

University of Virginia Football Media Conference

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Tony Elliott Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. If I read the Clemson media guide correctly, you have not experienced back-to-back losses as part of a coaching staff since your first year as an assistant there. This is kind of uncharted territory for you. What are you drawing on as you work through this?

TONY ELLIOTT: Really just drawing on the advice that I got from Coach Swinney, any of the coaches I've talked to in terms of building a program. Hold true to your core values, continue to look for small signs of improvement. I've seen those. Obviously disappointed with our inability to figure out a way to win at this point.

Still encouraged. I'm building a program. That's one of the things that I'm trying to get these guys to understand. There's a difference between having a good team and building a program. Good teams, they may be good for one year. Good programs, they sustain success over the long haul.

In order to build a program, there's philosophies, processes, the way that you operate, core values that you have to truly, truly instill. A lot of bamboo tree. You might not see immediate result.

But you got to keep watering, believing and trusting that at one point it's going to click and you're going to see the growth.

Q. With Louisville this week, how do you prep not knowing their quarterback situation?

TONY ELLIOTT: Right, you prepare for what you see. Over the course of Satterfield's time there, they've played different quarterbacks. You can draw on some of the schematic things they might do different.

It's very difficult to reinvent what you're doing in one week for somebody else. Typically you're going to recruit the skill set to fit your offense.

Jim and I were talking on the way over, Taylor played for him at App, Taylor is different than Malik, but it's a very similar offense. There's components they will be able to tap into.

I think you prepare for what you see. You still got to prepare as if their guy is going to be the guy. It's going to be a game time decision. Be ready to adjust.

I think that's where, as a program, as a team, we have to learn that you got to own the plan so that you can make adjustments. If you don't own the plan, then it's impossible to make the proper adjustments during the game.

Q. When you're helping the players adjust in fundamentals, technique, it's one way. When you're trying to change the mentality of the team, what is the challenge?

TONY ELLIOTT: Yeah, the biggest challenge is for me to keep my composure, right? I pride myself on trying to be a calm guy.

Technique is technique. I know that technique is muscle memory. It's consistently doing it a certain way over time, then it becomes just part of your DNA. I understand that.

The cultural piece, it's finding the right way to communicate to these guys to get them to believe and to buy in. I was a little bit embarrassed with my reaction to a couple things during the game just 'cause I lost my composure a little bit. I apologized to the staff and to the players.

But I saw things that from a cultural standpoint I just did not like, that's not going to be who we are as a program. I just believe that my job at that time is to try and address those things.

Sometimes frustration can get the better of anybody, but there's a commitment to making sure that the core values of this program is what we lean on to be able to win and what we display and what we represent when we go out there.

Q. You're inheriting a program that has been bowl



eligible for five straight years, yet you're talking about they need to buy in. They feel like the old culture was somewhat successful. How do you think that kind of ties in?

TONY ELLIOTT: They've had success doing it their way. I acknowledge that, I respect that. But I also have had success coming from where I'm coming from, the way I was trained, what it took from a cultural standpoint to be successful there.

It's like teaching an old dog new tricks. There's going to resist at times because they've had success doing it one way. But this is a new regime, this is a new direction going forward.

I can take the approach, Hey, you have a good team, but then I'm starting over year after year and I don't establish the foundation of the program.

For me, the foundation of the program is, one, having appreciation for your opportunity to play. When you take the field, right, for pregame warmups, you take the field with enthusiasm, with excitement, with a sense of urgency and appreciation to play. You don't walk onto the field, right?

We had some guys that made it about themselves. They thought it was okay to walk on the field for pregame warmups. From my culture, the culture we're trying to establish, it tells me you don't have the right sense of urgency. You're in the going to have the details in crunch time.

That's what we're seeing on both sides of the ball. It's a handful of plays where guys use the wrong technique or wrong fundamentals, they for the wrong targeting.

Again, maybe they're not used to that, but I know fully how you run onto the field sends a message. I didn't like the message that the team sent when they came onto the field for pregame warmups.

Q. You talked on Saturday about looking throughout the week for the little details, Friday night. Last week was a good week of practice.

TONY ELLIOTT: It was.

Q. There were promising signs. Maybe if those aren't as telling, where do you look?

TONY ELLIOTT: What I'm noticing is that I see the signs during the week, then you get to games. Games are different than practice, right? We talk a lot about kind of

military, the way things are done there. When the real bullets are flying, then it's a little bit different.

When I'm seeing, you get to the game, guys are more concerned with talking trash between the plays and getting up in each other's face, yet we don't have the right targeting when we call the inside zone, right? I'm focused on the right targeting on the inside zone so we can be actual during the day, and not winning the trash-talking contest after the play.

Being disciplined, if a guy pushes you after the whistle, trust that the referee is going to make the call. You don't turn around and push the guy in the face. Those were the kind of things that had me upset in the game because we're trying to win a football game. Next thing I know I'm having to coach things that we've already stopped in practice, that we don't do in practice, then they're showing up in the game.

I get it. They're done things one way. Some guys are going to try to push the envelope, they're young people, I get that, I understand it. Those are things from a culture standpoint I don't believe are going to help us win, right?

My job as the head coach is to make sure that I correct those things. I got to go about figuring out the appropriate way with each guy because each guy is different. It's just taking time for me to reach each individual.

I was really proud of the guys, to just be honest. Friday night and Friday was a challenge from a schedule standpoint with the threat of the hurricane. We had to change plans. The guys handled that exceptional.

Our routine for Friday night was kind of thrown out of whack because the power goes out at the hotel. The guys handled that exceptionally well.

I thought the guys did everything up until it was time to take the field. Then we walk on the field. That doesn't show me the appreciation for your opportunity. That showed me a little bit of entitlement which I didn't like to see.

The result is you missed a play that you need to make, right, because your intensity is not where it needs to be. That could be the one play in the game that determines the game. Or you lose your composure, and you have a penalty. We have six penalties, they were all 15-yard penalties, they change the complexion of the game.

If you look at how the game started, first we don't kick the ball where we're supposed to kick it, right? We got five guys inside the hash, kick the ball in the middle of field. That doesn't seem like a big thing, but we structure the

coverage team. You watch most teams, they structure the coverage by eliminating half the field by kicking the ball into the boundary. We misfit it there.

Luckily guy makes a play, defense gets a stop. Offense is moving the ball. First we have a big ball down the sideline. Man, you got to make that play, find a way to make that play. Okay, that's an impossible play, you make it most of the time, we didn't make it. We worked back to a third-and-three.

Good call, slants versus man coverage. Got our feet flipped the wrong way, our timing is off, we don't complete it, play field position, wet night, got them pinned to the 13. Second play, guys late to watching No. 3 come across. They pop it out. We give them to 15-yard penalties, gave them seven points, right?

Fellas, you got to understand that you got to finish it all the way through. You got to maintain that focus the entire time. It starts with how you get on the field.

I can point to two examples. Illinois game, I might have mentioned this, the opening kickoff, before the ball is through the end of the end zone, the entire defensive unit is on the field. We take the game, we take the field on Saturday, we gotten guys running out and one guy late off the sideline. That's the same guy that was walking out of warmups.

All of it correlates, right? You got a transition. Where we're struggling a little bit is just trusting it in the game, right? It takes time because, man, it's different in the game. Things move faster, they happen faster. You got to keep your focus. We didn't have the focus to come out. That's nobody's fault but my own. It's my job to fix it.

We had a tough meeting yesterday, collective accountability, not just on that but on some other things that happened in the game. The guys owned it. We had a good practice yesterday. The guys are getting ready for practice. I anticipate we're going to have a good practice today.

Q. Sounds like the answer is no. But penalties, 55 continued to block after the whistle. Did you see anything in the tape that you exonerate your guys, or was it all...

TONY ELLIOTT: What you tell them is, There's no place for that in the game, right? You play the game during the snap, between the whistles. After that, like, that's when you get your eyes to the sideline and you move on.

Right, the guy may have pushed you. Continuation of the

play. You already have one personal foul on the season. They're looking at it. Live above reproach. Control that. Let's focus your energy that you're wasting there to when the ball is spotted, go appropriately and handle your business within the rules of the game.

It doesn't matter what the other team is doing because, again, a lot of that is intentional to distract you, to get you out of your game. For some guys, man, it's working. When that happens it hurts the team, right? It hurts the team.

That's why we cut out the fighting in practice. There's a lot of schools that allow guys to practice, they say it's part of football. It's not part of football because you can't do it. You are technically battle between the whistles, but it's structured.

If you want to be a great trash talker, don't talk treasure. The other guy realizes he don't get to you. You've won the mental battle.

That's some of the things with some of these guys that I'm trying to get them to buy into, that we need to focus that energy appropriately, not get lost in the moment, get caught up in what somebody else is doing because they're always going to see the second guy. That's what you tell them all the time, They're always going to be the second guy.

It's the guy that pushes back that they see.

Q. The back-to-back losses, you focus game at a time. When we look at the schedule, it looks like you have a couple chances for what would be dubbed winnable games, then a tough stretch. Big picture as your building the program, culture, how important is it to get a little momentum going in terms of good feelings with wins?

TONY ELLIOTT: I think it's important, but I don't want to jeopardize building a program for those wins because then those wins will be short-lived, right? Trust me, I want to win every game. I'm not looking at the schedule saying, Okay, these are the winnable games.

My approach is, if we focus on ourselves, we play... What I said is, Right now, fellas, we're not a team. We're a group of individuals. We're undisciplined. That's the result of why we're not making the plays that we're supposed to.

But when we heal as a team, this team can be special, right? It's got everything that it needs to be competitive in every single game that it plays with a chance to win. That's really what you want, is be competitive, get into the fourth



quarter, whose culture is going to win in the fourth quarter?

That's what my focus is. I'm not looking at the schedule. Right now I'm trying to figure out schematically what we need to do a staff to be successful against Louisville. What do I do in conjunction with the staff to help find the right motivation for these guys to be detail-oriented, focus on the little things, not listen to the voices on the inside. Focus on what they can control. They can control their attitude they come to work every day, the quality of the work they put in, then how they show up on Saturday to play.

Q. Hollins took over on kickoff returns after the fumble. Is Starling still an option? What does he have to do to win the coach's trust back?

TONY ELLIOTT: Biggest thing is go out and have a good week of practice and show just improvement with his attention to detail with the ball security. Again, that probably won't happen again. That's one of those anomalies that you fumble on air because he jumped over somebody.

It's a great coaching point. That's why we work ball security. I got to get these guys to do, I got to do a better job of figuring out, is understand don't just do the drill, understand why we're doing the drill and why it's important.

When I say 'finish with ball security through the cone', this is why I'm telling you to do it. Hand the ball to the ref needs to be your mindset. Again, you're trying to create positive muscle memory. That's why we put them in awkward body position carrying the ball.

Some younger guys want to get through the drill, get on to the next. Until we try to own the drill, master the drill, understand the purpose of the drill, we're still going to have these kind of issues until we build that positive muscle memory.

Q. In the passing game, Brennan had time to throw. Are you seeing strides with the offensive line?

TONY ELLIOTT: The guys up front, they're working their tails off. You got five guys that are trying to gel together. You got one that's playing with one and a half arms. He got a cast on his hand. That's difficult for an offensively man to be able to punch with a cast on your hand. They're battling. We're asking them to establish the line of scrimmage in the run game and we're asking them to pass protect.

Part of how we help them is when we do pass, we're on time, right, that we don't hold the ball too long, unless it's a play where we're trying to really go downfield.

What you saw is the guys, they did a good job of working together, communicating, passing off. Brennan had some time. I think Brennan so far played his best game. He looked the most comfortable. He had a little bit of time. Still too many drops. We slipped.

The biggest play, this is just kind of the definition of where we're at. Biggest play of the game, wide open, we slip because we're cutting off the wrong foot. When we work break points, it's punching in, punch out. Punch, gather, plant, open, separate. Knee and toe in the direction of the cut, use your elbow to throw you, low center of gravity. Sink your hips. If not, you're going to cut off the wrong foot, you're going to fall. Ah, Coach, that ain't gong to happen.

I pointed out to them, I don't want to bring this up, but I told Wayne the same thing, right? You better make sure your bottom shelf is on your stomach. The best block play in the 2015 national championship that would have spit for about 30 yards, we fumble the ball because we don't have the discipline to do it.

It's just getting these guys to trust what we're telling them. Hopefully they'll see more positive examples than they will bad examples. We're going to fully give this a try in all areas 24/7 in everything that we do.

Q. When you look at the wide receiver group, you were saying you were hoping these young guys to push the veterans. Sean Wilson is there. What have you seen from him?

TONY ELLIOTT: He's a big body that can run, that can catch. He showed that he's got some toughness to him. Biggest thing is getting him to a point where he can function on his own so you can run the offense.

He's got a great attitude. He's working hard. I think he's a talent that's got a ton of upside, that could be a really, really good player.

Developing him, growing him, then giving him an opportunity. We throw him in there on kickoff return, he's been playing a little bit on special teams to see how he's going to respond and react when the bright lights are on. So far he's shown that's not too big of a job for him.

Where we're at, just from with Billy being down, more than likely not going to be able to go this week, so we got to rely on him, Demick, Ethan Davies has to step up. All these young guys got to step up.

The older guys need it. Playing 70 snaps, every kid wants

to say I can play 70 snaps, but that's a lot. You start getting into the middle, late season, that starting to compound on your body.

Q. Sticking with the wide receivers, are you hoping to get Malachi back this season?

TONY ELLIOTT: I'm hopeful. But still no timetable. I'm encouraged seeing him walk around. He started to progress to the next phase of his rehab, doing a little bit of running. But definitely would love to get him back. In the spring I was talking about him a lot. He was really, really making strides. That's a big 6'4", 220-pound guy that you can do a lot of things with.

We won't rush it, force it. We're going to do what's best for him in his recovery. If he gets to a point where the doctors say they're going to turn him loose, we're going to get him going.

I think he's eager, too. He's a guy we have to make sure. He's a heavy guy. We're talking about a fracture in the foot. 220-pound guy. You don't want to rush that.

Q. Do you have an update on Fentrell and Horton.

TONY ELLIOTT: So both of them are back this week. Horton came in to get some x-rays. X-rays were good. Practiced yesterday. Will practice today.

Fentrell was a sickness that came up late in the week. But we feel like he'll be ready to go this week.

Q. Among the things that become your responsibility when you're the head coach is the final say on who's redshirts when you hit the four game. You're getting to that point now where some guys are at three. Do you have a good sense of you're all in these guys? Are there some guys that you're taking a wait and see, on the cusp?

TONY ELLIOTT: Most of the linemen, with the exception of Boley, are going to more than likely redshirt, with Houston being a guy we would manage his four games. Carson as of right now would be a guy that would redshirt. JR is playing. Dakota is obviously handout with his knee.

The young quarterbacks, we'd redshirt most of those guys unless we find a role for Delaney. Delaney is a guy I'm trying to figure out. He's fast, athletic. I know he wants to compete at quarterback. I want to give him every opportunity. That's a big athlete that when you put the ball in his hand, he can go.

He's playing the role of Malik over there this week in the

scout team. He would be a guy that we would try to maybe find something for him.

Defensively, I'm trying to think. D-line, T.J. is a guy that we're anticipating redshirting. Who else? McDonald would be at linebacker. Bracey is a guy that we're playing. We're all in on Bracey.

On the back end, trying to see. I don't think we brought any corners in. Safety we're good there for the most part. Trying to think if there's any freshmen. Bettridge we're playing.

There's some that, hey, if we have to have 'em, we have to have 'em. We'll try to do what's best for them but also do what's best for the team.

Q. As you went back and looked at I counted five batted-down passes, one of them was outside the pocket. Anything you saw that's coachable?

TONY ELLIOTT: There were two that were outside the pocket where Brennan has to get that ball up over the defender. He's got the change the arm angle. What you saw with the ones that were batted down interior-wise, some quick-game situations where we're trying to get the ball out over the middle. What you started to do is once the D-linemen realized they couldn't get home, they started spying the quarterback, timing and jumping, batting it down.

Credit to the offensive line that they're giving them time, but a teachable moment for the offensive line like don't relaxed, stay engaged. Now you see what they're doing. They are trying to get their hands up in the throwing lanes. If you stay engaged, their hands stay down, now we get the ball throw or over those guys.

Q. Other than quarterback situation in Louisville, what else about that team has impressed you?

TONY ELLIOTT: Oh, man, their scheme. Their scheme challenges you, especially with the wide zone and then all of the play-actions. So you can create a little bit more time when you move the pocket to throw some of those deep routes.

Defensively, man, they're direct. Not as big, but they're very twitchy inside. What it's kind of seemed to be our Achilles' heel is when we get to these odd fronts, get somebody head up on our center, given us a little bit of a challenge. That's what they base out of.

Also, too, there's opportunity there. We're going to have to handle the junk. Kind of like Syracuse, when they do a lot

of different things, they jump in and out of structure, move guys around. They primarily are built to stop the run with that seven-man structure because they can get that seventh defender to the box. They're good enough to play man coverage.

Their boundary coverage does a good job, long, physical, does a good job from a press standpoint.

Biggest thing, they're like us. They are going to come out hungry. They're battling for their season just like we're battling for our season.

We have to play well. No question about that. It's going to start in the trenches. Our guys, when they get opportunities, they have to make plays.

Q. You said if anybody had any ideas about the slow start thing, it was baffling you, too. Have you noticed any tendencies that have kept you guys from getting off to a better start?

TONY ELLIOTT: I think, especially early on offensively, when we have taken our shots, they're just not sticking. I think about Syracuse, we got a big ball to KT over the middle, just off his fingertips. Then we have the big ball to Lavel, and it's just off his fingertips. Then it gets into the crunch time. Now where details are the most important, like on the slant where our timing is off because our steps and technique is wrong running the route.

Just missing those big plays. I think when you hit those big plays, what it does is it creates an enthusiasm and excitement with everybody and heightens the sense of urgency, whereas when you miss those plays, it can be a little bit deflating. Oh, man, here we go again.

But you got keep swinging, keep fighting. What I tell them a lot is you can't let one play beat you twice, all right? That's the same thing with a good play, right? A good lay is not going to happen twice unless you lock back in on the next play.

We just got to work on pushing through that. I think Brennan looks like he's in a better place, just the last week of practice, how he played, his communication on the sideline. Starting to see him exert his leadership a little bit more and communicate with his wideouts, let them know what his expectations are.

I think what he had last year was him and KT just had a feel thing. They had a feel thing. They'd been in that system. He had time. Eventually KT was going to get up, boom, he was going to hit him.

Now we're establishing the run, things are thrown on timing. It's a little bit different. We're getting man coverage, not a lot of zone coverage. You got to be detailed, have great technique so you can create separation. It's take a little bit of time.

I think if we can connect on one of those big plays early, I think that can get us off to a fast start. Then I just think defensively it started with how we came out of the locker room.

For those guys, they played well for four weeks. They need some success. That's what I told them. Like we got to compliment each other, right. Offense, you need to compliment the defense. You need to reward the defense, like, when they get a stop and go score some points. Let's not be allergic to the end zone. It's a different way to get there, but let's go get there.

I think if we hit those big plays, we can really get the guys' attention and hopefully that will increase the intensity and the details will continue to improve.

Q. Chayce Chalmers is with the groundskeepers doing a lot of stuff in the community. How important is it having a guy do that?

TONY ELLIOTT: Oh, man, it's awesome. I try to be transparent. I got on Chayce in the game, right? I got on Chayce because after a play, Chayce was like nose to nose with one of the players. I'm like, Not Chayce Chalmers.

I get Chayce and I let him know, That's not who we are, let's not focus on that.

He, like the kid that he is, he takes it like a champ. Yesterday in practice he's like, Coach, I just want you to know the guy got up in my face and asked me what I was going to do.

I said, Nothing, coach. I was getting ready to walk away.

I got on Chayce. Man, you're one of my best kids and I even got you after the play going face to face.

He's always going to try to do the right thing. He's super committed to being the best at everything that he does. I had a chance in the summer to do the walk, learn more about the groundskeepers, all the history behind that, then what inspired it.

He's always around the office. He's always looking for help. He's always looking for community service opportunities. At the end of the day I want to win football

games, there's no question about that. At the end of the day I believe my mission field is to help develop young men like Chayce, and use their platform to make the lives of those around them better.

For those guys football, it's a short window. They think it's their whole life. It's a very short window. Then they got the rest of their life to live.

The last thing I want to do within this program is use guys. Unfortunately this business is a cruel business, right? There's all different kinds of ways to skin the cat. But it is a business. I want the way that we conduct business here with UV football that these young men get a great return on their investment.

That's why it's critical that we establish the foundation. Once we establish the foundation, then it's going to attract the young men like Chayce that are committed to excellence in all that they do. That's what's going to drive the culture over the years.

In my belief, ultimately it's going to produce the consistency to have teams year after year that are competitive. Each team has to make the decision on the price that they're willing to play to earn success.

Chayce is awesome. He's the kind of guy you'd let watch your kids. I love all of 'em. Not that they're doing anything bad, I just don't know if they'd watch 'em. They'd be on their phone doing something else. Chayce would be the guy that would be engaged with the young men.

He's a blessing. I don't mean to ramble, but yesterday was the fourth anniversary of C.J. Fuller passing away. That was one of my running backs at Clemson. I shared that with the team because they're trying to learn how to take me, right?

I know a lot of people, their perception of me was seeing me up in a box at Clemson, removed from the atmosphere. I think most of you have been to practice. I run around, I can get excitable, got a lot of passion about the game. I coach the guys hard. I believe in trying to make practice difficult. I want to push 'em so that they feel a little bit uncomfortable to grow, not disrespect them, but push 'em, challenge 'em, hold 'em accountable.

The guys are trying to learn me. I brought up C.J. and Tyshon Dye who passed away a year later in July. Fellas, this is who I am and this is why I do it, is because I have a vision of what your future to possibly look like that maybe you can't see yet, but I only get a short window in your life to be a part of it. I don't want anything from you but your best. That's all I'm asking for.

That's the culture that I'm trying to establish here. Again, it's about the team. It's about collective accountability. It's not about individuals. It's about appreciation. After practice yesterday I brought up all the student managers. I wanted to make sure that everybody on the team knew their names.

These young people, they ride a bus while we fly the plane. They put the uniforms out so you don't have to do it, right? When we don't come out and play with a passion and enthusiasm and appreciation, that's selfish because there's a lot of people that sacrifice, not to say that people provide the scholarship money for you, the resources.

We got a responsibility. We're not going to be perfect, I get that, but we got a responsibility to play with a certain level of appreciation and gratitude.

Chayce gets that. Him and Marcus and the other guys that are working for that cause, at the end of the day it's about people. This business is about people. It's about developing young people. I believe if we do that right, we get that right action then the by-product will be success on the field.

But we're building. We're trying to establish that. We're trying to get some older guys that have had some success to buy in. It's not that they don't want to, it's just they're learning how f that makes sense.

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