

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

TONY ELLIOTT: *Yeah how cool was that? I mean, Scott Stadium was electric. And it's what I've been envisioning. I think it's what everybody in Virginia football has been envisioning. And really, it should be like that every week. Big credit in overtime with the false start, because they were down there in the section where it was loud and cheering and really was a difference in the game. So just big shout out to the students and the fans for packing Scott and making it what we know it can be, one of the toughest environments in all of college football. So really, really appreciate everybody that came out on Friday night.*

Q: When your team got back together to start prepping for Louisville, what did you think of the players' focus level, and did playing on a Friday instead of a Saturday help in that regard to give them a little more time to celebrate Florida State and get that out of their system?

TE: *It was pretty cool because I met with the senior leadership before I actually walked into to meet with the team and I asked them if they watched the film, and many of them had already done so and I said, what do you think? And they said, "man, we could have played even better", right? So it was a good sign that everybody was excited to win, but also understands that we haven't played our best game yet. We left some plays out there on the field. So I think this group is really starting to understand that it's not about an opponent. It's not about the moment of joy in a locker room after the game so to speak, but it's about the process of preparing to try and chase your best game week in and week out.*

Q: Yeah, kind of along those lines. Guys have played some fourth quarter down to the wire games against Louisville. For the returning

guys, is this one that they have circled because of what's happened the last two years against the Cardinals?

TE: *I would imagine that that they do because they've gone against some really good Louisville teams and it's come down to the to the fourth quarter. But, also they understand that in our league, and where we want to be in our league towards the top, it's going to be four quarter games every week down to one down to one possession. So they're going to be excited to play. We've just got to make sure that as we progress through the week that we don't try to skip ahead, that we commit to the theme of the day and the quality of work that it takes day in and day out in preparation to be ready to play your best on Saturday.*

Q: You guys won, obviously, a one possession game this past week. What do you think was the biggest difference? Those have eluded you guys at times over the last couple of years. What do you think was the biggest difference on Friday night, in your opinion, looking holistically?

TE: *Right, I feel like the guys didn't flinch. They believed. They believed they were going to win the game. They didn't necessarily know how it was going to happen, but they believed at the end of the day, they were going to make the play or plays to win the game. And I think that's the difference. What you saw on Friday night, for us was a culture game. The culture that we've been really trying to build here. An attitude of belief, an attitude of work, playing together, being a team. And at the end of the day, and Florida State will probably say the same thing, there was a lot of plays that were left out there. But at the end of the day, I felt like our guys believed that they were going to win that game and they found a way.*

Q: Some of the game's biggest moments were (Ja'Son) Prevard's two interceptions, (Mitchell) Melton's fumble, and (Will) Bettridge's kick in

overtime. Walk me through those from your perspective and what you saw there.

TE: Well, first, the first interception by (Ja'Son) Prevard, man, that was a big one. Heck of a play. You don't see that. He tipped it to himself and then had the concentration and ability to finish the play with the interception. And then the one in overtime obviously was because of pressure, so pressure forced the quarterback to throw off his back foot and throw it up for grabs. And he came down with it.

(Mitchell) Melton is continuing to get better week after week. And I think as his hand continues to heal, and he gets out of that cast, I think you're going to see even more out of him down the stretch when he can really use that hand with the finger on it that was broken.

And then (Will) Bettridge, man, I told Bettridge, like, hey dude, I've already envisioned you kicking a 50-yarder to win this game. I told him that throughout the course of the week. And he prepared and he believed, and protection wasn't great, and that's an area where we got to improve. The protection wasn't great on that kick, but the operation was intact, and he hit it when we needed it

Q: Still missing Noah Vaughn, but those four running backs have been fantastic throughout the year. What do they each bring to the room, J'Mari (Taylor), Xavier (Brown), Noah (Vaughn) and (Harrison) Waylee?

TE: Yeah, excited about Noah (Vaughn) getting back. Noah's back in practice this week, so I anticipate that he'll be full go by the end of the week. But they all bring something a little bit different.

I think you're really starting to see J'Mari (Taylor) emerge as a racer-type back. He's showing his elusive ability, and then also he can run with power and he just has a knack for the big play.

I think we've all known since X (Xavier Brown) showed up here that he's an explosive type of player. But what you're seeing now is he's getting more comfortable running behind his pads in between in between the tackles.

And (Harrison) Waylee, he's got the most rush. He's got the most rushing yards of any active player in college football, so he's very experienced. He's a little bit bigger, so he runs more downhill with power. But you're seeing that he's starting to become more comfortable in the system. You're seeing his feet be able to allow him to be a little bit more comfortable.

And then Noah (Vaughn) is kind of a combination of all those things. I've said for a long time that prior to Harrison and J'Mari coming in that I thought that Noah was the most complete back because he can do a lot of different things well. And he's just going to get better as he gets more experience over the course of this season and his career.

Q: Last time out in Louisville, Perris (Jones) got hurt. Is that something that the guys have been thinking about? Is that a source of motivation to go out there and win it for Perris?

TE: Many of the guys that are on the roster now weren't there and weren't a part of that. It'll be something that we acknowledge, but for a lot of those guys, they weren't a part of that. And that's always a tough subject to approach to as a football player, when you're talking about a guy down on the mat and being momentarily or for a little while paralyzed. But hopefully, I think he's up there doing some stuff with school. So hopefully he'll come around and the guys will have a chance to meet him.

Q: Over the course of your time here, you were able to win against ranked opponents before. How do you prepare this team to benefit from success and kind of shake this off? And how

much is having a veteran team is a little different and how you prepare for that?

TE: Right, so really going to count on the leadership of this team. Guys like Mitchell (Melton), JT (Jayden Thomas), Chandler (Morris), guys that have been there before to help the guys understand that really you don't change the approach, you don't change the process. The process, if anything, you have to insulate yourself more so that you're not looking at your phone, listening to the text messages and what people are saying and just focus on what you can control and how you prepare. But the positive about where we are, especially going into this game at Louisville is we played at NC State, which is one of the better environments in all of college football. And they do a really good job of making it difficult on the opposing team. I thought we handled the environment well, so we've got a little bit of experience there. The biggest thing is constantly reminding the guys that it's not about anything external, it's all about internal, starting with us in this room and how we think and then making sure that we hold each other accountable to what we say are our standards. And it was a I had to do that on Thursday of last week. I got after the guys pretty good at the end of practice because I saw some things that I challenged them at the front end of the week not to do. And as we got to the end of Thursday, I started to see a little bit of the guys maybe relaxing. And so I jumped them pretty good after practice, but they responded. I'm confident that we have a veteran group that's going to respond and they want to be challenged. They want to know what it takes. But we passed one test, but we got so many more tests ahead of us that we got to prepare for.

Q: And there were some guys that were on the line of possibly coming back prior to that game health wise. Do you have any updates on Brady Wilson, Ethan Sipe, and even Chandler Morris' thumb?

TE: Yeah, so Chandler (Morris), I haven't really heard much else about the thumb, so he's good. He's good to go. Looked fine yesterday in practice. Sparky's (Daniel Sparks) getting closer so we're hopeful that Sparky will be able to punt this week. Ethan Sipe played a few snaps in the game, but he'll be ready to roll. He's got another week and he'll be ready to roll. Played a little bit in the game, we're kind of easing him back in. But I'm hoping by the end of this week, he'll be ready for us to just kind of take all the restraints off and let him go. Brady (Wilson), I think Brady is another week away, but we're hopeful that after the bye week we'll get him back. Same thing with Wohlabough (David Wohlabough Jr.), by then Big Wallace (Wallace Unamba) will be back in practice. So I think the closest one really is Sparky, but Sipe will be ready to go.

Q: And I know Makilan (Thomas), that was an earlier injury. Have you had any updates on how -?

TE: Yeah, I mean, that's one there that, especially with his size, just don't want to rush it. All right, we don't want to rush. That's, that's the kind of the, the fifth man there with the, with the pin put in it. And, and so the biggest thing is he's up walking, he's in a boot, but still hasn't come out of the boot on dry land. So we're going to err on the side of being cautious for him in particular, especially in his situation, because he comes back and, and he gets on the field. It could be a year, it could cost himself a year, especially if he's not ready. So we're going to make sure that that thing is absolutely healed all way up before we start progressing him back.

Q: (Will) Bettridge got here in 2022, so you've seen every one of his kicks. He's had ups and he's had downs. How did he respond after the missed kick against NC State that turned out to be significant?

TE: He came back and he hit the biggest kick in his time and here for this staff. And there was no doubt. Right before he went out to kick, I gave him five and man, he hit my hand pretty

hard. That let me know that he was ready to go. So just proud of him and man, he's been through a lot. I mean, you also got to take into consideration the jersey number that he wears. He wears that in honor of D'Sean (Perry), and D'Sean birthday was not too long ago, and then they were having a big event down in Miami on Saturday after the game. So just really, really proud of how he's responded. And he was our special teams player of the week as a result.

Q: So is everyone on the sideline looking at that field goal or are there guys who are looking away?

TE: To be honest with you. I was I was ready to go to the next overtime. I'm thinking about I'm talking to coach kids like a get ready to get ready to roll. We're about to go to the next overtime. Wasn't even thinking about that. That was just you can feel the belief on the sideline that nobody was even thinking that he wasn't going to make that that field goal from the Florida State game, defense was obviously very good, came up in big spots.

Q: You did give up, I think, four pass plays over 30 yards. It's a very explosive offense. But that happened against Stanford, it happened a couple times against William & Mary when they dropped. What are you seeing on the long pass plays and how big a concern is that?

TE: I think this game in particular, man, some of those were competitive plays. Whereas in the previous games, it was more non-competitive plays, bad eyes, bad communication that resulted in busts that gave up the big plays. I got to give credit to Duce (Robinson). He made some plays from that standpoint. And then one of them was a speed sweep where they flipped it, we had them leveraged, and then man, they did a better job of capturing the edge and it goes around that counts as a long pass play from a standpoint when it's flipped. So, I thought it was improved overall. What I like to see is I thought we were in position now. Next step is we got to make some plays. But there were a lot of plays

that were contested and their guy made a play. But I think we're improving from the standpoint of the communication and the eye discipline, which again, not making any excuses. We got to do a better job as coaches. to help those guys that haven't been in our system as long as some of the others. Kind of get up to speed with all of the different things we're asking them to do.

Q: And then you mentioned, (Antonio) Clary, what did you see when you replayed the targeting?

TE: Yeah, it's a tough, man, it's a tough deal. Biggest thing is target a little bit lower inside that don't go up near the near the head because once you once you launch and You get close to the to the to the face mask head area. They have to they have to call it. After we saw it in slow motion and looked at it, everybody was in agreeance like yeah, they got it. They've got to make that call but he asked me he text me and asked me like what could I do better? I just say target a little bit lower and try not to get up above the head And he was trying to what he was trying to do is he was trying to displace the ball from the receiver. He was trying to target the ball, ball is up a little bit higher, and just stay away from the head.

Q: Did you feel like your defense overall took a giant step forward, and particularly in the pressure department?

TE: Yeah, I thought that they, against the number one offense in the country, I thought that they came up with stops when we needed. They had three takeaways and two fourth down stops. Right and I think the two fourth down stops ended up being the difference in the game because we gave it back to him three times so imagine if we don't give the ball back to him three times, they get three turnovers and the two fourth down stops and at that versus an offense like that dynamic. That's a pretty good showing.

Now we got to clean up some things in our run game. I think our safeties can take some better angles and fit some things a little bit better because we got a little leaky in the run game at times. We knew they were going to make plays, But I thought that just from a competitive standpoint, I thought they played fast. I thought they were physical. We made a couple plays. We also gave up a couple plays, but that's opportunity for growth. But I thought that they gained a little bit of confidence coming out of that game and what they're capable of.

And I think with Kam (Robinson) getting going, because he's still not fully in game shape yet, so hopefully another week or two, he'll be ready to roll. Even also challenge some guys that I think we can play better. That's the big thing. more in the tank as this unit grows. And I think we can even get better from a pressure standpoint as we go down the stretch. A couple guys been challenging, Cazeem (Moore) and Fisher (Camac). I think they got another level they can go to. I like the interior rotation with the D tackles. And I thought Hunter Osborne really showed up in the game. I thought you saw some really good things out of Jason Hammond. So I think we got opportunities to get even better on defense.

Q: And just about Louisville's offense, I know their personnel has changed some but are they basically the same as they were a year ago or have they changed?

TE: *Coach Brown does a great job of adjusting his system to his personnel. One thing is they're going to have elite quarterback and that can distribute the ball that can make all of the throws. They got to their one, two punch at running back is probably as good as anybody in the league or the country. And those guys are fast and they can go and coach. Coach Brown does a good job of challenging you in the run game because he does a lot of different things. It's hard to get a beat on what he's doing. It's been effective. Zero is a big physical receiver and then five is shifty and fast, so he's got a lot of*

weapons. And then their offensive line is retooled and they're athletic, they're long. So they pose some problems. But it's a fun challenge because Coach Brown does a really good job of being very multiple and never really giving you two plays of the same type. And his guys are able to execute it and they execute at a high level. So great challenge for our guys on defense. They need to have a great week of preparation to be able to communicate, to make the adjustments that we need to make with the motions and the shifts and all the different personnel groupings that they're going to face on Saturday.

Q: You were talking about how you saw how much belief this team had that they could win the game on Friday. Did you still kind of learn anything about them, how they took care of that game, and also maybe just the prep throughout the week too?

A: Yeah, I learned a lot about the team. when we came into the stadium, right? Because I've been in this matchup a lot, and I know that sometimes teams lose to other teams' logo. And I felt like they came in with their eyes straight ahead. They didn't deviate. They didn't look to the left. They didn't look to the right. They kept their blinders on, and they were very focused. And so you're learning that the senior leadership is figuring out how to get the team mentally focused and dialed in to play. And then I learned through the game that I think we still even got a little bit more in the tank. There's areas where we can continue to improve. So if we're able to take the belief, the toughness, the physicality, the speed in which we played with, and we clean up the technical things that we need to clean up and be committed to playing with both passion and precision, I think we've got an opportunity to continue to improve as a football team.

Q: And you just talked about Louisville's offense there, but what else just kind of sticks out about them when you look at them on tape?

TE: Well, they're undefeated. They came from behind. They were down 17 points on the road. So they got a lot of belief as well. They're a confident bunch defensively. They got a really good rotation on their D-line, which allows them to stay fresh. Linebackers are very athletic. They run well on the on the back end. They're very well coached and coordinated, don't see them out of position much. It's a really good football team that is also two years removed from being in the ACC championship, right? So there's guys on that team that have been there, that have done that. And they're playing at home and they got a quote unquote ranked team coming in. They feel like they should be ranked. So I mean, there's a lot of things that are going to make this a challenging opportunity for us, but our guys will be ready.

Q: How good do you guys have to be in the punt coverage department with Caullin Lacy back there for Louisville?

TE: Really good, really good. It starts really with our operation though, right? So we got to make sure, because they can pressure you, so they can come after it. And two years ago, we had a punt blocked for a touchdown up there that kind of decided the game. So we're going to have to, they're going to test us again. I mean, they got to test us, right? That's professional courtesy. They got to make sure that we fix those problems. So we got to, starts there and then our guys can't get held up. They got to fan the field. They got to have discipline in their coverage lanes. They got to come to balance. And we learned a valuable lesson, right? We got to get the ball carrier on the ground. Like the one 23 -yard return that we gave up to Florida State, we got three guys there. Somebody's got to go make the tackle, right? And with this guy that they got, man, he's exceptional. I think he's number one in the country. He's phenomenal. So great opportunity. Great challenge for our returner, Cam (Ross), kind of going head to head. I think one and two in the conference are battling, but we got to do a great job fundamentally. We got to play with great effort.

We got to get great kicks. Our kickers got to kick the ball. Our punters got to punt it exactly where we want it based off of the coverage, and everybody's got to be on top of their game when we get to punting situations on Saturday. Ideally, you would say, like, offense, let's not punt, but that's very hard to do.

Q: And then Maddox Marcellus is playing a lot for you guys in third down situations. What did you expect when you guys brought him in from Eastern Kentucky and what has he provided you guys both on defense and on special teams?

TE: Yeah, what you saw in Maddox on tape was that man, he was a physical guy that flies around. He can go sideline to sideline and he can down the football and then he gets here and you see all of that validated in spring practice. And so what you love about Maddox is first and foremost, he's very intelligent as a football player. He has a lot of pride in his preparation. He's physical. He can go sideline to sideline and through his preparation he plays with really, really good anticipation. It gives us some added depth to the linebacking situation. Going back to Landon Danley, and he's been battling the shoulder. And it just had gotten to a point where he needed a little bit of time to rest, but he's back in practice this week. We anticipate that he'll be ready to go, but having Maddox helps us, especially with Landon being down last week.

Q: Yeah, you've talked about before how you like to sit in that offensive line room and kind of learn from Coach Heff. Y 'all brought in so many transfers on the offensive line. Only one of them started this last week. Just how has he kind of adapted and developed that group?

TE: Yeah, all you really need to look at is we got starting right tackle who started four games for us last year and now is back starting at right tackle for us is a converted tight end. Two years ago, he was a tight end. Now he's starting at right tackle and playing good football for us,

and you've seen (McKale) Boley get better. You've seen (Noah) Josey get better. The ability for Drake (Metcalf) to go from guard to center just goes to show the his ability to teach and develop and the buy -in that the guys have in that room and for (Kevin) Wigenton to go in from being pretty much injured the week before with an ankle to now playing 88 snaps at right guard versus a defensive front like Florida State and go in there and produce is really just a credit to Coach Heff's ability to teach and develop and the guys buy-in in that room.

Q: What are those meetings like? Walk me through. What is that like?

TE: It sounds like you're getting a lesson. It's intense. It's very, very intense. There's some humor. The guys, they're very attentive in those meetings. There's a lot of detail. There's a ton of detail, not just from a scheme standpoint, but from a fundamental technique standpoint. There's a lot of quizzing to make sure that the guys can regurgitate the information that is being presented, but it's a fun meeting overall to be a part of.

Q: You've talked a few times about needing kind of your veteran leadership to keep the mindset, right? What's been the process of building that leadership when you have a lot of your older guys are new? I mean you have some guys back, but a lot of your older guys are transfers. What's been the process of them developing as leaders?

TE: So I think it started in the offseason with the guys that were here the veteran guys that were here welcoming those guys in and Kind of explaining to them. This is how we do things and then also giving them opportunities to. have input and then when we meet as a senior leadership team incorporating those guys and giving them a voice as well. So it's not just the voice of the guys that have been here. It's a collective voice because again, you got you got guys that have three guys that have been in national championship games and have a ton of

experience and what it's like. So giving them a voice and bringing some validation to the things that I've said over the course of time that I've been here. It's really cool just to see that group emerge and evolve and become one unit and not the guys that were here versus the new guys. It's Virginia football, this team, and anybody that's in that senior leadership group has a voice. They know they have a voice. They use their voice. They let me know kind of the things they like, the things they don't like, and we kind of meet in the middle, and then it resonates down to the rest of the team. And then outside of that, other guys that have a voice as well. It's not very effective if you have 50 seniors in a meeting. When you get it down to about 14 or 15, now you can have a more productive meeting.

Q: Did you have more of a hand than usual in terms of determining who would be those? Because if you got Jameer (Carter) or Noah (Josey), it's organic. It's over the years. These guys, you've only got a couple of months to figure out who's the leader.

TE: I let the guys that were here select who they wanted to bring into the so really started with (Antonio) Clary, Sage (Ennis), (Noah) Josey and Ja (Jahmeer Carter) and then from there said a you select kind of the guys that that are part of that group and like for example, you wouldn't necessarily think it but Chandler's (Morris) in there and Grady Brosterhous is in there, right? And so they did a great job of selecting the guys that they felt like truly were helping lead over the summer and the spring to be a part of that group for the season. Oh man, so you got, so JT's (Jayden Thomas) in there, Mitchell Melton's in there, Cazeem (Moore) is in there, J'Mari (Taylor) is in there. I don't want to miss anybody. I'm just trying to think about when we sit in there, who's all at the table around me. So those are some of the, oh, Monroe Mills is in there, and I'm probably missing somebody.

Q: Coach, you were talking about the punting operation, punt coverage. How has Elijah

(Slibeck) done handling that role with Daniel (Sparks) out and until he gets back?

TE: Man, I thought, first of all, filling in on the kickoffs. I mean, he's been phenomenal. I mean, six touchbacks this past week and then touchbacks, I think he was like six out of seven or something like that the week before. So he's done a phenomenal job there. And then he hasn't had a ton of opportunity to punt over the last couple of weeks, but he's done exactly what we've asked him to do. We challenged him to get a little bit more leg into the pooch punt that we had there. But other than that, I feel like he's really stepped up and taking advantage of his opportunity with Sparky being down.

Q: When you brought in Jahmal Edrine, obviously looked at him and see that he's going to be a great target. Did you know how big of a blocker he would be for you guys and how intense he is about that? You always want to complete wide receiver and he's kind of showing.

TE: Yeah, it didn't. That's kind of what you don't know. Because when you start looking at the film, when they break it down, majority of it is passing situations. But you could tell from his passion for the game and his enthusiasm that he was going to Now, here's what I need. I need it every week because this week in particular, he was a captain, he's from Florida, so I knew he'd be fired up for this one. Now I need it every week and I need it more consistent, right? Because I think he can even take it to another level. And I've really been challenging him as a complete receiver, because I think he's still got another level that he can elevate his game all the way around to.