

# University of Virginia Football Media Conference

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## Bronco Mendenhall Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

**Q. It's been awhile since you've had a full week to prepare for a game. This week you actually have a couple extra days. What has the additional time allow you to do?**

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Rest, recover, heal mentally and physically. It's been, yeah, a taxing season so far, rapid pace going from a Friday to a Thursday. I think everybody on the way home from Miami was just so thankful. It was hard to get the days right.

It felt like the day after Miami was Sunday, but it wasn't, it was Friday. Then it felt like the next day was Sunday, but it wasn't, it was Saturday. Then it felt like Sunday was Monday, but it really wasn't.

Good to be recalibrated. Doesn't mean everything is now magically fixed and healed as far as body parts or anything else, but the rest came at the right time.

**Q. Were you able to get a head start over the weekend with players?**

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Coaches were able to get a head start. Players-wise we really allowed them to rest and recover. I'm sure they were on their iPads watching game film, all that.

We didn't insert the plan earlier. We didn't do extra meetings with our players. We really allowed Saturday to be a normal Saturday as if we played on a Friday I guess is the best way to say that. Saturday was basically a Monday. We're one day ahead. But the players don't know the plans yet so we're not any farther ahead that way, but the coaches are farther ahead.

**Q. You mentioned the North Carolina game exposing some weaknesses. Over the last couple games, have you been pleased with how the defense has addressed some of those problem areas?**

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Yeah, we're addressing. I see us just chipping away at it. There's clear progress being made everywhere from that point of reference.

I think it's also clear what teams we're playing, what their identities look like as we get to games five and six. It kind of starts to put things in a little bit more perspective of how glaring are the weaknesses or is that just what we do against anybody. The picture is becoming clearer.

Back to your first question. Yeah, I think we're chipping away at addressing, working on. It's showing yield. We need to add consistency to it, but I see it happening, yes, from not only the Miami game but the Wake Forest game. I saw progress in both.

**Q. Josh Hayes, the transfer corner, seemed like he had a pretty good workload for Carolina and Wake. I thought I saw less of him against Miami, could be wrong. Where is he at and what has bringing him along been like?**

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Yeah, it's great. We want him to play as much as we can get him to play through his preparation. That was the plan against Miami. He played well while he was in. He gave up one 50/50 ball if you remember kind of down the sideline, really in good position. He's battling to start every week.

Practice really matters for us. He's going head-to-head with Fentrell Cypress. Each week's practice determines who goes out to start the game. That's where he is.

**Q. Your secondary, it felt like it took a step back in terms of Carolina in terms of giving up the explosive plays that you talked about in the off-season. Wake Forest, while they moved the ball, they didn't have as many big plays. Are you happy to where you've gotten to in terms of limiting big plays?**

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Yeah, we're making real progress in relation to a year ago. It has been targeted. We're not perfect yet. You still see an assignment mistake or two, especially if it's at a critical time. We had one of those in the Miami game where we had an assignment

mistake.

We're chipping away at it. You can feel it happening. It's not perfect yet, but I see progress and it's real.

**Q. Coming back after that Miami game, how would you describe the mood on the plane and the ride back? Everyone was probably tired. Kind of coming into this week, you talked about how much urgency you've wanted this team to have. Does that drop off after a win or do you want it to keep picking up?**

BRONCO MENDENHALL: It doesn't drop off. In terms of describing the mood, gratified I would say. There's nothing in terms of stepping back or reflecting. Just gratification, right? The profession that I'm in, maybe that a lot of people are in, just not quite as visible, man, small, small differences lead to large impact.

A ball bouncing off a post after a hard-fought game is a completely different result than it going through. Our team, man, they held together and they battled, they held together and battled, they encouraged one another, held together and battled.

To have a tangible result on the road, our first win in the Orange Bowl -- not the Orange Bowl, whatever the name of the field is now, sorry about that. Yeah, it's great.

ACC wins on the road are hard to come by. Just lots of things that we were grateful for and anxious to do again. So, yeah, urgency is not affected. If anything, it's enhanced.

**Q. The workload for Keytaon, he has the cast, how impressed have you been with the determination out there on the field? Nothing seems to stop this guy whether it's a position change or an injury.**

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Yeah, Keytaon, he can do anything. He knows he can do anything in a humble way. He's so optimistic and so positive and so passionate. Man, am I lucky that he's at UVA and I'm so lucky to be his coach.

He's just someone that I can't wait to see every day. There's always a smile, there's always something we can do, always just a word of encouragement for anyone in the program. He backs it up with how he plays.

I'm learning a lot by watching just a remarkable young person.

**Q. Thompson seems to be a guy who is not afraid to do the dirty work. A guy who is like that on the**

**defense is Nick Jackson. When you look through some of the plays, one stood out was when he pulled the Miami center which allowed a sack. A lot of times looks like Jackson can get the sack but instead keeps to his assignment which allows other players around him to make those plays. How great is seeing a guy like Jackson develop a game like that?**

BRONCO MENDENHALL: I would say it goes beyond that, kind of reflective of what we were talking about with Keytaon. It's team first. Maybe all eras, right, we're all self-centered to some level, we think about our own goals, priorities, whatever. Football is a team game. The role that you play on any given assignment is for the team.

Yeah, I think both Nick and Keytaon grasp and understand that really well.

**Q. When you look back at film of the second half at the defense, how much of some of the struggles or missed assignments were due more about what Miami's second half adjustments were doing, their up-tempo defense?**

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Not much. It was very similar. The biggest difference in the second half, the short field after the interception. Yeah, one assignment mistake in coverage. Otherwise it would have looked a lot like the first half.

What seemed to be big really was small after re-looking at it. Yeah, we had a third down after the turnover, about six inches was the difference of an incomplete and a complete, then we blew a coverage. Other than that it would have been very similar.

**Q. The past couple of weeks you keep mentioning about issues coming up defensively at the critical times. Is that just a challenge of simulating those kinds of scenarios in practice or how do you get better at those?**

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Yeah, really just what you said. Through emphasis, right? My job is to always be in advance of, and I wish I was perfect at that. I've never predicted for sure how we're going to play or what the opponent has success with or not. I tried as hard as I can in terms of our processes.

After each game, right, the sample size grows and it becomes clearer where we might need attention. In this past game what became clear is we led the game from beginning to end. So playing from in front from beginning to end, then as teams are becoming more desperate to score, then making sure that we're aware of the down and

the distance and the situation, where the sticks are.

Just contextual football I think is the answer, right? Those are things we'll have to simulate more in practice as we expose areas that maybe I overestimated where we were or were good in that.

I just watched it, and no we're not. Sometimes the threshold that needs to be met is met in practice. I see it in the game. Oh, no, we're not quite there yet. That would be one of those not quite there yet.

**Q. How much does Malik Cunningham remind you of his father? How dangerous do you think he is?**

BRONCO MENDENHALL: On a scale of whatever dangerousnesses there are, I would put him at the top of the dangerous scale in terms of how fast, how athletic. He can pull it down and run on any given play. I'm just really impressed with him. I think he's a really good athlete. I think his throwing accuracy and precision has improved. On any given play, he's a threat.

Yeah, doesn't take much to remind me from a year ago where we had a really hard time getting him on the ground or tackling him. He's a really good football player in a scheme that uses him really well.

**Q. Brennan was not happy after the game with his performance. He thought the offense overall could have been more productive. After you looked at the tape, what were your thoughts on the way the offense played?**

BRONCO MENDENHALL: How refreshing to win, to win that kind of game, to battle, all that, then have your quarterback, the very first thing he's thinking about is how to improve.

Yeah, he was upset about his interception. Came right to me after the game and said, That one's on me. I don't have to say a thing which is so remarkable and so refreshing, that accountability. We played over 50 plays in the first half. Defensively we had a lot of three-and-out, getting the ball back. The points per play, I think he would have expected to be higher. We all would have. Give Miami credit, right? It's not like they're not skilled and don't have good players and good coaches.

With the opportunities in relation to the points, I think that's probably what Brennan was referring to, those that we can better. Especially in the second half when we needed, to we had so many chances. We had chances to separate in that game both offensively and defensively. But our own lack of execution or mistakes, and to Miami's credit, kept

them fighting back. We always struggled to pull away and we didn't execute well enough on either side to pull away. Tells you where we are, but also where Miami is, right? It's not just one-sided.

My guess is all of that contextually was what he was talking about.

**Q. The jersey selection a couple weeks ago was something on social media. What can you tell us about Joe in terms of how he UVA and what he brings to the program?**

BRONCO MENDENHALL: How he got here was one of those -- we know A.J. was arriving from Louisville. I didn't know early on that Joe was coming, as well. He was coming as a graduate student and paying for his own grad school. Just unselfish in every way. He works so hard. He's capable. It's just a bright spot.

Those two kids, just A.J. and Joe, they kind of come as a team, like a Super Hero tandem. They travel together. They're just always smiling, they're laughing, elbowing one another. There's some side dialogue happening, giggling. They're just fun to be around.

He sacrificed a lot to be here. He's thankful and grateful to be here. I think that's not only why he reacted so passionately about his jersey, but the team as well. He's one of the favorite players on our team just because of what he gives.

**Q. When you have a quarterback that you're opposing like Cunningham, it stresses the whole defense, but is there one particular position group that they got to be coached a little differently when a quarterback has that skill set?**

BRONCO MENDENHALL: I'd love to say it's just one, but it's really the entire 11 because they're all interrelated. You can't just say the defensive line you have him because there is not a matchup that is in our favor athletically. You can't say linebacker, you have him. In space there's not a matchup that's in our favor or anyone else's.

Secondary-wise they have to know their coverage will be longer and what we call plaster because routes convert and adjust as the quarterback is harder to get on the ground. He's a run threat, he creates on his own, which means there's a great chance he'll still have the ball after you tackle in the open field after you've covered downfield.

It affects everyone which just means the plays extend. You play defense longer when a quarterback is as athletic as Louisville's quarterback.

**Q. A week ago some of the players mentioned that they were seeing more of you around the defensive side of the ball and at practice. Was that true or were you just more vocal? If it was true, will you be doing that again this week?**

BRONCO MENDENHALL: I'm not sure I was more vocal or more around. Yeah, it could or could not be true, I guess. I just like our team. No, I love our team. I want to help wherever I can in any way that I can.

I move and I adjust and I'm intuitive as to where and how I can possibly make a difference or spread influence. Yeah, that's what I'll continue to do.

**Q. I think Brennan talked a little bit about going into Miami knowing the opportunity to run the ball would be there. Then y'all kind of established that early on. Is it more at this point with the run game just looking for that opportunity to get that going early?**

BRONCO MENDENHALL: It is. I really like Mike Hollins and Wayne Taulapapa and Keytaon in the run game, Devin Darington. We've used Ronnie Walker as well. We're capable in the run game. So much of it now is what is the defense doing, what does the run game yards and opportunities look like, and how is the game being managed, really how does it fit.

So all of those things in the Miami game, it just was -- I love seeing our running backs run. They're physical, they're tough, they're always falling forward, fighting for extra yards. It adds a dimension to our offense when people are playing coverage first. That makes them -- holds them accountable to the chains being moved, and that's necessary.

**Q. You didn't have an update last Thursday, anything been Jelani Woods or Justin Duenkel, Adeeb Atariwa or De'Vante Cross?**

BRONCO MENDENHALL: De'Vante Cross is the only one I have an update on. He was battling personal issues and family issues that are private. He's back with the team. There was nothing disciplinary-wise or violations or anything like that. It was just a personal matter with his family that he was working through, as so many of us have, and needs attention sometimes.

The other three regarding injuries, I don't have an update at this point. I probably won't until Thursday. That seems to be when I have the clearest idea as to when, if and how guys might play.

**Q. What have you seen from the changes you've made on the left side of the offensive line, especially now that Haskins is healthy again, shuffling Nelson over to guard?**

BRONCO MENDENHALL: I really have liked Ryan Nelson at guard. That seems to be a natural and effective position for him, so I've liked that a lot. Jonathan Leech started to tackle. As I was reviewing film with the team, and I do that where I'm kind of talking about all positions and all things in front of the entire team, that didn't take long on offense where Haskins kept showing up and blocking really well and playing through the whistle, just performing in a way that we knew he could, but has been a little bit hampered by injury.

I really liked what I saw when Haskins and Nelson were in at the same time in those stretches on Saturday or Thursday against Miami. Yeah, that gives us more depth and more flexibility. It will be needed, right? We're just going into game six. That just helps our depth.

**Q. Obviously Haskins and Nelson was the left side of the line two years ago. How much does that experience of those two guys playing next to each other help that situation?**

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Yeah, it helps tremendously, right? There's chemistry that's formed when you play next to someone. There's communication that's always established. It's much like owe will you and Chris Glaser at center and the right guard spot. Between Glaser and Swoboda.

It doesn't mean that I'm opposed to having five players play the entire game, but rarely do you see an offensive front that can play over 80 plays really, really effectively and really, really aggressively for that amount, at least in relation to my standards.

I would love to see Bissinger and Leech also continue to show up as they are. That gives us really about eight when you look at the different possibilities of players that can rotate through and not suffer anything execution-wise.

**Q. Having played two games not on Saturdays, how much of a benefit that is on the back end this week to get the extra few days of rest?**

BRONCO MENDENHALL: We'll see. I know for the head coach it feels really good right now on a Monday. I'll find out from the team when we see them practice tomorrow. We're anticipating, right, a healthier and more rested team.

It doesn't always play out like that. Sometimes there's a

little bit of a mental sluggishness because it's not playing Thursday or Friday. We've had a few days off. I've seen both. Usually it ends up being beneficial just for the health part as the week goes on.

**Q. I think there's nine ACC quarterbacks that are starters in the NFL Now. Brennan, I don't know that people thought he would be in that realm. Discuss where he is in terms of his development.**

BRONCO MENDENHALL: He's absolutely in that realm. He's not kind of on the fringe, he's right in the middle of that realm. I don't know how to endorse him or share what I think about him any more than I have starting from last year to this year. He's really good. He can make every single throw, he's tough, competitive, smart, durable. Anyone that doesn't think that I guess they'll find out the hard way, right? All you have to do is watch him play and the production speaks for itself.

I'm really impressed. He has tons and tons of room to improve as well. But capability is right there in every level. I really think he's a good player.

**Q. With a lot of these quarterbacks that are really good, like Brett Favre thought he could hit a shoebox from 55 yards away.**

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Probably could.

**Q. Brennan seems really accurate. How much of that is Brennan and how much of that is the cockiness of a quarterback?**

BRONCO MENDENHALL: It's both. I wish I could dissect that into the exact percentages, but it's both. Sometimes when you hit shoeboxes from 50, you do it 10 times in a row, you actually become pretty confident. For those of us that can't hit the shoebox from 50 once, we're probably not as confident.

He's done it enough now, and the sample size has become big enough, not perfect, there's still issues he can develop and grow in. This is absolutely not an issue of capability. He can basically hit whatever you put out there moving or stationary as many times as you want and he can do it with people chasing him around.

**Q. I know it's not as simple as checking it off the list. Having won at Miami, not that your road windows are behind you, was that an important step? Is there something your team takes from that in terms of being able to win on the road going forward?**

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Oh, yeah. There's a lot of

things where after the game Jim Daves comes up to me, it always starts with, This is the first time since. I've had a lot of the first time since in my short time here at Virginia. This is the first time since. This is the first time since. This is the first time since. The last time we did that was. This was another first time since.

We've really worked hard to become more consistent and better not only at home but on the road. To have a tangible result that reflects progress is always important. As you mentioned, doesn't mean we've arrived, but it was accomplished. That counts. It counts in any way that you can get it. Now we use that and build.

**Q. We'll have to look up the last time you won back-to-back ACC road games.**

BRONCO MENDENHALL: I usually find out after the game. When I'm walking off the field, Hey, coach, this is the last time since. Whenever that happens we'll talk about it.

THE MODERATOR: This is the first time since two years ago we've ended four minutes early, so, coach, you're free.

BRONCO MENDENHALL: Thanks.

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