I got to help, I got to help. If I'm locked in, I'm in, then you have no hope, so now my technique is a little bit different.

My aiming points, my eyes, right, my footwork is different. I have to apply the appropriate technique and footwork based off the protection call. And then I just can't get caught up into trying to win the matchup. Like as an athlete I just got to go do my job and be technically sound and trust that if I do that, I'll give the quarterback enough time to get the ball off and he'll make it right.

Q. You said after the game Saturday that you need to build better home field advantage.

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah.

Q. Play better at home. The flipside of that, your best wins this year have come on the road. Has there been a common denominator with the road performances?

TONY ELLIOTT: I think the guys embrace kind of the villain role going on the road. But to be a great program you got to defend your house most importantly. And then be a road warrior.

I think when you start talking about streaks, very rarely do you see a 35-game road winning streak. You might see a 35-game home winning streak or senior class that finishes their career undefeated at home as opposed to on the road. There is more challenges on the road from a logistical standpoint, and then you don't necessarily have the momentum of the crowd to build off.

I think the guys have really embraced that mentality and mindset. I got to develop the mindset that this is our house. Nobody walks into our house and leaves with a win. If you're going to win anywhere, you should win at home.

So that's the mindset. So I have to figure out how to kind of keep the mindset on the road but then develop that same mentality when we run out the tunnel in Scott Stadium, it should be +7 for us before we kickoff.

That's just, again, how I think, how I was trained, the mentality. Then when you're on the road you're a road warrior.

Q. For Virginia Tech, Bhayshul Tuten has been ver consistent runner for them? What do you see that stands out about him? You saw him last year.

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, he's got deceptive speed, extremely powerful lower body, and great contact balance. He's got good body control.

So you see that. When you feel like you got him boxed in he finds a way to move his hips, get his leg out the way so that you can't get a good wrap on him, and then his feet are quickly on the ground; his center of gravity where it needs to be; and then able to power through a lot of runs.

And always falling forward. That's the sign of a great back. They fall forward. I always trained my running backs, you never want your back on the ground. Everything falls forward. Even if you hit him at the line of scrimmage he's going to fall for two. Hit him at the two, he's going to fall for four. That makes a big difference. That's what great backs do practice.

Q. Big picture, signing next week. How are you guys preparing for off-season?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, so the signing day, everything is accelerated a little bit, so a lot of the class is already determined before the middle of the season. We had a couple official visits this past weekend trying to sign a couple more high school guys.

Man, the folks in the scouting department are nonstop because now is I guess the FCS season is over so a lot of the grad transfers and those individuals are getting in the portal.

Once the 9th hits it's going to get flooded. We're already preparing to be evaluating a lot of film on the guys currently in. Obviously having conversations with the guys that have entered the portal and are approved to talk to.

So the folks behind the scenes are already working preparing for finishing out the signing day for the high school guys next week and then preparing for the portal when it's going to be on and popping.

And the difference is this year that makes it a little bit tougher is it's a dead period all the way up until the portal opens; then it's a quiet period for 14 days. So now you're going to be scrambling to get guys here. Why I said that's different is because now you can't go on the road and see them.

You used to be able to go on road and see them, have conversation, kind of recruit them to come see you. Now everything is going to be done on the phone and through conversation and you're

going to be not begging, but down on your knee. Please come see me, please come visit. They're going to have everybody and there is 14 days and all 130-plus schools will be vying for the top guys on the market.

It's going to be a little different and going to be hectic.

Q. More about their great pass rush, What else seconcerns you about Tech's defense?

TONY ELLIOTT: Because they don't just have one. They got several good pass rushers. Their D-line is in my opinion up there with the top in the league. They got so much depth. They can roll so many guys in at those four positions up front. They don't miss a beat and stay fresh. So that concerns you.

Linebacker, they moved Caleb (Woodson) to linebacker so they're more athletic. They're long at linebacker, all three of them. Nickel, Sam, all the way it their Will is 6'3" kids that are athletic and rangy.

All-conference corners and honorable mention all-conference guy on the other side, and then their safeties are physical and come downhill.

You can tell defensively, and they're playing good ball for the most part. They run well. They're sound, athletic, and then they're deep up front, which poses some challenges. Keeps them fresh in the run game and the pass game. If they get you behind the chains, then they can turn all the pass rushers loose.

Q. Do you lose an abnormal amount of guys because of all the exceptions for the extra years? Does that mean you're going to have to go to the portal a little more than you'd rather do? Are you handcuffed a little bit? I know you said on ACC Network a few weeks ago that you have to primarily focus on grad students because of various issues?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, so great question. So you saw it on Senior Day. Got a bunch of seniors. Two parts. So parts of this is the question that you're asking about the extensions with COVID, and then obviously the tragedy guys were able to get additional years.

Also the other piece of that is a decision I made when I first got here not to just clean house and run guys off. Man, I wanted to be committed to the guys that were committed to the University and see them through graduation.

So there is an additional group of guys that are now going to be graduating that will be transitioning on, so it does increase the number. This is probably the first time where I had additional numbers to supplement the roster. But I want to get the right guys. Whether they're portal guys or high school guys I still want to be a developmental program. But this is a different cycle than the previous two because of the COVID, the tragedy, and then also young men, us fulfilling our obligation to the young men at the university by seeing them through graduation.

Q. Are you handcuffed all (by admission requirements)?

TONY ELLIOTT: Oh, yeah. So grad transfer route is definitely easier for us in terms of getting them in. Still got to get the right guys because grad school is still challenging.

Undergrad is a little bit more challenging because of the 60 hours that they got to complete to get to a degree from UVA.

So even if there is an older guy with one year of eligibility left, I just don't know -- morally I don't think it's the right thing to bring a guy in that has to have 60 hours and only one year to do it. That's pretty much impossible.

And when you're looking at the undergrad guys you got to make sure they got the right amount of eligibility and do they have enough

transferable credits to get in and are they going to lose credits. If they lose, now you're adding that on top of the 60 they got to complete here.

So it's a little bit more of a constraint on the undergrad side. That's why you've only seen a handful of those and more grad transfer guys.

We'll look in both spots for the best players, but it is a little bit easier, so to speak, on the grad transfer route because of the degree fields we have available and getting those guys in.

Q. This is the first time dealing with scholarship limits as well.

TONY ELLIOTT: Yep.

Q. How difficult is it to kind of go around this? I know the limit is 105. I know you don't have to reach 105 by each guy getting a full scholarship? How much harder is that?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, so we don't know exactly what the scholarship numbers are yet until the settlement in the conferences and the institutions agree upon that. From an ACC and university standpoint, I haven't been given the scholarship numbers.

I'm operating based off the 85. We anticipate that we're going to get the roster reduced to the 105. That's the number I'm hearing. Still, we don't know that for certain.

The way I'm operating is based off 85, that's what I'm replacing, and then obviously have a list of guys that if the number goes up, we'll be ready to roll. If it stays the same, then we're already in good shape and then we'll figure out how to make up the difference.

So if you stay at 85 and comes down to 105, going to be typically what you've always done. Your scholarship guys, and you have some type of preferred walk-on individual. If they say, hey,

105 all the way around, then we'll have guys in the pipeline ready to roll.

Still a slippery slope, tricky. Last thing you want to do is promise something to a guy that you can't deliver, if that makes sense. So still waiting on guidance from the settlement and that will give the administration and the ACC guidance on how they want us to proceed.

Q. Any updates on Noah Josey and Ben Smiley?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, so Noah Josey should be good to go. It was a shoulder, a little bit banged up there. Then Smiley is day to day. Hopefully he'll be back with us. I know he's out at practice, he's moving around, he is doing some things. Just has to clear the protocol.

Q. Coach Mack Brown had such a long successful career. Just get your reaction to that, he's finishing up.

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, shot him a text. Told him I love him. He's one of the best on and off the field. Had an unbelievable career, and all I can think about is I know how he impacted my life, so there will be so many, countless number of young men whose life he impacted.

So it's a career well done. If you're a young coach, that's what you aspire to do, is to have a career where you impact as many people as possible. I know that's the case with him. So going to miss him at the ACC meetings because I usually sit right next to him. Going to miss competing against his teams. At the same time, I think he's earned the right to say that he's had an unbelievable career. Hate that it ended this way for him, but excited for his family and what's next for him. I know he's not done.

Q. In terms of the emotion this week, you talk the about wanting your players to realize it's a rivalry. How do you then also balance that it doesn't go over the top on game day?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, that's a great question. Again, having been a part of rivalry, I've seen it go too far. That's not what you want. You want it to be a complete, competitive, clean game. It's going to be a game where there is a little bit of emotion.

So constantly challenging the guys to channel it the right way. In between plays don't waste any energy on what's happening on the other sideline, what's being said. Channel that energy so when the ball is snapped you got six seconds of fury until the whistle blows. Then that's where you concentrate it.

Again, the objective is to have the better emotions at the end of the game, so it does take discipline. You got to control that passion and energy so that you can channel it where it needs to go so you can ultimately celebrate in the locker room at the end.

Q. Two more injury questions. Kam Robinson and also Trell Harris.

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, so we anticipate Trell will be cleared and ready to roll by game time. Kam, a shoulder, so he's been playing with a banged up shoulder that's got to be fixed after the season, and we wanted to just because of the amount of snaps he's played with that and then also some of the dislocations that have taken place throughout the course of the season, we want to look at it to make sure it wasn't any worse than when started the season.

So last week he was held out until we got confirmation from the doctors with the imaging that it was safe for him to continue to play the remainder the season. Then he got the thumbs up later in the week, but the other guys had gotten the majority of the reps.

We said, hey, we'll situate him and get him into the flow of the game. This week he will be turned loose and ready to roll.

Q. Trell (Harris), what does getting him back mean to the offense?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, I think it'll be big. Just gives us more balance. Gives us another option, another body. I think he is a little bit different than the guys out there in terms of his play speed and ability to go over the top. So I think it just kind of gives us a little bit more balance. Hopefully it will free up a little bit for Mal and the other guys. So, yep.