

**University of Virginia Football Media
Conference
Tuesday, Nov. 4, 2025
Head Coach Tony Elliott
Press Conference**

Q: You obviously have a lot of new players in the program this year, but you also have a core that's been with you for one, two, or all three of your first years here. Is this team benefiting from the lessons those teams learned, or is this kind of a clean slate this year?

TE: No, we're definitely learning. from the past because we talk about things, especially games that we beat ourselves. So we go back and some of those guys, it's painful for them, but they have an opportunity to see where we've come from and just how easy it is to be on the other side. But no, we take every opportunity to try and teach these guys from lessons in house and then also from lessons around the country. I think it's really the leadership, the senior leadership group and the captains that we have is more so focusing on what do we need to do today to be our best is really the approach that we're taking.

Q: Jacob Holmes has been a little more active and more disruptive the past few weeks. What have you seen from him? And what's the benefit when you get a pass rush from the interior spot of your D line?

TE: Yeah, the benefit on the interior is, man, when those ends can force him to step up, then you got somebody there to down the quarterback. And in terms of Jacob, what we're seeing is what we saw flashes of when he came in. He missed some time in the spring with injury, and then he got hurt early in camp. And so then kind of had to come back off the, I think it was an ankle in camp and a hamstring in the spring. But now you're starting to see what we saw on tape, just some suddenness, some quickness, some pass rush moves. on the inside.

And I think coming off of the injury, we had him more in a sub package until he got fully healthy. And now we can play him in some more base down situations, which helps.

Q: And then on offense, Sage Ennis, how much has he improved since you first had him when you were at Clemson? He's become kind of an every down player for you guys now. What have you seen from him throughout his career?

TE: Coming out of high school, if you go back and you look at Sage in high school, man, he was a very dynamic player, played multiple positions, did a lot, has really good speed for a guy his size, has improved catching the ball over the years. I think the biggest thing is just persevering through the injuries, right? That's the biggest thing. I think now he's at a point where he feels healthy, feels good, and so you're able to see a little bit more of what you knew and you saw, when he was a younger player, now that he's kind of feeling as healthy as he was when he was young.

Q: I know you said that you wanted to kind of drown out the noise and have people not maybe talking to families just kind of let's let's blur everything out. But today is the college football playoff show. How do you handle in house? Do you rely on guys like Jaden Thomas and Mitchell Melton who've gone through the process and gone through those selection shows? Do you watch it together? Like how do you approach that?

TE: Oh, we're definitely not going to watch it together. No, no. But uh, so so, um, I told them yesterday, I'm going to address it once and that's the only time I'm going to talk about it. This is the week that it starts. And I encourage you not to get caught up in it, not to watch it. And truth be told, it doesn't matter what you rank today.

You wanna worry about the one after that first week in December. That's really what the focus

is. And so what happens today doesn't matter, right? We control what we do from here on out if we're really serious about it. about being where we wanna be in December. And that's really all I'm going to say about it and encourage them not to watch it.

I can't stop them, but we're definitely not going to sit down and watch it. And I told the staff, I said, hey, I'd encourage you not to really watch it because it's not. It's not really for us right now, to be honest with you. Because again, it's just like preseason rankings, right? I think everybody was making a big deal of where we were ranked in the preseason. And I was like, okay, it's a preseason ranking.

We have an opportunity to do something about it. So we won't take that approach, but really not going to talk about it much more with the guys. And hopefully, but I know I told him I tried, and all along I've been trying to tell him what I know. from my experience and I've tried to tell them that a more people are going to come out the woodworks. You're going to get a lot more messages after every game. A lot more people are going to want to be a part of what's going on and and unfortunately that becomes a distraction.

So if you want to stay focused, you're going to have to, you know, And so that'll be the message. And we've also kind of simplified our focus down the stretch and really don't talk about big picture at all, really just focus on trying to go 1-0 each day so that we can go 1-0 on Saturday.

Q: And do you have any updates on both Noah Vaughn and Ben York after the last game?

TE: Yeah, so hopeful that Ben will be back this week. Noah is still just struggling with that ankle. So hopefully this week, but not for certain. And then JT (Jayden Thomas), we'll see what he can do in practice today.

Q: And finally Ben York. How have you seen him grow and come off the bench.

TE: He (Ben York) was in the spring, man, we were super, super, super excited about kind of the progress he was making and then got his shoulder dinged up a little bit that hampered him. And then you started to see those flashes coming back to where, man, he was playing really good football last week before he got hurt. He was actually the lineman of the week for us and played in the 30 snaps that he played. So starting to get to that point to where we had confidence to be able to play him on the right and the left. So I hate it with him going down, but I'm hopeful that he'll be back this week and continue to progress. So his confidence has really started to pick up. I think athletically we knew coming out of high school that he had a chance to be really good.

Q: Now everything is kind of starting to fall into place for you have been outwardly a symbol of calm during all these tight games I'm wondering when you get home, like how's your family taking this? How is your wife taking it how your kids taking it? Are they like going through the stresses and let you know how they go through these these games?

TE: So I The wife, I mean, she's been through all of this before and really she just wants me to be dad when I come home. So she's not really wanting to talk about it and she's kind of used to it. Now the boys let me know that they're pretty special themselves. Ace just left a tournament where he was MVP at the All - States in PG (Perfect Game), hit five home runs and 13 RBIs in like five games. So he's like, dad, I'm pretty good too. I'm having some success. We played in a championship for travel baseball.

So really I'm just dad when I go home. And to be honest with you, I'm very grateful for my wife because she's been a big part a big inspiration in helping me kind of balance it all and understand

what the most important thing is, is the family. And when I come home, I just need to be dad.

Q: So they don't let you know how they watch these games?

TE: *Oh, I mean, to be honest with you, they're actually the biggest critics I got. Like, what were you thinking?*

Like, dad, we gotta do better here, we gotta do better there. And I'm like, look, I got a press conference on Tuesday where they're going to give me all of those questions, man. Come on, give me a break, all right? Well, what about that 0-2 fastball that was right down the middle that you fouled off? How about get a hit right there? But no.

But they watch it. My oldest son in particular, he watches it, he studies it. But we really just try to keep it to family when I get home.

Q: After the game in Chapel Hill, (Antonio) Clary said that he was still kind of getting the rust off, feeling better, but there was still room to improve. How far has he come kind of since then, and what do you hope to get from him down the home stretch?

TE: *Right, so I think he played 60 snaps, and that's the first time he's played that many snaps in a long time at North Carolina. And man, Clary is just a warrior, and I don't think people what he has to go through just to get himself ready to play. He's got to get his knee drained every week. Man, it's a lot. So we knew it was going to take a little bit of time. But what you're starting to see is you're starting to see him kind of show you some glimpses of the past, of playing fast, diagnosing things quickly because he's back out there.*

Being a leader for his teammates, great man, great energy on the sideline. Helping guys, came up to me during the game and was standing next to me and he's like, it's toss play. And then it was a toss play, he said. Coach, that's film

study. So just those veteran things, and that really is what makes it fun, coaching this group. Because we got some unselfish guys, because there's nobody that wants to be out there for every snap of the game more than Antonio Clary.

But he knows kind of where his body is, and he also knows that strength is in numbers. And so the more experienced you are, have, the fresher guys are later in the game because we're splitting snaps, the better we're going to be in that game and the games to come.

Q: You talk about people coming out of the woodworks and everything right now. But does it feel like there's a different kind of air when you're around grounds, when you're around this building, even on game days at Scott Stadium right now compared to the first three years?

TE: *Definitely game days at Scott Stadium. And it feels like what I envisioned it feeling like and hopefully that's the same. the folks that are in the stands that they feel like a different type of energy around game day. Because Saturdays during football season, man, they're special, right? They're special for a lot of reasons and there should be a certain feel associated with it. So I'm happy that we're starting to kind of have that feel around the building.*

It's about the same every day, we focus on our theme of the day. So today is takeover Tuesday, it's our heaviest work day. So it's a padded practice and we're going to get after it some base down install. So that's what you feel around here. You do notice a few more good jobs and great season going and that kind of stuff. But really notice the biggest differences in Scott Stadium on Saturdays.

Q: Speaking of Scott Stadium, I know everyone for years has kind of talked about the atmosphere there and improving that.

Is it as simple as success brings the fans out or is there something else kind of to it?

TE: Yeah, great question. I think success, but also too, I think it's a sense of responsibility, right? All the way around and understanding that every role is critical, right? That really, Saturdays is about supporting the fans. team, but it's about tailgating, man. It's about family bonding.

It's about time with your friends, and then celebrating your team and supporting your team and letting it culminate in the game, in the atmosphere inside the stadium. But there's a lot more to it. And that's what I wanna continue to build here, is that where, man, you don't plan a wedding. Right during football season like you don't do those kind of things and like everybody's focused on like those seven Saturdays like nothing else matters like and that's that's kind of what I'm what I'm used to and I know that may be a little bit overboard So to speak but that that to me is really what it's what it's all about just there's so much pageantry with the game and it's not just about the actual game it's about the relationships and and the memories and the time that you that you spend with family and then you got babies that their first picture is in Virginia gear, and they can remember all of the games that they attended. It has an opportunity to be something really special.

Q: Last one is just, do you feel like you hear more from people when you're out and about? Are more people coming up and doing those fist bumps and things like that?

TE: A little bit. Little bit, but also too, I'm not out much, right, this time of year. So I might go to Chick -fil -A, but I think me and my wife are on speed dial at Chick -fil -A. We eat so much Chick -fil -A, so they already knew us.

Q: You guys have preached that next man up mentality a lot this season, especially with just the injuries you guys have had. And we saw

that again this weekend, Eli Wood, one of those guys kind of stepping up. How much do you think having that mindset has helped you guys find the success that you have this season?

TE: It's critical. Without it, I don't think we're where we are. guys have had to step up. I mean, you know, game five. I guess it was game five. Brady (Wilson) goes down.

Now Drake's (Metcalf) got to move in. Well, then Wiggy's (Kevin Wigenton) up. Well, then Wiggy goes down. Now Sipe's (Ethan Sipe) up, right? Now Brady's back, right? Well, then Jack (Witmer) and Ben (York) goes down.

(McKale) Boley goes out. I mean, and then you look on the defensive side, you got guys going down and guys stepping up. So it's critical. And I think that is one of the differences with this team in years past is we do have more competitive depth so that we got guys in position and ready to go, which makes our practices more competitive, which I think prepares us better for competition on Saturday, so it's critical to our success.

Q: What are just your initial impressions of this Wake Forest team? They have the number two scoring defense in the ACC right now.

TE: Yeah, so what I do hear a little bit more is kind of I wouldn't say unrealistic expectations, but maybe people looking at a score and assuming that 42 to 7 is not indicative of this football team that's coming in here. And you're starting to see them formulate an identity under the new staff. They play really hard. They play a physical brand of football. They have some very dynamic weapons on offense that can score at any time. That game was what 13-0 in the third quarter.

It was a close game. I think they sacked the quarterback several times It was it was challenging for him to run the football until the second half. And then they had some

opportunities to score. And so this is a football team that's pretty good. So don't let the record or the scores of previous games fool you. And I was telling the staff that for me, before they went to not having division, it always came down to going through Wake Forest in the month of November, right, to get to Charlotte, right?

And it was always, didn't matter where you played them at, they were going to fight you tooth and nail and be a scrappy bunch. And so I see a lot of that in this football team. So this football team here in Charlottesville has been warned and been told, you better not buy the lie. Because this is a talented team that's starting to figure it out, and they play hard. And then defensively, they really, really challenge you up front, because they can just create havoc with all of the movement and the personnel that they have on the D line. And then their quarterback can beat you with his arm and his legs, and then they got probably the most dynamic running back in the league.

So it's a really good football team that's coming in here, and man, they're fighting for a lot too. And so they want the same thing that we want. So it's going to be a battle.

Q: Thinking about the goals that you set out this offseason now in the month of November, what are some of the things your team has done that you're most proud of? And where are some areas you're still looking to improve?

TE: I think the thing I'm most proud of is that they just found a way to win football games, right? Despite who they're playing, despite the injury situation, they just found ways to win football games, which tells me that they're very goal oriented, right? And they focus week to week and they got a humility about themselves to come back to work each week and chase their best game. So that's what I'm most proud of is that day. And I think that's what you're going to see more in college football. over the next

several years, you're going to see a lot more one possession games.

It's going to be a lot more like the NFL, where it's going to come down to one possession. Because the teams are going to, the talent is going to be dispersed across all the programs. And everybody's going to have enough talent to win any given Saturday.

Q: And Kam Robinson has been on a tear this year. He was a highly coveted in state recruit. What does it mean for him to lead by example as a Virginia native playing elite ball for his home school?

TE: I think it just brings confirmation to the message that we're preaching to the guys in the state that you don't need to leave the state of Virginia to accomplish any of your goals. If you desire to be an All-American, compete for a conference championship, you can do that at Virginia. Graduate from one of the most prestigious institutions in the country, you can do that at Virginia. Prepare yourself to play in the National Football League, you can do that here at Virginia. And then also too, hopefully he'll be a sounding board for all of the young men in the state that you're also going to be treated the right way when you come here at the University of Virginia.

You're not going to be used, you're going to be poured into in all areas of your life, you're going to be developed holistically. Because we care about what your dreams are, and we also care about what your future looks like beyond the game of football.

Q: I don't know how much stock you put into PFF (Pro Football Focus) grades, and how your grading system may be different. But they had your offense line as 89 % in pass protection this week, which supposedly was the highest since 2017. Can you just talk about your past protection and how far that's come?

TE: Right, so I think I said last week that the six sacks that we gave up was kind of an anomaly, not who we are and you are what you repeatedly do. And this week, for the record, we had two sacks and I don't think they were on the offensive line, right? One was the quarterback, it was well protected and he kind of pulled it down early to scramble and got tackled. And the other one was a move to pocket and he slipped. So I thought they responded and came back and did a really good job of creating some clean pockets, which has been pretty consistent because we've had several games where we haven't given up any sacks and we've kept our quarterback clean.

I think it's a testament to the game plan that Coach Kitch (Des Kitchings) puts together with the input from Coach (Terry) Heffernan, and then the level of detail and work that they put in throughout the course of the week to understand the opponent, the looks that we're getting, and then just taking pride in protecting the quarterback. We say that the quarterback and the football is the program, and that's a goal. Offensively, that's a goal special teams wise to protect the ball and then offensively is protect the ball protect the quarterback and everybody has a role. So it's not just the offensive line I think if you study it you're going to see that J'Mari (Taylor) has done a really really good job stepping up in there and doing his part from a protection standpoint and then the quarterback to understanding when it when it's necessary for him to kind of get out of some situations, so I think it's a combination of those guys but most importantly it's taking pride in protecting the program which starts with the quarterback and the ball.

Q: Where does Chandler (Morris) rate in the quarterbacks you've coached over the years in terms of keeping plays alive and being able to keep his eyes downfield and find open receivers.

TE: And that aspect is good as any of them. And I'd say he's probably up there at the top in that

aspect of being able to get out of plays and turn them into positive plays and then extend plays and be able to extend plays with his legs and with his passing down the field.

Q: Corey Costner has had two back-to-back solid games. What do you remember of him when he was a recruit and you were looking at his tape and what stood out and how much he's grown already as a true friend?

TE: Right. So first of all, very quiet. Corey doesn't say, doesn't say a whole lot. So he was an interesting one to recruit. because you never knew what he was thinking. But you watch him on tape, he was just dynamic.

He played multiple positions. He was an offensive guy, defensive guy. You knew that he had a burst and some long speed. And then he gets here and you really get to see his body start to transform. And then you start to see him out on the practice field. And man, he can do some different things, some very dynamic things.

Physicality to be able to play the nickel spot, you know, because we were thinking okay safety corner you can any gas and versatility to play corner, so You didn't really know all of until you got him, but you saw some really, really, really intriguing traits in the recruiting process. But he's a quiet guy, but man, he's a fierce football player. He loves to play. He's learning how to prepare in week in and week out to give himself an opportunity. So I'm excited for him and his future and just the competition that he creates there too. That's great competition for JP (Ja'son Prevard), right, to push him.

Because we're going to need both of those guys to play at a high level at that position to get to where we wanna go.

Q: Coach you've talked all year about the importance of defending Scott Stadium in the video that football posted after the Cal game and seemed like it was one of the first things you remind your guys 'Hey, we got to come

home and defend Scott next week.' Just how much pride you have in the fact that your team is 5 -0 in Scott Stadium And how important are you going to emphasize that in the next in these last two home games?

TE: Oh, it's it's going to be paramount in what we what we talk about like you you defend your turf Right? Like that's, you don't ever want to say those are givens, but man, we try to find a way to win at home. And that was something that we didn't do, you know, early on in the building of the program. And so just excited that the guys have started taking pride in that and man, one of the things that I'm kind of most proud of being a part of is I've been around senior classes that never lost a game at home.

Like, how cool is that? Like, I know there's some other stats out there, but to say, man, we win our entire career without losing a game at home, or we win an entire, we gotta start with an entire season, first of all, right? But man, that's kinda, those are the things that mean the most to me, right? Is guys can say things like that. But you gotta, man, you gotta defend your turf. And you should have a home field advantage.

That's why I've stressed the importance of the fan engagement, attendance, the interaction, making noise at the right times to help us have a competitive advantage. Because when you go on the road, it's difficult. You gotta overcome the travel, man, you're in an environment that could be imposing upon you that they're making it difficult.

So it starts with defending Scott Stadium and then you go chase those other opportunities on the road.

Q: J'Mari (Taylor) hit one hundred fifty carry mark on saturday for the season uh... how is he stayed healthy, durable, and able to withstand all the bumps and bruises he's taken throughout the season.

TE: Well, he does a lot to take care of his body off the field. And he's eating right, sleeping, hydrating, doing all those things. I think he's got a natural ability as a runner to get skinny, to go down and not take significant shots consistently. And he's a warrior. He practices the right way.

I think he can accelerate to the contact, which allows him to be the aggressor in the concept of being the hammer and not the nail. And I think that helps him stay healthy because he's able to inflict the brunt of the force on the opponent.

And then he's able to protect his body and get small so that he doesn't take too many hard shots.

Q: He was hobbled up the other day, came out briefly. I think after the game he was telling me though, there's no way he's coming out. Does he like that throughout the week, throughout when you talk to him on the sidelines? Is he determined to stay out there?

TE: Yeah, he's the kind of guy that we have to help him. help himself by maybe putting a different color jersey on him certain days out the week so that he doesn't take any unnecessary contact. But he's a go kind of guy. I mean, he's going to go.

He loves to play. He loves his teammates. He's a great team guy. He loves to compete and he likes to be challenged too. He got challenged in the game. I kind of put on my running back coach hat during the game.

I saw a couple of runs where I thought that there was a little bit more there and I challenged him. And he accepted the challenge and came out and he saw a little bit different demeanor out of him. So he's a fun guy to coach because he doesn't say much. He just goes to work. He doesn't complain.

He just shows up every day, very blue collar.

Q: You are outscoring opponents in the fourth quarter by 19 and you've got the most third down conversions in FBS. Are you looking to push that success forward either in downs the first and second or in the first half third quarter?

TE: Yeah, so I guess they took it down but our plan to win is win third down win red zone.

Right? So we want to be a good third down team throughout the course of the game. And that was a challenge coming off of this past game versus cows. I thought we did really good the first six we converted and then we weren't as good in the second half with our third down conversions collectively, but we still finished the day 53%, right? Which is a good day on third down. Fourth quarter is a mindset and mentality.

Everything we do around here and And so I know a lot of people do it, they put the fours up, but that's not just on game day, right? Every day at practice, and for those who are out at practice, they know that when we hit a certain point in practice, everybody in the program out on that field puts the fours up. We play the same video that's playing on Saturday, we play it at every practice. at a certain point that signifies this is the fourth quarter. Because that's when most games are either won or lost in the fourth quarter.

And we talk about the least important thing is the score at halftime. Score at halftime don't matter, right? What matters is getting yourself in position to go win the fourth quarter. And that's what we talk about. So third down, red zone, first down efficiency, all those things need to be at their best in the fourth quarter. But also too, up leading up to the fourth quarter.

We want a fast start. It's important for all those things to be good. We want a strong middle eight.

Those things got to be good, but definitely in the fourth quarter, that's when you got to finish.

Q: Ryan Odom picked up his first win as men's basketball coach yesterday. Could you detail some of the conversations you've had with him? Or if you haven't talked yet, what would you tell them after yesterday?

TE: No, well, congrats. I texted him before the game and he texted me after the game. He's been awesome. He texts me after every game with words of encouragement and he's come out to practice a couple times and we've had a chance to talk. So I'm excited for him and good to get off to a fast start, good start.

Hopefully, when things calm down for us, I'll be over there in attendance watching. I'm excited to see his style of play. Because I played a little bit of basketball back in the day, but I'm excited to see kinda his coach's style and his style of play. But happy for him, but he's been very, very, very supportive of what we're doing and a big fan. And I'm very, very grateful and I hope to return the favor once a while. get really cranking and rolling.

All right, appreciate it.