

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

Q: Your offense has been, for the most part, consistently productive this season. Do you have a good sense of where your defense is right now, obviously? Had some struggles against State, played well the other two games.

Tony Elliott: *Yeah, just settling in. I think both offense and defense trying to figure out what their identity is, how to communicate properly together, playing a lot of different guys. So we're starting to get a better sense of where we are. I think this week will be a really good challenge. We'll know a lot more about our offense and defense as we get into ACC play.*

Q: Kam Robinson warmed up against William and Mary. He's back on the depth chart. How confident are you that he will be able to play against Stanford?

TE: *I feel really good.*

That was the plan. The plan was to let him warm up. And last week, he practiced with non-contact. So we wanted him to get used to the game day routine since he'd been out for a couple of weeks. And that's why we allowed him to warm up. We did a couple of other guys like that.

He did that. Mekhi Buchanan did that. Kenan Johnson and (Antonio) Clary. All in anticipation of these guys being available hopefully this week.

Q: And when you get Cam Robinson back, what type of athlete do you get and what of a difference maker?

TE: *Yeah, I think the film speaks for itself. You just go watch him play and he's a very, very fast,*

very instinctual, violent guy, can run sideline to sideline. So you get a very dynamic athlete back at the linebacker position.

Q: Your offensive line, you guys brought in seven transfers. Only one of those guys is currently starting, but you guys have figured out a way to make it work. How have you seen the group develop, and how have you managed, I guess, to get past all the injuries, particularly at right tackle?

TE: *It's a next man up mentality, and I think credit to Jack Witmer and his development and getting Drake (Metcalf) back from injury was really big and (Ethan) Sipe as well, being able to fill in. He still hobbled a little bit with his foot and now his ankle. But the guys have bonded and gelled, and even the guys that are on the sideline right now that aren't playing are being productive. They're engaged, they're involved in the meetings, they're out at practice, they're being an extra set of eyes to help Coach Heff (Terry Heffernan) with the little things throughout the course of practice. So it's been fun to watch, even though it's a little painful, when a lot of the guys that you thought would be in there are not available.*

Q: What are you seeing from Stanford front? They've got nine sacks early this year. You guys haven't allowed a sack. What do you see from their defensive front that could pose some problems for your line?

TE: *Well, first of all, their entire defense is very experienced. I think they're all seniors or graduates on the defensive side of the ball. 91 (Clay Patterson) is playing at a high level. He's a matchup problem for any interior guy in a one-on-one situation. So you got to be smart in how you handle him and may have to slide in his direction. And then they do a lot defensively from a structure standpoint to create confusion.*

And then their second level guys, linebackers when they pressure, they know how to get to the quarterback. So 91 has three sacks and then

they also got a handful of sacks from the second level. So they do a really good job schematically of testing your protection rules and they get some matchup advantages on backs. And that's always something that you're working on trying to keep the big guys off your backs. Their edge guys do a really good job of squeezing the pocket and forcing the quarterback to escape interior. which allows the defensive line, the defensive tackles, to get the ball carrier on the ground quickly.

Q: Building off that, Stanford's run defense is only allowing 3.5 yards per carry and is 29th in the nation in terms of rushing yards per game. You guys are first in the ACC in yards per rush, rushing attempts, third down conversions. What do you need to do to keep having success on the ground?

TE: It's going to come down to just a little bit of practice. in execution. That's what it always comes down to, hand placement, pad level, coordination, working together. When we're supposed to be doubling, we need to stay on our doubles as long as we can to create a new line of scrimmage. Backs are going to have to be disciplined with their eyes. They're going to have to run with a mentality to fall forward.

So it's going to be a good matchup. I'm excited to see how our guys respond now that we're getting to ACC play.

Q: Since it's ACC landscape and also Virginia landscape, I wanted to get your reaction to Virginia Tech firing Coach (Brent) Pry over the weekend.

TE: Yeah. Over the last few years, Coach Pry's been good to me. I thought we had a good relationship here working together in state, even though we're rivals. Man, hate it for him and his family. You don't want to see that happen to any coach. We know it's a part of what we sign up for, but you hate to see that. I don't know all the details behind all of that, and really, it's not my job to go and find that out.

Just know that Coach Pry's a heck of a football coach.

He's been really, really good to me over the last I hate to see that, hate that for the young people in the locker room at this point in the season. But ultimately, you got to trust that the administration had a plan, knew what they were doing. But just praying for Pry and his family as they go through this tough time.

Q: And you mentioned last week, (Antonio) Clary wanting to come back and sometimes pushing the body. What's your role in kind of mentoring him about what's right, compared to obviously he's got the passion to come out and play?

TE: He's mad at me right now because he wants to play and he's one that he'll lay it on the line for you. He has no regard for his body, and he's willing to go down for the team. I want him to be able to play as much football as possible, and I think he will. that I have to be the bad guy and say, hey, no, we need to take another week, then I'm willing to do that because ultimately I want to see him play and play as much as he possibly can. And then also I'm a little bit more experienced in terms of the after effect of injuries long term. So you don't want to put him in a situation where five, ten years from now, he's going to be walking with a permanent limp because he came back too soon.

So it's kind of give and take. But I tell you what, yesterday he was turned loose to run around full speed with the group and he looked good. But we'll still continue to talk between Clary and myself and the medical staff to see what is the right time. How does the knee respond? Because really it's a... structurally is fixed and he's in a he's in a good place from a strength standpoint now It's just how does it respond to the volume of? Practice and then how does it respond in the game?

So I get a lot of advice from the medical folks I don't try to overstep my boundaries there, but

then also from just a because I care about him and I care about his long-term health. I don't want to put him on the field too early.

Q: You've made recruiting in this state a priority. Given that and given what school he came from, was Kam Courtney an important recruit in last year's class and why?

TE: I believe so. One, he came from a state champion caliber program where he knew how to win, knew what it took, was going to bring that. And then as a football player, he's just a football player. He can do a lot of things. You saw his explosiveness in a return game. You saw him as a ball carrier on a reverse.

And he's made some really good catches down the stretch here this season. So he was a huge part of keeping a player like that from leaving the state and going to the Big Ten. It was important to keep him home.

Q: With you guys just playing NC State a few weeks ago, how does that help you guys before going into this ACC opener just facing an ACC opponent as non-conference early on in the season?

TE: Great question. I think now you got a sense for the speed of the game, the physicality of the game. I'm not saying that the other opponents that you play were not physical, but you get a test in league, even though it was non-conference. And one of the better teams in our league that's won a lot of football games that has recruited well over the last 10 years or so to be able to build their program holistically. So it was a really good opportunity for us to see where we were, to feel what it feels like to be in an ACC game as we get ready for Stanford coming in here Saturday night.

Q: Just from your film study, did it look like that Stanford took a giant leap forward last week?

TE: I thought they did a really good job of capitalizing on turnovers and generating turnovers. That was the difference in the game. But you just see that Stanford has the ability to run the football. Behind that big offensive line and they got some big thick running backs that come downhill that are going to fall forward. The quarterback does a good job of distributing the ball I think their tight ends are as good as any that we're going to play all year. On the other side defensively, like I said before they challenge you. So it looks like they built some confidence coming out of that game versus a BC team that was down 17-6 and boom within a couple minutes, now they're leading, they score 14 points quick off of two turnovers. And so they capitalized on that. So we're expecting to get their best and they're going to come in here confident.

And they got some things that challenge you in all three phases that we got to be prepared for. So I'm excited to see how our guys respond to Stanford, a team that we haven't played before. I'm excited too, because it's the first time that Virginia and Stanford have played, first time that I've played against Stanford. And Coach (Frank) Reich is a very accomplished football coach, very, very good at what he does, done it at the highest level. You can see some of the pro influence on what they do offensively, so it's going to be a fun challenge.

Q: Was standing behind for your offensive tackles who are on crutches or scooters or whatever? But how is this offensive line despite that kind of come together? You talked about no sacks allowed and eighth in the country in rushing yards how they kind of found a way?

TE: They just found a way but I think what they what they've done is they've taken pride in the program, starting in the weight room. In the way that Coach Smo (Adam Smotherman) and the staff down there have helped them build their bodies. So I think they're confident in their strength and their conditioning. And then with

Coach Heff (Terry Heffernan) and his expertise and the details and fundamentals of the position. Understanding the scheme that coach that coach (Des) Kitchings is drawing up for him. I think they just have a lot of confidence right now. They feed off of each other and I believe that they've turned it into not an individual standard but a collective standard of what the position is supposed to supposed to look like with all five of those guys and it doesn't matter who's in there. That's the been the funnest thing to watch is it's really been a next man up mentality. We've played a lot of guys in a lot of different positions as we've been figuring out we've faced adversity and it seems like each week a soldier goes down and we got another one that's ready to step up and play.

Q: When you talk to Drake Metcalf, he's almost like a playing version of Terry Heffernan. What have you seen just in the last years? He's kind of gone through everything that Drake's had injury wise that he's gotten himself back to this point.

TE: Yeah, I told him. The other day before practice that man, he's moving extremely well. And so super proud of how he attacked his rehab. And we were probably a little bit too aggressive to begin with. Because he was a guy that said, man, I want to get back as fast as possible. And we had a little bit of a setback.

And he responded to that the right way. And that's what I'm proud of is because of his response to that. And as opposed to getting down about it, just taking it in stride and going back to work has put him in the position that he is. Now he's moving well, he's communicating well, he's playing at a high level. So just excited to have him back and he's kind of the mouthpiece of the room. Because he's got a big personality if you ever spend any time around Drake.

But what I do know is I know he loves those guys in that unit. He'll do anything that he possibly can for him. He's going to hold them

accountable and call them out when they need to. And then also if he has a mistake or something, he's going to own it. He's been a good leader for us as well.

Q: I'm not breaking any news here but California is far away. With Stanford coming here and you going to Cal, does that open up California any more for recruiting? Does it change your outlook on how much you look at that state?

TE: Yeah, so we have a couple of players from California on our roster right now.

I think the brand, Virginia, has already opened up. The academic side has already opened up an opportunity to go to California. I think the biggest challenge is just the ability to truly build relationship because of the proximity. It's very difficult to get back and forth in both directions. Them trying to come to a game to really see what it's all about, and us actually getting out there to get into the school and the community to find out everything we can about a player.

But I think it does open up an opportunity. I think recruiting has changed. It's become more national. But for us, it's going to be relationship-driven. So if we have relationships out there in the West, we're going to definitely take advantage of them. We went out there to see a couple quarterbacks last year.

So we are recruiting the state of California and I think us being able to play out there is probably more beneficial than them coming to play out here because we actually get to, to put our brand of football on display in front of, you know, recruits and people in the, Because TV also plays a big factor too, like 10:30 p.m. at night over here, it's hard to stay up that late for a game and then vice versa. Them being able to see our games when we start early, right? So a 12 o'clock kick here is a 9 a.m., and they're coming off a Friday night. So it makes it a little bit challenging from that standpoint. But being

able to physically play in the state does help because people get to see you live.

Q: John Rogers caught a touchdown this past week. What are you seeing from him development-wise? I know Sage was out, but what are you seeing from John, one of the younger players in your program that you guys recruited? What are you seeing from his development?

TE: *Yeah, excited about John. First, his body has changed. He came in here probably around just at 220 pounds. Now he's hovering about 235ish. And because of that, he's a little bit more physical at the point of attack. We knew in the recruiting process that he was a dynamic athlete.*

John can really run, change direction, has some explosiveness, something that is different than some of the other guys in the position room. But he's so much to learn as well. And what you're seeing now is, that he's getting a better understanding of the scheme, which is allowing his physical traits to now really kick in. So just super excited for John. All the guys love John.

He was a student body president coming out of high school. So he's a very social guy. Everybody likes John. Great for us on special teams as well. So he's going to have tremendous value moving forward this season and in the future.

Q: It seems like you guys got the tight ends a little more involved as the game went along Saturday. Are you seeing Chandler (Morris) look for them more and more as the season progresses? What are you seeing there?

TE: *For them in particular, whenever the run game really gets going, it helps them because of some of the play action stuff that comes off of the run game. Because they're involved in a run game, and then when you can sell the run, it sets up the play action. And a lot of your more primary, the primary targets go to them in the play action, as opposed to some of your drop*

back. And your drop back, depending upon what kind of scheme you're running, they may not be the primary target. But a lot of times in your play action, the first place you look is for the tight ends.

Q: How important was it to be able to get Danny Kaelin that much playing time, not just for this season, but for his development in the future?

TE: *Yes, it was really important and just super proud of the guys for having the right mindset and mentality to come out and have that workman approach so that we could play guys. And for him to have action early in the second quarter and all through the third quarter was big. And we hope to be able to continue to play him so that from a standpoint, if there's ever an injury, he's ready to go. But then also down the road, it helps him to get those valuable snaps. And it was good to see Cole (Geer) get in there too and play a little bit.*

So to have a game where you're able to play as many guys that we were able to play on the roster. And I've been doing it for a long time, and I haven't been a part of many games like that where you have a chance to really, really, and not just at the end of the game, but in competitive situations, play a lot of your depth. I know we got the questions about the secondary, but man, that stuff is huge, to be able to play depth so you can iron out some of those issues before you get into conference play.

Q: That actually goes with my question, the secondary and the kind of working that communication issues that you might have when you have so many new pieces. Do you feel like this group is finally kind of getting together? You kind of know what pieces work well together now after a few games getting into ACC play?

TE: *Yeah, I think we're getting closer. The challenge is as soon as you get closer, it seems to be knock on wood and somebody get dinged*

up and then now your combination changes. And it may, it may seem simple from the outside, like, oh, we'll just plug a guy in. But when you're playing the teams that can change structures on you, they're constantly motioning, right? They're trying to find numbers and angles and guys are on opposite sides of the field and now they got to communicate across the field and it's all got to be tied in from the front, the backers, and then the secondary.

Because again, their run/pass reads can change like that. Their fits can change like that. When they're in man coverage, close splits can change things. So there's a lot of communication that has to take place. And you hear me talk about chemistry. It's the same thing on the offensive side of the ball.

You got to build chemistry together. So the more we can play together, and obviously we're doing everything we can in practice, but it's in the game because you can't truly simulate in practice what it's going to be like in the game because you don't know what the calls are going to be from the opposite sideline. So every snap that we get with those guys out there is valuable for us and we got to make sure that we do everything we can from a preparation standpoint. As we're building that chemistry, we don't have big mistakes that lead to that was the only thing about the game this past week.

We just had some uncharacteristic big play busts that that we got to get cleaned up which the guys have taken ownership of and we're going to make sure that we at least correct those errors and then hope that we're in the process prepared for whatever we see on this coming Saturday.

Q: And just updates on Noah Vaughn, Daniel Sparks, D'Marcus Crosby.

TE: *Yeah, so (D'Marcus) Crosby is dealing with a tooth issue that should be getting fixed this morning, matter of fact. And so we anticipate that he'll be ready to go. Noah (Vaughn) is early*

on, looks like he's in a good place. High ankle sprain. We do want to take some more pictures just to be just to be safe but you got to wait until it's weight-bearing to be able to take those stress pictures so that could be could be a couple weeks.

(Wallace) Unamba we're realistically probably around the bye week just to let that knee that knee calm down. So I'd anticipate by the time we get after the Louisville game we should be getting "Big Wal" big wall back. Kam's (Robinson) good to go. (Antonio) Clary should be turned loose. So we're getting several guys back. But the biggest thing out of the game was the ankle on Noah (Vaughn). Oh, (Daniel) Sparks, hip flexor.

I think Sparks should be available to punt. We may take the duty of kickoff away just for a little while. Because that's where he puts a little bit more stress on the leg. But it was a hip flexor strain and you saw he was in there holding for us on our extra points. We just wanted to be careful there, but I anticipate he'll be at least available to punt this weekend.

Q: When Frank Reich was talking yesterday, he said Jahmeer (Carter) is the best defensive lineman you guys have. Is he still getting better, Jahmeer, even in his veteran sixth year? What are you seeing from him this season?

TE: *Yeah, if you come out and you watch Jahmeer at practice, even in our walkthrough tempo, when it's truly a walkthrough, he has bands on his hands to work on keeping his hands tight. His pad level is very low. He's intentional with his hand placement. So he's constantly working, which has allowed him to continue to improve. And he's going to be a guy that's going to constantly push for that ceiling, right? He's going to get every inch and every ounce out of his ability as he can.*

I think the offseason was really good for him. Man, he took his diet very serious, transformed his body a little bit. I think the depth really helps

so that he can stay fresh. If he's not having to play 65, 70 snaps, man, he can play at a different speed. for those 25-30 snaps when he's in there. So I think it's a combination of several things, but he's the ultimate pro.

He shows up every day. He's probably in the building right now doing something. He's probably in the weight room, to be honest with you, he's probably in the weight room. We don't practice until four o'clock this afternoon, he's probably in the weight room doing foam rollers and all kind of stuff just to keep his body in the best condition as possible. And then he's going to be up here watching film on special teams and on their offense.

So just proud of the leadership that he brings and the example that he sets. And I want him to continue to play at a high level because there's nobody that works harder in our program than "Big Jah".