

University of Virginia Football Media Conference

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Coach Bronco Mendenhall Press Conference



Q. You only had one early game last year and the team was kind of sluggish against NC State. I was curious the challenges that come with the 11:00 a.m. kick against Illinois.

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Yeah, that's a good memory. It shouldn't be -- we're an early morning practice team, and so really this fits our normal routine in terms of when we practice. So I wouldn't anticipate -- man, I'm hopeful it won't affect us much in terms of our normal routine.

Anxious to see -- I have traveled before and crossed time zones for early games. That seems to be more difficult. Why it happened a year ago, couldn't quite put my finger on that, and so much was different a year ago. I'm hopeful it's just not an issue again because of our normal routine.

Q. Could you speak to the changes on the depth chart in the defensive secondary? Grant being listed at safety and Cross at nickel? Is it based on the opponent, or are these long-term moves you're making?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Yeah, more of the first, more of the opponent. So right where -- we love flexibility and we love adaptability, so we try to put the best 11 football players out there really in any configuration we can on any given week. It kind of just reflects some of the flexibility there.

Q. Has Grant played that spot before?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: He has, and again, it provides us more depth, and what we've learned over -- to win the Coastal Division and to make it through the ACC Championship game and to go to the Orange Bowl and keep doing all that, depth in secondary is really important, so players cross-training and being available at multiple positions and training there and playing there, that helps with our depth.

Q. Do you have an update on Jelani Woods' status?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: He's good to go. No ill effects, and yeah, 100 percent.

Q. Watching Illinois in their opener against Nebraska, they were running a lot of stretch runs, a lot of perimeter plays. NC State gave you some trouble with that last year. How do you feel like your perimeter defense is now after one game, and how do you prepare for those stretch type of runs?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Yeah, certainly hopeful that it's improved, the run game. There are some similarities, and with bigger personnel, two tight ends and an extra side end. Yeah, it doesn't take much for a ball to crease or to have success. It has been an emphasis and a target for us, so hopefully we've improved.

Q. You'll be playing Saturday on a pretty solemn anniversary in our country; what was the defensive coordinator at New Mexico doing on that Tuesday morning, and how did that event shape you and maybe even your family?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Hmm. It just added perspective. So much during the season seems to be football first, and everything else really of significance seems to just take a backseat. I work hard and our program works hard to make sure there's relative balance. Sometimes it takes a pretty significant event to have you just stop for a second and try to put things in priority again and to remember, I would say to anchor, to identify the things that are truly important. I think that was helpful to me just to make an intentional effort from that point forward in season especially just to hold on to things that really matter.

Q. Do you remember what you were doing that morning in Albuquerque?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: As a coach in season you start early, and so it was just a week and a day of early-morning football study and preparation. And then it wasn't. And it didn't take much to switch that.

Q. You're doing some things different defensively



schematically. Is this personnel driven, and is this a return at all to the 3-3-5 you learned from Coach Long?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Partly both. Partly the opponent, and so again, really one of the things that I learned early in my career is you put the best 11 players out on the field that match up best against any given opponent. And so the more and more years that I coach, the more scheme and knowledge and options become available to then deploy or to use the existing best players that we have in our program against any given opponent.

That was what you saw on Saturday.

Q. Another one about the secondary; guys like Clary and Fentrell Cypress especially who maybe hadn't played as much previously, what have you seen, because we talked so much about this being such a veteran secondary, guys like that who were able to crack that and get on the field, how were they able to do that?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Yeah, just really, really diligent effort. So we have kind of three criteria that we talk about a lot, how durable are you, how consistent are you and how productive are you, and those two, from this fall camp all the way through our first game, have been -- and unlike previous years where they've been hurt, so they have been there every day, and they have been very productive, and they've done it each day, and so they've built trust. That's how you crack in is you build trust, and that comes from being durable and consistent and productive.

Q. What are some things that really stood out to you about Brennan as the week went on?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: It appeared that -- I mean, it's cliché, but the game continued to slow down, and he continued to speed up. So his decision making, his rhythm, his certainty, his confidence, his execution, it just got better and better and better. A strong night offensively in terms of yards and balance with over 200 rushing and over 300 passing, but that was gaining momentum throughout the course of the night, and so yeah, I think he just got sharper and sharper as we went.

Q. Brennan said after the game the other night that the offense wasn't complicated to him. How complicated or sophisticated is this offense, and is this system just an enhancement of what you were running before, or is it simply because you have unusual personnel?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: It's more of the second, and it's back to the same philosophy that we're using defensively. It's just the maximization of resources, right, so we're

looking at every good football player on our team, and we've got four different quarterbacks that all can do different things, and there's no reason they all have to play quarterback. And so we're just maximizing any good football player on our team, putting him out there in as many unique, creative but productive ways as we can, and so the concepts remain relatively the same, not always, but relatively the same. The personnel and maybe the formations that we use, those are kind of where the main differences come. Just to highlight the best players on our team.

Q. A lot of coaches say we like going 1-0. Do you gauge the first two or three games as to what kind of team you're working with comparable to maybe the past years as a coach?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Not only every game but every practice. But certainly the games I think are more revealing because as coaches we're on the sideline and we're watching in real time if their habits are holding, if their decision making is consistent. They're giving us feedback with every play on has there been any what we call slippage from how they've practiced to now how they're applying it in a real and live setting, and they're doing that and I'm doing that collectively, what does the entire group look like in all the different phases. So certainly feedback is really important with as many experienced players on our team, not as many unknowns, and not as much I would say uncertainty as the decision, kind of where we are and how fast we get there, that's a little bit more of where my focus is.

Q. Ra'Shaun Henry has nine catches in his Virginia career and five have been touchdowns. Is there something that makes him a good red zone target or is it a coincidence he's been in the end zone so much?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: It sounds like we need to throw it to him more. That wasn't a statistic I was aware of. You know, sometimes if there are other established receivers and if there's other patterns that become predictable, then sometimes defenses play harder to the percentages, or they favor where maybe typically we go, and so sometimes a great complement emerges if over things are overplayed.

So I think that's part of it, where he's been the complement. But now he's emerging not as the complement but as a primary threat, so it'll be fun to see where the statistics go. But he's capable, and I would consider him the most improved player, and I thought he was becoming a strong player through the year last year and toward the end. He's starting at a much higher level than that, so I have a lot of confidence in Ra'Shaun and really excited for him.

Q. We saw Clemson and Georgia be a real defensive struggle. Virginia Tech-North Carolina a real defensive struggle. You were one of three teams in the ACC that shut out their opponent. I know it's a small sample size, just week one, but do you have a theory of why maybe defenses were out in front? Is that a thing you see early in the year? I know there's a lot of super seniors back. Any thoughts?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Man, I think your theories and your ideas is as good as what I would have. It's really hard to shut anybody out. I made the comment to my team today, it's hard to shut someone out just playing against air. It's challenging. There's just so many different things that can happen.

So why? I don't know in relation to the point production of the entire sample size, how that all balances out. Too early to say. But I know it's difficult. And with the rules moving more and more toward offensive, I would say, philosophy and being offensive friendly, it's a challenge.

Hard to say for sure. It'll be interesting to see if it continues that way.

Q. If I could sneak in one more, do you have an update? Josh Hayes, the transfer from NDSU, I know you said he was out, you hope to get him back week one. Can you tell us more about his situation?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Recovering. I still don't have an exact time frame or I would pass it on, but he is recovering, is on track. It looks like it's just going to be a little longer than what we thought, but we're still hopeful that he comes back and contributes this season and certainly the beginning of the season.

Q. Even if it's vague, could you tell us what he's dealing with?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: A lower body. Lower leg is I think the term I'm supposed to use.

Q. You had some experience with it last year using multiple quarterbacks, but how tough is it and how much time do you think it's going to take for that system to kind of find a rhythm when you're rotating guys in and out?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: I think we saw some of the benefits a year ago, and I think we certainly saw it happening throughout the course of just this one game. Yeah, so there are certain plays where we are using different quarterbacks. Man, I think the play count and the volume isn't enough to truly affect what we're doing mostly,

and I think for the possible benefit, it's a good trade. So I believe in the idea.

Q. Kind of along those same lines, when you're using guys like Rodriguez to run the ball or Ira or non-running backs, is that -- you kind of talked about this earlier, but is that a reflection of just how much talent they have? Is it a reflection of the running backs, or how does that all kind of shake out?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Yeah, I really like our running backs, so it's not a reflection of that. It just is atypical. Those things are difficult to prepare for and hard to identify and what personnel group is it or who might carry the ball. Yeah, so again, a lot of this is coming from being on the defensive side, and those are all things that are challenging. Hopefully it adds some value to our offense, but also some of those kids are really good carrying the football. They're good throwing it. They're good football players. When they've played that position, the game is not -- it seems to be slower for them right from the beginning with their training, and so they're more ready to play and play early.

Q. The Illinois wideout Isaiah Williams, he's their No. 1, what kind of stands out about him and their offense in general?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Well, I think that they're well-coached, and so when you look at the history of their head coach and you look at the successes and then the style, there's a proven track record there. So when you're able to complement and do that and then have strong receivers in addition to a good running game, that makes it more difficult to defend.

Yeah, just capable football players and well-coached.

Q. Another question on Rodriguez: He joined the program as a quarterback. At what point did you realize that maybe he had some of those FBP skills in the Keytaon mold? Did that happen during the spring or was it a summer revelation?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: In the spring, and we still consider him a quarterback, it's just while he's battling in the quarterback world, there's no reason he can't help us and play football. We have a saying here that playing is more fun than watching, so he's still a quarterback, but that doesn't mean he can't carry the ball and he can't do other things while he's becoming our quarterback.

But we saw it in the spring, and I was really impressed then.

Q. It's still early, obviously; you're one game in. Just assess because it's hard when you have your kind of talent, assess how your guys are doing. Is it according to plan, anything that kind of helps you understand your team better as each game goes on this season.

BRONCO MENDENHALL: I would love to say that there are kind of the micro points along the way that I'm looking for and seeing, and the reality, and I say this each year, and I'm just always amused at the rankings to start a football season, and yeah, I think there's lots of commercial value to it in terms of intrigue and possible match-ups and television. I really don't think anyone truly knows until after week 8, and that's probably the earliest.

So I think the playoff rankings, and as we go to that, that's about when that starts, and so all of us are uncovering and discovering and working and trying to get a big enough sample size as fast as possible to truly understand and gain the identity of where we are. But it's about at that point where we know.

So yeah, I'm paying attention every day, and I'm looking closely every day, and I'm using every statistic that I know and all the intuition, as well. Sometimes it just takes time, and I'd love to give you a better answer, but yeah, usually, as my wife and I talk, talk to me after week 8, then let's see what the rankings are and then I'll tell you more clearly what our team looks like, and that's just about how it works.

Q. Is she usually right with her assessments?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: More than I am for sure. Actually that answer is completely for my marriage and the quality of life at home right there.

Q. What did you think of Illinois's offense, and did you notice any major differences between week one and week two?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Similar, and so not major differences but subtle differences, as all of us will do. There is a slight percentage change here, or maybe a highlight of a play or little bit more here, or the execution becomes a little bit more polished in this area. Usually it's easier to see those things early in a season. Later they become a little more subtle. But I would just say, again, there was subtle things that were improving and that I was identifying, but nothing major in terms of identity change that I saw.

Q. To build on Jerry's question about the identity of the Illinois offense, Coach, week one it was Brandon Peters and Art Sitkowski came in at relief at

quarterback for Illinois, and Sitkowski got pretty much all the reps in the week two game against UTSA. How are you preparing for the possibility that Peters may come back, may not? Are you preparing for both right now?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: You have to. Really you defend the offense the best you can, the concepts the best you can. You anticipate whatever changes might happen, and certainly at that position a great example in week one is we weren't preparing for the quarterback that started for William & Mary. We were preparing for another quarterback, and the styles were similar but not identical. You really try to identify the core of what an offense does, why they're doing it, who are the best players and supporting cast, and then you adjust from there.

Q. They did play a game in I guess we call week zero, so your kids may have had the chance to see that, and it was kind of attention grabbing because it was against Nebraska. I know week two is different, but do you get the sense that your guys paid attention to their week one score? Was that at all an attention grabber?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Oh, sure. I think our players, our coaches, I think all of college football paid attention. What a great start for a coach taking over a program, and to have that kind of exposure and that kind of whim, you really couldn't have scripted it any better, so I think everyone paid attention and saw the capability there.

Yeah, our players, they love football, right, and so they watch, and they're seeing College Gameday and when we have a night game, there's games going all day, so certainly they saw it and took note.

Q. When it comes to having sixth-year guys this year, you've got two of them in De'Vante Cross and Nick Jackson. You've had a little bit of experience with some of those older guys from your time at BYU, but what does it bring to the table having guys that have been through that many battles, so to speak, on the field for you?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Yeah, steady. So there just is a steadiness and a confidence and a resolve where their highs aren't as high, their lows aren't as low, and just the daily presence of what this takes is really, I would say, grounding for a team. It's just reference points, right, for any player to look, and without even me pointing it out, but I can if I need to, just when in doubt, look there.

It's just nice to have that presence, and even as grown-ups, right, as games come, we can get high and we can get low and pressure affects us all different, but when

young people are playing at the level they are and poised and handling that so well with kind of the boots on the ground level, it really helps.

Q. I've just got one more about a guy emerging on the defensive side. Hunter Stewart, how has he kind of emerged, for lack of a better word, and what did you see from him on Saturday and maybe going forward?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Yeah, that's a good pickup. In fact, one of my first notes after I watched the game, and I send notes in my brief before we meet to the different staffs, right, the offensive staff, the defensive staff, the special teams, and that was my very first note to our defensive staff was I was impressed with Hunter Stewart's play. He played well, he played hard, he was productive and just took a big jump. What a great time and what a big need that he's addressing. So I was impressed with his play, and of the entire team, right, he was the one to me that -- I'm not going to say was unexpected, but how he played was -- man, I would say probably exceeded the expectations I had of where he would be in week one, so it was great.

Q. I'm wondering if you have any players that perhaps aren't starting this next game but are leaders off the field.

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Yeah, that is a really good question. We put lots of emphasis on what we call the fourth side, and the fourth side, right, starts on our own sideline. I actually grade the fourth side similar to how I do the game, and I'm paying attention to who's really cheering for our team and who's invested in them. We do the same with section 118 and for our players that aren't dressing. Yeah, I expect that section to be the catalyst and kind of the model of what the fourth side looks like.

So I have names that -- and we have kind of a staff monitoring that section on the sideline, so I have names submitted, and those will be announced on Thursday. But that's one of the ways that I see that, and so yeah, stay tuned and there will be some announcements coming up this week.

Q. Just want to ask you a little bit about Darrius Bratton. How has he grown as a player and as a person for you at UVA?

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Hmm, Darrius is -- he's a young person of substance and maturity and diligence and consistency and humility, and all those qualities have grown because he's battled through injury so much. He just keeps going. He's smiling and he's always optimistic.

In terms of a football player, he's very capable. He's long and he's fast and he has good ball skills and he's a good tackler.

Injuries have been in the way of, I think, most people seeing what he truly can do, and so I'm so hopeful for him that he's able to stay healthy and kind of have the season that he would like and we'd like him to have because as a person he's just an amazing young man to be around and one of the most likable players or people that I've met. He's remarkable.

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