

**University of Virginia Football Media
Conference
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Head Coach Tony Elliott
Press Conference**

Q: With the players coming off an extended break, what did you want to see today in this first practice back and did you see it?

TONY ELLIOTT: I think you had a little sneak peek to the beginning of practice, so you're well aware that we had to start over and kind of get our minds back in the right place. But the biggest thing I wanted to see was just that we didn't take a step backwards. And I thought the guys had energy.

Focus early on, you could tell you're coming off of a break, so I wanted to see us be able to have that focus intensity. And sometimes as a coach, you got to help them with that. And at the beginning of practice, we started with a ball security drill and wasn't as clean as I was hoping, so we had to have a little bit of a reminder and a reset. But they finished a lot better than they started.

Q: Around the country, there's been schools that have decided not to hold a spring game, you guys are doing one. What's your reasoning and what value can you get out of a spring game that you can't get out of practice?

TONY ELLIOTT: I think the value hasn't changed. Your spring game is an opportunity to evaluate guys that you haven't seen before, some of your younger guys, your developmental guys. We don't have pre-season games, so it's an opportunity to create as close to a game, you know, like situation in the stadium, with all of the electronics going, with a good crowd. So, it's still a developmental sport, so I think those are the advantages of it.

And you look at where we are from a roster standpoint, yes, we've got some guys that have

played a lot of football, but I got, you know, a bunch of new guys that are here, what, twenty, twenty-five of them, you know, that just got here. Some that got some experience, some guys that are undergrad guys that we still need to figure out what they can do. I got a lot of younger guys that are going to get a lot of reps, and it's just an opportunity for us to have one more evaluation.

With the rules, you only get three scrimmages throughout the course of the spring. I think it's a great opportunity to develop your team. And as I've said, there'll be years where it may not make as much sense, because you have a more veteran team, everybody's returning, you know exactly what you got. But I think as long as you got a situation where you're trying to evaluate to figure out exactly what you got, I think there's a lot of value in the spring game.

Q: Kind of going around that, would you want the spring schedule to change with the way college football is? Maybe adjust a little bit on when to do the spring or spring practice?

TONY ELLIOTT: That's a great question. I still got to learn a little bit more, see a little bit more, maybe have a couple more cycles to really evaluate. I think every year it's going to be different. I think it's going to be a year-to-year type situation, just especially when we're in this space where the building of your roster is different than the years past.

As a coach, of course, you want more time on the grass with your guys, but also, too, as a former player, you want to be sensitive to the fact of wear and tear on their body. And then, you know, the closer that you get to the season and the more risk you have of injury and not any kind of mechanism to be able to replace if you have injuries, I think you got to take that into consideration.

And you know, they're not pros yet from the standpoint of, man, you got guys that are eighteen years old coming out of college whose

body's got to change. You got some guys that are twenty-one, twenty-two that are closer to pros. And really just trying to figure out that proper balance. I just need more data before I can say exactly what I feel is best. I just know where we are as a football team right now. We still got a lot of developing to do and we're going to take full advantage of the spring.

Now we got to be smart. We do have several guys that are coming off of surgeries from last season that we don't have available, so we got to be smart. We may not have as much contact as we would have in years past just because of our depth situation, but we are going to have to have contact. And that's why I told the guys after practice today, we got a good stretch of contact practices over the next four or five practices where we got to get the work in to help guys develop.

And you talk about the depth issues and concerns, the secondary is very different when it comes to the spring, new faces like Ja'son (Prevard) and Devin (Neal). What have you seen from those guys and just the room overall when you're dealing with those health concerns?

Yeah, I mean, every day you kind of cross your fingers, hoping that one of those guys doesn't go down. And (Ethan) Minter's been down for a couple of practices. We anticipate getting him back here pretty soon, which will give us additional depth. And he's the guy, like when you talk about Ethan (Minter), that played as a freshman, but he's still got some developing to do. A high school quarterback that's transitioning to the secondary, he needs every single rep that he can get.

And Ja'son (Prevard)'s a guy that played some corner. We're playing him at nickel. He can do both. We probably won't have the luxury of playing him at both this spring, because we don't quite have the depth. Devin Neal's played high level ACC football, but also, he didn't play as many snaps last year as he may have wanted.

So again, having a chance to see him run around, you kind of have an idea of what you got, but you need to see him in the new system.

And Keandre Walker has been good to see him out there getting a ton of reps because he's a guy that played a bunch as a freshman and then was riddled with injury last year and needed to redshirt to take advantage of that year, and now we got him going full speed, and Kevon Gray.

But other than that, we're kind of knocking on wood that one of those guys doesn't go down because that may change the structure of practice going forward if we lose. Because every other position I feel like we got enough depth to be able to practice the way that we need to practice. And we plan to address with the next portal window the issues that we have in the secondary from a depth standpoint. But it's really good for those guys because they're getting a ton of reps. It helps them from a developmental standpoint.

Q: Coach, staying on defense, some of the top linebackers are out. How are you handling the reps for that group? Has everybody looked ok?

TONY ELLIOTT: Man, those guys, they got to role, but it's really good for Landon Danley, a guy that played a ton of special teams and showed a ton of promise, he just didn't quite have as many opportunities at linebacker till later in the season, so he's out there running with the first group, getting reps. And it's good to have Stevie Bracey back. He was a guy that had played in the past but was injured last year.

And Myles Brown is getting a ton of reps, which is a guy who's really transformed his body. Like here's a linebacker that came in at 189 pounds and now he's up to about 216 pounds so his body's completely different, and there's flashes of ability there. It's just, he doesn't know right from left right now in terms of all the calls on defense. He learning as quick as he can; as you would say, he's drinking from a fire hydrant

right now, just trying to catch everything that he can. Adding Maddox (Marcellus) has been a big addition for us. And then Logan Kotter, Rob Keys, all those guys are getting reps.

So obviously with James (Jackson) being down, Trey (McDonald) being down, and Kam (Robinson) being down, we still feel like we got good adequate depth there and some guys that are going to help. And part of the reason that those guys are down is because they had to play so many snaps last year because we didn't have the depth. So, this is really going to be helpful for the guys that are taking reps now, but then also for those guys when they come back. Because by that time, we should have some more depth built up to help them.

Q: There's been some chatter amongst coaches about, not just having a spring game amongst yourself, but playing another school to create interest and because of the lack of depth that a lot of people have. Where do you stand on that?

TONY ELLIOTT: I'd be for it. I mean, you think about, we practice against each other so much and you get an opportunity. I mean the NFL guys, they have joint practices, they practice against each other, they play four preseason games. It's just another opportunity to truly evaluate your football team against somebody else. I mean I think you've got universities that are close enough to where you could create some interest.

I'd be all for it. Obviously, we need to know more details around it, but I'm not opposed to it. I would welcome it. I mean, you scrimmage in high school. You go to some states, they play spring games against other schools. I'd be all for an opportunity to be able to go out and kind of gauge yourself against somebody else before it counts for real.

In terms of your quarterbacks, are they acclimating well? And have you learned

anything about them that you didn't know before?

Yeah, I thought the first day, you could kind of tell that they're coming into a new system and things were moving fast, but I thought there was a huge jump between practice one and practice two. And I thought they had a good day today considering.

Daniel (Kaelin) man, he moves much better than you may anticipate for a bigger guy. And again, we saw high school film and obviously you look at him in high school and yeah, he does some really good things, but you haven't seen that against the speed of the college game. And then last year, he didn't do a ton at Nebraska, so the ball jumps out of his hand. And again, a lot of these things, you don't get to see the live evaluations like you would when you're dealing with the transfer portal unless they've played a ton of football somewhere else.

I think we knew kind of what you had in Chandler (Morris), but what you didn't see as much last year is they didn't run him as much, but to watch him scoot around and move around, man he's got a lot of quickness to him and you know he's not afraid to pull the ball down and run, and it's good just for everybody to kind of see the moxie that he has.

It's been fun to watch those guys just battle, and it's made Gavin (Frakes) kind of elevate his level of play as well. It's been fun to watch him, you know another year in the system, it looks a lot more comfortable.

I'm excited about the next you know four or five practices, where we're going to be able to get the coaches off the field, have some live periods. Obviously, they won't be live, the quarterbacks, but everything around them will be live, and we'll be able to see those guys kind of in an uncontrolled scrimmage-type situation.

Q: Sticking with quarterbacks, obviously with two new guys coming into a program, they're

getting used to everything. How have you seen them kind of acclimate to being here in the culture, and maybe another position group you can kind of slide in, but quarterback, you are kind of there front and center?

TONY ELLIOT: Right, with the quarterback, the biggest thing is leadership. That's probably what you don't know. You can look at the measurables, you can watch the film, you can see them throw the football. But it's just how are they going to be in the locker room. And that's what's been awesome.

From day one, those guys just have carried themselves in a way that just commands respect from a leadership standpoint. And they're working together. We brought both of them in, told them they're going to compete, and that's what we've been doing. And we haven't made any designations yet, but it's been good to watch them both lead in their own way. And you can tell that they both have great leadership skills. A little bit different; they got different styles. But nonetheless, very effective from a leadership standpoint. And that's what's been fun to watch.

And the coaches are going to be more on the Xs and Os. For me, it's more big picture, looking at the chemistry, the cohesion, the leadership, what's the identity of this group going to be, and a lot of that is going to be driven by the quarterback position.

And then, Devin Neal, you mentioned he didn't play a lot of snaps last year. I guess, what kind of attracted you to him, and his situation was pretty different than a lot of other guys.

Two years ago, he was Third Team All-ACC, and man, made a ton of plays, and we played against him up there in a big game, made some plays, and so you knew what he could do versus ACC-caliber competition, and obviously as long as there was no issue as to why, it just kind of worked out the way it did for him at Louisville,

I'm grateful for us because that gave us an opportunity.

And then when you meet him, you see he's a very serious young man, very conscientious. He's a matter-of-fact guy. And he was looking really not for anything to be given to him, but just an opportunity to truly come in and compete. I think that's what attracted us to him, and to him to us, that he felt like he legitimately had an opportunity to be able to compete with our depth situation in the secondary.

Q: Trell Harris last year flashed early in the season before he got hurt. What are you seeing from him this spring? And what are you hoping he develops as he gets ready for a second year in a program?

TONY ELLIOTT: Biggest thing for Trell (Harris) is just staying healthy, and from a positional standpoint, just being able to finish on the down-the-field balls. I think that was the one area, even when he played last year, it was kind of hit or miss, so to speak. He'd make a big one down and then he'd have one, and he just doesn't finish the play. That's the area in this game I want to see him improve, and then really prepare his body for the long-haul.

But man, he looks quick. I think we all know he's very fast. And you put the ball in his hands, and he can make plays. All of that is still there. Biggest thing is just making sure that he stays healthy and then let's go work on the area of just tracking those balls over the shoulder, down the field.

I know we had asked you about it some last year after he had gotten hurt, but how much did he change your offense when he was out? How much did things change for you guys?

I think what you saw is like, people couldn't just sit two over top of Malachi (Fields). And we were trying to figure out who's going to be that

guy that fills in for Malik Washington, and we all knew that that was going to be extremely hard to replicate that. But what we found is we had Trell (Harris) that kind of balanced it out.

And then when Trell went down, we just didn't quite have that speed to go over the top, so to speak. And I think that allowed them to sit more over the top of Malachi (Fields) and try to take him away, and so we had to move him around and put him in the slot just to get the ball in his hand. But I think it made us kind of more one-handed, so to speak. Whereas when you got both of those guys, you can balance it out.

And then I think Trell (Harris) just had the speed that we hadn't had in a while. Even with Malik (Washington), it was different with Trell (Harris) because he could really stretch you over the top and force you to kind of pick what you want to defend.

But when he went down, we noticed that people could sit on us a little bit more. They weren't quite as scared about us running by them, where I think Trell (Harris) gives you that home-run type speed to just run by. It doesn't matter whether you come up in his face or you play him in catch technique at eight yards, he could still run by you.

Q: At the annual football banquet in December, I think Jam Jackson was voted defensive rookie of the year. What do you want to see from him this year? And how much have you saw him develop since he's arrived at Virginia?

TONY ELLIOTT: Just look at his body. I mean, he came in probably at 170, 175 pounds and now he's 190, 190 plus, which allows him to carry himself a little bit more confidence. I want to see him continue to improve tackling. And the biggest thing for him is just confidence. I think you saw some games, man, he was on, and then there were some games where, it's like: come on, Jam, I need you to be Jam!

When he's confident, he can give you everything that you want. So just having that consistency of confidence to go out there and play at a high level. And then just nitpicking his game, you want to see him just finish on some tackles a little bit better.

Tomorrow is Pro Day. Jonas Sankar had a good time at the NFL Combine. How much was it nice seeing his performance there, and how much he's risen his own stock?

Obviously, we're going to be biased because we see him every single day, but it's good for him to go out and put it out there for the country to see. We knew what type of player that he is and what he brought to our team, and we knew that he that he can run and do a lot of things. And when you're talking about the NFL, they're going to nitpick you to death. But it was good for him to be able to go out and show it against the other top players in the country, of what his skill set is and I'm excited for him tomorrow.

I don't think he's going to do all the testing, but I know he'll do some of the specific workouts positionally for some of the coaches and that's just another opportunity for him to showcase what improvements he's made since the Combine.

It's one of those deals his teammates are going to benefit too because there's going to be a lot of people that are coming to see him. That's going to give Chico (Bennett Jr.) and Chris (Tyree) and Corey (Thomas Jr.) and all those guys an opportunity to showcase what their skill set is.

We talk about it, but it's hard. The NFL Combine, what, they bring in 300 players, there's only 255 draft slots, and they're going to have Pro Days at every school in the country. And I think, what, 500 rookies will get a get a shot, and then not all 500 of those will make rosters. It's hard. And so to be at the Combine is a blessing, but just to have an opportunity to work out in front of NFL personnel is a blessing.

And as I told the staff, too, this is a big recruiting day for us and our roster, because you know where we want to go as a football program, we want to be recruiting the guys that want to come to Virginia because they want to have a chance to play on Sundays. And this is a great opportunity for them to be able to see their teammates work out in front of twenty-nine of the thirty-something teams will be present with some type of personnel here tomorrow. So that's a great opportunity for our guys.