

**University of Virginia Football Media
Conference**

Tuesday, Oct. 14, 2025

**Head Coach Tony Elliott
Press Conference**

Q: Has your approach to handling bye weeks evolved in your four years as head coach, and how did you think this one went for the team?

TONY ELLIOTT: *Yeah, the overall approach is very similar, but I think with each team, you have to evaluate where that team is, and you also have to evaluate where the bye falls. Like, if it's earlier in the season, it may be different than later in the season, but this one being halfway through the season, I felt like a very similar structure, but I did modify a little bit just because of the health of the team. So the practice structure was very similar, but the amount of contact at the practices was different than maybe past bye weeks.*

Q: After the bye week, what are some of the injury updates across the team?

TE: *Yeah, so hopeful. Brady's (Wilson) working himself back into practice, so optimistic that he'll be available here soon. Same thing with (David) Wohlbaugh. Both of those have worked themselves back into practice. We know about Dakota Twitty, he had to have surgery, so he's going to be out for an extended amount of time. Noah Vaughn is close to being back in practice.*

(Daniel) Sparks is back, ready to roll in his punting role. I'm trying to think of who else we, McKale (Boley), yeah, McKale's fine. He's back, he's back rolling. He's back in practice, been doing well. So I think those were the major The major ones, all the long-term guys are still long-term. None of those guys are we expecting back.

Q: Of course, and I watched your interview with Adam Breneman in the flushing toilet story. This season, how would you grade your

team's focus on those small details, like picking up after themselves?

TE: *Yeah, so I think that it started off very, very, very well. And I think with success, there's always challenges. And so this was a great reset for us. as a football team. And I think if you just watch kind of the course of the first six games, you can see a little bit in, okay, with success, sometimes there's a tendency to think, oh, I got this. And it's not quite as important to focus on the little things, but it impacts your play.*

And so this was a really good opportunity for us to reset midway through the season to say, When we are really focused on the little things, we play complimentary football and we make it hard on the opponent. When we don't have quite the sense of urgency and the complete focus on the little things, then we create opportunities that make it much more difficult for us. So it's going to be fun to see how the guys respond to this off week because there was some transparency.

Right?

And it's to be expected. And I told him that this is, and I've told him from day one, the hardest thing is managing success. It's not chasing success. It's when it happens, now all the distractions come. And that's really what keeps you from focusing on the little things is you get distracted by everything else. And maybe you start to see things big picture too much and not in the microscope.

So a great opportunity to teach and learn. And that's what's been fun about this football team is the challenges that I put in front of them, they've accepted them. And it seems like each week they've tried to really learn the lessons of the game that they play. just played.

Q: Of course, and speaking of distractions, No. 4 Ole Miss may have been falling asleep at the wheel a little bit playing Washington State. They had Isaac Terrell sack Trinidad Chambliss

twice. They had a couple other sacks on Chambliss. How will you game plan to limit that aggressive Washington State front, especially given the O-line help?

TE: *Well, I know that obviously Ole Miss, I think they missed a couple opportunities early in the first two drives, but a lot of credit to Washington State. And they play extremely, extremely hard. They're very, very well coached. (WSU) Coach (Tyler) Rogers does a really, really good job. And you look at his background, he's a national champion, right?*

And he's used to winning. And so he knows what it looks like and what it takes and they pride themselves on effort. So we're going to have to match that. And that's what is really cool about this matchup in this particular game because I think A lot of people say that Virginia plays hard. When they watch the games, man, these guys play hard. Well, when you watch Washington State, they play extremely hard in all three phases.

So it's going to be a battle of who can play the hardest. but at the same time who can play sound and under control and that's going to be the challenge. So, you know, we have to do a good job of communicating. They do a good job with their personnel and their looks to put them in a position to be successful. We need to stay out of long yardage so that the advantage doesn't go to the defense for them to pin their ears back and try to get after the quarterback. We're going to have to play a very physical brand of football this week.

We're going to have to play sound. mistakes and we just got to match their energy, if not exceed it.

Q: *Just on the heels of that, they gave up 59 points in a row, two weeks in a row. From what you've seen what changed and clicked with them? That's a dramatic turnaround.*

TE: *Yeah, I think that, and I'm just speaking from my perspective, my point of view, I think when they changed quarterbacks and they went to number four, I think he brought just a calming presence and then they didn't turn the ball over as much. Those games got out of control because of turnovers in field position, but he seems to have calmed them down. He's got a moxie to him. He can run the ball. He can make all the throws. He looks like he just has it, a swagger that kind of mellowed him out. And defensively, each week they seem to be getting better and better and better as a unit. So I think it was really the quarterback change from my perspective is what I think's made the difference. And they've gotten better each week as a team.*

Q: *Virginia hasn't been to a bowl game since 2021. You're one win away now. Do you kind of lose track of that with everything else that's been going on, the back-to-back, really good wins together. Are you kind of take in what that would mean for this program?*

TE: *Not really. We haven't discussed it. We haven't talked about it because I believe this team has even bigger goals and things that they want to get accomplished. So we were just focusing on going one and oh, to be honest with you, this was a reset halfway through to see kind of where we are. What did we do well? What are areas to improve?*

How do we make those improvements? And really is block out that kind of noise, right? Because that's the kind of noise that comes in. And man, it was great to go on the road Friday (recruiting), right? But everywhere you went, man, people were excited. And it was so awesome to see, really.

It's so cool to see people excited. But man, we're only halfway. And like I tell the guys, the least important thing is a score at halftime. So your record at halfway during the season doesn't matter. It's what you do in November, what you

do in December, and you gotta separate in October. And so we haven't talked about that.

We're not discussing that. We're just trying to figure out how to defend Scott Stadium. Right, which has been an objective of this football team in this program to be a better team at home. We're playing a very, very capable and good powerful football team that's getting better each week like we were not focusing on that. If we take care of what's in front of us right each week. then ultimately, I think that we'll get to the end goal.

But that's the hard part with the success is everybody starts talking about it. And now you start, okay, now you start, you're gazing up in the stars all day long thinking about, what's it going to be like in Florida? What's it going to be like? That's when you get distracted, and then you don't take care of what's in front of you. So really just trying to keep everybody grounded, starting with myself, right? And making sure that I'm insulating myself, staying off my phone, just focusing on my job, trying to challenge the staff to do that so it resonates with the players.

But big picture, yeah, I know in the back of my mind it's a big deal, but I can't focus on that because I want it to be an even bigger deal at the end if that makes sense. Yeah, I mean, they believe. They played. two really good opponents, right, in games where they probably weren't favored to win, and they believed. And so they believe that this team can be different, that it can accomplish their goals and their objectives. And so now it's just staying focused.

Q: I talked to Trell Harris and he said at the beginning of the season that you put up on the whiteboard – 2025 – and said why can't this be your year? How have you seen that instilled in your team this year?

TE: *And in the past, I would give them different numbers, right, of things that could be accomplished. And this year, I just said, man, let's just focus solely on us and what we can*

control. And man, we gotta start something. Because really, before, it can be consistent over time. It has to start with one team, and I just wanted the 2025 team to adopt that mentality and that mindset. And now we're fighting like crazy to stay committed to how we felt, how we thought the day we saw that.

Because that was the first day of camp, or the day before camp, when we saw that number. Now it's, okay, yeah, it's game seven. but really I need day one energy and day one focus. And that's really challenging in the environment that we're in because, man, there's so much going on in college football, right? There's so much going on that you can easily get distracted just in what's going on around college football and, man, And we talk about it a little bit, right? And I try to keep them grounded and humble, man, because we got some examples.

And this happens every year, right? You start with preseason rankings, and then, man, that all changes by the end of the season.

Well, why?

Let's focus on why it changed, and what can we do to make sure that we don't fall victim to that? Because at the end of the day, man, we're where we wanna be. It's what we thought we could accomplish, but we're not done yet.

Q: Hunter Osborne's playing more and more, it seems like. What are you seeing from him development-wise? He had the sack against Louisville.

TE: *What are you seeing from him as he's earned more playing time? And so he's improving, Jah is Jah (Jahmeer Carter), Jason's (Hammond) getting better. Anthony Britton is the best version of himself. So the competition is forcing all those guys to elevate their game. And I'm hopeful down the stretch, we're going to see the impact. And I forgot Jacob Holmes in there too, Goldie (Jacob Holmes), he's playing at a high level.*

So I think a combination of understanding, competition, and then with depth, it allows them to play a little bit faster, a little bit longer, because they don't have to carry as many reps each game.

Q: He was saying when you were recruiting him, your vision to him, what you were trying to sell him stuck. What was the message to him? He's coming from Alabama, a place that's used to winning, accustomed to winning. What was your message to him to sell him on Virginia?

TE: *We know what it looks like. We know what it looks like, and I came here to build something similar to what we're used to, and I need you. I need you to help me. Because it's one thing when I paint the vision and I say it, but when I got guys in the locker room that have lived it, that understand it, that can reinforce it, that's how we can do it. And he can be a pivotal piece in helping propel this program going forward.*

Q: There was a time that schedules were all, you play your non-conference and there may be a rivalry, you know, Clemson-South Carolina at the end, but now these non-conference games come up all throughout the schedule. Do you like that? Does it give you more time to get familiar with an unfamiliar opponent? Is it disrupting? How do you look at that timing?

TE: *You know, if you have a bye week, I think it helps because now you have two weeks to become familiar with an opponent. But with the changes in college football, from year to year and and movement on staffs You're getting to know your in-conference opponents each year each week you play them, right? So I don't really have a have a problem with it. I kind of like having it sprinkled in there throughout the throughout the course and Man, I feel a little bit for Washington State in the amount of travel man. They've been where they've been They've been they've been to Colorado.*

They've been to Mississippi. They've been to Virginia and then they had another one. They've been to Texas So they've already traveled. Now, I'm not advocating for that kind of travel schedule, but I do like the concept of being able to play in different spots and have different teams come in. And I know this is the first time that Virginia and Washington state have ever played, but man, it's a cool, it's a cool matchup. And I think it's made college football better to be honest with you.

And it was kind of, I was saying this earlier, but man, I'm watching Southern Cal and Michigan and it's a conference game and I have to get used to it. But like, how cool is that, that you get to see those type of games, even though it's a conference game, but there, there, there's some, some pains associated with it, but I think it's actually good for college football when you're getting to play different opponents from across the country.

Q: On that same topic, teams are bringing in so many people, you're kind of trying to put it all together much faster than you ever had to. Does the bye week, and when it comes, does it allow you to do more install? Are there things you've learned about this group through the first six games that now you can say, Hey, let's do some of this, let's do some less of this because it's a violent game.

TE: *Right, so six games, coming at six games, you got half your season, so it's a good body of work. So now you're more comfortable and familiar with your players that you brought in. You know the strengths and weaknesses, so you can add a little bit more. Or you can go back into the install that you put in during fall camp that you may not have been able to pull out. And so really it comes down to whether or What is the structure and the scheme of the teams that you're playing that you can pull? And then each week, you're going to throw a few wrinkles in there.*

But you only got so much time on the practice field to work on it, but it gives you a little bit of time. But man, each week, and that's why I tell them, I mean, each week is a season of its own, to be honest with you. You got a whole lot that you gotta get accomplished and figured out in one week. And then as soon as Sunday hits, you gotta scrap it and start all over.

Q: When you were recruiting, you recruited the guys that had championship pedigrees, that came from schools like St. Thomas Aquinas who were used to winning. And then even on the recruiting front from the portal, you recruited guys that had that championship caliber. Does that help when you look at that bye week? how they can help the younger guys and just guys who haven't been in that situation kind of handle that success in that bye week?

TE: I think it's helped all the way around. I think that that's a big reason why we are where we are because of the leadership that they provide in the locker room. And for the bye week, it definitely helps. But the biggest thing that we focused on was just spending more time together, because that's what happens during fall camp and during the summer. It's just them. We're always together, we're always doing something.

Then the season starts, and then you got class, and you got all this stuff going on, that the only time you're really together is the prescribed times that you're in the building. So this off week was really a focus on, man, let's spend some time together. Because that's what it's going to take down the stretch, right? And I think those guys can reinforce that. When some of the younger guys may say, man, I got a break, I wanna go hang out a little bit and be a regular person. They can say, well, hey, look, No, you need to stay locked in, you need to stay focused because there's something bigger that we're working towards.

So yes, it really, really helps. Because it's one thing when Coach Elliott says it, right? But when your teammates can reiterate it, and you've been in tough situations with them to where you have that level of trust and you're going to follow them blindly Even though you may not see it. You're going to blindly follow those guys Because it's like what our kids right? We tell our kids all the time. Don't touch the stove It's hot, you know, and you know, I bet you if they see their buddy with a band-aid on they're like, okay I'm not touching the stove as much as to what what mom and dad say so it.

Q: Mitchell Melton especially has grown a lot and getting used to more conditioning. How has it been adjusted with the club and how frustrating is that with them? I'm not sure the timeline there, but that was a big something for him?

TE: It was what, ten days before the first game, we find out he's got a broken finger. And then we're talking about, man, well, it may be surgery. I'm like, whoa, it can't be surgery, right, not on a finger. And I was messing with him. I'm like, look, man, I'm a wide out. I got all kind of swollen fingers.

Like D-Line is supposed to have crooked fingers. We gotta play, but he's a tough guy. But I think with the full club, it was a little bit harder for him to be able to use his hand. And now as it's healed, he's able to put a smaller cast that gives him access to his fingers at his position when you have to be able to use your hands to set edges in the run game. and to clear defenders in the past game, which are different moves. So each week it's getting stronger and stronger, and then there's less protection, which frees him up.

And I think that's allowed him to just continue to play faster and faster. And then each week that goes by, he's more and more comfortable with the scheme. And then you got (Daniel) Rickert on the other side, you know, that now you got two guys that got good speed off the edge,

right? Now you got to figure out which way you're going to slide. So now some of those guys are getting more one-on-ones and you're starting to see Cazeem (Moore) inside a little bit more in our speed package with Goldie (Jacob Holmes). So so I think with the depth it's benefiting everybody right because it's allowing them to stay fresher right play faster. But then also create some more one-on-ones. But the key is being efficient on first and second down so we can get to those third down passing situations to be able to turn the pass rushers loose.

Q: How does Dakota's Twitty's injury affect rotation at tight end and how does the No. 3 wideout shape out.

TE: Yeah, young bucks got to step up. So right now you're working with Sage (Ennis) and John Rogers.

You got a chance to see him in the game. And now Walker Wallace is going to have to come on. Takai Kirby is going to have to come on. And then (Willem) Thurber and (Justin) Zames, they both got a guy to grow up. So it puts us in a situation where we don't have quite the comfort level with the depth that we have. But we got guys that they want to step up, kind of like Ben York got to step in when, when Boley goes out and it's like, Hey, next man up, you got to be ready.

So they're working hard and, and the bye week was big for them to, to get them some valuable reps. But, but right now it's a combination of who's going to be that, that third guy with, with Tekai (Kirby) and with Walker Wallace and (Willem) Thurber and (Justin) Zames.

Q: Walker Wallace got in the game against Louisville. What has his progression looked like after not having played football for 4-5 years?

TE: Right, but what you like is he's a champion, all right? And he's used to being out there on the field, was a really good high school football

player and decided to play lacrosse. And each week he becomes more and more comfortable. And so you're starting to see that he's a big man that moves well, that's willing to put his face in there and block.

And now he's in football shape and it's starting to come back to him. So I'm excited to see how the last six games go for him and his development.

Q: You guys hired a new director of player personnel. I'm wondering, how has the front office structure changed and grown since you first took the job?

TE: It's changed a lot. I think the approach in recruiting is similar but different. Now you have to have more resources because you have a larger pool of individuals between the portal and the high school ranks to evaluate. For me, kind of turn over more of that responsibility to the front office, as opposed to a lot of that was controlled kind of by the head coach. I think the philosophies and the fit and all those things are still the same, but just in the weeds, you're kind of turning that over to the front office as we continue to progress and evolve in this new landscape. So it's changed a good bit, but I'm excited about Cory (Martin) and what he brings.

And it was important to, as we build out that front office still, find individuals that believe in our core mission as a program, as we kind of move forward and navigate this new landscape.

Q: You talked about trying to keep guys healthy during the bye week and focusing on kind of being together, but just on the field, what were some of the things that you wanted to hone in on during the bye week?

TE: Yeah, so red zone. is an area, both offense and defense, improving, continuing to stay efficient on third down. So kind of maybe get a head start on some of the third down stuff. Fundamentals, basics, getting back to the details, pad level, hand placement,

communication. Also on the field, trying to get some of the younger guys some experience, some more reps, so that they're better prepared as we get back to action. This week in particular, so those are some of the things that we focused on.

And then also being mindful of the amount of contact too, right? Because I mean, it's six games in, but really we've been going at it for, what would that be, about ten weeks now. And football, I mean, you gotta practice football to play football, so it can take a wear and tear on your body.

Q: You guys have been pretty good in short yard situations this year. The direct snap to Jamari seems to be working as evidenced at Louisville.

TE: Yeah, a lot of people are doing it. So who asked me that question the other day? I was trying to get the details, right? Now I see a lot more people doing that. The word is out. So you see a lot more people kind of direct snapping to the back.

Q: But (Grady) Brosterhous was kind of your short yardage thing before. He's healthier now. Do you all think about going back to that?

TE: Unfortunately, a little bit of a setback with his foot. So we were hopeful, but then once we got back into action, so he's still a little bit hampered there. So we gotta continue to be creative in those situations. I wish it was different where we had that element too, but it doesn't look like we might not have that down the stretch.

Q: A couple of weeks ago, you mentioned that you would consider about week seven, week eight, permanent season captains. Is that something that the team is still considering? And who have you seen step up and become a leader for this team?

TE: Yeah, so after game eight, we'll have a team vote like we did at the end of the season in years past, but we'll do it after game eight. And what I've learned as a coach is don't try to put any expectations on it, right? Because there is an element that that you don't see what happens down in the locker room when they when they vote. So it's going to be interesting to see who the permanent guys are after the but the guys that we've been counting on that you see stepping up is is is sage. (Antonio) Clary, Jah (Jahmeer Carter), (Noah) Josey. Mitchell's (Melton) become more of a voice, which we've needed.

You see JT (Jayden Thomas) stepping up. I think there's other guys that quietly lead, like Jamari's (Taylor) not going to say anything, but man, he shows up every week, for the most part, and just does his job. Same thing with Xavier Brown. The guys that I talked about are probably the more vocal, the more vocal it is. I'm really proud of Monroe Mills his situation, man. He's coaching guys every single day. So he's embracing his role and his opportunity despite being injured.

So that's been a fun thing to watch his evolution. I sat him down yesterday. I was sitting down on the bench going out to practice. He walked by. I said, Monroe, sit down. I said, you're going to be a coach one day, aren't you?

And he said, that's possible. So I think he's enjoying that. But you're starting to hear his voice a little bit more. James Jackson has always been a vocal. a vocal guy. And then there's other younger guys.

Chandler's (Morris) been great in terms of his leadership. So there's a lot of potential candidates, but at the end of the day, they know a little bit more of what goes on in the locker room than I do. So it'll be interesting to see how it pans out after game eight.

Q: Noah Josey said he's like a mini coach (Terry) Heffernan? Would you agree?

TE: *Very similar.*

Q: **Coach, and then you just said as you guys are crossing this halfway point, what have you not seen in the first half that you want to see in the second half of your season?**

TE: *Good question, I want to see, I saw it early and I want to see it more is just one of our items on our plan to win is being special on special teams. I think in the first couple of games, I thought special teams was a big difference in the game. And then the last couple of games, I felt like we just kind of, evened out the matchup and I want to see the special teams really in all areas like we're really good on kickoff return Punt if we tackle a little bit better, then we're probably you know sitting better in the conference in the rankings punt return We're okay kickoff. We're kind of near the near the top I like to see those areas really like like our punt coverage and then also our punt return You know average go up and then we maintain our efficiency on kickoff return and and kickoff and and then also on field goal, just, man, being able to really consistently hit them from 30 and between the 30 and the 35. I'd like to see that in the second half of the season. And then I'd like to see the depth really kind of, you know, start kicking in.*

So I think some guys got some valuable snaps. I want to see that across the board, the depth, the quality of the depth just continue to rise. we go into the second half.

Q: **You mentioned Monroe Mills, obviously with his injury out for the season, do you talk to him at all about just his future and kind of what he wants at any point?**

TE: *I think they'll start to be some conversations as we get deeper into the into the season. But now it's really just focusing on his rehab and then him maximizing his role within the within the team. And so I think, you know, that's really the focus now. And then we'll talk a little bit more down the stretch about him. Same thing*

with Makilan Thomas and some of these other guys, Jamaric Morris, you got him. But now it's really just focus on because we don't want that to be a distraction either.

Right. So let's focus on what we can control now. And then there'll be appropriate time for us to talk those things.

Q: **What has Jack Witmer done for you guys this year?**

TE: *Yeah, I mean, heck, Jack was kind of like the guy that started four games for us last year when (McKale) Boley's down and got us through and we get off to a good start. And then some guys get healthy and then everyone wants to kind of forget about Jack. But what he's been is he's been dependable, he's been available, and he's getting better.*

And I'm super proud of a big Jack and And the way he's handled that too, right? Because he was a guy that switched positions, knew that he needed some time to develop, got thrown in the fire, right? Then the guys come back. So he's kind of not having as many reps, but he's still trying to find a way to progress. And then when his numbers called again, like he's been available. He's helped us do some really good things on offense.

So I'm super proud of him and very, very grateful to have him. And I'm excited to see him continue to get better and improve and develop these last six games.

Q: **It's homecomings this week. Do you have any plans for program alumni to come stop by, talk to folks?**

TE: *Yeah, I mean, they're always welcome. One thing I've been very, very adamant and intentional about with this staff is welcoming back all the former players. So they're always welcome. So it's not a situation where they got to wait till homecomings week to be able to come around. So I'm excited for them to be*

back. There's always people going through the building, meeting new guys all the time.

So they're always welcome. Hopefully they'll have a chance. I know with our schedule and it being a night game, the team will be gone. We'll be at the hotel most of Saturday and a good portion of Sunday. of Friday. So each week I have an alumni sending a video to speak to the team on Friday night and I show it to the guys just as a reminder of what they're playing for, the guys that came before them and the pride that they have.

And it's an authentic message. I don't script it. I'm telling them what to say. It's whatever is on their heart. Just kind of keep it PG if you can, but share what's on your heart. And so I'm not sure who we got this week.

Blanda (Wolfe) helps me with that. But they're always welcome, love to see them back and want them back. But we're creating an environment where, man, they're welcome to come back at any time.