

TaxSlayer Gator Bowl: Virginia vs Missouri

Friday, December 26, 2025

Jacksonville, Florida, USA

EverBank Stadium

Antonio Elliott

Eliah Drinkwitz

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Good morning. Please welcome coach Tony Elliott from the Virginia Cavaliers.

Next up we have Missouri head coach Eliah Drinkwitz.

We'll just jump right into this. Both of your teams have arrived in Jacksonville with a lot to play for. How do you help your players understand the history and significance of playing in a bowl game?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Last time we were here was the last time we beat Alabama. It's a significant piece of our history and some of the accomplishments that we've had.

Anytime you get an opportunity to play in a bowl game, I think it's a really special event. I said this on the press conference. Bowl games are defined by two things: the location, and obviously spending Christmas in Jacksonville. I was at the beach for the first time in my life on Christmas Day. What an awesome experience that has been.

The second is a quality opportunity, the opportunity to play against a really, really good Virginia team, led by Coach Elliott, ACC coach of the year. They're one drive away - I know he's probably stewing over that - one drive away from being in the College Football Playoff. It's as good of an opponent as you can have.

Our guys know that it's going to take a lot to compete in this game. I think anytime you're a competitor, you want to have a quality opponent. So our guys are ready and prepared.

THE MODERATOR: Coach Elliott?

ANTONIO ELLIOTT: I'm going to steal a little bit of what he said. The school that we're practicing at, the hotel, the weather. Everything about the experience is new for our guys.

Also being able to play against a team like Coach Dink's team. Man, you cut them on film, immediately we knew we were going to a really, really good bowl. When you watch the tape, you're playing a team like Missouri.

THE MODERATOR: You mentioned you spent Christmas here. A little bit of a different question. Christmas dinner with your team. Another probably first for your group. If you could invite two or three people to that Christmas dinner yesterday, who would you invite and why.

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Well, if it was up to me, just saying thank you, I would invite Sarah because she did an excellent job with this bowl, and Greg. Both of those people have done an excellent job.

This has been first class. We have been to some really good bowl games in the past. I know Coach Elliott has been to some really good bowl games.

The hospitality, the hotel, the food, the service has been really, really special. We appreciate y'all and we appreciate every volunteer with the Gator Bowl to make this Christmas Day a lot of fun and Christmas Eve a lot of fun for our players.

THE MODERATOR: Who would you invite?

ANTONIO ELLIOTT: I have three names. First would be the big man upstairs. Obviously it's his birthday and the real reason for the season, just to put everything in perspective.

I haven't seen Trevor and I haven't seen Travis. Trevor Lawrence and Trevor Etienne in about five years. I think I would invite them over just to celebrate with us. We're in there playing in their venue, in their hometown. Also to help our team understand what it's like to play in the post-season.

We've been approaching this game like a Playoff game. This really is two teams that are a drive and a half away from playing the College Football Playoff. I would have brought those two over to just maybe help me get these



guys fired up to go against him.

THE MODERATOR: You didn't sign them for the game? They are not playing (smiling)?

ANTONIO ELLIOTT: I tried to, but they wouldn't answer.

THE MODERATOR: You mentioned bowl week. Is there one or two events that really stand out? We have a lot of the committee here with us. Something that really stands out that made this week special for you and your team?

ANTONIO ELLIOTT: The opportunity today for six of our players to be over meeting with the young people that really are the superstars. They're the ones that have been battling life-altering situations. So for our players to put in perspective of how blessed they are.

Then having a chance to go over to the naval base and tour the destroyer ships. I'm a little bit of a kind of military nerd. I like things like that. It was really cool to see that up close and personal.

I've been on an aircraft carrier and to Air Force bases, but never been on a ship like that. It also helps our guys put everything in perspective.

Football is the ultimate team sport that is all about sacrifice. When you meet the officers and enlisted folks aboard those ships, you realize those are the ones that are really making the ultimate sacrifice for us to be able to talk about a football game. They give it up for is.

THE MODERATOR: Anything that stands out for you?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: I think the opening night, just the attitude of gratitude, giving back to the community. I think that's an awesome mission they have in providing food for food-insecure people, children. I think that was a great deal.

For our guys to be just be able to write an encouraging note. Encouragement is such a powerful thing, using your words in a positive way. I think that was really cool.

The Dream Team event we went to was impactful. There was one kid kept picking Virginia to win the game. It was bothering me a little bit (smiling). Otherwise it was good.

ANTONIO ELLIOTT: One out of six. We had to get one vote.

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: We got there first. I recruited five of 'em. Couldn't get a commitment.

THE MODERATOR: The giveback is a big piece of the bowl game. I'm sure it's what you deliver for your teams every year. Anything in particular you do during the year you'd like to highlight for this audience?

ANTONIO ELLIOTT: Each Friday during the season, we have a couple opportunities in town, in Charlottesville, the UVA Medical Hospital has a big children's wing. Several of our guys will spend their Fridays before we start our preparation visiting the children from all over the east coast, the state of Virginia, to bring encouragement.

We have another group that goes to one of the local elementary cool schools and reads to the children there.

Those are two things that stand out.

We have a big community service event each semester. This past year we went to a local housing project and tried to do anything we possibly could just to help renovate and make life a little bit better for them.

THE MODERATOR: How about you?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: We do some similar things. The one I would highlight, my wife and I's passion has been foster care ministry. There's a foster care group called Coyote Hill in town. We track with them. We do a Night of Champions for all the foster care kids within Boone County.

We bring those students in or families in. The families go and have a night and a meal with the coaches' wives. All the young athletes go and do a night with our players, do a football camp with them. Then we bring them back to the game and have their whole family for a game.

Then for Christmas, since these guys are getting NIL, we have each position group adopt a family and go out and buy them all Christmas gifts, use their influence in a positive way, their finances. We preach a lot to our guys you're blessed to be a blessing, so use your resources.

One of the cool things, our defensive ends, our edges, were in line to buy it. They're at Target. A lady was like, What are y'all doing?

Zion Young, who is vocal, We're buying Christmas gifts for Coyote Hill.

She says, No, I'm buying it.

So she went over and paid for everything. The guys went and got another kid and bought more stuff. It is awesome to see that, the Lord multiply that.

THE MODERATOR: That's a good story about NIL.

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: There's a lot of good stories about NIL. A lot of car dealers have gotten rich off selling cars. We've been able to give back to the community. It's the gift that keeps on giving year-round.

THE MODERATOR: I'm assuming that being a leader of men is still one of the most important things as there are now assets and money behind this. How has your job changed? Describe the importance of being that leader of men and shaping the next generation.

ANTONIO ELLIOTT: I think he said it the best way: you're blessed to be a blessing to others. I know I didn't get into this business to be sitting here today. I got into this business, my first job as at an HPCU. All I wanted to do was coach ball, to be around young people, to use that platform to impact them. I was fortunate to have people that believed in me to help me develop to ultimately be fortunate enough to be in this position.

At the end of the day we're teachers, we're developers of young people. That's the hardest thing I think in our line of work, is keeping the focus because there are more good things than there are bad things. But a lot of times the things that catch people's attention in the media are the things that make your job frustrating. But it's a small minority of the time.

To me it's a calling. There's a higher level of responsibility. At the end of the day I don't believe I'm going to be judged by the number of wins and losses, but I will be judged by the impact on the hearts and souls of the young men I've been fortunate enough to be in charge of.

We take a comprehensive approach, a holistic approach within our program. We want to prepare our guys to be champions in all that they do.

They're going to be men much longer than they are football players. We need these young men that possess so many talents beyond the physical things you see on Saturdays.

He mentioned one of his D-ends is very vocal. I'm sure he's got so many gifts that he can give and pass forward, then has an unbelievable platform. We keep that in perspective.

Everything we do is about building champion men. In the process we believe that whatever they touch, whether it's football, academics, their spiritual life, their social life, they're going to be champions.

THE MODERATOR: Anything to add?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: The one thing I remind our coaching staff and our players about all the time, our coaches who are around our players, is these guys are still developing and maturing. Even though we're paying them like professionals, they're not quite there yet. We got to walk 'em through those hard things in life.

We got to walk 'em through - plagiarism - when the easiest way out is to cheat in class. This is the consequences for your actions.

They're still all making decisions. Because of the spotlight, because of the ESPNs and all that, we can't judge 'em too harshly. We got to correct 'em, mold them, use discipline. We have to keep helping them move along and make sure that these choices don't define them forever.

That's something the last three years for us, is that as the stage, the lights, the money has gotten bigger, the development of these young men is still priority. That's really what we got into it for.

It has turned into a business model, but we can't be so business-minded that we forget about that.

THE MODERATOR: You talk about the leaders on your team. Looking for that unsung person that you don't talk a lot about in the media normally, who is that for you? What do you have to say about him?

ANTONIO ELLIOTT: I think Jah Carter doesn't get talked about as much. The reason being this year is we were able to add additional players around him at his position so we had a rotation so he didn't have to play as many snaps. In that process his impact has not diminished at all. It's actually improved and increased.

He's a guy that was there with the previous staff, went through the transitions, never been to a bowl game. Now we're here. It's just so awesome. You see a fifth-year guy that could be focused on himself. When he's not getting reps in practice, he's taking a young guy over to the side and coaching him one on one. That just permeates throughout the position group and the guys within our locker room.

I would say Jah Carter, No. 90, that doesn't get talked about as much as maybe some of our other team captains.

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Probably for us Jalen Catalon. He was a transfer from UNLV. Plays safety for us. Has rotated quite a bit in the secondary. Is a steady, consistent hand. Carries the message of the coaching staff from the team room to the locker room, which I think is very



important. He's just been consistent.

Even through the transitions of the bowl games and players playing, not playing, he's been consistent, rallies the troops, making sure we have the right kind of spirit and energy at practice. I've been really proud of him.

THE MODERATOR: We have a football game tomorrow. Talk about your week of preparation and what the fans could be excited to see from your team.

ANTONIO ELLIOTT: It's been a good week. We tried to keep it as normal as possible being that we are playing on a Saturday. The only difference was we practiced Tuesday morning before we flew down.

It has been really good energy. The guys have been excited. They've loved the preparation down here because of the weather and the venue. Very spirited from a practice standpoint.

We understand the opponent we're going to get ready to play. It going to be a fast game, right? It is going to be a very physical game. It is going to be a game that comes down to one possession.

Our guys are focusing in on the details to be able to play our best to give us a shot to be in position in the fourth quarter to see which team wants to win it the most.

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Yeah, we tried to have a typical game week the last week. We gave our guys three days off to go home. We met down here, had a practice Tuesday, Wednesday. Today will be a Fast Friday for us. We'll be ready to kick off tomorrow night.

Obviously with our quarterback, who was penciled in to be the starting quarterback leaving, an opportunity for a freshman to step up. That will be a little bit of a challenge for us to see how can he acclimate.

They do a tremendous job on the defensive side of the ball in the back end with their secondary. It's like this offensive guy told them to mix up all these coverages. You have no idea what they're doing in the back end.

It's really going to be strength on strength for us. I think their defense and our defense are the thing that we both lean on. I don't want to misspeak.

Then offensively both of us control the clock and try to move the ball down the field and take our shots when we can.

We're going to have to rely on Jamal Roberts and Ahmad

Hardy. Those are our two running backs. We've had some wide receivers step away, too. Gives an opportunity for Kevin Coleman and Donovan Olugbode to step up.

It wouldn't surprise me if it doesn't come down to the kicking game because it is such an even match with offense and defense.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you very much, to the two coaches, for the fireside chat.

We'll open it up for questions.

Q. All the turmoil going on in college sports right now. Both of you have thousand-yard rushers who started at other colleges. I'm assuming there's something there that you liked about the way they were coached and the way they were developed. We have two mid-major basketball teams in this city who have lost their leading scores to the ACC, SEC and the Big Ten in the last three years. When things kind of settle down a little bit, do you think the Power Four conference teams, when they get a transfer from an FCS team, a mid-major, a Division II team, should there be some kind of developmental fee that goes back to those colleges after a kid transfers to your program?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: This is actually a law-related question to applies to the NFL, too. As soon as the NFL starts paying universities and us for developing their talent. There would be no NFL if there wasn't college football. As soon as they start paying us, then I think that's something that would happen.

But it's going to have to start top down.

ANTONIO ELLIOTT: I think he answered it perfectly (smiling). I just want to say ditto.

Truth be told, we're at a different place in our program than maybe Coach Drink is with us taking over as a new staff. Really last year was the first cycle that we had through with a big transfer portal class. So what we saw was just really good football players that could help us get better.

I think the longer we're in it and the more direction we do get from the NFL, we'll be able to maybe pay it forward.

Q. Coach Drink, you mentioned Zion Young. Is there an update on his availability for the game? Any other roster updates you might want to share?

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: I don't want to share 'em because I don't want Tony to know (smiling).



Zion's playing. Had been deliberating on that. But he will play tomorrow. Excited for him to do that.

We've had a healthy week of practice. Nothing since I think last Tuesday when I updated everybody. Obviously I think the starters that have opted out obviously were Beau, Josh Manning and Marquis Johnson. Obviously the injuries with Brett Norfleet and Josiah Trotter. It's five pretty good players. Other than that, we're ready to rock'n roll.

You got any news 'cause I'd like to know? I saw a tweet about your running back. Has he made up his mind yet or what (smiling)?

ANTONIO ELLIOTT: He's still deliberating.

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: Tell him to call me. Tell him Zion's playing.

Q. Tony, but Harrison Waylee, Noah Vaughn, Xay Davis in the backfield, what is your comfortability?

ANTONIO ELLIOTT: Got to go play. At the end of the day it's truly the message that you preach every day, is the next man up. You got to be ready.

I told the guys throughout the course of the season that in games like this, it's going to be somebody that you don't expect, so everybody better be ready.

I'm excited if they get the opportunity to go out there and play. Obviously Harrison has played a lot of football. Prior to injury, Noah was playing at a high level. Obviously Xay Davis, a freshman, hasn't had much burn. If he's out there, buckle up because Zion is playing. You better be ready to go.

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: I'll say this about this whole situation.

I think for our team, for sure, obviously hearing from Coach, this game means a whole lot to both sides. There's opportunities here. But it's also an opportunity for other guys to get a chance to play.

With the redshirt rule not applying, you'll see some freshmen run down on kickoff, on special teams, get an opportunity to play, develop the bottom half of your roster. That is really what these practices have been all about for us.

It's a great situation. We wish those guys well that moved on. But really it's about our team now moving forward. That's what we're focused on.

Q. Tony, Corey Costner starts for you guys at the nickel. What did you see from him as he played more and more?

ANTONIO ELLIOTT: I think, one, you saw the ability to make the big play. He came up with some phenomenal plays that you wouldn't expect a freshman to make.

Then over the course of the season, you just saw his ability to play down in and down out. He was also being subbed in on some of our fast packages just to get a different level of coverage at the nickel position.

Physically he came in the door ready to play. But by mid-season you felt comfortable with him being able to go out and function on his own, get himself lined up, relay the calls. We're excited for him to have now an opportunity to play potentially a whole game.

You wish Prevard the best, but I'm excited for Corey and his opportunity.

ELIAH DRINKWITZ: The play he made against Cal and the interception was pretty sporty. I think y'all will be just fine (smiling).

Q. Obviously you've been here long enough to know the city is pretty galvanized around the Jaguars right now. The fans will give Coach Meyer credit for making sure that Trevor and Travis played on this team. Could you describe what it was like to coach those two young men.

ANTONIO ELLIOTT: Man, made me look really, really good. Seemed like everything on the call sheet was going to find a way to work when you had those two.

First and foremost, I think the thing that I take away from my time with Trevor and with Travis is they're unbelievable human beings. They're just phenomenal, phenomenal people.

Trevor, man, nobody's had it more challenging than him since he was 14 years old. He's always been in the spotlight. He's handled it better than anybody that I've ever seen on what you can expect out of a person that's in the spotlight.

I'm just happy that now kind of things are starting to settle in for both of them.

Travis was the type of guy that showed up every day with a smile on his face, didn't complain, went to work, was a team guy.

Those are the things that I remember the most. There were some phenomenal plays they made. I think you're seeing that from an ability standpoint.

What you do know about both of those guys is they're champions. It was a matter of time before they were going to be able to influence the circle around them and galvanize them and lead them in the right direction.

Q. Coach Elliott, in the long history of Virginia football, you've never won 11 games in a season. To have the additional practices, how much of an opportunity is this for the program, not just for the present, but for the years ahead?

ANTONIO ELLIOTT: It's a huge opportunity, man. We're trying to catch up with Coach Drink. Like my shoe game is trying to catch up (smiling).

I've been coaching this guy for a while. Going back to the days in the ACC, he's always been a guy that I admire and have an appreciation for how he does things.

Over the last three seasons, we haven't been to the post-season. If you look at it, that's about 45 practices that we've missed out, and three games, an opportunity to develop our program. This is huge.

Both teams are playing for legacy. I believe y'all are playing for your third 9-1 season in a row. We're playing for the first potential 11-win season in school history. There's a ton to play for. That's been fun, cool to see these guys rally around another goal that they had set when they may have came up a little bit short on some other goals that they set.

It's huge for our program going forward to be able to get these 10, 12 practices with these young guys, have an opportunity to play some of them in this game. It really sets the stage for next year.

Q. Tony, probably when you first took this job, you never thought you were going to be in the situation with 15 new players on the roster through the off-season. You said this group has kind of changed your mind in how you were going to approach roster building, can change the landscape. How did they do that? What was it about this team that changed how you're approaching?

ANTONIO ELLIOTT: I'm not going to speak for Drink. But my wife probably can attest that as coaches, we're stubborn. We are set in our ways. We like things the way we like them. We're not necessarily open to change.

When you're talking about going completely against the model that we came up in as young coaches. As young coaches you might have 25 guys as freshmen, you knew you were going to have those guys for the next four years.

You cycled them through, you developed your team, you built chemistry, camaraderie, you had a culture set in place. Now half of your team comes in in January. How is this going to work?

This team was able to teach me a lot about kind of where we are, how to coach the younger generations, that you still can develop team, you still can have culture. Leadership, everything and rises and falls on leadership if you get the right leaders in place.

It also taught me that if you're going to do this, you don't necessarily have to change like everybody else does. You can adapt according to your philosophies and your principles.

So the staff did an unbelievable job of finding the right people first, then the talent. Coach will tell you, we're limited on the amount of time we can have with our guys. There's got to be certain individuals that take the message of the coaches down to the locker room. That's what these guys proved to me that if you have the right leaders in place, you can bring a large number of new guys in.

Ultimately the locker room is going to police itself if the culture is set and you have the right guys.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you so much. Good luck tomorrow.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports