

**University of Virginia Football Media
Conference**

Tuesday, Sept. 9, 2025

**Head Coach Tony Elliott
Press Conference**

Q: This is your UVA strong game. Given that so much of the team has turned over since 22, is this a topic you address with the guys who were not here then and fill in on it? And how do you do so?

TONY ELLIOTT: *You know, we walk in the building, we're reminded with the gear display that we have in the likeness of Lavel, Devin and D'Sean. So every day they're reminded of what this program has overcome. And then yesterday after practice, I addressed it with the team, letting them know just how the importance of this game in particular, but more importantly, the legacies that we have a responsibility to carry forward. And everybody who comes into the program, they're aware of that when they sign up to join the Virginia football team. So we'll talk about it, we'll address it. Now, my expectation is that the ones that have been here know more about it than the ones that are new to it.*

And hopefully they'll inquire about just about what type of young men those three were.

Q: At linebacker, Trey McDonald has had a lot of snaps at special teams, hasn't really had any at linebacker. What do you see as his role on the defensive side and where do you want to see him possibly grow?

TE: *Great question. So he played a lot of football for us last year, indeed. And with the development of a couple guys and then also bringing in, it's kind of made that a very, very difficult position to get on the field and find snaps. And so he's done a great job on special teams. We're looking at cross training him a little bit at our bandit position as well, just to give him some more flexibility. The great thing*

about Trey is he knows the defense, he knows it inside and out.

It's just a tough competition battle. at that position, but he's embracing the role that he has on the football team. He was a captain for us last week because of the impact that he's making for us on special teams. And you never know how the season's gonna play out. But one thing I know is he shows up every day, goes to work, making himself better, and then also helping his teammates get better. So hopefully that role will increase at linebacker, but definitely it's going to be, he's going to be a staple of what we do on special teams.

Q: When you look back at Saturday's game, the run defense, was there a commonality in what went wrong? Was it poor tackling, bad angles, guys who just maybe haven't played a lot together? How do you see the run defense issue?

TE: *There were a couple of, on the big plays in particular, we took a couple of bad angles. The guys that fit it forced it to where it was supposed to go a little bit late to trigger. Gave that running back way too much space. And I think we all know how good (NC State running back) Hollywood (Smothers) is. And then there were a couple of times where we had three defenders at the point of attack and we just didn't down the football and we allowed him to spin out, dive forward and turn a potentially zero yard gain into a five yard gain or a two yard gain into a seven yard gain.*

And then that just becomes advantage offense when you're, when you're calling second and shorts, as opposed to second and longs. And I think if, if, if we tackle a little bit better, you know, trigger on our angles a little bit better, you know, at times there's a couple, couple of plays where they, they, they did a really good job offensively and had us, had us up like that's going to happen from, from time to time. But I do feel like we left a couple of plays, out on the field defensively, where we had solid calls, guys

in position, we just didn't down the football the way that we did in the first game and playing a team like NC State, you need to down the football. And then, you get a bunch of rushing yards on, we got a free blitz coming up the field, doesn't stay upfield shoulder on a quarterback, quarterback sees it and we're in man coverage. So we got a free rusher. We got to down the football there. That turns into a 20 yard plus gain. That hurts your rushing defense.

Q: How do you kind of remedy that during a week this week? What are some of the things you guys do with the run defense?

TE: Yeah, go back to the basics and first it starts with a high level of accountability on Monday as a team when we talk about it and talk about the right way and take ownership of it and then put together a plan throughout the course of the week to address it with the drills that we're doing in tackling and also the drills we're doing in our rush angles to make sure that we stay leveraged on the football and force it back up inside. The guys, they're going to take ownership of it. Coaches, we got to get better. We got to help them get better. We got to always be evaluating our drill work and making sure that it relates to on the field production.

Q: The offensive line has not allowed a sack in the first two games. First time that's happened since 2014. You've gotten a lot of guys in there. What have you seen from the position group as a whole so far?

TE: Just taking a lot of pride in what they're doing and it's the offensive line, backs, tight ends and the quarterbacks. Everybody's involved in protection. But I thought we, first that defensive front, I thought we did a good job with the 40 plus pass attempts that we had or somewhere in that range of having clean pockets. So it starts with communication, guys trusting their fundamentals. And then occasionally there's going to be quarterback that's got to bail you out and Chandler's (Morris) been able to do that and it's resulted in

having no sacks and then knowing when to get rid of the ball when you are flushed out of the pocket and not taking unnecessary hits. So I think it's a combination of, and I thought the backs did a really good job there in particular, J'Mari (Taylor). As we say in our world, he put his face in the fan, you know, he's going against a guy that probably outweighs him by about 15, 20 pounds that's coming full speed.

And man, he stood in there and put his face in the fan and gave the quarterback time to deliver. So it's the OL, the backs, tight ends and the quarterbacks all working together and we need to knock on wood and we need to continue that trend going forward.

Q: J'Mari (Taylor) is one of just two players in the country to have five plus rushing touchdowns in the first two games. How have you seen him step up as a leader since his arrival in Charlottesville? And what have you seen about that home run ability he showed against NC State?

TE: Just being himself. I think one of the challenges for any of these guys that are coming into a new program is you gotta try and figure out your identity and your role, but it starts with being yourself. And so he came in very humble, and he was a guy that was pushing 2,000 rush yards in his career, 23 plus touchdowns. played a lot of football. So he just was himself and fit in really well with the other guys in the running back room and just went to work. If you meet Jamari, he's very blue collar, doesn't say a lot, a student of the game.

He's always seeking to get better. He's always asking ways to improve. He takes coaching well. So I think he just came in and was himself and it, garnered the respect of his teammates, which allowed him to go out to practice and in scrimmage situations and just be himself and find ways to make the routine play. But then also show that he has the ability to hit the home run when it presents itself.

Q: What has been Landon Danley's development? And then how would you evaluate specifically his play on Saturday?

TE: Yeah, I thought that he had a handful of plays he probably wants back. I think if he had that rush off the edge, he's gonna force it back inside and James (Jackson) was coming, that could have been a sack right there. But he kind of, let the angle get away from him and the guy got outside of him. But in the first two weeks for a young guy that's starting for the first time, I think he's improving, he's progressing. He was a safety quarterback, tight end in high school, transitioning to the linebacker position. So the first thing that he did was really change his body.

If he came in here, probably 190 pounds, now he's up to 220, 225 -ish at times. So he's really changed his body. He's starting to learn, to be able to orchestrate the defense, because at that position, it's not just about yourself. I mean, you got to help get the front set. You got to line the defensive lineup. You got to be able to communicate the calls.

And so he's just maturing. I think some of his quarterback background is helping him there. A couple of fits we got to work on, just hand placement a little bit better with him. But overall, he graded well enough for us to have a chance. It's just about two or three plays that I know as he sees them on tape, he's going to learn from and get better.

Q: And you were talking a minute ago about Trey McDonald, the way he knows the defense. What kind of an asset has he been for Landon (Danley) as he's trying to learn that spot?

TE: Been a great asset. Just a guy to be able to lean on and help him understand some of the things that may be new to him. So he's been good for not just Landon, but for all those young backers in that room. And credit to Trey, he understands kind of his new role with those guys to help them get up to speed with the

understanding and then fit in where he can. But he's been awesome for all those guys to be able to learn from.

Q: Injury wise, Wallace Unamba missed last week. And then also Antonio Clary, I know you said at the end of August, you're gonna start ramping up. Where is he in his progression?

TE: Yeah, so Clary's getting the results of his LEAP (lower extremity assessment protocol) test. And that's the last big hurdle. Once he gets that, then it can be okay. We can really ramp you up to get you going. So we should get that here in the next couple of days. And hopefully within the next couple of weeks, you'll see Clary back out there.

Tough part with him is, man, that knee's been through a lot. and trying to get back and we don't wanna put him out there until he's absolutely ready to go. Cuz he's the kind of guy, and I said this last year when he got hurt, he's the kind of young man, the soldier that's gonna die on the field. And I don't wanna put him out there until we know that it's 100%. he's ready to go. And then Wallace will be week to week with Wallace.

So we're hopeful that this week could be, I'd say, probably doubtful for this week. But I'm hopeful in the next week or two, or two weeks, we'll get him back.

Q: With William & Mary this week, kind of in the bigger landscape of college football, FCS games, where is their value now? For FBS teams, especially with the ACC now it's a lot about revenue, like TV viewership and stuff. You know, these games don't normally draw a lot of viewers on TV. Where do you find the value in a game like this kind of moving forward? Cause you all have a couple more scheduled out.

TE: I think it's important for the game of football. I think it's important for the state of Virginia from the standpoint of there's a lot of

high school players in the state of Virginia that wanna play. And this gives an opportunity for both programs to have exposure. And they got, let me see, what did I count? Four Power Four players. players on their defense, right? One from here, shout out to Aiden Ryan.

So they got four power four players on their roster. They had several players from the last time that we played them that were able to transfer us. So I think it's great for the state, for the bigger schools to play, some of the smaller schools to give them a venue to play on this stage, to get the exposure so that, cause every kid wants to play Power Four, but there's not enough spots for every kid that's getting recruited to play at the Power Four or maybe they got to develop a little bit more. It's a great opportunity for them to see, hey, I can go to William & Mary, I can go to these smaller schools and develop and then have an opportunity to compete against the higher level and then possibly maybe elevate my status over time. I think it's just good for football.

I think it's good for the state when you play these games.

Q: When you went shopping for a running back, how did you find J'Mari (Taylor) and what popped out at you?

TE: *Man, that process, you're watching that ticker every minute of every day during the portal cycle to see what names go in. And then immediately when a name goes in, you have your scouts and your folks in recruiting watch the tape. And I think what popped out is you saw some home run ability on tape. And then as you studied him more, you saw, okay, well, man, not only can he hit the home run, he's really good at the, And then you start to really study, and it's like, man, that's really good eye-feet coordination. So I think it started with you saw some pop on tape with the home run ability. And then obviously, you're gonna say, okay, well, let's see.*

the total package. And then as you study him, and then you get a chance to meet him, you bring him in and you spend some time around him, you talk football with him, you put him on the board, you see that he has a great foundation. And so it was competitive too, because there was some other running backs that came through, some that are playing in ACC at other schools. For us, we just felt like with his skill set and his character and his personality, he was the best fit to start with. And then after we kind of solidified him, chasing another one to get, because we needed to, right, with our running back situation. And then Harrison (Waylee) came available late, and we've been very pleased with both of those guys.

Q: And what do you specifically like about his (J'Mari Taylor) running style? What makes him so tough?

So with him, and I keep saying it, and I guess I probably need to expand upon it. He's got really, really eye -feet coordination, right? So his eyes talk to his feet very seamlessly. And so what that means is he can see the cut, and then he knows when to tell his feet to do what it needs to do to get to the cut. Like you see some backs, they have their eyes open with natural patience, right?

He's one that he doesn't struggle with patience. He can find the cut and then he understands situations too. Like you saw, there was some short yardage ones where he knew the situation where he got down behind his pads, even though he's right at 200 pounds, man, he's down behind his pads and he's running through, running through contact. And then there's other situations where, you know, like on the screen, you saw on the screen, Like he was very, very patient because he understood where his blocker was going to be. Some backs are going to see the green grass and they're just going to go and they're going to run themselves into a tackle. He's going to, you know, understand the

big picture and have the patience to be able to set up the block.

And then, the one fourth down, this is an area where it's our job as coaches to make sure we're disciplined. He lines up a little bit too tight. And because of that, even with his high feet coordination, it happens too fast, that he's not able to make the cut down behind. Because there was a hole there on that fourth and one, but he was so tight to the line of scrimmage. And that's the challenge of coaching, because we sit in there for hours, and then we go back and forth. Is the alignment six yards?

Is it five yards? Is it four yards? What's the optimal spacing? And we were, and that's The difference in winning and losing a ballgame potentially is that one foot, right? And that's where, hopefully, we grow and learn from what happened on Saturday that, man, every inch, every foot, every play matters, right? I know we see the big plays, we see the interception, we see the missed field goal.

But there's a first and ten on the 25 that we got three players there that Man, we're grasping, if we can just find a way to get contact on the body, we down that football now at second and long, and they don't get that drive started, right? But going back to your question, he has really, really good eye, feet coordination, and he got good body control to where he can get himself into the right position most of the times to make the required play.

Q: What is your process for choosing the team captains at the end of the season captains at the end of the year? Do the coaches have any input in that?

TE: No, it's selected by the players in the room. So in the past, what we've done is we've waited till the end of the season to vote. The senior leadership came to me at the end of last year and said, we would like to be able to select permanent captains before the end of the season. So what the plan is now is after game

eight, we'll have a team vote and that team vote will select the team captains. And from there on out, those individuals will actually wear the C on their jersey as permanent team captains, as opposed to getting the jersey at the end of the season with the C on it in a frame. They want to be able to wear it on the field.

So they're going to do it after the eighth game. And then I'll still recognize all of the seniors with the game captains throughout the course of the season. So once we select permanent captains, there may be a permanent captain as part of that. There may be multiple, or it could be guys that are not permanent team captains, but they get to be a game captain because they got a connection to that game. I want to recognize all the seniors as much as possible.

Q: I know you don't have a vote in the process, but what has (Daniel) Sparks done from the leadership standpoint each of the past two seasons to be named a captain after the year?

TE: One is he's shown the ability to perform, and I think he's performing at an extremely high level right now, considering what we're asking him to do, doing double duty. He's just been present, great attitude of practice every single day, he challenges all those specialists. That's a different world. You know, when you're in that specialist world, that's kind of those forgotten toys at times, right?

Because their practice schedule is even different than our practice schedule, because they go out early to warm up, because they got to kick generally in the first part of practice. And then they don't kick again until sometimes at the end, but most times at the end (or) until the next day and so and then their world is very very finicky I'm not gonna sit here and say I'm an expert on the kicking where I understand the kicking game in special teams but to go out there and tell the kicker the angle and all that's why I rely on Drew (Meyer) and those specialists and then they also go attend different workshops in the summer to gain more experience and knowledge But he's

just been present every day. He's had a great attitude. He works extremely hard. He performs and he's earned the respect of not just the guys in the specialist room, but everybody on team.

Q: You mentioned the pass rush earlier.

Another thing I wanted to look at was turnovers. It seems like you feel like pass rush - wise, you're almost getting home. Turnovers, are you close on forcing them, or are those two areas concerns?

***TE:** So you had three in the first game. So we got three turnovers, and that was a hard-fought football game. Nobody wanted to turn the ball over. Tackling and getting more hats around the ball will give us a better chance to put the ball on the on the ground. And I think some alignments they did a good job of having some concept to create some picks. And man coverage I think part of it is, if you can't force them to stay behind schedule, right? It allows them to stay on the aggressive and not necessarily put the ball in jeopardy, right? Like if you look at us, 13 and 19 on third down, man, I told Des (Kitchings), you got to frame that one.*

I don't know if I've ever been a part of a game, especially as many third and longs. Now, credit to the guys. They went out there and they executed, man, what they were able to do. But, you know, we were in more situations to put the ball in jeopardy than so to speak, it was one of seven on third down. And then they had long explosive plays that kept them ahead of schedule where they don't necessarily have to put the ball down in jeopardy.

So I think it starts with being able, being a good tackling football team, getting behind the chains. Now you're going to be forced to put the ball in jeopardy, right? Because now you can swarm, you can swarm tackle and make them fumble, or you can put them in obvious passing situations, which helps your pass rush, right? So kind of leading into the next thing, I think it's very, very hard on second and four. to get a pass rush, right? But if we do what we're supposed to

do, and the guys are taking ownership, so it's not anyone's answering the question, not anyone's fault, but if we get them in second and long, now the pass rush has a chance to get home, okay?

But if you're in second and short, now you gotta call more concepts to stop the run. Right? And so you might not be putting the pass rush in a pass rush situation. Now they're playing gaps, right? As opposed to rushing the pass. And then also what it does is it allows them to use play action.

So now they got play pass to slow your pass rush down, right? Because now they got to play the run and then quickly recognize pass and then transition. So I think it's a combination of a couple of things. I think later in the game, I think we affected the quarterback a little bit. I think we had two sacks that we, you know, Mitchell (Melton) goes over the top of the quarterback and then he spins out and gets it back to the line of scrimmage. That's a sack.

I think (Landon) Danley had a sack, right? If he doesn't get it, James (Jackson) is coming. So if he forces the quarterback to step up in the pocket, we're probably going to have a sack, or at least we're going to get a hit on the quarterback. I think (Daniel) Rickert got close, got a couple of hits. So I think we got to do a better job of playing more efficient on first and second down on defense. And we did, and heck, we did it the week before, like the week before, like we did, we created some turnovers.

This week, we just, we didn't tackle the back as consistently, which I think impacts the pass rush because now you're expecting those guys to get home in shorter yard situations where the ball is going to be out. And when we had them, we didn't get them on the ground.

Q: I think two years ago, probably going into this game, I asked you about a matchup of African -American head coaches. And I think the thought was, like, making good progress,

things are going the right direction. I look at it this year, and I don't know that the numbers have changed nationally in the ACC. What do you think about the progress on that front?

TE: Being transparent with the way college football is, I really haven't had time to think about it. Other than just trying to say, you know what, the way that I can impact it the best is just do the best job that I possibly can with the job that I have. And try to impart as much wisdom and knowledge to all those around me, regardless of the color of their skin, in hopes that that maybe they see what we're doing here at Virginia to say, you know what, somebody else is worthy of getting a shot. But with all that's going on in college football, man, my focus has been on trying to build our roster. And I believe, and that's always been my motto too, just focus on what I can control and do the best that I possibly can with that. But it's gonna be pretty cool to go out there and shake hands with Coach (Mike) London.

And I've always respected him from afar. We met in person the last time he was here and he's been encouraging me since then and does a great job. He's won a national championship. So he's a very accomplished coach. And so it's going to be, it's going to be fun to be able to have a good conversation pre-game and then watch our teams go, go battle and compete.

Q: Coach, the third quarter obviously was a kind of decisive part of the game on, on Saturday. In your tenure so far, the second and third quarters, you're negative 175. How do you kind of look at that? third quarter, how do you fix it? Second quarter as well, that kind of middle part of the game.

TE: Yeah, we talk about the middle eight. And so we've, we've rearranged practice. We've, we've made it a point of emphasis. You know, it's, it's, it's not just something that you say. it's got to be something that you, that you believe. And, you know, I think with this team, the sample size isn't big enough yet because the middle eight of

The first game, we go and we score a two-minute drive, then we get an interception right out the gate.

So you win the middle eight. And then this week, you know, like I said, and I told them at halftime, the least important thing is the score at halftime. The score at halftime don't matter. And I think we saw that around college football. There were several teams that had leads at half time. But I gotta do a better job in the locker room at halftime of making sure that I have the mindset the right way to come out.

Hopefully these guys will learn from this experience that you can't be complacent and every play matters, right? And we put a lot of emphasis on the fourth quarter. And I think we battled in the fourth quarter to give ourselves a chance to win. We got some stops when we needed to get some stops in the fourth quarter. We gotta be able to recreate that same level of focus and energy and that's my job and that's a great question. because we got to do better right there in the middle eight.

So with this team, I think the verdict's still out on how they're going to respond. The great thing is we got another opportunity this week to get back out there and go to work. But we've been trying to address it with some of the things we're doing in practice and putting as much a point of emphasis on the middle eight as we do the fast start and the fourth quarter.

Q: I have a question about the two-minute drill as well. The end of the first half, almost the same yard line, almost the same time on the clock, you kind of slowed it down. In the fourth quarter, it felt like the play that ended up being the turnover was more rushed than that. How do you kind of want those two situations managed? Can the end of the game one also kind of be a little slower? Did you need to score fast? What do you think about that?

TE: Well, we were bleeding the clock actually. And so we were trying to bleed the clock and

that was a mesh concept. We had a guy coming open, right? And we didn't want to score too fast, but at the same time too, you want to score in that situation. And I think it just came down to, Chandler (Morris) saw it, and he saw a back matched up on the defensive end, right? And needed to put the ball over the top and move it to his right, just left it a little bit inside, and didn't want to throw back across his body with the tight end coming.

Because you always tell a quarterback, roll right, throw left, sit bench, right? That's kind of the old proverb there. They don't want to throw back across their body. You know, in that point, I don't know if it was rushed as much as we were trying to bleed clock, but we had one timeout left, and we're trying to also give ourselves an opportunity to have, you know, three or four plays just in case, because it's different because we're going for a touchdown, right? If you're playing for a field goal, like it's completely, you manage the situation completely different, right? But going for a touchdown, you want to play with a tempo to give yourself multiple opportunities, and we only have one timeout.

So it's not like we can stop the clock. And then if a ball is caught inbounds, right, that's a different situation than one on the sideline to get out of bounds. So I think it was more just a function of Chandler want that one back and I think we all we all do in that in that situation. But we were trying to bleed as much clock as we could to get and also to the other thing that's changed a little bit about your timeout usage at the end of the game is the injuries. So if a guy goes down and he's injured, and he goes down after the ball is spotted, then you can lose a timeout. And then you have the 10 second runoff.

If you have a penalty where the ball, a penalty while the clock is running, they can elect to run 10 seconds off or you have to burn a timeout. So trying to hold that timeout for those, you know, in the game situations, but also, you know, trying to score. And I think if we had it all over again, it would probably be the same play call.

We'd just be a little bit more careful with the ball and maybe throw it out of bounds right there, you know, as we roll to the right, as opposed to maybe force that ball down the field.

Q: Scheduling, another scheduling question. Y'all are coming off a with the non-conference game, you got an FCS game. What is your ideal schedule look like? I know there's a lot of talk about going to nine conference games too in the future in the ACC right now.

TE: *Right. I'm in support of the, I mean, heck, I mean, it's non-conference, it's an ACC game. That's how we approached it. I mean, we weren't approaching it as a non-conference game and this is NC State, second win in his team, last four years in ACC on the road at their place. This is an ACC game for us. So in essence, we're playing, you know, So I'm all in favor of playing an additional conference game.*

I mean, you want a schedule to build your team and test your program, all right? I think it's important. But at the same time too, you also, when you're in it, you know how physical an ACC game can be. So you wanna also give your team an opportunity to recover after some physical tough games. Not saying that this one's not, it's gonna be a physical tough game. But you wanna try and schedule the best you can, but you gotta put tough games at the beginning of the season.

Man, how awesome has it been so far? in college football to see all these marquee matchups. Man, it's been, I bet it's been fun for y'all. I don't get to watch them, but it's fun for me at least follow the scores and see that, you know, all these power, power four teams are playing each other and they're playing out of conference. So I think it's, I think it's healthy for the, for the game. I think it'll pay dividends long-term too.

But for me, I've always been the mindset. I've never ran away from scheduling from, from the

day I got here. I mean, we jumped on some big ones right out the gate.

But I think it's also helped us continue to grow and build our program.

Q: Mekhi Buchanan was meant to receive scans a few weeks. What's the status of him?

TE: So he's back in practice this week. We'll see by the end of the week if he's ready to go. That ended up being a high component ankle sprain that was, you know, four to six. We thought initially, you know, we could be aggressive and maybe four, but it's taken probably closer to six. But he's out in practice, man, I'm excited to see him run around.

So hopefully this week, but if not this week, definitely by next week, he'll be full practice and taking some of the restrictions off.

Q: Are you expecting also David Wohlabaugh to be more available?

TE: Yeah, so while Wohlabaugh is still with the surgery, he's still kind of in that surgical mode to where we got to let the stitches heal before we, so he hasn't gotten stitches out yet. So hopefully when he gets the stitches out by the end of this week, early next week, then we can ramp him up. So I don't know if he'll be back next week, but I think by the time we get back from the bye week, I think he'd be, be ready to go. And then Kam's (Robinson) back in practice this week in hopes of next week being ready to rock and roll.

Q: Noah Vaughn had a 20 -yard run on Saturday. What's he done to earn more opportunity?

TE: Yeah. I mean, he's just, he showed up every day and gone to work, right? I think in the building and around, I've said that he's probably the most complete back. He can do a lot. Each day, he's getting better from an experience standpoint to where you feel confident to throw him out there in pass protection.

We know what he can do with the ball in his hands, and he continues to do that. So he's just battle. And it's a tough, I mean, right now to get carries in that running back room, it's pretty tough. I mean, you got J'Mari (Taylor) you got X (Xavier Brown), right, that's a really good football player. You got (Harrison) Waylee, that's, like I said, he's 3,000 yards in his career plus, and you got Noah. But I'm really proud of that group because they put their egos to the side. They've made it about the position. They're all pushing to create a standard of performance at running back, regardless of who's in there. And I think that's what he's done. He said, you know what, I'm just gonna be a part of the group, push for the standard, and it's good to see him have success.