

**University of Virginia Football Media
Conference
Tuesday, Sept. 2, 2025
Head Coach Tony Elliott
Press Conference**

TONY ELLIOTT: Good morning. Decided to kind of settle in and get into a routine, so second week.

Q: Did you learn anything last season about handling success after that fast start that you can apply this year, you think?

TE: Great question. It's very hard. It's probably the hardest part is handling success, and that was the message that I had with the team. Obviously, got off to a good start. Got the result that they wanted. Now they gotta make sure that they flush it and start back over and reinvest in the process.

And this is a different team. So the things that I learned were more relative to that team. This team's gonna have to kind of figure out their identity. But that was a message to the group that, man, we got the result that we wanted. Now let's recommit to the process, go back to work. And I told them, I said, congratulations, you get to go do it all over again.

And that's the real challenge.

Q: What are your expectations for Chandler Morris this Saturday? Are you expecting him to practice today and play Saturday? What's the status there?

TE: My expectation is play his tail off. We're gonna need him and he was back in practice yesterday in full go. And so my expectation is that he has a great week of prep and he's ready to go and brings his best game.

Q: What do you like about what he (Chandler Morris) did Saturday running the offense and obviously played pretty well too.

Yeah, you just showed maturity was, you know, it took us a couple of couple of drives to really settle in. You got a group of pretty much new guys playing together, but I thought he did a good job of settling in and once he got settled, he was able to distribute the ball, manage the system, put together some scoring drives. Loved to see him go down feet first right there, but that's what you love about him is he's such a competitor. He was that close to the goal line and even down on the field when I got to him, he had a little bit of a sense of humor. He said that wasn't very successful. but he's like, coach, I was so close and all I saw was the goal line.

So I think we got to see the competitor, but then also we got to see a little bit of the gamesmanship of what he can do as a veteran quarterback.

Q: On Saturday, it was your first time really seeing all the new pieces together in a game environment. When you see that, what was kind of your biggest takeaways on how they kind of work together and just seeing them in the live game environment?

TE: It was great for everybody to get a chance to what we've seen out here on the practice field. And these guys have done a really, really good job of coming together as a team. And I wanted to see what would happen when you had a little bit of adversity. Were they gonna be able to play complimentary football? Were they gonna gel even more together? And I think that's what we what we saw is we saw a group that even though offense had a good drive to start but didn't come up with points, man, defense goes out, they play complimentary football and then special teams kicks in.

So just a sign that they're really starting to come together and they got each other's back.

Q: Coach, do you have an update on the status for Kam Robinson, and what did you see from Landon (Danley) playing in that spot for him, and what did you like there?

TE: Right, so Kam, he's got the incision from the surgery, is healing well, and he's out of the sling and back. He's able to actually condition and should be back in practice with us next week. And hopefully in a couple of weeks, he'll be ready to go. So I anticipate hopefully by Stanford. that he'll be ready to roll for game action. But man, he was one of the biggest cheerleaders on the sideline.

He was waving that towel with that right arm that shows me that that shoulder is starting to feel pretty good, but he'll be back in practice next week with us. And then Landon, he led us in tackles. He looked like he wasn't overwhelmed, that he was in tune with the game. the responsibility that comes with the position that he plays. And flew around, made some plays for us, so just excited about the next step that he's taking and seizing the opportunity that he has in front of him right now.

Q: Saturday just the offensive line rotation Where do you want that to kind of get to like do you want? Ten guys playing in the first half or where do you where do you kind of want that?

Hey, I'd love to be able to play ten guys in the first half that that's a couple things that means that you got depth that you can trust and then you're in you feel like you're in a position where you can can roll those guys So man, I'd love for that to be the case. I know that may not be a what you've seen over time and the most conventional thing, but we do it on the defensive line all the time and playing multiple guys. So I'd love to have the depth prepared and ready to go. And then hopefully in positions and games to where you feel confident that you won't lose any kind of rhythm by subbing those guys. So I'd love to get as many, I'd love to have, I think I said it before, I'd love to have 12, 13, 14 guys that you can play at that position.

Q: And then with Wallace Unamba, he left with a right knee injury. What's his status?

Yeah, so he's working himself back into practice this week and we're hopeful that he'll be ready to go. Still early in the week and yesterday was a lighter practice. Today will be a good test to see if he'll be ready to go this week.

Q: Hey, Coach, the last time you saw NC State was two years ago. So what were kind of some of your takeaways from that game and also maybe just what you've kind of seen from them so far and what stands out about them?

TE: Right, the takeaways were discipline. You got to stay disciplined. You're playing against a very good opponent, especially at the end of the game. You got to finish it the right way. And very similar, they're a physical football team, want to run the football. They got an even more dynamic quarterback.

Now they're very similar to what they've always been in the trenches. They're big up front athletic linebackers can run and then they got athletes in the secondary. So it's a typical NC State team. It fits coach (Dave) Doeren's identity and how they approach it. He's a defensive guy and he wants to win up front with the defensive line be physical and then offensively, you know, he wants a he wants an offense that can that can line up put their hand in the dirt and come after you. So that's what you see out of them.

Some really, really good skill guys too that can make you, that force you to defend the field vertically and horizontally.

Q: Ethan Minter primarily was an offensive player in high school. What gave you confidence that he could make the transition to safety and did you have any tape of him tackling?

He was a football player. That was really the confirmation. And generally at the high school level, your best athletes play quarterback for you. And I had a chance to go observe him both

football-wise and then playing basketball. You saw from a basketball perspective that he was a physical kid. He would get up there and wasn't afraid to use his body to play defense.

And not a ton of tackling, but tackling is something that you can learn and you still gotta teach it, even natural defensive guys (need to learn) how to tackle. But what you knew about him is that he loves the game. He was a great teammate. He was a leader, a really, really good athlete, and he was willing to make the transition. As long as there's a willingness there, generally the guys that are willing to make that transition are able to successfully make that transition.

Q: Did you expect to have him (Ethan Minter) available for spring practice last year, given the injury he had his senior season?

TE: Yeah, we felt like with the timing, unfortunately, it shut him down for the bullpen. senior season that we would be able to have him in some capacity. And what we didn't know was how quick of a healer he was gonna be. And then really, you have an idea, but you don't know until you get them in your environment just how, I mean, what's their work ethic, what's their work habits, and his are amongst the best that I've seen.

Q: How much research did you guys put into your studying your red zone attack or approach in the offseason and it looks like what's the direct snaps and some jumbo sets and stuff you made some changes. Can you just elaborate on that?

TE: Right. So, I mean, Red Zone, that was Red Zone and third down were two of the biggest points of emphasis in the offseason to the point to where we researched a lot of the concepts that we were doing. We researched the teams that were in the top 25 to see kind of what their efficiency effectiveness was, what they were doing to the point to where we changed a lot of even the installation moving red zone earlier

into practices. So basically day one, we're creating a mindset of being effective scoring touchdowns in the red zone by day one install, both in the spring and in fall camp had an emphasis on red zone. So we did a lot more work in those areas throughout the course of a fall camp. And then also in the spring, based off of the research that we saw from, and then I think personnel helps us too.

Having some more offensive linemen available gives us the ability to go a little bit heavier down there in some obvious run situations. But now you get guys more suited to create and move the line of scrimmage involved. And then also losing Grady (Brosterhaus) with his injury, and he'll be back here in a couple weeks, forced us to be a little bit more innovative, look at some other ways to try and generate touchdowns when we get down in the red zone. And you're going back in the film study from Saturday night.

Q: With all the experience you've collected on the team, were there instances where you just saw that this was a much different football team just because of the experience in those situations?

TE: I think what you saw was the way that it showed up the most was the complimentary football, being able to play complimentary football that yes, we go down, we don't score on the first drive, man, defense comes out, they do their job. And then Caleb (Hardy) is in there and even though it wasn't a call block, he trusts the coaching and understands that we felt like somebody was gonna come free. We didn't know who it was gonna be, but have the confidence and the preparation and being able to take what we did drill work wise in practice and apply it. And then later in the game, where you saw on the sideline, you saw the older guys cheering for the younger guys and being invested in their success. So I think what you saw was the experience showed more of a team camaraderie and atmosphere and the ability to quickly respond to adversity. And that was a

challenge that I had for the entire team. Three things I wanted to see was a fast start, control the momentum, and finish.

And I think that's where you saw more of the experience showed up in those three areas so that we could put together a quality game.

Q: You mentioned depth earlier, how have the new roster limits impacted you early in the season? And how have you adjusted to it over the past year?

TE: Yeah, I mean, it's game one. So I think to fairly answer that question early in the season, give us about three more games to see how it really, really impacts. Because each game is gonna determine the impact of depth depending upon the flow of the game. But I think with the roster limits, I'm thankful that they didn't go right to 105 right away.

So it allowed us to be able to carry enough depth to practice the way that we need to. I think to fairly answer that question, when we truly get to the 105, and having to practice when you only have 105, is gonna impact a lot of what you do. Which I think could impact early season games, because you won't have the ability to tackle as much as you did. And it's gonna be harder to truly get the reps that you need for the truly developmental guys. because you're going to have to modify the way that you practice. So I think that to answer those questions is going to be coming in the future, in particular this season for the early season impact.

But I think long -term, you're going to see over the years, it's going to impact the ability to develop just because you don't have as many numbers. And then you're going to have injury and then you still got to practice and you got to manage the development. And they're getting those guys ready, and you can't replace.

So there's going to be some challenges ahead, but also things that it's exciting, too, for us to

learn how to modify our game to fit the current landscape.

Q: Coach, you mentioned after the game that even though the sack numbers weren't there, you thought the ends played well, were disruptive, and obviously Coastal was trying to move out of their way. When you watch the film, what did you see from those guys, and how much more can you get out of that group?

TE: Oh, I think we can get a lot more out of that group, and my biggest challenge was I want us to get to the quarterback, even if its not schematically they're not gonna let us, we gotta find a way to get there. But it was good to see multiple guys go in there and didn't see much of a drop off. And so I'm excited about what the potential is going forward. We're really gonna need those guys this week to step up because we can't allow the quarterback to get comfortable back there because he's very good. as a passer.

But then also we gotta be very disciplined in our rush lanes because he can hurt you as a runner as well. So I thought we showed some good things. I know it was a little bit frustrating at times because the ball was getting out quick. They were throwing it sideways on us and forcing us to retrace and redirect. It was good to see Mitchell (Melton) play through his hand situation. I didn't know how that was gonna look.

Q: Good to see (Daniel) Rickert get in there and give us some quality reps as a spy guy, but then also trying to impact the quarterback.

A: So I think there's a ton of growth opportunity for those guys and we're gonna need them, especially over the next several weeks as we play some of these dynamic quarterbacks. And off that, it looked like Rickert was kind of just moving all over the formation. I saw him line up behind the nose tackle at one point. Just where do y'all see just

kind of his ability just to kind of move around the defense?

TE: Yeah, so what you saw was a function of Coastal (Carolina) doing a really good job of catching us in, you know, a pass rush package on third down and then not allowing us to sub, right, by playing with tempo and keeping that personnel on the field because you had Rickard and you had Cazeem (Moore), you know, playing on the interior, which, you know, is really good for us on third down. poses some challenges when you get into base down situations when you gotta defend the run, cuz you got smaller guys playing on the interior that don't necessarily always work against the type of double teams that they gotta face. But that was a function of seeing him more so in our third down. But when we can get, if we're efficient and effective on first and second down, then I think it gives us more flexibility to get those speed rushers on the field on third down.

So it was good to see those guys. get opportunities, but at the same time too, it's tough. It's most ideal when they get caught out there because they're playing with tempo in some base -down situations. In fairness to them, you know, (Daniel) Rickert and Cazeem (Moore), I mean, they're edge guys. They're not big (Anthony) Britton that's 310 pounds, that's used to taking on double teams. I mean, these are speed guys that are meant to come off the edge, but that's kind of the risk -reward because, you know, in third down, you want them Inside to create some more one -on -ones to see can you create an advantage on a guard?

But then flip side is when it's first and second down. Now the advantage could potentially go back to the offense because they got a lot more of their offense available to run versus some of those sub packages.

**Q: What would you make of the run game?
And I think yours longest run was like eight yards from the running backs outside of**

Chandler's (Morris) run. Did you like what you saw with the run game?

TE: I mean, we were sitting there right there. Going into the last drive with about 173 close to 180 yards rushing total. And if you can rush for 200 yards in a game, I mean, that's a pretty good regardless of how you rack them up. I thought the backs initially ran hard and then the game kind of got, I mean, it became explosive, the receivers started making plays, you'd love to see some longer runs. But overall, I thought the production was there and I felt like we left a couple runs out there.

Which is an opportunity for us to really challenge the backs, but I'm not worried about the direction that we're headed and we had four different backs that had equal amounts of carries. That was more pleasing to me that you were able to play all four of them and get them touches. Because we're gonna need all four of them over the course over the course of the season. And I think the other thing that that hurts your overall number is, it's a good thing, is we're down in the red zone. And we only got four yards to go, or we only got three yards to score. And so, overall it's going to bring your averages down. But hey, if we're snapping a ball on the four-yard line and running it in for touchdowns, then I'll take that every day. Then there may be an open field explosive, but we do have to.

And I thought we had some that we could have extended a little bit but it's a great opportunity for us to challenge all four of those guys and the offensive line To go out there and be a little bit more explosive.

But overall, I mean we won the matchup rushing the football. We had success, you know running the ball down in the in the red zone So those are all positives and I think the explosiveness will come as the games dictate throughout the course of the season.

Q: You talked a little bit about NC State can bring stretching the field. They have Wesley Grimes, a very speedy receiver. That receiver room is pretty deep for them. What is the challenge that they possess when you look at NC State?

TE: Well, one, their receiving core is big. They're all long guys. They're fast. The quarterback's got a got a cannon so he can make every throw. They can run by you.

And if you back off of them, they can make you miss on the underneath stuff. So we're going to have to get lined up. We're going to have to communicate. We're going to have to stay on top of routes. We're going to have to get some pass rush. So the quarterback doesn't have, you know, time to find the, to find the open guys.

So they pose and then they're tight in, you know, (Justin) Joly, he's as good as we're going to see in this league, big physical guy that can stretch the field as well. So and then they're running backs and catch the ball out of backfield. So their skill their skill is as good as we're going to see in this in this league. And so we got to create some pass rush to try and see can we either get the ball out quick and then keep everything in front and rally to it or we're going to have to, you know, affect the quarterback so that, you know, doesn't have time to find those deep balls on the perimeter.

But then also he can find those intermediate balls over the middle of the field where they can stretch. And if he hits them on the run, they got the ability with the speed to have a step on you. That could create some chunk plays.

Q: Scott Pioli had been around a good bit with you guys over the last month. What kind of influence and what kind of advice do you think that he gave or was valuable to your program?

TE: I think he was valuable from a front office perspective to the individuals that are now transitioning into that world. That's a new world

for us in college football. So I know it was valuable for Tyler Jones and (Justin) Speros and several of the folks that work on that side of things. For me, it was awesome just to have somebody with that experience that's been around some of the best coaches in football, just to bounce ideas off of, to get critique, to say, am I headed in the right direction? Culturally, how does it feel to you?

Are things matching up? What are you seeing on the practice field? Personnel wise, you've evaluated a ton of personnel, do we have the right body types and fits. And then it also brought some validity to what we're doing for our players to be able to have somebody with his experience and to be able to ask questions about what the next level is like. And then also get confirmation that the things that we're doing from a preparation standpoint are actually what needs to be done to prepare them to transition to the next level.

So it was awesome having him around.

Q: And then just with NC State on defense and structure for that new coordinator, what did you see there that stood out to you?

TE: It looked like a group that had been playing together for a while, even though it's new pieces. So you got a new structure and then also some new transfers that have come in. but they looked very well coordinated. They were in position all night. They were flying around, playing fast.

Looked like they had good communication. The reaction times were really, really good. So they got a bunch of seniors and graduates on the defensive side of the ball. And it looks like they've done a great job of finding the personnel that fit who they are, the style of play. And you can see that those guys look like they've been playing together for a while, as opposed to a new group of new coordinator, new guys coming in. You can see that they've bought in to what they're doing.

They look very well coordinated, in position, and guys were flying around, having fun, and look like a really, really tight unit that's already gelled, even after one game.

Q: Pass protection took a big step forward. Can you talk about that a little bit?

TE: Yeah, anytime you can come out of the game without having a sack on the stat sheet is really positive. That's one of our goals and objectives offensively. I thought they did a good job of communicating, ID-ing. Biggest thing is we want to make sure that quarterback doesn't get touched. So we had some clean pockets in drop back and then also with our play action stuff.

And again, we also got some three-man rushes, you know, with that structure. They were dropping eight at times, and that's how that defense is built. So it took a little bit of pressure off of us. They were trying to get into throwing lanes and drop guys into coverage, but we're going to have to be on our P's and Q's because this is defensive front that we're getting ready to play both (Sebastian) Harsh and (Cian) Slone are very, very active on the edges. (Brandon) Cleveland is very big on the inside.

They can jump in and out of structure, go from four down to three down. And then they got some experienced linebackers that can bring pressure. So we're gonna get tested.

Q: From a pass protection standpoint this week. When you have an opportunity to watch a team that's on your upcoming scheduled play on TV, do you take advantage of that? Do you pick up anything on TV like with state opening against East Carolina? Or do you get it all from the coaches film?

TE: No, you watch both and you try to see if there's anything you can pick up. I mean, but when I watch just like man, that's NC State that I'm accustomed to flying around, really good on

defense. Quarterback is very, very dynamic. Reminds you of Lamar (Jackson). He's Lamar-ish when you watch him just the way he how fluid he is running You know how he looks in the pocket and he's got a cannon so you saw all those things. But the nuances you really wait for the coaches tape to be able because again the TV's you know going to commercial and it's cutting at different angles. So it's a little bit more difficult to really follow it.

But when you get a chance to look at the coach's tape, it's where you get the most of your information about the team. But it's good, I'm glad college football's back. For you get it to get a chance just like you know last night watching a little bit of I didn't get to see Virginia (Virginia) Tech on Sunday because we were really, really engulfed in in the preparation But last night you kind of got the TV on you're watching, North Carolina a little bit So you're getting a preview of there and and I'm not gonna buy the lie. All right I mean they're gonna That football team by time we get to by the time we roll to town They're gonna be they're gonna be greased up and ready to ready to go But you at least get to see some body types you get to get to see some some structures, some defensive structures, some offensive scheme when you do get to watch.

And I don't get to do it much, so I like the Monday games and some of the Sunday games because I get to watch a little bit.

Q: You told us that you wanted to get a look at Daniel Kaelin in some live action. Maybe not exactly the way you wanted to do it, timing-wise, but what did you see, and how do you feel about him in a situation where you need him?

TE: So the plan was, after that series that Chandler (Morris) took the shot, we were already planning on putting Danny in and letting him roll, because he's earned it, and then, too, it's an opportunity. in a competitive situation to get some reps. And also too later in the game, we started subbing some guys. So maybe there

were some younger guys that he hadn't practiced with and he's trying to gain his rhythm. But I feel really good about Kaelin in the game and his future and excited about him. And that's why I said that he's earned the right to play because of what he's shown on the practice field.

And obviously the game, was in a different situation the later it went. So we didn't get to see as much just because the game was under control. But man, I feel good.

And so if there was a situation with Chandler, I have no reservations putting Danny in there to go win a football game.

Q: At linebacker, we talked about Landon Danley and Trey McDonald, but Caleb Hardy is now switched over that position. What was the conversation like with him moving and what was it about him that you wanted to move along pretty easy?

TE: Conversations went like, Caleb - this is where your body's headed. You know, you're up to 228 pounds, right? you're looking more like a linebacker than a safety, and nothing wrong with that. And so we're thinking about moving you a little bit closer to the ball, and he's like, coach, whatever I gotta do for the football team. And so far, it's shown to be a good decision all the way around, because he just looks really natural as a linebacker.

And again, it's gonna become even more natural as he learns the defensive scheme from that position. But athleticism, you got a bigger safety now playing linebacker. So you're gonna have an increase in speed, agility, athleticism. And then as he learns the position, then you'll see more of the physicality come into play. But so far I was pleased with his effort.

And each day he looks more and more comfortable in the box.

Q: Tyshawn Wyatt missed all of 2024 at JMU. and played a pretty good amount of snaps on Saturday. What have you kind of seen from spring through now, him getting his kind of sea legs back under him?

TE: That's right. So he played a lot of football and he played multiple positions over the course of his career. And what you're seeing is every day, he's just gaining more and more confidence in his knee and to the point to where he can play out there at tackle for us, could always go inside that guard. And he's a guy that we're going to need down the stretch to just continue to improve. is a step in the right direction for him. And 18 months is a long time to be without football.

And so you see each day, he's kind of getting back to having the confidence that he needs to go out and be the player that he was. Coach Heff (Heffernan) is gonna take that up to the, it's really gonna be based off the week of practice, to be honest with you. And that's how it shook out after fall camp and the week of practice, but it's gonna be, it could be Ben York, right? And we're gonna get (Jon) Adair ready. Adair shown as a first-year guy that physically he's ready to compete more so than maybe some of the other guys that are young. So it's gonna be a good year. And I like it, I like it like that when they don't know until Friday who's gonna be the next guy in. Because that just means that you got competition, guys are competing, and it helps you from a depth standpoint. So we'll see, today's just Tuesday, today's our first day back in pads. Today and tomorrow will be the real test to see how all those guys absorb the game plan.

And that's the challenge for all of the guys that are on the squad is, can you flip the page quickly? Kind of maintain focus on what we do, but also be able to adjust off of the scheme that we're getting ready to play, because this is a totally different defensive structure than what we prepared for. We prepared for an odd 3 -3 stack with all different kind, with the Rover dog

safety, to now we're anticipating it's going to be an okie front, four down, you know, multiple coverages on the back end, but completely different structure. So how quickly can those guys flush what we did for 25 practices to now get really four practices and be ready to play. So it'll be a game time decision on who would be the next man to go in.